

Charles University
Faculty of Arts
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PhD thesis summary
Autoreferát (teze) disertační práce

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Dating in Modern Societies
Způsoby seznamování v současné společnosti

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2023

Introduction

In the past decade, online dating has been displacing other ways of meeting partners (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). In the US, online dating has surpassed meeting through friends and family around the 2013 for heterosexual couples (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). For same sex couples, meeting online has been the most prevalent way to meet for the past two decades (Rosenfeld et al., 2019; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Examining the role of online dating in society has thus become important not only for understanding online dating itself, but also in terms of consequences it has for the formation, longevity, and quality of formed romantic unions. Furthermore, it contributes to our understanding of the effects of technology on human life and interactions between humans and information and communication technology.

The fast emergence and widespread popularity of online dating begs the question of how it is related to one of the most persistent patterns in the research on partnerships and families – homogamy. In sociology, homogamy happens when individuals marry someone who is similar to them on some salient trait. The origins of homogamy are usually explained by two, mutually non-exclusive, factors – preferences and opportunities. Preferences refer to individuals wanting to affiliate with similar people, while opportunities refer to the structures and constraints limiting who is likely to meet with whom. In standard studies, we usually observe already formed unions – the very endpoint of the process of searching for a partner. However, mating is a long, complex process, and most couples dissolve before they can be observed. Furthermore, many individual partner preferences will never materialize into couples due to unavailability of partners or rejections. These parts of the mating process typically remain hidden in empirical research. Online dating gives us a great opportunity to observe the initial stages of the process with both the successes as well as failures. This in turn enables us to see whether the eventual matches reflect the preferences or whether they are results of the forces that structure the dating market beyond mere individual preferences.

Theoretically, having an easy, fast, and virtually unlimited access to a pool of potential and willing partners should greatly favour one's preferences as the obstacles presented by physical and social environment are diminished. This dissertation aims to advance the understanding of online dating by examining as of now unstudied context of Czechia by using both quota-based survey representative to Czech adult Internet users, but more importantly a digital trace data from a Czech online dating app.

From newspaper ads to online dating

Chapter 2 provides a historical perspective on the development of online dating in the Czech Republic, highlighting the ways in which online dating has evolved over time and the challenges it has faced along the way. The chapter provides important context for understanding the current state of online dating in the Czech Republic, which is examined in more detail in subsequent chapters. The key argument of this chapter is that the development of online dating per se is the newest technological variation in a long history of humans using various forms media and technology for matchmaking, i.e., finding a suitable partner.

The evolution of matchmaking in the Czech Republic mirrors the global journey from straightforward, economic-transaction-focused lonely hearts ads to the diverse online dating landscape of today. Early instances of such ads in the Czech lands, notably prevalent in newspapers like *Národní politika* in the late 19th century and specialized matrimony newspapers such as *1. Československý sňatkový zpravodaj* in the 1920s, were reflective of the societal norms of the times, focusing on pragmatic and financial aspects of potential unions. However, the progression of these ads was not linear; they were initially banned in 1948 in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic due to their emphasis on bourgeois marriage concepts but were reintroduced in 1964 due to public demand, reflecting the societal needs and perceptions of different eras (Radvanová, 1964; Staněk, 1977).

With the advent of technology, the Czech Republic embraced computer-mediated matchmaking with ventures like *Rendez-vous 68*, which aimed to bring a “scientific approach to mating” in response to the rising divorce rates in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (Staněk, 1977; Šubert, 1969). The subsequent proliferation of the Internet marked the emergence of online dating sites like *Seznamka.cz* in 1998, amidst the global rise of similar platforms, signifying the integration of modern dating methodologies in the Czech dating landscape.

Despite the initial scepticism and the myriad of concerns surrounding the commodification and superficiality of relationships through these platforms, the endurance and acceptance of online dating in the Czech Republic are indicative of its significant role in modern societal structures.

Online dating in Czechia: An Overview as of 2022

Chapter 3 of the dissertation examines the current state of online dating in Czechia as of September 2022. The chapter provides much-needed data on the online dating experience, opinions, and outcomes in Czechia. The findings are based on a survey of 1,000 Czech adult

internet users conducted in September 2022 by Behavio labs, collected for the purposes of this dissertation.

The chapter begins by examining who dates online in Czechia, including demographic information about online daters. It then discusses the current attitudes toward online dating in Czechia, including the perceived advantages and disadvantages of online dating.

Firstly, online dating is prevalent in Czechia, with meeting online being the most common way to find a romantic partner. Overall, 36% of Czechs surveyed reported ever using online dating, and 22% of reported meeting their current partners online. Between 2020 and 2022, almost half of couples reported meeting online, likely due to social distancing imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, most Czechs surveyed do not think dating online is something to be ashamed of, or that online daters are desperate. However, other beliefs about online dating are a mixed bag and do not always correspond well with the experiences online daters report having. For instance, while most Czechs surveyed think that online daters look for sexual encounters, online daters themselves reported finding friends, short- or long-term partners on a similar rate as finding someone solely for sex.

Lastly, individuals who met their partners online reported the same levels of satisfaction with their relationship as those who met in other ways.

Taken together, the results of this chapter indicate that online dating has become a prominent way of meeting partners in Czechia and that the results mirror current results from the US and other Western countries.

Homophily on a Czech online dating app

This chapter will bring the first insight into age homophily in online dating in the context of the Czech Republic. The chapter first overviews the patterns of age homogamy, i.e., the similarity of spouse's age. In the Czech Republic, the most common age difference between spouses is just one year. This is, however, in sharp contrast with expectations from the evolutionary theory, which shows men's preference for younger women and women's preference for older men (Buss, 1994). This chapter thus first looks at whom men and women find most desirable, i.e., whom do they contact the most, and whom they respond to.

The results show that the youngest women on the app are not the most frequently contacted, despite being very popular. The number of messages has a peak in 25-28 years for women and then starts decreasing. We can observe a similar trend for men; however, the trend is flatter as there is less variance for men than there is for women. This is because women receive way more messages than men, a trend that was documented by previous studies on online dating (e.g., Rudder, 2014). An interesting finding is that although social sciences usually assume that men's attractiveness does not decrease with age (Becker, 1998; Hakim, 2011; Možný, 1999), this is not supported in this chapter.

Since women, and especially young women, receive much attention online, it is reasonable to assume that they are in the position of "choosers" and the successful matches will represent their preferences. This is supported by the data, as women's messages to men are more often reciprocated. Furthermore, the results show that although older men frequently attempt to connect with young women, they ignore their messages and prefer men their own age. The probability of a successful homogamous (roughly the same age) match decreases with men's increasing age; however, it remains around 50 %, which is still higher than average.

Partner preference and age: Real-user mating behavior in online dating

This chapter extends the previous chapter on age homophily in online dating in the Czech context. It utilizes the same dataset as the previous chapter. From the first chapter, we know that men systematically prefer younger women regardless of their own age and that women's preferences become more diverse with age. Younger women prefer slightly older men, but when they reach 30, they tend to be more open to younger men. The second chapter that asks the question of how much younger or older counterparts are individuals willing to contact, and how this changes with their own age. To answer the question about the width of the age gap individuals are willing to cross, I adapt a methodology used by Skopek, Schmitz, and Blossfeld 2011.

The results show that young men show a preference for women their age. However, this preference declines with age, and they gradually shift to younger partners. As they age, they grow more ambitious and are willing to cross larger age gaps toward younger partners. Overall, men in our data set avoided older women, including women who are only slightly their senior. This avoidance is stable for all ages and confirms that although men state tolerance for slightly

older partners in surveys (Schwarz & Hassebrauck, 2012), they rarely act upon these statements in real-life dating.

The youngest women prefer older partners over partners their age. Then, up to 30 years old, they prefer partners of the same age or up to 9 years their senior. As women age, they are more open to younger men and more restrictive toward older men. The older the woman is, the more willing she is to cross larger age gaps toward younger partners. As already mentioned, the same trend can be observed for men. However, there is a lag as to when this shift toward younger partners occurs. Women start initiating contact with significantly younger men (5–9 years younger) later, in their mid-forties, while men develop this preference around their mid-thirties.

It Takes Two to Tango: Desirability on a mobile dating app

Previous studies on online dating concluded that homophily patterns online closely reflect those found in marriages (Fiore & Donath, 2005). Users have been found similar in terms of education (Skopek, Schulz, et al., 2011), race (Potarca & Mills, 2015), physical build, or smoking (Fiore & Donath, 2005; Hitsch et al., 2010). Most of the previous studies explained the observed homophily by preference, i.e., by users actively seeking users of similar qualities and characteristics. The structural constraints are considered to be reduced online as the potential for heterogeneity exists – users can search for dissimilar users and can meet this way (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). However, rejection as the force behind homophily was seldom considered (notable exceptions are Bruch & Newman, 2018; Kreager, Cavanagh, Yen, & Yu, 2014).

This chapter examine the desirability of users, measured by the frequency of contacts (“swipes”) by other users on a Czech mobile dating app. The number of incoming contacts reflects ones desirability or attractiveness for others (Bruch & Newman 2018). In particular, it examines how the desirability of users affects their mating behavior and the behavior of their counterparts. Bruch and Newman (2018) show that users are relatively good judges of their desirability and can place themselves into the hierarchy of desirability accordingly. Moreover, they tend to contact more desirable counterparts as a norm and hardly ever contact less desirable users than themselves. However, the larger the gap between message initiators’ and receivers’ desirability, the less likely are users willing to answer. Kreager, Cavanagh, Yen and Yu (2014) find similar results, as users pursuit more desirable counterparts who do not respond to, i.e., reject, those attempts.

This chapter aims to expand the discussion of non-reciprocity (i.e., rejection) as the driving force behind homophily. It proposes that homophily through preference is a viable option for desirable users with a large pool of partners who professed an interest in them but may not be for those who receive little messages themselves. The goal is to examine different strategies of users when it comes to sending and responding (rejecting) to messages with respect to desirability.

When users send each other invitations to chat, some users are bound to accumulate more invitations than others. As a byproduct of their romantic attempts, they create a hierarchy of desirability. Subsequently, we can analyze whether users of a similar level of desirability, measured by the frequency of being contacted by other users, tend to contact each other. Moreover, since the dataset includes information on whether the contact was reciprocated or not (the invitation was accepted or rejected), we can analyze whether the reciprocated matches are more often between users with similar or dissimilar qualities. For example, we can see whether the most popular users choose each other and reject the other. The results corroborate previous studies regarding women's higher desirability on online dating apps. Given the skewed gender ratio on the app, and the prevailing dating scripts, men were in the position of pursuers (sending more messages than receiving) and women in the position of "choosers" (receiving more messages than sending). Men pursued more (up to by two-thirds on average) desirable women than themselves, in line with the mechanisms of competition and non-reciprocity. We do not see the same pattern for women, who tended to slightly partner down on average. Here, the results differ from Bruch and Newman (2018) who found aspirational pursuit for both men and women.

Since pursuing mates and being successful in doing so are two inherently different things, we also looked at reciprocal matches. Even though the successful matches were still aspirational, mutually attracted users were considerably more similar in desirability compared to all swipes. This result is again in line with the mechanism of competition or non-reciprocity. Given that we only observe the initial swipe and its acceptance/rejection, heterogenous matches may dissolve with an ongoing exchange, as suggested by Schaefer (2012) and observed by Kreager et al. (2014).

Conclusion

The key finding of this thesis is that the preference for homophily does not show in the initial pursuits, rather, homophily is the result of rejection. Regarding age, the results suggest that the preferences expected by evolutionary theory, men looking for young women and women looking for men their age or older, are present but for older women, there is a preference for younger men too. However, as in case of desirability, the successful matches, i.e., pursuit attempts that received a reply, are between individuals who are closer to age than the initial pursuits. The initial pursuit can be characterized as aspirational, i.e., users aim to date those more attractive than themselves in terms of age or desirability, but they get rejected by them. It is likely that this process repeats until they match with those of similar characteristics, a process that eventually results in homophilous couplings.

Furthermore, the thesis brings first glimpse into the current landscape of online dating in Czechia. It shows that the experience with online dating is widespread, with many couples, especially in recent years, meeting online. This has implications for research on union formation as very little is known about the effect of mode of meeting a partner (online vs offline) on the quality and longevity of relationships, and on social inequality. While some longitudinal surveys now include questions about the couples' mode of meeting, such surveys are rare (notably, *How Couples Meet and Stay Together* in the US, and *pairfam* in Germany), and we lack such information for Czechia.

In order to delve deeper into online dating apps and their effect on resulting unions, academic research would benefit from a closer cooperation with the private sector. This serves two purposes: 1) there is much value in data collected by the online dating sites and apps as it captures users' behavior in real-stakes scenario in an unobtrusive way, 2) there is very little research that assesses how the design of online dating platforms structures users' behavior, and consequently, their successes or failures on the dating market. Given the current discussions about so-called incels, i.e., involuntary celibates, and their radicalization (e.g., O'Donnell & Shor, 2022), understanding the process of pursuing and being rejected by mates online seems more important than ever (Sparks et al., 2022). This line of research is also relevant to the area of computational social science where the study of the effect of algorithms on users' behavior is among the most prominent topics.

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Publications

del Rio-Chanona, R. M., Hermida-Carrillo, A., Sepahpour-Fard, M., Sun, L., **Topinkova, R.**, & Nedelkoska, L. (forth.) Mental Health Concerns Precede Quits: Shifts in the Work Discourse during the Covid-19 Pandemic and Great Resignation. *EPJ Data Science* (accepted for publication).

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Teaching experience

Regular courses

2022 – present LMU Munich, Institute of Sociology

- Research Practicum in Computational Social Science (2022 - present)
- Sociology of Partnerships (2023)

2019 – 2022 Charles University, Faculty of Arts

- Zpracování sociologických dat (2019 – 2021)
- Vybrané kapitoly ze sociologie rodiny (2019)

Guest lectures & workshops

- 2023 Web scraping with R (3h workshop, part of Vybraná témata datové analýzy), Charles University, Faculty of Arts
- 2022 Data scraping with R (2h workshop, part of methods@manchester), University of Manchester
- 2022 Web scraping with R (2h lecture, part of Vybraná témata datové analýzy)
- 2020, 2021 Online dating (2h lecture, part of Sociology of Love), Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences
- 2020 Data visualization fallacies (2h lecture, part of Introduction to Social Science Research Methodology), Charles University, Faculty of Arts
- 2019 Online seznamování, public lecture (1h lecture, part of Týden vědy a techniky)

Work experience

- 2022 - present Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Institute of Sociology (Postdoctoral) Researcher, chair of Computational Social Sciences
- 2020 - 2022 Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences Research assistant, dept. of Social Stratification
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- 2017-2019 Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences Research assistant (part-time), dept. of Value Orientation of Society

Grants & awards

- 2021 Charles University, SVV-ADAKIN, 36 000 CZK aimed for experimental study data collection
- 2021 SSRC/Summer Institutes in Computational Social Science Research Grant, 2 244 USD, co-investigator
- 2021 Summer Institute in Computational Social Science, London Partner Grant, 1 800 USD, co-investigator
- 2020 Anglo-Czech Educational Fund, 11 700 GBP, travel/study grant
- 2020 Grant Agency of the Charles University (GAUK), 336 000 CZK, 2020-2021
- 2019 Edvard Beneš award for best thesis in sociology and/or history, 3rd place