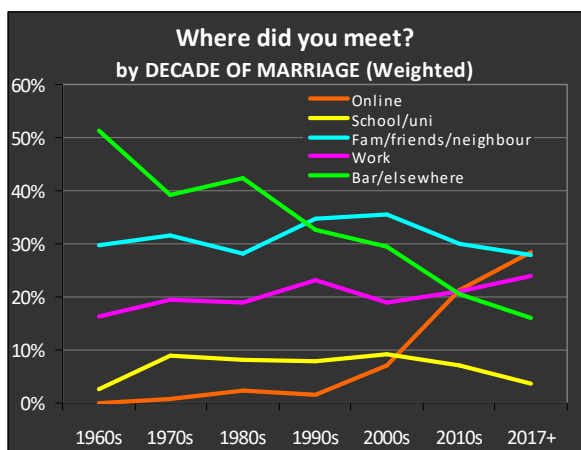




Relative Strangers: The Importance of Social Capital for Marriage

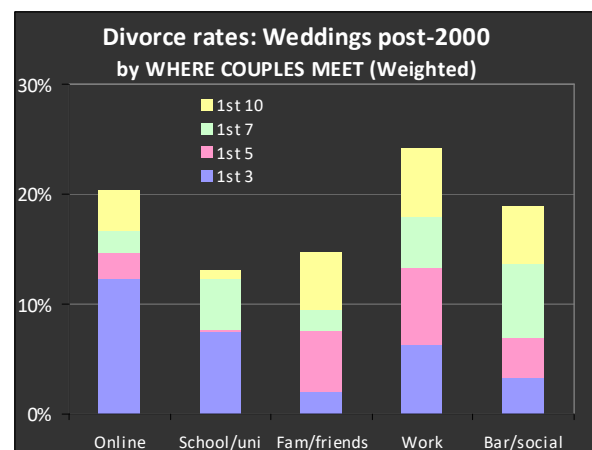
Harry Benson, October 2021

- Young lovers are increasingly shunning traditional avenues for meeting a future spouse in favour of meeting online. However the risk of divorce during the early years of marriage is significantly higher where couples have met online.
- In one of the first UK surveys of its kind, Marriage Foundation commissioned Savanta ComRes to ask 2,000 ever married adults aged 30 and over where they had met their first spouse.
- Data have been weighted to be representative of the UK population.
- Until the 2000s, two thirds of married couples met either through family and friends or through social settings such as bars or parties. That proportion has now dropped below half, replaced mainly by the surge in online meetings.
- In our survey 28% of couples who married since 2017 had met online, overtaking family and friends as the most popular way to meet prior to marriage. This concurs with findings from our OnePoll survey earlier this year that found 30% of unmarried couples under 30 had met online.
- But there are clear risks to marrying outside of established social settings.
- Even after taking into account gender, age and occupation, couples who met online post-2000 had higher divorce rates, but only during their first three years of marriage.
- Our finding provides compelling evidence for the importance of social capital, the cumulative support, wisdom and love of established family and friends, during the early years of marriage.



In our sample of 2,027 'ever married' adults aged over 30, meeting a future spouse through family friends or neighbours has been consistently popular until at least the 2010s.

The long term decline of meeting in bars and other social settings is now being replaced by the growing popularity of online meetings.



However there are clear risks attached to meeting outside of family and friends where wider social capital and support is strongest.

Among those who married since the year 2000, couples who met online had significantly higher divorce rates, but only during their first three years of marriage.

Introduction

Does it matter where couples meet? And why?

The most recent UK study that I can find on this subject (*Lampard 2007*) highlights a trend towards meeting at places of education or work and away from public places for socialising.

A more recent US study (*Rosenfeld et al, 2019*) picks up the growing trend towards online dating, suggesting that nearly 40% of US couples met online. However their study finds that meeting in bars and restaurants is still the second most popular meeting place, reaching nearly 30%.

The two rising trends were replacing meetings through friends, work, family, school or church.

However these two studies appear somewhat at odds with one another and, anyway, it's clear that a UK update is needed that also looks at the influence, if any, of where couples met on the risk of subsequent divorce.

Rather more in line with the US finding was our survey commissioned earlier this year and conducted by OnePoll, where we found that 30 per cent of young unmarried couples said they had met online (*Benson 2021a*).

So one of the questions we asked when we commissioned the polling company Savanta ComRes to conduct a new survey of 2,027 adults over the age of 30 who had ever been married, of whom 62% were still married for the first time, was "How did you meet your spouse for your first marriage?".

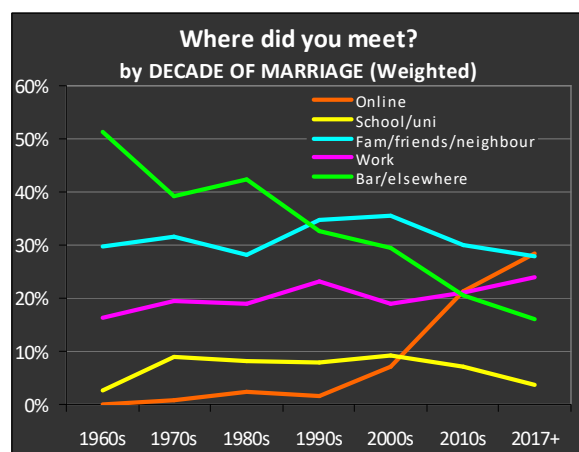
This briefing note forms the second analysis of findings from our survey of ever married adults, the first analysis being about the prevalence of prenuptial agreements and their subsequent impact on divorce risk (*Benson 2021b*).

Where did couples meet?

In our survey, participants were asked about their gender, age, year of first marriage, where they met their first spouse, current occupation and their current marital status.

Our first stop was to look at where couples met by decade of marriage. Results are shown in the chart and table below.

All results are weighted to be representative of the UK population.



First marriages by decade

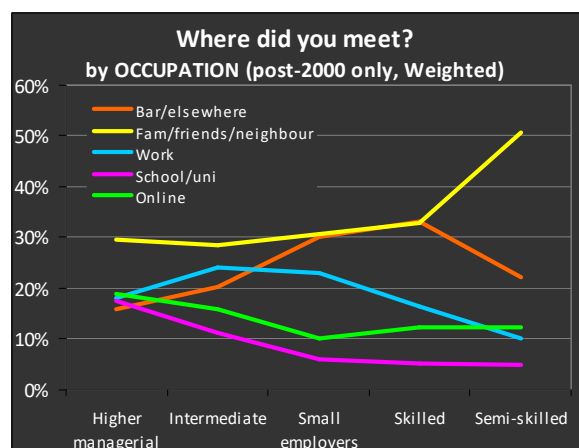
Where met?	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2017+
Online	0%	1%	2%	1%	7%	21%	28%
School/uni	3%	9%	8%	8%	9%	7%	4%
Fam/friends/neighbour	30%	32%	28%	35%	35%	30%	28%
Work	16%	20%	19%	23%	19%	21%	24%
Bar/elsewhere	51%	39%	42%	33%	29%	21%	16%
n=	128	400	360	347	436	348	101

In the years since 2017 when the most recent 100 weddings in our survey took place (using weighted data), the proportion of couples who had met online reached 28% of weddings and overtook the proportion who had met through family and friends. This proportion concurs with the findings from our earlier survey where we found that 30% of unmarried adults under 30 had met online.

The trend towards online meeting prior to marriage (up from 1% in the 1990s) is increasingly taking the place of meeting in social settings such as bars and restaurants (most recently 16%, down from 33% in the 1990s).

In order to take into account the popularity of meeting online, I then reduced the sample to look only at the 907 adults who married for the first time post-2000.

The chart and table below show where couples met by occupation.



First marriages since 2000 by social class

Where met?	HM	Int	SE	Sk	SS
Online	19%	16%	10%	12%	12%
School/uni	17%	11%	6%	5%	5%
Fam/friends/neighbour	29%	28%	31%	33%	51%
Work	18%	24%	23%	17%	10%
Bar/elsewhere	16%	20%	30%	33%	22%
n=	62	245	199	122	100

Aside from the semi-skilled of whom half still meet through family, friends or neighbours in place of meeting at work or in a bar or restaurant, there are few obvious differences in where couples meet across the social spectrum.

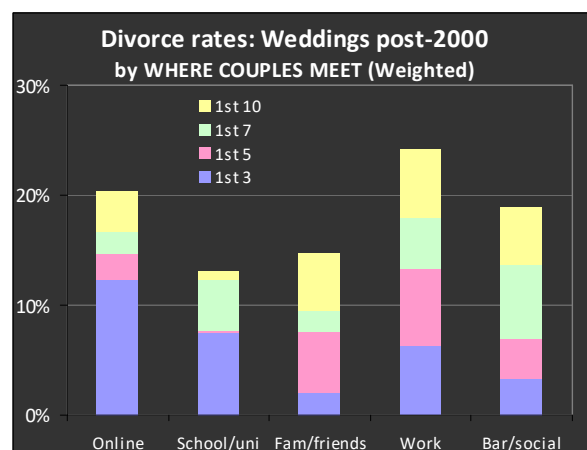
Does it matter where couples met?

A regression analysis of the entire sample (n=2,021) shows that the overall risk of ever having divorced up until now is unrelated to where couples meet.

However given that the big trend towards meeting online has only taken off in the past two decades, I reduced the sample to look only at those who married for the first time since the year 2000 (i.e. 2000-2021, n=907) and then further into those had married three or more years ago (2000-2017, n=723), five or more years ago (2000-2015, n=657), seven or more years ago (2000-2013, n=602), or ten or more years ago (2000-2010, n=487).

In this way I can compare the risks of ever divorcing within the first three, five, seven and ten years of marriage, among only those who married in the year 2000 or later.

The chart and table below show the cumulative risk of divorce in the early years of marriage, through the first 3 years (blue), 5 years (pink), 7 years (green), and 10 years (yellow), depending on where couples met.



First marriages since 2000 by divorce rate

Where met?	1st 3	1st 5	1st 7	1st 10
Online	12%	15%	17%	20%
School/uni	8%	8%	12%	13%
Fam/friends/neighbour	2%	8%	10%	15%
Work	6%	13%	18%	24%
Bar/social	3%	7%	14%	19%
n=	723	657	602	487

Prima facie, couples who met online had the highest risk of divorce during their first three years of marriage (the blue columns) at 12%, compared to just 2% for those who met via family, friends or neighbours.

However by ten years of marriage, those meeting through the workplace appear to have the highest rate of divorce at 24%, compared to 20% of those who met online, 19% who met in a bar or restaurant, and 15% of those who met via family, friends or neighbours.

In regression analyses, the only differences of statistical significance were between those who met online who were more likely to divorce in the first three years of marriage, but only when compared to those who met through family or friends or who met socially in a bar or restaurant.

Taking into account gender, age and occupation, the odds of divorce within the first three years of marriage was 6 times higher among those who met online compared to those who met through family, friends or neighbours ($p < .05$).

These differences were not repeated in my five, seven, or ten year analyses. Across each of these time periods, there were no significant differences in divorce risk depending on where couples met.

All results are weighted to be representative of the UK population.

Conclusion

Our findings are based on a sample of 2,027 ever-married respondents spanning genders, age, region and each decade of marriage since the 1960s, conducted by Savanta ComRes in July 2021.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we found that meeting online is now a popular way for couples who eventually marry to meet. In recent years, this has largely displaced meeting socially in bars and restaurants.

Meeting via family, friends and neighbours also remains consistently popular as does meeting at work.

Aside from semi-skilled adults being more likely than other groups to meet via family, friends and neighbours, there are few differences between social groups in terms of where couples meet prior to marriage.

Our most significant finding is that couples who married after the year 2000 having met online experienced a significantly higher risk of divorce during the first three years of marriage, even after taking into account gender, age and occupation.

This higher risk had disappeared within the first five years of marriage.

Why might this be the case?

Bearing in mind that this higher risk compares those who meet online with those who meet through family, friends or neighbours, one strong possibility is that couples are marrying as relative strangers.

Gathering reliable information about the long term character of the person you are dating or marrying is quite obviously more difficult for couples who meet online without input from mutual friends or family or other community.

For online couples, wider social bonds between families and friends have to form from scratch rather than being well-established over years or even decades.

It is therefore not entirely unsurprising that the input of family, friends or co-workers reduces the risk of making a hasty mistake.

The fact that the added risk disappears after the first three years of marriage points to the importance of social capital established over the long term through families and friendships and communities.

But social capital not only gives couples access to reliable information from which to make a good decision about a life partner. It also gives couples access to a social support network on whom to lean both for affirmation of them as a couple and support when they need it.

Does this undermine online dating?

No.

But it does highlight the greater risks and difficulties of getting to know a relative stranger where reliable sources of background information and subsequent social support are less readily available.

And it does make the case for attending a marriage preparation course where an established body of evidence has shown the greatest benefits in the first few years.

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