



Marriage Foundation

Press Release from Marriage Foundation

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Divorce rates six times higher for couples who meet online in early years, finds new study

- **Study suggests that social networks play important role in supporting couples during first three years**
- **After three years of marriage where couples meet little difference**
- **Marriage Foundation says developing social capital helps in providing reliable information and support**

Married couples who meet online are six times more likely to divorce than couples who met at university or via family and friends in the first three years of marriage, finds a major new study from Marriage Foundation.

The study, *Relative Strangers - The importance of social capital for marriage*, surveyed 2,000 ever married adults aged 30 and over where they had met their first spouse and divided them by decade. Unsurprisingly, online meetings are now the most popular place to meet a husband or wife, accounting for a third (32 per cent) of those marrying in the last two years, up from just 1 per cent in the 1990s and seven per cent in the 2000.

The growing popularity of meeting a future partner online, is not without added risks, the report finds. According to research commissioned by Marriage Foundation and using data from Savanta ComRes, couples who met online and married since the year 2000 had the highest risk of divorce during their first three years of marriage at 12 per cent, compared to just 2 per cent for those who met via family, friends or neighbours. Even after seven years, the figure from our sample was 17 per cent compared to just 10 per cent.

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

“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.

“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.”

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation’s Research Director commented: “These figures are troubling given the increasing popularity of couples meeting online. It suggests that in the early years of marriage, couples who meet this way, might lack sufficient social capital or close support networks around them to deal with all the challenges they face when compared to those who met via friends, family or neighbours. Over time this disparity disappears, but the question is why does it exist in the first place?”

The report continues, “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.”

Social capital, includes networks of friends and family who usually share similar values or beliefs, these can include, living in the same area, or working together or in similar industries, it might also include shared religion. Groups with high social capital are usually considered function better because of their shared goals and informal support they provide.

Mr Benson continued, “Our findings in NO way undermines, or diminishes the vital role of online dating. 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.

“Identifying these differences, should allow those of us who provide support and instruction to couples thinking of tying the knot to better target the information we provide and encourage a focus on building social capital in the early years of marriage.”

Marriage Foundation did not examine whether there was any difference between divorce rates for those who used relationship sites, like eharmony and Bumble compared to hook-up sites such as Tinder and Grindr. However previous research found that contrary to the image of hook-up site users only looking for casual relationship, nine in 10, who met this way and were currently in a relationship, wanted to marry.

That survey, carried out by One Poll, asked 2,000 young unmarried adults aged 18-30 about their attitudes towards tying the knot and their relationship status.

Of those who said they were in a relationship and had met using a ‘casual dating app’ such as Tinder and Grindr, nine in 10, (89 per cent) said they wanted to marry and four in five (80 per cent) expected to marry “at some point”. This compared with 84 per cent and 77 per cent respectively among those who met through long-term dating apps.

Sir Paul Coleridge, founder of Marriage Foundation concluded: “The arrival and gradual growth of online dating has been hugely beneficial in massively expanding the marriage market for adults of all ages and social groups increasing the chances of them finding reliable love. None of us are nowadays confined only to finding a permanent partner in our immediate ‘neighbourhood’. Marriage Foundation is solidly supportive of this gradual innovation which is undoubtedly good for the health and development of marriage in general. However, as with all apparently positive changes to our social behaviour there are hidden risks which couples need to be aware of. Our new research, the first of its kind, seems to show that ‘online’ marriages are significantly more vulnerable early on. The probable explanation for this is that the multifaceted, subconscious trawl for information and evidence (social capital) that naturally takes place with the old, more gradual system and which helps to inform selection and choice is somehow blunted with the more formulaic online system. The availability of the usual evidence is thus potentially more limited, and more mistakes result. Perhaps also there is a tendency to overlook or be blind to shortcomings in the enthusiasm of finding a potential long-term mate; the “rose tinted spectacles” scenario. The antidote to this danger is surely to encourage ‘onliners’ to undergo proper marriage prep before finally committing or tying the knot. In this way potential flaws are more likely to be exposed and so addressed in a managed and positive environment before they emerge after the wedding.”

Notes to editors

About Marriage Foundation

Marriage Foundation was founded in 2012 by Sir Paul Coleridge, a High Court judge who was moved by his personal experience in 40 years as a barrister and judge specialising in family law. The think tank seeks to improve public understanding of marriage and to reduce the numbers of people drawn into the family justice system – some 500,000 children and adults each year. It has established itself as a leading voice on marriage issues in the UK.

Sir Paul Coleridge, Harry Benson and Michaela Hyde from the Marriage Foundation are available for comment and for interviews linked to these new findings.

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