

Relationship between the Internet and marital decision

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, the Internet has transformed the way of living, from daily communication and consumption to entertainment and work. But most importantly, it alters the traditional way and attitude toward marriage in public. To probe how Internet penetration influences marriage in China, the paper concentrates on the effects of the Internet on online dating and intergenerational differences towards the marital decision. Using the data gathered from NBS, CNNIC, and ACWF, the paper analyzes the results and provides main explanations. The findings show a positive correlation between the Internet usage and online dating as well as the first marriage age. Besides, according to the research results, there is difference of Internet reliance, city selection, premarital relationships between different generations.

Keywords: *Internet, online dating, marital decision, intergeneration*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet, being characterized as the dominating element of modern society and the digital revolution, has gradually immersed in people's daily life from diverse facets in the past 20 years. Recently, focusing not only on its educational [1, 2] and economical effects [3, 4], researchers have also investigated its impact on demography and family. Marriage, as one of the three primary indicators of social demography and family construction, recently has raised experts' concern, leading to several hypotheses and theories proposed in the field. Some scholars contend cyber technology, causing the popularization of online pornography [5] and decline in marital stability [6], is detrimental to a conventional family, while others believe it promotes the feasibility of online communication and online marriage counseling [7], which largely increase the potential family construction and maintain the well-being family relationship. Such discussions about the Internet and marriage so far always focus on phases after partnership formation, underlying the negative and positive of Internet usage on maintaining marital and family relationships from a broader and comprehensive perspective. Few experts have concentrated on the role of high-speed Internet during the digital era in marital decisions systematically. Does high-speed Internet break geographic restriction and influence people's choice of marriage? Or it sets up a new invisible barrier and impedes the rate of marriage? The questions above are directly related to the status quo of marriage decision and formation. Moreover, they are relevant to the trend of marriage and family in the future.

Therefore, with the aim of minimizing the defects of the Internet and ensuring that the social marriage rate is developing in a direction favorable to the society, the concern about marriage is mainly concentrated on stages before marriage and family formation take place. These questions will be addressed in the paper by analyzing the

current situation in China. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: In Part 1, the related literature will be reviewed and three major hypotheses will be proposed. Then, the paper will introduce the data sources in Part 2, and Part 3 will analyze the results and offer a further theoretical explanation. Eventually, the conclusion and limitation will be discussed in Part 4.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

First, with regard to the Internet usage on marriage, high-speed Internet, providing various digital entertainment channels, encourages online surfing and crowds out time spent searching for partners, and thus has negative effects on marriage. This statement is supported by Putnam (2000) who claimed that Internet utilization plummeted the stock of social capital, the main approach to socializing and communicating, resulting in disconnected social structure and social participation [8], and hence may cause increasingly decline in marriage. This conclusion, however, has been refuted by other experts. Stefan et al.(2014) [9]. Using a quasi-experiment that hindered broadband Internet roll-out for many households, they indicate the effect of the Internet on a composite social capital index is significantly positive.

Therefore, it is more likely to suggest that the Internet increases communication among people and possibly increases the rate of partnership. This is statement is advocated by Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012). They contend that the Internet promotes new social strategies in search of partners and like-minded people efficiently and consequently increases the possibility of initiating a new friendship and partnership [10].

Second, the Internet offers large amounts of dating websites to socialize with people who have no social ties with them before. Such dating websites may

weaken the role of the offline dating market since Hadoop and cloud computing efficiently select data-matching mates for netizens, saving the cost and massively expanding the pool of potential partnership offering. However, objectively, the high possibility of Internet fraud and uncertainties of the unknown mates should be considered when it comes to online dating. This is in line with Anderson (2005), who recapitulates that a trend of forming a negative attitude toward online relationships prevails in public and so does the trend exist among participants in those relationships [11]. Moreover, subjectively, as is shown by Francesco, Osea, and Luca (2019), the increase in the likelihood of a mate may simultaneously increase the desired reservation quality of the searchers with respect to potential partners [12], as a result of which a general trend of marriage decision in public must exist. Nevertheless, it is hard to conclude how the rate of marriage in the digital era will be influenced by Internet usage.

Thirdly, the Internet provides unprecedented information on personal shared daily life after marriage and individual experience through social applications and platforms, either positive or negative toward marriage, which possibly lays the foundation for marriage preparation mentally or alters people’s opinions towards marriage. With regard to this alternation, it is important to take into account the existence of a ‘digital divide’ in the ability to extract information from the Internet by different generations. It is generally believed that recent generation, being immersed in the digital society at an early age, tends to have a higher proficiency and dependency level on the Internet, which is in accord with the study documented by [13].

In terms of these three mechanisms above, the following hypotheses are made: Firstly, the development of the Internet stimulates online dating. Secondly, there is a common tendency, which is disparate to that in the past, to marriage decision. Thirdly, the Internet promotes the emergence of intergenerational differences toward marriage.

3. METHODOLOGY

Concerning the relationship between Internet usage and online dating market and Internet and tendency to the marital decision, the paper utilizes data collected from NBS (National Bureau of Statistics in China) and CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center), both of which contain comprehensive and authoritative statistics relevant to the change of marriage and Internet penetration, providing clear and reliable digital information. Then, in search of the intergenerational attitude towards the marital decision, contending that only data from macroscopic level cannot explicitly display that, the author used the data from sampling survey of ACWF (All-China Women’s Federation) in 2015 to present an intact image of nowadays intergenerational difference towards marriage.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Internet and the online dating market

4.1.1. A positive correlation between Internet usage and the online dating market

Figure 1 reports the popularization rate of the Internet in China from 2011 to 2019. The Internet permeability curve in it shows a positive correlation with the permeability curve of online dating marketing in figure 2.

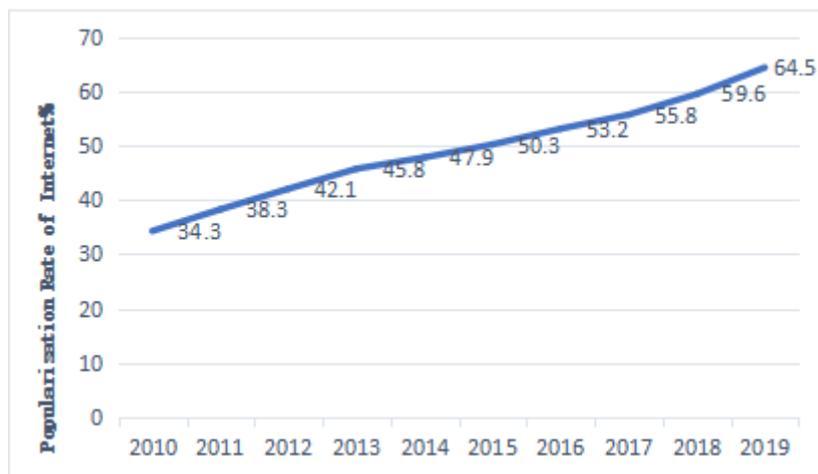


Figure 1. Popularization rate of the Internet in China from 2011 to 2019 (data collected from NBS)

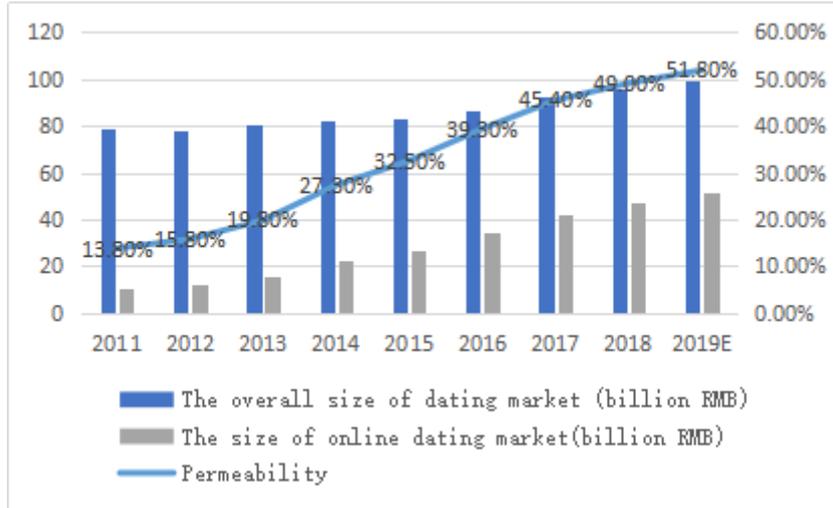


Figure 2. The overall market size of dating and online dating in China from 2011 to 2019E (date collected from CNNIC)

This is consistent with the prediction in the paper. With the advance of the digital era, the dating market has faced a tremendous opportunity and challenge. After 20-years development, a mature and unified online dating service pattern has been shaped. Online dating companies, depending on the large netizen base both globally and nationally, not only expand the market overseas but also adopt a more systematic and personalized matching mode, named assortative mating, a process to pair up daters with similar life experience and income level, to meet costumers' needs. These days, the market is also trying to exert advanced science and technology such as VR/AR to further enhance the security and credibility of the online dating market. Simultaneously, netizens, being more and more familiar with the operation and algorithm pattern of online dating, accept and rely on the online dating market in search of potential partners. In other words, it is the development and popularization of the Internet that expands the cyber-related markets. The online dating market, benefiting from the massive database system provided by the Internet, is a derivation of pervasive Internet usage. Therefore, there is a positive correlation between Internet usage and online dating market.

4.1.2. An increase in online dating market share over the whole dating industry

Information in figure 2 drawn from CNNIC illustrates the overall market size of dating and online dating from 2011 to 2019E in China. According to this graph, we can easily discern that the share of online dating over the overall dating market has increased conspicuously, from about 12.5% in 2011 to about 50% in 2019(estimated). Nevertheless, the increase of the whole dating market in the past 9 years is relatively low.

The former phenomenon can be explicated by the expansion of Internet usage. The remarkable increase in the online dating market is driven by the spread of the Internet, which provides online dating with a steady and efficient engine to develop. For the latter, it is suggested that a slow pace of the whole dating and marriage industry is due to the decrease in marital need in reality. Supported by marriage and divorce rate from 2010 to 2018 in figure 3. It is conceivable that the increase in divorce rate and decrease in marriage rate nationwide display a general negative trend of marriage development in society. Consequently, the whole dating marriage, still carried by the social development inertia, is partially retarded.

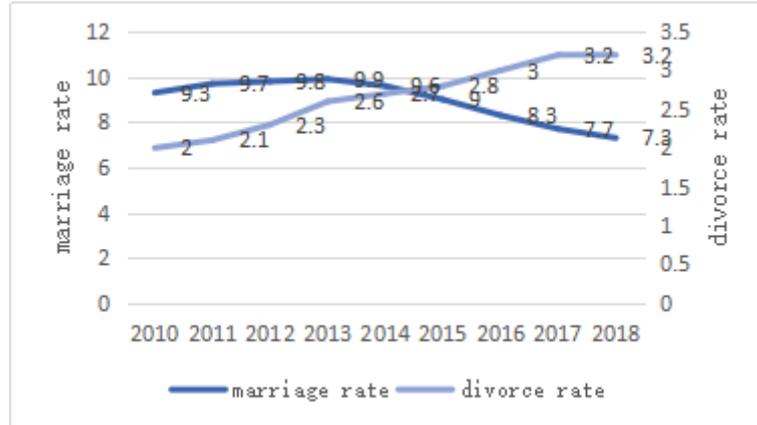


Figure 3. Marriage and divorce rate from 2010 to 2018 in China (data collected from NBS)

4.2. The common tendency to the marriage decision

First of all, there is a positive correlation between Internet penetration and first marriage age. As shown in the figure 4, after entering the digital era, there is a significant increase in the average first marriage age, reaching the age of 29.9 in females and 32.2 in males during 2018.

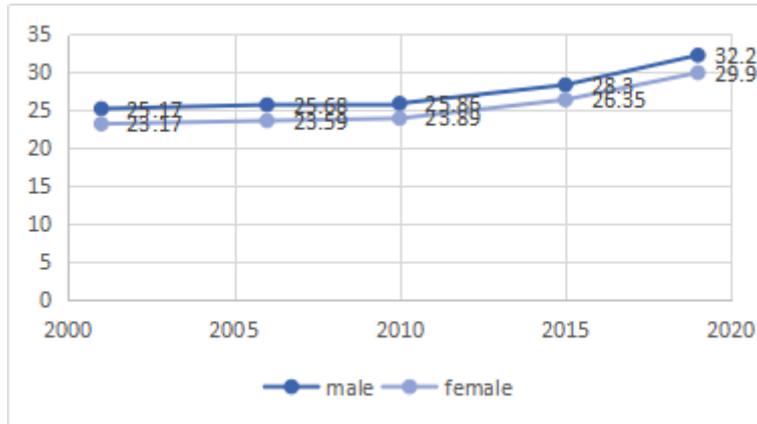


Figure 4. Median age of first marriage by gender (data collected from NBS)

Although a direct causal relationship between Internet usage and the average first marriage age can hardly be found, several factors can contribute to this positive correlation. Firstly, as mentioned above, the decrease in time and cost in searching for potential partners at the same time gives rise to the increase in criteria of daters' selection. Being "demanding" when using online dating websites or applications is more cost-effective. People tend to sacrifice more time to find a perfect and like-minded companion since the increase in the dating pool dramatically raises the possibility of that. On the contrary, in traditional offline dating activity, surrounded by a small pool of possible targets, people are unwilling to refuse a dater whom they will not consider at all online as it is time-consuming to successively attend the offline dating events. This is keeping with The Economist [14] in which it indicates on Tantan, a Chinese online dating and communicating application, men express interest in 60% of women they see, whereas women are interested in just 6% of men; this dynamic means that 5% of men never receive a match. Such an online dating

method is common in the digital-dating era and barely satisfies utilizers, especially female users who are too demanding to start a relationship. Subsequently, the online dating market popularizes late marriage in society. Second, pervasive Internet usage raises the contingency and uncertainty of the partnership. Development of the Internet alters the traditional relationship among people, creating diverse online communities in which people with the same interest can readily exchange ideas and have communication. Particularly, following the arrival of social applications on the smartphone, such as QQ, Wechat, and Weibo, which largely expand the people's social circle beside the normal offline friendships, people can connect with strangers online. Such a process makes the romantic emotions and feelings come easily. However, due to the limit of online socializing, it is difficult to know each other's behavior standards and living conditions materially and mentally. This remarkably increases the contingency of online dating and the uncertainty of the

online relation. Consequently, to know the potential partner comprehensively through the Internet, people need more time to familiarize themselves with one another.

4.3. Difference of marital decision among generations

The research conducted by ACWF selected 10 representative cities in China, including Beijing, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Nanjing, Changsha, Wuhan, Chengdu, Shenyang, Hefei, and Zhengzhou to explore the different attitudes among generations toward the marital decision. Eventually, 10157 samples are recovered, and the basic descriptive statistics are as follows:

Table 1. Basic Descriptive Statistic of the Research

Gender structure	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	5050	49.72
Female	5107	50.28
Age structure	Frequency	Percent (%)
60s	670	6.6
70s	2854	28.1
80s	3819	37.6
85s and 90s	2814	27.7

4.3.1. The way how couples meet

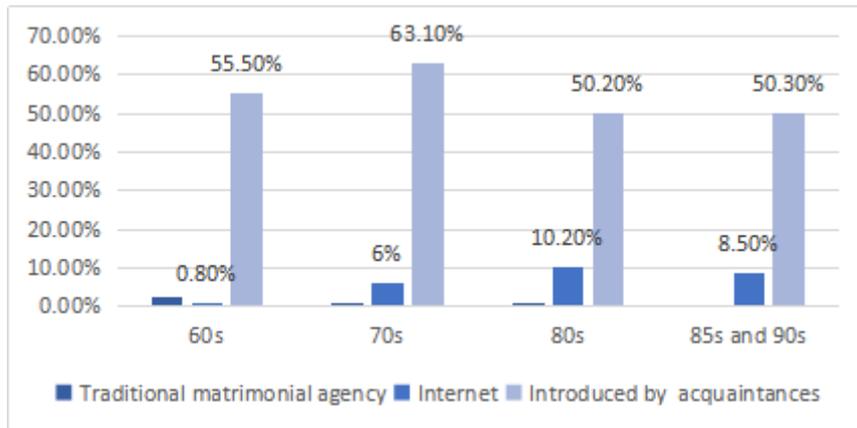


Figure 5. The way how couples meet (%)

Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of the way that the couples meet, in which the introduction of acquaintances is still the most popular strategy for marriage establishment among the different generations. Simultaneously, marriage establishment through the Internet increases a lot, from 0.8% in the 60s to 10.2% in the 80s, raising more than 12 times. This change can easily be explained by the expansion of the Internet. In the 1960s when the Internet was still an expensive and unpopular tool for communication, rarely did people get access to online communicating and dating platforms. However, for people born in the 80s and later, the Internet has been an inseparable part of their life, which largely raise the possibility of online dating and marriage establishment through the Internet.

4.3.2. The birthplace of couples

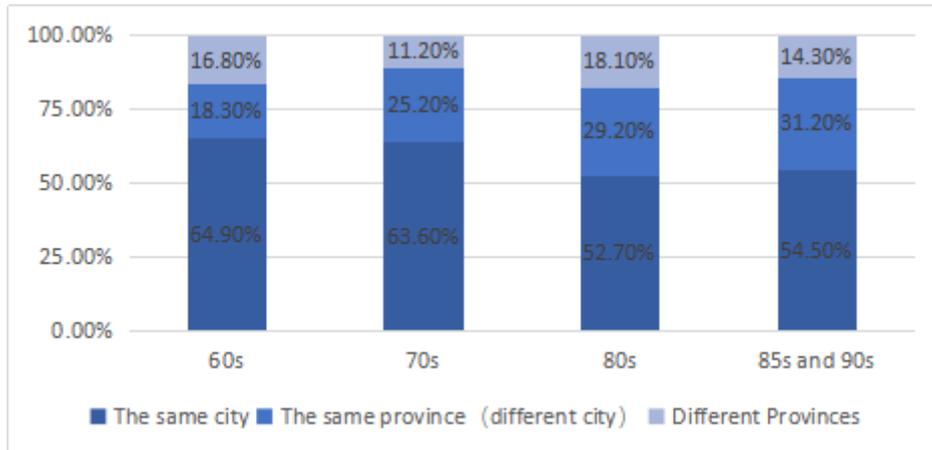


Figure 6. The birthplace of couples

The disparity of birthplace composition is delineated by figure 6. From this chart, it is easy to tell that the proportion of couples from the same city diminishes more than 10% as the generation change. At the same time, the tendency to find a partner from a different city and province is in vogue. Overall, Internet not only provides a broader platform to search for potential partners from various regions, but also breaks the restriction of geographic limitation, advocating online chat and face-to-face communication. Thus, the difference in birthplace among couples no longer is a serious

factor that affected the marital decision. However, from the figure 6, the trend of finding a partner from the same province but different cities still exists. The possible reason behind this is the recognition of geo-culture among people.

4.3.3. Change in the percentage of people who married their first love

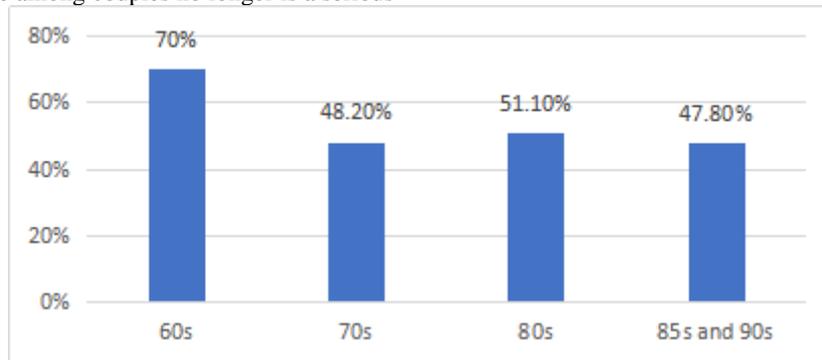


Figure 7. Percentage of people who married their first love

Figure 7 presents a negative correlation of percentage among people who married their first love as generations change, which decreases from 70% in people born in the 1960s to 47.8% in people born in the 85s and later.

This corresponds with the trend of marital decision explicated above. The convenience of online dating and the increase in the possibility of a mate can stimulate the qualified reservation of the daters with respect to potential partners. With the desire of finding a well-matching companion, people no more make do with their partnership.

5. CONCLUSION

Internet pervasively affects marriage. This paper mainly illustrates the relationship between the Internet and marital

decision in China during the digital era from several aspects. Conclusively, according to the data collected, the positive correlations between the Internet and online dating development and Internet usage and first marriage age are demonstrated by the paper. Simultaneously, the existence of intergenerational difference toward partnerships suggests that compared with the older generations, young adults are more likely to advocate the Internet-based pattern of marital decisions. However, there is also an apparent limitation in this paper. Lacking the demonstration of a causal relationship between Internet usage and first marriage age as well as the difference of marital decision and attitude intergenerationally, the paper does not validate whether the Internet usage causes the delay of first marriage age in the society and whether the widespread

of Internet leads to the intergenerational disparity. Solely based on the correlation and analysis of potential factors without, hardly can the paper prove a solid casual relation between Internet and marital decision. Hence, in future studies, I will try to testify the casual relation with regard to Internet development and marriage. It is worth noting that endogeneity factors, such as educational level, living space, and occupation, should be well controlled during that time. Also, on account of the intergenerational difference, it is worth cogitating the way to alter the conservative beliefs of the old generations, help them to follow the pace of social innovation, and share the benefits in the increasingly digital society.

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