

Population & Societies

Who uses online dating sites in France? Who finds their partner this way?

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According to a poll conducted in 2014, Internet dating sites are supposedly used by one in three adults in France. Marie Bergström shows that the facts are rather different. For the first time, analysing data from a study of individual and conjugal trajectories (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux) based on a random representative sample of the population, she provides a detailed picture of who visits dating sites in France, and how these sites are used.

Until now, dating services had never really caught on in France. While classified ads and marriage agencies have existed since the nineteenth century, their popularity has always been limited. In the mid 1980s, less than 2% of the French population aged 21-44 reported having used this type of service, and the vast majority had no intention of ever doing so.[1]

But today's online dating sites seem to have succeeded in breaking the mould. The first sites were developed in the United States in the 1990s, and since then the phenomenon has grown. Today, there are several hundred different dating sites on the Internet in France. [2] Designed to match sexual or romantic partners, these services are similar to the erstwhile system of small ads, marriage agencies and Minitel services, but with a much larger number of users. Who makes use of these services? How many people have found a partner in this way? Data from the ÉPIC survey of individual and conjugal trajectories (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux – Box 1) have been used to address these questions.

Dating sites are widely used in France

As shown by the 2006 survey on sexuality in France (Contexte de la sexualité en France, CSF), dating sites very quickly gained a foothold in the country. In that year, while only 42% of French households had Internet access, more

Box 1. The ÉPIC survey (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux)

The ÉPIC survey was conducted by INED and INSEE in 2013-2014. [3] Focusing on relationship trajectories among individuals living in France, it asked respondents about their "important romantic relationships", both present and past. A total of 7,825 persons aged 26-65 answered the survey questionnaire, and 14,699 relationships were described. The study also included a section on use of dating sites. The findings presented here are largely based on this part of the questionnaire.

than 10% of respondents had already visited a dating site. [4] These services have enjoyed rapid success, and their use has continued to increase: in 2013, 14% of persons aged 26-65 had visited a dating site (Table 1). Based on an estimation of younger users, the overall proportion of users in the 18-65 age group is around 16-18%. The figures do not show a dramatic increase in usage, but these sites are more popular in France than in other countries such as the United States, where only 9% of the over-18s had visited a dating site in 2013 (Box 2). [5]

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(1) Source: Les situations familiales, INED, 1985.

(2) Source: Statistiques sur les ressources et conditions de vie (SRCV), INSEE, 2006.

Table 1. Dating site usage by age group, 2006 and 2013 (%)

	Ages 18-25	Ages 26-30	Ages 31-35	Ages 36-40	Ages 41-45	Ages 46-50	Ages 51-55	Ages 56-60	Ages 61-65	Total ages 26-65	Total ages 18-65
2006	28	19	13	10	9	7	4	3	2	9	12
2013	(28-40)*	29	21	16	14	12	10	6	3	14	(16-18)*

Sources: CSF (INSERM-INED, 2006) and ÉPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013-2014) surveys.

Coverage: Women and men aged 18-65 in 2006 (N = 11,872); women and men aged 26-65 in 2013 (N = 7,825).

Interpretation: 19% of persons aged 26-30 had already visited a dating site in 2006, and 29% in 2013.

* The ÉPIC survey only interviewed persons aged 26 and above, so the practices of younger people cannot be observed. They are probably big users of these sites. A range of values can be estimated for this age group, with an initial “conservative” estimate assuming that usage rates at ages 18-25 have remained stable since 2006 (28% in this age group, 16% in total) and a second, more realistic estimate, assuming that usage rates have increased at practically the same rate as in other age groups (40% in this age group, 18% in total).

Box 2. Measurement and mismeasurement of online dating

The growing interest in dating sites has produced an inflationary spiral of exaggerated figures. Many attempts have been made to measure the scale of the phenomenon, and ever higher usage statistics have been cited, although they cannot generally be trusted due major weaknesses in the data collection methods used. First, the surveys are often based on online questionnaires administered to samples constructed using the quota method. This process limits representativeness, notably because intensive Internet users are over-represented, leading to overestimation of dating site users. This was the case for a poll conducted in 2014 which claimed that 34% of persons aged 18-69 had used these sites.[6] The ÉPIC survey conducted at the same time on a random and representative sample of the French population shows that the proportion is in fact only half as large (16-18% at ages 18-65 according to our estimates). Likewise, the often vague definition of “online dating” also leads to overestimation. In 2012, a widely cited study published in the United States affirmed that the Internet had become a key tool for meeting a prospective partner, accounting for 22% of heterosexual couples formed in the late 2000s. [7] However, the way in which the responses were coded tends to inflate the phenomenon. Not only does the analysis cover all sexual relationships (and not only romantic relationships), but it also considers couples whose first meeting did not occur online: even if the Internet only played a secondary role, the couple may still be coded as having “met online”. When a stricter definition is applied – considering only relationships formed via online dating sites – more modest results are obtained with the same survey data. In the United States in the late 2000s, around 9% of intimate and/or sexual relationships began on a dating website.

(a) For example, an encounter between two people who first met at university and who later got in touch again via the Internet was coded as both “met at university” and “met online”.

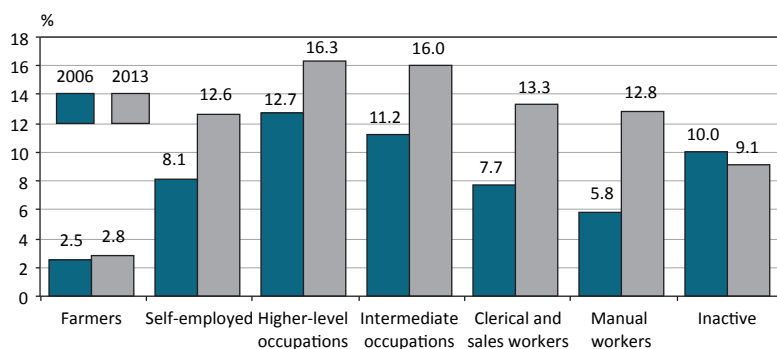
While frequent, the use of online dating sites is not yet an entirely socially accepted practice in France, however. Only half of the users surveyed readily admit to friends and family that they have registered on such a site. The others say that they do not admit this easily (28%) or only tell a selected few (21%). These dating sites challenge the idea of love as destiny and are seen as a way of meeting someone when all else fails. For these reasons, many users are reluctant to admit using them, for fear of a negative response.

A growing diversification of users

The growing number of dating site users reflects a democratization of their usage. Over time – and more specifically with the development of Internet access and the greater visibility of dating services – the population of users has grown more diverse (Figure 1). In 2006, dating sites attracted twice as many executives and persons in higher-level occupations as manual workers (13% versus 6%), but seven years later, the gap had narrowed (16% versus 13%). So while the higher social classes are still over-represented, users have become more socially diverse in recent years.

This democratization process is also reflected in users’ place of residence. While in the mid 2000s, dating sites users were mainly urbanites, from Paris especially, their geographical spread now covers the whole country. But the social diversification of users does not necessarily reflect greater social mixing. As dating sites have grown in number, they have become increasingly specialized. Sites are now highly segmented and target specific populations, such as persons of a particular age group, place of residence, social background or religious culture. [8] The democratization of dating sites is thus a “segregated democratization”.

Figure 1. Dating site usage rates by occupational category between 2006 and 2013 (%)



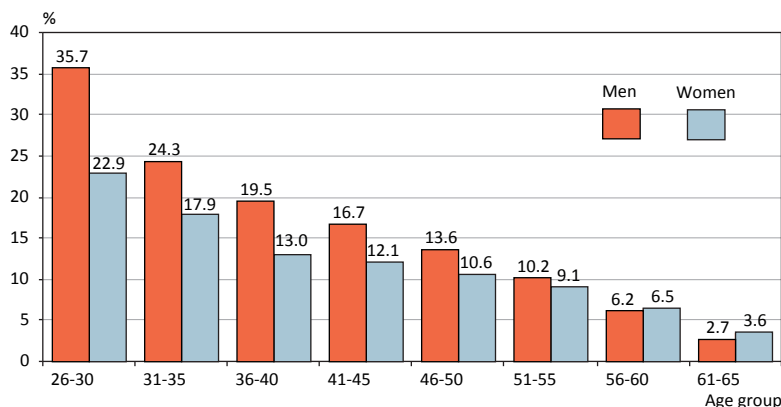
Marie Bergström, *Population & Societies* n° 530, INED, February 2016.

Sources: CSF (INSERM-INED, 2006) and ÉPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013-2014) surveys.

Coverage: Women and men aged 26-65 in 2006 (N = 9,690) and in 2013 (N = 7,825).

Interpretation: In 2006, 6% of manual workers had already visited a dating site. In 2013, the proportion was 13%.

Figure 2. Dating site usage by sex and age group, 2013 (%)



Marie Bergström, *Population & Societies* n° 530, INED, February 2016.

Sources: ÉPIC survey (INED-INSEE, 2013-2014).

Coverage: Women and men aged 26-65 in 2013 (N = 7,825).

Interpretation: 24% of men aged 31-35 report having already registered on a dating site, versus 18% of women of the same age.

Gender differences in usage

Dating sites are particularly popular among the under-30s. Young people of this generation have been socialized in a digital age and use the Internet extensively. And, above all, it is an age group that counts a high proportion of singles, especially among men, who form unions at a later age than women. For this reason, males outnumber females among users aged 26-30, with 36% of men in this age group reporting having registered on a site versus 23% of women (Figure 2). The sex ratio becomes more balanced as age increases, however. From age 46, usage

rates are similar for both sexes, while women outnumber men at the oldest ages. Late in life, more women live alone than men, and a greater proportion of women also go online to find a partner. The population of users reflects the population of singles. Far from representing a parallel market for people who would be unable to find a partner in another way, dating sites are structured by the same principles as the “traditional” market for sexual and intimate partners.

The way these sites are used also varies between the sexes. Many sites charge subscription fees, and users must pay to contact a potential partner. In many cases, only men are required to subscribe, so more men than women report having paid to use a dating site. Among dating site users, 45% of men report having paid a subscription fee, versus 18% of women. The conditions of use thus respect the traditional codes of heterosexual courtship. Both online and offline, the man is often expected to cover the cost of dating.

Only a minority of couples are formed via dating sites

While dating sites are very popular, their role in union formation is still marginal. Among persons who met their current partner between 2005 and 2013, less than 9% did so using a dating site. These sites rank fifth in the

list of places where people meet their partner during this period, behind the workplace, parties with friends, public places and in someone’s home. Contrary to a widely held belief, dating sites have not become a leading method for finding a partner in France, except for same-sex couples (Box 3).

Dating sites more often lead to casual dating than to stable relationships. Out of the population as a whole, just 2% report meeting their current partner via these sites, while 7% say they have initiated casual romantic and/or sexual relationships in this way. These sites

Box 3. Gays and lesbians often meet their partner online

For some populations, such as gays and lesbians, dating sites play a major role in couple formation. While dating sites play a marginal role compared to other forms of encounter in the heterosexual population, they are the main venue for meeting romantic partners among homosexual men and women. Among persons who met their current (same-sex) partner between 2005 and 2013, one in three did so via a dating site.

generate large numbers of encounters, some of which lead to sexual relations, but only a small proportion are of a lasting nature. This is also the general image of dating sites in France. A majority of the ÉPIC respondents agree that dating sites lead mainly to casual relationships (57%). This idea is especially current among those who have actually used these services (70%).

Romantic relationships that begin online are more often between individuals with previous experience of a union. For individuals looking for a first partner, these sites are in competition with many other options for finding a mate (school, leisure activities, parties, etc.). So many young people use these services to have fun, to flirt or to meet new people, but relatively few find a first romantic partner in this way.

Dating sites play a greater role in repartnering. Between 2005 and 2013 they accounted for just 5% of first unions, but for 10% of subsequent unions. The tendency is similar for personal ads and marriage agencies, whose services correspond more to the expectations and situations of separated or divorced persons.[9] At a time of life when the social circle is mainly made up of couples, offering few potential partners, dating sites are of specific interest as they provide opportunities to meet new sexual and romantic partners outside one's habitual social network.

Dating sites arouse curiosity, and the use of dating services is, for the first time, becoming a widespread practice in France. They have not redefined the geography of romantic encounters, however, as most couples, and first couples especially, still meet in other ways.

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Abstract

While Internet dating sites are a source of interest and curiosity, few surveys have been devoted to the phenomenon. A recent survey of individual and conjugal trajectories (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux) makes it possible for the first time to measure and characterize the use of these services in France. It reveals that while dating sites are very popular, they play only a modest role in union formation.



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