

# Final report: How Americans meet, pick and stay together with their partners

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## Introduction

Love is a mystery, but relationship probably is not. In this report, we look into various facets of romantic relationships. Specifically, we study the ways Americans couples meet, the criteria they possibly have to pick their partners, and the ups and downs of their relationships (cohabitation, marriage, cheating, and so on).

We also have a separate section devoted to online dating. As online dating penetrates into the modern dating culture, people are having mixed opinions about this new way of meeting potential partners. What is the big deal about online dating? We will see the answer at the end of the report.

## Data

How Couples Meet and Stay Together 2017 (HCMST2017) is a survey that explores how Americans couples meet and stay together. The survey has 3,510 respondents.

Generally speaking, the survey questions can be classified into three categories

- Background: gender, sexual orientation, age, years of education, etc.
- How the the person met his/her couple: when did they meet, did they meet online, at bars, or through friend connection, etc.
- Results: start time of the relationship, start time of cohabitation, time of marriage, sex besides partner, relationship quality, etc.

## How Americans meet their partners

### Partnered

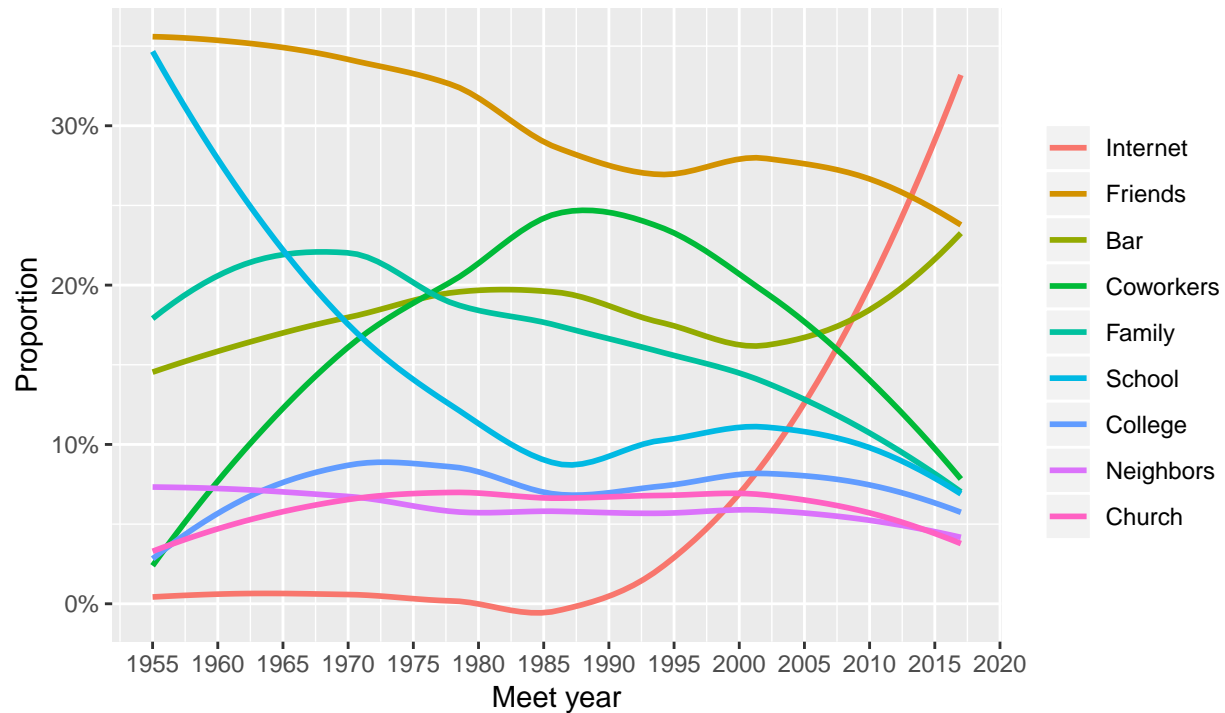
Firstly, we look at how partnered Americans meet each other and how the ways have changed over time.

We restrict our attention to heterosexual couples because there are not enough data for homosexual couples after we group them into each year.

Also, we only look at years after 1955 because there are too few heterosexual couples who met before this year.

## The changing ways Americans meet their partners (heterosexual only)

Internet has surpassed friends and bar to become the most popular source.



Source: HCMST 2017

Before the 21st century, most heterosexual people met their partners through friends. Meeting at bars or through family followed behind. Over the years, meeting through friends or family have gradually lost popularity while meeting at bars became a little more popular. By 2017, meeting at bars has been almost as popular as meeting through friends.

The 21st century witnesses the takeoff of the Internet as a platform for dating. It surpassed friends around 2013 to become the most common way heterosexual couples met and the speed of increase still seems pretty fast.

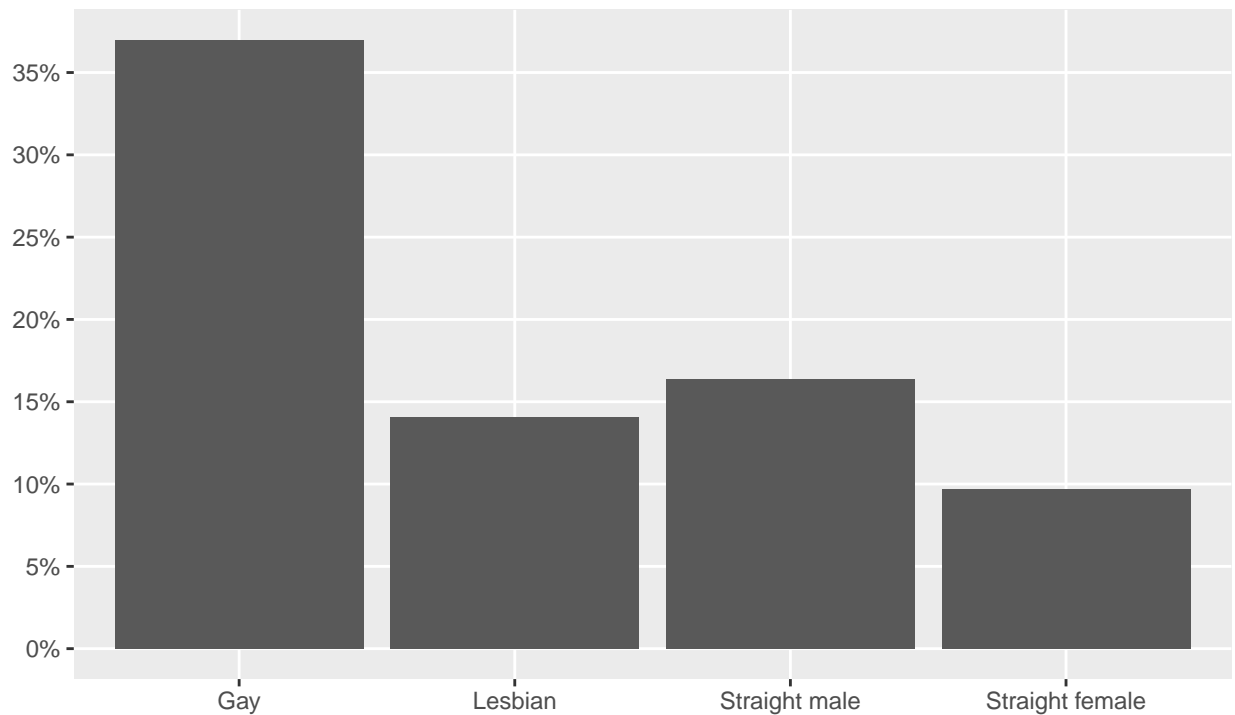
Finally, the decline of traditional ways and the surge in popularity of the Internet suggests that the Internet is replacing, rather than complementing the traditional ways heterosexual couples meet.

### Unpartnered

Now, we turn to unpartnered Americans. Instead of looking at how they meet potential partners, we look at how many of them are still actively looking for a partner.

## Percentage of uncoupled Americans that went on a date last year

### Unpartnered lesbians and heterosexuals are committed to being single



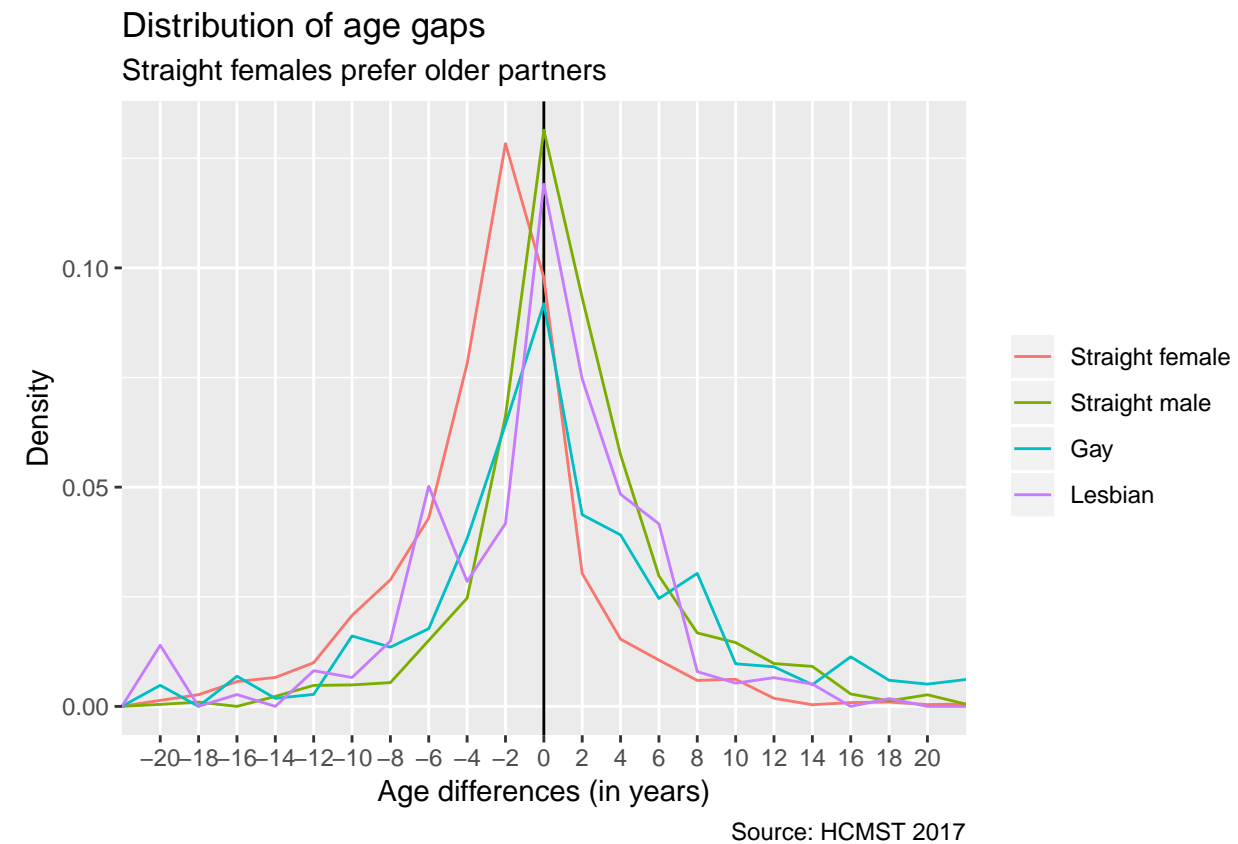
Source: HCMST 2017

Interestingly, fewer than 20% of unpartnered heterosexuals and unpartnered lesbians have gone on a date in the past year. This suggests that being single is actually a quite stable status for these groups. In contrast, unpartnered gays are much more active in seeking partners. Over 35% of them dated someone last year.

## How Americans pick their partners

In this section, we delve into how Americans choose their partners. To be more precise, we look at the attributes of the couples in the survey and try to infer the criteria they possibly have when picking partners. Let's start with age.

## Age



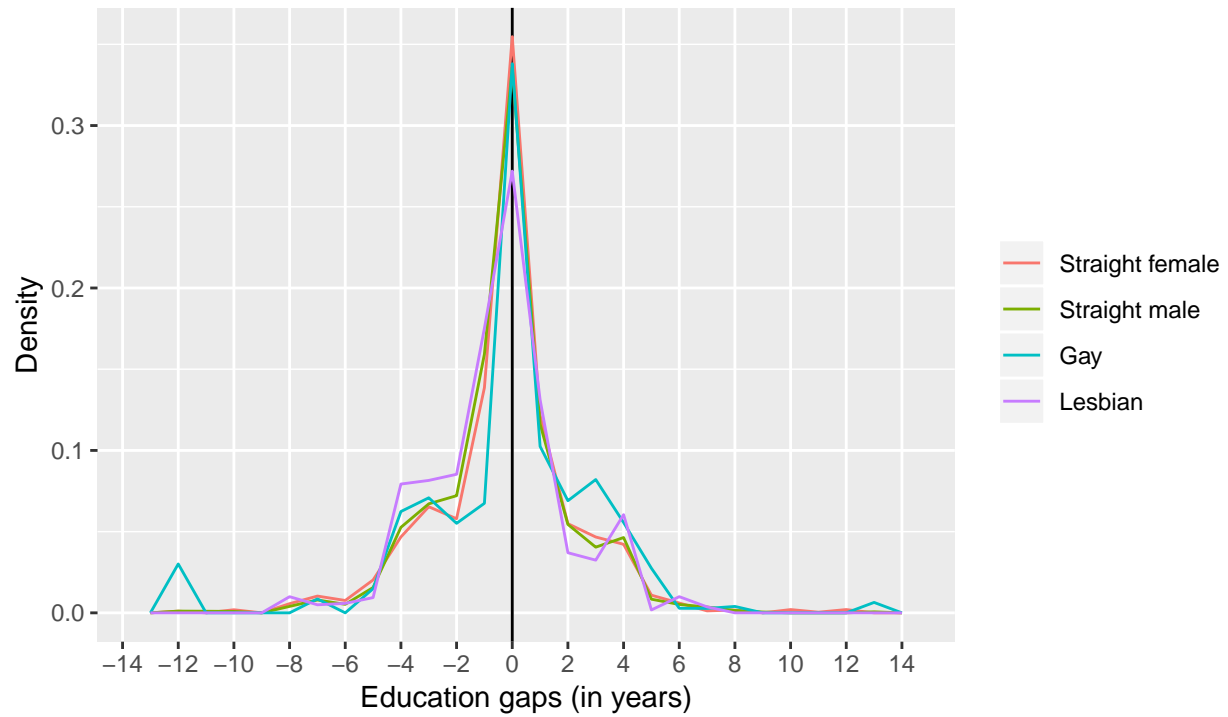
As expected, most people prefer to find partners of their own ages. However, straight females prefer to have partners that are slightly older than themselves. The distribution of age gaps is almost the same for straight males and lesbians. The distribution for gays is flatter, indicating that gays are less particular about age gaps.

## Education

Next, we move to education. To quantify education levels, we look at the years of education the person has had.

## Distribution of education gaps

People prefer equally educated partners, regardless of their identities

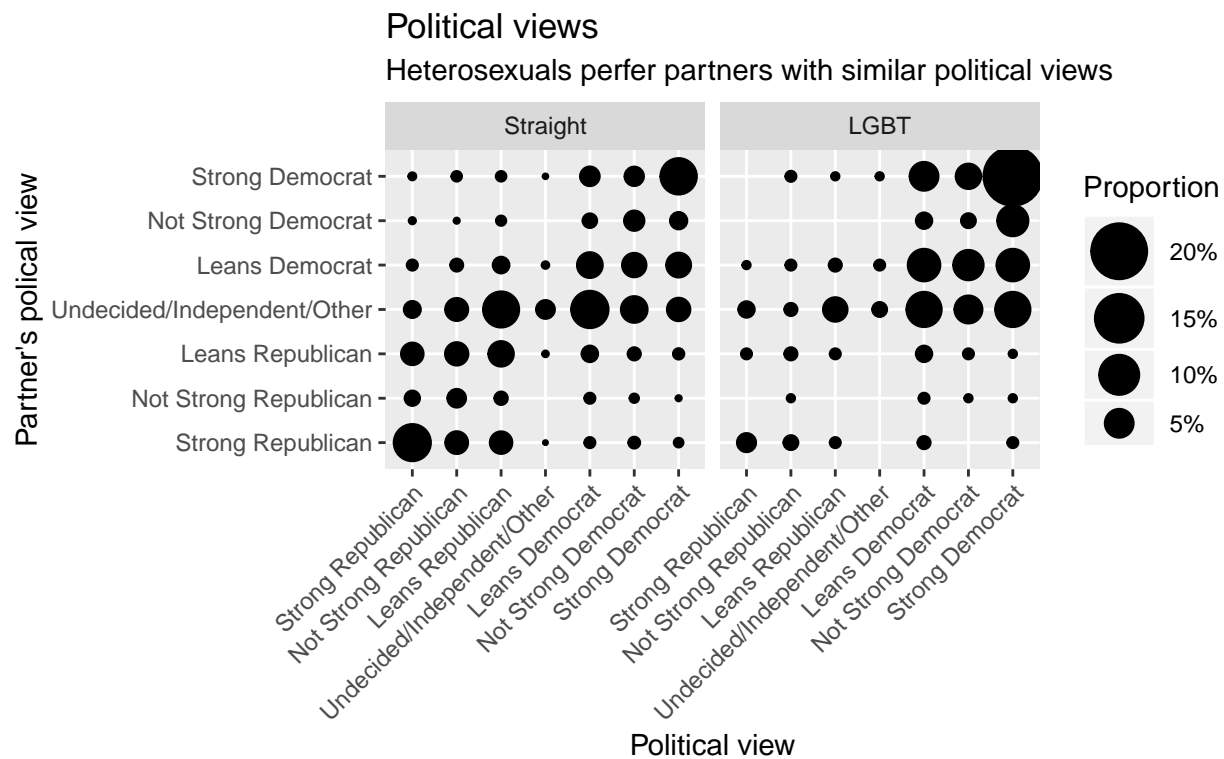


Source: HCMST 2017

Similar to age, Americans also prefer to have equally educated partners, regardless of their identities. From another perspective, people with the same years of education are more likely to go to the same university, attend similar social events and have similar jobs, which then make them more likely to meet each other.

### Political views

Lastly, we compare the political view of each respondent with that of the partner.



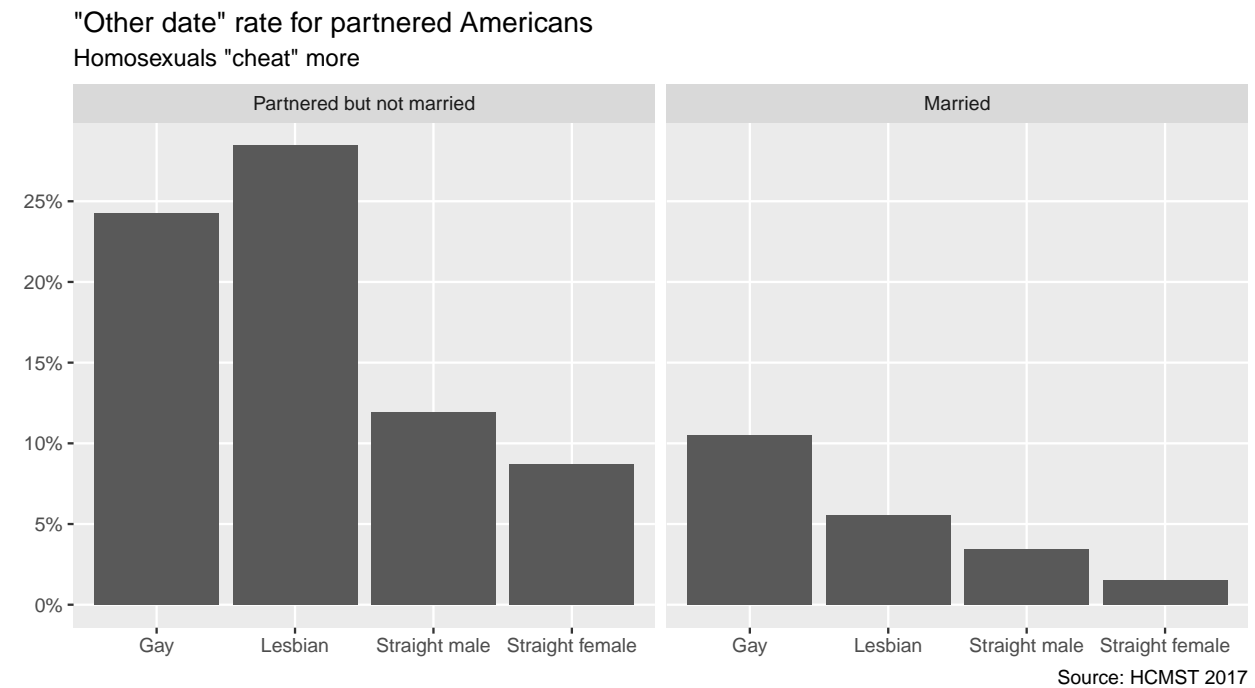
Source: HCMST 2017

We can see that heterosexuals prefer partners that have similar political views. The pattern is less clear for homosexuals. However, we can see that homosexuals are much more likely to be Democrats.

### How Americans stay together with their partners

We look at the relationships from three aspects: fidelity, quality and time spans between relationship milestones.

## Fidelity



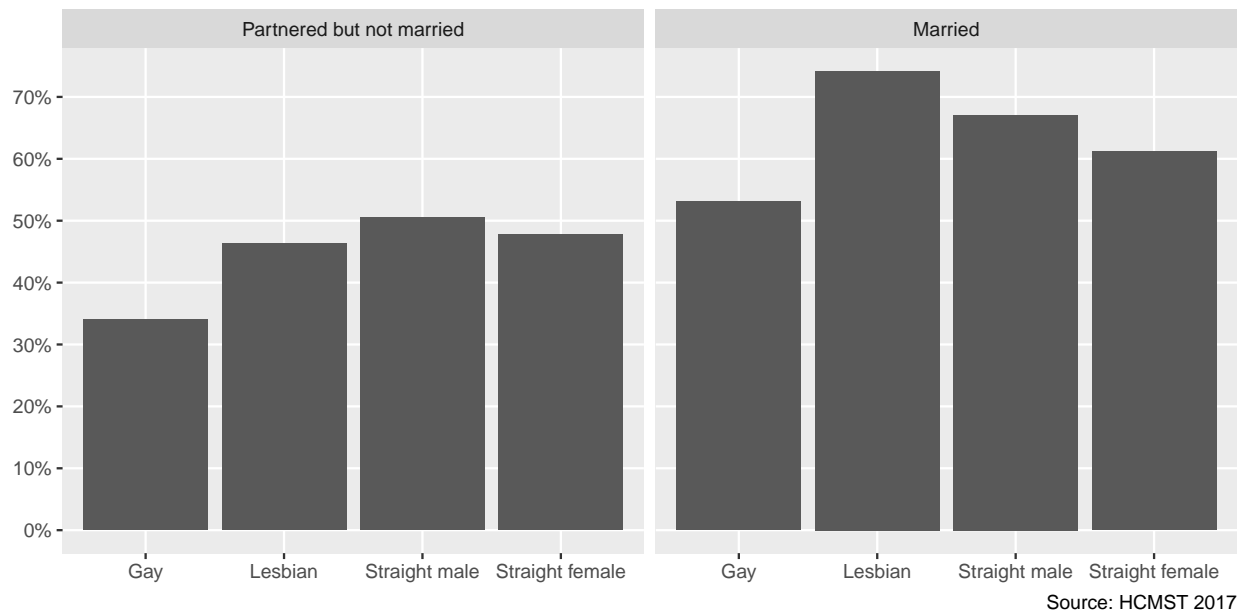
In the survey, “other date” refers to dating and hookup behavior with anyone besides their current partner in the past year. I filtered away relationships that started in or after 2016 to ensure that the relationship has been established for at least 1 year as of the survey. (The survey was conducted in May and June 2017.) Therefore, “other date” for these couples necessarily mean infidelity or nonmonogamy.

We can see a huge drop in the rate after marriage. Moreover, heterosexuals have much fewer “other dates” both before and after marriage. In contrast, homosexuals are more likely to have dates with people other than their partners. Another possible explanation is that homosexuals might be more honest about their infidelities and/or are more tolerant of nonmonogamy.

## Quality

Next, we turn to the quality of relationships. More precisely, it is the relationship quality as evaluated by the respondents.

### "Excellence" rate for partnered Americans Gays are less happy about their relationships



The “excellence” rate is defined as the proportion of people in that group that feel their relationships are in an “excellent” condition. Interestingly, as gays have more “other dates”, they are also less happy about their relationships. Next, marriage seems to be a huge transition for lesbians. There is a jump from 46% to 74% in “excellence” rate after marriage, which makes lesbians the happiest couples among all four groups. Finally, straight males seem to be happier about their relationships than straight females.

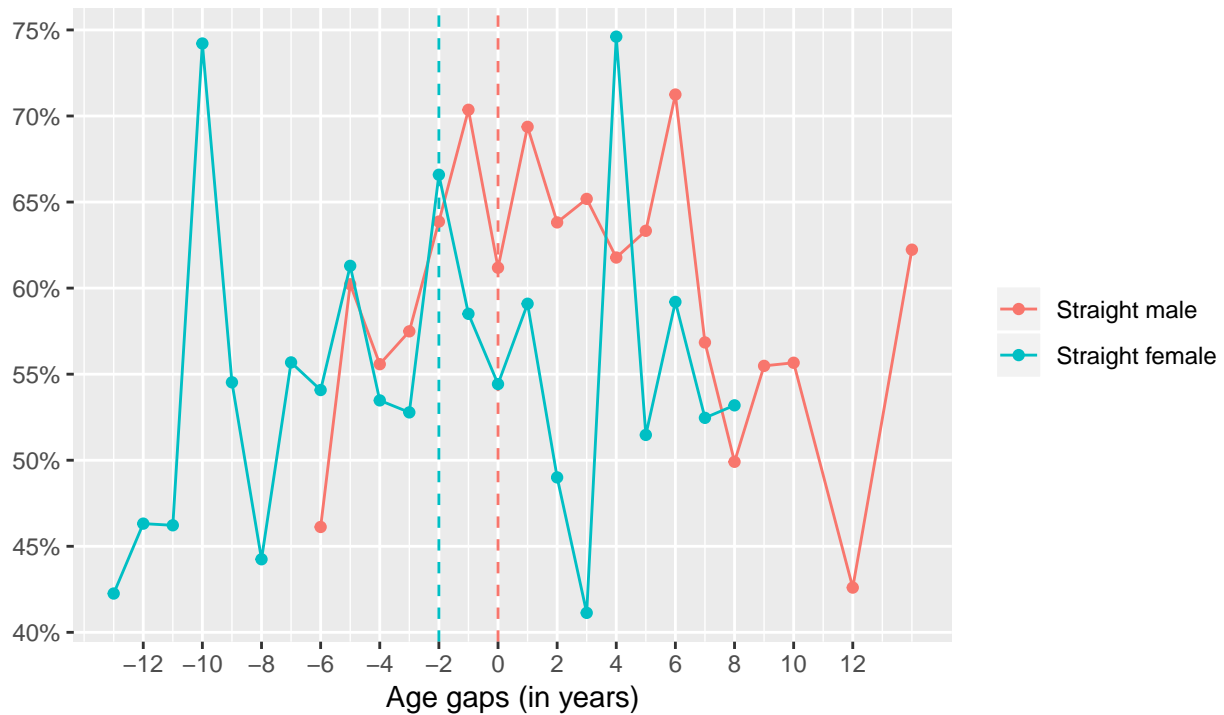
Now, we look at the common attributes shared by happy couples. Here we focus on heterosexuals as there are not enough data for homosexuals after we break them into smaller groups.

### Age gap



## "Excellence" rate for couples with different age gaps

### Males with smaller age gaps reported happier relationships



Source: HCMST 2017

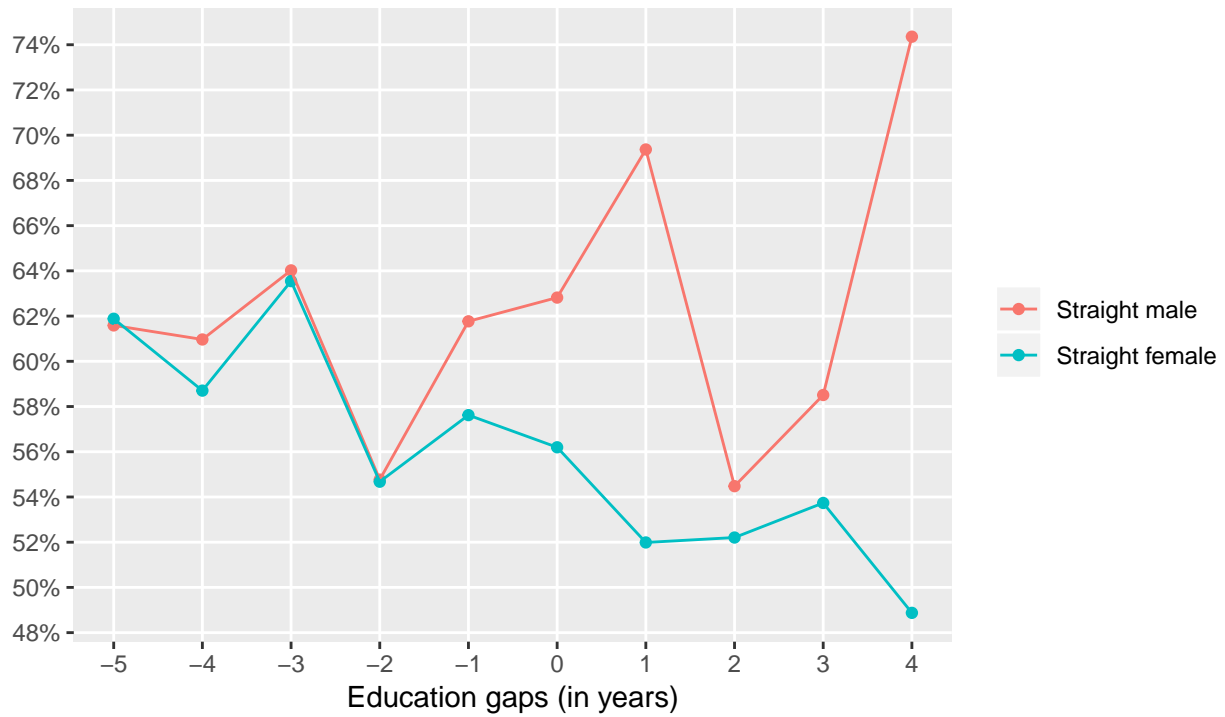
There seems to be some symmetry for both males and females. The excellence rates for straight males are symmetric around 0 (decreasing from here towards both ends) while the rates for straight females are symmetric around -2 (with a slightly more complicated trend).

For straight males, the larger the age gaps in absolute values, the less likely they would be happy about their relationships. For females, an age gap of -2 years seems to be a sweet spot. This matches with our previous conclusion that females prefer partners that are slightly older than themselves. The excellence rate decreases from here towards both ends. Interestingly, an age gap of -10 and 4 (which are both 6 years away from -2) results in surprisingly high excellence rates.

## Education gap

### "Excellence" rate for couples with different education gaps

Females with more educated partners are happier



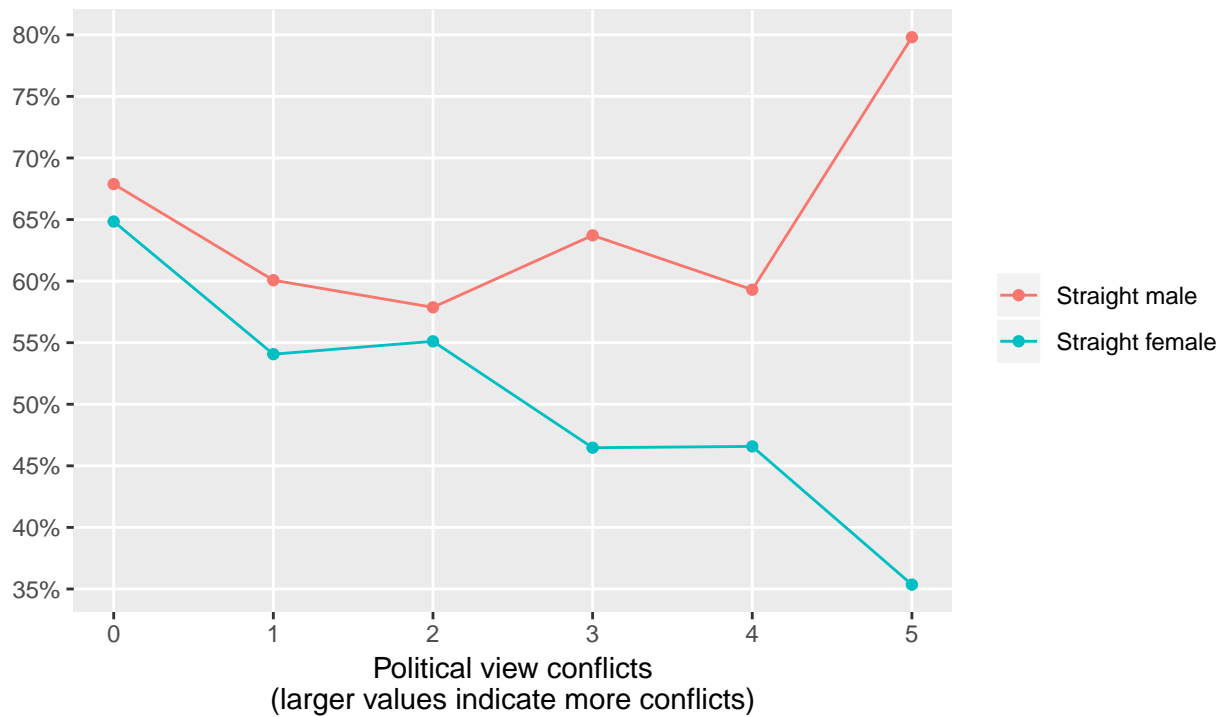
Source: HCMST 2017

The pattern for males is not quite clear. However, for females, having more educated partners (compared to themselves) brings them happier relationships.

#### Political view conflict

## "Excellence" rate for couples with different degrees of political view conflicts

Females with smaller political view conflicts reported happier relationships



Source: HCMST 2017

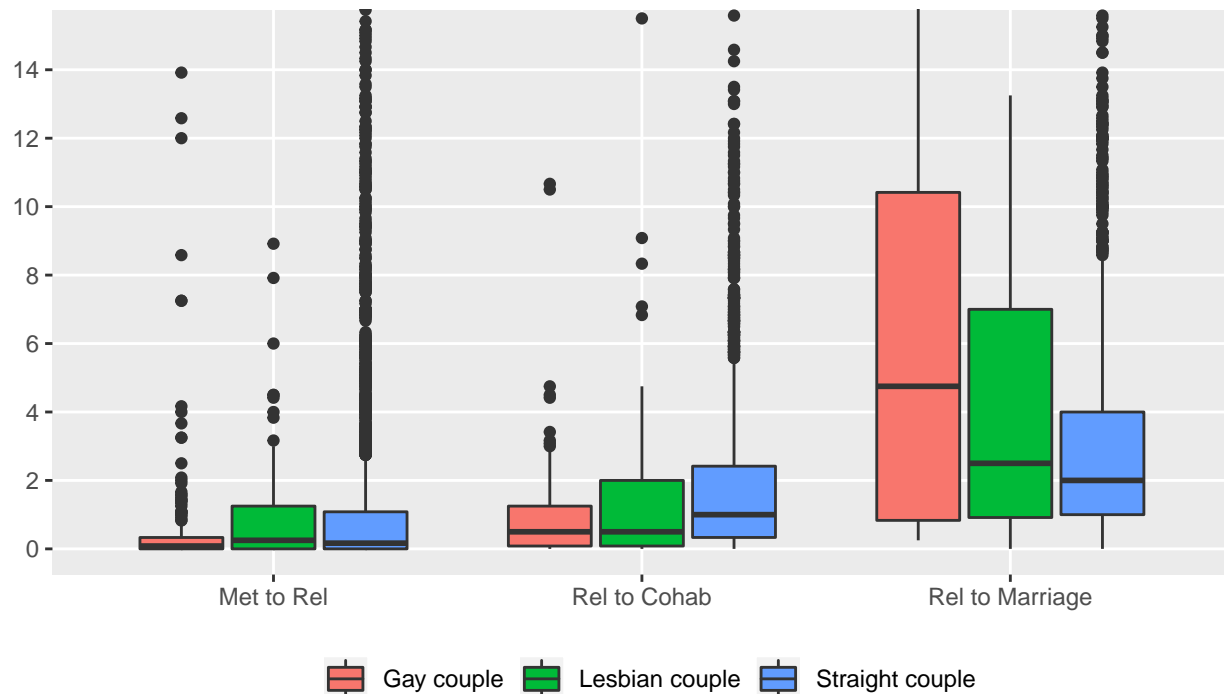
Lastly, women reported happier relationships when their partners have similar political views. The pattern is not as clear for men.

### Pace

Next, we look at the pace of relationships, or more specifically, the time spans between relationship miletones.

## Time spans between relationship milestones (in years)

Homosexual couples move to marriage much slower



Source: HCMST 2017

Gay couples are slightly faster to establish relationships and move in together than other types of couples. The most striking part of this plot is the super long time spans between relationship and marriage for gays and lesbians. This is expected, however, since same-sex marriage was not legalized until 2015.

## What's the big deal about online dating?

In the final part, we look at how online dating may (or may not) affect the relationships that developed out of it.

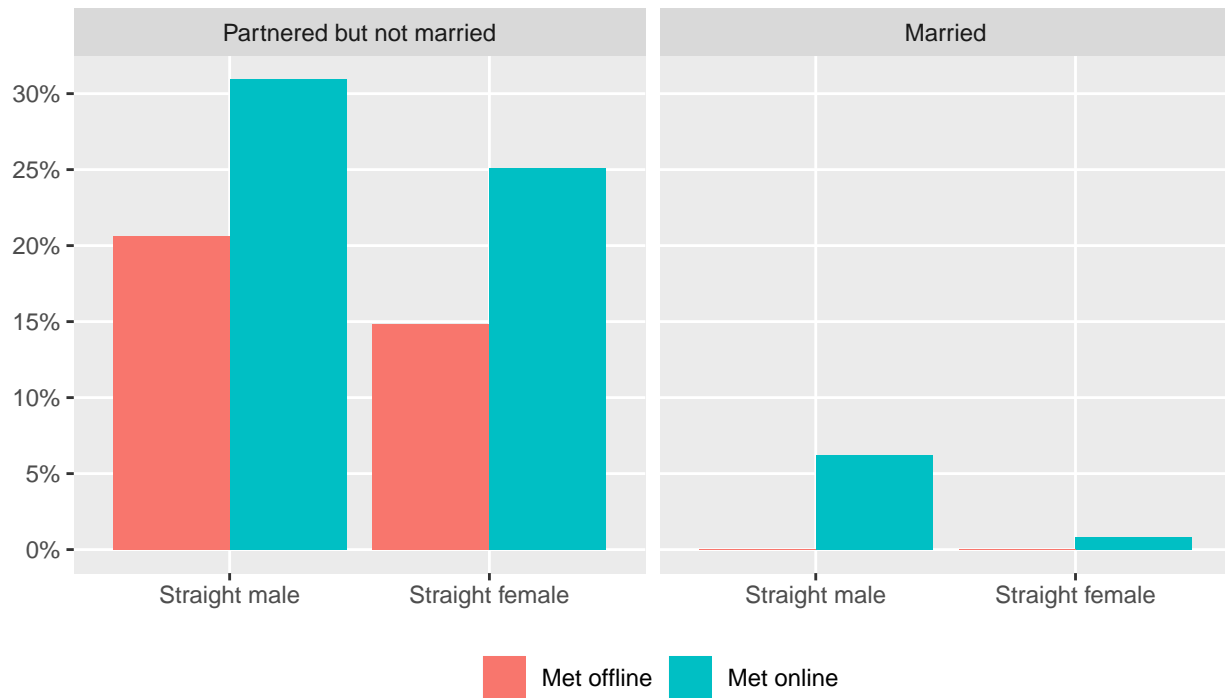
There is a common criticism that relationships formed online are “shallow and less committed”. Some researchers also point out that online dating results in faster transition into relationship and marriage. We will look into these claims.

For this entire section, we filter out relationships that started before 2010, as relationships formed online are more likely to be recent ones. Otherwise, the difference between relationships formed online versus offline might simply reflect the difference in time that these relationships started.

## Fidelity

"Other date" rate for couples that met online/offline

Couples that met online "cheat" more



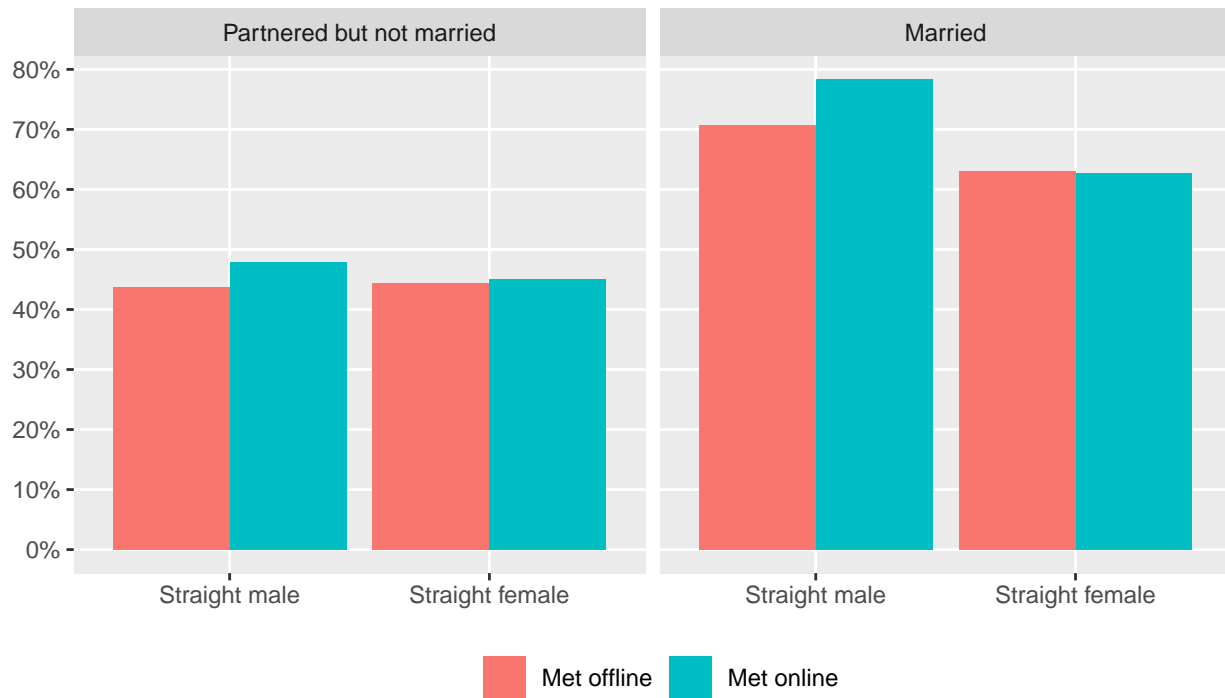
Source: HCMST 2017

In accordance with the claim that online dating results in less committed relationships, couples that met online indeed are more likely to have "other dates". Again, it is possible that those that experiment online dating are more open to talk about infidelity and nonmonogomy.

## Quality

### "Excellence" rate for couples that met online/offline

Couples that met online are slighter happier



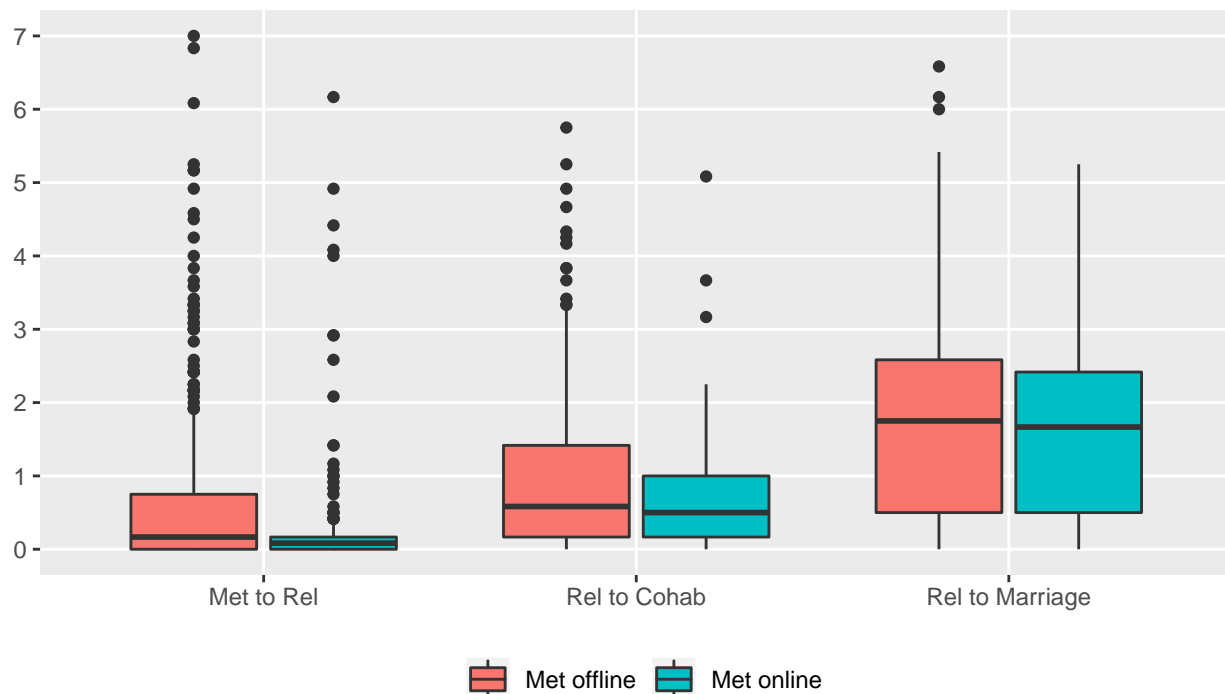
Source: HCMST 2017

Despite having higher “other date” rates, couples that met online are also more likely to have an excellent relationship. To some extent, this refutes the claim that relationships formed online are shallower.

## Pace

### Time spans between relationship milestones (in years)

Couples that met online have a slightly faster pace



Source: HCMST 2017

In terms of time spans between relationship milestones, the popular claim about online dating seems correct. Couples that met online are faster to get into relationship, move in together, and get married. It is possible that online dating endows people with a larger pool of potential partners and hence make them more likely to find their ideal match. That being said, the difference in time spans is not really huge. From this aspect, it seems that online dating and offline dating are not that different after all.

## Conclusion

In this report, we looked into how Americans meet, pick and stay together with their partners. In particular, we found out that online dating has become the most popular way Americans meet their partners. We also confirmed that people prefer to have partners of similar ages, education levels and political views. After that, we looked at the fidelity and quality of relationships, as well as the time spans between relationship milestones. We discovered that gays are more into nonmonogomy and feel less happy about their relationships. We then went on to demystify the attributes shared by good couples. In particular, age gaps matter for men (smaller age gaps are better) while education gaps and agreement in political views matter for women (more educated partners are better, fewer conflicts are better). Finally, we delved into online dating. We found out that couples that met online cheat more but also feel slightly happier about their relationships.

## References

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3. Rosenfeld, M. (2018). Are Tinder and Dating Apps Changing Dating and Mating in the USA?. In Families and Technology (pp. 103-117). Springer, Cham.