



Navigating the Dating World

National Centre for
Family Research



*The Malta Foundation
for the Wellbeing of Society*

TRENDS

A recent local study titled *Sustaining Relationships: Couples and Singles in a Changing Society* (PFWs, 2016) brought to light a number of interesting facts on relationship behaviour in Malta. This study, based on a representative sample of 2465 persons, found that two thirds of respondents were in a relationship while one third were not.

Of the 823 respondents who were not in a relationship, over two thirds gave a lack of interest as their main reason, while 15% said that they have not yet met the right person. Only 8.7% of those not in a relationship stated that they were unhappy, or very unhappy, at being single.

Reason	% of Not in relationship
Not interested	68
Have not met the right person for me	15
Have had bad luck/am afraid of relationships	5
Do not have the time/opportunity to meet anyone	5
Have not met the right person for my children	3
Caring responsibilities	1
Other	3

Reasons given for not being in a relationship

Of the remaining 1,642 respondents who were in a relationship, 73% stated that they were married and 27% stated that they were dating. Of those who dated, 6% were dating on a casual basis while 94% were dating on a committed and exclusive basis. Dating occurs across all age groups, though it decreases with age.

Age	Single %	Dating %		Married/ Civil Union %	Total
		Casual	Committed		
18 to 35	36.8	0.8	34.8	27.6	100
36 to 55	26.1	1.4	15.2	57.3	100
56 to 70	29.6	0.8	10.7	58.6	100
71 and over	52.2	0.7	7.3	39.7	100

Relationship status of study participants

When looking at dating trends by marital status, one third of all single and separated respondents were in a dating relationship. Of all marital status groups, divorced persons were most likely to date (51.7%), while the lowest proportion was among widowed persons (8.2%). Across groups, dating was significantly more likely to be of a committed rather than a casual nature.



Civil status	Not in relationship %	In a relationship %	Casual dating %	Committed dating %
Single	64.8	35.2	1.9	32.6
Divorced	48.3	51.7	0	51.7
Separated	63.7	36.3	4.6	30.9
Widowed	90.7	9.3	0.7	8.2

Relationship status according to civil status

Traditionally, the stages of dating in Malta started with a date and moved through a casual to a committed relationship to marriage. Premarital sex gradually became more common. Dating habits and stages have now changed considerably.

Data relating to students at the University of Malta show that 86.3% reported having been on a date at least once, whereas 73.3% had hooked-up at least once. The study cannot be generalised to the University population because the sample, though considerably large (408), was not random (Duca 2012).

Although we do not have local research on how young persons meet and start dating today, anecdotal evidence suggests that young people increasingly date via Instagram and sexual relations follow soon after. It is generally the man who initiates a date, though this is not always the case. The use of dating apps is increasing in Malta, especially since the launch of Tinder in 2012. Cupidok, Tumblr and Malta Singles are other popular approaches to dating, while Grindr is used by gay, bi and trans persons. Dating apps are particularly useful for older persons who have less opportunity to meet dating partners.

We do not know how often dating apps are used in Malta. In the US, 30% of adults between 18 and 29 used online dating websites (Statista 2018). We also do not know how many date with the intention of having a casual sexual encounter or a holiday fling and how many date with the intention of building a significant and meaningful relationship with a partner. In relation to this, further research on the intended use of online dating apps would also be useful.

Hooking-up includes some form of sexual activity and is typically casual and non-committal.

CHALLENGES

People seeking to date face a number of challenges today.

Rapid social change has meant that it is often the case that partners no longer share a similar vision and values about the ways in which they would like their relationship to unfold. Examples when this happens include decisions around whether or when to initiate sexual relations, whether to cohabit before marriage, whether to go for a religious or a civil wedding, or whether to postpone marriage until the birth of a child. Mutual respect, open communication and the avoidance of coercion are of enduring importance in relationships today, as is the timely seeking of help when needed.

Young people's dating behaviour also affects their family of origin, who may embrace more traditional views, and which may result in a degree of stress for all parties concerned. A number of parents today report concern about the prospect of teenage pregnancy. In 2017, 5.6% of all births in Malta occurred to teenagers, which is higher than the EU average rate of 4.9%. Changing social norms may render young women, especially those brought up in a difficult environment, more vulnerable to an unintended pregnancy at an age when they should be setting their own life on a firm foundation.

The use of social media, while offering unprecedented opportunities to meet people, may also generate a number of difficulties. The most serious among these is revenge porn, where one party to a relationship seeks to humiliate or intimidate the other by making public what should be very private details or sexually explicit images of their partner. This has been linked to various suicides across countries. In Malta, as in many other jurisdictions, revenge porn is punishable by imprisonment and fines. Dating apps, too, may carry a dark side, where persons may present misleading profiles, abuse of people's privacy, toy with others' emotions, or disappear at regular intervals or permanently. An ethics of online dating needs to be developed and widely promoted.

Couples also face financial challenges. Changes in the housing market are having an impact on the development of relationships today. In earlier years,

buying an apartment together generally happened when the relationship was well into its commitment stage. Today, this is happening increasingly early on in a relationship, possibly linked to increasing house prices and the difficulty of buying property alone, along with the fact that monthly loan repayments are more manageable the younger you are. The impact of this increased financial responsibility on the dating relationship merits further study.

Getting engaged is still considered to be an important life event in the relationship of a couple, and is given a lot of importance on social media among young couples. Typically, most committed relationships move on to marriage, which often entails very expensive wedding preparations resulting in another hefty financial outlay for many couples.

Unfortunately, there are a number of research gaps about dating behaviour in Malta and we rely on anecdotal data on a wide range of topics, such as:



RESEARCH GAP 1

- Dating patterns across the lifespan looking at the dating behaviours and trajectories of teenagers, younger and older adults, from the perspective of all genders. This would include decisions around the initiation of sexual intercourse and contraception, as well as the move to formalise one's relationship and the financial challenges that this brings with it. Following the finding that adequate income is a predictor for relationship wellbeing (PFWS 2016), it would be interesting to research whether financial considerations dictate the stages of dating.

RESEARCH GAP 2

- Different dating styles of separated, divorced and widowed persons, with a special focus on how blended families are formed.

RESEARCH GAP 3

- The use of social media for dating purposes and the prevalence of dating apps across age groups and gender, including the intended use of such media and the outcome of such use.

RESEARCH GAP 4

- Dating abuse including cyber abuse is also an area that merits to be explored locally, not least because of the implications it has for policy and practice.

RESEARCH GAP 5

- Inter-faith relationships are a growing reality among young people. This trend deserves further research in order to inform policy.



FURTHER RESEARCH ON DATING TRENDS MENTIONED IN THE SECTION ABOVE WOULD HELP TO INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE.

Relationship education needs to be developed further and made more widely available, in an age-appropriate manner. Such education should help partners develop the necessary skills to nurture healthy relationships, and promote mutual respect, clear communication and problem-solving. It should also help partners to recognise unhealthy relationships and develop the appropriate skills to leave such relationships where necessary.

Further research evidence could also contribute to a revision of the 2013 guidelines for sex education in schools.

Guidelines on the safe use of dating apps should be made widely available. Specialist support for those who have experienced cyberabuse should be made available and easily accessible.

Practitioners need to be offered continuous professional development on supporting healthy relationships, and provided with training on evidence-based intervention with couples.

Consideration should be given to providing specialist financial counselling to couples as they plan their future together.

Useful resources

LOCAL ORGANISATIONS

CANA MOVEMENT

Catholic Institute
St Publius Street
Floriana FRN1441
Tel 2223 8000

www.canamovement.org

HERE ARE SOME USEFUL WEBSITES THAT OFFER ADVICE

For online articles about various aspects of relationships, see these sites:

PSYCHCENTRAL

https://psychcentral.com/lib/category/relationships?_ga=2.225500186.1037465865.1573752323-2092078036.1573752323

PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/relationships>

THE GUARDIAN

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/28/six-new-dating-terms-you've-never-heard-of>

LOVIN MALTA

<https://lovinmalta.com › lifestyle › the-pros-and-cons-of-online-dating-in-Malta/>

For a useful resource that provides guidance on how to date safely online see

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO ONLINE DATING
<https://us.norton.com/internetsecurity-privacy-ultimate-guide-online-dating.html>

For an interesting podcast on dating apps listen to

https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/ukcp-news/podcasts/talking-therapies-dating-apps-finding-love-in-the-21st-century/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=newsupdate&utm_campaign=081119

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Here are some useful sites that offer advice and support on various relationship aspects:

RELATE

<https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help>

RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA

<https://www.relationships.org.au/relationship-advice/relationship-advice-sheets>

TWO OF US

<http://www.twoofus.org/home/dating-advice/>

LOVE IS RESPECT

<https://www.loveisrespect.org/>

LOVE AND LIFE TOOLBOX

<https://loveandlifetoolbox.com/>

USEFUL BOOKS

EIGHT DATES: ESSENTIAL CONVERSATIONS FOR A LIFETIME OF LOVE

A useful and enjoyable book written by scholars with a lifetime of experience of what makes relationships work.
By J. Gottman et al., 2019.

COUPLE SKILLS: MAKING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WORK

By M. McKay, P. Fanning and K. Paleg, 2006

MINDFUL RELATIONSHIP HABITS

By S. Scott and B. Davenport, 2018

THE LOVE SECRET

By S. Johnson, 2014

HOLD ME TIGHT

By S. Johnson, 2011

ATTACHED: THE NEW SCIENCE OF ADULT ATTACHMENT AND HOW IT CAN HELP YOU FIND - AND KEEP - LOVE

By A. Levine and R. Heller, 2012