



# Love and Belonging: How Immigrants Find Romantic Partners in Canada

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Research brief prepared by Capri Kong



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## Key Ideas

- **Immigrants are 56% more likely than Canadian-born individuals to use online dating.** Moving to a new country often starts with limited access to local networks, so immigrants seek other ways to meet potential partners.
- Online dating helps connect immigrants and Canadian-born individuals. **Immigrants who use online dating report a higher rate of partnering with people born in Canada compared to those using offline channels.**
- **Immigrant men are more successful in partnering with Canadian-born women through online dating than through offline channels.** Online platforms allow users to meet more people, which can facilitate interactions across ethnic and language groups and mitigate barriers that limit offline connections.

## Recommendations

- **Immigrant-serving organisations should promote digital integration to help immigrants build connections with Canadian communities.** Online dating can encourage cross-cultural exchanges, reduce social distance, and foster a sense of belonging.
- Current integration policies and services primarily focus on economic incorporation. This overlooks how relationships help with integration. **Government integration policies should also fund programs to help immigrants build new social relationships.**

Traditional dating channels often reinforce homogamy, matching partners from similar backgrounds. In contrast, online dating leads to more inter-nativity partnerships, where one partner was born in Canada and another was born elsewhere.

A sense of belonging—a feeling of being at home—is often tied to settling down, forming relationships, and building a family. This can be particularly difficult for immigrants. They leave friends and family in their home countries to rebuild lives in new countries. Some immigrants also want to find romantic partners in their new homes. How do immigrants meet people, find love, and cultivate a sense of belonging in Canada?

This is the question that Dr. Yue Qian, Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia and CMS affiliate, asked when she did research on the dating experiences of immigrants and people born in Canada. She compared traditional dating channels—meeting people at school, work or through established networks—with online dating platforms. She found that traditional dating channels often reinforce homogamy, matching partners from similar backgrounds. In contrast, online dating leads to more inter-nativity partnerships,<sup>1</sup> where one partner was born in Canada and another was born elsewhere.

**Note:** In this brief, “nativity” refers to whether a person was born in Canada (“Canadian-born”) or born outside of Canada (“foreign-born” or “immigrant”).

## Key Findings

### Immigrants Meet Locals Online

It is not always easy to find someone special. Before online dating, people typically met romantic partners through traditional, offline channels. These channels usually take place through formal institutions like schools or workplaces, or through people's existing social networks. Often, these networks are built on shared interests and backgrounds, such as similar hobbies or upbringings. As a result, these offline channels for finding love tend to reinforce homogamy, that is, pairing people with similar education levels or cultural backgrounds.

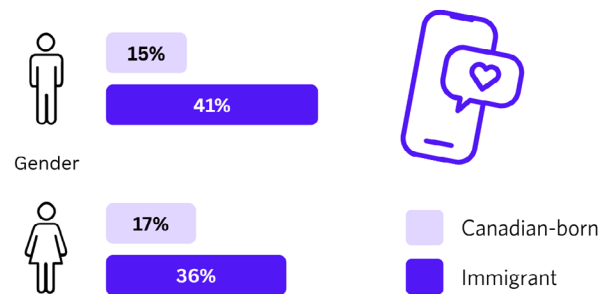
Online platforms, on the other hand, open the door to meeting a broader and more diverse pool of potential partners.<sup>2</sup> Some people worry that the search and filtering capabilities of online dating platforms could reinforce homogamy.<sup>3</sup> However, Qian's research finds evidence for diversity: online dating can promote inter-nativity partnerships, bringing together individuals born in Canada and those from other birthplaces. She discovered that 36% of couples who met online included one Canadian-born partner and one from elsewhere, while only 24% of couples who met through offline channels did.

### Bridging Gaps with Dating Apps

In fact, more immigrants use online dating than Canadian-born individuals. Qian asked 1,700 adults in Canada about their romantic relationships. She found that 38% of immigrants and 16% of Canadian-born individuals had used online dating. There were also some small gender differences: 41% of immigrant men and 36% of immigrant women had used online dating, compared to only 15% of Canadian-born men and 17% of Canadian-born women.<sup>4</sup> Even taking into account factors such as age, education and where they live, immigrants are still 56% more likely to use online dating than Canadian-born individuals.

Why are immigrants more likely to use online dating? Immigrants often have a harder time finding a partner in new countries. Immigrants generally do not have the established social network of those born in Canada and may be less familiar with local dating customs,<sup>5</sup> putting them at a disadvantage in the dating scene. Online dating apps can bridge these gaps by providing immigrants with more opportunities to be matched with Canadian-born individuals, since these platforms often feature a wide and diverse range of people. These meeting opportunities not only help immigrants to find partners but can also promote cultural exchanges and foster connections across cultural boundaries. Immigrants can learn about local cultural norms and dating practices while also sharing their own perspectives and experiences with Canadian-born individuals. Such exchanges can reduce the social distance between immigrants and Canadian-born individuals and facilitate immigrants' integration into Canadian society.

### Who uses online dating apps?



Data shown includes only those identifying as male or female and reporting heterosexual dating, as outlined in Qian (2022).

**Figure 1.** Online Dating App Usage by Nativity and Gender (Source: Qian 2022)

### Navigating Gender and Nativity Stereotypes

Qian's research reveals a bit of a paradox: immigrant men are the most likely to use online dating, but they are the least likely to form long-term relationships through these platforms. Indeed, only 29% of immigrant men reported that they formed a long-term relationship through online dating, which is much lower compared to 48% of Canadian-born men, 42% of Canadian-born women, and 41% of immigrant women.

What is causing this gap? Qian suggests that the answer lies partly in gender and nativity stereotypes against immigrant men. For example, disparities in wealth between Canada and some developing countries can lead to negative impressions of immigrant men's education and financial status. Traditional gender expectations can still play a role—many women are encouraged to “marry up” when it comes to education, status, and income, which poses challenges for some immigrant men in their search for partners. On top of that, immigrant men are often perceived as “unacculturated” or not fitting in, especially if they struggle with English, may not share the same sense of humour, or are not familiar enough with popular cultures in Canada.<sup>6</sup> These nativity stereotypes make immigrant men less desirable in the Canadian dating market. While immigrant men are still less likely to be successful in online dating than other groups, those who have formed relationships online highlight opportunities for breaking down stereotypes to bring immigrants and Canadian-born individuals together.

### Methods

This research draws on data from a 2018 national phone survey of 1,700 adults in Canada, including both immigrants and Canadian-born individuals, who were asked about their romantic relationships. The analysis focused on heterosexual relationships and used statistical models incorporating education, race, place of birth, and age.

## Conclusion

Online dating is more than just a way to find love: it is a channel for immigrants to build a sense of home and belonging. These platforms help immigrants build meaningful connections with diverse members of Canadian society and also learn and adapt to local cultures. Although online dating creates opportunities for inter-nativity partnerships, more efforts are still needed to reduce online bias and cultivate more space for cross-cultural connections.

Immigrant-serving organisations should promote digital integration to help immigrants build connections with Canadian communities. Online dating can be leveraged to facilitate cross-cultural exchanges, reduce social distance, and foster a sense of belonging. Belonging has multiple dimensions. Current integration policies and services primarily focus on economic incorporation. This overlooks how relationships help with integration. Governmental programs for immigrant settlement should incorporate community-building and relationship-development into integration policies.

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