

LOVE (AND SEX) IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA



The world's

biggest

erogenous
zone





Romance and sex used to be private and shrouded in mystery: i.e., practiced behind closed doors. Back in the early days of popular novels, moralists warned that romantic fiction would put dangerous ideas into people's heads, inflame their imaginations and stoke lewd desires. Once moving pictures became a popular pastime, the same strictures were applied to them. The U.S. Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code) presented strict guidelines on the subject, including: "excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown" and "in general, passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element."¹ Similar moral impulses tried to tone down the performances of hip-swiveling Elvis "The Pelvis" Presley in the 1950s; his hip gyrations were just too much, too much.

Oh, if those moralists of yore could only see us now...

In free societies, no amount of moralizing could hold back the tide of what people respond to. Mass media have made romance, lust and love normal parts of everyday life. Through several generations now, hundreds of millions of people all round the world have had mass-media heartthrobs to fall in love with. Books, magazines, movies, songs, radio and TV have exposed us all to different ideas—"memes"—about what's normal and what's possible in intimate relationships.

Traditional media, subject to the limits of legislation and distribution, have been somewhat controllable. But the Internet? That's a whole 'nother story. The Internet gives everyone everywhere pretty much unrestricted access to any imaginable aspect of intimate relationships. Virtually any romantic or erotic content an individual might imagine is on the Internet and can be found with just a few clicks. And now social media gives people instant access not only to romantic and erotic content, but also to each other.

It's often said that the mind is the biggest erogenous zone of the body. In that case, the Internet is the most powerful erogenous zone the world has ever known. Novels, movies, music and TV were just a foretaste of the impact the Internet has had already (and will have in the future) on intimate relationships, on relationships more generally—and beyond that, on the way we live our lives.

In this paper we look at five key aspects of how Americans think about online romance through the prism of an online survey of 1,000 Americans online, carried out for Euro RSCG in January 2011.



OBSERVING LOVE ONLINE



Regular use of the Internet has got many of us wondering about one of the favorite themes of philosophers and science fiction, from Buddha and Plato to *The Matrix*: What is reality? The difference being that in this case it's not just a head-in-the-clouds academic issue—it's a real, live practical question for ordinary people every day. The language we use reveals the confusion, as we make a distinction between things happening on the Internet and things happening "in real life."

So are things people do online "real," "unreal"—or something else?

There are some cases that are beyond discussion: Breaking a leg or catching a sexually transmitted disease in "real life" has far more tangible consequences than getting hurt or infected in a virtual world (although computer viruses can be devastating). But in other areas the lines are not so clear. Many different "real life" products and activities can migrate partially or wholly online—not just books, music and movies, but also medical consultations, education, jobs, careers and even warfare.

The more people become used to spending time online, the more normal it feels to be seeking out important things in life online as well as offline. That includes love in all its forms. In fact, the increasing scope for interactions online is forcing us to expand our notions of what the word "love" means.

What’s called “love” in books and songs and movies and conversation is hard to pin down. It’s actually a whole range of feelings and relationships: “Eros” (lustful erotic love); “Mania” (obsessive love); “Lludus” (conquests and deception); “Storge” (natural affection); “Philos” (friendship love); “Pragma” (practical love) and “Agape” (spiritual love).²

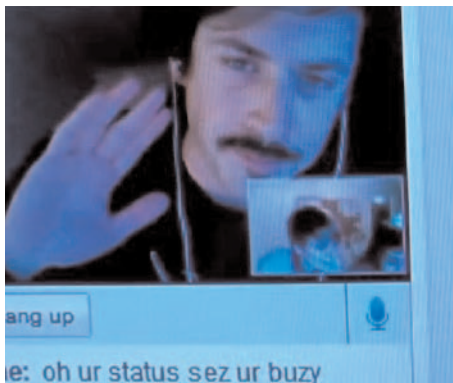
At first glance, it seems most of these types of love require physical proximity, but on further consideration, maybe they don’t after all. Perhaps some—or even most—types of love can transpire online. As people become more adept at online interactions, and more online tools become available, some of these forms of love will grow as naturally online as they have done offline.

“The increasing scope for interactions online is forcing us to expand our notions of what the word ‘love’ means.”



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **It’s possible to have a romantic relationship with someone on the Internet.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108
	41%	28%	29%	46%	37%	29%	21%	52%



Plenty of Americans think that it’s possible to have a romantic relationship with someone on the Internet—overall one third agree (34 percent). There’s a big difference between men and women (41 percent versus 28 percent), which indicates that more women than men need a physical connection to make the romance work for them. There’s a clear generational difference, too; the younger the cohort, the more of them see online romantic relationships as possible. And even 21 percent of Matures see the possibility.



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **It’s possible to have an erotic relationship with someone on the Internet.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108
	39%	27%	26%	43%	36%	29%	21%	53%



“More women than men need a physical connection to make the romance work for them.”

There’s very little difference in the percentages of respondents who see the possibility for erotic relationships online, with 33 percent agreeing overall. Prosumers are far more likely to see the possibility for both romantic and erotic relationships.



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **I know somebody whose relationship started with online interactions.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108
	49%	52%	47%	66%	57%	43%	26%	80%



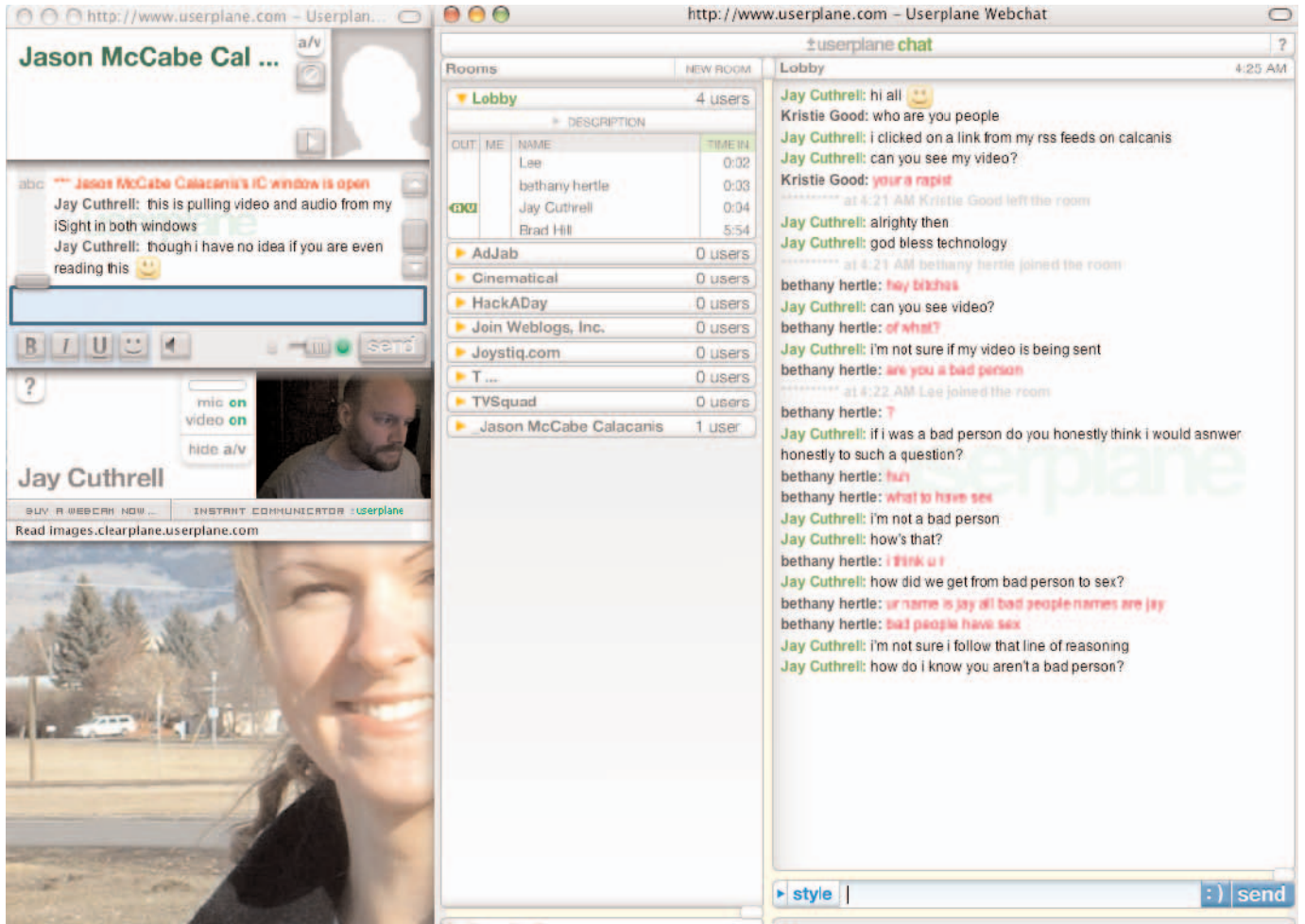
Love online - Agreement with the statement: **Online dating has become normal/mainstream.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108
	53%	55%	49%	65%	60%	47%	30%	69%

The real impact is where online and offline mix—where one leads to the other. Overall, half the sample (50 percent) knows somebody whose relationship started with online interactions, and more than half (53 percent) think online dating has become normal/mainstream. There’s a clear generational gradient here, as well: The younger the cohort, the more the agreement. Impressive proportions of Boomers (43 percent) and Matures (26 percent) know somebody whose relationship started with online interactions.



EXPERIENCING LOVE ONLINE



A lot of the resistance and hostility to activities online stems from lack of familiarity with the technologies, the interfaces and the modes of interacting. Online is a new and different space with different cultural norms that we have to learn and adapt to, just as we learn and adapt to the culture of a new town, a new company or a new social set.

We have all seen media pieces about what people do on the Internet (and now we have seen the back story, too, via *The Social Network*). But as much as we've heard other people talking about it, it's all hearsay and theory until we have experienced it for ourselves. It's when personal experience comes into the equation that consumers become active and energized, exploring for themselves, swapping tips with friends and driving the online activity that translates into big shifts in behavior.

“More men than women engage in online flirting—or at least admit to it.”



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **I have flirted with somebody online.**

	Men	Women	Married	Gen Y	Gen X	Boomers	Matures	Prosumers
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108

39%	23%	18%	49%	37%	22%	8%	51%
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Not everybody starts out as a vocal, prolific poster of online comments. For many people the first big challenge in social networking online is venturing to say anything at all in spaces where there may be strangers and it's not possible to read other people's mood and reactions easily. Then, once people get comfortable with basic online interactions, they move on to the sort of interactions that are a little riskier even offline, let alone online: joking, arguing and flirting.

More men than women engage in online flirting—or at least admit to it; a substantial 39 percent of men in the survey say they have flirted with somebody online, compared with a more modest 23 percent of women. The question is whether the gap between the two would be wider or narrower in face-to-face interactions. For women, one big plus of flirting online is that there's less physical risk if things get out of hand.

Not surprisingly, the frequency of this online behavior correlates with age; the younger the cohort, the more they have flirted online. Still, it's impressive that 8 percent of Matures have flirted online, too.



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **I have experienced strong feelings of attraction for somebody online.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108

26% 14% 12% 30% 23% 15% 9% 35%

For people unfamiliar with or skeptical of online interactions, it may be hard to imagine feeling anything much for someone in whose physical presence you have never been (and may never be). However, as people interact online, feelings are stirred up. And why not? It's not at all unusual for people to have strong feelings about other people they'll never meet in person, such as popular actors, musicians and authors, so why not people online with whom you're able to have an actual conversation?

More than a quarter of men (26 percent) and 14 percent of women say that they have experienced strong feelings of attraction for somebody online.

The fact that even 9 percent of the Matures have experienced strong feelings of attraction for somebody online indicates that what happens on the Internet can put a twinkle in older eyes, too.



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **I have had a romantic, sexual or erotic relationship online.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108

22% 12% 12% 24% 22% 10% 7% 32%

“Engaging in relationships online may risk making people less available for relationships with people close to them.”



One thing that makes social media crucially different from traditional media is the potential for interactions with real people. People have always felt strongly attracted to remote figures in books, in pictures or TV and movie screens. In most cases it's not regarded as unusual for people of any age to "have a thing" about some media figure who is, for all practical purposes, purely virtual; it's one-way only.

Now with social media, a similar phenomenon is happening—except that it's two-way. The parties interact; they respond to each other. It may well be less concrete and "real" than meeting a person in the same physical space, but it's more of a real relationship than is possible with a celebrity.

A solid 22 percent of the men and 12 percent of the women say they have had a romantic, sexual or erotic relationship online.



THE EFFECTS OF LOVE AND SEX ONLINE



Hundreds of millions of people are now using the Internet as a tool for living, or rather as a whole range of tools for different aspects of life. As the great media and communications theorist Marshall McLuhan observed, “We become what we behold. We shape our tools, and then our tools shape us.” And true to McLuhan’s statement, consumers are finding that online services can be shaped into great tools to meet their various “love” needs to some degree: connection, interaction, recognition and affection, not forgetting arousal and passion. Many in today’s world are concerned about the ways in which these tools seem to be shaping the users.

Front and center of these worries is pornography, known euphemistically as “adult content,” although “adult” is a moot point: Many sites boast “barely legal teens,” and teenage boys are widely identified as big consumers of porn. As former AOL editor-in-chief Jesse Kornbluth commented: “Porn and teenage boys have been inseparable since the beginning of time. The Internet offers more extreme porn than the airbrushed *Playboy* images I grew up on, but that’s not a reason to get unduly riled. I’m much more concerned about porn and adult males, many of whom seem to use it as a substitute for real relationships. Substitution quickly becomes distance, and distance becomes an unbridgeable chasm—and the porn-obsessed masturbator develops an unhealthy view of sex and women.”³

According to Gizmodo, 40 million Americans are regular visitors to porn sites and one third of visitors are women; 25 percent of search engine requests are pornographic and 35 percent of downloads are pornographic.⁴

Clearly, there’s a lot of sexual content being consumed, so we can expect the effects to be reflected in at least some of our large representative sample.

“Social media has lessened the time, money and effort of searching for partners and increased the likely success rate.”



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **Discussions on the Internet have influenced how I think about sex.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **Images on the Internet have influenced how I think about sex.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108



Both discussions and images of sex on the Internet have influenced men more than women, but images have a bigger influence all around. Almost twice as many men as women (15 percent versus 8 percent) say discussions on the Internet have influenced how they think about sex. However, the impact of images on the Internet is far more striking; almost three times as many men as women (26 percent versus 9 percent) say images on the Internet have influenced how they think about sex. Among Married respondents and for each generational cohort except Matures, around 50 percent more have been influenced by images than by discussions.



“There are plenty of sites aimed at people looking for something other than a serious committed relationship...”



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **Online relationships can take the pressure off face-to-face relationships.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108

31% 28% 26% 44% 33% 24% 13% 49%



Love online - Agreement with the statement: **Online relationships can be too much of a distraction from face-to-face relationships.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108

34% 37% 36% 41% 38% 30% 41% 40%

Whether relationships are on- or offline, they take time, attention and care. We see a great deal of ambivalence about the positive and negative effects online relationships can have on face-to-face relationships. On the positive side, online relationships may act as a safety valve, enabling a person to experience or express things that might not have a place in their face-to-face relationships. Similar percentages of men and women (31 percent and 28 percent) agree that online relationships can take the pressure off face-to-face relationships. Significantly, this thought resonates with more than a quarter of married respondents (26 percent).

On the negative side, engaging in relationships online may risk making people less available for relationships with people close to them. Here, too, similar percentages of men and women (34 percent and 37 percent) agree that online relationships can be too much of a distraction from face-to-face relationships. This thought earns agreement from 36 percent of married respondents.

Comparing the two sets of responses yields two important insights. Firstly, more men than women see online relationships as having positive effects on face-to-face relationships, and more women than men see such relationships as having negative effects. Secondly, across most segments, except Gen Y and Prosumers, more respondents see the negative effects than the positive. For Gen Y the positive balance of online relationships is slight; for Prosumers, it's wider.



CYBER-CHEATING



What's the real state of American relationships now? The official statistics indicate a marriage rate of 7.9 marriages per 1,000 Americans and a divorce rate of 3.9⁵, which suggests a divorce rate of more than half the marriage rate, but it's not quite that straightforward. The divorce rate in first marriages is 41 percent, in second marriages it's 60 percent, and in third marriage it's 73 percent.⁶

For cyber-alarmists with short memories, let's not forget that divorce rates in the United States were on the rise long before the Internet was being widely used. For many decades, Americans' commitment to family values has had to slug it out with their beliefs in freedom, consumer choice and new beginnings—and the balance has apparently tipped towards freedom and choice. And now that the Internet is impacting every aspect of life, it's highly likely that it's having an impact on relationships and break-ups too.

Just as the Internet has made it a lot easier to find rare books and discontinued spare parts, so has it eased the search for romantic partners. In fact, one need not even actively be looking—our e-mail inboxes are bombarded daily with offers from Russian brides, hot singles and lonely housewives. For anybody with even a little curiosity, romantic connections are never more than a click or two away. The law of averages surely makes it likely that more people now than before will be tempted to check out who else is available, with a possibility that this increased illicit behavior may lead to more divorce.



After all, social media has lessened the time, money and effort of searching for partners and increased the likely success rate. Even people who are married or in a stable relationship can keep looking for more attractive partners; they can stay in the market, either looking for opportunities to cheat or else for a completely new relationship.

Aside from the mainstream matching sites such as eHarmony.com and Match.com, there are plenty of sites aimed at people looking for something other than a serious committed relationship: websites such as AshleyMadison.com (“Life is short. Have an affair.”)⁷, Liketocheat.com and Affairlink.com invite extramarital encounters.

The jury is still out on whether the potential for cyber-cheating is rocking the marital boat. Economist Todd D. Kendall ran analyses of large-scale data sets (from 2003, hence before social media), looking for correlations between Internet penetration rates and divorce rates. He found no clear evidence that the rise of the Internet has increased divorce but added “the results presented in this paper can only identify short-term effects of Internet access, leaving open the possibility of different or opposite long-term effect. Certainly, the Internet makes romantic search much easier and hence likely to become more widespread.” As Kendall points out, for married people using the Internet to look for extramarital affairs, the Internet increases privacy and reduces the chances of being caught.⁸

However, people who feel positively about their current situation are less likely to look around than people who don’t feel as positive. So as an indicator for potential cyber-cheating, we looked at how Americans feel in their current relationship situation.



Please check all that apply to how you feel in your current relationship status.

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108
Fulfilled	28%	32%	43%	25%	32%	30%	32%	26%
Settled	36%	40%	50%	28%	41%	36%	48%	30%
Bored	16%	12%	8%	20%	16%	12%	3%	19%
Open to better offers	17%	13%	4%	22%	16%	14%	3%	17%
Looking to spice things up	25%	24%	21%	32%	33%	19%	6%	40%

The results show that there is a lot of potential for relationship shake-ups bubbling under the surface in the United States. Above all, there’s a very significant minority (overall 25 percent) looking to “spice things up.”

Half of married Americans (50 percent) feel settled in their relationship status but fewer of them (43 percent) feel fulfilled. In fact, 8 percent feel bored in their relationship and although just 4 percent are open to better offers, a substantial 21 percent are looking to “spice things up.”

“There is a lot of potential for relationship shake-ups bubbling under the surface in the United States.”



The bellwether Prosumers point to more casting round for a change of relationship; fewer of them feel fulfilled (26 percent versus 30 percent of non-Prosumers) or settled (30 percent versus 39 percent of non-Prosumers), more of them feel bored (19 percent versus 14 percent of non-Prosumers), and far more of them are looking to spice things up (40 percent versus 23 percent).



Cheating online - Agreement with the statement: **The Internet has made it easier for people to cheat on their partners.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108



Cheating online - Agreement with the statement: **I know somebody whose relationship ended because of their actions online.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108



Cheating online - Agreement with the statement: **Having a strongly sexual relationship online doesn't count as cheating on your partner.**

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Gen Y</u>	<u>Gen X</u>	<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Matures</u>	<u>Prosumers</u>
N=	500	500	515	181	336	389	94	108



More than half of Americans of all conditions think the Internet has made it easier for people to cheat on their partners. Even among the Matures (aged 65 and over), more than half (55 percent) agree that the Internet has made cheating easier.⁷ How much of that is supposition, how much is observation, and how much is personal experience?

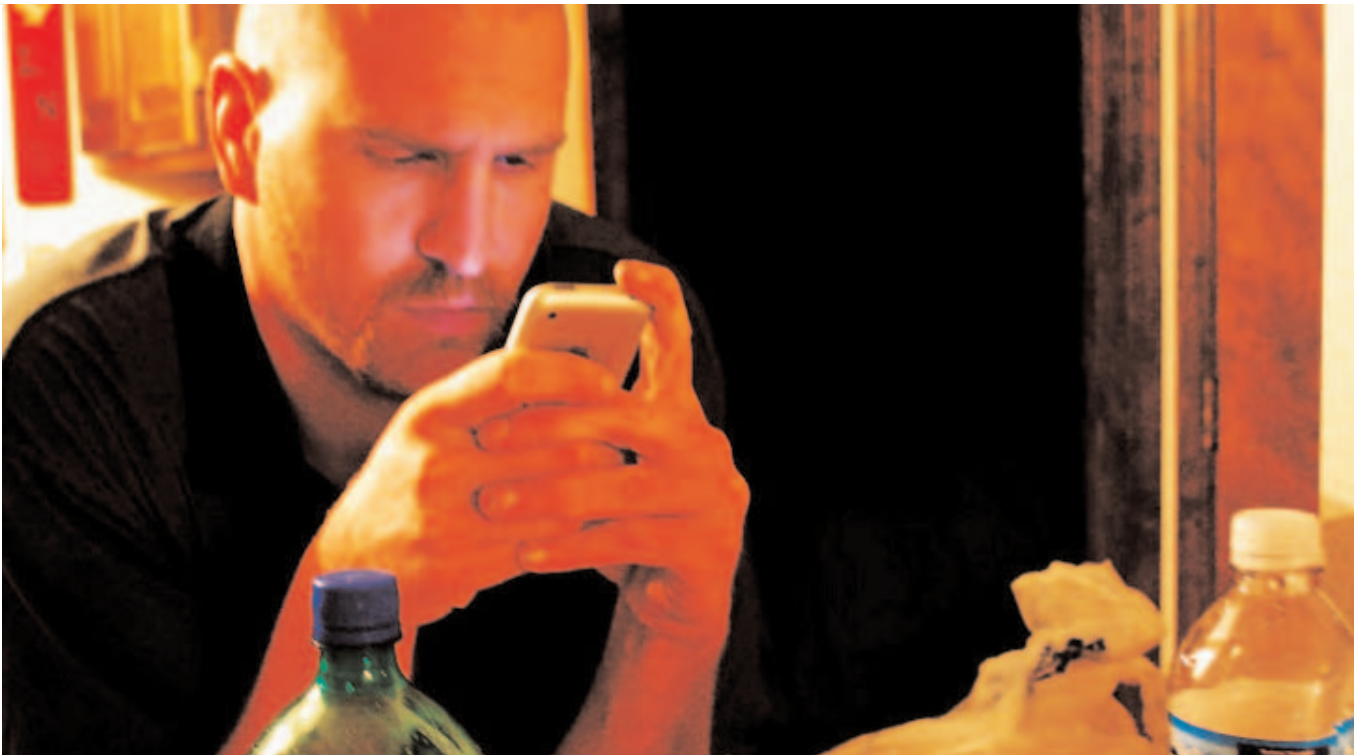
A strikingly high proportion of the overall sample (31 percent) knows somebody whose relationship ended because of their actions online. This is a huge impact for technologies that have been truly mainstream for barely a decade. The impact has been observed most by the youngest cohort (49 percent) but even among the over-65s, it's on the radar of 8 percent.

On the sticky question of online sexual relationships, the great majority of Americans disagree that "Having a strongly sexual relationship online doesn't count as cheating on your partner." However, not all Americans disagree; 6 percent agree that online sex doesn't count as cheating.

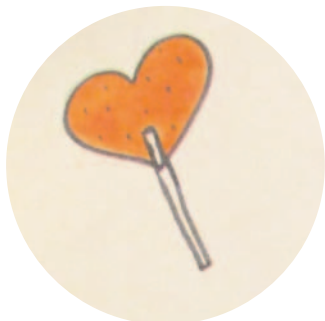
“More than half of Americans...think the Internet has made it easier for people to cheat on their partners.”



TYPES OF SITES THAT SCORE



Finding satisfactory romantic partners is one of those eternal human challenges, and modern life hasn't made it any easier.



Increased mobility makes for stretched and fractured social circles; each new move means more time and effort building new social ties that may provide or lead to romantic possibilities. Busier lifestyles leave less time for hanging out and building relationships. Consumer culture encourages people to expect more and look around for better deals if they're not satisfied; the same thinking easily transfers to personal relationships.

Pretty early on in the life of the Web, people realized that the Internet offered plenty of scope for helping people find romantic partners; that is not a new phenomena. Almost a decade ago, in 2002, *Wired* magazine noted the growth of online dating ("Today, one in five singles looks for love on the Web") and forecast that it would become the norm within a couple of decades: "Twenty years from now, the idea that someone looking for love won't look for it online will be silly, akin to skipping the card catalog to instead wander the stacks because 'the right books are found only by accident' ... After all, how likely is it that the book of your dreams will just fall off the shelf and into your arms?"⁹

Online dating site Match.com launched way back in 1995¹⁰, eHarmony started its online activities in 2000¹¹ and PlentyofFish started in 2004¹². Nichier sites have been around a long while, too. The Jewish dating site JDate.com was founded in 1997¹³, the LGBT site Gay.com launched in 1996.¹⁴ And these rub virtual shoulders with a bewildering range of sites offering romantic matching for all imaginable niches: vegetarians, Catholics, geeks, deaf and ASL people, golf nuts, Trekkies and even Mac fans.¹⁵

To echo *Wired's* point, with so many options for finding romantic partners online why would anybody with Internet access not make use of them?

A paper presented to the American Sociological Association in 2010 said that the Internet is “unambiguously gaining importance over time as a place where couples meet.” The authors said that in the coming years the Internet could eclipse friends as the most influential way Americans meet their romantic partner.¹⁶ Commenting on his findings, co-author Michael J. Rosenfeld, an associate professor of sociology at Stanford University, said: “the Internet is a friend to everybody who is looking for something that’s hard to find [...] And that’s true whether you’re looking for parts for a ‘57 Chevy, or a partner who has some attributes that are uncommon.”¹⁷

There’s no longer any question that the Internet is increasingly becoming the go-to place for people seeking a romantic partner of any sort. But which bits of the Internet look like the best bets?

“Consumer culture encourages people to expect more and look around for better deals if they’re not satisfied...”



Could you imagine this type of site/media leading you into some kind of romantic or erotic relationship? – Answering probably/definitely

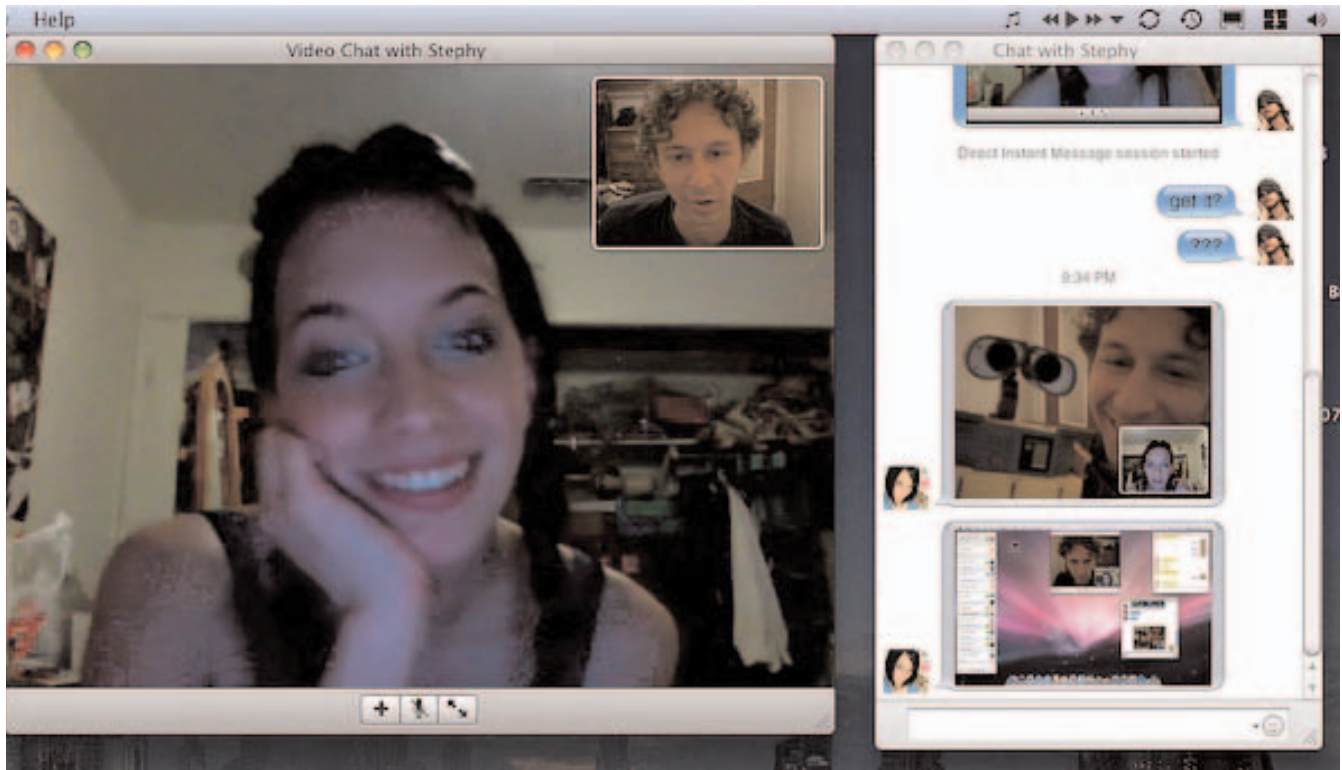
	Men N= 500	Women 500	Married 515	Gen Y 181	Gen X 336	Boomers 389	Matures 94	Prosumers 108
Fulfilled	28%	32%	43%	25%	32%	30%	32%	26%
General social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	32%	22%	24%	40%	31%	21%	11%	52%
Match-making sites (e.g., Match, eHarmony)	30%	22%	22%	34%	33%	19%	14%	37%
E-mail	30%	20%	23%	27%	29%	22%	20%	33%
Dating sites	28%	20%	20%	30%	32%	17%	12%	32%
Specialist social networking sites (e.g., Flickr)	19%	10%	13%	18%	20%	11%	6%	28%
Adult sites	21%	7%	12%	15%	19%	11%	9%	22%
Chat services (e.g., MSN, AIM, Skype)	21%	12%	13%	23%	23%	11%	4%	22%
Blogs or discussion forums	17%	11%	13%	16%	16%	12%	10%	21%
Classified services (e.g., Craigslist)	16%	6%	9%	14%	15%	9%	2%	19%
Location-based services (e.g., FourSquare)	15%	8%	10%	17%	13%	10%	4%	19%
Brand-based site	16%	7%	10%	12%	15%	8%	9%	19%

The specialist sites and media each have their fans as places with a good chance of leading to a relationship, but top of them all are general social networking sites such as Facebook. These sites are by far the most promising for the youngest cohort of Gen Y (40 percent) and for Prosumers (52 percent). Prosumers consistently rated all the different channels higher than other groups, but the margin is particularly wide for general social networking sites.

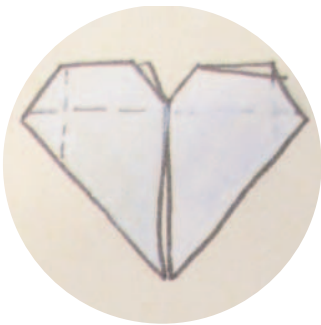
Men rated every channel significantly higher than women; it seems that, across the board, men are more optimistic than women about their prospects with online matchmaking and dating.



WHAT IT ALL MEANS



GENDERS—EQUALLY ONLINE, BUT DIFFERENT



We're long past the days when the Internet and computers can be cast as the domain of men (i.e., boys and their toys). Women are fully present on the Internet; still, there's no getting away from gender differences in attitudes and the things men and women do online. According to Aaron Smith, a research specialist at the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a few years ago men were more likely than women to be online, but that's no longer the case. "In general, a lot of the general gender differences in Internet usage that we saw have pretty much gone away ... It tends to show up more in the applications they use than whether they go online and whether they have a computer."

The fact that an increasing percentage of relationships and marriages started with online connections proves that serious numbers of women are seeking and finding romantic connections online. However, our survey shows that consistently more men than women are positive about every aspect of online romance. Significantly more men than women think that every type of electronic/online interaction can lead to some kind of erotic or romantic relationship, and that it's possible to have romantic or erotic relationships on the Internet. Words and images on the Internet have influenced thinking about sex for significantly more men than women, and far more men than women have flirted with, been strongly attracted or had a love relationship with somebody online.

The higher percentages of men pursuing romance online should not be interpreted as meaning that women are not interested in making a whole gamut of romantic connections online; the percentages for women are lower, but they're still substantial. What's more,

the lower numbers of women may give an advantage to the ones who are actively searching online, because online dating and matching services are essentially sophisticated marketplaces bringing supply and demand together. If women are in shorter supply than men, then their bargaining power should be greater; they should be in a stronger position to be picky. Theoretically, online searching gives women greater quality control. They can check out potential romantic partners and go through some of the preliminaries from a safe distance, with far less risk of getting creeped out, groped or worse on a first date.

ONLINE ROMANCE—BLUSH NO MORE

Online dating is no longer weird—in fact, it’s smart. It’s no longer the geeky or desperate exception, it’s the mainstream and increasingly plain vanilla norm. Not all consumers have had direct personal experience with it yet—at least not that they will admit to—but plenty know people who have, and even more have read or heard about people who have. In a world where prominent tattoos and piercings have moved from the fringes towards almost-normal, and where people hold loud cell-phone conversations in public places, online dating hardly merits a raised eyebrow—unless it’s for something on the edge of the moral map.

GENERATIONS—DON’T WRITE OFF THE SENIORS

On virtually every metric in our survey, positive and not-so-positive attitudes towards online romance correlate directly with age; Gen Y tends to be more positive than Gen X, who are more positive than Boomers, and they’re more positive than Matures. This is not at all unexpected.

Gen Y was born into life online; Gen X came to it in young adulthood; Boomers spent more than half of their lives in a pre-online world; and if Matures speak digital, it’s with an analog accent. For Gen Y online is “d’oh”, for Matures it’s “Are you sure?”



“More men than women think that ... it’s possible to have romantic or erotic relationships on the Internet.”

The mating agenda is far different for younger cohorts than for older. For Gen Y, it's all about checking out the full range of who's available, playing the field, trying partners out and maybe hoping to find the One for a serious relationship. For Gen X, there are far fewer first-timers and far more who have had at least one serious relationship (with the scars to prove it) and are looking for a change or a whole new start. For Boomers, very few are first-timers and many are hoping that they've still got what it takes for romance. Whatever fantasies Matures may have must be tempered by what they see in the mirror and what their physician's report tells them.

The urges and the energy of younger cohorts in online dating can be pretty much taken as read; it offers great opportunities to meet their needs. However, the response of Boomers and Matures is very encouraging for any business offering romance-related products or services online. As these huge demographics age and live on—and on, and on—and time takes its toll on their old connections, they will need new connections. For older people who may not feel like cruising singles bars or ready for senior speed dating, online services will be a new lease on romantic life.

THE SOFT-SELL MEETS THE MIGHT-BE-INTERESTED

“The big difference between general social networking sites and dedicated dating sites is the difference between a neighborhood bar and singles bar.”



Prosumers are consistently ahead of the curve on most trends, so it's particularly intriguing that a majority of them rate general social networking sites such as Facebook as offering great chances of leading to romance. General social networking sites also emerge as top for men, women, Marrieds and Gen Y. Specialist matchmaking sites also score strongly, but nowhere near as strongly among Prosumers and Gen Y.



The big difference between general social networking sites and dedicated dating sites is the difference between a neighborhood bar and singles bar. In general networking sites and the neighborhood bar, people go along to socialize, to hang out, to meet old friends and maybe make new friends, to chat and maybe play games with other people. It may be that the interactions lead organically to romantic connections. In the singles bar and the online dating site, people are there with a clear agenda: to find a romantic partner.

The social networking site is about interaction; the dating site is about transaction. The people who are most at home online—Gen Y and Prosumers—are the ones who are most likely to regard online as just another space, with its own characteristics, where they can do what they feel like naturally. Others may still be more inclined to see online services as being about transactions and getting things done.

BRANDS: A THIRD WHEEL?

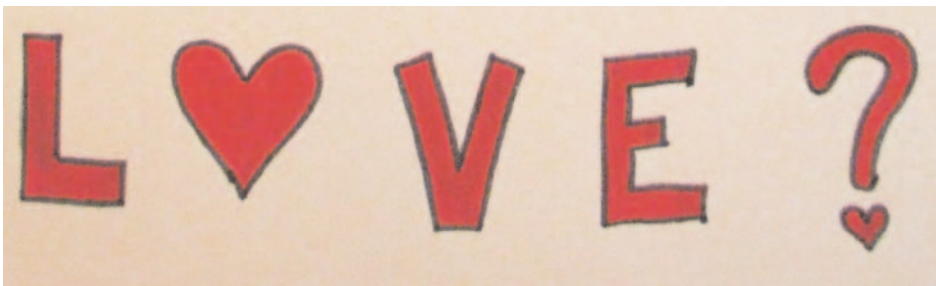
The space where would-be romancers meet is controlled and strongly branded by the site owners—Facebook, Match.com, etc.—and it's the site owners who provide the value in terms of features and functionality.

Whether visiting a dating site or a general social networking site, consumers are there to meet and interact with each other. They're looking for a "product," for sure, but the product they're seeking is a unique individual person who matches their hopes and desires as near as possible. They're probably looking for a "deal," but the deal they're seeking is with another person willing to trade time and attention and goodwill and maybe more.

If the romantic encounter were taking place in a physical space, then brands would surely have their place; food, drink, apparel, fragrance, personal care and maybe in due course more intimate products. But in the virtual space of online interactions, what's the scope for brands to find a place?

Which brands can bring value to the party? How can brands be present and add value without being a third wheel?

“Whether visiting a dating site or a general social networking site, consumers are there to meet and interact with each other.”



ENDNOTES:

- 1 <http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>
- 2 http://www.psywww.com/intropsych/ch16_sfl/six_types_of_love.html
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- 14 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay.com>
- 15 <http://cupidino.com/>
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