

Online Dating

Americans who are seeking romance use the internet to help them in their search, but there is still widespread public concern about the safety of online dating

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Summary of Findings

Most online Americans who are single and looking for dates have used the internet to pursue their romantic interests and millions more Americans know people who have tried and succeeded at online dating.

In a new survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, there are two central findings that illustrate how important the internet has become for those seeking romance in 21st Century America: First, among the relatively small and active cohort of 10 million internet users who say they are currently single and looking for romantic partners, 74% say they have used the internet in one way or another to further their romantic interests. Second, there is relatively broad public contact with the online dating world because significant numbers of Americans personally know others who have tried and succeeded at online dating. Some 15% of those in this survey of the general public – representing about 30 million Americans – say they know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or married someone they met online. Twice as many know someone who has at least dabbled in the online dating scene.

- 31% of American adults—63 million people—say they know someone who has used a dating website.
- 26% of American adults—53 million people—say they know someone who has gone on a date with a person they met through a dating site.
- 15% of American adults—30 million people—say they know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or married someone he or she met online.

At the same time, most internet users believe online dating is dangerous because it puts personal information online and they also think that many online daters lie about their marital status.

Most internet users (66%) agree with the statement that online dating is a dangerous activity because it puts personal information on the internet. Some 25% do not consider online dating dangerous. Female internet users, older users, and those who have lower levels of income or education are among the most wary of these risks.

Those who have actually used the services are more confident; 43% think that the activity involves risk, while 52% do not see the activity as dangerous. In a separate question, 6% of online daters say that dating websites do an “excellent” job of protecting people’s

This Pew Internet & American Life Project report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the internet that was gathered through telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International between September 14 and December 8, 2005. 3,215 adults, aged 18 and older, were interviewed. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is +/- 2%. For results based Internet users (n=2,252), the margin of sampling error is +/- 2%. 204 users of online dating websites were part of the sample. For results based on that subsample, the margin of sampling error is +/- 8%.

Summary of Findings

personal information, while 32% say they do a “good” job. Another 33% rate the services as “fair” and 12% say the websites do a “poor” job of protecting their information.

In addition, 57% of internet users agree that a lot of people who use online dating lie about their marital status; while 18% disagree, and 25% say they do not know. Those with lower levels of income or education are more likely than the average internet user to suspect that people lie.

Just over half (52%) of online daters agree that a lot people are dishonest about being married, while 32% disagree, and 15% say they do not know. The internet users who are single and looking for dates report similar views.

While some stigma about online dating persists, most internet users do not view it simply as a last resort.

The majority (61%) of online adults do not think that people who use online dating are “desperate.” However, 29% hold the view that online daters are in dire dating straits. Internet users who are single and looking for dates are less likely to hold this negative view; only 20% agree that online daters are desperate.

Those who do regard online daters as desperate tend to have less experience online and say they are less trusting of people generally. And although online men are more likely than online women to view dating services as a good way to meet people, they are also more likely to categorize online daters as a desperate group.

One in ten internet users say they have personally gone to dating websites.

Those who are in the market for online dating services are a relatively specific group. Looking at the total internet population, 11% of all American internet-using adults—about 16 million people—say they have gone to an online dating website or other site where they can meet people online. We call them online daters in this report.

Our survey also finds that, at the moment, 7% of online adults, or about 10 million people, say they are currently seeking romantic partners. Within this group, 37% have gone to a dating website.

Online Daters are defined here as internet users who have gone to an online dating website or other site where they can meet people online.

- 43% of all online daters, or nearly 7 million adults, have gone on dates with people they met through the sites and 17% of them, nearly 3 million adults, have entered long-term relationships or married their online dating partners.

- 3% of the internet users who are married or in long-term committed relationships say they met their partners online. That also represents about 3 million people.

A majority of online daters report good experiences with the sites.

Of the 16 million people who have been to online dating sites, 52% say they had mostly positive experiences. At the same time, a sizable segment, 29%, report mostly negative experiences. Few offer a mixed response: just 7% say they had both positive and negative experiences. The remaining 12% say they do not know or decline a response.

Still, the general online public is evenly divided over the merits of online dating. While 44% agree that internet dating is a “good way to meet people,” the same percentage disagrees with that statement. A sizable segment, 11%, says they do not know. Online men (48%) have a greater tendency to see the benefits of online dating when compared with online women (41%). And, in general, the younger the internet user, the more likely he or she is to rate the services favorably.

Online daters believe dating websites help people to find a better match because they can get to know a lot more people.

Most online daters think that using internet dating services helps to open up the playing field. Fully 64% agree that online dating helps people find a better match because they have access to a larger pool of potential dates, while just 31% disagree with this assessment. Another 6% say they do not know whether or not online dating facilitates better connections.

The general online public is less certain, but generally supportive of the notion that online dating facilitates better pairing. Looking at the total population of internet users, 47% agree that online dating allows people to find a better match because the pool of potential mates is larger online. Another 38% disagree, and 15% say they do not know.

There are uses of the internet beyond dating websites that have woven themselves into the world of romance.

Dating websites are just one of many online avenues that can lead to a romantic connection. Those who describe themselves as single and looking for a partner comprise a relatively small segment of the online population that totals about 10 million people. They use the internet both as a roadmap for the offline world and as a destination to meet people by marshaling things like search engines, email, and instant messaging to connect with a romantic partner.

Some 74% of those in this cohort report that they have used the internet in at least one way to facilitate dating and romance.

The table below lists the various dating-related activities included in our survey:

Summary of Findings

Dating-Related Activities Online	
<i>Roughly 10 million internet users say they are single and looking for a romantic partner. Here are some of the ways they have used the internet for dating...</i>	Single and Looking Internet Users
Flirt with someone	40%
Go to an online dating website	37
Ask someone out on a date	28
Find a place offline, like a nightclub or singles event, where you might meet someone to date	27
Been introduced to a potential date by a third party using email or instant messaging	21
Participate in an online group where you hope to meet people to date	19
Search for info about someone you dated in the past	18
Maintain a long-distance relationship	18
Search for info about someone you were currently dating or were about to meet for a first date	17
Break up with someone you were dating	9

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, September–December 2005. Margin of error is $\pm 9\%$ for Single and Looking Internet Users (n=140).

Summary of Findings

Online Dating: Summary of Findings at a Glance
Most online Americans who are single and looking for dates have used the internet to pursue their romantic interests and millions more Americans know people who have tried and succeeded at online dating.
At the same time, most internet users believe online dating is dangerous because it puts personal information online and they also think that many online daters lie about their marital status.
While some stigma persists, most do not view online dating simply as a last resort.
One in ten internet users say they have personally gone to dating websites.
A majority of online daters report good experiences with the sites.
Online daters believe dating websites help people to find a better match because they can get to know a lot more people.
There are uses of the internet beyond dating websites that have woven themselves into the world of romance.
Source: Mary Madden and Amanda Lenhart. <i>Online Dating</i> . Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, March 5, 2006.

Contents

Summary of Findings

Acknowledgments

Part 1. Introduction

Part 2. The State of Relationships in America

Part 3. Who Is Dating Online?

Part 4. Public Attitudes Toward Online Dating

Part 5. Beyond Dating Websites

Methodology

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About the Pew Internet & American Life Project: The Pew Internet Project is a nonprofit, nonpartisan initiative of the Pew Research Center that explores the impact of the internet on children, families, communities, the work place, schools, health care, and civic/political life. The Project aims to be an authoritative source for timely information on the internet's growth and societal impact. Support for the project is provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The project's website: www.pewinternet.org

About Princeton Survey Research Associates International: PSRAI conducted the survey that is covered in this report. It is an independent research company specializing in social and policy work. The firm designs, conducts, and analyzes surveys worldwide. Its expertise also includes qualitative research and content analysis. With offices in Princeton, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C., PSRAI serves the needs of clients around the nation and the world. The firm can be reached at 911 Commons Way, Princeton, NJ 08540, by telephone at 609-924-9204, by fax at 609-924-7499, or by email at: ResearchNJ@PSRA.com

Part 1.

Introduction

Public attitudes toward online dating have changed.

Since their emergence in the mid-1990's, online dating services have become an increasingly popular way for Americans to seek romantic partners and lifelong mates. While people have been finding love online since the earliest days of the internet, through newsgroups, chat rooms, games and other online communities, the meteoric development of the commercial dating industry has brought millions of paying users and mainstream exposure to the activity. The Online Publisher's Association reported in 2004 that dating websites created more revenue than any other paid online content category, as they netted roughly \$470 million in consumer spending, up from about \$40 million in 2001.¹ Revenue growth has slowed in recent years, but the industry continues to maintain a robust base of users, many of them willing to pay premium fees for access to specialized services.²

All the while, online dating has also been solidifying its image offline, not only through features in movies, television, and advertising outlets, but also through the influence of daters' personal success stories, which have percolated through family, friends, and coworkers, and have contributed to the momentum and social acceptance of the practice.³ A 2003 New York Times letter to the editor, written in response to a feature article on online dating, describes this ripple effect firsthand:

"The success of Sascha Segan, mentioned in your article, in meeting his fiancée, Leontine Greenberg, on Nerve.com persuaded a mutual friend of ours to try the service, and she convinced me.

Next year, I'm getting married to a man I met on Nerve.com. Two nights ago at a party, I ran into a friend of a friend and her new Internet-acquired boyfriend, who are the next step in the chain reaction started by Sascha and Leontine.

My thanks to Sascha for being so open about looking for love in cyberspace. May we all be so lucky."⁴

¹ Online Publishers Association, "Online Paid Content U.S. Market Spending Report," March 2005. Available at: http://www.online-publishers.org/pdf/paid_content_report_030905.pdf Note: These figures do not include the purchase of adult and/or pornographic content online.

² eMarketer, "Online Dating Gets Tough," February 14, 2006. Available at: <http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?1003826>

³ See the following article for an example of this shift in attitudes: "Online Dating Sheds Its Stigma as Losers.com" by Amy Harmon, from The New York Times, 29 June 2003, Late Edition, pg. 1.

⁴ "Finding Your Heart's True Love Online," by Michelle Solomon, The New York Times, 5 July 2003, Letters to the Editor, Section A.

The appeal of online dating undoubtedly varies from user to user, but convenience has been a key selling point in the marketing of the services. As some of the most popular online dating services suggest, users enjoy access to a pool of potential mates that is larger and easier to navigate than the offline world, and only costs as much as “the price of a couple drinks.”⁵

Some early concerns about the potential risks of online dating still linger, but deception seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

Online dating has not always had the best reputation. When online dating activity was observed in the mid-1990s, some attention focused on the ease with which people could deceive others. One article in the St. Petersburg Times on Valentine’s Day 1995 stressed:

“But be warned, cyberdaters. You might find yourself having an erotic chat with someone named Bambi4You, who is really a man pretending to be a woman. [O]f course, you could be a woman pretending to be a man, or a man who is looking for a cross-dresser . . . the combinations are numerous.”⁶

Coincident with that kind of concern were those who suggested that the quest for dates online could be socially harmful. Typical of this sentiment was a 1999 article in the Washington Post that sounded some dire warnings:

“While Internet use can expand the number of relationships—intimate or not— and reduce the costs of long-distance communication, habitual use can also reduce a person’s social contacts with family members and in-person friends, experts say. In extreme cases, spouses, children, neighbors are pushed aside.”⁷

While the success of online dating services suggests that these extreme cases have been the exception rather than the rule, some of these initial concerns about finding a partner online still resonate today. In an October 1996 advice column, Ann Landers cited a warning from a writer who advised those considering online dating to verify their date’s identity, and to look out for signs that would-be daters are actually predators. The writer advised users to meet any dates arranged online in public places and to be wary of those who refuse to divulge both their work and home telephone numbers before meeting.⁸ Likewise, the current “Safety Tips” page on Match.com in 2006 cautions that users would be wise to do some background research on their potential dates before meeting—asking for photos and phone numbers and possibly even paying for a background check. Even more imperative, the site cautions, one should always meet in a public place for the

⁵ See the FAQ section at Match.com and the animated tour at Yahoo Personals for references to these attributes.

The reference to the cost of access as equivalent to “the price of a couple drinks” comes from the Match.com FAQ section, available at: <http://www.match.com/>.

⁶ “Getting it on-line” by John A. Cutter, from the St. Petersburg Times, (Florida) 12 February 1995, pg 3F.

⁷ “Sex, Lies & E-mail; Internet dating offers plenty of opportunities to meet that special someone, but therapists warn that what you see online is not always what you get” by Pamela Gerhardt, from The Washington Post, 27 July 1999, Final Edition, pg. Z12.

⁸ Internet User Offers Tips For Safety” by Ann Landers, Creators Syndicate Inc. from Tulsa World, 14 October 1996, Final Home Edition, pg. A5.

Part 1. Introduction

first date.⁹ While the site acknowledges that deceptive daters are undeniably part of the mix online (in the same way one might encounter ill-intentioned suitors at a nightclub or party), they recommend that users exercise the same discretion as they would in any offline dating situation.

Similarly, the same 2003 New York Times article that prompted a glowing letter to the editor also yielded a letter of warning about dishonest daters from another reader:

“As a member of the online dating world, I can attest that there is a frequent disconnect between who people say they are and the truth. What’s most frustrating is not the outright lying but the masterful deception.

I met a woman who described herself as a "striking blonde." She was plain-looking but an excellent bowler!”¹⁰

This dater’s experience is more indicative of the tradeoffs that many daters accept as simply part of the game. While this user had some disappointing experiences with dishonesty, it was not the type of deception that resulted in physical harm (though notably, this letter was written by a man). He still sees enough benefit to continue to be a regular “member” of the online dating world, and he suggests that the redeeming aspects of someone’s personality may resolve that person’s exaggerated physical description. In this way, the risks and payoffs of the online dating world more closely resemble the basic realities of dating in the offline world.

Recent coverage in the popular press has reflected this. It is not clear exactly when public attitudes started to shift, but an ever-growing share of stories about people finding dates, romance, and even marriage partners online began to emerge in the early 2000s.

This study helps fill a gap in the research on online dating.

The academic literature and marketing research that documents the rise of online dating and its impact on society has also been emerging at a swift pace. Internet romance has been the subject of several recently issued books, many journal articles, and a considerable number of graduate theses and dissertations.¹¹ Yet, much of the available work is either quite specialized in scope or is based on proprietary data, creating challenges for researchers who wish to examine general patterns that might be comparable with other national data on social trends. Furthermore, there was a need to benchmark the broader use of the internet for dating-related activities, which extend well beyond the confines of online dating services.

⁹ See the “Safety Tips” section at Match.com, available at: <http://www.match.com/help/safetytips.aspx>

¹⁰ “Finding Your Heart’s True Love Online,” by John Deprospo, The New York Times, 5 July 2003, Letters to the Editor, Section A.

¹¹ The Online Dating Research Center at MIT has been particularly active in contributing to this field. The bibliography section of their website serves as a good guide to recent research on online dating. Available at: <http://smg.media.mit.edu/personals/biblio.shtml>

Part 1. Introduction

Given that little data on public attitudes and experiences had been gathered through nationally representative surveys, the Pew Internet & American Life Project decided to explore this subject in a survey in the autumn of 2005, after being approached by Dr. Phillip Morgan from Duke University and Dr. Seth Sanders from the University of Maryland. Both researchers had encountered this gap in available data while conducting work on designing new models to explore technology's impact on relationship formation and family change. The Pew Internet Project, having a shared interest in studying this aspect of the internet's social impact, was uniquely poised to gather new data for the field. The results are the basis for this report.

Part 2.

The State of Relationships in America

A general portrait of marriage and divorce in America at the end of 2005

The Pew Internet Project's fall 2005 Online Dating survey tried to get a sense of the general state of household partnerships in America. The table below shows the breakdown. These data mostly line up with findings of the U.S. Census Bureau from a 50,000-household survey in 2001.¹²

Marriage and Divorce in America			
Marital status	All Americans	Men	Women
Married	53%	56%*	50%
Living as married	3	2	4*
Never been married	21	25*	18
Divorced	11	11	11
Widowed	9	3	14*
Separated	2	2	3
Don't know/Refused	1	1	1

* = Denotes a statistically significant difference.

Source: *Pew Internet & American Life Project Online Dating Survey, September-December 2005. N=3215. Margin of error is ±2%.*

In general, marriage patterns have ebbed and flowed over time. Census data show fairly consistent patterns throughout the first half of the 20th century with a swing toward marriage in the 1950s and 1960s. Marriage rates then receded as the ranks of both the widowed and the never-married increased.

In our sample, 56% of American adults over 18 are married or living as married, while 43% of adults are not married. That 43% includes 11% who are divorced, 2% who are separated, 9% who are widowed, and 21% who have never been married.

Looking at basic demographic variations, our survey showed that those with college degrees and higher levels of household income are significantly more likely to be married than those with high school diplomas and those living in households with more modest

¹² The most recent data on marriage and divorce published by the U.S. Census Bureau can be found at: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/marr-div.html>

Part 2. The State of Relationships in America

levels of income. African-Americans are more likely than whites and English-speaking Hispanics to have never been married.

Most internet users who are married or in committed relationships met each other offline.

In our sample of internet users, we found that relatively few couples started their relationships online. Most people who are currently in serious long-term relationships or marriage either met through family and friends or in a work or school setting. Still, bars and other social gatherings are still a relatively popular place for long-term relationships to begin. Those who started their relationship over the internet make up only 3% of the population, roughly the same as the portion who say they met at church. Here is a rundown from the survey of how internet users in marriages or long-term relationships first encountered each other:

- 38% met at work or school.
- 34% met through family or friends.
- 13% met at a nightclub, bar, café, or other social gathering.
- 3% met through the internet.
- 2% met at church.
- 1% met by chance, such as on the street.
- 1% met because they lived in the same neighborhood.
- 1% met at a recreational facility like a gym
- 1% met on a blind date or through a dating service.
- The remainder cited a variety of other ways they met, such as growing up together.

Only 16% of single Americans, or 7% of all adults, say they are hunting for a partner.

While a sizable segment of the population is single, about a quarter of unmarried Americans (26%, or about 23 million adults) say they are in committed romantic relationships. Single men are more likely than single women to report being so situated. Yet among the uncommitted, relatively few say they are in the market for relationships.

Part 2. The State of Relationships in America

Singles and Their Relationships			
	<i>All single Americans</i>	<i>Single men</i>	<i>Single women</i>
In committed relationships	26%	30%	23%
Not in committed relationship and not looking for partner	55	42	65
Not in committed relationship but looking for partner	16	23	9
Don't know/Refused	3	5	3

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Online Dating Survey, September-December 2005. Margin of error is ±3% for all singles, ±5% for single men and ±4% for single women.

Among all singles, just 16% say they are currently looking for a romantic partner. That amounts to 7% of the adult population and 7% of internet users. Some 55% of singles report no active interest in seeking a romantic partner. This is especially true for women, for those who have been widowed or divorced, and for older singles. Yet even among the youngest adults, relationship-seeking is somewhat muted: 38% of singles ages 18-29 say they are not currently looking for a romantic partner, compared to 22% in that age cohort who are looking for partners. The rest say they are currently in committed relationships.

All of the relationship-seeking singles were asked to describe how many dates they had been on in the past three months and they reported this way:

- 36% said they had been on no dates in the previous three months.
- 13% had been one date.
- 22% had been on 2-4 dates
- 25% had been on 5 or more dates.

This subpopulation of singles is too small in our survey sample to report highly reliable comparisons of men and women on this dating question. But it was generally the case that single men reported being less active than single women in going on dates.

Americans who are single and looking for relationships are also more likely than those who are not looking to be employed full or part time. Two-thirds (67%) of single and looking Americans have a full or part-time job—while close to half (48%) of non-lookers are similarly employed.

Single Americans in the market for a romantic partner are more likely to go online than non-lookers. Fully three-quarters (75%) of single adults who are looking for a romantic partner say they use the internet, compared to 56% of those who are not looking.

And in more than a third of these cases, on-the-market singles are likely to use that internet connectivity to visit online dating websites; 37% of online singles who are

Part 2. The State of Relationships in America

looking for romantic partners use dating websites. Nevertheless, 61% of single and looking internet users do not use dating websites.

A majority of relationship-seeking singles say it is difficult to meet people where they live.

Sometimes geography and lack of proximity to desirable partners can complicate the search for a romantic partner. When singles who are actively looking for partners were asked about the dating scene where they live, a majority (55%) said it was difficult to meet people. Only 43% said it was easy, while 2% said they didn't know.

Moreover, when asked to describe the dating possibilities where they live, a plurality, 47%, said there were very few single people in their town they would be interested in dating. Another 41% said there were lots of single people in their town that seemed interesting, but 10% said they didn't know much about the local singles scene.

Part 3.

Who Is Dating Online?

One in ten internet users have gone to a dating website.

About one in ten (11%) internet users who responded to our survey said they had ever gone to a dating website where they could meet people online.¹³ That represents about 16 million people. Looking exclusively at the current target population for these services, we find that 37% of internet users who say they are both single and currently looking to meet a romantic partner have gone to a dating website, which represents about 4 million people.

Online daters are generally younger and more likely to be employed. Looking across age groups, the youngest cohort (18-29 years old) has the largest percentage of online daters within it, with 18% of all online adults in that age group visiting a dating site. However, 11% of online adults ages 30-49 have ventured to dating sites, while 6% of those ages 50-64 and a mere 3% of those aged 65 and older have tried dating sites.

Online daters are more likely to be employed than non-daters, but they are not necessarily garnering huge salaries. Those earning lower incomes are slightly more likely to be online daters. Much of this discrepancy may be explained by the general youth of online daters, who have not necessarily entered their prime earning years. Possibly due to the relatively small sample size, there are no statistically significant differences in online dating use across race and ethnicity categories or education levels.

Some of those who have used online dating websites are now officially “off the market.” Of the 16 million American adults who have ever used online dating websites, about one quarter (23%) are now married or living as married. Still, the majority (45%) of those who have visited the sites have never been married. Three in ten (31%) online daters were married but are now divorced, separated or widowed.

The table on the following page gives the basic percentages of which online Americans use online dating sites.

¹³ Similar data from comScore Media Metrix gathered in the month of January 2006 shows that 14% of internet users ages 12 and older visited a dating website.

Part 3. Who Is Dating Online?

Who Uses Online Dating?		
<i>% within each group that have gone to dating websites and % that have not</i>		
	Online Daters	Not Online Daters
All Internet Users	11%	89%
Sex		
Men	12%	88%
Women	9	91
Race/Ethnicity		
White	10%	90%
Black	13	86
Hispanic	14	86
Location		
Urban	13%	87%
Suburban	10	90
Rural	9	91
Age		
18-29	18%	82%
30-49	11	89
50-64	6	93
65+	3	97
Household Income		
Less than \$30,000	14%	86%
\$30,000 to \$49,999	13	87
\$50,000 to \$74,999	10	90
\$75,000+	9	91
Home Internet Speed		
Broadband	12%	88%
Dialup	9	91
Education Level		
Less than High School	14%	86%
High School Grad	10	90
Some College	11	89
College+	10	90

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Tracking Survey, September-December 2005. Margin of error is ±2% for all internet users, but ranges from ±3% to ±10% for subgroups. Some figures do not add up to 100% due to non-response.

However, even among the singles who have ventured to online dating sites recently or in the past, some are currently unavailable. Of the single people who have used online dating sites (never married, separated, divorced, or widowed), nearly one-third (31%) are currently in a committed romantic relationship—65% are not. This ratio of involved vs. unattached singles is similar to what we find in the overall population of online singles.

Part 3. Who Is Dating Online?

Of the currently married people who have used online dating sites, the vast majority of them were married in the past 10 years, with nearly two-thirds (64%) married sometime in the past three years.

When we asked the single online daters whether or not they were currently looking for a partner, roughly half said they were looking for a new romantic relationship and about half said they currently were not.

A majority of online daters report good experiences with the sites.

The survey shows that many online daters appear to be successful in meeting people online. A sizable segment of those who use online dating websites (43%) have actually followed through with a date, and 17% say their online romances have resulted in a long-term relationship or marriage.

Most daters report that online dating is a pretty good experience. Just over half of online daters report that they had a mostly positive experience with online dating websites—52% reported a mostly positive experience, while 29% said it was mostly negative, 7% said it was both positive and negative, and 12% were not sure.

Dating sites Yahoo and Match.com win the hearts of most users.

Though internet users often take advantage of other opportunities for dating, flirting, meeting, and investigating potential dates online, websites specifically geared toward online dating form the core of internet romance activities. Panel data gathered by comScore Media Metrix shows that Yahoo Personals and Match.com attracted the most visitors in January 2006. The table below lists the top ten websites that fall within the personals and dating category:

Top 10 Personals Sites	
<i>Audience: All Persons at U.S. Home/Work/College-University Locations, January 2006</i>	
	Unique Visitors (000)
Yahoo! Personals	6,052
Match.com Sites	3,893
MarketRange Inc.	2,676
Spark Networks	2,638
MATE1.COM	2,354
TRUE.COM	2,093
EHARMONY.COM	1,796
Love@AOL	1,516
Zencon Technologies Dating Sites	1,091
LOVEHAPPENS.COM	976

Source: comScore Media Metrix (Note: comScore Media Metrix is a division of comScore Networks, Inc.)

Online daters tend to identify with more liberal social attitudes, compared with all Americans or all internet users.

Those who have used dating websites are more likely to describe themselves as supporters of gay marriage and identify as “someone who likes to try new things” when compared with the general population of adults and all internet users. They are less likely to identify themselves as religious and are less likely to say they believe in traditional gender roles for men and women.

Social Attitudes			
<i>The percentage of each group that says these statements describe them “very well.” Statistically significant differences between daters and larger populations are indicated in bold.</i>			
I am...	Online Daters	All Americans	Internet Users
A religious person.	29%	46%	43%
A supporter of women’s rights.	64	60	62
A supporter of the death penalty.	37	34	35
A supporter of gay marriage.	28	17	20
Someone who believes in traditional gender roles for men and women.	27	33	31
Someone who likes to try new things.	66	49	52

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, September–December 2005. Margin of error is ±8% for Online Daters, ±2% for All American Adults, and ±2% for Internet Users. Statistically significant differences are noted in bold.

31% of all American adults say they know someone who has used a dating website.

While most Americans do not have firsthand experience with online dating, close to one in three adults know someone else who has tried the services. Internet users are in somewhat closer proximity to online dating; 38% of them know someone who has used online personals. Among those who are single and looking, 44% report knowing an online dater.

Of course, online daters themselves are the most likely to know others who have used online dating services; 74% know someone else who uses online dating services. However, that still means that 26% are forging their own path in online dating, without others leading the way.

Part 3. Who Is Dating Online?

In general, younger people and those with higher levels of income and education are more likely to be tapped into the online dating scene via someone they know. Being a broadband user or someone who is single and looking in an area where it is difficult to meet people also increases the likelihood of being connected to someone with online dating experience:

- 51% of those with broadband all around them—those with high-speed access at home and work—know someone who has used a dating website.
- 52% of seeking singles who live in areas where it is difficult to meet people say they know someone who has tried online dating.

While equal numbers of urban, suburban and rural internet users have tried online dating websites, adults who live in urban communities are more likely than those who live in suburban or rural areas to say that they know someone who has used an online dating website; 35% of urban adults know an online dater, compared with 30% of suburban adults and 26% of rural adults.

26% of American adults say they know someone who has gone on a date with someone they met through a personals site.

Overall, about one in four Americans knows an online dater who has met another user for a date offline, and one in three internet users know someone who has followed through with a date. However, other subgroups report greater proximity to online daters:

- 37% of those who are single and looking report knowing someone who has gone on a date after meeting that person on a dating site.
- 46% of those with broadband at home and work know someone who has followed through with a date.
- 64% of online daters know someone else who has gone on a date with someone they met online.

15% of American adults and 43% of online daters know someone who has found a long-term partner online.

One in six adult Americans (15%) say they know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or married someone they met online. Again, certain subgroups are even more likely to know someone who has eventually ended up with a long-term partnership that began at an online dating site.

- 23% of those who are single and looking report knowing someone who began a long-term relationship online.
- 25% of those who have broadband at home and work know someone who had a serious relationship that began online.

Part 3. Who Is Dating Online?

- 43% of online daters know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or married a person they met on the internet.

Part 4.

Public Attitudes Toward Online Dating

Online daters overwhelmingly view the services as a good way to meet people, but the general online public is split over the merits of online dating.

While respondents were asked specific questions about the use of online dating websites, they were also surveyed about their impressions of online dating more generally. Those who have actually used dating websites report back with favorable reviews. Fully 79% of online daters agree that using dating websites is a good way to meet people, compared with 19% who disagree.

Fully 61% of the internet users who are single and looking for dates agree that online dating is a good venue for finding a mate. However, overall, internet users are split in their view of online dating; while 44% agree that internet dating is a “good way to meet people,” the same percentage disagree with that statement. A sizable segment, 11%, says they do not know. Online men (48%) have a greater tendency to see the benefits of online dating when compared with online women (41%). And, in general, the younger the internet user, the more likely he or she is to rate the services favorably.

Rural internet users are less likely than urban or suburban users to think that online dating is a good way to meet people; 38% of rural users agree that online dating is a good choice, compared with 48% of urban users and 44% of suburban users.

Still, internet users and online daters do agree that online dating helps people to find a better match.

Although the average internet user is not as enamored with online dating as their single and seeking counterparts, they do see the benefits of finding someone online. They agree that online dating allows some people to find a better match because they can get to know a lot more people. Looking at the total pool of internet users, 47% agree that online dating facilitates better pairing. Another 38% disagree and 15% say they do not know.

Online daters are even more supportive of this view. While 64% of online daters agree that online dating helps people find a better match, just 31% disagree. Another 6% say they do not know whether or not online dating facilitates better connections.

Single and looking internet users, by comparison, are equally as likely as online daters to tout the benefits of accessing a larger pool of people online; 64% of single internet users who are looking for someone to date agree that online dating helps people to find a better match, while just 28% disagree.

Part 4. Public Attitudes Toward Online Dating

These sentiments are relatively consistent across different community types and socioeconomic groups, but male internet users and younger internet users have a greater tendency to think online dating creates better couples.

There is no clear consensus about the ease and efficiency of online dating.

Although online dating may present more opportunities to meet potential dates, it does not necessarily remove all of the complexity that comes with the dating process. Online daters are not overwhelmingly convinced that they have found an easier or more efficient way to meet people. About half agree that online dating is easier than other methods, but nearly as many (44%) disagree. Single and looking internet users are also split over this proposition; 45% agree that online dating is relatively easy, while 45% disagree.

Looking at the total population of internet users, just 33% think that online dating is not as difficult as other ways of meeting people, while 53% disagree, and 13% say they do not know. Online men are more likely than women to see the sites as efficient, though it is still a minority view; 36% of them agree that online dating is easier, compared with 30% of online women. Internet users who are ages 30-49, those who have a college degree or more and those who have an annual household income of \$75,000 or more also stand out as groups that are more likely to acknowledge the convenience of online dating.

Rural internet users are less likely than urban or suburban users to say that online dating is an easier and more efficient way of meeting people. Just 28% of rural users agree that online dating is easier, while 35% of urban users and 34% of suburban users say this.

Those who see online daters as desperate are the exception rather than the rule.

Regardless of how effective online dating may be, most internet users do not think that online daters are simply turning to cyberspace out of desperation. The majority, 61% of online adults, do not think that people who use online dating are desperate. Just 29% hold the view that online daters are indeed those who are in dire dating straits.

Those who do regard online daters as desperate tend to have less experience online and say they are less trusting of people generally. And although online men are more likely than women to view dating services as a good way to meet people, they are also more likely to categorize online daters as a desperate group.

Single and looking internet users are even less likely to hold this negative view; only 20% agree that online daters are desperate. And while one might expect that none of the online daters themselves would agree with this assessment, 19% do. However, it is likely that these respondents are referring to those they encountered while using dating websites, rather than themselves. Within the small subsection of online daters who hold

Part 4. Public Attitudes Toward Online Dating

this negative view, most also report that they personally had negative experiences using the services.

Most internet users think it is risky to post personal information on online dating websites, but online daters are less concerned.

Most internet users (66%) agree that online dating is a dangerous activity because it puts personal information on the internet. Just 25% do not consider online dating dangerous. Female internet users, older users, and those who have lower levels of income or education are among those who are most wary of these risks.

Among those who are single and looking, there is no clear majority view; 51% agree that it is a risky activity and have concerns about exposing personal information through the services, while 44% do not.¹⁴

Those who have actually used the services are not as wary. 43% think that the activity involves risk to personal information, while 52% do not see the activity as dangerous. However, this view does not necessarily stem from personal experience; within the subsection of online daters who consider the practice unsafe, equal numbers report positive and negative experiences using the services.

In a separate question, 6% of online daters say that dating websites do an “excellent” job of protecting people’s personal information, while 32% say they do a “good” job. Another 33% rate the services as “fair” and 12% say the websites do a “poor” job of protecting their information.

Looking at internet users who have not used online dating websites, concerns about personal information are more pronounced. Fully 69% of respondents in this group have privacy concerns, while 22% do not. Just 9% of internet users who have never gone to a dating website say they do not know whether or not online dating is dangerous.

Internet users and online daters both suspect that many people are dishonest about their marital status on dating websites.

While the online public and online daters alike recognize the potential of these social tools, they remain wary of those who take advantage of the anonymity afforded by the internet. A sizable majority of internet users agree that a lot of people who use online dating lie about their marital status; 57% agree that many people lie, while 18% disagree, and 25% say they do not know. Those with lower levels of income or education are more likely than the average internet user to suspect that people lie.

¹⁴ This difference is not large enough to be statistically significant.

Part 4. Public Attitudes Toward Online Dating

Just over half (52%) of online daters agree that a lot of people are dishonest about being married, while 32% disagree, and 15% say they do not know. Single and looking internet users report similar views.

Those who do not have personal experience using the sites are no more suspect of people's dishonesty than the average internet user.

Part 5.

Beyond Dating Websites

Three out of four online Americans who are single and looking for romantic partners have used the internet for at least one dating-related activity.

The act of using dating websites is just one online avenue that can lead to a romantic connection. The internet facilitates a wide array of other dating- or romance-related activities. A myriad of places and tools, from search engines to email and instant messaging, are marshaled by internet users who are trying to connect with a romantic partner—that includes everything from information seeking to virtual flirting. Among all internet users who are single and looking, 74% have engaged in at least one dating-related activity.

Most of them have done three or fewer of these activities, but one-quarter have done between four and ten online activities related to dating. Just 2% of all single and looking internet users have done all ten of the dating activities that we asked about (see full list in table on the following page).

Flirting online ranks highly among those who are searching for someone.

Whether you meet someone offline or online, email and other forms of online communication now play host to some of the most crucial interactions in the early stages of a relationship. Indeed, a substantial segment of single and looking internet users, 40%, say they flirt online, and 28% have used the internet or email to ask someone out on a date. As one might expect, online daters are considerably more experienced with online courtship; fully 60% of online daters say they have flirted online.

A smaller segment (21%) of single and looking internet users say that people they know have tried to play online matchmaker for them, introducing them to potential dates via email or instant messaging.

The single and looking segment of the online population uses the internet both as a roadmap for the offline world and as a destination to meet people. While 27% have used the internet to find a place offline, like a nightclub or singles event, where they might meet someone, 19% have participated in an online group where they hoped to meet people to date.

Beyond facilitating that initial connection, the internet can help make or break a couple. While 18% of single and looking internet users have maintained a long-distance romantic

Part 5. Beyond Dating Websites

relationship with someone online, 9% report breaking up with someone using the internet or email.

Dating-Related Activities Online	
<i>Roughly 10 million internet users say they are single and looking for a romantic partner. Here are some of the ways they have used the internet for dating...</i>	Single and Looking Internet Users
Flirt with someone	40%
Go to an online dating website	37
Ask someone out on a date	28
Find a place offline, like a nightclub or singles event, where you might meet someone to date	27
Been introduced to a potential date by a third party using email or instant messaging	21
Participate in an online group where you hoped to meet people to date	19
Search for info about someone you dated in the past	18
Maintain a long-distance relationship	18
Search for info about someone you were currently dating or were about to meet for a first date	17
Break up with someone you were dating	9

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, September–December 2005. Margin of error is ±9% for Single and Looking Internet Users (n=140).

One in three online daters has used the internet to search for someone they dated in the past.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the dating scene in the digital age is the newfound ability for singles to “Google” each other or search online for information relating to a potential date before they meet or even agree to meet. While pre-internet perusing might have involved talking with a potential date’s acquaintances, or sifting through a yearbook to find pictures from that person’s past, internet-era searching can instantly reveal a wide array of details about the person’s work experiences, education, and personal life, photos, blog postings, etc. Of those internet users who are single and looking, 17% have searched for information about someone they were currently dating or were about to meet for a first date.

Another form of personal “Googling” involves seeking information about someone with whom you were involved in the past. Similar in size to the pre-date Googling crowd, 18% of internet users who are single and looking say they have searched for information about someone they have dated in the past, compared with 32% of online daters who say they have done this.

Part 5. Beyond Dating Websites

Looking at the larger population of all internet users and beyond dating-specific searches, 28% of all internet users say they have searched for information online about someone they know or might meet.¹⁵

¹⁵ Pew Internet Project Tracking Survey, September 2005.

Methodology

Summary

The September 2005 Tracking Survey (Online Dating Extension), sponsored by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, obtained telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3,215 adults living in continental United States telephone households. The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research International. The interviews were conducted in English by Princeton Data Source, LLC from September 14 to December 8, 2005. This report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey of Americans' use of the Internet. Statistical results are weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is $\pm 1.9\%$. For results based Internet users ($n=2,252$), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points. Online daters ($n=204$) have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 7.5 percentage points.

Details on the design, execution, and analysis of the survey are discussed below.

Design and Data Collection Procedures

Sample Design

The sample was designed to represent all continental U.S. telephone households. The telephone sample was provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to PSRAI specifications. The sample was drawn using standard *list-assisted random digit dialing* (RDD) methodology. *Active blocks* of telephone numbers (area code + exchange + two-digit block number) that contained three or more residential directory listings were selected with probabilities in proportion to their share of listed telephone households; after selection two more digits were added randomly to complete the number. This method guarantees coverage of every assigned phone number regardless of whether that number is directory listed, purposely unlisted, or too new to be listed. After selection, the numbers were compared against business directories and matching numbers purged.

Contact Procedures

Interviews were conducted from September 14 to December 8, 2005. As many as 10 attempts were made to contact every sampled telephone number. Sample was released for interviewing in replicates, which are representative subsamples of the larger sample. Using replicates to control the release of sample ensures that complete call procedures are followed for the entire sample.

Calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chance of making contact with potential respondents. Each household received at least one daytime call in an attempt to find someone at home. In each contacted household, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult male currently at home. If no male was available, interviewers asked to speak with the oldest female at home. This systematic respondent selection technique has been shown to produce samples that closely mirror the population in terms of age and gender.

Weighting and Analysis

Weighting is generally used in survey analysis to compensate for patterns of nonresponse that might bias results¹⁶. The weight variable balances the interviewed sample of all adults to match national parameters for sex, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, region (U.S. Census definitions), and population density. The White, non-Hispanic subgroup was also balanced on age, education and region. These parameters came from a special analysis of the Census Bureau's 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) that included all households in the continental United States that had a telephone.

Weighting was accomplished using Sample Balancing, a special iterative sample weighting program that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables using a statistical technique called the *Deming Algorithm*. Weights were trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the final results. The use of these weights in statistical analysis ensures that the demographic characteristics of the sample closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the national population. Table 1 compares weighted and unweighted sample distributions to population parameters.

¹⁶ Questions were cut on interviews done after 10-14-05. Due to this, weighting was done in two parts. The first weighting was weighted by form on interviews before 10-14-05.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Parameter		Unweighted	Denwt (WEIGHT)
Gender			
Male	48.1	45.7	48.3
Female	51.9	54.3	51.7
Age			
18-24	12.6	7.6	12.3
25-34	18.0	12.6	17.6
35-44	20.3	17.4	20.5
45-54	19.3	22.0	19.2
55-64	13.4	16.7	13.9
65+	16.4	23.7	16.5
Education			
Less than HS Grad.	15.1	9.9	12.9
HS Grad.	35.8	34.5	36.1
Some College	23.3	23.2	24.0
College Grad.	25.8	32.4	27.0
Region			
Northeast	19.2	19.0	19.6
Midwest	23.0	24.5	23.6
South	36.0	36.9	35.5
West	21.8	19.6	21.3
Race/Ethnicity			
White/not Hispanic	71.7	80.4	73.5
Black/not Hispanic	10.8	9.8	11.0
Hispanic	11.9	6.0	10.3
Other/not Hispanic	5.6	3.9	5.3
Population Density			
1 - Lowest	20.1	24.2	20.6
2	20.0	22.7	20.5
3	20.1	21.9	20.4
4	20.2	17.2	19.6
5 - Highest	19.6	14.0	18.8

Effects of Sample Design on Statistical Inference

Post-data collection statistical adjustments require analysis procedures that reflect departures from simple random sampling. PSRAI calculates the effects of these design features so that an appropriate adjustment can be incorporated into tests of statistical significance when using these data. The so-called "design effect" or *deff* represents the loss in statistical efficiency that results from systematic non-response. The total sample design effect for this survey is 1.22.

PSRAI calculates the composite design effect for a sample of size *n*, with each case having a weight, *w_i*, as:

$$deff = \frac{n \sum_{i=1}^n w_i^2}{\left(\sum_{i=1}^n w_i \right)^2} \quad f$$

In a wide range of situations, the adjusted standard error of a statistic should be calculated by multiplying the usual formula by the square root of the design effect (\sqrt{deff}). Thus, the formula for computing the 95% confidence interval around a percentage is:

$$\hat{p} \pm \left(\sqrt{deff} \times 1.96 \sqrt{\frac{\hat{p}(1 - \hat{p})}{n}} \right) \quad f$$

where \hat{p} is the sample estimate and *n* is the unweighted number of sample cases in the group being considered.

The survey's margin of error is the largest 95% confidence interval for any estimated proportion based on the total sample—the one around 50%. For example, the margin of error for the entire sample is $\pm 1.9\%$. This means that in 95 out every 100 samples drawn using the same methodology, estimated proportions based on the entire sample will be no more than 1.9 percentage points away from their true values in the population. It is important to remember that sampling fluctuations are only one possible source of error in a survey estimate. Other sources, such as respondent selection bias, questionnaire wording and reporting inaccuracy, may contribute additional error of greater or lesser magnitude.

Response Rate

Following is the full disposition of all sampled telephone numbers:

Table 2: Sample Disposition

	Final
Total Numbers dialed	22,642
Business	1,892
Computer/Fax	1,500
Cell phone	38
Other Not-Working	4,152
Additional projected NW	1,806
Working numbers	13,254
Working Rate	58.5%
No Answer	381
Busy	101
Answering Machine	2,375
Callbacks	508
Other Non-Contacts	292
Contacted numbers	9,598
Contact Rate	72.4%
Initial Refusals	4,378
Second Refusals	1,013
Cooperating numbers	4,207
Cooperation Rate	43.8%
No Adult in HH	3
Language Barrier	616
Eligible numbers	3,588
Eligibility Rate	85.3%
Interrupted	373
Completes	3,215
Completion Rate	89.6%
Response Rate	28.4%

Table 2 reports the disposition of all sampled telephone numbers ever dialed from the original telephone number sample. The response rate estimates the fraction of all eligible respondents in the sample that were ultimately interviewed. At PSRAI it is calculated by taking the product of three component rates:¹⁷

- Contact rate – the proportion of working numbers where a request for interview was made – of 72 percent¹⁸
- Cooperation rate – the proportion of contacted numbers where a consent for interview was at least initially obtained, versus those refused – of 44 percent
- Completion rate – the proportion of initially cooperating and eligible interviews that were completed – of 90 percent

Thus the response rate for this survey was 28 percent.

¹⁷ PSRAI's disposition codes and reporting are consistent with the American Association for Public Opinion Research standards.

¹⁸ PSRAI assumes that 75 percent of cases that result in a constant disposition of "No answer" or "Busy" are actually not working numbers.