

## Love on the information suitor highway

March 7 2006

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Angie Vasconcellos started dating online two years ago before she moved to Arizona but broke off the relationship before it got too serious.

"It's easy to meet people from the convenience of your own home," said the 24-year-old from Tempe. "You get to screen who you talk to first, online and then eventually meet them and see what they're all about ... and if you like what they're all about in person and enjoy their company, you start to develop a relationship and eventually, you start dating."

Vasconcellos is just one of many Americans who have dabbled in online dating or knows someone finding love over the information suitor highway.

Some 31 percent of U.S. adults say they know someone who has used a dating Web site, while 15 percent or roughly 30 million people know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or married via the Internet, according to a recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

The study, called "Online Dating," interviewed 3,215 adults in a telephone survey last fall, finding that more online daters were using the Internet in a variety of ways to make potential love connections.

"It really doesn't matter where people meet each other," Vasconcellos said. "I think online dating can be great, and I'm sure a lot of people have dated online and are now married -- it's pretty much commonplace now and very much accepted in today's society."

And that's the idea that authors Mary Madden and Amanda Lenhart are trying to convey, that the stigma of finding love online is wearing off.

"Online dating sprung out of newspaper personals," Lenhart said. "Except now, most people are aware of who is doing it and don't see there is a stigma of desperation."

The study found that 11 percent of Internet users -- or 16 million people -- have used an online dating Web site and about 3 million have found long-term relationships or married someone via Internet Web sites and their services.

"We found that online daters had access to a wider pool that could help them find a better match," Madden said. "They could search for people and focus on niche interests like religion affiliation. They also had a sense of control in an arena where a lot is left up to chance."

Lenhart added that online daters were spending more time online because it simply fit into their lifestyle, and at the same time, these same online romancers used technology as a mediated way to speak with someone, getting over the initial awkward stage of meeting a person.

They acknowledged that thanks to word of mouth, strength of success stories and more people using online dating services, these factors were carrying a lot of weight in the increase to the media.

The study found that 7 percent of the online daters saw themselves as single and looking for a romantic partner online, some 40 percent say they flirt online, and 28 percent have asked someone out from online.

It also found that 74 percent said they have used the Internet for romancing, whether using an online dating service, searching for a potential date or flirting over e-mail or instant messaging.

Online daters were doing more research on dates, the authors mentioned, thanks to the Internet and "Googling" information on a date, with 17 percent having done this while currently dating a person or about to go on a first date.

According to the authors, two trends emerged in tech dating. On one hand there was a more competitive wave of social network sites and the other, more niche sites specialized in providing top-tier services using scientific approaches such as eHarmony.

They also noted that there were strength in numbers based on the number of users on a service and saw that smaller sites were cross-lifting, forming a larger network to compete with their larger counterparts.

Yet, with more people trying to find romance online, not as many were taking the first step with an in-person meeting, the study found. Only 43 percent or 7 million had gone on a date they met from a Web site.

Still, the authors found that many were concerned about the potential dangers of posting personal information and reliability of information users post on sites.

Some 66 percent of Internet users said they agreed that online dating was dangerous because of personal information online, while 57 percent said a lot of people lie about their marital status on online dating sites.

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