

Forget Cupid. Online connections have valentines falling in love, researcher says

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(PhysOrg.com) -- With the ease of online dating services and the explosion of Facebook and virtual communities, it's no surprise that a growing number of people have found their valentine through the Internet.

But Stanford [sociologist](#) Michael Rosenfeld is curious about who they are. And here's what he's found: Gay men, lesbians and middle-aged heterosexuals are most likely to use their computers as matchmaking machines.

What these gay and straight groups have in common, he says, is that they're the least likely to rely on traditional forums of family, workplace and neighborhood to look for love.

"People still meet [romantic partners](#) in those places, but it seems to be less common," said Rosenfeld, an assistant professor of sociology. "The Internet is displacing those classic venues."

Rosenfeld's [online survey](#) of 3,000 adults shows that 61 percent of gay participants met their partners online during the past two years, compared with 23 percent of heterosexual couples. If you're straight, the most common way to meet your significant other is through a friend.

"I didn't expect the difference to be as dramatic as that," Rosenfeld said. But after doing follow-up interviews with survey subjects, the statistics made sense.

Online meeting sites offer a degree of anonymity that is generally more important to gay men and lesbians who don't want to risk outing themselves to unsupportive relatives, co-workers or neighbors. The sites also deepen a seemingly shallow dating pool.

"Only 2 percent of couples in the United States are same-sex couples," Rosenfeld said. "People have described how much of a revelation it was for them to discover that they weren't limited to the one gay bar they know. They've been to that gay bar and met the four people they thought they could meet there and were exasperated over the idea that their entire universe might be contained to those four people."

Gays are also less likely than their straight peers to get help from relatives in finding a mate. While 22 percent of women married to men and 17 percent of men married to women met their spouses through a relative, less than 1 percent of partnered [gay men](#) and about 8 percent of partnered [lesbians](#) said they met their current partner through a family connection.

But regardless of your sexual orientation, roaming for romance online offers the opportunity to be highly selective.

"The Internet gives a spectacular advantage for everyone looking for something unusual," Rosenfeld said. "That includes everyone looking for special batteries for a 1972 camera or spare parts for a printer that's been out of production for 20 years. And it also includes people who are looking for a partner who is in a needle-in-a-haystack population."

That's exactly what the appeal of [online dating](#) was for Rick Cobb. At 42, he didn't expect much help from the more traditional social sources of friends, family and the workplace. He figured at his age, everybody he knew was too preoccupied with their own personal lives to dabble in his.

And with his 10-year marriage recently over, Cobb didn't want to waste time sorting through potential dates at a bar or a party. He was looking for a woman in a situation similar to his own: divorced with children.

"If I were in my 20s hanging out with single people, I'm not sure I'd think about using one of these Internet dating sites," Cobb said. "But for someone like me who doesn't have the traditional ways for finding a mate anymore, it's perfect."

Despite being single, Cobb is far from alone.

Nearly 23 percent of the straight subjects in Rosenfeld's study who met their partners online in the past decade were between 35 and 44, making middle-aged heterosexuals the most likely straight group to do so. The youngest study participants - those between 18 and 24 - were the least likely to have met a partner online.

"Younger people have more traditional ways of meeting people," Rosenfeld said. "But the middle-aged people are past school, they already know everyone at their job and they're looking for some other way to broaden their social horizons. For them, the Internet is a new miracle."

Now that Rosenfeld has a handle on who is meeting online, he will soon start trying to answer to the next question: How long do those couples last?

Provided by Stanford University

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