

A third of us have used dating websites: study

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The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) conducted an online questionnaire with 12,000 couples from 18 countries, all of whom had regular access to the internet. They were asked a series of questions about whether they had visited dating websites, other online services and where else they might go looking for a partner. The questions related to the period 1997 to 2009.

Middle-aged men and women (aged 40-69) looking to start new

relationships after 1996 were the most likely to use online dating sites, with 36 per cent of them revealing that they had found their current partner online. The study dispels the myth that social networking and online dating is primarily for the young with just 23 per cent of 18-40-year-olds saying they had started a [relationship](#) through the internet. However, only two people in the sample started a relationship in their 70s and neither did this through the internet.

The study reveals to what extent chat rooms and social network sites have played a role in introducing people to their partners. For people who began their relationship before 2000, less than 10 per cent said they had met on a social networking site. But by 2005 that had doubled to 21 per cent, while the popularity of chat rooms declined over the same period.

Study co-author Dr. Bernie Hogan, Research Fellow at the OII, said: "Finding your partner online was once regarded as a bit of a novelty, but this survey suggests it has become a common if not dominant way of meeting new partners, particularly if you are between 40 and 70 years old. Our questionnaire also reveals that people who know others who date online are more likely to try it and approve of it. Our study gives us some insight into the significance and impact of the internet and how it is affecting intimate relationships both online and offline."

Church events, family gatherings or activities based around a shared hobby are experiencing a slight decline in popularity as ways of finding a partner and this could be because they are viewed as less successful hunting grounds, says the study. For example, only one in 15 people who said they were looking through their church found someone that way. Despite the recent spike in online dating, most of the sample said they had met their partner through traditional offline channels – through friends of friends (67 per cent) or meeting at clubs or bars (69 per cent).

Co-author and OII Director, Professor William Dutton, said: "When you ask the question "How did you meet?" the most likely answer is still "through mutual friends" or "at a club or bar". But this study suggests there has been a noticeable shift in dating strategies. Men and women are seeing the internet as a new place to meet – another option for the networked individual. A growing number now view dating as a distinct and intentional activity with its own set of contexts and conventions. The popularity of online dating seems largely down to its accessibility and the fact that people seem comfortable disclosing what appear to be personal details in a "pseudo-anonymous" online setting."

The study reveals there might be national differences in attitudes to online dating. Users in Northern European countries are slightly but significantly more likely to rely on one-to-one dating websites while those in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking nations are more likely to use [social networking sites](#) as well.

The most gregarious online nation appears to be Brazil – more than eight of out ten (83 per cent) of those interviewed who had access to the internet said they had met someone who had been first introduced to them online, but this was not just limited to personal relationships. By contrast, in Japan, a country known for embracing technology in so many ways, internet users were rather reluctant to engage with online dating.

The paper is based on the '*Me, My Spouse and the Internet Project*' at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, supported by a grant from eHarmony, an online dating service.

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