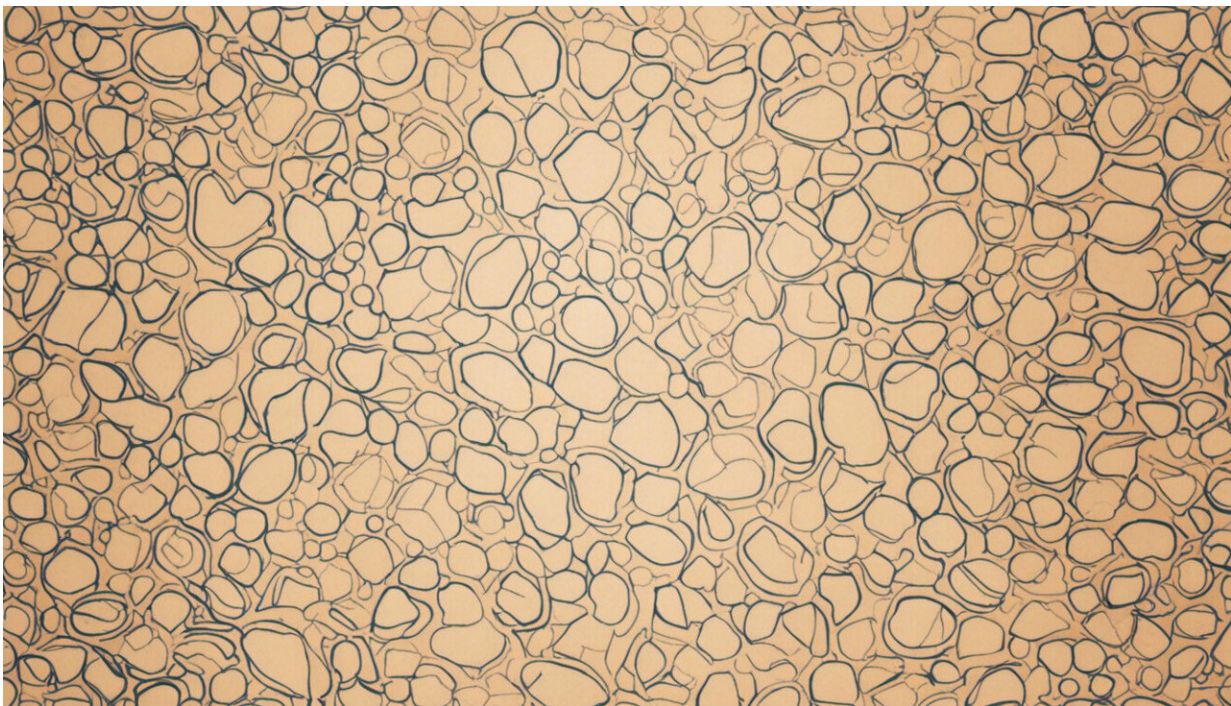


# Probing Question: How much has dating changed in recent years?

March 2 2012, By Melissa Beattie-Moss

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The economy may be struggling, but these days Cupid has found some profitable new niches. With about 95 million single adults in the United States, the online matchmaking industry is booming, to the tune of a billion dollars in revenue projected for 2012. Communication technologies such as Facebook, Twitter and Skype have created new

ways to find potential partners, and GPS-enabled smartphone apps can even tell you which eligible singles are within a mile of your location at any given moment.

Despite all the digital bells and whistles, it still all comes down to a face-to-face encounter, a.k.a. the date. Is dating fundamentally any different for young adults today than in our parents' and grandparents' days?

There have indeed been some important changes, said Sara Vasilenko, a postdoctoral fellow in Penn State's Prevention Research Center and Methodology Center. "One of the biggest differences between young people today compared to earlier generations," she noted, "is that they are getting married at later ages." A recent Pew [study](#) shows that marriage is at a record low in the [United States](#) and the median age at first marriage has never been higher for both genders. "So although dating and romantic relationships are important for adolescents and [young adults](#) today, some of the expectations around dating and functions of dating may differ when most people get married in their mid- to late-20s compared to their late teens and early 20s as they did in the past."

Delaying marriage has many implications, including on the sex lives of young singles. Vasilenko, who received her doctorate in human development and family studies at Penn State, has conducted research on attitudes about sex and dating among college students, and co-authored [a related paper](#) with her graduate adviser, Eva Lefkowitz and colleague Jennifer Maggs.

"The notion that college students are abandoning romantic relationships for casual sex -- 'hook-ups' -- is a bit exaggerated," she explained. "Research has found that many college students have engaged in sex outside of a relationship at some point in their lifetime. However, this is not happening as frequently as popular media may lead you to believe. In

our recent study, my colleagues and I found that nearly 90 percent of occurrences of sexual behavior happen with a dating or relationship partner. So although it is common for [college students](#) to occasionally engage in nonrelationship sex, in reality the majority of college student sexual experiences occur within relationships.”

What of the notion that modern technology is killing romance? “My sense,” said Vasilenko, “is that rather than fundamentally changing the nature of relationships, new technologies may be serving as tools to further basic human relationship goals. Research suggests that newer forms of communication like cellphones, texting and Facebook are often used to express affection with a romantic partner and can be associated with better quality relationships.” However, cautioned Vasilenko, “Communicating in more public forums online can also give rise to jealousy and other negative relationship outcomes. There has been anecdotal evidence that many people cite issues resulting from Facebook in divorce filings. But I think it is likely that Facebook didn’t cause these problems, and that without these technologies, jealousy or other relationship problems would still play out in other ways.”

Although far fewer young people today follow the socially prescribed steps of traditional courtship and wooing -- steps that once led from chatting with the [parents](#), to going steady, to engagement and marriage -- “the desire for close romantic partnerships remains,” said Vasilenko, “and will remain strong in the future.” That’s good news for singles -- and for a busy guy named Cupid and his colleagues in the digital matchmaking biz.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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