

Monitor 2007-2009 Supplementary Report: Internet Relationships

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SUMMARY Previously published findings from the 2005 Monitor showed that around 13% of adult Australians said they had used the internet to form online friendships and/or romantic relationships (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006). To explore community views on the phenomenon, three questions about use of the internet (generally, for friendship, for romance) were included in the 2007 and 2009 Monitor surveys. Findings suggested that, although adult Australians are very comfortable with general use of the internet, and showed slight increases in comfort ratings over time, they were relatively uncomfortable with use of this medium for friendship and romance.

The Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor is an annual national survey which captures community views of 1000 Australian adults. The Monitor typically samples a mature cross-section of the adult population (average age around 50 years, range 18 to 80+). In 2005 the Monitor explored Australians' experiences with internet relationships. An analysis by Hardie & Buzwell (2006) showed that 13% of that sample said they had used the internet to form friendships and/or romantic relationships. Online relationships are likely to be more prevalent among adolescents and young adults (see Donn & Sherman, 2002; McCown, Fischer, Page, & Homant, 2001; Whitty & Gavin, 2001), but the older adult Monitor sample reported only modest prevalence. Since the majority reported no experience with internet relationships, Australian community views about online friendship and romance needed further investigation. These issues were therefore followed up in subsequent surveys. All respondents to the 2007 and 2009 Monitor surveys were asked to rate their levels of comfort with 1) general use of the internet, 2) use of the internet to make new friends and 3) use of the internet to find romance. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentages and mean ratings illustrating Australians' levels of comfort with use of the internet generally, to make new friends, and to find romance in 2007 and 2009.

	% Not Comfortable	% Not Sure	% Comfortable	Mean Rating 0 - 10 scale
Comfort using the internet: for general use				
2007 survey	22%	10%	68%	6.7
2009 survey	20%	9%	71%	6.8
to make new friends				
2007 survey	66%	12%	22%	3.3
2009 survey	62%	14%	24%	3.4
to find romance				
2007 survey	75%	12%	13%	2.4
2009 survey	74%	11%	15%	2.4

Notes: N = 1000 for each survey, ratings were collapsed into categories (0 to 4 = not comfortable, 5 = not sure, 6 to 10 = comfortable) to yield percentages.

There was a slight trend for increasing community comfort with internet use from 2007 to 2009, but both samples reported relatively high levels of comfort with general internet use and significantly lower levels of comfort with internet use to form relationships. Men were consistently found to be more comfortable than women with all types of internet use, but both gender groups showed similar patterns of (dis)comfort with internet relationships compared to general internet use. Both men and women were significantly more comfortable using the internet for friendship than romance (all statistical comparisons, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that, although online relationships may be popular among some segments of the population, there is not yet widespread community comfort with the possibility of finding friendship or romance on the internet.

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