

Finding Love Online: The Nature and Frequency of Australian Adults' Internet Relationships

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Abstract

A telephone survey of 1013 Australian adults revealed 78% had used the internet, 13% to form online social relationships. Those forming online relationships tended to be students, young, single, comfortable with new technology, likely to vote Green and unlikely to vote Liberal. When this group was broken down into those who formed online friendships (n = 82) or online romantic relationships (n = 22) close examination of the latter revealed an interesting profile. Those who experienced online romance spanned all age, gender, political and religious groups. Most met their cyberpartner face to face on many occasions and relationships tended to be lasting. Equal proportions of single and partnered individuals admitted they had experienced online romance, indicating that many cyberdaters may be cybercheaters. It appears that the internet is replacing traditional routes to friendship and romance, but further research is needed to clarify the nature and impact of online relationships.

Key Words – Internet relationships; online friendship; online romantic relationships; online adultery

Introduction

Despite early fears that use of the internet would cause people to become isolated and socially awkward (see Kraut et al. 1998), the internet has instead become a prime venue for social interaction (D'Amico 1998). In particular, the introduction of communication applications such as email, chatrooms, bulletin board systems, Multi-user Dungeons (MUDS) and Multi-user Dimensions Object Orientated (MOOs) has allowed internet networks to function as important social networks for users (Donchi & Moore 2004; Garton, Haythornwaite & Wellman 1997; Wellman et al. 1996). Indeed, social interaction has been found to be the primary purpose of home computer use (Moore 2000) and it has been suggested that the social impact of the internet is as dramatic as the advent of the telephone or television (Bargh & McKenna 2004). This is a paradox of the internet - on the one hand it epitomises the alienation of the modern world, on the other it can lead to the development of supportive and sometimes intensely intimate relationships (Cooper & Sportolari 1997).

The potential of the internet to foster new relationships has been a topic of interest in both the academic literature and the popular press. Hardey (2004) described the internet as a new mode of meeting people and forming relationships, noting that new information and communication technologies are supplementing or replacing traditional routes to potential romantic encounters. Recent media articles also claim that the internet is the modern tool for forming social relationships in both Australia and overseas. In a recent newspaper report describing research commissioned by an online dating service, www.parship.co.uk, it was reported that 3.6 million Britons used online dating services last year (*The Age* 12/1/2006 'Online dating reaches critical mass'). According to the article, this represents 65% of the 5.4 million Britons who were looking for a relationship and used a dating service in 2005. It was also reported that around 50% of British singles believe they will meet a suitable partner using the internet, while 42% of European singles believe they will find a romantic partner online.

Despite popular opinion about the utility of the internet as a social tool to facilitate interpersonal relationships, most research in this area focuses on the internet as a means of transmitting information rather than as an instrument for social interaction (Donn & Sherman 2002; Rozart 1994). Many researchers have considered computer-mediated-communication (CMC) to be impersonal, and have neglected the possible social implications (Donn & Sherman 2002). However, in light of the burgeoning number of reports of relationships that are initiated online (for example, McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant 2001; Parks & Roberts 1998, Whitty & Gavin 2001), there is a need for researchers to explore the social and personal implications of these new technologies (Whitty, 2004).

Much of the research to date on technology and social relationships has been based on US and UK data, but relatively little is known about Australians' use of the internet for social interaction. In recent telephone surveys, the Swinburne National Science and Technology Monitor (SNSTM 2004) showed that Australians believe science and technology can improve their quality of life. They are very comfortable with new technologies, particularly the internet. Take up rates for the internet have been high in Australia (Internet World Stats 2006), making this population very suitable for an exploration of adults' online social relationships.

Online Relationships

Some researchers believe that it is the lack of traditional social cues such as physical appearance that makes CMC ideal for forming genuine social relationships (Donn & Sherman 2002), thus several researchers have explored the development of internet-

facilitated social relationships. One of the early studies in this area was conducted by Parks and Floyd (1996) who surveyed 176 regular contributors to Usenet news groups. They found that nearly two-thirds of their participants had formed relationships with people they had met online, with a small proportion of relationships (7.9%) identified as romantic. In a later study, Parks and Roberts (1998) surveyed 235 participants in online text-based games (MOOs) and found that 94% had formed ongoing personal relationships with other players. The majority of relationships were classified as friendships, but a significant proportion (26.3%) were classified as romantic relationships. Similarly, McKenna and Bargh (1998) found that of 600 randomly selected newsgroup respondents, 51% had formed close friendships and 35% had formed romantic relationships through their online interactions.

Taking a step beyond previous studies, McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) used structural equation modelling to explore whether people who can better disclose their 'true' or 'real' self on the internet, rather than in face-to-face settings, are more likely to form close relationships online and will tend to bring these relationships into their 'real' lives. In a group of randomly selected newsgroup posters (n = 576), McKenna and colleagues found that their hypothesis was confirmed. People who felt they could better express their 'real self' on the internet (in relative terms, as compared to the other participants) were more likely to form strong online relationships. They also found that individuals who located their 'real self' on the internet were more likely to bring online friends into their 'real life', by telephone calls, letters, and meeting in person. In addition, they were significantly more likely to have an affair or become engaged to someone they met via the internet. McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) concluded that internet acquaintances can and do develop into close relationships which can include intimate relationships.

McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) followed up their participants two years later and found that the stability of relationships which initially developed on the internet compared favourably to relationships which originally developed face to face. For example, they found that 79% of friendships and 71% of romantic partnerships were continuing, with most of these relationships reported as being closer and stronger. McKenna and colleagues concluded that the internet is an important social tool. They noted that it helped those who were friend-rich in 'real life' become richer through their online interactions, while those who were friend-poor in 'real life' became richer than they had been.

Online Romantic Relationships

One particular type of relationship that may develop online is the romantic relationship. Indeed, self-help books for finding love in cyberspace, for example, *Complete Idiots Guide to Online Dating and Relating* (Schwartz 1999), have begun to appear. It seems that online romance, or cyberdating, has emerged as a distinct type of contemporary relationship. Underwood and Findlay (2004) note the growing popularity of online romance, stating "it is obvious that online relationships are occurring in greater numbers and given then ubiquity of the internet can only be expected to increase" (p.139).

It may not be surprising that many of the relationships formed on the internet are of a romantic nature since, according to Wysocki (1998), more than 50% of all online communication is related to sex. Indeed, Cooper, McLouglin and Campbell (2000) claimed that the internet and associated technological advances would have tremendous influence on every aspect of sexuality in this new 'information age'. It is perhaps not remarkable, then, that people are using the internet to find a romantic partner.

The internet can provide connection and community, and may also facilitate romance, especially for people with limited options such as the elderly, those with disabilities, and

people isolated by distance or due to time limitations (Cooper, McLoughlin & Campbell 2000). Conversely, young people with limitless options may also be using the internet to form romantic relationships. For example, Donn and Sherman (2002) explored young adults' attitudes and practices regarding internet use to facilitate romantic relationships in a sample of 300 university students. They found that most students knew of someone who began, or developed, a relationship with a person they met online. More postgraduate than undergraduate students had taken steps to meet a friend or romantic partner on the internet, and more postgraduates reported meeting someone in person whom they had first met online. Postgraduates also expressed more positive views of using the internet to form relationships, than did undergraduates. For example, postgraduates agreed significantly more with the statement, "There is nothing wrong with trying to meet someone to date on the internet", while undergraduate students agreed significantly more with the statement: "People who try to find relationships on the internet must be desperate". In addition, postgraduate students seemed more likely to move an online relationship into offline mode. Nice and Katzev (1998) surveyed 248 American university students in order to explore the frequency of online romantic relationships. Of the nineteen students (7.7%) who had formed a romantic relationship online, two were engaged to marry someone they had met via the internet. The remainder were evenly split between casual and exclusive dating.

A much higher proportion of online romantic relationships was found in a recent study of young adult chatroom users. In Whitty's (2004) survey of over 5000 chatroom users (62% female, 38% male; mean age = 23 years), a staggering 74% of respondents said they had at some stage formed a romantic relationship with someone they had met online. These were primarily online romances which did not generally progress to 'real life' offline relationships. Only 35% of Whitty's survey respondents reported that they had physically met with someone they met on the internet.

Online romantic relationship formation appears to be on the increase (Whitty 2004). Much research in this area has focussed on the experiences of students or frequent internet users, but the incidence of online relationship formation in the general adult population is currently unknown (Donn & Sherman 2002).

Online Adultery

Some of the research exploring online romantic relationships has focussed on the issue of online adultery or cybercheating, which may be defined as forming an intimate relationship with someone other than the primary partner through the internet. There have been increasing reports of internet infidelity (Gwinnell 2001) and suggestions that online adultery is becoming an increasingly attractive form of social and/or sexual behaviour (Cooper, McLoughlin & Campbell 2000). In addition, some have claimed that online adultery accounts for a growing number of divorces in the USA (Quitter 1997). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that Schwartz and Southern (2000) reported that the majority of their respondents who were involved in online sex were married. Similarly, Wysocki (1998) found that half the respondents who said they were involved in online sexual relationships also reported that they were married, some with up to three children. Although both men and women were found to be involved in internet infidelity, the majority of these self-confessed online adulterers were male.

Although few large scale studies on internet adultery have been reported, some research has focused on individual case studies. For example, Biggs (2000) presented the case of a woman whose marriage broke down due to her online relationship with a single man. Subsequently she embarked on a new life which included a series of internet relationships.

Gwinnell (2001) also presented a case study of a man who engaged in internet adultery. Gwinnell attempted to identify factors which might contribute to online adultery, noting that the seductive anonymity and easy intimacy of online relationships, along with the man's social isolation, obsessive internet use, emotional and physical health problems, seemed to play a role in his online adultery. These factors may be associated with internet infidelity for some individuals, but identifying common risk factors for online adultery must be further explored in larger samples.

Underwood and Findlay (2004) surveyed 75 individuals who were involved in extra-dyadic relationships on the internet. All of the participants (53 of whom were male) were married or in a de facto relationship. Two thirds of the participants reported that their online relationship had migrated to other channels of communication. For example, just over a third said they had met their online partner face to face; while eleven said they had met and had sex with the internet partner. Many of those engaged in online infidelity had done so more than once. More than half (53%) said that they had entered into multiple online romantic relationships. The average number of extramarital online romantic relationships reported by respondents in this sample was surprisingly high, with a mean of six and a median of three extramarital online romances.

Demographic Differences in Online Relationships

A number of researchers have noted demographic differences in the individuals engaged in online relationships. For example, Parks and Floyd (1996) found that, although women are generally more likely than men to form 'real life' offline interpersonal relationships, when it comes to online relationships there is no gender or age bias. Men and women of any age or marital status may develop an online relationship. In terms of purely social relationships, or online friendships, McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) found that males and females were equally likely to develop a friendship with someone they met online by way of email, exchange of pictures or letters, and face to face meetings.

Use of the internet to form social relationships may be particularly important for young adults and adolescents. For example, in a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2001, 754 telephone interviews were conducted with internet users aged between 12 and 17 years of age. In this study it was found that online communication was an essential feature of young people's lives and had partially replaced face-to-face interactions.

For adults, an important use of the internet appears to be the formation of romantic relationships. Press release information at Match.com, an internet website used by those seeking a romantic relationship, indicates that their membership consists primarily of singles aged 21-49 years (Donn & Sherman 2002). Perusal of a similar Australian website, www.RSVP.com.au, reveals that large numbers of adults of all ages are using this popular internet site to contact others for both friendship and long term relationships.

There appears to be a demographic pattern for those seeking extramarital romance or sexual relationships online. Underwood and Findlay (2004) found that those seeking extramarital online romance tend to be male, tertiary educated and employed in professional occupations. Similarly, Schwartz and Southern (2000) found that most respondents who engaged in internet sex were men employed in professional occupations. There is, however, little published demographic information about people seeking online friendships and (non-adulterous) romantic relationships.

Current Study

Most previous research on online relationships has been conducted with regular internet users obtained via newsgroups or chat rooms, or with university students. The nature and frequency of online relationship formation, and the demographic profile of those involved in online relationships, is unknown in the general adult population. We know that Australia has embraced the use of internet technology (Internet World Stats 2006), and that Australians believe new technologies can improve their lives (SNSTM 2003; 2004). Thus, the aim of the current study was to survey a representative sample of Australians to examine the proportion of adults who had used the internet for social purposes, and to identify those who had formed online friendships or romantic relationships. Demographic differences were explored among those who had or had not formed online social relationships. For those who engaged in online relationships, demographic differences between those who used the internet for friendship and those who used the internet for romance were examined.

Method

Sample and Methodology

A sample of 1013 Australian residents over the age of 18 years was interviewed as part of the annual Swinburne National Science and Technology Monitor survey. Interviews were conducted at a computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) facility during September-October 2005. Participants' telephone numbers were selected using a predetermined quota system designed to randomly select numbers progressively to ensure that the proportion of completed interviews represented the population of Australia. The 2005 Monitor survey had a participation rate of 28%. Of 3587 eligible phone calls, 1013 resulted in agreement to participate, while 2587 individuals refused to take part in the survey. This is consistent with general participation rates for community surveys.

The annual Monitor survey includes sets of questions to cover demographics, use of new technologies, trust in science and comfort with new technologies. In addition, the 2005 Monitor included a set of questions about internet use, internet friendships and online romantic relationships. These were the focus of the present paper.

Results and Discussion

Sample Demographics

Of the 1013 Australians interviewed, 338 resided in New South Wales, 248 in Victoria, 188 in Queensland, 98 in Western Australia, 77 in South Australia, 24 in Tasmania, and 20 in both the Northern Territory and the ACT. There were 429 men and 584 women in the sample. A slight over-representation of women is common in telephone surveys as women are more likely to be at home during the day to answer the phone and tend to be more willing than men to participate in surveys.

In terms of age, the majority of participants were born in the 1940s (17.8%), 1950s (21%), and 1960s (19.5%). Moderate proportions were born in the 1930s (11.2%), 1970s (13.7%) and 1980s (9.9%), with small proportions born in the 1920s (6%) or pre-1920s (0.6%).

Nearly one third of the sample was university educated (22.5% had undergraduate degrees, 9.7% had postgraduate degrees). A modest proportion had TAFE qualifications (13.5%) and many had completed year 12 (23.9%), while 30.3% of the sample had left school before year 12.

Most participants were in paid employment, 37.4% full-time and 19.2% part-time. Only 2.6% were unemployed, while 25% were retired. A further 8% of the sample was engaged in home duties, and 4.4% were engaged in study.

The majority (62.9%) were currently partnered and living together in a married or de facto relationship, while 33.9% were currently single (14.4% of whom were previously partnered, 19.5% never partnered). A small group of participants (3.2%) were in committed relationships but did not live with their partner.

Use of the Internet

A striking 79% of the sample had internet experience. Moreover, nearly 70% reported that they had used the internet during the past week, most often at home (59%) and, to a lesser extent, at work (27%). This finding was consistent with recent internet world statistics which rank Australia as a high access country and estimate internet penetration at 68.4% (Internet World Stats 2006).

Comparison of Internet Users Who Had or Had Not Formed Online Social Relationships

Of the 796 participants with internet experience, 104 (13%) reported that they had used the internet to form social relationships (either friendships or romantic relationships) online, while the remaining 692 had not used the internet to meet people. These two internet user groups were assessed on demographic characteristics via chi square analysis, and compared on levels of trust in science, comfort with technology and overall life satisfaction using t-tests. In view of the sample size and number of comparisons, the statistical criterion for significance was set at .01.

Chi square analyses revealed no significant association between use of the internet for social relationships and place of residence, with similar proportions of those who had and those who had not formed online relationships residing in all states and territories. Use of the internet as a social tool appeared to be equally popular throughout Australia, with no differences associated with geographic residence by State. Future research might focus on a more fine-grained exploration of internet use by urban, rural and remote Australians.

Internet use for social purposes was also found to be unrelated to gender. Similar proportions of women and men in our sample used the internet as a social tool. This was consistent with the findings of McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002), which showed that males and females were equally likely to maintain social relationships with someone they met online.

Use of the internet for social purposes was not related to level of education for this sample. Similar proportions of high school, TAFE and university graduates had/had not used the internet to form relationships. This finding suggested that the utilisation of technology for social purposes is widespread, and not confined to those who are better educated.

Overall, the results showed that geographic location, gender and level of education were unrelated to whether Australian internet users sought social connections online. These findings underscore the fact that internet access is widespread in this country and the internet is proving to be a popular tool for online social interaction

In contrast, significant associations were found for age (χ^2 , df 7 = 65.02, $p < .001$), employment status (χ^2 , df 6 = 30.72, $p < .001$), political preference (χ^2 , df 6 = 18.45, $p < .001$), and relationship status (χ^2 , df 5 = 60.33, $p < .001$). Examination of the observed versus

expected frequencies and standardised residuals showed that online social relationships were most prevalent among those younger participants born in the 1980s. In terms of employment status, full-time students were more likely than full-time or part-time employees, retired or unemployed groups, to engage in online social interaction, perhaps reflecting a combination of youth plus regular access to the internet enabled by their educational institution. These findings were consistent with previous research showing students and young adults to be focused on forming social relationships online (Donn & Sherman 2002; Whitty 2004).

With regard to relationship status, those who were single or not living together were more likely to report online social relationships than those living in married and de facto relationships. There may have been some reluctance on the part of those in live-in relationships to admit to online relationships, which could account for this result. Alternatively, this may be an accurate reflection of the single participants' motivation and time available to seek friends and romance on the internet.

Examination of political preferences showed that Labor, National, and Democrat voters were equally likely to have had or not had online social relationships. Those who voted Green were more likely to have had online relationships, while those who voted Liberal were less likely to have done so. This finding may be an artefact of age differences in political preference and requires further examination in future studies.

Comparison of the average levels of comfort and trust for the two groups showed that those who had used the internet for online social relationships were, unsurprisingly, more comfortable with new technologies in general ($t, df 788 = 4.20, p < .001$) and with internet technology in particular ($t, df 792 = 4.72, p < .001$). The group means are shown in Table 1. Those who had formed online relationships also held a stronger belief that science and technology can solve most problems faced by humans ($t, df 784 = 2.79, p < .01$). It appears that those who believed new technologies could solve human problems may have viewed social issues such as loneliness as a solvable problem.

Table 1. Comparison of internet users who had formed online social relationships (n=104) with those who had not formed online relationships (n=692) on ratings of life satisfaction, comfort and trust in science and technology.

	Online Social Relationships		No Online Social Relationships	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Life Satisfaction	7.73	1.50	7.98	1.64
Comfort with new technologies**	7.71	1.76	6.83	2.03
Comfort with the internet **	8.97	1.50	7.86	2.34
Trust that science can solve human problems*	5.97	2.35	5.25	2.45

Note: Questions were rated on a 0-10 scale, with higher scores indicating greater comfort, trust and satisfaction. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Interestingly, the two groups reported similarly high levels of life satisfaction ($t, df 792 = 1.46, p = .145$). This finding was in contrast to the common stereotype of the socially inept computer 'nerd' who might seek relationships online to compensate for a deficit in social skills. Early research by Kraut et al. (1998) suggested social and psychological deficits among internet users. Follow up research by Kraut et al. in 2002 noted that the negative effects of using the internet appeared to have dissipated. Thus they reversed their claims

that the internet was associated with psychological ill-being. In agreement with the more recent Kraut et al. (2002) findings, internet users in the present sample were satisfied with their lives regardless of whether or not they formed social relationships online.

Overall, the current findings suggested that Australian internet users who formed online social relationships, as opposed to those who did not use the internet to form online relationships, tended to be young, single, full-time students. They were generally more comfortable with new technology, believed that science could solve most problems, were most likely to vote Green and least likely to vote Liberal.

Comparing Internet Use for Online Friendships versus Online Romantic Relationships

Of the 104 Australian adults who used the internet to form online social relationships, 79% said they used the internet to make new friends, while 21% said they used the internet for online romantic relationships. Surprisingly, no one fell into both categories. Those who used the internet to form friendships did not report also using the web for romance; while those who reported online romance did not report use of the internet for general friendship. Since the nature of these online relationships differed, it seemed worthwhile to compare the online friendship group ($n = 82$) with the online romance group ($n = 22$). The available data could not explain why some used the internet for friendship while others sought romance, but it was hoped that demographic and attitudinal comparisons might shed some light on people's motivations for the differing types of relationships. Again, chi square analyses were used to identify associations with demographic factors, while t-tests were conducted to compare the two groups on levels of comfort, trust and life satisfaction.

The two groups reported similar levels of life satisfaction (t , $df\ 101 = .98$, $p = .33$). Both groups were reasonably well satisfied with life, with no indication that lower levels of satisfaction might prompt relationship seeking of either type.

No mean differences were found between the online friendship group and online romance group on trust and belief in science. Both groups reported similarly high levels of trust in science (t , $df\ 101 = .11$, $p = .91$) and strong beliefs in the benefits of science (t , $df\ 101 = .81$, $p = .42$). Thus, both groups appeared to recognise that advances in science and technology could improve their social world. The online friendship and online romance groups did differ, however, in their degree of comfort with new technology (t , $df\ 101 = 2.67$, $p < .01$), with the friendship group reporting greater general comfort with new technology (mean = 8.53, $sd = 1.17$) than the romance group (mean = 7.68, $sd = 1.79$). Despite their belief that technology could improve their world, those seeking romance online seemed to be less comfortable with that technology. This may be a function of the different types of relationship sought, as individuals desiring an online romantic relationship may be more concerned with issues such as online privacy and may feel more vulnerable in this domain than those seeking friendship.

There was no significant association between group membership and any of the demographic factors. No differences were found for age, gender, relationship status, state of residence, employment status or voting preference of those who formed online friendships and those who had online romances. There was a slight tendency for tertiary education to distinguish online romantics from the friendship group, with more postgraduates reporting online romance than would be expected by chance. Although this nonsignificant trend (χ^2 , $df\ 4 = 8.33$, $p = .08$) was not statistically reliable, it was consistent with previous research showing that postgraduates were most likely to seek online romance (Donn & Sherman 2002).

Overall, there was little to distinguish those who formed online friendships from those who formed online romantic relationships. Apart from a slight tendency for online romantics to be more highly educated, and a significant tendency to be less comfortable with new technologies, there was no discernable pattern of demographic differences between online romantics and online friends. Indeed, the similarity of the two groups was striking. For example, men and women were equally likely to seek both friendship and romance online, dispelling the possibility of gender bias in online romance. Both online romantics and online friends spanned the range of age groups, geographic locations, employment categories and political preferences in similar proportions. All groups were similar in their use of the internet to meet the common human need for social connection with others.

Perhaps the most unanticipated similarity between the two groups was in terms of relationship status. Those in married, de facto and committed relationships were as likely as their single counterparts to form both types of online relationships (χ^2 , df 1 = .28, p = .60). Similar proportions of respondents with partners (54.5%) and without partners (45.5%) had formed romantic relationships online. This finding was somewhat unexpected. Single respondents might be expected to seek out romantic relationships, but those with partners might be expected to be less likely to seek romance online. It appeared that some of the cyberdaters in the sample might be cybercheaters. This possibility was further explored below, following the analysis of Australians who reported an online romance.

Profile of Australians Who Reported an Online Romance

There was an identifiable pattern of differences between Australian internet users who did or did not form online social relationships, although there was little to distinguish those who had online friendships from those who had online romances. Nonetheless, the descriptive profile of the 22 adults (12 men, 10 women) who reported an online romance held some surprises. Online romantics were as likely to be living with their partner (40.9% married or de facto) as to be single (45.5%). There were equally likely to have no children (50%) or have up to two children (50%).

Online romantic relationships were reasonably long lasting. For some, cyberdating lasted only weeks (4.5%) or months (27%), but for many the online romance lasted for years (18.2%). Indeed, 50% said their online romances were ongoing at the time of the survey, but it was not clear when these ongoing romances had commenced. Most people who had an online romantic relationship reported that they had met their romantic partner face to face. Just 18% had never met, while 13.6% met at least once, 13.6% met a few times, 22.7% met many times, and 31.8% said they were in an ongoing romantic relationship. Only relatively rarely did the romantic online relationship remain purely in cyberspace.

Online romance was not confined to the young. While 45% of online romantics were under 35 years of age, a similar proportion (41%) were aged between 36 and 55 years, and a substantial proportion were older, with 9% aged 56 to 65, and 4.5% of online romantics over the age of 76. This finding was consistent with recent reports about the growth of online matchmaking among all age groups and increasing use of the internet as a replacement for marriage brokers and other traditional routes to romance (Hardey 2004).

Most online romantics were in paid employment (63.6% full-time, 9.1% part-time, 4.5% unemployed). Students made up just 13.6% of this group, while 9.1% were retired. There was a tendency for online romantics to be tertiary educated, with 32% holding undergraduate and 27% postgraduate degrees. The remainder had TAFE qualifications (18%), year 12 (18%) or less (4.5%). In terms of political affiliation, online romantics were most likely to be

Labor voters (43.8%), followed by Liberal (31.3%), and Greens voters (13.6%). They tended not to be religious (50% reported no religious affiliation), however those who were religious were as likely to be Anglican (4.5%) or Uniting (4.5%) or Muslim (4.5%), while a slightly higher proportion (13.6%) was Catholic.

This demographic profile suggests that online services meet the romantic needs of Australians from many demographic categories. Those who engaged in online romantic relationships spanned all age groups, religions and political groups; although most were tertiary educated and in paid employment. Some encounters were short lived, but many resulted in lasting relationships. The need to find romance appeared to be fairly widespread and well served by internet technology for this sample of adult Australians.

Cyberdating or Cybercheating?

To explore the cyberdate-cybercheat possibility noted above, a chi square analysis of online romantics' relationship status (single versus partnered) by length of online romance (weeks, months, years, currently ongoing) was conducted. It was possible that past cyberdating had led to current offline live-in relationships, but these would not be classed as current online romantic relationships. Of course, it was also possible that some people with offline partners were engaged in supplementary online romance or cybercheating. An association between length of internet romance and relationship status was found (χ^2 , df 3 = 14.30, $p < .01$). Examination of the observed versus expected frequencies and standardized residuals showed that significantly more online romantics who were currently partnered (married, de facto) also said their online romance was ongoing (see Table 2).

Table 2. Current 'real life' relationship status by length of online romantic relationship: Analysis of 22 Australians who reported an internet romance.

	Length of online relationship			
	Ongoing	Years	Months	Weeks
Single, divorced, widowed	1	2	6	1
Married, de facto	10**	2	0	0

Note: ** adjusted standardized residual = 3.4, $p < .01$

Unless there was some confusion among respondents about what constitutes online and offline relationships, it seemed that nearly half the online romantics were cybercheaters. In light of the previous research on internet infidelity (Cooper, McLoughlin & Campbell 2000; Underwood & Findlay 2004) these results were not completely unexpected. Moreover, recent research on Australians' offline sexual activity suggests that a substantial minority may condone some forms of infidelity. A 2003 telephone survey of sexual attitudes and behaviours in a representative sample of nearly 20,000 Australians showed, that while 78% agreed that it is wrong to have an affair while in a committed relationship, the remaining 22% either disagreed or gave neutral responses (Rissel et al. 2003a). The survey also showed that a substantial proportion of men (15.3% of those who lived with their partner, 12.8% who were partnered but did not live together) said they had paid for extramarital sex while in a relationship (Rissel et al. 2003b). Further research is needed to clarify the relative prevalence of cyberdating and cybercheating among Australian adults.

Conclusion

The current study was a first attempt to explore who is engaging in online relationships in the general Australian population. It was found that a very high proportion of Australian adults have used the internet. A substantial proportion of those with internet experience have used this technology to form new social relationships. Those who formed online social relationships tended to be young, single, full-time students who were comfortable with new technology, believed that science could solve most problems, were most likely to vote Green and least likely to vote Liberal. There was little to distinguish those who formed online platonic friendships from those who formed online romantic relationships, apart from less comfort with new technologies and more postgraduate qualifications among internet romantics. Those who had an online romance spanned all age groups, political and religious affiliations. Although most tended to be non-religious, online romantics who were religious were as likely to be Anglican, Uniting or Muslim, and slightly more likely to be Catholic. Closer examination of the online romantics revealed that some cyberdaters may be cybercheaters. Equal proportions of single and partnered individuals from all age groups admitted they had experienced online romance. Most said they met face to face on many occasions and the relationships tended to be long lasting, with many ongoing at the time of the survey. It does appear that the internet may be replacing traditional routes to friendship and romance, but further research is needed to clarify the nature and impact of online relationships.

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