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Subject Area - Sociology

Internet Dating

How effective is the internet as a means of meeting new people? Examine the successes and failures of internet dating.

Background History:

In recent years 'internet dating' has become very popular for a number of reasons, mainly due to its ease and convenience. In a world where single people often have little time to socialise and find it hard to meet like minded people the internet has provided a link to the world of dating and romance. The scope of people it appeals to is far reaching with men and women of all ages, backgrounds and ethnicities interested.

The number of internet dating sites is continually growing and has become a very successful and effective business. It is estimated that around 6 million people in Britain belong to an internet dating site. Certainly the stigma which was attached to internet dating a few years ago seems to have passed.

(University of Bath Study, 2005)

Statistics show that internet dating is big business with leading sites such as Yahoo Personals and Match.com drawing in 4.9 million visitors and 4.2 million visitors respectively in January 2004 alone. (Blazier, 2004)

Research:

So just how successful is internet dating as a means of meeting new people? Leading internet dating company match.com was launched in 1995 and estimates that through their site hundreds of thousands of relationships have been formed. Moreover, match.com estimates that over 200,000 members found the person they were seeking through the site. (match.com, 2005)

In 2004 a survey was set up by the Weddingchannel.com with results again indicating high success rates for internet dating. The study found that 12% of the 4743 couples registered had met on dating websites. The study also discovered that over 70% of those who had met their partners through internet dating sites were happy to openly admit this to friends and would recommend internet dating to the people around them. (match.com, 2005)

Furthermore, a recent and crucially, an independent research study has also concluded that internet dating is officially a successful way of meeting new people and forming friendships or romance attachments and summarises that online dating can indeed be a success for many people.

The University of Bath in conjunction with Dr Gavin, Dr Scott and Dr Duffield, carried out an online survey of 229 people aged between 18-65 who had previously used internet dating sites.

The study (2005) found that when couples who had spent time forming friendships through emailing or chatting online met for the first time, 94% of them went on to see one another again. Of these relationships formed, on average they lasted for approx 7 months, with 18% of them lasting for over a year. Such figures are in line with relationships formed in more traditional ways. (University of Bath Study, 2005)

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The study also brought up a number of other interesting facts; the degree to which the couples interacted before meeting up seemed to play a vital role in the success of the relationship. For example, those who talked on the telephone before meeting up and those who chatted simultaneously online (as opposed to simply emailing) were found to have formed 'deeper' and more emotional attachments. Similarly, those couples who exchanged gifts before meeting up seemed to form deeper and more committed relationships. The study concluded that simultaneous communication forms more of an intimacy.

Interestingly, the research showed that men were generally more likely to be committed to the relationship than the women, and tended to be more dependent upon the women. One explanation for this was the fact that perhaps men felt more comfortable with the anonymity which writing brings as it gave them a chance to express their emotions more easily than they would have been able to face to face. It seems that likewise webcams were not viewed as desirable or successful with anonymity being preferred. Dr Gavin (Author of Research Study) stated that;

"We also found people are shying away from using webcams because they feel its important not to see their partners for some time – there is something special about text-bases relationships." (University of Bath Study, 2005)

Of all the relationships studied, 39% of the couples were still together at the time of the survey, and of these 24% of the couples had been together for at least a year, and 8% for at least 2 years. Of the relationships which had ended, 14% had lasted for over a year, and 4% had lasted over 2 years. (University of Bath Study, 2005)

Successes:

Invariably there are always going to be people who are more successful at meeting others than some. Many suggest there is a lot you can do to maximise the success of your internet dating experience. For example, the first thing you need to do is produce a great profile to post online. Dating websites such as the Singlescafe.net express the importance of posting a photo alongside your profile, preferable a happy one! This helps ensure people take the trouble to actually read your profile if they like the look of you. The information in your profile should be kept simple and honest. Good grammar and spelling is also a must. (Dr Black, 2003)

DatingDirect.com like many of its rivals offers advice on dating tips and how to find a successful relationship. They suggest that you become a 'go-getter' and don't just wait for others to respond to your profile but actively seek out profiles of like minded members and beginning posting immediately. The theory obviously being that the more people you respond to, the more likely to are you find someone suitable. Obviously for the highest chances of success you should be contacting people who appeal to you, particularly in terms of their hobbies and interests as well as their location. Similarly, they advise that you should respond quickly to members who have contacted you. You should not worry about seeming to eager, good manners win out here. These tips they argue maximise your potential of successfully meeting people and forming a relationship through internet dating.

There are obviously many happy stories of both relationships and friendships formed through internet dating. It gives people an opportunity they may not have had otherwise for many reasons. For example some personal success stories follow:

"...I was very sceptical at first, not really thinking it would work. Anyway I decided 'nothing ventured nothing gained' and sent 6 emails, I received 4 replies, Becky was one of them...since I last contacted you Becky and I have got engaged,

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we are so happy.... meeting Becky has made my life complete.”
Graham (<http://app6.datingdirect.com/public/success/feedback.asp>)

“What a brilliant service, I have found the girl of my dreams and we are now going strong. Keep up the good work!”
Patrick (<http://app6.datingdirect.com/public/success/feedback.asp>)

“I met my wife on a dating website. We married last April and are expecting our first baby this April. We couldn't be happier. I've met the love of my life. My soul mate. I would recommend dating websites to anyone. They do work.”
Adam Stevenson, Plaistow, West Sussex, England(BBC News Page, 2005)

Certainly for shy people or those who fear rejection the internet has opened up a new world. They can contact people who are in the same position as them without fear.

Failures:

Aswell as the success stories there also seem to be some failures. At the very least there are a number of common pitfalls to internet dating. While most subscribers will desire a large number of responses to their profile, this can actually backfire on you if you end up receiving far to many to cope with. Conway (from Askmen.com) discusses how he once received 56 responses to his profile and found this rather overwhelming, meaning he had to spend a huge amount of time replying to all the women and basically often repeating what he had said and asking the same questions over again as he couldn't keep on top of the correspondence;

“I can't tell you how many times I've been embarrassed because I asked a woman the same question four or five times.”
http://www.askmen.com/dating/dating_advice_100/102c_dating_tips.html)

Likewise, it can be a disappointment to some who do not receive as many responses to their profiles as expected.

On a more serious note its important to be aware of the dangers of internet dating as a means of meeting people. The main concern for the user is that the person they are contacting is not who he/she says they are and what they are telling you is not true. There is no way to monitor this and it is purely down to human judgement and experience. A bad experience may put you off internet dating for good. Dating sites urge a strong need for caution.

One of the biggest pitfalls of internet dating seems to be the issue of whether all of the users are infact single. It is very common that many people will claim to be divorced or single when infact they are not. The internet is an easy way to cheat for these people with little of the risks involved were they to meet someone in a more conventional sense. Jennifer describes her personal unhappy experience of internet dating:

“I tried it a long time ago, but the men I met were all, without exception. control-freaks, psychos and/or chauvinists, and usually married. From a personal point of view, I'd say avoid it like the plague, but if it is all you have got, be very, very careful. It is far too common an occurrence that women get caught in dangerous situations using the world wide web.”
Jennifer, UK (BBC News Page, 2005)

In agreement that internet dating is not a viable option to forming new relationships Sarah say;

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“Internet dating never works. You can be sure that if a person says one thing to you, they are saying the exact same thing to someone else.”

Sarah UK (BBC News Page, 2005)

Sadly too, often many con artists will use internet dating sites in order to attract people who may be wealthy. Advice suggests you should never reveal anything financial about yourself and most certainly never offer to help someone out with money.

There is also the issue of age with the minimum age being 18; however, again there is no way to verify this. Similarly, there is no true way of knowing until you meet up whether that photo posted in the profile is really a genuine one. If you meet up with someone who has deliberately misled you the experience of internet dating is unlikely to be a successful one. (www.bol.ucla.edu/~jbred/Dangers.htm)

There are also risks involved when the internet dater takes the next step and decides to meet up with the person they have been chatting with. While most meetings will at the very least be harmless ones its important to be aware that the person you are meeting could be dangerous or unstable. The advice given is to always meet in a public place, maybe even bring along a friend. Never meet in a private place where you will be alone and never give out your home address to a stranger. The chances of meeting someone dangerous are not high but awareness is needed. (www.bol.ucla.edu/~jbred/Dangers.htm)

Conclusion:

Whilst it is clear that internet websites are becoming increasingly popular in a society where people find it difficult to socialise and date in a more conventional fashion, it is somewhat unclear just how successful internet dating is for meeting people, or more importantly, in meeting the ‘right’ person and forming long term attachments.

Whilst researching the information I have found that there are numerous stories and experiences which support the idea that internet dating is indeed a very successful way of meeting people, however, there are an awful lot of people who say it has been unsuccessful for them. I think it is important to consider the aspect of ‘luck’ in internet dating just as you would in traditional dating. Despite this, however, the internet obviously opens up a wide potential for meeting people and therefore logic would argue that with access to more potential partners it is more likely you may meet the one who is destined for you. Certainly for many people who otherwise would not have even been on the dating scene the internet opens up huge possibilities and success can definitely be found.

Infact I would conclude that whilst there are both successes and failures to be found, the majority of the somewhat slim available research on the topic does strongly suggest that the internet is a successful way of meeting people. Certainly all the internet dating sites will agree with this statement and offer and display numerous personal success stories, but more importantly, an independent study carried out by the University of Bath strongly indicated that many long lasting relationships were formed through this method of dating and that couples had as good a chance of staying together as relationships formed in more traditional settings. It must be noted again that the research on this topic is still slim and the study was not a major one but nevertheless evidence available overall strongly suggests that internet dating is a success.

Certainly there are ways in order to make internet dating more successful for you and I discussed these earlier. There are

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also pitfalls to internet dating again discussed earlier. The key seems to be to persevere just as you would in any other dating scenario and the outcome looks good.

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