

# Hi-tech dating

Meeting a potential partner in cyberspace may still seem the stuff of movies, but in reality more people are going online to date, Wendy Pryer reports.

Research conducted by Murdoch University Mass Communication Lecturer Dr Sharon Delmege provides a fascinating insight into internet dating.

Dr Delmege said that more than 50 per cent of singles in the United States use internet dating sites and there's been a huge increase in their popularity in the 10 years they've been available in Australia.

She said that with 92 per cent of Australians having access to a computer at home, many people chose to search for a potential partner online from the comfort of their own homes instead of across a crowded bar.

"Today we're time poor, more likely to live on our own, be better educated, have more money and work longer hours, have fewer kids, marry later and have higher rates of divorce or separation, but we still want a partner," Dr Delmege said.

This was in line with research conducted in Toronto of 500 internet daters, of which 75 per cent went online to find a partner.





"Most of the participants said that if you're not into pubs, then it's hard to meet someone," Dr Delmege said.

Along with colleagues Dr Kirsty Best and Dr Beth Pingelly, Dr Delmege conducted focus groups with 14 users of internet dating websites, or mediated relationship portals, on which her research paper is based.

Participants in this small study were aged from 18 to early 60s and were mostly tertiary educated. About half were single but all had been in previous relationships—about half of the group had been previously married.

Some internet dating sites charge a fee for membership, but all require members to display their own profile before they can access other members.

Dr Delmege said users liked the anonymity of searching for a potential partner online. She said it was quite private because people chose an alias, and their profile didn't include personal information.

Members can sift through hundreds of profiles but categories such as sex, age, distance, ethnicity, education, occupation, religion, politics, star sign, smoking and drinking habits as well as physical characteristics help users filter or reduce the number of profiles viewed.

Dr Delmege said it was interesting to look at what filters participants actually used to narrow down the field in search of a potential dating partner.

Age and proximity were key filters, but just as in the real world, looks mattered. Members

can choose to include photos or videos and whether to make them visible or password protected, but most participants said they tended not to look at profiles that didn't have a photo displayed.

"The photos and profiles are taken very seriously," Dr Delmege said.

"Users look for clues such as clothing, spelling and what people reveal about themselves, as well as looking for key phrases such as, recently separated."

Interestingly, the more experienced a person becomes at using internet dating sites, the more open-minded they become about what they are looking for in a partner because going through the process helps them understand what they're looking for.

Honesty was of paramount importance to all users studied, said Dr Delmege, although all participants admitted telling at least one lie about themselves, usually about their age, in order to be included within someone else's filters.

### So does online dating work?

According to Dr Delmege, all users wanted to meet someone face-to-face. They didn't spend months online chatting to someone they were interested in without following through in the real world.

"Everyone agreed that while you might have all the boxes ticked online, that first meeting in person (or discussion on the telephone) was the most important thing," she said.

"There's an awful lot of filtering that goes on before that first date, but it was still the clincher as to whether or not they were attracted to the person.

"One couple in the study met online and have just returned from their honeymoon and everyone said they'd made at least one friend through internet dating."

As with everything involving the internet, there will always be privacy and safety concerns. However those concerns belonged to the friends and families of the users interviewed in this study—users felt completely safe and hadn't experienced any security concerns.

"Basically most of the users felt their safety could be more at risk in a pub," Dr Delmege said.

"By the time they actually meet someone they want to date, there's the same risk as going out on any date."

While some participants felt there was a stigma associated with using internet dating sites to find a mate, they were open about their own use with at least some friends and family.

She said all participants found their internet dating experience positive and had become more socially confident as a result and this translated into other areas of life.

Writing about themselves had helped them think about their values and who they were, and the experience of meeting people helped them clarify what they wanted from a relationship.



Mark and Melanie Griffiths on their wedding day.

## Online success

When Melanie and Mark Griffiths met through an internet dating site, oddly enough it wasn't a relationship they had in mind.

These popular sites, used by up to half of all singles in the US, are not only the place of romance but friendship as well.

Melanie was already dating someone she'd met online when she stumbled across Kalgoorlie-based Mark on the site she already had made several friends through.

During her single years, Melanie said she often met up "in the real world" with single like-minded friends she'd met online.

After a month-long holiday overseas, Melanie returned to Perth and her then relationship ended. She continued her online friendship with Mark and they finally met in person.

A month later Mark moved to Perth and they haven't looked back since—the friendship founded on many common interests soon blossomed. In June this year, the couple took the next step and married.

Melanie admits she found internet dating sites a little daunting to begin with but said waiting in a pub for Mr Right to come along wasn't the answer either.

Melanie tried that for a while but said it was difficult to even get a conversation going with a stranger in that environment.

Pubs weren't the place for Mark either. When his 27-year marriage ended in 2006, the non-drinker tried pubs a few times but found the anonymity and ease of internet dating a much better option.

"If you're going to use these sites you have to be honest – Melanie and I never lied to each other," Mark said.

"After some experience, you can tell from a person's online, demeanour what it is they want.

"The best thing (about internet dating) is that you can decide how much information you want to put out there. If you feel uncomfortable about any situation online you can just block the other person's access."

