

Online daters do better in the marriage stakes

Those who first find each other through the Internet are more likely to stay hitched.

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Couples in the United States who meet online seem to enjoy at least as much marital bliss as those who meet in more traditional venues, according to the results of an online survey of more than 19,000 people funded by online dating service [eHarmony](#).

The survey's participants consisted of people who married between 2005 and 2012. About 35% reported that they had met their spouse online, more than through introductions by friends, work and school combined. The study revealed that people who used this method to meet their spouses were slightly older, wealthier, more educated and more likely to be employed than those who went with tradition¹.

Yet only about 45% of these online meetings took place on a dating site; the rest occurred through social networks such as Facebook and MySpace, as well as chat rooms, online communities, virtual worlds, multi-player games, blogs and discussion boards.

"Surprisingly, we found that marriages that started online were associated with better outcomes," says psychologist and lead author John Cacioppo of the University of Chicago, Illinois, who is also a scientific adviser to eHarmony.

About 94% of marriages that had started online lasted at least until the time of the survey in 2012, compared with about 92% of those in the offline group. The difference was still statistically significant after controlling for other demographics such as age, race, religion and income.

Wedded bliss

Those who met online also reported a slight difference in marital satisfaction — rating their unions on a 1-to-7 scale at 5.6, versus 5.5 for those who met offline. "These are small effects, but it's stunning that there are any effects at all," Cacioppo says.

In addition, the study examined differences between 18 individual dating sites, including eHarmony, Match, Plenty of Fish and Yahoo Personal. After controlling for demographic factors, they found no significant differences in the number of reported break-ups by people using the various services.

But there were notable differences in marital satisfaction between users of different sites. For example, those who married a spouse they met on eHarmony rated their marriages more highly than did those who met on Match, who were in turn more satisfied than those who met their spouse on Yahoo Personals.

Market-research firm Harris Interactive carried out the survey and independent biostatisticians at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston, Massachusetts, analysed the data. The researchers had reached an agreement with eHarmony that any results affecting the company would not affect publication of the study, and that all data would be made freely available.

"I know of no other way to do this kind of study," says Cacioppo, who likened the situation to medical researchers working with drug companies to conduct costly research. "I would love for the US government to put money into studying these kinds of questions," but US granting agencies have typically shunned projects on marriage and relationships, he says.

'Small cheese'

Eli Finkel, a psychologist at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, says he was excited to see such a large-sample study on this topic, but that the authors seem to have oversold their findings. Although he acknowledges that the researchers found evidence that "online dating is about as good as offline dating" for finding a fulfilling marriage partner, he says that "the case that online dating is



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Couples who met in online venues — ranging from dating services to chat rooms — had slightly better outcomes in their marital life than those who met in other ways.

better is dubious”.

“When you have a huge sample, almost everything will come up statistically significant just because of the sample size,” says statistician Giles Hooker at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. “But it’s important to remember that these are really small effects.” The difference in marital satisfaction between the groups was “pretty small cheese in this range”, he says; although the offline group saw more break-ups, it works out as only about one more break-up per 100 marriages.

People responding to the online survey might also not be representative of the whole population. “The authors report that twice as many people stopped filling out the survey as completed it,” Hooker says. “Who gave up and who kept on could have a large effect on the results. Perhaps a happy experience with online romance makes you more likely to persist with the survey, or people who enjoy filling out online surveys are also better at filling out questionnaires on dating sites and meeting people online.”

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References

1. Cacioppo, J. T., Cacioppo, S., Gonzaga, G. C., Ogburn, E. L. & VanderWeele, T. J. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* <http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1222447110> (2013).