

**Intimacy and Older Adults:  
A Comparison between Online and Offline  
Romantic Relationships**

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**Refereed Paper**

## **Intimacy and Older Adults: A Comparison between Online and Offline Romantic Relationships**

**Abstract:** Using online dating sites to find romantic partners has rapidly become the norm and there are many studies illustrating this trend. Qualitative research regarding older adults in this context is scarce, however, as is research regarding older adult romantic relationships that begin face to face (F2F). This paper reports the findings of 45 semi-structured interviews with two groups of older adults (60 years plus): those who were currently in or recently involved in a romantic relationship that began (1) online or (2) F2F. The findings suggest that older adult online relationships develop more quickly than those that begin F2F and that they are of shorter duration and are less likely to become ongoing. In terms of sexual intimacy, however, all relationships (in both groups) became sexual and most did so in a short time. It is argued that the mode of relationship initiation may have an impact on relationship development and longevity but that this may not necessarily be a negative outcome for older adults.

**Keywords:** older adults; romantic relationships; online dating; intimacy; sexuality

## **Introduction**

Early studies into online romantic relationships found that they happened almost incidentally as a result, or by-product, of involvement in discussion groups, chat rooms and so on (see for example McCown et al. 2001). With the arrival of Internet sites devoted solely to online dating, however, *deliberately* looking for a partner online has rapidly become the norm. By the year 2000, 12 million people were registered on the seven largest online dating sites – all based in the United Kingdom, the United States, Israel and Canada (Brym & Lenton 2001: 9). More recent research has shown that a staggering 63 million Americans know someone who has used an online dating site (Madden & Lenhart 2006: 2) and almost 30 million – one in six American adults – know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or has married someone they met online (Madden & Lenhart 2006: 13). A Canadian report released in 2001 estimated the potential of online dating users in that country alone to be between 3.7 and 3.9 million (Brym & Lenton 2001: 12).

Despite Australia's small population size, there are currently 15,300,000 Internet users – approximately 74% of the population (Internet World Stats 2008). What this means in terms of Australians and their online dating habits is difficult to determine, however, as there are relatively few studies measuring the prevalence. One study, a 2006 Australian poll conducted by Global Market Insite estimated that, of 1000 people surveyed, 23% used online dating websites (GMI 2006). Another study of a nationally representative sample (1013 participants) found similar results: of the 104 Australian adults who had used the Internet to form social relationships, 21% had used the Internet for online romance (Hardie & Buzwell 2006: 9).

Michael Hardey (2004) suggests that one of the reasons dating sites have become progressively more important in the instigation and establishment of romantic relationships, is due to the ease with which “finding, getting to know and meeting others” is achieved; so much so “that the process itself can be seductive” (page 216). The following results suggest that Hardey may well be right, with the latest data from Europe indicating that online dating has fast become a global trend.

**[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

### **Theories about online dating**

One possible explanation for the prevalence of online dating is found in the work of Walther (1996) who classified computer-mediated communication (CMC) as “hypersonal”, describing it as “more.... socially desirable or intimate than normal” communication (p.34) and claiming that it “surpassed the level of affection and emotion of parallel f2f [face-to-face] interaction” (p.17). Wysocki (1998) supports this viewpoint, suggesting that relationships formed on the Internet progress far more quickly and intimately than face-to-face relationships, partly because of the degree of anonymity but also because of the heightened level of self-disclosure it provides. Al Cooper and his colleagues suggest that the very nature of computer-mediated relating (CMR):

reduces the role that physical attributes play in the development of attraction, and enhances other factors such as propinquity, rapport, similarity and mutual self-disclosure, thus promoting erotic connections that stem from emotional intimacy rather than lustful attraction (Cooper et al. 2000: 522).

Whilst an amalgam of these different factors may go some way in explicating the development of online relationships into romance, they do not, however, provide insight into what these relationships are like or how long these relationships last or even how quickly they develop into offline (face-to-face) relationships – these matters are still open to conjecture. One of the few studies in this area conducted an analysis of narrative transcripts collected from list-serves and websites concerned with personal stories of online “close” relationships (Wildermuth 2001: 90). In this study, relationships ranged in duration from 4.5 weeks to 13 years (n = 83). The mean length of successful (ongoing) relationships was five months (n = 42), and the mean length of unsuccessful (terminated) relationships was seven months (n = 41). Furthermore, the results of the recent Australian study (reported earlier) found that online romantic relationships were “reasonably long lasting”, ranging from weeks (4.5%) and months (27%) to years (18.2%) (total n = 22) (Hardie & Buzwell 2006: 10).

Some studies have looked at different aspects of online romantic relationships, including cyber-flirting (Whitty 2003a; 2003b), cyber-sex (Wysocki 1998) and cyber-cheating (Hardie & Buzwell 2006), but whether all of these relationships eventually develop into offline romantic relationships and whether they are all subsequently sexual, has yet to be elucidated.

### **Older adults and online dating**

Although there is now a substantial body of research detailing different kinds of online relationships – including their frequency, their forms, and their impact on offline relationships – studies regarding older adults are scarce, as most studies on Internet romance tend to centre on younger samples (see for example Albright & Conran 1998; Donn &

Sherman 2002). Similarly, qualitative data regarding older adult relationships that develop offline is also uncommon. The research that does exist tends to be quantitative in nature and to centre on medical issues, particularly sexual activity levels and their apparent decline over time (see for instance Lindau et al. 2007). Moreover, despite academic research to the contrary (for example ABS 2005; Fox 2004; Wiley & Bortz 1996) stereotyping of older adults means they are often regarded as being technophobic (Philbeck 1997) and asexual (Denmark 2002; Rubin 1968) – two qualities that appear to preclude their use as a suitable research population.

Malta's (2007) study goes some way in debunking this stereotyping of older adults, by showing that not only are older adults long-term Internet users, they also use the Internet to meet potential romantic partners and that these relationships can become sexual online and offline (Malta 2007: 96). Furthermore, the research conducted by Brym and Lenton estimated that older adults aged 60 plus comprised 1.6% of online Canadian daters (2001:14), whilst the telephone survey reported by Hardie and Buzwell found older adults (aged 56 to 64 years and 76 years plus) comprised 13.5% of the 22 Australian online romantics who were interviewed (2006:10). In addition, recent statistics supplied by RSVP.com.au, an Australian online dating site, indicate that older adults (aged between 56 and 120 years) comprise 8% of their membership database (RSVP.com.au. March 2008). Although these numbers are relatively small, they indicate that older adults are using the internet and that they are looking for love online.

## **Rationale**

Together these findings provided the impetus for the current exploratory research project investigating the development of older adults' romantic relationships, both online and offline. The offline component was included in the current research in an attempt to provide comparisons between older adult relationships that begin online and those that begin face to face. The research was thus designed to address the obvious knowledge gap in this area by asking *how* older adult relationships develop: do they happen deliberately or consequentially? Are they slow to develop or do they happen quickly? Are these relationships long-lasting or transitory, or as Wildermuth (2001) has stated, "successful" or "unsuccessful"? Are they sexual, both online and offline? If relationships are sexual, how long does it take before they become intimate? Differences and similarities between the two kinds of partnerships are also examined. Finally, the research looks at whether the mode of formation (online or offline) has any effect on the relationships themselves.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Australian participants 60 years of age or older and either currently involved or recently involved in a romantic relationship that began online or face-to-face (F2F) were recruited via various means: by an online notice which was posted on an Australian dating website (RSVP.com.au); through an article that appeared in two Australian seniors' newspapers; through a radio interview which was broadcast in Victoria; through word-of-mouth referrals; and through an article which was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a state-based

broadsheet. All participants will be referred to by a pseudonym followed by their age in brackets (for example: Mary (76)).

### **Procedures**

As explained previously, this research project was developed to explore older adults' romantic relationships, both online and offline. Semi-structured qualitative interviews provided an overview of older adults' Internet use (how many years, how many hours per day, what it was used for, involvement in online groups, use of online dating sites) and their romantic relationships (their instigation, their development, their longevity and whether they were sexual or not). Interviews were conducted online by instant messaging (IM) or email (30), by phone (5) and F2F (10)<sup>1</sup>. The interviews were divided into two groups according to the method of relationship initiation: Online Romance group (32 interviews) versus F2F Romance group (13 interviews). This allowed for comparisons to be made between the groups. All interviews lasted between one and two hours, with the exception of the three email interviews.

### **Results**

#### **Sample Characteristics and Internet Usage Statistics**

Characteristics of each sample group and their Internet usage statistics have been summarized in Table 2. The age range for the Online Romance group was younger than the F2F Romance group (60 – 76 years versus 63 – 92 years). There was also a difference between the groups in terms of the number of years online (1 – 20 years for the Online group compared to 8 – 17

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<sup>1</sup> A pilot study consisting of five interviews was conducted with American participants. This material is not included here. A total of 50 interviews were conducted in all.



**[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

years for the F2F group), although the *average* number of years online for both groups was surprisingly similar (10.6 (Offline group) versus 10.5 (Online group)). Only eight of the 13 F2F Romance group, however, had computers at home, compared to all 32 of the Online Romance group. This may simply be due to the difference in ages between the two groups (mean age Online group = 65.5 years, compared to the F2F group = 71.5 years) and/or a reflection of the fact that many of the older group may have retired before the Internet (and email) became embedded in daily working lives. This may also explain the difference between the two groups in the number of hours/day spent online, with the Online Romance group spending an average of 3.6 hrs/day and the F2F Romance group an average of 1.6 hrs/day. Whilst both groups reported that their main use of the Internet was for email, the Online Romance group reported using the Internet far more extensively, for instance: information, research, news, share trading, banking/finance, travel and games.

**Romantic Relationships Results*****Deliberate or Consequential?***

For the Online Romance group, not surprisingly, all but two relationships happened *deliberately* as a result of registering on online dating sites such as RSVP.com.au. The other two relationships occurred incidentally, as a consequence of work-related activities. For Nicholas, using online dating sites to search for new partners far exceeded his expectations, as this quote illustrates:

**I registered on RSVP after researching various sites... I was approached by a dozen interesting ladies. Where else could that happen? That was within the first 36 hours!** Online Romance: Nicholas (63)

For the Online Romance group, the Internet provided the most effective means to finding new partners, since hanging out in pubs, clubs and bars was neither appealing nor appropriate. When I asked Sharon *why* she chose to use the Internet to find a partner, she explained that:

**There is really no other place that someone my age can meet people. It is not cool to be old and desperate.** Online Romance: Sharon (61)

For the F2F Romance group, the story was quite different, with the majority of relationships occurring as an unexpected consequence of involvement in a social group or workplace, or as an introduction through friends and family. As Evie explained:

**Oh god it was the last thing... I'd been 23 years a widow... you know, I had a very active life but ah, no, I didn't look for anyone... it just happened.** F2F Romance: Evie (92)

The three F2F group participants who deliberately looked for romantic involvement did so through joining "Singles" or Dance clubs or answering advertisements placed in the "Singles" pages of local newspapers.

### ***Long-Lasting or Transitory versus Successful or Unsuccessful?***

The study by Wildermuth (2001) defined "successful" relationships as those that were "ongoing", even though the average length of these relationships was a relatively short five months. This classification was deemed unsuitable for the present study, as "successful" here was taken to mean a relationship that was relatively long-lasting, *viz.* greater than 12 months.

Furthermore, “unsuccessful” or transitory relationships were taken to be those that lasted less than 12 months.

For the Online Romance group an interesting difference was found between relationships which had formed consequentially and those which had formed deliberately. The two relationships that began as a consequence of work-related activities were also by far the longest, lasting in excess of 5 years and 7 years respectively. In contrast, only 12 of the 30 relationships that were formed through online dating sites could be classified as long-term and therefore, successful, lasting an average of 22 months. The remaining 18 relationships were classified as transitory (unsuccessful), only lasting an average of 4.5 months.

If we look more closely at the 30 deliberate Online relationships and reclassify them into those that are currently ongoing and those that are not: of the 12 relationships that were long-term, seven were currently ongoing, whereas only six of the 18 transitory relationships were current. Quite the opposite was found for the F2F Romance group, however, where the majority of relationships – whether they were initiated deliberately or not – were shown to be highly successful and long-lasting (11 of 13: mean = 4 years); and nine of the 13 relationships were still ongoing (with a further two ending only because of death of the partner).

These results bring up important issues regarding the mode of initiation of romantic relationships, especially whether relationships that are formed online are less “successful”

overall than those formed offline. These results will be reviewed in more detail in the Discussion section.

### *Sexual?*

Contrary to societal stereotypes, **all** older adult participants in both groups reported that their relationships were sexual. The sexual relationships were broken down into two groups in an attempt to capture how quickly sexual relations commenced: those that occurred in the first three months of the relationships and those that occurred after three months. In the Online Romance group, 27 reported onset of sexual relations occurring rapidly (on average at 4 weeks). Sexual relations for the remaining five in this group occurred between six to 12 months (one occurred at 6 months and two occurred at 12 months because of proximity issues). In all cases, older adults were very clear about how important sexual intimacy was in their lives and what it meant for them:

**Extremely important. Life-giving. Lusty... There is so much sexual play one can have when penises no longer work as they once did.**

Online Romance: Emily (73)

**I feel better when I have a sexual partner, both physically and mentally. Sex is an integral part of life.**

Online Romance: Owen (66)

**I do not wish to have a relationship with a man that doesn't include sex. I am quite a physical person, like being in my body and like the sensations that sex offers.**

Online Romance: Amy (64)

Although the results were slightly lower for the F2F Romance group, nine still reported onset of sexual relations on average at four weeks. The remaining four participants in this group said that sexual relations occurred between five to 12 months. As for the Online Romance group, sexual intimacy was an integral part of these older adult relationships:

**I was happy to be intimate...when we got to that stage... I was quite happy... and I didn't feel like I was an old fool.** F2F Romance: Evie (92)

**And I said, are you going to kiss me? And he came and kissed me so nicely you know... We have a fantastic relationship. We were dancing here with the music, we were showering together... so, so, so perfect.**  
F2F Romance: Alice (70)

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

These results provide a description of older adults, their Internet use and their romantic relationships, and how these relationships develop through two mediums: online and F2F. Differences between the two groups, in terms of relationships, appeared in a number of areas.

As would be expected, the vast majority of relationships in the Online Romance group occurred deliberately (as a result of using online dating sites) whereas F2F relationships tended to occur consequentially (as a result of daily living activities). Whether the mode of relationship initiation has any impact on the strength and longevity of relationships is difficult to say categorically, but the results presented here seem to indicate this may be likely. Certainly those relationships that began F2F were more likely to be ongoing and longer-term than the Online relationships. This may not necessarily be negative, however, as one likely explanation is that there is a much larger pool of possible partners to choose from online than there is in face-to-face situations, which may have the effect of allowing the Online Romance group greater freedom of choice and less impetus to “stick with” a relationship that does not altogether suit.

Online relationships also appeared to happen more quickly than F2F romances. This, in itself, may also have had an impact on the longevity of the relationships. Perhaps

relationships which take longer to develop through the face-to-face medium have a more solid foundation going forward – or it may be that those involved feel they have invested more time and energy in the relationship and are not prepared to give them up quite as readily as Online ones. However, further research is needed before this can be confirmed. Whether this makes relationships that begin F2F more “successful” in the long-term is open to conjecture.

Interestingly, there was very little difference between the two groups in terms of sexual intimacy. All relationships became sexual and most relationships (in both groups) became sexual in a fairly short time. This result indicates that the desire for love, sex and intimacy is of fundamental importance, regardless of age.

Given the anticipated future size of the older adult population and their increasing use of the Internet, it can only be expected that finding a partner online will quickly become the norm for much of this generation. The results presented herein are interesting and warrant further investigation and clarification – and invite comparisons with other age groups. Furthermore, the lack of recognition amongst researchers of older adults as sexually-active, technologically-adept beings and, as such, suitable candidates for research projects, also warrants further attention.

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Table 1. Numbers of people visiting dating sites in the United States and specific EU Countries (for the month of March 2008)

United States	25.8 million
Germany	5.6 million
France	4.7 million
United Kingdom	3.6 million
Italy	2.7 million
Spain	2.3 million

Source: “An Interview with Alex Burmaster” Nielsen Online 2008: [2]

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Table 2. Sample Characteristics and Internet Usage Statistics for the Online Romance versus the F2F Romance Group

Total Sample (n = 45)		
Description	Online Romance Group (n = 32)	F2F Romance Group (n = 13)
Gender (Females : Males)	16 : 16	8 : 5
Age Range (Years)	60 – 76	63 – 92
Mean (Median)	65.5 (65)	71.5 (69)
Years Online Range	1 – 20	8 – 17*
Mean (Median)	10.5 (10)	10.6 (10)*
Hours Online/Day Range	0.25 – 10	0.43 – 4*
Mean (Median)	3.6 (3)	1.6 (1.25)*
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