Malta, S. Love actually! Older adults, the internet and romance.

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Meet Katherine. She loves the Internet. She has been using it for over 13 years and is on it for more than 4 hours every day. She uses it mainly for research and email and, of course, instant messaging, where she keeps in constant touch with her partner of 10 years, John. They use the Internet as a means of staying connected and, on occasion, for engaging in cyber-sex, which she describes as “fun”. When they first met face-to-face Katherine said they couldn’t keep their hands off each other.

Sound familiar? You bet! Recent research has shown that almost 30 million people in America alone know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or has married someone they met online, and over 63 million know someone who has used an online dating site.

Next there’s Lizzie. She’s been using the Internet for 10 years and goes online anywhere between 4 to 8 hours every day. Like Katherine, she uses it mainly for email and social purposes and for staying connected to her partner of 8 years, Michael. Lizzie said that the when she and Michael met face-to-face, they “knew on first sight” that they “would end up in bed.” Like Katherine, Lizzie says cyber-sex has become part of her sexual repertoire.

Whilst neither of these stories may surprise you very much, what may surprise you is that Katherine is 82 and Lizzie is 72 years old. In both these cases, they met their new partners online and became intimate with them the very first time they met face-to-face.

If the ages and activities of Katherine and Lizzie shock you, then you are amongst many in society who believe that older adults are just not capable of using the Internet, let alone being sexual.

There are a number of issues that these anecdotes illustrate. Firstly, older adults are clearly able to use the Internet and many have been using it for a long time. Like most of us, they use it for information gathering and socializing, but they also use it for banking, paying bills and online share trading, which implies they have a high level of familiarity and trust in the technology – and which shows they are certainly not the “technophobics” that society believes them to be.
Secondly, these anecdotes demonstrate that older adults are clearly sexual. They are actively engaged in initiating romantic, intimate relationships, and often use the Internet as a means to find them and maintain them.

The stereotypes about older adults being asexual have persisted for many years, despite academic evidence to the contrary. The spate of Virgin television ads showing older adults in various amorous states of undress, the recently released film “Away From Her” and the play “Half-Life”, currently showing in Melbourne, make obvious that these stereotypes are not only outdated, but they are also flawed. Older adults engaging in sex is a fact of life.

I recently spoke to a group of University students about my research regarding older adults and their romantic relationships. I started out by saying that for many of us the thought of parents being sexual was too difficult to contemplate. I then went on to ask what they thought of their grandparents being intimate. There were gasps of horror, intakes of breath and many cries of “no way”. If our children who, we are told, are leading the way in so-called “raunchy” behaviour and no-holds barred sexual practices, but can’t get their minds around older adult sexuality, then who can?

Research about older adults and sexuality tends to focus on medical issues, levels of sexual activity and its decline over time. These studies only serve to perpetuate the myth that decreases in sexual interest and capacity are intrinsic to the ageing process. Qualitative interviews with older adults reveal far more about their sexuality and clearly indicate that the desire for love, romance and intimacy is of fundamental importance, regardless of age.

We will leave the last word on the subject to Lizzie: “Once we had slept together, we both felt it was the most wonderful sex we’d ever experienced – and it still is! Amazing...”

Sue Malta is a doctoral student at the Australian Centre for Emerging Technologies & Society (ACETS), in the Faculty of Life & Social Sciences at Swinburne University, in Melbourne. She is also Managing Editor of the Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society (AJETS). She is currently researching older adults and their romantic relationships, both online and offline and is looking for more participants. Participants must be 60 years of age and older, currently involved or previously involved in a romantic relationship that either began online or face-to-face. Interviews are treated as confidential and all names and identifying information are changed to protect the privacy of individuals. Sue can be contacted on smalta@swin.edu.au