

## Microtrends

By Mark J. Penn and E. Kinney Zalesne

### Sex-Ratio Singles

There is perhaps no feeling more acute than being left out. Everyone remembers what it felt like not to be picked for a sports team, or to be excluded from a friends- night out, or to be the only one not invited to a wedding. What compounds the angst, of course, is the injustice—*why me?* I am a better ballplayer, a more loyal friend, a more gregarious guest—and yet I'm the one left out.

In today's world, more and more women are finding themselves left out of the institution of marriage. Some opt out deliberately, but others fill up the dating Web sites, only to be disappointed. Many blame themselves, wondering what went wrong.

The truth is, there is *nothing* wrong with single women that a few more heterosexual men wouldn't fix. In the Wild West 150 years ago, there were too few women, so they had to import brides. Today, we have the opposite problem. There are too few straight men for all the straight women, and so women are unexpectedly caught in a game of musical chairs—in which at least 3 percent of them are going to be left standing.

In 1994, a National Opinion Research Center study on "The Social Organization of Sexuality" found that 9 percent of men and 4 percent of women said they had engaged in at least some homosexual behavior since puberty. Another study by a team at the Harvard School of Public Health reported that 6.2 percent of men and 3.6 percent of women reported a same-sex partner in the previous three years. A third study reported that 9 percent of men and 5 percent of women who had had at least one homosexual experience said those experiences could be described as "frequent" or "ongoing".

What these studies suggest is that whatever the actual number of gay people may be, gay men outnumber lesbians in America by approximately 2 to 1. Numerically speaking, when the music stops in heterosexual America, there are a lot of women left standing.

Which means that for the first time in America, there are more single women than ever who are likely to stay that way.

Here's how the numbers play out.

At birth, girls have it pretty good. There are 90,000 more boys born every year than girls, setting up a favorable dating ratio. But by the time those kids turn 18, the sex ratio has shifted a full point the other way to 51 to 49, because more boys die in puberty than girls. (Researchers call it a "testosterone storm," which causes more deaths among boys from car accidents, homicides, suicides, and drownings.)

As though that wasn't bad enough—socially speaking, for heterosexual women—the Gay Factor then kicks in. Assuming that about 5 percent of U.S. adults are gay (as experts claim, and polls bear out), there are something like 7.5 million gay men and 3.5 million lesbians in America. If you subtract them from the already lopsided numbers of overall men and women, you get something like 109 million straight women to 98 million straight men—for a straight sex ratio of 53 to 47.

It is even worse for black women. Setting aside the gay factor (which doesn't actually move the black adult sex ratio, since the number of black adults is relatively small), the gender ratio in the black adult community already starts out at 56 to 44, due to the high rates of death among black teenage boys. Then the relatively high incarceration rate of black men—4,700 for every 100,000 black men, compared to only 347 for every 100,000 black women—moves that ratio another point, to 57 to 43. Factor in gender gaps in college education *on top of that*, and it's no surprise that many black women, especially the more successful they are, are single.

It is always possible that there are more lesbians that appear in the surveys that we reviewed. On the other hand, the studies seem to suggest that even if women experiment with lesbianism, they less often choose it as their permanent lifestyle.

We all know that because men die about four years earlier than women, there are far more widows than widowers. But clearly the gender imbalance happens much earlier, too—in the dating years—yet because there has not been sufficient attention to that fact, women too often blame themselves for events that are statistically beyond their control.

Some effects of Sex-Ratio Singles are already evident. In 2005, single women were the second-largest group of home-buyers, just behind married couples. They bought nearly 1.5 million homes that year, more than *twice* as many as single men. Though it would have been unheard of fifty years ago, American women are now regularly buying homes and building equity before they are buying bridesmaids gifts and building families.

A related trend, given the rise of single women, is the number of women bearing or adopting children without a partner—known as Single Mothers by Choice. When the TV character Murphy Brown decided to have a child without a husband in the early 1990s, it was still radical enough to

have Vice President Dan Quayle dress her down in what may have been his most famous speech ever (and perhaps the only one by a vice president to engage a fictional character in debate). But at that time, there were only about 50,000 such Moms in America. Now there are an estimated three times that many.

It is possible that the unfavorable straight sex ratio, discouraging as it is for women in some respects, has encouraged women to excel elsewhere. As we'll see in the trend on Wordy Women, young women outnumber young men in fields like law, public relations, and journalism. Women outvoted men 54 to 46 percent in the 2004 presidential election. Women outnumber men in college by about 57 to 43 percent.

Of course, the greatest beneficiaries of the women who are Sex-Ratio Singles are straight men, who—frankly—have never had it so good. Women who wouldn't give them the time of day in college start noticing, eight or ten years later, that there are measurably fewer men in play than there used to be. Suddenly, the balding guy with the solid job, and the reasonably good fatherhood potential, starts looking kind of hot.

And there are more commercial and political implications as well. Home maintenance, home repair, and home security companies have an enormous new market to attend to in single women. How long until Merrill Lynch appreciates the power of single women investing and retiring alone—and changes its trademark logo, the testosterone-charged bull—into something more graceful?

If women actually *want* husbands as much as they want houses, will we someday have mail-order husbands—importing them to Trenton and Tuscaloosa the way we once sent brides to the Wild West?

If women *don't* want the husbands that badly—but they do still want the children—there is a nearly limitless market for sperm donation, and all the financial and ethical regulations that will come with it.

Historians have well documented that a society with too many unattached men leads to war. Will a society with too many unattached women lead to peace?

**Cougars**  
***Women Who Date Younger Men***

Every era in pop culture reinvents the titillating affair between the older woman and the younger man. *The Graduate* in 1967, in which the worldly Anne Bancroft (Mrs. Robinson of Simon and Garfunkel fame) seduces the naive Dustin Hoffman. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* in 1996, Terry McMillan's best-selling novel about a successful stockbroker mother who finds unexpected romance with a young Jamaican islander. *Something's Gotta Give* in 2003, in which 50-something Diane Keaton dates 30-something Keanu Reeves (before settling on Jack Nicholson).

But what started out as scandalous, and then became intriguing, has now become downright ordinary.

Older men seeking younger trophy wives is an age-old phenomenon. "Dirty old man" is a universal cliché. But now in America, women's growing financial and sexual independence have made them, too, increasingly interested in younger dates. According to a 2003 study by the AARP, one in three women between 40 and 69 is dating a younger man, and about one-quarter of those men are ten or more years younger.

Although the U.S. Census Bureau tracked these pairings differently between 1997 and 2003, the increase is clear: In 1997, fewer than half a million couples in America were a woman and a man at least ten years younger. In 2003, nearly 3 million couples were a woman and a man at least six years younger.

And between 2002 and 2005, says the online dating service Match.com, the percentage of women in their database who were willing to date men ten or more years younger nearly doubled.

Maybe it's because older women with younger men has been all the rage in real-life Hollywood, too. The woman who played the nation's first female president on *Commander in Chief*, 51-year-old Geena Davis, is married to 35-year-old Reza Jarrahy. Sixty-year-old Susan Sarandon has children with 48-year-old Tim Robbins. Nearly 50-year-old Madonna's husband, Guy Ritchie, is 39.

Proof positive of a trend, there's now a *name* for women who date significantly younger men: Cougars. According to Valerie Gibson, sex columnist for the *Toronto Sun* and author of *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men*, the term started in Vancouver, British Columbia, as a putdown for older women who would go to bars and go home at the end of the night with whoever was left. But in recent years, it's become more positive—signifying an older, single woman who knows what she wants, has the money and confidence to acquire it, and isn't constrained by desires for babies and a white picket fence.

And so now there are at least a half-dozen Web sites devoted to Cougar dating, complete with mugs and T-shirts. Oprah explored - Older Women in Love with Younger Men - in 2003. On the wildly popular *Sex and the City*, 40-something Samantha Jones dated - boy toy - Smith Jerrod longer than anyone else in the show's six seasons. In 2005, Fran Drescher, star of the 1990s TV hit *The Nanny*, launched a new comedy called *Living with Fran*, a show about a mother of two who falls in love with a man half her age—apparently based on her real-life experience. VH1 presented *Kept*, a reality show in which a group of 20-something men compete to escort Mick Jagger's ex-wife, the 50-year-old Jerry Hall, for the following year. All of these innovations in entertainment reflect a trend in real life.

A couple of factors have triggered the growth of the Cougars. High divorce rates combined with longer life spans means a greater likelihood of women's reentering the dating market. In fact, according to a 2004 survey conducted by AARP, 66 percent of "late-life divorces" —those that occur in a couple's 40s, 50s, or 60s—are initiated by the women, not the men. Women's success in the workforce means that some women want a man with a less developed career—so that he can move if she needs to, and perhaps be their kids - primary caretaker. (Of course, men have pursued that arrangement for years.)

But according to Valerie Gibson, it's all about sex. A woman's sexual peak is more aligned with that of the younger man. And having either rejected marriage or been through an unsuccessful one, the older woman is looking for something lighter and more frivolous. In her 40s and 50s, says Gibson, sex for women is recreational, not procreational.

Unless, of course, she *wants* children. Over 100,000 women aged 40-44 gave birth in 2004, a 63 percent increase from ten years before. Over 5,000 women aged 45 - 49 did, too—a ten-year increase of 129 percent. So Cougars come in every stripe.

What's in it for the men?

They, apparently, like the confidence and sexual experience of the older women, and that the women are generally not looking for commitment. And as distinct from decades ago, older women are looking younger every day— thanks to on-demand cosmetic surgery and 24/7 gyms.

As a result, the men, too, at Match.com are interested in older women. Between 2002 and 2005, men interested in dating women five or more years older increased 44 percent. Those interested in a ten-or-more-year difference doubled.

Where do America's Cougars take us - In one sense, Cougars mean that younger men are finally getting even with older men, who since the dawn of time have been poaching their available dating pool. Maybe in that regard, the dating algorithms are all just evening out.

On the other hand, single women—having a hard enough time as it is due to the increasing number of openly gay men—now have a new segment of competition from their older sisters and, indeed, their Moms. (The motherdaughter tension over the same man was the underlying text of *The Graduate* and *Something's Gotta Give*.)

But today's Cougars are the result of the natural instinct for people with success to trade that success for sexual attractiveness. And what was once achievable only by older men with money is now within the reach of women with power and accomplishment (or a good inheritance). Just as billionaire men have to be on the watch for women on the make, bidding their time until the money becomes theirs—so now Cougars need to beware of younger men seeking shelter from the storm. They, too, can use detective services to see what their younger boyfriends and spouses are up to; and they, too, need to worry about whether the younger mate will stick around if the older one gets ill, or simply isn't as much fun in later years.

And Cougars deserve a community. They seek guidance as to what kinds of men to seek and to avoid. They need new dating rules regarding finances, sex, and commitment. And they seek sisterly advice on how to handle the reactions of parents, siblings, ex-husbands, friends, and especially children. They need the right vacation spots. They even need just the right birthday cards. You may not have a Cougar in your family, but ask around or watch people on a busy street corner for a few minutes, and you will spot them soon enough. They are committed to their lifestyle, and it is an essential element of who they are and what they think about. And they are approaching that magical 1 percent that will make them a microtrend marketplace of interest to politicians, filmmakers, pastors, and marketers.

Mrs. Robinson would be so proud.

### **Office Romancers**

If there was one thing your mother might have warned you against—or your mentor, or your best friend who blew up his love life and his career at the same time—it was Don't Date at Work. You'll compound the heartbreak; you'll compromise your professionalism; you'll expose yourself to sex harassment suits. You'll distract yourself from your job and misplace your affections. The polite aphorism was something like, "Don't mix business with pleasure."

But according to a 2006 employee survey by Vault ("the most trusted name in career information"), *nearly 60 percent* of employees in America have been involved in an office romance, up from just 47 percent in 2003. And of the 42 percent who hadn't had an office romance, 9 percent said they'd like to.

Though many Office Romancers try to hide their affairs, almost everyone knows it's going on: Forty-three percent of employees say there is an office romance currently happening at their workplace, and another 38 percent say there might be. (For many, the discovery is not so subtle: In another survey, by Hotjobs, a remarkable 44 percent of respondents said they've actually caught co-workers -getting amorous- on the job.) But the bottom line is: No one really minds. Fully 75 percent of workers think that romantic and sexual relationships between co-workers—at least if they are peers—are totally okay.

Why the surge? In the long term, it's of course because of the growing equality of men and women in the workforce. The gap has been steadily closing for decades.

In the shorter term, it has to do with the rise of working singles. There are more of them than ever in the workforce (up 22 percent since 1995), and singles aged 25-34 are working more hours per week than they used to—up about 8 percent since 1970. (So really, where else *could* they find romance?)

But of course, some married people are in on the action, too. The Vault survey found that 50 percent of workers have known a married co-worker to have an affair with someone else at the office.

Not surprisingly, men are more flirtatious at work than women (66 versus 52 percent, according to one survey); and substantially more men (45 percent) say they have had an interoffice romance than women (35 percent). That latter discrepancy either means that women are *serial* Office Romancers; that men are more boastful about this; that women more often leave the workplace after having an affair; or that some of those men's affairs are homosexual. I think the bottom line is this: The office has become the twenty-first-century singles bar. Water is the new gin and tonic, and Muzak the new club beat.

Evidently, some work settings are more conducive to the interoffice affair than others. The Vault surveys found that the number one industries for interoffice hookups are media and entertainment, followed by advertising/ marketing and consulting. (Finance and technology, much more dominated by men, are the least likely fields to spawn a fling.) I'm the CEO of a public relations firm and the president of a consulting firm. I am proud to say we have had several

interoffice marriages that started as office romances, so a lot of good can come from this—now that men and women are in the workforce with greater equality, and can find people at work with similar skills and interests.

We're not alone in having nurtured office romances into long-term love. In a 2006 study by the Society for Human Resource Management, over 60 percent of the HR professionals interviewed said that romances in their offices had resulted in marriage. I can attest from personal experience that having married couples on staff can be a big win—they share a passion for our work; they back each other up if there's a crisis at home; and they are productive for the firm even in downtime, since (so they tell me) they wrestle with work challenges even as they give their kids a bath.

The fusing of work and love is nothing new. Moms and Pops have worked side by side since the dawn of agriculture, and again since the dawn of commerce. In fact, married couples make up the majority of business owners in America, with more than 1.2 million husband-and-wife teams running companies. And Americans have always had a special place in their heart for couples who work together (from George Burns and Gracie Allen to Sonny and Cher) and workers who couple together (from Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn to Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie). Where would music be without famous crooning couples—from Johnny Cash and June Carter, to Beyonce Knowles and Jay-Z? (Where would crime be without Bonnie and Clyde?)

And of course, at-work affairs are not new. "The boss and his secretary" is about as old a horseplay cliché as existed in the twentieth century.

But what's different now is that Workers Who Couple, and Couples Who Work Together, are happening not just in larger-than-life Hollywood or in your basic mom-and-pop shops—although those businesses, too, are growing at record rates—but in big and medium-sized companies, which, as a result, need some new rules. According to the Vault survey, only about 1 in 5 companies has policies regarding interoffice romance. Given concerns about intruding on employees' privacy, most companies have shied away from too much regulation, perhaps just venturing to ban supervisors' relationships with subordinates, or stepping up their reminders about sexual harassment. (Wal-Mart's policies are pretty aggressive, as you probably read about in 2007. After internal investigators found evidence that two high-level marketing executives, one senior and one junior, were having an affair, it fired them both—touching off a public relations storm that ended up with the couple's intimate e-mails splashed across the front pages.)

But are even those policies sufficient? Should even co-equal colleagues who are romantically involved be allowed to share a supervisor? A project? Office space? If all goes well, maybe it's delightful all around—but if the romance sours, one of them could get vindictive.

What about romance with clients, or vendors? How about with employees of competitors—especially if your employee is junior, and the competitor's is senior? Is that some kind of nefarious competitive advantage?

Moreover, as more and more office relationships take off, and more flings turn into rings, it is surely time to revisit the workforce rules, customs, and support systems regarding family employment. Right now in America, there are no uniform U.S. laws that prohibit the hiring of relatives, but it is estimated that up to 40 percent of companies still have rules on their books outlawing "nepotism"—a set of rules from the 1950s designed to stop white, male employees from hiring their underqualified relatives. (The word "nepotism" actually comes from the word "nephew.") Sure, it's still a good idea to stop unqualified nephews from sopping up company resources. But did we also intend to put at risk the jobs of colleagues who get married—and might suddenly violate company policy regarding spousal employment? Did we mean to discourage marriage between otherwise well-suited colleagues? When Congress tried to pass a ban on lawmakers' spouses lobbying on Capitol Hill as part of its ethics cleanup in 2006, some people complained about that very problem, and confusion set in—was our sense of ethics now in conflict with our sense of family? Maybe there's been new meaning given to the old expression that politics spawns strange bedfellows.

Clearly, there is a whole host of HR needs going unaddressed at every level. Co-working spouses want to be reviewed and compensated without regard to the other—but, on the other hand, they would *also* appreciate it if one is laid off, the firm goes out of its way to retain the other. From the employers' side, bosses need some kind of assurance that if co-working couples split up, they'll keep the company out of it, and especially not take up colleagues' time asking them to take sides. And speaking of colleagues, they, too, need some kind of guarantee that when it comes to deciding promotions, awards, or other compensation, the co-workers who happen to be married to the decision-makers won't get preferential treatment. Maybe the new workplace policies, focused less on nephews and more on husbands and wives, should be called "nuptialism."

Beyond formal workplace policies, Office Romancers and Married Colleagues need a community, some fellow travelers with whom to work through shared experiences. What's the best way to handle disclosure of the relationship, and the breakups? Workplace disagreements, or

competitions that spill over to home? How about health insurance options, and parental leave? The double humiliation of a spouse's in-office affair?

On all fronts, we might look to universities. As the number of female Ph.D.'s skyrocketed—from about 8,000 in 1966 to over 20,000 in 2002—there was a huge boom in the number of academic couples. As a result, universities have been working for decades on ways not only to permit, but to encourage, positions for double-entry candidates. As this could be a wave of the workplace future, other employers may want to take note.

Finally, couples themselves need to assess what it means to put all their proverbial eggs in one basket. With people working later and later into their lives, a co-working marriage could literally mean 24/7 togetherness for fifty or sixty years. Blissful, I know, for some. For others, maybe a little too close.

It's a new workplace out there, and in what was once a male-dominated office environment, where sexual harassment was the number one problem, the power structure is changing and so is the social structure. Sexual harassment remains a serious issue. But we can now look forward to a time where social collegiality, between truly co-equal men and women in executive positions, is a driving force in our work life and our social life.

In the meantime, as the workforce works through these transitions, you are more likely than ever to stumble upon colleagues smooching (or more) on their lunch break. Could be hot gossip for the water cooler. Or, it could be just Mom and Pop, sneaking a little together time before the afternoon presentation.

### **Commuter Couples**

In May 2006, the New York Times splashed a front-page color portrait of Bill and Hillary Clinton under the headline, "For Clintons, Delicate Dance of Married and Public Lives." Here it comes, readers thought. New, lurid details about the most dissected marriage in America.

The story was compelling—although not from the point of view of either gossip or politics. It was compelling because the way that former President Bill Clinton and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton live—two careers, two houses, seeing each other fourteen days a month, traveling to be together two out of every three weekends—is increasingly a way of life for married Americans. It's called the Commuter Marriage, and the Clintons are far from alone—more than 3.5 million people are doing it.

In 1990, an estimated 1.7 million married people in the United States were living apart for reasons other than separation. Fifteen years later, that number has more than doubled.

Did everyone start taking -A Room of One's Own- just a little too seriously?

The truth is, commuter marriages have always been big in our culture. Ben Franklin had one as our first ambassador to France—though he rarely got back home. Some of America's most important jobs basically *require* them. Active-duty soldiers leave spouses and children for extended periods during deployment. Members of the U.S. House or Senate, like Hillary Clinton—and state legislators in places large enough to have a faraway capital—routinely bed down in apartments near work and then travel home on weekends. (Handfuls of U.S. congressmen live like college freshmen in shared quarters on Capitol Hill.)

But increasingly, regular people—not just soldiers and public servants— are living apart from their spouses, too. Mostly they are dual-career couples who can't, or don't want to, uproot both of their professional lives just because one has to, or can, take a job or get a degree somewhere else. Forty years ago, such a decision would have been unthinkable. Women earned so little, there was such serious stigma attached to women living alone, and travel was so expensive that if a husband had to relocate, the wife pretty much always went along. But now that women make more, nearly 30 percent of American households are people living alone, and air travel is relatively cheap—commuter marriage is just one of the many ways that dual-earning couples are working out their life's work. And, by the way, it's not just for the young and starting-out. According to experts at AARP, the number of married people over 50 who live separately tripled between 2001 and 2005.

While many people in America telecommute so they can spend more time with their families, Commuter Couples are doing the opposite. They are physically where their work is, but using technology to connect them to family. And so while much has been written and advertised about the new Mobile Worker, little has yet been said about the new Mobile Spouse—away, and yet constantly connected through technology. And soon spouses will be able to track each other through the GPS chips in their cell phones, so they will always be able to locate their loved one.

Is commuting dangerous for the marriage? According to the Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships (LDRs), commuters are not any more likely than geographically close couples to break up. Nor, says Dr. Gregory Guldner, director of the center, are commuting couples likely to be less satisfied in their relationships, or to cheat more. Says Dr. Guldner, so long as couples find a way to share in each other's day-to-day events, find ways to talk about the

big issues, and yes, "learn the art of long-distance sex," commuting couples have as solid a shot as anyone.

What do Commuter Couples mean for America? At a political level, you suddenly have a greater number of people -belonging- to two states, which could complicate the rules about voting, taxation, and school enrollment, all of which are based on place of residence. There are also significant marketing opportunities, including financial planning, communications, travel, and special event planning. When being apart is the norm, being together can take on special meaning. Perhaps one reason why these marriages seem to be working is that people really have to appreciate each other to tolerate a commuter marriage—and yet the special feeling of being together, something easily lost in one-house marriages, is constantly renewed. In addition, they afford a degree of space and privacy that conventional marriages don't have—and that space may just be the pressure valve that gives these marriages an equal or better chance of success, in a world where divorce is the norm.

Commuter Couples also affect the workforce. You might think commuters are the least loyal employees, the first to leave on a Friday afternoon to rejoin their distant lovers for the weekend. Or the grumpiest around the office, because they're so lonely without their spouses and kids.

But the truth is, while they're in the city of their employer, commuter spouses probably have far fewer distractions than their counterparts with families or busy single lives. They may actually be more capable of giving their employers a full 24/5 workweek, and a full 24/7 one when it's an "off" weekend. So in an era of high job turnover *anyway*, it may be that the most attractive employees are the ones who look like drifters—unattached and unrooted— except a couple weekends per month, and on holidays.

Eventually, one partner or the other generally moves, so most Commuter Couples don't stay that way forever. Since people now change jobs every two to four years, chances are that is how long most Commuter Couples will stay in that state before they reunite. But with so many job changes and two-career couples, the chances that people—at least for some part of their lives—will have a Commuter Relationship for at least a couple of years is skyrocketing. So get ready for the next new condition of modern life.

## **THE INTERNATIONAL PICTURE**

The 3.5 million Americans who are in commuter marriages are hardly alone.

Around the industrialized world, foreign job placements—and dual-career couples—are on the rise. But as a result, more and more couples of every nationality are spending at least some portion of their married lives in separate cities. In every language, it seems, the principle "whither thou goest, I will go" is now less compelling than it used to be.

Whereas many Commuter Marriages are by choice, especially within the U.S., some are by necessity—especially if the first spouse's relocation is to a foreign country. According to a 1999 Global Relocation Trends Survey, of the nearly 50 percent of spouses who had jobs before their significant others were relocated, only 11 percent were able to find employment in the host country. And employers weren't very sympathetic: Just 19 percent aided the partner's job search, while one-third offered no support at all. (The others offered token counseling or job-finding fees.) To make matters worse, only a handful of countries even provide working permits to spouses. So even couples who wanted to live together may end up being commuters.

And indeed, it is probably fair to say that most Commuter Marriages in the world are not among upscale, dual-career couples—but rather among downscale people forced apart by economics. In the U.S. itself, there are millions of guest workers (and illegal immigrants), many of whose spouses are back home. In the Middle East, this phenomenon is often the majority situation:

-In Kuwait, 63 percent of the population is foreign-born—mainly service workers and laborers from Egypt, the Philippines, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka. (An estimated 4 percent of Egyptians go abroad for work, 70 percent of them to Arab Gulf countries.)

-In Dubai, just 17 percent of the population is native-born.

-In Saudi Arabia, two-thirds of all jobs are held by foreigners. In 2006, these workers sent \$14 billion back to their families.

Fortunately for many such couples, international travel is faster and cheaper than ever before. So are international telephone calls and e-mail connections. So one can only hope that spousal reunions happen often enough to keep the marriage together—and that, in between, husbands and wives can make do with virtual, and remembered, good night kisses.

### **Internet Marrieds**

It used to be embarrassing to need the Internet to date. It smacked of geeky antisocialness—people who couldn't make it in the "real" dating world. People with something to hide. People so

desperate for a date they would seek out strangers at odd hours, from their lonely, maybe even creepy dens. At a minimum, online dating brought to mind older, unsuccessful singles whose dating years were waning and whose biological clocks were ticking. Going online was your Hail Mary effort to find a mate before you got too old. (And the men all figured that the women online were easy—weren't they practically advertising for men?)

But in the last few years, online dating has switched, becoming something of a destination not of last but of first resort. No longer a refuge for people who can't hack "normal"? dating, Internet dating is increasingly viewed as a fun way to meet *more* potential dates, while also efficiently weeding out the Totally Undesirable. According to a 2006 study on online dating by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 61 percent of online Americans do not consider online dating "desperate." Nearly half of online Americans think Internet dating is a good way to meet people.

As a result, nearly 1 in 4 single Americans who are looking for a romantic partner—or about 16 million people—use the 1,000 or more dating Web sites out there. That includes almost 1 in 5 Americans in their 20s, and 1 in 10 Americans in their 30s or 40s. And as of 2004, those Web sites were netting roughly \$470 million a year, up from a mere \$40 million in 2001. Social networking wasn't invented for politics—it was invented for socializing.

The previous venues for finding mates—religious institutions, mixers, matchmakers—are being replaced by where the new generation is to be found—at the office, and on the Internet.

Sure, Internet dating still has its risks. On [www.onlinedatingmagazine.com](http://www.onlinedatingmagazine.com)—a site devoted to in-depth coverage of the online dating services industry and dating tips for those who date online—three of the six most popular articles are "Dangers of Online Dating", "Online Dating Safety Tips", and "Staying Clear of Married Men". But amid the millions who are trying online dating nonetheless, there are a select few for whom e-meeting turns into engagement. According to the Pew study, 17 percent of online daters—or nearly 3 million American adults—have turned online dates into a long-term relationship or marriage. That's exactly the same number of couples in America who say they met in church.

And while there are no firm data on the growth in Internet Marrieds, the trend line is clearly rising. Online dating pioneer Match.com didn't even exist until 1995. eHarmony, which boasts the greatest number of client marriages, wasn't launched until 2000. The hundreds and hundreds of other dating sites—including subspecialty niches, like DateAGolfer, Animal Attraction (for pet lovers), or Positive Singles (for singles with sexually transmitted diseases)—have only just cropped up. And now that it's getting easier to upload pictures and even videos for online prospects, the possibility of bull's-eye matching is only getting more and more real.

In 2007, something like 4.4 million Americans will get married. Almost 100,000 of them will have met online.

In the spring of 2007, we did a short poll of people who met and married on the Internet. While there are Internet Marrieds of every type, it seems that the most typical ones are upscale, urban Democrats who put some serious work into online dating, and are now very, very happy about it.

*Upscale.* Seventy-six percent of Internet Marrieds are employed outside the home, with another 12 percent at home full-time with kids. Seventy percent of the full-time employees are in professional or managerial positions. Sixty-nine percent of Internet Marrieds own their own homes. Sixty-one percent have finished college, including 20 percent who have finished graduate school. A whopping 51 percent have household annual incomes of \$75,000 or more.

*Urban.* Almost half of Internet Marrieds live in cities. Presumably people in rural areas already know the locals, but urban environments mean that there are hundreds of thousands of potential matches in your neighborhood that you don't know.

*Democrats.* Seventy-two percent of Internet Marrieds say they are liberal or moderate, with 43 percent identifying as Democrats. (In an average national sample, Democrats would be only about a third of the population.) Interestingly, though, this group is a little more religious than your typical Democrats. Fifty-one percent say they attend religious services at least a few times a month, compared to only 31 percent who attend "never or nearly never." (In a typical Democrat sample, regular services-goers would more likely be under one-third.)

Internet Marrieds had to put some work into the process. Nearly 6 in 10 said they used online dating sites for a year or more before they found their spouse, and about the same number had to date at least six different online matches before they found The One. (Almost a quarter had to date more than ten.) And while the Internet Marrieds did not go into this feeling desperate, they hardly felt joy or confidence, either.

*?When you first considered online dating, what were your attitudes toward it??  
(multiple responses permitted)*

Percent

**Nervous 65**

**Skeptical 55**

**Embarrassed 27**

**Neutral 22**

**Delighted 20**

**Confident 10**

**It was a last resort 10**

Source: PSB, 2007

But life has worked out for them. A remarkable 92 percent say their marriages are happy, including 80 percent who say "very happy". Fifty-seven percent think their marriages are stronger because they met online, compared to only 6 percent who think they are weaker. Seventy-three percent think they and their spouse have particular advantages because of the way they met, compared to only 24 percent who think they have disadvantages.

And Internet Marrieds are pleased to spread the word. Eighty-four percent have advised other single friends or family members to date online. Eighty-eight percent say they would support their children (one day) dating online. And fully 92 percent say they would support their children marrying someone they met online.

Finally, age-wise, Internet Marriage can happen for anyone. Fifty-five percent of respondents are under 35 (about one-third are in their early 30s), but 46 percent are over 35, including almost a third who are over 45. It works for second-timers, too: Thirty-one percent of Internet Marrieds are on their second marriage.

Internet Marriage could be the wave of the future. With marriage rates at an all-time low to begin with, people who want to find a spouse need an effective, efficient way to cut through the hooking-up scene and get right to the real deal. In our poll, when respondents were asked what was the best thing about online dating, their top two answers were "I could narrow my search to people of a certain type - and - I could look over a lot of people in a short amount of time." Marriage isn't something to be taken for granted anymore. If you want to meet The One, you've got to put yourself virtually out there.

In fact, in a world that increasingly emphasizes self-determination, leaving your soul mate search up to singles bars, office romances, and friends of friends seems not only rather passive, but downright negligent. There are 6 billion people in the world, and only a relative handful in your daily orbit. If you really want love, step it up. Do some targeted research, and make that Cupid's Arrow a surgical strike.

As Internet Marrieds grow in number, there are a couple of things we can expect. First, more Commuter Couples. The number of Americans choosing that lifestyle has already climbed to about 3.5 million, but since Internet Marrieds are already more likely to start out in different cities—and are already more comfortable with communication, and intimacy, online—the Commuter Married trend is only likely to grow.

Second, expect more diverse pairings, across race, ethnicity, and nationality. Marital diversity, too, is on the rise—but once the dating marketplace is blown wide open, unconstrained by traditional community or local ties, soul mates of whatever background will have far greater freedom to find each other. (Of course, ethnic or religious minorities who want to find like people will have an easier time of that, too. Just go to [www.EligibleGreeks.com](http://www.EligibleGreeks.com), [www.EthiopianPersonals.com](http://www.EthiopianPersonals.com), [www.Muslima.com](http://www.Muslima.com), or any of the dozens of other ethnically niched dating sites you can find in about two clicks of a mouse.)

Third, look for e-therapists. While Internet Marrieds had the advantage of narrowcasting their love searches, they also likely sacrificed what used to be a cornerstone of the dating world: a personal voucher by the cousin, the roommate, or the colleague who actually knew your intended before you did. Now, with more and more relationships being high-speed but not homespun, there can be some surprises that call for newfangled counseling. In our poll, the Internet Marrieds (most of whom had spent at least a year on these sites, remember) said that, by far, the worst part about Internet dating was that the people you met could misrepresent themselves. And among the Internet Marrieds who said meeting online had been a *disadvantage*, the number one disadvantage they gave was that they hadn't sufficiently gotten to know their spouse's backgrounds and/or families.

Fourth, look for a lowered online guard when it comes to Internet Marrieds' families. Children of these couples will grow up hearing all about how Mommy and Daddy fell in love over e-mails and chat rooms. How effectively will those parents be able to tell their kids to turn off the computer? And more ominously, will those children have their guard unduly down when it comes to chatting up strangers online?

Like Office Romancers, Internet Marrieds need a community of their own, to work through shared experiences, lessons, challenges, and in-jokes. Throughout this book, I speculate about the need for such communities among many of the microtrend groups. But in this case, I have real proof: While only 37 percent of Internet Marrieds say they know at least several couples who met online, 82 percent say they would like to.

Skeptics may wonder how deep and true Internet-based relationships are, suspecting that people found online will go back online. But what we learned in polling them was the opposite—they choose their mates after going through a wide array of choices, and they are starting out on a very strong footing.

We are a ways off from the offspring of Internet Marrieds hitting the dating scene in major numbers, and it will be interesting to see if it really grows into the mainstream way to date and settle down. But start looking—next to the bronzed baby shoes, have Internet Marrieds framed or bronzed the ads that brought them together? If they have, then the 1990s stigma regarding online dating will be dead, replaced by a pride in searching the earth and the Internet for The One.

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