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NATIONAL DESK

## **Online Dating Sheds Its Stigma as Losers.com**

By AMY HARMON (NYT) 2051 words

Of the 120 men she traded messages with online in her first four months of Internet dating, Kristen Costello, 33, talked to 20 on the telephone at least once and met 11 in person. Of those, Ms. Costello dated four several times before realizing she had not found "the one."

It is one of the first lessons learned by many in the swelling ranks of subscribers to Internet dating sites: soul mates are harder to come by than dinner and a movie. But like a growing number of single adults, Ms. Costello, a fourth-grade teacher in Florham Park, N.J., remains convinced that the chances of finding her life partner are better online than off.

"The difference is there's a huge number of people to draw from," said Ms. Costello, who is getting divorced and tried Kiss.com on the advice of a friend who met her current boyfriend through the site. "I just haven't found the right one."

Online dating, once viewed as a refuge for the socially inept and as a faintly disreputable way to meet other people, is rapidly becoming a fixture of single life for adults of all ages, backgrounds and interests. More than 45 million Americans visited online dating sites last month, up from about 35 million at the end of 2002, according to comScore Media Metrix, a Web tracking service. Spending by subscribers on Web dating sites has soared, rising to a projected \$100 million or more a quarter this year from under \$10 million a quarter at the beginning of 2001, according to the Online Publishers Association.

And despite the Web's reputation as a meeting ground for casual sex, a majority of the leading sites' paying subscribers now say that what they are looking for is a relationship.

Stories of deception persist. Many online daters turn out to be married, and it is taken for granted that everybody lies a little. But they are more often trumped by a pervasive dissatisfaction with singles bars, dates set up by friends and other accepted ways of meeting prospective mates.

"My brother told me to join a canoeing club or something stupid like that," said Dan Eddy, 28, who met his fiancée, Sherry Sivik, 27, of North Ridgeville, Ohio, on Match.com.

Ms. Sivik sent an e-mail message to Mr. Eddy when she saw a picture of him with a shaved head. She refused to meet him for weeks, afraid he would be "some kind of lunatic." But after hearing that Mr. Eddy drove a Jeep, Ms. Sivik's friends, who had a

long-running joke about trying to find her a bald guy with a Jeep, knew it was all over.

As word spreads of successful matches, the stigma of advertising for a romantic partner online rather than waiting for friends and fate to conjure one is fading. "I really don't think there's anyone under 35 who would think twice about it," said Sascha Segan, 29, who has persuaded several friends to try online dating since meeting his fiancée, Leontine Greenberg, on Nerve.com.

Not prepared to cede the potential of a better love life to youth, older singles are also logging on to dating sites in growing numbers.

"We're at a time of life where nothing's structured where you can mingle," said Judith Carrington, a public relations executive who lists herself on Match.com as in her late-50's. "And as you get older it's hard to find a deep bond with people because you've had rich lives and you haven't lived them together."

After a few unremarkable dates, Ms. Carrington, whose husband died several years ago, said she recently had dinner with an investment adviser she met through the service and felt drawn to him because of a shared experience with a family member's mental illness.

"Just to have someone in the running is nice," she said.

As it did for book buying and auctioning used toys, the Internet reduces the transaction costs of meeting romantic prospects. With pictures, long essays, sometimes even videos - - and a cut-to-the-chase etiquette that encourages pointed questions in e-mail messages -- singles say they can learn far more about potential partners online than they can by sizing them up across a crowded room or wringing information from a friend.

"The traditional institutionalized means for getting people together are not working as well as they did previously," said Norval Glenn, a sociology professor at the University of Texas. "There's a need for something new and the Internet is filling that need."

Two or three decades ago, most American couples met in high school or college, Professor Glenn said. But as more people choose to marry later in life, few social institutions have arisen to replace the role that local communities, families and schools once played.

Internet dating may finally be stepping into that breach.

"The Internet gives the impression, and it may or may not be truthful, that you can find someone who is more specifically tailored to your desires," said David M. Buss, author of "The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating" (Revised edition, Basic Books, 2003). "So perhaps the sense that you don't have to settle as much will bear out in more solid bonds."

Along with large dating sites like Match.com, which boasts nearly 800,000 subscribers who pay \$24.95 a month each, and 8 million separate profiles, numerous dating sites now exist for every imaginable group of people. Generally, there is no charge for posting a profile on a Web dating site, but to contact a prospective date, most sites require users to pay a subscription fee.

Lativish Gardner, 24, a Web designer in Valdosta, Ga., switched from Yahoo Personals to BlackPlanetLove.com last month, for instance, to better focus his search.

"I'm a black man and I'm using Black Planet to find a black queen," said Mr. Gardner, who flew to Houston recently to meet a woman he found on the new site.

Web sites like TONY.com (Time Out New York), Nerve.com and Boston.com offer online dating services by pooling a collection of profiles submitted by their younger, more urban subscribers, through a template provided by their New York-based company, Spring Street Networks. In addition to the fundamentals, subscribers are asked to complete sentences like, "In my bedroom you'll find," and to cite their most humbling moment.

Greg Bush, 34, an emergency room doctor in Huntington Beach, Calif., swears by Eharmony, one of several sites that profess to take a more scientific approach to the matchmaking process. Prospective subscribers to Eharmony, founded by a psychologist, fill out a long questionnaire, and the service says they are rejected if it appears a match for them cannot be found.

"She's gorgeous," said Mr. Bush of the woman the service set him up with, a pharmaceutical representative he said he planned to propose to soon. "She's the kind of girl I'd look at all night but never go up and talk to because I'd be too intimidated."

The first trick to online dating is to narrow the search without inadvertently ruling out a perfect match. Helen Gaitanis, 35, of Los Angeles searches only for white men aged 33 to 43 who are at least 5-foot-9. She refrains from filtering out brown eyes, despite her strong preference for blue. Typically 600 profiles of men within 25 miles of her zip code show up in her Match results, Ms. Gaitanis said.

"You can kind of get a feel: Are they dorky, are they going to be a slick cheeseball party guy?" Ms. Gaitanis said. "I look at my profile and I think sometimes it's more intense than others. It's not as flirty or playful. But it says who I am."

Indeed, for women, who have long been taught to search for a mate while scrupulously pretending not to, social historians say online dating may be making it more acceptable to openly signal what they are looking for.

But gender rules still apply. Men say women rarely send the first e-mail note. And like many women, Ms. Gaitanis found that when she did send an e-mail message to a man, he almost never responded. Instead, she is concentrating on refining her profile and updating it often enough that it does not get lost in search results, as profiles are generally ranked in order of the latest updated. She has also seized on Match's new "wink" feature, which allows subscribers to indicate interest in someone's profile simply by clicking a button, which sends them a prewritten message.

"It's like saying, 'Hey, look at me, what do you think?'" said Ms. Gaitanis, who received 6 winks back out of the first 10 she sent. "They can respond or not and at least you didn't

spend any time writing an e-mail."

There are still plenty of holdouts. Ms. Gaitanis's brother, John, 28, told her that online dating was "strictly for losers."

And even those who embrace online dating acknowledge a major flaw: the frequent disconnect between who people say they are online and what they are really like. In one recent example, the Army said it was investigating accusations that a colonel, who is already married, duped dozens of women on tallpersonals.com into believing that he would be marrying them.

Most online dating deception is of the run-of-the-mill variety.

"It's amazing how all women say they're slender when a lot of them are overweight," said one 79-year-old Manhattan man who lists himself as 69 on his Match.com profile.

A Culver City, Calif., woman who lists the adjacent, more upscale Santa Monica as her residence, said, "I swear every time they put 5-10 you have to deduct 3 inches."

But what is most persistently frustrating, veteran online daters say, is not so much the obvious lies as the difficulty in judging physical chemistry through virtual communication.

"Certain things look really good on paper," said Rebecca Hammond, a computer consultant in Manhattan who has met several boyfriends through Nerve.com. "Then in real life it's a completely different story."

After enough of such encounters, many online daters burn out.

Those who do find partners say they are often plagued by the insidious sense that they might find someone better -- if only they paged through a few hundred more profiles.

"If you get unsolicited e-mails coming in it's hard not to look," said David Kleinbard, a researcher for a credit ratings agency in New York who has dated several women from JDate, a Jewish online dating service. "And if the person's cute it's hard not to give it some thought."

But for Jonathan Gerstel, 40, a university fund-raiser who was looking for a Jewish woman in Durham, N.C., with a kind disposition and at least shoulder-length hair, JDate proved the perfect tool.

Amid the 20 matches he found Marta King, 38, an actress and teacher looking for a Jewish man who knew what he wanted in life, made at least as much money as she did, and liked to dance, or was at least willing to try. If the process lacked a certain romantic sweep that Ms. King once imagined, she said she had come to prefer reality.

"I just don't think it matters how you meet," Ms. King said.

Just this month, the two reached an online dating milestone: They removed their profiles from the JDate site.

Correction: July 1, 2003, Tuesday Because of an editing error, a front-page article on Sunday about the increased popularity of online dating misstated the Web address for Time Out New York, which offers such a service. It is Timeoutny.com, not TONY.com.

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