Love Actually! Older Adults and their Romantic Internet Relationships

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Abstract

This research was inspired by two stereotypes: first, that older adults don't do computers – and certainly not the Internet and, secondly, that older adults don't do sex – they are asexual. The results clearly show these stereotypes to be flawed. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted via synchronous computer-mediated-communication (private chat). The sample consisted of older adults (61 – 85 years) who had all used the Internet to meet potential romantic partners, either through their involvement in online discussion groups or via online dating sites. For the most part, the relationships described were meaningful, intimate and long-lasting. The majority were involved in ongoing sexual activity with their partners, and for some, cyber-sex was or had been an integral part of their relationships. Additionally, a proportion enjoyed flirting online with others and some were also involved in extra-dyadic relationships; indicating that sex and intimacy outside of primary, committed relationships was just as compelling an activity for these older adults as for younger Internet users.

Keywords: Older adults; online relationships; romance; cyber-sex; cyber-cheating

Introduction and Purpose of Research

By 2050, in developed regions of the world, adults over the age of 60 will outnumber children by two to one[1] (United Nations Population Division 2002: 15). In Western cultures, old age is typically viewed in a negative light (Birren & Schaie 2006: 389), and ageing is seen as a process of "inevitable decline and deterioration" (Friedan 1993: 9). There is much evidence, however, to indicate that older age can be, and often is, a time of enrichment (Sneed & Whitbourne 2005: 375). And, contrary to ingrained societal expectations, many older adults live healthy, happy and fulfilled lives.

Early data suggested that older adults were being left behind in regards to information and communications technology, specifically in the use of computers and the Internet (see, for example, Adler 1996: [2] (Philbeck 1997: [1]). However, further research indicated that this was not so, with the elderly population responsible for upwards of 40% of all new computer sales in the U.S. (Conover 1997: 8) and increasing numbers of the elderly surfing the Internet (Riddle 2001: [1]) .

Much has been written about computer-mediated communication (CMC), and the formation and maintenance of Internet relationships has emerged as a topic of interest in recent years. With the marked proliferation of websites that promote romantic relationships (for instance, Match.com, RSVP and so on), online romance has been attracting much media and research attention (see for example, *Love Blooms in Cyberland* (Montgomery 1999), *Love Online* (Stone, Rogers & Platt 2001), Parks & Floyd 1996; Parks & Roberts 1998; Hardie & Buzwell 2006). There is, however, a marked paucity of studies investigating older adults and their online relationships. Given the predominance of the older adult population both now and in the future, this is surprising.

Whilst it is clear that older adults *are* developing online romantic relationships, the nature and meaning of these relationships has not been elucidated. The current research was motivated by, firstly, a desire to address this knowledge gap; and secondly, by the existence of two prevailing stereotypes: (1) that older adults don't do computers, and certainly not the Internet, and (2) that older adults don't do sex: they are asexual.

Background

A "Greying" Population

Increases in life expectancies and a sustained decline in fertility have led to a "structural ageing" of Australia's population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2003). In 2001, 12% of the population of Australia was aged 65 years and over; by 2051 this figure is estimated to be 25% (ABS, 2003). In the USA in 2003 there were approximately 36 million people aged 65 and over, with the number expected to double (to approximately 71 million) by 2030 (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics (FIFARG), 2004: [2]). In the UK the projections are very similar: those aged over 65 years are expected to equal 23% of the population by 2031 (National Statistics Online, 2006: [1]). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), this purported "greying" of the population is a global phenomenon, with the proportion of older adults to all other age groups, worldwide, expected to rise by 223% between the years 1970 and 2025 (WHO 2002: 6-7 h).

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[1] Children aged 0 – 14 years of age

Increased Life Expectancy

The expected increase in the size of the elderly population is coupled with a corresponding increase in life expectancy. Not only will there be many more older adults in the population, they will survive longer than ever before. In Australia, life expectancy at birth increased by 23.3 years for females and 21.4 years for males over the last century (1901-2000): indeed women are now expected to live approximately 83 years, and men 78 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Website, 2006).

Whilst life expectancy has shifted, retirement ages for many in the Western world have, until recently, remained fairly stable. In Australia the mandated retirement age remained at 65 years for much of the 20th century (Foskey 2001: 4). However, between 1983 and 2002, the *average* age of retirement stayed reasonably constant at approximately 60 years for men and 58 years for women (ABS 2005a: 4). Given the increase in longevity, this means, effectively, that older adults today can expect to live a minimum of 15 – 23 years post-retirement:

> ……..a twenty-year-old man in 1900 could scarcely have looked ahead to retirement at all; today such a man can expect to spend nearly one quarter of his adult lifetime in retirement. These added retirement years have important consequences for income, social involvement, leisure, health, and indeed nearly all aspects of the process of ageing (Riley, 1987: 4).

Ageism and Stereotyping

Ageism is usually regarded as negative generalizations and perceptions about particular age groups and is a fact of life for many older Australians (Gething et al. 2003: 2). As a group, they have become used to being typecast as frail, confused and a "burden" on society (de Vaus, Gray & Stanton 2003: 19; Hoyer 1997: 39). This stereotyping persists despite much evidence showing that many older adults lead happy, productive and valuable post-retirement lives (de Vaus et al. 2003: 19-20; Sneed & Whitbourne 2005: 375). Furthermore, it extends to all aspects of older adult lives, including their sexuality. According to Denmark, "one of the most pervasive myths in our society is the belief that a decrease in sexual interest and a diminished capacity for sexual behavior are an intrinsic part of the aging process" (2002: 17). Moreover, Rubin suggests that society regards old age as the "sexless older years" and that this "socially harmful stereotype" is perpetuated by the:

> general tradition of equating sex, love, and romance solely with youth; the psychological difficulty that children have of accepting the fact of parental intercourse; the tendency to think of aging as a disease rather than a normal process; [and] the focusing of studies upon hospitalized or institutionalized older people (Rubin 1968: 86-88)

Another area where this stereotyping has been quite marked is in relation to technological advancements, as older adults are perceived, at the very least, to be "resistant to adopting new technologies" (Adler 1996: [2]) or, worse, to be technophobic (Philbeck 1997: [1]). Furthermore, computers have long been regarded as the exclusive bastion of the young (Imel 1998: [1]; White et al. 1999: 359) and older adults are seen as having been "left out of the computer revolution" (Furlong 1989: 145). Many initial studies in this area supported this view, highlighting the low levels of computer use amongst older adults and their apparent lack of Internet experience (Cooper 2000: *I*; Fong, Wellman, Kew & Wilkes 2001: 3).

Older Adults, Computers & Internet Use

Current evidence indicates, however, that older adults are making the digital conversion in increasing numbers. For instance, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported recently that, whilst most age groups were experiencing small declines or a plateau in computer usage, the proportion of adults aged 65 years and over using computers was continuing to grow; rising to 21% in 2002 (ABS 2005b: 2). Comparable results are found in America where, between 2000 and 2004, the percentage of seniors who accessed the Internet jumped by 47% to a total of 22% (Fox 2004: 1). This rate of increase is phenomenal when one considers that only 2% of the elderly were online in 1996[2].

But *how* do older adults use the Internet? Studies have shown that, of the 22% of American seniors who are online, as many as 94% use the Internet to send or read email, with many accessing health-care or medical information (Fox 2004: 10), shopping, banking, paying bills and engaging in chat groups (Kiel 2005: 21), checking their genealogy, keeping up with the stock market and expanding their social networks (Adams, Oye & Parker 2003: 407). Ninety-one percent of older Australian adults (65 years plus) say they use the Internet for personal or private use (ABS 2005b: 3); and older adults in the United Kingdom (those over 50 years) use computers and the Internet to play games, organize and store photos and to download music (Goodman, Syme & Eisma 2003: [2]). According to a report by Fox, once they make the transition to online technology, "…seniors are just as enthusiastic as younger users" (Fox 2004: 3).

Computer-Mediated Communication

From the mid-1980s when it first became established, through to the first decade of the 21ˢᵗ century, the Internet has become ingrained in the lives of many (Wellman & Hogan 2004: 389). Indeed, an early poll indicated that using the Internet had become "a necessity" for countless people (D'Amico 1998: [1]). In 2000 the Angus Reid Group,[3] a leading provider of market and social research in Canada, estimated that there would be one billion Internet users by 2005 (Pastore 2000: [1]). According to a more recent Nielsen//NetRatings survey (January 2006), as many as 68.6% of the U.S. population use the Internet (Internet World Stats 2006). The same survey found an almost identical penetration for Australian users (68.4%; Internet World Stats 2006).

Research has shown that the main use of the Internet is *primarily* for "interpersonal communication" (Kraut et al. 1998: 1019). This "computer-mediated communication" (CMC) breaks down barriers created by time, distance, shyness or disability, and allows users to interact with others they might never normally encounter offline (McKenna, Green & Gleason 2002: 11; Parks & Floyd 1996: 93). In this manner, CMC is seen to promote and facilitate social contact between individuals and groups, helping to create new forms of relationships and social networks. This is especially true today given the unprecedented rise of alternative forms of interaction on the Internet, such as blogging, Youtube, Facebook and so on.

Online Relationships

Whilst many use the Internet to maintain their existing social ties (Donn & Sherman 2002: 107), it has become increasingly apparent that the Internet has developed into a medium for facilitating *new* relationship formation (Hardey 2004: 207). One of the earliest studies in this

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[2] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press: April 1996 Biennial Media Consumption Survey. Available at:
http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=127
[3] Now the Ipsos-Reid Group

area found that nearly 61% of a sample of 176 participants had "formed a personal relationship" with someone they "met" through online newsgroups (Parks & Floyd 1996: 86). In a study published just two years later, Parks and Roberts found that 93.6% of 235 participants in a "real-time text-based virtual environment" (that is, a game environment) had formed ongoing personal relationships (1998: 517). In a later study, 80% of a sample of 30 undergraduates who were regular Internet users were also found to have formed "casual or friendly" relationships online (McCown et al. 2001: 595): indicating that for a majority of users the Internet provides the means to originate new relationships.

The nature of these online relationships was initially questioned, with early research dichotomizing them into "shallow (and) impersonal" versus "genuine (and) personal" associations (see Parks & Floyd 1996 for discussion). However, it soon became clear that Internet-based relationships could be both meaningful **and** long-lasting (McKenna et al. 2002: 20-21; 24). Some reports even suggested that once trust and rapport were built, online relationships could often be *closer* than offline ones (Walther 1996: 5).

Online Romantic Relationships

Initial studies into online romantic relationships found that these relationships occurred consequentially (almost "incidentally") as a result of involvement in chat rooms, discussion groups and so on (see for example McCown et al. 2001). Returning to the early study conducted by Parks and Floyd (1996), for instance, it was found that a small percentage of the online relationships that were formed via involvement in newsgroups (~8%) were considered to be romantic. Furthermore, of the almost 94% who reported the development of online relationships in the Parks and Roberts (1998) account of games participants, 26.3% were classified as romantic.

With the relatively recent (1995) advent of Internet sites related solely to online dating, deliberately seeking a partner online has rapidly become the norm. By the year 2000 as many as 12 million people were registered on the seven largest online dating sites (Brym & Lenton 2001: 9). A 2006 report highlighted the extent of this phenomenon, with over 63 million Americans knowing someone who had used an online dating website (Madden & Lenhard 2006: 2), and almost 30 million people – one in six American adults - knowing someone who had been in a long-term relationship or had married someone they had met online (Madden & Lenhart 2006: 13). A plethora of popular news reports have also appeared accentuating this trend. For example: *Love Blooms in Cyberland* (Montgomery 1999), *Love Online* (Stone, Rogers & Platt 2001), *Modern Romance* (Biever 2006), *Online Dating* (Choice 2005), *Online Dating Reaches a Critical Mass* (The Age.Com.Au 2006).

Why is online romance so prevalent? One possible explanation is found in the work of Walther (1996) who classified 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. Cooper highlighted three key factors that "turbocharge" online sexual activity *viz* accessibility, affordability and anonymity, which he termed the "Triple-A Engine" (Cooper 1999 cited in Cooper, McLoughlin & Campbell 2000: 522). However, whilst these factors may facilitate contact with like-minded others, they do not explain *how* romance develops online. 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).

However, how quickly online relationships develop into romance and how long these relationships last, is 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). Relationships ranged in duration from 4.5 weeks to 13 years (n = 83). The mean length of successful (ongoing) relationships was 5 months (n = 42), and the mean length of unsuccessful (terminated) relationships was 7 months (n = 41). The results of a more recent Australian study 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, cyber-sex and cyber-cheating (see for example Whitty 2003a; 2003b; Wysocki 1998).

> Whatever the initial reason for accessing online communications, whether on a local bbs [Bulletin Board], a commercial server like Compuserve or Genie, or the Internet itself, most people… used the medium as a way to expand their potential for meeting suitable partners, whether the desired outcome of that meeting was focused on sexual activity or a search for enduring love (Albright & Conran 1998: [8])

The dictionary defines flirtation as "behaviour intended to arouse sexual feelings or advances without emotional commitment" (Collins English Dictionary 1999: 434). Whilst Ben Ze'ev maintains that "typical flirting is usually harmless" (2004: 150) Feinberg argues that flirting is, essentially, a short-cut to intimacy (Feinberg 1996). Flirting behaviour is facilitated by the Internet, not only because it provides a medium that is, arguably, friendly and safe (Whitty & Carr 2003: 879) but also because it allows for "the profound sharing of intimate information" (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 146) and because it promotes "powerful emotional bonds" (Merkle & Richardson 2000: 190). However, the distinction between cyber-flirting and cyber-sex is not always apparent. This lack of a boundary between the two behaviours, prompted Whitty and Carr to ask whether cyber-flirting itself could be regarded "as an act of betrayal" (2003: 882).

Cyber-sex is an interesting phenomenon. It is described in Wikipedia as:

> "a virtual sex encounter in which two or more persons connected remotely via a computer network send one another sexually explicit messages describing a sexual experience [which] ….sometimes includes real life masturbation" (Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org /wiki/Cybersex)

Just who engages in cyber-sex and how many are actually "doing it" is also up for debate. Currently there is a shortage of reliable Internet statistics. One study reported "more than 50 percent of all on-line communication is related to sex" (Childs 1994; cited in Wysocki 1998: 428). However, the source is hard to verify (it appeared in *Playboy* magazine). Cooper and his colleagues' research into the area of online sexual activity (OSA) have produced varying results. For example, one study had a response rate of 85% men and 15% women (Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy & Maheu 2002), but a more recent study of 1835 survey respondents found a gender breakdown of 55% men versus 45% women, with 79% involved in OSA

(Daneback, Cooper & Mansson 2005: 322-323). The mean age of those involved was 29.7 years for women and 31.5 years for men. Unfortunately, respondents over the age of 65 were eliminated from the dataset. The earlier research by Wysocki found that, in the majority, those involved were: young (mean age = 35.2 years), male, well-educated, married, and with as many as three children (1998: 434-435). What makes online sex so compelling? Perhaps this excerpt from an ethnographic study of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) provides a clue:

> "…..typed text… itself become[s] eroticised as representations, flirting, heated and pleasurable sex talk, cybersex, in which the actual encounter between participants becomes… **'like being inside a piece of interactive pornography'**" (Rival, Slater & Miller 1998: [9] my bolding).

Wysocki's finding that nearly fifty percent of her sample engaged in online sex outside of marriage, is interesting (1998: 435). This figure suggests a much higher proportion than that detailed in the *American Sexual Behaviour* report, which found that 16% of the population had ever cheated on their spouses (Smith 2006: 54). These differing results may simply be a reflection of different research environments (online versus offline) and populations sampled (sexually-explicit bbs users versus the general population).

Older Adults and Online Romantic Relationships

Whilst it is clear that online romantic relationships are rapidly becoming the "norm" for most segments of the population, the extent of older adults' involvement has still to be established. A Canadian study found 1.6% of online daters were aged 60 plus (Brym & Lenton 2001:14). However, most studies have used younger sample populations, making it difficult to generalize to adults 60 years and over. For instance, the Parks and Floyd (1996) investigation only included adults up to the age of 57 years, and the oldest participant in research conducted by Whitty and Gavin (2001) was 51 years old. The age range of the 75 respondents in a study undertaken by Underwood and Findlay (2004) was not specified; but the mean age for males was 43 years and 41 for females. In yet another study, Donn and Sherman (2002) surveyed University students who were aged from 22 to 50 years of age. In one of the few "sociological" reports that was found, qualitative interviews were conducted online with 33 participants, in an attempt to elucidate "online love" (Albright & Conran 1998). The oldest respondent was just 46 years old.

The Australian study by Hardie and Buzwell found that, of 22 adults who participated in a telephone survey and who identified themselves as being involved in online romance, 9% were aged 56 to 65 and 4.5% were 76 years or older (2006: 10). Interestingly, most of the 22 online romantics (86.7%) had met their partners' face-to-face, even though a significant proportion (~41%) were either in a married or de facto relationship at the time, leading Hardie and Buzwell to label these cyber-daters as "cybercheaters" (Hardie & Buzwell 2006: 10). The proportion of older adult respondents who could also be labeled in this manner was not altogether clear, however.

In contrast to the lack of academic evidence, many popular press articles indicate that older adults *are* looking for romantic relationships – both online and offline. A U.S. News & World Report article in 2001 stated that:

> The Web is…serving millions as an electronic matchmaker. A recent AOL study found that nearly 40% of wired seniors had used the Web to find a friend or lover (Kelly 2001)

and a New York Times article described senior romance as such*:*

> In proliferating Internet chat rooms and forums, in medicine cabinets of sex-enhancing drugs and wrinkle creams, in cruises just for them, in dating services and newspaper personal advertisements under "Seniors Seeking Seniors", in shacking up instead of remarrying, romance in old age has come in from the cold (Kilborn 2004:1.19).

From the preceding anecdotes it seems clear that older adults *are* looking for romantic relationships, both on- and offline. As stated earlier, however, the empirical evidence to support this contention is somewhat harder to find.

Given the size of the Baby Boomer generation reportedly 'coming-of-age' in 2006, and their propensity for pushing the boundaries of whatever decade they are situated in, it is interesting to speculate that there will be a superfluity of older adults wired up and looking for romance online. As Adams et al. commented in 2003:

> For decades, as a group, [the Baby Boomers] have challenged and pushed the limits of …norms; redefining the concepts of family and sexual expression (among many others)… we should anticipate increased changes and challenges in other social norms as this huge cohort moves into later life… Their technological competence and relative affluence will increase the potential of the Internet as a source of personal and social expression of sexuality in later life. (Adams et al. 2003: 413).

Finding out what is going on in terms of older adult's intimate/romantic Internet relationships has, therefore, become almost a necessity. The aforementioned discussion is what drives the current research project.

Research Questions

As stated earlier, this research is first and foremost inspired by two stereotypes. These are:

- Older adults don't do computers – and certainly not the Internet
- Older adults don't do sex – they are asexual

The aim of the current study is to investigate older adults' romantic Internet relationships. Due to the dearth of either quantitative or qualitative research in this area both in Australia and overseas, the project is of an exploratory nature; therefore, no specific hypotheses have been generated. Certain questions have been formulated, however. Firstly, if we make the assumption that older adults *are* finding love online, the starting point must then be, *how* are they doing it? Are they engaging in deliberative behaviour – going online with the intention of finding romantic partners – or are online romances developing as a consequence as some other, unrelated, behaviour? What are these romantic relationships like? Are they similar to, or different from, offline relationships? Do these online relationships linger in cyberspace – or do they graduate to offline, face-to-face relationships? Are these relationships sexual – both online and offline? Do the relationships last? That is, are they long-term relationships, leading to commitment and possibly marriage, or are they short-term, transitory affairs? Further, what meaning do those involved attach to their online experiences and the relationships that develop? Additionally, given that Wysocki (1998) and Hardie and Buzwell (2006) found relatively high percentages of cyber-cheaters in their studies, are any of these older adult online relationships adulterous?

Method

The current project is part of a much larger research undertaking consisting of three phases:

- Phase 1 : 30 semi-structured online interviews via private chat
- Phase 2 : 30 semi-structured offline (face-to-face) interviews
- Phase 3 : online survey

The results presented in this paper are of a preliminary nature and are pertinent only to Phase 1 of the study. Reporting of the results will be largely confined to the range and nature of themes found, owing to the relatively small size of the data set to date.

Participants

The sample for Phase 1 consists of older adults (aged 60 years plus) who are engaged in or who have recently been engaged in a romantic relationship that began online. Participants were sourced through various means: firstly, by study notices placed in online forums, such as SeniorNet.com and RSVP.com; and secondly, by word-of-mouth referrals (in effect, creating a snowball sample).

The original study notice asked for participants who were engaged in or had recently been engaged in an "intimate" relationship that began online. I did not receive one response. When I changed the wording to "romantic" relationship, I began to receive contacts from older adults. This minor semantic difference suggested that the use of the word "intimate" was, for older adults, synonymous with "sex". I was then faced with a dilemma. Would this so-called word "sensitivity" in respondents ("intimate" versus "romantic"), be reflected in the details they were willing to disclose about their relationships? This fear was unfounded. Once people agreed to participate they were more than happy to talk about every aspect of their romantic relationships, intimate or otherwise. The self-selected sample also meant that I never once received contact from anyone who was purely and simply interested in online sex.

Procedures

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted via synchronous computer-mediated-communication (private chat). Information and disclosure statements were sent to all prospective participants. Responses were copied and pasted into Word documents for later thematic analysis. A semi-structured interview schedule was implemented, beginning with questions designed to provide an overview of older adults' Internet involvement: how many years, how many hours per day, what it was used for and so on. Questions were then asked regarding online romantic relationships: their instigation, their development, their longevity and whether they were sexual or not. Other questions were asked on various aspects of these relationships: ranging from cyber-flirting and cyber-sex to cyber-cheating; followed by a few further general questions including self-rating and demographic questions. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

This research project was initiated, first and foremost, as an exploration of older adults' online romantic relationships. Therefore, it seemed more than appropriate to choose a qualitative interviewing method to conduct this exploration and even more appropriate to conduct those interviews in the same environment the relationships were established - online. Online interviews have distinct advantages: firstly, interviews can be conducted with anyone, anywhere and at anytime (within reason of course!) – bypassing many time/space constraints. Secondly, online interviews generate their own automatic transcripts, not only

saving time and energy but allowing researchers to engage with the material in a more timely manner than traditional transcribing methods. Thirdly, participants' responses are often clear, concise and well thought out, compared to many instantaneous verbal responses. This very conciseness can be a drawback, however, with some richness of detail being lost. Furthermore, the absence of face-to-face cues can also mean there is some scope for misinterpretation of the questions being asked.

Ethical Issues

In any study of this kind, confidentiality and informed consent are paramount. All participants were informed that they would not be able to be personally identified in any report of this work. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of names and all identifying information was changed or omitted. For the purposes of this paper, the designation "male" or "female" followed by "age" will be used when reporting specific data. As there were two females aged 66 years, their responses will be distinguished from each other by the designation "A" and "B".

Results to Date

The Sample

Seven (7) online interviews have been conducted to date. The sample consisted of six females and one male, ranging in age from 61 – 86 years (mean age = 71 years), six of whom were previously divorced and one who was widowed. Four participants were currently married or in de facto relationships, although two of these relationships did not involve cohabitation: one because they were still married and the other out of choice – indeed, her partner lived in a different state.

The older adults in this study were highly educated (range: associate (2 year) degree – postgraduate qualifications); were employed or had previously been employed in what could be described as typically middle-class occupations (academic, social worker, nurse, teachers, writer); were relatively early adopters of the Internet (evidenced by the number of years already online: 7 – 20+ years, mean years online = 11.8 years) and had a high degree of familiarity with the Internet (not just information gathering or socializing but banking / paying bills and online trading, implying a high level of trust in technology). These findings fit with previous research which suggests that early adopters of technology are more likely to be in higher status occupations (Dickerson & Gentry 1983: 226); and that those engaging in online romantic relationships are generally well educated (Wysocki 1998: 435; 82% of her respondents had a college education).

Internet Activity

The older adults in the current study spent a large amount of their daily lives engaged in online activities (mean daily use = 5.4 hours/day). Furthermore, all were actively engaged in online social and/or discussion groups (100%), but only four of them (57%) were involved in social or activity groups in their offline lives. I was surprised by this result and wondered if it was because the older adults were perhaps incapacitated and possibly housebound as a consequence; but answers to the question about health revealed this was not the case. One explanation could be related to the amount of time these older adults spent engaging in online activities. As this was quite extensive, conceivably there would not be a lot of time left for face-to-face socializing/interacting. This view was reinforced by one older adult, who said that for her the Internet "is a great part of… [my] social world" [Female: 72 years]. Certainly

the older adults who were not involved in offline groups were amongst the highest Internet users (10, 5 and 4 hours/day): one of them had never been involved in offline social and activity groups, whilst the others had been involved at some stage but had stopped because of reasons to do with moving interstate and being consumed with their new relationships. However, given that another older adult was quite actively involved in three offline social or activity groups and was also the second highest Internet user (8+ hours/day), no direct link between the two variables could be made.

Online Romantic Relationships

(a) Onset and Duration

Three older adult participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship that began on the Internet, and four had recently been involved in relationships that started online. Most of the relationships had developed rapidly, taking between one to six months to develop (mean onset = 3.2 months), with the remaining two relationships developing relatively more slowly over the course of one year. The only male in the study explained his experience like this:

> I would say [the relationship happened] rather quickly…. Like the 4th of
> July… It was… intense [Male: 85 years]

Whilst another participant had this to say about her relationship:

> My partner knew immediately this is who he was looking for. He was ready to
> meet me right away. I'd say we corresponded about a month before meeting,
> and I was the hesitant one! We dated about three months before he moved in,
> and he's been here a little over three years. [Female: 61 years]

Based on this it appears that older adults not only fall in love online, they often fall in love relatively quickly, going against the stereotype that older people are not interested in romance/sex.

Most of my participants' relationships could be termed "successful" or "long-lasting", that is, they ranged in duration from three to 10 years (mean duration = 6.5 years), whilst some relationships were considerably shorter, with a mean duration of 4 months. A similar proportion of ongoing/terminated relationships, was found in the study by Wildermuth (reported earlier), however, the mean duration of terminated relationships was 7 months compared to 4 months for the current study. These results indicate that online romances amongst older adults can and often do develop into long-lasting and deeply meaningful relationships. Most of my participants fell in love quickly, and most had lasting relationships with the partner they met online.

(b) Instigation and Development of Relationship

Surprisingly, given the overall prevalence of online dating sites, *deliberative* behaviour (joining dating sites such as RSVP.com and actively seeking a romantic partner online) only accounted for the development of two of the relationships in the current study. These older adults were very pleased with the opportunities that online dating sites gave them and both said they would recommend their use to others. One participant described the ease with which she could meet potential partners:

> I had virtually no luck offline. First, I have no idea how to meet single men
> [because] I'd been married for a long time. Second, I'm not gorgeous, and
> hate being rejected out of hand. Using Match.com was amazingly easy,

which was so good for my ego. I had a man fly in from the other end of _, and another from _. When I was in _ for six weeks, I had about 5 dates!" [Female: 61 years].

The other participant said that she did not like the "pub and club scene" and that she liked the "confidentiality, security and privacy" of using dating sites [Female A: 66 years].

The rest of my participants found romance *consequentially* – as a result of participation in online discussion or friendship groups. When asked whether they would use any of the Internet dating sites if they became single again, most replied emphatically "never"! The same respondents also said they *would* recommend the Internet to others as a means to meeting new partners, but clarified this apparent anomaly by saying that this could be achieved by joining various discussion groups. Whilst not explicitly stated, the implication here was that the Internet could be used as a tool for meeting a variety of people, and the more people you met the more likely you would be to find romance.

All except one of my participants met their online partners face-to-face, and all engaged in sexual activity the first time they met. For four older adults, the mean time between meeting online and meeting face-to-face/commencement of sexual activity was 3.75 months; for the other two, first meeting and sexual activity began at twelve months. The following quotes illustrate their experiences:

> We couldn't keep our hands off each other when we were first together [Female: 82 years]

> We knew on first sight that we would end up in bed… Once we had slept together… we both felt it was the most wonderful sex we'd ever experienced – and it still is! Amazing… [Female: 72 years]

The one older adult who had not yet met her online lover face-to-face, said she "might well...this summer" although she also said she was avoiding the issue as she did not want to hurt her husband [Female B: 66 years]. These results illustrate unequivocally that older adults are not sexless: sex is clearly a very important part of their romantic relationships. It also indicates that myths about older adult relationships developing slowly over time are both out-dated and incorrect.

(c) Cyber-flirting, Cyber-sex and Cyber-cheating

I asked my participants what they thought of flirting online. More than half of them thought that flirting online was not acceptable behaviour, saying that it could easily be misconstrued and might lead to infidelity. One older adult qualified this by saying that she "sure wouldn't do it unless I meant it" and that "you would only flirt with someone [that] you were interested in taking the relationship further" [Female: 82 years]. Another said: "I would not get intimate (talk about sexual matters) or even flirt on line" [Female A: 66 years]. The remaining three participants thought that cyber-flirting was not only acceptable, but was also a harmless and enjoyable pastime: "cyber-flirting is less a threat to a marriage than [flirting] in person" [Female B, 66 years]. This same dichotomy of opinion occurs in the literature (*cf* Ben Ze'ev 2004; Feinberg 1996; reported earlier herein) and may be a reflection of views in society in general. However, I have no evidence to support such an assertion at the current time.

Given the response to the questions on cyber-flirting, I fully expected to find that many of my participants would not have engaged in cyber-sex and would find the question

uncomfortable. I was wrong on both counts. Over half of them (57%) reported that they had engaged in cyber-sex activities either before or after they met their partners face-to-face:

> "It was fun!" [Female, 82 years]

> "I am open about being a woman, a sexual woman… I have no qualms about that aspect of life… In person, things can and often do become sexual… online it is more like foreplay… or when one's lover is gone [away] and [it becomes] correspondence of what WILL occur when they do see you" [Female B, 66 years]

Although there has been little research in this area, it appears that older adults are pursuing cyber-sex and enjoying it as part of their sexual repertoire. How widespread this practice is amongst older adults is hard to determine at the present time. The study by Daneback et al. (2005) detailed earlier, found 79% of their sample had engaged in cyber-sex. Unfortunately, as those 65 years and over were eliminated from the dataset, it is difficult make any correlations between the two studies.

When asked about cyber-cheating, most of the older adults in the current study thought that cyber-cheating was not acceptable under any circumstances:

> "if it's a real romance, yes, it's "cheating". It means you're using emotional energy elsewhere, instead of seeing what's missing from the relationship… if you define it as a romance, I think it's…unfair to the partner." [Female: 61 years]

Two participants however said that developing a secondary relationship online whilst still in a primary, committed relationship was acceptable. Indeed, both these participants were currently engaged in extra-dyadic relationships that began online, qualifying them for the label of "cyber-cheaters" as defined earlier by Hardie and Buzwell (2006: 10). One of these older adults described her secondary relationship thus:

> "personally, I don't feel it is cheating… now if (we) met and had sex yes… that would be" [Female B: 66 years].

These results are also similar to those found in recent Australian research which showed that 78% of both men and women think it is "always wrong" to have a secondary relationship outside of marriage (Richters & Rissel 2005: 65). In my study, various reasons were given for the circumstances under which an extra-dyadic relationship was permissible: if the other partner had dementia; if the other partner was no longer sexual; if there were long periods of absence. How these responses fit with the literature has not been determined, but will be followed up in the future.

Discussion

First and foremost, the older adults who participated in this study were not only long-term Internet users, but also spent a large part of each day engaged in online activities. In particular, they had all used the Internet to meet potential romantic partners; although for most this occurred as a consequence of their involvement in online social and discussion groups, and only a few deliberately accessed online dating sites to do so. Not only do these findings illustrate the depth of older adult Internet involvement, they also have important implications for Internet researchers who tend to disregard older adults as relevant subjects.

Secondly and perhaps more importantly, not only were the older adults in this study involved in ongoing sexual activity with their partners, they were very happy to talk about it! The vast

majority of relationships became sexual very quickly, in all cases at the first face-to-face meeting, and for some of the participants, cyber-sex was or had been an integral part of their relationship. For the most part, the relationships described were intimate, meaningful and long-lasting. Far from being asexual, these older adults were actively engaged in loving, romantic relationships that clearly reflect those of their younger – and more socially acceptable – counterparts. Additionally, a proportion of participants enjoyed flirting online and some were also cyber-cheats, indicating that sex and intimacy outside of primary, committed relationships was just as compelling an activity for these older adults as for younger Internet users. These results clearly demonstrate that the desire for love, romance and intimacy is of fundamental importance, regardless of age.

Conclusion

The results presented herein provide a snapshot of older adults and their online romantic relationships. Whilst results to date are brief, further data is currently being collected and will allow a fuller discussion of this phenomenon in the future. The results from the second phase of the project (face-to-face interviews) will also allow a much needed comparison between relationships that begin online and those that begin through face to face meetings. The third phase of the project (an online survey) will hopefully provide much-needed quantitative data to back up the results derived from the interviews. Additionally, it may be possible to ascertain through existing online dating sites, the numbers of older adults actively engaged in deliberately looking for a romantic partner.

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, as it has for countless others. The results presented in this paper give an interesting insight into older adults and their romantic Internet relations, but they also raise more questions than they answer. How do you explain older adult online romantic behaviour? How does it differ from their offline behaviour? How different is it to that of younger cohorts? Can existing sociological theories of love and intimacy explain older adult online romantic relationships? If not, why not? Where do theories of ageing fit in?

Whilst the existing literature provides a good foundation to address these questions with, most of the work has centred on younger samples and is possibly not pertinent. The lack of recognition amongst researchers of older adults as sexually-active, technologically-adept beings and, as such, candidates for online research projects, seems to be a reflection of prevailing societal stereotypes. Hopefully the current research will provide a starting point from which to dismantle them.

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