

The Role of the Internet in UK Married Life: Survey Results from the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

The Internet has become an important means of managing the relationships that we have with others in our everyday lives. A recent survey conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) (University of Oxford), has drawn on a representative sample of over two thousand married Internet users to understand the role played by the Internet in their relationships.

The Institute's research on the societal implications of the Internet has a focus on the role of networks in social relations, including relationships within the household and family relations. OII Director Bill Dutton said 'This study is a dramatic illustration of the potential for the Internet to reconfigure social relationships'.

Questions included: how and where they first met their partners, their Internet use, their online behaviours, and attitudes to these behaviours (including what they considered to be 'acceptable behaviours' and monitoring activities). The survey forms part of the Institute's research project 'Me, My Spouse and the Internet'.

All data are weighted based on the Institute's Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS) to represent Internet users in the UK. The couples first met each other either online ('met-online' couples) or offline ('met-offline' couples).

1. Meeting a partner

- 6% of married Internet users first met their partner online. They were most likely to have met through an online dating site (34%), chat room (19%) or instant messaging site (18%).
- The married Internet users who first met offline were most likely to have met in a bar or pub (25%), at work (19%) or been introduced by friends (14%).
- The couples that first met online were more likely to have different levels of education (36% of the 'met-online' couples had different levels of education; compared with 21% of the 'met-offline' couples).
- The couples that first met online were more likely to have an age gap of greater than six years (gap > 6yrs for 39% of the 'met-online' couples'; gap > 6yrs for 24% of the 'met-offline' couples).

2. Online behaviour

- 20% of married Internet users admitted to reading their partner's emails and text messages; and 13% to having checked their partner's browser history.
- Survey respondents said they would be 'unhappy' about their partner doing the following online with somebody else: falling in love (97%); having cyber-sex (94%); disclosing intimate details (92%); communicating relationship troubles to others (89%); sharing personal information about the other partner (88%); flirting (85%).

- There was general agreement between partners about the level of acceptability of certain online behaviours within their relationship. However, there was disagreement within 46% of couples about the acceptability of a partner viewing 'adult' sites, with men being more likely to accept this in their partner than women.

3. Maintaining relationships

- 10% of married Internet users indicated that the Internet was 'somewhat or extremely important' in maintaining their relationship. 19% exchanged messages with their partner at least weekly through email and 14% through online chats.
- Face-to-face communication was the most reported way for married Internet users to discuss personal matters and resolve problems, but technologies were also used, including telephone (51% of users), text messaging (27% of users), and email (14% of users). 81% said they never used email to discuss personal matters.

About the survey:

The survey was designed by the Oxford Internet Institute and hosted on their servers. An independent market research company, ICM Research, contacted its panel of Internet users, with 6012 married individuals approached to answer the survey. Once the first partner of a couple had completed the questionnaire their partner was contacted and asked to participate in the study. The final sample consisted of 2401 individuals and 929 couples in which both partners completed the questionnaire. Respondents formed a representative sample of the UK population.

The study focused on married couples in the UK, and had the additional intention of testing models of marital happiness developed by e-Harmony.com, an online match-making company. The research project was supported by a grant from e-Harmony.com. More information about their research and projects can be found at eHarmony Labs.

Notes for Editors:

The Oxford Internet Institute (University of Oxford) is a leading world centre for the multidisciplinary study of the Internet and society, focusing on Internet-related research and teaching, and on informing policy-making and practice.

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