

# First Comes Social Networking, Then Comes Marriage? Characteristics of Americans Married 2005–2012 Who Met Through Social Networking Sites

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## Abstract

Although social networking sites (SNS) have become increasingly prevalent and integrated into the lives of users, the role of SNS in courtship is relatively unknown. The present manuscript reports on the characteristics of Americans married between 2005 and 2012 who met through SNS drawn from a weighted national sample ( $N=18,527$ ). Compared to other online meetings (i.e., dating sites, online communities, one-on-one communication), individuals who met through SNS were younger, married more recently, and were more likely to be African American. Compared with offline meetings, individuals who met through SNS were more likely to be younger, male, African American and Hispanic, married more recently, and frequent Internet users with higher incomes. Trends suggest an increasing proportion of individuals are meeting using SNS, necessitating further research on factors that influence romantic relational development through SNS.

## Introduction

THROUGHOUT THE 2000s AND UP TO THE PRESENT, the adoption and integration of Internet technology into individuals' everyday lives has been remarkable, particularly in the realm of romantic relationship development. Since 1997, there has been a sea change in both attitudes toward and adoption of technologies facilitating romantic relationship development, particularly online dating.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, only 3% of a nationally representative sample had met over the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Recently, that percentage had increased to 3–6%.<sup>3</sup> This trend is particularly notable in recent marriages. A weighted national sample of Americans married between 2005 and 2012 found that more individuals met online than any single offline location (e.g., work, through friends, school), and 34.95% of all Americans who married in that time interval had met online.<sup>4</sup> Although Internet dating draws considerable public and research attention, meeting through online dating sites only represents a plurality of all online meetings in recent marriages.<sup>4</sup> Social networking sites (SNS), including Facebook and MySpace, were the second most common location of an online meeting (i.e., 20.87%), comparable to meeting through school offline (~7% overall).

Most individuals use SNS to maintain or deepen existing relationships, rather than to initiate new relationships.<sup>5</sup> SNS users often deny using SNS to identify potential romantic partners.<sup>5</sup> The self-reported use of SNS for dating purposes is

very low, although it is more common among men than women.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, SNS offer a low effort and discreet method of learning about potential romantic partners. Facebook makes relationship status and interest in partners transparent, and those features are both used as and perceived to be signs of openness to romance.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, SNS provide easy access to weak ties, or friends of friends.<sup>5</sup> Offline, both friends and weak ties play a critical role in romantic relationship development.<sup>8</sup>

Research suggests that the role of SNS in relationship initiation, much less marriage, should be relatively scarce or infrequent. Given increasing trends of SNS use<sup>9</sup> and the prevalence of recently married individuals meeting through SNS,<sup>4</sup> the present investigation provides greater descriptive focus on this emerging group. Very little is known about the characteristics of these individuals: "the networked relationship itself has not yet been examined and is a subject ripe for future research."<sup>10</sup> The present investigation compares individuals who met through SNS to individuals who met online in other ways, and compares SNS meetings to offline meetings in general and to offline meetings through friends.

## Methods

Data collection and sampling procedures of the data used in the present investigation are documented in Cacioppo et al.<sup>4</sup> Respondents were recruited through an online survey.

There were 19,131 respondents in the sample who had been married once between 2005 and 2012 and who were not currently engaged to another person. The weighting procedures of Harris Interactive were utilized in the present analyses. The survey instrument did not ask respondents to identify on which SNS they met, but provided three examples of SNS: Facebook, MySpace, and ClassMates. Cacioppo et al. report sample characteristics and the 14-item marital satisfaction measure used here. Prior to conducting analyses for the present investigation, some responses were eliminated. As in Cacioppo et al., widowed individuals were excluded ( $n=147$ ). Second, individuals whose age exceeded three standard deviations above the mean ( $>73$  years) were excluded ( $n=53$ ). Finally, a variable was calculated to determine age when married. Individuals who reported marrying younger than 17 years of age were excluded ( $n=321$ ). The present study's sample included 18,527 respondents.

## Results

Initial analyses sought to answer the question, what are the characteristics of individuals who met on SNS versus other online sites. The results of the logistic regression indicated that respondents were more likely to have met their spouse on SNS if they were younger, married more recently, and African American (Table 1). A logistic regression compared the likelihood of being divorced or separated based on online meeting location. Results indicated that controlling for demographic covariates (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity, region, education, income, and age), those who met on SNS were no more or less likely to be divorced or separated than those who met online otherwise.

Respondents who had met using SNS were then compared to respondents who met on three other online locations. There were existing categories for meeting on SNS ( $n=1,277$ ) and meeting through online dating ( $n=2,625$ ). Two other categories were collapsed: one-on-one Internet communication (i.e., e-mail, instant message, message on blog;  $n=500$ ) and online community (i.e., chatroom, discussion group, virtual world, multiplayer game, online community;  $n=1,564$ ). Subsequent analyses compared those who met through SNS with respondents meeting through the other three online locations.

The four categories were used in analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) analyses to distinguish further those who met using SNS from the other three online meeting places. Controlling for regression covariates, there was a significant difference between the four online sites for relationship satisfaction,  $F=17.95$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=0.008$ . Estimated marginal means showed that those who met using SNS ( $M=5.66$ ,  $SE=0.05$ ) were equally as satisfied in their marriages as both those who met through dating services ( $M=5.65$ ,  $SE=0.12$ ) and one-on-one communication ( $M=5.56$ ,  $SE=0.12$ ) and more satisfied than those who met through online communities ( $M=5.43$ ,  $SE=0.10$ ).

Controlling for all regression covariates, there was a significant difference between the four online categories for amount of time spent on the Internet in an average week,  $F=14.21$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=0.007$ . Estimated marginal means showed that those who met using SNS ( $M=26.43$ ,  $SE=0.49$ ) spent more time on the Internet than those using dating services ( $M=23.77$ ,  $SE=0.33$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), but the same amount of time as both those who met through one-on-one communication ( $M=23.90$ ,  $SE=0.77$ ) and those who met through online communities ( $M=26.94$ ,  $SE=0.44$ ).

TABLE 1. OLS LOGISTIC REGRESSIONS PREDICTING CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUALS WHO MET USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

	<i>Compared to other online meetings (N=6,429)</i>			<i>Compared to all offline meetings (N=13,428)</i>			<i>Compared to offline meetings through friends (N=3,644)</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Sex (female = 1)	-0.12	0.07	0.89	-0.51	0.06	0.60*	-0.51	0.08	0.60*
Race									
African American	0.48	0.12	1.62*	0.16	0.11	1.17	0.50	0.14	1.64*
Asian American	-0.07	0.20	0.93	-0.03	0.19	0.97	-0.03	0.23	0.97
Native American	0.29	0.48	1.33	0.75	0.42	2.12	0.66	0.53	1.94
Mixed race	-0.25	0.43	0.78	-0.08	0.40	0.93	0.23	0.50	1.25
Hispanic	0.08	0.08	1.08	0.64	0.07	1.90*	0.75	0.10	2.12*
Other	0.24	0.78	1.28	-0.39	0.70	0.68	-0.87	0.75	0.42
U.S. region									
East	-0.06	0.09	0.94	0.23	0.08	1.26	0.19	0.10	1.21
Midwest	-0.26	0.10	0.77	-0.11	0.09	0.90	-0.21	0.11	0.81
West	-0.20	0.08	0.82	0.13	0.08	1.14	0.14	0.10	1.15
Education	-0.04	0.02	0.96	0.00	0.02	1.00	0.03	0.02	1.03
Months ago married	-0.01	0.00	1.00*	-0.01	0.00	0.99*	-0.01	0.00	0.99*
Hours on Internet/wk	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.01	0.00	1.01*	0.01	0.00	1.01*
Income	-0.04	0.02	0.96	0.13	0.02	1.14*	0.13	0.02	1.14*
Age	-0.05	0.00	0.95*	-0.04	0.00	0.96*	-0.04	0.00	0.97*
Constant	1.45	0.22	4.26	-0.88	0.19	0.41	0.48	0.25	1.62
$R^2$			0.09			0.08			0.14

Note. \* $p<0.001$ ; referent white and U.S. South region.

There was a significant difference between the four online sites for how recently they married,  $F=10.18$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=0.005$ . Estimated marginal means showed that those who met using SNS ( $M=49.79$  months ago,  $SE=0.70$ ) had married more recently compared to those who met through one-on-one communication ( $M=54.77$ ,  $SE=1.10$ ) and those who met through online communities ( $M=54.50$ ,  $SE=0.62$ ), but were married as recently as those who met through an online dating service ( $M=52.07$ ,  $SE=0.47$ ).

There was a significant difference between the four online sites for respondent age,  $F=94.29$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2_p=0.044$ . Estimated marginal means showed that those who met using SNS were younger at time of data collection ( $M=34.36$ ,  $SE=0.28$ ) than those using dating services ( $M=40.11$ ,  $SE=0.19$ ), younger than those who met through one-on-one communication ( $M=38.15$ ,  $SE=0.46$ ), and younger than those who met through online communities ( $M=38.47$ ,  $SE=0.25$ ). Figure 1 illustrates the mean ages and percent of marriages by year for each online category.

*Compared to offline meeting*

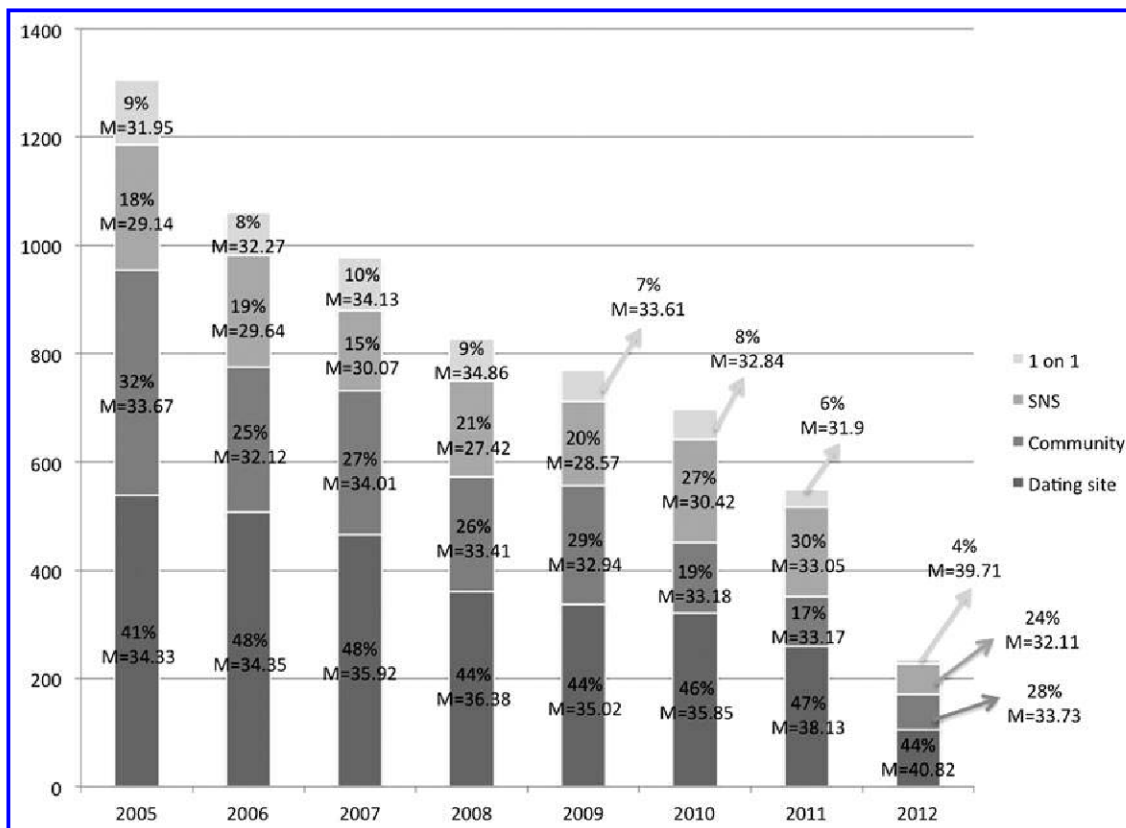
The next analyses answered the question of how individuals who met on SNS compared with those who meet offline. Logistic regression results indicated that respondents were more likely to have met on SNS compared to any offline location if they were male, younger, Hispanic (compared to white), used the Internet more often, had higher household income, and married more recently (Table

1). These results are very similar to those reported in Cacioppo et al.,<sup>4</sup> who found that online meetings were more common among males, Hispanics, and respondents with higher SES. A second logistic regression compared SNS meeting and offline meeting for marital satisfaction. Controlling for demographic covariates, those who met using SNS were more satisfied than those who met offline,  $B=0.21$ ,  $SE=0.036$ ,  $\beta=0.054$ ,  $t=5.95$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\Delta R^2=0.003$ . The final regression analysis compared those who met using SNS with those who met offline through friends because it is the most likely comparison point to SNS meetings among offline meeting places.<sup>10</sup> Those who met online through SNS were more likely to be younger, male, African American and Hispanic (compared to white), married more recently, and more frequent Internet users with a higher income (Table 1).

**Discussion**

Nearly 21% of Americans married between 2005 and 2012 who met online met through SNS, which represents nearly 7% of all possible online and offline meeting places combined.<sup>4</sup> The present study suggests that compared to other ways of meeting online, meeting through SNS presents no more of a risk of divorce or separation and is associated with equal or greater (i.e., online communities) marital satisfaction. What characteristics are more common among recently married individuals who met through SNS?

One of the more prevalent trends across all analyses is the relative youth of respondents who met through SNS. As a



**FIG. 1.** Mean age and percent of respondents in each online category by year.

group, they were younger than respondents who met through another online meeting place and younger than those who met offline in general and through friends offline specifically. Why are younger individuals using SNS to find marriage partners? One reason could be that young adults historically adopted SNS more quickly and used SNS more often than older adults.<sup>9</sup> From 2005 to 2012, Facebook grew dramatically and much of the early growth was due to the adoption of college students then adolescents and then young adults. Compared to older users, young Facebook users continue to have more expansive Facebook friendship networks and use Facebook more.<sup>9</sup> The adoption and use of Facebook (and MySpace in the early 2000s) greatly increased exposure to potential romantic partners for younger users, which increased the proximity of potential partners through weak ties.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Figure 1 suggests that the average age of individuals who met through SNS and then married increased from 2005 to 2012, while the overall proportion of those who met through SNS grew. If the characteristics of those who use SNS to meet partners is a function of the adoption and use of SNS, then as a greater proportion of Americans use and integrate SNS technologies into their daily lives, the age at marriage should increase as should the proportion who meet romantic partners through SNS. Indeed, individuals who met through SNS are more frequent Internet users compared to those who met through friends offline and those using Internet dating services. Very little is known about the trajectory of romantic relationship development through SNS,<sup>10</sup> but these data would suggest that it is a growing trend—that while currently characteristic of young individuals, it is increasingly characteristic of older individuals.

Compared to other online meeting places, individuals who met online through SNS were more likely to be African American than white. This demographic trend also appeared when comparing meeting online through SNS with meeting offline through friends. Why might this be? On average, African Americans tend to have smaller and more homogeneous social networks.<sup>11</sup> If African Americans are unable to meet people outside their immediate social network, or numerically lack social brokers who might introduce people outside the network, they may turn to SNS to meet potential romantic partners. Individuals who do not have existing social networks with suitable romantic partners often benefit from the reach afforded by online dating.<sup>1</sup> Given that SNS are a more common meeting place for African Americans (compared to whites) than any other online location, the reach, accessibility, and built-in weak tie networks of SNS offer similar advantages as online dating. Given the paucity of research on minorities and SNS use in general, particularly in the realm of romantic relationship development, more research is needed.

Although there was no sex difference between those who met through SNS and other online locations, there was a sex difference favoring men between those who met using SNS and those who met offline through friends. This offers some support for the finding that men use SNS for dating purposes more than women,<sup>6</sup> but only compared to meeting offline through friends. Although sexual orientation was not requested in the survey, gay men might use SNS more often for dating purposes, which also might explain the sex difference. Future work should explore

what characteristics of SNS or men influence this sex difference.

This descriptive report lays the foundation for future work comparing online and offline romantic encounters. Given the lack of focus on romantic meetings through SNS, this paper provides several directions for further exploration: the use of SNS by African Americans, the change in trends of using SNS for romance as older adults adopt SNS, and the sex difference in using SNS for dating compared to meeting through friends. Future work should pay careful attention to past and emergent trends in SNS use. A close comparison of individuals who met through SNS in 2005–6 compared to 2012–13 might draw attention to how the platforms themselves and use of those platforms have changed. With an eye toward emergent trends in SNS use, particularly in regard to romantic encounters, future work should seek a detailed and theoretically grounded context to understand this phenomenon.

### Acknowledgments

Harris Interactive was commissioned by eHarmony.com to perform a nationally representative survey of Americans married between 2005 and 2012, and eHarmony.com provided the data for others to use. Initial analyses published: Cacioppo JT, Cacioppo S, Gonzaga GC, Ogburn EL, VanderWeele TJ. Satisfaction and break-ups differ across on-line and off-line meeting venues. *Psychological and Cognitive Sciences* 2012; 110:10135–10140. doi:10.1073/pnas.1222447110. Thanks to Dr. Steve Carter for assistance and support.

### Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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**This article has been cited by:**

1. Fox Jesse, Anderegg Courtney. 2014. Romantic Relationship Stages and Social Networking Sites: Uncertainty Reduction Strategies and Perceived Relational Norms on Facebook. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 17:11, 685-691. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text HTML](#)] [[Full Text PDF](#)] [[Full Text PDF with Links](#)]