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Steve Chern/Corbis

Love is on the Web, Everywhere you Click Around...

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By Faith Pennick

The Internet era has brought a new convenience and immediacy to our working and social lives. Email and instant messaging keep us in contact with friends and loved ones. The ability to capture media such as photos, videos and music and disseminate them via the Internet has revolutionized both journalism and the arts. So it was only a matter of time before those in the mood for love could go online to get their groove on.

Online dating isn't new. Mainstream web portals such as Yahoo have long had their own "personal" sites, where members post profiles of themselves — basically electronic personal ads — and request responses from those who meet certain criteria (race, age, smoking status, religion, etc.). Other sites, like Match.com, are tailored specifically to those in the dating scene.

As African Americans have grown more web-savvy, forums have emerged catering to black singles, couples in open relationships and straight-up freaky deaks seeking to expand their black book entries. It's not always about "hittin' it." Many people use the web to meet new, platonic friends. This new personals scene online may make it easier for black people — particularly those who are bashful — to pinpoint potential partners, or at least kindred spirits.

Take Olivia, for example (not her real name). The 33-year-old single woman says it's not easy to meet what she refers to as "quality" black men in her hometown, New York City. It's been nine months since she seriously dated anyone, and she acknowledges that she's looking to make a permanent love connection. Her most recent major relationship grew out of chatting with a brother on AOL, and lasted about a year and a half.

Although she finds it tough meeting worthy brothers in the circles she frequents, Olivia says that the online pickings are about the same as the guys she meets around the way. "The pool of potential mates is not very wide," Olivia says. She describes the choices as more concentrated in availability, but less selective in quality — quality people being, in her words, those "serious about life, about connecting with people in a meaningful way. Not just flirtation, not just a rendezvous. But not just in a romantic way, either. Some serious, meaningful dialogue."

Nancy Wallace, 31, also wants a meaningful, ongoing relationship, but says she does not shy away from encounters that are purely physical. "Being fairly casual about sex, it tends to skew [mate selection] a little," Wallace says. "If the opportunity for something interesting happens, and I know that it's not going to be long-term, I won't necessarily turn it down."

Wallace, a computer application support executive from Massachusetts, has charted the online waters for a decade, beginning when only a handful of African Americans could be found on the Internet. The number of African Americans online is growing, according to reports from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, which details the rise from 23% African Americans online in 1998 to 36% in 2000 (compared to 50% of whites); those same studies, however, point out a growing online gender gap — black women are far more likely to use the Internet than black men. The numbers bear out Wallace's belief that more color is needed online, especially if your ideal mate is a black man.

Mutual interests are paramount in bringing people together online, and in cyberspace you can discover them instantaneously. Olivia says she took the initiative in contacting her current love interest because of a shared affection for the alt-rock/soul group Fishbone expressed on his

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