

BlackPlanet.com page. Another sister, Angela, 36, says she also looks for similar interests in African American men (and men of other races), such as travel and affinities for Caribbean and salsa music.

Angela (not her real name), a divorced computer professional who lives in upstate New York, says meeting people online is actually a double-edged sword. "I think it's harder initially," she says. "It takes more time to know the person. But you hone in on someone with things in common."

Mario Lee disagrees. He says it's easier to meet people via the Internet. A Bay Area resident who works for an investment software firm, Lee has been socializing online for four years. "At first, it was 'This is a nice way to pick up some dates,'" says Lee, 37. Now he claims that he does not actively pursue dates online, but wants to "find someone interesting to talk to."

Angela says she's met and dated about six of the men she's interacted with in the year and a half she's actively been online as a single woman. The one long-term relationship she had as a result of an Internet-borne friendship — with a Latino man she met on an African American dating site—recently ended. Angela says there are enough African Americans online to find that special someone, but adds a caveat: "You might have to do a little bit of searching. Then, you have to find out who's sincere, who's keeping it real."

So, what's the verdict on African Americans and online dating? These individuals have obviously embraced it as a viable option to find friendship as well as true love. All said that they have never encountered any type of violence or inappropriate behavior from the people they've met face-to-face. There is the downside, however, of false identity. In a medium in which a person can put forth a new persona and lie about looks, age, occupation — even gender — cyberdating is as much about sorting out the poseurs from the truthful as it is picking out princes (and princesses) among the frogs.

"People feel compelled to be less than what they truly are," Olivia says, "and more than what they truly are. You can't get a true sense of a person online until you meet them." Lee also expressed disdain for those women who aren't exactly forthcoming about their relationship status, resulting in Springer-like spats online with jealous lovers. "A lot of ladies have problems — husband problems, boyfriend problems — a lot of drama."

Some still feel there's a stigma attached to hooking up with paramours through the Internet, particularly for men. "No man wants to admit to meeting a girl online," says Lee. "People will think he can't go down to the club or to the bar and meet a girl...it makes it look like he has no game."

But the search for love continues — online and offline — and the Internet seems to have established itself as another opportunity for African Americans to find friendship and, many hope, their soulmates. "I've met a lot of people that I otherwise would not have met," Wallace says. "I still think of myself as fairly shy. I'm much more willing to put myself out there online."

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