Match Group

THE Spark STUDY

The Spark Study

A study of modern connection in Britain



It has never been easier for singles to communicate with other people online, **and never harder to truly connect with them in person.**



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Key findings

Never talked so much, but never met so rarely.
Singles spend 4.7 hours a week socialising through a screen, yet 32% met nobody new in person last month and 52% neither asked anyone out last year nor were asked out themselves. 32% often or always feel lonely.

Dating apps are producing relationships.
56% of app users have had a relationship with someone they met on an app, and 77% have dated someone they met on one. 56% of all singles say deleting the app because it worked is the modern happy ending.

The old places to meet someone have lost their pull.
21% of Boomers met their most recent partner at the pub, compared to only 4% of Gen Z. Dating apps and friends are now the joint most common way to meet a partner (20% each), and 31% of recent relationships began online.

Younger singles are dating with most intention.
Millennials (52%) and Gen Z (49%) are the generations most likely to want a life partner or a long-term relationship, against 14% of Boomers. Only 8% of Gen Z want something casual.

Trust and safety come first when dating.
67% of women worry about their safety before a first date, compared to only 31% of men. Before meeting someone from an app, most women tell someone their plans (68%), meet somewhere public (61%) or share their live location (52%).

Singles are turning to AI for dating support, but still want full control.
39% of singles, and 66% of Gen Z, have used AI as a sounding board in their dating life. However, 66% say letting AI hold their conversations for them is unacceptable.

Never talked so much, but never met so rarely

32%

met nobody new in person last month

HOURS A WEEK SOCIALISING



52% neither asked anyone out last year nor were asked. 32% often or always feel lonely.

Dating apps are producing relationships

56%

of app users have had a relationship with someone they met on an app

APP USERS WHO HAVE



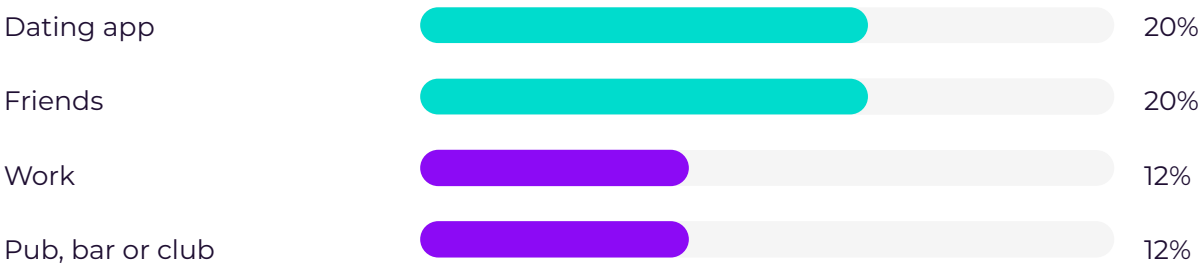
56% of all singles say deleting the app because it worked is the modern happy ending.

The old places to meet someone have lost their pull

4%

of Gen Z met their most recent partner at the pub, against 21% of Boomers

WHERE SINGLES MET THEIR MOST RECENT PARTNER



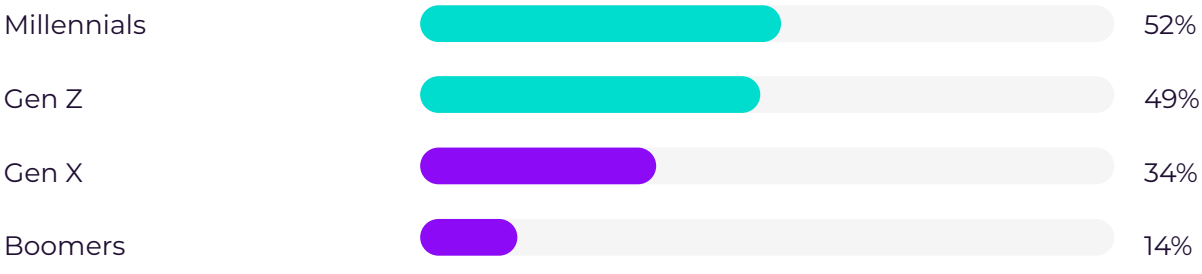
Dating apps and friends are now the joint most common way to meet a partner (20% each), and 31% of recent relationships began online.

Younger singles are dating with most intention

52%

of Millennials want a life partner or a long-term relationship

LOOKING FOR SOMETHING SERIOUS



Only 8% of Gen Z want something casual, and just 9% are not looking for anything at all.

Trust and safety come first when dating

67%

of women worry about their safety before a first date

WORRY ABOUT PERSONAL SAFETY



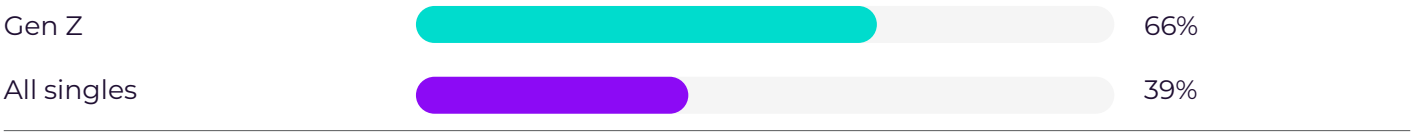
Before a first date from an app, 68% of women tell someone their plans, 61% meet somewhere public and 52% share their live location.

Singles are turning to AI for dating support, but still want full control

39%

of singles have used AI as a sounding board in their dating life

HAVE USED AI WHEN DATING



However, 66% say letting AI hold their conversations for them is unacceptable.

Dr Veronica Lamarche,
Senior Lecturer,
University of Essex

There is a clear disconnect between the amount of time and energy people are spending socialising online, and their ability to successfully turn these online connections into meaningful relationships in person."

The study in twelve numbers

Never easier for singles to communicate, never harder to truly connect

47%
agree it has never been harder to really connect with people, both online and in person.

32%
always or often feel lonely. This rises to 40% of Gen Z.

52%
neither asked anyone out in person in the past year, nor were asked out themselves.

4%
of Gen Z met their most recent partner in a pub, bar or club. Among Boomers it is 21%.

Singles are dating with intention, and on their own terms

49%
of Gen Z are looking for a life partner or a long-term relationship, compared to 34% of Gen X and only 14% of Boomers.

43%
would build their ideal first date around a coffee. Only 19% want it to involve alcohol.

~3
is the average number of safety precautions a woman takes before a first date from an app, most often telling someone her plans, meeting somewhere public and sharing live location.

68%
think the dating apps that succeed in the future will be the ones with the best safety features.

What gets people from talking to meeting

39%
of singles have used AI in their dating life. This rises to 66% of Gen Z.

£104
is what singles report a first date costs them all in (the date itself, clothes, grooming and travel). £38 of this is spent on the date itself. Millennials spend the most at £118 and Gen X £111.

77%
of dating app users have dated or been in a relationship with someone they met on an app.

56%
of dating app users have had a relationship with someone they met on an app.

From 3,007 single adults (18+) across the UK, surveyed between 28 August and 1 September 2026.

Singles have never found it easier to talk to other people, or harder to truly connect with them

Single adults in Britain are more reachable than any generation before them, and yet they find it more difficult to meet new people than previous generations. The average single has 31 contacts on their phone they could arrange to see and spends close to five hours a week (4.7 hours) socialising through a screen. In a typical month, a third of them (32%) meet nobody new face to face at all, and more than half (52%) did not make any romantic approaches in person over the past year, nor received any. The places where people used to meet have simply fallen out of use. Only 12% of singles met their most recent partner in a pub, bar or club, and among Gen Z (the under-30s) it is just 4%.

Almost half of singles (46%) agree it has never been easier to communicate with someone than it is now, and only 21% disagree. A similar share (47%) agree it has never been harder to really connect with people, with only 20% disagreeing. Not everyone sees it this way, but those who do outnumber those who do not by more than two to one.

Singles are not giving up on romance, they are changing how they look for it.
This report follows that change in three parts.

> **Part One** measures the gap between talking and meeting. It looks at how much of social life now happens through a screen, how few new people singles actually meet, and what has happened to the places where relationships used to start.

> **Part Two** looks at what singles are searching for instead, and shows that young singles are most likely to be looking for something serious. It also sets out what singles, and women in particular, say they need in order to trust someone and feel safe meeting them.

> **Part Three** looks at what helps people get from talking to meeting. It covers how singles use AI to prepare for a date rather than to do the talking for them, how bringing a friend along takes the pressure off a first meeting, and the role of apps in modern dating.

How to read this report

All figures come from an online survey of 3,007 single adults aged 18 and over across the UK, weighted to the known profile of single adults by age, gender and region. Where a question was put only to a subgroup, for example people who have used a dating app or singles who are dating or open to dating, the base is stated in the text or beneath the table.

Generations were fixed in advance. Gen Z are aged 18 to 29, Millennials 30 to 44, Gen X 45 to 60 and Boomers 61 and over.

Money and time figures are averages derived from banded answers and should be read as indicative. Percentages are rounded, so components may not add exactly to the totals shown. The full method statement is published in the methodology of this report.

The gap

Singles are talking more but meeting less as social lives have moved online and the places that used to bring people together have fallen out of use.



The state of connection

Britain's singles spend almost as much time socialising online as they do in person, and a third of them did not meet a single new person last month.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Singles spend 4.7 hours a week socialising through a screen and 5.3 hours in person. Gen Z spend more time socialising online (7.1 hours) than in person (6.8).
- A third of singles (32%) met nobody new in person last month. In rural areas it is 40%, and among Boomers 49%.
- 32% feel lonely always or often. Among Gen Z it is 40% and among Millennials 39%, against 18% of Boomers.
- Half (50%) have plenty of people to talk to, but 41% do not feel deeply connected to anyone. 61% want more of their social life to happen face to face.

Reachable all day

A single adult in Britain now spends almost as much of their social life on a screen as in a room. They put 4.7 hours a week into messaging, video calls, group chats and gaming with other people, against 5.3 hours socialising in person. Among the under-45s the order has already reversed. Gen Z spend 7.1 hours a week socialising online and 6.8 meeting people in person, and Millennials 5.7 hours a week socialising online against 5.1 hours in person. In contrast, Gen X and Boomers still spend more of their time in a room. Boomers average 2.2 hours a week online and 4.6 in person.

Among all singles, 43% agree that most of their social life now happens through a screen. The figure rises to 52% of Gen Z and 55% of Millennials before falling to 24% of Boomers. More than a third (37%) regularly message people socially whom they never meet, and among Gen Z this rises to almost half (47%). What the screen has produced is a long contact list rather than a deep one. The average single could arrange to meet 31 of the people on their phone, although four in ten could only meet ten or fewer.

7.1 hrs

a week Gen Z spend socialising online, against 6.8 hours in person

43%

agree most of their social life now happens through a screen; 55% of Millennials

31

contacts the average single could arrange to meet; four in ten have ten or fewer

Meeting almost nobody new

For all those contacts, singles tend to meet very few new people in person. A third (32%) met and spoke to nobody new last month, not counting colleagues or the people who served them in places like shops and cafés. Older singles are more likely than younger ones to have met nobody new. While only 17% of Gen Z met nobody new, this rises to almost half (49%) of Boomers. Meeting new people is also easier in cities. 40% of singles in villages and rural areas met nobody new last month, compared with only 28% of those living in cities.

The problem is not that the new people singles meet are unpromising. It is that so few new people come along in the first place. When singles do meet new people, it often leads somewhere. Of those who met someone new last month, 44% met at least one person they would like to date. Among Gen Z and Millennials the figure was 55%.

Lonely, with plenty of people to talk to

Almost a third of singles (32%) say they often or always feel lonely. Loneliness is especially high among younger singles. 40% of Gen Z and 39% of Millennials often or always feel lonely, compared with 30% of Gen X and 18% of Boomers. Among all singles, 35% say they often feel they lack companionship (rising to 47% of Millennials), 30% often feel left out and 32% often feel isolated from others. LGBTQ+ singles feel this most. 42% say they often lack companionship, 43% often feel left out and 42% often feel isolated.

Half of Britain's singles have plenty of people to talk to, but four in ten do not feel deeply connected to anyone.

Loneliness is not caused by a lack of people to talk to. Half of singles (50%) agree they have plenty of people in their life to communicate with, but four in ten (41%) also agree they do not tend to feel deeply connected to anyone. Taken together, these two figures tell the same story. Singles have company but not closeness, and they know that more in person interactions would help. Six in ten (61%) would like more of their social life to happen face to face, rising to 68% of Millennials and 64% of Gen Z.

Dr Jaime Garcia Iglesias,
Chancellor's Fellow,
University of Edinburgh

Loneliness is not simply an individual problem. These findings show how deeply it is woven into contemporary social life, reflecting wider changes in how we work, socialise and relate to one another. Responding to it therefore requires collective, not just individual, solutions."

32%

of singles feel lonely always or often; 40% of Gen Z and 18% of Boomers

32%

met nobody new in person last month; 40% of rural singles

61%

would like more of their social life to happen face to face; 9% would not

What the platforms can do

More than half of singles (55%) now say dating apps are simply how single people meet, in the way the pub was for earlier generations. At the same time, six in ten want more of their social life to happen face to face. An app that only leads to more chatting makes the first of those things true without helping with the second. What this generation wants is an app that leads to real meetings, and the rest of this report is about what those meetings now need.



The new front door

Dating apps and friends are now the joint most common way for singles to meet a new partner. Where a fifth of Boomers met their most recent partner in the pub, this was the case for just 4% of Gen Z.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Dating apps (20%) and friends (20%) are tied as the most common way singles met their most recent partner, ahead of work (12%) and the pub (12%).
- The pub produced 21% of Boomers' most recent partners and 4% of Gen Z's. For Gen Z, social media (16%) now beats the pub four to one.
- 78% say asking someone out in a pub is acceptable, but only 22% asked anyone out in person last year and 52% neither asked nor were asked. The most common reasons are fear of rejection (40%) and lack of confidence (39%).
- Given the choice, 52% would prefer to meet their next partner in person and 12% online. Only 7% would choose an app, yet 20% met their most recent partner on one.

Where singles met their recent partners

Dating apps and friends are now joint first as the way singles met their most recent partner, at 20% each. Work (12%) and the pub, bar or club (12%) come next, followed by social media (10%) and school, college or university (9%). The rest are small. Family introductions account for 4% of relationships, a chance meeting in public for 4% and a hobby, sport or class for 3%.

Put the apps together with social media and online communities and the picture is clear. Nearly a third (31%) of the most recent relationships among Britain's singles began online.

The older ways of meeting someone are fading with each generation. The pub produced 21% of Boomers' most recent partners, but only 15% of Gen X's, 7% of Millennials' and 4% of Gen Z's. The workplace follows the same path, from 17% among Boomers down to 9% among Gen Z.

For younger singles, the apps have taken the place of the pub and the workplace. 27% of Millennials met their most recent partner on an app, well ahead of friends (21%), work (11%) and the pub (7%). Gen Z singles met their most recent partner at school, college or university (19%), through friends (18%), on an app (17%) or through social media (16%), with the pub accounting for just 4%. For this generation, an introduction to a new partner now comes through social media four times as often as across a bar.

How singles met their most recent partner (%)

	All	Gen Z (18-29)	Millennials (30-44)	Gen X (45-60)	Boomers (61+)
On a dating app	20	17	27	23	13
Through friends	20	18	21	22	18
At work	12	9	11	12	17
At a pub, bar or club	12	4	7	15	21
Through social media	10	16	13	8	4
At school, college or university	9	19	6	3	4
Through family	4	6	3	3	5
Out in public	4	3	3	5	5
Through a hobby, sport or exercise	3	3	3	4	4

Base: singles who have had a romantic relationship. Categories under 3% not shown.

Dr Jaime Garcia Iglesias,
Chancellor's Fellow,
University of Edinburgh

Where people meet partners has changed markedly across generations: the pub and the workplace have declined, while social media has become increasingly important. Dating apps show a more complex pattern, peaking among Millennials and playing a somewhat smaller role for Gen Z. These shifts are not simply about personal preference; they reflect changing social worlds and the opportunities people actually have to meet one another."

Asking someone out is still acceptable

The old ways of meeting people have not declined because asking someone out became culturally unacceptable. 83% of singles think it is fine to ask out a friend of a friend at a social occasion, 78% someone in a pub or bar, and 69% someone at the gym. Asking out a colleague divides people more, with 63% saying it is acceptable and 27% saying it is not. Sending a direct message to someone on social media is acceptable to 61% of singles, and to 70% of Gen Z but only 44% of Boomers. The one place where more singles say asking someone out is not acceptable is the street. 41% think it is acceptable to ask out a stranger in the street or on public transport and 49% do not, although Gen Z are more relaxed about it (49%) than Boomers (24%) or singles living in rural areas (30%).

But actually asking someone out in person is increasingly rare

People still think it's acceptable to ask someone out in person, but they do not do it very often. Nearly eight in ten singles (78%) say it is fine to ask someone out in a pub, yet only 12% of relationships began in one. Over the last twelve months, only 22% of singles asked anyone out in person at all. Men were twice as likely as women to have done so (31% against 15%), while women were more likely to have been asked (33% against 21%). Gen Z were the most active, with 34% having asked someone out and 43% having been asked. Only 28% of Gen Z had done neither, compared with 82% of Boomers. Where people live makes a difference too. 28% of city singles asked someone out in person last year, but only 13% of rural singles did.

When singles explain what holds them back, the reasons are personal rather than anything to do with how dating works these days. Among those who are dating or open to it, fear of rejection and a lack of confidence come top. A quarter (26%) say asking someone out is a skill they have lost, rising to a third of Gen X (33%) and Boomers (32%). Only 13% say it is simply not how dating works any more, and just 6% say nothing stops them.

What stops singles asking someone out in person (%)

	All	Women	Men	Gen Z (18-29)
Fear of rejection	40	45	35	40
Lack of confidence or shyness	39	44	33	37
Worry about misreading the situation or signals	33	34	33	32
I rarely meet anyone new I'd want to ask	30	33	27	25
Worry it would come across as inappropriate or creepy	29	26	33	29
I'm out of practice; it feels like a lost skill	26	27	25	18
I'd rather get to know someone online or by message first	17	16	17	19
It's just not how dating works any more	13	14	11	14
Nothing stops me	6	4	8	4

Base: singles dating casually or open to dating. Respondents could select more than one.

22%

asked someone out in person in the past year; 31% of men and 15% of women

82%

of Boomers neither asked nor were asked in person; 28% of Gen Z

26%

say asking someone out is a lost skill they are out of practice at

What the platforms can do

Dating apps did not cause the decline of pub meetings, but they have taken over much of its old job of bringing people together. The data shows what singles want from them now. More than half (52%) would rather meet someone through a shared activity, through a friend or by chance, and many (39%) say a lack of confidence stops them acting when the chance comes. So there is a clear opening for apps that help people get from the screen into the room, whether through events, group formats or first dates built around an activity. That is what singles say they want.



The rebuild

What singles are doing instead. Searching seriously for something that lasts, and setting new rules for trust and safety, with women leading the way.



The intentional generations

Gen Z and Millennials are Britain's most commitment-minded singles

KEY FINDINGS:

- Millennials (52%) and Gen Z (49%) are the generations most likely to be looking for a life partner or a long-term relationship, well ahead of Gen X (34%) and Boomers (14%). Only 8% of Gen Z want something casual.
- Gen Z are the least likely to drink on a first date. A third of Gen Z who have been on a first date recently (33%) say all or most involved alcohol, against 45% of Gen X. Gen Z are also the only generation whose ideal first date is as likely to be a walk (31%) or an activity such as mini golf (30%) as a coffee (29%) or drinks (29%).
- Wanting something serious does not rule out casual encounters. 36% of Gen Z and 36% of Millennials had a hook-up or one-night stand in the last year, against 20% of Gen X and 9% of Boomers.
- App users typically chat for around 12 days and 47 messages before meeting, and 63% would rather take their time and build trust first. Gen Z are the most thorough checkers. Only 2% of Gen Z app users do no checks on a match before meeting, against 8% of app users overall.

What people are looking for

Asked what they are looking for right now, more singles want something serious than anything else. 37% are looking for either a life partner, marriage or something like it (17%) or a long-term relationship (20%). Another 23% are open to something serious or something casual. Only 6% want something casual or short-term, 9% want company and new friends rather than romance, and 21% are not looking for anything at all.

Younger singles are the most likely to want something serious. Half of Gen Z (49%) and half of Millennials (52%) are looking for a life partner or a long-term relationship, well ahead of Gen X (34%) and Boomers (14%). A quarter of Gen Z (24%) and 27% of Millennials want a life partner, marriage or something like it, more than either older generation. Just 8% of Gen Z want something casual, and only 9% are not looking for anything, compared with 41% of Boomers.

Gen Z are also the most active. Half say their most recent relationship began within the last year, and as Chapter 2 showed, they are the generation most likely to have asked someone out in person or been asked. The bigger differences are between men and women, and between cities and rural areas. Women are more likely than men to want a serious relationship (40% against 33%), while men are three times as likely to want something casual (9% against 3%) and more likely to be open either way. Rural singles are the least likely to want something serious (30%) and twice as likely as city singles to want company rather than romance.

What singles are looking for right now (%)

	All	Gen Z (18-29)	Millennials (30-44)	Gen X (45-60)	Boomers (61+)
A life partner, marriage or something like it	17	24	27	14	5
A long-term relationship	20	25	25	20	9
Open to either serious or casual	23	24	19	25	22
Something casual or short-term	6	8	5	6	4
Nothing romantic: friends, fun, company	9	6	5	9	17
Not looking for anything right now	21	9	14	21	41

Base: all singles. Don't know (4%) not shown.

Singles in the generations with the biggest reputation for dating casually are the most likely to be looking for a life partner.

The sober first date

Most first dates now involve little or no alcohol. Among singles who have been on a first date in the last couple of years, 37% say all or most of those dates involved alcohol, while 47% say few or none did, and a quarter (25%) say none at all. Gen Z are the least likely to have had alcohol on all or most of their first dates (33%) and Gen X the most (45%). Women are more likely than men to have had first dates without alcohol (51% say few or none, against 44% of men).

This is by choice. Asked whether they would want alcohol on their ideal first date, only 19% would prefer drinks. 46% would be happy either way and 29% would rather not, rising to 33% of women. Asked what their ideal first date would be built around, singles put a coffee (43%) ahead of a walk (37%), drinks (36%) and a meal (34%). Gen Z see it differently. For them a walk (31%), an activity such as mini golf or bowling (30%), a coffee (29%) and drinks (29%) are all about as popular as each other, and one in five (21%) would choose something at home such as cooking together, compared with just 8% of Gen X. Boomers are the most likely to choose a coffee (61%), and outside the cities a coffee (52%) and a walk (44%) are well ahead of everything else.

49%

of Gen Z want a life partner or long-term relationship; 8% want something casual

47%

of recent first dates involved little or no alcohol; a quarter involved none

19%

would prefer their ideal first date to involve drinks; 29% would rather it did not

Intention and the casual encounter

Wanting something serious has not stopped people having casual encounters, and among Gen Z and Millennials the two go hand in hand. A quarter of singles (26%) had a hook-up or one-night stand in the last twelve months. Among Gen Z and Millennials it was 36%, compared with 20% of Gen X and 9% of Boomers, and men (32%) were more likely than women (20%) to have had one. So the generations most likely to want a life partner are also the most likely to have had a casual encounter in the past year. Young people still have casual encounters. What is striking is that they are also looking for something serious at the same time.

Dr Jaime Garcia Iglesias,
Chancellor's Fellow,
University of Edinburgh

Casual encounters and long-term intentions are not necessarily contradictory. These data suggest that people can pursue different forms of intimacy at the same time, each serving different social and emotional purposes. We know from research, particularly with gay men, that casual intimacy can provide companionship, connection and opportunities to explore relationships alongside, rather than instead of, the search for something long term."

Vetting before meeting

It is also notable how much checking singles now do before meeting someone for the first time. People who use or have used a dating app typically chat for around twelve days and exchange around 47 messages before they agree to meet in person. Women take longer than men, at 14 days and 53 messages compared with 10 days and 39. Given the choice, 63% of app users would rather take their time and build trust first, rising to 68% of women. The 37% who would rather meet quickly, on the basis that you only really know someone in person, are more likely to be men (44%) and Gen Z (44%).

People also check up on a match while they are chatting. Before a first meeting, half of app users (48%) look at the other person's social media, more than a third (38%) check that the photos really are them, and three in ten (30%) look for a verified badge or search for the person's name online. Only 8% do none of these things, and among Gen Z just 2%. Women do more checks than men, 2.7 on average compared with 2.1, and are much more likely to look at someone's social media or search for their name.

What app users do before meeting someone for the first time (%)

	All	Women	Men	Gen Z (18-29)
Check their social media profiles	48	56	39	50
Check their photos are really them	38	41	35	37
Have a video call with them	32	34	30	35
Search for their name online	30	38	21	25
Check whether their profile has a verified badge	30	31	28	26
Exchange voice notes to hear their voice	27	28	26	30
Ask mutual friends or connections about them	19	24	15	21
Look up their job or their LinkedIn profile	16	19	12	19
None of these	8	5	11	2

Base: dating app users who meet people from apps. Respondents could select more than one.

What turns a chat into a date

Asked what the chats that led to a meeting had in common, app users said it was more about the conversation than the profile. Finding things in common (43%), attractive photos (41%), making each other laugh (39%), being asked genuine questions (38%) and quick replies (34%) were the most common answers. Seeming genuine matters more than a polished profile. Photos that looked recent and real (32%) mattered almost twice as much as a well-written bio (17%), and a fifth (22%) say a verified profile was part of it. Gen Z are the most likely to say the conversations that worked involved voice notes (20%) or an early plan to meet (19%).

What the platforms can do

Singles who want something serious are not looking for as many matches as possible. They respond to honest photos, verified profiles and a firm plan to meet, and an app should focus on promoting all three. Features such as voice notes, Face Check, Signals, Friend's Take, Date Ideas, Your Turn Limits and Match Note on Hinge, and the Music and Astrology modes on Tinder, help people find things in common and agree a plan to meet.

Dr Jaime Garcia Iglesias,
Chancellor's Fellow,
University of Edinburgh

These preferences show that attraction is not just about image or personality. People combine visual cues with much harder-to-capture qualities that emerge through interaction. Images translate easily into an app interface; personality and affective connection do not. Dating apps therefore have to negotiate a persistent tension between what can be communicated instantly through a profile and what can only really emerge through conversation and interaction."

The new rules of trust and safety

To stay safe on dates, singles meet somewhere public, tell a friend or family member their plans, and share their live location during the date.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The biggest worry for men before a date is whether they will like the person (57%). For women, it is whether the person has been honest about who they are (73%).
- 67% of women worry about their personal safety before a first date, compared to 31% of men. 41% of women have previously felt unsafe on a date.
- For 62% of women, safety always or often decides where, when and whether they meet someone. 23% of men say it never crosses their mind.
- Women take an average of 3 separate precautions before a date with someone from an app. 68% of women tell someone their plans and 52% share their live location.
- 68% think that the most successful dating apps in the future will be the ones with the best safety features.



Common dating concerns

Before a first date, what plays on the mind: % saying a lot or a fair amount

	Women	Men	Gap
Whether they have been honest about who they are	73	50	+23
Whether I'll like them	71	57	+14
Whether they've been honest about what they're looking for	71	50	+21
What I'll wear and how I look	70	49	+21
Whether they will find me attractive	67	53	+14
My personal safety during the date	67	31	+36
How awkward the date might be	63	47	+16
How I'll get home safely	60	29	+31
The possibility of being rejected	59	48	+11
Whether I can trust the app itself to protect me	59	37	+22
My privacy, and how much they could find out about me	55	37	+18
The risk of being scammed, or that they are after money	51	38	+13
How much the date is going to cost	43	35	+8

Base: singles dating casually or open to dating. Ordered by women's answers.

Women worry more than men about every one of these things, and their biggest worries are different. Men worry most about whether they will like the person and whether the person will find them attractive. Women worry most about whether the person has been honest and whether they will be safe.

Men worry most about chemistry. Women worry most about honesty, and twice as much as men about their safety (67% vs. 31%).

Dr Veronica Lamarche,
Senior Lecturer,
University of Essex

Women do a lot of 'safety work' preparing for first dates, and also worry a lot more than men about their first date experiences – from whether their personal safety is at risk, to whether they will like their date, and whether their date will find them attractive."

The experience gap

These worries are rooted in experience. Two in five women (41%) have felt unsafe when meeting someone new for a date, compared with 29% of men. Younger singles have felt it most. More than half of Gen Z (53%) have felt unsafe on a date, and the figure falls with each generation, to 44% of Millennials, 29% of Gen X and 13% of Boomers. LGBTQ+ singles are also more likely to have felt unsafe than straight singles (47% against 34%).

Whatever their experience, these worries take a toll on the date itself. Two thirds of singles (67%) say they make it harder to relax and be themselves, and while women feel this more (72%), most men do too (61%). Men are, though, more likely to say the worries make no real difference to them (31% against 21% of women).

For women, safety often decides whether a date happens at all. 62% say it always or often shapes where, when or whether they meet someone, compared with 25% of men. In contrast, close to one in four men (23%) say safety never crosses their mind, while only 5% of women say the same.

67%

of women worry about their personal safety before a first date; 31% of men

41%

of women have felt unsafe meeting someone new for a date; 53% of Gen Z

38%

of women say safety shapes every decision about a date; 23% of men say it never crosses their mind

Safety precautions

Before meeting someone from an app, what they do to feel comfortable (%)

	Women	Men	Gap
Tell a friend or family member my plans	68	34	+34
Arrange to meet somewhere public	61	45	+16
Share my live location with someone during the date	52	22	+30
Plan how I will get there and home again	41	23	+18
Arrange for someone to check in during or after the date	40	21	+19
Suggest something low-key, such as a coffee or a walk	33	24	+9
Have a video or voice call beforehand	19	16	+3
None of these	1	12	-11

Base: dating app users who meet people from apps.

Women say they learned how to protect themselves and spot warning signs from their own experience (34%), from friends (33%), from family (27%) and from news stories and documentaries (27%). Men mostly point to their own experience (31%) and instinct (29%). Gen Z are the first generation to learn about safety from creators they follow on social media (23%) and at school or work (13%).

LGBTQ+ singles

LGBTQ+ singles are more likely than straight singles to have run into safety problems while dating. Almost half (47%) have felt unsafe meeting someone new for a date, compared with 34% of straight singles. They also take more care before a date with someone from an app, and are more likely to meet in a public place (60% against 52%), tell someone their plans (57% against 52%) and share their live location (42% against 37%). At the same time, they use dating apps more than anyone else. 27% met their most recent partner on one, compared with 19% of straight singles, and they are just as likely to be looking for something serious (38% for both).

The bridges

What helps singles get from talking to meeting.



AI as a sounding board

Two in five singles have used AI in their dating life

KEY FINDINGS:

- 39% of singles have used AI in their dating life, including 66% of Gen Z, 53% of Millennials and 7% of Boomers. The most common uses are getting advice about a match, planning dates, practising what to say and building confidence.
- 49% say using AI to check someone is who they say they are is acceptable. 66% say letting AI hold conversations for you is unacceptable, and 62% say the same about altering photos.
- 9% have used AI to write messages, but 35% would end things if they found out a match had done so.
- 39% agree AI could make dating more comfortable and trustworthy and 25% disagree. Gen Z and Millennials are the most convinced.

Who is using AI in their dating lives, and what are they using it for?

Two in five singles (39%) have used an AI tool such as ChatGPT, Claude or Gemini, or AI features built into other apps, for something in their dating life. This rises to two thirds of Gen Z singles (66%), compared to 27% of Gen X and 7% of Boomers. City singles (47%) are far more likely to have done so than rural singles (27%). People use AI for a range of different tasks. Getting advice about someone they are talking to (11%), planning date ideas (11%), practising what to say (10%) and building confidence before a date (10%) are each used by around one in ten singles.

Among Gen Z the numbers are higher, with almost one in five having used AI for advice about a match, to plan a date or to build confidence before one (all 18%).

What singles have used AI for in their dating life (%)

	All	Gen Z (18-29)	Millennials (30-44)	Boomers (61+)
Getting advice about someone I'm talking to	11	18	16	1
Planning date ideas	11	18	16	2
Practising conversations, or what to say	10	17	12	2
Building my confidence before a date	10	18	14	2
Improving or writing my dating profile	9	13	13	1
Choosing which photos to use	9	16	13	1
Writing or polishing messages	9	15	12	1
Checking whether someone's photos or profile seem genuine	9	13	13	3
Talking through how a date went	8	13	12	1
Any of these	39	66	53	7

Base: all singles. Respondents could select more than one.

Coach yes, impostor no

Acceptable uses of AI in dating (%)

	Acceptable	Unacceptable	It depends
Using AI to check that someone is who they say they are	49	21	20
Using AI as a sounding board: advice, confidence, what to say	35	31	25
Using AI to write or improve the text of your profile	33	35	24
Using AI to help write messages to someone you are dating	24	45	23
Using AI to enhance or alter your profile photos	15	62	15
Letting AI hold entire conversations on your behalf	15	66	12
Using an AI companion as a replacement for dating real people	15	59	15

Base: all singles. Don't know not shown.

Dr Veronica Lamarche,
Senior Lecturer,
University of Essex

People are open to AI acting as a ‘relationship coach’ who can support and advise them, but not as a replacement in the dating experience.”

Singles are happy for AI to help them be themselves, but not to take their place. The most accepted use is checking that someone is who they say they are. 49% think this is acceptable and 21% do not. Views are more evenly split on using AI as a coach for advice, confidence or what to say, with 35% finding it acceptable and 31% not. Anything that changes what the other person sees, or replaces the person altogether, is rejected by most singles. Around two thirds say it is unacceptable to alter photos (62%), let AI hold whole conversations (66%) or use an AI companion instead of dating real people (59%). Gen Z are more open to every use, with 40% accepting coaching and 23% accepting AI holding conversations, but they rank the uses in the same order as everyone else.

Who’s really talking?

9% of singles have used AI to write or polish messages to someone they are talking to, rising to 15% of Gen Z. But most would not want it done to them. If they found out that messages they had received were written by AI, 35% say they would feel deceived and it would end things, and 29% would be uneasy but hear the person out. Only 16% would be relaxed about it and 4% would be impressed. Women (40%) are more likely than men (29%) to say it would end things. Gen Z are the least bothered of any generation. 28% say it would end things and 23% would be relaxed about it.

Some apps are going a step further and exploring whether two people’s AI assistants could talk to each other and report back before the people themselves speak. This appeals to 27% of singles, while 43% find it unappealing, including 28% who find it very unappealing. Gen Z are slightly more in favour than against, at 35% to 31%. Among Boomers it is 12% to 64%.

39%

of singles have used AI somewhere in their dating life; 66% of Gen Z and 7% of Boomers

49%

say using AI to check someone is who they say they are is acceptable; 21% say not

35%

would end things if they discovered a match’s messages were written by AI

Who daters debrief with

After a date, most singles talk it over with a friend (53%). Others turn to a group chat (18%), a sibling (15%) or a parent (12%). A fifth (20%) keep it to themselves, and men (31%) are three times as likely to do this as women (10%). 7% of singles talk it over with an AI chatbot, rising to 11% of Gen Z. That puts AI roughly level with a therapist or counsellor (9%) and an online community (10%) for Gen Z, but well behind a parent (20%) or the group chat (29%).

What singles think AI will never be able to do

Asked what AI could never do in dating, singles most often say judging whether two people will have chemistry (37%), knowing whether someone can be trusted (35%), flirting and keeping a conversation going (33%), choosing who you should date (31%) and spotting red flags (28%). Only 6% think AI will eventually be able to do everything.

Even so, singles are cautiously positive about it. 39% agree that AI tools could make dating a more comfortable and trustworthy experience, while 25% disagree. Millennials (47% to 18%) and Gen Z (45% to 19%) are the most convinced, and Boomers (24% to 38%) the least.

What the platforms can do

Singles have drawn a clear line, and it shows where dating apps should focus. People welcome AI that checks a profile is genuine, filters out abusive messages and helps a nervous person start a real conversation, and women welcome it most.

Dr Jaime Garcia Iglesias,
Chancellor's Fellow,
University of Edinburgh

AI has opened up new opportunities in dating, but the barriers this report identifies are fundamentally human: fear of rejection, lack of confidence and a desire for authenticity. That makes AI implementation in dating, if desirable at all, a delicate proposition."

Friends in the room

One in five singles would prefer to meet someone new with friends around, rising to almost one in three women

KEY FINDINGS:

- 47% of singles find a double date with a friend appealing, rising to 52% of Gen Z and Millennials. 51% of women like the idea, against 42% of men.
- 22% would rather meet someone new with friends around, including 29% of women and 14% of men.
- 23% would build their ideal first date around an activity such as mini golf or bowling, rising to 30% of Gen Z.
- 36% would be more likely to go to a singles event if it was organised through an app they already use, rising to 41% of Gen Z and 42% of Millennials.

The alternatives to meeting one-on-one

Most singles (78%) would still rather meet someone new one on one, but more than one in five (22%) would prefer to have friends around when they do. Twice as many women (29%) as men (14%) feel this way, and it is more common among rural singles (29%) than city singles (21%). Double dates appeal to even more people. Almost half of singles (47%) like the idea, rising to 52% of Gen Z and Millennials and 51% of women. It is younger singles who are most open to anything that takes the pressure off a first meeting.

Half of singles under 45 like the idea of a double date with a friend, lowering the stakes of a first meeting.

47%

find a double date with a friend appealing; 52% of Gen Z and Millennials

29%

of women would prefer to meet someone new with friends around; 14% of men

36%

would be more likely to go to a singles event if their dating app organised it; 42% of Millennials

The activity date

As singles move away from drinks, they are moving towards doing something instead. Almost a quarter (23%) would build their ideal first date around an activity such as mini golf or bowling, rising to 30% of Gen Z but only 10% of Boomers. One in ten (10%) would choose something sporty or outdoors, 23% something cultural such as a gallery, museum or cinema, and 14% something at home, rising to 21% of Gen Z. Having a friend there or an activity to focus on means a first date does not rest entirely on the two people involved.

Organised singles events

Organised singles events, such as run clubs, supper clubs, speed dating and activity nights, divide opinion. 32% of singles find them an appealing way to meet someone and 32% do not. They appeal most to younger singles and people in cities. 39% of Gen Z and 39% of Millennials like the idea, compared with 14% of Boomers, and 36% of city singles compared with 28% of rural singles. Dating apps could help bring more people along. 36% of singles would be more likely to go to an event if it was run through an app they already use, rising to 41% of Gen Z and 42% of Millennials, while 19% would be less likely.

What the platforms can do

Dating apps are already responding to this appetite for meeting in person, with double dates, group formats and events run through the app. The demand is there. Half of the under-45s like the idea of a double date, and more than a third of singles would be more likely to go to an event if their dating app organised it.



The price of the spark

Singles say a first date costs them £104 all in, and that the monthly search for love costs £128. They are trying to cut back on expenses without giving up on romance.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The Spark Index, what singles say they would spend on a first date all in, is £104. £38 of that goes on the date itself, £27 on clothes, £21 on grooming and £19 on travel.
- Singles who are dating spend £128 a month because they are dating, around £1,540 a year. Millennials spend £166 a month and Gen Z £162, compared to £98 for Gen X and £46 for Boomers.
- 52% agree that splitting the bill is now normal (59% of women, 43% of men). 35% of men paid for everything on their most recent first dates.
- 23% now suggest walks or coffees instead of dinner or drinks, and 74% agree a low-cost first date can be just as romantic as an expensive one.
- 41% say the pressure to look their best has put them off going on dates, rising to 52% of Gen Z.

The Spark Index

The Spark Index is what singles say they would spend on a first date, all in, and will be tracked every year from this first report. Singles who are dating or open to it say they would spend an average of £38 on the date itself, on food, drinks or activities. Getting ready and travelling takes the total to £104, made up of £27 for clothes or accessories, £21 for grooming or beauty and £19 for travel.

Singles say a first date costs them £104 all in. Only £38 of it is the date.

The £38 average hides a wide range. A quarter of singles (26%) would spend between £20 and £39 on the date itself, while 11% would spend nothing and 6% would spend £100 or more. Men budget more than women, at £47 for the date itself and £118 all in, compared with £30 and £92 for women. Millennials spend the most of any generation, at £118 all in, largely because they spend more on clothes and grooming. Gen X are next at £111, then Gen Z at £105, with Boomers spending the least at £77.

The Spark Index 2026: what singles would spend on a first date (£, mean)

	All	Men	Women	Gen Z (18-29)	Millennials (30-44)	Gen X (45-60)	Boomers (61+)
The date itself	38	47	30	33	39	44	38
Clothes or accessories for the date	27	29	25	28	32	30	15
Grooming or beauty for the date	21	20	22	23	24	20	11
Travel to and from the date	19	23	16	20	23	18	12
Spark Index (all in)	104	118	92	105	118	111	77

Base: singles dating casually or open to dating. Means derived from banded answers, don't knows excluded; indicative. Components may not sum to the total because of rounding.

The running cost of the search for romance

Dating costs money every month, not just on the day. Singles who are dating or open to it spend an average of £128 a month on dates, clothes, grooming, transport and apps, or around £1,540 a year on top of what they would normally spend. The biggest cost is the dates themselves at £34 a month, followed by clothes for dates (£32), grooming and appearance (£26), transport (£20) and dating apps and services (£17). Six in ten (61%) spend something each month on dates and 36% spend on apps and services, rising to 45% of Gen Z.

Gen Z and Millennials spend the most per month. Millennials spend £166 a month and Gen Z £162, compared with £98 for Gen X and £46 for Boomers, and men spend £149 compared with £110 for women. Most app users do not pay for a subscription. Only 17% currently pay for a subscription or premium features, including 23% of men and 12% of women. Among those who do, 72% say it has helped them meet people they are compatible with, and 29% say it has helped a lot. 23% say it made no real difference.

Who pays

Men still pick up the bill more often than not. On their most recent first date, 35% of men paid for everything and a further 11% paid for more than half, while only 3% of women paid for everything. A quarter of first dates (24%) were split roughly evenly, rising to 36% among LGBTQ+ singles. Attitudes have moved further than behaviour. 59% agree that nobody should be expected to pay because of their gender (62% of women, 55% of men), and 52% agree that splitting the bill on a first date is now the normal thing to do. Women (59%) are more likely to agree with this than men (43%), who more often sit on the fence. Gen Z have their own rule. 40% think whoever suggested the date should pay for it, compared with 13% of Boomers.

Trimming the cost, keeping the romance

The cost of living has changed how people date more than whether they date at all. Among singles dating or open to it, 23% now suggest walks or coffees rather than dinner or drinks, 19% date closer to home to save on travel, 17% go on fewer dates and 17% choose cheaper venues. Another 13% have put dating on hold altogether, 13% have felt pressure to spend more than they can comfortably afford, and 11% say they spend about the same as before. The pressure falls hardest on younger singles. 34% of Gen Z and 37% of Millennials say they have spent more than they could really afford on a first date, against 13% of Boomers.

How the cost of living has changed the way singles date (%)

	All	Gen Z (18-29)	Millennials (30-44)
I suggest walks or coffees rather than dinner or drinks	23	24	27
I date closer to home to save on travel	19	21	22
I go on fewer dates	17	20	20
I choose cheaper venues or activities	17	22	20
I've put dating on hold altogether	13	15	14
I've felt pressure to spend more than I can comfortably afford	13	17	17
I spend about the same as before	11	7	10

Base: singles dating casually or open to dating. Respondents could select more than one.

There is no longer any stigma about a cheap date, if there ever was. Three quarters of singles (74%) agree that a free or low-cost first date such as a walk or a coffee can be just as romantic as an expensive one, and only 5% disagree. Agreement runs from 66% among Gen Z to 81% among Boomers.

The hidden cost of looking the part

For younger singles, the biggest cost is looking the part. 44% of singles agree that getting ready for a date, including clothes, hair, beauty and grooming, adds up to a significant amount. Among Gen Z it is 54% and among Millennials 52%, compared with 24% of Boomers. The pressure to look their best is stopping some people from dating at all. 41% agree it has put them off going on dates, rising to 52% of Gen Z and 49% of Millennials, and 44% of women compared with 38% of men. Before a first date, 60% of singles worry about what they will wear and how they look, rising to 70% of women.

What the platforms can do

The low-cost formats singles are choosing, such as walks, coffees and activities, also take some of the pressure off a first date. The Spark Index will track whether what singles say they spend on a first date falls as activity-led formats grow.

The modern happy ending

More than half of app users have had a relationship with someone they met on an app and agree that deleting the app is the modern happy ending.

KEY FINDINGS:

- 56% of app users have been in a relationship with someone they met on an app, and 77% have dated someone they met on one.
- 53% of all singles know a couple who met on a dating app, rising to 66% of Millennials.
- 56% of singles agree that deleting an app because you have met someone is the modern happy ending, and 55% agree apps are now simply how single people meet.
- 38% of app users say apps have been good for their love life and 22% disagree. Gen Z are the most positive (45% to 16%) and the only generation whose trust in the people on apps has risen.

Among singles who use or have used dating apps, 56% have been in a relationship with someone they first met on an app, and 23% have been in more than one. A further 21% have dated someone from an app without it becoming a relationship. In all, 77% of app users have dated someone they met through an app.

The results are visible well beyond the apps themselves. More than half of all singles (53%) personally know a couple who met on a dating app, and 19% know several. Among Millennials, the generation that grew up with the apps, 66% know a couple who met this way, as do 61% of Gen Z. Among Boomers it is 33%.

The modern happy ending is deleting the app because it worked, and 56% of singles agree.

For most singles, the goal is to delete the app. 56% agree that deleting a dating app because you have met someone is the modern happy ending, and only 7% disagree. Millennials are the most likely to agree (62%). 55% also agree that dating apps are now simply how single people meet, in the way the pub was for earlier generations, while 10% disagree.

56%

of app users have had a relationship with someone they met on an app; 23% more than one

53%

of singles know a couple who met on a dating app; 66% of Millennials

56%

agree deleting an app because you have met someone is the modern happy ending

Dr Jaime Garcia Iglesias,
Chancellor's Fellow,
University of Edinburgh

That the 'happy ending' involves deleting dating apps raises a fundamental question about the kinds of relationships we build not only with each other, but with dating platforms themselves: do we see apps as legitimate partners in dating and, increasingly, socialising, or as hurdles to get through to find a relationship?"



What the Spark Study shows

The central finding of this study is that singles want real connection, but that finding it in person has become more difficult.

Britain's singles have never been easier to reach, and they now spend almost as much time socialising online as in person (4.7 hours a week against 5.3). Yet a third (32%) did not meet a single new person last month, half (52%) neither asked anyone out in person last year nor were asked, and a third (32%) often or always feel lonely. The places where people used to meet have fallen out of use. A fifth of Boomers met their most recent partner in a pub, compared with only 4% of Gen Z. Few singles think there is anything wrong with asking someone out, but few actually do it, because they fear rejection or lack the confidence.

This matters because most singles, and younger singles in particular, are looking for something serious. Half of Millennials (52%) and Gen Z (49%) want a life partner or a long-term relationship, compared with one in seven Boomers (14%), and only 8% of Gen Z want something casual. They are also thoughtful about how they go about it. A coffee has replaced drinks as the ideal first date, and app users chat for around twelve days before they agree to meet.

The high cost of dating makes the search harder. A first date costs £104 all in and the search for love £128 a month, and 41% of singles say the pressure to look their best has put them off dating altogether, rising to 52% of Gen Z. Most are cutting back where they can, and three quarters (74%) say a cheap date can be just as romantic as an expensive one.

Faced with these challenges, singles are finding new routes to romance. Dating apps and friends are now the joint most common way to meet a partner, at 20% each, and nearly a third (31%) of singles' most recent relationships began online. For Gen Z, an introduction now comes through social media four times as often as across a bar. Dating apps are increasingly important avenues for connection. More than half of app users (56%) have had a relationship with someone they met on an app, 77% have dated someone they met on one, and 56% of singles agree that deleting the app because it worked is the modern happy ending.

For those routes to work, singles need to feel safe and be able to trust the person they are meeting. Two thirds of women (67%) worry about their safety before a first date, and most women tell someone their plans or share their live location before meeting someone from an app. Two thirds of singles (68%) think the apps that succeed in future will be the ones with the best safety features.

Singles are also bringing others in to help with their search for romance. Two in five (39%) have used AI to prepare for a date, whether for advice, planning or confidence, although two thirds (66%) say it should never hold their conversations for them. Almost half (47%) like the idea of a double date with a friend, and more than a third (36%) would be more likely to go to a singles event if their dating app organised it.

This is the first wave of the Spark Study. The measures in this report will be repeated every year on the same wording, so next year will show whether the gap between talking and meeting is closing, whether singles feel safer meeting people from apps, and whether more of them are finding what they are looking for.

How the study was conducted

Sample and design

Strand Partners surveyed 3,007 single adults aged 18 and over across the UK online between 28 August and 1 September 2026. Single was defined at screening as not married, not in a civil partnership, not living with a partner and not in a committed relationship. People who are dating casually qualified. Data are weighted to the known profile of single adults in the UK by age, gender and NUTS 1 region, using Census 2021 (Office for National Statistics [ONS] and NISRA) and Census 2022 (NRS) data. A separate survey of 1,000 single adults in the Republic of Ireland was conducted as a standalone study.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire took twelve to fifteen minutes to complete online and was organised in modules that follow the chapter plan of this report. A set of tracking questions, including the Spark Index items, are fixed so that the study can be repeated every year on the same basis.

Standards and publication

Strand Partners is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. A full method statement, question wording and data tables are published alongside the report. The methodology was reviewed and co-signed by Dr Veronica Lamarche, Senior Lecturer, University of Essex & Dr Jaime Garcia Iglesias, Chancellor's Fellow, University of Edinburgh before fieldwork. The modules covering safety and experience of harm passed ethics review, and the survey closed with signposting to sources of support.

Measures and definitions

Relationship and dating were not defined for respondents. The questions on relationships and on how people met their most recent partner both left the term to the respondent, so results reflect how singles themselves understand it.

Loneliness is measured with an ONS harmonised question, unchanged, so that results can be compared with national benchmarks, together with the three companion items from the short UCLA scale.

Generations were defined in advance. Gen Z were aged 18 to 29 at fieldwork, Millennials 30 to 44, Gen X 45 to 60 and Boomers 61 and over. Where the report refers to the under-30s it means Gen Z, and where it refers to the under-45s it means Gen Z and Millennials together.

Money, time and message figures are means calculated from the midpoints of banded answers, with "don't knows" excluded. They are indicative, and the full distributions are published in the tables. The Spark Index is the sum of mean stated first-date spend across four categories, the date itself, clothes, grooming and travel, among singles who are dating casually or open to dating. It is calculated from unrounded means.

Precaution and check counts are the mean number of items selected per respondent. Where percentages are expressed as fractions in the text (one in three, one in twenty) they follow a single rounding rule, and the exact percentages are in the tables.

What the study cannot say

The sample is of single adults, so the question on how people met their most recent partner describes the past relationships of people who are now single, not how Britain's current couples met. The survey is a single snapshot and cannot say what causes what. For example, this study records that the loneliest singles are also the youngest and the most online, not that one leads to the other.

Match Group

THE Spark STUDY

