

Home > Lifestyle > Full story

▶ Dial... for soul mate

Trends

Youngsters across the country give the thumbs up to mobile dating

By P. Sreevalsan Menon

The expected has happened, and one needed only bare statistics to predict the phenomenon: in a country where 54 per cent of the 1 billion people are youth, there are over 40 million mobile phone subscribers. Mobile dating is just one more item on the 'thumb'ing agenda that includes SMSing, gaming and chatting.



Palm dates: Mobile buddies Vikas and Sneha met up last month

Dating, as used here, is an all-encompassing term. There could be nothing romantic about it, as Herehanif Sama will tell you. The 35-year-old has had 'blind dates' in many countries in less than a year; that, too, sitting in India. "As a tour leader with an international company, I travel to many countries," he says. "I have no problems in getting a comfortable stay in any country, thanks to friends." That is, the 'dates' he connects to.

Sama calls it 'networking' but many of those who subscribe to the mobile

dating service MonAmi are in search of soul mates. The biggest pull: you can choose to remain anonymous and easily wriggle out of a relationship that is headed towards disaster. The popularity of the dating service can be gauged from the testimonials: "Wow! U guys r doing great with air chat! And the private rooms r perfect!" and "Thanx!!, Mar and I getn married thanx 2 AirG!" or "I met my love because of u so again thank u". Vancouver-based Air Games Wireless (AirG) is a leader in publishing and distributing mobile entertainment products.

"A lot of 'success stories' are reported in India. People make new friends and even fall in love, and we get many e-mails from happy customers," says Ajay Adishesan, managing director of Mumbai-based Corusant Tec, which provides the service in India in association with AirG. MonAmi is an internationally available SMS dating service, offered on the 8888 short code and available with Mobile First Alliance, a consortium of five mobile operators. MonAmi uses WAP and SMS, two mobile communications platforms found on most mobile handsets. This makes it easy for operators as well as subscribers.

During the week before Valentine's Day this year, there was a frenzied rush of SMSes by mobile dating subscribers. Corusant throws up impressive statistics. At 67,730, there was a 30 per cent rise in the number of SMSes exchanged; 70 per cent of Indian users were male. Youngsters of 17-18 years accounted for half the traffic; the rest was made up by 20- to 35-year-olds.

Even rural India is dating by the thumb. Uttar Pradesh generated 10,500 SMSes, Bihar and Jharkhand, 8,596 while Mumbai and Delhi together notched around 10,000. "I think the primary reason would be limited possibilities to socialise with the opposite sex in places like UP or Bihar," says Adishesan. However, psychiatrist and social commentator Mohan Agashe has a different view. "They [rural youth] are riddled with problems like unemployment, low wages and social taboos,"



People make new friends and even fall in love, and we get many e-mails from happy customers.

Ajay Adishesan, Coruscant Tec

Operators are happy that the service is on the fast track to popularity. An Airtel spokesperson says the service is perceived as a text flirt service similar to online dating, where a person can create a profile and search for others with similar interests. One is not tied to a computer and can chat anytime, anywhere.

That was precisely what got Mumbai's Vikas Sahni, 27, hooked to Airtel's Track Ur Mate. Telling his 'dates' about his day eases the tedium of crowded journeys to and from work. But Sahni is not keen on real-life dates with his SMS pals. "I don't want to lose the fun by meeting them in person," he says. "I am not sure which way the relationship will go once we meet."

He broke the rule for Sneha, a 23-year-old mass communication student who opted for the service to make friends who could give her some career advice. The two met for coffee last month and have been great pals ever since.

"People find this service unique primarily because of the international access and the discreetness of the service," says Adishesan. Mobile companies are able to retain customers for one or two months under this service. Like any other public service, m-dating, too, can be misused though companies have technological safeguards.

MonAmi monitors chat rooms with profanity filters and 24x7 monitoring is available on request. However, there can be no absolute checks. As Sama says, "I feel secure since no number is displayed and my privacy is maintained."

Sama feels the technology can evolve to resemble a matrimonial service with freedom and flexibility. "One can save commission paid to Web sites or marriage bureaus," he says. Technologically, m-dating will move from SMS to Java-based services with richer user interfaces. Users in Europe, Korea and Japan are now on to 3G video dating on mobiles. Considering the demand, it won't be long before India catches up.

http://www.the-week.com/25apr10/lifestyle_article5.htm

he says. "So they are always on the lookout for an opening to vent their feelings. Be it festivals or mobile dating, their purpose is to channelise that extra energy."

Agashe slams the mobile dating phenomenon as an erosion of value systems. "Today's youth do not want to understand the depth of an institution like marriage or the courting process," he says. "It's an experience that can't be realised in a virtual world." But there's no stopping reality. MonAmi (SMS) and AirDate (WAP chat) alone have four million registered users around the world. An average MonAmi session is 6-9 messages per user per day.

But addicts show no restraints; some send as many as 100 in a day at Rs 2 for an international SMS.