



## The FUTURE of NEW YORK CITY A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

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# Jobless, lovelorn rush to network

LinkedIn, Facebook, Match.com report record traffic as economy falters

**Amanda Fung**

When Inna Shaulskaya lost her job at a jewelry wholesaler in November, one of the first things she did was log on to her LinkedIn account. Though she had joined the professional social network a few years earlier, she rarely checked in.

"I had a job; I didn't have time or interest in using it," she says.

Now the Brooklyn resident uses the site religiously to connect with former co-workers, search for a job and promote her own personal finance site, Moneyallocator.com. For similar reasons, Nicholas Ricci, owner of Professional Services Inc., a construction firm in Ozone Park, Queens, recently joined LinkedIn and Upworld.com, a startup social network for the real estate and construction industries.

"I see what is happening in the city—the business I am in is suffering," he says. "I have to find ways to get new business."

Ms. Shaulskaya, Mr. Ricci and thousands of other unemployed New Yorkers are flocking to all sorts of social networks to find new jobs, giving sites like LinkedIn and Facebook a huge traffic boost. Even online dating services like IAC's Match.com are reporting record activity as people turn to the Internet to find solace in a soul mate. And as long as the nation is in a recession, these sites are expecting the surge to continue.

For the last four months of 2008, LinkedIn, which has 1.4 million members in New York state, reported an 11% increase in the number of connections made between users, a 10% boost in invites sent among members and a 9% uptick in page views. Facebook reached a milestone of over 150 million active users earlier this month.

Manhattan-based Interactive One, which operates the nation's largest African-American social network, BlackPlanet.com, and a number of other niche sites including AsianAvenue.com and MiGente.com, has seen a 12% jump in unique visitors, a 23% boost in total page views and a 20% increase in total minutes spent on all of its sites from the third quarter 2008 to the fourth quarter.

BlackPlanet.com, in particular, which attracts about 6 million unique monthly visitors and has 17 million members, has seen a spike in activity since mid-November. This is unusual: "Typically during the holidays, traffic goes down," says Smokey Fontaine, chief content officer of Interactive One. "We are finding that folks are using us to relieve stress."

## Home alone

Even smaller, upstart social networks such as 18-month-old Upworld.com are getting an extra lift. Upworld.com has seen its membership more than triple, to 13,000, within a year without any marketing efforts. Since October, the Manhattan-based network has seen messaging activity on the site rise 20%.

"People are staying home more," says Jonathan Alpert, a Manhattan-based psychotherapist. "They can't afford to go out and party."

With less money to spend on socializing, singles are seeking love from the comfort of their own home. The holidays are generally slower than usual for dating sites, but not this year. OKCupid.com, a free dating site based in Manhattan, began

to see more users during the summer, typically a slow season because people go outside more, says founder Sam Yagan. He says the site now has over 1 million active users, up 66% in less than a year. Since the end of September, unique visitors to the site are up 10%, and page views are up 13%.

“Being single is much harder when life is not going well,” says Wendy Kaufman, founder of Balancing Life's Issues, a nationwide executive training company. “It's OK to be alone when things go well.”

### **It pays to sign up**

Even paid dating sites are seeing historic traffic—after all, a \$30 monthly membership fee is cheaper than one night out in the city. Match.com said that during the month of November, the site saw its largest growth in membership in over seven years. Match.com attributed the stellar results to the recession and to a new feature that introduces five potential beaus to members daily. Sign-ups from New York state residents on Lavalife.com, a Toronto-based dating service, were down 13% until the stock market meltdown, according Marina Glogovac, CEO of Lavalife. New York membership increased 7% each month from the beginning of the third quarter through the end of 2008.

“People usually postpone relationships because they're too busy. There is something about times of crisis that brings people back to dating,” says Ms. Glogovac. “When you're in love or when you find someone, it is healing.”

Despite the flood of eyeballs, most of these sites are ad-supported and they are seeing the impact of the troubled economy on their bottom lines. Although OKCupid met its goal of reaching \$2 million in revenue last year, Mr. Yagan admits that his site is vulnerable to a declining ad market. Jennifer Magee, Upworld.com's founder, had to pull plans to market her site due to the economy.

But now, she doesn't need to advertise. “Lots of people are referring their peers,” she says.