

Tomorrow's Life

Save your skin -
nowhere to hide the
damage done **Beauty**

Second helpings -
Singapore festivals
line up for more **Arts**

Is your mobil
slowly killing

Life

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST MONDAY, AUGUST 4, 2008



The crowd is getting younger at singles parties as more people pluck up the courage to join dating agencies, writes **Katie Lau**

Close encounters

On a recent Saturday night, it's pounding music and flashing strobe lights as usual at a members-only club in Lan Kwai Fong. No one is dancing

however: everyone's busy trying to strike up conversations - which isn't surprising, since this is a singles party organised by a local dating agency. The difference is that many of the participants are in their 20s.

Ellen Lo, a 25-year-old jewellery buyer, says she signed up "just to see what it's like" but concedes "it can be awkward when you can't find anyone nice to talk to". She seems more comfortable chatting with two women she has just met rather than circulate among the crowd. Although she exchanges contact information with a few men, Lo reckons most are too young for her. "They are not my cup of tea."

Dating services used to be regarded as an avenue mainly for those in their 30s to 40s, and for the socially awkward or romantically challenged. However, perceptions are changing as thousands of young people turn to organised dating. There are now so many that agencies have begun lowering age brackets for activities such as speed dating to cater to the younger clientele, some accepting men of 24 and women as young as 20.

Attractive, outgoing and gainfully employed, many don't seem like typical candidates seeking help to widen their social circles and meet potential partners, but there's been a cultural shift.

"People from this generation are less afraid of expressing themselves and feel that if they want something, they can't sit around and do nothing. They have to make it happen," says Petula Ho Sik-ying, an associate sociology professor at the University of Hong Kong.

Lunch Actually, a Malaysia-based company that opened a branch in Hong Kong in June to provide more personalised dating services, is also expecting more clients in their 20s, although with membership fees ranging from HK\$1,500 to HK\$10,000, their lunches are for more affluent singles.

"I've noticed that people in their 20s are more adventurous and more willing to try new things," says founder Violet Lim Seow Yan. "When I ask them why they are considering a dating service, they often mention that they are curious and want another avenue to meet new friends."

"Women are smarter than before," says Shirley Chan Wai-shan, a senior consultant at Affinity. "They are attractive and have good jobs, and they want a partner who is more mature and financially stable. They are frustrated with men their age. They figure their bargaining power with eligible males declines with age. The younger they are, the better their chances of getting the man they want."

