

# **The Internet: How Technology Affects the Creation of Discourse Communities**

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## **Introduction**

The advent of the internet has brought with it a plethora of new ideas, both about the internet and new ideas themselves. It is also easier than ever to communicate these ideas with people from around the world instantaneously. Thus, the concept of the discourse community has grown. Instant communication can both empower and hinder us in our search for knowledge and community in the global village. This paper seeks to better understand the role of technology in the creation of online communities via the internet from a theoretical rhetorical perspective.

## ***Online Discourse Communities***

Three distinct types of discourse communities bubble up for me as I ponder the internet. They are Blogs and Newsgroups, Chat and Instant Messenger and finally, the use of online profiles and “Online Dating.” I will briefly consider the former two and focus on the latter for the remainder of this paper.

## **Blogs**

Blogs are everywhere. Anyone can set up a Blog easily through a variety of sites. A quick Google search yields many Blogs. The most interesting thing is that you can find

Blogs on anything you happen to be interested in, thus, creating a community of others who are interested in the same thing.

## **Chat/Instant Messenger**

Chatting via Instant Messenger is another beast. Whether you're using MSN, Yahoo or AOL, you can find people to chat with in real time quite easily. Online profiles tend to blur over into this category since they often lead from seeking out profiles to chatting in real time. Though I am not looking specifically at chat in this paper, it is an important piece of how people connect with each other online.

## **Online Profiles/Dating Websites**

Match.com is just one example of hundreds of websites devoted to bringing people together. Most sites offer free services, though often you must pay for extended benefits. You create a profile and you look at other people's profiles and off you go... seeking that special someone or just potential friends. The power here is the ability to pre-select potential friends/dates based on common interests. As I'll discuss below, there is controversy about whether this selection really helps us.

Websites are often a portal for other kinds of communication, such as Blogs or instant messaging. The online profile is the start of the conversation which may lead to instant messaging, calling and finally meeting. Not all of these things must happen, but any combination. Often, online dating websites will include Blogs which will certainly bring out many diverse opinions. I remember one Blog about patriotism on a dating website that started just after the Iraq war. A heated argument between one American citizen and one British citizen ensued about the role of patriotism when you disagree with

the actions of the president. It went on for quite a while and people from all over the world joined in. Some were polite and others were rather rude. In the end, no true resolution came about, but everyone following the messages had a much more complex understanding of outsider's views of America.

It only takes one experience like this to begin to see the complexity of online community building and interactions. This conversation would not have happened offline as its members lived all over the world. But what came out of it was meaningful and interesting.

## **Theory: Nichification versus Unification**

Does the internet bring us together or does it separate us out from the rest? This is a much debated question and two views stand out, that of David Shenk and David Weinberger.

### ***David Shenk***

David Shenk, in Data Smog, refers to, "Nichification," (Shenk, 113) as the way in which we get more and more specialized and obscure in our interests. Consider the following:

What comes through loud and clear ... are not the cultural commonalities but the profound and, in many cases, irreconcilable, differences. As society becomes more and more virtual, the fragmentation and political polarization will only increase ... Instead of gathering us into the town square, the new information technology clusters us into social cubicles.

There are fewer central spaces, and not even a common channel (Shenk, 111-112).

Shenk argues that moving into close communities of people with like interests actually brings out our differences, instead of opening the forum for differences of opinion. He does, however, later argue that we need to act as our own filters to be careful of what we take in and what we believe (ibid, 126). David Weinberger offers a less pessimistic view.

David Shenk raises an interesting question as to where the common spaces are on the internet. Are they Blogs or chat rooms? Are they National news pages, such as MSNBC.com or CNN.com? Are they governmental pages? I would imagine not. The truly communal web pages are Blogs and online profiles. There, you truly will come into contact with all kinds of different people. It's up to you whether you will decide to talk to them or not, but at least you'll be aware of their views.

### ***David Weinberger***

David Weinberger's view is much more empowering than David Shenk's view. In Small Pieces Loosely Joined, Weinberger offers an interesting counter-argument. One of the main differences between offline communities and online communities is the concept of time. In an offline community, say, a book club, the meeting exists for the allotted time once a month and that is it. If you miss the meeting, you are out of luck. Online communities, on the other hand, do not require time as a prerequisite for involvement. Blogs or message boards or newsgroups allow participation to exist as long as the thread goes on. That is, as long as those interested in reading the thread have no more disagreements (Weinberger, 109-113).

Weinberger's second point about online communities is that they are less exclusive than offline communities. Go back to the image of the book group. Some groups will let anyone join; however, others may require a more formal entrance process. Online communities only require an interest, and thus are much more inclusive than offline communities (ibid.).

Thus, the internet can nichify us, or cause us to keep getting more and more fragmented and separate from the public forums, or, viewed from another angle, it can increase communication between people of like interests. I posit the latter is truer. We don't close ourselves off so much as to only have contact with people exactly like us. That would be impossible. The process of meeting people online automatically brings people together that would not normally meet in public. The web is a powerful tool in the creation of communities.

## **Online Dating Survey: Method Overview**

What do people really think about online profiles and dating? I know what I think about it, but how do my thoughts differ from others? To discover the complexity, I decided to take a survey about what people really thought.

The first survey consisted of 24 questions: some quantitative and some qualitative. (See Appendix 1 for complete quantitative results). The survey was posted on a few online profiles, both straight and gay (national as well as international sites) as well as emailed out to my friends with instructions to pass it along to others who may be interested in taking it. I received 100 responses in four days. I offered a second, follow-up survey to everyone who provided me with an email address. I received 21 responses back on this survey. Here are some brief results about the group:

- 83% Male
- 18% Female
- 75% of respondents have an online profile
- 22% Straight
- 67% Gay/Lesbian
- 12% Bisexual
- Half of the respondents were between the ages of 18-29

Thus, it's pretty safe to say that the average respondent is a gay male in his twenties.

### ***My Lens: Philosophical Assumptions***

My philosophical assumptions are what guide my worldview and thus what guide my survey and theory. Littlejohn and Foss state: "The starting point for any theory is the philosophical assumptions that underlie it," (Littlejohn, 18). I will briefly summarize the philosophical assumptions that underlie my research.

### **Epistemology: Social Constructivism**

I am a social constructivist through and through. I believe we construct reality socially. We exist on this earth not alone, but intricately connected to each other. Our lives are defined by the communities we are a part of and we are judged by communal standards, (Subbiah, 58).

Even more interesting is the way that language binds communities (Subbiah, 60). Language is the glue that makes a community function. Imagine a community of Babel,

where everyone spoke a different language... that certainly wouldn't last to long!

Language is the common bond that allows us to communicate. Therefore, it is also the foundation of the discourse community.

## **Ontology and Axiology**

Ontologically, I'm a pragmatist. People have control over their lives and act accordingly. We actively pursue goals, as opposed to being products of upbringing. In terms of Axiology, I am value-conscious. That is to say that I don't think this study is applicable to everyone. As I stated above, this is more reflective of the 20s gay male population than any other demographic, though I will look at what others responded as well. My conclusions will not be conclusions, but new ways at looking at how people create online communities and the role of technology therein.

## ***What Isn't in the Scope?***

I'm not looking at friend maintenance online. This paper seeks only to look at how people create new communities for themselves online and not how they remain in contact with family and friends that they met offline. This is not to say that these connections are not important-they are. The internet has made it easier to maintain friendships across distances. One question on my follow-up survey asked about the type of contact people seek using online profiles or dating services. Half of the respondents indicated they used it for, "Maintaining contact with previous friends" Even though I am not looking at this aspect, it is certainly important.

## **Theory: What is a Discourse Community?**

A discourse community is any group that sets itself apart from other groups based on standards, sacred texts, shared history, goals and rituals (Freed and Broadhead). These communities are typically thought of as being in the workplace. For example, Microsoft is a discourse community unto itself with its own language, sacred texts, etc. To be a part of a community is to understand the history and goals of that community, or company, in the case of Microsoft.

Discourse communities are not limited to corporations, however. They can exist anywhere and on any topic. Thanks to the advent of the internet, they don't have to even exist in physical spaces.

### ***Freed & Broadhead: Elements of Discourse Communities***

Freed and Broadhead's Discourse Communities, Sacred Texts, and Institutional Norms offers some unique insights into the elements of a discourse community. Online communities possess each of these elements, though their subject matter is not job related. Online discourse communities can be topic related, such as a Blog on Emily Dickinson or they can be geared towards meeting people with common interests, whatever they may be.

### **Standards**

Standards are the only qualification that exists for being a member of online communities. By becoming a member, you must adhere to a set of "Rules of Conduct," which function as the sacred text. The rules of conduct are agreed to by everyone participating in the community and they include things like being kind and courteous.

Discourse communities establish paradigms that, “set an agenda and attempt to guarantee its meeting, often rewarding those who do and discouraging those who don’t. They legislate conduct and behavior, establishing the eminently kosher as well as the unseemly and untoward” (Freed and Broadhead, 156).

## **Sacred Texts**

In the context of Freed and Broadhead’s essay, the proposal is their example of a sacred text: “It is a guide, not just for writing proposals but for living, working, and surviving in the culture” (Freed and Broadhead, 158). The same is true of online dating communities, though the sacred text has changed from the proposal to the Rules of Conduct. These texts along with the unstated rules form the basis of how to interact with others in the community.

## **Shared History and Goals**

Shared history and goals are things that people look for in others when creating online communities. They can often find these things by selecting the most appropriate website or Blog for their particular interest.

## **Rituals**

Some of the online dating rituals include: sending messages via the website, exchanging Instant Messenger (IM) profiles and chatting in real time, exchanging phone numbers and calling each other and meeting in person. Different people approach these rituals in different ways. In my survey, I asked, “At what point do you consider someone you meet online a friend?” Half of the respondents indicated meeting in person. This is certainly the goal in meeting people online and the basis for how real online friends can

be. Other respondents indicated that it was a feeling they got after chatting with the person that determined whether they would continue the ritual process or let it go.

### ***Phillipsen: How are People Connected?***

Phillipsen posits that language is what connects people to communities. Because speaking is social, it necessarily connects the listeners. In Speaking Culturally, he states, “To know, and to use appropriately, the meanings, rules, and speech habits of a local group signals and affirms that one is a member of it,” (Phillipsen, 14). Online discourse communities are therefore at a disadvantage, as members do not have the aural aspect of language, only the written. I surmise Phillipsen would argue that purely written communication makes it more difficult to create communities, thus bolstering the view that meeting someone in person is an important ritual in the creation of communities.

While the internet helps us to create communities, it makes sense that if the entire ritual is not carried out, online communities can only go so far. To an extent, they can facilitate the sharing of ideas, but when you want to really get to know someone, it has to go offline—that is, meeting in person or talking on the phone. In the context of dating, the internet is a starting place and not the end all of creating a community.

### **Theory: Analyzing the Author and the Reader**

When we look at any text, there is a definite author of the text and a specific reader, you, in this case. Mary Coney and Walker Gibson argue that there are not only the author and the reader; there is also the implied author and the mock reader. Rhetorically, this confuses things a bit and causes me to question whether or not people can really

portray themselves online in an accurate manner. However, first I will look at Coney and Gibson's ideas.

### ***Mary Coney: Implied Authors***

In The Implied Author in Technical Discourse, Mary Coney argues for the existence of the implied author, which is the view of the author that is pictured by the reader. That is, the author tries to convey themselves in a certain way that may or may not be who the real author is. Thus, the picture of the author by the reader may not be the real author (Coney).

### **After meeting an online friend in person, are you surprised by how they really are?**

This question on my survey brought up a lot of different answers. Some people are surprised and some people aren't: "[I'm] not really [surprised]. I'm open-minded and try not to build expectations before I meet someone." It seems almost 50/50. It does, however, look like the people that are not surprised have often spent more time chatting with the person. Inaccurate pictures are the most common thing people are surprised about. Some even complained of pictures that looked like they were ten years old.

Another interesting comment was about interests being inaccurate: "There's always a bit of a surprise. The most annoying surprise is when you realize that many of the things they said they were "interested" in are simply passing fancies. Don't tell me you love Russian literature if you have only read "The Idiot," and are not sure who Tolstoy is. If you list "skiing" as an activity that you really enjoy, you had better have an idea of what your favorite ski resort is. Interests are often misrepresented."

## **How real are online friends?**

In the midst of implied and real authors, how real are we online? The survey responses to this question are all over the place. Some people would argue that online friends are, “Real friends if we have been chatting for a long time, others are acquaintances,” whereas others say about online friends, “You cannot know [if they are real], they can make up anything!” There’s the rub. People can make up anything. Another respondent noted, “They are as real as their conversation presents them to be. If I feel that their communication is honest and straightforward, they become much more real to me than those whose words are contrived and forced or leading.”

The important thing is to be a discerning reader. You can eventually see if people are lying based on how they portray themselves. If the implied author is too far away from the reader’s view of the real author, then the real reader will not buy it. When there is enough of a disparity, the image falls apart.

## ***Walker Gibson: The Mock Reader***

Gibson makes an important distinction between the real reader and the mock reader. By separating the role of the reader into these two facets, Gibson empowers the reader by allowing them to make the choice to accept or reject the role the author projects onto them (Gibson).

The mock reader allows the reader to take some analytical distance between the text and their relation to it. If the real reader (the person holding the book) is aware of the mock reader that the author is invoking, the real reader has the power to accept or reject the mock reader that the author imposes. This is the criteria, according to Gibson, with which books are labeled as bad-when the mock reader is rejected. However, the author

has power in this situation as well. The author has power over the real reader if the real reader accepts the mock reader that is proscribed by the author (Gibson).

### **Do people willingly become the mock reader?**

Gibson closes his article with the reader asking themselves, "Who do I want to be?" (Gibson, 6). It is the reader who will decide whether or not to become one with the text they are reading-to accept the social construction of the profile and become the mock reader or reject it. In the context of online dating, as the reader is viewing a profile, do they become the author's mock reader? Or do they reject the role and move on?

In my survey, the answer was no (Almost 90%). One respondent commented that it is only a matter of time before people figure it out, so it is useless to pretend to be someone you're not.

### **Are people accurate in their portrayal of their online selves?**

When I asked about how accurate people are on their own profiles, the results were even more conclusive. People don't tend to lie about who they are. 80% of the respondents indicated that their profile was 80-100% accurate to who they really are.

When I asked whether they lied about specific things (Real name, job, relationship status, HIV status and interests), they almost always responded that they did not lie. However, a small percentage of people indicated that they sometimes lied about their real name, but only because they were being cautious or because they didn't think they would meet the person.

## **Conclusions**

Creating communities online is different for everyone. Some people really enjoy it, others don't. Most people only occasionally meet people in person they met online. The key is to chat with the person a lot before deciding to meet. Discernment is the best practice here. When I asked about how people decided whether or not to meet a person, many said that they just knew because of a "gut reaction" or intuition. What seems to come up over and over is the sense of how real online communities are. People are accurate in portraying themselves and yet cautious about others. This is important, because one should always be cautious, but it gives me faith in humanity. Most people are looking for the same things as everyone else.

The internet as a means to the creation of discourse communities is a large topic and one that not much has been looked at. This study brought up more questions than answers, but a rhetorical perspective offers the tools needed to start thinking about how to look at the internet as a discourse community creation device.

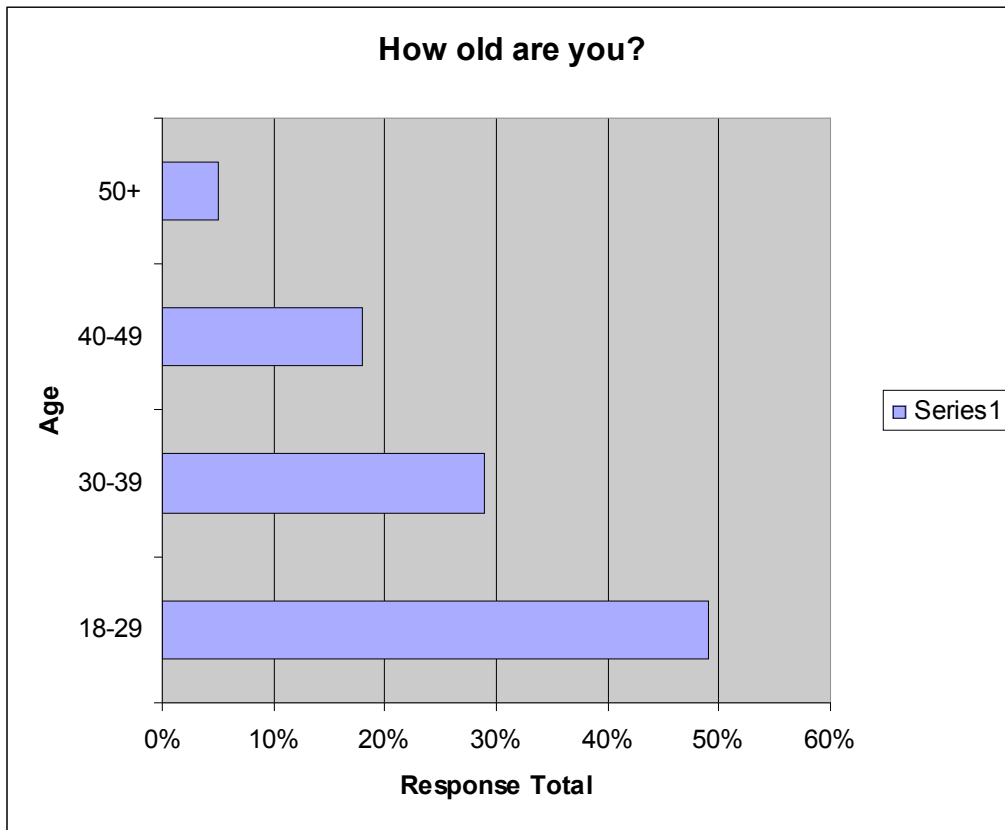
## **Suggestions for Further Research**

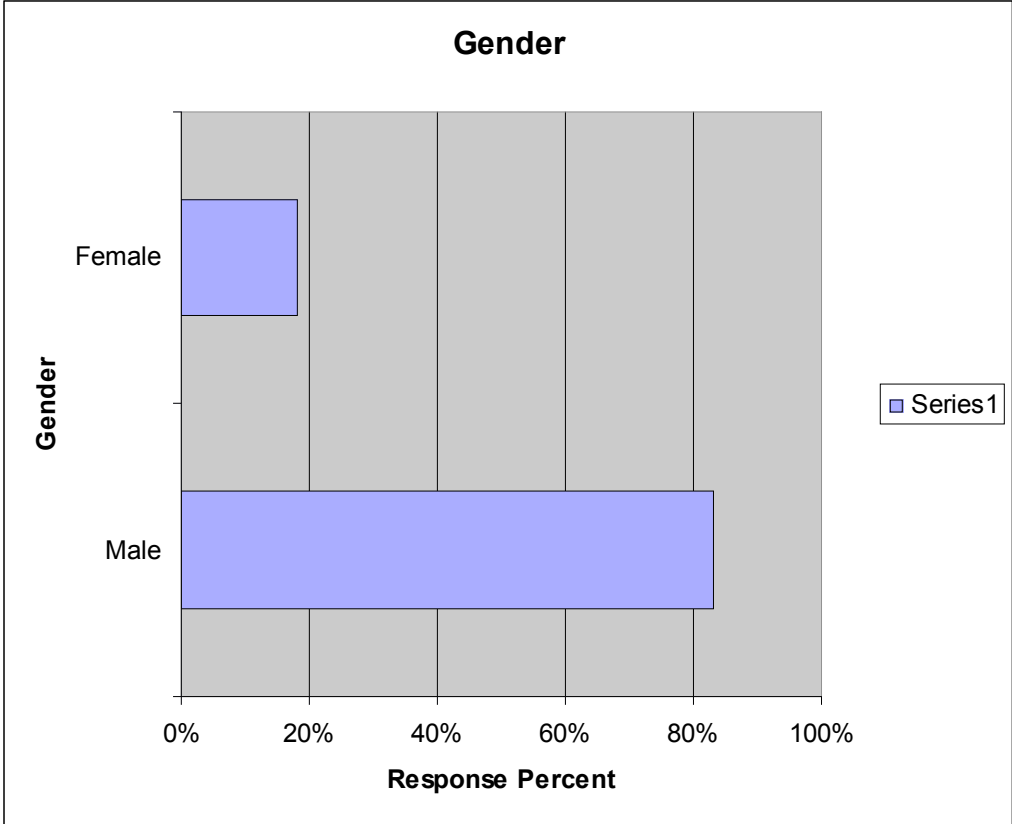
This paper brought up a number of interesting questions, many of which I had neither the time, nor the resources to answer. A much more developed survey targeting specific audiences may clarify more issues that this paper raises. Some additional questions I have are:

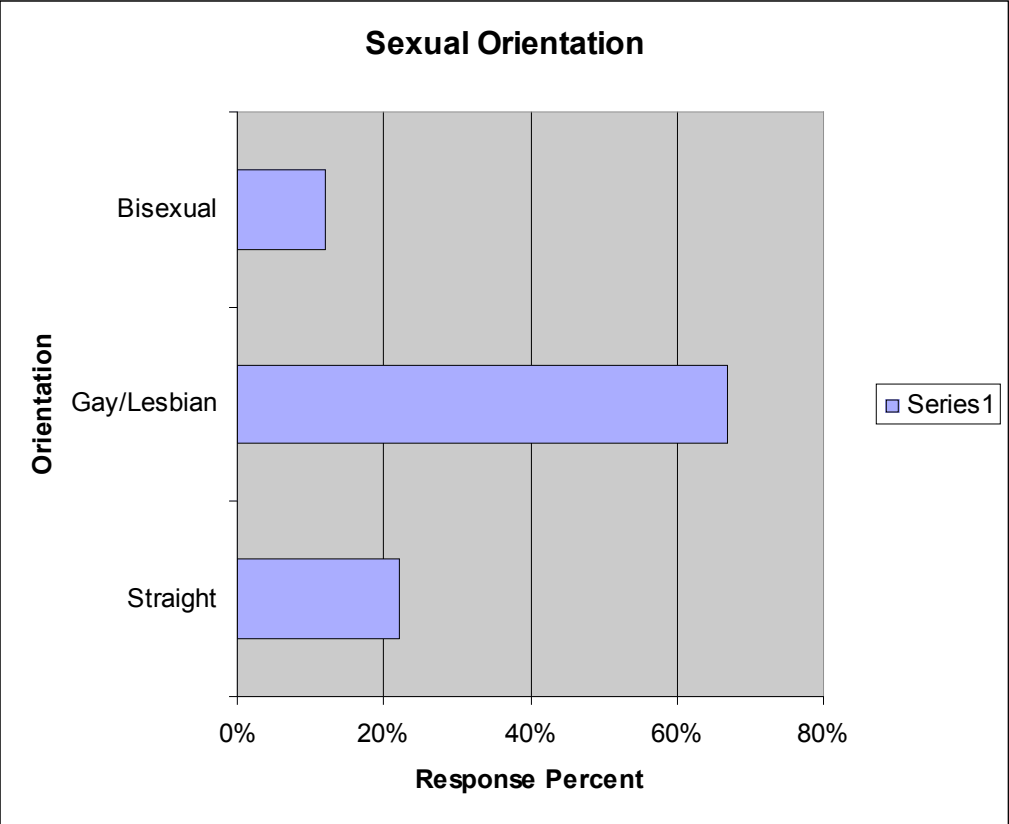
- Analyze the sacred texts of online communities, such as the "Code of Conduct" pages to see what we can learn about the community.

- How do people in foreign countries respond to online dating? Is it different culturally?
- Do males and females approach online dating the same way? If not, how is it different?

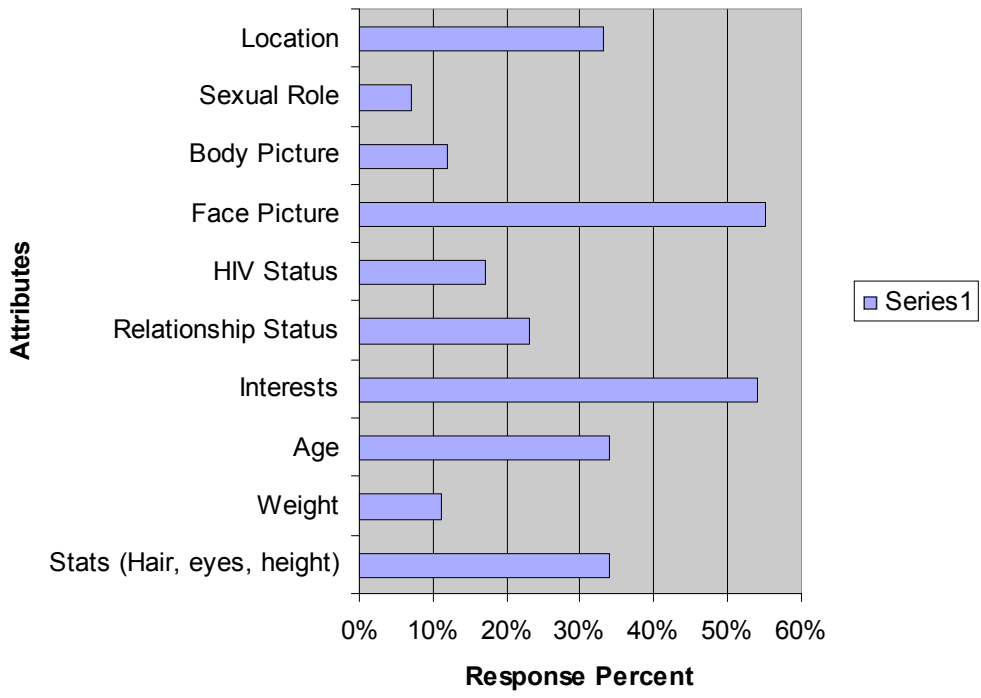
## Appendix 1: Online Dating Survey Statistics



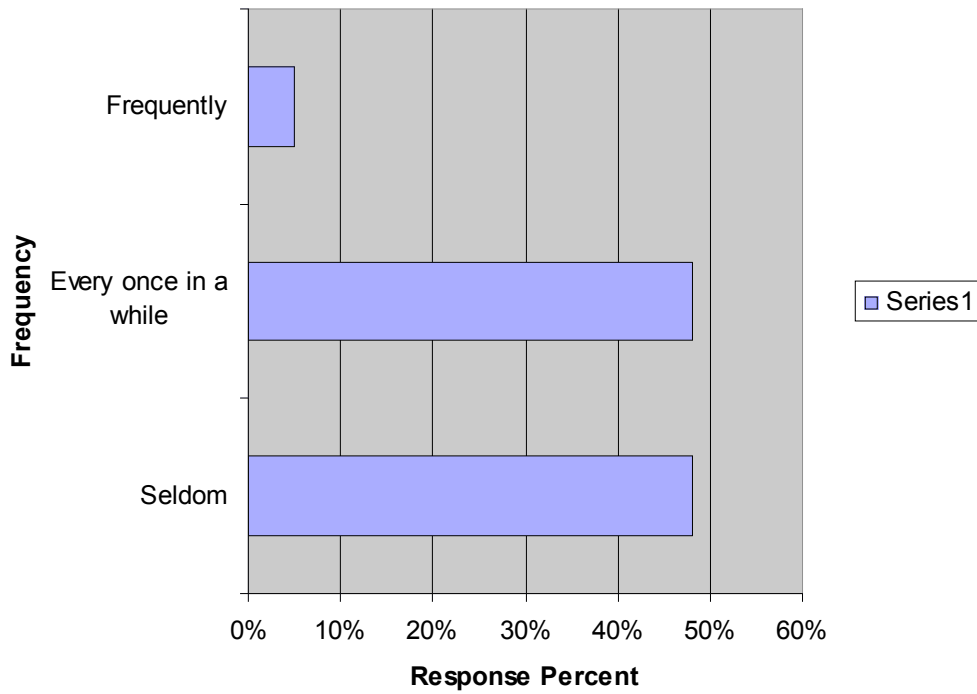


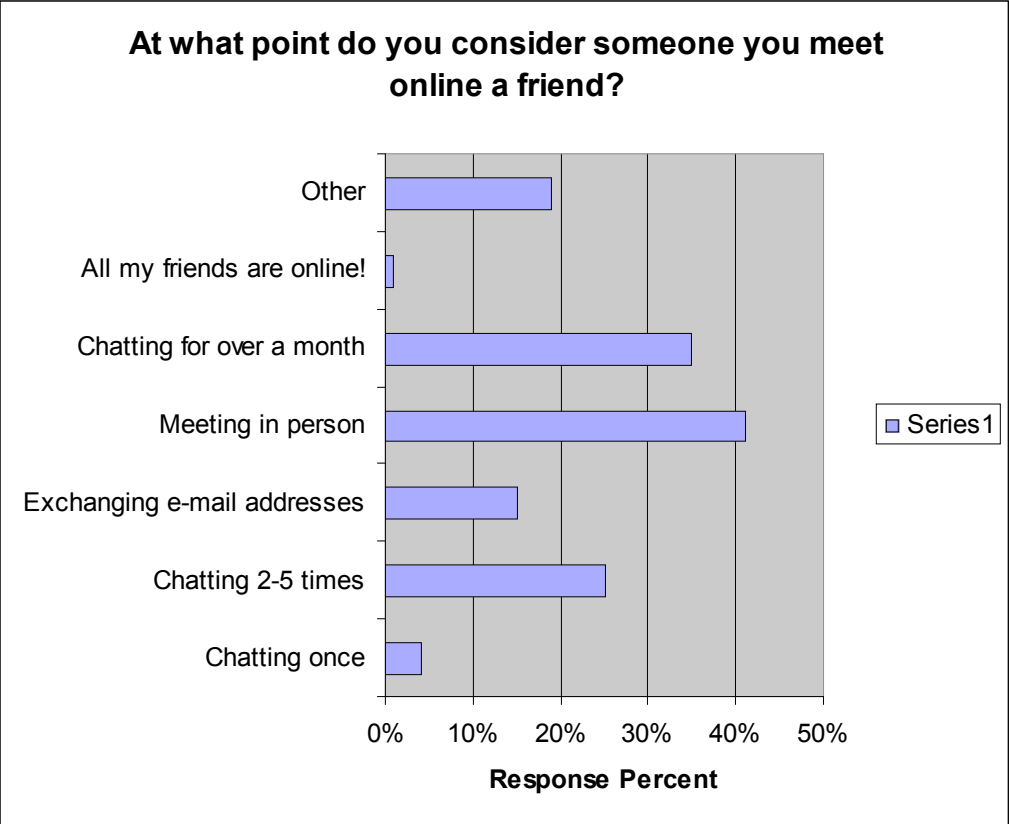


### Significant Attributes in Other's Profiles



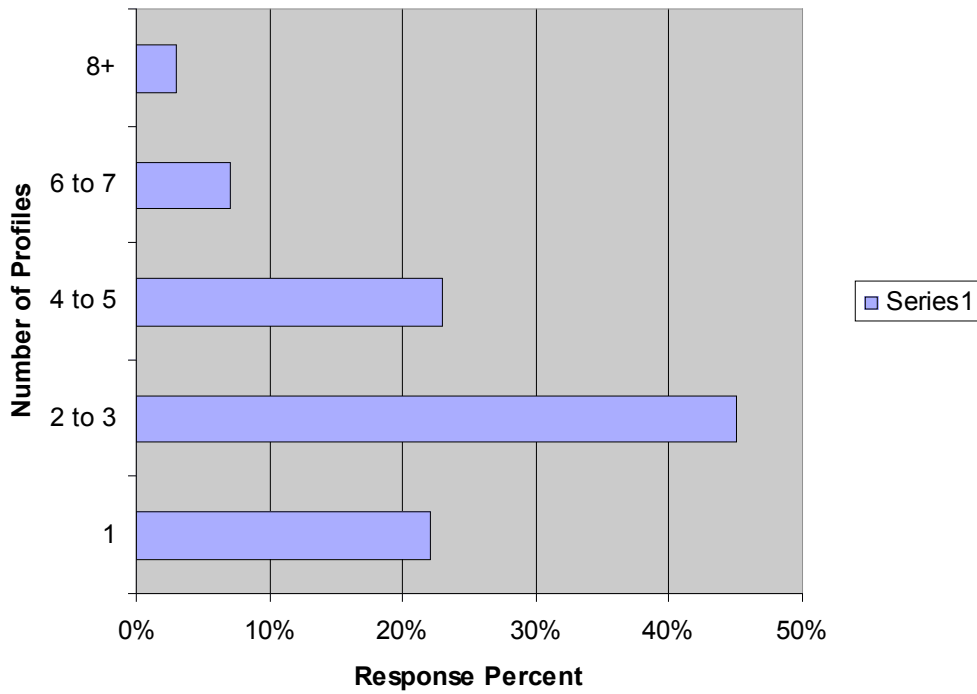
### How often do you meet people online?



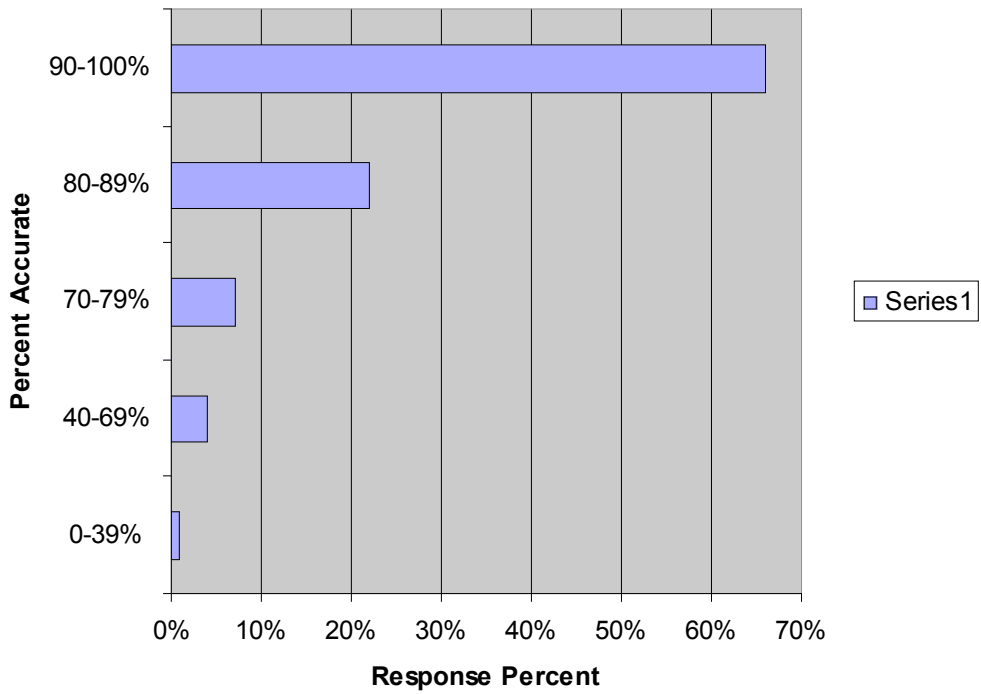


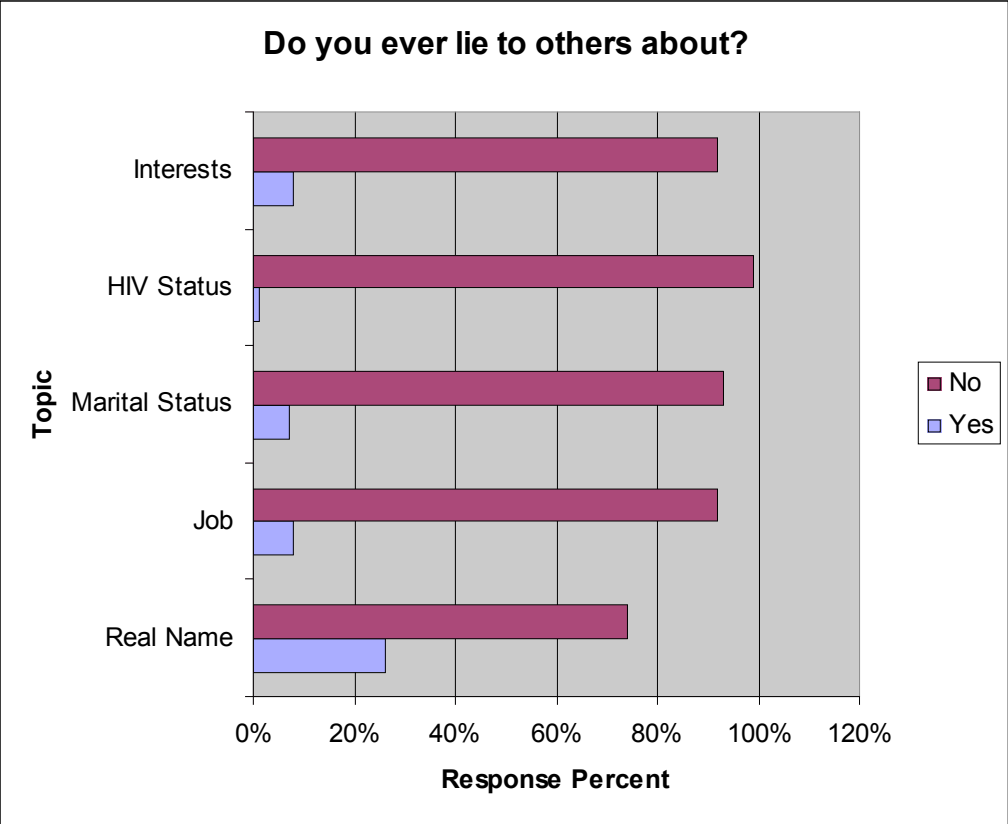
Most of the respondents who marked “Other,” above indicated it was a gut reaction.

### How many online profiles do you have?

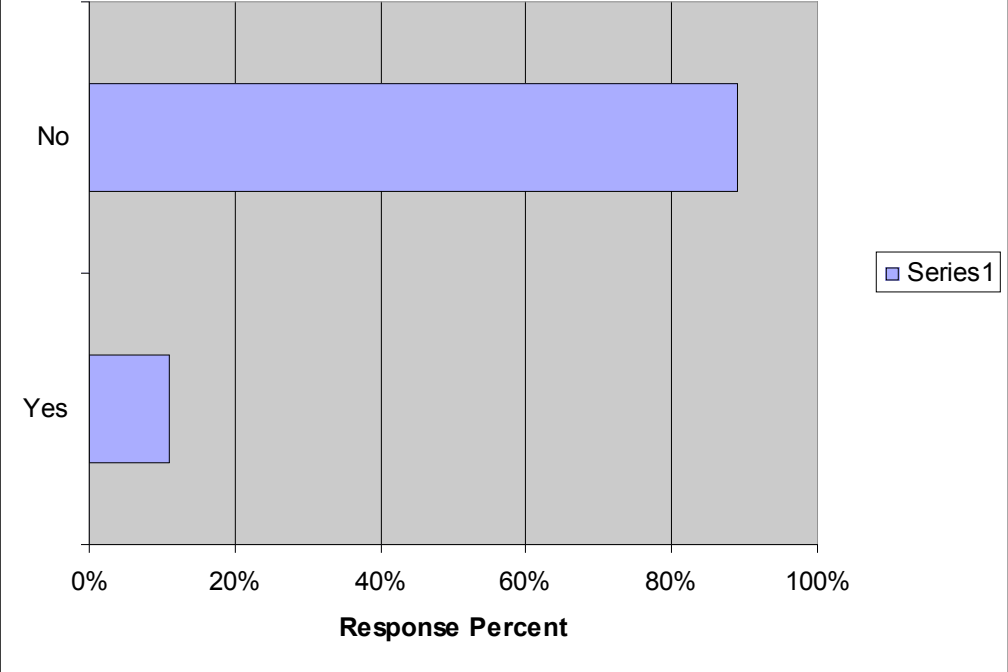


### How accurate is your profile to who you really are?





**Do you ever pretend to be different from who you really are in order to impress someone else?**



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