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If Harry Met Sally Online, Could He Trust Her?

A Discussion of Honesty in Online Dating

The world of dating has changed drastically since Harry met Sally back in 1989. Perhaps most significantly, dating has moved from the real world to the online world. Potential dates are often introduced through websites, instead of in person. However, one can never be quite sure if the description of the online person and the actual real world person will match up. The emergence of internet dating raises a slew of new questions about online honesty and trust.

How can trust be established on an online dating website? How can online daters know that what they perceive about others through their online photos and profiles is accurate information? What, if anything, motivates users of online dating sites to portray themselves honestly? Do better ways exist of promoting online honesty in a dating context than relying on the information in the dating websites that are currently available? What are some of these ways, and what might their shortcomings be? In this paper, I will explore issues of honesty in the world of online dating. I will investigate methods of encouraging truthfulness and accuracy in online dating profiles, and I will apply signaling theory to analyze these methods in terms of how well they achieve their goals.

Online Profile Background Information

An online dating profile typically consists of three main sections: basic facts, photographs and free-form essays. The basic facts section usually involves filling out a form, and asks users simple, straightforward questions about such things as height, weight (or body style), age, place of residence, occupation, and level of education, to name a few. These questions differ slightly from site to site. Often, the user must answer these questions both about himself and about a potential ideal mate. The forms are usually filled out by selecting an answer from a series of options supplied by the site; thus, the user typically cannot be very creative in this section.

The answers to the questions in this section are very straightforward from a signaling perspective as well – they leave little room for interpretation or unintentional signals. For example, if Harry puts down that he is 5’10’’, lives in Boston, and works as a cardiologist, then he probably intends to signal that he is 5’10’’, lives in Boston, and works as a cardiologist – there is not much more that one could infer from this information.

The photograph section is a bit more complicated, in that it can reveal qualities about an online dater that are both intended and unintended. Primarily, the photographs are a signal of the physical appearance of the online dater in question. A photograph may reveal traits such as gender, race, age, hair and eye color, attractiveness and physical fitness. Online daters can use photos strategically to signal other qualities as well, such as what activities they enjoy, how well-traveled they are, and which famous people they have hobnobbed with. This can be accomplished by posting photos of oneself climbing a

mountain, posing in front of the Taj Mahal or Eiffel Tower, or shaking hands with a presidential candidate, for example.

However, these “activity” photos may also give off signals that the poster did not intend. For example, if Sally posts a picture of herself with a group of people eating dinner at T.G.I. Friday’s, her intention may have been to signal that she has a lot of friends who engage in social activity together. But someone who looks at the photo and notices that she is dining at T.G.I. Friday’s might assume that she has a predilection for chain restaurants, and might dismiss her as being too mainstream or lacking discriminating taste. This was probably not the quality that Sally intended to signal by posting this photograph. Thus photos can be used in numerous ways to reveal less apparent (and unintended) qualities than the more immediately obvious ones of gender, race, age, and attractiveness.

The other major component of an online dating profile is the essay, or written, portion. On most dating websites, online daters must answer open-ended questions about themselves and about what they are seeking in a relationship. Many sites simply ask users to describe themselves, the types of people that they would like to meet, and what they are seeking in a relationship. Other sites have more creative questions, such as: “If you could pick one super-human power (such as comic-book characters have) what would you choose?” on matchmaker.com.

The essays are intended to give insight into the personality of the person behind the profile. Like the photo section, the essay section can reveal both intended and unintended qualities about a person. For example, if Harry writes “I definately always enjoy laughing adn crackign funy jokes”(sic), he may intend to signal that he has a good

sense of humor. However, through his spelling mistakes and typos, what he may be signaling unwittingly is that he is careless and does not pay attention to details. But this could also be interpreted as a signal that he is very busy, and has better things to do than to proofread his online dating profile. Thus, like the photo section, the essay section is open to multiple interpretations of signals.

Evaluating Honesty Online

Currently, there is really no way of ascertaining that a person has been honest about himself on an online dating website, simply by viewing that person's profile. A person can lie about age, occupation, place of residence, and even gender. It is very easy to post misleading photos and to write deceptive essays. In fact, it is possible to invent an entirely fictional person, and post this person on a dating website; other online daters will have no way of knowing that this person does not actually exist. Such a feat would be significantly harder to pull off in the offline world – someone would have to assume a false identity. The poser would have to produce consistent signals indicating that he is the fictional person, which might involve wearing elaborate disguises and acting believably as another person. The costs of producing these signals would generally be much higher than they would be online. It is much easier to mislead others about one's identity online than it is in person.

Some websites, such as true.com, claim to do criminal background investigations of everybody who signs up so that each member can at least be sure that he or she is not communicating online with any convicts. True.com also screens all its members against public records to check marital status and ensure that its members are not married. Thus,

if Harry communicated with Sally on true.com, he could probably be reasonably certain that she is not a criminal, and not married. But beyond that, it is still nearly impossible to validate the honesty of one's profile without actually meeting that person. Everything that person claims about himself, from the photos he posts, to his stated occupation, to his supposed age, must be taken on faith as accurate information. Almost all the signals he can produce online are conventional, meaning that they are not inherently reliable. The conventions of society are the only things potentially keeping the signals honest, rather than the costs of producing the signals themselves.

The only assessment signal (a signal that is inherently reliable) that can truly be demonstrated on an online dating website, is the amount of effort one has put into creating a profile. If Sally has posted several photographs, answered every single question on the forms, and provided long, thoughtful, well-written, and correctly spelled responses to the essay questions, she has obviously put a lot of work into creating the initial profile. The information could all be false, deceptive, or even copied and pasted from another's profile, but the fact that it is there in the first place means that she had to spend significant time and effort in putting it there.

Beyond assessing how much effort one has put into one's profile, and knowing that one is likely neither a criminal nor married, how can one evaluate the validity of anything else that people claim about themselves online? One solution is simply to meet in person; as stated earlier, it is much more difficult to consistently produce deceptive signals in person than it is online. But an in-person meeting can be rather costly in terms of time, effort and possibly money as well. Also, given the millions of people who subscribe to online dating sites, how can one determine which members are worth the

costs of meeting in person? Is there a method of ensuring greater honesty and accuracy online, so that one does not waste time meeting people in person who do not measure up to the claims of their online profiles?

Online Reputation Systems Applied to Dating – TrueDater.com

Online transaction sites, such as eBay, have established online reputation systems to keep their buyers and sellers honest about completing transactions with each other. The way it works is that after a transaction has been completed, the buyer and seller involved can leave comments about each other, consisting of a line of text and a numeric rating to indicate whether their experience dealing with their counterpart in the transaction was positive, neutral, or negative. Through this feedback mechanism, each buyer and seller develops an online reputation as to how trustworthy, responsible and pleasant they are in business dealings. The desire to develop a good reputation and the fear of developing a negative reputation combine as motivational factors in encouraging buyers and sellers to be honest, and to follow through with their deals. Possessing a good reputation will presumably lead to future deals for each buyer/seller, and thus, it is in their best interest to make an effort to acquire one.

Could a similar feedback model be applied to online dating websites in an effort to encourage honesty and accuracy in online dating profiles? Ebay's online reputation system appears to work in encouraging honesty in buyers and sellers, but can a system that is applied to the exchange of goods be successful when the goods being exchanged are the people themselves? When the buyers and sellers are buying and selling

themselves, the exchange takes on a whole new dimension, and there are many new factors to consider in an online reputation system for this type of exchange.

One site does exist, in fact, that allows online daters to write reviews of those whom they have met in person through an online dating website. This site, called TrueDater.com, advertises on its main page: “Join thousands who use TrueDater.com to share reviews of whether the information in people’s online dating profiles is true or not.” TrueDater.com lets the user specify the profile name or number of someone he has met through an online dating site, and then write a review of this person, based upon an in-person meeting. The site is completely free for anyone to use. The current participating sites from which online dates can be reviewed include Match.com, American Singles, Jdate, and Yahoo Personals.

Users are supposed to evaluate others in terms of how honest they were in their profiles and whether they matched up in person to how they portrayed themselves online. This mostly applies to the basic facts about a person, but it can also apply to essays and photographs. For example, if Harry claims to be 5’10” in his profile, but only appears to be 5’7” in reality, he would not be a TrueDater. If his picture shows him with a head full of thick, brown hair, but in person, he is balding and going grey, this would also be the type of thing that someone might comment on in a TrueDater review.

A review consists of a “yes” or “no” response to the question “Is this person a TrueDater?” This is followed by an explanation of why the person is a TrueDater or not. The primary intent of the site is to evaluate people objectively in terms of how honestly they portrayed themselves in their profiles. The site is not intended for more subjective reviews of one’s personality or why one online dater did not like another.

In order for TrueDater.com to begin to be effective, people who use the associated online dating services need to be aware of its existence. TrueDater.com provides links to Match.com, Jdate, and Yahoo Personals, but none of these sites reciprocate by providing links back to TrueDater.com. Somehow, TrueDater.com needs to advertise itself to members of its associated sites so that they will take advantage of it.

This differs from eBay, in which the online reputation system is built right into the eBay site itself. Would online daters fare better if each site had its own built-in feedback system, or is a separate review system, like TrueDater.com, preferable in this context? If a system similar to TrueDater.com was built right into an online dating website, it would certainly solve the problem of making sure that participants were aware of it.

In its current form, all the reviews posted on TrueDater.com are anonymous – the identity of the reviewer is never revealed to anyone. The reviewer can optionally choose to enter the email address of the person for whom she is writing a review. This will merely notify the reviewed person that someone has written a review of his profile, and he will be sent a link so that he can read the review if he so chooses. But it will not inform him of who wrote the review, nor will it reveal his email address to anyone else. However, if Sally has recently met Harry on an online dating site, and he receives notification of a review written about him shortly after the meeting, he may be able to figure out who wrote the review. If Sally truly wants to remain anonymous, it might be in her best interest not to notify Harry that she is reviewing him. Harry could learn of the review anyway, simply by logging into the TrueDater.com site, but it would not be blatantly called to his attention.

From a signaling perspective, after someone has already paid the costs of taking the time to meet someone from an online dating site, the subsequent costs of writing a TrueDater.com review of the person are relatively low. The larger cost has already been paid, and it does not take very much time or effort to write a review. But what are the benefits of writing a review?

Suppose that Sally went on a date with Harry and was not particularly interested in or attracted to him, but she found that he did represent himself accurately in his profile. What does Sally have to gain by reviewing Harry positively? In all likelihood, Sally will never see Harry again, and may not particularly care about boosting his reputation for the benefit of his future online dating endeavors. Also, because of the anonymous nature of the reviews, Harry will not necessarily find out that Sally has reviewed him, so he will not even be able to reciprocate by writing a favorable review of Sally.

If Sally posts her review in a timely manner, and if Harry has not met anyone else from the dating website recently, in theory, he could figure out that it was Sally who wrote the most recent review of him. He might appreciate the favor, and respond in kind, by writing Sally a favorable review. But there are really too many hypotheticals here to ensure that Sally will reap any benefit from writing a positive review of Harry.

To examine this particular scenario further, one might ask what would motivate Sally to write a positive review of Harry. Perhaps the knowledge that Sally has done Harry a favor by boosting his reputation provides motivation enough for Sally to write the review. Even without the guarantee that she will reap any rewards in exchange, the act of doing something nice for someone else might make Sally feel good about herself,

and this might be enough of an incentive to motivate Sally to write the review. After all, she has nothing to lose in doing so, and the cost of writing the review is low.

On the other hand, suppose that Sally found that Harry had misrepresented himself in his online profile by claiming to be younger, thinner and taller than he actually appeared in person. Sally may have appreciated having access to this information before she wasted her time in meeting Harry. This might motivate her to review Harry as having not been honest on his profile, in order to forewarn other online daters about him. Of course, if Harry sees the negative review and correctly guesses that Sally is responsible for it, he could reciprocate with a negative review of her, and her reputation would suffer as well. But as in the first scenario, the likelihood of this happening might be too slim to cause Sally to refrain from posting the negative review.

But then again, does Sally have anything to gain by posting a negative review? As with the positive review, the costs are low, but what are the benefits? By exposing Harry as having been inaccurate on his profile, and warning other daters about Harry's deceptiveness, Sally might believe that she is helping the online dating community as a whole (assuming that TrueDater.com is widely used among this population). Sally is also effectively punishing Harry for his dishonesty, and in a sense, exacting revenge on him for wasting her time by providing misleading information about himself. This might be enough to motivate her to post the negative review, especially given the low costs of doing so.

In another scenario, suppose that based upon meeting him, Sally really liked Harry and was very interested in continuing to get to know him and eventually date him exclusively. The desire to ward off her competition might motivate Sally to post a

negative and dishonest review of Harry, in an attempt to prevent other online daters from developing an interest in meeting him. In this situation, Sally would be producing a deceptive signal for her own benefit, though not for the benefit of other online daters. The costs of signaling deceptively in this instance are not really any higher or lower than producing an honest signal, but depending on the motivation behind the signal, the benefits to the signaler might be greater.

Likewise, in a comparable but less likely scenario, if Sally did not care for Harry and found that he was dishonest on his profile, she might still be motivated to recommend him on TrueDater.com in order to mislead her competition into meeting him. This might theoretically leave her with greater opportunities to pursue the more honest online daters, while her competition would waste time meeting dishonest people like Harry. However, in a large enough dating pool, the chances of such a scheme having any noticeable effect are extremely slim, and it is highly unlikely that people would use the system in this manner.

If we assume that the larger purpose behind TrueDater.com is to encourage greater honesty in online dating overall, the whole foundation of the site breaks down if people do not believe that they will be exposed for being dishonest on their profiles. If there are no consequences to lying about oneself in one's profile, then there might be nothing to encourage honesty, and deception will become the norm. The belief that people are willing to write negative reviews of others, and expose them as dishonest, is intended to keep the amount of online deception in check.

Like the eBay online reputation system, TrueDater.com works if people believe that it works. Even if Sally does not actually post a negative review of Harry, the belief

that she will do so if he misrepresents himself might be enough to dissuade Harry from lying in his profile. Thus, even if most people don't actually take the time to write negative reviews, the fear that they will may be enough to make TrueDater.com effective in motivating people to portray themselves honestly in their online profiles.

Another interesting point to consider is that it is entirely possible to write reviews about oneself. If Harry has received a negative review, he could easily follow it up by posting a glowing review of himself. This might help his reputation, or at least attempt to reduce the damage done by the negative review. Of course, if this type of thing is done frequently, it negates the effectiveness of TrueDater.com overall.

Online Recommendation Systems Applied to Dating – GreatBoyfriends.com

Recommendation systems are another method of sharing information with other people online. Several websites exist that implement such recommendation systems – two examples include Amazon.com and Epinions.com. These sites provide users with the opportunity to write reviews of just about anything – products they have tried, books they have read, movies they have seen, etc. Additionally, users can read reviews written by others when they are thinking about buying a particular product, and want to see what others have to say about it.

These recommendation systems differ from online reputation systems in that in a recommendation system, it is not the honesty of the buyer or seller that is being reviewed, but rather, only the product itself. This model disregards the role of the buyer and seller, and focuses solely on the quality of the product. Can we view online daters as products,

or merchandise to be traded, and apply the online recommendation model to online dating?

GreatBoyfriends.com is a site that attempts to do just this. The main page of the site boasts: “GreatBoyfriends.com – where every single man comes with a woman’s stamp of approval.” (The site also includes GreatGirlfriends.com at the same URL, so it works in both directions). The site operates as follows: if Sally knows Harry (or vice-versa) in an offline context, she can write an online recommendation describing Harry’s traits, and why she thinks he would make a great boyfriend. Theoretically, she could be Harry’s friend, sister, mother, or even his ex-girlfriend (assuming the break-up was amicable). The recommendation form includes the same sections as an online dating profile – it has a basic facts section with a form to fill out, some open-ended essay questions, and a place to upload photos of the recommended person. Essentially, Sally, the recommender, would write an online dating profile for Harry. Additionally, the form includes a space for Sally to include some information about herself and her relationship to Harry.

Users of the site can contact Harry, the subject of the profile, and in some cases, they also have the option to contact Sally, the person who wrote the recommendation; it is up to Sally allow this option. This option might be useful if someone is interested in getting more background information about Harry before taking the leap and contacting him directly.

How might GreatBoyfriends.com promote honesty? Why might the profiles on this site tend to be more honest than those in a regular dating site?

First of all, a profile written by a third party might portray its subject more accurately than the subject can portray himself. People sometimes tend to have inflated views of themselves; although they may think they are being honest about themselves, they might tend to exaggerate certain traits and stretch the truth in some instances. In other cases, people can be self-deprecating and humble; they might not be good at selling themselves, or at highlighting their positive features. Thus for both of these situations, a profile written by a third party might paint a more accurate and objective picture of how the subject of the profile truly comes across to others.

Second of all, a third party will have less incentive to be dishonest in writing a profile. On GreatBoyfriends.com, the person who benefits from the profile is the subject of the profile, not the author of it. Unlike the subject, the author has nothing personal at stake, and nothing to gain by writing a deceptive profile. Moreover, writing a deceptive profile is slightly more costly than writing an honest profile, because the author must come up with lies, rather than simply stating what he already knows to be true. Because of the higher costs of deception, it is in the author's best interest to remain honest.

What might motivate Harry to recommend Sally as a great girlfriend in the first place? The site itself gives one source of motivation by offering a promotion: In order to contact anyone else on the site, one must be a member, which costs \$20 a month. However, if one submits a recommendation, then he receives a month of free membership. Thus, Harry might submit a recommendation of Sally more for his own benefit than for hers. How might this promotion impact Harry's tendency to be honest or to deceive?

Suppose that Harry sees several women on GreatGirlfriends.com that he would like to contact. However, he wants to avoid paying the \$20 fee for a month of membership. Additionally, all of his friends and relatives are married or involved in relationships, and none of them is looking to date. Thus, Harry has no one to recommend in order to get his free month. He decides to copy some photographs from another website and post a recommendation of a fictional person whom he claims as his friend, simply to bypass the \$20 fee. In this instance, the website's promotion accomplishes its goal of increasing membership, but it also actually encourages deception in the process.

Again, suppose that Harry sees several women on GreatGirlfriends.com that he would like to contact, and that he wants to avoid the \$20 fee. He ultimately decides that the fee is not worth it, and that he will try to meet women in other ways. Then he notices that by recommending a friend, he can become a member and avoid the fee. Harry has wanted to fix up his friend Sally anyway, as she has been single for a long time. This gives him the perfect opportunity to try to get Sally a date, while trying to get himself a date at the same time. So Harry posts a recommendation of Sally, becomes a free member, and also contacts some women himself. In this scenario, Harry sincerely wants to help his friend, and this website has provided him with the tools to do so. While Harry has no reason to be dishonest in Sally's recommendation, he is primarily motivated by the promotion on the site, not by his desire to create an accurate profile of Sally. While GreatBoyfriends.com's promotion in this case has again encouraged greater use of the site (which ultimately benefits the site), it has not necessarily promoted honesty.

GreatBoyfriends.com might more reliably encourage honesty if it did not offer the free-month promotion. Without the promotion, users of the site would have no reason to

recommend friends other than selfless good will. Aside from the satisfaction that Harry would gain by knowing that his actions have helped his friend Sally, he would have nothing to gain personally from writing the recommendation. If Harry is willing to spend time and effort in writing a detailed profile about Sally with no personal rewards, it is likely that Harry is an altruistic person, and is therefore honest in his review of Sally. It also sends a powerful signal about Sally herself, in that she has enough positive traits to inspire Harry to recommend her selflessly.

The counter scenario here would be if Harry was angry with Sally, and was trying to hurt her, rather than help her. In this case, he might want to write a negative review. His motivation would be one of anger or revenge, rather than selflessness, and it is more likely that the recommendation would be dishonest.

Unfortunately, from the receiver's perspective, upon reading a GreatBoyfriends.com recommendation, there is no way to tell for sure if it is honest or deceptive. The receiver cannot know whether a review has been motivated by selfless admiration, vengeful malice, or the desire to get a free month on the site. Thus, even though GreatBoyfriends.com was initially created so that people would not waste time meeting others who had lied about themselves online, its premise could still backfire and result in dishonest profiles.

Can Harry Trust Sally Online?

What the examples on TrueDater.com and GreatBoyfriends.com have shown us is that although methods can be introduced to encourage honesty online, nothing can really be done to ensure it. There are too many potentially underhanded motivations that people

might have for attempting to deceive others online, and it is not possible to account for all of these in an online format. In the end, it is still necessary for two people to pay the costs of meeting in person before each can truly determine whether the other was honest online.

By restricting communication to an online format, people may initially pay fewer costs in terms of time and effort spent in meeting others. But in order to reliably evaluate the signals that others send online, it becomes necessary to take the communication to an offline setting. The costs of accurately assessing honesty are high, and no perfect online solution exists to lower these costs.

So can Harry trust Sally online? Perhaps, but he will have to meet her in person first to find out for sure.