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## Love Online: A Report on Digital Dating in Canada

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## MAIN FINDINGS

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- Four main social forces appear to be driving the rapid growth of online dating:
  - A growing proportion of the population is composed of singles, the main pool for online dating.
  - Career and time pressures are increasing, so people are looking for more efficient ways of meeting others for intimate relationships.
  - Single people are more mobile due to the demands of the job market, so it is more difficult for them to meet people for dating.
  - Workplace romance is on the decline due to growing sensitivity about sexual harassment.
- 1.1 to 1.2 million Canadians have visited an online dating site.
- The potential for online dating services in Canada is an additional 2.5 to 2.8 million adults.
- While more than 80% of Canadian users of online dating services are single, nearly 18% are married or living common-law.
- In Canada, Internet users are younger, better educated, more likely to be employed in the paid labour force, and more likely to earn higher income than Canadians in general.
- Compared to Internet users in general, online daters are more likely to be male, single, divorced, employed in the paid labour force, and urban.
- Online daters are sociable offline. 24% belong to a religious organization, 41% belong to clubs, 82% visit family or relatives at least once a month, and 53% go out with others for social or leisure activities more than once a week.
- Most people use online dating services mainly to find dates and establish a long-term relationship, not to flirt online, find a marriage partner or find a sexual partner.
- People use online dating services mainly because:
  - It creates the opportunity to meet people one would otherwise never meet.
  - It offers privacy and confidentiality.
  - It is more convenient than other ways of trying to meet people.
- The main perceived disadvantage of online dating is that people sometimes do not tell the truth about themselves.
- A third of people using online dating services have not met anyone face-to-face as a result of their online activities. Nearly half have met 1 to 5 others and the remaining fifth have met more than five other people.
- A quarter of online daters have misrepresented themselves online. There were almost no differences between men and women in their propensity to misrepresent themselves.
- Among online daters who had met other online daters face-to-face:
  - 63% had sex with at least one person they met online;
  - 60% formed at least one long-term friendship;
  - 27% met at least one person they regarded as a “partner;” and
  - 3% met someone they eventually married

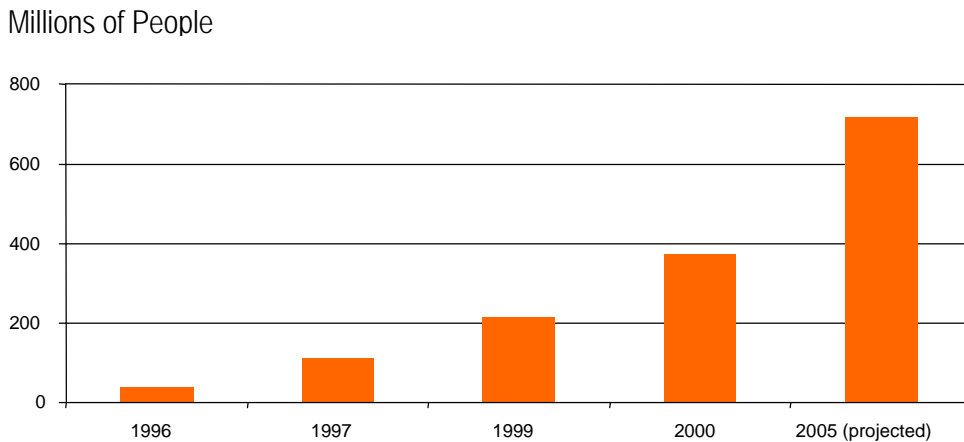
- Online dating seems to be safer than conventional dating. Thus, although 10% of people who went out on a date with someone they met online reported being frightened at least once, this was not sufficiently serious to change their favourable attitude toward online dating. Moreover, the experience of conventional daters is almost certainly worse than that of online daters.
- Embarrassment is not a major factor inhibiting Canadians from using online dating services. The main inhibiting factors are control-related (some people believe it is too risky) and pragmatic (some people do not believe it is effective, others think there are better ways to meet people for dating, and still others have simply not yet found a suitable date). However, if a friend has used an online dating service, and especially if the friend's experience was positive, these inhibitions are considerably reduced.
- Clients of online dating services can increase their sense of control and feeling of safety by:
  - using anonymous e-mail addresses;
  - using broadband communication via web camera where available; and
  - following common-sense dating tips available on the World Wide Web.

# 1. The Birth of a New Society

It is not often that one gets to witness the birth of a new society. Yet the birth of a new society is exactly what is happening on the Internet today.

The society is growing quickly. Numbering 40 million people in 1996, it reached 375 million in 2000. It is conservatively projected to grow to more than 700 million by 2005 (see Figure 1). In 2005, only China and India will be bigger than the society of the Internet.

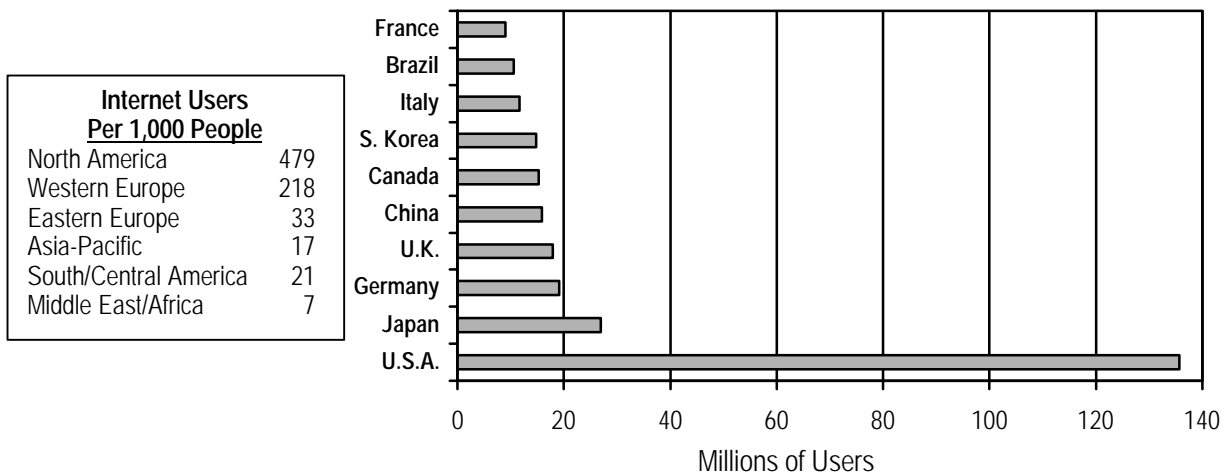
**FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF INTERNET USERS, 1996-2005 (PROJECTED)**



Sources: "Face of the Web..." (2000); "Internet Growth" (1999); "The World's ..." (2000)

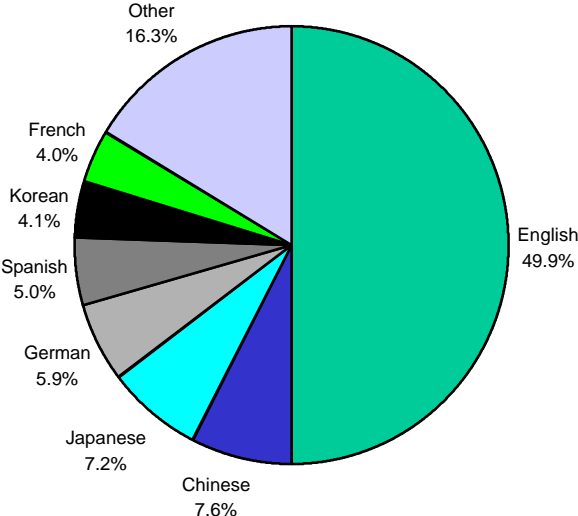
Internet use is disproportionately concentrated in the most highly economically developed countries (see Figure 2). English is far and away the predominant language of the Internet (see Figure 3). However, that is changing. Internet use is growing especially quickly in Asian countries – notably China, Japan, and South Korea. In September 2000, for the first time, just under 50% of sites on the World Wide Web used the English language.

**FIGURE 2: INTERNET USERS WORLDWIDE, DECEMBER 2000**



Sources: "The World's ..." (2000); "Worldwide Internet..." (2000)

FIGURE 3: INTERNET USAGE BY LANGUAGE GROUP, SEPTEMBER 2000



Source: "Global Internet..." (2000)

## 2. But Is It a Society?

A society is a large, enduring network of social interaction that survives by accomplishing five main tasks: (1) preserving order, (2) producing and distributing goods and services, (3) teaching new members, (4) providing its members with a sense of purpose, and (5) replacing old members (Aberle et al., 1950). Bearing this definition in mind, does the Internet form a society? We believe it does.

Internet society accomplishes many of the same tasks as other societies. For example, although control of members is much less centralized and extensive than in other societies, Internet society has established governing structures, such as those that regulate conventions in the use of HTML code, the allocation of domain names, and user behaviour on specific sites. Similarly, although e-commerce is still only a fraction of economic activity in the world of bricks and mortar, it is growing much more quickly than the economy as a whole. Meanwhile, distance education is becoming increasingly popular (some universities already offer entire degrees online) and the Internet has become an important agent of informal socialization. Thus, the first three tasks of an enduring society – preserving order, producing and distributing goods and services, and teaching new members – are all performed by Internet society.

So is society's fourth task: providing members with a sense of purpose. More precisely, Internet society provides its members with *many* senses of purpose by enabling social interaction in a wide variety of contexts.

Today, Internet users interact socially by exchanging text, images, and sound via e-mail, Internet phone, video conferencing, computer-assisted work groups, mailing lists, and chat groups. Some forms of computer-assisted interaction operate in delayed time. "A" sends a message to "B." "B" receives the message when he or she logs on, responding when convenient. For example, as of December 2000, people had created about 30,000 "Usenet newsgroups" and 80,000 "mailing lists" that allow delayed computer-assisted interaction on defined subjects ("Liszt's Usenet...", 2000). Some of these discussion groups focus on particle physics. Others are devoted to banjos, lawyer jokes, Russian politics, Francophone culture, sadomasochism, and just about every other human activity imaginable. Each discussion group is composed of tens, hundreds or thousands of individuals.

Other forms of computer-assisted interaction operate in real time; people communicate by means of "instant messaging." As of December 2000, there were about 25,000 "IRC chat channels" functioning on the Internet ("Liszt's Usenet...", 2000). Most have small memberships. Others are very large, commercial operations. The largest IRC chat channel, ICQ, claims that 86 million people around the world had logged on by the end of December 2000 ("ICQ.com," 2000).

The proliferation of computer-assisted communication in delayed and real time has resulted in the creation of "virtual communities." Virtual communities are associations of people, scattered across the country or the planet, who communicate via computer and modem about subjects of common interest. Membership in virtual communities is fluid but the communities endure. They are self-governing bodies with their own rules and norms of "netiquette" (McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith, 1995; Sudweeks, McLaughlin, and Rafaeli, 1999).

For example, one of the earliest, and therefore well-studied, forms of virtual community is the MUD or "multiple user dimension." A MUD is a computer programs that allow thousands of people to role-play and engage in a sort of collective fantasy. These programs define the aims and rules of the virtual community and the objects and spaces it contains. Users log on to the MUD from their PCs around the world and define their character – their identity – any way they wish. They interact with other users in real time, either by exchanging text messages or by having their "avatars" (graphical representations) act and speak for them. The first MUD was created in 1979 at the University of Essex in England. In April 2000, there were more than 1,600 MUDs worldwide and perhaps a million MUD users ("The MUD Connector," 2000).

MUD users form social relationships. They exchange confidences, give advice, share resources, get emotionally involved, and talk sex. Although their true identities are usually concealed, they sometimes decide to meet and interact in real life.



Some people may dismiss all this as yet another computer game played mainly by bored college students, a sort of high-tech version of *Dungeons and Dragons*. The fact is, however, that a large and growing number of people are finding that virtual communities affect their identities in profound ways (Dibbell, 1993). Specifically, because virtual communities allow people to interact using concealed identities, MUD users are free to assume new identities and are encouraged to discover parts of themselves they were formerly unaware of. In virtual communities, shy people can become bold, normally assertive people can become voyeurs, old people can become young, straight people can become gay, men can become women.

Take Doug, a Midwestern college junior interviewed by MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle. Doug plays four characters distributed across three different MUDs: a seductive woman, a macho cowboy type, a rabbit who wanders its MUD introducing people to each other, and a fourth character "I'd rather not even talk about because my anonymity there is very important to me. Let's just say that I feel like a sexual tourist." Doug often divides his computer screen into separate windows, devoting a couple of windows to MUDs and a couple to other applications. This allows him, in his own words, to

*split my mind . . . I can see myself as being two or three or more. And I just turn on one part of my mind and then another when I go from window to window. I'm in some kind of argument in one window and trying to come on to a girl in a MUD in another, and another window might be running a spreadsheet program or some other technical thing for school . . . And then I'll get a real-time message . . . that's RL [real life] . . . RL is just one more window . . . and it's not usually my best one (quoted in Turkle, 2001: 52).*

Turkle (2001: 52) comments:

*[I]n the daily practice of many computer users, windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system. The self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times, something that a person experiences when, for example, she wakes up as a lover, makes breakfast as a mother, and drives to work as a lawyer. The life practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time . . . MUDs . . . offer parallel identities, parallel lives.*

In the 1980s, most observers believed that social interaction by means of computer would be restricted to the exchange of information (for a review and critique of this literature, see Wellman et al., 1996). It turns out these observers were wrong. As MUDs illustrate, Internet society can provide its members with a sense of purpose, giving them new freedom to shape their selves as they choose.

### 3. The Rise of Online Dating

The fifth task of any enduring society involves replacing old members. That is, people ensure the survival of their society by dating, courting, forming long-term offline relationships, and reproducing. With respect to this task, too, Internet society is now beginning to measure up to other societies. Online dating is a growth industry, and cases of online relationships resulting in long-term relationships are increasingly common.

Online dating services are only about five years old. Wherever the Internet extends, people now use these services. For example, China's Xinhua News Agency recently ran a story about two handicapped people, one in China and the other in California, who met thanks to an online dating service and eventually married ("Internet Dating...", 2000). By the middle of 2000, the seven largest online dating sites on the Internet boasted over 12 million registered members and many more "guests" or "visitors." Of these seven large sites, four are based in the U.S. The U.K., Israel, and Canada host the other three large sites. The Canadian site, Webpersonals, and its associated Womanline.com and Manline.com sites, have more than one million members, about a quarter of them Canadian residents. Advertising revenues aside, membership subscriptions generate up to CAD \$450,000 per month per million registered members. *Business Start-Ups* magazine ranked online dating as one of the top five business ideas of 2000 and beyond ("Market Overview," 2000; "Mediametrix's...", 2000; "DatingClub.com...", 2000; Rogers, 2000; "uDate.com...", 2000).

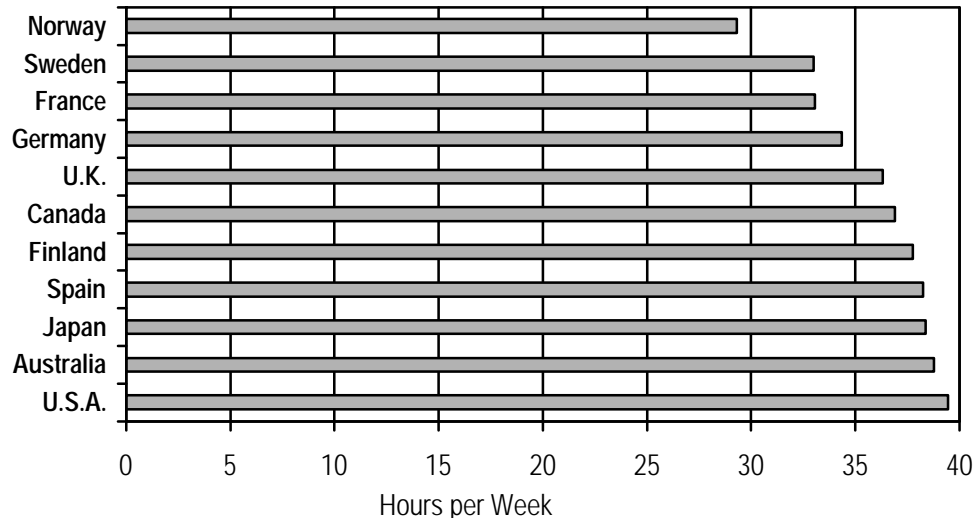
How does an online dating site work? Typically, any Internet user may browse the ads free of charge. However, to place an ad and interact with others, one must pay to become a site member. Some sites charge a monthly fee while others operate on a fee-per-use basis. Ads include text and an optional photograph and sound recording of the member. Members may correspond by e-mail or instant messaging.

Members create a public identity – a name by which others may identify them and a user profile by which others may determine their level of interest in specific individuals. The user profile usually includes such information as the member's sex, age, locale, marital status, type of relationship preferred (e.g., romantic involvement, marriage, casual sex, online sex), sexual preferences, and so forth. The online dating service also categorizes this information and allows members to search for other members with specific characteristics. For example, one may search for heterosexual single Christian men between the ages of 35 and 44 living within a 50 km. radius of one's home and wanting a romantic involvement. Some smaller sites are devoted exclusively to Christians, blacks, Jews, gay men, and so forth (Briscoe, 2000; Crary, 2000).

Four main social forces appear to be driving the rapid growth of online dating:

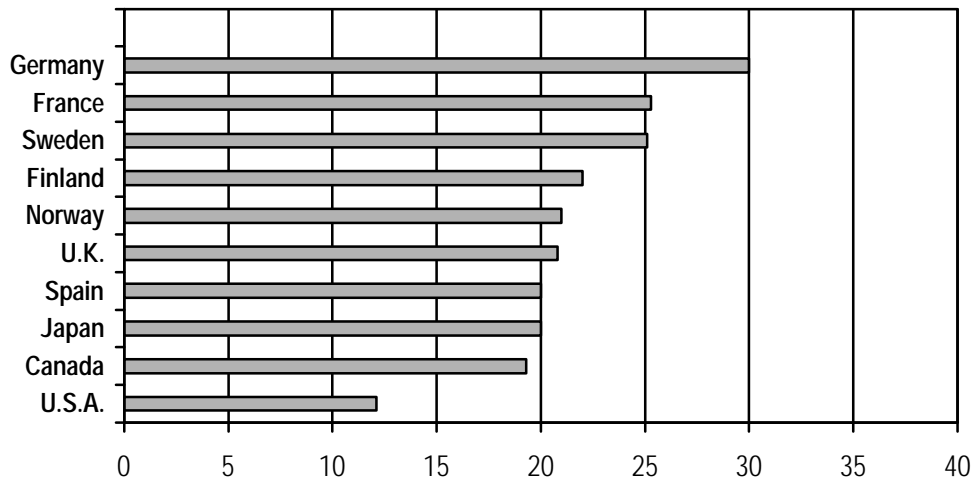
- *A growing proportion of the population is composed of singles.* Statistics Canada divides the Canadian population into four categories by marital status: married (including common-law unions), single, widowed, and divorced. Of these four categories, "married" has been growing slowest and "divorced" has been growing fastest for decades. Between 1995 and 1999, the number of married Canadians grew by 3.3%. The number of single, widowed, and divorced Canadians grew by 4.4%. With more single, widowed, and divorced people in the population, the dating and marriage markets have grown apace (Statistics Canada, 2000d).
- *Career and time pressures are increasing.* In the 1970s, many observers predicted the advent of a "leisure society" by the end of the century. Instead, people are working longer hours (Schor, 1992). Among the world's rich countries, Canada ranks in the middle in terms of hours worked per week and near the bottom in terms of paid vacation days (see Figures 4 and 5). According to a 1998 Statistics Canada survey of more than 11,000 Canadians over the age of 14, a third of Canadians identify themselves as "workaholics" and more than half worry they do not have enough time to spend with their family and friends. Nearly a fifth of Canadians reported "severe time stress" in 1998, up significantly since 1992 (Statistics Canada, 1999). Increased pressure from work makes it more difficult to find the time to engage in conventional dating methods, such as meeting eligible partners in athletic clubs and bars. People are looking for more efficient ways of meeting. Online dating has emerged as a credible alternative.

FIGURE 4: AVERAGE HOURS WORKED PER WEEK, SELECTED COUNTRIES, 1977-98



Source: "Mild Labor..." (1999)

FIGURE 5: AVERAGE PAID VACATION DAYS PER YEAR, SELECTED COUNTRIES, 1997-98



Source: "Mild Labor..." (1999)

- *Single people are more mobile. According to the 1996 census, more than a fifth of Canadians were not living in the same census subdivision as five years earlier. Nearly 7% said they had moved from another province or another country (Statistics Canada, 2000h). These numbers reflect the fact that single people, who compose nearly 80% of online daters, form an increasingly flexible work force, more willing to uproot and relocate in response to job market demands than in the past.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a growing number of jobs require frequent travel. As a result of increasing geographical mobility, single Canadians are finding it more difficult to meet other people for dating and sustained intimate relationships. Online dating is increasingly seen as a possible solution to this problem.*
- *Workplace romance is on the decline. Due to growing sensitivity about sexual harassment in the workplace, it is more difficult to initiate workplace romances. Increasingly, people understand that sexual or romantic overtures may be interpreted as sexual harassment and result in disciplinary action or suspension. This encourages the search for alternative milieux in which to meet people for sexual and romantic involvements. Again, online dating benefits (Luck and Milich, 2000).*

In short, while demand for dates is on the increase, social circumstances often make it difficult for people to find good dating partners. Thus, a 1999 Toronto Sun/COMPAS poll found that fully 52% of Toronto's singles were not dating, while 75% said they are finding it difficult or very difficult to find a good dating partner (Mandel, 1999). This suggests a large growth potential for online dating. Let us now determine more precisely the size of this potential market in Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> Dual careers may make it more difficult to relocate so it is questionable whether married people are more mobile.

## 4. The Potential of Online Dating in Canada

A telephone survey of 1,200 Canadians conducted 7-29 November 2000 for MSN.CA suggests that the potential for online dating in Canada is about 3.1 million unmarried people (MSN.CA, 2000c; see the Methodological Appendix for details regarding the survey). We arrived at this figure by multiplying the number of unmarried Canadians over the age of 17 by the percentage of Canadians who use the Internet at least once a month. The figure excludes the northern territories, which were not surveyed. For 19 out of 20 samples this size, the maximum margin of error is  $\pm 2.8\%$ .

For two reasons, the figure of 3.1 million is a conservative estimate. First, it is based on the finding that 39.1% of Canadian adults are Internet users. (For purposes of the survey, Internet users were defined as people who used the Internet at least once in the month preceding the survey or normally use the Internet but did not do so in the past month due to illness, vacation, etc.) However, a recent Statistics Canada survey found that 41.8% of Canadians are Internet users (Dickinson and Ellison, 2000). Using the higher Statistics Canada estimate, the primary pool for online dating services is more than 3.3 million people. Since the proportion of Internet users in the Canadian population is likely to grow in coming years, even this figure understates future potential.

A second reason why 3.1 million is a conservative estimate is that it refers only to unmarried Canadians. Yet some married people also use online dating services. In a separate survey of 6,581 Canadian users of online dating services conducted on 31 November and 5 December 2000, we found that 17.7% of users of online dating services are married or live common-law (MSN.CA, 2000b; see the Methodological Appendix for details regarding the survey). Taking into account married users, the potential for online dating services in Canada is between 3.7 and 3.9 million people, depending on whether one uses the MSN.CA or Statistics Canada estimate of Internet use.

While 3.7 to 3.9 million people represent a large potential pool, it must be emphasized that it is largely untapped. The MSN.CA telephone survey found that 13% of respondents had "read the personal or dating ads" online or "ever checked out online dating services." This translates to about 1.1 to 1.2 million Canadian adults. Thus, between 2.5 and 2.8 million potential users of online dating services have never visited an online dating service.

The Statistics Canada survey (Dickinson and Ellison, 2000) provides provincial breakdowns of Internet use that allow the calculation of potential pool size by region (see Table 1). By far the largest potential pool for Internet dating services is in Ontario (about 1.6 million adults). Quebec, the Prairies, and British Columbia each have potential pools of about 600,000 to 750,000 adults. Atlantic Canada has a potential pool of nearly 300,000 adults.

**Table 1 Online Dating Potential by Region**

Region	Unmarried 18+ Population <sup>a</sup>	Internet Users as % of Population <sup>b</sup>	Market (Unmarried)	Market (Total) <sup>c</sup>
Atlantic	619,381	38.7	239,700	282,127
Quebec	1,922,081	33.1	636,209	748,818
Ontario	3,042,562	44.5	1,353,940	1,593,587
Prairies	1,348,254	45.9	618,849	728,385
B. C.	1,059,742	48.1	509,736	599,959
Total	7,992,020		3,358,434	3,952,876

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Estimate based on 1996 census data for 18+ population and 1996-2000 population growth of 3.63%.

<sup>b</sup> Per cent of respondents who said they used the Internet at least once in the past month according to the Statistics Canada (2000) survey.

<sup>c</sup> Assumes the married pool is 17.7% of the total.

## 5. A Socio-demographic Profile of Canadian Online Daters

The two MSN.CA surveys show that online daters differ in significant ways from the general Canadian population and from Canadian Internet users who do not use online dating services (see Table 2).

As we have seen, people who use the Internet at least once a month comprise about 40% of the Canadian population. However, Internet users are younger, better educated, more likely to be employed in the paid labour force, and more likely to earn higher income than Canadians in general. Specifically, for Canadians over the age of 17:

- The most striking age difference is in the 60+ age cohort, which comprises more than a fifth of the Canadian population but only 4% of Internet users.
- More than 37% of Internet users have attended university. This compares to 24% of the Canadian population as a whole and only 16% of the Canadian population who do not use the Internet.
- 61% of Canadians are employed in the paid labour force, compared to 78% of Internet users.
- Half of Internet users have an annual individual income of \$40,000 a year or more. In contrast, average individual income in Canada was \$24,148 in 1996. Average income for unattached individuals was \$25,784 in 1998.

Using the MSN.CA Internet Dating Online Survey, it is also possible to compare online daters with Internet users who are not online daters. This comparison shows that the two groups are similar in some respects but different in others. Online daters are more likely to be male, single, divorced, employed, and urban. They are also more likely to enjoy higher income. Specifically:

- While 7% more women than men use the Internet but do not use online dating services, fully 37% more men than women use online dating services. For every woman using online dating services, there are more than two men.
- Single people comprise 80% of online daters but only 29% of Internet users who do not use online dating services.
- People who have ever been divorced comprise 31% of online daters but only 15% of Internet users who do not use online dating services.
- Online daters are somewhat more likely to be employed (85%) than are Internet users who do not use online dating services (78%).
- Online daters are also likely to live in the suburbs or the core of major urban areas (70%) than are Internet users who do not use online dating services (55%).
- Finally, online daters earn somewhat more than Internet users who do not use online dating services. About 55% of online daters earn \$40,000 a year or more, compared to about 50% of Internet users who do not use online dating services.

**Table 2 Social and Demographic Characteristics of Online Daters, Internet Non-daters, and Canadian Population (in per cent)**

	Online Daters	Internet Users / Non-Online Daters <sup>a</sup>	Canadian Population <sup>b</sup>
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	68.3	46.4	49.5
Female	31.7	53.6	50.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Age</b>			
18-25	15.8	18.8	12.3
25-29	17.3	11.6	8.9
30s	33.8	28.3	21.1
40s	23.0	25.1	20.9
50s	8.3	11.8	15.2
60+	1.6	4.3	21.6
Total	99.8 <sup>c</sup>	100.0	100.0
<b>Education<sup>d</sup></b>			
Less than high school	2.8	2.5	31.7
High school graduate	14.5	22.2	14.7
Some college to college graduate	53.5	38.1	29.3
Some university to university graduate	19.1	26.8	20.0
More than one university degree	10.0	10.3	4.3
Total	99.9 <sup>c</sup>	99.9 <sup>c</sup>	100.0
<b>Marital Status<sup>e</sup></b>			
Single	80.2	29.1	
Married and common-law	17.7	70.0	
Widowed	2.1	1.0	
Total	100.0	100.1 <sup>c</sup>	
<b>Ever Divorced</b>			
Yes	31.3	14.5	
No	68.7	85.5	
Total	100.0	100.0	
<b>Employed<sup>d</sup></b>			
Yes	85.0	77.9	60.7
No	15.0	22.1	39.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Annual Income<sup>d</sup></b>			
<20K	10.9	16.4	
20-nearly 40	34.7	34.2	
40-nearly 60	28.1	28.1	
60-nearly 80	14.4	12.6	
80-nearly 100	5.5	6.0	
100+	6.5	2.9	
Total	100.1 <sup>c</sup>	100.2 <sup>c</sup>	average income for individuals = \$ 24, 148

Table 2, cont'd.

	Online Daters	Internet Users / Non-Online Daters <sup>a</sup>	Canadian Population <sup>b</sup>
<b>Urban-Rural Residence</b>			
Rural or farming	4.8	12.6	
Small town far from major city	9.4	11.3	
Small town near major city	15.5	20.7	
Suburb of major city	40.9	28.5	
Core of major city	29.4	26.8	
Total	100.0	99.9 <sup>c</sup>	
<b>Province/Territory</b>			
Newfoundland	3.6	2.1	1.8
Prince Edward Island	3.1	0.6	0.5
Nova Scotia	2.3	2.9	3.1
New Brunswick	1.8	2.7	2.5
Quebec	8.0	25.8	24.0
Ontario	39.0	37.9	37.9
Manitoba	3.6	4.0	3.7
Saskatchewan	2.1	3.3	3.3
Alberta	14.2	8.9	9.7
British Columbia	19.0	12.0	13.2
Northern territories	3.2	--	0.3
Total	99.9 <sup>c</sup>	100.2 <sup>c</sup>	100.0

Sources: MSN.CA (2000b; 2000c); Statistics Canada (n.d.; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2000d; 2000f).

- <sup>a</sup> Telephone survey only.
- <sup>b</sup> 2000 population data unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>c</sup> Does not equal 100 due to rounding.
- <sup>d</sup> 1996 population data.
- <sup>e</sup> 1999 population data.



## 6. Online Daters are Sociable, Self-confident Offline

One of the enduring myths about avid computer users is that they are social isolates in the real world, locked in their basements alone for hours on end, windows tightly sealed and shuttered. Similarly, online daters are sometimes characterized as “losers” or “lonely hearts,” people who are unable to form normal social ties and enjoy normal social interaction. In this view, they pursue online dating out of desperation.

There may have been some truth to these observations four or five years ago, when online dating was in its infancy (Klement, 1997). However, the MSN.CA online dating survey found little evidence to support these generalizations today. It turns out that, at the end of 2000, Canadian online daters are sociable and self-confident. Offline, they tend to be joiners of organizations. They often visit family members. They frequently engage in social and leisure activities with others. These findings are consistent with the results of other recent Canadian research on avid computer users. It turns out that the myth of the socially isolated computer enthusiast is just that – a myth (Hampton and Wellman, 1999; 2000; Wellman and Hampton, 1999).

About 30% of Canadians claim to belong to churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Membership is concentrated among people 35 years of age and older, and especially among people 55 years of age and older. Only about 15% of Canadians under the age of 35 say they attend church, etc., weekly (Bibby, 2001: 128, 132). Set beside these figures, it is surprising that almost 24% of online daters say they belong to churches, etc. That is because more than half of online daters are under the age of 35, compared to just 29% of the population. It seems that online daters are more likely to belong to churches, etc., than non-online daters of the same age.

Additional evidence of sociability comes from a question on club membership. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were “a member of any clubs, such as a bridge club or athletic club, within the past year.” Fully 41% of respondents said they belonged to such clubs. Of those who said they belonged to such clubs, 61% said they belonged to more than one. In striking contrast, a recent Statistics Canada study shows that only 18% of Canadians aged 15 and over belonged to one or more “sports and recreation organizations” (Hall et al., 1998: 43).

When respondents were asked how often they visit family or distant relatives in a typical month, only 18% replied that they do not visit them even once. This cannot be considered a high figure in a society with high geographical mobility; in Canada today, people often live a considerable distance from family members and cannot visit regularly. More than 82% of online daters visit family or relatives at least once a month and 39% visit them weekly or more often (see Table 3).

Finally, respondents were asked how often they go out with one or more people for social or leisure activities in a typical month. Only 4% said they typically do not go out with others at all. Roughly speaking, a quarter of respondents go out with others 0 to 2 times per month, a quarter go out 3 to 4 times a month, a quarter go out 5 to 8 times a month, and a quarter go out 9 or more times a month. So, on average, online daters go out for social and leisure activities with others a lot. Some 53% typically go out with others for social or leisure activities more than once a week (see Table 4).

It is interesting to compare these results with comparable data from the MSN.CA telephone survey. About 86% of respondents in the telephone survey said they have never read personal or dating ads on the Web or “checked out” an online dating site. These people are much more likely than online daters to belong to a religious organization (40% vs. 24%) and visit their families and relatives one or more times per week (51% vs. 39%; see Table 3). However, Internet users who have never read personal or dating ads on the Web or checked out an online dating site are somewhat *less* likely than online daters to belong to a club (37% vs. 42%). They are also somewhat less likely to go out once a week or more for social or leisure activities (68% vs. 65%; see Table 4). Thus, online daters are less sociable in terms of religious and family activities but more sociable in terms of friendship and intimate activities.

Sociable people tend to be self-confident. It should therefore come as no surprise that online daters are, in general, a very self-confident group.

Specifically, 70% of respondents said they would feel comfortable making a speech in public. Of these, 45% said they would feel very comfortable. Only 30% of respondents said they would feel uncomfortable making a speech in public. Of these, 36% said they would feel very uncomfortable.

Respondents were also asked about how others see them: "In terms of your personality, how do you think that people who know you well would rank your self-confidence, say, on a scale from 0 to 6, where 0 is not self-confident and 6 is very self-confident?" Only 5% of respondents answered in the "not self-confident" range (0-2). Another 10% gave a neutral response (3). Fully 86% of respondents answered in the "self-confident" range (4-6).

In terms of self-confidence, Internet users who have not read personal or dating ads on the Web and have not checked out an online dating site are slightly more self-confident than online daters. Seventy-five per cent of Internet users who have not read personal or dating ads on the Web or checked out an online dating site said they would feel comfortable making a speech in public and 89% said that others regard them as self-confident.

In sum, the picture that emerges from these data goes a long way toward dispelling the myth of the online dater as a social isolate lacking social skills. On the whole, online daters are joiners. They often socialize with family and friends. They see themselves as self-confident. And they believe others see them that way. Although Internet users who have not read personal or dating ads on the Web or checked out an online dating site differ from online daters in some ways, the two groups differ little in terms of overall sociability and self-confidence.

**Table 3** "How often in a typical month do you visit family or distant relatives?" (in per cent)

	Online Daters	Internet Users Who Are Not Online Daters <sup>a</sup>
0 visits	17.9	10.2
1 visit	20.9	17.2
2-3 visits	22.6	21.4
4-5 visits	17.8	24.1
6+ visits	20.8	27.1
Total	100.0	100.0

<sup>a</sup> Telephone survey only.

Source: MSN.CA (2000b; 2000c).

**Table 4** "Roughly how often do you go out for social or leisure activities with one or more people in a typical month?" (in per cent)

	Online Daters	Internet Users Who Are Not Online Daters <sup>a</sup>
0-2 times	23.2	26.3
3-4 times	24.1	27.2
5-8 times	28.8	24.1
9+ times	23.9	22.4
Total	100.0	100.0

<sup>a</sup> Telephone survey only.

Source: MSN.CA (2000b; 2000c).

## 7. Motivations for Using Online Dating Services

Let us now consider the specific reasons online daters give for using online dating services. In the surveys, we presented respondents with six possible reasons. We asked them to indicate on a scale of 0 to 6 how often they used online dating services for each reason. Multiple responses were allowed. Table 5 summarizes the data for the 6,581 people who participated in the online survey.

The main conclusion we draw from Table 5 is that people use online dating services mainly to find dates and establish a long-term relationship. Thus, 78% of the online survey respondents said they often use online dating services to meet someone. The second most frequently cited reason for using such services is to find someone for a long-term relationship. Fifty-eight per cent of respondents said they often use online dating services for that purpose. The third most frequently cited reason for visiting online dating sites is to find sexual partners. Forty-three per cent of respondents said they often use such services to find sexual partners. Smaller percentages of respondents often use online dating services out of curiosity or fun with no intention of making face-to-face contact (41%), for casual online chatting and flirting (36%) or to find a possible marriage partner (31%).

Table 6 shows how motivations vary by sex, marital status, and age. Consider sex first. Women are more likely than men to use online dating services to flirt or chat online and much less likely than men to use such services to find sexual partners. Thus, 30% of men and 40% of women say they often use online dating sites for casual chatting and flirting but nothing more. In contrast, 53% of men and only 20% of women say they often use such sites to find sexual partners. Women and men are about equally likely to use online dating sites for other reasons.

**Table 5 Motivations for Looking at Personal Ads on the Internet (in per cent)**

*“People tell us they look at personal ads online for different reasons. How often would you say that you turn to the personal ads on the Web and online dating services...”*

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Total
to find someone you'd like to meet?	3	19	78	100
to find someone with whom you'd like to have a long-term relationship?	11	31	58	100
for sexual relationships?	27	31	43	101 <sup>1</sup>
out of curiosity or fun with no intention of making any kind of contact?	18	41	41	100
to find a possible marriage partner?	30	34	36	100
for casual online chatting or flirting and nothing more?	22	45	33	100

<sup>1</sup> Does not equal 100 due to rounding.

**Table 6 Motivations for Using Online Dating Services by Socio-demographic Variables (per cent of respondents in online survey who often use online dating sites for each reason in each category)**

**Item: out of curiosity or fun with no intention of making any kind of contact**

<b>Sex</b>	
Male	39
Female	45
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	42
Married	43
Common-law	46
Widowed	30
Divorced	37
<b>Age</b>	
20s and younger	47
30s and 40s	38
50s and older	36

**Item: for casual online chatting or flirting and nothing more**

<b>Sex</b>	
Male	30
Female	40
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	34
Married	41
Common-law	43
Widowed	24
Divorced	25
<b>Age</b>	
20s and younger	41
30s and 40s	30
50s and older	23

**Item: to find someone you'd like to meet**

<b>Sex</b>	
Male	79
Female	76
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	76
Married	73
Common-law	73
Widowed	82
Divorced	84
<b>Age</b>	
20s and younger	72
30s and 40s	81
50s and older	81

**Item: to find someone with whom you'd like to have a long-term relationship**

<b>Sex</b>	
Male	58
Female	60
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	60
Married	30
Common-law	29
Widowed	70
Divorced	73
<b>Age</b>	
20s and younger	50
30s and 40s	63
50s and older	63

**Item: to find a possible marriage partner**

<b>Sex</b>	
Male	36
Female	37
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	39
Married	11
Common-law	13
Widowed	52
Divorced	47
<b>Age</b>	
20s and younger	28
30s and 40s	41
50s and older	39

**Item: for sexual relationships**

<b>Sex</b>	
Male	53
Female	20
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	36
Married	76
Common-law	72
Widowed	32
Divorced	34
<b>Age</b>	
20s and younger	36
30s and 40s	45
50s and older	47

Motivations also vary in interesting ways by marital status. People who are single, married, and living common-law more often use online dating services without intending to make face-to-face contact than people who are widowed or divorced. On the other hand, people who are married or divorced more often use online dating services to find dates than people who are single, married or living common-law. The motivational dividing line is different when it comes to establishing long-term relationships and looking for a marriage partner. Not surprisingly, people who are married or living common-law are less likely than others to want to use online dating services to establish long-term relationships or find a marriage partner. A third (and gaping) division emerges with respect to those who most often use online dating sites to find sexual partners. Most frequently, such people are married or living common-law.

As far as age is concerned, a big motivational divide separates people in the 18 to 29-year age group from those who are 30 and older. Members of the younger age cohort more often use online dating with no intention of meeting face-to-face than do members of the older age cohort. Older people more often use online dating for all other reasons than do younger people.

Interestingly, when we broke down the age categories, we found that people under the age of 25 or over the age of 59 say they are most likely to use online dating to find sexual partners. We also discovered that Atlantic Canadians are least likely to use online dating to find sexual partners while Quebecers are most likely to do so; only 20% of Quebecers, compared to 27% of Atlantic Canadians, say they never use online dating for this purpose.<sup>2</sup> Finally, one's sexual orientation influences one's propensity to use online dating to find sexual partners. About 29% of heterosexuals and 28% of lesbians say they never use online dating for this purpose, compared to only 12% of gay men.

These findings establish that motivations for using online dating services are complex and vary by one's social characteristics. The people who most often use online dating sites without intending to establish face-to-face relationships are women, people under the age of 30, and people who are single, married, and living common-law. Those who most often use online dating sites to find sexual partners are men, people under the age of 25 or over the age of 59, people who are married or living common-law, Anglophone Quebecers, and gay men. Those who most often use online dating sites to find dates and establish a long-term relationship are single, married or divorced, and 30 years of age and older. Finally, those who most often use online dating services to find a marriage partner are single, widowed or divorced, and 30 years of age and older.

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<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, however, the proportion of people who have actually had sex with someone they met online falls as one moves from East to West (see p. 43). Note also that the Quebecers who answered the online survey are disproportionately Anglophones because Webpersonals runs only English-language sites. This inference is consistent with the fact that Quebecers compose 24% of Canada's population, French is the mother tongue of 81% of Quebecers, but only 8% of respondents in the online survey were from Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2000e).

## 8. Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Dating

More than a million Canadians over the age of 17 have at least visited an online dating site.<sup>3</sup> Nearly all adult Internet users have at least heard about online dating. What do these people see as the main advantages and disadvantages of online dating? How do their perceptions vary by sex, region, and other social and demographic factors? These are the questions we answer in this section.

Both the telephone and online surveys asked respondents which of four statements *best* describes how they feel about online personal ads or dating services. These statements ranged from “I don’t see it as a particularly effective means by which to meet people” to “I think that it is a great way to meet people whom they might like to date.” Table 7 shows the distribution of responses to all four statements.

Only 36% of respondents in the telephone survey said they do not see online dating as a particularly effective means by which to meet people. Similarly, the online dating survey reveals extremely high consumer satisfaction. A mere 6% of online daters said they do not regard online dating as a particularly effective means of meeting people.

Internet users in British Columbia, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada are significantly more likely than other Canadian Internet users to see online dating as an effective means of meeting people.<sup>4</sup> Men who use the Internet are significantly more likely than women to share this opinion. Francophones are significantly less skeptical than Anglophones about the effectiveness of online dating and less educated Canadians are significantly less skeptical than more highly educated Canadians. A significantly larger number of non-skeptics live in places other than the suburbs of major Canadian cities. Internet users living in small towns and villages far from major cities are the least skeptical about the potential effectiveness of online dating. Finally, we created a measure of social isolation. It combines information on how many clubs respondents belong to and how often they visit family members and go out on dates. Respondents who are moderately or highly socially isolated are significantly more likely to be skeptical about the effectiveness of Internet dating than respondents who are less socially isolated.

The third statement tapping respondents’ feelings about online dating is decidedly upbeat: “I think that it [Internet dating] is catching on as a popular means for people to be able to contact people whom they might like to date.” Some 34% of all Internet users and 51% of online daters agreed with that statement. Examining responses by region, sex, community size, education, social isolation, and language, we find much the same distribution of skeptics and optimists as for the first statement discussed above. Among Internet users in general, online dating optimists are disproportionately small-town men in Quebec, British Columbia, and Atlantic Canada. Disproportionately large numbers of optimists are concentrated among people at the low and high ends of our social isolation scale, among those who are less well educated, and among those who speak French.

Interestingly, these patterns do not recur when we examine online daters. Online daters are much less skeptical and more optimistic about online dating than Internet users in general. Moreover, among online daters, skeptics and optimists are roughly equally distributed between regions, sexes, community types, educational categories, and levels of social isolation. For example, 52% of women and 50% of men who use online dating services think these services are becoming more popular. Similarly, 25% of women and 23% of men who use online dating think “it is a great way to meet people whom they might like to date.” One way of interpreting this finding is to conclude that, regardless of their social characteristics, online daters are similarly predisposed to think of online dating in non-skeptical and optimistic terms.

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<sup>3</sup> 21.9 million Canadians over the age of 17 times 39.1% Internet users times 13% of respondents in the telephone survey who said they had at least visited an online dating site equals 1.1 million people.

<sup>4</sup> In all tables, statistical significance at the .05 probability level is indicated by an asterisk. Statistical significance is not reported for the online survey for two reasons. First, there were more than 6,500 respondents. In a sample this large, statistical significance is so common it is often unenlightening. Second, the respondents in the online survey were self-selected, not randomly selected, so tests of statistical significance are not justified.

A second possibility is that the experience of online dating erases social differences in skepticism and optimism. Said differently, some categories of Internet users are more skeptical or pessimistic than others about online dating. However, the use of online dating services may substantially reduce the overall level of skepticism and pessimism, as well as differences in skepticism and pessimism between different categories of the population.

In both the telephone and online surveys, respondents were asked to evaluate nine possible advantages of online dating on a scale from 0 to 6. We calculated the percentage of respondents who gave each item a score between 4 and 6. Responses to these items are reported in Table 8.

**Table 7 Most Important Feelings About Online Dating by Socio-demographic Variables (in per cent)**

*In general, which of the following statements best describes how you feel about online personal ads or dating services as a means to make social contacts with people for the purposes of dating or developing a relationship? (per cent of respondents citing item in each category; n.a. = not available; \* = statistically significant at p. < .05)*

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: I don't see it as a particularly effective means by which to meet people.</i>		
<b>Region</b>		
British Columbia	32	6
Prairies	39	6
Ontario	40	6
Quebec	33	7
Atlantic	35	8
North	n.a.	8
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	29	6
Female	43	6
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	38	7
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	24	7
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	35	6
Suburb of major city	43	6
Centre of major city	35	7
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	15	13
High school graduation	33	5
Some college	41	7
College graduation	37	5
At least some university	38	7
<b>Social Isolation</b>		
High	38	6
Medium	40	6
Low	27	7
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	38	n.a.
French	33	n.a.

Table 7, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<b>Item: I don't think that it is used yet by many people but it has the potential to make it easier for people to meet.</b>		
<b>Region</b>	*	
British Columbia	28	20
Prairies	31	20
Ontario	27	19
Quebec	23	26
Atlantic	27	18
North	n.a.	18
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	30	21
Female	23	17
<b>Urbanity</b>	*	
Rural/farming	22	16
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	24	18
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	29	19
Suburb of major city	25	20
Centre of major city	27	21
<b>Education</b>	*	
Less than high school	18	13
High school graduation	25	17
Some college	24	18
College graduation	29	19
At least some university	25	24
<b>Social Isolation</b>	*	
High	38	21
Medium	25	19
Low	29	19
<b>Language of Interview</b>	*	
English	29	n.a.
French	21	n.a.



Table 7, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: I think that it is catching on as a popular means for people to be able to contact people whom they might like to date.</i>		
<b>Region</b>	*	
British Columbia	35	50
Prairies	24	51
Ontario	30	53
Quebec	41	47
Atlantic	35	46
North	n.a.	48
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	38	50
Female	31	52
<b>Urbanity</b>	*	
Rural/farming	35	48
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	45	47
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	34	51
Suburb of major city	30	51
Centre of major city	35	51
<b>Education</b>	*	
Less than high school	61	44
High school graduation	37	50
Some college	28	52
College graduation	33	54
At least some university	34	48
<b>Social Isolation</b>	*	
High	38	50
Medium	32	52
Low	40	50
<b>Language of Interview</b>	*	
English	29	n.a.
French	43	n.a.

Table 7, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: I think that it is a great way to meet people whom they might like to date.</i>		
<b>Region</b>	*	
British Columbia	5	24
Prairies	6	23
Ontario	3	23
Quebec	3	21
Atlantic	3	28
North	n.a.	24
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	3	23
Female	4	25
<b>Urbanity</b>	*	
Rural/farming	5	29
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	7	28
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	324	
Suburb of major city	3	23
Centre of major city	3	22
<b>Education</b>	*	
Less than high school	6	30
High school graduation	5	28
Some college	7	23
College graduation	2	23
At least some university	3	21
<b>Social Isolation</b>	*	
High	4	22
Medium	3	24
Low	2	25
<b>Language of Interview</b>	*	
English	4	n.a.
French	3	n.a.

For all Internet users, the three main advantages of online dating are as follows:

1. *It creates the opportunity to meet people one would otherwise never meet* (64% of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6). Men are significantly more likely than women to cite this as a big advantage. People living in rural and farming areas, as well as people living in small towns and villages far from major cities, are significantly more likely than people living in other types of communities to cite this as a big advantage.
2. *It's easier to end a relationship if it's just online* (55% of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6). Men are significantly more likely than women to cite this as a big advantage. People living in small towns near big cities, as well as people living in the suburbs of major cities, are significantly less likely than people living in other types of communities to cite this as a big advantage. Anglophones are significantly more likely to cite this as a big advantage than Francophones.
3. *It's less expensive to meet potential dates online than in other ways* (50% of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6). Men and Anglophones are significantly more likely to cite this as a big advantage than women and Francophones.

Compared to Internet users in general, online daters gave much higher scores to all nine advantages of using online dating. For online daters, the three main advantages of online dating are as follows:

1. *It creates the opportunity to meet people one would otherwise never meet* (89% of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6). Online daters who have at least a high school diploma are more likely than online daters without a high school diploma to regard this as a big advantage. Women are more likely than men to regard this as a big advantage – just the opposite of the pattern observed for Internet users in general.
2. *It offers privacy and confidentiality* (75% of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6). Ever-married online daters and people with at least a high school diploma are more likely to consider this a big advantage than never-married and less highly educated online daters. Women are slightly more likely than men to regard this as a big advantage – again, just the opposite of the pattern observed for Internet users in general. Specifically, among online daters, 78% of women, compared to 75% of men, regard the privacy and confidentiality issue as important. Among Internet users in general, 47% of men but just 32% of women regard it as important.
3. *It's a lot more convenient than other ways of trying to meet people* (74% of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6). Among online daters, a disproportionately large number of divorced people, people with at least a high school diploma, and people who do not live in the core of a major city view this as a big advantage. Again, women are more likely to regard this as a big advantage than men; and again, this is just the opposite for Internet users in general.

We conducted 11 in-depth telephone interviews of online survey respondents (MSN.CA, 2000a; for details, see the Methodological Appendix). We selected these 11 people at random from respondents who said online dating is “a great way to meet people” and said they were willing to be interviewed in depth by telephone. When asked, “What prompted you to use online dating?” they virtually unanimously stressed its convenience and the way it allows users to be selective. Typically, one woman in her 20s from Montreal said: “I feel that online I can find someone more compatible because I’m very much into the computer field and if someone has an ad up on the Internet that means that he knows how to use a computer...[Also] you can get to know the person first [before dating] and sometimes see a picture, which helps.” In the words of a Toronto man, also in his 20s: “You see right away if you have some compatibility. It’s not like a random chance where you walk into a bar. You know right away if they’re a smoker or a non-smoker, you know if they participate in some of the same activities you participate in. Some of them have photos. You can see if there’s a physical attraction. Quite a long list! You can assess the person more easily.” Or as a woman in her 30s from Calgary put it: “You don’t have to have these lengthy, drawn-out conversations at a bar with one person. Via the Internet you can start up five or six or seven different conversations with people and kind of weed them out.”

**Table 8 Advantages of Online Dating by Socio-demographic Variables (in per cent)**

*As you may know, there's a fair amount of talk these days about online dating services, including their pros and cons. People appear to have opinions whether they use online dating services a lot or have never even visited an online dating site. So far as you can tell, how would you rate each of the following possible advantages? Please use a numbered scale where 6 means it's a big advantage and 0, not an advantage for online dating services? (per cent of respondents claiming that item is a big advantage [scores 4 to 6] in each category; n.a. = not available; \* = statistically significant at p < .05)*

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<b>Item: You might meet people you'd never otherwise meet.</b>		
<b>Region</b>		
British Columbia	67	90
Prairies	65	87
Ontario	65	90
Quebec	58	86
Atlantic	77	87
North	n.a.	89
		*
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	68	88
Female	60	90
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	64	88
Married	62	89
Common-law	64	86
Widowed	50	88
Divorced	75	91
	*	
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	69	90
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	69	89
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	58	89
Suburb of major city	61	89
Centre of major city	65	88
	*	
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	81	78
High school graduation	63	88
Some college	62	90
College graduation	60	89
At least some university	65	89
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	66	n.a.
French	60	n.a.

Table 8, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: It's a lot more convenient than other ways of trying to meet people.</i>		
<b>Region</b>	*	
British Columbia	44	76
Prairies	42	73
Ontario	45	73
Quebec	28	70
Atlantic	44	73
North	n.a.	77
<b>Sex</b>		*
Male	39	73
Female	37	76
<b>Marital Status</b>	*	
Single	36	70
Married	39	77
Common-law	36	70
Widowed	7	77
Divorced	51	79
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	43	75
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	44	75
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	37	75
Suburb of major city	34	75
Centre of major city	39	70
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	65	63
High school graduation	9	74
Some college	35	74
College graduation	37	73
At least some university	37	75
<b>Language of Interview</b>	*	
English	43	n.a.
French	29	n.a.

Table 8, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: It's a more certain way of meeting people who might want to meet you.</i>		
<b>Region</b>	*	
British Columbia	32	67
Prairies	28	67
Ontario	31	68
Quebec	22	60
Atlantic	18	67
North	n.a.	62
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	28	66
Female	25	68
<b>Marital Status</b>	*	
Single	26	65
Married	24	69
Common-law	29	61
Widowed	29	69
Divorced	41	70
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	26	71
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	28	71
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	24	68
Suburb of major city	24	67
Centre of major city	30	63
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	48	59
High school graduation	28	72
Some college	21	68
College graduation	25	67
At least some university	26	63
<b>Language of Interview</b>	*	
English	28	n.a.
French	23	n.a.

Table 8, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<b>Item: It offers privacy and confidentiality.</b>		
<b>Region</b>	*	
British Columbia	39	73
Prairies	41	76
Ontario	46	77
Quebec	32	75
Atlantic	45	76
North	n.a.	77
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	47	75
Female	32	78
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	41	72
Married	39	84
Common-law	39	81
Widowed	29	84
Divorced	43	78
<b>Urbanity</b>	*	
Rural/farming	46	76
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	48	76
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	31	79
Suburb of major city	36	78
Centre of major city	42	72
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	42	66
High school graduation	36	78
Some college	36	76
College graduation	37	76
At least some university	43	74
<b>Language of Interview</b>	*	
English	43	n.a.
French	32	n.a.

Table 8, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: It's easier to end a relationship if it's just online.</i>		
<b>Region</b>		
British Columbia	58	50
Prairies	58	51
Ontario	58	53
Quebec	49	55
Atlantic	62	55
North	n.a.	55
	*	
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	59	49
Female	51	60
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	57	50
Married	53	59
Common-law	56	55
Widowed	50	62
Divorced	57	54
	*	
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	59	54
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	63	56
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	48	57
Suburb of major city	51	53
Centre of major city	59	49
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	72	48
High school graduation	56	57
Some college	58	53
College graduation	52	53
At least some university	54	50
	*	
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	58	n.a.
French	49	n.a.



Table 8, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<b>Item: Online dating gives me more information about people I might want to date than I can get in other ways.</b>		
<b>Region</b>		
British Columbia	24	63
Prairies	24	61
Ontario	27	63
Quebec	19	57
Atlantic	19	63
North	n.a.	66
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	27	61
Female	18	65
<b>Marital Status</b>	*	
Single	22	61
Married	22	61
Common-law	26	63
Widowed	0	70
Divorced	29	66
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	27	69
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	28	63
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	18	64
Suburb of major city	22	63
Centre of major city	22	59
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	29	59
High school graduation	25	67
Some college	21	62
College graduation	19	63
At least some university	24	60
<b>Language of Interview</b>	*	
English	25	n.a.
French	19	n.a.

Table 8, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: It takes less time to meet people through online dating than in other ways.</i>		
<b>Region</b>		
British Columbia	41	57
Prairies	41	56
Ontario	43	58
Quebec	39	51
Atlantic	44	61
North	n.a.	64
	*	
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	43	54
Female	39	65
	*	
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	40	53
Married	39	62
Common-law	46	56
Widowed	31	68
Divorced	49	64
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	41	62
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	50	58
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	40	59
Suburb of major city	38	57
Centre of major city	41	56
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	41	52
High school graduation	44	61
Some college	39	57
College graduation	39	57
At least some university	41	57
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	43	n.a.
French	38	n.a.

Table 8, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<b>Item: It's less stressful to meet people I might want to date online than trying to meet them in other ways.</b>		
<b>Region</b>		
British Columbia	50	66
Prairies	49	65
Ontario	51	69
Quebec	44	64
Atlantic	48	68
North	n.a.	70
	*	
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	52	67
Female	44	67
	*	
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	46	64
Married	48	71
Common-law	53	66
Widowed	36	73
Divorced	52	71
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	52	69
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	55	74
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	45	70
Suburb of major city	46	67
Centre of major city	49	64
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	50	65
High school graduation	48	70
Some college	48	69
College graduation	46	69
At least some university	49	63
	*	
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	50	n.a.
French	44	n.a.

Table 8, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: It's less expensive to meet people I might want to date online than in other ways.</i>		
<b>Region</b>		
British Columbia	52	52
Prairies	57	50
Ontario	52	53
Quebec	46	51
Atlantic	55	56
North	n.a.	59
	*	
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	55	52
Female	47	54
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	50	47
Married	52	59
Common-law	49	57
Widowed	36	62
Divorced	50	59
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	48	60
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	55	55
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	51	55
Suburb of major city	51	52
Centre of major city	49	50
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	65	62
High school graduation	49	56
Some college	46	53
College graduation	50	55
At least some university	51	48
	*	
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	53	n.a.
French	47	n.a.

Finally, respondents in both the telephone and online surveys were presented with a list of five possible disadvantages of online dating (see Table 9). A smaller percentage of online daters than Internet users in general found that online dating had any big disadvantages. However, both groups identified the same two items, with very similar meanings, as the two biggest disadvantages:

1. *People online might not tell you the truth about themselves.* Some 89% of Internet users and 82% of online daters found this a big disadvantage of online dating. Women were significantly more likely than men to find this a big disadvantage. There were no other noteworthy differences between subgroups.
2. *The people you meet online might be hiding something.* About 85% of Internet users and 72% of online daters found this a big disadvantage of online dating. Again, women were significantly more likely than men to find this a big disadvantage and there were no other noteworthy differences between subgroups.

The 11 people interviewed in depth agreed unanimously that the number one disadvantage of online dating is that some people misrepresent themselves. As one respondent put it when asked about the disadvantages of online dating: "I can't really think of any [disadvantages] other than a few people will, shall I say, exaggerate the truth."

Summing up the findings on perceived advantages and disadvantages of Internet dating, we conclude that, on the whole, a substantial majority of Internet users and an overwhelming majority of online daters regard online dating as a highly effective means of meeting people. For Internet users in general, there are variations in the degree to which different categories of the population are optimistic or skeptical about online dating. However, there are few such variations among online daters, either because they are uniformly predisposed to a favourable opinion or because favourable experience with online dating erases much of their initial skepticism and pessimism. Substantial majorities of both Internet users and online daters offer pragmatic reasons for using online dating. In particular, they emphasize that online dating creates opportunities to meet people one would not otherwise meet, makes it easier to end a relationship, is less expensive than other ways of meeting potential dates, offers privacy and confidentiality, and is a lot more convenient than other ways of trying to meet people. The main perceived disadvantage of online dating, especially for women, is the possibility of misrepresentation. We address this issue at greater length below.

**Table 9 Disadvantages of Online Dating by Socio-demographic Variables (in per cent)**

*People also talk about the disadvantages of online dating services. On a 0 to 6 scale where 6 means a big disadvantage, how would you rate the following possible disadvantages? (per cent of respondents claiming each item is a big disadvantage [scores 4 to 6] in each category; n.a. = not available; \* = statistically significant at p < .05)*

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<b>Item: The people you meet online might be hiding something.</b>		
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	81	69
Female	89	78
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	82	70
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	85	74
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	85	74
Suburb of major city	85	73
Centre of major city	86	69
<b>Social Isolation</b>		
High	83	73
Medium	86	71
Low	86	71
<b>Self Esteem</b>		
High	88	69
Medium	83	72
Low	87	75
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	85	n.a.
French	86	n.a.
<b>Item: People online might not tell you the truth about themselves.</b>		
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	85	80
Female	92	86
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	87	78
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	85	80
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	87	83
Suburb of major city	88	84
Centre of major city	92	82
<b>Social Isolation</b>		
High	86	81
Medium	89	83
Low	90	82
<b>Self Esteem</b>		
High	91	82
Medium	86	82
Low	90	83
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	88	n.a.
French	89	n.a.

Table 9, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: You might not have any friends or relationships in common with people you meet online.</i>		
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	56	37
Female	60	45
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	60	40
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	50	43
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	65	40
Suburb of major city	59	40
Centre of major city	57	38
<b>Social Isolation</b>		
High	58	39
Medium	53	40
Low	63	39
<b>Self Esteem</b>		
High	65	38
Medium	56	40
Low	55	41
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	56	n.a.
French	63	n.a.

*Item: When you're communicating on line, you don't get to see or otherwise sense what a person is like.*

<b>Sex</b>		
Male	72	19
Female	80	20
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	73	18
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	72	19
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	79	22
Suburb of major city	80	19
Centre of major city	75	19
<b>Social Isolation</b>		
High	75	19
Medium	75	20
Low	78	20
<b>Self Esteem</b>		
High	79	19
Medium	75	19
Low	76	20
<b>Language of Interview</b>		
English	77	n.a.
French	75	n.a.

Table 9, cont'd.

	Telephone Survey	Online Survey
<i>Item: Some of the people who use online dating services might be a little desperate.</i>		
<b>Sex</b>	*	
Male	67	51
Female	76	61
<b>Urbanity</b>		
Rural/farming	65	54
Small town/village 1 hr.+ from major city	70	54
Small town < 1 hr. from major city	71	54
Suburb of major city	74	55
Centre of major city	73	53
<b>Social Isolation</b>		
High	67	53
Medium	72	55
Low	74	55
<b>Self Esteem</b>	*	
High	78	56
Medium	70	53
Low	68	55
<b>Language of Interview</b>	*	
English	75	n.a.
French	66	n.a.



## 9. Observation, Contact, Meeting, and Misrepresentation

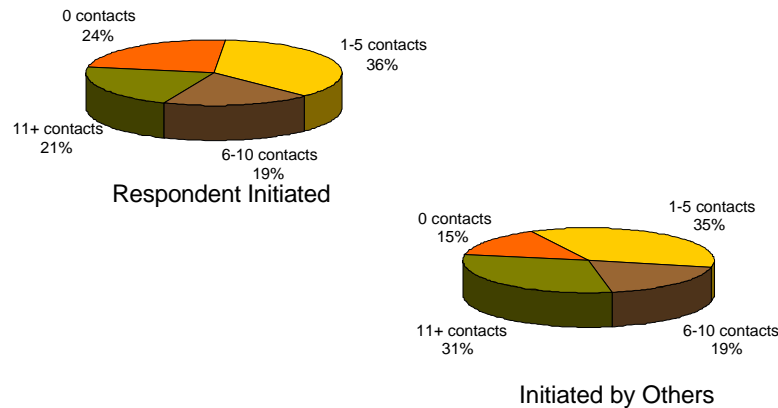
As noted above, some people read online personal ads merely for fun, out of curiosity, or to engage in erotic verbal fantasies with no intention of meeting their correspondents. Specifically, over a third of our online survey respondents said “chatting and flirting” are important reasons why they use online dating services. There are no big differences among various categories of the online dating population in their tendency to use online dating for chatting and flirting.

Chatters and flirts aside, other people actually meet one or more correspondents face-to-face. Let us now see how often people establish contact with others through online dating services and how often they meet face-to-face. We then discuss misrepresentation in online contacts.

*Observation and Contact.* Respondents in the online survey were asked how many people they had contacted by e-mail or other means as a result of an online personal ad or dating service. They were also asked how many people had contacted them. Figure 6 shows the results of these queries. Nearly a quarter of respondents never initiated a contact. Over a third initiated 1-5 contacts. Nearly a fifth initiated 6-10 contacts and just over a fifth initiated more than 10 contacts.

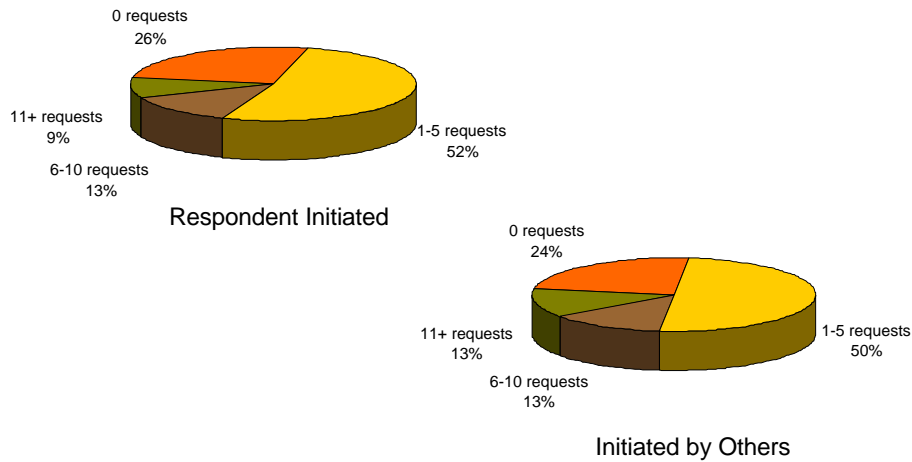
Respondents were somewhat more likely to be contacted by others than to initiate contact. Thus, the median number of respondent-initiated contacts was 4 while the median number of other-initiated contacts was 5. For people who have been in contact with others, more than 80% of contacts took place within the past year and another 10% took place within the past two years. There were practically no differences between men and women in the number of contacts they initiated. However, women were more likely than men to be contacted by others. Thus, nearly 16% of men but only about 12% of women had never been contacted. At the other extreme, 3% of men but nearly 12% of women had been contacted more than 50 times.

**FIGURE 6: CONTACTS RESULTING FROM ONLINE DATING**



*Meeting.* We asked respondents how many people they had asked to meet in person as a result of online dating and how many people had asked to meet them. The results are summarized in Figure 7. About a quarter of respondents said they requested no meetings with others and about half said they requested meetings with 1 to 5 other people. The remainder said they requested meetings with more than five other people. The figures are much the same for meetings requested by others. In both cases, the median number of requested meetings is 2. About 2% more men than women asked to meet others and 8% more women than men were asked to meet by others.

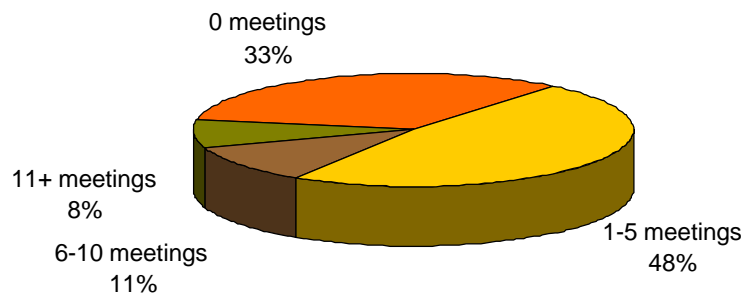
**FIGURE 7: REQUESTED MEETINGS RESULTING FROM ONLINE DATING**



How many people actually meet face-to-face as a result of using online dating services? As Figure 8 shows, a third of respondents reported no face-to-face meetings as a result of online dating. Nearly half reported 1 to 5 face-to-face meetings and nearly a fifth reported more than five face-to-face meetings. The median number of face-to-face meetings is 2. Men reported fewer than 2% more face-to-face meetings than women.

About two-thirds of online daters exchanged pictures and 86% talked on the phone before agreeing to go out on a date. Some 55% of respondents spoke on the phone three or more times before first getting together with someone they met online. Only 2% of respondents met face-to-face the same day they established contact. About a third met within a week and a quarter within two weeks of first contact, the remaining 40% taking more than two weeks to meet. This suggests that most respondents approach online dating cautiously, taking the time to collect information and grow comfortable before going out on a first date. On the other hand, a minority is quick – in our judgment, perhaps too quick – to date.

**FIGURE 8: FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS RESULTING FROM ONLINE DATING**



*Misrepresentation.* People do not always give accurate information when they place personal ads online. Some people misrepresent themselves to stimulate interest. In the online survey, people who had placed personal ads were asked if they had ever given inaccurate information about their appearance, job, education, income, age, marital status, interests and hobbies, and whether they have children. Multiple responses were allowed. Over a quarter of respondents said they had misrepresented themselves. This is a somewhat smaller percentage than we expected to find. We were also somewhat surprised not to discover big differences between men and women in their propensity to misrepresent themselves. The only sex difference worth mentioning is that slightly more men than women (11% vs. 8%) misrepresented their marital status. Age is the number one issue people misrepresent. Fourteen per cent of respondents said they had misrepresented their age. Tied for the number two spot as topics of misrepresentation are marital status and appearance (10% each).

## 10. Some Consequences of Online Dating

We asked respondents about the kinds of relationships they formed with people they met online. Multiple responses were allowed.

Of those who met other online daters face-to-face, 63% had sex with at least one person they met online. Having sex with a person first encountered online is somewhat more likely for men than women (66% vs. 58%) and for Canadians living in the East than those living in the West. Thus, 69% of Atlantic Canadians, 67% of (mainly Anglophone) Quebecers, 65% of Ontarians, but only 60% of respondents from the Prairies and British Columbia say they have had sex with someone they met online. A higher proportion of gay men (79%) than heterosexuals (62%) and lesbians (61%) said they had sex with people they meet online. As far as age is concerned, it is people in their 40s who are most likely to have sex with someone they met online (67%) and people under the age of 25 who are least likely to do so (58%).

Sex aside, 60% of those who met other online daters face-to-face formed at least one long-term friendship. Twenty-seven per cent met at least one person they regarded as a “partner.” And 3% met someone they eventually married. The probability of marrying someone whom one first encounters online falls with age. The people most likely to marry a person first encountered online are in their 20s. The people least likely to do so are more than 39 years old. The probability of marrying an online date is not associated with one’s income or education. However, the people most likely to marry someone they met online tend to live in small towns near major cities or in the suburbs of major cities. Such people compose 25% of online daters but 56% of online daters who married someone they met through an online dating service.

What pre-dating practices are associated with the establishment of long-term relationships among online daters? We asked respondents: “How many, if any, of the people that you have met as a result of on-line dating have become a long-term friend, a partner or a spouse?” Table 10 shows how various pre-dating practices are associated with people who formed different kinds of relationships.

Table 10 demonstrates that people who form long-term relationships are more likely to take a long time to get to know other people online. They are also more likely to engage in a protracted exchange of information and emotion before the first date. Specifically, people who find long-term friends, partners, and spouses online are more likely than others to send photos to people they eventually date, see photos of those people, talk to them on the phone ten or more times, and wait more than a month before first meeting them. It may be that daters looking for long-term relationships are generally more selective than daters looking for casual relationships. It may also be that people who spend more time getting to know others before meeting them face-to-face inadvertently increase the chance of finding a good match and therefore forming a long-term relationship. In either case, the duration and intensity of pre-dating “courtships” is likely to be greater for people who eventually form long-term relationships.

Despite the apparently high “success rate” of online daters, 42% of people who went out on a date with someone they met online reported at least one bad experience on a date. For 38% of people who went out on a date, the bad experience merely involved “disappointment” at least once. Another 33% simply “felt uncomfortable” at least once. More seriously, 10% said they felt “frightened” at least once and 26% said they were “pestered” at least once after a date. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

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**Table 10 Online Practices Leading to Long-Term Relationships (in per cent)**

	No Long-term Relationship	Long-Term Friend	Partner or Spouse
Saw photo (% “yes”)	61	68	67
Sent you photo (% “yes”)	66	76	75
Talked on phone 10+ times	7	9	14
Met 1 month+ after first contact	11	16	16

It is important to note that the 10% of daters who said they were frightened at least once on a date were not frightened enough to change their positive opinion about online dating in general. That is clear from Table 11, which shows no difference in attitude toward online dating between people who were frightened and those who were never frightened. The same finding – no difference in attitude toward online dating – held for the 26% of daters who reported being pestered at least once after a date. It also held for men and women considered separately. We conclude that, in the great majority of cases, the more serious negative experiences reported by our respondents were not all that serious.

They were almost certainly less common than the kinds of negative experiences people have during conventional dates. For example, a recent nationwide survey of dating in Canadian universities found that, in the year preceding the survey, more than half the men and women who dated were insulted or sworn at by a date and more than half experienced a date throwing, smashing or kicking something. Nearly 12% of men and 20% of women were pushed, grabbed or shoved by a date in the year preceding the survey (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 1998: 60). Seen in this context, it is quite possible that online dating is safer than conventional dating. That was certainly the strong consensus of the 11 online daters we interviewed in depth. “It just seems safer doing it this way...Online dating gives you more control,” said one woman in her 40s from northern Ontario. When asked whether she would recommend online dating to others, a woman in her 30s from Calgary replied: “Oh, definitely, yes. Because it’s safe...It’s risk free. You can get to know somebody anonymously before you meet them.”

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**Table 11 Per cent of People Who Met for a Date and Were Frightened at Least Once by Attitude Toward Online Dating**

	Not Frightened	Frightened
Attitude toward online dating:		
I don't see it as a particularly effective means by which to meet people.	6	5
I think that it is catching on as a popular means for people to be able to contact people whom they might like to date	21	22
I think that it is catching on as a popular means for people to be able to contact people whom they might like to date.	51	49
I think that it is a great way to meet people whom they might like to date	22	24
Total	100	100

## 11. Inhibitions Limiting the Use of Online Dating

Generalizing from our telephone survey, we noted above that 13% of adult Canadian Internet users have visited an online dating site. This does not, however, mean that they have all done so with the intention of finding a date. That intention has motivated 8% of adult Canadian Internet users. About 4% have made contact with another person via an online dating service. But only 2% have actually met someone face-to-face as a result of using such a service. As these figures illustrate, there is a gap between curiosity and action. A big part of that gap results from people's inhibitions about using online dating services. In this section, we examine some of those inhibitions.

For purposes of our analysis, we find it useful to compare three groups: (1) Internet users who have never visited an online dating site (87% of the people in our telephone survey); (2) users of online dating services who have never gone out on a date as a result of using such a service (38% of the people in our online survey); and (3) users of online dating services who *have* gone out on a date as a result of using such a service (62% of the people in our online survey).<sup>5</sup>

*Internet users who have never visited an online dating site.* In the telephone survey, we presented respondents with a list of five possible reasons why they may not have used an online dating service. We asked them to rank the importance of each reason on a scale from 0 to 6. Multiple responses were allowed. Two main reasons for never using an online dating service emerged: perceived lack of control and perceived lack of effectiveness. Specifically, the top reason people gave for not using an online dating service was because they want to see a potential date before actually dating the person (89% of respondents cited this as a very important reason). The third most frequently cited reason was because they feel they cannot trust people they meet online (64% regarded this as very important). We interpret both these reasons as "lack of control" factors. The second most important reason people gave for not using online dating services was utilitarian; they feel there are better ways to meet people. Some 85% of respondents regarded this as a very important reason for not using online dating services. We found less embarrassment or stigma about using online dating than we expected. Only 30% of respondents said "embarrassment" was a very important reason for not using online dating services. "Embarrassment" ranked fifth out of the five reasons we listed for non-use.

*Non-daters who have visited an online dating site.* We asked people who had visited an online dating site, but who had not dated as a result of doing so, why they had not gone out on a date. Multiple responses were allowed. Most of their reasons were pragmatic. Leading the list was "no one interests me" (44% gave this as a very important reason). The reason next most frequently mentioned as very important was that online dating "is too risky." As in the telephone survey, "embarrassment" ranked last as a reason for not dating.

*Online daters.* Our third group is composed of people who have actually gone out on a date as a result of visiting an online dating site. Most of them were very matter-of-fact about their experience with online dating. Nearly three-quarters reported that they have told their friends about online dating, while more than 40% said they have told family members or co-workers. Why did some respondents not tell others about their experience with online dating? Mainly because they regard such matters as personal or simply because the subject had not come up – not because they view it as embarrassing.

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<sup>5</sup> Because of the different statistical assumptions we must make about the telephone and online surveys, we decided not to combine the 13% of respondents from the telephone survey who have visited an online dating site with groups (2) and (3). Instead, we dropped them for this part of our analysis.

Having friends or acquaintances who use an online dating service seems to remove much of the resistance to online dating, especially if their experiences are positive. That is the main conclusion we draw from Table 12. The first row of Table 12 shows that the percentage of people with a friend or acquaintance who visited an online dating site increased from 26% (for Internet users who have never visited an online dating site) to 56% (for people who have visited an online dating site but never dated anyone as a result) to 77% (for people who have dated as a result of using an online dating service). Interestingly, respondents report that the great majority of their friends and acquaintances who have used online dating have had positive experiences (Table 12, row 2). Yet these positive experiences have influenced only half of Internet users who have not visited an online dating site to develop a more positive attitude toward online dating (Table 12, row 3). Only a quarter of them would recommend online personal ads to a friend who asked for advice about finding a companion (Table 12, row 4). Note, however, that this last percentage more than doubles for people whose friends had positive experiences using online dating (Table 12, row 5). So if having a friend who uses online dating makes one more favourably disposed to online dating, having a friend whose experience using online dating is positive makes one even more enthusiastic.

Summing up our discussion of inhibitions limiting the use of online dating, we note there is less stigma associated with online dating than we expected to find – additional evidence, we conclude, that online dating is becoming mainstream. More people are not exploring online dating for two main reasons. The first is pragmatic. A considerable number of people do not think it would be effective while another sizeable group simply has not yet found anyone who interests them online. The second reason for non-use has to do with perceived risk. A substantial number of Canadians do not use online dating services because they feel it decreases their control of the dating situation. Increasing their sense of control would go a long way toward making online dating more popular. The next section is therefore devoted to the question of how people's sense of control can be increased.

**Table 12 The Influence of Friends on Non-visitors, Visiting Non-daters and Daters (in per cent)**

	Non-visitors	Visiting Non-daters	Daters
<i>Item:</i> How many of your friends or acquaintances have used on-line dating services? (per cent "one or more")	26	56	77
<i>Item:</i> Thinking of your friend or friends who used online dating services, from their perspective was the experience positive? (per cent "yes")	66	79	80
<i>Item:</i> Thinking of what you learned from this person (or these people), how have your attitudes towards online dating changed? (per cent "became more favourable")	50	88	87
<i>Item:</i> If a friend of yours asked you for advice about finding a companion, would you recommend online dating? (per cent "yes")	26	80	90
<i>Item:</i> If a friend of yours asked you for advice about finding a companion, would you recommend online dating? (per cent "yes" for respondents whose attitudes towards online dating became more favourable due to friend's online dating experience)	53	88	95



## 12. How to Ensure a Safe Date

Misrepresentation is not uncommon in face-to-face interaction, but at least when we sit across from people we can judge them by their tone of voice, body language, use of space, facial expressions, and general appearance. These cues are absent online. Similarly, when people go out on a conventional first date, they are often reasonably well acquainted with their date or they have the assurance of a friend or a relative that the person is worth knowing and is not a nuisance or a threat. Typically, less certainty characterizes a first date between people who meet online.

How can clients increase their sense of control and feeling of safety? We believe a combination of technical innovations and the promotion of a few common-sense rules can do much to accomplish this goal. Specifically:

- *Clients should use non-identifying e-mail addresses.* People pay online dating services for the ability to select potential dates and establish initial contact with them. However, once rapport has been established, people typically exchange personal e-mail addresses and circumvent the online dating service entirely. This creates a problem for some clients, who may subsequently wish to end communication with a particular person but cannot do so because that person has their e-mail address. In our surveys we asked people about negative experiences they might have had using online dating services. The problem of unwanted communication was one issue that emerged from the responses. If more clients used non-identifying e-mail, such as that available at no charge from MSN's "Hotmail" (2001) site, this problem could be nearly eliminated. Clients could block unwanted e-mail or change their anonymous e-mail address and give their new address only to people with whom they wished to establish or maintain contact.
- *Clients should use broadband communication via webcam.* For many people, part of the mystique and fun of online dating is its anonymity. For others, however, anonymity is a problem, especially after they have established contact with a potential date and the question of meeting face-to-face arises. Fast Internet connections (which are increasingly widespread) and Web cameras (which are inexpensive) could help overcome this problem. These technologies facilitate communication and allow people to gain a richer understanding of one another than is possible through text-only interaction. On the basis of this understanding, potential daters might decide not to pursue the relationship. Alternatively, they might decide to meet face-to-face, feeling more secure about meeting than would otherwise be possible. Over the next couple of years, these new technologies are likely to become widely available. Clients of online dating services could increase their sense of security by adopting them.
- *Clients should heed the "Safe Dating Tips" that are available on the Web and promoted by some online dating services (e.g., Jobel, 2001).* Among other things, these tips urge clients to:
  - *Agree to a first meeting only after reaching a high comfort level.* It may be self-evident to most people that they should feel comfortable before agreeing to meet a stranger face-to-face. However, some people are more easily manipulated than others, and need to be reminded that *they* are in control. Excessive eagerness on the part of the potential date, the use of inappropriate language, insistence on meeting in a secluded or private place, etc., may suggest a problem. Reaching a high comfort level may take up to six weeks, as several of the people we interviewed in-depth emphasized.
  - *Arrange for a first meeting in a public place, during the day, and with a defined time limit.* Meeting at a café for a half-hour mid-morning coffee is a safe first date. If things progress well, arrangements can be made for longer and more intimate meetings. If not, it is relatively easy to extricate oneself from a date that takes place in public during the day and that has been predefined as lasting no more than 30 minutes.
  - *Adopt a guarded approach to revealing personal information.* To avoid unwanted contact, one's telephone number, home address, and place of work should be treated as confidential information. This information is best kept to oneself until trust has been established.

Adopting these technical innovations and common-sense rules would enhance people's ability to screen out potentially problematic dates. They could make online dating even more comfortable and safer than conventional dating.

### 13. Conclusion: The Future of Online Dating

People have always advertised their availability for intimate relations with others, as well as their romantic and sexual preferences. Our dress, comportment, talk, and willingness to enter various social contexts that serve as dating markets advertise our availability and our preferences.

Online dating differs from conventional dating partly in that it changes the signals people use in their “advertisements.” Online dating requires that people state explicitly, in written communication, what is conventionally implied visually and verbally. Some people may think this removes the mystery at the heart of romance. They may regard online dating as a cold and mechanical outgrowth of the computer age. However, many other people find online dating more exciting than conventional dating – and at least as romantic.

Especially to the growing number of single people who are geographically mobile, facing mounting job pressures, and finding it less acceptable to initiate workplace romances, online dating also seems to be more efficient and less expensive than conventional dating strategies. The comparative advantages of online dating were repeatedly stressed in our in-depth interviews:

- From Toronto: “Well, I’m not a big fan of the bar scene and there really are no other alternatives available to me at this time other than being set up through friends. And I’ve had bad experiences with what I guess you’d call the traditional way. You know, one of my very good male friends, his wife set me up with one of her girlfriends and now she’s mad at me, because I didn’t like the person she set me up with. So, that puts a strain on my relationship with my male friend. I’ve had more of those types of things than I’ve had online.”
- From Calgary: “There are many more men than women using online dating. I was inundated after I put my photo up.”
- From Vancouver: “Online dating is much better...I’m not a bar person and when I go to the athletic club I’m going there to work out.”
- From the Hamilton area: “Recently with all my time on the road, it’s a good way to meet people away from my hometown.”
- From northern Ontario: “There is such a huge...number of men out there [but] I really don’t know where to go, living in a fairly small city, to meet people. But I’ve also heard that about people living in Toronto.”
- From Montreal: “I go to the gym almost on a daily basis. I know everybody in my gym. And I guess it’s because I see them every day I decided not to get involved with them...At least on the Internet if you don’t like a person you don’t have to speak to that person again but at the gym you have to see that person again and if you go out with that person and it doesn’t work out you still have to see his face again next week...People I meet online I feel more comfortable with. They’re easier to get along with.”

For these and related reasons, online dating has gone mainstream. “Going mainstream” implies growth in numbers. It also suggests that online dating attracts “regular” people, or at least regular people who use the Internet. Furthermore, we have every reason to believe that the popularity of online dating will grow as more people get connected to the Internet, the advantages of online dating become better known, and dating services help overcome its disadvantages.

In the next decade, online dating is bound to grow for technological reasons too. Consider, for example, the impact of peripheral devices that allow *tactile* interaction between remotely connected PC users. Such devices are already on the market (see, for example, “Digital Sexsations,” 2001). Computer industry experts confidently expect these devices to become more sophisticated as bandwidth and microchip capacity grow (Kurzweil, 1999). These peripherals will make it possible for people not just to meet and communicate online, but also to have virtual dates, thus stimulating the growth of the online dating industry by giving new meaning to the expression, “keeping in touch.”

## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

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Most of the data presented in this report come from two surveys funded by MSN.CA:

1. A telephone survey of 1,200 randomly selected Canadians living outside the northern territories (400 in Quebec and 800 in the rest of the country) was conducted between 7 and 29 November 2000. The authors of this report were chiefly responsible for questionnaire design and solely responsible for data analysis. Fieldwork was conducted by COMPAS Inc. The response rate was 35.4%. For 19 out of 20 samples this size, the maximum margin of error is  $\pm 2.8\%$ . Where appropriate, we have reported statistical significance for relationships at the .05 probability level. When reporting estimates of frequencies and percentages for the population, we weighted responses to take account of oversampling in Quebec. When reporting associations between variables, we did not weight responses since associations are normally unaffected by oversampling and because a larger sample increases the reliability of findings.
2. Webpersonals, Canada's main online dating service, hosted an online survey on their sites on 31 November and 5 December 2000. Members and visitors to the Webpersonals sites were presented with a pop-up window when they logged on to the site. It asked them if they were willing to participate in the survey and informed them the survey was restricted to Canadian residents. 16,070 people answered at least one question and 6,581 people completed the questionnaire. For purposes of this report, we analyzed data from all respondents who completed the questionnaire. We construe this as a response rate of 41.0% ( $[6,581/16,070] * 100 = 41.0\%$ ). Again, the authors of this report were chiefly responsible for questionnaire design and solely responsible for data analysis. We do not report statistical significance for relationships discovered in the online survey for two reasons. First, in a sample this large, statistical significance is so common it is often unenlightening. Second, the respondents in the online survey were self-selected, not randomly selected, so tests of statistical significance are not justified. From respondents who completed the main survey, we selected 185 men and 105 women who said online dating is "a great way to meet people" and said they are willing to be interviewed in depth by telephone. Eleven individuals were subsequently selected at random from this group of 290. They participated in 20-minute taped interviews from which we quote in this report. Fieldwork was conducted by COMPAS Inc. The authors of this report designed the interview schedule and analyzed the results.

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