



# It doesn't hurt to ask: Question-asking increases liking

Karen Huang, Mike Yeomans, Alison Wood Brooks, Julia Minson, Francesca Gino  
Harvard University

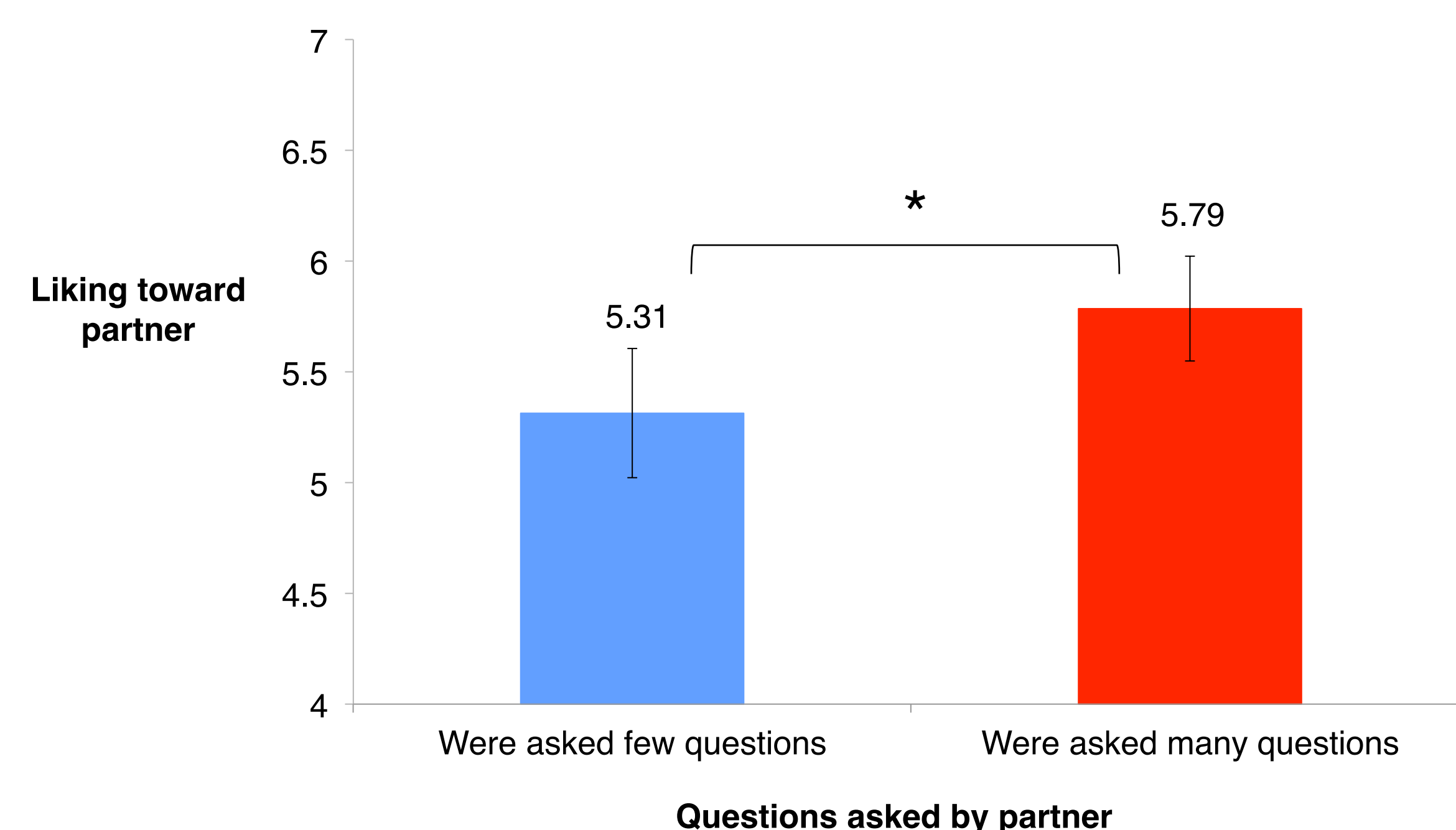
## Abstract

Conversation is a fundamental human experience, one that is necessary to pursue intrapersonal and interpersonal goals across myriad contexts, relationships, and modes of communication (e.g., written, spoken). In the current research, we isolate the role of an understudied conversational behavior: question-asking. Across three studies of live dyadic conversations, we identify a robust and consistent relationship between question-asking and liking: people who ask more questions are better liked. When people are instructed to ask more questions, they are perceived as higher in responsiveness, an interpersonal construct that captures listening, understanding, validation, and care. We measured responsiveness with an attitudinal measure from previous research as well as a behavioral measure: the number of follow-up questions one asks. In both cases, responsiveness explained the effect of question-asking on liking. In addition to analyzing live get-to-know-you conversations online, we also studied face-to-face speed-dating conversations. We find that speed daters who ask more questions during their dates are more likely to get second dates, a behavioral indicator of liking. We trained a natural language processing algorithm as a “follow-up question detector” that we applied to our speed-dating data (and can be applied to any text data to more deeply understand question-asking dynamics), and the follow-up question rate explained why question-asking led to speed-dating success. Despite the persistent and beneficial effects of asking questions, people do not anticipate that question-asking increases interpersonal liking.

## Study 1

Does the amount of question-asking influence liking?

- N = 398 participants from Harvard behavioral lab (199 dyads)
- Instructions: “You will be randomly paired with another participant to chat for fifteen minutes. During the conversation, *your objective is to get to know each other.*”
- Manipulation for one partner only, at the dyad level
  - High question-asking: “Ask the other person *at least 9 questions.*”
  - Low question-asking: “Ask the other person *at most 4 questions.*”

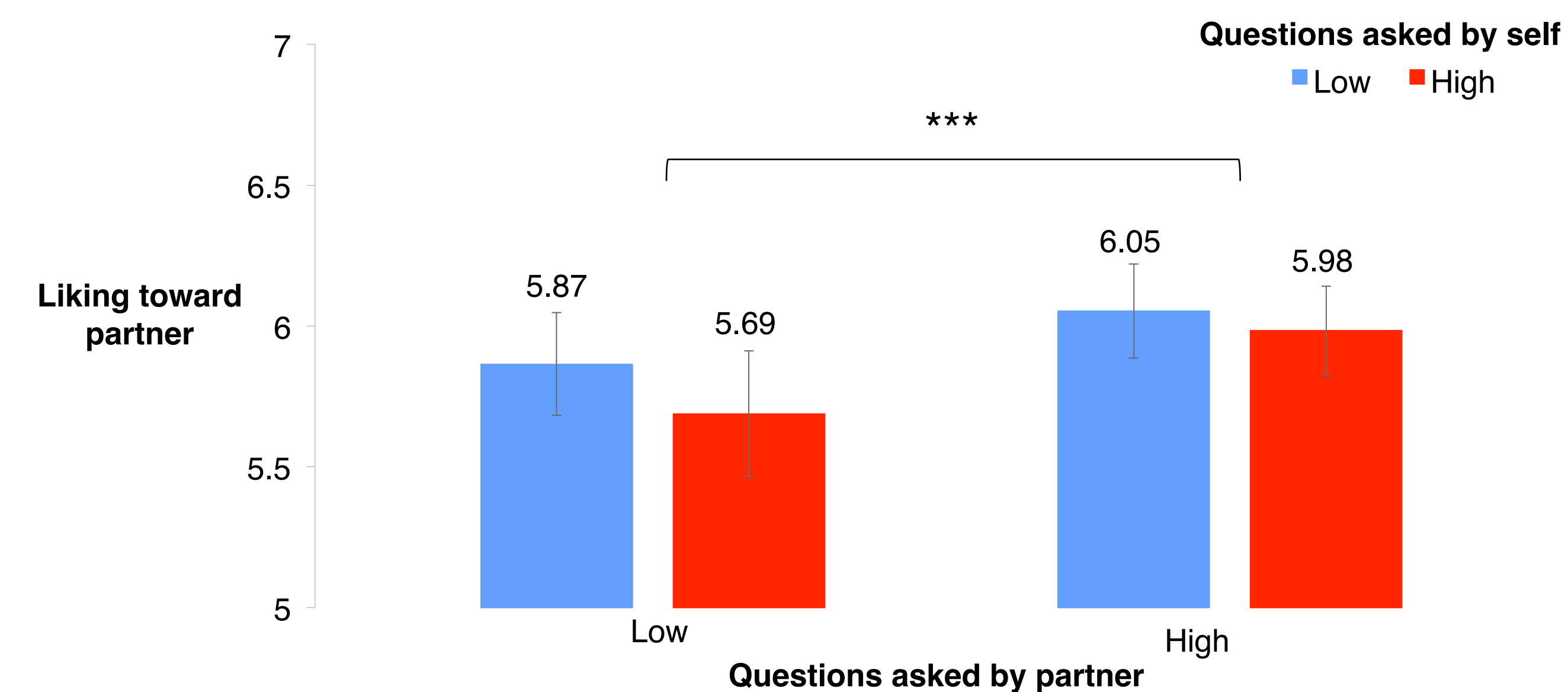


$t(197) = 2.47, p = 0.014, \text{Cohen's } d = 0.35$

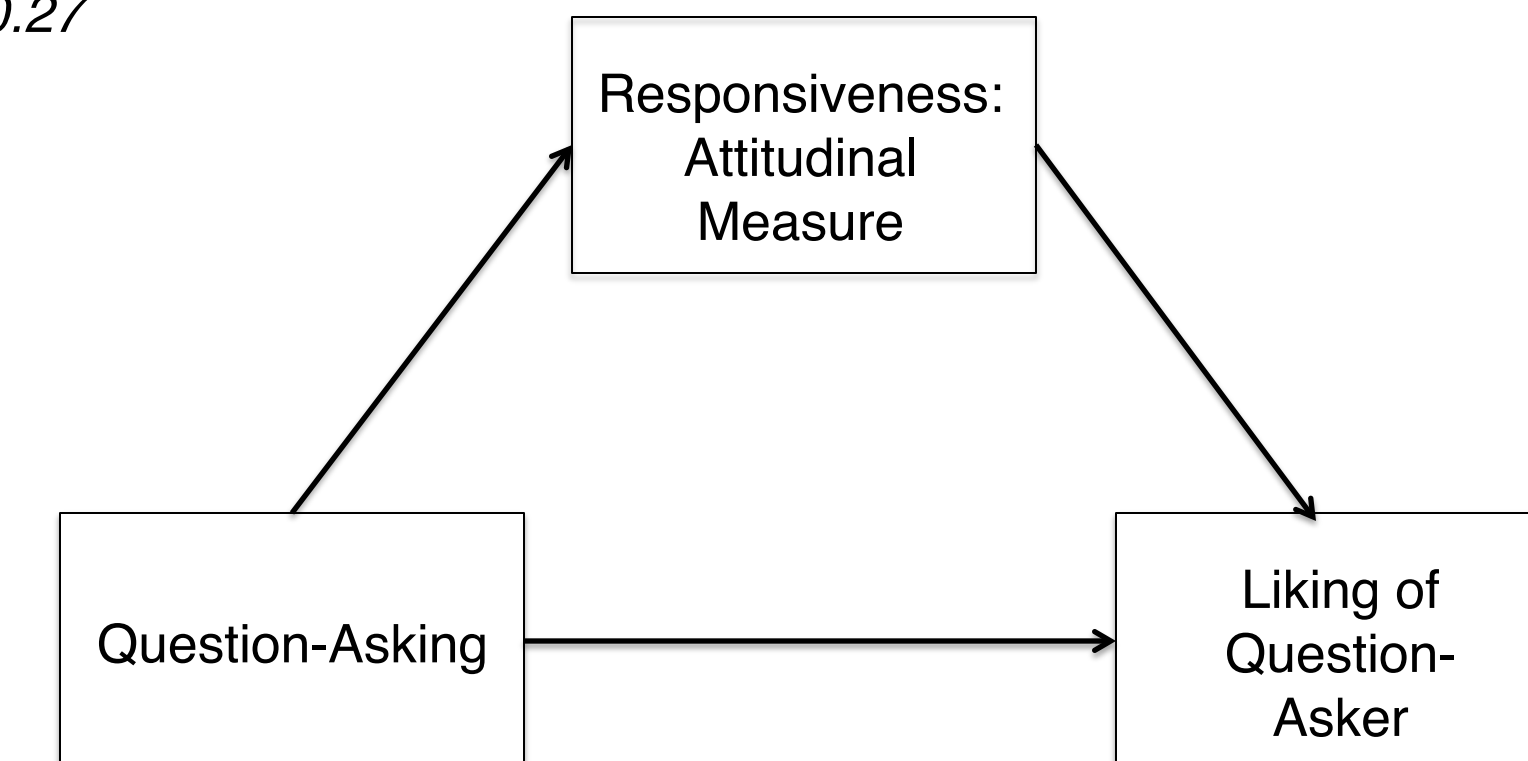
## Study 2

What explains the effect of question-asking on liking?

- N = 338 participants from MTurk (169 dyads)
- Manipulation for both partners (self: high vs. low question-asking vs. partner: high vs. low question-asking)



HLM:  $\beta = 0.279, SE = 0.089, t(306) = 3.13, p = .001; \text{Cohen's } d = 0.27$

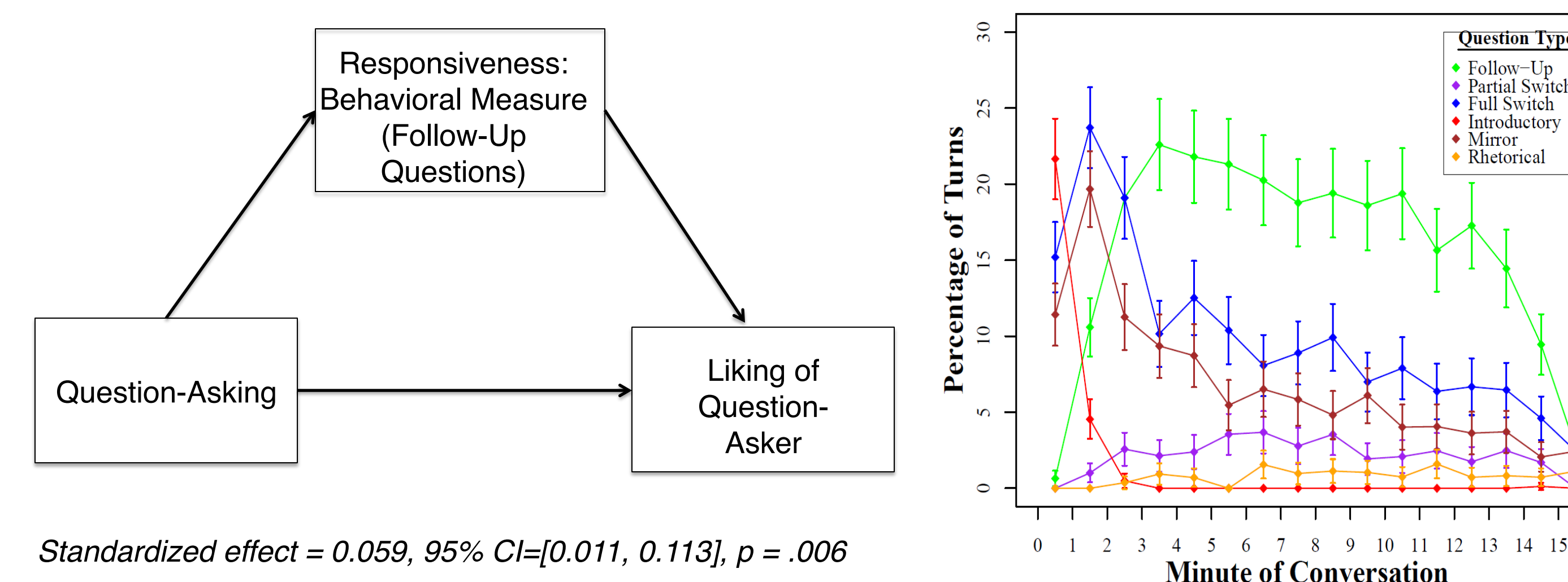


Standardized effect = 0.072, 95% CI=[0.004, 0.143],  $p = .041$

## Classification of Question Types: Studies 1-2

Does question-type influence liking?

Question Type	Example	Percentage
Follow-Up	Person 1: I'm planning a trip to Canada. Person 2: Oh, cool. <b>Have you ever been there before?</b>	39.9%
Full-Switch	Person 1: I am working at a dry cleaners. Person 2: <b>What do you like doing for fun?</b>	28.1%
Partial-Switch	Person 1: Not super outdoorsy, but not opposed to a hike or something once in awhile. Person 2: <b>Have you been to the beach much in Boston?</b>	5.5%
Mirror	Person 1: What did you have for breakfast? Person 2: I had eggs and fruit. <b>How about you?</b>	18.9%
Introductory	Person 1: hello! Person 2: <b>Hey, how's it going?</b>	5.8%
Rhetorical	Person 1: What's the craziest event you've been to? Person 2: Yesterday I followed a marching band around. <b>Where were they going?</b> It's a mystery.	1.9%



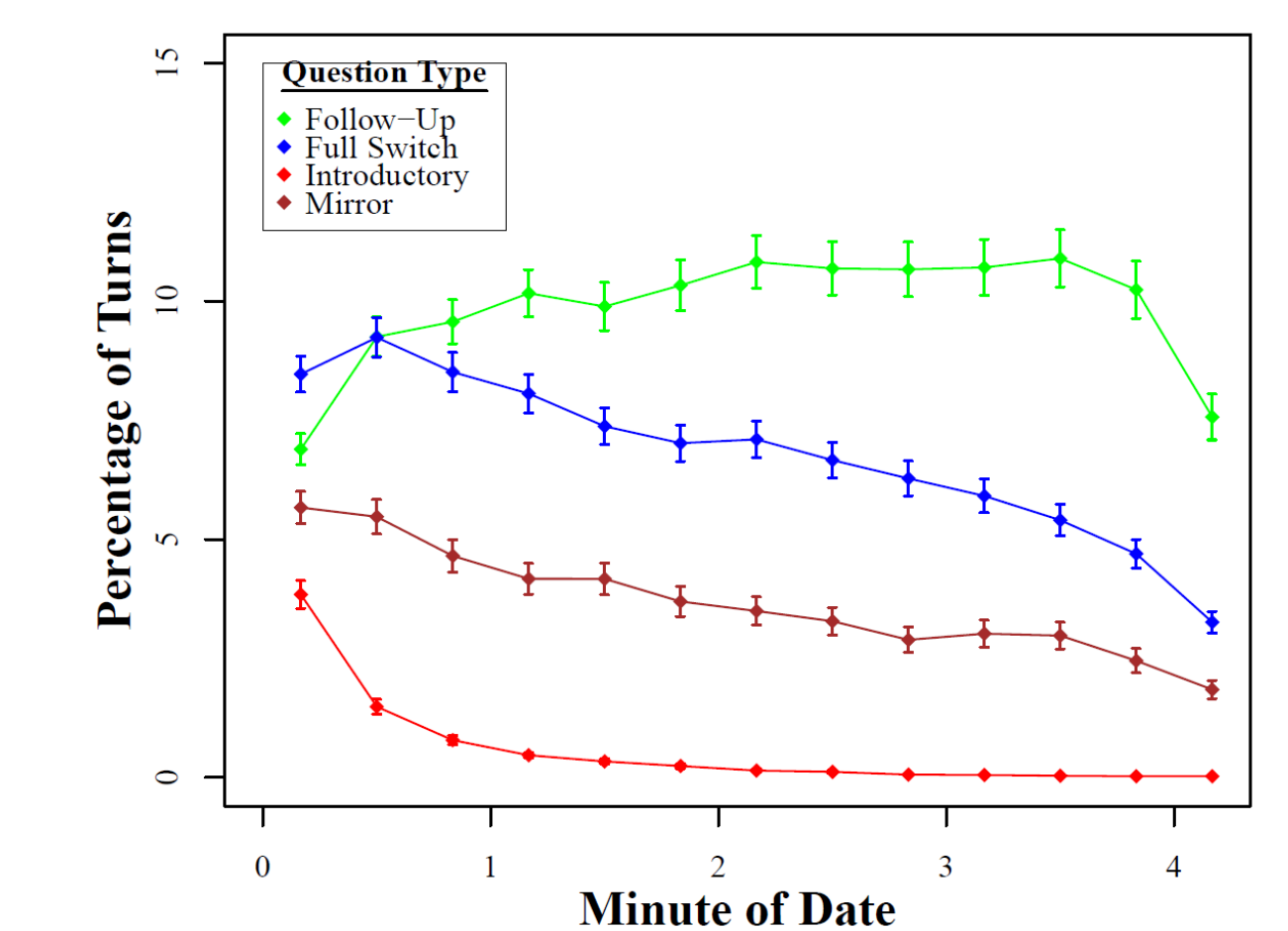
## Study 3

Do question-askers do better when speed-dating?

- N = 110 men and women, each went on 15-19 speed dates (Jurafsky, Ranganath, & McFarland, 2009; Ranganath, Jurafsky, & McFarland, 2009)
- IV: Number of questions each person asked on each date
- DV: Yes/No second-date decision
- We used the human coding of question types in Studies 1-2 to build an automatic, natural language processor (a “question-type detector”)
- Can use the detector to classify question types in any conversational text data. We used it to classify question types in our speed-dating data.

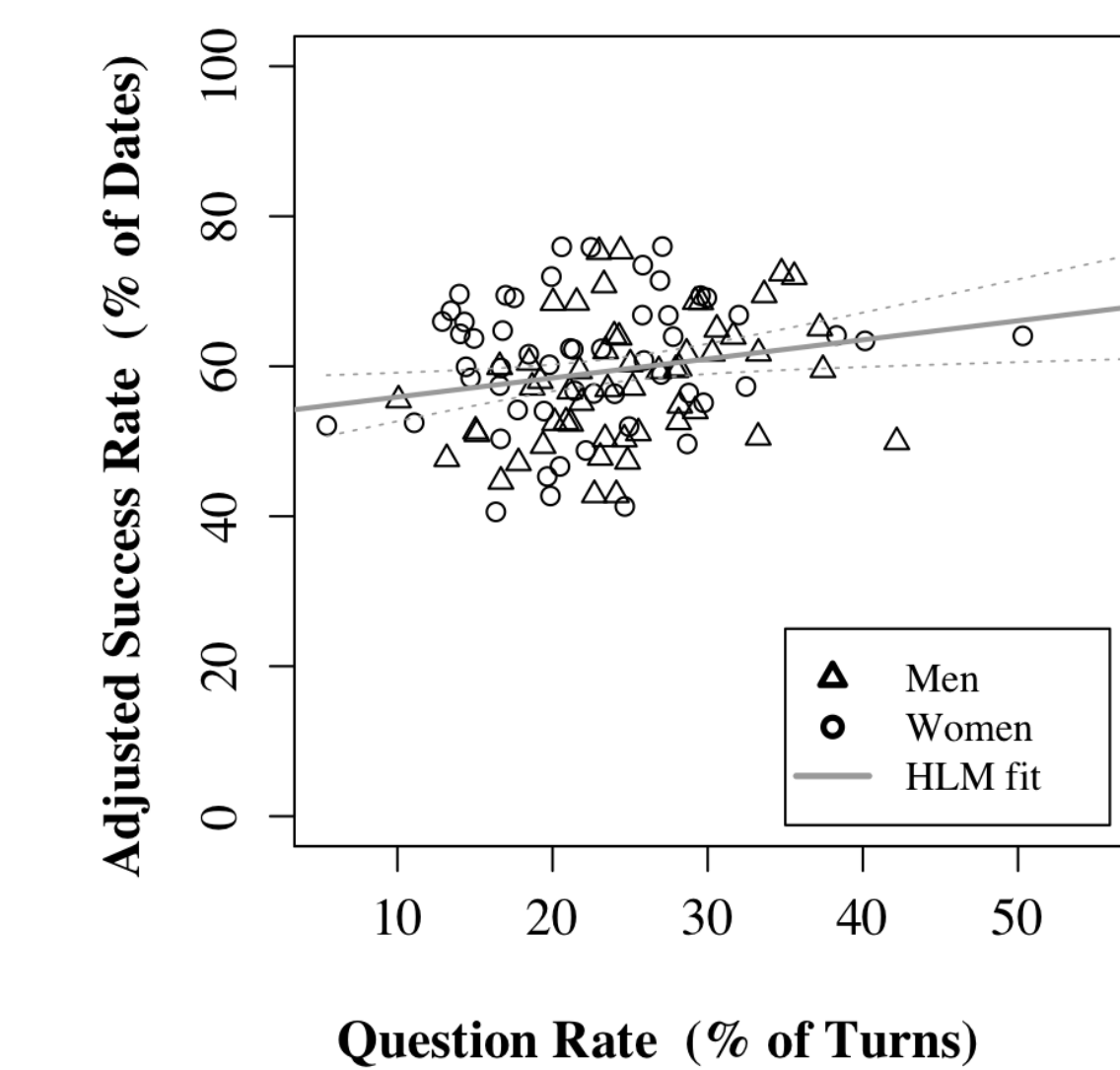
Distinctive “ngrams” (phrases) associated with the four most common question types

Follow-up Questions	Full-switch Questions	Introductory Questions	Mirror Questions
which	how old	how are you	how about
why	do you like	hello	what about
what kind	travel	your name	yourself?
cool	fun	how are	and
nice	do you live	hi how	i am
wow	interests	today?	and you
is it	hobbies?	what is	what about you
how do	you a student	go?	and
where do	weather	name?	no, i
want to	you from?	are you?	yes, i



Hierarchical logistic regression models predicting second-date success

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Total Question Count	.097*						
Total Question Rate		.079*	.137***	.150*			
Full Switch Question Rate			-.118	.083			.126
Follow-Up Question Rate			.184*	.235**			.287**
Introductory Question Rate			.041	.090*			.062
Mirror Question Rate			-.001	-.060			-.049
Gender (1=Male)			.850***	.888***			
Rater Fixed Effects	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES
Dyad Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Dependent Variable	wants 2nd date	wants 2nd date	wants 2nd date	wants 2nd date	wants 2nd date	wants 2nd date	wants 2nd date
Observations	1961	1961	1961	1961	1961	1961	1961
pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.002	.001	.002	.032	.035	.135	.137



## Conclusions

- Across three studies, people who ask more questions are better liked.
- The effect of question-asking is driven by an increase in responsiveness, which leads question-receivers to like the partner more.
- Prior research has conceptualized responsiveness as understanding, validation, and care (Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988), and we show that an important behavioral indicator of responsiveness is asking more follow-up questions in a conversation.
- We trained a natural language processing algorithm as a “follow-up question detector” that we applied to our speed-dating data, and the follow-up question rate explained why question-asking led to speed-dating success.

Questions & feedback welcome!  
Contact Karen Huang at [karenhuang@g.harvard.edu](mailto:karenhuang@g.harvard.edu).