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Flirting with Perceptions: An Examination of Flirting Between the Sexes

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### Abstract

The biggest problem involving flirting arises from the misperceptions involved with it. Looking at the different ways in which the sexes communicate flirtation can help to understand and change approaches in flirting based on intention. Examining these differences led to finding other factors involved in the misperceptions that occur. The type of setting, intent behind the flirtation, the sexual implications of the flirtation, the ambiguity associated with both the verbal and the non-verbal types of flirtation, the medium through which the flirtation occurs, as well as the difference in sender and receiver perceptions further help in the understanding of these misperceptions by using those gender differences. Through these differences the barriers involved with this common type of miscommunication can be torn down and clarity with flirting can arise anew.

## Flirting with Perceptions: An Examination of Flirting Between the Sexes

This study is about flirtation between members of the opposite sex, using the differences in flirting styles between the genders, in order to understand how they affect the perception of these actions.

Over the years a popular topic among teen magazines and even the more adult magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* has been that of flirtation. There are many articles and quizzes based on how people misinterpret flirting advances and tips on how to help. People have realized the common disconnect in how men and women perceive flirtatious behavior between each other and continue to search for ways to bridge that gap, wishing to communicate their intent more clearly.

By examining the differences in the styles of flirting in men versus those in women it becomes easier to adjust one's perception of another's flirtatious behavior. The questions this paper aims to answer are age old questions stemming from these similarities and differences based on gender communication styles. Through answering those questions it becomes easier to understand how one can unknowingly give mixed signals.

Delving into the general questions involved with flirting led to even more specific ones. These questions have led to the belief that there are more factors in different perceptions of flirtatious behavior than just the differences in communication styles between men and women. Exploring and understanding these differences can lead to knowing how flirting may help determine how a relationship develops; whether that relationship becomes platonic, romantic, stays as it is, or even if it starts at all. This type of knowledge encourages people to control their

own destinies among their relationships by providing them with the tools to help chose the relational path of their choice.

RQ1: How do people flirt?

RQ2: What types of behavior do others consider flirtatious?

R3: Does the type of setting affect this perception?

R4: What intentions may be behind a flirtatious behavior?

## Literature Review

In order to accurately discuss flirtation one must look at what is considered flirting. The only way to determine flirtation is by examining judgments and perceptions of what could be considered flirtatious behavior. Abrahams (1994) conducted a study that focused on these perceptions of flirtatious behavior. During this study Abrams found six dimensions which men and women use to determine flirtatiousness. The six dimensions are: sexual assertiveness, overtness, invitation, playfulness, non-verbalness, and unconventionality. Sexual assertiveness involved messages that showed sexual interest such as showering with someone. Overtness involved messages that were clear and direct involving their intent often using both verbal and nonverbal cues so as to decrease ambiguity. Invitation involved messages that suggested desire for increased interaction whether it be long term or an implied or simply just hanging out in the current fashion more often. Playfulness involved messages that are while unconventionality focused on messages that differed from the norm. Non-verbalness involved messages of a nonverbal nature.

He found that men and women used these dimensions in similar fashions with differences coming only from men rating experiences more inviting than women did, as far as the dimension of invitation was concerned. However, a study by La France, Henningsen, Oates, & Shaw (2009) showed very strong differences between the sexes during observations of face to face interactions.

### Nonverbal

Ivy and Backlund (2008) talk about the importance of nonverbal flirting and how it is a large part of flirtatious behavior because it is usually how we convey interest in others. They

refer to a study done in singles bars that found women use 52 nonverbal cues to show interest in men, the most popular being smiling and increased physical proximity. They came to the realization that women are more in control of the flirting process, which they separated into four conclusions.

Women are better at encoding and decoding nonverbal behavior of a flirtatious nature and also have a larger and well developed set of rejection strategies. Women also exhibit a wide assortment of flirting behaviors to signal their interest to men, as well as when exhibiting flirtatious behavior they will typically be approached by men. It is usually only after a woman has initiated an encounter by indicating nonverbally that an approach would be welcome that a man will physically approach.

While nonverbal flirting appears to be more widely used Henningsen, Kartch, Orr, and Brown (2009) conducted a study pitting nonverbal and verbal flirting against each other in terms of perceptions of sexual intent. They found that the ambiguity of nonverbal flirting is a large reason for the difference in how men and women perceive flirtations, with verbal flirting giving off a stronger perception of sexual interest than non-verbal flirting.

### Intentions

Ivy and Backlund (2008) state that people flirt for reasons that are not limited to, having an attraction for or being interested in someone. In order to familiarize oneself with these intentions it is beneficial to look at two studies on flirtation in cross-sex friendships.

Egland and Spitzberg (1996) defined four different types of flirtation with their study: conversational, display, stereotypical, and attentiveness. Conversational flirtation involves supportiveness as well as positive reinforcements. This type may not be distinguishable from

normal non flirtatious behavior in a platonic relationship. Display flirtation involves more overt types of behavior. This type can often involve touching or other explicit types of shown attraction. Stereotypical flirtation is the type of flirtation often found at parties or bars. Attentiveness flirtation involves different types of expressing concern attention and interest in the person they are conversing with. They found that platonic relationships usually exhibit the conversational and attentiveness types leaving the more sexual types for romantic relationships. They speculated that this *pseudo flirting* helps define relationships and test boundaries based on the intentions of the parties wishing to escalate the relationship.

Guerrero and Chavez's (2005) study focused less on the types of flirting and more on the romantic interest level in the relationship. They came up with four different intention types among friendships which varied from mutual romance to strictly platonic leaving the other two types of intentions being with one party desiring the part the other is rejecting. The study found correlations between types of disclosure and flirtation based on these intentions, largely being affected by levels of relational uncertainty. Those who had lower levels of relational uncertainty with their romantic interest level in the relationship disclose more than those with higher levels of relational uncertainty.

## Perceptions

The vagueness involved in non-verbal flirting was brought up earlier, but can verbal flirting be just as vague? Dougherty, Kramer, Klatzke, and Rogers (2009) wrote an article based on research of language convergence and meaning divergence that suggests it can be. They found that people use similar words leading to three issues. The issues with using similar words in conversation, whether by shortcuts or brevity often lead to the illusion of shared meaning.

Because of this illusion meanings diverge causing people to use different words or use the same words that imply a different meaning.

Another barrier to perceptions matching intentions can be the presence of alcohol. This was the subject of the study done by Lannutti and Camero (2007). They found that alcohol did affect the perception of intent associated with different types of physical contact by males. The three types of physical contact they testing in this study were putting his arm around the woman, putting his hand on the woman's thigh, and attempting to kiss the woman. They found that women who were drinking expected the contact and flirtatious behavior more than those who were not. The women who were sober found the three different types of contact equally unexpected while those who were drinking were more tolerable to different kinds.

This study also tested how attractiveness affected perceptions. The conclusion was that the attractiveness of the men initiating the contact did not change the expectation of it, but the more attractive men were evaluated more positively by the women.

### Sexual Interpretations

It is widely known that one of the biggest misperceptions made between men and women during flirting is misinterpreting types of behavior as sexual interest or intent. Abrahams (1994) found that his overtness, invitation, and sexual assertiveness dimensions had a more sexual connotation. They were also rated higher as being perceived as flirtatious. La France (2009) had also come to the conclusion that confirmed their original hypothesis in reference to sex being related to flirting especially in men.

Hennigsen (2004) conducted a study based on these types of miscommunications in flirting. It focused on how the sexes viewed the intentions of flirting based on six types of

motivations. The six motivations in this study were sex, relational, exploring, fun, esteem, and instrumental. The relational motivation involved trying to intensify or strengthen the relationship while the exploring motivation involved feeling out how the other person feels in relation to the relationship. The sex motivation involves trying to get somewhere sexually with the other person while the fun motivation is flirting just for the sake of it being an enjoyable activity. The esteem motivation suggests that people flirt in order to make themselves feel better about their self by judging other people's reactions to them. The instrumental motivation for flirting involves people using flirting as a goal to attain something such as a free drink at a bar. The major difference he found involved men perceiving friendly behaviors as more sexual than women do.

### Setting

Another factor that needs to be looked at in understanding the outcomes of flirting is the setting in which the flirting is done. Henningsen, Braz, and Davies (2008) study did just that incorporating social valence theory to see if the motivations for flirting are affected when placed in a work setting as opposed to a social setting. They found that the view of flirtations in relation to sex in different settings did affect perception. Workplace flirtation was not perceived as sexual as often as the social kind, which also added to an increase in sexual harassment associated with workplace flirtation because of the societal norms associated with the workplace not being suitable for sexual activity.

Ridge and Reber (2002) take on a similar scenario as their study deals with flirtation in a job interview scenario. They concluded that men were more flirtatious when they believed the woman was attracted to them. However, the women did not find themselves as being flirtatious bringing up problems linked to sexual harassment type situations.

## The Internet Age

With technology advancing as it has and communication not being strictly face-to-face as it used to be, we are faced with flirting that occurs through these new media. Whitty's (2003) found no significant differences in whether people found it easier or preferred to flirt either on or offline. He also suggests that *cyber-flirting* will only increase over time.

Fox (2004) suggests that cyber-flirting may in some ways be returning us to a more antiquated style of the courting process because of its focus on learning about each other instead of the physical contact. Alapack, Blichfeldt, and Elden, (2005) imply that the anonymity of online communication makes flirting easier, allowing people to open up easier and establish very strong bonds.

Along with this new wave of technology comes a possibly more overtly sexual type of flirting through dirty text and sexually suggestive picture messages called sexts. Jayson (2008) refers to this new epidemic while explaining that young adults find it easier to be more forward through these types of mediums than in face-to-face contact.

## Discussion

It appears from the literature review that men and women do have different flirting styles obviously contributing to the reason why the perceptions of that flirtatious behavior do not always match. Now that we understand that it is easier to try and tweak the actions that we subconsciously give off as flirting when we do not mean to actually flirt.

It seems that from most, possibly all the studies reviewed, men find most of women's flirtatious behavior to be an expression of sexual intent and interest. Since it has become clear

that the motives behind flirting may not be directly linked to this type of attraction women can learn a valuable thing from this knowledge. If women do not feel with the very possible reaction that comes from men perceiving their intent as sexual it would be in the best interest to be wary of the intent behind the flirting. The articles showed that flirting happens for many reasons and in a variety of settings all of which affect the perception of those actions. In situations outside of the workplace it would be beneficial to not flirt for intentions aside from courting, such as, to get something they want or just for the fun of it, if women do not want to attract that type of attention. Workplace flirtation should probably be avoided all together due to the high risk involved with issues such as sexual harassment.

Flirtation can be an important tool in determining the way a relationship whether strictly platonic or not is developing. Communication is the biggest commodity in cases like this. Even though changes in flirting can be an indication that one or both party's intentions have changed and they are testing the waters, flat out talking about those changes in intentions is the quickest way to put both people on the same page in the relational development. Being on the same page will help minimize those misperceptions people have with flirting behavior making the process easier by steering it in the desired direction with less confusion.

It still remains a tad unclear how the addition of more non-face to face flirting mediums will add to the misperceptions. People appear more open and daring through those mediums and this could lead to bigger misperceptions because of people using flirting for reasons other than courting more often because of the ease and anonymity associated with them.

By understanding how more ambiguous the nonverbal flirting cues we give off are can allow a shift in which type of cues are used more often. This knowledge and shift can allowed

for the sender to be more aware of how the receiver will interpret something and make intentions and therefore, perceptions more clear and consistent between the two parties.

### Conclusion

Misperceptions in flirting with intent to court and otherwise are a topic that we run into daily as a society. Understanding why these misperceptions occur can greatly improve day to day life.

### Limitations

One of the biggest limitations of this paper came from the small number of sources reviewed. Reviewing a larger selection of sources may allow the findings to change. Another limitation comes from these sources mostly involved reviewing non courting situations for flirting. Also these studies are based solely on heterosexual relationships.

### Future Research

If a focus on flirting with intent to court was added the similarities and differences could be more obvious and possibly change by focusing more clearly on the intent behind flirting and not just the perceptions of it. Would similar misperceptions arise while studying homosexual relationships? What about from those involving a mix of the two?

Another possible way to go with future research is by flipping the research here. Here the research looks at the receiver misinterpreting the sender's non flirtatious behaviors as flirtatious. A new spin on misperceptions in flirting might be found by looking at situations where the receiver does not see the senders intentional flirtatious behavior as flirtatious.

## Practical Applications

The information gathered here can be placed into a helpful situation, such as, a seminar or programs to help people understand and react to their relationships, and how flirting is linked to sexual harassment in office types of situations. These programs can help bridge the miscommunication gaps by educating people of what they might be doing subconsciously and how they can change it to make their lives easier.

Overall flirtatious behavior whether intentional or not is something people deal with daily. Using these observations on the misperceptions involved with flirting we can help further our effectiveness through our own communication techniques.

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