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Abstract

Single adults often seek successful flirtatious encounters; yet these encounters can sometimes be considered failures. However, little research has identified flirtation rejection strategies enacted by those not interested in reciprocal flirting. The purpose of this study was to examine behavioral and verbal flirtation rejection strategies among college students. Stemming from a grounded theory methodology and a focus group method, 21 college students shared their experiences in focus group discussions. Thematic analysis yielded five behavioral rejection strategies (i.e., departure, friendship networks, cell-phone usage, ignoring, facial expressions) and four verbal rejection strategies (i.e., significant others, brief responses, politeness, insults) and sex differences in their usage. Results suggest that both men and women possess a predictable arsenal of available rejection strategies.

Keywords

Flirting, Courtship, Rejection, Focus Groups, and Grounded Theory

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Single adults often seek successful flirtatious encounters; yet these encounters can sometimes be considered failures. However, little research has identified flirtation rejection strategies enacted by those not interested in reciprocal flirting. The purpose of this study was to examine behavioral and verbal flirtation rejection strategies among college students. Stemming from a grounded theory methodology and a focus group method, 21 college students shared their experiences in focus group discussions. Thematic analysis yielded five behavioral rejection strategies (i.e., departure, friendship networks, cell-phone usage, ignoring, facial expressions) and four verbal rejection strategies (i.e., significant others, brief responses, politeness, insults) and sex differences in their usage. Results suggest that both men and women possess a predictable arsenal of available rejection strategies. Key Words: Flirting, Courtship, Rejection, Focus Groups, and Grounded Theory

Introduction

Flirtation can be an efficacious pathway to a number of prosocial outcomes, including progressive communication, romantic interest, and sexual encounters, and is a common practice among college students to achieve these goals (Beck, Clabaugh, Clark, Kosovski, Daar, Hefner, et al., 2007). However, flirtatious communication is oftentimes unsuccessful because of unexpected or unwanted communication attempts (Keyton & Rhodes, 1999; Lannutti & Camero, 2007). When not desired by recipients, their actions often hinder the success of such potential interactions. Moreover, because unwanted flirting has serious consequences such as perceived sexual harassment or obsessive relational intrusion (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Keyton & Rhodes), flirters may be well-advised to remain perceptive of rejection to avoid such predatory outcomes. Indeed, men view flirting as more sexual than women and perceive rejection as less potent (Henningsen, 2004; Moore, 2002). The purpose of this study, then, was to understand college students' communicative and behavioral rejections toward unwanted flirtation.

Flirtation and Rejection

Flirting behaviors may be largely idiosyncratic, yet most individuals share some commonalties when engaging in courtship behaviors. Fundamentally, flirting is a form of self-promotion (Rodgers & Veronsky, 1999), which can occur both verbally and

nonverbally. Research suggests sex differences exist with both nonverbal behaviors (e.g., Abbey & Melby, 1986; Koeppel, Montagne, O'Hair, & Cody, 1992; Moore, 1985) and verbal expressions (e.g., Levine, King, & Popoola, 1994). For example, women may engage in behaviors such as giggling, licking lips, and tossing hair, while men may arch their backs, flex their muscles, and stiffen their stance (Rodgers & Veronsky). Although these behaviors may be seen as stereotypical behaviors, men and women engage in self-promotion or flirtation differently considering the different physical features and cultural norms regarding the sexes. For example, men usually do not have long hair to toss nor is it normative, so consequently, there are sex differences in this nonverbal flirtation behavior. Less research has focused on the verbal facets of flirting, but men tend to flirt using more direct and verbal tactics while women use more nonverbal and indirect tactics (DeWeerth & Kalma, 1995). As such, men tend to be blunter in their flirting while women tend to flirt in more implicit manners.

Even less research has focused on flirtation rejection. Moore (2002) discovered that men rate nonverbal rejection behaviors less negatively than women. Essentially, men may continue flirting with a woman even if she illustrates disinterest in flirting back. Although extant research has suggested some preliminary findings, little is known about flirtation rejection strategies, or how people communicate disinterest when they are receiving unwanted flirtatious advances. Considering that flirting may be both verbal and nonverbal and sex differences exist, it is likely that flirtation rejection responses will also be verbal and nonverbal and will vary by sex. Therefore, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: What are behavioral rejection strategies college students engage in to indicate disinterest in unwanted flirtatious communication?

RQ2: What are verbal rejection strategies college students engage in to indicate disinterest in unwanted flirtatious communication?

RQ3: What sex differences, if any, influence these strategies?

Assessing Flirtation Rejection Strategies

Previous experimental work has been conducted on opening lines in flirtatious communication, which motivated us to research this general area. However, after reviewing the paucity of available flirting research, we discovered that no research has yet examined how individuals communicate rejection after a failed flirtation attempt. Moreover, because rejection can sometimes be face-saving and vague (Young, Paxman, Koehring, & Anderson, 2008), a closer examination of initial rejection attempts may help reveal common verbal and behavioral cues of disinterest to avoid potential embarrassment, or even worse, harassment issues. Thus, we decided to conduct exploratory research on this understudied topic. Based on a grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we wanted to be sure that all ideas on this topic emerged from the participants' discussions and not from other established sources. This inductive approach helped us better understand the topic by directing us toward choosing a focus group method and open coding data analysis procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Understanding and identifying such communication behaviors might help others be more cognizant of failed flirtation attempts, which could open more successful lines of

communication and improve interpersonal interactions.

Participants and procedures

Participants were 21 students (7 men, 14 women) enrolled at a large Eastern university. Participants were informed that (a) their participation was voluntary, (b) the purpose was to identify their perspectives on flirtation rejection, (c) their responses would remain confidential, (d) their participation would not affect their course standing or grade, and (e) the focus groups would be audiotaped. Participants ranged from sophomores to seniors and were recruited from introductory communication classes. Participants were given minimal extra credit for their participation. Some participants knew each other because they were members of the same class. Other students may have never met before.

Our investment in this area of research is based on the paucity of work on flirting. We pursued this topic because we have conducted other work on this area. Specifically, we conducted previous experimental research on flirtation open lines and verbal attempts of conversation initiation. Because rejection is a plausible consequence of opening lines, we decided to fill this gap in the literature and build on our previous work. Therefore, we invited participants to partake in one of three hour-long focus group sessions. We conducted both mixed-sex and same-sex focus groups because we believed that some of the female participants might be more inclined to discuss flirting and rejection in an all female group. We were concerned that male participants might cause female participants to become more reticent and uncomfortable discussing this topic. However, this may not have been the case considering that both mixed-sex and same-sex sessions lasted the same amount of time and individuals shared similar experiences. Although this possibility is not definitive, both men and women appeared equally to enjoy discussing the topic.

Focus groups were used because of their exploratory effectiveness in gathering information and understanding how people feel or think about an issue (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This method also allows for descriptive accounts of actual experience. Considering that most individuals have been recipients of flirtation at some point in their life, focus group participants could offer experiential accounts and descriptions concerning possible flirtation interactions. Finally, focus groups were chosen instead of interviews and observations because of the conversational nature of focus group sessions and the ability for individuals to share their stories in relation to others' possible shared experiences.

Institutional review board permission was granted under expedited review after one revision. Expedited review was submitted because participants would not remain anonymous in the focus groups, and anonymity is required for exempt review. Participants were greeted, informed about the nature of focus group sessions, and asked to sign the consent form. Human subjects approval required that all participants be briefed and sign an informed consent form. Participants read the form and the focus group moderator ensured participants that all responses would be kept completely confidential. We used the same questioning guide for each session. The questioning guide consisted of ten questions (see Appendix) developed by the authors before conducting the focus groups, which consisted of questions related to frequency of flirting,

flirting settings, flirtation rejection strategies, and reactions to rejection. Based on recommendations by Krueger and Casey (2000), we developed a questioning guide with one opening question, two introductory questions, one transition question, four key questions, and two ending questions. We chose this route so at minimum, we had a systematic set of questions to guide our focus group sessions. Then, additional questions were posed during the actual sessions to promote conversation and the elaboration of ideas. We preferred this style of conducting our focus groups because it involved a systematic way of collecting data and ensured that each participant was provided with the same questions. Once the focus group session ended, we thanked participants and asked them to reiterate, in writing, two of the flirtation rejection questions they had answered in the focus group session. This was done so that participants who may have been reticent about participating could elaborate on ideas.

Data analysis

We transcribed verbatim the audiotaped conversations during the three focus groups. For the purpose of this study, only the responses of the flirtation rejection strategies were analyzed. We did not include the written responses from participants in the data analysis because an initial examination of this data revealed that the responses were redundant and reflected the audiotaped data. For all three research questions, the transcriptions were subjected to a thematic analysis (Bulmer, 1979). We printed out the full transcriptions, and the first author inductively coded each individual response concerning flirtation rejection. A detailed line-by-line analysis led to the development of categories by using both open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Responses were first open coded; that is, they were "broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (p. 102). The first author grouped similar codes together to develop categories during the axial coding process. Using a constant comparative approach, the first author modified categories to best reflect the data by comparing within and across categories and added new categories when the data did not fit an existing category. Thus, similar codes were grouped together to develop categories by sorting and synthesizing frequently recurring codes to represent recurrent themes (Charmaz, 2002). The first author then developed a codebook after grouping coded responses by commonality and creating themes for both men and women. The second author coded all of the transcripts using the codebook to achieve 94% agreement (Holsti, 1969).

Results

The data revealed that a variety of both behavioral and verbal rejection strategies are used by participants in each of the focus groups sessions. However, after the three sessions, many strategies were repeated and no new ideas emerged, suggesting theoretical saturation of the data. Results of the thematic analysis yielded nine overall rejection strategies (five behavioral, four verbal).

Behavioral rejection strategies

The first research question asked what behavioral rejection strategies people

engage in to indicate disinterest in unwanted flirtatious communication. Thematic analysis yielded five themes, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see Table 1): *departure, friendship networks, cell-phone usage, ignoring, and facial expressions.* All of these themes surfaced for both sexes except for *ignoring.* Men did not report that they used the ignoring strategy.

Table 1

Behavioral Rejection Strategies

Theme (Behaviors)	Examples
Departure	I would just leave the actual location where the guy is standing.
	I definitely think leaving is always the best thing to do. You can do it in a nice way.
Friendship Networks	Like for a girl, we are always going to have our girls with us. So you just kind of encourage your girls to help and give them the sign to drag you away.
	Normally, if a girl will look around and is totally not interested, I'll give a face and my friends and I will do another round of shots or something.
Cell-Phone Usage	Be like hold on a second (to answer phone) or just start flipping through your cell phone.
	Give the wrong phone number.
Ignoring	Don't flirt back.
	If you are sitting down and they keep talking to you, just kind of turn (away).
Facial Expressions	Give dirty looks.
	Don't make eye contact.

The *departure* theme refers to an individual actually leaving the scene or location of the unwanted flirtatious communicator. One participant said, "I would definitely walk away." Participants indicated that they preferred removing themselves from unwanted interactions as a method of avoiding unsolicited flirtatious advances.

The *friendship networks* theme involves utilizing friends as a way of ending flirtatious conversation. One participant said, "I'll be like 'I'm going to take some shots with my friends here.'" Participants expressed that they use their friends as a means of escape or a reason to terminate conversation.

The *cell-phone usage* theme refers to the participants' use of a cell phone in an attempt to defer unwanted flirtatious communication. Participants indicated that using a

cell phone is a possible excuse for avoiding flirtatious conversation. This included answering a phone call, or pretending to, or giving flirters false phone numbers. One participant said that she would say something like, "Is that my phone ringing? I'll be right back" and then "answer" her phone.

The *ignoring* theme refers to pretending like the individual who is flirting does not exist. This involves acting as if the intended flirting is not even happening. Participants did not actually leave the situation, but as one said "just kind of turn away." They did not acknowledge the person once the flirting began.

The *facial expressions* theme refers to ocular and facial behaviors that indicate a disinterest in flirting. Essentially, participants revealed that they give mean looks to avoid eye contact with the undesired flirter. These are nonverbal methods that are intended to give the flirting individual the message that they should stop flirting or go away.

Verbal rejection strategies

The second research question asked about the verbal rejection strategies people engage in to indicate disinterest in unwanted flirtatious communication. Thematic analysis revealed four themes (see Table 2): *significant others, brief responses, politeness,* and *insults*. These themes are also not mutually exclusive. The *significant other* theme refers to the mention of a boyfriend, girlfriend, or fiancée, despite whether this is true. This is mentioned to convince the flirter that he or she is already involved with someone else. A common response from multiple participants was to tell the person "I have a boyfriend."

The *brief responses* theme refers to short, fleeting comments to the undesired communicator. One participant said she would "use really short response like yes or no." Responses are kept short to indicate that the receiver is not interested.

The *politeness* theme refers to being nice and respectful even though the flirting is unwanted. One participant said, "I joke around. I don't want to be mean." This strategy involves being courteous as opposed to direct so the communication may actually continue longer than desired.

The *insults* theme refers to being rude and sometimes offensive to the communicator. This strategy is very direct and insults the individual flirting. More than one participant said to "describe why you don't like them."

Sex differences in strategies

The third research question inquired about sex differences in flirtation rejection strategies. The data suggest some sex differences in flirtation rejection preferences. For women, the most common strategy was departure. Overwhelmingly, women reported that they leave the situation when someone flirts with them and they are disinterested. Uniquely, women reported using a significant other as an excuse much more (only one man reported using this tactic as opposed to numerous women). Men reported using insults more than women. Women expressed that they often times act polite even when they are not interested in flirting.

Table 2

Verbal Rejection Strategies

Theme (Verbal Expressions)	Examples
Significant Other	I've done the whole "I have a boyfriend" when I don't have a boyfriend. Like "oh, that guy over there, he's mine." Well, actually, if you are not engaged and you say you are, it is a little bit more effective.
Brief Responses	I won't say anything more than I need to. Use one word answers.
Politeness	Usually I talk to them for a little bit. I'm not a complete bitch. I don't like to be that mean. There's no reason not to talk to someone. I think that you need to try to put yourself in that situation. If you think a guy was cute and you walked up to him and put yourself out there, you wouldn't want him to be like "don't talk to me."
Insults	My roommate is really rude. She'll just say to a guy, "ew, you are gross, get away." "Leave me the hell alone."

Although both sexes reported using friendship networks, the responses between men and women concerning friendship networks were fundamentally different. Women reported using their friends as a means of escape (e.g., they communicated that they needed to go with their friends). Men, however, indicated more often that they deferred a flirting woman to one of their male friends (e.g., "I usually introduce them to one of my friends" or "I'll pawn them off on someone else"). While women use their friends as an excuse to cease interacting, men reported that they did not necessarily want a flirting woman to leave because one of their friends may be interested.

Men did not report using the ignoring strategy, while women did. Thus, men usually do engage in flirtatious conversation while women may not allow the communication channels to even open, which is consistent with previous research (Moore, 2002). Also, men reported that they usually do not reject women in a flirtatious conversation, while women reported that they frequently reject men. Overall, the data suggest that women are frequently recipients of unwanted flirtatious advances by men, and tend to rely on a set of core strategies that are either passive or active strategies. Indeed, women reported that some of these passive strategies are rather face-saving forms of rejection, attempting to avoid embarrassment for the flirter. Other responses, however,

were quite active and straightforward, consisting of outright humiliation attempts or direct denial. Collectively, the data also suggest that although women may use a wide array of passive and active rejection strategies, the desired goal is to cease communication with the unwanted pursuer as quickly as possible. In contrast, men reported they were more likely to entertain the notion of flirting with women, even if not completely interested. However, when men were completely disinterested in flirting, they reported using insults as a preferred strategy, suggesting that when men do decide to reject, they tend to be less polite. These findings are supported by the literature on verbal aggression concerning the disengagement of dating relationships (Sutter & Martin, 1998).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine behavioral and verbal flirtation rejection strategies. The findings have numerous implications. First, college students engage in a wide range of both behavioral (i.e., departure, friendship networks, cell-phone usage, ignoring, and facial expressions) and verbal rejection strategies (i.e., significant others, brief responses, politeness, and insults) when they are recipients of unwanted flirting. Also, the behaviors and words can drastically differ stylistically. For example, one participant disclosed that she prefers to state that she is going to the bathroom, and then never returns, which falls under the departure theme. Another participant explained that he just walks away. Both strategies result in the same outcome, yet are stylistically different. Therefore, although strategies are thematically similar with comparable outcomes, people employ different communication styles to obtain such outcomes. These results imply that communicator style may have a substantial influence on the stylistic aspects of flirtation rejection, but generally, individuals are motivated to reach the same sort of outcome.

Second, sex differences seem to largely affect these stylistic aspects. As previously noted, men and women appear to reject one another differently. Men reported using direct insults as a means of rejection, whereas women reported being more polite. One consistent finding was that both women and men advocated leaving the situation as an effective strategy to avoid undesired flirting. However, when trying to perceive a rejection strategy, one must realize that men and women may communicate differently (e.g., males did not use the ignoring strategy). Men apparently do not ignore female attempts at flirting.

Third, these results offer insight into what to look for when assessing a flirtation encounter and gauging its success. As Moore (2002) suggests, men are less efficient at gauging a flirtation situation and may continue to court a woman when she may not be interested. Such inefficiency may be misconstrued as stalking or obsessive relational intrusion if unwanted. As Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) noted, inappropriate and excessive flirting and courtship behavior is typical of stalking behavior (i.e., hyper-intimacy). This study offers some insight into the ways college students communicate their disinterest in unwanted interactions.

It would be pragmatic to educate individuals about these rejection strategies. It is possible that many people are not even aware when they are being rejected. Constructing a typology of rejection strategies would be practical for identifying failed flirtation communication attempts. If individuals are able to recognize flirtation rejection in real

flirtation encounters, they could possibly preserve more dignity by ceasing communicative attempts when actual rejection occurs.

Future Research and Limitations

Future research should consider exploring some of the limited areas of this study. Two limitations in this study could include the sample studied and potential social desirability biases. First, the sample used in this study consisted of college students, which was the focus for our particular research questions, but we recognize that this population is unique from other populations who also engage in the types of communication we were exploring. Other populations, such as marital partners, almost certainly flirt (and communicate rejection) in a fundamentally different way (perhaps using the significant other strategy more often). Future research should consider other diverse populations. Second, the potential for socially desirable responses when describing self behaviors in this study is a limitation. College students may have exaggerated their responses or communicated for self-promotion purposes. With any self-report method of data collection, the potential for inaccurate data is always a limitation. However, the questions posed in these focus group sessions were non-threatening questions and it is likely that a majority of the responses were genuine.

Other possible areas for future research might include reactions to flirtation rejection, differences in rejection strategies between single versus committed individuals, and operationalizing flirtation rejection strategies in a quantitative manner. Constructing a scale that would measure frequency of preferred flirtation rejection strategies could offer researchers an opportunity to correlate these strategies with other interpersonal communication variables. Additionally, field research involving the observation of naturally occurring rejection behavior might address some of the aforementioned limitations of the current study. Furthermore, participants noted that alcohol plays an important role in flirtation. Researchers should continue to examine the mediating function alcohol has on flirtation communication (Lannutti & Monahan, 2002; Monahan & Lannutti, 2000) as well as any other mediating factors. This study offers a beginning to understanding what individuals do or say when they are not interested in reciprocal flirting.

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Appendix

Questioning Guide

Opening
1) Tell us your name, major, and mention if you are single or not.

Introductory
2) How often do people flirt with you?
3) Where do you get hit on? Is this a question you made up, or did you get it someplace? The phrase "hit on" seems leading in a way. . .

Transition
4) How often are you disinterested in flirting back?

Key
5) What are some things you say to show you are not interested in flirting?
6) What are some things you do to show you are not interested in flirting?
7) If you had to pick one strategy that was the most effective in showing you are not interested in flirting, what would it be?
8) What are some things you have seen other people say or do (e.g., friends) to show they are not interested in flirting?

Ending
9) What are some reactions people have when you indicate you are not interested in flirting?
10) I wanted you to help me understand what people say or do when they are hit on and they don't want to be. Is there anything I missed? Is there anything else you want to say that you haven't?

Author's Note

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