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Articles

How to Flirt Best: The Perceived Effectiveness of Flirtation Techniques

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Abstract

Four studies were implemented in order to ascertain how men and women flirt with potential partners and which flirtatious actions are considered most effective. Study 1 (n = 40) and Study 2 (n = 60) sought to discover the actions that men and women, respectively, engage in to indicate romantic interest to a partner. Study 3 (n = 110) sought to determine which flirtatious acts from women are perceived as most effective by men. Women's flirtations that suggest sexual access were expected to be rated as most effective. Study 4 (n = 222) sought to determine which flirtatious acts from men are perceived as most effective by women. Men's flirtations that suggest emotional commitment and exclusivity were expected to be rated as most effective by women. The results were consistent with the hypotheses and are discussed in terms of prior research.

Keywords: flirting, sexual access, commitment, exclusivity

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One of the tasks men and women looking to form a relationship face is attracting mates. One way to accomplish this task is by flirting. Flirting involves indicating to potential mates that one is interested in dating/spending time with them (see Downey & Vitulli, 1987; Henningsen, 2004; Moore, 2002; Whitty, 2003). To date, no research has examined which flirtation tactics are perceived as most effective for men and women. The current researchⁱ seeks to ascertain which flirtatious acts are perceived as most effective for men and women, using an evolutionary perspective.

Flirting is considered a universal and essential aspect of human interaction (Eibl-Eibesfeldt & Hass, 1967; Luscombe, 2008). Individuals, both married and single, flirt. Additionally, flirtation can be used for either courtship initiation or quasi-courtship purposes. Quasi-courtship refers to instances where flirtatious behaviors are used when one or both parties are not interested in sexual contact (Henningsen, 2004; Scheflen, 1965). One example of this is for jealousy induction. Wade and Weinstein (2011) report that individuals can induce jealousy in a current partner by using techniques that involve flirtation with an individual other than their partner. Flirtation can also be used as a way to gauge how attractive one is to others and as a way to possibly gain resources (Henningsen, 2004). Flirtation can occur in multiple forms. Individuals can flirt non-verbally (Crook, 1972; Givens, 1978; Moore, 1985; Renninger, Wade, & Grammer 2004), or verbally (Grammer, Kruck, Juetten, & Fink, 2000; Whitty, 2004).

Both men and women use verbal interaction as a way to communicate interest in someone. Women, however, having more at stake biologically than men do (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994), also engage in such acts as a way to elicit information from a man to see if he is potentially a good mate (Grammer et al., 2000). Thus, as Moore (1985) reports, it is the women who initiate and control the situation.

Men and women alike use nonverbal signals, such as direct glancing, space-maximization movements, and automanipulations, in relevant mate-selection contexts (Renninger et al., 2004). The nonverbal courtship signaling involved in flirtation serves a useful purpose. Women use subtle indicators of male interest to help them pace the course of any potential relationship while they assess a man's willingness and ability to donate resources. Therefore, the task for women is to express enough interest to elicit courtship behavior, but not to elicit a level of interest that leads a man to skip courtship behavior, while men attempt to display their status, health, strength, and intelligence in a desired, unthreatening way. From an evolutionary perspective flirting can be thought of as a product of our evolved mate acquisition adaptations.

Evolutionary theory suggests that men and women have evolved adaptations to solve the problem of mate acquisition. Buss and Schmitt (1993) report that men and women have different mate preferences due to their differences in obligatory parental investment (Trivers, 1972). Men seek a parental investment from women that is primarily physical. Specifically, reproductive fitness concerns for men center on future offspring production. Men were and are faced with finding the best possible mates to bear their offspring (Buss, 1989, 2006; Trivers, 1972). Thus, Buss (1989, 2006) reports that men choose mates based on fertility and reproductive potential cues, and sexual access. Reproductive fitness concerns among women center around securing good genes and a strong parental investment at the financial level (Buss, 1989; Trivers, 1972). Women were and are concerned with finding men that are most willing and best able to genetically and financially invest in their offspring (Buss, 1989). Since men can invest at two levels, genetic and financial (Trivers, 1972), women most often focus on cues indicative of a strong future parental investment for long term mate selection (Buss, 1989, 2006).

Since sexual access is crucial for male mate selection and securing a commitment is most important for women's mate selection, one might expect a woman's actions that are suggestive of sexual accessibility to be the most effective way to flirt with a man. Conversely, since women typically desire a long term commitment, a man's actions that are suggestive of a willingness to commit may be the most effective way for a man to flirt with a woman. Yet, there is a void in the attraction literature. Recent research has not examined this. It is important to ascertain which flirtatious actions are most effective as this knowledge will further enhance the knowledge base regarding flirtation, and further strengthen the knowledge base regarding human attraction. Since evolutionary theory based research can account for many aspects of mate attraction, yet has not examined the effectiveness of overt flirtation tactics, it is important to determine if evolutionary theory can also account for the overt tactics that are most effective for flirting with members of the opposite sex.

The present research sought to examine the aforementioned issue with 4 studies. Studies 1 and 2 ascertained which flirtatious actions are performed by men and women, respectively. Studies 3 and 4 ascertained which flirtatious acts are perceived as most effective for men and women, respectively.

Study 1

Methods

Participants — Participants were 40 men ranging in age from 18 to 22, $M = 19.66$, $SD = 1.42$, from a private University in the Northeastern US. They were recruited from an introductory psychology course and on campus. Participants from the introductory psychology class were recruited via posting a sign-up sheet indicating dates and time when these individuals could take part in the research. Their involvement was in partial fulfillment of research participation requirements associated with the introductory psychology course. Participants recruited from the campus were approached and asked if they would agree to participate in the research and did not receive any compensation for their involvement.

Procedure — Participants received a questionnaire that included demographic questions regarding: age, sex, race, and whether or not they were in a relationship. Following standard act nomination methods used in prior research that set out to determine which actions men and women engage in when such actions are not previously known (Buss, 1988a, 1988b; Buss & Craik, 1983; Wade, Auer, & Roth, 2009), the next two pages of the questionnaire contained the following act nomination instructions for a short-term or a long-term mate and 5 numbered blanks on each page for individuals to write in their responses:

Please list below actions that you have done, or would do, to flirt with a woman for a potential long term relationship (a long-term mate) (or a potential short term relationship (a short-term mate)). A long-term mate is someone you would date more than a few times and would definitely consider marrying. A short-term mate is someone you might date just once, have a one night stand with, or date a few times but would not consider marrying. We are interested in specific behaviors. So you should be able to answer the following questions about each thing you list below: Have you ever done this action or would you do this action? If so, how often have you performed it or would you perform it?

The order for the long-term and short-term act nomination questions was varied for participants (some participants received the long-term act nomination request first while others received the short-term act nomination first).

Results

The nominated acts were examined by one of the authors and one other individual. Consensus nominated acts were kept. Twenty-six flirtatious acts were identified for men, see Table 1. Table 1 shows acts that range from commitment/exclusivity related behavior to direct sexual behavior. Additionally, the acts nominated for short-term and long-term mates did not differ.

Table 1

Flirtatious acts for men

1. He makes eye contact with you	14. He has sex with you
2. He makes body contact with you	15. He spends time with you
3. He asks you out	16. He asks for favors from you
4. He converses with you	17. He asks for your help
5. He smiles at you	18. He calls you
6. He dances with you	19. He gives you gifts
7. He acts interested in you	20. He holds hands with you
8. He compliments you	21. He kisses you
9. He has dinner with you	22. He goes to a movie with you
10. He makes you laugh	23. He makes random comments to you
11. He buys you a drink	24. He sends you valentines
12. He does favors for you	25. He tickles you
13. He laughs at your jokes	26. He gives you flowers

Study 2

Method

Participants — Participants were 60 women ranging in age from 18 to 23, $M = 19.45$, $SD = 1.48$, from a private University in the Northeastern United States. They were recruited from an introductory psychology course and the campus. Participation from members of the introductory psychology class was in partial fulfillment of research participation requirements associated with the course. Participants recruited from the campus did not receive any compensation for their contribution. The sample was 92% Caucasian, .02% Black, .02% Hispanic, and .05% Asian. Also, 48% of the participants were in a relationship and 52% were not in a relationship.

Procedure — As in Study 1, participants received a questionnaire that included demographic questions regarding: age, sex, race, and whether or not they were in a relationship. Similarly, following standard act nomination methods used in prior research that set out to determine which actions men and women engage in when such actions are not previously known (Buss, 1988a, 1988b; Buss & Craik, 1983; Wade et al., 2009), the next two pages of the questionnaire contained the following act nomination instructions for a long-term or a short-term mate and 5 numbered blanks on each page for individuals to write in their responses:

Please list below actions that you have done, or would do, to flirt with a man for a potential long-term relationship (a long-term mate) (or a potential short-term relationship (a short-term mate)). A long term mate is someone you would date more than a few times and would definitely consider marrying. (A short-term mate is someone you might date just once, have a one night stand with, or date a few times but would not consider marrying.) We are interested in specific behaviors. So you should be able to answer the following questions about each thing you list below: Have you ever done this action or would you do this action? If so, how often have you performed it or would you perform it?

Once again, the order for the long-term and short-term act nomination questions was varied for participants (some participants received the long-term act nomination request first while others received the short-term act nomination first).

Results

As in Study 1, the nominated acts were examined by one of the authors and one other individual. Once again consensus nominated acts were kept. Fourteen flirtatious acts were identified for women, see Table 2. Table 2 shows acts that range from showing interest, i.e., “She makes eye contact with you”, to behaviors that are more physical, and suggestive of sex such as “She rubs against you”. As in Study 1, the acts nominated for short-term and long-term mates did not differ.

Table 2

Flirtatious Acts for Women.

1. She smiles at you	8. She touches you in general
2. She makes eye contact with you	9. She engages in deep conversation with you
3. She laughs at your jokes	10. She dresses revealingly
4. She shows interest in you during a conversation (she asks about your interests)	11. She rubs against you
5. She teases and jokes around with you	12. She dances with you
6. She engages in light conversation/chats with you	13. She kisses you on the cheek
7. She touches your arm	14. She moves closer to you

Study 3

Hypothesis

Women’s actions that suggest sexual accessibility should be rated as most effective.

Methods

Participants — Participants were 110 men ranging in age from 18 to 79, $M = 25.00$, $SD = 11.67$. They were recruited online via the campus electronic bulletin board at a private University in the Northeastern United States and via national listservs. Participants did not receive any compensation for their contribution. Seventy-seven percent of the participants were Caucasian, 6.4% were African American, 6.4% were Hispanic, 3.6% were Asian and 4.5% classified their race as ‘other’. Additionally, 91% of the males considered themselves to be heterosexual while 9% reported their sexual orientation as homosexual or other. Also, 49.6% of the men reported being currently in a relationship while 50.4% reported not being in a relationship currently. Lastly, 80% of the men reported that they have sexual relationship experience while 20% reported not having sexual relationship experience.

Procedure — Participants received an online questionnaire with: demographic questions (age, race, sexual orientation, sexual relationship experience, current relationship status), a short form of the Marlowe Crowne Social Desirability scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972) to be able to rule out/control for socially biased responding, and the 14 flirtatious acts from Study 2. The following instructions preceded the flirtatious acts:

Below are listed acts that a woman might perform to flirt with a man (indicate to a man she is interested in him). We are interested in how effective you think each act would be at achieving this goal. Please read each action carefully and rate it in terms of how successful it would be in attracting you (indicating to you that they are interested in you). Use the 7-point scale below each action to indicate the effectiveness of

the action. A 7 means it is highly effective. A 4 means it is moderately effective and a 1 means it is ineffective. Please answer truthfully and do not discuss your responses with others answering the questionnaire.

Results

Cronbach's alpha (1951) revealed that the flirtatious acts for women were reliable, $\alpha = .90$. The items for the social desirability scale were summed to create a social desirability sumscore, and a series of Mixed Model Repeated Measures ANOVAs with the social desirability score included as a covariate were computed. The 2 (relationship experience) \times 14 (flirtations) Mixed Model Repeated Measures ANOVA revealed a significant effect for flirtations, $F(13, 88) = 3.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$, see Table 3. Pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni corrections based on the number of comparisons computed indicated that the items: "She kisses you on the cheek," "She rubs against you," "She moves closer to you," "She touches you, in general," and "She touches your arm" were rated as most effective. The social desirability covariate was not significant. Additionally, none of the other Mixed Model Repeated Measures ANOVAs that were computed were significant.

Table 3

Mean Perceived Effectiveness of Female Flirtatious Actions

Flirtatious Act	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
(a) She kisses you on the cheek	4.91	1.28
(b) She rubs against you	4.54	1.42
(c) She moves closer to you	4.46	1.27
(d) She touches you, in general	4.34	1.30
(e) She touches your arm	4.29	1.28
She teases and jokes around with you	4.27	1.29
She dances with you	4.24	1.36
She engages in deep conversation with you	4.01 ^a	1.48
She shows interest in you during a conversation (asks about your interests)	3.72 ^a	1.55
She laughs at your jokes	3.40 ^{ac}	1.56
She smiles at you	3.28 ^{abcde}	1.30
She makes eye contact with you	3.25 ^{acde}	1.54
She dresses revealingly	2.84 ^{abcde}	1.72
She engages in light conversation/chats with you	2.74 ^{abcde}	1.48

Note. Higher numbers mean the particular love act was perceived as more effective. Superscripts denote significant differences ($p < .05$), e.g. mean for row a, "She kisses you on the cheek", is significantly different from means for rows that have an 'a' in their superscript, etc. Comparisons were Bonferroni corrected based on the number of comparisons made.

Study 4

Hypothesis

Flirtatious actions by men that suggest commitment and exclusivity were expected to be rated higher in perceived effectiveness.

Methods

Participants — Participants were 222 women ranging in age from 18 to 77, $M = 25.00$, $SD = 13.19$. They were recruited online via the campus electronic bulletin board at a private University in the Northeastern United States

and via national listservs. Participants did not receive any compensation for their involvement. Eighty-one percent of the women were Caucasian, 9.4% were Asian, 4.5% were Hispanic, 1.8% were African American and 2.7% classified themselves as 'other'. Additionally, 59.6% of the women were on birth control, while the 40.4% reported not currently using birth control. Also, 94% of the women were heterosexual while 6% were homosexual. Regarding sexual relationship experience 80% reported having sexual relationship experience while 20% reported no sexual relationship experience. Lastly, 46.6% reported being currently in a relationship while 53.4% reported not currently being in a relationship.

Procedure — Participants received an online questionnaire with: demographic questions (age, race, sexual orientation, sexual relationship experience, current relationship status), a short form of the Marlowe Crowne SD scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972) to be able to rule out/control for socially biased responding, and the 26 flirtatious acts from Study 1. The following instructions preceded the flirtatious acts:

Below are listed acts that a man might perform to flirt with a woman (indicate to a woman he is interested in her). We are interested in how effective you think each act would be at achieving this goal. Please read each action carefully and rate it in terms of how successful it would be in attracting you (indicating to you that they are interested in you). Use the 7-point scale below each action to indicate the effectiveness of the action. A 7 means it is highly effective. A 4 means it is moderately effective and a 1 means it is ineffective. Please answer truthfully and do not discuss your responses with others answering the questionnaire.

Results

Cronbach's alpha (1951) revealed that the flirtatious acts for men were reliable, $\alpha = .90$. As in Study 3, the items for the social desirability scale were summed to create a social desirability sumscore, and a series of Mixed Model Repeated Measures ANOVAs with the social desirability sumscore included as a covariate were computed. The 2(current relationship status) \times 26(flirtations) Mixed Model Repeated Measures ANOVA yielded one significant interaction, $F(25, 176) = 1.72, p < .023, \eta^2 = .98$. Women in relationships rated "He tickles you" as a more effective act of flirtation ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.74$) than single women ($M = 3.28, SD = 1.87$).

Additionally, there was a significant effect for flirtations, $F(25, 176) = 9.60, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .58$, see Table 4. Pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni corrections based on the number of comparisons computed revealed that the items: "He holds hands with you", "He spends time with you," "He asks you out," "He makes you laugh," "He kisses you," "He acts interested in you," and "He has dinner with you" were rated as most effective.

Once again, the social desirability covariate was not significant. Similarly, no other Mixed Model Repeated Measures ANOVAs that were computed were significant.

Table 4

Mean Perceived Effectiveness of Male Flirtatious Actions.

Flirtatious Act	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
(a) He holds hands with you	5.01	1.22
(b) He spends time with you	4.91	1.09
(c) He asks you out	4.91	1.25
(d) He kisses you	4.89	1.28
(e) He makes you laugh	4.59 ^a	1.58
(f) He acts interested in you	4.56 ^{ab}	1.12
(g) He has dinner with you	4.51 ^{abc}	1.22
He calls you	4.46 ^{abcd}	1.20
He compliments you	4.24 ^{abcd}	1.17
He gives you flowers	4.38 ^{abcd}	1.48
He goes to a movie with you	4.06 ^{abcdefg}	1.27
He smiles at you	4.04 ^{abcdefg}	1.38
He sends valentines	4.01 ^{abcdefg}	1.66
He converses with you	3.94 ^{abcdefg}	1.54
He laugh at your jokes	3.88 ^{abcdefg}	1.38
He gives you gifts	3.88 ^{abcdefg}	1.49
He makes body contact with you	3.84 ^{abcdefg}	1.45
He makes eye contact with you	3.82 ^{abcdefg}	1.51
He does favors for you	3.68 ^{abcdefg}	1.45
He tickles you	3.56 ^{abcdefg}	1.84
He dances with you	3.48 ^{abcdefg}	1.48
He makes random comments to you	3.44 ^{abcdefg}	1.77
He asks for your help	3.37 ^{abcdefg}	1.45
He has sex with you	3.26 ^{abcdefg}	1.98
He buys you a drink	3.12 ^{abcdefg}	1.49
He asks for favors from you	2.56 ^{abcdefg}	1.45

Note. Higher numbers mean the particular love act was perceived as more effective. Superscripts denote significant differences ($p < .05$), e.g. mean for row a, “He holds hands with you”, is significantly different from means for rows that have an ‘a’ in their superscript, etc. Comparisons were Bonferroni corrected based on the number of comparisons computed.

Discussion

The results were consistent with the hypotheses. Flirtations from women that suggest sexual access and flirtations from men that suggest exclusivity, commitment, and caring were perceived as the most effective flirtatious acts. These actions were rated as most effective because they relate to the characteristics that men and women prefer for their partners. Buss (1989, 2006) reports that men prefer women who are sexually accessible and women prefer men who suggest that they are willing to commit.

Across all men, the actions that were perceived to be most effective were the following: “She kisses you on the cheek,” “She rubs against you,” “She moves closer to you,” “She touches you, in general,” and “She touches your arm”. A kiss on the cheek may be an effective act of flirtation because men may view it as prelude to more passionate kissing which men view as an action that increases the likelihood of sex (Hughes, Harrison, & Gallup,

2007). This explanation is in line with error management theory (Haselton & Buss, 2000) which points out that men, in order to not miss out on an opportunity to have sexual relations with a woman, tend to overestimate women's actions as indicators of sexual access being granted. Touching on the arm and touching in general may be effective flirtation techniques because touching is interpreted by men as an indication of sexual interest (Guéguen, 2010). Moving closer may be an effective flirtation act because intimate interactions occur at smaller distances (Baron & Byrne, 1981; Hall 1963). Consequently, a man may interpret a woman's moving closer to him as suggestive of sexual access. Rubbing against a man may be an effective act of flirtation because it involves touching, and because it may be similar to actions that take place during a sexual interlude.

Women perceived the following actions to be most effective: "He holds hands with you," "He spends time with you," "He asks you out," "He kisses you," "He makes you laugh," "He acts interested in you," and "He has dinner with you". All of these items reflect a level of commitment/exclusivity, and interest on the part of the man. Additionally, holding hands involves touching, and in a courtship compliance context women respond positively to a man touching them (Guéguen, 2007). Guéguen (2007) reports that women view a man touching them in a courtship context as a signal of dominance and dominance is related to status which is a characteristic that is important for women's mate choices (Buss, 1989, 2006). Making a woman laugh may be a most effective act of flirtation for men because humor ability reveals intelligence (Greengross & Miller, 2011; Howrigan & MacDonald, 2008) and women prefer men who can produce humor (Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006). Having dinner with a woman may be an effective flirtation act because it conveys interest as well as a willingness on the part of the man to share resources with a particular woman. Kissing a woman may be an effective flirtation act for men because it allows a woman to assess the parental investment potential of the man. Hughes et al. (2007) report that via chemosensory analysis of the saliva in a male's kiss and via the wetness of a man's kiss women are able to ascertain a male's genetic and parental investment potential.

Women in relationships may rate the flirtation "He tickles you" as a more effective flirtation act than single women because women in relationships have more experience with tickling than single women do. However, this is speculative. Thus, additional research is needed to substantiate this explanation.

Conclusion

Flirtations from women that suggest sexual access and flirtations from men that suggest exclusivity, commitment, and caring were perceived as the most effective flirtatious acts. These findings suggest that individuals can attract mates effectively via overt/verbal means and via overt actions. Furthermore, the findings show that overt flirtation has an evolutionary basis just as nonverbal/covert or unconscious flirtation does. Additionally, these findings are consistent with evolutionary theory based research showing that men and women's selection of mates is rooted in reproductive fitness and parental investment concerns. Thus, one can conclude that flirtation is a product of our evolved mate acquisition adaptations. These findings add to the evolutionary theory based literature on mate attraction and mate preferences. This does not mean that social learning may not play a role. But, social learning only provides a proximate explanation rather than an ultimate explanation (Confer et al., 2010) for why such flirtatious actions would be perceived as most important.

Limitations

The present research examined the perceived effectiveness of men and women's flirtations rather than the actual effectiveness. Therefore, additional research is warranted. Future research should examine, if possible, how ef-

fective the actions actually are in attracting men and women. Additionally, the present research involved primarily US participants. Therefore, additional research including participants from other countries is warranted.

Notes

i) A version of this paper was presented at the 5th Northeastern Evolutionary Psychology Society Conference, Binghamton, NY.

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Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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