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Alana Policastro
Hope College

Kate Gaynor
Hope College

Anika Verbeek
Hope College

Olivia Budzisz
Hope College

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"Flirting or Hurting?": Perceptions of Flirtatious Textings' Appropriateness

Alana Policastro, Kate Gaynor, Anika Verbeek, Olivia Budzisz, Austin Beattie
Department of Communication, Hope College, Holland, Michigan

For more information, contact:
Alana Policastro or Dr. Austin Beattie
Martha Miller Center
257 Columbia Avenue
Room 107
Holland, MI 49423
616.395.7595
alana.policastro@hope.edu or
beattie@hope.edu

Introduction

Background:

Online communication proves not only to be a place where already existing relationships are played out, but where new ones can be cultivated. However, what role does flirting play in all of this? A substantial amount of significant relational interaction occurs via text messaging. By understanding the processes and expectations in romantic and platonic relationships for flirting behaviors, we may help relationships create improved boundaries for those interacting with people in romantic relationships.

While online communication is often regarded as a lesser form of interaction compared to real-life interaction, Bargh & McKenna find that the internet can be an effective place for initial relationship formation. In a survey, they found that a non-marginal sum of people have cultivated at least one meaningful relationship fully online, and over 50% of them made an effort to meet those online friends in real life. 22% of the participants who responded were in a long-term serious, committed relationship (married, engaged, or living with) with someone whom they had met online.

Previous studies regarding flirting definitions and communication do not integrate online flirting behaviors regarding appropriateness. Understanding this is important because while we can define flirtatious behavior, many couples have different standards for boundaries within their romantic relationships, and what is deemed appropriate when messaging with another person outside their relationship.

Project Overview.

Our research aims to take a specific look at different levels of flirting and the way they are each perceived in terms of appropriateness, especially by both individuals in relationships and individuals who report being single. Thus, the following research question is put forward:

How does a person's self-reported relationship status change the perceived appropriateness (DV) of 4 different levels of flirting communication behaviors (IV)?

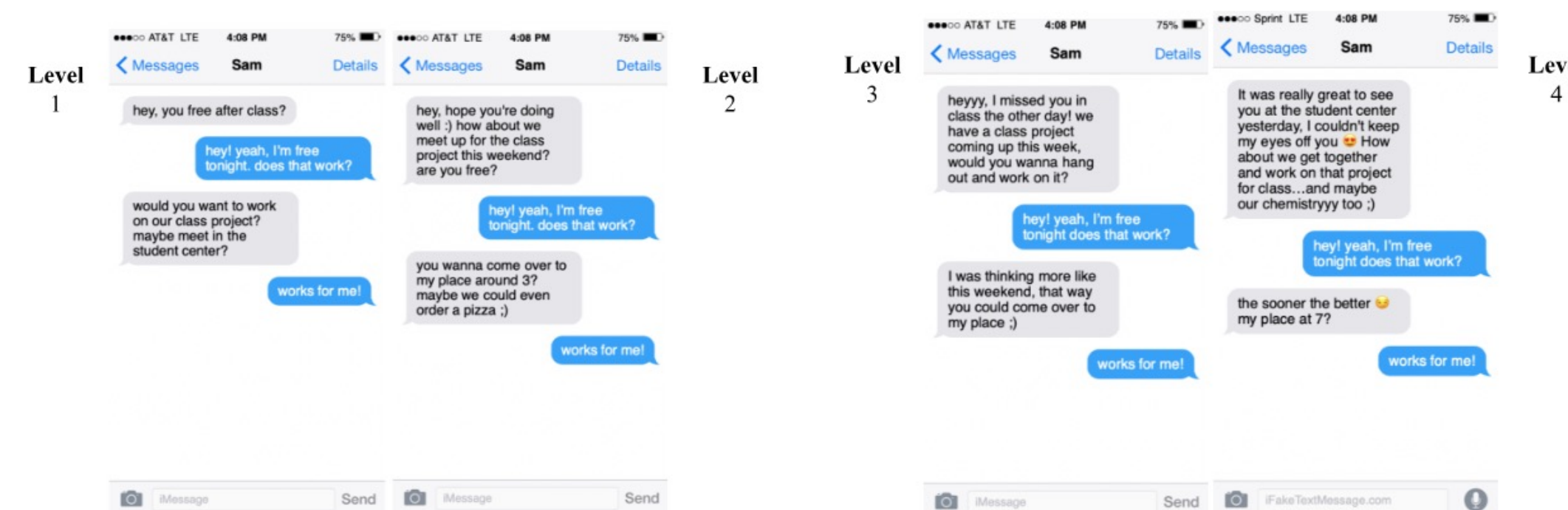
The hypothesis is that participants in a relationship will report higher levels of appropriateness (DV) when viewing flirting levels 3 & 4 rather than flirting levels 1 & 2 (IV).

Methods

The Texts:

Text conversations were crafted between two people using both AI and texts from people in each stage of relationships. Each conversation consists of meeting to work on a school project. Each text message featured increasingly sexual content ranging from:

- 1: Casual and Friendly
- 2: Friendly and Collaborative
- 3: Playfully Collaborative
- 4: Lightly Teasing Collaboration.



Sample Composition: 170 students that are currently enrolled at a Midwestern Liberal Arts College. Of the participants, 66.5% (n = 111) of them were females and the other 34.5% (n = 59) identified as male. Ages ranged from 18 to 27 years. Majority of students that participated were 19-year-olds (43.9%, n = 76), then (24%, n=41) of 20-year-olds, then 21-year-olds at (14%, n=22), 22-year-old at (6.4%, n=11) and lastly (0.12%, n=2) were either 17 or 27 years old. (59.1%) said "No I am single" and (40.9%) said "Yes I am in a relationship."

Analysis:

A T-Test was used to evaluate the correlation between an individual's relationship status and accurately assessing the level of appropriateness of flirtatious behavior within a text message conversation.

Table 1. Mean Appropriateness of those in versus out of relationships in one of 4 texting scenarios

Condition	Relationship Status?	Mean Appropriateness (Comparing those in vs. out of a relationship)	Standard Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1: Casual and Friendly	Yes	4.644	.198	4.253	5.036
	No	4.615	.212	4.195	5.036
2: Friendly and Collaborative	Yes	3.952	.167	3.622	4.283
	No	3.946	.126	3.697	4.195
3: Playfully Collaborative	Yes	3.000	.313	2.381	3.619
	No	2.100	.342	1.422	2.778
4: Lightly Teasing Collaboration	Yes	2.500	.221	2.063	2.937
	No	2.127	.167	1.796	2.458

Abstract

With this century's rise of technology, new texting behaviors have not only been introduced, but have grown in their capacity for emotional intensity. This emotional intensity often translates into the forming of both platonic and romantic relationships online, as the online space acts as an easier "buffer space" for the relationships to begin. Understanding more about the perceptions of flirting behavior over text messaging is essential to develop more clear boundaries for romantic partners in an increasingly online world. This study addresses the link between relationship-status and perceived level of appropriateness of varying degrees of online flirtatious behavior. Using pre-written text messages containing varying degrees of flirtatious behavior, we compared average levels of appropriateness for the same text message conversation by those both in and not in a romantic relationship. Results demonstrated that there was a significant difference in perceptions of conversational appropriateness such that participants who were in committed relationships rated the flirty message conditions as more appropriate than participants who were single.

Results

Results demonstrated that there was a significant difference in the self-indicated average appropriateness for the same texting situations between those in versus not in romantic relationships, specifically for more intense messages.

Additionally, results indicated that as the degrees of varying flirtatiousness progressively got significantly lower, it was correlated with the level of appropriateness the designers of the experiments made each text to be (when measuring the average acceptability, appropriateness, and it being the "right way" to text someone).

Those in relationships were found to perceive the more intensely flirtatious messages as more appropriate than those not in relationships, specifically most significant in text scenarios three and four, the two most flirtatious text scenarios.

Conclusions and Implications.

This study is one that found a difference in the perceived appropriateness of increasingly intense flirtatious text messages by those in-relationships as compared to those out of relationships. Our findings show that as messages increase in flirting intensity, those in relationships deem them as significantly more appropriate than those who are not. This contributes an important understanding to how specifically online romantic interactions are perceived. Understanding how this perceived appropriateness varies based on relationship status will further allow partners to communicate on online relational boundaries with other dyadic relations, noting that these perceptions likely vary based on a variety of factors.