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BRIEF REPORT

Flirting Competence: An Experimental Study on Appropriate and Effective Opening Lines

Keith Weber, Alan K. Goodboy, & Jacob L. Cayanus

An experiment was conducted to examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of five flirtatious opening lines enacted by a male participant to initiate conversation with a female participant. Video messages were constructed to represent the following opening lines: direct introductions, direct compliments, humor attempts, cute–flippant lines, and third-party introductions. Participants were 642 college students who viewed one of these five videos and reported on the appropriateness and effectiveness of an opening line after controlling for perceptions of actor physical attractiveness. Results indicated that participants rated the third-party introduction and direct introduction opening lines as the most appropriate, whereas the third-party introduction was perceived as the most effective. Direct compliments, humor attempts, and cute–flippant lines were rated as equally inappropriate and ineffective.

Keywords: Competence; Flirtation; Flirting; Opening Lines; Pick-Up Lines

Romantic relationships may thrive or cease to develop based on initial communication encounters between potential partners. Indeed, the act of flirting is an initial communication encounter that revolves around sexual and relational expectations

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(Egland, Spitzberg, & Zormeier, 1996; Henningsen, 2004) and constitutes one way to establish intimacy, sexual intentions, and relational definitions (Egland et al., 1996). Flirting can be seen as a major part of social relations and as an indication of interest, and can be the first step in a long-term relationship (Koeppel, Montage-Miller, O'Hair, & Cody, 1993; Levine, King, & Popoola, 1994). The main reasons to study flirtation and initial interactions, according to Koeppel et al. are to promote understanding and to "make communicators aware of how to avoid potentially serious mistakes in social relations" (p. 31).

Some empirical attention has been given to the concept of flirtation (e.g., Abbey, 1987; Abbey & Melby, 1986; Abrahams, 1994; Egland et al., 1996; La France, Henningsen, Oates, & Shaw, 2009; Rodgers & Veronsky, 1999), as well as the nonverbal behaviors associated with sexual intentions of the source, such as eye contact and smiling (e.g., Abbey & Melby, 1986; Koeppel et al., 1993; Kowalski, 1993; McCormick & Jones, 1989; Walsh & Hewitt, 1985). Although research has primarily focused on nonverbal behaviors, Kleinke, Meeker, and Staneski (1986) stated, "ultimately, however, when we want to make a new acquaintance we have to think of something to say" (p. 586).

According to Levine et al. (1994), opening lines (commonly referred to as pick-up lines) refer to what an individual says when attempting to initiate romantic communication. Kleinke et al. (1986) proposed three categories of opening lines: direct (i.e., straightforward communication attempts), innocuous (i.e., implicit and vague communication attempts), and cute-flippant (i.e., preplanned clichés). Research suggests that women perceive innocuous lines as the best strategies, followed by direct, and then cute-flippant lines (Cunningham, 1989; Kleinke et al., 1986). Levine et al. also discovered that cute-flippant lines were rated as the least positive. There is, however, another category of opening lines that studies have failed to investigate. Parks and Eggert (1989) discussed the role of third parties and social networks as a form of relationship initiation and noted that individuals may use friends or family to introduce them to a person they find interesting or attractive. Similarly, Clark, Shaver, and Abrahams (1999) found that two of the most instrumental relationship initiation strategies were direct and third-party strategies. More recently, in a focus group study (Weber, Cayanus, & Goodboy, 2005), participants revealed five common opening lines. Three of these opening lines—direct introduction, third-party introductions, and cute-flippant lines—are consistent with the research by Kleinke et al. and Clark et al. However, the remaining two types of lines were coded as direct compliments (i.e., flattering a prospect) and humor attempts (i.e., using innocuous but amusing comments). As a result of the previous research on these types of lines, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: The use of cute-flippant lines will be perceived as less (a) appropriate and (b) effective than the use of direct introductions and third-party introductions.

Although there is research indicating how effective these first three types of attempts might be, the remaining two types of lines found in the focus groups were coded as direct compliments (i.e., flattering a prospect) and humor attempts (i.e., using

innocuous but amusing comments). How these attempts might be perceived is unclear at this point and as such, the following research question was forwarded:

RQ1: How will the use of humor appeals and direct compliments be perceived on (a) appropriateness and (b) effectiveness as compared to cute-flippant lines, direct introductions, and third-party introductions?

Similarly, whereas Cunningham (1989), Kleinke et al. (1986), and Levine et al. (1994) suggested that direct lines are perceived more positively than cute-flippant lines, Levine et al. found that men rate all opening lines more positively than women. However, because Levine et al. did not test the effectiveness of third-party, humor, and direct compliment opening lines, it is uncertain if men and women will differ in their ratings of these types of appeals. As a result, the following research question is forwarded regarding gender differences:

RQ2: Will gender differences exist in participants ratings of the opening lines?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 642 college students from a large, mid-Atlantic university. The mean age was 20.1 ($SD = 1.32$), with a range of 18 to 36. There were 312 men and 308 women (22 did not report gender). Participation in this study was completely voluntary, but extra credit was offered; students who chose not to participate in this study were given an alternative manner in which to receive extra credit.

Procedures

Five different videos were created to portray an initial interaction between a male and female character. These videos were filmed with professional recording equipment in a bar that was rented for the day with a paid bartender and actors. The script for the videos begins with two male friends meeting in a bar and chatting, when one of the male characters spots an attractive women sitting across the room. The male actor decides to approach the woman. All five scripts were two minutes in length and were exactly the same until the moment when the male character first approaches the female character. At the point of approach, the male character initiates a conversation with the female character using one of the five opening lines targeted for study (see Table 1 for examples).

After viewing one of the five experimental videos, participants completed a brief questionnaire and were told to respond to the items based on their perceptions of the interaction between the two actors.

Instrumentation

The Canary and Spitzberg (1987) Conversational Appropriateness Scale was used to assess participants' ratings of the appropriateness of the male actor in his interaction

Table 1 Opening Lines, Descriptions, and Representative Examples

Opening line	Description	Example
Direct introduction	Initiating a conversation with a simple introduction.	“Hi, my name is Josh. What is your name?”
Direct compliment	Giving a compliment based on physical attraction.	“I had to tell you how fine you are.”
Humor attempt	Attempting to enact humor to make the other person laugh	“Do you think I look like Johnny Depp?”
Cute–flippant line	Trite clichés that are intended to appear cute.	“You must be tired because you’ve been running through my mind all day.”
Third-party introduction	Using a common acquaintance to perform the initial introduction.	“Hi Kayla, this is my friend Josh.”

with the female actor (e.g., “Everything he said was appropriate”). This scale is comprised of 20 items that are measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*) ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.18$; $\alpha = .93$). Responses on the scale were recoded so that higher scores indicated that the participants perceived the male actor to be more appropriate.

Five items from the 20-item Canary and Spitzberg (1989) Conversational Effectiveness Scale were used to measure participants’ perceptions of how effective the man was in initiating the interaction with the female actor (e.g., “His communication was effective”). Only five items were chosen because many of the items on the scale did not seem appropriate in this context. We felt that this was an acceptable decision because Rubin, Palmgreen, and Sypher (1994) advised users of the scale to create acceptable subscales in their review of the measure. The questionnaire asks participants to respond to the items on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*) ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.41$; $\alpha = .87$). Consistent with previous research, a statistically significant correlation was observed between the conversational appropriateness and effectiveness measures in this dataset ($r = .65$, $p < .001$).

Control Variables

In an attempt to control for extraneous variables, the actors were instructed to keep their nonverbal cues constant in each of the experimental manipulations (e.g., stand the same distance from each other, eye contact, facial expression, etc.). Nonverbal immediacy scores on both the male and the female actors were collected for each of the experimental groups to use as a control variable (e.g., “He smiled” and “He maintained eye contact”). Eight representative items from the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003) were used to measure nonverbal behaviors that increase perceived physical or psychological closeness (e.g., eye contact, smiling, etc.), which are frequently construed as flirting behaviors (Walsh & Hewitt, 1985).

This scale asks participants to respond to the items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that no significant difference existed in the ratings of the male character's use of nonverbal immediacy ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.66$; $\alpha = .72$) between the different videos, $F(4, 623) = 1.08$, $p = .37$. Similarly, results of an ANOVA indicated no significant difference in the ratings of the female character's nonverbal immediacy ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.67$; $\alpha = .70$) between the different videos, $F(4, 621) = 0.92$, $p = .45$.

Similar to nonverbal immediacy, it is possible that the difference in the perceived attractiveness levels of the actors could serve as a confounding variable. Participants were asked to "rate the attractiveness of" each actor on a scale from 1 (*extremely unattractive*) to 10 (*extremely attractive*). Results of a paired t test indicated that participants rated the female actor ($M = 6.55$, $SD = 1.64$) as being significantly more attractive— $t(627) = -22.71$, $p < .01$ —than the male actor ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.78$). As a result, the difference in the actor's attractiveness rating was used as a covariate in all subsequent analyses. In addition, it is important to note that, across conditions, no significant differences were found in either the men's attractiveness levels, $F(4, 625) = 2.32$, $p = .06$, or the women's attractiveness levels, $F(4, 626) = 0.14$, $p = .97$. This finding removes the possibility that participants in any one treatment group found the actors more or less attractive for some reason that we had not controlled for.

Results

To test $H1$, $RQ1$, and to control for experiment-wide error rate (Hatcher, 1994; Khattree & Naik, 2000; O'Rourke, Hatcher, & Stepanski, 2005), a multivariate analysis of covariance was first computed utilizing the five different experimental opening line conditions as the independent variables, with scores on the two outcome variables serving as the dependent variables. In addition, the difference in the male and female attractiveness ratings was entered as a covariate. The results of this analysis yielded a significant model, Wilks's $\Lambda(8, 1,240) = 0.54$, $p < .001$. The individual analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were then examined to test $H1$ and $RQ1$. Results of the first ANCOVA revealed a significant model, $F(4, 621) = 125.13$, $p < .001$ (partial $\eta^2 = .45$). A closer examination of Tukey's multiple comparison test indicated that third-party introduction ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 0.96$) and direct introduction ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 0.89$) were rated as significantly more appropriate than direct compliments ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.91$), humor attempts ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.77$), or cute-flippant lines ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.87$). Results of the second ANCOVA was also significant, $F(4, 621) = 41.00$, $p < .001$ (partial $\eta^2 = .21$); and Tukey's multiple comparison test indicated that third-party introduction ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.42$) was perceived as significantly more effective than all other opening lines. In addition, the direct introduction opening line ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.50$) was rated as more effective than the direct compliments ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.25$), humor attempts ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.31$), and cute-flippant lines ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.28$; see Table 2).

$RQ2$ was concerned with gender differences in the appropriateness and effectiveness ratings. Results of individual t tests indicated that men rated the male

Table 2 Results of Analyses of Covariance Between Opening Lines and Conversational Appropriateness and Effectiveness

Dependant variable	Opening line	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Appropriateness ^a	Third-party introduction	5.70 _a	0.96	127
	Direct introduction	4.94 _a	0.89	230
	Direct compliment	3.35 _b	0.91	79
	Humor attempt	3.29 _b	0.77	98
	Cute-flippant	3.14 _b	0.87	93
Effectiveness ^b	Third-party introduction	4.70 _a	1.42	127
	Direct introduction	4.44 _b	1.50	230
	Direct compliment	3.26 _c	1.25	79
	Humor attempt	3.02 _c	1.31	98
	Cute-flippant	2.98 _c	1.28	93

Note. Means with different subscripts are significantly different from each other.

^a $F(4, 621) = 125.13, p < .001$ (partial $\eta^2 = 44.6\%$).

^b $F(4, 621) = 41.00, p < .001$ (partial $\eta^2 = 21.1\%$).

actor as being significantly more appropriate— $t(618) = 2.56, p < .01$ —and effective— $t(618) = 2.65, p < .01$ ($M = 3.85, SD = 1.17$ and $M = 3.60, SD = 1.41$, respectively)—than did women ($M = 3.62, SD = 1.21$ and $M = 3.31, SD = 1.39$, respectively). However, these differences accounted for less than 2% of the variance in participants' ratings.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of five different opening lines men use to initiate flirtatious communication with women. The results indicated that participants rated both third-party introductions and direct introductions as the most appropriate, but third-party introductions were perceived as the most effective. Third-party introductions involve a sponsorship effect if the individual performing the introduction is perceived positively by the woman being approached. That is, if the third party performing the introduction is seen as trustworthy by the female participant, it is likely that the participant would attribute similar characteristics to the man being introduced. This idea is also consistent with what persuasion researchers often refer to as a “sponsorship effect” (Gass & Seiter, 1999).

One of the more surprising findings was the negative responses participants exhibited with respect to the humor attempt condition. It is possible that participants did not perceive the humor attempt message as funny. If this was the case, then it is understandable how the humorous attempt opening line could be confused with an attempt to use a cliché or a cute-flippant line. This finding highlights the risk an individual takes when attempting to use humor to make a positive impression (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). Similarly, the direct compliment opening line may also

have been confused as a cute–flippant line. This would explain the negative response elicited by this opening line. In retrospect, manipulation checks should have been included with the questionnaire to be certain that the messages used were perceived by the audience as representative of the meta-strategies for which they were intended. Obviously, this is a significant limitation to this study.

Another limitation to this investigation was that only one video—and, therefore, one opening line—was used to represent each strategy. Before researchers can make generalizations as to which class of opening lines is most effective, it is necessary to examine multiple messages representing each major strategy type. This might also help to clarify if the humor attempt failed because humor is simply an ineffective strategy or because the line used in the scenario was not funny. Future research should test this possibility. Despite such limitations, however, results of this study suggest that single men would be well-advised to consider using sponsorship from third parties to initiate flirtatious conversation with women. If third-party sponsorship is unavailable, men should consider using direct introduction opening lines and should avoid using direct compliments, humor attempts and cute–flippant lines.

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