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Cyber-flirting: An Examination of Men's and Women's Flirting Behaviour both Offline  
and on the Internet

***Dr. Monica T. Whitty***

## ABSTRACT

While flirting is a relatively under-researched area within psychology, we know even less about how people cyber-flirt. This paper explores how often individuals flirt offline compared to online. Moreover, it attempts to examine how men and women flirt within these different spaces. Five thousand, six hundred and ninety seven individuals, of which 3554 (62%) were women and 2143 (38%) were men, completed a survey about their flirting behaviour both in face-to-face interactions and in Chat Rooms. The first hypothesis, which stated that the body would be used to flirt with as frequently online as offline, was partly supported. However, it was found that individuals downplayed the importance of physical attractiveness online. Women flirted by displaying non-verbal signals (offline) or substitutes for non-verbal cues (online), to a greater extent than men. In Chat Rooms men were more likely than women to initiate contact. It was concluded that cyber-flirting is more than simply a meeting of minds and that future research needs to consider the role of the body in online interactions.

**KEYWORDS:** Cyber-flirting, flirting, Internet relationships, sex differences, attraction

Cyber-flirting: An Examination of Men's and Women's Flirting Behaviour both Offline  
and on the Internet

*The distinctiveness of the flirt lies in the fact that she awakens delight and desire  
by means of unique antithesis and synthesis: through the alternation or  
simultaneity of accommodation and denial...*

-- [Simmel, 1984, p. 134]

Given the burgeoning number of reports of relationships that initiate online (e.g., McCown, Fischer, Page, & Homant, 2001; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Whitty & Gavin, 2001) there is now an additional pressing need to understand exactly how these relationships begin. Some research has considered how romantic relationships progress online. For example, Whitty and Gavin (2001) contended that relationships often do not remain online but tend to progress from chat to email to phone to face-to-face. McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) concluded from their research that the absence of gating features and the ability to self-disclose more in an anonymous environment were important reasons why relationships on the Internet develop quickly and are often close and intimate. However, while their research does in part support their claims, these researchers did not explore in detail the types of conversations that take place online. For instance, were some of these conversations about appearance? Whitty has argued that while physical bodies are not present online, the body still matters (Whitty, 2003, Whitty & Carr, 2003). For example, one can still flirt online by describing what one's body looks, feels, and smells like.

Given the strong emphasis by theorists, such as McKenna et al. (2002), on the absence of the body online and the arguments made for attraction on the Internet to be as a result of a meeting of minds, one aim of this study was to examine whether the role of the body has been overlooked. Moreover, this study aimed to explore whether men and women flirt online in traditionally defined ways. While it is recognised here that there is a great range of flirting behaviours that social scientists ought to consider, this study limited its focus to the following flirtatious behaviours: non-verbal behaviours, such as smiling, eye gaze and touch, substitutes for non-verbal behaviours, such as emoticons (smiles, winks), acronyms (LOL – laugh out loud), descriptions of physical attractiveness, descriptions of socio-economic status, and initiating contact.

#### Traditional flirting versus cyber-flirting

Previously, it has been argued that discussions around the absence of the body on the Internet are counter-productive, and instead social scientists need to shift their focus to how the body is portrayed online (Whitty, 2003; Whitty & Carr, 2003). Givens (1978) believed that face-to-face flirting behaviour mostly consists of non-verbal signals, especially in the early stages of relationships. Unlike the spoken word, body language can signal attraction without being too obvious. This ambiguity protects people from any humiliation if the person to whom they are signalling attraction does not share these sentiments. Some basic codes that are important to consider in flirting include kinetics, oculosics, physical appearance, olfactics, vocalics, proxemics and haptics (defined below). Whilst individuals might be skilled at displaying these flirting signals in face-to-face encounters, the question is how are these traditional offline cues replicated online (if

at all)? This paper now turns to consider these basic flirting codes in greater detail and speculates on what the online equivalents might be.

Traditional displays of kinetic gestures include hair tossing, licking lips, mirroring behaviour, smiling, laughing or giggling. Oculistics, or eye movements, include pupil dilation, demure glances, short darting glances, eyebrow flashes often accompanied by a smile and eye contact. Olfactic forms of flirting are exemplified by the wearing of perfume and after-shave. Flirtatious speech is typically more animated speech with moderate amounts of laughter, fewer silences and pauses and increased warmth and interest. Proxemics is the amount of personal distance kept between individuals. Individuals who lean toward one another and who are at the same body angle are perceived as being more seductive than those individuals who lean away from each other. Haptics, or the use of touch, is a common form of communication, particularly in flirtatious behaviour. Another sign of seductive behaviour is the use of unnecessary clothing adjustment.

For flirting to occur in cyberspace the body needs to be represented through text (Whitty, 2003, Whitty & Carr, 2003). For example, rather than making an effort to look good, as one would traditionally do for an offline date, individuals can create a first impression by describing via the text how attractive they appear. However, unlike traditional interactions, this is not restricted to the appearance of one's actual body. As argued in previous papers, cyberspace allows one, through text, to create new attractive bodies (Whitty, 2003, Whitty & Carr, 2003). Indeed, we can devise an entirely new attractive being, one that has a good job, earns huge sums of money, and is well educated. Even if photos are exchanged online, these are not necessary photos of the actual

individual, or alternatively, people are able to carefully select images of themselves that put themselves in the best light (possibly by selecting pictures of when they were much younger).

Demure glances and eyebrow flashes are not as easily replicated online. However, there are some alternatives to these non-verbal gestures. For example, emoticons, which are drawings made from grammatical symbols, might be a useful alternative. We can use facial expressions such as smiley faces, winks and kisses as a substitute for body language. Moreover, rather than use audible laughing and giggling, individuals can use acronyms, such as LOL (laugh out loud or lots of laughs). Seductive 'screen names' are another device people can add to their repertoire of online flirting behaviours. Although one cannot physically touch online, one can describe touching another individual, what that touch feels like and in turn how they visualise being touched by the person they are interacting with (see Whitty, 2003, Whitty & Carr, 2003 for a more detailed discussion of cyber-flirting).

Some offline flirting behaviours are not so easy to translate online. For example, it is difficult to find substitutes for olfactics, vocalics and proxemics. Online participants do not know what the person they are chatting with smells like, nor are they allured by their sexy deep voice. The subtleties of voice, such as pitch and tone, are not evident online. Pauses in conversation might be attributed to a poor Internet connection, or bad typing skills, as opposed to a lack of interest. Individuals also cannot indicate attraction online by leaning closer to another or by mirroring their body movements.

### Gender differences

In addition to considering how the body might be represented in flirtatious behaviour online, this study examined whether similar gender differences characteristic of offline flirting were evident in online flirting. Evolutionary psychologists contend that in considering courting behaviours we need to examine the resources that men and women contribute to mating and potential offspring (e.g., Buss, 1988; Trost & Alberts, 1998). They suggest that women contribute their physical bodies, which should indicate good health, youthfulness and fertility. In contrast, some of the important defining characteristics for men include physical dominance, and an ability to produce resources (e.g., social status, ambition, and high income). Indeed research has found evidence to support these assumptions. Men, more than women, rate physical attractiveness to be an important quality in a partner (Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990; Travis, 1977). Women, more than men, rate traits reflecting dominance and social status as an important characteristic in selecting a potential partner (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Kenrick et al., 1990).

If men and women place more importance on some attractive qualities than others, we would, in turn, expect men and women to flirt in different ways in order to accentuate these characteristics. Moore (1985) contends that women are not passive in the courting process, but rather, in the main, control much of the flirting process. Her research has observed women in places, such as singles bars. She identified 52 different non-verbal displays by women, which she argued were courtship signals that served to attract and elicit the approach of men. These included gestures such as facial and head

patterns, smiling, laughing, touch, leaning and primping. In addition to Moore's (1985) research, others have argued that women possess a larger repertoire of flirtation strategies used to signal interest in men (e.g., Muehlenhard, Koralewski, Andrews, & Burdick, 1986). Hall (1984), for instance, has purported that women gaze at interaction partners more, and use touch and body movements more in interpersonal interactions. McCormick and Jones (1989) observed 70 couples and found that women were more active participants in flirtation and were often the initiators of the flirtation. Trost and Alberts (1998) reported that, in contrast to women, men were more likely to flirt by signalling status and dominance, which is often achieved by flashing money, exaggerating their income, wearing expensive clothes, bragging about their superior intelligence, and exaggerating their level of sexual popularity.

These gender differences are not simply confined to face-to-face encounters. Research conducted in the 1970s found that women in personal ads were more likely to offer attractiveness and seek financial security, while men were more likely to offer financial security and seek attractiveness (Harrison & Saeed, 1977). Smith, Waldorf and Trembath (1990) analysed personal ads from six issues of 'On the Scene' magazine from January 1989 to June 1989. They were interested in what attractive qualities individuals were seeking in a partner. Not surprisingly, these researchers found that physical attractiveness was the highest ranking quality desired by men and in fact appeared more than twice as often in men's ads than it did in women's ads. Women, in contrast, were more likely to hope for a man who is understanding, emotionally healthy and is financially stable. Koestner and Wheeler (1988) examined what attractive features men and women were more likely to emphasise about themselves in lonely hearts columns.

Again, these researchers found that men were more likely than women were to emphasise their own educational and occupational status.

### Transcending gender roles on the Internet?

To date, little is known about gender differences in courting behaviour and attraction online. Some theorists have suggested that cyberspace is a place where people are liberated to be whoever they want to be (e.g., Turkle, 1995). Applying Turkle's understandings of cyberspace, this is possibly a place where individuals can transcend gender roles when it comes to flirtatious behaviour. In contrast to Turkle's view, some research suggests that the trends that exist in offline relationships are replicated online. For example, it has been found that in Chat Rooms men, more than women, lie or exaggerate details about their education, occupation and income (Whitty, 2002). Scharlott and Christ's (1995) work also sheds some light on gender differences and attraction in an online dating site. These researchers surveyed people in 1990 using an Internet dating site called 'Matchmaker'. At the time, photos and videos were not a feature of the service, however, participants were able to rate their attractiveness on a scale from very good looks to below average. These individuals also included other details about themselves including income. Scharlott and Christ (1995) found that "many heterosexual users of Matchmaker largely conform to the gender-specific roles traditionally ascribed to 'available' men and women" (p. 201). In their study men were more likely to initiate contact and women were more likely to take on a more passive role. Moreover, the women who rated their own appearance as above average or very good received more

messages from men than the women who rated themselves as average. Interestingly, the same result did not occur for men.

For the purposes of this study, chatrooms were chosen, as text was the primary mode of communication in these spaces at the time of the study; unlike, for example, online dating sites which typically have photographs displayed. Drawing on the research described in this paper, the following hypotheses were generated:

- H1: That the body (or depictions of it) will be used to flirt with as frequently in Chat Rooms as it is face-to-face situations.
- H2: Women will flirt more frequently than men both in Chat Rooms and in face-to-face situations by employing non-verbal signals (or substitutes online for these signals), such as smiling and eye-gaze, laughing (or indicating laughter online) around someone they are attracted to, using touch (or indicating the use of touch online), and by emphasising physical attractiveness.
- H3: Men will flirt more frequently than women both in Chat Rooms and in face-to-face situations by describing their social economic status, and by initiating contact with someone they find attractive.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants who had used Chat Rooms were invited to participate in the study. Five thousand, six hundred and ninety seven individuals completed the survey, of which 3554 (62%) were women and 2143 (38%) were men. Although a limitation of the survey, in order to eliminate bias, only heterosexuals were invited to participate in the study. Ages ranged from 18 to 70 years with a mean of 23 years ( $SD = 8.28$ ) years. Seventy

percent of the sample had a high school education, 14% had completed a diploma or a certificate, 13% a degree, and 3% post-graduate qualifications. Fifty-five percent of the sample were single, 29% had a boyfriend or girlfriend, 11% were married or cohabiting, 4% were separated or divorced, and 1% did not answer. Seventy four percent had formed a romantic relationship with someone they had met offline, while 23% had formed a romantic relationship with someone they had met online. Thirty five percent had met up with someone face-to-face whom they had first encountered online. Fifty-nine percent of the sample stated they flirted more frequently offline, 22% online, 13% the same, and 6% did not flirt. The sample consisted of individuals from a range of countries, with 69% from America and Canada completing the survey, 16% from Australia and New Zealand, 6% from the UK, 2% from Europe, 2% from Asia, 1% from South America, 0.5% from the Middle East and 0.2% from Africa (the remainder of the participants did not state their country of residence).

### Materials

For this study a survey was constructed which focused on ways people flirt in face-to-face situations and how they flirt in Chat Rooms. Although a plethora of flirting behaviours could have been selected for this study, given that the aims were to examine whether the body can be reconstructed online to flirt with and to examine whether men and women flirt in traditionally defined ways, this study focussed on non-verbal behaviours and substitutions of non-verbal behaviours online, descriptions of attractiveness and socio-economic status and the initiation of contact with another.

Past research on traditional flirting was considered in the construction of the survey. In addition, substitute acts for flirting behaviour online were considered. Participants were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never, 7 = all the time) how frequently they flirted by displaying particular behaviours to indicate attraction to another. Participants were asked to consider flirtatious behaviour in face-to-face situations and flirtatious behaviour in Chat Rooms. Some example of items included: “Do you ever make an effort to look physically attractive so that you might attract another/others?” and “Do you ever use emoticons, such as smiley faces :- ) or a wink ;- ) to signal to someone online that you are attracted to them?” Participants were asked if they flirted by describing income, and/or education, and/or occupation; making an effort to look physically attractive; initiating conversation with someone they found attractive; displaying non-verbal gestures, such as smiling or eye gaze; and laughing and touch. Participants were asked if they flirted online by describing income, and/or education, and/or occupation; describing oneself to appear physically attractive; initiating contact with someone they met online; and by displaying non-verbal substitutes, such as emoticons; and by using acronyms, such as LOL (laugh out loud, lots of laughs) with someone they find attractive.

### Procedure

For this study, it was deemed insufficient to exclusively recruit participants via a web survey. Given that such a method might have solely attracted regular Internet users and this study was interested in both offline and online flirting, it was decided to recruit people both online and offline. Participants were recruited online by placing notices in a

random selection of online newsgroups (these included religious, political, student and relationships groups). With the increase in annoyance people are experiencing with spam, it was elected to place notices, rather than target individuals randomly within these groups as studies have done in the past (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996). In addition, participants were targeted offline by inviting university students at the University of Western Sydney, and by placing surveys in randomly selected cafes and libraries throughout Sydney, Australia. Thirteen percent of the participants answered the survey offline and 87% answered the survey online. To eliminate problems with multiple submissions online IP addresses were logged. In both conditions participants were ensured confidentiality and were able to withdraw consent up until the time of submitting the survey. Participants were invited to complete the survey and place it in a provided locked box. The survey ran continuously for 6 months.

## RESULTS

An analysis was originally performed to determine if there was any significant difference between participants who completed the survey online compared to those that completed the survey offline as well as country of origin. Given there were no significant differences this factor was not considered in the final analysis.

To test the first hypothesis paired t-tests were performed on the items that assessed the extent to which the body was depicted in flirting behaviour. As shown in Table 1, the first hypothesis was not supported for any of the items.

Table 1

Paired t-tests for using the body to flirt with offline and online

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Offline flirting behaviours</u>	<u>Online flirt behaviours</u>	<u>t</u>
	<u>M</u>	<u>M</u>	
	<u>(SD)</u>	<u>(SD)</u>	
Appearing physically attractive	4.90 (1.48)	2.28 (1.71)	96.22***
Non-verbal (e.g., smiles, emoticons)	4.59 (1.45)	3.50 (2.07)	37.06***
Laugh (or acronyms, such as LOL)	4.57 (1.48)	3.45 (2.05)	37.80***
Touch (or descriptions of touch)	3.76 (1.61)	2.21 (1.65)	55.76***

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Given that the majority of the participants (59%) stated that they flirted more frequently offline this it is perhaps not surprising. To explore this further, each of the flirting behaviours were considered for whether participants claimed to flirt more frequently offline, online, or both the same (note: those who claimed not to flirt were not included in this analysis). A MANOVA was performed using the online and offline flirting behaviours as the dependent variables, and place were individuals flirted more frequently as the independent variable. Applying an  $\alpha$ -level of 0.05, there was a statistically significant difference on the combined dependent variables  $F(24, 10194) = 109.67, p < .001$ ; Wilks' Lambda = .63; partial eta squared = .21. The dependent variables were then considered separately. Table 2 presents the Univariate F-tests, using an  $\alpha$ -level of .05. It is noteworthy to point out that according to Cohen (1988) these effect sizes are mostly moderate.

Table 2

Frequency differences for online and offline flirting items.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Flirt</u> <u>more</u> <u>offline</u> <u>M</u> <u>(SD)</u>	<u>Flirt</u> <u>more</u> <u>online</u> <u>M</u> <u>(SD)</u>	<u>Same</u> <u>M</u> <u>(SD)</u>	<u>F</u>	<u><math>\eta^2</math></u>
Offline Attractiveness	5.03 (1.41)	4.87 (1.46)	4.91 (1.51)	7.00**	.003
Offline Non-Verbal	4.84 (1.32)	4.23 (1.40)	4.87 (1.43)	91.59***	.04
Offline Laugh	4.71 (1.38)	4.48 (1.46)	4.72 (1.50)	11.49***	.004
Offline Initiate	4.42 (1.27)	3.76 (1.30)	4.38 (1.31)	117.05***	.04
Offline Touch	4.02 (1.55)	3.28 (1.50)	4.03 (1.54)	106.19***	.04
Offline SES	2.05 (1.32)	2.13 (1.44)	2.14 (1.50)	2.55	.001
Online Attractiveness	2.05 (1.57)	2.92 (1.91)	2.58 (1.82)	124.60***	.047
Online Non-verbal	2.97 (1.95)	4.68 (1.76)	4.52 (1.88)	455.69***	.151
Online Laugh	2.97 (1.95)	4.54 (1.81)	4.36 (1.88)	375.56***	.128
Online Initiate	2.53 (1.72)	4.23 (1.62)	4.01 (1.80)	553.49***	.178
Online Touch	1.78 (1.35)	3.22 (1.85)	2.86 (1.80)	448.27***	.149
Online SES	1.97 (1.54)	2.71 (1.94)	2.42 (1.79)	98.28***	.037

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Perhaps not surprisingly, Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons revealed that individuals who flirted more frequently face-to-face were more likely than individuals who flirted online, to flirt in face-to-face situations by emphasising attractiveness, using non-verbal signals and laughter, initiating contact, and by using touch. Comparisons also showed that individuals who flirted more frequently online emphasised attractiveness more than individuals who flirted face-to-face or flirt as much online as they do offline. Furthermore, individuals who flirted more frequently online, were more likely than

individuals who flirted more frequently face-to-face to use substitutes for non-verbal cues, initiate contact, use descriptions of touch, and emphasise socio-economic status.

Interestingly, an inspection of the means revealed, that emphasising the body offline through attractiveness, non-verbally and through laughter appeared to be the more favoured way to attract others for people who flirt more frequently offline. Nonetheless, the body still appeared to play a significant part of cyber-flirting for people who flirt more online, via non-verbal signals (such as emoticons) and by representing laughter. However, the emphasis of physical attractiveness appears to be downplayed.

A MANOVA was performed to investigate, sex differences in flirting behaviour. The dependent variables included items that measured online and offline flirtatious behaviour. Applying an  $\alpha$ -level of 0.05, there was a statistically significant difference on the combined dependent variables for sex  $F(12, 5440) = 38.73, p < .001$ ; Wilks' Lambda = .92; partial eta squared = .079. The dependent variables were then considered separately. Table 3 presents the Univariate F-tests, an  $\alpha$ -level of .05 was employed to determine significance. The effect sizes are relatively small (Cohen, 1988).

Table 3

Sex differences for online and offline flirting items.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>F</u>	<u><math>\eta^2</math></u>
Offline	4.62	5.08	125.21***	.022
Attractiveness	(1.57)	(1.39)		
Offline Non-Verbal	4.50	4.65	14.90***	.003
	(1.48)	(1.43)		
Offline Laugh	4.34	4.72	85.54***	.015
	(1.51)	(1.44)		
Offline Initiate	4.20	4.18	0.349	.000
	(1.36)	(1.35)		
Offline Touch	3.51	3.93	88.83***	.016
	(1.62)	(1.57)		
Offline SES	2.11	2.02	5.37*	.001

	(1.41)	(1.32)		
Online Attractiveness	2.15 (1.67)	2.35 (1.73)	16.69***	.003
Online Non-verbal	3.32 (2.02)	3.61 (2.09)	25.68***	.005
Online Laugh	3.25 (2.00)	3.57 (2.07)	32.41***	.006
Online Initiate	3.22 (1.86)	2.96 (1.87)	23.91***	.004
Online Touch	2.31 (1.67)	2.15 (1.64)	12.07**	.002
Online SES	2.17 (1.69)	2.17 (1.69)	.017	.000

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Hypothesis 2 was partially supported by the results. Women did flirt more than men in face-to-face situations by displaying non-verbal signals, with laughter, touch and by making an effort with their appearance. Online, women flirted more than men using substitutes for non-verbal cues (such as emoticons), using substitutes for laughter (such as acronyms like LOL), and by describing themselves as physically attractive. However, contrary to what was predicted, men scored higher on indicating touch in their flirting online.

Hypothesis 3 was also partially supported. Men, more than women, flirted in face-to-face situations by emphasising their socio-economic status. However, contrary to expectations, men were not more likely to initiate contact offline. Online, however, men were more likely than women to initiate contact but they were not as likely to emphasise SES more than women.

## DISCUSSION

In spite of some researchers' claims that the Internet is more of a meeting of minds than of bodies, this study found some evidence that the body plays a significant role in cyber-flirting in Chat Rooms. The data suggests that individuals are more likely to use the body to flirt with offline. However, given that the majority of the sample stated that they flirted more offline a second analysis was required. In this analysis people who claimed to flirt more face-to-face were compared to people who claimed to flirt more online and people who claimed to flirt online as much as they did offline. This highlighted some significant differences. The results suggested that those who flirt more online were able to translate the body through text. For example, kinetics (in the form of acronyms, such as LOL), oculusics (in the form of emoticons, such as a wink), speech/laughter and haptics (through descriptions in the text). Indeed, the representation of non-verbal cues and laughter appeared to be a popular way for individuals to cyber-flirt. This study goes some way in supporting previous theoretical arguments that the body can be successfully translated online (Whitty, 2003, Whitty & Carr, 2003). However, it is possibly the more Internet savvy that are better able to do this (future research is required to test out this claim). Researchers have collectively argued that using the body offline in isolation of verbal cues allows one to convey sexual interest without the high risk of possible humiliation, shame or possible rejection (Feinberg, 1996; Koepfel, Montage, Miller, O'Hare and Cody, 1993, Moore, 1985). Although future research needs to consider the role of verbal cues online in more detail, this study does suggest that we cannot dismiss the importance of the body altogether when it comes to initiating relationships in Chat Rooms.

While this current study does provide some evidence that we must consider the presence of the body more online, it must not be ignored that, in line with previous work, such as McKenna et al.'s, 2002, who focused on presentation of self online, it was found here that how one physically looks does not play as an important role online as it does offline in the development of romantic relationships. Perhaps by overlooking how one actually looks, individuals are able to maintain some anonymity. In turn, being unidentifiable possibly creates more opportunities for individuals to feel free to open up on the net (Whitty & Gavin, 2001).

In the main, men and women flirted in distinctively gender defined ways, both in face-to-face encounters and in Chat Rooms. Although the small effect sizes suggest that we need to treat these results with caution, as predicted, women were more likely than men were to flirt online and offline by employing non-verbal signals, laughing and emphasising physical attractiveness. The only item where this was not supported was with descriptions of touch online, where men scored significantly higher than women did. Perhaps this is because the use of touch in face-to-face situations is a more subtle advance than the descriptions of touch online. Moreover, future research might investigate what exactly these descriptions of touch are online (for example, are these more explicitly sexual?).

Hypothesis 3 was only partly supported. Men were not more likely than women were to initiate contact in face-to-face situations with women they were attracted to. However, they were more likely than women were to emphasise SES. In contrast, online men were more likely to make initial contact, but were not more likely to emphasise SES. Perhaps men were more likely to make initial contact online, as the anonymity that the

Internet provides allows men to feel less inhibited than they would in face-to-face encounters.

The gender differences revealed in this research were interesting. Despite the changes that the women's movement has brought about and the increased likelihood that women can fend for and support themselves and their children, when it comes to initiating relationships women still pay more attention to their resources, such as their physical bodies. This appears to be evident across all mediums, including face-to-face, personal ads and as this study has found in Chat Rooms. Despite the opportunities, as articulated so well by theorists such as Turkle (1995), that the Internet provides individuals to play and experiment with identity, this study suggests that gender roles are not easily transcended online. However, this study only partly supports an evolutionary approach (see Buss, 1988), suggesting that other theories need to be developed to explain these gender differences.

This study provides us with some important insights into how men and women flirt online compared to face-to-face encounters. Nevertheless, there are some limitations to this research that are necessary to point out, which future studies might want to consider. One of these being that flirting is not necessarily an entirely conscious behaviour. For example, people do not typically consciously dilate their pupils to indicate sexual interest in others, nor do they always consciously flirt by displaying an eyebrow flash, accompanied by a hair toss. This makes it difficult to measure flirtatious behaviour with self-report questionnaires. Self reports on behaviour cannot guarantee that individuals behave in the same way they report they do in surveys. Moore (1985) attempted to overcome this limitation by using observational methods. However, her

study also had its shortcomings, in that it is also difficult to ascertain for certain whether the non-verbal signals she observed were truly flirtatious signals (conscious or unconscious). Of course observing flirtatious behaviour online is fraught with difficulties. Firstly, it is more difficult to determine if what is being said is flirtatious and secondly there are a number of ethical issues to consider (see Whitty, 2004). Considering this in another light, however, people could possibly be more aware of what they do to flirt online as communication online is typically more thoughtful and strategic. Hence, self reports might be the most appropriate tool to employ to measure cyber-flirting. Future research might give further consideration to this question.

Another limitation of this study was the list of items chosen to consider flirtatious behaviours. Future research, for instance, might consider a broader range of behaviours, with more attention to verbal flirtation. Of course, it is also acknowledged here that more research is required to confidently determine how the body is represented in online flirting.

Rather than considering the Internet as one generic space, future studies might continue to consider how men and women flirt in different spaces on the Internet. Spaces such as MUDs and MOOs (multiple-user dungeon, or more commonly understood these days to mean multi-user dimension or domains) which were originally a space where interactive role-playing games could be played, very similar to Dungeons and Dragons, might be considered further. In this space we find people experimenting with and playing with multiple characters. We might predict that individuals playing in these spaces might find it easier to flirt than other online places. We would also perhaps expect that online dating sites, where the expectation is to find someone romantically to hook up with, are

one of the more popular sites to flirt on in cyberspace. However, given the expectations to put up photos of oneself, future research might find in these spaces online physical appearance does play an important role. Spaces such as newsgroups (spaces on the Internet devoted to the discussion of a specific topic) possibly create less opportunity for individuals to cyber-flirt. The type of topic and whether people reveal who they really are can alter the dynamics of such as space.

### Conclusions

Overall, these results are important because they give a general overview of how men and women flirt online compared to offline. Despite changes in our social conditions, and the possibilities of experimenting with new roles online, both online and offline, women tend to flirt more than men by emphasising physical attributes. This study challenges the oft-touted claim by theorists that the Internet is a place where there is a meeting of minds, in absence of the body (McRae, 1996). Instead, it is suggested here that researchers need to focus more on how the body is reconstructed on the Internet. This study suggests that in Chat Rooms physical appearance is downplayed, however, that the body is nevertheless represented in emoticons and acronyms. In conclusion, these results highlight that the empirical and theoretical examination of how we might conceptualise flirting online is worthy of further investigation.

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