Hispanic Women's Use of Nonverbal Flirting Cues

Jeffrey S. McQuillen, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Communication
University of Texas - Pan American
1201 West University Drive
Edinburg
TX 78539

Marcolfa Zamora McQuillen, MA
Instructor
Office of Undergraduate Studies
University of Texas
Pan American

Ruben D. Garza, MA
Department of Communication
University of Texas
Pan American

Abstract

A survey based on a 52-item, Likert-type questionnaire was used to determine the nonverbal cues most frequently employed by women when flirting. Six nonverbal variables were examined to determine their relation to flirting behavior in women. Eye gazing and smiling were found to be the most widely used nonverbal cues. Smoking, drinking, style of dress, and perceived level of attractiveness were found to have significant relation to flirting behavior.

Keywords: Flirting, Nonverbal Behavior, Intercultural Communication, Hispanic Studies

1. Introduction

This study was designed to identify the nonverbal cues Hispanic women identify using when flirting. Specifically, the project assesses those nonverbal cues Hispanic women most commonly report using when they are attempting to flirt. In addition, the impact that specific demographic variables may have on the frequency of nonverbal cues used by Hispanic women was analyzed. Flirting is defined as any physical action, movement, posture, or gesture used for the purpose of gaining and/or keeping a man's attention, or demonstrating an interest in him.

2. Review of Literature

Flirtation first emerged as a genuine field of study over 40 years ago with Eibl-Eibesfeldt's (1970) examination of the widespread rituals displayed by mate-seeking animals. He found that women used strikingly similar nonverbal cues to test the sexual availability and interest of the opposite sex (Rodgers, 1999). Smiles, coy gazes, arching the eyebrows, giggle and self-touches were all seen in women from different cultures. Eibsfeldt (1970) argued that these nonverbal cues represent primal behaviors driven by evolutionary memories housed in primitive parts of the brain (Lott, 1999).

By using different verbal and nonverbal strategies women take an active role in attempts to sexually influence men (Perper& Weis, 1987). According to Perper (1985), most women consciously plan their actions as a means for attracting men. Despite the popular belief that women rely on men to be the initiators of sex, the contrary was found to be true (Perper& Weis, 1987). According to Perper, (1985) men make the first move; however, women initiate those encounters by signaling men with their movements and gestures. Givens (1978) found that speech seems to play a lesser role in flirting, courtship and seduction.

He argued that the orientation for these social exchanges seems to rely more on nonverbal cues such as: facial expression, postures, gestures, gaze patterns, and tone of voice.

Moore (1985) supports Perper's position that men make the first move, but that women actually precipitate the flirtatious scenario through their nonverbal cues. According to her research, women are responsible for flirtatious exchanges about 65% of the time. Even though the man initially approaches the woman, the woman usually summoned him via a bevy of nonverbal cues (Moore, 1985). Moore (1985) was among the first researchers to categorize the cues associated with women's flirting. She identified and catalogued 52 different nonverbal courtship behaviors used by women. She also found that women who drew the most responses were those who projected the most signals. In addition, women who used a wider repertoire of signals were more likely to experience success (Moore, 1985).

Researchers such Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Moore have not only provided a template for investigating courtship behaviors, but have given invaluable insight into the observable intricacies surrounding flirting as it applies to nonverbal communication.

Moore, however, used consequential and contextual evidence to justify the validity of her list of cues. Only those cues exhibited by women that consistently resulted in males' attention were documented as flirting cues. Moreover, the cues listed were seen almost exclusively in courtship contexts. They were not exhibited, or were shown in very low frequencies, in non-courtship settings.

Despite the fact that past research has provided a large quantity of useful and valid information on flirting, these efforts are not without limitations. First, most prior research relied primarily on observation. This method possesses distinct advantages. Unfortunately, observation also poses many threats to validity. Unobtrusive observation is a challenge in open environments. Observations conducted in hotel bars, cocktail lounges, restaurants, and other singles clubs can often produce unpredictable circumstances that may affect the behavior of the subjects being observed as well as the people around them. Researchers cannot be confident that uncontrolled environmental factors have not affected the subjects' reactions. Assuming that observed nonverbal signals are directly associated with flirting can be problematic. A woman may cross and uncross her legs as a matter of comfort and not necessarily because she is attempting to solicit a male. Ultimately, a person's actions do not always accurately represent what that person is feeling or thinking.

To address the above limitations, the present study employed the survey methodology using as its primary data-gathering tool a 52-item questionnaire based chiefly on the 52 nonverbal cues catalogued by Moore (1985). Validation of Moore's typology by prior studies (Eibsfeldt, 1970, Givens, 1987, Moore & Butler, 1989, Muelenhard et al, 1986, Schefflen, 1965) serves to justify the use of her categories as the basis for the present measurement tool.

The questionnaire for this study also included six demographic variables: age, marital status, smoking, drinking, style of dress, and subject-perceived level of attractiveness. These variables were selected on the premise that a correlation may exist between these variables and the frequency with which a womanflirts.

Monica Moore provides some evidence of the relationship of age and flirting behaviors. She observed that adolescent girls ages 13 to 16 used many of the same cues (31 out of 52) that she had observed in adult women only their cues were not as fluid noras graceful and were more exaggerated. Moore also noted that the girls signaled a lot less than the women, but further suggested that this lower frequency may have been due to the shorter observation periods and the context of the settings (Moore, 1995). Although Moore established a correlation between age and flirting, still in question is how flirting frequency differs between younger and older adults.

Marital status might also be a factor thatinfluences the frequency of flirting. Society, in general, views married people as having more positive personal and professional traits (Etaugh&Malstrom, 1981). Duberman (1974) found that most people view marriage as a more desirable and natural state than "singlehood." This expressed preference may drive single women to flirt more. Also, as discovered by Cargan (1981), single people are more likely to have feelings of loneliness. These feeling may fuel a woman's desire to flirt in an attempt to attract a mate. Smoking has been linked to increased sexual behavior in teenagers and young adults.Thus, it might also be a factor that influences the flirting behavior of women smokers and non-smokers. A studyconducted by Robinson and Telljohann (1999) found that amongst sixth-graders, smoking was the highest predictor of engaging in sexual relations.

Zabing (1984) also found a significant association between smoking and sexual behavior amongst first-time visitors to contraceptive clinics. Interestingly, after viewing a videotaped role-play of women smokers and non-smokers, university students judged women who smoked as more open to being outgoing and sophisticated than non-smokers (Jones & Carroll, 1998).This research suggests the presence of a correlation between smoking and flirting.

Alcohol has long been believed to cause a lack of restraint manifested in the loosening of sexual inhibitions, suggesting an obvious link between consumption and increase flirtatious activities. A study by Abbey, Zawacki, and McAuslan (2000) found that after consuming alcohol, both men and women behaved more sexually and were more disinhibited when observed in controlled, mixed-sex dyads. In addition, studies have shown that men and women are perceived as being more sexually available by one another when they are drinking (Abbey &Harnish, 1995).

The way a person dresses can speak volumes about how that person feels about herself or himself and about what they may be trying to communicate to others around them. Clothing definitely serves a social purpose, otherwise styles and fashions would not exist, and people would wear clothing solely for protection from the cold or heat (Ryan, 1991). Therefore, there is a strong possibility that a woman's style of dress may play a role in determining flirting preferences. For this study, the relationship of conservative, moderately conservative and provocative styles of dress with flirting behavior preferences was examined.

Finally, the subject's perceived level of attractiveness may have a strong impact on her willingness to engage in flirtatious behaviors. Nezlek (1999) found that people who perceive themselves as being attractive and who thought others saw them as attractive had more intimate interactions with members of the opposite sex than those who saw themselves as unattractive. In terms of flirting, women who feel they are attractive may have more confidence when flirting. Moreover, Mathes and Edwards (2001) discovered that attractive women obtain greater rewards from men than unattractive women.

Based on the preceding review, the study posed the following research questions.

RQ1: What are the nonverbal cues Hispanic women most frequently use for flirting?
RQ2: Do any of the factors: age, marital status, smoking, drinking, dress, self-perceived level of attraction correlate with Hispanic women's nonverbal flirting behavior?

3. Methodology

3.1 Subjects

A convenience sample of one hundred and seventy-five subjects ranging in age from 18 to 62 with a mean age of 25.3 participated in the study. Questionnaires were distributed in university classrooms.

3.2 Instrument

The instrument was a 52-item, Likert-type scale based on Moore's (1985) catalogues of nonverbal flirting cues, and included nine demographic questions designed to measure the frequency with which respondents felt they would employ the particular flirting cue being described. The questions were measured on a scale of 1 to 9 (1 = extremely unlikely that the cue would be used for flirting and 9 = extremely likely that the cue would be used). The highest possible individual score on the survey was 468 total points.

4. Results

Data were analyzed using a One-way ANOVA and a series of independent-t tests. Overall individual mean scores for all groups are shown on Table 2.

To address research question 1, which examined the most frequently used nonverbal cues, a list of the top 15 of the 52 cues measured is shown in table 1. Cues are listed in descending order of mean scores.

Neither age nor marital status were found to have a significant influence on flirting behavior, [F (3,171)=2.24, p = .087] and [t (172) = 1.871, p = .063], respectively.

A statistically significant difference was found between smokers and non-smokers [t (173) =2.793, p= .006]. Smokers reported an overall mean score of 4.71 as compared to the non-smokers' mean, 3.84. This group comparison yielded the highest mean difference.

A significant statistical difference was also found between the drinkers and non-drinkers [t (172) =2.028, p = .044]. The above analyses support the assumption that women who smoke and/or drink tend to be more flirtatious.

Table 1: Most Frequently Used Nonverbal Cues

Nonverbal Cues	Mean Score
Glance and try to make sustained eye contact (2-3 seconds)	6.23
Glance and then quickly look away	6.23
Smile then look downward or away	6.20
Show him a partial smile	5.95
Flip hair back with hand during conversations	5.76
Walk across room so he can see me	5.75
Touch him on his arm during conversation	5.49
Approach and stand close to him (2 feet)	5.36
Show him a full smile	5.23
Move to the beat of music while sitting or standing	5.17
Purposefully laugh or giggles at his comments	4.89
Use more hand and arm gestures while speaking	4.86
Play with or caress some type of object (glass, keys, rings, etc.)	4.82
Touch him on his back, usually during conversation	4.65
Place hand on his shoulder while standing or sitting next to him	4.46

Style of dress was also an indicator of a woman's propensity for flirting [F (2,148) = 5.95, p = .003]. Post hoc analyses revealed a significant difference between the sexy dressers and the conservative dressers [F (2,148) = 5.95, p = .002] and the sexy dressers and the moderate dressers [F (2,148) = 5.95, p = .004]. There was no significance between the conservative and moderate dressers.

Finally, a woman's self-perceived level of attractiveness was also found to be an indicator of a woman's flirting tendencies [F (2,169) = 6.88, p = .001]. Women who labeled themselves as highly attractive had higher overall mean scores than the women who rated themselves as moderate or low in attraction. Post hoc tests showed significance between the high attractive group and the low attractive group [F (2,169) = 6.88, p = .002]. No significance was found between the low and moderate groups. Significance was found with four of the six variables. Age and Marital status were the only two variables that did not achieve statistical confirmation. Women who rated themselves as having a high level of attractiveness had the highest overall mean scores, 4.78, while women who rated themselves as having a low level of attractiveness had the lowest overall mean scores, 3.07 (See Table 2 for a list of all group mean scores).

5. Discussion

This study investigated the nonverbal cues Hispanic women reported using most frequently when flirting and described the potential relationship between select demographic variables and the reported frequency of flirting behavior use. Findings provide evidence, based on frequency of use, that the most important nonverbal elements for flirting involve the face, in general, but more specifically, the eyes and mouth. Eye gazing and smiling were the cues that achieved the highest frequency scores and were the top four rated nonverbal cues. These findings indicate that the face is an extremely important tool not only for communicating but also for flirting. Consistent with these results, many communication scholars believe that next to human speech, the face is the primary source of interpersonal information (Knapp and Hall, 1997).

The use of the hands was the second most frequently employed nonverbal flirting cues. Six out of the top 15 nonverbal cues involved the use of hands. Whether for touching (person, self, objects) or gesturing, the hands are readily used to communicate. Gestures, which are referred to as building blocks for human interaction (Knapp and Hall, 1997), also scored high on the list.

A significant correlation was found between women in the18to21 agerange as compared to women who were in the 30 and above age range. One possible explanation for this finding is that, as a woman reaches a certain level of maturity, the need to flirt may not be as great, due to involvement in interests other than social functions where most flirting takes place (i.e. parties, bars, clubs, etc.). Younger women spend a lot more of their free time on entertainment and thus have more opportunities to flirt.

Surprisingly, single women were not found to be significantly higher on flirting frequency when compared to married women. The assumption was that since married people are viewed more positively in society (Etaugh&Malstrom, 1981) and are not found to be as lonely (Cargan, 1981) single women would be more flirtatious. Failure to achieve statistical support for therelation between marital status and flirting may be due to the fact that the questionnaire specifically stated to answer all questions keeping "past experiences" in mind. Consequently, many married women may have answered the questions from the context of their single pasts.

Smokers scored considerably higher on the survey than non-smokers, which is the result that was expected. Prior research had indicated a correlation between smoking and increased sexual behavior in teenagers and young adults. Based on that research, the assumption was that smokers would score higher on the survey. The same could be said for women who drink as compared to those who do not. The relationship between alcohol and sex is as seen on television, in the movies, and in magazines. The findings of this study parallel past research on the study of alcohol as it pertains to disinhibition and add support to the images of alcohol and sexuality that are so prevalent in the media.

Another interesting finding was the high score of the sexy dressers in comparison to the women who rate themselves as moderate or conservative dressers. The findings are in accordance with a study done by Parks and Scheidt (2000) in which men and women were asked to judge the behavior of women at bars based on their dress. Both men and women viewed those women who dressed more provocatively as being more flirtatious. Another possibility is that women who dress more provocatively are more confident and are, thus, more inclined to flirt, which is a possible explanation for why the self-rated highly attractive women scored higher on the survey. In fact, the above two groups had the highest overall scores, which suggests that confidence and self-esteem may also factor into a woman's flirting tendencies.

A few limitations need to be addressed. First, the sample size was rather limited (n = 175).

Secondly, the sample was not representative of the general population. The overwhelming majority of respondents were college students. Students may provide responses that differ from non-students or career women. Another limitation, and certainly a key concept, is the fact that much of the time people are not aware of their nonverbal behavior; in regards to flirting much of it takes place at a subconscious level.

Unobtrusive observation remains the best way to research nonverbal communication, however, this study allowed women to rate what they feel are the most widely used or recognized nonverbal cues when flirting. Also, the study provided evidence that certain variables are viewed as having a significant impact on self-report ratings of nonverbal flirting behaviors. Finally, these data are consistent with and provide additional support for Moore and other researcher's findings regarding women's use of nonverbal cues for the purposes of flirting.

Table 2: Individual Mean Scores for all Groups

Group	Total Subjects	Mean score
Young	47	4.46
Moderate	63	4.03
Mature	30	3.98
Older	35	3.48
Single	109	4.22
Married	65	3.73
Smoker	37	4.71
Non-smoker	138	3.84
Drinker	111	4.23
Non-drinker	63	3.69
Conservative	20	3.33
Moderate	100	3.82
Sexy	31	4.77
Low (attractiveness)	10	3.07
Moderate	120	3.83
High	42	4.78

6. Reference List

Abbey, A., Zawacki, T., and McAuslan, P. (2000).Alcohol's Effects on Sexual Perception.*Journal of Studies on Alcohol,* 688-695.

Abbey, A. and Harnish, R.J., (1995). Perception of Sexual Intent: The role of gender, alcohol consumption, and rape supportive attitudes. *Sex Roles*, 32, 297-313.

Cargan, L. (1981). Singles: An Examination of Two Stereotypes. *Family Relations*, 30, 377-385.Duberman, L. (1974) Marriage and its Alternatives, New York: Praeger Press.

Etaugh, C. and Malstrom, J. (2001). The Effect of Marital Status on Person Perception.*Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 801-805.

Givens, D. (1978). The Nonverbal Basis of Attraction: Flirtation, Courtship, and Seduction. Psychiatry, 41, 346-357.

Givens, D. (1984). Love Signals: How to attract the perfect mate. Cammeray: N.S.W.

Jones, B. and Carroll, M., (1998). The Effect of a Video Character's Smoking Status on Young Female's Perceptions of Social Characteristics. Adolescence. 33, 657-668.

Knapp, M. and Hall, J. (1997). Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.

Moore, M (1985). Nonverbal Courtship Patterns in Women: Context and Consewuwnces. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 6, 237-247.

Moore, M (1995). Courtship signaling and adolescents: "Girls just wanna have fun?".Journal of Sex Researcg, 32, 319-328.

Mathes, E. and Edwards, L., (1978). Physical Attractiveness as an Input in Social Exchanges.The Journal of Psychology.98, 267-275.

Meulenhard, L., Koralewski, M., Andrews, S., and Burdick, C. (1986). Verbal and Nonverbal Cues that Convey Interest in Dating: Two Studies. *Association Advancement for Behavior Therapy of*, 17, 404-419.

Nezlek, J. (1999). Body Image and day-to-day Social Interaction. *Journal of Personality*, 67, 793-Parks, K, and Scheidt, D., (2000). Male Bar Drinkers' Perspective on Female Bar Drinkers.*Sex Roles*. 43, 927-939.

Perper, T. (1985). Sex Signals: The Biology of Love. Philadelphia: ISI Press.

Perper, T. and Weiss, D. (1987).Proceptive and Rejective Strategies of U.S. and Canadian College Women. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 23, 455-480.

Robinson, L. and TellJohann, S., (1999). Predictors of Sixth Graders Engaging in Sexual Intercourse.*Journal of School Health*, 69, 369-376.

Rodhers, J. E. (1999). Flirting Fascination. Psychology Today, 32, 36-41.

Ryan, M. (1991). Clothing: A study of Human Behavior. *Human Ecology*, 19, 28-32.

Scheflen, A. (1991). Quasi-courtship Behavior in Psychotherapy, Psychiatry, 28, 245-257.

Zabin, L., (1984). The Association between Smokers and Sexual Behavior among Teens in U.S. Contraceptive Clinics.*American Journal of Public Health*, 74, 261-263.