

Flirting hard to detect, communication studies researcher finds

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(Phys.org) —Humans are really bad at detecting flirting, according to research at the University of Kansas. And their wingmen aren't any better.

Jeffrey Hall, an associate professor of communication studies and author of the 2013 book "The Five Flirting Styles," conducted a study to see how often pairs of strangers correctly identified when the other was [flirting](#).

"If you think someone is not interested in you, you are probably right, they are not interested," Hall said. "But if someone is, you probably missed it."

The study is detailed in the article "Accurately Detecting Flirting: Error Management Theory, the Traditional Sex Script, and Flirting Base Rate," which was published this spring in *Communication Research*. Hall was the lead author on the study, and Seth Brooks, a KU undergraduate, was the third author.

The first study brought together 52 pairs of single, heterosexual college students. The pairs of strangers sat alone in a room and talked for 10 to 12 minutes in what they thought was a study on first impressions. At the end of the study, the students were asked to fill out questionnaires in separate rooms. Among other things, students had to note if they flirted and if they thought their counterpart had.

While the pairs were more than 80 percent accurate in knowing when their counterpart was not flirting, they were far less accurate in detecting when they were being flirted with. Only 36 percent of men judged correctly, and for [women](#), the number was 18 percent.

"Behavior that is flirtatious is hard to see, and there are several reason for that," Hall said. "People aren't going to do it in obvious ways because they don't want to be embarrassed, flirting looks a lot like being friendly, and we are not accustomed to having our flirting validated so we can get better at seeing it."

In a second study, Hall had more than 250 people watch six one-minute video clips of those in the first study interacting. Just one person was shown at a time. The third-party observers were not any more accurate in detecting flirting than those taking part in the interactions. When flirting didn't occur, they were 66 percent accurate. When it did, they were 38 percent accurate.

The lowest accuracy rate was found in females observing males flirting. They identified the flirting just 22 percent of the time. Both men and women had an easier time detecting when females were flirting. Hall said that could be because women tend to be more transparent.

"It doesn't appear to be the case that men have some intuition about women and women have some intuition about men. But it does seem that women are just a little more clear if they are interested or not," Hall said.

Students' difficulty in detecting flirts could be the same reason humans have trouble spotting a liar, Hall said. The assumption is most people are telling the truth because most people do. And, of those who don't, it's only a small group doing the majority of the lying.

The same is true for flirting.

"Most people on most days are not flirting with everyone they come in contact with," Hall said. "But, some people are occasionally flirting, and maybe a few people are flirting a lot."

Just like lying, knowing when someone is flirting can take awhile to pin down, and it often needs third party confirmation.

"You just don't assume everyone is flirting with you," Hall said.

For those wanting to hone their flirting detection skills, Hall's advice is to be open to the possibility that people are flirting, especially in settings where flirting is common, such as at a party or bar.

"If you are missing out that people are flirting with you at a place where people go to flirt, then that's on you," he said.

However, he admits, flirting can be harder to detect in other contexts, such as work or being a subject in a study on first impressions. One of the saddest pairs Hall encountered in the study was a male and a female who both flirted, but didn't think the other was flirting back.

"Talk about a missed opportunity," Hall said.

More information: "Accurately Detecting Flirting: Error Management Theory, the Traditional Sexual Script, and Flirting Base Rate." Jeffrey A. Hall, Chong Xing, and Seth Brooks. *Communication Research*, 0093650214534972, first published on May 25, 2014.

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