

Research defines more behaviors that reveal romantic attraction

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Credit: BemDevassa/Wikipedia

If you want to know whether people are flirting with you, look at what they say and do. Each person has a different tactic for communicating attraction, or flirting style, and new research suggests that during a short get-to-know-you conversation people show they're attracted in a way matches their flirting style.

"Researchers have long known that many verbal and nonverbal behaviors are linked to underlying attraction, but this is the first study to show that different ways of communicating attraction reveal a person's flirting style," said Jeffrey Hall, associate professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas. "How you flirt says a lot about what flirting means to you."

Hall, author of "The Five Flirting Styles: Use the Science of Flirting to Attract the Love You Really Want" (Harlequin, 2013), recently published a study with co-author Chong Xing examining links between verbal and nonverbal flirting behaviors in the March issue of the peer-reviewed *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*.

In the investigation, Hall's team observed 51 pairs of opposite-sex heterosexual strangers who had self-identified their flirting styles in a questionnaire, similar to Hall's popular online Flirting Styles Inventory, available to the public.

Hall breaks down flirting styles into physical, traditional, sincere, polite and playful categories.

In the new study, strangers interacted for 10-12 minutes and agreed to be videotaped.

"They sat on comfy blue chairs, and a coffee table was nearby," Hall said. "We had prompt cards to read with questions to help them learn about other person, such as 'what accomplishment are you most proud of?' These were meant to get the conversation going."

Afterward, subjects reported their level of attraction toward their conversation partners. Then, Hall and his team reviewed the interactions.

"One of the important things to keep in mind is that flirting is an

outgrowth of your feeling toward another person—something you can't easily hinder," Hall said. "When you're expressing yourself with someone you might like, nonverbal and verbal behaviors begin to reflect attraction, with a coy smile here and a laugh and a tease there, to clarify how you feel about a person."

Hall and his team coded 36 verbal flirting behaviors—such as making compliments, asking questions and revealing information—and nonverbal flirting behaviors —such as leg-crossing, palming, leaning forward, playing with objects and nodding. The research team found different verbal and nonverbal cues indicated underlying [physical attraction](#) for each style.

"We found that as people became more attracted to their conversation partner, they showed that attraction in ways that revealed their flirting style," Hall said.

The KU researchers noted people with the sincere style—who communicate attraction through self-disclosure and focused attention—were attentive and less fidgety in the short interaction.

"Female sincere flirts laughed and smiled more, and more frequently showed a telltale sign of interest—the coy gaze," Hall said.

The KU researchers also discovered males who were traditional flirts (those who believed men should make the first move and women should be more passive) were more likely to lean into the interaction and adopt an open body posture. Traditional females acted in more demure way, by palming—or showing their wrists and hands—and gently teasing their conversational partner.

Perhaps the hardest flirts to read were the polite flirts, according to the researchers.

"A polite flirt tends to be very hands-off and respectful, but as you can imagine, this type of flirting isn't obvious to the people they're attracted to," Hall said. "They lean back, create even more space and are more even in verbal tone. For most people, it signals a lack of closeness, but polite flirts do it more the more attracted they become."

The physical style didn't quite play out as expected. Hall's group found that physical flirts—those who express sexual interest through body language—offered fewer compliments when they were attracted to a potential romantic match. Moreover, these usually self-assured physical flirts—habitués of cafes, parties or busy nightspots—were a bit stymied talking alone in a room, one-on-one.

"There's good reason why the physical style doesn't play out in a conversational environment," Hall said, "That's not where physical flirts go. It's not where they're most confident."

But across all flirting styles, a few things are true. When it comes to flirting, most people are pretty subtle. What's more, everybody does it differently. Because flirting is low-key and varied, we're often oblivious when people send us signals of romantic [attraction](#).

Perhaps that's why Cupid's arrow misses the mark all too often.

"We're really bad at detecting if people are [flirting](#) with us," Hall said. "We're great at knowing when they're not interested. But the reason we're bad at seeing when they are interested is people show it in such a variety of ways."

Provided by University of Kansas

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