

Preference for SMS versus Telephone Calls in Initiating Romantic Relationships

Ruth Byrne is a staff and training and development officer with the Bureau of Meteorology

Bruce Findlay is a lecturer in Psychology at Swinburne University.

Abstract

This study examined sex differences in the likelihood of initiating first moves (toward relationship establishment) or first dates via short message service (SMS) text messaging and telephone calls. The sample comprised 159 females and 107 males, mean age 28 years, who completed an on-line self-report questionnaire that assessed relationship initiating behaviours. Whereas females were more likely to initiate first moves using SMS than telephone calls, males had no preference for communication channel. In initiating first dates, males were more likely to telephone than SMS, whereas females were reluctant to initiate regardless of the communication channel. Although males were more likely than females to initiate first moves and first dates via telephone calls, there were no sex differences when initiating via SMS. It was concluded that while SMS appears to have somewhat influenced the manner in which romantic first moves are initiated, traditional gender role expectations and preference for telephone communication are still strong when initiating first dates.

Keywords: Relationship Initiation, Romantic Relationships, Computer-Mediated Communication, SMS, Dating.

Introduction

Since dating as we know it began in the 1920's, societal expectations regarding heterosexual romantic relationship formation has encouraged males to pursue females (Cate & Lloyd, 1992). While dates and romantic relationships are traditionally initiated via telephone or face-to-face interaction, recent commercial studies suggest that some people are now initiating romantic relationships using short message service (SMS) text messaging, a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) enabled by mobile telephones (Asia Market Intelligence, 2002; Mori, 2000). In a nationally representative sample of mobile phone users in the United Kingdom, a quarter of the participants used text messaging to flirt, with 19% saying they would consider using text messaging to initiate a date (Mori, 2000). With approximately 70% of Australians now owning a mobile telephone (Australian Communications Authority [ACA], 2003), and SMS messages sent in Australia averaging 329 million each month (ACA, 2003), SMS technology may not only be affecting the way in which people communicate, but possibly the way in which romantic relationships are initiated.

Gender Roles And Relationship Initiation

Research on romantic relationship initiation has mostly focused on sex differences in the likelihood of initiating (Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999; Green & Sandos, 1983; McNamara & Grossman, 1991), and the characteristic initiation strategies used by males and females that are thought to reflect conventional gender roles (Berger, 1987; Rose & Frieze, 1989, 1993). Gender roles refer to the attitudes, behaviours and personality characteristics considered appropriate for males and females within a particular culture. Whereas males are typically assumed to be dominant, aggressive, emotionally restricted, competitive, self-confident, sexual and independent, females have typically been considered the reverse – compliant, emotionally expressive, empathic, warm, nurturing, non sexual and dependent (O'Neil, 1981; Snyder, 1984; Sprecher & McKinney, 1987).

Research suggests that adherence to culturally prescribed gender roles creates favourable impressions in initial cross-sex encounters (Curran, 1972; Huston & Levinger, 1978; Ickes, 1993; Rose & Frieze, 1993). The reliance on socially defined roles to guide behaviour in the early stages of romantic relationship development can be illustrated by the strong gender stereotyping found in dating scripts (Laner & Ventrone, 1998, 2000; Rose & Frieze, 1989, 1993). Scripts are shared collective guides operating within a particular culture that prescribe appropriate behaviour and allow individuals to predict how others might behave in a particular situation (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). Studies suggest that guidelines governing first date behaviour are formal and customary (Laner & Ventrone, 1998, 2000; Rose & Frieze, 1989, 1993). When asked to describe typical behaviours that occur on a first date, both males and females agreed that males take a dominant proactive role by initiating the date and deciding where to go, taking the female to dinner and/or the cinema for which the male pays, and initiating any physical or sexual interaction. In comparison, participants agreed the female's role was subordinate and passive, in that she acts in response to the male's initiatives (Laner & Ventrone, 1998, 2000; Rose & Frieze, 1989, 1993). Given that experienced daters emphasised gender roles more strongly than inexperienced daters, Rose and Frieze (1989) suggested that successful dating was perhaps dependent upon conformity to these roles.

Gender role differences have been used to explain distinct strategies used by males and females in romantic relationship initiation. While strategies cited by males tend

to be direct in their approach, indirect strategies such as sending subtle nonverbal cues (Jason, Reichler & Rucker, 1981) and flirting (Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999)

are more characteristic of females. In a study conducted by Berger (1987), male and female participants were asked to imagine themselves in a party situation where they saw an attractive person whom they wished to ask for a date, and then list the steps they would use to achieve this goal. Males mostly nominated a direct approach of introducing themselves, initiating a conversation to discover common interests, and then asking the female out on a date. In comparison, females were more likely to hint to the male they would like to be asked out, ask a mutual friend whether the male was interested, or give the male their number and wait to be phoned and/or asked out. Females said they either did not know how to ask someone out on a date, or for reasons of social appropriateness would not, even if they knew how.

Although males are more likely to initiate dates and romantic relationships than are females (Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999; Green & Sandos, 1983; McNamara & Grossman, 1991), and both males and females consider it more appropriate that males do the initiating (Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999; Green & Sandos, 1983; Mongeau et al., 1993), most females report having initiated dates (Jason, Reichler & Rucker, 1981; Korman, 1983; McNamara & Grossman, 1991; Mongeau et al., 1993; Sarch, 1993). Nevertheless, a study by Mongeau et al. indicated that females are less likely to initiate first dates than subsequent dates, and when females did initiate the first date, fewer than half the female initiators requested a second or subsequent date.

Mongeau et al.'s (1993) finding suggests that when females do take the initiative, they subsequently expect the male to take a more active role as the relationship progresses. Conducting in-depth interviews with 25 single women, Sarch (1993) reported unanimous agreement that the male role in a dating relationship was that of the pursuer. Although a majority of women interviewed asked men out on dates, they still felt the man's role should always be active, regardless of the role a woman chose to play. The females interviewed also admitted to fearing that they would appear too eager or controlling if they phoned a man too often. Recent dating etiquette books suggest females are still advised to adopt a submissive role and allow males to take the lead (Doyle, 2002; Fein & Schneider, 1995). Females seeking "Mr Right" are advised not to talk to a man first, not to call him and rarely to return his calls (Fein & Schneider, 1995). According to Doyle, men are less likely to be romantically interested in women who ask them out, as they feel emasculated. Consequently, Doyle advises females to engage in indirect passive strategies to signal their romantic interest, so that "the ball is clearly in his court, but he's under no obligation to hit it back to you" (p. 68).

Although Doyle's (2002) suggestion of emasculation perhaps appears both contentious and extreme, other authors have suggested that where the female initiates, males may feel somewhat threatened (Jason, Reichler & Rucker, 1981), and less in control, possibly as their objectives surrounding the relationship and its potential outcomes are more ambiguous than when they have been the initiator (Mongeau et al., 1993). According to Mongeau et al., this loss of power may upset males and result in less positive perceptions of female initiators. Although most males have a positive attitude towards female initiated dates (Kelley, Pilchowicz & Byrne 1981; Mongeau et al., 1993), female initiators have been perceived by males as more sexually active (Mongeau & Carey, 1996), less tactful, likeable and attractive, and more of a feminist (Mongeau et al., 1993). These attributions made towards female initiators mostly contravene traditional female gender roles. Not surprisingly then, having a positive attitude towards equal rights for women has been

shown to predict male approval for female-initiated dates (Mongeau et al., 1993; Muehlenhard & McFall, 1981), with males having less positive attitudes towards feminism more likely to prefer that females hint than ask them out directly (Muehlenhard & McFall, 1981).

While Street, Kimmel and Kromrey (1995) found that males advocate a preference for androgynous women, other research suggests that males perceive sex-typed or feminine women as more attractive than women with dominant or masculine qualities, at least based on first impressions (Bridges, 1981; Ickes, 1993). In a study conducted by Keisling and Gynther (1993), males perceived physically unattractive and average women described as affectionate and compassionate as more attractive than those described as independent and assertive. Seeking to enhance their attractiveness in the eye of the beholder, females are perhaps motivated to appear more feminine in order to make a favourable impression upon the male. Zanna and Pack (1975) found that, when led to believe that a desirable male preferred traditional women, female participants manipulated their self-presentation to appear more stereotypically feminine than they had previously described themselves.

Korman (1983) found that feminists, who are generally regarded as more independent, dominant and autonomous than non-feminists, and therefore less likely to conform to gender role norms, were more likely to initiate dates than non-feminists. Nonetheless, results were highly positively skewed for both groups, suggesting many feminists do not initiate dates either. Although feminists may demand equality in other aspects of life, they still appear somewhat reluctant to assert themselves in the traditionally male-dominated domain of relationship initiation. Given the considerable evidence that female initiated relationships tend to be shorter in length than those initiated by males (Jason, Reichler & Rucker, 1981; Kelley, Pilchowicz & Byrne, 1981; Mongeau et al., 1993), females are perhaps cognisant that should they wish to develop a stable and permanent romantic relationship, it is important not to undermine the male's perceived dominant role in the critical early stages of relationship development (Jason, Reichler & Rucker, 1981).

Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as electronic mail and SMS text messaging is considered an effective tool for managing self-presentation in order to make the "right" impression. The asynchronous nature of CMC enables individuals to purposely plan, contemplate and edit messages with greater awareness and control than that available during spontaneous conversation (Kiesler et al., 1985; Levine, 2000; Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Furthermore, the absence of aural and visual information means that vocal and visual signs of nervousness are not apparent. Perhaps as a consequence, shy individuals report experiencing lower levels of shyness and less inhibition in interacting with communication partners when on-line compared to face-to-face (Roberts, Smith & Pollock, 2000).

In a study of communication channel preference in premarital romantic relationships, O'Sullivan (2000) found a preference for mediated communication channels over face-to-face communication, when the initiator anticipated that their preferred impression was potentially threatened by their relationship partner. Although mediated channels comprised a composite measure of telephone, letters, answering machines and electronic mail, O'Sullivan attributed the preference for mediated communication to the "buffer effect". Given the physical and psychological distance created by lack of visual and perhaps aural information, the initiator is somewhat insulated from the potentially negative reactions of the receiver that may be

conveyed through the receiver's facial expression and intonation. Should an individual believe their romantic advances could be rejected, a preference for mediated communication may prevail.

A further consideration that may encourage the use of computer-mediated communication is that distance and asynchronous interaction reduces the intensity for the communication partner, giving the receiver control over when and how to respond (O'Sullivan, 2000). This lowered intensity may be particularly relevant for female initiators concerned with appearing to be actively pursuing a male. In a study of single females' use of the telephone in dating relationships (Sarch, 1993), the female interviewees spoke of leaving rehearsed messages on males' answering machines, presenting with a light, upbeat tone and content so that a return call by the male was provoked. Although aural information was still available, the rehearsal performed much the same function as editing of message content, with the female strategically managing her self-presentation to appear "direct, yet spontaneous, confident yet needing some assistance, and assertive yet not aggressive" (p. 140).

The Present Study

The present study was an investigation of preference for communication channel when initiating the first move after an initial face-to-face interaction, and when initiating a first date. In particular, the study compared individual preference for communicating via telephone calls, or via SMS text messaging, a form of computer-mediated communication enabled by mobile telephones that has experienced enormous growth in recent years (ACA, 2003). Although telecommunication companies have reported SMS is popularly used to flirt and initiate dates (Asia Market Intelligence, 2002; Mori, 2000), previous research has not investigated preference for SMS over alternate channels in the context of relationship initiation, nor suggested why SMS might be preferred.

As preference for a particular communication channel needs to be considered in light of alternate channels available (O'Sullivan, 2000), it was decided to compare SMS with telephone calls, as phoning relies heavily on synchronous contingent interaction and conveys aural information, whereas SMS does not. As the asynchronous computer-mediated nature of SMS creates greater distance between communication partners and affords initiators greater control over their self-presentation, it was of particular interest in the present study to explore whether females declared a preference for SMS text messaging over telephone communication when initiating first moves and first dates.

The study distinguished between making the first move and initiating a first date, since among some groups, interaction and relationship formation tends to be more informal (Laner & Ventrone, 1998) and is not necessarily instigated by a first date. Often the first date marks a significant turning point in a romantic relationship (Mongeau & Carey, 1996), and due to the strong gender role script it may evoke (Rose & Frieze, 1989, 1993), expected behaviours from males and females may differ considerably from behaviours in making the first move after an initial face-to-face interaction. It was a further aim to examine whether males are still more likely to initiate first moves and first dates than females, regardless of communication channel. Since much of the dating literature is now more than ten years old, societal changes and the emergence of new technology may have changed behaviours.

The study was limited to a heterosexual sample, as lesbian and gay men's dating scripts differ somewhat from traditional heterosexual gender roles and scripts (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994), and the questionnaire design could not distinguish

whether bisexual women and men were referring to same sex or opposite sex partners. As gender roles and dating scripts are culturally defined, the study was also limited to respondents residing in Australia.

Hypotheses And Research Aims

It was predicted that males would be more likely than females to make the first move and initiate the first date, and to have initiated more first moves than females in the past 12 months. It was a research aim to explore whether males and females differed in their preference for using SMS text messaging and telephone calls to initiate first moves and first dates, and whether different preferences for communication channels also emerged in the number of first moves initiated in the past 12 months.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 266 participants who were either single (74.4%) or currently in an exclusive romantic relationship of less than 12 months duration (25.6%; $M = 4.35$ months, $SD = 2.75$). There were 159 females whose ages ranged from 18 to 46 years ($M = 27.85$, $SD = 6.10$), and 107 males aged between 18 and 58 years ($M = 28.76$, $SD = 7.26$). All participants resided in Australia, considered themselves heterosexual, and owned a mobile telephone with text messaging capability.

The vast majority of participants were Australian born (82.3%), with the balance of participants being born in the United Kingdom or Europe (6.4%), South East Asia (3.4%), New Zealand (3%), Africa (2.6%) and other countries or regions (2.3%). The sample was well educated with 25.2% currently completing or having attained post-graduate qualifications and 46.2% undergraduate qualifications. Participants were employed in a wide range of industries with full-time students comprising only 14.3% of the sample. Participants had been using text messaging as a communication means from one month to five years, with the average length of experience two and a half years ($M = 30.13$ months, $SD = 14.98$). The amount spent on personal mobile telephone calls and text messages ranged widely from \$1 to \$600 per month ($M = \$71.56$, $SD = \$81.10$), with 50% of the sample spending between \$30 and \$80 per month.

Materials

As part of a larger study, participants answered a variety of questions related to their communication channel preference for communicating with desired others in the early stages of a romantic relationship, and a series of questionnaires that measured aspects of personality. Only items and questionnaires used in the present study are described.

Participants read a brief vignette describing a hypothetical situation where they had met someone to whom they were attracted and would potentially consider forming an exclusive romantic relationship with, hereafter called a "desired other". Using 5-point Likert scales where 1 = "very unlikely" and 5 = "very likely", participants rated how likely they were to initiate the first move with the desired other after an initial face to face encounter, and how likely they were to ask the desired other out on a first date. For both questions, participants were asked to rate the likelihood of initiating contact via a telephone call and a SMS text message. Participants were also asked how many desired others they had initiated the first move with in the past 12 months using telephone calls and text messages.

Participants also completed demographic questions such as sex, age, sexual orientation, cultural background, relationship status, and occupation.

A standard scale of social desirability (The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale [Short Form], Reynolds, 1982) was included to control for participants who might respond to self-evaluative questions in an overly socially approved manner.

Procedure

The data was collected via an on-line survey over the Internet. To recruit participants, an email describing the study and containing a link to the questionnaire was sent to the first researcher's network of friends and associates, who forwarded the email to their social network to create a snowball effect. The study was also publicised through newsgroups such as *alt.support.shyness* and *alt.romance.chat*, an on-line dating site *findsomeone.com*, and the local media. Data was collected over a three month period, with 52% of visitors to the website completing the questionnaire.

To be eligible, participants were required to be aged 18 years or over, as obtaining parental consent to participate in the study would have been difficult using an on-line survey. Participants needed to have been single for some period during the past 12 months (i.e. not in an exclusive romantic relationship), and to have owned a mobile phone with text messaging capability during this time. Participants were informed via an introductory message that the study was exploring individual preference for communicating with desired others during the early stages of a romantic relationship and aspects of their personality. Participants were assured that their responses were completely anonymous, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Completion of the survey was considered to demonstrate participants' informed consent.

Results

The data were screened to ensure statistical assumptions were met. Although likelihood to make the first move via an SMS text message was negatively skewed, the data on this variable was not transformed as the statistics used are robust if the sample size was considered large enough (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). The Social Desirability scale was adequately reliable with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .72. As no participants had exceptionally high social desirability scores all cases were retained for analysis.

Likelihood To Initiate The First Move

A 2 (sex) x 2 (communication channel) mixed design analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, with communication channel (telephone and SMS) the within subject variable. The results revealed a significant interaction between sex and communication channel ($F(1,264) = 24.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$). Females were far more likely to initiate the first move with a male by sending him an SMS text message ($M = 3.66, SD = 1.27$) than they were to initiate the first move by telephoning him ($M = 2.77, SD = 1.19$). In comparison, males reported no preference for communication channel (SMS: $M = 3.56, SD = 1.21$; Phone: $M = 3.73, SD = 1.11$).

As predicted, males were more likely to initiate the first move than were females ($F(1,264) = 16.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$). This main effect needs to be considered in light of the sex by communication channel interaction. Separate ANOVAs for each communication channel revealed that while males were far more likely to make the first move via a telephone call than were females ($F(1,264) = 43.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$), females were just as likely as males to make the first move via an SMS text

message ($F(1,264) = .41, p > .05$). This strong preference in females to initiate the first move via a text message also contributed to a main effect for communication channel ($F(1,264) = 11.32, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$), where first moves were more likely to be initiated via a text message than a telephone call.

Number Of First Moves Initiated In The Past 12 Months

Controlling for the number of months single, the number of first moves initiated in the past 12 months was highly positively skewed for both telephone and SMS, with relatively few initiations being admitted to by most participants. A calculation of Cook's distance identified fifteen cases that had a substantial influence on the ability to generalise from the data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). These cases were removed from the analysis.

A 2 (sex) by 2 (communication channel) mixed design analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted, controlling for number of months single, to determine the effects on the number of first moves initiated in the last 12 months. Results revealed a significant interaction between sex and communication channel ($F(1,248) = 14.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$). In the past 12 months, females had initiated more first moves with males via SMS text messages ($M = 1.32, SD = 1.47$) than via telephone calls ($M = 0.61, SD = 0.89$). In comparison, males had initiated as many first moves via SMS text messages ($M = 1.63, SD = 1.91$) as they had via the telephone ($M = 1.82, SD = 1.49$). Overall, and as anticipated, males had initiated more first moves in the past 12 months than had females ($F(1,248) = 26.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$). Nevertheless, ANCOVAs for each communication channel revealed that males had only initiated more first moves than females by telephone ($F(1,248) = 63.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$), with no sex difference in the number of first moves initiated in the past 12 months using SMS ($F(1,248) = 2.07, p > .05$).

Likelihood To Initiate A First Date

A 2 (sex) x 2 (communication channel) mixed design ANOVA was conducted, with communication channel (telephone and SMS) the within subject variable to determine their effect on the likelihood to initiate a first date. A significant interaction between sex and communication channel was found ($F(1,264) = 28.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$). Males were more likely to initiate first dates via a telephone call ($M = 3.99, SD = 1.12$) than an SMS message ($M = 2.55, SD = 1.15$), whereas females were reluctant to initiate first dates regardless of the communication channel (Telephone: $M = 2.90, SD = 1.37$; SMS: $M = 2.64, SD = 1.21$). Although overall, males were more likely to initiate first dates than females ($F(1,264) = 21.42, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$), separate ANOVAs for each communication channel revealed that males were only more likely to initiate first dates than females over the telephone ($F(1,264) = 46.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$). Using SMS, males and females were equally unlikely to initiate ($F(1,264) = .32, p > .05$). Given this, there was a strong overall preference for initiating first dates via a telephone call ($F(1,264) = 60.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$).

Discussion

The results support the hypothesis that males were more likely to initiate first moves and first dates, and had initiated more first moves in the past 12 months, than females. However, when considering sex differences for each communication channel, this was only true for telephone initiations. The results also suggest that males and females did differ in their pattern of preference for communication channel in initiating the first move. Females were more likely to initiate the first move using text messaging, and had initiated more first moves in the past 12 months using text messaging, than by telephone calls. Males showed no preference for communication

channel in likelihood to initiate first moves and in the number of first moves initiated in the past 12 months. In contrast, for initiating first dates, males were more likely to make a telephone call than send an SMS text message, whereas females were equally reluctant to initiate first dates via telephone as they were via SMS.

Overall Sex Differences In The Likelihood Of Initiating First Moves And First Dates

As anticipated, and consistent with the findings of previous researchers (e.g., Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999; Green & Sandos, 1983; McNamara & Grossman, 1991), we found that males were more likely than females to initiate the first move and first date, and had initiated more first moves in the past 12 months. Although this finding suggests that both males and females may still regard the male's role in relationship initiation as that of the pursuer (e.g. Sarch, 1993), males were more likely to initiate only via telephone calls. When it comes to using SMS to initiate first moves and first dates, male and female participants were equally likely to do so. Since the patterns of channel preference differed for first moves and first dates, and have distinct implications, the results will be discussed separately.

Sex Differences In Preference For Communication Channel In Initiating The First Move

While males indicated no preference for communication channel in initiating first moves, females were more likely to initiate the first move and had initiated more first moves in the past 12 months via SMS text messaging than via telephone calls. This conclusion should be treated cautiously, since the likelihood of females initiating first moves via text messaging did not reach the threshold of 'likely' based on a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 = "very likely", and the average number of first moves initiated by females in the past 12 months was just over one. Nevertheless, there was still a clear preference for initiating first moves via SMS as opposed to telephone calls. Although what actually constituted the first move was not examined, it did not necessitate the initiator asking the desired other out. Rather, the female initiators may have signalled their interest in the desired male by being flirtatious, thus employing an indirect strategy that is traditionally characteristic of females in romantic relationship initiation (Berger, 1987; Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999). Similar to studies conducted by telecommunication companies that demonstrate the popularity of text messaging for flirting (Asia Market Intelligence, 2002; Mori, 2000), females in the present study may have felt less self-conscious in sending flirtatious messages via SMS to communicate their interest in the male than they would being flirtatious over the telephone.

An alternative explanation for females' preference for text messaging over telephone calls was that the psychological distance created by lack of aural feedback potentially enabled the female initiator to save face should their romantic interest not be reciprocated. Should the male reject the female's romantic advances, a text message to that effect, or perhaps no response at all, may be less difficult for the initiator than having to spontaneously react to the awkwardness of rejection over the telephone. This rationale is also plausible for why males may use text messaging and are just as likely as females to initiate first moves via SMS. Nevertheless, as females are more likely to be concerned regarding the risk of an unsuccessful romantic relationship initiation than are males (Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999), and potentially are less experienced in dealing with rejection due to their lack of initiation experience, female participants may have demonstrated a stronger preference for SMS over the telephone, whereas male participants had no preference.

Females may also prefer to initiate the first move via text messaging rather than telephone calls because, according to O'Sullivan (2000), the psychological distance and asynchronous interaction perhaps reduces the intensity for the communication partner, and allows them greater control over when and how to respond. As suggested by Mongeau et al. (1993), males may feel less in control when the female initiates, which could lead to less positive perceptions of her, or of the potential for the relationship. Perhaps by sending a text message, females in the present study were giving the desired male room to decide whether he was interested in pursuing her romantically.

Just as the females in Sarch's (1993) study feared that they may appear too eager or controlling should they phone the male too often, it may be speculated that females in the present study may fear violating traditional gender roles by appearing overly independent and assertive should they make the first move by telephone. Previous research has suggested that males are attracted to feminine women, at least at the initial encounter (Bridges, 1981; Ickes, 1993; Keisling & Gynther, 1993). Accordingly, females in the present study may have been motivated to adhere to traditional gender roles in relationship initiation, and thus avoided making the first move by telephoning the desired male, for fear she would be perceived to be actively pursuing him.

Sex Differences In Preference For Communication Channel In Initiating The First Date

Although males were likely to initiate first dates via the telephone, they were unlikely to initiate via SMS. A possible explanation for this was that phoning to ask someone out on a first date may constitute an important part of the dating script, whereas sending an SMS text message to request a first date could be perceived as an offhand script violation. Although previous studies on dating initiation have not investigated the communication channel used to initiate dates, Rose and Frieze (1989) argued that behavioural norms surrounding a first date have changed little since the 1950s, suggesting that the channel used to initiate first dates would traditionally be face-to-face or telephone. As scripts prescribe appropriate behaviour within a given situation, initiators are perhaps conscious of making a poor impression by asking someone out on a first date via SMS, as it could be considered improper.

Unlike males, females in the present study were unwilling to initiate first dates, regardless of the communication channel. Social appropriateness and the belief that it is the male's role to initiate first dates (Berger, 1987; Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999; Green & Sandos, 1983; Mongeau et al., 1993) may underpin this reluctance. Dating script adherence may also explain why females were unlikely to initiate first dates, yet relatively willing to initiate first moves via text messaging. As initiating the first move suggests a less formal interaction compared to initiating a first date (Laner & Ventrone, 1998), females are perhaps less bound by the social rules of dating initiation, and subsequently freer to adopt a more proactive initiating role.

Limitations of the Present Study and Directions for Future Research

The sample was largely comprised of highly educated and professionally employed participants, most likely due to the snowballing recruitment technique that was utilised, as peer networks are often similar in background and status. This may limit the extent to which the present study's findings can be generalised to other populations. It would therefore be useful for future researchers to include a more representative sample comprising various socio-economic status groups.

Although the ages of sample participants ranged from 18 to 58 years, the number of participants at the lower and higher end of the range was not large enough to constitute separate samples to uncover any age-related effects. Future researchers could seek to increase the number of participants across age groups and could also consider including adolescents in their sample as research suggests that SMS technology is extremely popular among this cohort (Asia Market Intelligence, 2002).

Future research might also investigate the preference for SMS text messaging versus telephone calls as a romantic relationship progresses through the courting stage to an established relationship, and perhaps also if and when a relationship disintegrates. As relational partners often develop norms of appropriateness for communication channels (O'Sullivan, 2000), longitudinal studies could also examine whether earlier communication channel preferences persist as the relationship progresses, and the effect channel preference has on the perceived quality of communication in the relationship.

The present study suggests that males and females still adhere to traditional gender roles when initiating romantic relationships, particularly when initiating first dates. Future research could possibly include measures of masculinity and femininity to determine any within group variation based on a propensity to adhere to traditional gender roles.

It would also be of interest to collect qualitative data on the nature of text messages sent in a relationship initiation context, and the extent to which messages differed for the sexes. For example, would females be more likely to indicate their romantic interest by flirting and hinting that they would be receptive to being asked out, while males could be more direct in their approach by suggesting a face-to-face meeting via a text message.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine sex differences on the likelihood of initiating first moves and first dates via SMS text messaging and telephone calls. While findings suggest that SMS has influenced the manner in which first moves are made, the initiation of first dates after an initial face-to-face encounter seems relatively unaffected by SMS technology. When initiating first dates, communication channel preference and gender-prescribed behaviour appears entrenched in Australian culture.

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