

Just say “no thanks”: Romantic rejection in computer-mediated communication

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Abstract

This research examined how certain features of online date-finding systems affect the types of message strategies users generate to refuse requests for romantic dates. An experiment analyzed how 190 participants rejected a date request from a member of the opposite sex. Politeness strategies varied as a function of the relationship between the requester and rejector (acquaintance vs. stranger) and the type of media (email vs. online dating messaging service). Results illuminate effects of interface characteristics and dyads' relationship type on date refusal messages. Online daters exploited certain communication features provided by dating website messaging services which allow new ways for romantic refusals to be performed that were not previously available in face-to-face communication or earlier forms of computer-mediated communication.

Keywords

date-finding sites, date refusal, Internet dating, politeness, romantic rejection

Online dating sites and Internet personals have become popular for millions of people trying to find romantic partners (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Searching for a romantic date via computer offers benefits such as convenience, control, and affordability (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). In addition, by altering communication patterns and practices, online dating systems may provide certain communicative advantages that can

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lessen the psychological and social costs that arise when an individual wishes to decline a romantic date. This research explores how online matchmaking systems reduce the embarrassment that online daters face when developing rejections to date requests. Previous research on date refusals has drawn on derivations of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to show how refusing a request for a date incurs potential embarrassment to the date requestor, and that individuals who wish to decline such requests must address a variety of ego-related goals while simultaneously making their decision apparent. The present study illuminates ways in which politeness dynamics in romantic rejection change as a result of two fundamental dimensions that online dating systems offer: the interface used for communication and the social distances among those who communicate. Interface factors include certain features afforded by computer-mediated communication (CMC) which differ from those available in face-to-face (FtF) or telephone interaction. In particular, some dating sites offer users automated, prefabricated messages that users may transmit in order to signal interest or disinterest to another individual. Such features, we argue, offer strategically impersonal responses in a context traditionally fraught with interpersonal risks.

Along with these interface factors, the level of acquaintanceship between an online date requestor and refuser prior to the date request may differ from that of traditional date-seeking. Traditionally, suitors have some degree of acquaintance with prospective dates. Yet online date-seekers and their targets may be complete strangers. Variations in acquaintanceship, and the interface's potential for the transmission of prefabricated messages of encouragement or discouragement, bear on the ways in which multiple goals related to date refusals may be pursued, and affect politeness levels in the refusal of a date request.

Politeness dynamics have not only been used in previous research on dating refusals in traditional settings, but politeness has also received some attention in the growing field of CMC (see Hiemstra, 1982; Morand & Ocker, 2003). The present research extends the study of politeness and CMC in personal relationship encounters by identifying politeness dynamics in online date rejection responses. In particular, this research considers how differences in technological features and the prior acquaintance among prospective daters can be understood through politeness theory and other conceptual CMC frameworks. In contrast to most recent research on CMC and relationships, we identify an instance in which impersonal communication is advantageous (see Walther, 1996). Interpersonal communication which connects one's rejecting comments to the unique, identifiable individuals who make or receive them may threaten egos, hurt feelings, or incur defensiveness. In order to mitigate these effects, CMC systems depersonalize the process and emphasize the utilitarian aspects of otherwise interpersonal interactions, as we will describe after a review of politeness dynamics traditionally associated with refusals and rejections.

Rejection messages: Theoretical background

Individuals who find themselves wishing to refuse someone else's request face a variety of goals to address as they construct their refusal messages (Dillard, 1997). The most obvious is the functional goal of conveying a refusal in an intelligible and legitimate

way, by referencing the previous request (“I can’t go out on a date with you”) rather than some ambiguous or unresponsive remark. There are also identity goals, which include (1) mitigating the threat to the target’s self-image after directly opposing the target’s desires, while (2) simultaneously managing one’s own self-presentation in a manner that maintains one’s own desired self-image.

Concern over a requestor’s and refuser’s self-image and self-presentation in the process of a request and rejection are amenable to analysis through politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness theory argues that when one presents a request to another person, it constitutes a *face-threatening act* (FTA) on the part of the person who must accept or reject the request. Traditional research suggests that FTAs take place when individuals are vulnerable to another person with respect to the individuals’ desire to be autonomous and free from impediment (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kline & Floyd, 1990). When someone tenders an unwanted request, a recipient who does not want to grant the request experiences both a need to express refusal, as well as an obligation to preserve the requestor’s dignity. This kind of threat to one’s autonomy is known as “negative face.” Extensions of FTA research suggest that requests not only threaten negative face but also threaten positive face (the need to be accepted and appreciated by others; the desire to be wanted; Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998; Wilson, Kim, & Meischke, 1992).

Johnson, Roloff, and Riffe (2004) applied politeness theory and face-preservation dynamics to date rejections in FtF contexts. As the target of a date request may not grant it, a requestor faces the possibility of being impeded from obtaining his or her desires. In addition to this threat to the requestor’s autonomy, a rejection also threatens positive face: It implies that the requester lacked the competence to select a target who is able to fulfill the request. In short, date refusals inherently threaten interactants with a loss of face. Johnson et al. (2004) argue that refusers are cognizant of the potential threat their rejection can create. As a result, the decision of how to redress these impending face threats often lies with the refuser. It is this process of deciding how to frame and deliver the refusal message that is being altered by online dating systems and the levels of acquaintanceship between requestor and rejector that these systems foster. To understand how online systems influence which rejection strategies are likely to be enacted, further review of the types of rejection messages that arise in dating rejections, and the factors that affect their selection offline, is warranted.

Elements of rejection messages

Politeness theory identifies different strategies from which communicators choose when attempting to confront the multiple goals presented in rejection. A rejector must choose how explicit to be by going *on record* or *off record*. An off-record refusal, such as sarcasm or a joke, allows the rejector to deny hurtful intent (e.g., “*You want to go out with Me? Wow, ha, ha!*”). Its indirectness allows receivers to make their own inferences about the relational message which mitigates face concerns, although it can fail to fulfill the functional goal of the refusal. In contrast, an *on-record* refusal (e.g., “*I can’t go out with you on Saturday*”) is more clear functionally. On-record refusals may be performed *bold on record* (BOR) (without redress) or *with redress*. BOR refusals are as concise and direct as possible. They emphasize fulfillment of functional goals over redressive action

that would preserve the target's face. Alternatively, rejectors can perform the refusal on record, *with redressive action*. Redressive action includes appeals to the target's positive face, to be socially accepted, or appeals designed to reduce the threat to negative face, desire for autonomy (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Due to the complexity involved in generating refusal messages and managing FTAs, a number of date rejection message types have become conventionalized. Choosing from among these message types allows rejectors to reduce their effort, feelings of guilt, uncertainty, or "scriptlessness" (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). Date rejection message types that fulfill the goal of conveying the refusal as well as mitigate the target's face threat include (a) a statement announcing the sender cannot go out on the date, (b) an apology for not granting the date request, (c) extension of appreciation for the target's request, (d) a reason or reasons for rejection, and (e) expression of concern for the target's potentially hurt feelings (Besson, Roloff, & Paulson, 1998). Besson et al. suggest that types (a) and (d) satisfy the instrumental goal (convey the refusal and the reason for non-compliance), whereas (b), (c), and (e) comprise facework. They further suggest that rejectors may also offer statements of encouragement to the requester (i.e., "giving face"), and suggestions for future contact on a platonic level.

Acquaintance and social distance

Another factor that affects message design, according to politeness theory, is the level of acquaintance that a requestor and rejector share, which Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to as *social distance*. Greater social distance exists among individuals who are not familiar with each other than between individuals who are friendly and acquainted (Morand & Ocker, 2003). Social distance affects the construction of rejection messages in that individuals who are more familiar with the target of their rejection are likely to be more concerned with the fulfilling the relational or identity goals of the rejection message (i.e., maintaining the relationship with the target and maintaining one's desired self-image) than are individuals with greater social distance, who have no pre-existing relationship. Consequently, communicators who have great social distance are more likely to produce BOR rejection messages. The presence of a pre-existing acquaintanceship may also affect partners' anticipated future interaction. Saeki and O'Keefe (1994, p. 72) suggest that "the anticipation of future interaction with the target should lead to a higher priority on protecting the face wants of the target, whereas the expectation of no future interaction should lead to a lower priority given to face wants." The Internet can alter prospective refusers' social distance and anticipated future interaction relative to traditional date-request encounters.

Applications to CMC

Whereas online date request rejectors should still be concerned with accomplishing functional, identity, and relational goals of rejection when they are relevant, certain features of CMC may affect the salience of these goals, as well as offer alternative messaging strategies, in ways that were not previously considered by those studying rejection in FtF contexts. Online dating sites, like many Internet applications, alter the

social distance of communicators relative to that which is common in most offline settings. Many forms of Internet communication bring people with great social distance into contact with one another, for discussions, product evaluations, and as prospective dates; according to Dutton (2009, p. 1.), “the Internet can reconfigure access to information, people, services and technologies...reshaping how we communicate with others, but also who we meet and get to know” (see also Dutton, Helsper, Whitty, Buckwalter, & Lee, 2008). In this case, online date-seeking and date-rejecting situations differ from most traditional date-request encounters in terms of communicators’ level of previous acquaintance. In traditional date-seeking it is typical that the parties have some acquaintance or are at least “weak ties” connected by an intermediary. Online communication systems remove this level of acquaintance for users who do not know each other at all before connecting online (see Wellman, 2001), although it is possible to discover and recognize an individual whom someone knows offline and has a date-seeking profile online (a case we will examine in the empirical study described below). Therefore, the use of online dating systems makes likely that greater social distance affects the politeness strategies that are employed by online date rejectors.

Moreover, research has found that anticipated future interaction has significant impacts on self-presentation and relational communication in CMC. In online dating sites, anticipated future interaction has been found to affect disclosure and honesty (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). In other contexts, differences in relational communication are more prone to anticipated future interaction effects in CMC than they are in FtF discussions (Walther, 1994). All things considered, low social distance dyads with greater expectations for future interaction have further impetus to attend to the relational and identity goals of the refusal than do strangers.

H1: Requester–rejector pairs who have low social distance (acquaintances) design CMC date rejection messages that contain more positive or negative politeness strategies than requester–rejector pairs who have high social distance (strangers).

Although the patterns predicted above rely on dynamics that are not caused, but rather facilitated by CMC, alternative interfaces and their normative connotations may make social distance more potent in some media than others, qualifying the relationships predicted in H1.

Interface effects

The choice to use CMC for romantic rejection

Early research suggested that CMC’s lack of nonverbal cues and impersonal qualities made it an undesirable medium for interpersonal communication (see for review, Walther & Parks, 2002). Subsequent research indicates that normal relational tone can be achieved through CMC, but also that there are contexts for which impersonal communication offers advantages over interpersonal communication, and in such contexts, CMC can be beneficial (Walther, 1996). When CMC is applied to potentially stressful interpersonal tasks, less personalized, asynchronous interaction, and the reduction of nonverbal cues may facilitate a decrease in facework accompanying a reduction of the importance placed on conventional maintenance of face (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978).

If it is true that rejectors feel “safer” behind a computer screen due to the features of CMC, they might be less likely to apply redressive action and more likely to explicitly state BOR refusals (McGlone & Batchelor, 2003). As such, CMC refusals may reflect efficiency over politeness, even if the risk of a face threat increases. Dyads who share high social distance and, as a result, already have less motivation to fulfill identity or relational goals may find that access to an impersonal interface further reduces their inclination to redress rejections. This is also expected to be evident for those rejectors who intentionally choose CMC over FtF communication in a deliberate attempt to emphasize impersonality.

There are other features of online matchmaking websites that facilitate impersonal communication. The use of “winking” in Match.com allows users to make contact with those who interest them without extending any specific personal message (Fiore & Donath, 2004). Sending a wink generates a scripted message to the recipient (indicating that an interested party has “winked at you”) containing a link to the sender’s profile. As the message content is pre-written and generated by the system rather than composed by the message sender, it provides an impersonal first attempt at initiating communication.

In contrast to dating sites, the norms regarding email respond to different communicative purposes. While email can be used for a one-to-many distribution (as in a Listserv), an individual using email to send a date request intends to communicate with only one person. As email addresses are not usually included in an online dater’s profile, they are not typically used for personal correspondence between online daters. Thus if an individual asks someone for a date using email, it connotes that the requester must have taken the time and effort to locate the target’s email address and compose an original message. Such behavior symbolizes a much more personal correspondence than simply sending a message within the dating website itself, just as the selection of one medium over another often connotes users’ interpersonal intentions (see Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987). As they lack the more mechanical or automated aspects of online dating messaging systems, messages sent to a private email account should be seen as the most personal, rather than impersonal, form of electronic correspondence.

Thus the degree of personal fit that different media afford (both alone and in combination with the degree of social distance) should affect the amount of facework and the number of politeness strategies used in the message. Aspects of dating websites allow rejectors to create messages with fewer politeness strategies because of the degree of impersonality that is associated with the routinized and prefabricated communication that this type of CMC offers. However, responses to an email message may be more likely to incorporate more politeness strategies in order to attend to the more personal nature of the correspondence reflected in this medium and the increased importance placed on face.

H2: Rejection messages delivered using email contain more politeness strategies than rejection messages delivered via the Match.com messaging system.

Rejection choice in CMC and social distance

CMC provides novel ways to address the communicative goals accompanying romantic rejection that were not considered in previous research. Various automated forms of rejection are afforded by online dating sites, aside from the ability to craft an original

verbal message. The following discussion explores situational and software-based designs that facilitate impersonal communication that offer certain advantages for online daters. By facilitating nearly anonymous encounters, by making normative an individual's option not to reply, and by providing automated/scripted messages as rejections, situations and interfaces may help individuals soften the blow of rejection by making transactions specifically "nothing personal".

Remain unresponsive

When social distance between date requestor and rejector is great, some profile owners choose not to respond to a date request at all. This may be normative and not altogether unexpected. Limaye (2001), writing in an organizational context, suggests that when individuals choose to initiate contact with someone else (who may expect but has not directly asked for such attention) they do so at their own risk of being ignored, and should not expect a reply; "In fact, one common method of rejection is keeping silent; . . . if people decide to apply, they are expending their time, effort, and money voluntarily without any external inducement and, as such, have no moral right to expect reasons for rejection" (p. 103). In online dating sites, ignoring advances is somewhat normative and functional in that it saves time and reduces cognitive load. According to Fiore and Donath (2004, p. 1397), some individuals "are so deluged" with advances that they simply do not respond to them.

H3: Those receiving requests from a stranger (high degree of social distance) utilizing the Match.com messaging system are less likely to construct a refusal message with original content than those receiving requests from a stranger via email.

One-click rejection

A unique interface component available in some dating sites with which to signal rejection is the reply to an overture that involves clicking a virtual button called "Say 'No, thanks'". Clicking "Say 'No, thanks'" automatically generates that message to the request initiator. This option may alter the process of online rejection and reduce the likelihood of a rejection bearing original content. Automated rejection messages would most likely be utilized by high social distance individuals, or those who are looking for an efficient way to fulfill the functional goals of rejection but are not concerned with relational goals. In this sense it is an impersonal and conventionalized affordance of the interface. It may be less appealing to low social distance rejectors who are more willing to expend effort on identity or relational goals.

H4: Within the Match.com messaging system, those receiving a request from a stranger (high social distance) utilize the Say 'No, thanks' option more than those receiving a request from an acquaintance (low social distance).

Tailored rejection messages

The greatest effect of social distance on politeness is expected to appear in Match.com users than among those using email (or traditional communication), since they have at

their disposal a broader range of impersonal and interpersonal refusal strategies. Given that rejectors in Match.com who have great social distance might be more likely simply to remain unresponsive or to respond using the one-click “Say no, Thanks” option, when they *do* choose to respond, they should be expected to construct a refusal message with few politeness strategies, compared with low social distance rejectors. Low social distance rejectors who are motivated to respond to the date request, in contrast, are prepared to expend cognitive effort and compose a message that fulfills both functional and relational goals, tailored to the target in such a way that overrides the impersonality of the Match.com medium. Despite the relationship posited in H1, the effect of social distance on the presentation of politeness strategies may be more subtle among email users. Email is a much more personal medium of interaction, and a difference between the number of strategies directed to either known or unknown targets of rejection may be minor, a prediction that adds precision to (but does not rule out) the relationship predicted in H1.

H5: Social distance affects politeness strategies to a greater extent in Match.com than in email: Rejectors who refuse a date request from an acquaintance (low social distance) in Match.com use more politeness strategies in their date rejection messages than strangers (high social distance) using Match.com, while rejectors using email with known targets or strangers differ less in the politeness of their messages.

Method

Sample

In total, 190 undergraduate students from a large Midwestern university voluntarily participated in this research in exchange for course credit. Participation was limited only to those who had prior experience with both email and online dating. The sample was 52% female, with a mean age of 19.8, $SD = 1.95$, mode = 19. Participants had a mean number of email accounts of 2.3, $SD = 0.97$. Although only 4.2% of the sample actually comprised active online daters at the time of data collection, approximately 29.4% of subjects had previously been an active member of an online dating website. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of subjects (95.3%) had visited at least one online dating website, $M = 1.49$, $SD = 1.06$. Approximately 30% of the sample reported either visiting or using Match.com currently or in the past, making Match.com the most frequently visited and used online dating website.

Procedure

Following techniques used by Besson et al. (1998) and Mongeau, Serewicz, and Therrien (2004), participants (Ps) received one of several hypothetical scenarios in which they imagined receiving a request for a romantic date from an individual of the opposite sex. In the present study, Ps were directed to a WWW address to complete research described as exploring how individuals communicate in romantic dating situations using online technologies. After providing informed consent, they then clicked on a link which randomly redirected them to one of the stimulus web pages (see Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008), each of which described a hypothetical scenario reflecting the respective experimental inductions:

(1) the interface/medium mockup (an email message or a Match.com-type screen), and (2) the date request, including the social distance manipulation, and (3) a self-description of the initiator's interests, hobbies, and pastimes, as is common in online dating messages. Elements of these stimuli differed in the following ways, in order to instantiate the hypothesized variables.

Social distance. In the high social distance condition, Ps were told that the date request came from an alumnus of the same university as the P, but who was otherwise a complete stranger. High social distance rejectors were also told that the date requester had already graduated from the university, thus the chances of seeing the requester in a common meeting place were reduced (lower anticipation of future interaction). In contrast, low social distance conditions described the request coming from an acquaintance that the P is aware of as a former classmate that he or she had interacted with in the past. Those in the low social distance condition were also told that the requester was still attending classes at the university, thus increasing the probability of a chance meeting (higher anticipation of future interaction). The request messages were independently judged on dimensions of realism by a separate group of college-aged raters prior to their use in this study.¹

CMC type. The stimuli were embedded in either a Match.com or email format. A version of each type is depicted in Figure 1.

Each of these conditions was replicated for male and female Ps so that all hypothetical scenarios depicted a request for a romantic date from an individual of the opposite sex. Although research suggests that sex differences may occur with regard to first date *initiation* (see Berger & Bell, 1988; Mongeau et al., 1993), the nature of these differences is controversial. Furthermore, the nature of sex differences with regard to *refusals* of date requests is unknown. In addition, while some sex differences in CMC language are known (e.g. Herring, 1995), other research indicates that CMC users adapt to dyadic partners' gender-linked language styles (Thompson & Murachver, 2001), rendering predictions about sex differences in online responses also tenuous. Although no specific effects due to sex are hypothesized in this research, the results of exploratory analysis for sex effects are reported.

The study originally also reflected different conditions featuring several reasons upon which Ps were to reject the date request, but subsequent analyses showed no effect as a result of the "planted" reason on the nature of the refusal message, and no further discussion of this variable is made in this reserve.

Dependent measures. After viewing the stimulus page, Ps answered an online questionnaire, upon completion of which they were debriefed in writing. The first dependent measure was an original 1–7 scale with which to assess the likelihood of responding to the date request, by asking "How likely would you be to respond to this message?"² Those in the Match.com condition were also asked to indicate on an original 1–7 scale, "How likely would you be to respond to the message by clicking on the 'Say no Thanks' reply option?" Regardless of their responses to these two items, Ps were also asked the open-ended question, "Please write out WORD FOR WORD exactly what you would

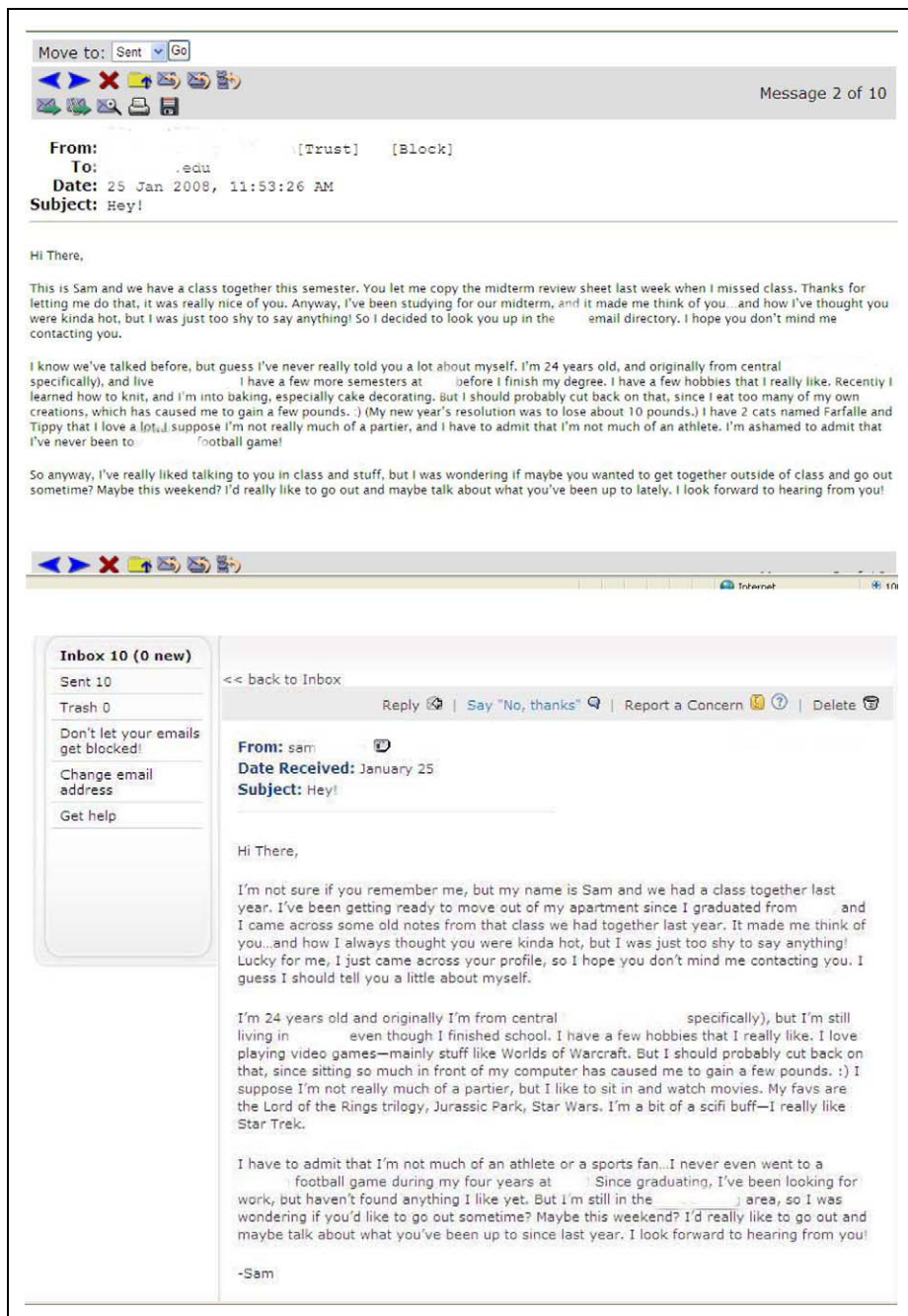


Figure 1. Email and dating site date request samples (locations and University omitted)

Table 1. Politeness strategies.

Codes	Definition	Exemplars
Rejection Reason	Statements directly refusing the date request Statements that give reason for why respondent can't go on date	"I just can't go out this weekend" "I'm so busy with work/ school." "My parents are in town this weekend." "We're just not that compatible." "Sorry about this . . ." "I apologize..."
Apologies	Statements indicating apology	"Thanks for your message." "I'm so flattered that you're interested in me." "Thanks for saying all those nice things about me."
Appreciation	Statements of appreciation for(a) the message or date request(b) complimenting the respondent	"I hope this isn't too harsh."
Concern	Expressions of concern for requester's potentially hurt feelings	"You sound like a great person." "I'm sure you can find someone else."
Encouragement	Statements that bolster requester's confidence in the face of rejection	"I hope we can still be friends." "We should get to know each other better."
Future Contact	Suggestions for future contact or relationship between respondent and requester	

say in your response message," the responses to which were later content analyzed. Ps were told that their rejection message would be communicated via the same type of CMC the requester initially used.

Induction checks. Induction checks were also conducted to assess perceptions of social distance. Using three original, 7-point semantic differential scales, Ps indicated how familiar they felt with the requester: "complete stranger/well acquainted," "best friends/no relationship," and "not familiar at all/very familiar" ($\alpha = 0.75$). Additionally, Ps indicated anticipation of future interaction with the requester using items from Walther (1994), $\alpha = 0.85$.

Content analysis

A content analysis of the rejection messages that Ps created was conducted following procedures used by Roloff and Janiszewski (1989) and Besson et al. (1998). Two coders independently unitized the written discourse into idea units. Idea units could be a single word, clause, or sentence that contains a single idea or thought (Van Swol, 2007). Unitizing reliability was high (average agreement = 0.83, Guetzkow's $U = 0.003$). Two more coders who were blind to hypotheses categorized each unit as one of the politeness strategies defined in Table 1. Disagreements were resolved by a third coder. Inter-coder reliability achieved an average agreement = 0.81, Scott's $pi = 0.77$.

Results

Induction checks

The first induction check assessed whether Ps assigned to the greater versus lesser experimental social distance conditions differed on the measure of perceived social distance. The result was significant, $t(188) = 6.38, p < 0.001$, with means in the expected directions, i.e., low social distance rejectors, $M = 2.95, SD = 0.88$, felt more acquainted with the requester than high social distance rejectors, $M = 2.12, SD = 0.91$. Another check demonstrated that a significant difference for anticipated and unexpected future interaction was induced, $t(188) = 8.79, p < 0.001$, with low social distance dyads reporting greater expectation of future interaction with the requester, $M = 4.18, SD = 1.28$, than did high social distance interactants, $M = 2.53, SD = 1.19$.

Gender and media use

Although no specific gender effects were hypothesized, an omnibus analysis was conducted to determine if gender differences interacted with other variables of interest. No significant interactions involving gender obtained, although a significant main effect emerged with respect to the likelihood to tender rejection messages: Men ($M = 4.27, SD = 1.71$) were more likely to respond with rejection messages than were women ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.90$), $t(188) = 2.31, p = 0.02, \eta^2 = 0.03$. Supplementary analyses also revealed some differences in the type of politeness strategies men and women employed: Female rejectors were more likely to incorporate *statements of encouragement*, $\chi^2(1, n = 62) = 3.16, p = 0.08$, and *statements of appreciation for the date request*, $\chi^2(1, n = 174) = 11.17, p < 0.001$, into their messages than male rejectors. Further comments on gender differences appear in the discussion.

Hypothesis tests

Hypothesis 1 predicted that low social distance acquaintances use more politeness strategies in their rejection messages than high social distance strangers. To test overall use of politeness strategies, the number of politeness strategies used in each message was summed and compared across conditions. Data were consistent with this hypothesis, $t(189) = 2.22, p = 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.03$ (one-tailed).² To find which of the politeness strategies was most utilized by rejectors, individual chi-square tests were conducted to see if there were differences among each politeness strategy. Results for *statements of appreciation*, $\chi^2(1, n = 175) = 0.02, p = 0.89$, and *concern for partner's feelings*, $\chi^2(1, n = 15) = 0.57, p = 0.45$, indicated no difference between low and high social distance rejectors in their use of these rejection message strategies. Surprisingly, *apologies* were more frequently utilized by high social distance rejectors, $\chi^2(1, n = 59) = 8.32, p < 0.005, \phi = 0.38$. Low social distance rejectors more frequently *made suggestions for future contact*, $\chi^2(1, n = 179) = 4.92, p = 0.03, \phi = 0.17$. In addition, anticipation of future interaction significantly correlated with overall use of politeness strategies, $r(188) = 0.47, p < 0.001$. The more a rejector expected potentially to meet or

interact with the target of rejection in the future, the more politeness strategies he or she used in the refusal message. Thus these data were also consistent with hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that email rejections contain more politeness strategies than rejections written using Match.com. Analysis did not reveal any differences between email and Match.com rejectors when all strategies were collapsed, $t(188) = 0.49, p = 0.63$. However, there were differences in the use of individual politeness strategies as revealed by a set of individual chi-square tests, which were consistent with the hypothesis. Email users were significantly more likely to utilize *apologies*, $\chi^2(1, n = 59) = 5.78, p = 0.02, \phi = 0.31$, and *expressions of concern for the requester's potentially hurt feelings*, $\chi^2(1, n = 14) = 4.57, p = 0.03$. There were no significant differences between email and Match.com rejectors in the use of *statements of appreciation*, $\chi^2(1, n = 175) = 0.57, p = 0.45$; *statements of encouragement*, $\chi^2(1, n = 62) = 0.58, p = 0.45$; or *suggestions for future contact*, $\chi^2(1, n = 179) = 0.99, p = 0.32$.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that those individuals receiving date requests initiated by strangers would be less likely to construct a refusal message in Match.com than in email. Data were not consistent with this hypothesis, $t(95) = 0.81, p = 0.42$. Match.com rejectors ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.82$) and email rejectors ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.87$) were equally likely – or unlikely – to construct a refusal message with original content.

Hypothesis 4's analysis revealed that, within the Match.com condition alone, social distance was an important predictor of reply likelihood, $t(91) = 1.97, p < 0.03, \eta^2 = 0.04$ (one tailed). Match.com users who were unacquainted with the date requester were significantly more likely to utilize the "Say, 'No thanks'" button as a form of rejection, $M = 4.43, SD = 1.99$, taking advantage of the impersonal form of refusal for date requests from strangers, than those who were acquainted with the requester, $M = 3.61, SD = 1.94$.

Hypothesis 5 predicted a specific, directional effect of social distance and media on politeness strategies, rendering a greater difference due to social distance in Match.com date refusals than in email refusals. The hypothesis was tested by subjecting politeness scores to a planned contrast test, with contrast coefficients assigned as follows: Match.com/acquainted (+2), Match.com/stranger (-2), email/acquainted (+1), and email/stranger (-1). Results supported the hypothesis, $t(186) = 2.99, p = 0.001$. Acquainted Match.com rejectors used the most politeness strategies, $M = 3.00, SD = 1.16$, and unacquainted Match.com rejectors used the least amount of politeness strategies, $M = 2.09, SD = 1.21$. In contrast, there was no appreciable difference between acquainted email rejectors, $M = 2.45, SD = 1.35$, compared with unacquainted email rejectors, $M = 2.42, SD = 1.40$.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine how relational dynamics and CMC media can affect the use of politeness strategies in romantic rejection message construction. Following from politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the research confirmed that the degree of acquaintanceship – social distance – between date requesters and rejectors affects the types of politeness strategies used in romantic refusals. These dynamics are accentuated in the case of certain Internet sites that facilitate dating

requests among people who have different levels of prior acquaintanceship. Following from new media theory arguing that CMC may be strategically impersonal, interpersonal, or hyperpersonal (Walther, 1996), this research identified a strategically impersonal use of CMC, where social norms and features of online dating websites facilitate rejection when compared with other existing forms of CMC such as email.

Relational effects

Predictions regarding social distance and acquaintanceship were generally confirmed. In line with prior offline research, low social distance rejectors constructed refusals with a proportionately higher number of politeness strategies overall than did high social distance rejectors (H1), suggesting a prioritization of redressive action over functional goals. This finding extends the application of politeness theory into the realm of CMC, illustrating one manner that users can and do adapt media for interpersonal purposes. Date rejectors in high social distance dyads were more likely to utilize apologies, whereas suggestions for future platonic contact were more likely to be used by low social distance rejectors. It may be that high social distance rejectors used apologies because they take less effort to compose than the other strategies. In contrast, acquainted rejectors were more likely to encourage future contact than were strangers, implying that they were more concerned with fulfilling relational goals and maintaining the existing relationship.

In addition, those Ps who experienced high expectations of future interaction with the target integrated more politeness strategies into their messages. Some in the low social distance condition explained that they were motivated to be more polite by the possibility of future contact: "First off I said I wasn't interested because it is the truth, secondly because i have to interact with this person in class, and i don't want her to think im [*sic*] an ass."

Media effects

Different media exerted influence on the use of politeness strategies, in some cases unexpectedly. Contrary to H2, when Match.com rejectors composed their own original messages they did not differ significantly from email users in their amount of politeness. The results of H5 help to explain this finding, however. Those results indicate that unknown Match.com users were less likely to construct tailored rejection messages containing large numbers of politeness strategies. The impersonal nature of Match.com in combination with their disregard of relational goals prompted lower levels of politeness strategies. In contrast, low social distance rejectors who were concerned with relational goals had to redouble efforts to overcome the impersonal environment of Match.com, and produced the most polite messages. Match.com users appeared especially sensitive to social distance, generating more politeness messages than email users when social distance was low, but fewer politeness messages when social distance was great. Although it was predicted that the use of email connotes a more personal connection that obligates redressive actions, the greater level of politeness by low social-distance Match.com Ps suggests that an even stronger relational obligation exists when

one encounters an acquainted suitor in the otherwise unacquainted sphere of an online dating site.

In contrast to H3, Match.com and email users were equally (un)likely to construct original messages to refuse date requests. The hypothesis had originally predicted that it was more normative, and perhaps more expected, to ignore date requests within an online dating system than in email. It appears email, too, provides a means by which remaining silent can become an impersonal response; ignoring a personal request would be obvious and insulting offline, but failing to respond to an asynchronous email request (or returning a voicemail) can be rationalized. In some cases, in fact, Ps incorporated the characteristics of technology itself in their refusal tactic, using electronic media as a reasonable “scapegoat” for their rejection: Reported one P, “I . . . choose not to respond to her email, [and] if she were to bring it up in class, I would say I must have accidentally deleted it”. Other users reported that “realistically, I would not respond” or “I would not respond at all.” The choice to remain unresponsive or communicatively unavailable is easy to do in mediated communication, but obviously less so in FtF. These responses that are unique to mediated communication raise questions for future research asking what other novel rejection strategies might appear in CMC that are not found in FtF rejection. Not only does technology provide a mechanism or scapegoat for rejection, the selective editing and asynchronous nature of online communication makes it plausible that rejectors may devise other tactics less clever or less plausible than they might FtF, where communication is faster and more spontaneous.

In other situations, where users of online dating systems were faced with messages from unknown sources, Match.com users would rather respond using the automated reply option than creating a tailored message with original content (H4). Importantly, online daters may view the “Say no, Thanks” rejection as a legitimate communicative response that can fulfill communicative goals, and are more likely to use it rather than a tailored refusal or unresponsive silence. In this case, the Match.com messaging system and others like it have given online daters a new option with which to deliver romantic rejection, one that, through its availability and impersonal connotation, seems to be very appealing for users as a way to reduce the cognitive effort and stress of goal fulfillment.

The results of this study suggest that new media provide new options for daters to reject others, mainly (a) one-click automated rejection or (b) remain unresponsive. This study shows that online daters are not only aware of these new communicative choices, but are choosing to use them to simplify and streamline what can often be a difficult, painful, and stressful process of romantic refusal. The option of automated rejection makes delivery much easier for the sender by reducing cognitive effort while still fulfilling the main functional goal of romantic refusal, thereby making it a welcome alternative to composing a rejection with original content. Thus automated rejection is an opportunity that many online daters take full advantage of. Indeed, it may be that part of the appeal of online dating websites is the ease with which rejection can be delivered.

Data from the present study indicated only one effect of gender: Men were more likely to respond to date requests than women. This pattern might be explained in light of the frequency with which men and women experience rejection. Men tend to be the initiators of romantic overtures, and as a result, also experience rejection more often than

women (Folkes, 1982) while women are more often the rejector (Baumeister et al., 1993). Thus when the roles are reversed and women initiate contact, men may be more sympathetic to the disappointment and face threat associated with rejection. Similarly, since women receive date requests more frequently, they may feel less compelled to respond to each and every request.

Limitations

The use of a college-aged sample is a potential limitation in this research. Although participants had to be familiar with online dating websites, the current sample does not reflect the main demographic of the users of online dating. Thus this research is only a first step at uncovering the communication dynamics surrounding romantic rejection. Future research should look to see if the application of politeness is a trend found with more avid and frequent users. An additional concern may be the use of one-tailed significance tests (see Levine & Banas, 2002), although the directional hypotheses throughout, and Bonferroni corrections on some analyses, may mitigate concerns over liberal statistical significance criteria.

In conclusion, this research has uncovered some of the norms surrounding the use of media in romantic rejection processes. This study contributes the findings that degrees of acquaintanceship and type of media both have a substantial impact on the linguistic composition of a romantic date rejection message. This study has shown that automated rejection is a widely used (and arguably new) practice among online daters. As this is a new way to refuse romantic attentions, the effects of this type of refusal on the rejectee are unknown. Researchers should examine whether receiving this type of rejection heightens or dulls the pain of rejection from a recipient's perspective. Clearly, the use of CMC for romantic relationships is on the rise and as it continues, researchers must uncover how media change the way information is collected, conveyed, and understood in the rejection process.

Notes

1. A focus group of six college-aged raters read the scenarios and suggested feedback regarding the realism of the personality characteristics mentioned in each scenario. Their feedback was incorporated into the stimuli and each message. After revisions were made to the stimuli, a separate pretest ($n = 22$) was conducted to determine the realistic nature of each of the eight stimuli. This group indicated their response to three items designed to measure the realism of each scenario using 1–7 Likert-type scales: “Someone could send me a message like this”; “I feel that I could have received a message like this from another person”; “I feel this message correspondence could have taken place in my own life,” ($\alpha = 0.72$). Scenarios were retained which scored above the midpoint of these combined scales.
2. As the dependent variable, politeness strategies, was analyzed in the tests of H1, H2, and H5, a Bonferroni adjusted α of .017 was invoked in order to protect against inflated potential for type 1 error. For the tests of H1 and H5, observed p values are lower than this value; H2 was not significant even at an unadjusted $p < 0.05$.

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