

# Free research paper on sexual harassment or flirting: an egyptian dilemma

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



## **Abstract**

This paper considers the problems, such as how sexual harassment and flirting become interchangeable in a social context and lead to suppression of sexual harassment, when there are no significant definitions that delineate them. It also shows the need to have such a definition in a culture that has not been able to give women an equality status in the society. By observations and collating anecdotal data, a survey of the factors that could potentially be regarded as crossing over the line of flirtations and treading on sexual harassment are listed. Offline and Online encounters are considered for this purpose. The paper finds that favorability and flirting and sexual harassment and unfavorability correlate positively. This study can help in showing how sexual harassment in public spheres can be reduced and even eliminated, while considering cross gender interests.

### 1. Literature Review

## **The Interchangeability of Sexual Harassment and Flirting in a Social Context**

Conventionally, in the Egyptian society, flirting and sexual harassment have been viewed as “ interchangeable.” Based on factors like interpretation (Henningesen, 2004), motivation (Henningesen, Braz, and Davies, 2008) or perception (Fitzgerald and Ormerod, 2006), flirting and sexual harassment can reciprocate similar responses in public (Abaza, 2001), private (Ilahi, 2009) and online (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004) spaces. The question of flirting / sexual harassment is further complicated by a broad array of differentials spanning from campus (Rowland, Crisler, and Cox, 2010), workplace (Gelfand,

Fitzgerald, and Drasgow, 1995) and street space (Ilahi) settings to online interactions (Whitty, 2003; Ben-Ze'ev; Ranganath, Jurafsky, and McFarland, 2009). Since it is in human nature to have cross gender interactions, it is necessary to define the nature of these interactions, such that either of the interacting individuals or parties is not affected by such exchanges. In the today's globalized world, where borders have given away to technological advancements, the Middle Eastern ideas of sexuality and sexual interactions are being imposed by Western ideas. The populace, especially the youth, should be able to interaction across genders without facing traumatic consequences. Thus, defining flirting and sexual harassment and the point where flirting becomes sexual harassment in the cultural context and social context of Egypt is important.

### **Flirtation / Sexual Harassment and its Reporting**

Although cross-cultural studies confirm generalizability of flirtation / sexual harassment across settings and cultures (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow), scarce research has been conducted in countries reporting flirting / sexual harassment practices such as Egypt (" Why is sexual harassment in Egypt so bad?" 2014). The case for flirting / sexual harassment is further complicated in Egypt's context given recent developments in Middle East in countries commonly referred to as Arab Spring countries (Herrera, 2012; " Does Online Flirting Predict Offline Revolution?" 2011). Combined factors of political and social upheavals, growing youth population, online activism and changing value sets contribute to added layers of ambiguity in flirting / sexual harassment duality. The 2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

states that often the problem with sexual harassment is that it goes unreported because of the stigma associated with sexual harassment. Indeed the report is probably correct, but while investigating the problems with sexual harassment, it does not dig deep to understand the mind of the harasser—was the harasser thinking he was being flirtatious and became aggressive because he lost face? It must be remembered that this paper does not discuss sexual violence or rape, but focuses on sexual harassment and the line that separates sexual harassment from flirting and how to define this line.

### **Problem of Sexual Harassment Aggravated by the Lack of Clear Definitions**

It remains a fact that sexual harassment is a problem in Egypt. In a shocking revelation after the Arab Spring, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality found that 99.3 percent of women in Egypt have faced some sort of sexual harassment or violence (Burleigh, 2012). Clearly, this report talks about a unique situation, and historically revolutions and political and social unrests have always instigated criminal tendencies—sexual harassment being one such tendency. However, even outside the Arab Spring, sexual harassment is in the most unexpected situations—by a friend, family member or acquaintance—with what seems as simple jocularity or flirting. The problem here is that when there is no clear definition between sexual harassment and flirting, the problem of sexual harassment intensifies, since flirting can potentially become an excuse for sexual harassment. A nation's progress depends strongly on its ability to provide a secure environment for its citizens, and this fact portends a dark future for the nation. Similarly, it is a

well-known fact that the sexual harassment of women is directly associated with the gender discrimination levels in a nation. When most men in the society perceive women as inferior beings, meant for to satisfy their needs— not necessarily sexual— and not survive for their own interests, the incidences of sexual harassment naturally tends to increase. These facts point out the urgency of addressing the problem of separating the sexual harassment from flirting in a organized and official manner.

Undoubtedly, cultural norms play a significant role in creating and maintaining cultural inequality and thus, gender inequality in the society. For instance, in certain societies, female education is not emphasized as much as male education. This is a cultural norm that creates gender and cultural inequality. Consequently, gender inequality can often stem from endogenous cultural norms in the society. It is a notable fact that gender polarization in a culture impacts individual well being. For instance, the confusion created by the process of gender polarization can result in confusion and those unable to understand or even confirm to this polarization have to suffer the ignominy and perhaps become social outcasts. In some cultures, cultural norms have a better tolerance for a higher level of domestic violence as compared to others. In such cultures, women were often regarded as a “ minority” as opposed to being equal to the men. In addition, gender polarization creates social expectations that defy biological and psychological urges that result in such confusions. Consequently, a group of people that cannot confirm to a set gender identity—homosexuals and transgender people—become social pariahs and face intense frustration The

significance of delineating the difference between sexual harassment and flirtation in such cultures is especially relevant.

## **The Resources that Point the Differences between Flirting and Sexual Harassment**

Against such a background of ambiguity in flirting / sexual harassment duality, emerging, recurring findings are pointing to a clearer split between both concepts. There seems, for example, an emerging distinction between flirting and sexual harassment in literature based on discriminatory legal, psychological and social burdens incurred by harassed women (Fitzgerald, Swan, and Fischer, 2010; Franke, 1997; Fitzgerald, 1993) vis-à-vis an apparent favorability detected in flirting (verbal and non-verbal) acts (Weber, Goodboy, and Cayanus, 2010; Ben-Ze'ev; Taher, 2011).

These findings only confirm flirting and sexual harassment are model-dependent constructs (Frisby, 2009; Ranganath, Jurafsky, and McFarland; Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley, 1997; Fitzgerald and Ormerod; Powell, 1986). Consequently, possible refinements in conceptualization of flirting / sexual harassment could be made in Egypt's context based on a (non)favorability criterion. That is, finer distinctions between flirting and sexual harassment could be highlighted in Egypt's context based on (non)acceptability by women of flirting vis-à-vis sexual harassment expressions. Further, given recent political, social and cultural changes in Egypt, sexual harassment has emerged as a defining, unacceptable construct of masculinity acts against women in public spaces by a security state (Amar, 2011), an isolating factor of public femininity (Koning, 2009; Ilahi) and an enactment of class barriers (Abaza). Flirting, in contrast, has emerged as a defining construct against

same political, social and cultural background but only in private online (Galal, 2003) and using new media (Herrera). Consequently, (un)acceptability by women of flirting and sexual harassment acts in public and private spaces could inform finer distinctions between both concepts in Egypt's context. This paper, hence, explores expressions of flirting and sexual harassment in an attempt to disengage both concepts in Egypt's context based on (un)acceptability by women.

## 2. Method

A combined method of watching people and collecting anecdotal data is adopted in conducting a survey of (non)acceptability of flirting and sexual harassment verbal acts. First, a broad, random sample of words and/or expressions are collected based on non-participant observations as well as anecdotal data representing Egypt's existing culture and subcultures. Then, words and/or expressions are categorized into different sets each representing (non)acceptable verbal acts for four segments in Egyptian society: (1) gated community residents; (2) white-collar workers (e. g. engineers, doctors, academicians, etc); (3) vocational workers; (4) unplanned community residents. (Un)acceptability is graded on a 1-5 scale (1 = completely acceptable; 5 = completely unacceptable).

The adopted method incorporates major strengths as well as limitations. The adopted method collects, for example, a broad array of data clusters hardly accessible to a non-native participant. The linguistic nuances implied in collected word and/or expression sets require prolonged acculturation processes often inaccessible in different contexts simultaneously. One major limitation of adopted method, however, is lack of official statistical data, let

alone research efforts, corroborating anecdotal observations.

Notably, personal exposure and openness to differential (un)acceptability degrees of flirting and sexual harassment acts over prolonged periods and in diverse communities has informed choice of selected words and/or expressions. Further, public / private space has been considered for in order to adjust for (un)acceptability in different contexts given Egypt's highly implicit culture. A complete list of collected words and expressions is included in Appendix.

### 3. Discussion

This study finds that (un)acceptability of words and/or expressions for flirting and/or sexual harassment in Egypt are functions of favorability for flirting and non-favorability for sexual harassment. Favorability of words and/or expressions used confirms acceptability and hence flirting. Non-favorability of words and/or expressions used confirms unacceptability and hence sexual harassment. The applied (un)acceptability standard confirms research basic assumption of an evolving distinction between flirting and sexual harassment in Egypt's context. This is corroborated across social segments, delivery media and news media coverage.

Along a social continuum spanning four segments - namely, (1) gated community residents; (2) white-collar workers (e. g. engineers, doctors, academicians, etc); (3) vocational workers; and (4) unplanned community residents - patterned frequencies of (un)acceptability confirm initial assumption of distinctions between flirting and sexual harassment in Egypt's context. The application of specific words and/or expressions across different social segments show indirect words and/or expressions being highly



acceptable (1-2) and direct words and/or expressions being highly unacceptable (4-5).

The (in)directness, moreover, further emphasizes whether used word and/or expression is a flirting or a sexual harassment act. This finding registers a high pattern of frequency as to whether a word and/or expression is an act of flirting or sexual harassment in case of higher social segments, specifically gated community residents (1) and white-collar workers segments (2). However, lower social segments, specifically vocational workers (3) and unplanned community residents (4) ones, do not show specific patterned frequencies as to whether a verbal act is a flirting or a sexual harassment one.

In addition to (in)directness, an act of flirting or sexual harassment is a function of context as well. Notably, one act of flirting is considered an act of sexual harassment based on situational contexts in lower social segments, ushering in a definition ambiguity of flirting and sexual harassment, particularly as verbal acts are combined with non-verbal ones. Higher social classes, however, do not show similar ambiguities.

Delivery medium also confirms anecdotal observations on (un)acceptability of words and/or expressions used in flirting and sexual harassment contexts. The Egyptian resort to online opposite sex encounters is, notably, justified by relying on a comfort-zone platform in which both sexes can express intimate disclosures freely, bypassing typical cultural norms and restrictions. Initial online encounters show patterned frequencies of flirting vis-à-vis sexual harassment from both men and women. Prolonged communication, however, show increasing patterns of sexual harassment, particularly from men. VoIPs,

further, consolidate findings of flirting patterns on initial encounters. Using imagery and video protocols, for example, confirm findings on sexual harassment words and/or expressions being used in patterned frequencies for extended online relationships. Conforming to offline cultural norms of courtesy to opposite sex, Egyptian men move from a flirting, milder, indirect style of communication into a sexual harassment, coarser, direct style. The finding is not adequately examined across different social segments.

Offline encounters show similar patterns, notwithstanding a combination of non-verbal cues, particularly in public spaces (Koning). Observations and collected online data show centrality of space for (un)acceptability of words and/or expressions. Differential patterns of flirting and/or sexual harassment are registered based on public space's nature. This is corroborated by research in malls (Abaza), coffee shops (Koning) and streets (Ilahi). A recurring pattern, in which words and/or expressions move from a flirting style into a sexual harassment one by moving from private into more public spaces, is also registered.

As well, news media coverage shows patterned frequencies of (un)acceptability of words and/or expressions used in flirting and sexual harassment contexts. Observations and collected online data show Egypt's news coverage of flirting and/or sexual harassment acts are decided based on an event's gravity (" Why is sexual harassment in Egypt so bad?") or as a social control by a police state (Amar). This is corroborated by emerging initiatives calling for an end of sexual harassment vis-à-vis flirting (" Stop Sexual Harassment in Egypt," n. d.) in legal terms almost exclusively.

Flirting, research finds out, is rarely discussed in news media as a

(un)acceptable act, let alone widely covered in news media as news, but mainly as a socializing act sought for in favorable terms (Taher). Sexual harassment, however, is viewed in less favorable terms and is discussed more in legal and gender-politics terms. Notably, sexual harassment per se is used more frequently in Egypt's public discourse in general and news media in particular.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study finds a correlation between favorability and unfavorability of a verbal act and flirting and sexual harassment respectively. Though not particularly straightforward, favorability and flirting and sexual harassment and unfavorability correlate positively. Flirting and sexual harassment acts are functions of favorability and unfavorability of words and/or expressions used, respectively. This study shows a possible distinction between flirting and sexual harassment could be made in Egypt's context based on (un)acceptability of words and/or expressions used. Identifying favorability and unfavorability on additional clusters for flirting and sexual harassment acts could further validate findings for social segments, delivery media and news media coverage and hence confirm initial findings on (un)acceptability of flirting and/or sexual acts. Suggested additional clusters could include non-verbal cues (in cross-cultural encounters) and linguistics register (in situational analysis). Differential correlations between different clusters could be established as well. This should enhance findings across multiple clusters.

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## Appendix

This appendix includes a full list of words and/or expressions used in study. Listed in Table A, used words and/or expressions are clustered into three main clusters: (1) social segments; (2) delivery medium; and (3) news media coverage as well as four sub-clusters, falling under social segments: (1) gated community residents (GCRs); (2) white-collar workers (WCWs); (3) vocational workers (VWs); and (4) unplanned community residents (UCRs). (Un)acceptability of a word and/or expression is graded based on a 1-5 scale (1 = completely acceptable; 2 = widely acceptable; 3 = context acceptability; 4 = widely unacceptable; and 5 = completely unacceptable).

## Table A