

Nonverbal Immediacy and Attachment Styles in Dating: A Comparison Between US American and Chinese College Students

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This study is a preliminary investigation to examine whether US American and Chinese college students exhibit different nonverbal immediate behaviors and attachment styles in a dating relationship. Among 92 qualified participants who completed online questionnaires, there were 51 US American students (34 females and 17 males) and 41 Chinese students (20 females and 21 males). The results show that, among Chinese students, the patterns of the relationships between attachment styles and nonverbal immediacy are similar to those of US Americans; between US American and Chinese students, there is a significant difference on the level of nonverbal immediacy, and there is no significant difference of attachment styles.

Issues regarding immediacy and attachment styles are central to romantic relationships (Bachman & Bippus, 2005; Guerrero, 1996; Guerrero, Farinelli, & McEwan, 2009; Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2008; Tucker & Anders, 1998). Immediacy is a means for psychological and physical closeness, which can be displayed both verbally and nonverbally. Immediacy is also considered as a tool for communicators to stimulate and influence the responses of others (Andersen, 2012; Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003; Santilli & Miller, 2011). When it comes to dating, the immediacy found between both parties can affect the quality, duration, and satisfaction and success of relationships. Specifically, nonverbal immediacy or nonverbal immediate behaviors are linked to the intimacy of the parties involved in a dating relationship (Andersen, Guerrero, & Jones, 2006). These behaviors in general reflect “both positive affect and involvement” (p. 261) and help explain unique characteristics of interactions in such a relationship. An attachment style is an interpersonal communication style that is related to the kind and quality of relationships people prefer to share with others (Bartholomew, 1990; Guerrero, 1996; Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996). Individuals with different attachment styles may vary in the extent to which they exhibit intimacy and nonverbal involvement to their relational partners. Thus, research of nonverbal immediacy and attachment styles should provide helpful information to understand individuals’ behavioral tendencies during a dating relationship.

Many studies suggest that there are cultural differences in relation to nonverbal immediacy (e.g., Anderson, 2012; Park, Lee, Yun, & Kim, 2009; Roach & Byrne, 2001; Roach, Cornett-DeVito, & Devito, 2005; Zhang, Oetzel, Gao, Wilcox, & Takai, 2007). These studies further concluded that the perception of immediacy was determined by cultural and contextual factors. In a situation where individuals have been involved in a dating relationship, nonverbal immediacy can be influenced by the culture of these individuals and the romantic nature of the relationship between these individuals. In other words, in a dating relationship, patterns of nonverbal immediacy observed in one culture may or may not hold in another culture. This could be true for the attachment styles of individuals in a dating relationship. The present study is a preliminary investigation to examine whether US American and Chinese college students exhibit different nonverbal immediate behaviors and attachment styles in a dating relationship.

Literature Review

Nonverbal immediacy in interpersonal relationships

One of the most important areas in nonverbal communication which has attracted a large portion of research is the topic of immediacy (for a brief summary, see Giles & Le Poire, 2006). Nonverbal immediacy or nonverbally immediate behaviors involve such physical behaviors as smiling, eye

contact, proximities, body orientation, gesturing, vocal inflections, and physical contact while communicating with others (Andersen, 2012; Richmond, et al., 2003; Santilli & Miller, 2011). Andersen and Andersen (1982) described nonverbal immediacy as behaviors that are non-spoken, show signals for communication, have multichannel attributes, and typically show signs of interpersonal closeness and warmth of communication.

Myers and Ferry (2001) contended that nonverbal immediacy plays a significant role in people's daily interpersonal communication and may be a predictor of a person's motive to communicate. The use of nonverbal immediate behaviors can be observed in many relational contexts. In terms of romantic relationships, a study by Guerrero (1997) indicated that many nonverbal immediacy hints (e.g., gazing, smiling) were more frequent and intense in romantic relationships than in friendships. Many studies found that people within the intimate relationships had the most frequent use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors. For example, Duck (1991) explained that romantic partners gaze at each other at least eight times the length of strangers during the silent moments. As Sidelinger, Frisby and McMullen (2012) concluded, "Given its intensity and prevalence in romantic relationships, nonverbal immediacy is an important communicative, rewarding resource for individuals" (p.75). Richmond and her colleagues (2003) developed the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (NIS) for measurement of nonverbal immediate behaviors.

Attachment styles

Attachment styles have been defined as "relatively coherent and stable patterns of emotion and behavior that are exhibited in close relationship" (Shaver, et al., 1996, p. 25). A person's attachment style, demonstrated by the communication during the social interaction, relates to the way he or she experiences, interprets, and responds to the behavior of other people (Bartholomew, 1990). A primary concept underlying attachment styles is intimacy/distance. More specifically, people with positive models of others engage in communication styles that demonstrate intimacy and attachment, whereas individuals who have negative models of others demonstrate communication styles that reflect avoidance and detachment. Feeney (1999) contended that attachment style is associated with issues of intimacy and distance in a romantic relationship because proximity-seeking is a critical element of the attachment system. In addition, intimacy (approach vs. avoidance) and self-sufficiency (low vs. high needs for *approval from* the partner) are the two dimensions based on which attachment style is built.

Bartholomew (1990) proposed a four- category model of attachment styles in adult romantic relationships (See Figure 1). "Secures" have positive views of self and others. They tend to be self-confident, comfortable with closeness, and trust others. "Preoccupieds" have negative views of self but positive views of others. They tend to lack confidence, be overly dependent, and require continuous external validation. "Dismissings" have positive views of self but negative views of others. They tend to be self-sufficient and confident, avoid intimate relationships, perceive relationships as relatively nonessential and unrewarding, and be excessively independent. "Fearfuls" have negative views of self and others. They tend to have low self-esteem, fear intimacy and commitment, and have low trust in others, since they fear being rejected or abandoned. Considerable research regarding attachment styles in romantic relationships has been conducted (e.g., Bachman & Bippus, 2005; Fuller & Fincham, 1995; Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero, Farinelli, & McEwan, 2009). For example, Bachman and Bippus (2005) found that individuals who are secures and comfortable with intimate relationship will have positive perceptions of supportive messages provided by their romantic partners and friends. On the other hand, people who are preoccupied and uncomfortable with intimate relationship will have negative evaluations of supportive messages provided by lovers and friends.

Specifically, regarding the relationship between attachment styles and nonverbal immediacy, Guerrero (1996) found that secures and preoccupied rated higher than dismissives and fearful avoidants on measures of gaze, facial pleasantness, vocal pleasantness, trust/receptivity, general interest, and attentiveness. Fearful avoidants sat furthest away from their partners and displayed least fluency and longest response latencies. Preoccupieds engaged in more in-depth dialogue than dismissives. Finally, preoccupieds and fearful avoidants were the most vocally anxious. Tucker and Anders (1998) also indicated that, among dating couples, individuals who scored higher on the secure

attachment scale would be engaged in more nonverbal intimacy, and individuals who scored higher on the avoidant attachment scale were engaged in less nonverbal closeness.

Cultural differences and interpersonal relationships

The US American and Chinese cultures are different regarding their value orientations and communication (e.g., Gao & Gudykunst, 1995; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In fact, the United States is usually identified as the most individualistic nation, and China is commonly considered as one of the most collectivistic societies (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 1991). Dion and Dion (1993) argued that people in individualistic cultures were more likely to perceive romantic love as a significant basis for marriage and to consider psychological intimacy as more important for marital satisfaction and personal well-being than people in collectivistic cultures. Moreover, independence and autonomy prevail in individualistic cultures, while dependence prevails in collectivistic cultures (Dion & Dion, 1988). In addition, in collectivistic cultures, social support networks for individuals were broad, including both their intimate relationships and their ingroups. In comparison with collectivistic cultures, social support networks for individuals in individualistic cultures just consisted of intimate relationships; thus, intimacy between relationship partners tended to be more salient (Dion & Dion, 1988).

Based on the research that has been reviewed, it is evident that, while studies about nonverbal immediacy and attachment styles in romantic relationships among American dating couples were well documented (e.g., Feeney, 1999; Guerrero, 1996; Tucker & Anders, 1998), research with the same focus to help understand Chinese dating couples is scarce. Furthermore, based on our search of existing literature, there have been no direct comparisons between US American individuals and Chinese individuals regarding their level of nonverbal immediacy and attachment styles in a dating relationship. Thus, based on those findings, the following research questions were stated:

RQ1: What is the relationship between nonverbal immediacy and attachment styles in a dating relationship among Chinese college students?

RQ2: Is there a difference between US American and Chinese college students regarding their nonverbal immediacy behaviors in a dating relationship?

RQ3: Is there a difference between US American and Chinese college students regarding their attachment styles in a dating relationship?

Method

Participants

All US American participants were recruited from one Midwestern university, and all Chinese participants were recruited from another Midwestern university. All of them participated voluntarily in this study. A total of 166 online questionnaires were returned. Since the focus of this study was on US American and Chinese college students in a dating relationship, any participant who was married during the time of survey, whose current or the most recent dating relationship was shorter than two months, and who was not either US American or Chinese (as their responses to the question on their nationality indicated) was excluded from the study. In the end, a total of 92 participants were qualified for this study and their questionnaires were used for the further data analysis. Among these 92 participants, there were 51 American students (34 females and 17 males) and 41 Chinese students (20 females and 21 males). The ages of American students ranged from 18 to 32 ($M = 21.74$, $SD = 3.32$), and the ages of Chinese students ranged from 19 to 31 ($M = 24.35$, $SD = 2.75$).

Instrumentation

The Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (Richmond, et al., 2003) was modified to assess the level of nonverbal immediacy in a dating relationship; this scale includes 26 items (13 positively worded, 13 negatively worded). For example, one of the positive items states, "I use my hands and arms to gesture while talking to my boy/girlfriend or spouse." One of the negative items states, "I avoid gesturing while talking to my boy/girlfriend or spouse." Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "5" (*very often*) to "1" (*never*). Reliability assessment of this scale in the present

study suggested a high level of measure consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .89, $M = 105.42$, $SD = 11.23$).

Attachment Styles were assessed by using Guerrero's (1996) Attachment Style Measure. All items were rated using 5-point Likert-type scales, with "1" representing strong disagreement and "5" representing strong agreement. Specifically, "Lack of confidence" (which, conceptually, is equivalent to "Secure," but measured in a negative way) was assessed with five items (e.g., "I worry that my boy/girlfriend or spouse will reject me."). "Preoccupation with relationships" (conceptually equivalent to "Preoccupied") was measured with eight items (e.g., "I worry that my boy/girlfriend or spouse does not care about me as much as I care about him/her."). "Fearful avoidance" (conceptually equivalent to "Fearful") was measured with five items (e.g., "I would like to have closer relationships, but getting close makes me uneasy."). Finally, "Relationships as secondary" (conceptually equivalent to "Dismissing") were measured with five items (e.g., "Relationships are the most central priority in my life."). Reliability assessment of three of these four scales in the present study suggested a range from a "respectable" to an "excellent" level of measure consistency (Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2008, p. 195), "Lack of confidence" (Cronbach's alpha = .89, $M = 11.20$, $SD = 4.33$), "Fearful avoidance" (Cronbach's alpha = .91, $M = 11.85$, $SD = 5.41$), and "Relationships as secondary" (Cronbach's alpha = .72, $M = 15.62$, $SD = 3.67$), respectively. Reliability assessment for the scale of "Preoccupation with relationships" revealed an "undesirable" level of measure consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .63, $M = 23.18$, $SD = 4.77$).

Results

The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the nature of the relationship between nonverbal immediacy and the four attachment styles of Chinese students (RQ1). As Table 1 shows, significant relationships existed between their nonverbal immediacy and "Lack of confidence" ($r = -.55$, $p < .01$), and "Fearful avoidance" ($r = -.55$, $p < .01$), respectively. That is, Chinese college students who were less self-confident showed less nonverbal immediacy to their partners, and those who were more fearful avoidant also showed less nonverbal immediacy to their partners. There was no significant relationship between their nonverbal immediacy and "preoccupation" nor between their nonverbal immediacy and "relationship as secondary."

The second research question asked whether there is a difference between US American and Chinese college students regarding their nonverbal immediacy in a dating relationship. An independent samples t-test was conducted to test this hypothesis. The Levene's test for equality of variances was significant ($F = 5.69$, $p < .05$), so equality of variances cannot be assumed, $t(69.14) = 4.23$, $p < .001$, effect size = .88. This analysis revealed a significant difference between US American and Chinese college students regarding their nonverbal immediacy in a dating relationship. Specifically, US American college students showed more nonverbal immediacy than Chinese college students to their partners. The sample means are displayed in Table 2.

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to answer the third research question. As shown in Table 3, this analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between Chinese and US American college students regarding their attachment styles in a dating relationship, Wilks' lambda = .91, $F(4, 87) = 2.14$; $p < .08$. The observed powers for tests on "lack of confidence," "preoccupation," "fearful of avoidance," and "relationship as secondary" are .65, .06, .10, and .05, respectively. The small values of the observed powers for those tests suggest that the sample size of the current study is too small for conducting a one-way MANOVA to statistically detect any possible significant differences.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between nonverbal immediacy and attachment styles of Chinese college students as well as the differences between US American and Chinese college students. The findings regarding the relationships between nonverbal immediacy and attachment styles among Chinese college students showed certain similarities to those of the studies involving American dating couples (e.g., Guerrero, 1996; Tucker & Anders, 1998). Specifically, avoidant individuals, who tend to possess the style of fearful avoidance ("fearfuls"), and individuals who show "lack of confidence" engaged in less nonverbal immediate behaviors in dating relationships.

In other words, these individuals tended to feel less comfortable with physical closeness and to experience less enjoyment during an interaction with their dating partners. Nonverbal immediate behaviors or lack of these behaviors have been linked to the level of pleasantness and affection among US Americans in a relationship (Guerrero, 1996). These could be true to Chinese people as well. Therefore, the findings related to the first research question provide an interesting support for the cross-cultural validity of the theoretical conceptualization of the attachment styles in interpersonal relationships.

In respect of the second research question, the results indicate that there were significant differences between US American and Chinese college students regarding their level of nonverbal immediacy. Specifically, American college students showed a higher level on the measure of nonverbal immediacy, and, thus, were considered more approached than Chinese college students in a dating relationship. This finding is consistent with other research suggesting China is, for example, a “distinctly nontactile” culture and the United States is a contact culture (Andersen, 2012, p. 308). Existent research also suggests that there are certain nonverbal behaviors appearing to be similar in all cultures, but their usages and meanings are often specifically identified with respective cultures (e.g., Hall & Chia, 1996). Those differences of usages and meanings have been attributed to the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Particularly, Gao (2001) argued that “... the presence of intimacy is a culture universal, but the way in which intimacy is expressed differs from culture to culture” (p. 340). Nonverbal immediate behaviors are certainly very important ways for people to express intimacy with their partners. The answer for the second research question provides a piece of evidence to support the findings in the previous studies in regard to these differences.

Regarding the third research question, there were no significant differences revealed between US American and Chinese college students regarding their attachment styles in a dating relationship. Given the findings of the first and the second research questions in this present study, it is unexpected to see the non-significant difference regarding the research question three. Based on the small magnitudes of the observed powers for those tests to answer this research question, one possible explanation for this outcome may be that the sample size of the current study is too small for conducting a one-way MANOVA to statistically detect any possible significant differences.

Based on the aforementioned assessment, the relatively small number of participants was a limitation presented in this study. A larger number of participants would help increase the ability to detect any potential differences of attachment styles between US American and Chinese college students. There was another limitation in this study. From a developmental perspective, romantic relationships such as dating may change because these relationships depend on relationship stages on which relational partners are sharing. Therefore, we suspected, with data being collected at only one point in the relationships, the ability for this study to capture the whole dynamics of these relationships would be limited. Thus, future longitudinal studies can help provide an ongoing understanding of the dynamic of these relationships.

Overall, this study was a preliminary investigation to examine the differences between US American and Chinese college students regarding their nonverbal immediacy behaviors and attachment styles in a dating relationship. The conceptualization of attachment styles in relationship can serve as a theoretical basis for examining such romantic relationships as marriage and dating. Nonverbal immediacy has been linked to the development of those relationships. To develop and to continue a line of cross-cultural research focusing on the attachment styles and nonverbal immediacy in romantic relationships help contribute to a large body of knowledge in intercultural communication.

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Figure 1Bartholow's (1990) styles of attachment (*adapted from Bartholow, 1990, p163*).

		<u>MODEL OF SELF</u> (Dependence)	
		Positive (Low)	Negative (High)
<u>MODEL OF OTHER</u> (Avoidance)	Positive (Low)	SECURE Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy	PREOCCUPIED Preoccupied Ambivalent Overly dependent
	Negative (High)	DISMISSING Denial of Attachment Dismissing Counter- dependent	FEARFUL Fear of Attachment Avoidant Socially avoidant

Table 1

Summary of Intercorrelations for Scores on the Nonverbal Immediacy, Lack of Confidence, Preoccupation, Fearful Avoidance, and Relationships as Secondary among Chinese College Students

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Nonverbal immediacy		-.55**	-.30	-.55**	-.25
2. Lack of confidence			.29	.65**	.36*
3. Preoccupation				.30	-.31*
4. Fearful of avoidance					.49**
5. Relationship as secondary					

Note. **: $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 2
Mean Nonverbal Immediacy Scores of US American and Chinese Samples

Variable	US Americans (<i>n</i> = 51)		Chinese (<i>n</i> = 41)		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Nonverbal Immediacy	109.63	8.47	100.20	12.10	4.23***

Note. ***: $p < .001$.

Table 3
Main Effects Means in Relation to US American and Chinese Students

Dependent variable	US Americans	Chinese
Lack of confidence	10.23 (4.42)	12.45 (4.01)
Preoccupation	23.06 (5.32)	23.45 (3.76)
Fearful avoidance	11.52 (6.00)	12.29 (4.56)
Relationships as secondary	15.56 (3.30)	15.74 (4.20)

Note. Standard Deviations are in the parentheses.