Rejection in a Gay Chat Room

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Abstract

This paper examines how the practice of rejection is interactionally accomplished and understood in the context of a gay chat room used by men to search for sexual partners. Using analytical tools from conversation analysis and politeness theory, it explores the various strategies participants use to issue rejections, the points in the negotiations at which rejections typically occur, and the tactics participants use to avoid being rejected. Though a systematic account of the way in which rejections are constructed and interpreted by participants in this particular context, I explore larger issues of how chat systems can affect norms of politeness in communities that make use of them and propose a framework for understanding the factors affecting rejection in mediated communication.

1. Rejection 1.0

Interpersonal rejection in the context of a potential or ongoing romantic or sexual relationship is one of the most difficult of all social actions, regardless of whether one is the victim of rejection or the perpetrator of it. In many ways interpersonal rejection is the ultimate face-threatening act, because it involves more than just the failure to approve a proposition, comply with a request, or accept an invitation; it also implies withholding approval from the very person who has made the proposition or issued the request or invitation. It threatens the face of the rejected, whose positive self-image is challenged and who is put in the position of having to respond to the rejection in a way that preserves whatever dignity he or she has left. It also threatens the face of the rejecter, who is often put in the position of having to somehow account for his or her behavior or answer challenges to it.

While there has been little work on interpersonal rejection in the fields of pragmatics and conversation analysis, there has been considerable work on the structure of refusals of offers or requests and rejections of invitations [1], [2], [3], which has shown that in face to face conversation and over the telephone, refusals and rejections are treated as ‘dispreferred actions’ [4], [5] by speakers, and so are often issued indirectly and mitigated by prefaces, elaborations, accounts, hedges, hesitations, palliatives, and various face saving strategies. In one of the few conversation analytical studies on interpersonal rejection, Kitzinger and Frith’s study of sexual refusal in the context of date rape prevention [5], it is precisely these normative features of refusal that confound the ‘just say no’ advice of counselors; in most situations of refusal, accounts, hesitations, or apologies are sufficient to be heard as refusal, with the word ‘no’ usually deemed unnecessary.

Of course, the kinds of interactional expectations and obligations associated with interpersonal rejection depend very much on the context in which it takes place and the relationship between the parties. The rejection of a person one knows well will likely be accomplished much differently from the rejection of a stranger at a bar. In the latter situation, rejections might involve very little in the way of facework and may be issued either in a much more direct fashion (‘Get lost!’) or in much more indirect, sometimes subtle ways, for example through body language.

One domain in which interpersonal rejection of potential sexual partners occurs frequently is the internet, where, on dating and social networking sites, in chat rooms, and over instant messaging programs, people often find themselves the targets of unwanted (and wanted) sexual advances from others. It remains unexamined, however, how the technologies through which these rejections are issued affect how they are accomplished or understood by users.

This paper examines how rejection is interactionally accomplished in the context of a gay chat room used by men to search for sexual partners. It explores the various strategies participants use to issue rejections, the points in the negotiations at which rejections typically occur, and the tactics participants use to avoid being rejected. Though a systematic
account of the way in which talk is constructed and understood by participants in this particular context I will explore larger issues of how chat systems can affect norms of politeness in communities that make use of them.

2. Looking for Sex Online

Studies from the U.S., the U.K. and China have found that a large and growing number of gay men use the internet to find sexual partners [6], [7], [8], and this new medium has introduced radically new ways of engaging in this practice, involving assumptions, expectations and conversational norms that are very different from those involved in the search for partners in more traditional gay spaces like bars and saunas [9], [10].

The data for this investigation is a corpus of one hundred conversations collected as part of a six month long ethnographic study of a gay chat room in Hong Kong [11]. The project took a participatory approach; a team of twenty frequent users of the chat room were employed to keep diaries of their online experiences and interview other users. As part of their fieldwork, participant-researchers randomly saved samples of chats during their visits to the chat room and subsequently (usually shortly afterwards) attempted to contact these chatters to secure consent for using the saved chat in the study. Chats for which consent was granted were anonymized, users screen names replaced with pseudonyms and any potentially indentifying material removed. With the cooperation of the chat room’s webmaster, the study and its aims were widely publicized in the chat room and associated website; users were informed when participant-researchers would be on-line and directed to the project’s website with information about the project’s objectives and the measures taken to safeguard the privacy of chat room users (http://personal.cityu.edu.hk/~en-cyber/home.htm).

The chat room in question makes use of a java based chat interface which allows for quasi-synchronous [12], text-only chat. Users do not have to register to use the chat room, and may choose a different user name and profile whenever they log on. The interface contains a list of users currently present in the room and a public chat window, which registers an automated greeting whenever a new user enters and in which users occasionally participate in public conversations.

Most of the activity in this chat room, however, occurs in the context of private chats that take place in separate chat windows that open when one user clicks on the name of another user on the list.

There are a number of important characteristics of the interactions that take place in this chat room that are especially relevant to the study of interpersonal rejection. The first is that conversations in this context are primarily goal directed, with almost every conversational offer oriented towards the goals of either promoting one’s suitability and availability for sexual contact or assessing the suitability and availability of one’s interlocutor. Ten Have, in his investigation of similar chat environments for heterosexuals [13], describes the goal structure of such conversations as, “find an X who wants a Y as a partner, where X is the desired chat character and Y is the character you yourself want to play”. This makes the status of rejection in these conversations very different from casual chat on the internet in which refusals to comply with requests or rejections of invitations do not necessarily mean that the conversation must end. In the conversations in this chat room, rejection of a partner’s invitation for sexual contact (an invitation which is issued tacitly whenever a user enters the chat room and clicks on the name of another user) effectively negates the reason for the conversation to continue. In fact, in much of the data I will present here, rejection and termination of the conversation occur in the same move. Examining rejection in this setting, then, requires understanding the intimate relationship between the accomplishment of rejection and the accomplishment of conversational closing, which itself takes on special normative features in computer mediated environments [14].

The second important feature of these conversations is that they are competitive. The chat room in question typically contains more than one hundred users at any given time, and users typically maintain conversations with multiple potential partners at once to maximize their chances of success. This means that multiple users often compete with one another for the interactional attention of a single target. Not surprisingly, then, rejection is an extremely common occurrence. In my corpus of one hundred chats, eighty-four of them ended with rejection, with only sixteen resulting in the successful negotiation of continued interaction via phone, email, IM or face-to-face contact.

The final important characteristic of this particular chat environment is the anonymity it affords to users. Unlike most online dating and social networking sites, as well as many gay chat environments, which require users to register and maintain a stable online identity and profile, this chat room allows users to alter their identity whenever they log on. As a result, users are dramatically less accountable for their actions compared to both physical gay spaces and to many other online gay spaces. This unprecedented anonymity
gives to users, in the words of ten Have [13], “an unprecedented license for unaccountable action, ranging from bland banality to criminal threat, while passing through all imaginable sexual ‘perversities’. This lack of accountability, as I will argue below, has a profound effect on the ways rejections are accomplished and understood.

3. Accomplishing Rejection

The strategies participants use to perform rejection in this context differ dramatically from those normally used in face-to-face conversations. Rejections are most often performed abruptly without redress, with participants simply terminating the conversation. Other strategies include prolonged periods of non-response (‘silence’), apologies, and accounts.

Figure 1 shows the relative distribution of strategies over the 84 conversations ending with rejection in the corpus. As can be seen from the figure, more than half of the rejections involved no conversational work on the part of the rejecter at all, not even a terminal offering (like “good bye”).

Figure 1. Methods of rejection

Rejections which were accomplished textually contained one or a combination of the following elements: a terminal offering (like “bb”), an account (like “you’re not really my type”), some kind of negative redress, typically an apology (“sorry”), and some kind of positive redress (like “good luck!”). None of the conversations contained explicit rejections (like ‘No’ or ‘I don’t want to have sex with you”), with the implication of rejection accomplished though one or more of the elements listed above.

Figure 2 shows the relative number of these elements occurring in text-based rejections, indicating a preference for less mitigation rather than more. This is a mirror image of what might be expected in face-to-face rejections and refusals, which normally demand more mitigation (elaborations, explanations, etc.) rather than fewer.

3.1. ‘Silence’ and Logging off

As stated above, the most common way for users to accomplish rejection is by either not responding to one’s chat partner as in examples 1 and 2 respectively.

Example 1
<hornygamforgwm> wanna swap?
<hornygamforgwm> not ok?
<hornygamforgwm> i got my face pic
<hornygamforgwm> still here?
<hornygamforgwm> time waster
Bye! hornygamforgwm left private chat.

Example 2
<gwm muscle>  pic?
>http://www.face-pic.com/xxx
<gwm muscle>  www.gaydar.co.uk/xxx
>you look nice
Bye! gwm muscle left private chat.

One important point when considering such rejections is that there is no way to determine for sure whether they are intentional or the result of technical or environmental factors (such as computer failure or distraction). Because the sender in this environment has no access to the recipient’s actions until a reply is posted, he or she must guess the source of the problem, whether it is recipient based or system based.[15], [16].

The most important thing, however, is that non-response and terminations in this context are almost always interpreted as rejections by users. From the perspective of conversation analysis it is not intention that defines a conversational offering, but rather whether or not hearers notably align or orient to the
offering in a particular way. This is another way these conversations differ from casual chats, in which users typically interpret non-response and abrupt exits as system related problems, giving their interlocutors the benefit of the doubt. [17].

This difference is in part a result of the goal oriented nature of these interactions; the invitation for sexual contact that underlies these conversations causes participants to interpret conversational behavior that might in other contexts be interpreted differently as a rejection of the invitation [1]. There is also something about the inherent ambiguity of such rejections, however, that may make them more attractive to users, allowing rejecters to escape the conversational work of rejection without fear of reprisal and at the same time to accomplish rejection rather decisively, and allowing the rejected to cling to the remote possibility that the rejection might not have been intentional.

In the case of non-response, the implication of rejection rests on a set of rules about time that build up among users of online environments and which govern such things as the normative length of pauses between turns and the kinds of meanings associated with deviations from this norm. In a previous study on timing in the same chat room [18], I noted that pauses between turns in this environment tend to be quite short (usually 3-9 seconds long) and that interactions that contain lengthy gaps between turns are rarely successful. I also noted that different users had different standards when it came to acceptable pauses between turns, meaning that the point at which non-response is interpreted as rejection is highly individual. Furthermore, given the fact that users often engage with multiple partners, many such ‘silences’ are more a matter of the need for users to distribute their attention over a range of tasks rather than an intentional desire to “snub” the other party.

While ‘silence’ offers nothing in terms of resolution of the matter, the act of logging off at least provides closure in the form of an automated message: ‘Bye! (name of partner) has left private chat’. While in friendly, less goal directed chats, such automated messages are sometimes used to take the place of terminal exchanges, in such cases they are almost always preceded by an action that invites a suspension of the turn-taking and makes the subsequent closing meaningful [14]. In the context of chats in which no such prior conversational work is present, it is hard to treat these messages as terminal offerings, especially since they do not make possible the normal second half of a terminal exchange since the partner who issues the first half becomes immediately unavailable.

3.2. Accounts and Redress

Though not as common, participants sometimes issue their rejections through textual objects like terminal offerings or apologies. While such textually accomplished rejections are ultimately more direct and less ambiguous than non-response and logging off, they often serve to mitigate the threat to the victim’s face through an account or some form of positive or negative redress. Even a terminal offering like “bye bye” acts to mitigate the face threat since, against the background of frequent ‘silences’ or abrupt terminations, it at least acknowledge the rejected as a legitimate conversational participant.

The most frequently used form of mitigation in the corpus was the account, most of which explained the rejection in terms of incompatibility. (“not match”). Such accounts soften the assessment of unsuitability by avoiding placing the entire blame for it on the rejected.

Participants also softened rejections through negative redress, usually in the form of an apology, and positive redress, with phrases like “take care” and “good luck”.

Often these forms of mitigation were used in combination. Table 1 shows the different combinations of these mitigating elements and their frequency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combination</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-response only</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log off only</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal Offering + Log off</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account + Log off</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Redress + Log off</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Redress + Log off</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account + Terminal Offering + Log off</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account + Negative Redress + Log off</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account + Negative Redress + Terminal Offering + Log off</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account + Positive Redress + Log off</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account + Positive Redress + Terminal Offering + Log off</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account + Negative Redress + Positive Redress + Log off</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account + Negative Redress + Positive Redress + Terminal Offering + Log off</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More frequently found combinations combine accounts with negative or positive redress, sometimes adding a terminal offering, as in examples 3 and 4.
Some rejections make use of all of the elements, as in example 5. It should be remembered, of course, that an exact correlation between the number of elements and the ‘amount’ of mitigation cannot be assumed, since different elements perform different social actions; a ‘terminal offering’ for example is not equitant to an action of positive redress.

**Example 3**
<gifted>
sorry, not my type, bye
Bye! gifted left private chat.

**Example 4**
> http://www.face-pic.com/letschat_isogwm
<fitGWMhk> ok will check
> thanks
<fitGWMhk> cute, but not for me
<fitGWMhk> good luck!
Bye! fitGWMhk left private chat

**Example 5**
> ur type?
<hot Jap iso GWM> sorry, but not really my type.
> oic
> that's ok
<hot Jap iso GWM> nice chatting with u though.
> bb
<hot Jap iso GWM> sorry, bye
Bye! hot Jap iso GWM left private chat.

In addition to these mitigating strategies, participants sometimes offer objects prior to the rejection (such as hesitations or hedges), which hint that a rejection is imminent. Among the most common pre-rejection offerings is the phrase “oic” (“oh, I see”) coming after an offer of information from the other party. In example 6, the status of ‘oic’ as a pre-rejection offering is substantiated by the other party’s anticipating rejection with the question, “too old for you?”

**Example 6**
<youn g n smooth> how old?
> 48
<youn g n smooth> oic
> too old for you?
<youn g n smooth> afraid so
Bye! young and smooth left private chat

4. Avoiding Rejection

Because of the goal directed nature of the enterprise and the frequency and abruptness with which rejections are usually issued, much of the preceding interaction in these conversations is designed to avoid rejection.

Figure 3 shows the conversational moves which immediately preceded rejection in the corpus and their frequency.

![Figure 3. Moves directly preceding rejection](image)

None of the rejections in the corpus immediately followed an explicit invitation. In fact, in most of the conversations the act of invitation, rather than explicit, is implicit in the mutual willingness of both parties to engage in the conversation in the first place, and the conversation itself acts as an extended side sequence in which various conditions for the acceptance or rejection of the invitation are explored.

Most of the rejections in my corpus occur after the offer of some kind of information which disqualifies one or both parties, as in example 7. Rejections are also particularly common after the offer of pictures, as in example 4 above, and also occur when users make requests with which their partners do not wish to comply (like “call me”), ask questions they do not wish to answer (like “what’s your real name?”), and refuse to comply with requests, as in example 8.

**Example 7**
> u tp or btm?
<19yo student for fun> top
> oic
> but I’a top too :( 
<19yo student for fun> oh....
<19yo student for fun> bye
Bye! 19yo student for fun left private chat.
The moves most frequently resulting in rejection are offers of information, but some kinds of information are more dangerous than others. Figure 4 shows the types of information resulting in rejection and their frequencies, indicating that, apart from the offer of graphic information in the form of a picture, the types of information most frequently resulting in rejection involved the user’s appearance, his age, the sexual role he preferred (active or passive), and his preferences for a partner.

Figure 4. Offers preceding rejection

Throughout the preceding conversations, participants engage in a number of strategies to avoid rejection, especially in critical moments that involve the exchange of pictures or potentially discrediting information.

One of the most common of these strategies is for participants to avoid going first in the exchange of information or pictures. According to Sacks [19], ‘who goes first’ is an important issue in conversations involving giving personal information or opinions about arguable matters. He even goes so far as to say that ‘you can take it as a first policy for examining conversation that people prefer to go second” (pp. 346).

The strategies participants use to avoid ‘going first’ involve attempting to open up ‘slots’ in the conversation where the other party is compelled to offer a picture or particular piece of information before them. This is done sometimes by treating questions like “hve pic?”, as requests for information rather than requests for action, and responding with “yes”, thus fulfilling the obligation to respond while avoiding complying with the request. Another typical strategy is the use of insertion sequences (i.e. answering the question with a question. Each time a participant does this, he reverses the discourse positions, resisting being positioned as the ‘answerer’ and imputing that role onto his interlocutor. Examples 9 and 10 demonstrate both of these strategies.

Example 9
<Wild btm> may i have ur pic
>do you hv too?
<Wild btm> yes, for exchange
>link??
<Wild btm> link
>me 2
<Wild btm> ok
> ok

Example 10
<little chub> pic?
>yes
<little chub> swap?
>ok u?
<little chub> ok. email or link?
>link
<little chub> face?
>yup. u?
<little chub> yes.
>good.
<little chub> exchange?
>no lie?
<little chub> sure
>promise
<little chub> sure

Another strategy for avoiding rejection involves accommodating one’s disclosure to the perceived desires of the other or, when those desires are not evident, presenting category markers that are vague enough to fit multiple desires. As one participant said: ‘he might pretend to be top but he is btm but when I say I am btm, he says hes a top or vers.’ Ambiguous offers like ‘anything’, ‘the same’ or ‘vers’ (meaning “versatile”) which avoid the user having to commit to information his interlocutor might not find acceptable, are common, as in example 11.

Example 11
>look for?
<lonely student> anything if match
> same
<lonely student> top/btm?
> vers
<lonely student> same

Finally, by attending to “pre-rejection offerings” like those discussed above, users can avoid
rejection by preempting it with their own “self-rejection”. In example 12, “gam swimmer” successfully preempts rejection by suggesting it, positioning himself as the party with the right to terminate the conversation first.

**Example 12**
<gam swimmer> well, you don't seem to be available for fun today
>no sorry
<gam swimmer> no worry
<gam swimmer> another time
<gam swimmer> bye for now as I am really horny and need to look for the others
Bye! gam swimmer left private chat.

5. Rejection 2.0

Based on the analysis above, the way online interaction affects practices of rejection seems to depend upon three dynamically inter-related factors, namely, the degree of accountability the medium enforces, the sense of social presence it creates, and the ways it influences how users focus and distribute their attention.

Perhaps most central to the choice of rejection strategies by users of this chat room is the relative lack of accountability the interface enforces. The reduced cues of the medium and the “involvement screens” [20] it creates assure users of total anonymity, at least in the initial stages of the interaction, making participants less answerable for their conversational actions. The ability to log off whenever one wishes makes it almost impossible for victims of rejection to further pursue rejecters or challenge their actions.

Related to accountability is the low sense of social presence created in text based computer mediated interaction relative to televideo, telephone and face-to-face interactions. It is almost always easier to perform a face-threatening act, and to be on the receiving end of one, when one cannot see the face of one’s interlocutor. At the same time, it is this low sense of social presence and the emotional buffer it creates that also helps to create the sense of intimacy that characterize these interactions, encouraging as it does the uninhibited exchange of personal sexual information. Text based chat provides users the simultaneous experience of distance and intimacy [21], allowing users to convey personal information and desires without having to risk face-to-face rejection with its increased risk for spoiled identity [22].

Finally, the forms rejection takes are influenced by the amount of attentional resources users have available for a given interaction and the ways the medium allows them to focus those resources [23]. In the case of this particular environment in which users typically engage in multiple simultaneous conversations requiring rapid replies, more elaborate forms of rejection are simply not efficient. The ability to issue rejections with the minimum of conversational work frees up attentional resources for the pursuit of more suitable partners.

The frequency of rejections, the abruptness of them, and the relative lack of face saving redress in this chat room might be expected to create for users considerable discomfort and anxiety, if not the impression that other users simply have “no manners”. Actually, however, the opposite appears to be true. Most users interviewed in this study regarded the opportunities the medium affords for ‘easy rejection’ as an asset rather than a drawback to searching for partners online as opposed to in physical venues like bars and saunas where rejection usually requires more interactional work. “You don’t have to embarrass yourself and the other person by thinking of some excuse.” said one participant, “You can just leave.” “It’s like, sorry. Bye- bye. Just like deleting a file,” said another. “It’s easier to reject people when you can’t see their face, I guess. And they can’t see yours and don’t know who you are either,” said a third.

For recipients of rejection, online rejection, even with its relative lack of face saving redress, was generally considered easier to take than rejection in other contexts. In fact, sometimes the use of mitigating strategies in on-line rejection were seen as potentially even more face threatening, because they often demand continued participation by the victim, requiring subsequent contributions such as accepting apologies and completing terminal exchanges. Another value of computer-based rejections pointed out by participants was that they were easier to interpret compared to those in bars and saunas which sometimes require the decoding of subtle paralinguistic and non-verbal cues.

One of the most important lessons of this analysis, then, is not just that norms of interpersonal communication differ in different media, but also that the standards for politeness or cooperation that develop in one medium and social context cannot be indiscriminately applied to other media and contexts.

The conversations which occur in this chat room are not seen by users as bounded, isolated encounters, but instead as “first steps” in the formation of potential “multimedia relationships” [24] involving a staged chain of encounters moving from simple text based chat to the use of instant messaging programs or web.
cams, to telephone conversations, to face to face interaction, with a variety of opportunities along this chain for men to cease the interaction before committing themselves to actually engaging in sexual contact. Each stage of this paradigmatic chain of encounters allows users to review the assumptions and expectations, about their potential partners that they have developed at earlier stages.

Each stage also involves progressively ‘richer’ media which alter the degrees of accountability, presence and focus involved in the interaction. The further one progresses along this chain, exchanging information, trading pictures, chatting on MSN or ICQ, talking on the telephone and meeting face-to-face, the less anonymous one becomes and the more accountable one is for one’s actions. Similarly, as more modes are made available, the greater the sense of social presence participants experience and the more difficult it becomes to engage in face threatening acts. Finally, the further one progresses along these stages, the more focused the encounters become, with the intrusion of a competing potential partner becoming less and less likely. Consequently, the further one progresses towards sexual contact, the more difficult it becomes to reject it, and the more difficult it becomes to accept rejection.

The forms of rejection made possible in this particular chat room, then, play an important role in the social organization of sexual negotiation in this community. By making rejection easier at these initial stages of the interaction, the interface allows users to more efficiently ‘weed out’ unsuitable partners, thus avoiding more painful kinds of rejection that might come later.

References


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