

“Oh My God, You Look Gorgeous.” Polite but Inappropriate? A Gendered Exploration of Compliment Perceptions Among Young Irish Adults

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Abstract

Set against the backdrop of the #metoo movement which has positioned inter-gender communication as a “locus of struggle” (Watts, 2003, p. 21) with respect to what constitutes appropriate means of communication, the current study aims to shed light on how young Irish adult females and males aged 18-25 perceive gendered compliments in terms of politeness and appropriateness. A questionnaire was developed using 24 compliments from a corpus of compliments generated from Irish participants of the same age (Marnane, 2020). Of the compliments presented, half originated from females and other half from males and they were evenly distributed between appearance and performance compliments. The participants were blinded to the gender of the complimenters, and although the situations were provided, it was not explicitly stated which compliments were appearance based and which were performance based. Participants were subsequently asked to rate the compliments in terms of politeness and appropriateness. A total of 150 replies were received which included 60 self-identifying males and 90 self-identifying females. The study finds that not only do Irish males and females perceive compliments differently but that these differences relate to compliment type and the gender of the person receiving the compliment. It is hypothesised that the differences between Irish males and females’ compliment perceptions are due to gendered enactment of compliments as well as changing cultural norms.

Key words: gender, perceptions, pragmatics, compliments, Irish English

Introduction

While compliments represent one of the most widely studied speech acts, to date we know very little about how they are actually perceived by those receiving them, and even less about the intersectionality between gender, compliment type and perception. Compliments are conceived as being multifunctional, ranging from “positively affective speech acts” to “positive politeness strategies in the context of a face threatening act” (Holmes, 1986, pp. 499-500), to actual face threatening acts

(FTAs). The very act of complimenting has been shown to be an “awkward”, “risky” or even “dangerous” (Miles, 1994, p. 120) undertaking, whereby the complimenter runs the risk of insulting or even harassing the complimentee through engaging in a speech act that constitutes a high risk of mismatch between the intended message of the speaker and the perception of the hearer. This risk is even more accentuated when the interaction occurs between different genders. In light of the above, this study illuminates, using the metrics of politeness and appropriateness, the interplay between gender and compliment type. It focuses on a clearly defined demographic of young Irish adults and aims to shed light on this under-researched field of study within the context of Irish English.

Literature Review

Compliments

Bublitz and Norrick (2011) posit that pragmatics is broadly seen as the “scientific study of all aspects of linguistic behaviour [and is] fundamentally concerned with communicative action in any kind of context” (p. 4). Central to the concept of “communicative action” is the speech act. While compliments as speech acts have been widely researched within pragmatics, the definition of a compliment varies within the literature. Wolfson (1983) describes compliments as “social lubricants”, which enable us to “create or maintain rapport” (p. 86). Herbert (1986) defines them as “expressions of good will” (p. 76) and good relations with others while according to Brown and Levinson (1987), compliments can also be considered face threatening acts (FTAs) as they can be interpreted as insults, as ironic, or as expressions of envy. Indeed, compliments can serve as both a mechanism for

creating rapport and as a threat to face, depending on the intent of the speaker and the perception of the hearer.

Holmes (1986) posits that compliments have three primary functions. Firstly, compliments can act as “positively affective speech acts [which] serve to increase or consolidate solidarity between people” (p. 499). Secondly, they can act as “positive politeness strategies [where] the speaker provides positive redress for the FTA” (Holmes, 1986, p. 500). Finally, compliments can function solely as FTAs. Holmes (1986) suggests two reasons for this: first, compliment responses which “take the form of rejections or evasions of credit [may point] to the fact that the compliment was experienced as an FTA” (p. 501) and second, a compliment may be “experienced as face threatening in that it assumes greater solidarity or intimacy between the participants than the recipient feels comfortable with” (p. 501).

In addition to their inherent multifunctionality, compliments can be operationalised in different ways based on various influencing factors. Among other factors, Chen (2010) posits that the gender of the complimenter and the complimentee is a major factor in complimenting. Gender is influential in determining “what one will compliment [their] complimentee on, how that compliment is going to be delivered linguistically, and sometimes even whether to pay the compliment at all in the first place” (2010, pp. 93-94).

Compliments and Gender

In a seminal study investigating gender-based differences in compliments and compliment responses in a New Zealand context, Holmes (1988) tentatively suggests “that women tend to use and perceive compliments as solidarity signals, while men are more likely to experience them as FTAs” (p. 462). As evidence of this, the author

proposes five key assumptions about male and female compliment giving that are of relevance here: that “women compliment each other more often than they compliment men or than men compliment each other”; “women strengthen the positive force of the compliment more often than men”; “men attenuate or hedge the force of the compliment more often than women”; “women compliment each other on appearance more often than on any other topic”; and finally, “women of higher status are more likely to receive compliments than higher status men” (pp. 462-463).

While many of these assumptions have been corroborated by subsequent studies (Alqarni, 2017; Bolton, 1994; Herbert, 1990; Fuchs, 2017; Miles, 1994; Qanbar, 2012; Sun, 2013; Wu, 2008), the first—i.e. that women make and give more compliments than men, has been refuted when studying young adults (Rees-Miller, 2011). Evidence posited for the assumptions include compliments serving as markers of solidarity among females (Holmes, 1988), “social norms [which] place greater emphasis on appearance for females and skills for males” (Parisi & Wogan, 2006, p. 21), women’s preferential use of the personal pronoun “I” (Sun, 2013) and men’s reluctance to compliment other men so as “not to send the wrong signals” (Paulston & Tucker, 2003, p. 189).

Compliment Perceptions and Gender

Miles (1994) acknowledges that while research into compliment giving and compliment responding is abundant, “little has been published on the reasons this speech act is both used and perceived so differently by the two sexes” (p. 92). According to the author, the differences in male and females complimenting perceptions can be attributed to the fact that “the degree of anxiety associated with compliments seems much greater for men than for women” (p. 120) from the

perspective of both the speaker and the hearer. By way of explanation, Miles (1994) postulates that “perhaps the greatest threat that some men perceive from compliments is the danger that compliments will undercut their traditional image of masculinity” (p. 122). Men fear that they may be perceived as feminine or even homosexual if they offer compliments too often or in the wrong situation. Females, on the other hand, report using compliments to “connect” and to “make the person happy” (Miles, 1994, p. 126), confirming the idea that women perceive compliments as “rapport enhancing” (Miles, 1994, p. 126).

While Miles (1994) focuses on the influence of gender on compliment perceptions, research also suggests that male and female compliment perceptions may also be influenced by context. Following McMillan (2013), the workplace can be an influential factor. According to the author, in this context, females perceive appearance compliments (ACs) from males as more harassing than other females, while males perceive ACs from other males as more harassing than from females. In contrast, Gao et al. (2017) have found that in a romantic context “compliments targeting appearance increased male attractiveness [for females] more than possessions” (p. 1). The research highlights that while gender is a major influencing factor on compliment perceptions, it is often mitigated by contextual factors.

Additionally, cultural differences may be a factor in compliment perceptions. Herbert and Straight (1989), who “examine subjective judgements offered by two cultural groups” (p. 35), have found that Americans exhibit high compliment offering but low compliment accepting and vice versa for South Africans. However, research into compliment perceptions lacks the ability to make generalisations regarding the commonalities and differences, and the influencing factors, of male and female compliment perceptions.

Irish English Compliments

The speech act of complimenting in Irish English has received very little attention. Generally, speech act research in Irish English has mainly focused on the areas of offers and refusal of offers (Barron, 2017), requests (Barron, 2008; McCarthy 2018), responding to thanking (Schneider, 2005), expressions of gratitude (Elwood, 2010), and refusals (Hickey, 2007). Schneider and Schneider (2000) contrast compliment responses in Irish English with American English, Chinese and German. Findings suggest that “overall compliment responses in Irish English give approximately equal weight to Leech’s (1983) modesty and agreement maxims in contrast to American English where the agreement maxim is most valued” (Barron & Schneider, 2005, p. 4). The current study adds to a small body of literature by exploring gendered perceptions of both females and males within the context of Irish English.

Politeness and Appropriateness

Finally, we address the issues of politeness and appropriateness which are the key metrics used to assess perceptions. Brown and Levinson (1987) provide what is arguably the most influential theory of politeness to date. Within the theory, politeness has been defined as “a complex system for softening face threatening behaviour” (O’Keeffe et al., 2011, p. 59) which can be codified in linguistic structures. Drawing on Goffman’s (1955) work on face and Co-operation Principles (Grice, 1975), Brown and Levinson (1987) compiled a list of specific linguistic strategies to avoid threatening face. However, Watts (2003) strongly refutes that the concept of politeness is in fact inherent in linguistic structures. In its place, he

proposes a bi-perspective relational model which considers first-order politeness— i.e. lay interpretations of politeness; and second-order politeness, or the “technical concepts in sociolinguistic theorizing about social interaction” (2003, p. 4). He posits that “whether or not a participant’s behaviour is evaluated as polite or impolite is not merely a matter of the linguistic expressions s/he uses, but rather depends on the interpretation of that behaviour in the overall social interaction” (2003, p. 8). He criticises Brown and Levinson’s model, among other things, for its lack of focus on “how an addressee may react to the politeness strategy produced” (2003, p. 85). Integral to gaining insight into the reaction of the hearer is the concept of appropriateness. The appropriateness of an utterance is defined by Fetzer (2004) as being “evaluated with regard to the nature of the connectedness between a communicative action, its linguistic realisation and its embeddedness in linguistic and social contexts” (pp. 19-20). According to Fetzer (2007), “appropriateness [...] is key not only to the investigation of the connectedness between a participant, their fellow participants and a communicative act, but also to the dyad’s communicative exchange as a means of maintaining - or dis-maintaining - social order” (p. 21).

Thus, the current study, with its focus on perceptions of both the linguistic strategies employed, and their appropriateness in a range of social situations, adheres to the concept of politeness proposed by Watts. It holds that understanding compliments requires not only attendance to linguistic strategies employed by the speaker, but also a consideration of how the strategies are interpreted by the hearer as interpretations are “constitutive of [...] the habitus of a historically situated and socially located *homo interactionalis*, subject to change as the locus of the struggle itself changes” (2003, p. 11).

In light of the above discussion, the following research questions have been developed.

- Does gender give rise to differential perceptions of politeness and appropriateness in compliments?
- Do Irish males and females between the ages of 18 and 25 perceive appearance and performance compliments differently?
- What are the factors that influence these differences?

Methodology

Overview

The aim of this study is to investigate compliment perceptions in Irish males and females aged 18-25. Using baseline data collected from the same age group (Marnane, 2020) a questionnaire was devised. The baseline data were collected using a Discourse-Completion Task (DCT) modelled on Yuan's (2002) DCT situations. The DCT consisted of 12 situations which allowed the participants to compliment based on both performance and appearance. The results of the DCT were analysed first according to the Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realisation Patterns (CCSARP) coding scheme (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1983) and then according to the linguistic patterns (LPs) used in each compliment. The individual compliments from the most commonly used LP for each of the twelve DCT situations were then coded according to their specific wording in order to establish the most commonly used compliment in each situation. The most commonly used compliment by both the male and female participants for each of the twelve DCT situations formed the data for a questionnaire. The DCT situations were reworded in order to reflect the receiving of a compliment. Each of the questionnaire questions appears alongside the

most commonly used compliment by the male and female participants for each DCT situation.

Assessing data from the same age group was an important consideration in order to control for potential generational bias. The questionnaire comprises two sections of twelve scenarios, each of which presents the participants with one female-generated compliment and one male-generated compliment in response to each scenario. Six of the scenarios are appearance compliments (ACs) and six are performance compliments (PCs). The gender of the complimenter is blinded in order to limit any bias the participants may have. Each scenario requires the participants to respond to two 7-point Likert scales. In the first section, the participants are asked to rate the politeness level of each compliment. In the second section, the participants are asked to rate the appropriateness level of each compliment. Examples of the questionnaire scenarios and DCT generated male and female compliments are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Example of Questionnaire Scenarios and DCT Generated Compliments

Compliment type	Scenario	Male Given Compliment	Female Given Compliment
Appearance	You show your friend a photo from a recent graduation. They compliment you on your choice of outfit. Your friend says:	Nice outfit.	You look gorgeous. That outfit is amazing.
Appearance	You are wearing a new pair of shoes. Your cousin really likes your new shoes and compliments you on them. Your cousin says:	Nice shoes.	I love your shoes. Where did you get them?

Performance	You have recently passed your driving test. You are driving yourself and your favourite co-worker to work. Your co-worker compliments you on your good driving ability. Your co-worker says:	You're a great driver. Congrats on passing the test.	You're a good driver. No wonder you passed your test.
Performance	You have recently started learning to play the guitar. Your friend compliments you on the quick progress that you are making. Your friend says:	You're making great progress, fair play.	Wow, you're learning so fast. Well done!

Participants and Data Analysis

In total 150 responses were gathered from 90 self-identifying females and 60 self-identifying males. All of the participants identified as Irish and were aged 18-25. The data collected in both sections are first analysed in order to investigate how the politeness and appropriateness levels of a female compliment (FC) or male compliment (MC) are rated by the participants when the compliments are presented separately. The data are then analysed with the aim of shedding light on how the participants rate the politeness and appropriateness levels of the FC compared to the MC; and finally gendered perceptions of appearance and performance compliments are analysed from a gendered lens using the same metrics. Mann Whitney U tests and Wilcoxon signed rank tests are applied throughout, as appropriate, to assess statistical difference.

Results

We will begin with providing an overall picture of gendered perceptions of compliments. We will then explore how the gender of the complimenter impacts perception and will conclude with an investigation into the effect of compliment type.

Overall Gender-based Perceptions

On the whole, females rank all compliments higher on the metric of politeness than males. Following a Mann Whitney U test, this was seen to be statistically significant ($p = 0.000$). If we consider responses to compliments from females (FCs), we can see that gendered perceptions do occur in terms of politeness. Females ranked FCs as more polite than MCs ($p = .000$). On the other hand, males ranked FCs and MCs equally vis-à-vis the same metric. For example, females rated “That was very interesting. Thanks for the great presentation” (FC) as more polite than “Great presentation. I really enjoyed that” (MC) whereas males evaluated them at the same level of politeness.

In brief, it can be said that females view compliments as less of an FTA vis-à-vis politeness than males. However, they consider compliments from a male to be more face threatening. As males, in general, consider compliments to be less polite than females, it can be claimed that they find compliments from both males and females to be equally face-threatening from the perspective of politeness.

As with politeness, males ranked the appropriateness of compliments in general much lower than females. This is followed by an assessment to ascertain if male and female respondents rated appropriateness differently according to whether the compliment was realised by a male or a female. Likewise, Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to assess statistical differences. The findings show that the female participants rate FCs to be more appropriate than the male participants rate the same compliment. ($p = .000$). Likewise, male respondents rank FCs as more appropriate than MCs ($p = .000$). To exemplify, both males and females judge “Wow, you’re

learning so fast. Well done!” (FC) as more appropriate than “You’re making great progress, fair play” (MC).

In summary, when perceptions of compliments are ranked in terms of politeness and appropriateness, the gender of the person giving the compliment plays a significant role insofar as females consider compliments from males to be significantly less polite and less appropriate. On the other hand, males reject compliments made by other males seeing them as more inappropriate than those emanating from females; however, they rank neither highly in terms of politeness. On a final note, it must be recognised that the respondents were blinded to the gender of compliment giver. It could tentatively be surmised that despite this, they were nevertheless able to imagine the situations as being gendered.

Responses to Compliment Type

In this section, the interplay between the gender of the perceiver and compliment type is considered. There are two distinct compliment types: appearance compliments (ACs) and performance compliments (PCs). Overall, ACs such as “I like your jacket!” are ranked more highly according to politeness than PCs e.g. “Congratulations on the award, well deserved”. A Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted and the difference was statistically significant ($p = 0.014$). With regards to appropriateness, the reverse is true insofar as PCs are deemed more appropriate than ACs ($p = 0.023$, following a Wilcoxon signed ranks test).

Turning to how compliment types interact with gender, we will consider the metric of politeness first. In terms of politeness, there is no difference in how females rank ACs and PCs ($p = 0.063$, following a Wilcoxon signed ranks test). Surprisingly, males rated ACs as more polite than PCs ($p = 0.029$, following a

Wilcoxon signed ranks test). An inter-gender comparison shows that females rate ACs as more polite than males ($p = .000$, following a Mann Whitney U test); however, males rate PCs as more polite than females ($p = 0.005$, following a Mann Whitney U).

Considering the metric of appropriateness, a different picture emerges. Females rank PCs as more appropriate than ACs ($p = 0.01$, following Wilcoxon signed rank). The same pattern is true of males ($p = 0.000$). A deeper analysis shows that females rate ACs as more appropriate than male ($p = 0.026$, following a Mann Whitney U test) and that males rank PCs as more appropriate than females ($p = 0.01$, following a Mann Whitney U test).

To sum up, although ACs are perceived as more inappropriate by both males and females, subtle differences do occur. Females find ACs more appropriate than males; whereas males find PCs more appropriate than females. It may therefore be stated that young Irish adult males and females perceive compliments differently in terms of the gender of the complimenter and the type of compliment. In brief, all compliments seem to constitute face threat for males. Male generated compliments such as “You’re making great progress. Keep it up” are viewed less favourably than female generated alternatives, for example “Well done! You really deserve it. You’ve been working so hard” by the two genders who responded; and PCs are less of a FTA than ACs. Therefore, “They look great on you” is deemed less appropriate than “Good game. Well done!”

Discussion

Overall Gender-based Perception

At the outset, it must be stressed that the results should be interpreted tentatively as comparisons with similar cohorts cannot be made due to lack of research in this area. In terms of gender-based perceptions, the results show that, on the whole, young Irish adult females perceive compliments to be more polite and more appropriate than their male counterparts do. Male and female ratings of politeness and appropriateness in compliments may broadly be attributed to the fact that females, in general, have been found to view compliments as “rapport enhancing” and to use compliments to “connect”, to “reach out”, or to “make the person happy” (Miles, 1994, p. 126), whereas males tend to view compliments more often as FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988; Sardabi & Afghari, 2015). This could have been partially attributed to the fact that females traditionally gave and received compliments more often than males (Holmes, 1988); however, more recent research into the same demographic cohort as the current study finds that “men in fact do give and receive compliments in numbers comparable to those given and received by women” (Rees-Miller, 2011, p. 2686). Despite the equalization in terms of giving and receiving compliments, a polarized perception still seems to persist. It can be proposed that females consider compliments as both more polite and appropriate than males do due to the fact that female compliments are used to “make the person happy” and they experience this sentiment when given a compliment. In contrast, males may view compliments as less polite and less appropriate because they perceive compliments in general as more of an FTA.

Furthermore, Allami and Boustani (2017) have found that “there is a large positive association between the speakers’ [appropriateness] and their [politeness]” (p. 128). The authors posit that the more confident an individual is regarding their appropriateness level within a situation, the more focused they are on their politeness level. This finding suggests that male and female complimenting behaviour is influential on their compliment perceptions. As mentioned, females have a longer tradition of giving and receiving compliments than males. This may have led to females developing a higher degree of comfort vis-a-vis appropriateness levels of compliments which consequently facilitated greater attendance to politeness. In contrast, given that males view compliments more often as FTAs and until recently, engaged much less in complimenting behaviour than females, they may be less confident in their level of appropriateness and, thus, be less focused on their politeness levels. This lack of confidence in appropriateness may subsequently lead to politeness in male compliments being ranked lower than politeness in female compliments.

Additionally, the results show that both young Irish adult males and females rank FCs as more appropriate than MCs. This finding is in agreement with global findings and may also be attributed to the frequency with which each gender historically gave and received compliments. Since females were traditionally more often the complimenter and the complimentee, both genders may perceive female compliments to be more appropriate as they are more familiar with them in everyday life. Females also rank FCs as more polite than MCs, whereas males rank FCs and MCs similarly in terms of politeness. This finding supports the idea that females are more focused on politeness as they make a distinction between FCs and MCs that males do not. This also suggests that the two genders consider politeness and

appropriateness as two distinct elements of a compliment. While appropriateness is ranked similarly, politeness is not thus suggesting that appropriateness in compliments may be judged according to situation, i.e. social setting, whereas politeness is judged at an individual or gendered level. This idea will be discussed further in the following section.

Gendered Responses to Compliment Type

The results show that young Irish adult females rate both ACs and PCs as more polite and more appropriate than males rate the same compliments. This finding is indicative of the previously discussed results which suggest that, overall, females perceive compliments as more polite and more appropriate than males do. These findings may be attributed to the aforementioned polarisation of male and female perceptions of compliment use.

The results also show that females rank the politeness of ACs and PCs similarly. Female rankings of ACs and PCs as equally polite may be attributed again to female perceptions of the use of compliments. It has been well documented that females view compliments as solidarity markers and as “expressions of good will” (Herbert, 1986, p. 76) which promote good social relations. The findings in this study suggest that this view of compliment giving has led to females generalising compliment types. Females do not distinguish between ACs and PCs in terms of politeness because, to females, these compliment types have a similar use and value, i.e. to enhance relationships and social rapport.

In contrast to females, males rank ACs as more polite than PCs. This finding suggests that male compliment perception has not experienced the same generalisation as female compliment perception. This distinction made by males

between ACs and PCs can again be attributed to male perceptions of compliments as FTAs, alongside the lesser frequency by which they both give and receive compliments. Additionally, an AC is commonly considered to be a more personal compliment than a PC due to the use of personal pronouns and expressions of liking/loving the subject matter (Sun, 2013). Sun (2013) notes that “the syntactic pattern I like NP (e.g. I like your haircut!) is more favoured by women than men” (p. 215). Sun (2013) also references Duan and Guo’s (2009) research on mainland Chinese, in which “women are also found to have a more personal focus than men when giving compliments; i.e., with ‘我 (I)’ involved in their sentences” (p. 215). As a consequence, the patterns used by the genders to give compliments may inform their compliment perceptions. Since males commonly use a minimal pattern when complimenting, the personal elements of an AC may be considered more meaningful, and therefore more polite, than a less personal PC.

This result is also surprising as it appears to be in conflict with the fact that males typically perceive ACs as more of an FTA than PCs, supported by the assumption that males fear that certain compliments are “dangerous” and will undercut their traditional image of masculinity. This also appears to be in contrast to McMillan’s (2013) finding that males perceive ACs from other males as harassing. However, the respondents in this study were blinded to the gender of the compliment giver. Had the gender been highlighted, the results may have been the same. Alternatively, it could be indicative of changing attitudes in Ireland. It could be suggested that male ratings of ACs may be attributed to an effort to move away from stereotyping masculine and feminine language, and be more accepting of the variation in language that is seen within youth culture today. By means of comparison, in a study on compliments in Santa Cruz (California) Miles (1994)

found that “the two genders follow identical rank order patterns with regard to proportions of compliments given on appearance and performance” (pp. 107-108) and attributes this finding to the fact that “Santa Cruz has a long history of social awareness and political activism directed towards eradicating the social, political, and economic inequities that frequently exist between men and women” (Miles, 1994, p. 107).

Alongside the potential cultural implications, it can be suggested that males’ rankings of ACs in terms of politeness may be attributed to the aforementioned distinction between politeness and appropriateness in compliments. Interestingly, both males and females rank PCs as more appropriate than ACs. This finding may broadly be attributed to the fact that ACs are considered to be more of an FTA than PCs, typically because of their more personal approach. If appropriateness is judged according to situation and politeness at an individual level, it can be concluded that certain social settings may not be considered appropriate for the more personal AC, despite it potentially being considered polite on a personal level. Although specific contextual information on the gender of the compliment giver is not provided to the respondents, the results point to the respondents being able to imagine the contexts in a gender-based manner. Chen (2010) has found that “the relationship between the complimenter and the complimentee [...] [is a] major [factor] in complimenting and compliment responding in the majority of languages” (pp. 93-94). As posited by McMillan (2013), ACs are considered most harassing when given by superiors, followed by subordinates, and lastly from peers. For example, McMillan (2013) has found that in the workplace females perceive ACs from males as more harassing than ACs from other females and posits that “what some men see as flirtation and

flattery, women would see as harassment” (p. 12) and that women often feel objectified by male compliments, particularly those based on appearance.

Additionally, as previously mentioned, McMillan (2013) found that males in the workplace perceive ACs from other males as harassing. Both males and females may therefore perceive PCs as more appropriate for settings like the workplace due to the possibility of an AC being considered an FTA, despite potentially perceiving ACs as more polite than PCs in certain situations. However, the current study did not focus on social setting as an influencing factor on male and female compliment perceptions. More research is needed on the influence of social settings in order to make generalisations regarding the topic.

Conclusion

Based on the results, it can be posited that even among young adults that compliment perception may constitute a gendered-based battlefield. This study has found that the criteria by which young Irish adult males and females judge, and therefore perceive, compliments includes the elements of politeness and appropriateness and that these judgements vary between the two genders. The study suggests that politeness is subject to more variation between the genders due to its more individually reliant interpretations; whereas appropriateness is more fixed within traditional social and gender norms. However, it is important to note that this is not as essentialised as other studies have found. This may be due that in recent years, young adult males have been found to give and receive compliments as frequently as their female counterparts (Rees-Miller, 2011) and that the increased interaction with compliments may be influencing their perceptions. Additionally, the study has found that females have experienced a generalisation between ACs and PCs which males have not.

Surprisingly, the study finds that males perceive ACs as more polite than PCs and tentatively attributes this to an emerging cultural shift in traditional gender norms. Finally, the study suggests that both complimenting behaviour and frequency in compliment use, alongside cultural and gender norms, have an influence on the way in which males and females perceive compliments.

Limitations of the study lie with the fact that gender-based perceptions of compliments have been understudied and as a consequence, the results of the study must be referred to tentatively. Further research in this area is needed in order to make generalisations regarding similarities and differences in male and female compliment perceptions, alongside generalisations regarding the cultural and gender norms that underpin these differences.

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