

## Do You Love Me, Too? Perceptions of Responses to *I Love You*

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The purpose of the present study was to determine how women and men react to different responses to *I love you*, and to investigate how likely women and men are to use these responses. To explore these effects, two studies examined the perceptions of different verbal reactions to an expression of love. Study 1 consisted of 240 adults (120 men, 120 women) who were recruited from Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk to take an online survey assessing their reactions to responses to *I love you*. As predicted, women preferred the "I'm just not there yet" response, whereas men preferred several responses, including both the "I'm just not there yet" response and an insincere response. However, both women and men agreed on the hurtfulness of the different responses. In Study 2, 121 college students (44 men, 76 women) participated in a survey assessing their likelihood of using the different responses from Study 1. Contrary to predictions, women and men both agreed that they would be most likely to use the "I'm just not there yet" response. Overall, these results suggest that although women and men prefer to receive different responses to an expression of love, they both report that they would most likely tell their partners exactly how they feel.

Saying *I love you* to a romantic partner for the first time in a new relationship is a terrifying moment that exposes the initiator to vulnerability and can sway the balance of power within the relationship. However, this moment can also be terrifying for the receivers of *I love you*, especially if they do not love their partners in return. The receivers then have to choose whether to be honest with their partner—potentially hurting their partner's feelings—or to be dishonest and preserve their partner's feelings while being untrue to themselves. In this type of awkward situation, it is possible that women and men may prefer different responses to *I love you*.

One reason that women and men may prefer different responses to *I love you* is that they have different timelines for falling in love. Harrison and Shortall (2011) surveyed college students to explore which gender says *I love you* first. Contrary to popular perceptions that women fall in love first, they found that men reported falling in love more quickly and were more likely to say *I love you* first.

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In addition to falling in love at different rates, women and men may also have different motives for saying *I love you* to their partners. To investigate such motives, Brantley, Knox, and Zusman (2002) surveyed college students to explore when and why they say *I love you* to their romantic partners for the first time. They found that men were more likely than were women to say *I love you* first in a relationship and to do so as a means of obtaining sex from their partners. Thus, men may have ulterior motives for saying *I love you* to their partners.

Not only do men say *I love you* in order to have sex with their partners, but evidence suggests that they have other reasons for saying it as well. For example, a diary study of college students' romantic relationships indicated that men were more likely to say *I love you* first in order to force women to commit to the relationship (Owen, 1987). By contrast, women were more likely to refrain from saying *I love you* first, presumably because they were better able to distinguish love from other related emotions such as like or lust, and also because they view their role in the relationship as reactive and men's role as proactive (Owen, 1987). Therefore, it seems that men often say *I love you* in order to move their relationship forward either emotionally (i.e., with commitment) or physically (i.e., with sex).

Whereas men say *I love you* to obtain sex from their partners, women appear to use the opposite strategy, namely using sex to obtain love. Consistent with this notion, Regan and Dreyer (1999) questioned college students about their motives for engaging in casual sex and found that men engage in casual sex to improve their social status and to show their sexual prowess, whereas women engage in casual sex to improve their chances of obtaining a long-term committed relationship. According to Reiss (1981), this pattern is the result of a patriarchal society in which men receive positive reinforcement for being promiscuous, but women are only justified in having sex if love is involved.

It is also possible that women and men have different motives for saying *I love you* and engaging in sexual intercourse because they have different goals in mind. According to Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), in order to obtain maximum reproductive fitness, men should operate on a short-term mating strategy that involves impregnating as many women as possible, whereas women should prefer a long-term mating strategy in which mates are carefully chosen for their resources and protection. However, Buss and Schmitt (1993) suggest that in order to obtain sex from women, men may need to act as if they want a long-term relationship when, in fact, all they want is casual sex. Saying *I love you* to their partners may be one way that men attempt to convince women of their commitment. By contrast, waiting to have sex until *I love*

*you* has been said may be how women attain emotional and resource investment from men.

Because women and men have different motives for initiating relationship milestones, it seems plausible that they perceive the milestones differently as well. However, when one person perceives that a milestone has been reached and the other person disagrees, an honest but hurtful message must be sent to clarify the future direction of the relationship. To examine gender differences in perceptions of this type of message, Zhang (2009) surveyed college students about honest but hurtful messages they had sent or received. Interestingly, men thought the messages were more intentional and perceived the messages as having more negative relationship ramifications than did women. Thus, when a man says *I love you* and his partner does not say it back, he may perceive the situation more negatively than would a woman if the situation were reversed.

Although previous research has examined the reasons women and men say *I love you*, as well as how they perceive honest but hurtful messages (e.g., Brantley et al., 2002; Zhang, 2009), there is a dearth of research on how women and men perceive different responses to *I love you* both as senders and receivers of the responses. To address this gap, the present investigation sought to determine (a) how women and men react to different responses to *I love you* and (b) to explore how likely women and men are to use these responses themselves.

We conducted two studies to examine the perceptions of different responses to *I love you*. In Study 1, we asked participants to imagine that they had said *I love you* to a partner and that their partner did not feel the same way. Then, participants rated their levels of satisfaction and hurt in reaction to various responses their partner might employ. Following Zhang (2009), we hypothesized that men would prefer to be lied to or to have the issue ignored, whereas women would prefer to know exactly how their partners feel. In Study 2, we asked participants to imagine the opposite scenario in which their partner had said *I love you* to them but that they did not feel the same way. Participants then rated the likelihood that they would use the different responses described in Study 1. Again, consistent with Zhang (2009), we predicted that men would rely on dishonest responses or ignore the issue whereas women would tell their partners exactly how they feel.

### STUDY 1

As part of a larger study exploring romantic relationships, participants were asked to imagine that they had said *I love you* to their romantic partner, and they then rated their feelings of satisfaction and hurt in response to their partner answering in various ways.

### Method

**Participants and Procedure.** Participants in the present study included 240 adults (120 men, 120 women) who were recruited through a posting on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) to take an online survey. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 73 ( $M = 32.48$ ,  $SD = 11.14$ ) and the majority of the participants were European-American (78.8%); the remaining participants were Asian-American (6.7%), Hispanic-American (5.0%), Multi-Racial (4.2%), African-American (3.8%), Native-American (0.4%) or did not specify their ethnicity (1.3%). Participants were "workers" on Mechanical Turk who could search for online "tasks" to be completed. Mechanical Turk workers typically complete many tasks at a time and are paid at least \$0.05 per task. If they agreed to take the survey, they were redirected via a link and were given 30 min to complete the survey and submit the task. Once their work was complete, it was manually approved and they were paid \$0.25 for participating in the 10-min study.

**Design and Measures.** The present study used a 2 x 6 design to determine male and female participants' satisfaction with and hurt felt in reaction to each of several different responses to *I love you* that could be used instead of a sincere reciprocation of love.

The scenario below asked participants to imagine that they were in a relationship with someone and had decided to say *I love you* for the first time:

Imagine that you have been in a dating relationship for the past six months. One evening as the two of you are watching TV together, you turn to your partner and say "I love you."

After reading this scenario, participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very*) how satisfied and how hurt they would be if their partner responded in one of six different ways. The responses included (a) saying "I love you, too" even though he or she did not mean it, (b) saying "Thank you," (c) saying "I really love spending time with you," (d) saying "That is so sweet," (e) saying "I'm just not there yet and I want to mean it when I say it," and (f) pretending not to hear and changing the subject.

### Results

Two 2 (Participant Gender) x 6 (Responses to *I love you*) mixed-subject ANOVAs were used to investigate the gender differences in satisfaction with and hurt felt as a function of the six different responses to *I love you* that could be used in lieu of a heartfelt *I love you, too*.

**Satisfaction with Responses to *I love you*.** First, as shown in Table 1, there was a significant main effect of the type of response to *I love you* on satisfaction, indicating that regardless of gender, participants were

most satisfied with their partner saying that they just weren't there yet or saying that they like spending time together,  $F(5, 234) = 103.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .69$ . Participants were less satisfied with their partners saying "That's so sweet" than they were with the "I'm just not there yet" response, but equally as satisfied as they were with the "spending time together" response. After that, participants were less satisfied with their partners saying "I love you" even though they did not mean it than they were with the "spending time together" response, but they were equally as satisfied as with the "that's sweet" response. Participants were next satisfied with "Thank you" and least satisfied overall with their partner ignoring them and pretending not hear.

TABLE 1 Mean Ratings of Satisfaction with Responses to "I love you" in Study 1

Response	All	Women	Men	t(148.28-238)
"I'm just not there yet and I want to mean it when I say it."	2.37 <sub>a1</sub>	2.51 <sub>a1</sub>	2.23 <sub>a1</sub>	1.73
"I really love spending time with you."	2.28 <sub>ab1</sub>	2.20 <sub>b1</sub>	2.36 <sub>a1</sub>	-1.07
"That is so sweet."	2.14 <sub>bc12</sub>	1.93 <sub>c2</sub>	2.35 <sub>a1</sub>	-2.83**
"I love you, too" (insincere)	1.97 <sub>c23</sub>	1.83 <sub>cd2</sub>	2.10 <sub>ab1</sub>	-1.80
"Thank you"	1.75 <sub>d3</sub>	1.59 <sub>d2</sub>	1.90 <sub>b1</sub>	-2.41*
Pretend not to hear and change the subject.	1.13 <sub>e4</sub>	1.04 <sub>e3</sub>	1.22 <sub>c2</sub>	-2.67**

Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all satisfied*, 5 = *Very satisfied*). Means in the same column that do not share alphabetical subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ . Means in the same column that do not share numerical subscripts differ at  $p < .01$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

A profile analysis was conducted to test for predicted gender differences in relative satisfaction as a function of the different responses to *I love you*. As expected, a 2 (Participant Gender) x 6 (Responses to *I love you*) mixed-subjects ANOVA revealed that women and men reported different levels of satisfaction with the responses to *I love you*,  $F(5, 234) = 2.87$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . As Table 1 shows, the most

satisfying response for women was the “I’m just not there yet” response. Women were next most satisfied with the “spending time together” response. After that, women were less satisfied with the “that’s sweet” response or the insincere “I love you.” “Thank you” was less satisfying than the “that’s sweet” response but equally as satisfying as the insincere “I love you.” Finally, women were least satisfied overall with being ignored. For men, the most satisfying responses were the “spending time together” response, the “that’s sweet” response, the “I’m just not there yet” response, and the insincere “I love you.” Men were equally satisfied with “Thank you” and with the insincere “I love you,” but less so than with the other three responses. Finally, men were least satisfied with being ignored.

Although women and men experienced similar satisfaction with the responses to *I love you*, there were gender differences. As Table 1 shows, men were overall more satisfied than were women with the “that’s sweet” response, “Thank you,” and being ignored.

Hurt as a Function of Responses to *I love you*. Interestingly, there was no significant interaction between gender and the responses to *I love you* on degree of hurt felt,  $F(5, 234) = 1.25, p = .288, \eta^2 = .03$ . As Table 2 shows, for both women and men, the most hurtful response was being

TABLE 2 Mean Ratings of Hurt for Responses to “I love you” in Study 1

Response	Mean
Pretend not to hear and change the subject.	4.41 <sub>a1</sub>
“I love you, too” (insincere)	3.17 <sub>b2</sub>
“Thank you”	3.13 <sub>b2</sub>
“That is so sweet”	2.80 <sub>c3</sub>
“I’m just not there yet and I want to mean it when I say it	2.69 <sub>cd34</sub>
“I really love spending time with you,”	2.59 <sub>d4</sub>

Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all hurtful*, 5 = *Very hurtful*). Means in the same column that do not share alphabetical subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ . Means in the same column that do not share numerical subscripts differ at  $p < .01$ .

ignored,  $F(5, 234) = 106.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = .69$ . The next most hurtful responses were the insincere “I love you” and saying “Thank you.” Participants were also somewhat hurt by the “that’s sweet” response and

the “I’m just not there yet” response. Finally, participants were equally hurt by the “spending time together” response and the “I’m just not there yet” response, but less so than the other responses.

### Discussion

The purpose of Study 1 was to determine how women and men react to different responses to *I love you*. The results partially supported the initial hypotheses in that women were most satisfied with the “I’m not there yet” response, which gives an indication of how their partner feels, whereas men were most satisfied with many of the responses, including the insincere “I love you.” However, contrary to predictions, men were least satisfied with their partner ignoring the *I love you*. Interestingly, despite the gender differences in satisfaction with the responses to *I love you*, women and men agreed on the hurtfulness of the responses: they reported that being ignored was the most hurtful response whereas the “I’m not there yet” response was one of the least hurtful responses.

### STUDY 2

In Study 2, we asked participants to imagine a scenario in which their partner had said *I love you* to them but that they did not love their partner in return. Participants then rated the likelihood that they would respond to the hypothetical partner by using each of the six responses from Study 1.

### Method

**Participants and Procedure.** Participants included 121 college students (44 men, 76 women) from a small liberal arts university in central Texas who completed a survey assessing their attitudes toward romantic relationships. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participant volunteers in public areas such as the library and cafeteria. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 35 ( $M = 19.95$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ), and the majority of the participants were European-American (68.3%); the remaining participants were Hispanic-American (15.8%), Multi-Racial (8.3%), Asian-American (5.8%), African-American (0.8%), or did not specify their ethnicity (0.8%). Most participants took 10 min to complete the survey. When they had completed their survey, participants were thanked and told that they would receive an email summary of the results.

**Design and Measures.** We used a 2 x 6 design to explore participants’ responses to *I love you*. Specifically, male and female participants rated their likelihood of using each of the potential responses from Study 1 if their partner said “I love you” but they did not feel the same way.

The scenario below asked participants to imagine that they did not feel ready to say *I love you* to their partners after hearing it from their partners:

Imagine that you have been in a dating relationship for the past six months. One evening as the two of you are watching TV together, your partner turns to you and says, "I love you." Your partner is waiting for a response, but you know you are not ready to say it back yet.

Participants then rated the likelihood that they would use each of six different responses if they did not feel ready to say *I love you* to their partner. The potential responses included (a) saying "I love you, too" even though he or she did not mean it, (b) saying "Thank you," (c) saying "I really love spending time with you," (d) saying "That is so sweet," (e) saying "I'm just not there yet and I want to mean it when I say it," and (f) pretending not to hear and changing the subject. A final section asked participants to answer open-ended questions about when and how they knew that they were in love with or wanted to marry someone.

### Results

There was no significant interaction between gender and the responses to *I love you* on the likelihood of using the responses,  $F(5,$

TABLE 3 Mean Likelihood of Using Various Responses to "I love you" in Study 2

Response	Mean
"I'm just not there yet and I want to mean it when I say it."	5.21 <sub>a1</sub>
"I really love spending time with you."	4.63 <sub>b1</sub>
"That is so sweet"	3.91 <sub>c2</sub>
"Thank you"	3.90 <sub>c2</sub>
"I love you, too" (insincere)	3.60 <sub>c2</sub>
Pretend not to hear and change the subject	2.11 <sub>d3</sub>

Ratings were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *Extremely Unlikely*, 7 = *Extremely Likely*). Means in the same column that do not share alphabetical subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ . Means in the same column that do not share numerical subscripts differ at  $p < .01$ .

111) = 1.54,  $p = .183$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ , indicating that women and men were similar in the response they believe they would be most likely to use. As

Table 3 shows, women and men agreed that the “I’m not there yet” response was the most likely response they would use,  $F(5, 111) = 38.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .64$ . The next most likely response was the “spending time together” response. Following that, participants were likely to use either the “that’s sweet” response, “Thank you,” or the insincere “I love you.” Participants reported being least likely to pretend they didn’t hear the *I love you* and change the subject.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of Study 2 was to determine the likelihood that women and men would use different responses if their partner said *I love you* and they did not feel ready to reciprocate. Contrary to predictions, there were no gender differences in the likelihood that women and men would use the different responses. That is, both women and men agreed that they would be most likely to use the “I’m not there yet” response and least likely to ignore their partner and pretend that *I love you* had not been said. Surprisingly, this pattern of results suggests that although women and men seem to prefer different responses (as found in Study 1), they nevertheless predict that they will give the same response. Interestingly, the “I’m not there yet” response could also be described as the most socially desirable response because patronizing or outright dishonest responses are perceived negatively in society.

### **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The present study sought to determine how women and men react to different responses to *I love you* as well as to investigate how likely women and men are to use these responses. The results partially supported the initial hypotheses in that there were gender differences in the levels of satisfaction women and men felt as a reaction to potential partner responses to *I love you*. Specifically, women preferred to hear the “I’m not there yet” response whereas men preferred any of several responses, including both the “I’m not there yet” response and the insincere “I love you.” There were no gender differences in the level of hurt that women and men felt in reaction to the responses or in the likelihood that women and men would use the various responses. Both women and men agreed that ignoring the *I love you* was the most hurtful response and that they would be most likely to use the “I’m not there yet” response if they found themselves in this situation.

Overall, our results offer support for the theory that women and men prefer different responses to *I love you* and react differently to honest but hurtful relationship messages in a romantic relationship. This pattern of results is consistent with Zhang (2009), who found that men perceived honest but hurtful messages as being more intentional and as having

more negative relationship ramifications than did women. In the present study, the honest but hurtful message was that a relationship partner did not love them and although men did not rate the hurt caused by the responses differently than did women, men did not have as clear a need to hear the "I'm not there yet" response which clearly indicates how the partner is feeling, as did women.

The present study represents one of the first attempts to study the perceptions of responses to *I love you* in a romantic relationship. One of the most interesting results is that women and men prefer different responses if their partner is not ready to say *I love you*. Men report that they would be equally satisfied with an insincere "I love you" as they are with the "I'm not there yet" response, whereas women report clearly preferring the "I'm not there yet" response. One plausible explanation for this result is that men tend to react more negatively to honest but hurtful relationship messages (Zhang, 2009) and therefore did not have as strong of a desire to hear them as did women. However, it is also possible that women and men simply perceive love differently. For example, when asked how they knew that they were in love, a male participant from Study 2 wrote: "That person would do anything for you and you trust them and feel the same way." Similarly, another male participant from Study 2 wrote: "A reciprocal feeling." Both of these responses indicate that for men to feel that they are in love, their partners must reciprocate those feelings. Perhaps men would rather avoid hearing the honest but hurtful message that their partners do not love them because then they would feel as though their love for their partners was invalidated.

Another interesting finding is that although women and men prefer different responses, they agree on how hurtful the different responses are and which response they are likely to use. In addition, although women and men view saying "I really love spending time with you" as the least hurtful response, they still report that they are most likely to use the "I'm not there yet" response instead. It may be that despite understanding the hurtfulness of the "I'm not there yet" response, people value the response because it is clear and because it contains the truth instead of being dishonest or condescending. Another possibility is that although men can tolerate hearing an insincere "I love you," they do not like the idea of giving that same response to their relationship partner. In this case, men are not giving all of the responses that they are comfortable receiving. It is also possible that men anticipate women's reactions to the honest but hurtful message and thus give the response that they think women want to hear.

Although the present study yielded interesting insights into an important milestone in romantic relationships, it is important to

acknowledge limitations in the samples. In Study 1, the online sample may have been too heterogeneous in that participants had different life experiences from which to draw in answering the questions. Study 1 also potentially had a selection bias favoring people with a lot of free time because participants were recruited from a website that finds workers to complete online tasks. Nonetheless, several well-known effects have been replicated in samples consisting of participants recruited from Mechanical Turk (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2011). In Study 2, the relatively homogeneous sample of predominantly European-American college students may not have been representative of Americans in general and may have displayed a social desirability bias that could potentially explain the discrepancies between Study 1 and Study 2. It is possible that because the samples were so different, it is not appropriate to compare their responses. In addition, in both studies we used a self-report method, which, although useful, is not the same as actual behavior. Although participants reported that they would be most likely to use the "I'm not there yet" response, if the actual situation occurred they might decide to use a different response. In the heat of the moment, it is entirely possible that participants might succumb to the pressure from their partners to reciprocate the *I love you* despite intending to say what they actually feel. Future research should investigate participants' actual use of the various responses to *I love you* in their current and past romantic relationships. Finally, each of the responses in the present study inherently varies in degree of honesty. For example, the insincere "I love you" contains an intentional deception whereas some of the other responses such as "That's so sweet" or "Thank you" acknowledge the *I love you* but do not offer any statement of feelings. Thus, future research should evaluate the level of honesty required for each response in order to offer further insight into the gender differences of the *I love you* situation.

Despite these limitations, the present study suggests that women and men prefer different responses to *I love you* when their partner does not love them, but that both report they would offer the "I'm not there yet" response in a situation in which they did not love their partner. These findings have important implications for people in relationships because honest but hurtful messages are an important part of working to maintain relationships (Zhang, 2009). It seems that men might be content being lied to and pretending a problem does not exist, whereas women may have a stronger need to hear the truth about what the problem is so that it can be addressed. These findings are in line with research showing that women are more likely to use strategies to maintain their relationships and spend more time talking about their relationships (Ragsdale, 1996). In short, the present study implies that to relate to each other better, men

may need to be more open to talking about problems and women may need to be gentler when discussing problems so that men will not view women as intentionally mean or the problems as detrimental to the relationship.

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