



The effects of relationship context and modality on ratings of funniness

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ABSTRACT

There is evidence to suggest that humour is an important part of mate choice and that humour may serve as an indicator of genetic quality. The current study investigated how rated funniness from a video clip was related to an individual's attractiveness as a short-term or long-term partner. We additionally tested for the presence of an attractiveness halo effect on humour ratings by comparing ratings of funniness from video clips, audio-only presentations, and photographs. We found that funniness was most strongly correlated with attractiveness for short-term relationships, especially in videos of males. We also found that attractiveness was related to funniness ratings differently across video, audio-only clips, and photographs. Relative to their rated funniness in the audio-only condition, with no appearance cues, attractive individuals were rated as funnier in video clips than less attractive individuals. An additional study demonstrated that ratings of flirtatiousness and funniness were strongly correlated. Perceived similarity between producing humour and flirting may explain why humour is more preferable in a short-term partner as flirting may be seen to signal proceptivity. The effects of attractiveness on humour judgement may also be explained by an association with flirtation as flirting may be most enjoyable when directed by attractive individuals.

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1. Introduction

Humour is a uniquely human quality and an almost ubiquitous aspect of speech (Gervais & Wilson, 2005) despite having no obvious or immediate survival benefits. It has been suggested that humour can facilitate and nurture social bonds (Yip & Martin, 2006) but, paradoxically, it has also been suggested that humour can do the opposite, by helping individuals to exert their own dominance by making others the target of their jokes (Alexander, 1986). The social function of humour will dictate the style of humour being used, be that affiliative or aggressive for example, but, according to the Mating Mind theory, humour may also perform an important function as an indicator of genetic quality, which may enhance one's attractiveness as a mate (Miller, 2000). Li et al. (2009) also suggest that humour is an important aspect of relationships in the Interest Indicator model but, in contrast to Miller (2000), contend that individuals make the effort of producing humour when they are already attracted to a potential mate. A third theory, following the What is Beautiful is Good perspective (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), suggests that physical attractiveness increases our ratings of perceived funniness.

Evidently, there is debate on the direction of the relationship between humour and physical attractiveness but not on whether humour is an important aspect of mate choice, for which there is much evidence. Buss (1988) found that both males and females thought

displaying a good sense of humour was an effective tactic in attracting a mate; results which have been echoed in mate preference questionnaire studies (Bressler & Balshine, 2006; McGhee & Shevlin, 2009). Miller (2000) suggested that a good sense of humour is so desirable because the difficulty associated with producing humour, which requires abstract thinking, theory of mind, and highly advanced language skills (Polemini & Reiss, 2006), as well as being creative and intelligent (Miller, 2000), means that humour appears to bear the hallmarks of a costly signal. In other words, the difficulty associated with producing humour enables the humour producer to demonstrate their high genetic quality (Polemini & Reiss, 2006) although this may be influenced by the type of humour being used as sexual humour or memorised jokes may not display genetic quality as ably as spontaneous wit (Bale, Morrison, & Caryl, 2006). This argument has been further bolstered by evidence which suggested that males prefer females to be humour appreciators rather than humour producers (Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006). The biological inequality of the costs of reproduction (Trivers, 1985) suggests that, generally, females should be discerning judges of male quality and this is reflected in many studies on humour. The sexually dimorphic nature of humour production and appreciation is evidenced by preference questionnaires demonstrating that males prefer females to appreciate humour while females prefer males to produce humour (Bressler et al., 2006; Lundy, Tan, & Cunningham, 1998; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011) and findings from lonely hearts advertisements, where men tend to offer a good sense of humour while women tend to seek it (De Backer, Braeckman, & Farinpour, 2008).

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Li et al. (2009) have however questioned this sexual dimorphism as, in their own study on the Interest Indicator model of humour, females suggested that producing humour was an effective way to demonstrate interest in a potential mate, which was indeed correctly interpreted by males as a way of indicating interest. The Interest Indicator model and the Mating Mind theory suggest functions for humour which could potentially exist alongside each other but the theories disagree about whether humour should actively enhance attractiveness. According to the Mating Mind theory, a man's attractiveness should increase following successful humour production, but the Interest Indicator model predicts humour might be attractive only when the listener is interested in them as a mate.

An additional consideration is that humour could also be related to an attractiveness halo effect (Dion et al., 1972), whereby finding someone physically attractive increases how funny you find them. In this way, the causality of the link between humour and attraction is reversed. Such a halo effect, however, may be complex as it is possible that physical attractiveness changes the interpretation of humour, a factor in the Interest Indicator model. Both theories suggest that funniness is an aspirational quality in a male partner but differ in how the perception of funniness interacts with physical attractiveness and gender, and the direction of this relationship forms the first research question of the current study.

We also address different relationship contexts to determine whether humour is more attractive for short-term relationships or long-term relationships. Li et al. (2009) did not find a significant difference between short or long-term relationships for their study on humour but, if funniness is an indicator of genetic quality, it may be more attractive for short-term relationships (Miller, 2000). However, humour does facilitate social bonds (Tisljar & Bereczkei, 2005; Yip & Martin, 2006) and may indicate 'good parent traits' (Greengross & Miller, 2008; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011) therefore funniness may also be an attractive quality in a long-term mate.

1.1. The current research

Previous studies on humour have generally used preference questionnaires to determine the attractiveness of humour. The current novel methodology was chosen to maximise ecological validity, by presenting clips of participants spontaneously producing humour. In the current study, we captured video clips of individuals behaving naturally to camera and had these rated for funniness and attractiveness as both a long-term and short-term partner. We additionally presented photographs and audio-only clips which were rated for the same questions. We hypothesised that humour would be valued more in short-term partners than long-term partners (Miller, 2000), but additionally that this may be subject to a gender difference. In contrast to predicting the same direction for term, the Interest Indicator model predicts that funniness would be equally related to attractiveness in both males and females, whereas the Mating Mind hypothesis predicts that humour production will be rated as a more attractive trait in men than in women. It was also hypothesised that there would be an attractiveness halo effect for humour for both males and females, wherein individuals who are more physically attractive would be rated as funnier than less attractive individuals in the photograph and video conditions.

2. Main study

2.1. Method: stimuli collection

2.1.1. Participants

Forty undergraduate psychology students from the University of Stirling participated to fulfil a course requirement (20 males;

age $M = 20.5$, $SD = 4.6$). These 40 participants will be referred to as the actors.

2.1.2. Procedure

Participants were asked to pose for a photograph looking straight into the camera with a neutral expression. The photographs were cropped to show only the top of the head to the top of the participant's shoulders. Each photograph was captured in front of a standardised grey background in a room with fluorescent lighting. Photographs were captured with a digital camera with a resolution of 2592×1944 pixels and with 24-bit RGB (red, green, and blue) colour encoding. After capturing the photograph, participants were asked the following question; "If you went to a desert island, and could take two out of the three objects, what would you take and what would you do with it?", with the option of choosing chocolate, hairspray, or a plastic bag. Each participant was given one minute to consider their answer and were then filmed answering the question on the same digital camera. Participants were asked to state what object they would bring with them and what they would do with it, and this was framed with the statement that this section of the study was freeform; therefore participants could answer any way they wished. Participants were not instructed to try to be funny nor did they know that humour was the focus of the study. After filming had concluded, participants were debriefed and the videos were analysed for explicit humour use to ensure it was appropriate to be used as stimuli. Nineteen of the actors appeared to intentionally use humour, which was categorised by laughing in a visible and audible way combined with/or making a surreal, sarcastic, or hyperbolic statement.

2.1.3. Stimuli preparation

Participants were instructed that they could speak for as long as they wanted when answering the question. The average length of the videos was 45.3 s ($SD = 16.3$ s) however all videos were edited so that they each lasted 20 s. This was carried out by preferentially trimming silences and the beginning and the ends of videos where the participant had yet to begin their answer or had already finished. Videos which still exceeded 20 s were then edited by removing the last sections of the videos, whilst still allowing for the conclusion of a final sentence so that each video still made sense to a viewer.

2.2. Method: rating stimuli

2.2.1. Participants

Eleven undergraduate psychology students from the University of Stirling participated to fulfil a course requirement (5 male; age $M = 21.5$, $SD = 7.4$). These 11 participants are referred to as the raters.

2.2.2. Procedure

Participants were tested alone in a quiet room. The stimuli presented to raters were the audio soundtrack of the desert island videos, a photograph, and then the desert island video with both picture and sound. All stimuli were presented online on a desktop computer with headphones, with each rater using the same computer and headphones each time. Each rater listened to all 40 audio clips first, then viewed 40 photographs, and finally watched all 40 videos, however the stimuli within each medium was presented randomly. Underneath each object, raters were presented with a 7-point scale which asked them to rate each piece of the stimuli for how funny they thought it was (1 = low, 7 = high) and how attractive they thought each participant was for short-term relationships and long-term relationships. Below this was a short description detailing what was meant by short-term relationships (dates, one-night stands) and long-term relationships (living together, marriage), to ensure all participants were answering with the same understanding. Following the ratings participants were debriefed.

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