



That's what she said! Perceived mate value of clean and dirty humor displays

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ABSTRACT

Humor is considered a valuable trait when evaluating potential mates, and women demonstrate a preference for men's ability to produce humor. Humor displays as a male mating strategy appear context-dependent, which suggests that women's preferences for certain humor may be contingent on their mating goals. One dimension of humor variability that could approximate men's long- (LTM) or short-term (STM) mating goals is communication of humor that is categorically clean or dirty, respectively, which could influence the humorists' desirability to women. Such displays may differentially signal sexual receptivity. Two studies tasked women with indicating interest in men who generated either clean or dirty humor. Across both studies clean humor producers were preferred when evaluating both the long- and short-term desirability of men, although this preference was larger for LTM evaluations. Study 2 also demonstrated that sociosexually unrestricted women (i.e., those with more permissive sexual attitudes) self-reported greater behavioral attraction toward dirty humorists, a preference mediated by their perceptions of dirty jokes as funnier. Dirty humor production in men and appreciation in women may facilitate respective STM goals. Results of this research provide further evidence that the specific mating context determines the appropriateness of humor use when used as a relational display.

1. Introduction

When identifying traits that constitute the ideal mate, people typically give special consideration to another person's sense of humor. A litany of research indicates humor is one of the most important traits people consider when evaluating another's mate value (Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Feingold, 1992; Lippa, 2007). Such preferences are unsurprising, as humor facilitates social bonding through a reciprocal exchange of production (e.g., jokes) and appreciation (laughter), which serve to foster closeness and strengthen pair-bonds (e.g., Li et al., 2009; Van Vugt, Hardy, Stow, & Dunbar, 2014). Within romantic relationships, women have a considerable preference for humorous men (Bressler & Balshine, 2006; Greengross & Miller, 2011).

Despite women's desire for funny men, not all humor is created equal. Different types of humor vary in their appropriateness based on the desired relationship. Specifically, previous research has shown that women prefer specific humor types, possibly due to intentions communicated using specific types of humor. Women especially prefer humor that may connote benevolence (e.g., non-injurious intentions toward others), but this preference is most apparent when evaluating mates for their long-term potential given the importance of benevolence displays in that context (Barclay, 2010; DiDonato, Bedminster,

& Machel, 2013; Zeigler-Hill, Besser, & Jett, 2013). Jokes connoting this so-called benevolence could include those colloquially deemed “clean.” However, given that certain types of humor may reflect interest in short-term sexual encounters (i.e., dirty jokes), women may shift preferences toward dirty humorists when interested in uncommitted sex. We sought to clarify how the different content of jokes becomes differentially preferable as a function of women's desired relationship context. Specifically, we sought to explore whether the use of dirty and clean jokes influences men's desirability in across different mating contexts.

1.1. Long-term and short-term mate preferences

Historically, mating has been a pluralistic endeavor for humans, with short-term (STM) and long-term mating (LTM) strategies serving different aspects of multi-faceted reproductive goals, necessitating careful mate selection. Individuals must prioritize certain traits in one context versus another based on that individual's primary goal in that context (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In STM, which emphasizes focusing on offspring quantity or heritable fitness for one's offspring (e.g., physically healthy mates), individuals acquire multiple partners for uncommitted sexual encounters and prefer physically attractive mates

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who appear interested in STM themselves (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Li & Kenrick, 2006). For example, women prefer muscular and extraverted men in STM contexts, as such traits connote heritable fitness and a similar interest in such encounters (Brown & Sacco, 2017; Frederick & Haselton, 2007). Men prioritize features of women's bodies that connote fertility for STM (e.g., 0.7 waist-to-hip ratio), a preference that would enhance reproductive success (Confer, Perilloux, & Buss, 2010; Singh, 1993). Although women may ultimately incur the cost of reduced parental investment in STM, they also stand to benefit from preferring attractive men as short-term partners. Such men would likely possess good genes, and thus heritable fitness for resultant offspring to act as compensation for long-term partners of potentially lower physical mate value.

Conversely, the committed, monogamous pair-bonding of LTM shifts priorities for ideal mates. Despite men and women's continued prioritization of attractiveness, women emphasize additional traits that reliably connote men's access to resources (e.g., higher status, conspicuous displays) and willingness to invest in offspring (Jonason, Li, & Madson, 2012; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). Nonetheless, benevolence remains the most important trait for LTM (Barclay, 2010; Li et al., 2002). Such benevolence signals the predictability and trustworthiness necessary for LTM, as those traits connote fidelity, simultaneously solving men and women's adaptive problems within that relationship context. For men, perceiving these cues would reduce concerns of extra-pair mating, thus reducing concerns of paternal uncertainty. Women's recognition of fidelity cues in men would facilitate identification of men less likely to divert resources from their pair-bond. Because of both the desirability signaled through men's humor use (Bressler & Balshine, 2006) and that humor connotes one's interest in forming a relationship (Li et al., 2009), women may ultimately be able to infer men's contextual mating intentions (i.e., relative receptivity to STM and LTM) based on their humor displays and therefore desire a type of humor consonant with a given context.

1.2. Women's mate selection through humor

Inherent differences in men's and women's reproductive biology have imposed considerable cost asymmetries in their sexual behavior and preferences. Men's minimal investment in reproduction is sperm provision, whereas reproduction is substantially costlier for women, considering their minimal investments include pregnancy and lactation, as well as slower reproductive rate from women's temporary removal from further reproduction during pregnancy. To offset these significantly greater costs to reproduction, women would have benefited by becoming choosier in mate selection, thereby reducing the likelihood of mating decisions that would reduce heritable fitness. Consequently, men's reproductive success would be contingent upon outcompeting other men on dimensions deemed valuable to “choosier” women (Trivers, 1972). In essence, women become the “buyers” in sexual marketplaces and select men, whereas men act as “sellers,” by attempting to signal traits and abilities that would satisfy women's reproductive criteria vis-à-vis other men (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). In fact, women have considerably more stringent criteria in partner selection compared to men by requiring higher minimal levels of desired traits in the service of offsetting the metabolic costs of reproduction (Kenrick et al., 1993).

One commodity men could offer to their partners is humor. Although research consistently indicates both men and women desire a partner with a sense of humor, women's selection criteria for humor are based specifically on men's ability to produce humor (Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006; Buss, 1989; Lippa, 2007; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011). That is, women especially desire men who can make them laugh (Bressler & Balshine, 2006). In fact, humorous men typically report greater success in mate acquisition (Greengross & Miller, 2011; Guéguen, 2010), with women reporting more interest in funny men on dating sites (Wilbur & Campbell, 2011). Because of this interest in

humor from women, men typically display humor in the service of signaling their interest toward women who would, in turn, show appreciation for such displays via laughter (Li et al., 2009). Considering the sexual marketplace, women act as the “buyers” to the humor men “sell.” Although humor itself is desirable, the type of humor men employ may further signal specific types of interests within a relational context. For example, affiliative humor, a benevolent humor style, can communicate interest in social bonding and social warmth, traits which tend to be preferred by women in long-term partners (Wilbur & Campbell, 2011).

1.3. Mating context and appropriate humor use

Despite humor's desirability in relationships, not all types of humor production are equivalently desirable, especially when considering different mating contexts. In fact, when tasked with deciding whether to use affiliative or aggressive humor when primed with STM or LTM, both women and men consistently reported utilizing affiliative humor across both contexts but downregulated their intentions to use aggressive humor in LTM (DiDonato & Jakubiak, 2016). This suggests an awareness in what constitutes appropriate or attractive humor for a context and that pursuing a long- or short-term mate requires different consideration for these displays. Other research has considered the attractiveness of specific interpersonal humor styles, or the underlying basis from which individuals generate humor. Affiliative humor, a style utilized to create positive social bonds, connotes warmth and competence to prospective mates, ultimately eliciting LTM desirability (DiDonato et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2013). Importantly, this favorability toward affiliative humor was most apparent among women's evaluation of male humorists, compared to men's evaluation of female humorists. Humorous, yet flippant, pick-up lines undermine men's attractiveness in LTM (Senko & Fyffe, 2010). Conversely, women find attractive, self-deprecating humorists more desirable than men whose humor deprecates others, especially within LTM contexts (Greengross & Miller, 2008; Lundy, Tan, & Cunningham, 1998).

Much like how different humor styles communicate prospective mates' contextual value, the content of men's jokes could convey considerable information about their sexual intentions that could provide a complementary cue to their desirability. Clean jokes are one analog to convey benevolence to another person, a trait deemed desirable in LTM (Barclay, 2010). Topics for such jokes could potentially include amusing observations of life. Importantly, such jokes' content would likely not be sexual, a potential analog for signaling disinterest in infidelity, and could convey sincerity in establishing a genuine connection (DiDonato et al., 2013; Lundy et al., 1998). Conversely, given the sexual nature of their content, dirty humor could be inappropriate in LTM. Such jokes could, at a minimum, communicate sexually permissive attitudes, or could even communicate actual interest in short-term sexual encounters, which women could find detrimental for LTM, as such jokes could communicate reduced interest in parental investment and proclivity toward infidelity (Jonason, Garcia, Webster, Li, & Fisher, 2015). Furthermore, dirty jokes could be disgusting, which would further elicit aversion from women, given their greater degree of sexual disgust compared to men (Tybur, Lieberman, & Griskevicius, 2009).

The clean-dirty distinction may suggest clean humorists would be especially desirable in LTM, as their humor would connote benevolence. However, this desirability could ultimately undermine their attractiveness in STM (see Brown and Sacco, *in press*). LTM desirability may communicate STM unsuitability because of perceived unwillingness to disentangle from partners (Jonason & Buss, 2012). Conversely, humorists utilizing dirty jokes may explicitly communicate interest in STM, implicating themselves as preferable in that context relative to humorists utilizing clean humor. Thus, dirty humor use may be a contemporary manifestation of explicit STM interest to facilitate STM. Since women tend to evaluate the humor displays of potential mates rather than produce humor themselves in a romantic context. We focus

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