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The University of Southern Mississippi

INTERPERSONAL DESIRABILITY OF THE SELF-DEFEATING HUMORIST

By

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Thesis

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Abstract

Humor is a multifaceted construct and can be defined in terms of the different ways people tend to use humor, which are referred to as humor styles. The present study examined the potential effects that the four different humor styles (Affiliative, Self-enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-defeating) have on other people's perceptions of the individual producing the humor, and whether that impact was moderated by the attachment style of the individual perceiving the humorist. The goal was to investigate the interaction between the humor styles and physical attractiveness of a target in predicting how attractive a person is perceived and the degree to which others desire to become friends with, go on a date with, or marry the individual.

One-hundred thirty-four female undergraduates viewed photographs of unattractive and attractive males. The photographs were accompanied with a description of the male's humor style. Participants then used a Likert scale to rate physical attractiveness and her desire to become friends with, go on a date with, and marry the target. Participants also completed a measure of attachment style.

Although all four styles were examined, the study was primarily focused on the effects of the self-defeating humor style. Compared to the relatively negative impact of self-defeating humor for less attractive targets, self-defeating humor used by highly attractive individuals enhances their desirability. This study did not find significant support for the similarity-attraction hypothesis. The results indicate that physical attraction plays a more vital role when insecure (anxious or avoidant) people select friends and romantic partners.

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Introduction

Stand-up comedy is an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving or speaking comically in front of an audience; the comedian's humorous effect is unsupported with other means, such as costumes, props, settings, or dramatic vehicles (Mintz, 1985). Kevin Hart's "Laugh at my Pain" comedy tour was a huge success and earned more than fifteen million dollars in ticket sales ("Kevin Hart", 2011). Millions of people gathered to watch the stand-up comedian tell jokes about his personal life and personal deficits. Audiences often love comedians for the humor provided at his or her own expense. However, do ordinary individuals attract the same positive attention while providing laughter at their own expense? Or, could this type of humor cause people to form negative impressions of the individual? How do other types of humor affect the way an individual is perceived? These types of questions are the focus of the present study.

Research on humor has shown that in general, a good sense of humor is a socially desirable trait in a potential mate (Craik, Lampert, & Nelson, 1996). People with a good sense of humor are perceived as more attractive and suitable as a long-term partner than individuals with an average or no sense of humor (McGee & Shelvin, 2009). However, humor is actually a multifaceted construct, which can be defined in terms of the different ways people tend to use humor, which are referred to as humor styles. The four styles consist of affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

A self-defeating humorist behaves comically or says derogatory statements at his or her own expense in an attempt to amuse others and to enhance interpersonal relationships (Fitts, Sebby, & Zlokovich, 2009; Martin et al., 2003). It should be noted

that although the two are similar, self-defeating humor and light self-deprecation are not the same. The self-defeating humor style involves ingratiation of one's self in order for others to accept the individual, which is different from a more healthy ability to laugh at your own mistakes and faults without doing it in a way that is overly degrading. Self-deprecation involves being able to poke fun at one's self in a gentle manner and may cause others to feel that the humorist is less threatening; however, self-defeating humor is excessively putting one's self down to a point that is seen as potentially detrimental to one's own well-being (Martin et al., 2003).

Self-defeating humor is used more frequently by individuals who show characteristics of an insecure attachment style and those with damaged self-esteem (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2010; Kazarian & Martin, 2004; Stieger, Formann, & Burger, 2010). Research on attractive qualities in a potential mate has found that the best romantic candidate possesses features that are characteristic of attachment security (Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994). People enjoy humor and are more attracted to secure individuals. Although secure individuals are the preferred candidate, there are certainly individuals with an insecure attachment style who are in romantic relationships (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2010). Insecure individuals have a tendency to engage in self-defeating humor; therefore, does this humor style affect how desirable they are? There is little research that focuses on the potential positive and negative effects of self-defeating humor on attraction and mate selection. Investigating the interaction between self-defeating humor and the physical attractiveness of a potential mate can help us further understand how this humor style affects interpersonal dating relationships.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the impact of the four humor styles on the perceived interpersonal desirability of the humorist, and whether that impact was moderated by the attachment style of the individual perceiving the humorist. The goal was to investigate the interaction between the four humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor) and physical attractiveness of a target in predicting how attractive a person is perceived and the degree to which others desire to become friends with, go on a date with, or marry the individual.

Literature Review

Styles of Humor

Contemporary research on humor reveals that humor is a multidimensional construct. The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ; Martin et al., 2003) was developed as a self-report measure of the four dimensions of humor relating to individual differences in how people tend to use humor in their everyday lives. The HSQ identifies two adaptive and two maladaptive dimensions of humor, and the styles are characterized as other-directed versus self-directed and benevolent versus detrimental (Cann, Zapata, & Davis, 2009; Martin et al., 2003).

Affiliative and self-enhancing humor are adaptive and benevolent, or at least benign, uses of humor. Individuals who engage in *affiliative humor* (other-directed) tell jokes in order to enhance interpersonal relationships and reduce interpersonal tensions (Martin et al., 2003). *Self-enhancing humor* (self-directed) involves a humorous outlook on life and maintaining it during adversity or when stressed. Self-enhancing humor is beneficial to psychological well-being because it serves as a coping mechanism and is used to maintain self-esteem (Martin et al., 2003; Stieger et al., 2010). Aggressive and

self-defeating humor are maladaptive humor styles and possibly detrimental to the individual's well-being. *Aggressive humor* (other-directed) enhances the self at the expense of others by being sarcastic, teasing, and ridiculing others (Martin et al., 2003). *Self-defeating humor* (self-focused) involves excessive self-disparaging in an effort to ingratiate oneself.

Self-defeating humor focuses on the individual's personal deficiencies (Cann et al., 2009). The individual also allows and encourages others to ridicule him or her. Klein and Kuiper (2006) suggest that people of a lower social status may use self-defeating humor as a means to regain peer relationships and status. A large amount of the literature on humor acknowledges the negative effects of this style. Self-defeating humor is positively correlated with neuroticism, depression, anxiety, hostility, aggression, bad mood, and psychiatric symptoms (Martin et al., 2003). It is also negatively related to self-esteem, psychological well-being, intimacy, and satisfaction with social supports. Although these relations are well-documented, the present study takes into consideration that there could be positive outcomes to using self-defeating humor under certain conditions.

Overview of Attachment Theory

Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied John Bowlby's theory on infant attachment to adult romantic relationships. They distinguished between secure and insecure attachment. Attachment-related anxiety and avoidance are the two dimensions used to conceptualize attachment security (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2010). An individual with low anxiety and low avoidance is considered to be securely attached (Foster, Kernis, & Goldman, 2007). An individual with anxious attachment is

preoccupied with concerns about being rejected by others. Individuals with avoidant attachment are reluctant to form close relationships with others.

Secure attachment is associated with high self-esteem levels (Huis in't Veld, Vingerhoets, & Denollet, 2011). Scholars have divided self-esteem into explicit (conscious, deliberate) and implicit (unconscious, automatic, habitual) self-esteem (Stieger et al., 2010). Implicit and explicit self-esteem are independent of each other, which allows self-esteem discrepancies to form. A self-esteem discrepancy where the individual displays low explicit but high implicit self-esteem is deemed as damaged self-esteem. People tend to prefer to go on a date with individuals with high self-esteem as opposed to those with low or moderate self-esteem (Ziegler-Hill & Myers, 2011).

When attempting to understand an individual's sense of personal security, it is necessary to consider the concepts of secure attachment and self-esteem. An individual's level of personal security impacts his or her interpersonal relationships. Low self-esteem has often been thought of as less desirable in a potential mate (Ziegler-Hill & Myers, 2011). People tend to desire secure individuals as dating partners instead of preoccupied or avoidant partners (Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994). Individuals who use self-defeating humor usually possess an insecure attachment style and/or have damaged self-esteem (Kazarian & Martin, 2004; Stieger et al., 2010).

Insecure Attachment and Self-Defeating Humor

The attachment styles have been shown to relate to the four humor styles. Cann, Norman, Welbourne, and Calhoun (2008) found that the avoidance attachment style is related to affiliative humor (low avoidance) and aggressive humor (high avoidance). Self-enhancing humor is used by individuals who are low on anxiety. Self-defeating humor

has been shown to positively correlate with the anxious attachment style (Cann et al., 2008; Kazarian and Martin, 2004). Their anxious preoccupation with interpersonal relationships and lack of security could explain why these individuals tend to rely on self-defeating humor in their attempt to be accepted by others. Anxious individuals worry about being abandoned by others and often perceive that their interpersonal relationships lack closeness (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2010). Being insecure about their relationships could cause them to go to extremes to get others to like them and increase closeness.

Little research has been conducted on the specific characteristics of insecure individuals that may be perceived as attractive. Brumbaugh and Fraley (2010) conducted a study to understand how insecure people attract mates. They found that individuals with avoidant and anxious attachment are likely to use humor in new dating interactions. Insecure individuals have dating strategies and some positive qualities, such as warmth and humor, which assist them in obtaining romantic dates. In initial encounters, two strangers who share a humorous experience tend to feel closer to each other; this feeling of closeness is even higher in anxious individuals (Fraley & Aron, 2004).

Martin et al. (2003) found that self-defeating humor negatively relates to self-esteem, psychological well-being, intimacy, satisfaction with social supports, and femininity. Self-defeating humor is often used by individuals with low self-esteem and an insecure attachment style (Kazarian & Martin, 2004; Stieger et al., 2010). Individuals with low self-esteem may hide or suppress their negative feelings about themselves and use self-defeating humor to mask their insecurities (Stieger et al., 2010). It is possible that the individual who makes self-disparaging jokes believes that this humor will convey that he or she is comfortable with their personal deficits, but in reality the individual is not. In

spite of being perceived as less attractive than secure individuals, many insecure individuals are in romantic relationships. Brumbaugh and Fraley (2010) conclude that when a sense of humor is displayed during the initial stages of a relationship, this may overshadow the character flaws of insecure individuals and make them more appealing because the interaction is more pleasant. In other words, showing a good sense of humor to a potential mate might help overcome being perceived as having an insecure attachment, thus improving the interpersonal desirability of the individual. Being that self-defeating humor may be a tool used to mask insecurities (Stieger et al., 2010), using this humor style may be initially seen as attractive due to the laughter that it invokes.

Many studies on interpersonal relationships have given support to the similarity-attraction hypothesis, which states that there is a higher attraction between two individuals who are similar to each other (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008; Lutz-Zois, Bradley, Mihalik, & Moorman-Eavers, 2006). People desire a partner who is similar to them in regard to personality traits (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008) and attachment styles (Klohn & Luo, 2003). Few studies have examined humor similarity and relationship quality. Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra (2010) applied the similarity-attraction hypothesis to the areas of humor and relationships. In regard to couple humor similarity, romantic partners resembled each other in regards to sense of humor (humor production and attitudes toward humor). However, the study failed to support its third hypothesis that partners who resemble each other with regard to sense of humor would experience greater relationship quality.

Barelds (2005) found that romantic partners resembled each other in regards to self-esteem. Building on Brumbaugh and Fraley's (2010) curiosity of how insecure

individuals attract mates, the present study also examined if insecure people are attracted to other potentially insecure individuals, as signaled by their use of a self-defeating humor style. Self-defeating humor is frequently used by insecurely attached individuals; therefore, the present study specifically investigated whether insecure participants are more attracted to targets who engage in self-defeating humor.

The Effects of Humor on Interpersonal Desirability

As Martin et al. (2003) described, humor does have a way of enhancing interpersonal relationships. Humor has been shown to be useful in the initial stages of forming new romantic relationships and in maintaining healthy relationships (McGee & Shelvin, 2009). In terms of long-term relationships, married couples who appreciated their spouse's sense of humor were more satisfied with the relationship than couples who did not (Ziv & Gadish, 1989).

A good sense of humor has been shown to be a desired personality trait in a potential mate (McGee & Shelvin, 2009). In a study conducted by McGee and Shelvin, participants were given vignettes that described potential long-term romantic partners, and each vignette varied in the description of the potential partner's sense of humor. The sense of humor in the vignette was described using phrases stating that the individual had a good sense of humor, average sense of humor, or no sense of humor (e.g. "I have known James [Chloe] a long time and I wouldn't say he [she] has either a great or poor sense of humor. He's [She's] kind of average."). The vignettes included positive attributes that evolutionary theory has shown to be important during mate selection, such as young, physically fit, attractive, ambitious, and having a high status. Individuals with a good sense of humor were perceived as more attractive and suitable as a long-term

partner than individuals with an average or no sense of humor. McGee and Shelvin attribute our attraction to mates with a good sense of humor to an individual's desire for happiness and amusement. This study did not include photographs of the targets; the participants had to imagine the targets. However, the present study included photographs of targets both high and low in rated physical attractiveness; the inclusion of photographs enabled the examination of whether the style of humor enhanced or detracted from how desirable the target was perceived.

In highlighting sense of humor as a socially desirable characteristic, there is a general tendency for people to assume a number of positive attributes to an individual described as having a good sense of humor, such as greater intelligence, self-esteem, and sociability (Martin, 2007). However, the specific ways in which an individual tends to use humor (i.e., affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, or self-defeating humor style) may cause others to perceive the individual as having negative personality attributes (Kuiper & Leite, 2010). An individual's style of humor influences whether he or she is perceived as having other socially desirable attributes. Kuiper and Leite (2010) found that individuals who display an adaptive humor style (affiliative or self-enhancing) are associated with more socially desirable characteristics than those who display maladaptive humor styles (self-defeating and aggressive). The adaptive styles of humor were both related to high levels of extroversion. Affiliative humor resulted in more positive impressions than any other style, and the high aggressive humor style resulted in the least positive impressions. Individuals who engaged in self-defeating or aggressive humor were perceived as more neurotic than those who had an adaptive style of humor.

Although individuals with a self-defeating humor style may be in romantic relationships, there are other individuals whose maladaptive style of humor could be causing potential mates to refuse any further contact. Kuiper, Kirsh, and Leite (2010) examined the impact of the four humor styles on recipients of the humorous comments. Recipients of humorous comments have a greater desire to continue interaction with friends who use affiliative and self-enhancing humor more than with friends who made aggressive or self-defeating humorous comments (Kuiper et al., 2010). Aggressive humor was shown to be the most maladaptive humor style in social interactions. The current study built on this previous study by applying its concept to the initial stages of forming a romantic relationship.

A number of studies point to the maladaptive and negative effects of self-defeating humor. However, small dosages of self-defeating humor may not be as harmful as excessive self-disparaging joking, and self-deprecating humor could have positive outcomes in social situations. In support of this notion, Kuiper and Leite (2010) found that individuals with high levels of self-defeating humor were perceived as more neurotic than individuals with low levels of self-defeating humor. Using self-defeating humor on rare occasions may be a tool during social interactions; however, a continuous pattern may become highly unappealing and lead to assumptions about the personal's underlying personal qualities (Cann et al., 2009). Gentle self-deprecation may be desirable. Small dosages of self-defeating humor could cause others to feel more comfortable and secure during interactions with the self-defeating humorist. Joking about one's mistakes and minor faults could create a non-threatening environment and cause others to view the

self-defeating humorist as a modest and down-to-earth person with flaws like everyone else (Janes & Olsen, 2010).

Under what circumstances is self-deprecating humor beneficial? Greengross and Miller (2008) examined the adaptive functions of other-deprecating and self-deprecating humor in relation to human sexual selection. Their discussion of other-deprecating humor relates this humor to “dissing” (“dissing” is a colloquialism for disrespect). It involves an individual poking fun at “the deficiencies in a same-sex rival’s fitness indicators, such as their health, intelligence, or status” (Greengross & Miller, 2008). Self-deprecating humor is a “socially pre-emptive way” to make fun of one’s own deficits. Individuals with a high social status who use self-deprecating humor are desired (more attractive) for a long-term relationship more than high-status individuals who engage in other-deprecating humor. Self-deprecating humor enhances the attractiveness of high-status individuals, and Greengross and Miller suggest that the usage of self-deprecating humor by low-status individuals could suggest that the person has undesirable characteristics, such as depression, low mate value, subordination, and/or low self-esteem.

Janes and Olson (2010) provide further support for the notion that self-deprecating humor does have positive outcomes. The researchers investigated the effects on participants who observed humor that ridiculed another person and ridiculed the self. Participants who watched a stand-up comedian tell jokes about another person had a greater fear of failure and exhibited more conformity on assigned tasks (ring toss task for fear of failure and rating the funniness of cartoon strips for conformity) than participants in the self-ridicule and no-ridicule conditions. In an additional experiment, participants were exposed to an instructional videotape on how to write Haiku poetry. Janes and

Olson found that the self-deprecating instructor created a perceived non-threatening environment for participants. These participants showed a higher level of creativity on the assigned task (Torrance's Test of Creative Thinking) compared to participants who were exposed to the other-ridicule and no-ridicule conditions. The participants in the self-ridicule condition rated the instructor more positively and respected the instructor more than participants in the other conditions.

Lundy, Tan, and Cunningham (1998) developed *The Social Transformation Model of Humor* to study the interaction of humor and physical attractiveness and how this interaction affects romantic attraction. This model views humor as adaptive and a means to playfully entertain another. Self-deprecating humor involves humble self-disclosures and putting oneself down in an exaggerated or nonsensical way. The model considers that self-deprecating humor communicates friendly, submissive intentions and may increase romantic attraction if other favorable variables are present. Physical attractiveness is considered a favorable characteristic that would influence romantic attraction. The self-deprecating humorous responses used in this experiment's transcripts involved putting one's self down, allowing others to belittle the target, and disparagement of the target's parents, which the researchers view as an indirect form of self-disparagement because it refers to the target's lineage. In order to experimentally examine the desire for future interaction with an opposite-sex individual, the researchers manipulated self-deprecating humorous comments with interview transcript (humorous and non-humorous) and manipulated physical attractiveness with photographs (attractiveness and non-attractive). The effects of humor and physical attractiveness were examined within five types of interpersonal relationships: dating, sexual intercourse,

serious relationship, marriage, and marriage with children. There were eight conditions (physically attractive and humorous, non-physically attractive and humorous, etc) and participants were assigned to only one condition. Participants had to rate their desire for future interaction with the stimulus person for each of the five romantic relationships. For women, physically attractive men who used self-deprecating humor were more desirable than non-physically attractive men. For women, self-deprecating humor enhanced the desirability of highly attractive males for romantic short-term and long-term relationships. This effect was not seen in men. Men placed a greater value on attractiveness.

The between-subjects design used by Lundy, Tan, and Cunningham is a limitation of the aforementioned study. Participants were assigned to one of the eight conditions. Individual variability could have affected how the targets were rated. Therefore, the current study incorporated a within-subjects design so that all participants served as their own control. This allowed the various individual differences of the participants, such as differences in characteristics that they personally find attractive in others, to be held equal across all conditions. In addition, Lundy et al. (1998) only examined self-deprecating humor. The present study examined the interaction of all four humor styles with physical attractiveness.

Gender Differences

Gender differences have been observed in the usage of the four humor styles and mate selection. Men and women do not differ in their preference for humor in romantic relationships (McGee & Shelvin, 2009). On the other hand, men tend to engage in more self-defeating and aggressive humor than women (Martin et al., 2003) in normal social

interactions. However, Campbell, Martin, and Ward (2008) found that men tend to use affiliative humor and women tend to use aggressive humor to an equal degree when resolving relationship conflict.

Martin et al. (2003) used the Extended Personal Attributes Questionnaire (EPAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979) to measure how the negative and positive valued masculinity and femininity traits relate to the humor styles. Aggressive and self-defeating humor were positively correlated with unmitigated masculinity and negatively related to positively valued (desirable) feminine personality attributes (Martin et al., 2003). Feminine valued traits include being helpful to others, emotional, kind, understanding, and warm to others (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). Unmitigated masculinity (negatively valued masculinity) consists of traits that are more typical of men and are undesirable in men and women. Unmitigated masculinity includes traits such as aggressiveness and being cynical. Aggressiveness and being cynical are undesirable traits in males; therefore, female participants may perceive that targets who use aggressive and self-defeating humor as less desirable.

When selecting a mate, men place greater importance on physical attractiveness (Lundy et al., 1998; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994) than on humor. In regards to race, Caucasian women are more likely to marry a man who is unattractive. Women are more likely than men to marry someone who is unattractive, older, and has more education; men are more likely than women to marry someone who is five years younger (Sprecher et al., 1994). To control for this gender difference, the present study used only females.

Value of Study to the Academic Discipline

It is uncertain of the exact impact that self-defeating humor has on interpersonal desirability. The present study investigated whether self-defeating humor would influence participants' desire to become friends with, go on a date with, and marry a potential partner. The study built on Lundy et al.'s (1998) *Social Transformation Model of Humor* by examining the interaction effect of humor and physical attractiveness. Examining the extent to which self-defeating humor is desired (or acceptable) in a potential romantic partner will further our understanding of the effects of self-defeating humor on interpersonal relationships.

Study Expectations

The purpose of the present study was to assess the impact of the four humor styles on the perceived interpersonal desirability of the humorist, and whether that impact was moderated by the attachment style of the individual perceiving the humorist. The study investigated the interaction between the four humor styles and physical attractiveness in predicting how attractive a person is perceived and the degree to which others desire to become friends with, go on a date with, or marry the individual.

Two main effects were expected, one for the humor styles (affiliative versus self-enhancing versus aggressive versus self-defeating humor) and one for physical attractiveness (attractive versus non-attractive). Based on previous research that considers affiliative humor to be the most adaptive humor style, the first hypothesis was that the affiliative humor style would result in a greater desirability than any of the other humor styles; participants would desire to become friends with, go on a date with, and marry the affiliative humorist more than the self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humorist. Research has shown that the aggressive humor style is the most maladaptive;

therefore, the second hypothesis was that participants would desire the aggressive humorist less than any other style. The third hypothesis was that, regardless of humor style, targets rated as more physically attractive would be more desirable in all three interpersonal relationships than targets rated as less physically attractive.

Given that individuals with maladaptive humor styles (i.e. aggressive and self-defeating humor) do manage to obtain romantic partners, physical attractiveness was expected to play a role in desirability ratings of targets. It was hypothesized that there would be an interaction between physical attractiveness and humor style for predicting the desirability ratings of the targets. Therefore, hypothesis four was that participants would have the strongest desire to engage in interpersonal relationships (friendship, dating, or marriage) with targets who were attractive and had an affiliative humor style, above and beyond the effects of physical attraction and humor style. The fifth hypothesis was that within the self-defeating humor category, highly attractive targets who use self-defeating humor would be perceived as more desirable than targets who are less physically attractive.

Hypothesis six was that the effects described above would be moderated by the attachment style of participants. Specifically, although the effect of self-defeating humor in the target was hypothesized to decrease desirability of the target, this negative effect was hypothesized to be more strongly negative for participants with secure attachment styles, and more weakly negative, or perhaps even positive, for participants who have insecure attachment styles.

Methodology

Overview

Female participants read descriptions of a number of males while viewing a photograph of each of them. Half of the pictures depicted physically attractive targets, and half depicted targets low in physical attractiveness. The descriptions associated with the pictures contained statements that reflect the use of one of the four humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, or self-defeating humor). Participants used a Likert scale to rate the level of physical attractiveness of the target and evaluate the desirability of the target as a potential friend, date, or marriage partner.

Participants

Research shows that males place a greater emphasis on physical attractiveness (Lundy et al., 1998; Sprecher et al., 1994). Due to this gender difference, the sample included only women. One-hundred thirty-six undergraduate female students at The University of Southern Mississippi were recruited for participation. The mean age was 20.3 (SD = 3.07). Participant ethnicity was 52.2% Caucasian and 47.8% African-American. There was no age restriction, except that participants had to be at least 18 years of age so that they could provide informed consent for participation. All participants were recruited from the experimental participant pool in the Department of Psychology, which consists of students who participate in psychological research studies in fulfillment of course requirements and/or for extra course credit.

Materials

To measure the participants' attachment style in relation to romantic relationships, The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire—Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) was administered. The ECR-R is a 36-item self-measure of attachment style to assess anxiety and avoidance. Sibley, Fischer, and Liu (2005) tested

the psychometric properties (reliability, temporal stability, construct, discriminant, and convergent validity) of the ECR-R. Sibley et al. included the extensively used Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) as a baseline to evaluate the ECR-R. In regards to romantic relationships, “the ECR-R provides one of, if not the, most appropriate self-report measure of adult romantic attachment currently available” (Sibley et al., 2005, p. 1534).

Images of males who had previously been normed for physical attractiveness were retrieved from the Center for Vital Longevity face database (Minear & Park, 2004). The photographs were in color and depicted men, between the ages of 18 and 29, with neutral facial expressions (i.e., neither frowning nor smiling). The vast majority of students at the University of Southern Mississippi are either Caucasian or African-American. Therefore, target race was matched to self-identified race of the participant.

Descriptors of Humor Styles. With each photograph was a brief description of the target’s humor style; the descriptions were created using questions from the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003). Descriptions differed in the style of humor being depicted (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, or self-defeating humor). The descriptors for affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor styles are listed below, respectively:

Affiliative. “He does not have to work very hard at making other people laugh— He is a naturally humorous person. He likes to tell jokes or amuse other people. He laughs and jokes a lot with his closest friends. He makes other people laugh by telling funny stories. He often thinks of witty things to say when he is with other people.”

Self-enhancing. “His humorous outlook on life keeps him from getting overly upset or depressed about things. When in an upsetting situation, he usually tries to think of something funny about the situation to make himself feel better. Even when he is alone, he is often amused by the absurdities of life. Even when he is alone, he makes an effort to think of something funny to cheer him up when he is feeling sad. In spite of the circumstances of life, he never loses his sense of humor.”

Aggressive. “If something is really funny to him, he will laugh or joke about it even if someone will be offended. He likes it when people use humor as a way of criticizing or putting someone down. Sometimes he thinks of something that is so funny that he cannot stop himself from saying it, even if it is not appropriate for the situation. When telling jokes or saying funny things, he is usually not very concerned about how other people are taking it. If someone makes a mistake, he will often tease them about it. People are sometimes offended or hurt by his sense of humor. If he does not like someone, he often uses humor or teasing to put them down.”

Self-defeating. “He often goes overboard in putting himself down when making jokes or trying to be funny. He lets people laugh at him or make fun at his expense more than he should. He often tries to make people like or accept him more by saying something funny about his own weaknesses, blunders, or faults. Letting others laugh at him is his way of keeping his friends and family in good spirits. He will often get carried away in putting himself down if it makes his family or friends laugh. If he is having problems or feeling unhappy, he often covers it up by joking around, so that even his closest friends do not know how he really feels.”

Procedure

Students signed up via the SONA study scheduling website, where the study was advertised. Participants first provided written informed consent; they were given the opportunity to have any questions answered and to decline participation, if they chose to after reading the consent form. The consent form emphasized that, after the study has begun, participants could decline answering any question(s) and had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. A demographics questionnaire was also administered. After the consent form and demographics questionnaire, participants completed The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire—Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000) before proceeding to the humor survey.

The study incorporated a within-subjects research design. Participants were exposed to all eight (2 levels of attractiveness X 4 humor styles) of the conditions. Two targets for each experimental condition were presented. Having two independent variables with two (attractive versus unattractive) and four (affiliative versus self-enhancing versus aggressive versus self-defeating) levels, a total of 16 targets were rated (2 X 4 X 2 targets each). There were two attractive images with the affiliative humor style in the description, two attractive images with the self-enhancing style, two attractive images with the aggressive style, and two attractive images with the self-defeating style. The same was done for the non-attractive images. The descriptions depicted the usage of affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, or self-defeating humor.

For each target/description pair, participants used a Likert scale to rate the level of physical attractiveness of the target and evaluate the desirability of the target as a potential friend, date, or marriage partner. The Likert scale for physical attraction ranged

from 1 (*very unattractive*) to 7 (*very attractive*), and the scale for desirability ranged from 1 (*very low desirability*) to 7 (*very high desirability*).

Participants participated in the study individually. The total time required of participants for this study was approximately thirty minutes. The procedures were conducted via an on-line survey, using the PsychSurvey website (<http://psychsurvey.org>).

Results

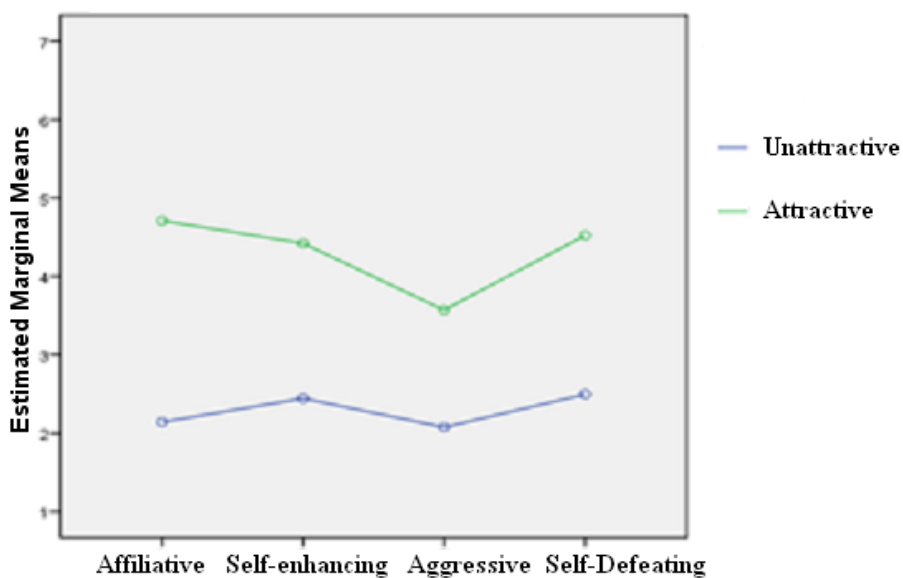
For the first set of analyses (which did not include attachment style), data were analyzed with a 2 X 4 repeated measures Analysis of Variance design, with two within-subjects factor. The within-subjects factors were physical attractiveness (unattractive or attractive) of the targets and humor style (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, or self-defeating) of the target. The ANOVA was used to analyze differences in the following dependant variables: participant ratings of target physical attractiveness, desirability of the target for friendship, desirability of the target as a dating partner, and desirability of the target as a marriage partner.

Physical Attractiveness Ratings

The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for physical attractiveness ($F(1) = 367.337, p < .001$) and for humor style ($F(3) = 29.786, p < .001$). The predicted interaction between humor styles and physical attractiveness was also significant ($F(3) = 14.670, p < .001$). As seen in Figure 1, being physically attractive is desired more than being unattractive regardless of the humor style. However, within the physically attractive targets, physical attractiveness ratings of the aggressive humorist are noticeably lower than the ratings for the affiliative and self-enhancing humorist, but not noticeably

different when looking at the ratings for unattractive targets, suggesting that aggressiveness does more harm for the attractive targets.

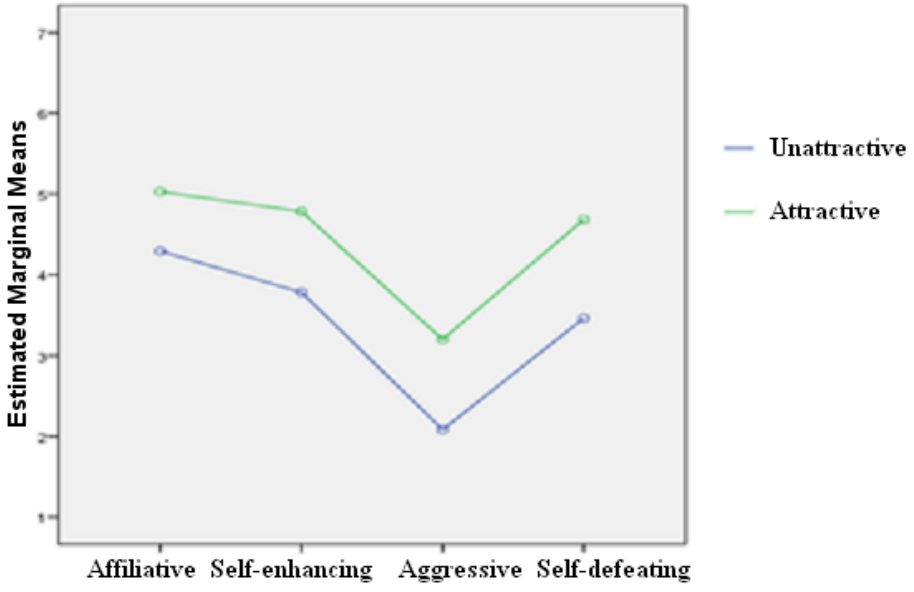
FIGURE 1. Physical Attractiveness Ratings



Friendship Desirability Ratings

For desirability for friendship ratings, there was a main effect for physical attractiveness ($F(1) = 103.852, p < .001$) and for humor style ($F(3) = 99.781, p < .001$). In addition, the predicted interaction between humor styles and physical attractiveness was significant ($F(3) = 2.905, p = .035$). As seen in Figure 2, the aggressive humor style is distinctly desired less than the other humor styles.

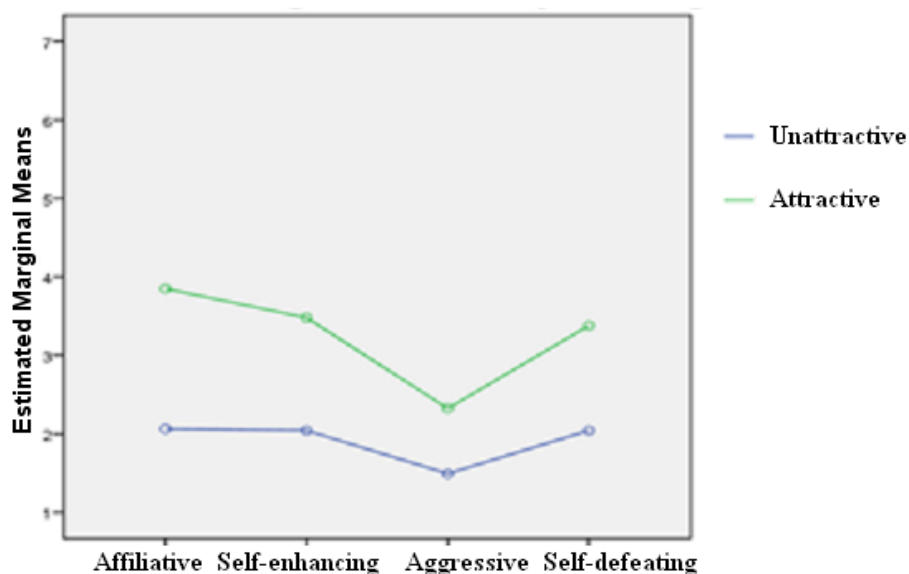
FIGURE 2. Friendship Desirability Ratings



Dating Desirability Ratings

The expected main effects for physical attractiveness ($F(1) = 147.391, p < .001$) and humor style ($F(3) = 47.033, p < .001$) were both significant for ratings of dating desirability. There was also a significant interaction between physical attractiveness and humor style ($F(3) = 13.283, p < .001$). The unattractive, self-defeating humorist is desired about the same as the affiliative and self-defeating humorist as seen in Figure 3.

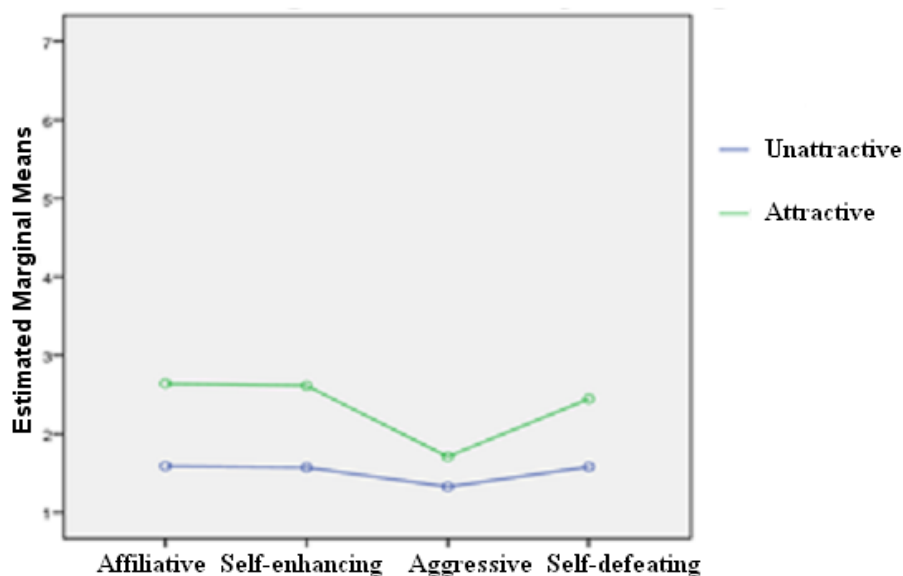
FIGURE 3. Dating Desirability Ratings



Marriage Desirability Ratings

For ratings of marriage desirability, there was a significant main effect for physical attractiveness ($F(1) = 84.541, p < .001$) and for humor style ($F(3) = 28.897, p < .001$). There was also a significant interaction between physical attractiveness and humor style ($F(3) = 14.992, p < .001$). Figure 4 shows that the humor styles are rated similarly for the unattractive targets. Furthermore, the ratings for marriage desirability overall were consistently the lowest of all the interpersonal ratings, across all targets.

FIGURE 4. Marriage Desirability Ratings



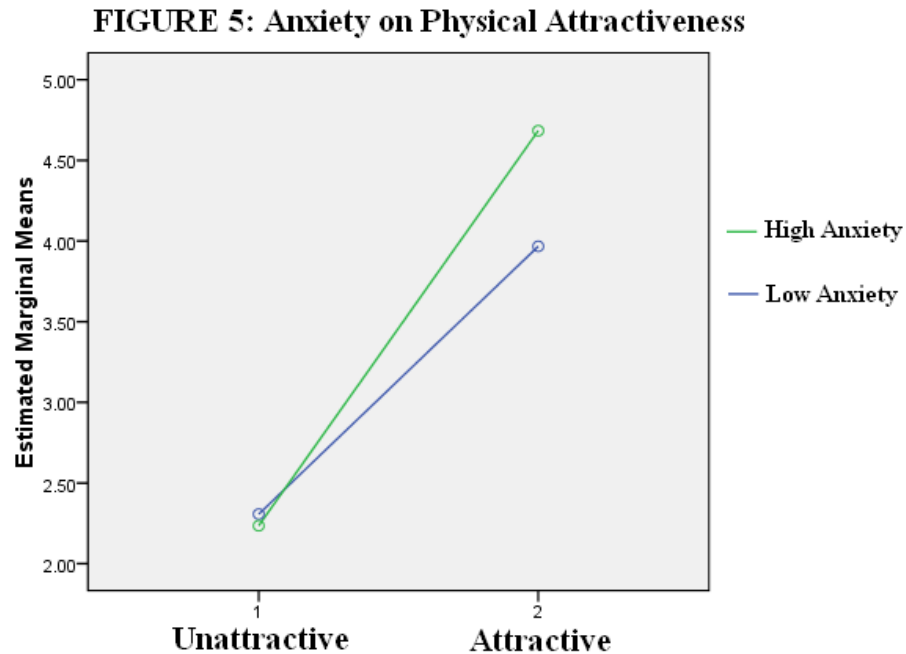
Effect of Attachment Styles on Desirability Ratings

A 2 X 4 X 2 mixed-model ANOVA was used. The between-subjects variables were attachment style (high avoidant attachment versus low avoidant attachment and high anxious attachment versus low anxious attachment), and the within-subjects variables were physical attractiveness of the target and humor style (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating). The dependent variables were participant ratings of target physical attractiveness, desirability of the target for friendship, desirability of the target for dating, and desirability of the target for marriage. The effects of physical attractiveness are not discussed here.

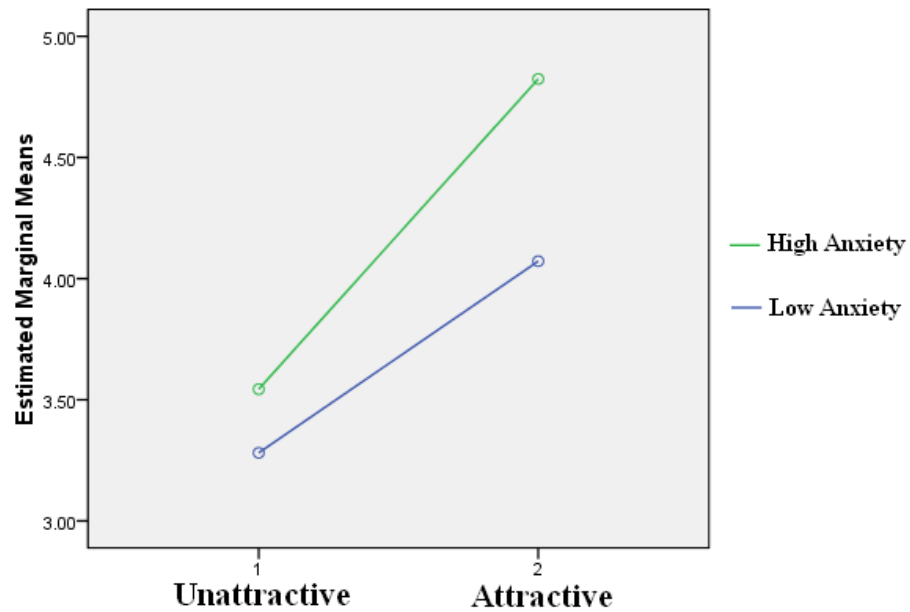
Anxious Attachment Style

Physical Attractiveness Ratings. There was not a significant main effect for attachment-related anxiety ($F(1) = 3.806, p = .054$). The interaction between humor and anxiety was not significant ($F(3) = .570, p = .635$). There was a significant interaction

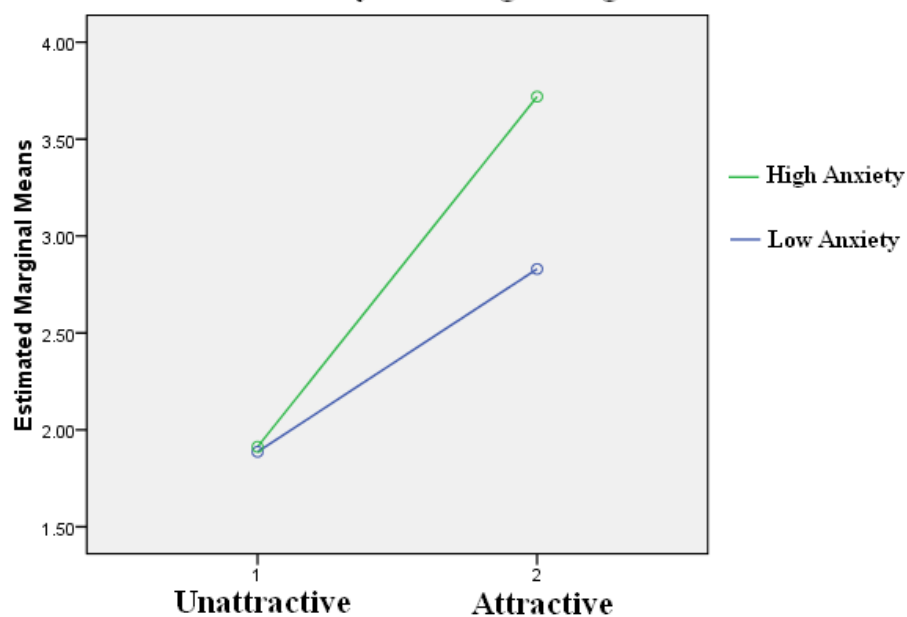
between physical attractiveness and anxiety ($F(1) = 15.173, p < .001$). As seen in Figure 5, highly anxious participants gave lower desirability ratings to unattractive targets, although the ratings are similar, and higher desirability ratings to attractive targets than did the low-anxiety participants.



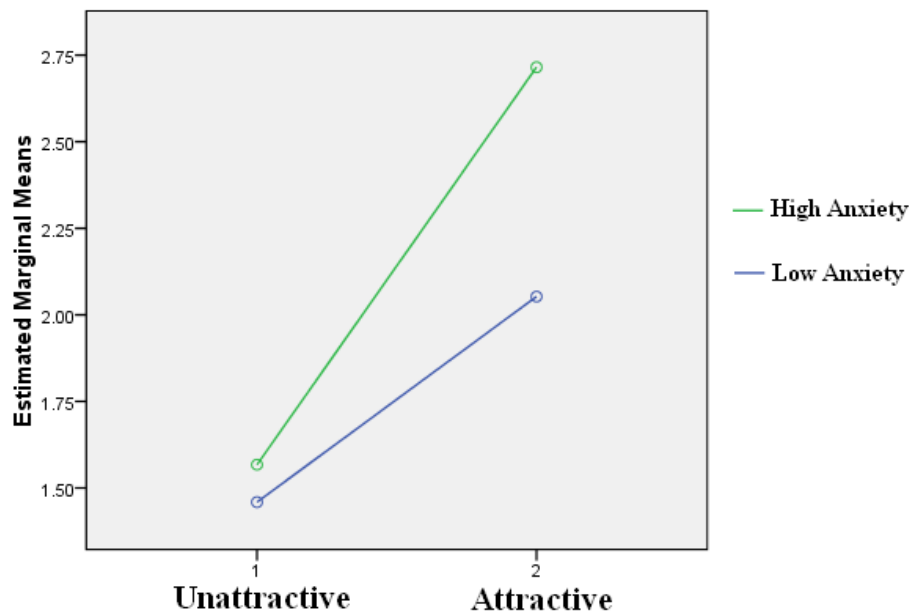
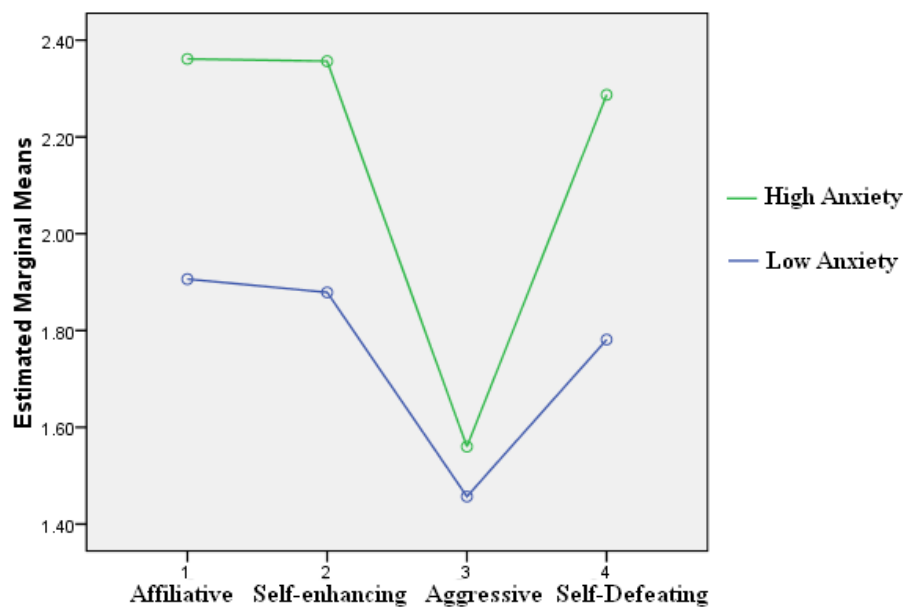
Friendship Desirability Ratings. There was a significant main effect for attachment-related anxiety ($F(1) = 6.081, p < .05$). The interaction between humor and anxiety was not significant ($F(3) = .792, p = .499$). There was a significant interaction between physical attractiveness and anxiety ($F(1) = 6.006, p < .05$). As seen in Figure 6, high-anxiety participants gave higher desirability ratings to unattractive and attractive targets.

FIGURE 6: Anxiety on Friendship Ratings

Dating Desirability Ratings. There was a significant main effect for attachment-related anxiety ($F(1) = 6.206, p < .05$). The interaction between humor and anxiety was not significant ($F(3) = 2.056, p = .106$). There was a significant interaction between physical attractiveness and anxiety ($F(1) = 16.596, p < .001$). High-anxiety and low-anxiety participants gave similar ratings for the unattractive targets as seen below in Figure 7.

FIGURE 7: Anxiety on Dating Ratings

Marriage Desirability Ratings. There was a significant main effect for attachment-related anxiety ($F(1) = 6.036, p < .05$). Only for marriage was there a significant interaction between humor and anxiety ($F(3) = 3.236, p = .022$). There was also a significant interaction between physical attractiveness and anxiety ($F(1) = 9.646, p < .05$). Figure 8 shows that highly anxious participants rate the attractive targets as more desirable than the low anxious participants rate the attractive targets, but both highly anxious and low anxious participants rate the unattractive targets about equally low. Moreover, ratings of marriage desirability was the only interpersonal relationship for which humor styles interacted with attachment anxiety. In Figure 9, support for the sixth hypothesis is seen. The negative effect of the self-defeating humor style was more weakly negative for participants who have an insecure (high anxiety) attachment style.

FIGURE 8: Anxiety on Marriage Ratings**FIGURE 9: Interaction between Anxiety and Humor**

Avoidance Attachment Style

Physical Attractiveness Ratings. The ANOVA did not reveal a statistically significant main effect for attachment-related avoidance ($F(1) = .586, p = .446$). There were no significant interactions between attractiveness and avoidant attachment ($F(1) = .144, p = .705$) nor between humor and avoidance ($F(3) = .681, p = .564$).

Friendship Desirability Ratings. There was a significant main effect for attachment-related avoidance ($F(1) = 4.417, p < .05$). There were no significant interactions between attractiveness and avoidant attachment ($F(1) = .017, p = .897$) nor between humor and avoidance ($F(3) = 1.164, p = .324$).

Dating Desirability Ratings. The main effect for attachment-related avoidance was nonsignificant ($F(1) = .005, p = .945$). There were no significant interactions between attractiveness and avoidant attachment ($F(1) = .389, p = .534$) nor between humor and avoidance ($F(3) = .568, p = .636$).

Marriage Desirability Ratings. The main effect for attachment-related avoidance was nonsignificant ($F(1) = 1.339, p = .250$). There were no significant interactions between attractiveness and avoidant attachment ($F(1) = 2.340, p = .129$) nor between humor and avoidance ($F(3) = .971, p = .407$).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to assess the impact of the four humor styles on the perceived interpersonal desirability of the humorist, and whether the impact is moderated by the physical attractiveness of the humorist or the attachment style of the participant. We investigated the interaction between the four humor styles and physical attractiveness in predicting how attractive a person is perceived and the degree to which others desire to

become friends with, go on a date with, or marry the individual. The results of the study support our notion that self-defeating humor may be beneficial in particular circumstances.

Physical Attractiveness and Humor Styles

The main effect for physical attractiveness on interpersonal desirability was significant. As predicted in hypothesis three, targets rated as more physically attractive were desired more in all three interpersonal relationships than targets rated as less physically attractive. Regardless of humor style, physical attractiveness made the target more desirable. Participants had more desire to become friends with, go on a date with, and marry the targets who were attractive than the unattractive targets. Being physically attractive is a desired characteristic in friends and potential romantic partners.

The study supported the aforementioned research of The Social Transformation Model of Humor (Lundy et al, 1998). Physical attractiveness is a favorable characteristic that enhanced the desirability for the humorists. The predicted interaction between humor styles and physical attractiveness indicates that attractiveness of an individual can enhance the desirability of self-defeating humorists.

Adaptive Humor Styles and Attractiveness

The present study supported the literature which considers affiliative and self-enhancing humor to be more desirable than aggressive and self-defeating humor (Kuiper et al, 2010; Martin et al, 2003). The main effect for humor style on desirability ratings showed that the adaptive styles of humor (i.e. affiliative and self-enhancing) were desired more than the maladaptive styles (i.e. aggressive and self-defeating). As expected in hypothesis one, the affiliative humorist had greater desirability ratings in all domains (i.e.

attractiveness, friendship, dating, and marriage) than the other humor styles. Regardless of attractiveness, individuals prefer affiliative and self-enhancing humorists more than aggressive or self-defeating humorists.

Interpersonal desirability ratings changed depending on the humor style and attractiveness of the target. The significant interaction between physical attractiveness and humor styles and the follow-up inspection of group means support the fourth hypothesis that participants would have the strongest desire to engage in interpersonal relationships with attractive targets who had an affiliative humor style, above and beyond the effects of both physical attractiveness and humor style. Unattractive and attractive targets with an affiliative humor style were desired more.

The most interesting finding between the interpersonal relationships is that the ratings for marriage desirability overall were consistently the lowest of all the interpersonal ratings across all targets. This outcome could be due to participants needing additional information, beyond humor and a photograph, about the target before deciding if marriage is an option. In other words, physical attractiveness and humor style may simply not have much effect on the desirability of a target for marriage in the absence of a lot more information about the individual.

Maladaptive Humor Styles and Attractiveness

The study showed that self-defeating humor may have some benefits. As predicted with hypothesis five, within the self-defeating humor category, highly attractive targets who used self-defeating humor were perceived as more desirable than less physically attractive, self-defeating humorists. Higher desirability ratings were given to self-defeating targets who were attractive. In fact, in many cases, physically attractive

targets with self-defeating styles elicited desirability ratings very similar to targets with affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles. Greengross and Miller (2008) found that self-deprecating (self-defeating) humorists with a high social status were desired for a long-term relationship more than other-deprecating (aggressive) humorists with a high social status. Specifically, compared to the relatively negative impact of self-defeating humor for less attractive targets, self-defeating humor used by highly attractive individuals enhances their desirability. One possible explanation for this finding is that self-defeating humor lessens the perceived intimidation of high status individuals. Interacting with highly attractive individuals may be intimidating; therefore, self-defeating humor may create a non-threatening environment (Janes & Olson, 2010). Furthermore, being that self-defeating humor has been shown to predict other negative personality characteristics, someone who is seen as unattractive may be perceived as having such characteristics to a stronger degree. Self-defeating humor in an unattractive individual could cause others to see him or her as being extremely insecure which is an undesired characteristic. Self-defeating humor may help increase the interpersonal desirability of an attractive individual while doing more harm to the desirability of an unattractive individual, which might otherwise be mitigated somewhat if that individual displayed a more adaptive humor style, such as the affiliative style.

As predicted in the present study's second hypothesis, the aggressive humorist was desired less than any other style in all three interpersonal relationships. Aggressive humor does more harm for an attractive target. This finding could be due to the person being seen as arrogant. Recall that self-defeating humor helps a high-status (or attractive)

individual be perceived as humble; A high-status individual who engages in aggressive humor by taunting and ridiculing others could be perceived as threatening and egotistical.

For the maladaptive humor styles, self-defeating humor is more attractive than aggressive humor. With the increased awareness of bullying and abuse, self-defeating humor could be seen as less negative and harmful than aggressive humor. It would be interesting to investigate if aggressive humor is actually perceived, by the recipient of the humor, as more threatening than self-defeating humor.

Attachment Style

As aforementioned, people tend to desire a partner who is similar to them in regard to attachment styles (Klohnen & Luo, 2003). In addition, romantic partners resembled each other in regards to self-esteem (Barelds, 2005). The current study examined if insecurely attached people are attracted to other potentially insecure individuals, as signaled by their use of a self-defeating humor style. Self-defeating humor is frequently used by insecurely attached individuals; therefore, the study specifically investigated whether insecure participants are more attracted to targets who engage in self-defeating humor. It was predicted that the decreased desirability for self-defeating humorists would be stronger for securely attached participants, and weaker for participants who have insecure attachment styles.

Being that people are attracted to secure individuals, I predicted that humor style would affect how desirable the target was perceived, as signaled by the use of self-defeating humor. Participants would desire the self-defeating humorist less than the more adaptive humor styles. However, this last hypothesis not supported to the expected degree. Humor style only affected desirability ratings for marriage when the target was

high in anxiety. This study did not find significant support for the similarity-attraction hypothesis.

The results indicate that physical attraction plays a more vital role when insecure (anxious or avoidant) people select friends and romantic partners. For all three interpersonal relationships, relatively insecure participants (high in relationship anxiety) gave higher desirability ratings to unattractive and attractive targets compared to the secure participants (high-anxiety), and insecure participants rated attractive targets as much more attractive than did secure participants. This finding could be due to insecure people being keenly aware of the flaws (unattractiveness) and attributes in other people. Although they fear rejection, these participants still desired to become friends with, date, and marry the attractive targets.

For the effects of avoidant attachment style on friendship desirability ratings, the reverse happened; insecure participants (high relationship avoidant) gave lower desirability ratings to unattractive and attractive targets, instead of rating them higher as seen with the high-anxious participants. This finding is in line with the general notion that individuals with an avoidant attachment are reluctant to form close relationships with others. The fact that this occurred for the friendship ratings is possibly due to the general hesitation of initiating a new interpersonal relationship with a stranger. It is easier to decide to date or marry someone whom you are already acquainted with. Despite their tendency to be uncomfortable with closeness, the high-avoidant participants gave higher desirability ratings for marriage than did the low-avoidant participants. Another interesting finding occurred in the dating condition. Secure participants desired to date unattractive targets more than the insecure participants did, and insecure participants

desired to date attractive targets more than the secure participants did. Being physically attractive could be a characteristic that makes high-avoidant individuals more willing to get close to another person.

Limitations

There are some potential limitations to the present study. Randomization of the images to a description would have allowed counterbalancing of target to humor style combinations. This control would have provided greater assurance that the desirability of the humor styles was not affected by any idiosyncratic characteristics of any particular photograph. However, the current study did employ average ratings from two separate target photographs for each condition, in order to reduce the potential for a single photograph to unduly influence ratings from a given participant.

In addition, the study was restricted to college students at a university in the south. Humor may not be a priority for older individuals, or it may also be the case that different humor styles have different effects on the desirability of targets at different ages. Lastly, cultural differences due to geographical location could have an impact on the results as well. For physical attraction, the images used may or may not be what is considered attractive at this particular school. In different locations there are different standards for what is attractive and unattractive.

Conclusion

There is little research on the effects of humor on attractiveness and mate selection. The majority of the literature examines humor as a personal quality that has personal and social benefits (McGee & Shelvin, 2009). The present study adds to the literature on the effects of self-defeating humor in interpersonal relationships and how

this humor style may influence attractiveness and mate selection. Maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships is associated with a number of positive outcomes such as lower risk of depression when facing negative life events (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2007). The quality of interpersonal relationships and social participation is important to an individual's well-being (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005; Reis, Wheeler, Kernis, Spiegel, & Nezlek, 1985). Furthering our knowledge of effective ways to use humor in relation to interpersonal relationships can help treat and understand individuals who may use maladaptive styles of humor.

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