

Humour and Mate Selection in a Romanian Sample

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Abstract

Introduction: *So far, as we are aware, there has been little investigation into partner's preferences when analyzing the Romanian samples.*

Objective: *This study intends to examine whether different levels of sense of humour would have a significant impact on attractiveness and suitability when it comes to considering a Romanian potential partner. We considered that people perceived as having a good sense of humour are considered significantly more attractive and suitable as a long-term partner compared to those perceived as not having a good sense of humour or those in the control group. Likewise, we expected that people perceived as lacking a sense of humour are considered significantly less attractive and less suitable as a long-term partner compared to those in the control group. Finally, we verified if there are significant gender differences in terms of attractiveness and suitability with a long-term partner when considering humour.*

Methods: *We constructed vignettes to describe a hypothetical partner - with humour as an independent variable and level of attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner as dependent variables. The sample included a total of 150 Romanian students.*

Results: *The results showed that subjects with a good sense of humour were considered more attractive and suitable as a long-term partner compared to subjects who lack a sense of humour. However, no significant differences were found when comparing subjects with a good sense of humour and subjects from the control group. Additionally, the male participants rated the female subjects with high levels of sense of humour as more attractive and suitable as a long-term partner, unlike the female participants.*

Conclusions: *These findings suggest that possessing a good sense of humour affects interpersonal attraction and mate selection. This is a minor step in understanding the Romanian peoples' preferences when it comes to humour and mate selection.*

Keywords: *humour, attractiveness, mate selection, long-term partner*

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I. Introduction

We tend to have a positive attitude towards people who possess a sense of humour and feel encouraged to spend more time with them. Interpersonal attraction and mate selection are important factors for human evolution. Several studies suggest that humour is a significant component in this respect (Buss, 1988; Canary et al., 1993; Cann et al., 1997; Goodwin, 1990 etc.). In terms of the initial attraction towards the partner, individuals also reported among other characteristics of the partner, a good sense of humour (ex. Buss and Barnes, 1986; Buss, 1988; Goodwin, 1990). In a study by Lefcourt & Martin (1986), 94% of the respondents were evaluated as having a sense of humour above average. At the first meeting, when individuals do not know each other, the use of humour in sharing experiences leads to a greater closeness among the people involved (Fraley and Aron 2004).

Considering the fact that individuals attach an important value to humour, it seems obvious that humour is linked with other positive traits. There is evidence that humour might play a key role in interpersonal attraction, being even more important than physical attractiveness or attitude similarity (Cann et al., 1997). For example, if women have a good sense of humour (and also emotional stability), even if they are less physically attractive, they might be perceived by men as attractive romantic partners (Feingold, 1981). When saying that an individual has a good sense of humour, people also tend to add to his/ her personality other desirable characteristics, such as: being friendly, extraverted, pleasant, considerate, imaginative, interesting, perceptive, intelligent and emotionally stable (Cann and Calhoun, 2001). Furthermore, among behaviours that maintain romantic relationships, several relevant features were identified, including humour (Canary et al., 1993). Even so, researchers did not investigate the effects of humour on interpersonal attraction and mate selection to a greater extent. Current studies are at times contradictory or fail to fully understand the importance of humour in this area of study.

Starting from the evolutionary theories, Sprecher and Regan (2002) suggest that women seek ambition and status in a romantic partner while men are more interested in physical attractiveness towards a female romantic partner. Buss (1988) noted that humour is one of the tactics that both males and females use in intrasexual competition for the other sex, but without finding relevant gender differences in

this respect. More recent studies have shown that while men, due to the way they are genetically structured, still put considerable stakes on the sexual aspect in the couple's relationship (Geary et al. 2004), women are more selective in terms of a partner (Li et al. 2002). Another study by Buss and Schmitt (1993) indicates that among the strategies men and women use to choose their potential partner, men seek short-term relationships, while women seek a long-term mate. Romanian men are good resource providers, and they are looking for partners in good health and fertility, while women prefer prosperity in men (Rusu and Bencic, 2007).

Data shows that perceptions of a person's sociability, humour and creativity are considered important triggers in the initial attraction towards a potential partner (Greengross and Miller, 2008). An early experimental study of Davis and Farina (1970) focusing on sexual communication, suggests that humour has a significant role in self-disclosure and social probing. The male participants in this experiment rated sexual cartoons funnier when confronted with an attractive female experimenter. Moreover, it is more difficult for women, unlike men, to end a romantic relationship in which the partner has a good sense of humour (DeLecce and Weisfeld, 2015). Women prefer partners with humour while men don't share the same preference (Bressler and Balshine, 2004; Bressler et al., 2006). Although men report that they want a partner with a sense of humour, they do not appreciate a woman with humour as being more attractive. Women are attracted to men who make them laugh (Provine, 2001), while men are attracted to women who laugh (Tannen, 2001). Thus, women are interested in a future partner who makes them laugh and men find attractive the women who laugh heartily in their presence. A study by Bressler et al. (2006) found similar results: while women appreciate a man's humour production, men want women to be more responsive to their humour.

Other studies have shown, however, that women who want a long-term relationship especially appreciate a partner's warmth / confidence and his status / resources less than other personality traits, including humour (Li and Kenrick, 2006). Regarding both sexes, they want a partner physically attractive, intelligent and warm (Li and Kenrick, 2006). Previous studies (Ziv, 1988; Rust and Goldenstein, 1989; Lauer et al., 1990; Raniseski, 1998; DeKoning and Weiss, 2002)

showed that the partner's similarity in humour styles predicts relationship satisfaction. Given that a partner's humour can reconcile the couple, we expect humour to occupy an important role through partnership preferences.

In our research, we started from the study of McGee and Shevlin (2009), who conducted an experiment (based on vignettes describing a potential partner) to examine the effect of humour and gender on attractiveness and mate selection. The results of the McGee and Shevlin study (2009) indicate that when a prospective partner has a good sense of humour, he/she is considered more attractive and suitable as a long-term partner compared with a potential partner who possess an average or no sense of humour. Also, men rated the female-subjects in the vignettes as significantly more attractive compared to evaluations from women towards male-subjects in the descriptions. Furthermore, McGee and Shevlin (2009) did not identify in their study an interaction effect between gender and humour.

Unlike the above-mentioned authors, in our study we did not manipulate the gender variable in our sample, and we used the same vignettes for all participants in order to obtain more accurate data (only the addressability was different – we used feminine gender in describing male-subjects and masculine gender for describing female-subjects), and we included a control group (equivalent with the authors' vignette in which the description of the target does not have a sense of humour). In the study from which we started (McGee and Shevlin 2009), the vignettes were constructed differently for the male and female participants, according to gender roles; the authors also introduced an experimental condition in which the described target has no humour. From our point of view, having no sense of humour at all is a very categorical way of thinking about humour if we consider its complexity, so we decided for a greater flexibility for this concept. Additionally, in one of the experimental conditions of this study (McGee and Shevlin, 2009) the authors refer to an average sense of humour, which we found slightly confusing. However, the authors identified small effect sizes for both attractiveness ($\eta^2 = .11$) and for suitability as a long-term partner ($\eta^2 = .13$). Thus, we considered improving the experiment of McGee and Shevlin (2009) and developing a vignette that can be used as a research tool in future studies. The authors mentioned above do not give us data about how they chose these vignettes; they only refer to the evolutionary theories when

explaining the choice of positive characteristics in the descriptions of subjects.

II. Objective and hypotheses

The objective of this study is to examine if one's sense of humour would influence interpersonal attraction and mate selection. It appears that we have a small amount of data on this issue, and sometimes the results are contradictory or lack consistency.

In order to verify these issues, we advanced the following research hypotheses: 1. Different levels of sense of humour have a significant impact on attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner. 2. Subjects perceived as having a high sense of humour are considered significantly more attractive and suitable as a long-term partner compared to subjects perceived as having a low sense of humour or those in the control group. 3. Subjects perceived as having a low sense of humour are considered significantly less attractive and less suitable as a long-term partner compared to those in the control group. 4. There are significant differences between ratings of men and women in terms of attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner when considering humour.

III. METHODS

3.1. Participants

The sample included a total of 150 Romanian students (72 men and 78 women), aged between 19 and 35 years old ($M = 25.46$ years, $SD = 4.55$). Among all the participants, 97 (64.7%) are involved in a couple relationships, while 53 (35.3%) are single. Most of the participants completed tertiary / higher education studies (68.7%) and secondary education studies (31.3%). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. In order to assess sexual orientation, we requested data at the end of the questionnaire to determine whether the participants perceive themselves as heterosexual or not. We only used the data that came from the heterosexual participants. We did not offer any reward or incentive for participation.

In order to establish the sample size, we conducted an a priori analysis using G * Power 3.1 software. We brought in the effect size $f = .40$ (high), the maximum statistical power (.99), and the software indicated an estimated sample of 138 participants. For better accuracy of the data, we decided to include in our study 150 participants (for more details see Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics

Participants (N=150)		
Relationship Status		
Singles	53 (35.3 %)	
In a relationship	97 (64.7 %)	
Studies completed		
Tertiary	103 (68.7 %)	
Secondary	47 (31.3 %)	
Primary	-	
	Males and Females characteristics	
	Males (n=72)	Females (n=78)
Age	M=26.35 (SD=4.75)	M=24.64 (SD=4.22)
Condition 1 (high sense of humour)	25	25
Condition 2 (low sense of humour)	27	23
Condition 3 (control group)	20	30

3.2. Materials

We constructed vignettes to describe a hypothetical partner, starting from Bem's theories regarding androgyny (1974). Given that we wanted to use the same vignettes for both male and female partners, we considered it important to use only androgynous characteristics. Employing the same vignette for both sexes ensures better control over the variables. We also assessed if the characteristics selected by us as androgynous are also considered androgynous by the participants. The respondents (n = 38) selected from a list of characteristics which were more specific for a male (n = 8), more specific for a female (n = 8) or androgynous / neutral (n = 8) – specific for both males and females - all these characteristics were mixed together. For each characteristic, we asked the respondents to indicate whether the characteristic was considered rather masculine, feminine or androgynous/ neutral (both specifically for males and females). The personality characteristics qualified as masculine were: ambitious, analytical, competitive, self-sufficient, aggressive, independent, athletic and individualistic. The personality characteristics qualified as feminine were: warm, tender, loyal, shy, sympathetic, childlike, gentle and gullible. The personality characteristics qualified as androgynous / neutral were: cute, charismatic, helpful, likable, adaptable, tactful, friendly and truthful.

Our attention was focused on the characteristics qualified as androgynous / neutral and their relevance for our respondents. The indicated androgynous features were also rated by the respondents as being androgynous / neutral in a large proportion: cute (86%), charismatic (76%), helpful (76%) likable (89%), adaptable (84%), tactful (71%), friendly (94%) and truthful (92%). Therefore, we decided to include these features in constructing the description of a potential partner. As well as McGee and Shevlin (2009) we chose to implement the vignette using only positive characteristics of a potential partner. In addition, in order to not have the vignette interfere with the participants' previous personal experiences, we chose to describe the target using a Romanian name as neutral as possible neutral (Flavia for the male respondents and Flavius for the female respondents).

According to H1, the sense of humour variable (with its levels) will be manipulated by inserting into the content of the vignette the following information about the sense of humour:

Condition 1. High sense of humour: *One person who knows Flavius (Flavia) very well said: "I have known Flavius (Flavia) for a long time and would say he/she has a very good sense of humour."*;

Condition 2. Low sense of humour: *One person who knows Flavius (Flavia) very well said: "I have known Flavius (Flavia) for a long time and I would say he/she lacks a sense of humour."*;

Condition 3. The control group - no information on the sense of humour is offered.

Full description of the female target (Flavia):

Flavia is a single young woman. She is easily liked by others and she is often described as a charismatic and cute girl. She's also a helpful person who does not remain indifferent to the problems of others and tries to offer her support as much as possible. When faced with a new situation, she has proven to be adaptable, and different people appreciated her as a person with tact. Flavia is friendly and friends say she is truthful and knows how to keep a secret.

[insert here Condition no. 1/ 2/ 3]

Very unattractive/ unsuitable	Very attractive/ suitable
1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7	

Full description of male target (Flavius):

Flavius is a young bachelor. He is easily liked by others and he is often described as a nice and charismatic guy. He is also a helpful person who does not remain indifferent to the problems of others and tries to offer his support as much as possible. When faced with a new situation, he has proven to be adaptable, and different people appreciated him as a person with tact. Flavius is friendly and friends say he is truthful and knows how to keep a secret.

[here comes Condition no. 1/2/3]

Very unattractive/ Very attractive/
 unsuitable suitable
 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7

3.3. Design

We used an experimentally based design in order to examine the effect of humour on interpersonal attraction and mate selection (the experiment was adapted after McGee and Shevlin 2009). The independent variable was the level of the sense of humour (high/ low or absent), whereas the dependent variables were ratings of attractiveness and ratings of suitability as a long-term partner.

3.4. Procedure

The participants in this study were randomized into three experimental groups. Each experimental group received a description of a potential partner of the opposite sex (male or female) containing only positive attributes that vary only in the description of the sense of humour: Condition 1. High sense of humour; Condition 2. Low sense of humour; Condition 3. Control group. We asked the participants to carefully read the target's description and then indicate the attractiveness of the person described on a Likert scale from 1 (very unattractive) to 7 (very attractive) and to which extent they find the partner (female or male) to be suitable as a long-term partner, also on a Likert scale from 1 (very unsuitable) to 7 (very suitable).

IV. Results

We analysed the data using the analysis of variance One Way ANOVA in SPSS 20.0., to verify the effect of humour on the attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner (Table 2 and Table 3). The results of the analysis indicated significant differences among the three groups of participants (high sense of humour / low sense of humour/ control

group), regarding the attractiveness, $F(2, 147) = 13.34$, $p < .01$ and suitability as a long-term partner $F(2, 147) = 13.02$, $p < .01$. The estimated effect size eta-squared index indicates a low to medium effect ($\eta^2 = .15$), while the Cohen's f index indicates a large effect ($f = .41$). The effect size was similar for both the attractiveness variable ($\eta^2 = .15$; $f = .41$) and suitability as a long-term partner variable with the partner ($\eta^2 = .15$; $f = .41$), which shows that only 15% of the variance of the attractiveness and of the suitability as a long-term partner was explained by humour, and also the existence of a strong link between humour, attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner according to the Cohen's f index.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations (SD) of Target Ratings

Levels of the sense of humour	Attractiveness		Suitability	
	M	SD	M	SD
low	4.50	1.03	4.14	1.17
high	5.54	1.16	5.38	1.36
control group	5.38	1.04	5.04	1.21

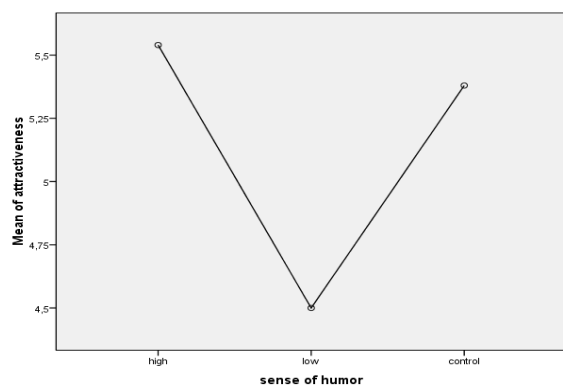
Table 3. Analysis of variance (ANOVA One Way) among different levels of sense of humour (high, low, control group)

Ratings of a potentially desirable partner	df	F	η^2	f	p
Attractiveness	147	13.34	.15	.41	< .001
suitability	147	13.02	.15	.41	< .001

Note: N= 150

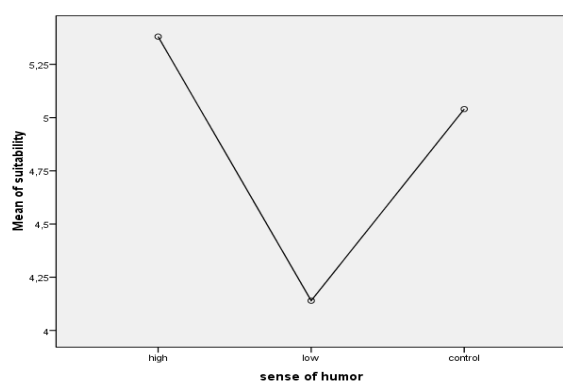
Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD method showed that for ratings of attractiveness, the mean rating in the high sense of humor condition ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.16$) was significantly higher ($p < .01$) than it was for the low sense of humor ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.03$). Thus, subjects with a high sense of humor were rated as significantly more attractive than subjects with a low sense of humor. There were also significant differences ($p < .01$) between the mean rating in the low sense of humour condition ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.03$) and the mean rating in the control group ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.04$), indicating that the subjects with a low sense of humour were rated as significantly less attractive than the subjects in the control group. However, we didn't notice significant differences ($p > .05$) when comparing the scores of the participants in the high sense of humour condition and the scores of participants in the control group.

Fig. 1. SPSS 20.0 Mean of attractiveness according to the different levels of the sense of humour



For ratings of suitability as a long-term partner, the results were similar. The mean rating in the high sense of humour condition ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.36$) was significantly higher ($p < .01$) than it was for the low sense of humour ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.17$). Thus, subjects with a high sense of humour were rated as significantly more suitable as a long-term partner than subjects with a low sense of humour. There were also significant differences ($p < .01$) between the mean ratings in the low sense of humour condition ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.17$) and the mean ratings in the control group ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.21$), indicating that the subjects with a low sense of humour were rated as significantly less suitable as a long-term partner than the subjects in the control group. Similarly, we did not notice significant differences ($p > .05$) between the mean rating in the high sense of humour condition and the mean rating in the control group.

Fig. 2. SPSS 20.0 Mean of suitability as a long-term partner, according to different levels of the sense of humour



Regarding gender differences, we analysed them using the T-test for independent samples. The

independent samples T-test revealed significant differences between men and women on the attractiveness ratings, $t(48) = 3.67$, $p < .05$ and on suitability as a long-term partner ratings, $t(48) = 2.75$, $p < .05$ in the high sense of humour condition. Men rated female subjects with a high sense of humour in the description as being significantly more attractive ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 0.99$) and more suitable ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.13$) as a long-term partner compared to women who rated the male subjects when referring to the attractiveness ($M = 5$, $SD = 1.08$) and to the suitability as a long-term partner ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.42$). The effect size was average in this case, $d = .58$ for the attractiveness variable and low, $d = .07$ for the suitability as a long-term partner variable. Regarding the participants in the low sense of humour condition and in the control group, there were no significant differences ($p < .05$) between men and women in rating attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner.

V. Conclusions

We aimed to investigate whether different levels of humour will significantly influence the attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner. So far as we are aware, there has been little investigation into partner's preferences in the Romanian samples. We were able to identify a study by Rusu and Bencic (2007) that sustains evolutionary theories regarding mate choices. Thus, Romanian men are good resource providers, and they are looking for partners in good health and fertility, while women prefer prosperity in men (Rusu and Bencic, 2007). Several studies (Ziv, 1988; Rust and Goldenstein, 1989; Lauer et al., 1990; Raniseski, 1998; DeKoning and Weiss, 2002) show that the partner's similarity of humour style predicts relationship satisfaction. Given that a partner's humour can reconcile the couple, we expect humour to play an important role through partnership preferences. The results of our study show that subjects described as having high-levels of sense of humour were considered more attractive and more suitable as a long-term partner compared to subjects who were described as lacking a sense of humour. The effect size for both attractiveness and suitability as a long-term partner was low to medium (eta squared) or large (Cohen's f index). However, there were statistically significant differences in ratings for those subjects who had a low sense of humour and those in the control group on both scales, but no statistically significant differences when comparing subjects in the high sense of humour condition with subjects in the control group. These

results suggest that only a low sense of humour was less desirable in terms of attractiveness and long-term suitability as a partner. When an individual has a high sense of humour or when we do not have clues about his/ her sense of humour, we might consider that they are attractive and suitable as a long-term partner in a similar proportion.

There are also previous studies that support the importance of humour in the interpersonal attraction (Buss and Barnes, 1986; Buss, 1988; Goodwin, 1990; Fraley and Aron, 2004; Greengross and Miller, 2008) or its importance in establishing long-term relationships (Canary et al., 1993). There is evidence that humour might play a key role in interpersonal attraction, being even more important than physical attractiveness or attitude similarity (Cann et al., 1997). Other studies have shown contradictory results. Buss and Schmitt (1993) indicate that among the strategies men and women use to choose their potential partner, men seek short-term relationships, while women seek a long-term mate. According to Li and Kenrick (2006), women who want a long-term relationship partner especially appreciate the partner's warmth / confidence and his status / resources and less other personality traits including humour. Regarding both sexes, they want a partner who is physically attractive, intelligent and warm (Li and Kenrick, 2006).

Our results sustain the study of McGee and Shevlin (2009) from which we started, indicating that when a potential partner has a good sense of humour, he/ she is considered more attractive and more suitable for a long-term relationship compared with a potential partner with a medium sense of humour or with one that has no sense of humour at all. The authors (McGee and Shevlin 2009) also found significant differences between the ratings of subjects with a good sense of humour and the ratings of subjects with no sense of humour at all. In our study, we used a control group, and the ratings of subjects in the control group did not differ significantly from those in the high sense of humour condition. It is possible that respondents in the control group also integrated a high level of humour into the positive description of the target. Previous studies show that when assuming that an individual has a good sense of humour, people also tend to add to his/ her personality's other desirable characteristics, such as: being friendly, extraverted, pleasant, considerate, imaginative, interesting, perceptive, intelligent and emotionally stable (Cann and Calhoun, 2001). The effect size in the study by McGee and Shevlin (2009) was also lower than the one obtained by us.

Regarding gender differences, men considered women with a high level of humour, more attractive and more suitable as a long-term partner, unlike women when rating male-subjects. The effect size was average in the case of the attractiveness variable and low in the case of the suitability variable. Previous studies (Bressler and Balshine, 2004; Bressler et al., 2006) indicate contradictory results, or no gender differences found in this perspective (Buss, 1988). Although men report that they want a partner with a sense of humour, they do not appreciate a woman with humour as being more attractive (Bressler and Balshine, 2004; Bressler et al., 2006). There are also studies proving interests of both women and men for humour in interpersonal attraction but in different ways. Thus, women are attracted to men who make them laugh (Provine, 2001), while men are attracted to women who laugh (Tannen, 2001). According to other studies, women who want a long-term relationship tend to especially appreciate more the warmth / confidence of their partner and his status / resources and less other personality traits amongst which is humour (Li and Kenrick, 2006).

Current studies are at times contradictory or fail to fully understand the importance of humour in this area of study. This is a minor step in understanding Romanian people's preferences when it comes to humour and mate selection. Researchers did not investigate the effects of humour on interpersonal attraction and mate selection to a greater extent. Our study results suggest that humour plays an important role in interpersonal attraction and partner selection. We also consider that we added several improvements to the study of McGee and Shevlin (2009), namely by introducing a unique vignette for all the study's participants and by using a control group. Other researchers might benefit from investigating the role of humour to a greater extent and possibly finding other variables that are important in this equation. Also, there are several limits to our research, regarding the type of humour we analysed (humour is perceived as a general construct; there is no clear distinction among different types of humour) and the fact that our results can not be generalized. Future research could address these issues.

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