The Effects of Humor and Laughter on Perceived Intelligence and Dating Success

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Theoretical Accounts of Humor and Laughter

- Humor:
  - Humor as a mental fitness indicator/sexually selected trait (Miller, 2000)
  - False Alarm Theory (Ramachandran, 1998)
  - Non-serious social incongruity (Gervais & Wilson, 2005)
  - Interest indicator (Li et. al, 2009)
- Laughter:
  - Indicator/receptivity signal (Li et. al, 2009)
  - Affect induction theory (Owren & Bachorowski, 2003)
  - Non-aggression tolerance/play (Caron, 2002)
  - Social-bonding agent (Mehu & Dunbar, 2008)

Humor as a Mental Fitness Indicator

- Miller (2000) argued that humor evolved as a sexually selected trait in males because humor production served as a mental fitness indicator, or rather, a means to display intelligence, and consequently over all fitness, to potential mates
- General intelligence is positively correlated with independent ratings of humor production skill (Howrigan & MacDonald, 2008) which in turn, is predictive of number of sexual partners (Greengross & Miller, 2011)
- Women find humorous men more physically attractive (McGee & Shevlin, 2009) and desirable, whereas men find women more desirable when they are receptive to their humor (Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011).

Laughter: A Receptivity Signal?

- Although many theoretical accounts of laughter capture its social nature, there is disagreement about the adaptive function of laughter.
- Some theoretical formulations have converged on the importance of laughter as a sexual receptivity or courtship signal, particularly in women (Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006; Mehu & Dunbar, 2008).
- Experimental evidence has found that male romantic interest is inferred through humor production, and female romantic interest is inferred through laughter (Li et. al., 2009).

Overview and Hypotheses:

- Brief Overview
- H1: Men who are exposed to a humor display of another man will respond by generating more humor attempts in their message when introducing themselves to the same woman.
- H2: Male perceptions of another man's intelligence should be higher when he attempts humor.
- H3: Perceptions of female receptivity (likelihood of obtaining a date, perceived female receptiveness, and confederate's perception of male rival's intelligence) should be highest when the confederate laughs in response to the male author's attempts at humor.

Sample Demographic Characteristics

- N = 161; all male participants recruited from MTURK (Restricted to the U.S.)
- Mean age: 33.61 yrs.; Median age: 30 yrs.
- Racial Distribution:
  - African American: 8%
  - Caucasian: 65%
  - Asian: 8%
  - Hispanic: 7%
  - Bi/Multi-racial: 3%
  - Other: 7%
- Education Level:

  Less than a Bachelor's Degree: 48%

  Bachelor's Degree or more: 52%

Method/Procedure

- The present study was presented to participants as an online dating paradigm;
  - Participants first watched a brief video of an attractive female confederate reading a script; the script was presented as a message she received from a man on an online dating website
  - The scripted message contained humor or no humor, and the confederate either laughed or did not laugh while reading the scripts (2 x 2 design).
    - Content of the script was identical with the exception of the addition of five humor attempts in the humor conditions.
    - Confederate laughed immediately after the humor attempts in the humor conditions, or laughed at exactly the same point at which humor attempts were omitted in the control conditions.

Method/Procedure (Cont.)

- After participants were exposed to one of four conditions, they were asked to rate the male author of the "message" on…
  - Likelihood of obtaining a date
  - Perceived intelligence
  - Confederate's receptiveness
  - Confederate's perception of male author's intelligence
- Participants were then asked to create their own message to the confederate in order to obtain a date.
  - Participants were told that their message was going to be read and rated by another male participant.

Humor present/laughter present condition

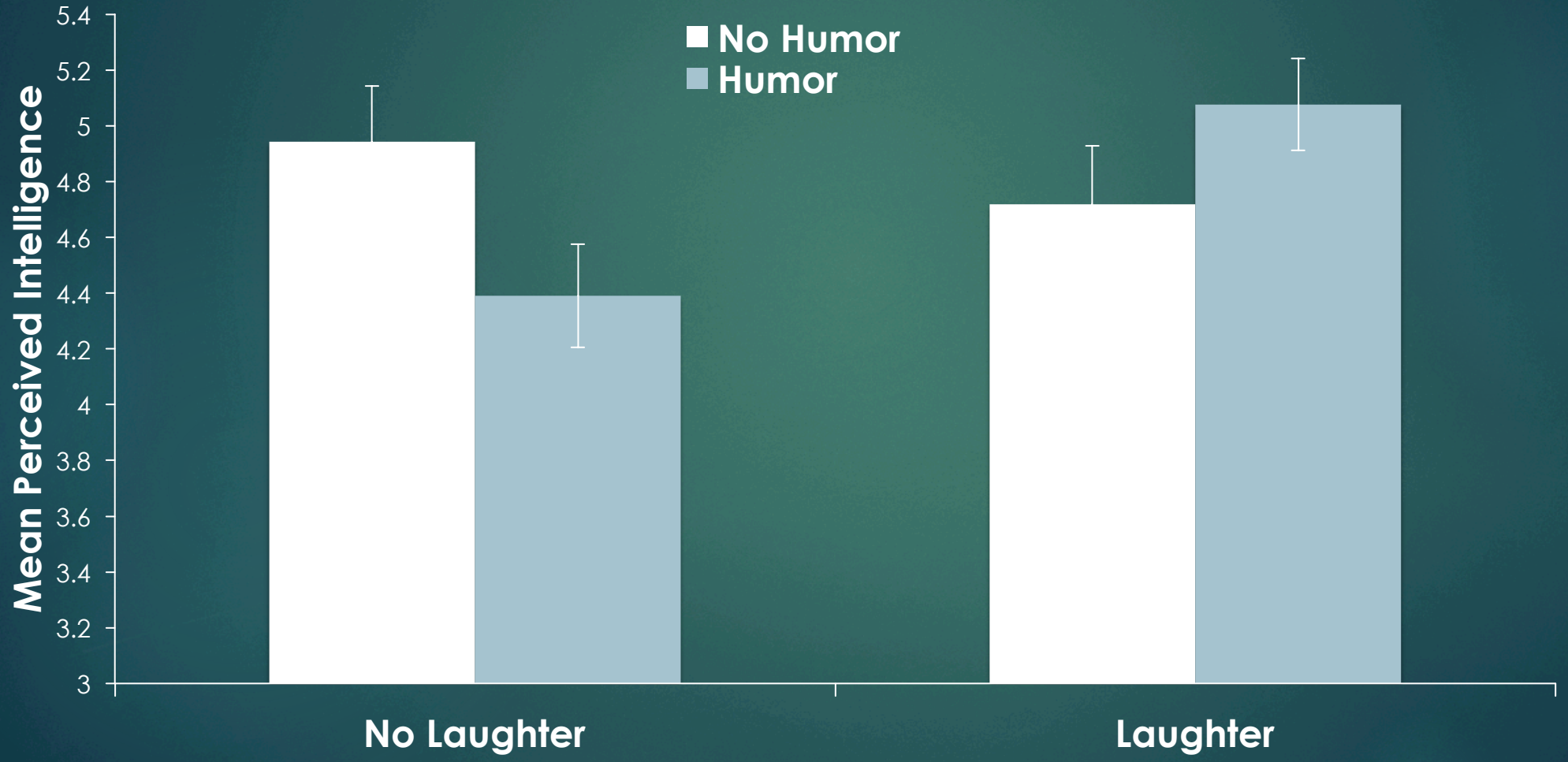
Results:

H1: Did humorous messages elicit humor production in male participants?

Yes. Men who were exposed to another man's humor generated more humor attempts, and their messages were rated as significantly funnier.

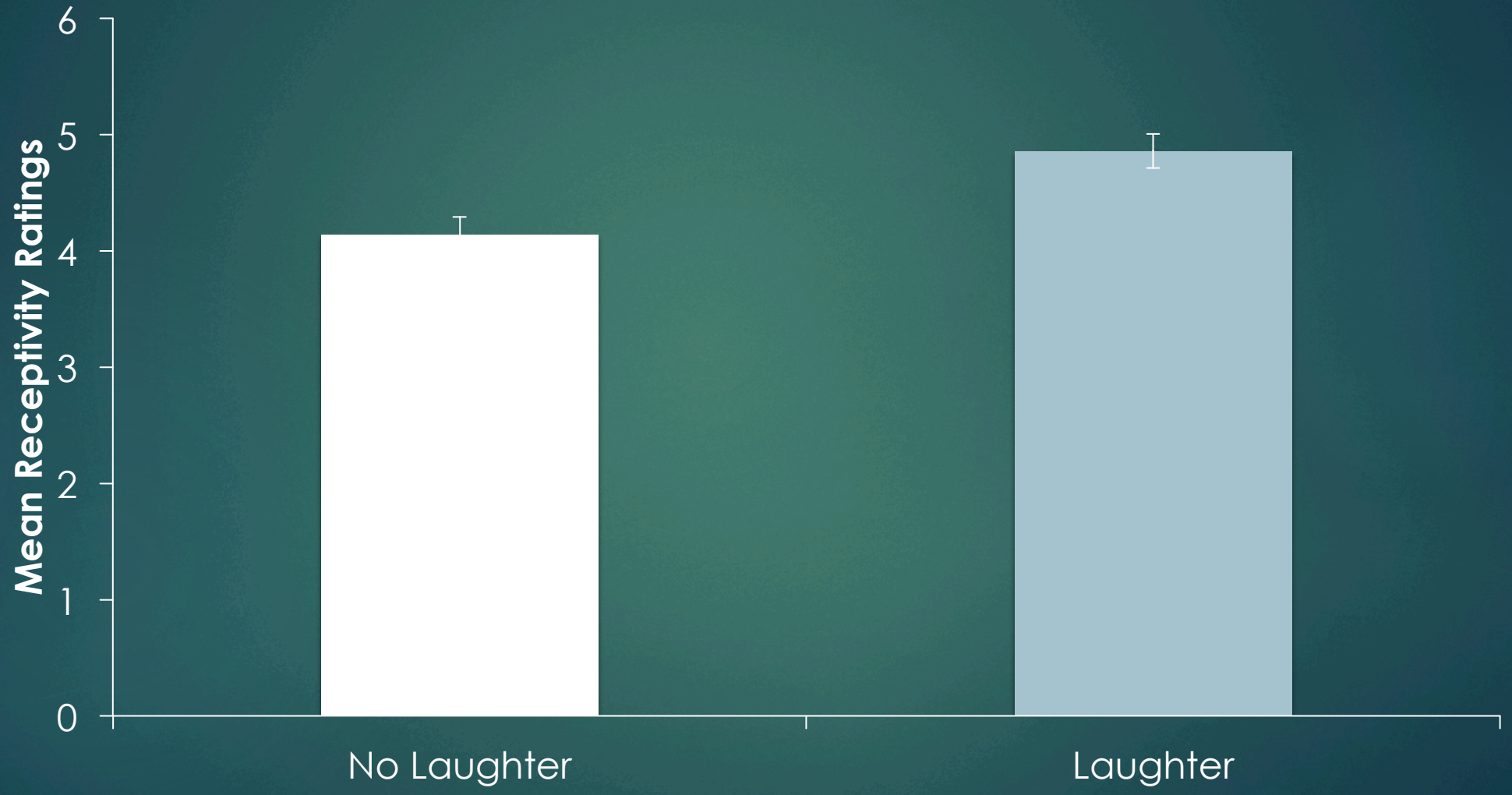
Going on a date with me will be more fun than a barrel of monkeys in heat! That's right, missy -- you done just hit the Computer Dating Jackpot! As you can see, I'm a man who likes to use exclamation marks! FYI, I don't talk like this in person, or I'd have to be yelling all the time. I do, however, like to use "air quotes." Like, "a lot." I don't use them when I write because the "keyboard" does all the work. But you just wait until "we meet"! It'll be a "veritable avalanche" of "air quotes" from here to "next Xmas"! Signing out for now; see "you" soon!

H2: Did participants infer greater intelligence from humor?



H3: Do humor and laughter interact to communicate perceived female receptivity?

Mean Female Receptivity Ratings



Discussion

- Hypothesis 1 was supported.
- These results are consistent with the fitness indicator model of humor, which is getting increasing empirical support (Gallup et al., 2015)
- But results could also be interpreted in light of priming effects, mimicry, or the tendency for laughter to communicate social play (Gervais & Wilson, 2005) to a potential partner or mate.
- Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Humor did not increase intelligence ratings. Rather, when a man made humor attempts and the woman did not laugh, his intelligence ratings decreased significantly.
- Hypothesis 3 was supported. Results are consistent with the interest indicator model (Li et al, 2009). Previous research is especially supportive of the role of laughter in female courtship behaviors (Givens, 1978; Grammer, 1990; Koeppel et al., 1993 Provine, 2004)

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusion

- Manipulate the presence of competition, the context of the study (via affiliative goals, or cover story), and/or the gender of the participants to more carefully differentiate between the fitness indicator model of humor and other models
- Focus more research study on conversational laughter, which represents 80-90 percent of laughter episodes (Provine, 2004)
- Despite these limitations, the strengths of this study include the ecological validity of the dating paradigm, the use of a behavioral humor measure, and the attempt to disentangle laughter and humor.

Thank you!