

Emotional Reaction Theory of Attractiveness

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Abstract

Attractiveness is considered important in the formation of intimate relationships. Previous studies found that the characteristics of the partners and occasionally elicited emotions could influence ratings of attractiveness. The present theory emphasized that attractiveness may reflect feelings elicited by the partner. Several emotions were summarized and emotional reaction theory was proposed to explain how these emotions elicited by partners, including positive emotions and epistemic emotions, may be seen as cues of attractiveness. Furthermore, these emotions were differentiated according to reactions to differences between couples and different meanings to self-development. The implications for intimate relationships and dating were discussed and it's suggested that early detection of emotions was as important as detection of attractiveness itself. Finally, future research prospects were discussed.

Keywords

Attractiveness, Dating, Emotion

1. Introduction

Attractiveness is the starting point of an intimate relationship. Experience from daily life and previous studies has shown that attractiveness varies greatly across different relationships. Imagine that an individual is seeking a lifelong partner; she/he may be attracted for different reasons. While the characteristics of the potential partners were the focus of research (Luo, 2009; Marchi et al., 2023; Ong, 2015), the feelings of the individuals themselves were less discussed. Some studies found that positive emotional arousal helped to create attraction (Mcclanahan et al., 1990; Marin et al., 2017); however, emotions were usually framed as dimensional and specific emotions were seldom considered in these studies. Furthermore, emotions elicited occasionally may be very different from emotions elicited by the partner.

In the dating scene, it's natural to expect that positive emotions can make an individual feel that she/he is attracted to the partner. Epistemic emotions, such as curiosity, surprise, and confusion, contribute to knowledge acquisition about the self and the world (Vogl et al., 2020). Because of meeting someone unfamiliar, some epistemic emotions may create an impression of being attracted. Previous theories suggested that there are different positive emotions (Desmet et al., 2021; Fredrickson, 2013) and epistemic emotions (Vogl et al., 2020). Thus, the present paper proposed several types of emotional reactions to capture the varieties of attractiveness. Moreover, emotional reaction theory was proposed to explain the mechanism of attractiveness.

2. Emotional Reactions

There are some positive emotions and epistemic emotions which appear to signal attractiveness. These emotions were described as follows:

Love. It is a mixed emotion. It includes serenity and desire. The feeling of merge and synchronization shapes an atmosphere of serenity. An individual finds that his/her partner is like another self. It seems mysterious. Partners in love feel energetic and comfortable. Individuals find that their thinking becomes fluent along with positive emotion. Partners play games about roughhouse: invade and resist. Attempts to change are part of play.

In Plato's account in *The Symposium*, men and women were initially united. Empirical research also found that a number of similarities exist between human mating partners (Horwitz et al., 2023). There is something that both of them like, for example, living habits. There is something that both of them avoid, for example, taboos. The partner is like another vivid self. Of course, there are differences between partners, but these differences bring joy. When you know your partner has a unique habit, you feel warm and smile.

Companion love. This feeling comes from similarities in values and the appreciation of differences between each other. The partners have common interests and usually cooperate well. Companion love can exist between good friends who often share feelings. In this type of relationship, acceptance of each other is more usual than attempts at change.

Nurturant love. Nurturant love occurs when an individual wants to help someone grow (Weidman & Tracy, 2020). It involves tenderness, expertise in life skills and long-term support. This feeling may appear with gratitude in pairs. When one receives nurturant love, the individual displays vitality and courage. Gratitude can make the receiver more patient and willing to wait for a long time (Desteno et al., 2014; Dickens & Desteno, 2016). Change of self-concept occurs gradually.

Mania. Mania refers to strong arousal and excitement (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). It can be characterized as high desire and low serenity. It's usually strong and makes one hard to fall asleep (Bajoghli et al., 2014). Some researchers equate mania with romantic love. However, some researchers believe that individuals with pathological personality traits are more likely to fall into this love style (Jona-

son et al., 2020). In a classic study, it's found that mania rating was related to low self-esteem, suggesting uncertainty of self in the relationship (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986).

Envy. Envy is associated with the differences between two individuals. Benign envy motivates an individual to pursue personal growth (van de Ven et al., 2009). When you experience benign envy, you try to follow him/her, like a fan of a star. Idealized images may be represented due to unfamiliarity; therefore, remoteness is important to maintain the feeling.

Curiosity. Curiosity occurs when an individual is interested in novel things (Vogl et al., 2019). It's an epistemic emotion (Vogl et al., 2020). When one only wants to read the other's mind but does not exchange feelings, one may focus on facts rather than relationships. It implies that effective communication is lacking, so too much attention was devoted to facts rather than feelings, opinions and solutions. High curiosity implies that one is unfamiliar with another. It also conveys ignorance of the world and may appear too immature for love. It is likely to operate at a normal level after some interactions.

Surprise. One may feel surprised when unusual traits attract attention. It occurs suddenly and requires one's cognitive effort to understand. It exists when two persons are different in many ways. The other person seems unpredictable in one's eyes.

Confusion. Confusion reflects deep differences in values. For example, egalitarianism and meritocracy differ a lot. These different positions can attract one's interest to explore. However, these differences also bring confusion and unresolved disagreement. Clarification of values is needed.

3. Emotional Reaction Theory

Present theory posited emotion at the core of attractiveness. It could provide insights into attachment theory and self-development. For example, secure attachment may stem from love, whereas insecure attachment may be associated with mania (Karandashev, 2022). As for self-development, Welker et al. (2024) found that the way people see themselves is shaped by their conversation partners. Present work suggested the potential role of emotions in this process.

Conceptual clarification of emotions. Almost all emotions listed above were defined in the past (Vogl et al., 2020; Weidman & Tracy, 2020). It is noteworthy that previous theories usually treated love as a general concept, whereas companion love was seen as a specific emotion (Weidman & Tracy, 2020). Slightly different from previous theories, the present theory distinguished love and companion love on the basis of the state of self, willingness to change for the other and reaction toward differences. This was in accordance with the tradition of theories on self-conscious emotion, which considered the representation of self as a cue in defining emotions (Tracy & Robins, 2004). The author believed that the feeling of merging was the signal of love, which was supported in theories about self-change (Aron & Aron, 1996; Emery et al., 2025). As for companion love, the present the-

ory suggested that acceptance and appreciation of each other were the signals. At the behavioral level, willingness to change for the partner can be seen in an intimate relationship, whereas keeping independence and respecting each other are more common in friendship relationships. As for reaction toward differences, the feeling of merging may make individuals in love feel that they suddenly find themselves having such habits, leading to feelings of joy and warmth. Friends usually respond to differences with appreciation and acceptance.

Stability and variability across time. It's assumed that these emotional reactions stem from stable interpersonal factors and can influence the pattern of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it's assumed that the emotional pattern of a couple can be stable across several months or years. Indeed, general love was shown to be significantly correlated across years (Miller et al., 2006). Because interpersonal relationships may develop over time, it's possible that the components of emotions can vary slightly. Overall, present theory assumes that stability is stronger than variability. This assumption is in accordance with adult attachment theory, which highlights the stability of patterns of adult attachment (Collins & Read, 1990).

General tendency or specific attraction. For example, the clinical concept of mania emphasizes the stable trait-like characteristics of an individual, whereas the concept of mania in romantic relationships emphasizes interpersonal factors. Swann (2009) suggested that clinical mania is associated with abnormal dopaminergic reactions to reward, implying a general tendency toward food, substance, and sexual stimuli. Mania in a romantic relationship is specific toward a certain partner. In the present paper, emotions were embedded in relationships.

How does the emotional reaction lead to attractiveness? It's important to note that emotional reaction is the result of interactions rather than personal traits. That is to say, combinations of traits are not sufficient to elicit emotion. The interactive process, common ground and attitude toward differences together elicit emotions (Table 1). Because the reaction patterns are relatively stable, the corresponding emotion can appear frequently in daily life. The most frequent emotion evoked by a certain person can be seen as the source of attractiveness.

Table 1. Emotions related to attractiveness.

Emotion	Reaction toward differences	Process of self-development
Love	Feelings of joy and warmth	Feelings of merge
Companion love	Appreciation and acceptance	View yourself and others positively
Nurturant love	Tenderness, patient	Gradual expansion of the self
Mania	Conformity	Change dramatically
Envy	Feeling benign envy	Change gradually
Curiosity	Feeling novel	Enrich knowledge of the world
Surprise	Feeling strange	Learn to respect differences
Confusion	Puzzled, confused	Reflection and clarification of values

Generally, the most frequent emotion in an intimate relationship is the well-known types of love, including love, companionate love, nurturant love and mania. However, other emotions such as envy, curiosity, surprise and confusion can also signal attractiveness. Despite some emotions being less likely to be dominant in intimate relationships, they attract a lot of attention and can be regarded as cues of attraction by some individuals.

These emotions may correspond to different processes of self-development. Love is related to feelings of merge and synchronization. Companion love is associated with appreciation and acceptance, shaping a positive self-concept. Nurturant love elicited by the partner may make an individual view herself/himself tenderer and gradually include the other in the self. Mania may make individuals change themselves dramatically to conform to their partners, reflecting uncertainty of self. Benign envy can motivate an individual to pursue personal growth but no deeper interaction. Epistemic emotions may help one learn knowledge of the world, respect differences and reflect on values in cold, rational manners. Despite the descriptions here being concise, these processes of self-development are in systematically different manners.

Implications for intimate relationships. The theory does not claim that certain emotions can lead to a successful intimate relationship. Further empirical research may be needed to find the “right” emotion for different individuals. It was found that friendship-based love was highly correlated with relationship satisfaction than was romantic love (Grote & Frieze, 1994). Another study found that the storge love style, a gradually formed love, was associated with relatively adaptive experience in romantic relationships (Karandashev, 2022). Nurturant love may display adaptive function when confronted with stress (Iida et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2016). Because these studies were conducted in populations with intimate relationships, it is unclear the predictive value of specific emotions in initial dating. Berg and Mcquinn (1986) found that love and evaluations of the dating relationship could predict a couple’s relationship 4 months later. This study only measured general love and the roles of specific emotions require further investigation.

Individuals may seek various emotions through social interactions as well as art and music. It’s possible that the proportion of emotions also matters, and individuals can regulate emotions in various ways. If one can be attracted due to various emotions, it’s nice for couples to share these emotions to meet the underlying needs. Indeed, different emotions may occur in a chain. For example, anger, nurturant love and love may occur serially, suggesting that misunderstanding is resolved.

Implications for dating. The present theory has practical value. Given that attractiveness and corresponding emotion can be detected at an early stage, individuals can forecast the pattern of emotion and interaction before they enter a formal romantic relationship. This can save time and avoid hurt from misunderstanding.

Because emotional reactions are the result of interactions between two individ-

uals, present theory argues that it's unnecessary to infer traits from the roles acted by them. For example, a gentle individual becomes impulsive and rude in dating, and a strong feeling of surprise could be detected. This may reflect huge differences between the dating individuals. The solution may be to find the right partner. Individuals need to be aware that some epistemic emotions may attract attention at first glance but are not signals of a comfortable relationship.

4. Future Research Prospects

The discrete approach of the present work left some questions to be answered.

The first question concerns the displays of emotions. [Cordaro et al. \(2020\)](#) identified several expressions including desire, sympathy, interest, surprise, confusion and happiness. It's interesting to ask whether all of the emotional reactions listed above have unique expressions. Indeed, it's possible that some emotions need two individuals rather than one to communicate. Voice can convey emotions ([Simon-Thomas et al., 2009](#)). It's natural to expect that these acoustic cues are also present in conversation. Overall, emotional cues of different modes in dating need further research.

The second question concerns the roles of negative emotions. The present paper did not discuss the roles of negative emotions because prior study suggested that unpleasant stimuli produced less attraction than pleasant stimuli ([Marin et al., 2017](#)). However, negative emotions may differ greatly. For example, fear signals avoidance, whereas anger is related to behavioral approach ([Harmon-Jones, 2003](#)). These two emotions may function in different ways. Fear of intimacy is related to non-continuing of the dating relationship ([Thelen et al., 2000](#)). In contrast, anger is more common in intimate relationships than fear. It has been found that anger functions in daily negotiations and also exists in romantic relationships ([van Kleef et al., 2004](#); [Kocur & Deffenbacher, 2014](#)). Another emotion related to the loss of love is anxiety. It seems that security and support are emphasized in nurturant love, making it similar to attachment in childhood. Thus, separation anxiety, which was originally proposed in attachment theory ([Ainsworth, 1985](#); [Hock et al., 1989](#)), may be more common at the early stage in nurturant love relationships compared to other types of relationships. Although negative emotions are less likely to convey attractiveness, the coexistence of positive and negative emotions may be possible. Hence, further exploration of negative emotions may help to understand attractiveness in a systematic manner.

5. Conclusion

The present work highlighted the role of emotions in attractiveness. Emotional reaction theory was proposed, and several types of emotions were summarized to describe the feelings of individuals in dating and provide explanations for attractiveness. The corresponding processes of self-development were further summarized, and implications for practice were discussed. Overall, the present paper provided a novel theory for attractiveness from the perspective of discrete emotions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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