

## CREATIVITY, A MATING BOOST FOR THE UNATTRACTIVE MALE

**PARIS:** In the ruthless world of the mating game, plain-looking men instinctively know that being funny, smart or poetic helps to compensate for a less-than-stellar exterior. That gut feeling has now gained scientific validation from an unusual study published yesterday. Average-looking men become more alluring when women sense the man has an imaginative spark, it found.

But for women, sadly, there may not be the same boost. Indeed, one experiment suggests that less attractive women even worsen their mating chances if they show mental zing. "Creative women with less attractive faces seem to be perhaps penalised in some way," said Christopher Watkins, a psychologist at Abertay University in Scotland, who carried out the research. Watkins first recruited a batch of volunteers who looked at pictures of men and women, rating each on the basis of their physical looks alone. Armed with this benchmark of beauty, he then submitted

the same pictures to another group of volunteers-but this time he provided clues about the subjects' creativity. Attached to each picture were mini exercises in the imagination.

### Look at me, I'm clever

In one test, there was a 100-word text based on "The Lovers," a surrealist painting by Rene Magritte in which two lovers kiss, their heads strangely covered in white cloths. Half of these texts, attributed to the persons pictured, were dull or factual ("Are they being held hostage?"), and the other half were inspired or conceptual ("It is perhaps an indicator that looks fade and in the end it does not matter as you will always be left with the personality of someone").

In a second test, head shots were linked with an everyday object-a tire and a text describing an alternative use for it. Half of these descriptions were inventive, others less so. The results showed that men

with less attractive faces get a big boost in the popularity contest if they show a creative touch, Watkins found. "Creative guys with less attractive faces were almost identical in attractiveness to really good looking guys who were not as creative," he told AFP in a phone interview.

The top-ranked men were those considered to be both physically attractive and creative. For women, though, the news is not so good. Looks remain paramount. In one experiment, creativeness did nothing to boost the allure of attractive women-and it even reduced the appeal of less attractive women. However, another experiment on similar lines had conflicting findings, Watkins found: creativity showed an equally boosting effect for average-looking women and male counterparts.

### He's a geek? Swipe left

Why would women rate creativity among men so

highly? Watkins pointed to evolutionary biology-the hidden criteria that drive us to seek the best mate for ensuring healthy offspring and their survival. "Women on average are a more selective sex when it comes to choosing romantic partners," he said. Imagination and inspiration may be "a proxy for intelligence," he suggested. "Creativity is thought to be a signal that an individual can invest time and effort into a particular task or can see things in novel ways that may be useful for survival."

That means nerds and poets are at a big disadvantage in online dating, where decisions to swipe left or right-to shun or show interest-are often based on just a glance. "Certain platforms that we have now for dating might not be favorable for assessing people on more complex attributes," Watkins said. The allure of creativity may not be limited to potential romantic partners, but extend to potential friends too, the study found. —AFP



**SOUTH AFRICA:** This handout picture shows a leopard at the Soutpansberg Mountains, South Africa. — AFP

## KEY LEOPARD POPULATION CRASHING, STUDY WARNS

**PARIS:** The leopard population in a region of South Africa once thick with the big cats is crashing, and could be wiped out within a few years, scientists warned yesterday. Illegal killing of leopards in the Soutpansberg Mountains has reduced their numbers by two-thirds in the last decade, the researchers reported in the Royal Society Open Science journal.

"If things don't change, we predict leopards will essentially disappear from the area by about 2020," lead author Samuel Williams, a conservation biologist at Durham University in England, said. "This is especially alarming given that, in 2008, this area had one of the highest leopard densities in Africa." The number of leopards in the wild worldwide is not known, but is diminishing elsewhere as well.

The "best estimate" for all of South Africa, said Williams, is about 4,500. What is certain, however, is that the regions these predators roam has shrunk drastically over the last two centuries. The historic range of Panthera pardus, which includes more than half-a-dozen sub-species, covered large swathes of Africa and Asia, and extended well into the Arabian Peninsula. Leopards once roamed the forests of Sri Lanka and Java unchallenged.

Today, they occupy barely a quarter of this territory, with some sub-species teetering on the brink of extinction, trapped in one or two percent of their original habitat. Leopards were classified last year as "vulnerable" to extinction on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List of endangered species, which tracks the survival status of animals and plants. South Africa recently suspended trophy hunting of leopards,

though experts agree this is not a major cause of the population decline.

### Bleak findings

A 2008 census of leopards in the 6,800-square kilometer Soutpansberg Mountains found a robust population of nearly 11 adult cats for each hundred square kilometers. To find out how the carnivores had fared since then, Williams and his team set up four dozen motion-triggered camera traps across the area, and left them in place from 2012 to 2016. The cameras captured a total of 65 individual leopards during the four-year period: 16 adult males, 28 adult females and 21 younger cats.

They also fitted eight adults with GPS collars to track their movements-or lack thereof. Only two of the GPS-tagged leopards survived the monitoring period. Three were done in by snares, one was shot by a local resident whose cattle had been attacked, and two went missing, probably killed since they also disappeared from camera surveillance. A statistical analysis of the results showed "a 66 percent decline over a period just over 7.5 years," the study concluded.

Ironically, the bleak findings helped conservationists and local officials raise money to hire a "community engagement officer." "One of the things he does is help local people adopt non-lethal techniques" to prevent leopards from attacking cattle and other livestock, including the use of guard dogs, Williams added. But the clash between humans and big carnivores, experts agree, is mostly due to humanity's expanding footprint, especially in Africa, whose population is set to expand by more than a billion before mid-century. —AFP

## MICRODOSING TREND HAS AMERICANS TUNING IN WITH PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS

**WASHINGTON:** After a litany of prescriptions failed to control her stormy mood swings and deep depression, writer Ayelet Waldman finally found relief in a blue vial of diluted LSD. Feeling she "had nothing to lose," the San Francisco Bay-area former federal public defender deposited two tiny drops of the psychedelic drug under her tongue-and soon felt her gloom subside. "I was starting to feel, frankly, suicidal," the 52-year-old told AFP. "If the other option is death-or at least, misery that feels like death-then there's no reason not to at least try something different."

Waldman says she renewed her spirit by "microdosing," a modish-albeit illegal and potentially risky-trend that involves ingesting a nearly imperceptible portion of a psychedelic drug, often LSD or psilocybin mushrooms. The goal is not to hallucinate but to boost work performance and creativity or, as was Waldman's case, treat a laundry list of ailments including mood disorders.

"Within the first day I felt better," she said. "The depression was just gone-and that was astonishing." She credits her daily LSD regimen of some 10 micrograms of acid-about one-tenth of a full, far more kaleidoscopic hit-with improving her relationships and enhancing her work. "I would have access to 'that flow,'" she said, describing how subtle doses of LSD changed her writing habits. "Your mind moves swiftly but not erratically, with a kind of really delightful focus."

Microdosing has gained traction outside drug-enthusiast circles in recent years, particularly among young professionals in California's Silicon Valley looking to dial up their careers. Its growing popularity has been ushered along by several influential US podcasts and most recently Waldman's latest book, "A Really Good Day: How Microdosing Made a Mega Difference in My Mood, My Marriage, and My Life," in which she details how psychedelics helped her get off the manic-depressive rollercoaster.

### More in touch

LSD, or lysergic acid diethylamide, is a potent synthetic drug that gained notoriety in 1960s counterculture. In large doses it can induce hallucinations and drastically alter perception and cognitive functions for prolonged periods of time. Carl, whose name has been changed for fear of legal repercussions, works in media in Washington and told AFP he has microdosed with LSD at work some half dozen times in the past year. He said the tiny hits help him stay focused.

"You've got more energy," the 29-year-old said. "The core of your consciousness is still there-you just might be a little bit more in touch." Oliver, whose name has also been changed, describes dropping microdoses as a "very mild euphoria-almost like anticipation of something good." The 25-year-old, who is also a

media professional in the nation's capital, has taken recreational tabs of acid-which he said have run him about 10 dollars each-in addition to tiny doses.

Rather than a full psychedelic experience, he said microdosing gives him "a slight sharpening of concentration, I think produced by the effect that LSD has of making everything feel textured and interesting." "I felt not on top of the world, but one percent more on top of the world than usual," he said. "Which kind of made me feel like I wanted to work." Oliver said he thinks of microdosing as "a cop-out way of doing psychedelics."

That classification brought mid-century studies on using psychedelics as medicine to a standstill. Obvious hazards include ingesting street drugs cut with harmful substances or incorrectly controlling dosage, Johnson said. And because intended doses are so small, perceived positive impacts might actually be placebo effects. Still, he said microdosing warrants controlled study as "it's absolutely interesting and very plausible that there could be effects of cognitive enhancement and anti-depression."

His own studies have yielded encouraging outcomes using psilocybin to help cancer



**WASHINGTON:** This photo shows LSD blotter tabs on top of a US quarter coin in Washington, DC. — AFP

"It's much less threatening," he said wryly. "And is less likely to like, cause temporary ego death, or make you spiral into soul-crushing confusion over the changing color of the sky."

### A legal gamble

While microdosing has shown anecdotal medicinal and performance-enhancing promise, potential risks like long-term toxicity remain unclear, said Matthew Johnson, who studies drug abuse and addiction at Johns Hopkins University. Microdosing is "totally unstudied" for both funding and legal reasons, he told AFP: LSD was first criminalized in 1966 and in 1970 the US government grouped it, along with psilocybin, in the most legally restrictive category of substances alongside drugs like heroin and mescaline.

patients manage anxiety and depression, or to help tobacco smokers quit. In general, he said, researchers focused on psychedelics say overregulation is hindering progress. The legal gamble ultimately dissuaded Waldman from continuing to microdose. She received her initial 30-day LSD supply from a friend of a friend-but procuring more proved nerve wracking.

Drug penalties vary state by state, but are often similar to the federal ones: up to a year in jail and a \$1000 fine for a first offense of LSD possession. As a former lawyer who has defended clients on drug charges, Waldman said she couldn't justify the risk. Until LSD is legalized-unlikely anytime soon-she said she probably won't microdose again. Unless, Waldman said, "I start to become suicidal again." "If it's a choice to die or commit a crime, I'll commit a crime." —AFP

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