

Humor Styles, Subjective Happiness and Self-Esteem Among Indian Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how humor styles could mediate the effect of self-esteem on subjective happiness. 150 Indian school students completed the Humor Styles Questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, and the Subjective Happiness Scale. Results showed adaptive humor styles (affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor) significantly predicted self-esteem and subjective happiness and mediated the relationship between self-esteem and subjective happiness. Maladaptive humor styles (aggressive humor and self-defeating humor) did not strongly predict self-esteem or subjective happiness. The mediation effects of humor styles found in the present research provided useful suggestions for future studies.

Keywords: *Humor Style, Happiness, Self-Esteem, School Students*

According to Martin, et al. (2003), humor can be categorized as adaptive and maladaptive humor styles. Adaptive humor styles include affiliative and self-enhancing humor. Affiliative humor refers to the tendency to tell jokes or engage in spontaneous witty banter to create amusement, lessen interpersonal tension, and facilitate relationships. Self-enhancing humor is the tendency to find amusement from the incongruities in life. Maladaptive humor styles include aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. Aggressive humor is the tendency to use humor at the expense of others to amuse oneself, such as teasing, ridicule, derision, and disparagement, to criticize or manipulate others. Self-defeating humor describes the tendency to amuse others by making fun of oneself or by exposing one's own weaknesses.

Humor is found to help people with coping with stress effectively, enjoy life better, experience fewer negative emotions and have healthier interpersonal relationships. Previous studies also showed that healthy humor was positively related with self-esteem. As such, this study aims to investigate whether humor can influence one's self esteem level in Indian university students (for example, the higher self-esteem one has, the higher use of affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor they report). Also, as described above, not all humor styles are beneficial (e.g., maladaptive humor styles), one may have low self-esteem due to lack of

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confidence caused by use of aggressive humor in situations that direct towards one's weight. Hence, humor may diminish human relations and reduce communicative atmosphere.

As to humor perception, valuation of humor and evaluation of self humor were found to be important for humor use. For example, Chinese and Taiwanese university students valued humor less than their counterparts in the West. So individual and cultural differences exist in humor appreciation as well as in humor use as a coping mechanism. After all, the better the person can use and interpret humor, the more competent he is in social situations.

Studies of humor styles and humor perception are rare and sporadic in India. Of the few English articles which could be found, it argued that the Indian term of mazaak was taken as an alternative word for humor in English and that people engaged in mazaak for mazaak (enjoyment and thrill). Ramaswami explored the proletarian masculinity and mazaak, reporting that industrial workers in Delhi tended to use ganda mazaak (vulgar humor) to cope with the hardship at work. Besides, male students scored higher than females on the sense of humor.

Self-esteem refers to the evaluative aspect of self-knowledge that is concerned with the degree to which people like themselves (Brown & Marshall, 2006). In other words, self-esteem captures the amount of personal value that individuals place on their self, as whole, or in different domains (Brown & Marshall, 2006). Self-esteem has been shown to have a strong relation to happiness (Cummins & Nistico, 2002; Diener, 1984) particularly in individualistic cultures (Diener & Diener, 1995). In general, people high in self-esteem are happier than those low in self-esteem (Argyle, 2001; Campbell, 1981; Cheng & Furnham, 2003). In addition, Lyubomirsky et al. (2006) found that self-esteem was positively correlated with optimism, and negatively correlated with hopelessness raising the possibility that self-esteem relates to happiness instrumentally, by predisposing people to view themselves as efficacious and to hold positive expectations about their lives (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of 150 Indian school students, studying in classes 8th – 12th, of which there were 75 boys and 75 girls. They are studying in schools in Noida, Uttar Pradesh area.

Objectives

To find relationship between self-esteem, subjective happiness, affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles as well as negative correlation with aggressive and self-defeating humor.

Hypotheses

Self-esteem and subjective happiness would be positively associated with affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor but negatively associated with aggressive humor and self-defeating humor.

Instruments

Three measures were used in this study,

1. **Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ):** The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ; Martin, et al., 2003) assesses the four humor styles: affiliative humor (8 items; e.g., "I enjoy making people laugh"), self-enhancing humor (5 items; e.g., "If I am feeling

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depressed, I can usually cheer myself up with humor”), aggressive humor (7 items; e.g., “If someone has a shortcoming, I will often tease him/her about it”) and self-defeating humor (5 items; e.g., “I let people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should”). The measure comprises 25 items to be rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1: Totally disagree and 7: Totally agree. In this study, the Chinese version of the HSQ was used. This version has acceptable internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's α s for subscales ranging from .61–.81 (Chen, 2007; Chen & Martin, 2007; Chen, Watkins, & Martin, 2013). In the present study, the Cronbach's α s of affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor were .82, .72, .65, and .77, respectively.

2. **Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES):** The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES) measures how one evaluates himself/herself (Rosenberg, 1965). The scale consists of 10 general statements about the self (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”) in which participants are required to rate the items on a four-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1: Strongly agree and 4: Strongly disagree. This scale has been widely used and has shown good reliability and validity (Rosenberg, 1965; Greenberger, Chen, Dmitrieva, & Farruggia, 2003). The Chinese translated version of the RSES scale (Hamid, Yue, & Leung, 2003) had Cronbach's α of .73. In the present study, Cronbach's α was .77.
3. **Subjective Happiness Scale. (SHS):** The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1997) consists of four general items about happiness (e.g., “Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?”). Participants were required to rate the items on a seven-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1: Not at all and 7: A great deal. Absolute ratings and ratings relative to peers are included for participants to characterize themselves on the first two items. Brief descriptions of happy and unhappy individuals as well as the extent to which each characterization describes them were offered in the other two items (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1997). The internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .89$; Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1999). The Subjective Happiness Scale was translated by the first author into Chinese and then back translated into English by an expert in Chinese language, to ensure the true meanings of the items were retained. In the present study, Cronbach's α was .87.

Procedure

The participants are inducted into the study after taking their informed consent as well as a socio-demographic form. They are made to fill three questionnaires as a part of the study via a Google form link. The scores thus obtained from the scales are subjected to Correlational analysis as well as Multiple Regression analysis. The results obtained are discussed with supporting research studies.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Frequency distribution of Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	75	50
Male	75	50
Total	150	100.0

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Table No. 2 Frequency distribution of current class

Current Class	Frequency	Percent
Class 12	30	20.0
Class 11	25	16.7
Class 10	15	10.0
Class 9	75	50.0
Class 8	5	3.3
Total	150	100.0

Table No. 3 Frequency Distribution of socio-economic class

Socio-economic class	Frequency	Percent
Upper middle	110	73.3
Lower middle	10	6.7
Prefer not to say	30	20.0
Total	150	100.0

Table No. 4 Correlation between Humor Styles, Subjective Happiness and Self-Esteem

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Affiliative humor					
Self-enhancing humor	-0.138				
Aggressive humor	-0.231*	-0.081			
Self-defeating humor	-0.251*	0.149	0.422*		
Self-esteem	0.297*	0.532*	-0.467*	-0.373*	
Subjective happiness	0.074	0.391*	-0.278*	-0.192	0.442*

*p<0.01

Table 4 shows the correlation results between humor styles, subjective happiness, and self-esteem. Affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor were positively correlated with self-esteem and subjective happiness, respectively. There were significant results found between aggressive humor and self-defeating humor styles and self-esteem and subjective happiness. Results showed that self-esteem was also positively correlated with subjective happiness.

Table No. 5 Multiple Regression Analysis on Humor Styles

	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	R ²	F	t	p
	B	SE	β				
1 (constant)							
Affiliative humor	0.229	0.050	0.249			4.57	<0.001
Self-enhancing humor	0.319	0.029	0.592			11.06	<0.001
Aggressive humor	-0.213	0.053	-0.236			-4.02	<0.001
Self-defeating humor	-0.179	0.035	-0.299			-5.07	<0.001
				0.61	56.937		
2 (constant)							
Affiliative humor	0.012	0.018	0.051			0.66	0.508
Self-enhancing humor	0.056	0.010	0.411			5.50	<0.001
Aggressive humor	-0.037	0.019	-0.160			-1.95	0.053

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Self-defeating humor	-0.026	0.012	-0.173			-2.09	0.038
				0.24	11.574		

Table 5 shows the results of the regression analyses between humor styles, self-esteem, and subjective happiness. Humor styles were found to be significantly associated with self-esteem ($R^2 = 0.61$) and subjective happiness ($R^2 = 0.24$). Self-esteem was positively associated with affiliative humor ($\beta = 0.249$), self-enhancing humor ($\beta = 0.592$) and self-defeating humor ($\beta = -0.299$). Subjective happiness was positively associated with affiliative humor ($\beta = 0.051$) and self-enhancing humor ($\beta = 0.411$). There was statistically significant association found between aggressive humor style and self-esteem ($\beta = -0.236$), but no significant association was found between aggressive humor style and subjective happiness. Taken together, these findings offered partial support for the hypothesis, that is, the two adaptive humor styles were stronger correlates of self-esteem and happiness than the two maladaptive humor styles.

DISCUSSION

The present study shows that self-esteem was positively associated with affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor and negatively associated with self-defeating humor. Higher self-esteem was predicted by the greater use of adaptive humor styles in the present sample. This partially confirms previous findings that students with higher self-esteem tended to use more adaptive humor (Martin, et. al., 2003; Hiranandani & Yue, 2014).

In addition, subjective happiness was found to be significantly and positively associated with self-enhancing humor. This suggests that the more adaptive humor styles the Indian students used, the happier they tended to be. In fact, previous studies did show that self-enhancing humor helped to establish a positive mindset for happiness, hope, and optimism (Thorson, et. al., 1997; Yue, et. al., 2010).

Self-enhancing humor mediated the effect of self-esteem on subjective happiness, providing partial support to the study's hypotheses. This means that the use of self-enhancing humor could affect self-esteem and happiness in Indian students. Happy students with high self-esteem tend to use self-enhancing humor. In fact, previous studies have shown that adaptive humor styles affected self-esteem and gelotophobia, the fear of being laughed at (Hiranandani & Yue, 2014), and the positive self-evaluative standards and self-esteem (Kuiper & McHale, 2009).

Finally, the present findings showed that the two maladaptive humor styles were worse predictors than the two adaptive humor styles on either self-esteem or subjective happiness. It could be due to the fact that aggressive humor was hard to assess on the HSQ scale or the items were not fully reflective of aggressive humor. In fact, some previous studies have shown that aggressive humor was not correlated with other factors such as life satisfaction and depressed mood (Cheung & Yue, 2012) or psychological well-being (Martin, et. al., 2003; Kuiper & McHale, 2009). The HSQ may not be a good measure of aggressive humor. Further studies are needed to verify the present finding.

This is one of the few studies to examine humor styles in India. Very few studies on humor styles have included an Indian sample, that may help to explain the themes in Indian psychology, personality and communication. This study showed that Indian students used adaptive humor styles more than maladaptive humor styles. This reflects that students tend

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to use mazaak (humor) to enhance relationships (Ramaswami, 2006). This could be attributed to that collectivism is emphasized in Indian culture, as such adaptive humor promotes reciprocity and interdependence among people. This also shows that humor styles matter for interpersonal relationships and communications, that is, affiliative and self-enhancing humor enhance social harmony, and self-esteem while aggressive and self-defeating humor do otherwise (Martin, 2003; Yue, et. al., 2010).

It was convincing to note that for the present Indian sample, self-esteem is positively correlated with adaptive humor styles and is negatively correlated with self-defeating humor for Indian students. This echoes previous findings that use of adaptive humor styles enhances self-esteem, peer acceptance, group identity, and cohesiveness (Klein & Kuiper, 2006; Kuiper & Martin, 1993). In short, humor matters in Indian societies. Maslow argues that humor is a characteristic of good health (Veale, et. al., 2006). Self-actualising people acquire non-aggressive humor styles to cope with stress (Veale, et. al., 2006), and people who score high on humor measures tend to have higher self-esteem (Kuiper & Martin, 1993), not to mention that this was also found in the current study.

Although the study demonstrated profound results in Indian humor styles, there were a few limitations to note. Firstly, this study reported that Indian students' use of adaptive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) was most preferred; the self-report measure may limit participants' responses. Future studies ought to include qualitative measures to determine the extent to which these findings of Indian humor are consistent. Secondly, longitudinal studies in the future can help to determine the contribution of humor styles to other factors contributing to psychological well-being, such as, emotional well-being, subjective happiness, and resilience. This study considered the Indian teenagers' use humor styles as their preferred social interaction styles and social influence of significant others.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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