

Humour Styles and its Relationship with Emotional Intelligence and Optimism

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ABSTRACT

Humor expression has been linked with physical, social and mental health (Lee et al., 2020). We all have encountered humour in our lives in the form of a joke, unintended slip of tongue or a comical comment. The response to humour is always a heartily laugh, increase in the production of serotonin and enhancement in positive feelings. Every individual has a unique humour style. The notion is that people who have a good sense of humour must be able to deal with life's problems effectively, thus displaying a higher emotional quotient. Keeping this background in mind this study delves into finding whether people demonstrating a high sense of humour have high emotional intelligence and a positive orientation towards one's life. The sample of the study consists of 100 (50=males, 50=females) students within the age range of 18-25 years. Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to find out the significant relationship between humor styles, emotional intelligence and optimism. Independent 't' test has been employed to compare males and females on humor styles and its correlates. The results of this study pointed towards the hidden nature of humor, which contradicts prior literature.

Keywords: *Humour, Humour Styles, Emotional Intelligence, Life Orientation*

Humour is considered to be an effective coping strategy and is a positive quality in an individual. It enables an individual to laugh off the adversities of life. It is the tendency of being appreciative of funny and comical things. Most of the humour experienced by us in our daily lives pops up spontaneously during our normal conversations with other people (Martin & Kuiper, 1999). This type of interpersonal humour occurs mostly in informal groups such as co-workers, friends, students etc. and is manifested in the form of jokes, sarcasm, and puns in social situations. It is a universal activity that is experienced by people of all races and colours.

According to Crawford (1994), humour is defined as any communication that generates a 'positive cognitive or affective response from listeners.' Romero and Cruthirds (2006) define humour as 'amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organisation.'

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Humour styles

People usually differ in their sense of humour and their humour styles. There are four different styles of humour (Martin, 2003).

- ***Affiliative Humour*** – Comedy shows on TV focus on this kind of humour. People showing this humour style tell funny stories, jokes, are lively, outgoing and have positive relationships with others. They make everyone around them jovial. Thus affiliative humour is associated with higher self-esteem and optimism (Launer, 2016).
- ***Self-enhancing Humour*** - People with this humour style find humour in times of stress and adversity and this acts as a healthy coping strategy for them. People manifesting this humour style tend to amuse themselves, when life throws lemons at them, thus exhibiting emotional stability. People with this humour style have a humorous outlook and report reduced state anxiety (Ford, Lappi, O’Conner & Banos, 2017).
- ***Aggressive Humour*** – It is considered to be a negative humour style. People demonstrating this humour style are more inclined to put down others and their humour is directed towards harming others at the psychological level. These people usually have low self-esteem and have impaired relationships with others. This humour style correlates highly with psychopathy and social exclusion (Masui & Ura, 2013).
- ***Self-defeating Humour*** – People with this humour style put themselves down to be accepted in a group. They become the centre of mockery by allowing other people, to crack jokes at themselves. People with this style have low self-confidence and usually seek validation from others. They disguise their true feelings and emotions from others by setting up cheery countenances. Research has revealed that self-defeating humour is positively associated with rumination, brooding and suicidal ideation (Tuck et al., 2014).

Definitions of Emotional Intelligence

Salovey and Mayer (1990) define “emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge and to reflectively regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.” Daniel Goleman (2005) defined emotional intelligence as “the capacity for recognizing our feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions effectively in ourselves and others”. Mayer and Salovey (1997) gave the four-branch model of Intelligence. The model comprises four emotion-related abilities.

- ***Perception of emotion*** – It refers to the ability of an individual to perceive one’s and others emotions using facial expressions and bodily movements.
- ***Use of Emotion to Facilitate Thinking*** - It involves using emotions to enhance cognitive abilities such as thinking, reasoning (inductive and deductive reasoning) while making decisions in a social situation.
- ***Understanding of Emotion*** – This branch deals with the ability to name and interpret the different emotions and to understand their causes and trajectories. It deals with the ability to recognize transitions among emotions.
- ***Management of Emotion*** – Emotional management deals with the ability to be open to all kinds of emotions including positive and negative ones. It involves monitoring and regulating one’s emotions and forming strategies to effectively deal with them.

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Optimism

Life orientation means the outlook person holds towards his or her future that affects his thoughts, feelings and behaviors. It is the cluster of many factors that contributes to the person's viewpoint. Generally, in life orientation, we categorise people into optimistic and pessimistic. According to Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom (2010) optimism is defined as an “*individual difference variable that reflects the extent to which people hold generalised favourable expectancies for their future.*”

Optimism is associated with higher levels of engagement and better subjective well-being. Optimism is also highly associated with good mood, perseverance, achievement and physical health (Peterson, 2000). It has also been seen that people with high optimism have larger social networks (Segerstrom, 2007). In another study optimism is a significant predictor of subjective well-being (Vacek, Coyle & Vera, 2011). Research has also suggested that optimism is positively associated with problem solving and cognitive coping strategies (Lee & Mason, 2013). Studies have also indicated that optimism is positively related with task-oriented coping and is negatively correlated with emotion-oriented coping (Ahmad, Omid & Masoud, 2015) Charlie Chaplin once said laughter is, “*the tonic, the relief, the surcease for pain*”.

Studies have been done to discover the relationship between emotional intelligence and humour styles, which indicates that people who appreciate humour have better emotional capacity than less funny people. According to Jip and Martin (2006) people who demonstrate self-enhancing and affiliative humour are better able to initiate conversations with strangers and make friendships easily. In their study, they found out that people using positive humour styles exhibit personal disclosure. On the other hand, people using an aggressive humour style seem to show a lower ability to provide emotional support to others (Kuiper, 2004).

According to psychologist Janet Gibson, “*Laughter creates bonds and increases intimacy with others*”. Humour is considered to be an asset in managing gloomy emotions. It encourages critical thinking by substituting negative thoughts with positive ones. Another research conducted on 94 university students suggests that humour is correlated with emotional intelligence i.e., understanding one's and others' emotions (Zahra, Kee & Usman, 2019). The findings of this study suggested that humour can change a person's thoughts and perceptions by improving positive emotions.

Major strides have been made in the arena of the positive use of humour style and quality of life. Generally, people who have a decent sense of humour have a very balanced view of life and are not easily bogged down by the challenges they face during the journey called life. A study conducted by Crawford and Caltabiano (2011) supports this claim. The study aims to measure the effectiveness of the Humour Skills Programme in increasing self-efficacy, positive thinking, optimism and perceptions of control. 55 volunteers from the community were assigned to a humour group and a non-intervention control group. Measures assessing indices of well-being were administered over 8 weeks. Results of the study revealed that people assigned to the humour group showed an increase in self-efficacy, positive affect, optimism while there was a decrease in depression, anxiety and perceived stress.

It has been seen that not all styles of humour are beneficial for boosting mental health. Self-enhancing and Affiliative humour is considered to be a major contributor to a person's psychological well-being. A sample of 800 undergraduates in Hongkong and China was

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taken to study the relationship among humour styles, dispositional optimism and mental health (Yue, Hao & Goldman, 2010). The Chinese Humor Styles Questionnaire, the Life Orientation Test-Revised, the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised were used. Results revealed a positive correlation between optimism and affiliative and self-enhancing humour but were negatively correlated with aggressive humour and self-defeating humour for the Mainland China sample.

Research Hypotheses

H₁: Affiliative humour will have a positive relationship with emotional intelligence and optimism.

H₂: Self-enhancing humour will have a positive relationship with emotional intelligence and Optimism.

H₃: Aggressive humour will have a negative relationship with emotional intelligence and optimism.

H₄: Self-defeating humour will have a negative relationship with emotional intelligence and optimism.

H₅: There will be gender differences in humor styles, emotional intelligence and optimism

METHODOLOGY

The sample consisted of 100 students (N=100) divided into 50 males and 50 females. A correlational study design was carried out and data was collected using the purposive sampling technique. A quantitative approach to data collection and analysis was adopted. The following instruments were used:

- **Humor Style Questionnaire:** HSQ (Humor Style Questionnaire) developed by Rod Martin and Patricia Dorris (2003) contains 32 items that measured four different humor styles (Affiliative humor, Self-enhancing humor, Aggressive humor, and Self-defeating humor). Participants are required to respond to the degree to which they agree with each statement (e.g., "I laugh and joke a lot with my friends") on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The reliability of the four scales is demonstrated by the test-retest reliabilities of 0.80 to 0.85. Validity is calculated by differential correlations with other measures of sense of humor, self-esteem, psychological well-being, social support etc. Cronbach's Alpha came out to be between .58 to .81 and content validity came out to be satisfactory (Sirigatti, Penzo, Giannetti & Stefanile, 2014).
- **The Schutte Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT):** It is a 33 item self-report measure of emotional intelligence developed by Schutte et.al (1998) which is based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) model of emotional intelligence and measures four subscales. The test taker is required to rate themselves on the five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Internal consistency of the scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha, to be 0.90. The test-retest reliability came out to be 0.78 for the total scores. The scores are reliable for adults and adolescents. Some studies have found evidence for the validity of the test. Schutte et al (1998) found that the scores are highly related to greater attention to emotions, greater clarity of emotions, and less alexithymia (it involves an inability to reveal emotions) The psychometric properties of the test came out to be satisfactory with good criterion validity and reliability ranging from .55 to .85 (Abdullah, 2018).
- **Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R):** It was developed by Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994) consisting of 10 items that measure the optimism and pessimism among the respondents. It is a four-point scale ranging from strongly disagreeing to

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strongly agreeing. Out of ten items, four are fillers. The reliability of the test came out to be 0.76, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. The convergent validity of the test indicated that it is highly correlated with the internal locus of control and self-esteem. Recent study on the psychometric properties of LOT-R indicates internal consistency of 0.72 (Carnicer, Calderon & Santacana, 2017).

Table 1 Showing descriptive statistics and t-ratio

MALE (N=50)			FEMALE (N=50)		t-ratio	Sig.(2-tailed)
VARIABLE	MEAN	S.D.	MEAN	S.D.		
Humour Total	146.840	18.024	142.640	15.034	1.265	0.209
Affiliative Humour	30.600	4.361	30.280	5.689	0.316	0.753
Self-enhancing Humour	30.420	6.655	29.380	6.213	0.808	0.421
Aggressive Humour	31.740	3.963	32.020	5.441	-0.294	0.769
Self-defeating Humour	30.300	5.761	28.360	6.016	1.647	0.103
Emotional Intelligence	117.000	10.866	120.580	12.225	-1.548	0.125
Life Orientation	13.660	4.220	14.220	4.092	-0.673	0.502

Table 2 Showing intercorrelations between Humor Styles, Optimism and Emotional Intelligence

VARIABLES	PEARSON CORRELATION
Affiliative Humour and Emotional Intelligence	-0.044
Affiliative Humour and Life Orientation	-0.024
Self-enhancing Humour and Emotional Intelligence	0.011
Self-enhancing Humour and Life Orientation	-0.129
Aggressive Humour and Emotional Intelligence	0.188
Aggressive Humour and Life Orientation	0.112
Self-defeating Humour and Emotional Intelligence	-0.13
Self-defeating Humour and Life Orientation	-0.165
Emotional Intelligence and Life Orientation	0.154

The tables above showed that no significant relationship existed between humour styles and emotional intelligence. Similarly, it indicated that there is no significant relationship between humour and life orientation. Thus, the results of the study came out to be non-significant which leads to the rejection of all the hypotheses of the study. The reasons for the results are explained in the discussion.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study came out to be non-significant. This means that the subject having good humour doesn't mean that he/she possesses high emotional intelligence and will necessarily have a positive orientation towards life. Humour is a subjective experience. What may be humour to one, can be a tragedy for another. It often involves both funny and damaging elements. When humour invades one's oppressors, it is considered valiant, but

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when it humiliates one's own self, it is perceived as a storm that carries away with it a person's integrity and self-esteem. Humour can be both funny and damaging.

Contrary to people's views, humour doesn't always bring one together but instead reinforces one's beliefs and is perceived as an enemy if it contradicts one's opinions. This concept of humour is brilliantly manifested in the movie "Joker". "*I used to think that my life was a tragedy, but now I realise, it's a.... comedy*". This dialogue by the protagonist Arthur Fleck reveals to us the dark side of humour.

According to Sigmund Freud, people tell jokes to relieve themselves from anxiety. One of the reasons that humor style was not correlated with optimism or emotional intelligence could be small sample size as well.

Many famous comedians are known to struggle with their mental health issues and succumb to suicide. Robin Williams, a well-known actor and comedian committed suicide in his home at Paradise Cay, California. Another popular comedian Brody Stevens, known for his role in the television series *Brody Stevens: Enjoy It!* also ended his life. Although a comedian committing suicide may sound paradoxical. This reveals that exhibiting mere humour doesn't always indicate that the person is emotionally strong and always has a positive outlook towards life in general. One cannot fathom what is embedded deep in the mind of the person, and maybe humour is just a medium to cope with pessimistic thoughts. Maybe through humour, the person is trying to escape the brutal reality which otherwise seems to be a daunting task for him. Many studies support this notion and have also shown that certain humour styles act as a medium to cope with depression, suicidal ideation and manifest borderline personality traits. A piece of recent evidence showed the negative correlation between self-enhancing humour style and borderline personality disorder (Meyer, Helle, Tucker, Lengel, DeShong, Wingate & Mullins-Sweatt, 2017). Psychopathology and cognitive dysfunction are usually seen in people using a self-defeating humour style.

A recent investigation justified this statement by showing a positive association of self-defeating humour style with rumination and suicidal ideation (Tucker, Wingate, Slish, O'Keefe, Cole & Hollingsworth, 2014). Some of the personality traits have also been found to be negatively correlated with affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles. According to Hill, McCabe and Vrabel (2016), antagonism and disinhibition are positively associated with aggressive humour style whereas psychoticism is positively associated with self-defeating humour style. Their study was conducted on 594 college students and the associations between pathological personality traits and humour styles were investigated. It indicated that negative affectivity and detachment has negative associations with affiliative and self-enhancing humour. This suggests that these people are uncomfortable in using humour to enhance themselves or their relationships with others. From the discussion it can be inferred that possessing humour is not the predictor of emotional intelligence and optimism in life.

It is not necessary that humor will always be related to a positive approach towards life and emotional regulation. Sometimes an individual uses humor to cope with anxiety, depression and lack of emotional intelligence. In other words, humor could also be used as a cover up for one's weak emotional regulation.

Studies have found that adolescents who use dark humor, self-defeating humor and aggressive humor styles are low on emotional intelligence and they have special preference for suicide ideation. This is because they might be using humor in order to protect

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themselves against interpersonal relationship problems, ease social tensions and to experience a feeling of belongingness (Lee et al., 2020). Some studies have also pointed to loneliness, shyness, introversion as a predictor of self-defeating and aggressive humor styles (Hampes, 2005).

Lastly, the reason for lack of significant correlation and gender differences in humor styles and its correlates could also be attributed to a small sample size. Maybe when the current study will be replicated on a larger sample size, significant correlations might emerge.

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Conflict of Interest

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