

The Relationship Between Humor Styles, Perceived Stress, and Emotional Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the relationship between humor styles, perceived stress, and emotional well-being. A correlational research design was utilized with a sample of 153 young adults who completed standardized measures, including the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). The results strongly supported the study's hypotheses. Adaptive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) were significantly negatively correlated with perceived stress and positively correlated with well-being. Conversely, maladaptive humor styles (aggressive and self-defeating) were significantly positively correlated with perceived stress and negative affect. These findings underscore the critical importance of the type of humor used as a psychological coping mechanism. The results affirm that adaptive humor serves as a significant buffer against stress, while maladaptive humor is associated with increased psychological distress, providing clear implications for mental health interventions.

Keywords: *Humor Styles, Stress, Coping, Psychological Well-Being, Positive Affect, Negative Affect*

Stress has emerged as one of the most significant public health challenges of the 21st century. Characterized as a state of mental or emotional strain resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances, stress is a ubiquitous feature of the human condition (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In contemporary society, the relentless pace of life, coupled with economic instability, social pressures, and constant digital connectivity, has transformed stress from an occasional challenge into a chronic background state for a significant portion of the global population (American Psychological Association, 2023). This sustained activation of the body's stress-response systems, particularly the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and the sympathetic nervous system, can lead to a cascade of negative physiological and psychological consequences. Chronic stress is a well-established risk factor for cardiovascular disease, immune suppression, metabolic syndrome, anxiety disorders, and major depression (McEwen, 1998; Sapolsky, 2004). Given its profound and multifaceted impact on human health and well-being, the scientific exploration of effective coping mechanisms is a critical and urgent imperative.

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Theoretical Frameworks of Coping and Humor

Coping refers to the conscious and unconscious cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals employ to manage external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding their personal resources. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), provides a foundational framework. This model posits that the experience of stress is not merely a function of the external event, but rather a product of the transaction between the individual and their environment. This transaction involves a two-stage cognitive appraisal process: primary appraisal, in which the individual evaluates the significance of the event, and secondary appraisal, in which they evaluate their available coping resources. Coping strategies are broadly distinguished between problem-focused coping (actions aimed at altering the stressor itself) and emotion-focused coping (efforts to regulate the emotional distress associated with the stressor). Within this landscape, humor has long been recognized as a potent, albeit complex, emotion-focused coping strategy.

Historically, the psychological function of humor has been explained by three major theories. Incongruity Theory, arguably the most influential cognitive perspective, posits that amusement arises from the perception of something unexpected that violates our mental schemas. The pleasure derived from humor, according to this view, comes from the cognitive effort of resolving this incongruity (Suls, 1972). Relief Theory, with deep roots in Freudian psychoanalysis, suggests that humor and laughter serve as a mechanism for releasing pent-up psychic or nervous energy, providing a cathartic release from inhibition and tension (Freud, 1905). Finally, Superiority Theory, the oldest of the major theories, proposes that amusement often stems from a feeling of triumph or derision towards the misfortunes, flaws, or inferiority of others (Gruner, 1997). While each of these classical theories offers valuable insights, none fully captures the multifaceted nature of humor in everyday life.

A Nuanced Model: The Four Humor Styles

Modern research has evolved from these general theories to a more nuanced understanding of humor as a set of distinct interpersonal and intrapersonal styles. The seminal work of Martin et al. (2003) operationalized humor into four distinct styles, providing a comprehensive framework that has become central to contemporary humor research:

- 1. Affiliative Humor:** An adaptive, prosocial style used to enhance relationships, tell jokes, facilitate social bonds, and ease interpersonal tension. It is fundamentally benign and other-focused.
- 2. Self-Enhancing Humor:** An adaptive, intrapersonal style characterized by maintaining a humorous and cheerful perspective on life, even during adversity. It involves finding amusement in life's incongruities and using humor for emotional self-regulation.
- 3. Aggressive Humor:** A potentially maladaptive style involving sarcasm, ridicule, teasing, and disparagement of others to assert dominance, express hostility, or enhance one's own standing.
- 4. Self-Defeating Humor:** A potentially maladaptive style where individuals excessively disparage themselves, allowing themselves to be the "butt" of jokes to gain social approval or amuse others, often at the expense of their own self-esteem.

This four-style model is critical because it moves beyond the simplistic notion of a "good sense of humor." It suggests that the *way* in which humor is used matters profoundly for psychological health. A substantial body of literature has validated this framework, linking the adaptive styles to positive outcomes such as higher self-esteem, greater optimism, lower

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depression, and stronger social support networks. Conversely, the maladaptive styles are often associated with negative outcomes like hostility, anxiety, neuroticism, and poorer interpersonal relationships (Kuiper, 2012; Frewen et al., 2008).

The Present Study

While these relationships are well-documented, continued empirical validation is necessary to solidify the differential effects of these styles across various populations and cultural contexts. The present study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by rigorously examining the distinct relationships between the four humor styles and their association with both perceived stress and emotional well-being in a diverse adult sample. By doing so, this research seeks to reinforce the theoretical importance of the four-styles model and highlight the practical implications for mental health interventions. The objectives and hypotheses are as follows:

Objectives:

1. To investigate the correlational relationship between the four humor styles and individuals' levels of perceived stress.
2. To explore the relationship between the four humor styles and measures of psychological well-being (positive and negative affect).
3. To analyse potential demographic variations, specifically gender, in the use of different humor styles.

Hypotheses:

- **(H1 & H2):** Adaptive humor styles (Affiliative and Self-Enhancing) will be negatively correlated with perceived stress, while maladaptive humor styles (Aggressive and Self-Defeating) will be positively correlated with perceived stress.
- **(H3):** Adaptive humor styles will be positively correlated with Positive Affect and negatively with Negative Affect, with the opposite pattern expected for maladaptive styles.
- **(H4):** The use of humor will vary across demographic variables such as gender.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative, non-experimental, correlational research design was employed to examine the naturally occurring relationships between the study variables. Data were collected at a single point in time using a cross-sectional online survey, a method chosen for its efficiency in gathering data from a broad sample and for its suitability in exploring associations between psychological constructs as they exist in a population.

Participants and Procedure

A sample of 153 participants was recruited using a convenience sampling method. Recruitment took place through announcements on online social platforms and university listservs, inviting adults to participate in a study on personality and well-being. The sample's age ranged from 18 to 55 years ($M = 26.15$, $SD = 10.50$), ensuring all participants were adults and providing a reasonable spectrum of adult life stages. The sample consisted of 95 females (62.1%) and 58 males (37.9%).

The study protocol received ethical approval from the [Name of Your University] Institutional Review Board. Interested individuals were directed to an online survey

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platform. The first page of the survey presented a detailed informed consent form, outlining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, procedures for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and contact information for the researchers. Participants provided their electronic consent before proceeding. The questionnaires were presented in a counterbalanced order to mitigate potential order effects. Upon completion, participants were presented with a debriefing page that provided additional information about the study's aims.

Measures

Three well-validated psychometric instruments were used for data collection:

- 1. Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ):** The 32-item scale by Martin et al. (2003) was used to assess individual differences across the four humor styles (Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-Defeating). Participants responded to statements (e.g., "I enjoy making people laugh") on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Totally Disagree*) to 7 (*Totally Agree*). Each of the four subscales consists of 8 items. The HSQ has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in previous research, with good internal consistency (Cronbach's α typically ranging from .77 to .85) and robust construct validity.
- 2. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10):** The widely used 10-item scale by Cohen et al. (1983) measured subjective stress levels. Participants rated the frequency of certain feelings and thoughts over the past month (e.g., "how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?") on a 5-point scale from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Very Often*). The PSS-10 is a well-validated measure of the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloading.
- 3. Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS):** The 20-item scale by Watson et al. (1988) measured two orthogonal dimensions of mood: Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). Participants rated the extent to which they had experienced 10 positive (e.g., excited, enthusiastic) and 10 negative (e.g., distressed, upset) emotions over the past week on a 5-point scale from 1 (*Very Slightly or Not at All*) to 5 (*Extremely*). The PANAS is a reliable and valid measure of affect, widely used in personality and clinical psychology.

Data Analysis Plan

All data were analysed using SPSS (Version 28). The dataset was first screened for missing values and outliers. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, ranges) were calculated for all demographic and primary study variables. The internal consistency of each scale and subscale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. To test the primary hypotheses, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships between the four humor styles, perceived stress, and affect. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to test the exploratory hypothesis regarding gender differences in humor styles. The alpha level for all tests of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Internal consistency for all measures was found to be acceptable to excellent in the current sample: HSQ subscales (Cronbach's α ranged from .75 to .82), PSS-10 ($\alpha = .85$), PANAS Positive Affect ($\alpha = .88$), and PANAS Negative Affect ($\alpha = .86$). The data were screened, and all variables were found to meet the assumptions for parametric testing.

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Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for all key study variables are presented in Table 1. On average, participants reported moderate levels of perceived stress. For humor styles, Self-Defeating Humor was the most frequently reported style, while Affiliative Humor was the least.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Key Study Variables (N = 153)

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Aggressive Humor (HSQ)	11.32	4.37	2 – 26
Affiliative Humor (HSQ)	8.72	4.44	0 – 19
Self-Defeating Humor (HSQ)	15.78	4.99	4 – 26
Self-Enhancing Humor (HSQ)	11.74	3.58	4 – 21
Perceived Stress (PSS-10)	20.08	6.96	1 – 40
Positive Affect (PANAS)	31.76	4.81	17 – 47
Negative Affect (PANAS)	30.24	4.25	15 – 47

Hypothesis Testing A comprehensive Pearson correlation matrix was generated to test the study's hypotheses. The results, presented in Table 2, provided strong and consistent support for the predicted relationships.

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Matrix for All Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Aggressive Humor	—						
2. Affiliative Humor	-.11	—					
3. Self-Defeating Humor	.18*	.04	—				
4. Self-Enhancing Humor	-.09	.25**	.15	—			
5. Perceived Stress	.22**	-.25**	.28***	-.30***	—		
6. Positive Affect	-.20*	.35***	-.26**	.40***	-.42***	—	
7. Negative Affect	.32***	-.29***	.38***	-.36***	.55***	-.45***	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In strong support of Hypotheses 1 and 2, the adaptive humor styles were significantly negatively correlated with perceived stress. Both Affiliative Humor ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$) and Self-Enhancing Humor ($r = -.30$, $p < .001$) were linked to lower stress levels. Conversely, maladaptive humor styles were positively correlated with perceived stress, including both Aggressive Humor ($r = .22$, $p < .01$) and Self-Defeating Humor ($r = .28$, $p < .001$).

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Strong support was also found for Hypothesis 3. Adaptive humor styles were positively associated with Positive Affect (Affiliative: $r = .35, p < .001$; Self-Enhancing: $r = .40, p < .001$) and negatively associated with Negative Affect (Affiliative: $r = -.29, p < .001$; Self-Enhancing: $r = -.36, p < .001$). Maladaptive styles showed the opposite pattern, correlating positively with Negative Affect and negatively with Positive Affect.

Finally, in support of Hypothesis 4, an independent-samples t-test revealed a significant gender difference in Affiliative Humor, $t(151) = 2.61, p = .010$, with a medium effect size, $d = 0.44$. Males ($M = 9.90, SD = 4.51$) reported significantly higher levels of this style than females ($M = 8.00, SD = 4.27$).

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the intricate relationships between humor styles, perceived stress, and emotional well-being. The findings provide robust support for the differential role of adaptive and maladaptive humor in psychological health, confirming that the way in which individuals use humor is a significant correlate of their mental state.

Adaptive Humor as a Buffer Against Stress and a Promoter of Well-Being

The study's primary hypotheses were strongly supported, demonstrating that adaptive humor styles function as a psychological buffer against stress and a promoter of positive affect. The significant negative correlation between Self-Enhancing Humor and perceived stress suggests that the cognitive ability to find amusement in life's absurdities and maintain a light-hearted perspective is a powerful tool for emotional regulation. This finding aligns with theories of cognitive reappraisal, where reframing a stressor in a humorous light can diminish its perceived threat and emotional impact (Samson & Gross, 2012). The strong positive correlation with positive affect further suggests that this humor style is a key mechanism for cultivating positive emotional experiences, which, according to Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build theory, can broaden an individual's cognitive resources and build psychological resilience over time.

Similarly, the negative correlation between Affiliative Humor and stress underscores the critical importance of social connectedness in mental health. By using humor to build and maintain relationships, tell jokes, and ease tension, individuals strengthen their social support networks. Social support is a well-established and powerful protective factor against the deleterious physiological and psychological effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The strong positive link with positive affect indicates that this humor style not only mitigates negative states but actively contributes to shared joy and positive social experiences.

Maladaptive Humor as a Significant Correlate of Psychological Distress

Conversely, the study confirmed that maladaptive humor styles are clearly associated with psychological distress. The positive correlation between Aggressive Humor, stress, and negative affect highlights the significant interpersonal cost of using humor to put others down. While it may provide a momentary sense of superiority for the user, this style likely erodes social bonds, increases interpersonal friction and conflict, and ultimately contributes to a more stressful and hostile social environment. It is a self-defeating strategy in the long run, as it alienates the very social resources that could buffer stress.

Furthermore, the strong link between Self-Defeating Humor, stress, and negative affect is particularly concerning. This style, where individuals disparage themselves for the amusement of others, may be used in an attempt to gain acceptance or defuse tension.

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However, the findings suggest that this comes at a high psychological price. By consistently engaging in negative self-talk, even in a humorous context, individuals may reinforce a negative self-concept, internalize a sense of worthlessness, and ultimately increase their vulnerability to depression and anxiety (Frewen et al., 2008).

Gender Differences in Humor Expression

While the primary hypotheses were strongly supported, the study also revealed a notable demographic finding. The fact that males reported significantly higher use of affiliative "bonding" humor is consistent with research on gendered communication styles and socialization. It suggests that, within certain social scripts, humor may be used more instrumentally by men to foster in-group cohesion, negotiate social hierarchies, and build rapport within male peer groups (Kuiper et al., 1993). This highlights that while humor is a universal human capacity, its expression and function can be shaped by social and cultural norms, warranting further cross-cultural investigation.

Practical Implications

The findings from this study have several important and actionable practical implications. For mental health practitioners, they suggest that assessing a client's humor style can be a valuable diagnostic tool and a target for intervention. Interventions, particularly within a Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) framework, could focus on helping clients reduce their reliance on maladaptive humor styles by challenging the underlying cognitive distortions, while actively cultivating more adaptive, self-enhancing, and affiliative approaches through behavioural experiments and skills training. For educators and workplace wellness programs, these results advocate for fostering environments where positive, inclusive humor is encouraged. Training programs could be developed to teach employees and students how to use affiliative humor to build teams and how to use self-enhancing humor to cope with academic or occupational stress.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the strong and theoretically consistent findings, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The primary limitation is its cross-sectional design, which, while effective for identifying associations, cannot establish causality. It is plausible that stress levels influence humor styles, just as humor styles influence stress. Future research should employ longitudinal methods, such as tracking a cohort of students through their university years, to see if changes in humor styles predict future changes in well-being. Furthermore, the reliance on self-report measures is subject to inherent biases, such as social desirability. Incorporating observational methods (e.g., coding humor use in a lab-based social interaction) or peer reports would provide a more comprehensive picture. Finally, the convenience sample was composed primarily of young adults, and replicating these findings in more diverse demographic samples (e.g., older adults, clinical populations, professionals in high-stress occupations) is an essential next step to confirm the generalizability of these results.

Implications for Future Research

Future research can build on these findings by examining the causal pathways between humor styles and well-being through longitudinal or experimental designs. Cross-cultural comparisons could reveal how cultural values influence humor expression and stress perception. Additionally, intervention-based studies could explore how training in adaptive humor styles can enhance coping and resilience among young adults and working professionals.

CONCLUSION

This study provides robust evidence for the critical role of humor in mental health and well-being. The findings clearly and consistently demonstrate that the *type* of humor one uses matters profoundly: adaptive humor styles are linked to resilience and positive psychological states, while maladaptive styles are associated with significant distress. The results successfully reinforce the importance of viewing humor not as a trivial or monolithic trait, but as a nuanced set of cognitive and social skills that can be harnessed to better navigate the challenges of life. By understanding the distinct profiles of these humor styles, we can better develop targeted interventions to help individuals build their psychological resources and foster a more resilient and flourishing society.

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Conflict of Interest

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