

Research Paper

Multidimensional Humor Styles and Generational Differences

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined generational differences in humor styles between Generation Z and Millennials, with a particular focus on testing differences in adaptive (affiliative and self-enhancing) and maladaptive (aggressive and self-defeating) humor styles. Using a cross-sectional research design, data were collected from a purposive sample of 150 participants, comprising 75 Millennials and 75 Generation Z respondents. The 32-item Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) was administered to assess the four humor dimensions. The findings revealed that Millennials scored significantly higher on affiliative ($M = 34.10$, $SD = 6.45$) and self-enhancing humor ($M = 37.10$, $SD = 7.65$) compared to Generation Z ($M = 32.80$, $SD = 7.10$; $M = 36.80$, $SD = 8.90$ respectively). Welch's t-test results showed these differences to be statistically significant ($t = 2.95$ and $t = 2.463$, $p < 0.05$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and supporting H1, which posits that Millennials use adaptive humor styles more frequently. Conversely, Generation Z scored significantly higher on aggressive ($M = 34.65$, $SD = 7.40$) and self-defeating humor ($M = 31.10$, $SD = 9.60$) compared to Millennials ($M = 31.20$, $SD = 4.95$; $M = 29.90$, $SD = 8.20$), with statistically significant t-values ($t = 3.791$ and $t = 2.237$, $p < 0.05$). These results support H2, indicating that Generation Z tends to use maladaptive humor styles more frequently.

Keywords: *Humor styles, Generation Z, Millennials, psychological well-being, comparative study*

Humour is a multidimensional psychological and social construct that goes far beyond telling jokes. Martin et al. (2003) identified four distinct humour styles organized along two axes: adaptive (Affiliative humour and Self-enhancing humour) and maladaptive (Aggressive humour and Self-defeating humour). Affiliative humour builds social bonds through lighthearted interaction, while self-enhancing humour functions as a personal coping mechanism during adversity. In contrast, aggressive humour relies on sarcasm or ridicule directed at others, and self-defeating humour involves self-disparagement for social acceptance. Adaptive styles are consistently linked to well-being, life satisfaction, and positive affect, whereas maladaptive styles tend to predict anxiety, loneliness, and reduced self-esteem (Hussain & Cerkez, 2024; Rastogi, 2023).

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Closely linked to humour is the concept of flourishing—a state of optimal psychological functioning encompassing positive emotions, meaningful relationships, and a sense of purpose (Seligman, 2011; Diener et al., 2010). Research has shown that adaptive humour predicts higher flourishing, while maladaptive humour is associated with poorer well-being outcomes (Rastogi, 2023). These patterns make flourishing a meaningful backdrop for comparing humour styles across generations.

Generation Z (born 1997–2012), shaped by digital-native experiences, rapid technological change, and elevated mental health challenges, tends to favor ironic, absurdist, and self-deprecating humour as tools for identity expression and peer bonding (Nielsen, 2021). Millennials (born 1981–1996), who transitioned into the digital world rather than being born into it, generally lean toward affiliative and self-enhancing styles that reflect their emphasis on social cohesion, collaboration, and adaptive coping (Sharma et al., 2023). These generational differences in communication norms and socio-cultural exposures suggest that humour styles may vary meaningfully between the two cohorts.

Against this background, the present study employs a cross-sectional design to compare all four humour dimensions across 75 Gen Z and 75 Millennial participants using the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ). The findings are expected to contribute to generational psychology and may offer practical insights for educators, mental health practitioners, and workplace professionals dealing with multi-generational groups.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Fransisca (2025) examined self-acceptance differences by humour style specifically within Generation Z samples and found affiliative humour predicted higher self-acceptance while aggressive humour predicted the lowest. Although this is a recent, geographically limited study, it points toward generationally-specific patterns worth comparing with millennial samples.

Huff (2024) examined generational differences in humour and their impact on workplace dynamics. The study found that humour preferences vary across cohorts, with older generations favouring traditional and sarcastic humour, while Millennials and Generation Z prefer irony, relatability, and meme-based humour. It also emphasized the importance of leaders maintaining inclusivity and professionalism. Overall, the study suggests that understanding diverse humour styles can improve workplace cohesion and morale.

Hussain and Cerkez (2024) conducted a comprehensive review and found that affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles are consistently associated with positive psychological and physical health outcomes, whereas aggressive and self-defeating humour styles are linked to negative outcomes. The study also highlighted the growing research interest in humour styles in recent years.

Ganya (2024) explored the relationship between humour styles and cognitive functioning among young adults and found significant associations between humour styles and working memory, along with gender differences in humour usage patterns.

Rastogi (2023) examined the relationship between emotional intelligence, flourishing, and humour styles among young adults. The findings indicated that affiliative and self-enhancing humour were positively associated with emotional intelligence and flourishing, whereas aggressive humour showed a negative relationship.

Multidimensional Humor Styles and Generational Differences

Sharma, Tiwari, and Saini (2023) investigated humour styles and quality of life among Indian youth and found that adaptive humour styles were positively associated with physical, psychological, and social well-being, while maladaptive styles were negatively related.

Napp (2023) reported that engagement with dark and self-deprecating humour was associated with higher psychological distress, but also with a sense of social belonging among peers, suggesting both coping and social functions of humour.

deCruz-Dixon (2023) found that affiliative and self-enhancing humour were linked to higher self-esteem and lower psychological distress, whereas aggressive and self-defeating humour were associated with poorer outcomes.

Madrid (2023) examined humour preferences in advertising and found that Generation Z prefers authentic, absurd, and unconventional humour, while older generations tend to favour more structured and nostalgic forms.

Meaney et al. (2022) investigated humour perception across age and gender groups and found that older individuals and women were more likely to perceive humour as offensive and less amusing, suggesting demographic differences in humour interpretation.

Jain (2022) studied humour styles and self-esteem among young adults and reported that affiliative humour positively predicted self-esteem, while aggressive humour showed a negative association.

Eype & Lokesh (2021) investigated the relationship between humor styles and emotional intelligence in young adults, including Millennials. The study found significant positive relationships between affiliative humor and all dimensions of emotional intelligence. Similarly, self-enhancing humor also showed significant positive relationships with all dimensions of emotional intelligence. These results suggest that Millennials who utilize affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles may possess higher emotional intelligence.

Nielsen (2021) found that Generation Z strongly engages with absurdist and meme-based humour, using it for identity expression and peer bonding, reflecting the influence of digital culture on humour styles.

METHOD

Rationale of Study

Humour is an important psychological and social construct that influences interpersonal relationships, emotional expression, and overall well-being. Different humour styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating) reflect how individuals cope with social and emotional situations. Generation Z and Millennials differ in terms of social environment, technological exposure, and communication patterns, which may lead to variations in their use and expression of humour. Additionally, humour styles are linked with psychological well-being, where adaptive styles promote healthy interactions and maladaptive styles may indicate emotional or social difficulties. However, limited research has compared these humour styles across generations. Therefore, this study aims to examine and compare humour styles between Generation Z and Millennials to better understand generational differences in behaviour and psychological functioning.

Multidimensional Humor Styles and Generational Differences

Objectives

1. To compare the overall pattern of adaptive humour styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) between the two generational cohorts.
2. To compare the overall pattern of maladaptive humour styles (aggressive and self-defeating) between the two generational cohorts.

Hypothesis

- **H1:** Millennials use adaptive humour styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) more frequently than Generation Z.
- **H2:** Generation Z uses maladaptive humour styles (aggressive and self-defeating) more frequently than Millennials.

Sample

There were 150 participants in all, 75 of whom were Millennials and 75 of whom were members of Generation Z. Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique, and they willingly answered a structured online survey. The 32-item Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ), which covers affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor was the main tool used to evaluate humor styles.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Participants should be individuals belonging to two generational groups:
 - a. Millennials: who were born between 1981 to 1996
 - b. Generation Z: who were born between 1997 to 2012
2. Participants must be fluent in the language of the survey/questionnaire to accurately interpret humour styles.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Participants with cognitive impairment.
2. Participants who fail to complete the required questionnaires or assessments.
3. Participants who provide duplicate or non-human responses.

Measures

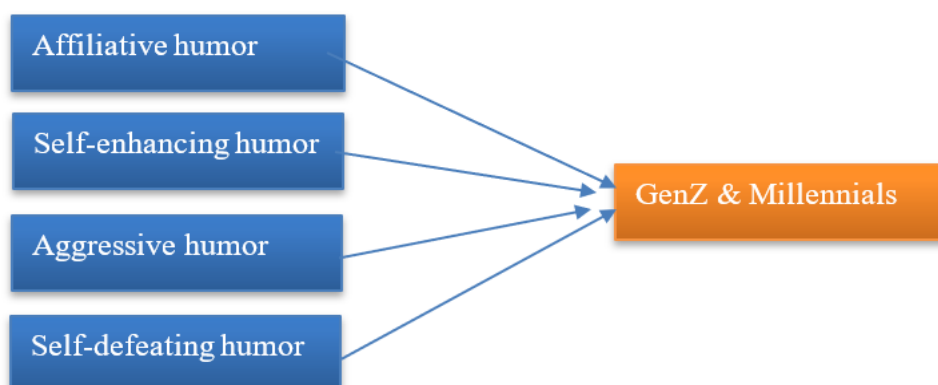
- **Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ):** To evaluate the many ways in which Millennials and GenZs express themselves humorously, the main instrument utilized was the “Humor Styles Questionnaire, which was created by Rod A. Martin. This 32-item test assesses four different aspects of humour: Affiliative, Aggressive, Self-enhancing, and Self-defeating. On a normal Likert scale, participants may indicate how much they agree with statements on the use of humor in social and emotional circumstances for each topic”. For comparative psychology research, the HSQ is an appropriate instrument because of its reliability and extensive validation in capturing patterns of adaptive and maladaptive humor. In the present research, subscale scores were calculated individually and treated as continuous variables for statistical comparison between the two generational groups.

Research Design

This research adopts a cross-sectional approach to examine and compare the humour styles used among Generation Z and Millennials. A cross-sectional design enables the simultaneous assessment of multiple variables such as humour styles, psychological well-being, and social interactions without requiring longitudinal follow-up. This design provides

Multidimensional Humor Styles and Generational Differences

a snapshot of the current humour preferences and behavioural patterns within both generational groups. It also offers methodological advantages, including efficient data collection, identification of associations between humour styles and demographic factors, and exploration of differences and variations in humour expression across generations.



Procedure

A systematic online questionnaire was developed to examine as well as compare the humour styles of Generation Z and Millennials. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: a humour style inventory, a psychological well-being scale, a social interaction and communication behaviour section, and demographic information.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to reach the intended population within both generational groups. Prior permission to conduct the study was obtained from the research supervisor. The questionnaire was designed and administered using Google Forms. Participants were invited to take part through email and social media platforms.

The questionnaire began with clear instructions outlining the purpose of the study, estimated completion time (10–15 minutes), and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any stage without any consequences.

Data Analysis

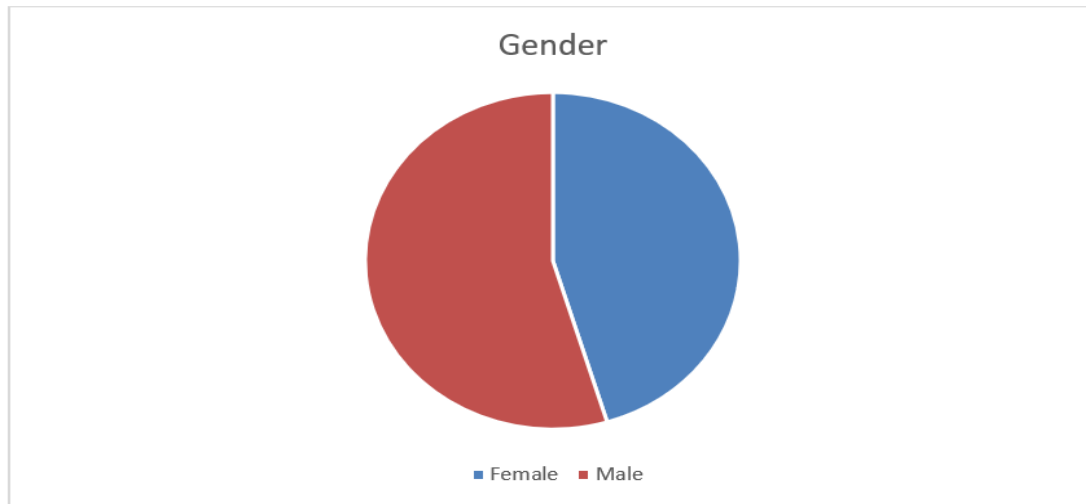
Descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted to examine the gathered data. Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were used in descriptive statistics to characterize the sample's demographics and provide an overview of the Humor Styles Questionnaire scores. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare Millennials and Generation Z on all humor types. Since Levene's test for equality of variances was significant across variables, Welch's t-test (equal variances not assumed) was used for interpretation. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to assess the practical significance of generational differences.

Ethical Considerations:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.
- Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.
- The study adhered to established institutional ethical guidelines.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS*Table 1: Gender*

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	68	45.33%
Male	82	54.67%
Total	150	100.0%



The gender-wise distribution of respondents shows a relatively balanced sample. Out of the total 150 respondents, 68 (45.33%) were female and 82 (54.67%) were male. This indicates a slightly higher representation of male respondents in the study. Overall, the distribution ensures adequate participation from both genders for meaningful analysis.

Table 2: Generation Category

Category	Frequency	Percent
Millennials (1981 to 1996)	75	50%
Generation Z (1997 to 2012)	75	50%
Total	150	100.0

The age-wise distribution of respondents indicates an equal representation of both categories. Out of the total 150 respondents, 75 (50%) belonged to the Millennial group (born between 1981–1996), while the remaining 75 (50%) were from Generation Z (born between 1997–2012). This balanced distribution allows for a fair comparison between the two generational cohorts in the study.

T-test results

Humor Type	Generation	Mean	SD	t (Welch)	p-value
Affiliative	Millennials	34.10	6.45	2.95	p <0.05
	Gen Z	32.80	7.10		
Self-enhancing	Millennials	37.10	7.65	2.463	p <0.05
	Gen Z	36.80	8.90		
Aggressive	Millennials	31.20	4.95	3.791	p <0.05
	Gen Z	34.65	7.40		
Self-defeating	Millennials	29.90	8.20	2.237	p <0.05
	Gen Z	31.10	9.60		

COHEN'S *d*

Humor Type	Cohen's <i>d</i>	Interpretation
Affiliative	0.19	Small effect
Self-enhancing	0.04	Negligible
Aggressive	0.56	Moderate
Self-defeating	0.14	Small

DISCUSSION

The present study examined generational differences in humor styles between Millennials and Generation Z, focusing on humor. The findings indicate that while some humor tendencies are shared across generations, significant differences exist, underscoring the influence of generational, cultural, and technological contexts on humor expression.

Millennials scored higher on affiliative and self-enhancing humor, consistent with prior research showing that adaptive humor is positively associated with psychological well-being, social functioning, and self-esteem (Hussain & Cerkez, 2024; Rastogi, 2023; Jain, 2022). Affiliative humor fosters interpersonal bonds and social cohesion, which aligns with Millennials' reported emphasis on collaboration and teamwork in both academic and workplace settings (IJIP, 2022; Sharma et al., 2023). Similarly, self-enhancing humor, used as a coping mechanism to maintain optimism, reflects Millennials' tendency to engage in adaptive, socially constructive humor (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2016). These findings support the idea that Millennials' humor preferences are aligned with long-form and socially oriented humor formats, such as sketches or parody, as observed in cross-cohort studies (IJIP Comparative Study, 2023).

Generation Z exhibited higher scores on aggressive and self-defeating humor. These results resonate with research linking Gen Z's humor to digital communication environments, meme culture, and self-referential irony (Nielsen / JSR, 2021; Madrid, 2023). Aggressive humor, often sarcastic or boundary-pushing, and self-defeating humor, involving self-deprecation, have been shown to correlate with identity construction, peer bonding, and coping strategies in online contexts (Napp, 2023). The findings are consistent with studies indicating that younger cohorts may use humor as a tool for social signaling and navigating rapid, memetic cultural environments, whereas Millennials prefer humor that emphasizes social harmony and optimism (Absurdism & Gen Z Meme Research; IJIP, 2023).

The independent samples Welch's *t*-test was conducted to examine generational differences in humour styles between Millennials and Generation Z. With respect to adaptive humour, the results indicate that Millennials reported significantly higher levels of affiliative humour ($M = 34.10$, $SD = 6.45$) compared to Gen Z ($M = 32.80$, $SD = 7.10$), with $t = 2.95$, $p < 0.05$. Similarly, Millennials also scored higher on self-enhancing humour ($M = 37.10$, $SD = 7.65$) than Gen Z ($M = 36.80$, $SD = 8.90$), with $t = 2.463$, $p < 0.05$. Since both results are statistically significant, the null hypothesis (no difference between groups) is rejected for these variables. Therefore, Hypothesis H1 is supported, suggesting that Millennials tend to use adaptive humour styles more frequently than Generation Z.

In contrast, for maladaptive humour styles, Generation Z demonstrated significantly higher usage. Specifically, Gen Z scored higher on aggressive humour ($M = 34.65$, $SD = 7.40$) compared to Millennials ($M = 31.20$, $SD = 4.95$), with $t = 3.791$, $p < 0.05$. Likewise, self-defeating humour was also more prevalent among Gen Z ($M = 31.10$, $SD = 9.60$) than

Multidimensional Humor Styles and Generational Differences

Millennials ($M = 29.90$, $SD = 8.20$), with $t = 2.237$, $p < 0.05$. These statistically significant differences lead to the rejection of the null hypothesis for maladaptive humour dimensions as well. Hence, Hypothesis H2 is supported, indicating that Generation Z is more inclined toward maladaptive humour styles. (Madrid, 2023; Hussain & Cerkez, 2024).

Overall, the findings reveal a clear generational pattern in humour preferences, where Millennials are more oriented toward positive, relationship-enhancing humour, while Generation Z shows a greater tendency toward humour styles that may involve sarcasm, self-criticism, or hostility. These differences may be influenced by varying social environments, digital exposure, and coping mechanisms across generations.

Overall, the study underscores that humor styles are shaped by generational, cultural, and technological influences. Millennials tend toward adaptive, socially constructive humor, whereas Generation Z exhibits more edgy, ironic, and self-directed humor. These patterns reflect broader differences in historical experiences, socialization processes, and modes of digital communication. Future research could further explore cross-cultural variations, cognitive and personality correlates, and the longitudinal development of humor styles across generations, as well as how humor interacts with psychological well-being and social functioning in emerging adults (Ganya, 2024; Rastogi, 2023; Sharma et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The present comparative study explored the humour styles used by Millennials and Generation Z, with a focus on affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humour. The findings reveal that while both generations share certain commonalities in their use of humour, notable differences exist across specific humour styles, highlighting the influence of generational context on humour expression. In conclusion, the present study highlights significant generational differences in humor styles between Millennials and Generation Z. The findings reveal that Millennials tend to prefer affiliative and self-enhancing humor, which are generally associated with positive social interactions and psychological well-being. In contrast, Generation Z demonstrates a higher inclination toward aggressive and self-defeating humor, reflecting a more direct, expressive, and sometimes self-critical style of communication. These differences suggest that humor is shaped not only by personality but also by the social and cultural environments in which individuals are raised. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding generational variations in humor for improving communication and interpersonal relationships.

Limitations

- **Limited Sample Size:** The study used a relatively small sample ($n = 150$).
- **Cross-Sectional Design:** As the data were collected at a single point in time, the study cannot establish causal relationships or changes in humor styles over time.
- **Self-Report Bias:** The use of the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) relies on participants' self-reported responses, which may be influenced by social desirability or subjective interpretation.
- **Lack of Control Variables:** Factors such as cultural background, education, or socio-economic status were not controlled, which may have influenced differences in humor styles across generations.

Implications of the study

- Millennials prefer affiliative and self-enhancing humor, while Generation Z leans toward aggressive and self-defeating humor, affecting communication and social interactions.
- Positive humor styles in Millennials suggest better coping and well-being, whereas Generation Z's humor may indicate higher stress or conflict tendencies.
- Understanding generational humor differences can help workplaces, educators, and content creators tailor engagement, team-building, and messaging strategies.
- The findings provide a foundation for future research on humor, mental health, and digital communication across generations.

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Multidimensional Humor Styles and Generational Differences

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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