

The Role of Humour Styles in Emotional Intelligence and Perceived Stress among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether humour styles mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress among young adults. A quantitative cross-sectional design was used with 222 participants aged 18–25 years. Standardized measures included the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test, the Humour Styles Questionnaire, and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation, ANOVA, regression, and mediation analysis. Results indicated that higher emotional intelligence was associated with greater use of adaptive humour styles and lower perceived stress. Self-enhancing humour negatively predicted stress, whereas self-defeating humour positively predicted stress. However, humour styles did not significantly mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress, indicating a direct effect of emotional intelligence on stress reduction. No significant differences were found across gender or socio-economic groups. The findings highlight emotional intelligence as a key protective factor and underscore the role of adaptive humour in psychological well-being among young adults.

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence, Humour Styles, Perceived Stress, Mediation Analysis, Young Adults, Stress Coping*

Perceived stress refers to the degree to which individuals evaluate their lives as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming (Cohen et al., 1983). It is defined as the feelings or thoughts that an individual has about how much stress they are under at a given point in time or in a certain period of time. It emphasizes the subjective and individualized nature of stress, acknowledging that external stressors alone cannot fully explain stress responses.

Humour is an individual's capacity to express or appreciate what's humorous, and it is a source of both entertainment and a means of coping with awkward or difficult situations. But the recent studies show that there are certain aspects of humour that can also be seen as a malign phenomenon, for example, a form of aggression against oneself or others.

Martin et al. (2003) identified four humour styles: affiliative and self-enhancing (adaptive), and aggressive and self-defeating (maladaptive). Affiliative humour involves social bonding,

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while self-enhancing humour reflects maintaining a positive perspective during stress. In contrast, aggressive humour targets others, and self-defeating humour involves self-disparagement. Adaptive humour styles are associated with better psychological well-being and reduced stress, whereas maladaptive humour styles are linked to increased distress.

Emotional intelligence is also related to humour use, as both involve emotional regulation. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence are more likely to use adaptive humour styles, whereas lower emotional intelligence is associated with maladaptive humour (Eype & Lokesh, 2021).

Although emotional intelligence, humour styles, and perceived stress have been widely studied, their combined interaction remains underexplored, particularly in the Indian context. Given the unique stressors faced by Indian young adults, it is important to understand how humour styles may influence the relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the mediating role of humour styles in this relationship.

Previous research has consistently highlighted the role of humour in managing stress. Martin and Lefcourt (1983) found that individuals with a strong sense of humour experienced fewer negative emotional effects under stress, indicating its buffering role. The development of the Humour Styles Questionnaire by Martin et al. (2003) further identified four humour styles—affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating—and demonstrated that adaptive humour styles are associated with psychological well-being, whereas maladaptive humour styles are linked to distress.

Empirical studies have also demonstrated a direct relationship between humour and perceived stress. Denizhan (2014) reported a significant negative association between humour and perceived stress, while Kruczek and Basińska (2018) found that adaptive humour styles are associated with lower stress and better coping strategies. Meta-analytic evidence further supports these findings, with Schneider et al. (2018) reporting positive associations between adaptive humour and mental health.

Research has also examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and humour. Yip and Martin (2006) found that adaptive humour styles are positively associated with emotional intelligence and social skills. Samson and Gross (2012) further suggested that humour functions as a cognitive reappraisal strategy, highlighting the role of emotional intelligence in emotional regulation. Empirical findings by Martín-Albo and Navarro (2019) and Eype and Lokesh (2021) indicate that individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to use adaptive humour styles and experience lower stress.

A substantial body of research has established a strong relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress. Naidoo (2008) and Forushani and Besharat (2011) reported a significant negative association between emotional intelligence and perceived stress. Further studies suggest that emotional intelligence reduces stress through adaptive coping strategies (Enns et al., 2018) and acts as a buffer against burnout (Mitra et al., 2018). These findings collectively indicate that emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in stress management through effective emotional regulation and coping mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

- To examine the relationship between humour styles and perceived stress.
- To assess the association between emotional intelligence and humour styles.
- To examine the impact of emotional intelligence on perceived stress.
- To explore the mediating role of Humour styles between emotional intelligence and perceived stress.

Hypothesis

- **H₀₁:** There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress among young adults.
- **H₁₁:** Emotional intelligence is negatively associated with perceived stress among young adults.
- **H₀₂:** There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and humour styles.
- **H₁₂:** Emotional intelligence is significantly associated with humour styles.
- **H₀₃:** There is no significant relationship between humour styles and perceived stress.
- **H₁₃:** Humour styles are significantly associated with perceived stress.
- **H₀₄:** Humour styles do not mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress.
- **H₁₄:** Humour styles significantly mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress.

Research design

The present study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design, using a survey-based method to explore the relationship among emotional intelligence, humour styles, and perceived stress. Mediation analysis was used to examine the indirect effects of humour styles on perceived stress and emotional intelligence.

Sample characteristics

The study included a total of 222 participants. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 25 years ($M = 21.67$, $SD = 1.82$). Regarding gender, the sample consisted of both males and females, with a higher proportion being females ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.50$).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Participants included in the study were young adults aged between 18 and 25 years who gave informed consent to take part. Most participants were college or university students, representing the young adult demographic targeted in the study. Exclusion criteria included being under 18 or over 25 years of age, or having a diagnosed psychiatric or neurological condition that could affect their responses. Participants who refused to take part or provided incomplete or invalid data were also excluded.

Tool Description

- **Schutte self-report emotional intelligence test (SSEIT; Schutte et al., 1998).** The Schutte self-report Emotional Intelligence test (SSEIT), developed by Schutte et al, is based on the emotional intelligence model proposed by Salovey and Mayer (1990). The scale consists of 33 self-report items that assess individuals' ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilise emotions effectively in themselves and others. Items

are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("*Strongly disagree*") to 5 ("*Strongly agree*"). Cronbach's alpha (α) of emotional intelligence is 0.96.

- **Perceived stress scale (PSS- 10; Cohen et al., 1983).** The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) is a widely used psychological instrument for measuring the degree to which individuals perceive their life situations as stressful. The PSS-10 version, consisting of 10 items, was used in the present study. The items assess how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives, particularly in the past month. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 ("*Never*") to 4 ("*Very often*"). Positively stated items are reverse-scored. The PSS is considered reliable and valid for use in both clinical and non-clinical populations. Cronbach's alpha (α) of Perceived stress is 0.64.
- **Humour styles Questionnaire (HSQ; Martin et al., 2003).** The Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ), developed by Martin in 2003, is designed to assess individual differences in the ways people use humour in everyday life. It consists of 32 items that measure four distinct humour styles: Affiliative, Self-enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-defeating. Affiliative and self-enhancing styles are considered adaptive, while aggressive and self-defeating styles are viewed as maladaptive. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 signifies "*Totally disagree*" and 7 signifies "*Totally agree*". Cronbach's alpha of humour style is 0.66.

Procedure

Data were collected using a survey-based approach from young adults aged 18–25 years through convenience sampling. The questionnaires were administered online using Google Forms. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 25). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were used to summarize the data. Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among emotional intelligence, humour styles, and perceived stress. One-way ANOVA was used to assess group differences across demographic variables. Regression analysis was performed to examine the predictive role of humour styles on perceived stress, and mediation analysis was conducted to assess the mediating role of humour styles in the relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4.1 shows the descriptive statistics of the sample (N=222)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Emotional intelligence	119.13	17.717
Affiliative humour	35.50	7.235
Self-enhancing humour	34.18	7.106
Aggressive humour	28.53	6.854
Self-defeating humour	31.81	8.027

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Humour styles	130.12	16.009
Perceived stress	20.47	4.909

The descriptive statistics indicated that emotional Intelligence demonstrated the highest mean ($M = 119.13$, $SD = 17.72$), while Perceived Stress recorded the lowest mean ($M = 20.47$, $SD=4.91$).

Table 4.2 shows the Correlation between Academic percentage and study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Academic percentage	—							
2.Emotional intelligence	.163*	—						
3.Perceived stress	-.040	-.159*	—					
4.Affiliative humour	.024	.321**	-.062	—				
5.Self-enhancing humour	.047	.350**	.205**	.158*	—			
6.Aggressive humour	-	.314**	-.012	-	-.113	—		
	.153*			.188**				
7.Self-defeating humour	-.040	-.035	.138*	-.132	.342**	.269**	—	
8.Humour styles	-.048	.153*	-.061	.379**	.631**	.434**	.707**	—

Correlation is significant at the $p < .05$ level (2-tailed). Correlation is significant at the $p < .01$ level (2-tailed)

Academic performance was positively correlated with emotional intelligence ($r = .16$, $p < .05$) and negatively correlated with aggressive humour ($r = -.15$, $p < .05$). No significant relationships were found with perceived stress or other humour styles.

Emotional intelligence was positively correlated with affiliative humour ($r = .32$, $p < .001$) and self-enhancing humour ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), and negatively correlated with aggressive humour ($r = -.31$, $p < .001$). No significant association was found with self-defeating humour.

Regarding maladaptive humour styles, emotional intelligence showed a significant negative correlation with aggressive humour, $r = -0.31$, $p < .001$. This suggests that individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are less likely to engage in hostile or disparaging forms of humour, which often serve to belittle others or escalate conflict. This finding reinforces existing literature indicating that emotionally intelligent individuals tend to avoid behaviours that damage relationships and instead promote positive social interactions.

Interestingly, the relationship between emotional intelligence and self-defeating humour was not significant, $r = -.04$, $p = .60$. This non-significant association may indicate that emotional intelligence does not strongly influence the use of self-disparaging humour. One possible explanation lies in cultural interpretation: in certain contexts, self-defeating humour may be perceived not purely as maladaptive, but as an expression of modesty, humility, or self-acceptance (Chen & Martin, 2007). Such cultural variations could explain why the association between EI and self-defeating humour was negligible in this study.

Table 4.3 Shows the One-way ANOVA for Perceived Stress, Emotional Intelligence, and Humour Styles by Type of Family.

Variables	Family Type	N	M	SD	F	p
Perceived Stress	1	189	20.52	4.73	0.136	.713
	2	33	20.18	5.89		
Emotional Intelligence	1	189	118.37	18.14	0.725	.486
	2	33	123.48	14.52		
Humour Styles	1	189	129.72	16.04	0.783	.377
	2	33	132.39	15.87		

Note. N = number of participants; M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

A one-way ANOVA indicated no significant differences in perceived stress, emotional intelligence, or humour styles based on family type ($p > .05$), suggesting that these variables were comparable across nuclear and joint families.

Table 4.3.2 shows the One-way ANOVA for perceived stress, emotional intelligence, and humour styles by area of residence

Variables	Area of Residence	N	M	SD	F	p
Perceived Stress	Rural	76	20.16	4.29	0.246	.782
	Urban	99	20.68	5.68		
	Semi-Urban	47	20.55	4.10		
Emotional Intelligence	Rural	76	119.18	17.57	0.725	.486
	Urban	99	120.31	18.42		
	Semi-Urban	47	116.53	16.50		
Humour Styles	Rural	76	129.47	14.66	0.240	.787
	Urban	99	130.95	18.16		
	Semi-Urban	47	129.40	13.25		

Note. N = number of participants; M = mean; SD = standard deviation

A one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences in perceived stress, emotional intelligence, or humour styles based on area of residence ($p > .05$), indicating that these variables were consistent across rural, urban, and semi-urban groups.

Table 4.3.3 Shows the One-way ANOVA for Perceived Stress, Emotional Intelligence, and Humour Styles by Socio-Economic Status

Variables	SES Group	N	M	SD	F	p
Perceived Stress	Low SES	12	19.67	5.84	0.991	.373
	Middle SES	199	20.42	4.77		
	High SES	11	22.36	6.33		
Emotional Intelligence	Low SES	12	111.17	20.36	1.304	.273
	Middle SES	199	119.52	17.62		
	High SES	11	120.64	15.98		
Humour Styles	Low SES	12	131.58	16.20	0.087	.916
	Middle SES	199	129.96	16.30		
	High SES	11	131.27	10.39		

Note. N = number of participants; M = mean; SD = standard deviation. SES = Socio-Economic Status (Low, Middle, High).

A one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences in perceived stress, emotional intelligence, or humour styles across socio-economic status groups ($p > .05$), indicating that these variables were comparable across low, middle, and high SES categories.

Table 4.3.4 Shows the ANOVA for Perceived Stress, Emotional Intelligence, and Humour Styles by Gender

Variables	Gender	N	M	SD	F	p
Perceived Stress	Male	102	19.89	4.32	2.662	.104
	Female	120	20.97	5.33		
Emotional Intelligence	Male	102	117.41	18.12	1.773	.184
	Female	120	120.58	17.31		
Humour Styles	Male	102	131.44	14.18	1.293	.257
	Female	120	128.99	17.40		

Note. N = number of participants; M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

An independent samples ANOVA showed no significant differences in perceived stress, emotional intelligence, or humour styles based on gender ($p > .05$), indicating that these variables were comparable between male and female participants.

Main study

The main analysis examined the effects of emotional intelligence and humour styles on perceived stress through regression and mediation analysis.

Table 4.4 Shows the prediction of Humour Styles on Perceived Stress

Effect	Estimate (B)	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	21.978	1.654	18.72	25.24	.000
Affiliative humour	-.042	.046	-.133	.049	.354
Self-enhancing humour	-.142	.046	-.234	-.050	.002
Aggressive humour	-.009	.048	-.104	.086	.859
Self-defeating humour	.084	.041	.003	.165	.040

Model statistics: $R = .268$, $R^2 = .072$, Adjusted $R^2 = .054$, $F(4, 217) = 4.22$, $p = .003$

Note. Dependent variable = perceived stress CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

A series of linear regressions was conducted to examine the relationship between humour styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating) and perceived stress among young adults. The results indicated that the overall model was statistically significant, $F(4, 217) = 4.22$, $p = .003$, explaining approximately 7.2% of the variance in perceived stress ($R^2 = .072$, Adjusted $R^2 = .054$).

Regression analysis indicated that self-enhancing humour was a significant negative predictor of perceived stress ($B = -.142$, $p = .002$), whereas self-defeating humour was a significant positive predictor ($B = .084$, $p = .040$). Affiliative and aggressive humour were not significant predictors ($p > .05$). These findings suggest that self-enhancing humour may function as a protective coping strategy, while self-defeating humour may contribute to increased stress levels. The lack of significant effects for affiliative and aggressive humour indicates that these styles may not directly influence stress perception in this sample.

Table 4.5.1 shows the prediction of Emotional Intelligence on Perceived Stress (Total Effect)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	25.73	2.22	—	11.59	< .001
EI Total	-0.044	0.018	-0.159	-2.39	.018

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.

Table 4.5.2 shows the prediction of Emotional Intelligence on Humour Style (Path a)

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	113.69	7.25	–	15.68	< .001
Emotional intelligence	0.138	0.060	0.153	2.29	.023

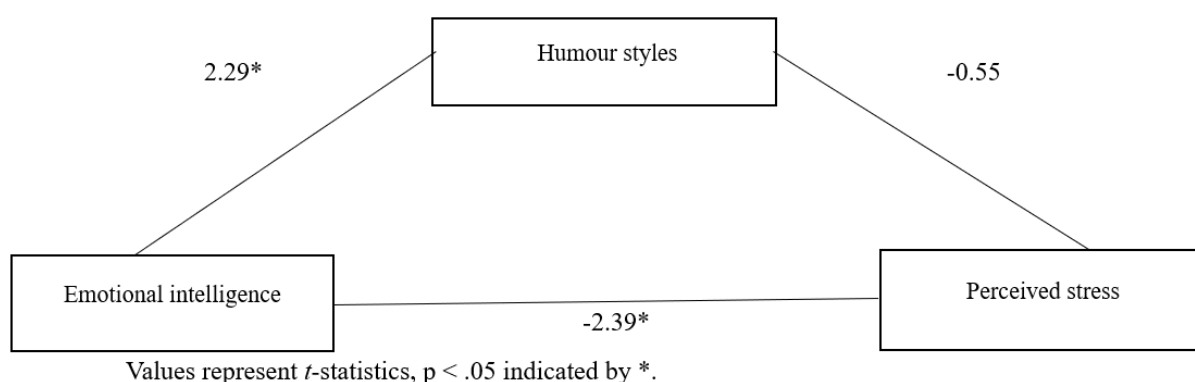
Note. *B* = unstandardized coefficient; *SE* = standard error; β = standardized coefficient

Table 4.5.3 shows the prediction of Emotional Intelligence and Humour Style on Perceived Stress (Path b & Direct Effect c)

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	27.03	3.24	–	8.35	< .001
Emotional intelligence	-0.043	0.019	-0.154	-2.28	.024
Humour styles	-0.011	0.021	-0.037	-0.55	.582

Note. *B* = unstandardized coefficient; *SE* = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.

Figure 4.6 shows the Mediation of emotional intelligence on perceived stress through humour styles.



A mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether humour styles mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and perceived stress. Emotional intelligence significantly predicted perceived stress ($B = -0.044$, $p = .018$), indicating that higher EI was associated with lower stress. EI also significantly predicted humour styles ($B = 0.138$, $p = .023$). However, when both EI and humour styles were included as predictors, humour styles did not significantly predict perceived stress ($B = -0.011$, $p = .582$), while the direct effect of EI remained significant ($B = -0.043$, $p = .024$). These findings indicate that humour styles did not mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress, suggesting that EI has a direct effect on stress reduction. This implies that emotional intelligence may influence stress through other mechanisms, such as emotion regulation and coping processes.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, humour styles, and perceived stress among young adults. Findings indicate that higher emotional intelligence is associated with lower perceived stress and greater use of adaptive humour, which in turn contributes to reduced stress levels. Maladaptive humour does not significantly mediate this relationship. These results highlight the protective role of adaptive humour and suggest that interventions combining emotional intelligence training with humour-based strategies may enhance stress management and resilience in young adults.

Limitations

The study has certain limitations. The sample consisted primarily of students aged 18–25 years, which may limit generalizability. The use of self-report measures may have introduced response bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretations. Future studies should consider longitudinal designs and more diverse samples.

Implications

The findings have practical implications for stress management among young adults. Interventions focusing on enhancing emotional intelligence and promoting adaptive humour styles, particularly self-enhancing humour, may help reduce stress and improve psychological well-being. These approaches may be useful in educational and clinical settings.

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Conflict of Interest

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