

A Study of the Relationship Between Emotionality and Humor Styles Among College Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between Emotionality and humor styles—Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-Defeating—among college students aged 18 to 25. Drawing from the HEXACO model of personality and the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ), the research explores how emotional responsiveness influences the use of humor for social bonding, coping, or self-deprecation. The Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES) and HSQ were administered to 396 students across various colleges. Data analysis using Spearman's rank correlation revealed weak but significant negative correlations between Emotionality and Aggressive and Self-Defeating humor, and minimal associations with Affiliative and Self-Enhancing humor. Gender-based differences were also observed. These findings suggest that Emotionality, while not a strong predictor, may subtly shape humor style preferences, with implications for emotional well-being, gender dynamics, and therapeutic practice.

Keywords: emotionality, humor styles, college students, affiliative humor, emotional expressivity, gender differences

Introduction

Emotionality refers to an individual's sensitivity and intensity of emotional experiences, encompassing the ways emotions are expressed behaviorally and physiologically. It includes both positive emotions such as joy and gratitude and negative emotions like anxiety and frustration. Emotionality forms a foundational aspect of personality and is integral to how individuals relate to others, cope with stress, and navigate social situations.

Humor is a universal human experience that serves diverse purposes—from entertainment and social bonding to coping and deflecting discomfort. According to Koestler (2024), humor is a stimulus that evokes laughter, while Crawford (1994) emphasizes its communicative function in generating positive affective responses. Martin et al. (2003) proposed four distinct humor styles: Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-Defeating. These styles range from adaptive forms that foster relationships and resilience to maladaptive forms associated with hostility and self-criticism.

Emotionality and humor intersect in meaningful ways. Emotionally expressive individuals may be more inclined to use affiliative or self-enhancing humor, while those with lower emotional regulation may resort to aggressive or self-defeating humor. Gender also plays a moderating role, with studies suggesting that women generally exhibit higher Emotionality and prefer supportive humor styles, whereas men may lean towards more aggressive forms.

The current study seeks to explore these interrelations by examining how Emotionality correlates with each humor style among college students and how gender differences may moderate these relationships. Understanding these dynamics can provide valuable insights into emotional well-being, social adaptation, and personality development during emerging adulthood.

Literature

Previous research identifies humor as a multifaceted trait linked to emotional regulation and personality. Martin et al. (2003) classified humor into four distinct styles: Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, and Self-Defeating. Adaptive styles such as Affiliative and Self-Enhancing are associated with better psychological well-being, optimism, and self-esteem, while maladaptive styles correlate with depression and hostility.

Chen and Martin (2007) found cultural differences in humor styles and their psychological impact, with Chinese students scoring lower on aggressive humor than Canadians. Kuiper and McHale (2009) noted that Self-Enhancing humor increases resilience and social self-esteem. Ruch and Heintz (2013) linked personality traits like extraversion and openness to adaptive humor, while neuroticism aligned with maladaptive styles.

Gender significantly influences humor perception and expression. Aillaud and Piolat (2012) noted men prefer dark and aggressive humor, while women favor supportive styles. Emotional expressivity, as measured by Gross and John (1995), also varies by gender, with women generally exhibiting greater expressivity. These findings underscore the complex interplay of Emotionality, humor styles, gender, and cultural context, warranting further investigation among college students in India.

Method

Participants: The study sample comprised 396 college students (242 females, 154 males), aged 18–25, selected through convenience sampling. Participants were screened to exclude those with diagnosed mood disorders.

Measures

- **Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES)** by Kring et al. (1994): A 17-item scale measuring emotional expressivity across various contexts.
- **Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ)** by Martin and Doris (2003): A 32-item inventory assessing four humor styles.

Design: A correlational, cross-sectional design was adopted. Spearman's rank correlation was employed due to non-normal distribution of variables.

Procedure: Data was collected online via Google Forms. Participants were briefed and consented voluntarily. After completing the EES and HSQ, debriefing followed. Confidentiality and ethical protocols were maintained.

Results

Descriptive and correlational analyses were performed using SPSS. The Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed non-normality, justifying non-parametric tests. Overall, weak correlations were observed:

- Emotionality and Affiliative humor: $r_s = .037$ (not significant)
- Emotionality and Self-Enhancing humor: $r_s = -.088$ (not significant)
- Emotionality and Aggressive humor: $r_s = -.142$ (significant)

- Emotionality and Self-Defeating humor: $r_s = -.135$ (significant)

Gender-based analysis

The results for males indicated a weak negative correlation between Emotionality and the Affiliative humor style ($r = -.122$), as well as the Self-Enhancing humor style ($r = -.219$). A negligible negative correlation was identified between Emotionality and Aggressive humor ($r = -.052$), suggesting that Emotionality does not predict male use of Aggressive humor. Additionally, Self-Defeating humor showed a weak negative correlation ($r = -.177$) with Emotionality, indicating that men are less likely to utilize self-defeating humor. (Table 10)

Emotionality had a slight positive correlation with *Affiliative humor* ($r = .144$) in women. This indicates that emotionally expressive women would be somewhat more likely to employ Affiliative humor for social networking. A negligible negative correlation was found between Emotionality and *Self-Enhancing humor* ($r = -.020$), hence Emotionality does not significantly predict humor utilized for coping in women. A weak negative correlation was found between Emotionality and the *Aggressive humor* style ($r = -.077$). *Self-Defeating humor* style and Emotionality showed a weak negative correlation ($r = -.055$). (Table 11). Hence, there are gender-based differences among men and women high in Emotionality in their adoption of a particular humor styles.

Discussion

The findings support prior research indicating that Emotionality negatively correlates with maladaptive humor styles. Highly emotional individuals appear less likely to employ Aggressive or Self-Defeating humor, potentially due to heightened sensitivity and social awareness.

The lack of significant positive correlations with Affiliative and Self-Enhancing humor suggests that Emotionality alone does not predict adaptive humor use. Gender differences indicate that emotionally expressive females are more likely to use Affiliative humor, while males show broader avoidance of humor styles as Emotionality increases.

These patterns may be shaped by socialization, personality traits, or cultural expectations. The Humor Styles Model (Martin et al., 2003) posits that humor arises from complex interplays of personality and context, not just Emotionality.

Conclusion

Emotionality exhibits weak yet meaningful associations with humor styles among college students. While it may discourage maladaptive humor use, it does not strongly predict adaptive humor. Gender differences further modulate these relationships. Future studies should explore mediating variables such as personality traits, cultural norms, and emotional intelligence.

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