

Use of Humor: A Gender Based Study

Neha Sharma* and Sonia Malik**

Abstract

Humor has been accepted as a virtue worldwide. The use of humor in various situations has been a source of pleasure to each and everyone. Humor has been defined as a personality trait, a playful activity and a coping mechanism that helps in dealing with stress. Humor inculcates sarcasm, satires, jokes, and stand-up comedies. The aim of the current study is to look for the gender differences on the basis of use of different styles of humor. The study is comparative research which aims to compare male and female students. The sample of the study includes 100 male students and 100 female students studying in post-graduation. Humor Styles Questionnaire has been used to collect the data for the current study. The results revealed that male and female students differ significantly on the basis of use of affiliative humor style. Besides this, no significant gender differences were found on self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor styles. It has also been evident from the result that male students scored higher on affiliative, self-enhancing, and aggressive humor styles whereas female students have scored higher on self-defeating humor style.

Key words: Humor, gender differences

We, human beings, have a very fascinating gift and that gift is humor. Humor plays a very important part in our lives. We smile and we laugh and we make others laugh as well. The ability of humans to make others happy and make them smile and laugh is termed as humor. Humor comes in different forms. It is not very easy to define what humor actually is. Many scholars have given different definitions to define the term but there has been no single definition which succeeds in defining humor precisely. Ruch (1998) claims that humor includes satires, television shows, stand-up comedy, joking around with people and ridiculing someone. It has also been explained as a stable trait of personality. On the other hand, for Freud (1905) humor is a coping mechanism that saves the individual from suppressing his thoughts and feelings. To Martin (2004) it is an adaptive form of play which might help individual in fighting back the stressors of life.

Age ago, humor was thought of as a unitary concept. Many philosophers and scholars thought that humor was a singular concept. To some Greek and Roman philosophers, humor was an activity to show the superiority towards inferior. The inferiority may be based on race, caste, gender, ethnicity, and culture. It was thought of as a mere spite which has been used to ridicule the powerless and to show superiority over them. After that humor came to be thought of as a mechanism of releasing tension and psychic energy. According to Freud (1905) humor acts as a process by which the individual releases taboo thoughts and feelings which are unacceptable by the society. This helps in decreasing the level of stress and provides relief. According to some other scholars, humor is an enjoyable and playful act. It has also been maintained that unlike showing superiority humor is intended to make others laugh and the intention is of doing good to others rather than to hurt their feelings. It has also been accepted as a stable personality trait. After a lot of research, scholars came to the notion that humor is not unitary but multifaceted in nature. The ground-

breaking research done by Martin and colleagues found that humor can be divided into four styles on the basis of how people use it. Out of these four, two are adaptive in nature and the remaining are maladaptive (Martin et al. 2003). Adaptive humor styles are those styles which aim at building healthy and trustworthy relationships with other people and help in coping with stressors of life. These humor styles are used by those people who are corroborative and show affirmation easily. It has been maintained that those who use adaptive humor styles have a view of solicitude for others as well as for one self (Ford, McCreight & Richardson, 2014). The pleasure is obtained by using healthy jokes, non-hostile, and generous amusements. While the maladaptive humor styles are hostile and are often used to degrade others. These include sarcasm, satire, and jokes related to the weakness of other people. These are often used to disrespect others and show power and pride over them. The people who use maladaptive humor styles often thought themselves to be much more powerful and superior to others. These people make jokes on the disability or disease that somebody is suffering from and amusement is extracted by making the other person feel low. These are violent and manipulative in nature. Due to these reasons maladaptive humor styles have been found to share negative link with positive attributes and positive link with negative attributes. Martin et. al. (2003) also maintained that maladaptive humor styles are bad for one's health and well-being while adaptive humor styles are good for overall well-being.

The research exhibited that individuals use humor for different purposes and there are different styles of using humor and hence, it was found that normally individuals use four styles of humor namely: affiliative humor style, self-enhancing humor style, aggressive humor style and the self-defeating humor style. The affiliative humor style and self-enhancing humor style are adaptive in nature and the remaining two are maladaptive.

*Scholar, Department of Psychology, M.D. University, Rohtak, Haryana, Email: nehasharma191996@gmail.com

**Professor, Department of Psychology, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, Email:soniamalik286@gmail.com

The affiliative humor style is helpful in improving the cohesiveness among people and improving the bonds among them. The people possessing it are often seemed to be outgoing and funny and have a positive outlook towards life and others. They, most of the times, indulge in making others laugh by telling them jokes and narrating funny stories. This style of humor is friendly and benevolent in nature which helps in building intense and deep trustworthy relationships. This style of humor is positively associated with many positive constructs including psychological well-being, social support, self-esteem, self-regulation, positive affect, conflict resolution, and satisfaction with life. It has also been found to share positive bonds with coping and reduction of stress (Cann & Collette, 2014). On the other hand, affiliative humor style shares negative ties with stress, anxiety, and depression (Martin, 2007).

The researchers in different studies have reported contradiction in the use of affiliative humor style by males and females. Some studies reported that females score higher on affiliative humor style (Falanga, Caroli, Sagone & Indiana, 2020; Vig, 2020; Yadava, Awasthi & Saxena, 2019; Kazarian & Martin, 2004) while others have reported that males score higher (Salvera, Usán & Jari, 2018; Edwards & Martin, 2010; Kazarian & Martin, 2006).

Self-enhancing humor style is another positive humor style. The people who have abundance of this humor style are often amused by the absurdities of life and its small incongruities. Rather than being stressed in the face of difficulties and stressors of life they believe in fighting them one on one and keep a positive and humorous perspective while confronting them. They show a positive outlook towards life. This is one of the virtuous styles of humor which engages in coping and fighting stressors. This style of humor often shares positive links with positive constructs like hope, curiosity, gratitude, zest and satisfaction with life (Proyer, Ruch & Buschor, 2012). Along with this it has been found to have negative links with the negative constructs like neuroticism, anxiety and stress.

Studies have revealed that self-enhancing humor style has been used by both males and females. In some researches females have scored higher on this style of humor and in some other studies males have found to show higher preference in using self-enhancing humor style. In study conducted by Wu, Yin and Chen (2016) males score higher on self-enhancing humor than females. While the study done by Vig (2020) reported contrasting results. The study established that the scores on self-enhancing humor style is higher for female participants rather than male participants. The study done by Martin et al. (2003) found that males have outperformed females on the use of self-enhancing humor style.

Aggressive humor style is one of the negative humor styles. The people possessing this humor style have feelings of superiority and aggression towards others.

It includes hostile jokes and degrading talks and disrespecting others. This style makes use of the weakness of others and laughing at it. It encompasses satires, sarcasm and calling names. The pleasure through this humor is obtained by degrading others and making fun of their weakness and disabilities. It can also include making hostile jokes about some one's caste, religion, culture, race, gender and ethnicity. It has been mostly used to show superiority and power over others. This humor style often shown to have negative associations with positive attributes including well-being and health (Martin, et al., 2003). Besides this it shares positive ties with negative constructs like stress, depression and anxiety (Martin, et al., 2003).

Most often, it has been seen in studies that males are found to use aggressive humor style than the female counterparts (Falanga, Caroli, Sagone & Indiana, 2020; MacDonald, Kumar & Schermer, 2020; Vig, 2020; Yadava, Awasthi & Saxena, 2019). Kazarian and Martin (2004, 2006) also reported that males prefer using more aggressive style of humor than do females.

Self-defeating humor style is the last one and this is also a negative/maladaptive humor style. It is devaluing oneself for the sake of making others laugh. These people have a negative self-image. They often use self-mockery to make others happy. They often become the scapegoat of the situation for pleasure of others. These people do not possess the ability to constructively solve problems in their lives. These people may have hostility and are having a low self-worth. In this way research has shown that this style of humor shares positive links with negative constructs including depressive psychiatric symptoms, maladaptive coping mechanism and greater social rejection, bad relationships and aggression (Martin et al., 2003). Consecutively, self-defeating humor style has been found to have negative links with positive constructs namely well-being and self-worth (Martin et al., 2003).

The studies done to find the use of self-defeating humor style by males and females show contradictory results. Some researchers have found females to score higher on this particular style of humor (Falanga, et al. 2020; Majumdar & Kumar, 2017; Wu, Lin & Chen, 2016) and some others have shown that males use more self-defeating humor style than females (Salavera, Usán & Jari, 2018; Liu, 2012). In the studies done by Martin et al. (2003) it has been reported that males often use self-disparaging humor style than females. Kazarian & Martin (2004, 2006); Edwards & Martin (2010) have also disclosed the same results in their respective studies.

In this way, Martin and colleagues found four styles of humor. They also devised an instrument to measure these four styles of humor named as "Humor Styles Questionnaire" which is a multidimensional instrument of measuring humor.

It is a multifaceted term that encompasses many things. It is a mental state which is non-serious, a cognitive process, an emotional experience and a behavioural response. The laughter and smile are expression showing that someone is happy. It is one of the intrapsychic phenomena in which a person has a non-serious outlook towards life. The person takes the situation as being non-threatening and harmless, incongruent and hence he devalues it and view it as being unworthy. In this way he determines it as being unimportant and humorous. After determining it as unworthy an emotion is evoked which is called mirth and then humor is expressed by laughter (Martin, 2007). The Smiling and laughter are forms of paralanguage which gives the feeling that the person is happy. In general terms it can be said that humor inculcates all the forms of laughter, giggling and smiling which can be a response towards a funny television program, a stand-up comedy, a satire or a sarcasm.

In this way, it can be said that it is not all flowers but also thorns. It basically depends on the individual how he/she will use it and for what purpose. Basically, it is a form of practice that we indulge in, which helps in making oneself and others happy but at other times it can be a way to ridicule someone or mocking them as well as mocking oneself for the sake of pleasure.

It has now been known that humor is multidimensional and has four styles, so different individuals use different humor styles based on the different purposes. There might be differences in the use based on the gender, personality and other traits of an individual. Among others, the present study is aimed at finding the gender differences in the use of humor among students. Studies have found that there is a difference between males and females in using different styles of humor. But there are incongruities in the literature review on what humor styles are mostly used by what gender. Mostly studies have shown that aggressive humor style has been used by males more than females. There may be numerous reasons for this difference. One such reason might be the high level of testosterone in males that makes them more aggressive than females. But today world has changed too much. Stand-up comedy and television shows use much more aggressive humor and not only males but females also indulge in aggressive use of humor at different occasions. Research has also revealed that females use more aggressive humor when they are with females and also with their friends who may be males or females. The use of self-defeating humor has also been increased. The media has changed the view of humor. In movies, web series, television shows aggressive, self-defeating humor styles are being used commonly. People these days seem to enjoy those stand-up comedies and web series which are full of degrading, sexual, racial, and cultural jokes. It has also become easier for everyone now to watch them

as the internet is available to one and all including children.

So, the present study has been undertaken to look for any gender differences in the use of humor as the time has changed with a greater pace since the times when television shows, web series, and stand-up comedies used little harsh language. The use of such language is too common these days. The study has chosen young adults who are studying in post-graduation. The objectives and hypothesis based on review of relevant literature are given below.

Objectives

1. To assess the different styles of humor of male and female students.
2. To compare male and female students on the basis of use of humor styles (affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive, and self-defeating).

Hypothesis

1. The male and female students would differ significantly on the basis of use of humor styles (affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive, and self-defeating).

Method

Participants

The sample of the study consists of 200 university students. Out of these, 100 males and 100 females have been chosen purposefully from universities of Haryana. The age range of participants was from 22 to 26 years. All of them are enrolled in post-graduation courses and are regular student of the courses. Students have been taken from all the streams viz. medical science, arts, commerce, behavioural science, and management etc.

Tools Used

Humor Styles Questionnaire has been used for data collection. The multidimensional scale has been given by Martin (2003). It is a self-report measure of humor styles. The questionnaire contains 32 statements and every statement has seven response options. The response ranges from "1 = totally disagree" to "4 = neutral" to "7 = totally agree". It has been divided into four styles of humor namely; affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating. Each humor style is being measured by 8 statements. The questionnaire has both positive phrased statements and negative phrased statements. For scoring the positive phrased statements 1 mark is given to totally disagree, 4 marks are given to neutral and 7 marks are given to totally agree. In the same way for negative phrased statements 1 mark is given to totally agree, 4 marks for neutral and 7 marks are given to totally disagree. The reliability and validity of all the subscales are satisfactory.

Design

The present study is a comparative study that compares two groups on the basis of gender namely; males and females. The study compares the groups on the basis of different styles of humor.

Procedure

First of all, to fulfil the purpose of the study, the participants were seated comfortably in a room and general instructions regarding the study were given. After building rapport with the participants, an informed consent was provided to all the participants and it was maintained that the participation is totally voluntary and they are free to leave at any stage of the study. Then after taking the consent from the participants the Humor Styles Questionnaire was distributed to them. Ample amount of time was given to them for completion of the questionnaire. Then the questionnaires were taken back and it was made sure that no question has been left unanswered. After the collection of data, the scoring was done with due concentration and required statistics namely descriptive statistics and t test were performed with the help of SPSS software to fulfil the purpose of the present study. In the end the scores were analysed and results were reported.

Results

The present study is aimed at finding the gender differences on use of different styles of humor. For the above said purpose descriptive statistics and t test were performed using “statistical software for social sciences”. First of all, the descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviation(SD)

Humor styles	Male Students (N=100)		Female Students (N=100)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Affiliative	39.48	6.96	36.87	7.00
Self-enhancing	36.83	5.93	35.53	5.99
Aggressive	20.63	5.71	20.53	7.31
Self-defeating	21.98	7.04	22.64	8.54

The table number 1 reveals the mean and standard deviation. The mean of male students on affiliative humor is 39.48 (SD = 6.96). For self-enhancing humor, the mean of male students is 36.83 with SD of 5.93. On aggressive humor, the mean is 20.63 with SD = 5.71. Lastly, for self-defeating humor the mean is 21.98 (SD = 7.04).

For female students, the mean of affiliative humor is 36.87 with a standard deviation of 7.00. The mean score of self-enhancing humor is 35.53 (SD = 5.99). On aggressive humor, the mean score is 20.53 and SD is 7.31. Finally, the mean score on self-defeating humor is 22.64 (SD = 8.54).

Table number 2 shows the results of t-test between male and female students on the use of different styles of humor. The table reveals that, mean score for affiliative humor for male students was 39.48 and for female students it was 36.87. The t-value was found to be significant at 0.01 (t = 2.642) indicating that male students use affiliative humor more than female students. They are more likely to use jokes to make stronger affiliations with their friends and family members. They tell jokes, engage in storytelling to amuse others which leads to better relationship and it helps in releasing tension. On the contrary, the female students are little less likely to use such style of humor. The male students are able to have a sense of direction and acceptance in life and are also able to have intimate, deep, and trustworthy bonds with their friends and family.

The table is also showing that no gender differences exist on all other styles of humor. The male students have also scored higher on self-enhancing, aggressive

styles of humor but the difference is not significant. The small difference demonstrates that male students use more self-enhancing and aggressive humor than female students. It shows that males tend to engage in teasing, ridiculing, and degrading others whereas females do this less often. Males are also more likely to laugh on the absurdities of life than females. The

Table 2 Mean differences between male and female students on humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating)

Variables		Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Adaptive humor styles	Affiliative humor	Male	39.48	6.96	2.642**
		Female	36.87	7.00	
	Self-enhancing humor	Male	36.83	5.93	1.541
		Female	35.53	5.99	
Maladaptive humor styles	Aggressive humor	Male	20.63	5.71	.108
		Female	20.53	7.31	
	Self-defeating humor	Male	21.98	7.04	.596
		Female	22.64	8.54	

**Significant at 0.01 level

results also demonstrate that females outperformed males in using self-defeating humor. Even though the difference is not significant, it can be said that females engage in self-disparaging humor more than males. They more often present themselves as the butt of the joke to amuse others. They also tend to use self-mockery to get along with friends and relatives more than male counterparts.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was fulfilled by applying descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation and t test. The first objective of the current study was to assess the different styles of humor used by male and female students. Table number 1 shows the mean and standard deviation for affiliative humor style, self-enhancing humor style, aggressive humor style and self-defeating humor style among male and female students. It can be noted from table number 1 that male students have scored higher on affiliative humor style securing a mean value of 39.48, self-enhancing humor style having a mean value of 36.83 and aggressive humor style with a mean of 20.63 than female students whereas female students have outperformed male students on use of self-defeating humor style securing a mean value of 22.64.

The second objective was to check for any gender difference on the basis of use of humor styles. The hypothesis stating, "The male and female students would differ significantly on the basis of use of humor styles (affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive, and self-defeating)" has been partially accepted as male and female students found to differ significantly on the basis of use of affiliative humor style having a t value 2.642 which is significant at 0.01 level. On the other hand, no significant gender differences were reported on the use of self-enhancing humor style, aggressive, and self-defeating humor style.

While comparing the results of the current study with the results reported by relevant review of literature it was found that some results are in favour of the studies done previously while others are in contradiction to those results. The results are discussed firstly for affiliative humor style then self-enhancing humor style, after that aggressive humor style and lastly, for self-defeating humor style.

First of all, most of the studies done previously show that females scored higher on affiliative humor style (Falanga, Caroli, Sagone & Indiana, 2020; MacDonald, Kumar & Schermer, 2020; Vig, 2020; Yadava, Awasthi & Saxena, 2019; Liu, 2012) whereas, the findings of the current study showed the contradictory results. The present study found that male students scored higher on the use of affiliative humor style rather than female students. Hence, the results of current study are in opposition to the studies mentioned above. Besides some other studies have reported the results that are in favour of the present research. These studies have reported that

males score higher on the use of affiliative humor rather than females (Ahmad, Pulungan & Sumarsih, 2021; Salavera, Usán & Jarie, 2018). Secondly, the results reported by studies done by Falanga, Caroli, Sagone and Indiana (2020), MacDonald, Kumar and Schermer (2020) and Salavera, Usán and Jarie (2018), Wu, Lin and Chen (2016) disclosed that males score higher on self-enhancing humor style. The results of the present study also reported the same results as male students surpassed female students on the use of self-enhancing humor style. On the contrary, results reported by Vig (2020), Yadava, Awasthi and Saxena (2019) and Liu (2012) disclosed that females outperformed males on the use of self-enhancing humor style. The results of these studies are in opposition to the results revealed by present study.

Thirdly, coming to the aggressive humor style. Mostly all the studies that could be retrieved showed that males outperformed females on the use of aggressive humor style (Sillars et al., 2020; MacDonald, Kumar & Schermer, 2020; Vig, 2020; Liu, 2012; Edwards & Martin, 2010; Kazarian & Martin, 2004) and the results of this study are also in favour of the present study as well. But the study done by Falanga, Caroli, Sagone and Indiana (2020) reported that females scored higher on the use of aggressive humor style than males. So, the results of this study are in opposition to their study. Finally, coming to the self-defeating humor style. Studies do not have any consensus on whether this particular humor style is being mostly used by what gender. Some have found that males surpassed females on the use of self-defeating humor style and some others have reported otherwise. So, it is still unclear whether females use this style of humor often or males. The present study has reported that self-defeating humor styles has been more used by female students rather than male students. The results of the study are in consensus with researches done by Falanga et. al. (2020), MacDonald, Kumar and Schermer (2020) and Wu, Lin and Chen (2016), whereas the results reported by the researches done by Vig (2020), Yadava, Awasthi and Saxena (2020) and Salavera, Usán and Jarie (2018), Edwards and Martin (2010) are in opposition to the results reported by present study because these studies have reported higher scores of males on the use of self-defeating humor style.

The present study has shown that gender differences only exist on the use of affiliative humor style and for all other humor styles no gender difference has been reported. The studies done by Vig (2020), Salavera, Usán and Jarie (2018), Kazarian and Martin (2006) and Martin et. al. (2003) have also reported significant gender differences in the use of affiliative humor style. The present study has also disclosed that no gender differences exist on the use of self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating humor styles. This can be accredited to the use of media now a days. The

face of media has changed overtime, which has increased the use aggressive and self-defeating humor by males and females equally. The accessibility of this kind of media to general population has also put impact on the young generations leading them to use aggression and self-mockery as a form of humor. Hence, it can be said that males and females are no different in using aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating humor.

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