



## **Influence of Humor Styles on Psychological Well-Being Among College Students**

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Received: 25 December 2025

Published: 19 January 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18298705>

**Abstract**

*Humor plays an important role in enhancing joy, relieving pent-up emotions, and improving mood, thereby positively influencing psychological well-being. It can become a potential coping mechanism for college students navigating substantial transitional stress that comes along with this stage. The present study examined the influence of humor styles on psychological well-being among college students and assessed the moderating role of gender. 170 students (male = 87; female = 83) aged 18–25 were randomly selected for the study. They were evaluated using the Humor Style Questionnaire, developed by Martin et al. (2003), and the Psychological Well-being Scale, developed by Ryff (1989). The obtained data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent sample t-test, and one-way ANOVA. Results showed that adaptive humor was linked to higher psychological well-being, and maladaptive humor with lower well-being among the participant group. Although female participants reported significantly higher psychological well-being than males, no interaction was found between gender, humor styles, and well-being. The findings emphasize the importance of adaptive humor in promoting well-being among college students, and cultivating it can enhance emotional stability and mental health among these cohorts. Interventions that encourage adaptive humor may help students better navigate the academic and personal challenges of the college years.*

**Keywords:** *Humor, humor styles, psychological well-being, adaptive humor, maladaptive humor, college students..*

**Introduction**

Humor is a multi-faceted psychological state rooted in human experience that contributes meaningfully to positive mood states and behaviors (Martin, 2007). It is widely recognized as a powerful inner tool that promotes emotional well-being, reduces stress, boosts motivation, and strengthens social bonds through feelings of happiness and connection. It is a product of perception and a highly subjective experience that depends greatly on an individual's mental traits (Ruch, 1998). Humor distances a person from the negative aspects of their situation, challenging and expanding perceptions, which allows them to face life with greater cognitive flexibility and insight. It is a unique coping mechanism that has important implications for emotional regulation, social interactions, and mental health (Friedman & Kuiper, 2015; Kuiper et al., 2004; Lefcourt, 2001). In psychology, humor is more than a source of entertainment; it is a form of multicomponent behavior that can influence mental health, social functioning, and character development. One of the most widely

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accepted models of humor was proposed by Martin et al. (2003), and organizes humor into four styles: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. These styles are also distinguished as adaptive and maladaptive styles. Affiliative and self-enhancing (beneficial styles), are identified as adaptive, meaning that they promote social cohesion, positivity, and emotional resilience. Aggressive and self-defeating humor styles represent maladaptive forms because they present associated with interpersonal conflict, issues related to self-esteem, and psychological distress (Gakhar & Singh, 2024). Humor has an impactful contribution to mental health outcomes, understanding humor strengths, styles, and functions is valuable for promoting psychological health in any social group of individuals.

College students experience a particular developmental process involving academic pressure, exploration of identity, transitions among peers, and increased emotional fragility. During this time, humor serves as a helpful psychological and social resource and can assist college students in coping with stress, developing connections with other college students, and fostering emotional balance. Several studies have shown that humor can enhance student engagement in the classroom, improve learning, and lower anxiety in educational contexts (Akben & Coskun, 2024). Humor can also provide a sense of belonging and psychological safety for a college student to belong, express their ideas, and connect with others. Humor can promote cognitive flexibility and creative thinking, which are beneficial for problem-solving and adjusting to new challenges (Oliveira, Arriaga, & Barreiros, 2023). In social contexts, the use of humor can build connections and evoke empathy. In turn, students may find it is easier to create significant relationships with others through humor, as well as cope with the demands of college life. Adaptive types of humor, such as self-enhancing humor and affiliative humor, have also been related to greater self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and psychological well-being in college students (Gakhar & Singh, 2024). Considering student college life with the context of academic due dates, social expectations, and personal development, humor is an adaptive coping strategy and a protective factor for resilience and mental health.

Psychological well-being (PWB) is defined as a condition of optimal mental functioning that involves positive affect, satisfaction with life, self-acceptance, and a sense of purpose and personal growth. Psychological well-being is more than simply the absence of mental illness; it focuses on thriving, having fulfillment, and effectively coping with challenges in life (Oliveira, Arriaga, & Barreiros, 2023). This is particularly applicable for college students who transition from academic stress to changes in identity to changing social roles. Maintaining psychological well-being throughout this period will promote emotional regulation, resilience, and motivation to excel academically. Humor is an important contributor to psychological well-being. Humor also mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, as self-enhancing humor acts as a buffer against stressful conditions and can promote positive affect (Xing, 2023).

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## Need for the study

The purpose of this study was to assess the influence of humor styles on psychological well-being in college students. Students go through many stressors that can impact their mental well-being. Humor is often studied and considered a coping mechanism that alleviates stress and essentially has the ability to produce a positive mental state. This study aims to build on the research and investigate the impact of humor styles in the degree of psychological well-being on college students, as well as review if there are any differences in humor styles and psychological well-being based on gender. This study is important as it raises awareness of humor as a means in promoting mental health and to consider the implications of this study to enhance our knowledge to contribute to support for student's psychological well-being.

## Objectives

- To assess the distribution of humor styles among college students.
- To examine levels of psychological well-being.
- To determine the effect of humor styles on psychological well-being.

## Hypotheses

H1: Students high in affiliative and self-enhancing humor (adaptive) will report significantly higher psychological well-being.

H2: Students high in aggressive and self-defeating humor (maladaptive) will report significantly lower psychological well-being.

## Method

### Participants

170 college students aged 18 to 25 years ( $M = 21.4$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ) were randomly selected for the study from undergraduate and postgraduate colleges located across Mysore city. The sample consisted of 87 male and 83 female college students.

### Measures

#### The Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ)

The Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ), developed by Martin et al. (2003), is a 32-item comprehensive self-report instrument that measures four humor styles, namely, affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor,

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aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor. There are four scales, each of which has eight items rated on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = Totally Disagree and 7 = Totally Agree. While affiliative and self-enhancing humor are considered adaptive humor styles, aggressive and self-defeating humor are seen as maladaptive humor styles. The authors report good internal consistency for the scale, with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from .70 to .85 across subscales. The scale also has construct and convergent validity.

### **Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS-18 Ryff, 1989)**

Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS-18), developed by Ryff (1989), is a validated 18 item questionnaire evaluating six dimensions of psychological well-being, namely autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose of life, and self-acceptance. It uses a 7-point likert scale with responses varying from strongly agree, somewhat agree, a little agree, neither agree nor disagree, a little disagree, somewhat disagree and strongly disagree. Some items are reverse scored to balance response bias. The total score is obtained by summing the individual item responses; the minimum score is 18, and the maximum score is 126 on the scale. The authors report good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.80 to 0.90. It also shown good test-retest reliability, good construct reliability, convergent reliability and good discriminant validity.

### **Procedure**

Data was collected from the sample using the Humor style Questionnaire (2003), Psychological well-being (1989). A total of 170 students aged 18 years to 25 years, enrolled in UG or PG programs at various colleges, participated in the study. The sample consisted of both male (n = 87) and female (n = 83) students, selected using a random sampling technique. The researcher introduced herself to the participants and briefly explained the nature and purpose of the study. Clear instructions were provided on how to complete the questionnaire. Participants were encouraged to clarify doubts before proceeding. It was made explicit that participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. The researcher emphasized the importance of honesty in responses, as accurate answers were crucial to the integrity of the study. Individuals with impairments, disabilities, or psychological disorders were not included in the sample. Similarly, students who were dropouts/repeaters or those who were already exposed to similar research were excluded from the study.

**Results**

|                             | Level | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-------|-----------|---------|
| <b>Affiliative Humor</b>    | High  | 97        | 57.1    |
|                             | Low   | 73        | 42.9    |
| <b>Self-Enhancing Humor</b> | High  | 94        | 55.3    |
|                             | Low   | 76        | 44.7    |
| <b>Aggressive Humor</b>     | High  | 29        | 17.1    |
|                             | Low   | 141       | 82.9    |
| <b>Self-Defeating Humor</b> | High  | 42        | 24.7    |
|                             | Low   | 128       | 75.3    |

**Table 1:** Showing the distribution of Humor Styles Among College Students (N = 170)

Table 1 presents the distribution of humor styles among college students. Among the participants, 57.1% demonstrated high affiliative humor, while 42.9% showed low levels. Similarly, 55.3% exhibited high self-enhancing humor, with 44.7% reporting low. In contrast, only 17.1% had high aggressive humor, whereas a significant majority of 82.9% displayed low aggressive humor. Regarding self-defeating humor, 24.7% scored high, while 75.3% had low levels.

| Level of Psychological Well-being | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Low                               | 2         | 1.2     |
| Moderate                          | 75        | 44.1    |
| High                              | 93        | 54.7    |

**Table 2:** showing the distribution of levels of Psychological Well-Being among College Students.

Table 2 showing the distribution of levels of psychological well-being among college students, out of all participants, 2 (1.2%) had low psychological well-being, 75 (44.1%) had moderate psychological well-being, and 93 (54.7%) had high psychological well-being.

| Humor Style | Group | Mean | SD | t | p |
|-------------|-------|------|----|---|---|
|-------------|-------|------|----|---|---|

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|                |      |        |       |       |       |
|----------------|------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| Affiliative    | High | 102.05 | 12.21 | 10.14 | <.001 |
|                | Low  | 81.71  | 13.88 |       |       |
| Self-Enhancing | High | 98.73  | 13.79 | 5.14  | <.001 |
|                | Low  | 86.62  | 16.95 |       |       |
| Aggressive     | High | 75.52  | 9.80  | 7.36  | <.001 |
|                | Low  | 96.98  | 15.04 |       |       |
| Self-Defeating | High | 75.62  | 9.62  | 10.25 | <.001 |
|                | Low  | 99.12  | 13.79 |       |       |

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**Table 3:** showing the Independent Samples t-Test Results for Humor Styles and Psychological Well-Being among college students.

Table 3 showing the independent sample t-test results for humor styles and psychological well-being. Participants with high affiliative humor had a mean psychological well-being score of 102.05 (SD = 12.21), while those with low affiliative humor scored 81.71 (SD = 13.88). For self-enhancing humor, the high group scored 98.73 (SD = 13.79), compared to 86.62 (SD = 16.95) in the low group. In contrast, participants with high aggressive humor had a lower mean score of 75.52 (SD = 9.80), while those with low aggressive humor scored 96.98 (SD = 15.04). Similarly, those with high self-defeating humor scored 75.62 (SD = 9.62), whereas the low group had a higher mean of 99.12 (SD = 13.79).

| Humor Style    | Gender | Group | Mean   | SD    | F    | p    |
|----------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|------|------|
| Affiliative    | Female | High  | 108.80 | 8.98  | 4.17 | .063 |
|                | Male   | High  | 96.45  | 11.75 |      |      |
|                | Female | Low   | 90.54  | 12.54 |      |      |
|                | Male   | Low   | 71.59  | 6.47  |      |      |
| Self-Enhancing | Female | High  | 106.30 | 10.29 | 0.01 | .930 |
|                | Male   | High  | 92.08  | 13.10 |      |      |
|                | Female | Low   | 93.36  | 14.80 |      |      |
|                | Male   | Low   | 79.51  | 16.33 |      |      |
| Aggressive     | Female | High  | 81.81  | 5.61  | 0.01 | .921 |
|                | Male   | High  | 67.77  | 8.16  |      |      |
|                | Female | Low   | 104.61 | 11.77 |      |      |
|                | Male   | Low   | 90.07  | 14.37 |      |      |
| Self-Defeating | Female | High  | 83.53  | 6.37  | 0.27 | .605 |
|                | Male   | High  | 70.24  | 7.53  |      |      |
|                | Female | Low   | 104.52 | 12.23 |      |      |
|                | Male   | Low   | 93.39  | 13.10 |      |      |

**Table 4:** showing Two-Way ANOVA Interaction Effects Between Humor Styles and Gender on Psychological Well-Being among college students.

Table 4 presents the results of a Two-Way ANOVA examining the interaction effects between humor styles and gender on psychological well-being among college students. For Affiliative humor, females in the high group reported the highest psychological well-being scores ( $M = 108.80$ ,  $SD = 8.98$ ), while males in the low group reported the lowest ( $M = 71.59$ ,  $SD = 6.47$ ). The interaction effect approached statistical significance ( $F = 4.17$ ,  $p = .063$ ), indicating a potential gender-based difference in how Affiliative humor relates to well-being. In the case of Self-Enhancing humor, females in the high group again showed the highest scores ( $M = 106.30$ ,  $SD = 10.29$ ), and males in the low group the lowest ( $M = 79.51$ ,  $SD = 16.33$ ). However, the

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interaction effect was not statistically significant ( $F = 0.01, p = .930$ ). For Aggressive humor, the highest scores were observed among females in the low group ( $M = 104.61, SD = 11.77$ ), while males in the high group scored lowest ( $M = 67.77, SD = 8.16$ ). The interaction effect was minimal and not significant ( $F = 0.01, p = .921$ ). Regarding Self-Defeating humor, females in the low group again scored highest ( $M = 104.52, SD = 12.23$ ), and males in the high group scored lowest ( $M = 70.24, SD = 7.53$ ). The interaction effect was not significant ( $F = 0.27, p = .605$ ).

Overall, the table suggests that females consistently reported higher psychological well-being scores across all humor styles, particularly in the high humor groups. While most interaction effects were not statistically significant, the near-significant result for Affiliative humor highlights a noteworthy trend in how gender and humor style may jointly influence psychological well-being.

Overall, the findings from the table demonstrate that females consistently reported higher psychological well-being across all humor styles, particularly in the high humor condition. Although the majority of interaction effects were not statistically different, the near-significant main effect of Affiliative humor was particularly interesting in that it suggested a potential interaction between gender and humor style in predicting some psychological well-being.

## Discussion

The present study explored the influence of humor styles on psychological well-being among college students. The results revealed that affiliative humor was most strongly associated with higher psychological well-being, particularly among females in the high humor group ( $M = 108.80, SD = 8.98$ ). In contrast, males in the low humor group reported the lowest scores ( $M = 71.59, SD = 6.47$ ). Although the interaction effect approached significance ( $F = 4.17, p = .063$ ), it suggests a meaningful trend worth further exploration.

These findings indicate that affiliative humor may serve as a protective factor for psychological well-being, especially among female students. This style of humor, which emphasizes social connection and positive interpersonal interactions, may enhance emotional support and reduce stress. The elevated scores among females may reflect gender differences in emotional expression and coping strategies, as women are often more likely to engage in relational and expressive behaviors that foster well-being.

The results are consistent with prior research by Martin et al., (2003), who developed the Humor Styles Questionnaire and found that affiliative and self-enhancing humor are positively associated with psychological well-being. Similarly, Heintz and Ruch (2013) emphasized the incremental validity of humor styles in predicting well-being beyond basic personality traits. However, the current study did not find significant interaction effects for self-enhancing, aggressive, or self-defeating humor styles. For instance, while females

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in the high self-enhancing group scored highest ( $M = 106.30$ ,  $SD = 10.29$ ), and males in the low group scored lowest ( $M = 79.51$ ,  $SD = 16.33$ ), the effect was not statistically significant ( $F = 0.01$ ,  $p = .930$ ). Likewise, aggressive and self-defeating humor styles showed no significant gender-based interaction, though females in the low group consistently scored higher.

These findings have practical implications for mental health interventions in college settings. Promoting positive humor styles such as affiliative and self-enhancing humor may contribute to improved psychological well-being, particularly for female students. Campus wellness programs could incorporate humor-based strategies to foster resilience and social bonding.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The current research has some limitations that should be acknowledged. The study utilized self-report questionnaires, which may have produced response biases or inaccuracies. Additionally, the use of a cross-sectional design means that the results are not able to provide evidence of causal relationships between humor styles and psychological well-being. The sampling largely consists of college students, which limits the ability to generalize the research findings to other age groups or populations. Additionally, gender was only considered as binary (male and female) which does not consider the experiences of those individuals that fall outside this schema. The research also did not account for cultural background or socio-economic status, although these variables may have a strong association with humor expression and mental health outcomes. Future studies should take on longitudinal designs to determine how humor styles may impact mental health outcomes over time. Additionally, future research should aim to include a diverse sample, across age groups, cultural context, and identity within gender, particularly non-binary and transgender. It could also be beneficial to test different approaches in these studies that investigate humor in conjunction with other forms of coping styles and sources of social support. Although the current studies may not have looked at humor in relation to mental health and wellbeing, research efforts that demonstrate the effectiveness of humor based interventions as means of improving or maintaining mental health among different cohorts of student populations would be a useful course of applied research.

### **Conclusion**

Humor styles are major predictors of psychological well-being among college students. When college students practice adaptive humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing), they have increased resilience and better positive functioning. However, maladaptive humor styles (aggressive, self-defeating) lower an individual's psychological health. Developing adaptive humor in higher education and counseling settings is an easy and

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effective way to promote well-being during emerging adulthood.

This research suggests humor is a helpful, simple-to-use, and important area of focus to support mental health in emerging adults during the transition to adulthood. Encouraging students to use positive humor styles and diminish harmful humor styles can support better coping with stress, more social connection, and greater well-being in the transition from emerging adulthood to adulthood. Including humor in personalized mental health strategies provides a unique and inclusive method of improving psychological health for diverse groups of students.

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