

A systematic analysis of positive and negative humour styles

Almas Hussain

Near East University, Atatürk Faculty of Education, Cyprus
almasbatool17@gmail.com

Yagmur Cerkez

Near East University, Atatürk Faculty of Education, Cyprus
yagmur.cerkez@neu.edu.tr

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to analyse the previous literature and identify the trend changes in studies of humour styles within four categories: psychological well-being, physical health, personality and counselling/therapy from 1995 to 2021. This systematic analysis included 65 articles published in different journals and available at SCOPUS, Taylor & Francis and PubMed databases. Results indicated that positive humour styles have a positive impact in all the four categories of study while negative humour styles affected individual's lives negatively. Qualitative study and psychological well-being have dominated the field of humour studies. We see an increase in humour studies publication after the year 2016 with most publications appearing in 2017.

Keywords: sense of humour, humour styles, psychological well-being, counselling, therapy, physical health.

1. Introduction

Humour is a crucial aspect of everyday life and, to analyse it empirically, more studies are being conducted on the matter to comprehend how the sense of humour relates to various aspects of our lives. Martin's thorough explanation of humour allows us to navigate the intellectual underpinnings of humour quickly. From a psychological perspective, humour is essentially a positive emotion called mirth, which is usually exhibited in social contexts by a cognitive appraisal process, which perceives incongruity in a non-serious and playful manner, while physical manifestations of this cognitive process are laughter-related facial and vocal expressions (Martin & Ford, 2018).

This definition highlights four components of humour, which are the social, cognitive-perceptual, affective, and vocal-behavioural components that play a role. Humour does not exist in isolation, as evidenced by the social component. People's social activities and interactions are more likely to be the source of humour. The cognitive-perceptual module describes the steps

involved in developing and comprehending funny messages. The third facet of this phenomenon is comedy's emotional aspect. In summary, regularly perceiving humour is believed to induce a joyful emotional reaction known as mirth. The final parts of comedy are the overt manifestations of the emotional experience, mainly comprising smiles and laughter. Some have stated that people with a good sense of humour are easily amused by jocular stimuli. According to prior research into humour styles, as it relates to emotional intelligence and social competence, the sense of humour can be conceived in a variety of ways (Martin & Ford, 2018).

1.1. Aim of the study

We often hear the phrase "laughter is the best medicine" but how valid is this statement? The trend analysis of humour styles and variables has been studied, which can give us empirical evidence concerning this claim. Humour and humour styles have been studied in different periods by philosophers and psychologists alike, but no paper has summed up how humour styles and humour affect our lives psychologically, physically and socially. The aim of this trend analysis is to also find out the role and impact of humour in the therapeutic process.

1.2. The humour styles model

The four unique forms of humour described in the humour styles model can have varying effects on psychological functioning. Self-enhancing and affiliative humour styles have been shown to boost psychological well-being and interpersonal connections, while self-defeating and confrontational comedy have been shown to be damaging. The humour styles paradigm has been used in clinical psychology, organizational psychology, personality, developmental, and social psychology, among other domains. The model of humour styles was developed over a decade ago. Since then, it has become one of the most important frameworks for the study of the sense of humour from a psychological perspective. This personality-based approach views sense of humour as a multifaceted individual difference trait characterized by four distinct humour styles, with self-enhancing and affiliative humour emphasizing the positive or adaptive aspects of sense of humour and self-defeating and aggressive comedy emphasizing the negative or socially destructive elements (Table 1). This framework also distinguishes between various types of humour based on whether they are aimed at themselves or at others (intrapersonal vs. interpersonal) (Martin et al., 2003).

Table 1. Positive and negative humour styles

Positive humour styles/Adaptive HS	Negative humour styles/Maladaptive HS
self-enhancing humour	self-defeating humour
affiliative humour	aggressive humour

The following are examples of these styles: adaptive and self-focused humour is described as self-enhancing (i.e., intrapersonal). This approach encourages and supports the ability to keep a humorous outlook on life, as well as the reduction of stress by decreasing cognitive and affective reactions to adversity. Furthermore, this humour style can be used to improve positive emotions, boost self-esteem, and manage bad emotions like despair and anxiety. As a result, this sense of humour is used as a coping mechanism to shield and cushion oneself, but not at the loss of others. Adaptive humour that focuses on others is known as affiliative humour. This pleasant and benevolent approach uses non-hostile jokes and spontaneous, witty chatter in a respectful and compassionate manner to amuse others. Affiliative style is used in interpersonal situations for the promotion of friendly ties, conflict avoidance, and heightened team spirit. Humorous banter and light-hearted jokes may help to support group cohesion and reduce interpersonal

tensions, resulting in more accepting and affirming interpersonal communication. In contrast to these two adaptive humour forms, maladaptive comedy styles are often destructive to one's self (self-defeating humour) or others (aggressive humour). It is self-defeating humour to be overly critical and insulting of oneself. In order to gain acceptance and approval, people with self-defeating comedy styles frequently allow themselves to be the target of jokes and laugh along with others when teased. In an ineffective attempt to strengthen connections with others, self-defeating humour is used at the price of positive self-evaluation. This endearing comic style can be used to mask negative self-perceptions and avoid confronting issues like low self-esteem and emotional neediness in a more acceptable manner. Finally, people with an aggressive comedy style use sarcasm, mocking, ridicule, and disparaging humour without thinking about the implications. Because aggressive comedy is intended to tear others down and criticize them, it has a negative impact on interpersonal interactions. Those used to aggressive comedy have little regard for others and use their sense of fun to harm others. As a result, regularly employing an aggressive humour style may help to alienate people, jeopardizing one's social and interpersonal relationships (Kuiper, 2012).

1.3. Literature review

Early research compared the four humour styles to significant personality traits like the Big Five and found that they had the predicted correlations (e.g., with extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience) (Martin et al., 2003). The ways in which humour is commonly presented (both positively and negatively) in social interactions are referred to as humour styles. Two varieties of humour (affiliative and self-enhancing humour) are regarded to be potentially beneficial to relationships and emotional well-being, whereas the other two are perceived as potentially destructive (aggressive and self-defeating humour).

Humour is an essential component of the human experience. A world devoid of laughter is a world devoid of soul. Indeed, comedy performs a variety of essential functions in life, including decreasing stress, defusing social tensions, exposing the absurdity of human conduct, and improving the overall quality of life. (Martin, 2007)

Humour has sparked a lot of debate and, more recently, a significant amount of empirical studies on a number of humour-related topics has been conducted. We can classify the existing literature on humour into three main categories, which read as follows:

- Humour / humour styles and psychological well-being
- Humour / humour styles and physical well-being
- Humour / humour styles and personality

For instance, Abel (1998) researched the relationship between humour, perceived stress, anxiety and physical symptoms. Regression analysis showed that humour did play a moderating role between these variables. Moreover, humour can help an individual restructure a situation to make it less stressful, and there is a link between humour and both motion- and problem-focused coping strategies (Abel, 1998, 2002). Numerous studies have also backed up the anecdotal evidence that laughter and humour can help relieve stress and anxiety. According to the authors, coping humour performs a protective psychological role by assisting in the screening of unpleasant stimuli and, as a result, negative emotions (Lefcourt et al., 1995; Moran, 1996; Kuiper & Martin, 1998; Moran & Massan, 1999). Positive personality traits have been proven to buffer the possible health benefits of a positive humour style and the probable health risk associated with a negative humour style. As a result, it appears that using excellent humour can help you keep a consistent positive personality style, which has been linked to psychological and physical well-being (Cann et al., 2010; Edwards & Martin, 2010). Affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles were linked to higher levels of happiness. A self-defeating sense of

humour was linked to a lower level of happiness. The perceived availability of social support moderated the impact of different humour styles. The relationship between aggressive humour and perceived support differed by gender (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Fritz, 2020). The association between the VIA-Inventory of Strengths and the five dimensions of humorous conduct (VIA-IS) was investigated. The VIA-humour was found to be connected with socially warm and competent humour, as well as the sense of humour, all of which have a similar human origin. Each humour style was linked to a set of strengths. Strengths associated with the virtue of temperance were also linked to the avoidance of mean-spirited and earthy kinds of comedy (Müller & Ruch, 2011). Only adaptive humour types were reliably connected to the sense of humour, and an affiliative style was the dominant predictor. Adaptive humour-related behaviours were deemed more socially acceptable, but maladaptive humour-related behaviours were deemed obviously socially undesirable. To summarize, a healthy sense of humour is not primarily focused on sharing comedy, and some forms of sharing humour might be harmful to one's social life (Cann & Matson, 2014). Even in terms of physical health, the nature of the humour style used determines the healthy or unhealthy behaviour of an individual and their purpose in life (Edwards, 2012; Mak & Sørensen, 2018; Nicole & Shawn, 2020).

Very few pieces of research have been conducted to study the role of humour styles in counselling and therapy practices, as well as the impact of different humour style usage by therapists on therapy outcomes. The Aggressive Humour Style (AHS) of therapists was found to be a strong negative predictor of client symptom change over time (Yonatan-Leus et al., 2017). Qualitative research involving interviews with ten professional psychotherapists was aimed to expand research on the relevance of humour in therapeutic practice. All participants agreed that humour can be beneficial in psychotherapy, but they also agreed that it should be introduced with caution due to the hazards associated. Contraindications linked to factors such as clients' gender, culture, mood, or personality features are investigated, as are participants' reports of potential benefits and hazards (Hussong & Micucci, 2020).

2. Methodology

Content analysis was used to uncover the overall trends in the current work on humour styles. As the first step in this trend analysis, electronic databases such as SCOPUS, Taylor & Francis and PubMed were scanned for articles using the keywords *humour* and *humour styles*, and the resulting articles were divided into three main categories.

1. humour and psychological well-being
2. humour and personality traits
3. humour and physical health

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles, abstracts, articles published in English language only, articles that included the keywords *humour* and *humour styles* as one of the variables were included in the study.

Books, non-published articles, chapter reviews, articles in languages other than English, articles with no proper citations and articles that included genetic aspects of humour were excluded.

2.2. Sample size

The search was also restricted to publications published between 1995 and 2021, as well as to empirical research articles. Books and review articles were excluded, in that order. In addition, articles focused on the many types of comedy and its effects were chosen. A total of 400 items were found in the initial search. By looking at the title and abstract of each article in the initial sample, we were able to determine whether or not it was relevant. The study omitted articles that did not primarily focus on humour or comedy styles. Genetic and environmental relationships between trait emotional intelligence and humour styles, for example, are typical instances of such papers that were eliminated. Also omitted were articles written in languages other than English. After these items were removed, the sample contained a total of 65 articles.

2.3. Research design

The study utilized a mixed method research design. Quantitative analysis was used to find frequencies and percentages, while qualitative analysis was employed to highlight the impact of positive and negative humour styles.

2.4. Procedure

The year of publication, research design employed in the study (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed), document language, sample size, and document type were all documented in the coding scheme used to analyse the selected content. Further, SPSS was used to yield descriptive statistics for the data collected. Data is presented in the form of frequency tables for a detailed understanding of statistics

3. Results

This section discusses the findings of systematic analysis, how humour styles influence an individual's physical and psychological health, and the role it plays in personality and counselling. The descriptive statistics are represented in the form of frequency tables.

Table 2. Summary of humour studies categories and research design

		Research design		Total
		quantitative	qualitative	
Humour studies categories	Physical health	8	1	9
	Psychological wellbeing	29	1	30
	Personality	20	0	20
	Counselling/ Therapy	4	2	6
Total	61	4	65	

Table 2 clearly shows that humour has been mostly studied with psychological factors that contributed to one's mental health and it has been the key focus of studies in early years of research. The use of humour in counselling and therapeutic processes is a recent interest, which

explains fewer studies in this domain. Over the years, quantitative research has been the dominant research design for studying humour styles in all four categories. The table indicates that out of 65 studies, only 4 were qualitative in nature. Table 3, in turn, indicates that most articles were published in the year 2010, followed by 2017. From 1995 to 2009, there have been few publications on the sense of humour as the key variable.

Table 3. Frequency analysis

Year	Frequency	Percentage
1995	1	1.5
1996	2	3.1
1997	1	1.5
1998	2	3.1
1999	1	1.5
2001	2	3.1
2002	1	1.5
2004	1	1.5
2005	1	1.5
2008	3	4.6
2009	2	3.1
2010	8	12.3
2011	7	10.8
2012	3	4.6
2013	5	7.7
2014	4	6.2
2015	2	3.1
2016	2	3.1
2017	7	10.8
2018	3	4.6
2019	1	1.5
2020	4	6.2
2021	2	3.1
Total	65	100

Table 4. Positive impact of humour style on each category

Results of studies category wise:

1. Psychological well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lessens symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress• Enhances coping strategies• Protection from negative stimuli, hence negative reactions• Positive self-competency• Positive judgements
2. Personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Happy and joyful nature• Extraversion• Agreeableness• Conscientiousness• Satisfied long-term relationships• Socially desirable personality• Openness
3. Physical health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boosts retirement survival• Lessens dementia problem (purpose in life established)• Less occupational burnout• Enhances recovery• Lowers relapse rate
4. Counselling/ Therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Beneficial in psychotherapy• Positive change• Clients' symptoms more likely to decrease• Quick rapport building

Note: References given in the Appendix.

4. Discussion

Humour is a complex phenomenon, and researchers have explored its various dimensions beyond just humour styles. However, the objective of the current trend review was to identify the major variables studied with sense of humour styles, track the changes, and observe shifts in research over time. As we can see from the aforementioned statistics, the sense of humour was studied with the therapeutic process in 2017, and there had been no articles published in this context before.

This study analysed the articles related to humour styles that were published in various journals from 1995 to 2021. Research on sense of humour increased from 2010 to 2017, with most studies published in 2010 (12.3%). After 2010, we see a steady decline in research related to humour styles. From the descriptive statistics, we can see that the most studied category with the sense of humour is psychological well-being (46.2%). Examining the results, we find out that positive humour styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) lowered psychological problems like depression, anxiety, stress, panic, emotion regulation, mood disorders and enhanced coping mechanisms, hope, optimism, and resiliency, whereas maladaptive humour styles worsened the

psychological well-being (Lefcourt et al., 1995; Moran, 1996; Herzog & Strevey, 2008; Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Fritz, 2020).

30.8% of the studies were conducted with personality and these pieces of research also indicated that humour plays a role in determining personality traits like openness to experience, extroversion, introversion, etc. People who employed adaptive humour styles were more likely to be happy, joyful, carefree, positive, social, and admirable than those who employed maladaptive humour styles (Schneider et al., 2018; Plessen et al., 2020; Cann et al., 2011). 13.8% of the research has been done with physical health and it was found that positive humour styles enhance healing process and lessen the pain in patients going through several diseases like cardiovascular, cancer, dementia, and similar diseases. Adaptive humour styles have also been linked to help men lose weight, as men could use banter to develop resilience (Edwards, 2012; Mak & Sørensen, 2018; Nicole & Shawn, 2020). The relationship between humour and health is a rich area of research that extends well beyond humour styles. However, humour styles are just one of many factors that can influence health outcomes. Some factors often considered more significant include genetics, access to healthcare, lifestyle, etc. Appreciation and a sense of humour were protective variables during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartzik et al., 2021). 9.2% of the research has been conducted to understand the role of humour in therapy and counselling processes. From a total of 6 studies, 2 studies in this category have been performed qualitatively through interviews with the counsellors, and the results support the assumption that positive humour can facilitate the therapeutic process. Negative humour styles, especially the aggressive one, showed a decline in client's progress in terms of change (Kang et al., 2017; Hussong & Micucci, 2020).

This trend analysis also highlights that 93.8% of the studies conducted are quantitative while only 6.2% are qualitative in nature; therefore, quantitative research design seems more prevalent in humour studies. General studies of humour styles are qualitative, while most of the studies with health are quantitative.

Humour styles are a dynamic construct that is currently researched in greater depth. This research examined patterns in academic articles published between 1995 and 2021, identifying some key trends in content and methodology related to the concepts and principles of humour styles.

5. Conclusion and limitations

“Humour is the best medicine” is a very prevalent phrase in our everyday conversations but this trend analysis shows that not all types of humour have salubrious effects. Only the positive humour styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) have been shown to have a positive impact in all four categories studied (i.e., psychological wellbeing, physical health, counselling and therapy and personality). 65 articles in this trend analysis were reviewed and all of them showed that affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles were related to improving psychological health, physical health, counselling process and creating a positive personality style.

The trend analysis shows that humour plays a vital role in our lives but more studies are needed to understand its impact and associations with different variables, especially in the physical health and counselling process category. Humour and positive emotions can contribute to overall well-being and may indirectly affect health outcomes. Addressing these broader factors is often more critical for promoting and maintaining good health. However, little research that has been done on the role of humour in the therapeutic process opens a path for a new dimension. The results indicate that if psychologists and therapists are trained to incorporate positive humour styles in the therapy, the success rate of such a therapy is likely to increase.

The present research was created to find all articles that met the sense of humour styles inclusion requirement. Because several articles failed to identify humour styles as significant variables, they were left out of the analysis. Because the conducted searches could not yield the specific article illustrating the impact of humour styles, it is probable that further papers satisfying the inclusion condition could have been missed. Furthermore, because no articles written in languages other than English were included in this review, significant research may have been ignored. This trend analysis did not include publications before 1995, which could limit the overall generalizations of the results concluded. The goal of this broad overview was to describe the current developments in humour research and how it is applied in the counselling/therapy process. As our understanding of humour evolves, it is likely that new and improved measures will emerge to capture its complexity more accurately.

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