



A Correlation Study between Empathy and Humour Styles in Emerging Adults

Shruti Rahul Manurkar and Dr. Maria Varisa Sequeira

Master's Student and Assistant Professor, Nirmala Institute of Education

shrutimanurkar@gmail.com, Mo.-8888480087

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate correlation between empathy and humour styles in emerging adults. The same included 101 emerging adults in the age group of 18 to 30 years. The data was collected using bio-data sheets, Humour Styles Questionnaire, and Toronto Empathy Questionnaire. The data was analyzed using Pearson's correlation. The results revealed that there was significant correlation between adaptive humour styles and empathy. However, there was no association found between maladaptive humour styles and empathy.

Key words: Humour styles, empathy, emerging adults

Introduction

The term "emerging adulthood" describes a unique developmental stage that occurs between the ages of 18 and 30. It is marked by self-focus, identity exploration, instability, feeling in between, and increased optimism about the future. This stage of life is one of the most uncertain and mentally fragile since it entails significant changes in living arrangements, relationships, work, and schooling. Decisions taken during this stage are frequently remembered as being extremely important and having long-term effects. Developmental expectations often involve taking personal responsibility, making independent judgements, and obtaining financial independence. In the Indian context, however, maturity is negotiated within an interdependent cultural framework that prioritises familial commitments and societal embeddedness. A combination of individualistic and collectivistic tendencies may be seen in modern Indian society, which has been influenced by urbanisation, shifting family values, access to education and career prospects. (Arnett, 2023; Arnett et al., 2014; Mitra & Arnett, 2021)

Emerging adulthood has become more psychologically taxing due to rapid societal change, and research has repeatedly shown that this stage is more susceptible to mental health issues. Concerns are particularly acute in India during the post-COVID era, with between 1/5th and



1/4th of youth reporting despair, anxiety, substance abuse, or suicidal thoughts. Academic pressure, severe rivalry for limited educational and occupational options, fear of failure, and strong family expectations remain prominent stressors. Although stress cannot be avoided, people's coping mechanisms vary. Therefore, it is crucial to identify psychosocial resources that promote well-being. Humour and empathy are important mechanisms that influence supportive relationships, emotional control, and social functioning. Although both are linked to favourable psychological outcomes, little is known about how they interact. A focused study among emerging adults is necessary to close this gap. (Bansal, 2013; Bhatia, 2018; Pandey, 2025)

Humour Styles

Humour is viewed by academics as a multifaceted, individual-difference construct. A commonly used paradigm provided by Rod Martin classifies humour along two functional dimensions: whether it is aimed toward the self or toward relationships, and whether it is benign or possibly harmful, resulting in a 2x2 model of four humour styles (Martin et al., 2003):

- **Affiliative Humour:** Using light, inclusive and non-hostile humour to enhance relationships and lessen interpersonal tension.
- **Self-enhancing humour:** Maintaining a light-hearted, upbeat attitude to cope with stress and hardship.
- **Aggressive Humour:** Using sarcasm, mockery, or derogatory jokes at others' expense, frequently without considering their feelings.
- **Self-defeating humour:** Using excessive self-mockery or becoming the object of the jokes to earn approval or escape bad emotions.

Although humour is extensively utilised in social interactions, its efficacy depends on an individual's ability to detect and respond to others' feelings and viewpoints, making empathy vital for understanding how different humour types influence relationships and social functioning.

Empathy

Empathy, as defined by scholars like Mead, is the ability to understand others' situations and modify one's actions based on that understanding. Mead introduced a cognitive component, emphasising the importance of comprehension in empathy. Today, empathy is seen as a



complex and multidimensional concept that involves individual abilities, interpersonal processes, personality traits, and responses to others' experiences. It encompasses a range of phenomena, from sharing emotions and understanding thoughts to feeling driven to assist those in need, reflecting various forms and intensities rather than a simple binary state (Bošnjaković & Radionov, 2018). Empathy provides a framework to assess interpersonal behaviours, such as humour, by encompassing cognitive and emotional factors that affect social understanding and emotional reactions. Consequently, research has shifted focus toward the relationship between various humour styles and empathy, rather than treating them as singular entities.

Review of Literature

Hampes investigated the connection between four humour styles and three aspects of empathy, and as a result was able to report that self-enhancing humour was negatively correlated with personal suffering and favourably correlated with perspective-taking among community college students, but affiliative humour was positively correlated with both perspective-taking and empathic care. Aggressive humour revealed constant negative connections with empathy, whereas self-defeating humour showed no significant relationships. Overall, the data imply that adaptive humour styles are associated with better empathic capacities, whereas aggressive humour implies larger empathic impairments. (Hampes, 2010)

Wu extended this research to younger populations and discovered that among Chinese teenagers, self-enhancing and affiliative humour were positively correlated with empathy, whereas aggressive humour was negatively correlated with empathic concern and perspective-taking, with girls reporting higher empathy and boys reporting more aggressive humour. In a similar vein, Halfpeeny found that among children in the UK, self-defeating humour exhibited weak or inconsistent associations, affiliative humour was only associated with cognitive empathy, aggressive humour was negatively associated with both cognitive and affective empathy and sympathy. All of the literature that is currently available, mostly from Western and East Asian samples, indicates that while aggressive humour is linked to empathic deficiencies, adaptive humour styles promote empathic functioning. This underscores the necessity for similar studies within the Indian sociocultural context. (Halfpenny & James, 2020; Wu et al., 2016)



Research Methods

Objective

- To examine the relationship between adaptive and maladaptive humour styles and empathy among emerging adults.

Hypotheses

H1: There will be a positive correlation between adaptive humour styles (affiliative and self-enhancing humour) and empathy.

H2: There will be a negative correlation between maladaptive humour styles (self-defeating and aggressive humour) and empathy.

Variables

- Independent Variable: Emerging Adulthood Status
- Dependent Variable:
 - Humour Styles
 - Empathy

Tools

Humour Styles Questionnaire

Dr Rod Martin developed the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) to assess four types of humour. The HSQ demonstrates good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.77 and 0.81. Factor analyses validate its distinct four-factor structure, providing evidence for construct and factorial validity.

Toronto Empathy Questionnaire

R. Nathan Spreng and colleagues created the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) as a quick self-report tool to evaluate a fundamental, mostly emotional aspect of empathy. The scale has strong test-retest reliability ($r=0.81$) and good to outstanding internal consistency, Cronbach's α ranging from 0.85 to 0.87 across studies.

Sample

A sample of 112 emerging adults aged 18 to 30 was collected, with 101 providing valid responses. Among the valid responses, 33.3% identified as male, 64.9% as female, while some opted not to disclose their gender. The study excluded individuals with psychiatric or mental health issues and those who did not pass the attention test.



Data Collection

Google Forms facilitated data collection. Participants provided informed consent before completing the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, Humour Styles Questionnaire, and a brief sociodemographic form. Their responses were kept confidential and subsequently rated and statistically analysed.

Data Processing

Pearson’s correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationships between the study variables.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Correlation between Adaptive Humour Styles (Affiliative and Self-Enhancing) and Empathy in the Emerging Adult population (N = 101)

Variables	Adaptive Humour Styles
Empathy	.198*

*p<0.05

Table 1 shows a significant correlation ($r=0.198$) between empathy and adaptive humour styles, indicating that individuals who use adaptive humour report higher empathic capacity. Research involving Italian students confirmed a positive relationship between empathic/self-efficacy and both self-enhancing and affiliative humour styles. Empathic self-efficacy reflects confidence in understanding others’ emotions. Additionally, self-enhancing humour correlates with perspective-taking ($r=0.28, p<0.01$) and affiliative humour relates to empathic concern ($r=0.23, p<0.05$). These findings collectively support that greater use of adaptive humour is linked to stronger empathy abilities.



Table 2: Correlation between Maladaptive Humour Styles (Aggressive and Self-defeating) and Empathy in the Emerging Adult population (N = 101)

Variables	Maladaptive Humour Styles
Empathy	.014

Table 2 illustrates a weak correlation ($r=0.014$) between empathy and maladaptive humour styles, which is not statistically significant. The findings contrast with Halfpenny & James (2020) study, where affective empathy ($r= -0.28$) showed negative correlations with aggressive humour, but self-defeating humour did not correlate with empathy dimensions. Further analysis reveals that neither aggressive nor self-defeating humour significantly predicted empathy dimensions in early adults (Wałęcka-Matyja, 2017). Collectively, the results indicate that maladaptive humour does not robustly correlate with empathy across samples, and aggressive humour may selectively relate to emotional empathy rather than as a whole, consistent with the weak relationship found in this study.

Conclusion

Among emerging adults, a significant positive correlation exists between empathy and adaptive humour types, with $r =0.198$ ($p<0.05$). This suggests that those who utilise adaptive humour also possess greater empathy. Conversely, maladaptive humour shows a weak, non-significant relationship with empathy ($r=0.014$), contradicting prior research. Thus, adaptive humour appears to bolster empathy, while aggressive humour reflects empathic weakness.

Implications

- Promoting adaptive humour styles can improve empathy and decrease mental health risks for Indian emerging adults, where psychological issues are prevalent.



- The findings advocate for the implementation of culturally sensitive, empathy-focused, and humour-based interventions in educational settings to enhance prosocial behaviour and interpersonal relationships.

Limitation of the Study

- The sample had an imbalance in male versus female participants.
- The sample size was small.
- The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire was used to test only the emotional aspect of empathy; the cognitive aspect was excluded.

References

- Arnett, J. J. (2023). *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*. Oxford University Press.
- Arnett, J. J., Žukauskienė, R., & Sugimura, K. (2014). The new life stage of emerging adulthood at ages 18–29 years: Implications for mental health. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 1(7), 569–576. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)00080-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)00080-7)
- Bansal, P. (2013). *Youth in Contemporary India*. Springer India. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-0715-3>
- Bhatia, S. (2018). *Decolonizing Psychology: Globalization, Social Justice, and Indian Youth Identities*. Oxford University Press.
- Bošnjaković, J., & Radionov, T. (2018). Empathy: Concepts, Theories and Neuroscientific Basis. *Alcoholism and Psychiatry Research: Journal on Psychiatric Research and Addictions*, 54(2), 123–150. <https://doi.org/10.20471/dec.2018.54.02.04>
- Halfpenny, C. C., & James, L. A. (2020). Humor Styles and Empathy in Junior-School Children. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 16(1), 148–166. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v16i1.1934>
- Hampes, W. (2010). The Relation Between Humor Styles and Empathy| *Europe's Journal of Psychology*. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 6(3), 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v6i3.207>
- Martin, R. A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., & Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the Humor



- Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(1), 48–75.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00534-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00534-2)
- Mitra, D., & Arnett, J. J. (2021). Life Choices of Emerging Adults in India. *Emerging Adulthood*, 9(3), 229–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696819851891>
- Pandey, Dr. Kashi. N. (2025). Mental Health and Indian Youth. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/DOI:%252010.25215/1302.113>
- Wałęcka-Matyja, K. (2017). Relationship with siblings as a predictor of empathy and humor styles in early adulthood. *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy*, 19(3), 43–51.
<https://doi.org/10.12740/APP/76339>
- Wu, C.-L., Lin, H.-Y., & Chen, H.-C. (2016). Gender differences in humour styles of young adolescents: Empathy as a mediator. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 99, 139–143.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.05.018>