

## IMPACT OF ADAPTIVE AND MALADAPTIVE HUMOR STYLES ON STRESS COPING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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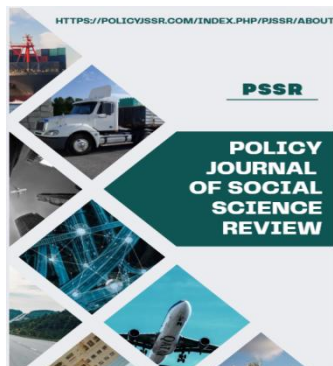
Owais Ahmad

### ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the impact of affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor styles on the stress coping of university students. Using a sample of 349 participants calculated with the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator from Abbottabad University. The researchers employed the Humor Styles and the Stress Coping Scale to evaluate these constructs. Descriptive statistics, multiple regression analysis, and independent sample t-tests were utilized to analyze the data, with reliability analyses confirming the psychometric properties of all instruments. The findings revealed that adaptive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) significantly and positively predicted stress coping. These results suggest that students who utilize humor to facilitate social cohesion or maintain a positive internal perspective are better equipped to navigate academic and personal stressors. Conversely, maladaptive humor styles (aggressive and self-defeating) significantly and negatively predicted stress coping. This indicates that using humor to disparage others or oneself may serve as an obstacle to effective stress management and emotional resilience. Regarding gender disparities, a significant difference was identified only within the domain of aggressive humor, where male students reported higher scores than their female counterparts. The study suggests that counseling services and educational interventions should prioritize the development of adaptive humor styles as a strategic component of stress management and resilience-building programs for university students.

**Keywords:** Aggression, Humor Styles, Stress Coping, University Students

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## Introduction

In contemporary society, university education is increasingly recognized as a pivotal developmental phase characterized by rapid psychological shifts, identity formation, and relentless performance evaluation. During this period, students navigate a confluence of academic competition, stringent deadlines, parental expectations, and career-related pressures, which collectively generate a significant stress load (Beiter et al., 2015). Empirical evidence indicates that global stress levels among university students have intensified over the past three years, exacerbated by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid transition toward technology-dense learning models (Zhang & Wong, 2023). Consequently, academic stress has emerged as a primary predictor of declining emotional health within the youth population.

Recent research suggests that as stress levels rise, students increasingly rely on internal psychological mechanisms to maintain emotional stability. Among these, humor is one of the most culturally accepted and socially reinforced mechanisms (Navarro & Gomez, 2022). Far from being merely a form of entertainment, humor serves as a sophisticated cognitive reframing strategy, allowing individuals to reinterpret adverse events in a more benign or less threatening light. According to Papousek et al. (2023), this process can immediately attenuate the

emotional charge of stressful situations, thereby preserving psychological equilibrium.

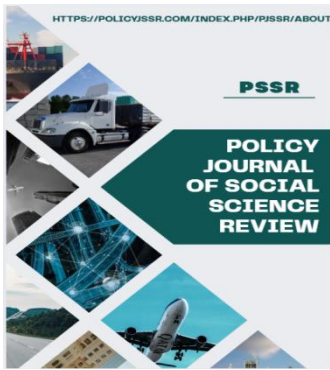
Neuroscientific research confirms that humorous processing activates the brain's reward circuits, fostering positive affect and buffering physiological responses to stress (Meyer et al., 2022). Consequently, humor exerts a direct biological influence on emotion regulation. Beyond biology, humor significantly shapes social experiences within the university environment—including friendships, collaborative projects, and peer interactions—all of which are instrumental in building emotional resilience (Shin & Park, 2024). When students utilize humor to foster connection, they cultivate a protective social climate. Also, humor can be deployed defensively or through self-attack, which may accelerate emotional vulnerability, particularly in cultures where sarcasm or self-ridicule are socially normalized (Zhou et al., 2024). Given this dual nature, researchers increasingly view humor styles as significant predictors of psychological adaptation, anxiety levels, and coping efficacy (Santos & Ribeiro, 2023).

Within the educational sector, chronic stress remains a primary risk factor for burnout and academic disengagement. Therefore, institutions are prioritizing the identification of sustainable coping mechanisms (Yoon & Choi, 2024).

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Strategies rooted in positive emotions are notably more protective than avoidance-based approaches; humor is consistently associated with enhanced optimism, cognitive reappraisal, and openness. These psychological resources enable students to adopt constructive management techniques. In developing nations, where students often face additional stressors such as financial instability and limited support services, adaptive emotional strategies become even more essential. Furthermore, recent cross-cultural studies indicate that humor styles are not generic but are shaped by cultural norms, gendered expectations, and campus micro-climates (Lim et al., 2023). Because professional counseling often carries a social stigma or remains inaccessible, many students rely on humor as a self-sufficient, informal toolkit for regulation.

Identifying these humor patterns—affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating—is vital for university health services. It allows professionals to discern whether students are coping healthily or masking underlying distress with maladaptive humor (Morris & Wells, 2023). While university life offers a sense of exploration and growth, it simultaneously imposes academic and personal demands that threaten psychological well-being. Understanding how specific humor styles hinder or support coping is, therefore, essential for

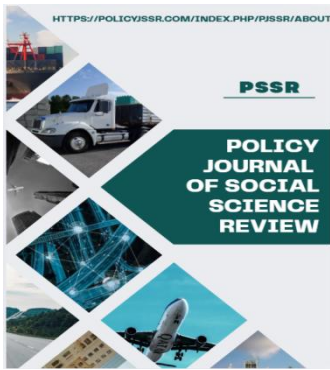
designing effective mental health programs and counseling models (Steiner et al., 2023). This study explores these relationships to provide actionable insights for student development and emotional resilience.

## Literature Review

Research indicates that humor serves both interpersonal and intrapersonal functions, contributing to positive social relations and personal psychological well-being (Martin & Ford, 2018). Affiliative humor involves the use of intellect to strengthen social bonds, alleviate tension, and enhance interpersonal attraction. Among university students, this style is linked to robust peer support, collaborative coping, and superior social adjustment (Navarro & Gomez, 2022). Recent evidence from Asian university populations indicates that students utilizing affiliative humor report lower perceived stress and better academic adjustment, particularly during high-pressure periods such as examinations (Lim et al., 2023).

Self-Enhancing humor reflects an individual's tendency to maintain a humorous perspective even in the face of adversity. This style facilitates optimism and cognitive reappraisal, allowing students to reframe stressful events in a less threatening manner (Kuiper, 2016; Meyer et al., 2022). Experimental findings suggest that self-enhancing humor activates reward-related neural networks that buffer stress

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responses, thereby contributing to mood stability and a mastery-oriented mindset.

Aggressive humor is characterized by sarcasm, teasing, or ridicule directed toward others. While it may be intended as play, it often damages relationships and escalates interpersonal conflict. This style is associated with poorer coping competence, lower social support, and significant emotional dysregulation (Romero & Cruthirds, 2017; Santos & Ribeiro, 2023). Furthermore, the prevalence of aggressive humor in digital spaces—such as through cynical memes—has been identified as a contributor to cyberbullying and social friction (Liu & Kim, 2025).

Self-Defeating Humor involves disparaging oneself to gain social approval or reduce situational tension. Although it may provide a reprieve from stress, it is strongly correlated with low self-esteem, ruminative thought patterns, and emotional vulnerability (Zhou et al., 2024). Recent meta-analytical data suggest that students who rely on self-defeating humor often employ avoidance strategies, such as social withdrawal or emotional disengagement, which undermine their long-term coping capacity (Morris & Wells, 2023; del Castillo et al., 2023).

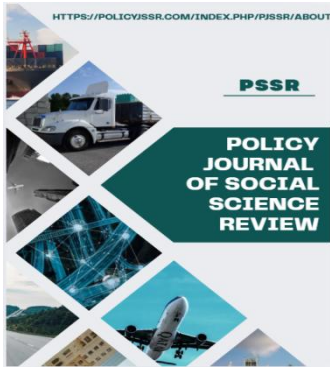
Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals exert to manage stressors and minimize their impact on well-being (Lazarus & Folkman,

1984). Humor functions as a sophisticated cognitive reappraisal strategy, enabling students to reinterpret negative experiences and reduce the intensity of negative affect (Papousek et al., 2023). Adaptive humor styles facilitate active coping and problem-solving, enhancing a student's tolerance for academic pressure (Yoon & Choi, 2024). Conversely, maladaptive styles are linked to emotional disengagement and increased psychological vulnerability. Given that humor is often used as a self-sufficient, informal toolkit—especially where professional counseling remains stigmatized—incorporating humor-based resilience training into campus wellness programs is an essential strategy for promoting healthier academic achievement and social adjustment.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Cognitive Appraisal Theory - Lazarus & Folkman (1984)**

Cognitive Appraisal Theory posits that stress is not an inherent quality of an event, but rather a consequence of how an individual cognitively evaluates that event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Recent findings indicate that, among university students, stress levels are driven more by appraisal styles than by objective academic workload (Hossain et al., 2024). In this context, humor acts as a mechanism for cognitive transformation, reframing adverse events into less threatening interpretations (Papousek et al., 2023).



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Adaptive humor styles—specifically affiliative and self-enhancing humor—function as cognitive reappraisal devices. These styles facilitate a fundamental shift, transforming the perception of a situation from a "threat" into a "challenge." This transition is the core of the cognitive appraisal shift. When students utilize positive humor, their perception of stress drops abruptly because the event becomes less emotionally charged (Lim et al., 2023). Furthermore, students who maintain this flexible appraisal style exhibit greater psychological resilience, which is predictive of sustained academic persistence (Steiner et al., 2023).

Conversely, maladaptive humor styles, such as aggressive and self-defeating humor, facilitate biased negative appraisals. Students relying on these styles are more likely to interpret situations as inherently hostile, ego-threatening, or embarrassing (Zhou et al., 2024). This negative framing is closely linked to threat-based appraisal and rumination, which frequently leads to emotional exhaustion (Morris & Wells, 2023).

The interplay between humor and appraisal provides a clear pathways for understanding behavioral outcomes: Humor Style → Cognitive Appraisal → Coping Response → Psychological Outcome (Huang & Wang, 2023). By altering the initial appraisal of a stressor, humor serves as a decisive factor in

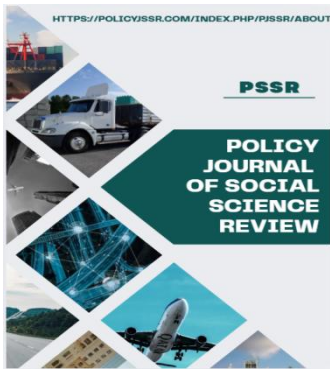
determining whether a student adopts a constructive coping strategy or succumbs to emotional distress.

### **Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions - Fredrickson**

The Broaden-and-Build Theory posits that positive emotions serve a critical evolutionary function by momentarily expanding an individual's cognitive capacity, which subsequently facilitates the development of enduring psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Recent empirical data suggest that humor acts as a primary catalyst for this expansion effect among university students (Meyer et al., 2022).

### **The Upward Spiral: Adaptive Humor**

When students engage in affiliative or self-enhancing humor, the resulting positive emotions broaden their awareness, leading to enhanced problem-solving capabilities and social connectivity (Navarro & Gomez, 2022). This process initiates an "upward emotional spiral," where each humorous interaction builds a reserve of resilience and emotional fortitude (Yoon & Choi, 2024). Furthermore, adaptive humor generates significant social capital—including stronger peer networks and increased social protection—which buffers students against academic adversity (Shin & Park, 2024). This theoretical framework explains why students who utilize positive humor tend to demonstrate higher levels of optimism, motivation, and tolerance for



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uncertainty (Huang & Wang, 2023). By building these internal and external resources, adaptive humor provides an indirect but vital defense against burnout and depressive symptoms (Lim et al., 2023).

### **The Downward Spiral: Maladaptive Humor**

In contrast, negative humor styles initiate a "narrowing" effect. Instead of expanding cognitive boundaries, aggressive or self-defeating humor induces negative emotional cycles that restrict cognitive flexibility (Zhou et al., 2024). This constriction limits the student's ability to see alternative solutions or seek social support.

### **Transactional Model of Stress & Coping**

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping posits that coping is a dynamic, bidirectional interaction between the individual and their environment. According to this framework, individuals select coping strategies based on the specific meaning they assign to a stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Recent research confirms this selection pattern among youth, illustrating that coping is not a fixed trait but a response shaped by situational demands and personal interpretation (Zhang & Wong, 2023; Steiner et al., 2023).

### **Humor as a Transactional Coping Strategy**

Within this model, humor serves as a decisive coping mechanism during real-world academic stressors, such as

examinations and formal presentations (Shin & Park, 2024). The specific style of humor chosen significantly dictates the emotional and behavioral trajectory of the transaction:

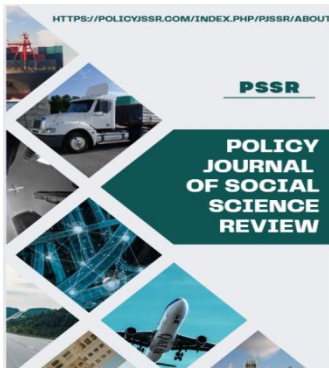
### **Adaptive Humor (Affiliative and Self-Enhancing)**

These styles promote "engagement coping," which encompasses active problem-solving and sustained effort (Huang & Wang, 2023). By reframing a stressor as a manageable challenge, positive humor leads to enhanced psychological well-being. Maladaptive Humor (Aggressive and Self-Defeating)

Conversely, "dark" or negative humor is frequently associated with avoidance-based strategies, including denial and emotional reduction (Santos & Ribeiro, 2023). Relying on these styles often results in increased distress and interpersonal friction (Papousek et al., 2023).

### **The Pakistani Academic Context**

University life in Pakistan presents a unique constellation of stressors, ranging from intense academic competition and stringent deadlines to financial burdens and family expectations. While international literature has established a clear link between humor and coping, research remains limited within the Pakistani university setting. Because cultural norms heavily influence the expression and social acceptability of humor, it is essential to investigate these

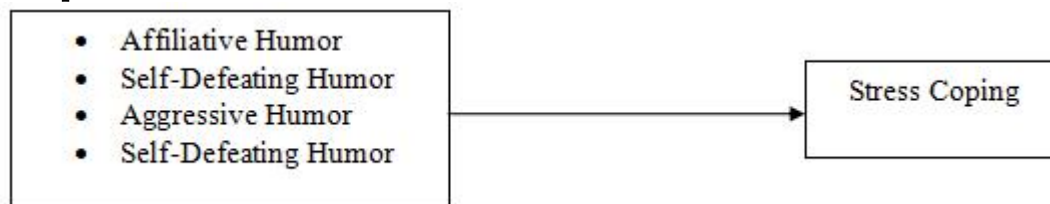


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styles within the local academic micro-climate. This study seeks to bridge this gap by identifying which humor styles facilitate adaptive resilience and which contribute to maladaptive outcomes among Pakistani students. By clarifying these relationships,

### Conceptual Framework



### Objectives

- To identify different humor styles among university students.
- To measure stress-coping strategies among university students.
- To investigate the impact of different humor styles and stress coping among university students.

### Hypotheses

- An affiliative and self-enhancing humor style will significantly predict stress coping positively among university students.
- Aggressive and self-defeating humor style will significantly predict stress coping negatively among university students.
- There will be significant differences between males and females in affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor styles and stress coping among university students.

### Methodology

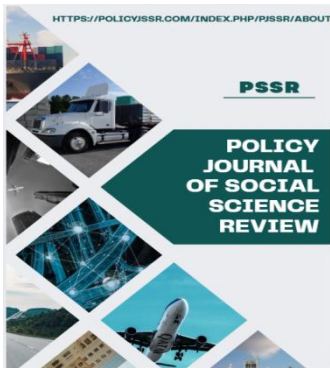
this research provides a theoretical foundation for universities to design culturally sensitive mental health programs, counseling interventions, and stress-management workshops aimed at fostering student well-being (Liu & Kim, 2025).

### Research Design

The present study employs a cross-sectional research design to examine the impact of humor styles on stress coping among university students.

### Sample

The current study employed a purposive sampling technique to collect the data. The sample consisted of 349 university students from Abbottabad University, selected according to the inclusion criteria of the study. Prior permission was obtained from the concerned authorities before data collection. The participants were approached in different departments of the university and were informed about the purpose of the study. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for research purposes. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and the participants were informed of their right to



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withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

### **Operational Definitions**

#### **Affiliative Humor**

Affiliative humor refers to using humor to make other people feel relaxed and happy. Such individuals tell jokes, say funny things, and use friendly banter to improve relationships and reduce tension. They may also healthily joke about themselves, without hurting their self-respect. This type of humor is positive and non-hostile and is associated with good social relationships, self-esteem, and positive emotions.

#### **Self-Enhancing Humor**

Self-enhancing humor means having a humorous outlook on life and using humor to cope with stress or difficult situations. People with this style can laugh at life's problems while still seeing reality clearly. This humor mainly helps the person emotionally rather than entertaining others. It is linked with lower levels of depression and anxiety and higher psychological well-being.

#### **Aggressive Humor**

Aggressive humor involves using sarcasm, teasing, ridicule, or insults toward others. In this style, humor is used without caring about how it affects other people, and it may hurt or offend them. It can include sexist or racist jokes and humor meant to dominate or control others. This type of humor is related to anger, hostility, and poor relationship quality.

#### **Self-Defeating Humor**

Self-defeating humor refers to making fun of oneself excessively to amuse others or gain their approval. People using this humor allow themselves to be the target of jokes and may laugh along when others ridicule them. This humor is often used to hide negative feelings or avoid dealing with personal problems. It is associated with low self-esteem, emotional insecurity, depression, and anxiety.

#### **Stress Coping**

Stress coping refers to how a person deals with stress, pressure, or difficult situations in life. It includes the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors used to manage stressful demands and reduce their negative impact. Coping can be positive, such as problem-solving, seeking support, or using humor to stay calm, or negative, such as avoidance or denial. Effective stress coping helps individuals maintain emotional balance, mental health, and overall well-being when facing challenges.

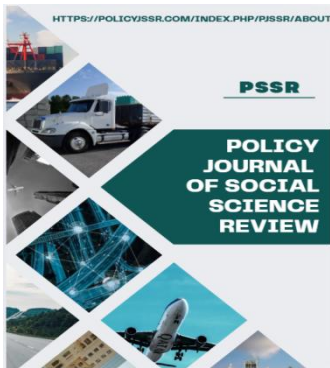
#### **Instruments**

The following instruments were used for data collection in this research.

#### **Humor Style Questionnaire**

The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) developed by Martin et al. (2003) was used to assess different humor styles of the participants. The scale consists of 32 items, measuring four humor styles: Affiliative humor, Self-enhancing humor, Aggressive humor, and Self-defeating humor.

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Responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores on each subscale indicate greater use of that humor style. The HSQ is a widely used and psychometrically sound instrument with satisfactory reliability and validity across different populations.

### **Stress Coping Scale**

To assess stress coping strategies, the Brief COPE Inventory developed by Carver (1997) was used. This scale consists of 28 items measuring different coping responses to stress, including problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping strategies.

Responses are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from I haven't been doing this at all to I've been doing this a lot. Higher scores indicate greater use of specific coping strategies. The Brief COPE has demonstrated good reliability and validity in previous research.

### **Demographic sheet**

The demographic sheet was used to collect basic information about the participants, including variables such as age, gender, and educational level. This information was collected to understand the background characteristics of the participant and to examine their relationship with stress coping strategies and humor styles.

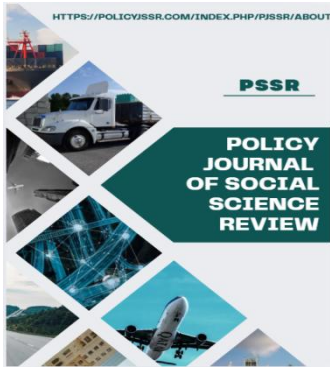
### **Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent was taken from the participants, in which the researchers

ensured to the participants that their data would be kept confidential and would be used solely in this research. The researchers further ensured that all participants were protected from any potential harm both physically and psychologically.

### **Procedure**

Initially, the researchers visited different departments of Abbottabad University to collect data from the students. The university setting was considered convenient due to easy access to participants and a high student flow, which made data collection more feasible. Prior permission was obtained from the concerned authorities and participants before the data collection process. The researchers personally approached the participants, explained the purpose of the study, and sought their informed consent. A total of 349 participants who met the inclusion criteria of the present study were included. The participants were informed that all information would be kept confidential and used strictly for research purpose. They were also assured that participation in the study would not cause any physical or psychological harm. The participants were requested to respond honestly to the questionnaire, as there were no right or wrong answers. The questionnaires were administered to assess humor styles and stress coping strategies among university students. After completion of data collection, all filled



questionnaires were carefully checked and then entered into SPSS version 30 for statistical analysis of the study.

#### Data Analyses

Once the data had been entered into SPSS, the Reliability of all the study scales was analyzed in the first step. All analyses were conducted based on the proposed hypotheses. The study includes different types of variables, where some variables are

treated as independent variables while others function as dependent variables. The analysis examines which variables have a significant positive or negative impact on the results and identifies the strength of relationships among the variables. All statistical analyses were carried out in accordance with the hypotheses to ensure accurate testing and achievement of the research objectives.

#### Results

**Table 1**

*Descriptives of Demographic Variables (N = 349)*

| Variables     | Categories          | F   | %     | M     | SD   |
|---------------|---------------------|-----|-------|-------|------|
| Age           |                     |     |       | 21.72 | 2.27 |
| Year of study | 1st & 2nd semesters | 80  | 22.90 |       |      |
|               | 3rd & 4th semesters | 81  | 23.20 |       |      |
|               | 5th & 6th semesters | 88  | 25.20 |       |      |
|               | 7th & 8th semesters | 100 | 28.70 |       |      |
| Gender        | Male                | 181 | 51.90 |       |      |
|               | Female              | 168 | 48.10 |       |      |

*Note.* F = Frequency, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The sample had a mean age of 21.72 years (SD = 2.27). The sample comprised 181 males (51.90%) and 168 females (48.10%). With

respect to year of study, 22.90% of the participants were enrolled in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> semesters (f=80), 23.20% were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> semesters (f=81), 25.20% were in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> semesters (f=88), and 28.70% were in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> semesters (f=100).

**Table 2**

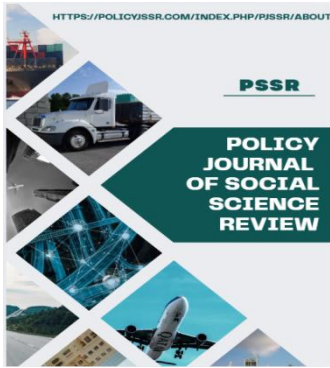
*Alpha Reliability of Study Scales (N = 349)*

Range

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| Scales        | K  | $\alpha$ | M      | SD    | Min | Max | Skew  | Kurt |
|---------------|----|----------|--------|-------|-----|-----|-------|------|
| Humor style   | 32 | .77      | 139.68 | 18.90 | 50  | 192 | -1.39 | 5.60 |
| Stress coping | 28 | .72      | 71.85  | 9.35  | 41  | 112 | .62   | 3.31 |

Note. K = Items of Scale, Skew = Skewness, Kurt = Kurtosis, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 2 presents the psychometric properties of the scales. The Humor Style scale demonstrated good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .77. The Stress Coping scale also showed acceptable reliability, alpha = .72. Descriptive analysis revealed that the mean

score for Humor Style was 139.68 (SD = 18.90), while the mean for Stress Coping was 71.85 (SD = 9.35). Normality indices (Skewness and Kurtosis) were also examined. Both humor style (-1.3) and stress coping (0.62) values lie within the range, indicating that the data are normally distributed, which means that we will be using parametric tests.

### Table 3

Multiple Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Stress Coping from Humor Styles (N = 349)

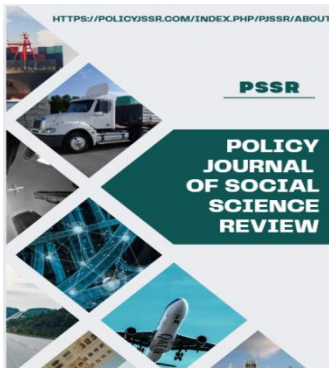
| Predictors           | Outcome       | B    | $\beta$ | t     | F     | R   | R <sup>2</sup> | $\Delta R^2$ | p   |
|----------------------|---------------|------|---------|-------|-------|-----|----------------|--------------|-----|
| Affiliative Humor    | Stress Coping | .41  | .27     | 5.23  | 27.38 | .27 | .073           | .070         | .00 |
| Self-Enhancing Humor | Stress Coping | .42  | .28     | 5.48  | 29.98 | .28 | .078           | .076         | .00 |
| Aggressive Humor     | Stress Coping | -.25 | -.13    | -2.45 | 6.01  | .13 | .017           | .014         | .01 |
| Self-Defeating Humor | Stress Coping | -.16 | -.11    | -2.07 | 4.30  | .11 | .012           | .009         | .03 |

Table 3 shows that multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine whether humor styles predicted stress coping. Affiliative humor significantly and positively predicted stress coping,  $\beta = .27$ ,  $t(347) = 5.23$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining 7.3% of the variance,  $R^2 = .073$ ,  $F(1, 347) = 27.38$ . Similarly, self-enhancing humor significantly predicted stress coping,  $\beta = .28$ ,  $t(347) = 5.48$ ,  $p < .001$ , accounting

for 7.8% of the variance,  $R^2 = .078$ ,  $F(1, 347) = 29.98$ . Aggressive humor negatively predicted stress coping,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t(347) = -2.45$ ,  $p = .015$ , explaining 1.7% of the variance,  $R^2 = .017$ ,  $F(1, 347) = 6.01$ . Likewise, self-defeating humor was a significant negative predictor of stress coping,  $\beta = -.11$ ,  $t(347) = -2.07$ ,  $p = .039$ , accounting for 1.2% of the variance,  $R^2 = .012$ ,  $F(1, 347) = 4.30$ .

### Table 4

Gender Differences in Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, Self-Defeating Humor Styles, and Stress Coping (N = 349)



| Variables            | Male<br>(n = 181) | Female<br>(n = 168) | t(347) | P   | Cohen's d |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------|-----|-----------|
|                      | M(SD)             | M(SD)               |        |     |           |
| Affiliative Humor    | 35.42(5.97)       | 35.04(6.16)         | .58    | .56 | -         |
| Self-Enhancing Humor | 35.53(6.40)       | 35.27(6.00)         | .39    | .69 | -         |
| Aggressive Humor     | 31.70(4.74)       | 30.58(4.79)         | 2.18   | .02 | .24       |
| Self-Defeating Humor | 34.04(5.89)       | 33.13(6.41)         | 1.38   | .16 | -         |
| Stress coping        | 72.48(8.83)       | 71.17(9.87)         | 1.30   | .19 | -         |

Note. M = Means, SD= Standard Deviation  
Table 4 presents the results of an independent samples t-test examining gender differences in Affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, self-defeating humors and stress coping between males and females. The findings indicate that there were statistically significant differences in aggressive humor style with males significantly scoring higher than females (M = 31.70, SD = 4.74), (M = 30.58, SD = 4.79);  $t(347) = 2.18$ ,  $p < .05$  with a small effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.24$ ). However, no significant gender difference was found for other humor styles and stress coping, as the p-value was found to be greater than .05.

### Discussion

Table 2 shows that all study measures are internally consistent. The skewness and kurtosis values for Humor styles and stress coping scales were within the acceptable normal range, respectively, confirming that the data met the assumptions for parametric testing. These findings suggest that the selected scales are both reliable and valid for assessing the constructs of

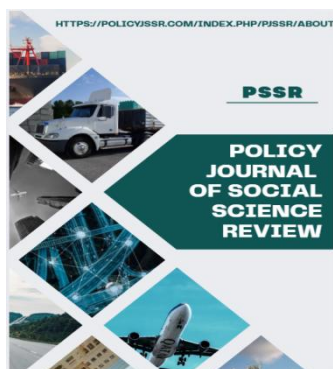
humor styles and stress coping among university students. The reliability analysis indicated that the Humor Style Scale demonstrated good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .77$ ), while the Stress Coping Scale showed acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .72$ ) (See Table 2). These findings suggest that both instruments were psychometrically sound and suitable for assessing humor styles and stress coping among university students.

Table 3 presents the multiple regression analysis which showed that stress coping was positively and significantly predicted by affiliative and self-enhancing humors as they both are considered as adaptive humor styles ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ), ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This indicates that individuals who frequently use positive humor styles tend to cope more effectively with stress, consistent with previous findings linking adaptive humor to psychological well-being (Zhou et al., 2024). Affiliative humor may facilitate social bonding and emotional support, while self-enhancing humor allows individuals to maintain a positive outlook during stressful situations, thereby

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enhancing coping capacity (Lim et al., 2023).

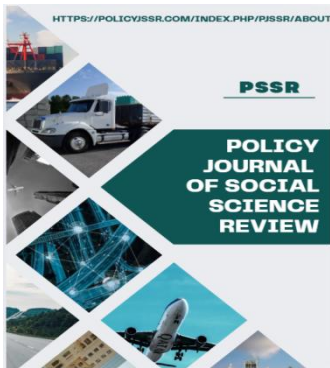
In contrast, stress coping was negatively and significantly predicted by aggressive and self-defeating humors as they both are considered as maladaptive humor styles ( $\beta = -.13, p < .01$ ), ( $\beta = -.11, p < .01$ ). These findings suggest that maladaptive humor styles are associated with poorer stress coping, which is supported by earlier research showing that aggressive and self-defeating humor are linked with psychological distress. Aggressive humor, which often involves sarcasm or ridicule, may lead to interpersonal conflicts and increased stress (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). Similarly, self-defeating humor may reflect low self-worth and reliance on unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Additionally, affiliative humor showed a strong positive association with self-enhancing humor ( $r = .40, p < .01$ ), indicating that individuals who use humor to strengthen social relationships also tend to use humor as a personal coping strategy, as reported in previous validation studies of the Humor Styles (Zhou et al., 2024). Aggressive humor was positively related to self-defeating humor ( $r = .16, p < .01$ ), suggesting that negative humor styles may coexist and reflect maladaptive emotional regulation patterns (Morris & Wells, 2023). Furthermore, in the study, gender differences were examined using independent samples t-tests, as reported in

Table 4. The results indicated a statistically significant gender difference only in aggressive humor. Males scored significantly higher than females on aggressive humor ( $t(347) = 2.18, p < .05$ ), which is consistent with previous findings indicating that men tend to report higher levels of aggressive humor with a small effect size (Cohen's  $d = .24$ ) (Aymen et al., 2026). This finding may be explained by socialization patterns and cultural norms that encourage males to express humor in a more assertive or confrontational manner. However, no significant gender differences were found for affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, self-defeating humor, or stress coping, as the p-values for these variables were greater than .05. This suggests that both males and females are similar in their use of adaptive humor styles and their ability to cope with stress. The absence of gender differences in stress coping indicates that stress management strategies may be influenced more by individual personality traits and humor styles rather than gender alone (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Taken together, the findings of the study highlight the important role of humor styles in stress coping. Adaptive humor styles, such as affiliative and self-enhancing humor, appear to facilitate better coping, while maladaptive humor styles, including aggressive and self-defeating humor, are associated with poorer coping outcomes.

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The results also suggest that gender differences are minimal, except in the expression of aggressive humor

## Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor, self-defeating humor, and stress coping among university students. The findings suggest that humor is an important psychological resource that influences how students handle stress. Specifically, adaptive humor styles—affiliative and self-enhancing humor—were positively associated with effective stress coping. Students who frequently use affiliative humor tend to strengthen social bonds, gain emotional support, and create a positive social environment, which facilitates stress management. Similarly, self-enhancing humor helps students maintain a positive outlook, reframe stressful situations, and regulate negative emotions, enhancing their resilience in the face of academic and personal challenges.

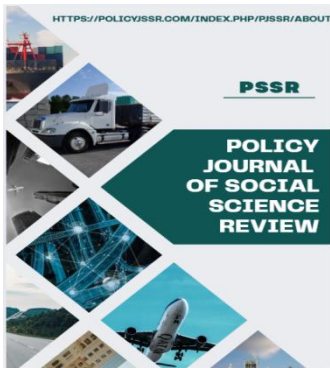
In contrast, maladaptive humor styles—aggressive and self-defeating humor—were negatively related to stress coping. Aggressive humor, which often involves sarcasm, ridicule, or interpersonal conflict, may increase stress levels and hinder constructive coping. Self-defeating humor, characterized by excessive self-mockery and reliance on approval from others, reflects low self-esteem and reliance on unhealthy

coping strategies, ultimately undermining students' ability to manage stress effectively. The study also examined gender differences in humor styles and stress coping. Results showed that males scored higher on aggressive humor compared to females, reflecting possible cultural and social influences on humor expression. The study contributes to the understanding of humor as a multifaceted coping mechanism and highlights the potential benefits of incorporating humor-based approaches in counseling, stress management programs, and educational settings to support students in dealing with academic and personal stressors.

## Implications

Affiliative and self-enhancing humor can help students cope better with stress, so promoting these positive humor styles may improve psychological well-being.

- Counselors and university support programs can include humor-based strategies to teach students how to use adaptive humor for stress management.
- Aggressive and self-defeating humor are linked to poorer stress coping, indicating a need to reduce maladaptive humor styles among students.
- Male students showed higher aggressive humor, so targeted awareness programs can help reduce confrontational or hurtful humor behaviors.
- Encouraging affiliative humor can strengthen social bonds and provide



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emotional support, creating a more positive campus environment.

- Stress management workshops can integrate humor training to teach students how to maintain a positive outlook during academic and personal challenges.
- Understanding humor styles as coping mechanisms can help educators and psychologists design interventions that enhance both mental health and interpersonal skills.

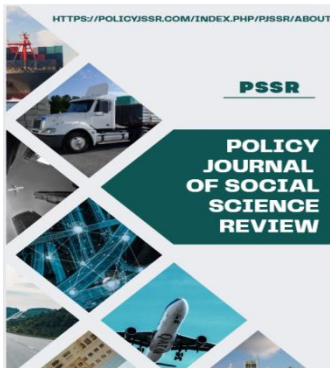
#### Limitations

- The study was conducted only at Abbottabad University of Science and Technology, so the findings may not be generalizable to students from other universities or regions.
- The research relied on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability or inaccurate responses from participants.
- The study used a cross-sectional design, causal relationships between humor styles and stress coping cannot be determined.
- The study focused only on university students, so the findings may not apply to other populations, such as working adults or non-students.

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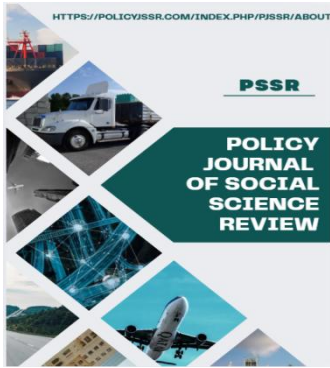
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