



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## A STUDY ON HUMOUR STYLES IN COPING WITH SOCIAL REJECTION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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### Abstract

This research aims to examine the link between humour styles and coping with social rejection in young adults aged 18-30 years. Humour is a crucial psychological resource that people use in different ways, which may have implications for dealing with difficult social situations like rejection or exclusion. This study will focus on four humour styles: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating.

A quantitative correlational study approach will be adopted. The study will collect data from young adult participants using the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) and the Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ). The HSQ is a scale designed to measure individual differences in humour styles, while the A-RSQ is a scale designed to measure rejection sensitivity and expectations about social rejection. Descriptive statistics, tests for normality, correlation analysis, and gender comparisons, if necessary, will form the main body of statistical analysis.

The results of this study are likely to contribute to a better understanding of the link between different humour styles and rejection sensitivity in young adults. This research may help to provide information about adaptive and maladaptive humour styles and their implications for coping with social rejection. The results may also have implications for psychological interventions to promote more adaptive ways of coping with social situations.

*Keywords: Humour Styles, Social Rejection, Rejection Sensitivity, Coping, Young Adults, Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ), Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ), Gender Differences*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Social relationships are fundamental to human psychology and support and regulate human mental health and emotion. Humans have an intrinsic desire to belong and to be socially accepted; social acceptance is critical to human development and functioning. Rejection, exclusion or disapproval often leads to increased negative emotional experience, self-evaluation, maladaptive behaviour, and other responses. Thus, social rejection is one of the most powerful interpersonal stressors with repercussions for emotional, cognitive, and behavioural processes in affected individuals.

Emerging adulthood is characterised by daily experiences of rejection. These include new social demands, comparing oneself to peers, academic demands and the instability of intimate relationships. Experiences of being ignored, rejected by the peer group or criticised, or rejected by a romantic partner can lead to heightened rejection sensitivity. Consequently, rejection-sensitive individuals often expect rejection even in neutral social situations, impacting their self-esteem and mental health.

A related construct is rejection sensitivity, which is the tendency to anxiously expect, interpret, and react to social rejection in an emotional, biased (i.e., pessimistic), or defensive manner in social interactions. Individuals with high levels of rejection sensitivity tend to perceive ambiguous social events as being negative for themselves and to react more negatively to social events. Rejection sensitivity has been studied about social anxiety, depression, and interpersonal relationship difficulties, and is of interest in clinical and social psychology.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Baumeister and Leary (1995) pointed out that the "need to belong" drives human behavior. Keeping stable social relationships is crucial for mental health. When this need is broken by rejection, people often feel emotional pain, insecurity, and distress. Rejection can challenge how we view ourselves and create feelings of isolation, negatively impacting our mental health. Supporting this idea, Williams (2007) suggested through the ostracism model that rejection harms four basic psychological needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaning in life. When these needs are at risk, people may feel sad, angry, anxious, or withdrawn.

Downey and Feldman (1996) introduced rejection sensitivity as a way of thinking and feeling that develops through repeated experiences of rejection, criticism, or inconsistent acceptance by others. According to this model, people learn to expect rejection, and these anxious anticipations become active in future social situations. Consequently, those who are rejection-sensitive may see uncertain social signals as rejection, leading to strong emotional reactions like anxiety, shame, or anger.

Martin et al. (2003) created the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) to highlight that humour styles reflect stable personal differences in how people use humour, whether effectively or ineffectively. These styles exist within wider social contexts, where societal norms shape what types of humour are accepted and their purposes. For example, men often learn to use humour in more assertive or dominant ways, while women may use humour to foster social bonds and smooth relationships.

## 3. OBJECTIVES

- To evaluate the impact of Humour Styles in coping with Social Rejection
- To find out the impact of Humour Styles in coping with social rejection on gender

### 3.1 HYPOTHESIS

H<sub>01</sub>

*There is no significant impact of humour styles on coping with social rejection.*

### **Affiliative Humour**

H<sub>01a</sub>: There is no significant impact of affiliative humour on coping with social rejection.

### **Self-Enhancing Humour**

H<sub>01b</sub>: There is no significant impact of self-enhancing humour on coping with social rejection.

### **Aggressive Humour**

H<sub>01c</sub>: There is no significant impact of aggressive humour on coping with social rejection.

### **Self-Defeating Humour**

H<sub>01d</sub>: There is no significant impact of self-defeating humour on coping with social rejection.

H<sub>02</sub>

*There is no significant impact of humour styles on coping with social rejection across gender.*

### **Affiliative Humour**

H<sub>02a</sub>: There is no significant gender difference in the impact of affiliative humour on coping with social rejection.

### **Self-Enhancing Humour**

H<sub>02b</sub>: There is no significant gender difference in the impact of self-enhancing humour on coping with social rejection.

### **Aggressive Humour**

H<sub>02c</sub>: There is no significant gender difference in the impact of aggressive humour on coping with social rejection.

### **Self-Defeating Humour**

H<sub>02d</sub>: There is no significant gender difference in the impact of self-defeating humour on coping with social rejection.

## **3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The current study used a quantitative, descriptive, and correlational research design. This design was chosen because the study aimed to explore the relationships between humour styles and rejection sensitivity without changing any variables.

A cross-sectional approach was used; data were collected from participants at a single time point. This design is suitable for examining naturally occurring psychological trends and connections between variables such as humour styles and rejection sensitivity.

## **3.3 SAMPLE**

A convenience sampling technique was employed in the present study to recruit participants. This method involves selecting individuals who are readily accessible and willing to participate, making it suitable for exploratory and correlational research. Participants were approached through various online platforms, including social media channels, academic groups, and personal networks, which facilitated the inclusion of a diverse sample of young adults. The use of online distribution allowed for efficient data collection across different backgrounds and locations. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection, ensuring ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process.

### 3.4 TOOLS USED

The study used two standardised psychological tools. The first tool was the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ), developed by Martin et al. (2003). The HSQ is a self-report measure consisting of 32 items. It measures four humour styles: affiliative humour, self-enhancing humour, aggressive humour, and self-defeating humour. Each subscale contains eight items. 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 particular humour style. Some items are reverse scored to control response bias.

The second tool was the Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ). This tool measures rejection sensitivity by assessing anxious expectations and reactions to possible rejection in interpersonal situations. The A-RSQ presents hypothetical social situations where rejection may occur. Participants rate their concern or anxiety about rejection and their expectation of acceptance or rejection. Rejection sensitivity scores are calculated by multiplying anxiety ratings with reversed acceptance expectation scores and then taking the mean across scenarios. Higher scores indicate greater rejection sensitivity. Both tools are widely used in social and clinical psychology research.

### 4 PROCEDURE

The data for this study were collected through an online survey. The structured questionnaire was created on a digital platform (like Google Forms) and then distributed to the respondents via social media platforms, academic groups, and personal networks.

The survey comprised three sections:

1. Informed Consent, which provided information about the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.
2. Demographic Details, including gender.
3. Standardised Scales: Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) and Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ).

Respondents were instructed to answer truthfully and were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes. The survey took approximately 15–20 minutes.

A total of 207 responses were received. Any incomplete or inconsistent responses were removed during data screening; thus, only valid responses were considered for the final analysis.

These will then be coded and exported to statistical software (JASP) for further analysis.

## 5 DELIMITATIONS

While the present study yields meaningful results concerning the link between humour styles and rejection sensitivity in young adults, some limitations need to be considered to facilitate an accurate understanding of the findings.

Firstly, the study employed a convenience sampling method. Participants were chosen based on their accessibility and willingness to participate through online platforms, meaning the sample is not representative of all young adults, nor is it possible to generalise the findings to the young adult population as a whole. Individuals with varying educational, cultural, socioeconomic, or regional backgrounds might express different humour patterns and exhibit different experiences of rejection sensitivity.

Another important limitation is the skewed gender distribution within the sample. The sample consists of significantly more female participants than male participants. While appropriate statistical analyses were employed, this discrepancy could influence gender-specific results and make inter-group comparisons less comparable.

The study utilised only self-report measures in the form of the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) and the Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ). Self-report data is subject to certain biases, such as social desirability bias (responding in ways that are perceived to be socially acceptable rather than purely truthful), response bias, and inaccuracies in self-perception. Humour is largely subjective and context-dependent, and so standard questionnaires may not be best equipped to capture these aspects fully.

The study adopted a cross-sectional design. As data was collected at a single point in time, it is not possible to make causal claims about the relationship between humour styles and rejection sensitivity. While associations can be identified, it is not known whether humour styles influence rejection sensitivity or if rejection-sensitive individuals learn to adopt certain styles of humour.

Another noteworthy finding of the study is that the correlations were primarily non-significant, suggesting that humour styles are unlikely to account for a substantial portion of rejection sensitivity. This leads one to believe that the constructs responsible for rejection sensitivity must be other psychological variables not considered in this study. For example, attachment style, personality type, ability to manage emotions, self-esteem, developmental experience, social anxiety, or interpersonal trauma could be stronger predictors of rejection sensitivity.

The cultural context is another limitation. Humour is known to be influenced heavily by culture (e.g., by social cues, familial interactions, and personal expectations), and as such, these characteristics might influence young adults' ways of expressing humour, as well as their interpretation and reaction to social rejection. While the scales used are well-accepted across cultures, they were developed in the West and might not accurately reflect Indian culturally specific ways of humour and rejection sensitivity.

Further, online data collection may have implications for participants' motivation and response patterns. As the questionnaires were completed in the absence of a researcher and direct supervision, there may have been less control over participants' attention, the way they approached the tasks (e.g., their level of earnestness), and potential environmental distractions.

Lastly, this study focused on young adults and thus the conclusions can only be applied to this age group and not adolescents, middle-aged adults, or the elderly. Humour styles and rejection sensitivity may change over different developmental stages because individual needs and the ways in which these needs are met change, thus affecting aspects such as personal maturity, social roles, and overall life experiences.

Despite the mentioned limitations, the current study adds valuable knowledge regarding humour styles and rejection sensitivity in young adults in India, and opens up numerous avenues for future research on coping mechanisms and interpersonal sensitivity in Indian young adults. The study's limitations also highlight the areas in which future studies could make improvements.

## 6. RESULTS

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Variable -Independent Samples t-test for Gender Differences in Humour Styles and Rejection Sensitivity (N = 204)

Variables	t	df	p-value	Interpretation
Affiliative Humour	-4.635	202	< .001	Significant
Self-Enhancing Humour	-1.060	202	.290	Not Significant
Aggressive Humour	-1.887	202	.061	Not Significant
Self-Defeating Humour	-1.289	202	.199	Not Significant
Rejection Sensitivity	0.941	202	.348	Not Significant

Table 1 shows the results of the independent samples t-test used to examine gender differences in humour styles and rejection sensitivity among young adults.

A significant gender difference was found in affiliative humour ( $t = -4.635$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This means that males and females significantly differed in their use of humour for social bonding, maintaining relationships, and creating positive interactions. This finding suggests that gender may affect how people use socially adaptive humour styles. Therefore, the null hypothesis related to affiliative humour was rejected. The result may reflect differences in communication patterns, emotional expression, and socialisation between genders.

For self-enhancing humour, no significant gender difference was identified ( $t = -1.060$ ,  $p = .290$ ). This shows that both males and females displayed similar tendencies to use humour as a coping mechanism during stress and tough times. Thus, the null

hypothesis related to self-enhancing humour was not rejected. The finding suggests that maintaining a humorous outlook on life may function similarly for both genders in this sample.

Additionally, no significant gender difference was noted for aggressive humour ( $t = -1.887$ ,  $p = .061$ ). Although the result was close to being significant, the p-value was above the accepted threshold of .05. This indicates that males and females did not differ much in their use of sarcasm, teasing, ridicule, or humour aimed at others. Therefore, the null hypothesis regarding aggressive humour was not rejected.

For self-defeating humour, the findings showed no significant gender difference ( $t = -1.289$ ,  $p = .199$ ). This suggests that both genders reported similar levels of self-disparaging humour and humour used to gain social approval or avoid rejection. Hence, the null hypothesis related to self-defeating humour was retained.

Lastly, no significant gender difference was found in rejection sensitivity ( $t = 0.941$ ,  $p = .348$ ). This indicates that both males and females in the sample experienced similar levels of anxious expectations and emotional reactions toward potential rejection. Therefore, the null hypothesis regarding rejection sensitivity was not rejected.

Overall, the findings show that gender differences were evident only in affiliative humour. Other humour styles and rejection sensitivity appeared to be quite similar between males and females in this study.

Table 2: Pearson's Correlation Between Humour Styles and Rejection Sensitivity (N = 204)

Variables	Rejection Sensitivity (r)	p-value	Interpretation
Affiliative Humour	-0.109	.119	Not Significant
Self-Enhancing Humour	-0.075	.287	Not Significant
Aggressive Humour	0.022	.757	Not Significant
Self-Defeating Humour	0.112	.111	Not Significant

Table 2 shows the results of Pearson's correlation analysis that looked at the connection between humour styles and rejection sensitivity in young adults. The results reveal different associations between humour styles and rejection sensitivity. However, none reached statistical significance.

## 7. MAJOR FINDINGS

From the descriptive statistics, it was found that affiliative humour was ranked highest out of all the styles of humour used by participants. Usage of Maladaptive Coping Styles of Humour was minimal. In view of the results obtained through statistical analysis performed using JASP, the major findings of the study are as follows:

1. Affiliative humour was the most frequent humour style used.

From the descriptive statistics, it was evident that affiliative humour scored the highest among all humour styles used by the participants. This is indicative that participants most often used humour for social interaction, strengthening interpersonal relations and contributing to a positive atmosphere among individuals. The study highlights that young adults are likely to use adaptive coping forms of humour rather than maladaptive forms.

The usage of affiliative humour is likely due to the importance of interpersonal relationships during young adulthood. Humour through affiliative use often involves joke telling, laughter, sharing, and interaction, which can act as a socially accepted defence mechanism, facilitating interaction between individuals.

## 2. Maladaptive coping forms of humour were low in usage.

It was evident that the humour style, aggressive and self-deprecating, received considerably lower average scores. This implies that participants were least likely to resort to ridiculing, sarcasm or making fun of themselves.

The use of maladaptive coping humour may be indicative of positive adjustment and better interpersonal relations in the participants. It may be that young adults are more aware now than ever before of the negative repercussions of hostile and self-belittling humour forms.

## 3. There was a gender difference only in affiliative humour.

There was found to be a statistically significant difference between the males and females regarding their affiliative humour. This shows that males and females differ in their tendency to use humour in social situations for strengthening interpersonal bonds and communication.

The gender difference in affiliative humour use may relate to socialisation factors, gender roles or patterns of communication styles and emotional expression. Affiliative humour's connection with maintaining smooth interpersonal relations might differ across genders.

No gender differences were found for self-enhancing humour, aggressive humour, and self-defeating humour. This indicates that males and females did not significantly differ with respect to their use of humour as a coping strategy for their fears of rejection.

## 4. Adaptive coping forms of humour show weak negative correlation with rejection sensitivity.

Concerning the correlation between humorous styles and rejection sensitivity, it was found that affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles have a weak negative correlation with rejection sensitivity. Although the correlations are non-significant, they tend to indicate that positive, adaptive humour may be related to marginally lower levels of rejection sensitivity.

The theoretical significance of the results is related to the established connection of adaptive humour styles with optimism, stress reduction, healthy functioning of interpersonal relations and better emotional regulation. It may be that an individual's ability to laugh even when subjected to interpersonal pain reduces the impact of rejection by facilitating emotional release and

enabling re-framing of the negative experience. However, since the correlations are non-significant, one cannot conclude that humour styles alone predict rejection sensitivity.

#### 5. Maladaptive coping forms of humour show a weak positive correlation with rejection sensitivity.

Aggressive and self-deprecating humour styles show weak positive correlation with rejection sensitivity. The results indicate that individuals who use ridiculing or mocking humour are likely to feel slightly more sensitive to rejection. However, the correlations are statistically nonsignificant.

The humour style, self-defeating humour shows a slightly stronger positive correlation with rejection sensitivity in comparison with aggressive humour. This finding correlates with studies indicating low self-esteem in people using this particular humour style and their higher dependence on others for approval. Nevertheless, the finding is non-significant, so no definitive statement about its use as a predictor for rejection sensitivity could be made.

#### 6. No statistically significant relation was found between humour styles and rejection sensitivity.

The most crucial finding of the study is that none of the above-mentioned humour styles correlates statistically significantly with rejection sensitivity. Null hypotheses stating that there is no relation between humour styles and rejection sensitivity are thus upheld.

Rejection sensitivity is probably dependent on deeper psychological constructs like attachment styles, personality, personal history of experiences, difficulty with emotional regulation and self-esteem. Humour styles might be more likely to act as surface-level behaviours, and not directly reflect underlying psychological processes associated with rejection sensitivity.

#### 7. The use of cultural and contextual factors should be considered in interpreting the results.

The lack of significance in the findings might also indicate the use of cultural and environmental factors. So far, most of the studies on humour styles are based on Western samples. The current results add to our understanding of how these aspects are addressed in Indian culture.

Collectivistic cultures, maintaining smooth social relations and a sense of belongingness, might differ in terms of expressions of humour and reactions to rejection. Therefore, it is important to understand that culture and context are influential factors in humorous styles.

#### 8. The study makes a novel contribution to understanding the link between humour and interpersonal relations.

The current findings add to the research on humour and interpersonal relationships by studying the interaction between humour styles and rejection sensitivity among young Indians, a rather unexplored area. These findings are based on the sample used in the current study and will provide valuable support for further studies.

### 8. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study set out to examine the relationships between humour styles and rejection sensitivity in young adults and gender differences on these constructs. Humour styles were seen as multifaceted coping processes encompassing both adaptive styles, such as affiliative and self-enhancing humour and maladaptive styles, such as aggressive and self-defeating humour. Rejection sensitivity was seen as a cognitive-affective propensity to experience anxious anticipation and amplified reactions to interpersonal rejection.

Results indicated that there was a statistically significant gender difference for affiliative humour, suggesting that males and females were different in their tendencies to use humour for interpersonal connection and communication with others. No statistically significant gender differences were found for self-enhancing humour, aggressive humour, self-defeating humour, and rejection sensitivity. This seems to suggest that some aspects of humour might differ across genders because of differential socialisation and communication experiences, while emotional sensitivity to interpersonal rejection may be similar across both males and females.

Correlation analysis using Pearson's  $r$  was also conducted between humour styles and rejection sensitivity. Results indicated a weak negative correlation between affiliative and self-enhancing humour and rejection sensitivity. This may suggest that adaptive styles of humour are associated with lesser interpersonal vulnerability. Results showed a weak positive correlation between aggressive and self-defeating humour and rejection sensitivity, suggesting that maladaptive styles of humour are associated with slightly greater emotional sensitivity toward interpersonal rejection. None of these correlations was significant. Hence, the null hypotheses, that there is no significant correlation between humour styles and rejection sensitivity, were not rejected. This seems to suggest that humour styles are unlikely to be robust predictors of rejection sensitivity independently in young adults in the current sample.

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