



Sense of humor and social desirability: Understanding how humor styles are perceived



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ABSTRACT

Humor can be expressed in many ways, some of which may not be seen as displaying a good sense of humor or as being socially desirable. Using the Humor Styles Questionnaire to predict global ratings of sense of humor for oneself and for a romantic partner indicated that only adaptive humor styles were reliably related to sense of humor and that an affiliative style was the primary predictor. Behaviors associated with adaptive humor styles were judged as more socially desirable, with maladaptive humor uses being rated as clearly socially undesirable. In conclusion, a good sense of humor is not based solely on sharing humor and some styles of sharing humor are socially damaging. Future research needs to determine when maladaptive humor may be beneficial.

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1. Introduction

A good sense of humor has been trumpeted as a social quality of considerable worth. Other positive personality qualities are assumed to co-occur with a good sense of humor (Cann & Calhoun, 2001), and a good sense of humor is ranked among the most desirable qualities in potential romantic partners (Lippa, 2007; Polimeni & Reiss, 2006). In a cross-cultural survey, relationship satisfaction was positively associated with spousal humorousness, defined as how often your spouse “makes you laugh” (Weisfield et al., 2011). A survey of married couples found that almost all reported that humor enhanced their relationship (Ziv, 1988). Even very early in relationship formation humor may be a benefit. Guéguen (2010) showed that men were more successful in getting women’s phone numbers if they displayed humor when interacting with friends. One suggestion, based on an evolutionary model, is that humorousness is a fitness indicator associated with qualities like intelligence and creativity because these are skills needed to generate humor (Greengross & Miller, 2011), and data have supported the proposed link between humor production, intelligence, and mating success (Miller, 2000). But when the term “good sense of humor” is used to describe someone, is generating humor the real criterion or does the type of humor matter?

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Being funny, using humor, and having a good sense of humor often are viewed as equivalent signs of a single underlying construct, with little distinction drawn among forms of humor. Are we attracted to others regardless of how they use humor because creating the humor is the key that signals underlying qualities we value? Negative forms of humor clearly exist. Humor characterized as disparagement (Zillman, 1983) or superiority humor (Gruner, 1997) is common, but the impact of these forms of humor is potentially less desirable. Their intent is to demean targets through humor to gain some social advantage for oneself. These forms of humor may be funny, at least to those not targeted, but do they convey the same message about the source as harmless forms of humor? When people report that they value a sense of humor, or when they indicate humor strengthens their relationships, they are likely imagining humor as a purely positive act rather than as a means of demeaning someone.

Until recently, humor research lacked a useful framework for differentiating the varieties of humor styles that characterized positive and negative humor. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) filled this gap with a model of humor that identified four humor styles; representing adaptive or maladaptive humor focused on others or the self. Affiliative humor, an adaptive humor, is used to form or strengthen bonds among people and reflects humor used to amuse others without harming anyone. Aggressive humor is used to establish superiority over others, to demean their value, and divide individuals. It is maladaptive, since it involves using sarcasm, teasing and disparagement to be funny. These two humor styles are other-directed. Self-directed humor reflects a

focus on humor to potentially benefit the self. Self-enhancing humor is adaptive humor and involves using humor to reappraise potential stressors and to cope with challenges. Self-defeating humor is less adaptive as it involves attempting to amuse others and gain approval by disparaging the self. Thus, while humor is created, there is a potential cost since the humor challenges the source's self-worth.

The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ; [Martin et al., 2003](#)), based on this model, provides a tool to assess individual differences in the four humor styles. The HSQ includes behaviors representative of the four styles that people rate as descriptive or not descriptive of their humor style. While all of the behaviors represent acts designed to be humorous, not all of them are likely to be viewed as characterizing a good sense of humor. In this paper we present two studies designed to investigate how variations in humor styles may lead to different perceptions and assessments of sense of humor.

2. Sense of humor and humor styles

In evaluating the HSQ, [Martin et al. \(2003\)](#) found that adaptive humor styles were consistently related to existing measures of global "sense of humor", but that the maladaptive styles also were often correlated. These results suggest either that the earlier measures were not differentiating between the adaptive and maladaptive uses of humor, or that, with respect to sense of humor; the different styles all were relevant. [Martin et al.](#) did find, however, that the four humor styles were differently associated with other personal qualities. Higher reported uses of the adaptive styles predicted lower depression and anxiety and higher levels of self-esteem and well-being. A self-defeating humor style was predictive of higher depression, lower well-being and self-esteem, and greater interpersonal aggression and hostility. An aggressive humor style was primarily related to higher interpersonal aggression and hostility.

Other researchers also have shown the humor styles are associated with very different personal qualities. For example, aggressive humor was associated with higher neuroticism and lower agreeableness ([Vernon, Martin, Schermer, & Mackie, 2008](#)), higher levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy ([Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010](#)), lower social competence ([Yip & Martin, 2006](#)) and elements of maladaptive schemas ([Dozois, Martin, & Bieling, 2009](#)). Maladaptive humor styles also are positively related to insecure attachment ([Cann, Norman, Welbourne, & Calhoun, 2008](#)). These qualities associated with maladaptive humor hardly seem socially attractive and seem unlikely to help support positive relationships. So, if adaptive and maladaptive humor styles are both associated with a good sense of humor, some degree of misperception of the associated qualities must be happening. Given these alternatives, we propose, in Study 1, to examine how the various humor styles are related to perceptions of global sense of humor.

3. Humor styles and social desirability

Given that the different humor styles are related to desirable and undesirable personal qualities, are these important differences appreciated by those exposed to the behaviors that represent different humor styles? Unless perceivers are unaware of the associations between the different humor styles and behavioral tendencies, it seems likely that the perceptions of a person based on the different humor styles should vary. Recent research supports this prediction. [Kuiper and Leite \(2010\)](#) had participants rate individuals who were described as either high or low on each of the four humor styles, rather than just as high or low on sense of humor. The affiliative style was rated highest on desirable

qualities; followed by the self-enhancing style, the self-defeating style, and the aggressive style. The opposite pattern was found for the ratings on undesirable qualities.

While these results suggest that different humor styles may conjure up very different perceptions of their users, with maladaptive styles leading to far less desirable perceptions, the actual descriptions used to portray the humor styles in this study might have biased these results. The descriptions given to participants included the humor style label, so people were told the target was high on "aggressive" humor. In addition, the descriptions did not just provide behaviors representing the humor styles; they also described intent in some cases. For example, in describing the high affiliative humor style, information indicated, "this person's friendly humor helps to create good relationships with others" ([Kuiper & Leite, 2010, p. 117](#)), while the low aggressive humor description indicated that the person "expresses humor only after considering its impact" (p. 117). A cleaner strategy would be to assess the individual behaviors that represent the humor styles, without providing labels or emphasizing intent. Thus, in Study 2, we examine how the individual behaviors that make up the HSQ are perceived: how socially desirable would a person be who engaged in these behaviors. In addition, to extend the findings from Study 1, we will have each behavior rated on the extent to which it reflects a good or bad sense of humor. We expect to find that the behaviors defining the maladaptive humor styles will lead to much lower perceptions of social desirability, and lower perceptions of a good sense of humor.

Although both women and men express an attraction to others who have a good sense of humor, some findings have suggested that there may be gender differences in what "sense of humor" means, especially in the context of romantic relationships ([Bressler & Balshine, 2006](#); [Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006](#)). Given these findings, in Study 2 gender and relationship type will be examined as factors that could impact perceptions of desirability.

4. Study 1: sense of humor and humor styles

The purpose of this study is to see how humor styles measured by the HSQ contribute to perceptions of global sense of humor. These relationships are examined for self-ratings and for ratings by a close other.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

Two samples were used to assess the relationship between humor styles and global sense of humor. Sample 1 included 82 couples in committed heterosexual dating relationships. Other analyses based on this sample have been reported elsewhere ([Cann, Zapata, & Davis, 2011](#)) and details of the recruitment process are reported there. The 164 participants had a mean age of 20.00 (SD = 3.07, range 18–43 years). The second sample ($n = 190$, 67 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.55$, SD = 4.61, range 18–46 years) was drawn from undergraduate psychology classes. Students participated to complete a course requirement, and volunteered by logging into a research participation web site.

4.1.2. Materials

The HSQ ([Martin et al., 2003](#)) includes 32 items, with 8 items assessing each of the 4 humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, self-defeating). Ratings are made on a 7-point scale [totally disagree (1) to (7) totally agree]. [Martin et al.](#) report acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas $>.75$) for each humor style and evidence of construct validity. In the couples sample, participants completed the HSQ by rating their perceptions of their

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