

## Humor Styles, Self-Esteem and Subjective Happiness

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### *Abstract*

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between humor styles, self-esteem and subjective happiness among Hong Kong Undergraduate students. 232 undergraduate students from 6 Hong Kong universities are asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire in the current study. Results showed that males considered themselves as more humorous than females. Meanwhile, males used more aggressive humor styles than females. However, both genders used more adaptive humor styles than maladaptive humor styles. Additionally, positive correlations were found between adaptive humor styles, self-esteem and subjective happiness. Adaptive humor styles were found to strengthen the relationship between self-esteem and subjective happiness. The significant findings on the relationship of humor styles, self-esteem and subjective happiness can be used as reference for similar studies in Hong Kong. In addition, the mediation effects of humor styles found in the present research provide useful suggestions for future intervention and therapeutic purposes in promoting mental health.

### **Introduction**

*“Humor is mankind's greatest blessing.”*

*- Mark Twain*

Most people like humorous person. Humorists are entertaining, energetic, funny and attractive. However, not everyone knows the mechanism behind the charm. People cannot escape from getting touch with humor because it is commonly used every day. It appears in daily events, parties and media. Humor does not only serve for social purpose, but also strengthens our abilities in coping with stress.

Being one of the hot topics in positive psychology, many researches relating humor have been done. In these researches, humor was found to be related to both physical and psychological well-being. Greater sense of humor was assumed to be relevant to several positive characteristics (Kuiper and Martin 1998). Humor tests were found to be positively correlated to the measurement of self-esteem. In addition, higher scores of humor scales were reported to be related to higher levels of emotional health, positive mood and zest of life (Celso *et al.* 2003). Following the previous studies, the current study aims to investigate the relationship between humor, self-esteem and subjective happiness among Undergraduates in Hong Kong.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Definition of Humor***

Literally, from *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson and Weiner 1989), the meaning of humor is “quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement,” which is “the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject.”

Since long time ago, humor has caught attentions of many psychologists. Humor

was referred as the highest defense mechanisms by Freud and a few psychologists. They considered humor is an acceptable way of expressing sex and aggressive impulses (Vaillant 1977, Andrews *et al.* 1989). Moreover, humor can be referred exclusively to a sympathetic, tolerant and benevolent form of amusement but not wit (Wickberg 1998). Both cognitive and emotional elements are included in humor, thus, humor could be a state or a trait (Martin 2000).

Also, it is believed that humor is beneficial to our mental health. People tend to think more positively by seeing humor in disasters. This positive thinking style helps in coping difficulties (Lyubomirsky and Tucker 1998). However, some humors are very damaging to both individuals and social relationship. For example, some people may enjoy disparagement humor when they have positive feeling toward the jokers even they have negative feeling toward the victims of the jokes (Zillman and Cantor 1976). Easily angered people are more likely to perform hostile humor than the others (Grziwok and Scodel 1956). In addition, Allport (1961) suggested that a mature person should process a non-hostile, self-deprecating humor with self-acceptance. All in all, humor can be hostile, disparaging and philosophical at the same time (Ruch 1998).

### ***Styles of Humor***

Recently, humor has grouped into two dimensions, adaptive and maladaptive. Adaptive humor refers to humors that are beneficial to psychological well-being. It includes affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor (Martin 2007). Affiliative humor refers to the tendency to tell jokes or engage in spontaneous witty banter in order to create amusement, lessen interpersonal tension and facilitate relationship. This kind of humor is non-hostile and tolerant. It affirms self and others, hence, increases interpersonal cohesiveness. Self-enhancing humor means the tendency to find amusement from the incongruities in life.

On the other hand, maladaptive humor is detrimental to well-being. It involves aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. The tendency to use humor for criticizing or manipulating others was regarded as aggressive humor. Examples of aggressive humor include teasing, ridicule, derision, disparagement. Some of the aggressive humors would also appear in offensive or socially inappropriate forms. Meanwhile, people who use self-defeating humor, tend to ingratiate themselves with others and try to amuse others by making fun at their own weakness. They use humor as a means to deny their underlying negative feelings or avoid dealing with certain problem (Stieger *et al.* 2011).

### ***Gender and humor styles***

Generally, males consider themselves to be more humorous than females. Men have higher likelihood to joke, tease, and kid than women (Wong 2010). Women like to act in an appreciative way and rather be a listener to the jokes. They are less likely to produce humor by themselves (Freud 1905, Ehrenzweig 1957, McGhee 1979a). Males and females are different in using and responding to both adaptive and maladaptive styles of humors (Svebak 1974, Ziv 1984, Aries 1987, Eagly and Johnson 1990). Studies showed males obtain significantly higher scores than females on the two maladaptive humor styles (Martin *et al.* 2003). The trend was more obvious when the humor was related to sexual or aggressive issues (Spiegel *et al.* 1969).

Gender role and social status are important on the perception on humor. Men may establish dominance and social control by using humor (Martin *et al.* 2003). Females are more careful about their responses on humor to avoid being derisive or

immodest. Because of the appropriate behavior assigned on women, they are less likely to show their enjoyment on humors. Some women may not be brave enough to pay the cost since some humors may carry risks (Brown and Levinson 1987).

### ***Humor and self-esteem***

Self-esteem is positively correlated with adaptive humor but not with maladaptive humor. Previous studies showed that healthy humor styles will lead to higher self-esteem (Martin *et al.* 2003). Particularly, affiliative humor style was proved to be positively related to various measures of self-esteem (Martin *et al.* 2003, Kuiper *et al.* 2004). Meanwhile, self-defeating humor style was negatively associated with self-esteem (Thorson *et al.* 1997). People who prefer self-defeating humor style tend to have damaged self-esteem because of their derogatory view of self-perception (Stieger *et al.* 2011). The reason is largely related to the endorsement of self-evaluative standards. Increase in endorsement of positive self-evaluative standards increases the use of affiliative humor, hence, causing higher levels of social self-esteem. Meanwhile, increased endorsement of negative self-evaluative standards leads to more frequent use of self-defeating humor and results in lower levels of social self-esteem (Martin *et al.* 2003).

### ***Humor and happiness***

Humor is globally accepted to be an indicator of positive mental health (Paul *et al.* 1986). Previous studies agreed that happiness and sense of humor were positively correlated (Paul *et al.* 1986). Sense of humor is one of the best predictors in differentiating happy and unhappy individuals. In contrast to unhappy students, happy students were more often reported reviewing negative event with a sense of humor and thinking about how much better of the present while comparing to the negative event (Lyubomirsky and Tucker 1998).

Positive emotions are the consequences rather than the cause of humorous amusement. Study found that perception of humor induces positive emotions by the expressions of smiling and laughter (Ruch 1998). When people are confronted with humor, they will have a cheerful smile and tend to laugh more. Factors of cheerfulness and low seriousness were repeatedly found to be the result of various humor instruments. Humorous behavior was shown to be related to high cheerfulness and low seriousness. In contrast, humor did not predict bad mood at all (Ruch *et al.* 2011).

In a more general perspective, humor affects people's outlook on life. Participants who watched comedy video were found to have significant level of hopefulness than those who had watched non-humorous video (Vilaythong *et al.* 2003). Indeed, humor was one of the characteristics that lead to higher life satisfaction. Peterson *et al.* (2006) found that individuals who had recovered from a serious illness or psychological disorder showed increased endorsement of character strengths that contributed to increased life satisfaction. Humor is one of the most frequently used character strength (Linley and Harrington 2006). Humor also indicates ones' social interest; the degree of social interest determines the possibility for happiness (Adler 1964).

Humor not only facilitates positive moods but also counteracts negative emotion as well (Gross and Munoz 1995). After being exposed to four minutes of humorous film, participants showed significant reduction in anxiety (Moran 1996). Besides, humor is able to provide positive short-term emotional effect comparable to the effect brought by doing vigorous physical exercise. Study found that watching comedy

videos increased positive mood and decreased negative distress in similar level as doing aerobic exercise. Moreover, watching comedy videos result in greater reduction in anxiety than doing aerobic exercise (Szabo *et al.* 2005).

In addition, humor can even counteract the effects of experimentally induced depression (Danzer 1990). Humor can make boring tasks interesting. From a previous study, participants reported higher level of energy and elation, and rated the boring proofreading tasks to be more challenging and invigorating after they had watched a comedy video (Dienstbier 1995).

Happiness is positively correlated with adaptive humor styles, and is negatively correlated with maladaptive humor styles. Many findings proved the use of different humor styles relates to happiness in several dimensions, ranging from optimism to lower aggressiveness. For example, Yue *et al.* (2008) found that optimism and mental health were positively correlated with affiliative and self-enhancing humor but negatively related to hostile and self-defeating humor. Affiliative humor was found to be negatively associated with depression (Martin *et al.* 2003). Self-enhancing humor was positively related to well-being and negatively associated with anxiety and depression (Thorson *et al.* 1997). Besides, aggressive humor was used more often with measures of hostility and aggressiveness. Findings show that individuals with higher aggressive humor might generate indirect costs by distancing themselves from others through their humor. Their humor reduces their happiness because they are lack of extensive or supportive social network to call upon when dealing with stressors (Kuiper *et al.* 2004). Meanwhile, self-defeating humor style was negatively correlated with well-being and social support, but positively associated with anxiety, depression, hostility, and aggression (Thorson *et al.* 1997).

To conclude, only affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor were believed to be positively correlated to elements related to happiness. Meanwhile, the two maladaptive humor styles were related to elements lead to lower happiness.

### ***Self-esteem and Happiness***

Self-esteem has a strong correlation with happiness not only because high level of self-esteem leads to happy and productive lives, but also its direct predictive power on happiness (Baumeister *et al.* 2003). Previous research revealed that higher self-esteem would lead to greater happiness. Under some circumstances, low self-esteem is more likely to lead to depression. Various studies proposed different points of view on the relationship. Buffer hypothesis was supported by some studies. Some suggested that self-esteem mitigates the effects of stress. However, opposite conclusion was found in other studies, indicating the negative effects of low self-esteem are mainly felt in good times while others still found that high self-esteem brings happier outcomes regardless of stress or other circumstances (Baumeister *et al.* 2003).

### ***Humor as mediators between self-esteem and happiness***

All in all, higher use of adaptive humor styles strengthens the positive relationship between self-esteem and subjective happiness while less use of maladaptive humor styles weakens the relationship. Previous findings suggested that individuals who scored higher on the Coping Humor Scale, reported more enjoyment in their interactions with others and more confident in those interactions. With increased social self-esteem, they are more likely to be associated with greater levels of happiness (Thorson *et al.* 1997). In fact, humor showed significant relations with all character strengths subgroups when self-esteem and self-efficacy are accounted

(Linley and Harrington 2006). Being one of the five most commonly-endorsed character strengths, humor is related to self-esteem in the sense that when we use our strengths, we feel good about ourselves and able to achieve things in a better way and work toward to fulfill our potential, thus, increased our life satisfaction (Linley and Harrington 2006).

Another research supported that high self-esteem individuals use more adaptive self-regulatory strategies than low self-esteem individuals. These strategies were factors causing their higher levels of reported happiness and satisfaction (Baumeister *et al.* 2003). And humor was believed to be one of the self-regulatory strategies.

The humor style chosen by an individual is also under concern. The relations were indicated in a research, which suggested lower levels of depression went along with increased use of affiliative humor. For participants with greater endorsement of negative self-evaluative standards, they tend to use more self-defeating humor, and resulted in lower levels of social self-esteem and higher levels of depression (Kuiper and McHale 2009). Self-defeating humor was strongly negatively correlated with explicit self-esteem and positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and several psychiatric and somatic symptoms (Martin *et al.* 2003). Furthermore, individuals with damaged self-esteem used self-defeating humor as a form of defensive mechanism to deny and hide their negative feelings, suppress anger and to mask their social and personal anxieties. And they are prone to depression, nervousness and have higher chance in suffering psychiatric disorders (Martin *et al.* 2003, Kuiper *et al.* 2004).

### ***Nomination of Top Ten Humorists***

With little mention on people in other occupations, Chinese undergraduates in Huhohot mostly nominated comedians to be humorists representatives (Yue *et al.* 2006). And 64.2% of nominated humorists among the Hong Kong students are comedians. This suggests that Chinese people tend to believe that humor is an exclusive expertise or special talent for comedians (Yue 2011).

### ***Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses***

The present study aims to investigate the relationship of humor style, happiness and self-esteem among University students in Hong Kong. Although previous studies had already revealed abundant information on the issue, few of them studied the gender effect and role of mediator played by humor styles on self-esteem and happiness.

Several hypotheses were made on the relationships among humor styles, self-esteem and happiness. First, present study would like to continue the investigation of the gender difference in humor styles. Second, it also attempted to test whether adaptive humor style relates to higher self-esteem and more happiness while maladaptive humor style relates to lower self-esteem and less happiness. Under the circumstances of the mediating effect of humor in previous study on psychological well-being and self-esteem, hypotheses were theorized that use of adaptive humor styles would strengthen the relationship between self-esteem and subjective happiness while the use of maladaptive humor styles would weakens the relationship. The conceptual framework for mediation was illustrated in Figure 1.

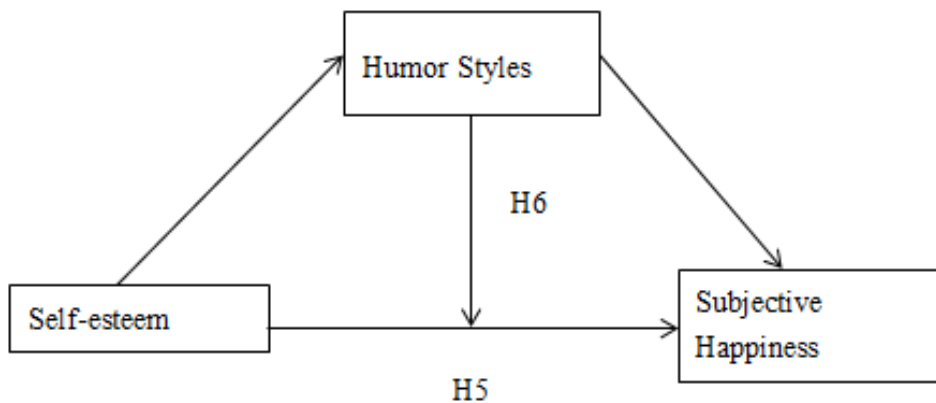


Figure 1. The conceptual framework for Hypothesis 5 and 6

The followings are hypotheses for the present study:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Males consider themselves to be more humorous than females
- H<sub>2</sub>: Males use more maladaptive humor styles than females while females use more adaptive humor styles than males.
- H<sub>3</sub>: Self-esteem is positively correlated with adaptive humor styles but is negatively correlated with maladaptive humor styles.
- H<sub>4</sub>: Subjective happiness is positively correlated with adaptive humor styles but is negatively correlated with maladaptive humor styles.
- H<sub>5</sub>: Self-esteem is positively correlated with subjective happiness.
- H<sub>6</sub>: Use of adaptive humor styles strengthens the relationship between self-esteem and subjective happiness while the use of maladaptive humor styles weakens the relationship between self-esteem and subjective happiness.
- H<sub>7</sub>: Hong Kong people will mostly nominate comedians as representatives of humor.

## Methodology

### Participants

232 participants were sampled in Hong Kong in this study, consisting 92 males (39.7%) and 135 females (58.2%). All participants were undergraduate students, who were mainly from 6 Universities in Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, the City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, and The Chinese University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Hong Kong Shue Yan University. Participants are aged between 15 to 28 with a mean age of 20.87 years old.

### Materials/Measures

A self-reported questionnaire was used in data collection for current study. It consists of five parts.

In the first section, through a 10-point Likert scale, participants were asked to evaluate four areas related to humor (1 = lowest, 10 = highest). The four areas included the rating on the importance of humor, their self-humor and humor of their parents. Moreover, they were asked to nominate maximally three best representatives they remembered both in China and in foreign countries. Moreover, they ranked the top ten important personality traits for humor. The following parts consist of three scales: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ) and

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS).

*Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg 1965) is a 10-item scale of explicit self-esteem (0 = totally disagree, 3 = totally agree). The higher the values, the higher the explicit self-esteem an individual achieves.

*Humor Style Questionnaire* (Martin *et al.* 2003) is a 32-item scale. It measures the four humor styles, affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor through a 7 point Likert scale (1 = lowest, 7 = highest). There are 8 items for each style. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese version in 2005 by Chen and Martin.

*Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky and Lepper 1997) is a 4-item scale. Both absolute ratings and ratings relative to peers are included for participants to characterize themselves in the first two items. And brief descriptions of happy and unhappy individuals as well as the extent each characterization describes them were offered in the other two items (Lyubomirsky and Lepper 1997).

### **Procedure**

Participants were invited to participate in a voluntary basis. The distributed Chinese-in-version questionnaire included five parts and takes about 10 minutes to complete. Eventually the collected data were entered into PASW Statistics 18 for further analysis by using independent sample t-test, Pearson correlation and Regression.

## **Results**

### ***Descriptive Statistics of the Demographic Variables of the Present Study***

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants (N = 232).

		N	Percentage
Gender	Male	92	39.7
	Female	135	58.2
Age	20 and below	92	40.9
	21 and above	133	59.1
Year of study	Year 1	76	32.8
	Year 2	47	20.3
	Year 3	99	42.7
	Year 4	6	2.6

Table 1 shows the demographic data of the present study, including participants' gender, age, and year of university study. As can be seen from the table, 58.2% of the sample was females and 39.7% were males. The participants were aged from 15 to 28 years old. 40.9% of them aged 20 and below (N = 92), and 59.1% of them aged 21 and above (N = 133). Majority of them were studying Year 3 (N = 99; 42.7%) and the least were in Year 4 (N = 6; 2.6%).

### ***Ratings of Importance of Humor and Self-Humor***

Table 2 summarizes the ratings of the importance of humor and self-humor among university students. Independent sample t-tests were run to compare the result for two genders. In both gender, the rating on the importance of humor were quite high ( $M = 8.43$  for male and  $M = 7.73$  for female).

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for rating of Importance of Humor and of Self-humor in Males and Females.

	Male (n = 92)		Female (n = 135)		<i>t</i> -value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Importance of Humor	8.43	1.499	7.73	1.218	3.916*
Self-Humor	6.68	2.080	6.03	1.424	2.817*
Father's humor	5.35	2.326	5.76	2.008	-1.416
Mother's humor	4.62	1.994	5.41	1.797	-3.102*

Note: \* $p < .05$

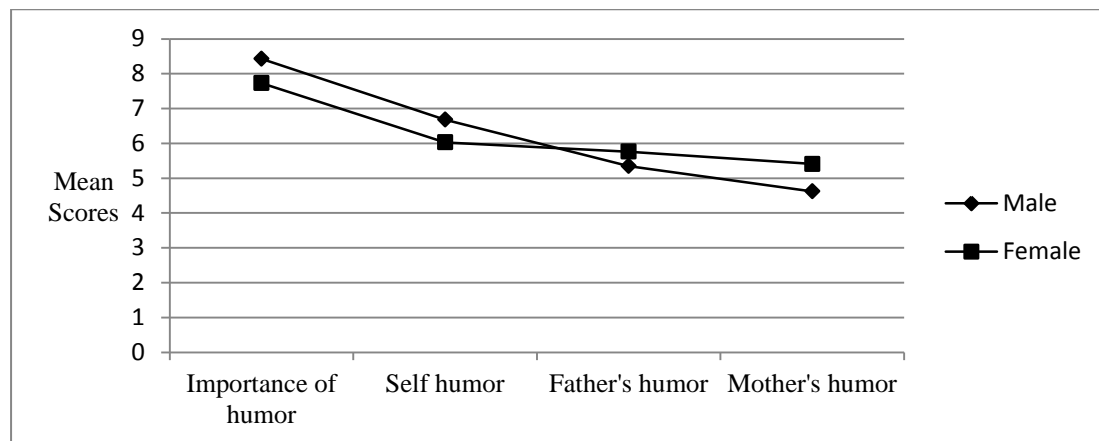


Figure 2. Ratings of Importance of Humor, Self-humor, father's humor and mother's humor.

The ratings of the males' importance of humor is significantly higher than females ( $t = 3.916, p < .05$ ). At the same time, the ratings of self-humor for males is significantly higher than females ( $t = 2.817, p < .05$ ). These findings provide full support to Hypothesis One that males consider themselves to be more humorous than females which are the same as the previous studies suggested (Yue 2011). There was also significant result in their rating of their mother's humor ( $t = -3.102, p < .05$ ), suggesting the different perception on humor in males and females. Although there was no significant different in the score of their father's humor, both genders rated their fathers to be more humorous than mothers. Moreover, both genders rated their self-humor much higher than their parents.

### ***Nomination of Top Ten Humorists***

Table 3a and 3b show the ten most frequently nominated humorists by Hong Kong University Students. Comedians and actors were found to be the mostly nominated Chinese humorists, consisting around 45% of the whole nominations. In addition, the most frequently nominated foreign humorists are actors, comedian and two presidents of the United State, which consist of 33.3% of the total nominations. For the nominated Chinese humorist, Stephen Chow, Wong Chi Wah, Jim Chim, Jan Lam are still in the top ten, which is similar to result of previous study. And Mr. Bean is still popular among students when they think of foreign humorist (Yue 2012).





Table 3a. Ranking of the Top Ten Chinese Humorists nominated.

Humorists Nominated	Occupation	Ranking	Percentage
Wong Chi Wah 黃子華	Actor/ Comedian	1	14.4
Stephen Chow 周星馳	Actor/ Comedian	2	12.9
Jim Chim Sui-man 詹瑞文	Actor/ Comedian	3	3.7
Jan Lam 林海峰	Disk Jockey	4	2.9
Wong Cho Lam 王祖藍	Actor/ Comedian	4	2.9
Eric Tsang 曾志偉	Actor/ Comedian	6	2.4
Sum Mei 森美	Disk Jockey	7	2.3
Kong Zi 孔子	Philosopher	8	1.6
Louis Yuen 阮兆祥	Actor/ Comedian	8	1.6
Michael Hui 許冠文	Actor/ Comedian	10	1.4
Total			46.1

Table 3b. Ranking of the Top Ten Foreign Humorists.

Humorists Nominated	Occupation	Ranking	Percentage
Mr. Bean	Actor/Comedian	1	12.1
Jim Carrey	Actor/Comedian	2	6.9
Charles Spencer	Comedian	3	5.3
Obama	President of U.S.A	4	3.0
Johnny Depp	Actor/ Comedian	5	1.3
Will Smith	Actor/ Comedian	6	1.1
Ben Stiller	Actor/ Comedian	7	1.0
Russel Peters	Disc Jockey/ Comedian	7	1.0
George Bush	President of U.S.A	8	0.9
Yu Jae-seok	Artist	9	0.7
Total			33.3

Table 3c. Top five Occupational categories of nominated Chinese and foreign humorists.

Ranking	Chinese	%	Foreign	%
1	Actor	45.5	Actor	32.6
2	Disc Jockey/host	4.3	Politician	6.3
3	Writer/composer	4.2	Host	1.9
4	Philosopher	3.9	Singer	1.6
5	Politician	3.3	Celebrity	1.0

Table 3c shows the top five occupation categories of nominated Chinese and foreign humorists. Most nominated humorists of Chinese and foreigners are actors, it scored 45.5% of the Chinese humorists and 32.6% for foreign humorists. Politician ranked within the top five in both Chinese and foreign humorists with slightly higher ranking in the foreign humorist list. Politician occupied 3.3% in Chinese group and 6.3% in foreigners group.

**Gender Difference in Use of Humor Styles**

Table 4. Gender Difference in the use of Humor Styles.

	Male (n = 92)		Female (n = 135)		t-value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Affiliative Humor	33.32	6.68	34.02	5.50	-.862
Self-enhancing Humor	33.49	5.97	33.52	6.50	-.035
Aggressive Humor	28.92	5.87	26.14	5.78	3.482*
Self-defeating Humor	29.62	7.32	28.35	6.55	1.345

Note: \*p<.05

Table 4 illustrates the use of four different humor styles in both genders. The data were tested by using independent sample t-test to determine the significant differences among genders. In general, the outcomes were satisfied that both genders use more adaptive humor styles than maladaptive styles of humor. And male uses significantly more aggressive humor than female ( $t = 3.482, p < .05$ ). This finding provides partial support to Hypothesis Two, indicating that females use more adaptive humor than males and males use more maladaptive humor than females.

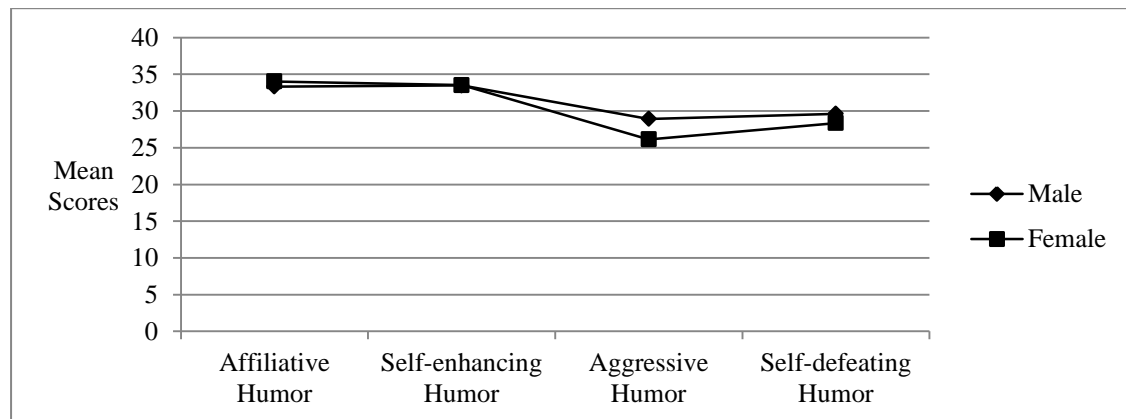


Figure 3. Mean scores of humor styles.

**Level of Self-Esteem and Subject Happiness among University Students**

Table 5. Comparison of Self-Esteem Level and Subjective Happiness by Gender.

	Male (n = 92)		Female (n = 135)		t-value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Self esteem	27.60	3.64	27.84	4.79	-.406
Subjective Happiness	17.18	3.81	16.92	3.42	.531

Note: \*p<.05

Table 5 indicated the mean scores and standard deviation of self-esteem and subjective happiness by gender. Analyzed by Independent sample t-test, there was no significant difference in level of self-esteem and subjective happiness in two genders ( $p > .05$ ), indicating the similar level of self-esteem and subjective happiness in both genders.

**Regressions on Humor Styles and demographic information**

Table 6 presents the regression analysis of the four humor styles and four demographic variables. They are gender, age, year of study, and religion of the participants. Through these results, aggressive humor was significantly associated with gender ( $\beta = -.223, t(226) = -3.085, p < .01$ ). It confirms the previous result in Independent sample t-test. Moreover, subjective happiness was significantly associated with religion ( $\beta = .178, t(226) = 0.31, p < .05$ ), implying that religion influences people's happiness.

Table 6. Regression analyses on Humor Styles, Self-Esteem, Subjective Happiness and gender, age, year of study, religion.

	Gender	Age	Year of study	Religion
Adaptive Humor				
Affiliative Humor	.080	.082	.073	.039
Self-Enhancing Humor	.013	-.043	-.141	-.005
Maladaptive Humor				
Aggressive Humor	-.223**	.061	.066	-.099
Self-defeating Humor	-.014	-.153	-.126	-.007
Self-Esteem	.038	.135	.069	-.108
Subjective Happiness	-.085	-.001	.027	.178*
$R^2$	.058	.056	.045	.042

Note: Regression coefficients are standardized

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

**Correlation of Self-Esteem, Humor styles and Subjective Happiness**

Table 7a illustrates that self-esteem was positively correlated with affiliative Humor ( $r = .275, p < .01$ ), self-enhancing humor ( $r = .381, p < .01$ ) and subjective happiness ( $r = .410, p < .01$ ), but not with aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. This finding provides partial support to Hypothesis Three, which self-esteem is positively correlated with adaptive humor and negatively correlated with maladaptive humor. Despite the positive correlation of subjective happiness and self-esteem, subjective happiness was significantly positively correlated with affiliative humor ( $r = .324, p < .01$ ) and self-enhancing humor ( $r = .443, p < .01$ ), but it has no correlation with aggressive humor and self-defeating humor.

The result provides partial support to Hypothesis Four, which implies that the positive correlation of adaptive humor and negative correlation of maladaptive humor with subjective happiness. And the finding supports Hypothesis Five that self-esteem is positively correlated with subjective happiness.

Besides, affiliative humor was positively correlated with self-enhancing humor ( $r = .332, p < .01$ ), self-defeating humor was positively correlated to self-enhancing humor ( $r = .277, p < .01$ ) and aggressive humor ( $r = .247, p < .01$ ), which is similar to the findings of previous study (Hiranandani 2010).

Table 7a. Correlations between Self-Esteem, Humor Styles and Subjective Happiness.

	Affiliative Humor	Self Enhancing Humor	Aggre -ssive Humor	Self- defeating Humor	Self- Esteem	Subjective Happiness
Affiliative Humor	-	-	-	-	-	-
Self- Enhancing Humor	.332**	-	-	-	-	-
Aggressive Humor	.047	.024	-	-	-	-
Self- defeating Humor	.007	.277**	.247**	-	-	-
Self-Esteem	.275**	.381**	-.004	-.121	-	-
Subjective Happiness	.324**	.443**	-.036	.043	.410**	-

Note: Correlation is significant if \*\* $p < .01$

Additionally, Table 7b shows the correlation between self-esteem, humor styles and subjective happiness in male and female students. For male, self-esteem was significantly correlated with affiliative humor ( $r = .468, p < .01$ ), self-enhancing humor ( $r = .443, p < .01$ ) and subjective happiness ( $r = .533, p < .01$ ). Whereas, for females, self-esteem was significantly correlated with self-enhancing humor ( $r = .354, p < .01$ ) and subjective happiness ( $r = .351, p < .01$ ), but affiliative humor did not have a significant correlation. Subjective happiness of both genders were positively correlated with affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor.

The findings partly supported Hypothesis Three. In addition, for both female and male students, self-enhancing humor was correlated to affiliative humor (male:  $r = .372$ ; female:  $r = .308, p < .01$ ) and self-defeating humor (male:  $r = .340$ ; female:  $r = .240, p < .01$ ). But only female's aggressive humor was correlated with self-defeating humor ( $r = .273, p < .01$ ).

Table 7b. Correlations between Self-Esteem, Humor Styles and Subjective Happiness in male and female students.

		Affilia -tive Humor	Self Enhancing Humor	Aggre -ssive Humor	Self- defeating Humor	Self- Esteem	Subjective Happiness
		Female					
Affiliative Humor	Male	-	.308**	.113	.039	.167	.313**
Self- Enhancing Humor		.372**	-	.64	.240**	.354**	.407**
Aggressive Humor		-.005	-.023	-	.273**	.010	-.066
Self- defeating Humor		-.020	.340**	.194	-	-.132	-.018
Self- Esteem		.468**	.443**	-0.10	-.100	-	.351**
Subjective Happiness		.342**	.499**	-.009	.109	.533**	-

Note: Correlation is significant if \*\* $p < .01$

***Humor Style acts as a mediator of self-esteem and subjective happiness***

Table 8. Multiple Regression Analyses on Humor Styles (N = 232).

	Self-esteem	Subjective Happiness
Affiliative Humor	.158*	.197**
Self-enhancing Humor	.408**	.391**
Aggressive Humor	.040	-.055
Self-Defeating Humor	-.247**	-.067
R <sup>2</sup>	.236**	.237**

Note. The regression coefficients are standardized.

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

Table 8 presents the four styles of humor were found to be significantly associated with self-esteem ( $R^2 = .236$ ,  $F[3, 228] = 16.348$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and subjective happiness ( $R^2 = .237$ ,  $F[3, 228] = 15.761$ ,  $p < .01$ ). More specifically, self-esteem was positively affected by affiliative humor ( $\beta = .158$ ,  $t = 2.477$ ,  $p < .05$ ) self-enhancing humor ( $\beta = .408$ ,  $t = 6.157$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and self-defeating humor ( $\beta = -.247$ ,  $t = -3.826$ ,  $p < .01$ ). And subjective happiness was positively associated with affiliative humor ( $\beta = .197$ ,  $t = 3.023$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and self-enhancing humor ( $\beta = .391$ ,  $t = 5.822$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The findings partially support Hypothesis Four that self-esteem was positively correlated with affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor, but negatively correlated with aggressive humor and self-defeating humor as well as Hypothesis Four, which proposed that

subjective happiness was positively correlated with affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor, but negatively correlated with aggressive humor and self-defeating humor.

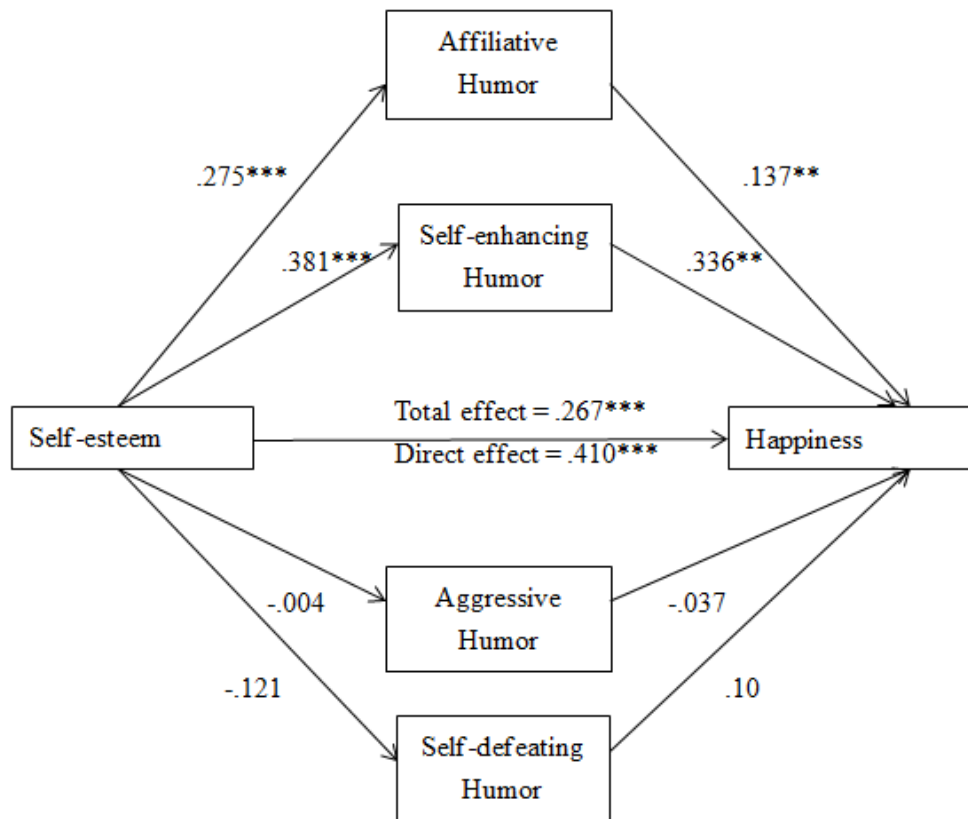


Figure 4. Path model of relations between self-esteem, humor styles, and subjective happiness  $**p < .01$   $***p < .001$

In the following analysis, the four humor styles were employed in examining the mediating effect. Regression analysis showed that self-esteem had a significant positive effect on happiness ( $\beta = .267, t = 3.941, p < .001$ ).

The results indicated that, self-esteem was positively associated with affiliative humor ( $\beta = .275, t = 4.317, p < .001$ ), and self-enhancing humor ( $\beta = .381, t = 6.187, p < .001$ ), but the effect of aggressive humor ( $\beta = -.004, t = -.67, p = .947$ ), and self-defeating humor ( $\beta = -.121, t = -1.825, p = .069$ ) were not significant.

Thirdly, the results showed that when the effect of self-esteem was adjusted, self-esteem was positively affected by affiliative humor ( $\beta = .228, t = 3.640, p < .001$ ), and positively influenced by self-enhancing humor ( $\beta = .336, t = 5.31, p < .001$ ). The effects of aggressive humor ( $\beta = -.037, t = -.587, p = .558$ ) and self-defeating humor ( $\beta = .102, t = 1.633, p = .104$ ) were not significant. Finally, the effect of self-esteem on subjective happiness remained significant ( $\beta = .410, t = 6.670, p < .001$ ). As a whole, both affiliative and self-enhancing humor mediated the effect of self-esteem on subjective happiness. The finding supports Hypothesis Six that adaptive humor strengthens the positive correlation of self-esteem and subjective happiness. The results of the relevant regression analyses are summarized in Figure 4.

Besides, the total mediating effect of the four humor styles was not significant in

Sobel tests (Sobel 1982) ( $z = 2.32, p = .01$ ). The mediating effect through affiliative ( $z = 2.76, p = .002$ ), and self-enhancing humor ( $z = 4.02, p = .000$ ) were significant. Thus, the finding supports Hypothesis Six that adaptive humor strengthens the positive relationship of self-esteem and subjective happiness.

### Ranking of importance of personality traits

Table 9a. Ranking of importance of personality traits (n = 177).

		Ranking	M	S.D.
Creative	富有創造力	1	4.80	2.797
Imaginative	想像力豐富	2	4.85	7.605
Articulate	善於表達	3	5.16	2.49
Funny	搞笑	4	5.35	3.11
Witty	機智	5	5.36	2.77
Rich insight	富有觀察力	6	5.53	2.81
Responsive	反應靈敏	7	5.59	2.71
Cheerful	性格開朗	8	6.03	3.08
Flexible	靈活	9	6.12	2.86
Confidence	自信	10	6.19	2.92

Table 9b. Gender Difference in Ranking on importance of personality traits.

		Male (n=71)			Female (n=106)			t-value
		Rank	M	S.D.	Rank	M	S.D.	
Creative	富有創造力	1	5.41	11.56	2	4.48	2.74	-.58
Imaginative	想像力豐富	5	5.41	11.56	1	4.48	2.74	.81
Articulate	善於表達	4	5.38	2.55	3	5.02	2.45	.81
Funny	搞笑	6	5.59	3.30	4	5.19	2.97	.72
Witty	機智	3	5.35	2.83	6	5.37	2.74	.12
Rich insight	富有觀察力	2	5.08	2.52	7	5.82	2.96	-1.78
Responsive	反應靈敏	7	6.14	2.51	5	5.22	2.79	2.32*
Cheerful	性格開朗	9	6.21	3.12	8	5.92	3.06	.37
Flexible	靈活	8	6.15	2.85	9	6.09	2.88	.35
Confidence	自信	10	6.21	2.94	10	6.18	2.93	-.07

Note: \* $p < .05$

The ranking of importance of personality traits was shown in Table 9a with creative being the most important personality traits and confidence being the least. Although both genders ranked confidence as the least important personality traits, in Table 9b, the result indicated male considered 'creative' be the most important while female stated the personality traits of 'imaginative'. Analyzed by Independent sample t-test, only the personality traits of 'responsive' ( $t = 2.322, p < .05$ ) scored significantly different for the two genders while there were no significant result for the other personality traits.



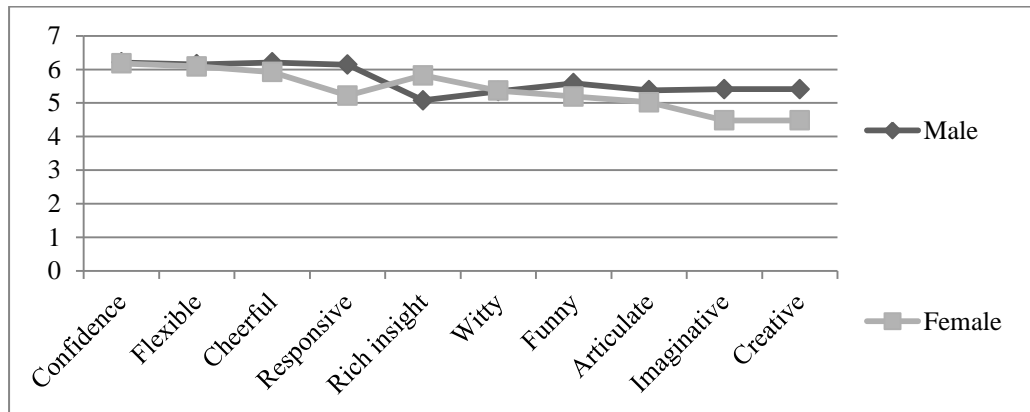


Figure 6. Mean scores on the importance of personality traits.

## Discussion

Hypothesis One assumed that males considered themselves significantly more humorous than females. The present finding supports the hypothesized gender difference. This result is consistent with Yue's (2011) previous finding. It is interesting to note that mother was considered more humorous than fathers by the females. This perhaps owing to the types of humor presented by their mothers as women are more likely to show a preference for real life anecdotal humor (Ruch 1998).

Most of the nominated humorists are comedians and DJs. The present high percentage of nominated humorists is consistent with Yue's (2011) finding which Hong Kong students perceive comedians as being the sole representatives of humor. Nevertheless, some differences are found in the occupational categories for the nominated Chinese and foreign humorists that there are more writers are nominated in the Chinese list, yet it is not included in the top five nominated occupation in the foreign group.

Hypothesis Two proposed that males tended to use more maladaptive humor styles than females, and females tended to use more adaptive humor style than males. The present findings provide partial support to the hypothesis. It confirms the correlation of gender and use of humor style as mentioned in previous studies (Martin, et al., 2003) that males use more aggressive humor style than females. It is probably because males used aggressive humor as a mean to achieve their status regardless the expense of other people (Kazarian and Martin 2004). Besides, women tend to look for intimacy, whereas men tend to seek self-presentation (Tannen 1986). This variation in conversational goals seems to be reflected in their use of humor styles. And the present findings are in the right direction in showing the gender difference.

Besides, self-esteem is positively correlated with affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor, but not with aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. It confirms previous finding that students with higher self-esteem tended to use more adaptive humor (Martin *et al.* 2003). The present result provides partial support to Hypothesis Three that adaptive humor styles tend to enhance self-esteem. In fact, the negative correlation between maladaptive humors and self-esteem were also shown in the result, but it was not significant due to the limitation of small sample size.

In addition, subjective happiness is shown to be significantly positively correlated with affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor, which provides partial support to Hypothesis Four. The positive relationship of happiness and adaptive humor was caused by the social interaction resulted from the provoked humor. Some indirect benefits were gained by individuals who were high on affiliative humor in

dealing with stressors through the supportive social relationships encouraged by their humor. Greater use of affiliative humor increases the available social support network for individuals, providing resources to deal with potential stressors as well as higher levels of social intimacy (Martin *et al.* 2003). On the other hand, people who use self-enhancing humor, would be able to establish a positive mindset with characteristics of greater happiness, hope, and optimism (Thorson *et al.* 1997). Nevertheless, there is no significant correlation on subjective happiness with aggressive humor and self-defeating humor because of the small sample size.

Significant positive relationship of self-esteem and subjective happiness is found, providing similar results as the previous findings (Baumeister *et al.* 2003) did and provide supports to Hypothesis Five.

Both affiliative and self-enhancing humor mediated the effect of self-esteem on subjective happiness, providing partial support to Hypothesis Six. The result is consistent with the study of Thorson and his colleagues in 1997.

There is correlation between self-enhancing humor and self-defeating humor. According to previous study, individuals who engaged in self-enhancing humor should employ their sense of humor effectively by avoiding self-defeating humor (Thorson *et al.* 1997). However, our result shows a positive correlation between the two humor styles. Further research can be done to investigate the correlation.

Moreover, the present finding shows correlation between aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. It is consistent with the previous research that aggressive humor is positively correlated with self-defeating humor, indicating people who use more certain type of unhealthy humor style will be more potentially use the other (Martin 2007).

Creative is ranked as the most important personality traits for humor. It is because humor and creativity may share many components, including playfulness, risk-taking, resolution of incongruity, even insight (Kuhlman 1984). The present finding provides support to Babad's (1974) study that creativity tests were significantly correlated with the rated funniness of subjects' humor productions.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Several limitations have to be noticed though significant findings are found in the present study. The most obvious limitation is the small sample size which leads to non-significant for the maladaptive humor styles. Larger sample size is suggested for future study. Besides, since the present study merely focuses on the Hong Kong university students, its generalization on the population is limited. Samples from diverse culture or regions are suggested for future study.

Moreover, as the participants are recruited through convenient sampling method and most of them are major in subjects related to social science, sample bias and subject bias may be induced. Perception of humor and gender role may also influence the result because of the high educational background of the sample. Confounding variables such as education level, social status should be controlled for future studies. Finally, being a self-reported measure, there are chances for participants to fill in the questions in a social desirable way. Longitudinal and qualitative designs are suggested for future studies.

### **Acknowledgements**

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Yue Xiao Dong, for his patience and regular guidance throughout the present study. His sharing on his previous studies as well as his valuable advice inspired me in exploring further on my topics.

Thankfulness would be given to all the people who have supported me in the present Final Year Project, especially to all the participants who had participated in this study.

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