

How Humor Styles Affect Self-compassion and Life Satisfaction: A Study in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of humor styles on self-compassion and life satisfaction. Two hundred and seventy-seven adults in Hong Kong completed the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS). Results showed that self-compassion and life satisfaction were positive predicted by self-enhancing humor but were negatively predicted by self-defeating humor. Self-enhancing humor style partially mediated the relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction. Affiliate humor and aggressive humor did not show any significant effect on either self-compassion or life satisfaction. These findings demonstrate how different humor styles affected self-compassion on life satisfaction and provided directions for future studies on humor.

Keywords: Aggressive humor; Depressive; Negative emotions; Humor; Anxiety

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Introduction

Self-compassion means to be kind to oneself and includes three components [1], including, self-kindness versus self-judgment, sense of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. According to Neff [2], *Self-kindness* refers to being kind and understanding towards oneself when one suffers or feels inadequate as against its negative form of *self-judgment*. *Sense of common humanity* refers to recognizing one's experience is a shared aspect of larger human experience against its negative form of *isolation* [2]. *Mindfulness* refers to taking a balanced approach to negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated as against its negative form of *over-identify* with one's suffering and being caught up and swept away by negativity [3].

Self-compassion is deemed to be an important characteristic that entails understanding oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being self-critical, perceiving one's experiences as a part of the human experience and having mindful awareness of one's thoughts and feelings [4]. There are positive theoretical reasons to believe that having self-compassion promotes mental-well-being, however, this construct has not been extensively and empirically examined yet [2]. Therefore, this study examined the link between self-compassion and life satisfaction.

Previous studies found that self-compassion was positively related to happiness, optimism and positive affect [4] and was

negatively correlated to emotion regulation difficulties and negative affect [2]. Self-compassion was also found to contribute to having more positive emotions, and less negative emotions, and depressive symptoms in both healthy and clinical samples [5-7]. Self-compassion would enhance emotional resilience as it could deactivate the threat system and activate the caregiving system [1].

Life satisfaction is a key indicator of individuals' successful adaptation to changes in life circumstances [8,9]. Life satisfaction reflects an overall evaluation of an individual's life from his or her own perspective [9]. Growing research showed that positive emotions enhanced life satisfaction whereas negative emotions impaired life satisfaction [10-12].

Life satisfaction has been found to be linked with well-being. Adults with higher life satisfaction showed greater success in interpersonal, occupational, and physical functioning [13]. Life satisfaction was found to be positively correlated self-esteem [14], and sense of coherence [15]. Previous studies also suggest that individuals who could regulate their emotional positively and build resilience would have higher life satisfaction [16-18].

Humor could produce a cognitive-affective shift or a restructuring of the situation so that it is less threatening [19]. It offers an opportunity for exploring cognitive alternatives in response

to stressful encounters and reducing the negative affective consequences of real or perceived threats. Helpful as it appears, humor could be divided into adaptive and maladaptive styles. Specifically, Martin et al. [19] divided humor into four styles: Affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor, with the former two being the adaptive styles while latter two being maladaptive styles. *Affiliative humor* is the benign use of humor to enhance relationships with others such as joking around with others, telling amusing stories, and amusing others. *Self-enhancing humor* is the benign use of humor to enhance the self, such as maintaining a humorous outlook on life, and use of humor in emotion regulation and coping. *Aggressive humor* is the detrimental use of humor to enhance the self at the expense of others such as teasing, use of humor to criticize or manipulate others, and compulsive expressions of humor without regard for the effects on others. *Self-defeating humor* is the detrimental use of humor to enhance relationships at the expense of self, such as allowing one to be the butt of others' jokes, and to use humor as a form of defensive denial to hide underlying negative feelings.

Previous studies show that use of affiliative and self-enhancing humor would lead to lower depression and anxiety, higher positive affect, and higher self-esteem; whereas use of self-defeating humor would lead to increased depression and anxiety, greater negative affect, and lower self-esteem [19-23]. Besides, self-enhancing humor was found to be positively associated with the ability to manage emotions whereas the ability to perceive emotions accurately was negatively related to aggressive and self-defeating humor [24]. Taken together, it is plausible to speculate that greater use of adaptive humor would lead to better emotional regulation and greater life satisfaction whereas use of maladaptive humor would do the otherwise. Interesting as the speculation is, there has not been any documented study in either Chinese society or Western society which directly addressed the issue. Thus conceived, we conducted the present study with two general hypotheses: (H1) Self-compassion was positively correlated with life satisfaction and adaptive humor styles but was negatively correlated with maladaptive humor styles; (H2) Humor styles would mediate the relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction.

Methods

Participants

277 Hong Kong Chinese were randomly selected to participate in this study, including 125 males (45.1%) and 152 females (54.9%). Their age ranged between 18 and 60 years old ($M=23.85$, $SD=8.66$). All participants were all registered students who took master program courses at the City University of Hong Kong.

Measures

Self-Compassion was assessed by *Self-Compassion Scale (SCS)* [2]. The Self-Compassion Scale consists of 26 items measuring participants' attitudes toward themselves with respect to personal faults (e.g. "I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like"), failures (e.g. "I try to see

my failings as part of the human condition"), and painful events (e.g. "When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation"). Participants were required to answer on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The questionnaire produces a total self-compassion score ranging from 26 to 130. Higher score denoted higher self-compassion. For the purpose of this study, a back-translation procedure was adopted to translate the 26 items into Chinese, to suit the participants' language. The items were translated into Chinese then back translated by an English expert to English. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.

Life satisfaction was assessed by the Chinese version of the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* [25] that was derived from the original scale [26]. The participants rated their global life satisfaction from their subjective perspective in 5 items (e.g. "In most ways my life is close to my ideal"). The items of the Satisfaction with Life Scale are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and are summed to yield a possible total score ranging from 5 to 35. Higher score denoted higher life satisfaction. In current study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

Humor was assessed by *Chinese Humor Styles Questionnaire (CHSQ)* [27]. The CHSQ measured four different styles of humor: affiliative humor (8 items; e.g., "I enjoy making people laugh"), self-enhancing humor (8 items; e.g., "My humorous outlook of life keeps me from getting overly upset or depressed about things"), aggressive humor (8 items; e.g., "If someone makes a mistake, I will often tease them about it") and self-defeating humor (8 items; e.g., "I often try to make people like or accept me more by saying something funny about my own weaknesses, blunders, or faults"). Participants were required to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with each item using a 7-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). In current study, the Cronbach's alphas for affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor were 0.86, 0.70, 0.61, and 0.76 respectively.

Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in this study on a volunteer and anonymous basis. All participants were contacted via the second author while being on campus. Once giving permission to join the study, they debriefed the purpose of this study and were reassured of their confidentiality. The questionnaire was printed in traditional Chinese characters to suit the need of the first language of the participants of this study. The questionnaires took approximately 15 min to complete.

Results

Table 1 shows the correlation between self-compassion, life satisfaction and humor styles. Self-compassion was positively correlated with adaptive humor styles and negatively correlated with maladaptive humor styles. Specifically, self-compassion had a relatively stronger positive correlation with self-enhancing humor ($r=0.44$, $p<0.001$) then affiliative humor ($r=0.20$, $p<0.001$). Likewise, self-compassion had a relatively stronger negative correlation with self-defeating humor ($r=-0.30$, $p<0.001$) then

aggressive humor ($r=-0.17, p=0.004$). Self-compassion was also positively correlated with life satisfaction ($r=0.36, p<0.001$). Besides, life satisfaction was positively correlated with self-enhancing humor ($r=0.33, p<0.001$) and self-compassion ($r=0.36, p<0.001$). However, the relationship between life satisfaction and affiliative humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor styles were insignificant. Taken together, the present findings largely supported Hypothesis 1 of the study.

Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis between humor styles, life satisfaction and self-compassion. Humor styles generally predicted life satisfaction ($R^2=0.13, F[4,272]=9.77, p<0.001$) and self-compassion ($R^2=0.33, F[4,272]=33.25, p<0.001$). Specifically, self-enhancing humor positively affected life satisfaction ($\beta=0.36, t=5.96, p<0.001$) and self-compassion ($\beta=0.46, t=8.69, p<0.001$). Self-defeating humor negatively affected life satisfaction ($\beta=-0.13, t=-2.03, p=0.04$) and self-compassion ($\beta=-0.36, t=-6.57, p<0.001$). Affiliative humor and aggressive humor did not show any significant effect on life satisfaction and self-compassion ($ps>0.05$). Hypothesis 1 and 2 were partially supported.

Figure 1 shows the mediating effect of the four humor styles on the relation between self-compassion and life satisfaction is presented. The outcome variable (life satisfaction) was regressed on predictor variable (self-compassion) and was found to be statistically significant ($\beta=0.25$). Although the relationship between the predictor i.e. self-compassion and the four humor styles were significant. Only self-enhancing humor was also found to be significantly related with the outcome variable i.e. life satisfaction. This suggested that self-enhancing humor partially mediated the relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was partially supported, indicating that only self-enhancing humor mediated the relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study found that self-compassion was positively correlated with life satisfaction. This implies that the more self-compassionate the participants were, the more they could feel satisfied with their life. Results also showed that self-compassion was positively correlated with affiliative and self-enhancing humor, while it was negatively correlated with aggressive and self-defeating humor. As suggested by Neff [2,3] that self-compassion is an adaptive way of relating the self when considering personal inadequacies or difficult life circumstances. It could facilitate individuals to perceive oneself more accurately and rectify maladaptive patterns of thought, feeling and behavior. As such, self-compassion promotes self-awareness that fosters a positive drive for growth and change [28].

The present study also showed self-enhancing humor significantly and positively predicted self-compassion whereas self-defeating humor significantly and negatively predicted self-compassion. This may be due to self-compassion promotes one's self-awareness by fostering a positive drive for growth and change [28]. By the same token, as self-enhancing humor and self-defeating humor occur solely within the individual whereas affiliative humor and aggressive humor occur in social situations self-enhancing humor and self-defeating humor could predict self-compassion more than affiliative and aggressive humor. In other words, the self-directed styles of humor function quite closely with self-compassion with a focus on the self.

The present study also found that life satisfaction was positively associated with self-enhancing humor and self-compassion. In addition, higher life satisfaction was correlated with higher use of self-enhancing humor which in turn, partially mediated the effect of self-compassion on life satisfaction. This suggests that self-compassion and self-enhancing humor could enhance one's life satisfaction. In other words, both self-enhancing humor and self-compassion could potentially broaden one's view point in facing

Table 1 Correlations between life satisfaction, humor styles and self-compassion.

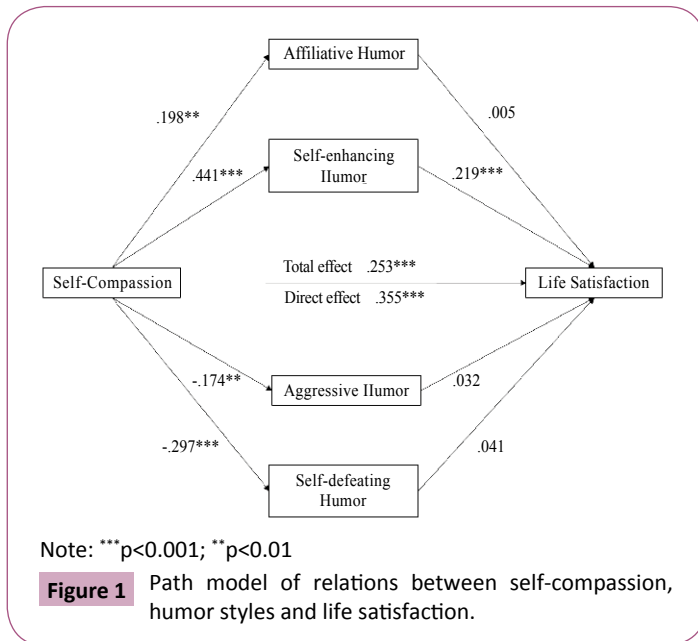
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Life Satisfaction	1	-	-	-	-	-
Affiliative Humor	0.08	1	-	-	-	-
Self-enhancing Humor	0.33***	0.33***	1	-	-	-
Aggressive Humort	-0.03	0.001	-0.04	1	-	-
Self-defeating Humor	-0.07	0.09	0.13*	0.40***	1	-
Self-compassion	0.36***	0.20**	0.44***	-0.17**	-0.30***	1

Note: *** $p<0.001$; ** $p<0.01$; * $p<0.05$

Table 2 Regressing analysis with humor styles predicting life satisfaction and self-compassion.

Predictors	Life Satisfaction		Self-Compassion	
	β	t-value	β	t-value
Affiliative Humor	-0.03	-0.52	0.08	1.51
Self-enhancing Humor	0.36	5.96***	0.46	8.69***
Aggressive Humor	0.04	0.58	-0.01	-0.17
Self-defeating Humor	-1.27	-2.03*	-0.36	-6.57***
R^2	0.13***		0.33***	

Note: *** $p<0.001$; ** $p<0.01$; * $p<0.05$



adversities and challenges in life. Likewise, self-compassionate people tended to perspective-taking more than those who lack of it [28]. As suggested by Neff [3], self-compassion does not stem from positive evaluation of the self but rather from recognizing the need to be kind to oneself at times of distress. This is well reflected in the present findings that self-enhancing humor and self-compassion led to positive emotion by broadening one's perspective-taking.

Finally, the present findings showed that affiliative humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating were poor predictors on self-compassion and life satisfaction. Similar pattern have been reported in previous studies, such that adaptive humor styles were mostly found to be related to measure of well-being as compared to maladaptive humor styles [19,23]. As mentioned earlier, these two humor styles occur solely within the social situations. The Chinese considered humor and satire are inferior forms of aesthetic expressions which are strongly influenced by the philosophy of Confucianism [29]. Chinese culture has given emphasis on the importance of good conduct, proper social relations, humility, and self-improvement to maintain group harmony [23]. Such inclination may explain the present study findings that other-directed form of humor styles (affiliative

humor and aggressive humor) are less functioning comparing with the self-directed humor styles (self-enhancing humor and self-defeating humor) in the current Chinese sample.

In short, the present study showed that positive properties of self-compassion and self-enhancing humor could help one to surf through the peaks and troughs in life with flexibility to the situation and positivity to the self.

Limitations and Future Directions

A number of limitations need to be pointed out for further study. First of all, the present sample was recruited through convenient sampling, which might induce some sample bias and could limit the generalization of the findings. In fact, majority of the participants were students at City University of Hong Kong and in their early adulthood, so further studies ought to recruit people from different walks of life as well as from different age groups to verify the present findings. Secondly, as the present study only sampled Hong Kong Chinese its findings could not be generalized to other Chinese populations in China, so future studies need to sample Chinese from other parts of China for comparison. Thirdly, the present study relied on self-report measures by which participants might answer the questions in a socially desirable way. Future studies ought to incorporate more objective measures, such as experimental and scenario approaches, to avoid the self-report bias. Last but not the least, the present data were correlational in nature, which could preclude a causal interpretation of the relationship between humor styles, self-compassion and life satisfaction. In particular, the study measured participants' responses at a single point in time, rather than looking at dynamic changes in life encountered over a longer time period. Therefore, it is difficult to verify the directivity of the effects identified. Future studies will need to employ a longitudinal design to investigate how the relationships among these constructs evolve over time. Despite all the above limitations, this study scored itself as the first study ever conducted of its kind and has generated some really interesting findings for later verification.

Author Contribution

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