COMEDY, CAMARADERIE, AND CONFLICT: USING HUMOR TO DEFUSE DISPUTES AMONG FRIENDS

Sheena A. Bringa
COMEDY, CAMARADERIE, AND CONFLICT: USING HUMOR TO DEFUSE DISPUTES

AMONG FRIENDS

By

SHEENA ALYSE BRINGA

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Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School

Graduate School

Stephen Yoshimura, Ph.D., Chair

Department of Communication Studies

Heather Voorhees, Ph.D.

Department of Communication Studies

Sara Polanchek, EdD

Department of Counseling
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Comedy, Camaraderie, and Conflict: Using Humor to Defuse Disputes among Friends

Chairperson: Dr. Stephen Yoshimura

This study sought to examine the role humor plays in defusing conflict between friends from an evolutionary perspective. Although a vast amount of research exists on humor, friendship, and conflict, no single study connects all three of these concepts together. This study attempted to fill this gap by examining how different humor styles used between friends in times of conflict relate to friendship satisfaction and life satisfaction. Specifically, the hypotheses predicted that friends who use affiliative humor to deescalate conflict are more inclined to report higher relational satisfaction and improved individual well-being than friends who use maladaptive humor to deescalate conflict. Seventy-four participants completed this study. The responses were collected in a cross-sectional questionnaire data with Qualtrics. The hypotheses were tested with a multiple regression model. The first hypothesis was supported, as the results indicated that adaptive humor led to higher levels of relational satisfaction and maladaptive humor, on the other hand, led to lower levels of relational satisfaction. H2 and H3 were not supported. H2 found zero correlation between adaptive humor and life satisfaction and a weak negative correlation between maladaptive humor and life satisfaction. H3 was unsupported because there was no statistical significance between adaptive humor or maladaptive humor on life satisfaction as a function of relational satisfaction. Implications and future directions are discussed as well, with the results of this study contributing both practical and theoretical knowledge to the fields of friendship, conflict, and humor.
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Humans, also fondly known as “homo-ridens” or “the laughing animal” (Koestler, 1964, p. 63), incorporate humor into almost all facets of their lives. Whether by telling a joke next to the water cooler at work, recounting a funny story to their family at dinner, watching a romantic comedy with their significant other, or sending an amusing meme to a friend, humor plays a role in nearly every aspect of one’s daily life. Although a myriad of humor-related benefits exist, a primary and evolutionary advantage of humor stems from conflict management among friends.

Studying the role humor plays in managing conflict among friends is important for several reasons. Although the connection between humor and friendship is an integral part of many people’s lives, it is understudied in academia. However, by studying the connection between conflict, friendship, and humor, individuals may be able to learn how to resolve or deescalate relational issues more effectively. Additionally, exploring the relationship between conflict, friendship, and humor can provide a better understanding of how humans interact when at odds with each other.

Evolutionary theory provides a unique lens for studying the connection between humor, conflict, and friendship. Humans may have developed higher-level communication skills as a way to give and receive knowledge; thus, ensuring the survival of the human race (Polimeni, 2006). Research regarding the evolutionary roots of humor is somewhat sparse compared to research on conflict management among friends, but the overall theory suggests that both friendships and humor may have helped humans adapt to evolutionary problems. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the role humor plays in defusing conflict from an evolutionary perspective. Specifically, the goal of the study is to examine the possibility that friends who use affiliative humor to deescalate conflict are more inclined to have higher
relational satisfaction and improved individual well-being than friends who do not use affiliative humor to deescalate conflict.

**Review of Literature**

**Humor**

Humorous communication between partners in established relationships can strengthen mutual feelings of affection, reinforce attachment, and contribute to greater relationship satisfaction (Shiota et al., 2004; Smoski & Bachorowski, 2003). In addition to improving positive emotions and closeness in interpersonal relationships, humor can also stabilize and preserve a relationship during times of conflict (Campbell, 2008). Humor “greases the wheels of relationships” because it can communicate criticism and/or disagreements while also communicating underlying feelings of affection to relieve tension (Long & Graesser, 1988; & Ziv, 1984, p. 3). Affable teasing among friends can also convey gentle condemnation in a face-saving manner (Keltner et al., 2001). There are some issues that are minor enough that simply teasing one’s friend may resolve the conflict. For example, if someone is frequently late, a friend may tease them by saying something along the lines of, “I swear, you’ll be late to your own funeral.” In turn, the late individual may not have realized their tardiness caused turbulence in their relationship and may make more of an effort to be punctual in the future.

Humor is a complex topic because its various meanings are versatile. For instance, one person may be humorous because they tell a joke and another person may have a good sense of humor because they find the joke funny. Three humor classification potentially exist: conformist humor, quantitative humor, and productive humor (Eysenck, 1972). **Conformist humor** is when two or more people find similar material/events humorous, such as two friends attending a standup comedy show and both finding it comical. Conformist humor involves two people who
share each other’s humorous interests. *Quantitative humor* involves the frequency of laughter or amusement. For example, one could measure how often the audience laughs during the comedian’s performance to find the data regarding the quantitative humor. *Productive humor* is when one is outgoing, amuses others, and tells jokes and funny stories such as a standup comedian as they perform their routine. It is called productive humor because an individual is producing the humorous acts. The three categories of humor that Eysenck outline have been expanded further by other contributors as well. Hehl and Ruch (1985) added to Eysenck's (1972) list, remarking that variations in sense of humor may differ based on several criteria. Ruch (2010) states the criteria:

1. the degree to which individuals comprehend jokes and other humorous stimuli;
2. the way in which they express humor and mirth, both quantitatively and qualitatively;
3. their ability to create humorous comments or perceptions;
4. their appreciation of various types of jokes, cartoons, and other humorous materials;
5. the degree to which they actively seek out sources that make them laugh;
6. their memory for jokes or funny events; and
7. their tendency to use humor as a coping mechanism. (p. 16).

Seeking out humorous content, using humor as a coping mechanism, and remembering comedic events are additional components to Eysenck’s (1972) original three criteria (Hehl & Ruch, 1985). By adding these components, research has established that humor is less passive and is more integral to one’s daily life than previously thought. In addition to various ways of experiencing humor, there are also several ways to identify distinct types of humor.
**Humor styles**

For evidence of the distinct types of humor, one need only recall childhood sleepover activities. From watching comedic movies, to drawing a mustache on the face of the friend who fell asleep first, humor clearly takes on many forms. The humor styles model splits the four different styles into adaptive humor (*self-enhancing and affiliative*) and maladaptive humor (*aggressive and self-defeating*) (Martin et al., 2003). These classifications contain the broad characteristics of humor, including telling jokes, having a comical outlook on life, teasing, bullying, being sarcastic, and being self-deprecating.

Self-enhancing humor is an adaptive humor style within the humor styles model. The term adaptive is a “heritable trait that serves a specific function and improves an organism's fitness or survival” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Self-enhancing humor involves the tendency to manage stress while maintaining a humorous outlook on life (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). Self-enhancing humor helps individuals cope with personal stress (Martin et al., 2003), potentially because it “…allows one to shift one' s point of view, illuminating the paradoxical or absurd aspects of reality, without making use of pathogenic processes” (Ruch, 1998, p. 44). Individuals with a strong sense of self-enhancing humor are typically more desirable to be around. In one study, for example, Fritz et al. (2017) found that individuals with self-enhancing humor had a better stress response after the 9/11 terrorist attack than individuals without self-enhancing humor. Individuals with self-enhancing humor are more enjoyable friends to have because they have a more optimistic and humorous perspective on life (Dyck & Holzman, 2013).

Affiliative humor is another adaptive humor style. It is earnest, sincere, and can be used to facilitate and enrich social relationships (Kuiper & Leite, 2010). This type of humor involves amusing and entertaining others as well as alleviating interpersonal stress (Martin et al., 2003).
For example, individuals who are competent in affiliative humor are often the life of the party and tell humorous jokes and stories. Campbell (2008) found individuals with partners who used affiliative humor more often than aggressive humor were more likely to be satisfied in their relationship, and reported feeling closer to their partners. Thus, it seems that both self-enhancing humor and affiliative humor can be beneficial for friendships in general, but particularly during stressful times, such as during conflict.

In contrast, aggressive humor and self-deprecating humor are the maladaptive humor styles of the humor styles model. Aggressive humor involves sarcasm, mockery, and teasing, without regard of its impact on others (Kuiper & Leite, 2010). Aggressive humor is easy to identify because its aim is to boost oneself above others. For example, one could say something rude such as, “Yo’ mama's so poor, the ducks throw bread at her.” Self-defeating humor, on the other hand, involves amusing others at one’s own expense in a self-defeating manner (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). An example of self-defeating humor could be, “Before I joined the gym, I looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy.” Although self-defeating jokes may be humorous, they are always at the expense of the speaker. Aggressive humor and self-deprecating humor have a negative impact on relational satisfaction (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). Additionally, people who use aggressive humor are more likely to be hostile, and people who use self-defeating humor have lower life satisfaction and are more likely to be depressed and/or anxious (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). Although aggressive and self-depreciating humor are not as ideal as self-enhancing and affiliative humor, both humor styles occur in most friendships.

**Evolution, Humor, and Laughter**

Humor is a large part of modern society. For instance, some professions are solely dedicated to making an audience laugh. In fact, comedy has its own genre among movies, TV
shows, plays, novels, and music. Humor benefits modern society in a number of profound ways, such as improved mood and self-esteem, a greater resistance to depression (Martin, 1993) improved physical well-being, immune system functioning, and pain tolerance (Martin, 2002). Yet understanding the advantages of humor throughout history and among evolving hominids is complex because it requires speculation. That is, researchers cannot go back in time to find out what humans were like thousands of generations ago and directly compare them to modern humans.

Humor and laughter have their benefits, but they are not without their costs. For example, before civilized society, laughter (often an involuntary response) may have drawn the unwanted attention of predators and thus, put people in danger. Additionally, laughing for an extended period of time consumes vast amounts of energy. One might therefore wonder why a behavior might evolve in light of potential costs, and research provides several potential answers.

**Evolutionary Theory and Humor**

Humor may be a genetic substrate because it is a global and ubiquitous feature throughout humanity (Polimeni, 2006). Furthermore, humor may be an evolutionary alternative to anger and irritation (Dixon, 1980). When humans began living in more populated groups rather than as nomads, expressions of aggression may have lessened due to consistent interaction, accountability, and the possibility of revenge (Dixon, 1980). In fact, humor may have developed as an “alternative response to the annoyances and irritations that could otherwise escalate into violence and murder” (Lefcourt, 2005, p. 621). Thus, humor has been a significant evolutionary trait for furthering the human race.

Evolutionary theory maintains that humor enhances an individual’s ability to manage external stressors (Polimeni, 2006). First, humor aids the brain in creating a “level of arousal
appropriate to the task” and then it “lifts restrictions on cognitive activity, thus enabling the creation of novel strategies and new solutions” (Polimeni, 2006, p. 12). Humor is not just an alternative response for frustration among humans; it is demonstrated in other primates as well.

Captive primates, especially chimpanzees, are known for their playful and teasing behaviors towards their cohabitants (Butovskaya & Kozintsev, 1996; De Waal, 1996; Gamble, 2001). For instance, chimpanzees engage in “chimpanzee politics,” including the use of humor to negotiate and decrease aggressive tendencies (De Waal, 1982). Young chimpanzees will tease others by throwing dirt, hitting each other with sticks or jumping on their elders (De Waal, 1996). However, primates in their natural habitat demonstrate less playful teasing behavior than captive primates (Goodall, 1986). Perhaps primates in enclosures tease each other as a way of defusing conflict. They must work diligently to placate conflict before it arises because they are in a smaller space. Teasing, in other words, “serves to gather information about the social environment, and to investigate authority” (De Waal, 1996, p. 114). By teasing each other in their encampment, they will find who is willing to work and play together and who is better off left alone.

Communication may have ultimately replaced “social grooming” as the primary social bonding activity among hominids (Aiello & Dunbar, 1993). Grooming stimulates pleasurable feelings that counterbalance hostile inclinations. Because humans do not groom each other socially, humor appears to instill “positive feelings while hierarchal competition and other minor social quarrels are being worked out” (Aiello & Dunbar, 1993, p. 34). Thus, humor is a valuable tool for solving mild disagreements because “it diminishes the risk of a contentious issue deteriorating to violence” (Polimeni, 2006, p. 21). Additionally, humor may have assisted the advancement of language by making conversations pleasurable (Polimeni, 2006). The happiness
connected with humor may have replaced the enjoyment linked with social grooming in primates because both laughter and social grooming release endogenous opiates (Barrett, Dunbar, & Lycett, 2002). In other words, both grooming and laughter release feelings of pleasure and result in positively reinforcing behaviors.

**Evolutionary Theory and Laughter**

Various explanations exist for why humor and laughter are evolutionarily adaptive. For one, it helps people manage difficult social situations. Indeed, the most predominant use of humorous communication is to “navigate contentious social situations,” because laughing is anxiety-reducing, pleasurable, and healthy (Polimeni, 2006, p. 23). In addition, humor is the inherent process that often results in laughter (Polimeni, 2006). Laughter is a “seizure-like activity” that can be provoked by undergoing a humorous mental stimulus and other stimuli such as tickling (Polimeni, 2006, p. 21). Laughter is a vocalization akin to the “primitive calls, cries, and songs of other species” more than the vocalization of human speech (Provine, 2000, p. 21). Van Hooff (1972) theorized that the potential phylogenetic origins of laughter could be connected to the “relaxed open-mouth display” seen in primates and often related to playful behaviors whereas grinning could lie in the “bared-teeth display” observed in various mammals (p. 72). Thus, laughter might be sign to others that one is attempting to act affiliatively rather than aggressively.

Humor’s fundamental evolutionary purpose may initially have been to facilitate cooperation and collaboration among people (Jung, 2003). Laughter may be a way to facilitate cooperation because it conveys empathy and sympathy to others. Therefore, laughing indicates that someone is both willing and able to work together and/or problem solve (Jung, 2003). Laughter is optimal for bonding because it can be executed concurrently by multiple people.
while also allowing group members to share in a potential endorphin release (Dezechache & Dunbar, 2012). Additionally, laughter is an adaptive vocal signal that indicates one is ready to play rather than harm (Provine, 2013). Another possibility for the evolution of humor and laughter is that they are the remaining remnants of adaptive behavior necessary for the survival of the human race (Goldstein & McGhee, 1972). Laughter may have originally been a “signal of safety to the group” or a manifestation of “unity in group opinion prior to language” (Hurley, 2011, p. 7). Laughter has evolved among other species as well.

Laughter has been seen as an evolutionary trait for other animals. For instance, when rats chirp at a 50 kHz frequency during social interactions it may signify play and this positive vocalization could be related to human laughter (Panksepp & Burgdorf, 2003). Additionally, dogs may also exhibit vocalizations similar to human laughter (Simonet et al., 2001). Humans are not the only creatures who laugh when tickled. Other primates such as chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans exhibit “laughter-like behavior” when tickled (Caron, 2002; Fry, 1994). Laughter is an evolutionary trait among humans and other animals that suggests one's intent is to play or work together rather than assault (Provine, 2013). The ability to manage conflict is vital both in the wild and in civilized society. Humor and laughter allow group members to resolve/deescalate conflict before it escalates.

**Conflict Management Among Friends**

Conflict is a certainty in life; it is the basis of every story. It is the reason people fight in wars, go to counseling, and excommunicate others. Interpersonal conflicts differ in intensity and range. They vary among mild differences, disagreements, disputes, campaigns, litigations, and fights and war (Keltner, 1987). For the purpose of this study, the definition of *conflict* is an “expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible
goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Hocker & Wilmot, 2017, p. 21). For conflict to take place, there must be an expressed struggle. Conflict emerges when there is a disconnect between the perceptions of one’s thoughts and feelings and the perceptions of another’s thoughts and feelings (Hocker & Wilmot, 2017).

Friendship has two major components: friendship quality and conflict (Demir et al., 2007). A high-quality friendship is associated with high levels of prosocial behavior, and closeness, and low levels of conflicts, and competition (Berndt, 2002). One study found that friendship quality and conflict are linked to happiness because good friends often buffer negative stressors (Demir et al., 2007). Additionally, quality and conflict experienced within the bond are likely to increase as the degree of closeness increases between friends (Demir et al., 2007). Best friends are more likely to experience conflict than friends of a lesser degree because they spend more time together and have a greater stake in the relationship. In this study, Özdemir et al., (2007) used the Network Relationships Inventory (NRI) scale (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) to assess friendship quality and conflict. They found that the quality of one’s relationship with their best friend was a significant predictor of happiness. Furthermore, the quality of one’s relationship with their best friend buffered the negative impact of conflict with that friend. Overall, the companionship of one’s best and close friends is a strong predictor of happiness.

**Conflict, Humor, and Friends**

Humor is a useful tool for conflict management throughout the world. For example, many cultures have tribal clowns that function to teach lessons and help manage social difficulties. One instance can be seen among the Mbuti people, who have an unofficially designated clown whose role is to act as a “buff between disputants, deflecting the more serious disputes away from their original sources, absolving other individuals of blame by accepting it himself” (Turnbull, 1965,
p. 183). In industrialized cultures, late-night comedy, comedic game shows, memes, cartoons, and other comedic media serve similar functions. Clearly, comedy is able to soothe people in a unique way.

One way that humor might help people is by fostering social harmony, specifically friendship. As one researcher wrote, “in laughing together, people identify with shared cultural meanings” (Hall, 2017, p. 45). Humor can be used to facilitate new relationships as well as support existing relationships by improving interpersonal ties, promoting open communication, and reducing conflict and uncertainty (Dyck & Holzman, 2013). Furthermore, research has shown through a variety of self-report surveys that sense of humor positively correlates with measures of intimacy (Hampes, 1992), empathy (Hampes, 2001), social assertiveness (Bell, McGhee, & Duffey, 1986), and interpersonal trust (Hampes, 1999) – all qualities that make a desirable friend.

Humor functions in several ways in conflict management. First, it can help people cope, reframe, celebrate, communicate ambiguity, and express hostility (Smith et al., 2000). The coping function of humor allows people to “psychologically detach from their immediate situation” (Smith et al., 2000, p. 1). People may cope with stressful circumstances and/or conflict by joking about the situation. Second, individuals may reframe conflict by using witty or humorous metaphors to adjust the perception of the issue. Adjusting the perception of the issue is valuable when endeavoring to resolve conflict by confronting the individual, through “facing the conflict directly and examining possible solutions” (Smith et al., 2000, p. 1). Third, rather than reframing the situation, celebration humor focuses on the positive aspects in a situation. An example of this may be, “It’s okay that Spot tore up the couch because I never liked it in the first place!” Ambiguous humor delivers messages in a tactful way. It allows people to express
ideas/feelings that, “if said more directly, would make others feel hurt or defensive” (Smith et al., 2000, p. 1). The ambiguity of this humor lets people ‘save face’ and increases the likelihood of compromise (Smith et al., 2000). However, humor can also be used to express hostility.

Humor can also be used in harmful ways that may be damaging to close relationships. People are more likely to make a hostile comment if it is disguised as a joke or sarcasm. When people are coerced to resolve conflict, they may choose aggressive humor (Smith et al., 2000). For example, people may use aggressive forms of teasing to criticize, mock, intimidate, or indirectly control others (Kowalski et al., 2001; Long & Graesser, 1988). Although humor can be used to express hostility, it is also effective as a coping mechanism, perhaps by helping disempowered people feel a greater sense of control and autonomy.

Humor defuses conflict in friendship because of its coping function. Coping allows friends to “psychologically detach from their immediate situation” (Smith et al., 2000, p. 1). People may cope with stressful circumstances and/or conflict by joking about the situation. For example, in one study, researchers investigated how firefighters cope with humor as a mechanism for dealing with traumatic stressors in their work life (Sliter et al., 2014). They found that coping with humor buffered the relationship for burnout and PTSD. Coping with humor allows one to express and come to terms with morbid topics. For example, Woody Allen once said, “The key is to not think of death as an end, but as more of a very effective way to cut down on your expenses.” This joke takes two topics that are stressful -death and bills- and combines them in a humorous way. In this light, death and bills are still realities of life; however, they seem more manageable.
Humor, Relational Satisfaction, and Well-Being

Evolutionary theory allows the proposition that humans developed higher-level communication skills as a way to share knowledge, communicate needs, and enhance relationships. However, some humor styles appear to be more beneficial for relational satisfaction and well-being than others.

For example, adaptive humor benefits relational satisfaction in a multitude of ways. Adaptive humor (i.e., affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles) can be used to facilitate new relationships as well as sustain existing relationships by strengthening interpersonal ties, promoting open communication, and reducing conflict and uncertainty (Dyck & Holzman, 2013). People who use adaptive humor are considered more desirable, optimistic, have higher self-esteem, and less symptoms of anxiety and depression (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). Whereas individuals who use aggressive humor are more likely to be hostile, and those who use self-defeating humor have lower life satisfaction and are more likely to be depressed and/or anxious (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013).

In contrast, people who use aggressive humor are less capable of providing emotional support or effectively resolving conflict (Kuiper et al., 2004; Yip & Martin, 2006). Similarly, people who practice self-defeating humor tend to be less capable of correctly reading emotions or asserting themselves (Cann et al., 2008, Yip & Martin, 2006). Overall, research indicates that interacting with people who have an adaptive sense of humor may be better for one’s health.

Adaptive humor benefits overall well-being in a variety of ways. Humor is associated with increased pain tolerance, improved physical well-being, and better immune system functioning (Martin, 2002). Humor is a primary asset in individual healing. One study found patients who watched comedic films instead of serious films after orthopedic surgery were less
likely to request pain relievers during their recovery period (Rotton & Shats, 1996). Humor can be used as a preventative measure as well. One study found that laughter prompted by an amusing film led to a substantial increase in salivary immunoglobulin A (S-IgA), which is often depicted as the “first line of defense” against upper respiratory infection (URI) (Lefcourt, 2005, p. 627). Additionally, another study found that laughter provoked during a comical movie was associated with heightened spontaneous lymphocyte blastogenesis and natural killer cell production (Berk et al., 1988). One year later, Berk et al. (1989) repeated their study but collected blood samples instead and found that laughter alters or mitigates some of the neuroendocrine and hormone levels associated with stress. Overall, it appears humor has a positive impact on one’s physical and emotional well-being.

Research shows that adaptive humor improves one’s mood and self-esteem and provides a greater resistance to depression (Martin, 1993). Adaptive humor has been found to adjust the emotional effects of stressful events (Lefcourt, 2005). If one has a humorous outlook on life, or ‘high humor’ they are more resilient to stress (Lefcourt, 2005). This high humor is similar to the previously mentioned self-enhancing humor from the humor styles model. Researchers found people with low humor had an increased decline in S-IgA concentrations from baseline levels when they underwent distress; whereas participants with high-humor demonstrated minimal change in S-IgA levels from their daily hassles (Lefcourt, 2005). In other words, participants with a humorous outlook on life faced less stress than those who did not have a humorous outlook on life. In a similar study, researchers instructed students to craft their own death certificate, eulogies, and wills. They found most participants displayed an increase in depressive and angry thoughts as well as confusion after the completion of the death exercises; the only exceptions were those with high humor (Lefcourt et al., 1995). Participants with high humor
demonstrated little or no mood shift after completing the death exercises. Students with the adaptive humor style were better prepared to deal with a stressful situation which prevented their overall well-being from being negatively impacted.

Overall, research suggests people with adaptive humor are more socially competent and have better overall well-being than people with maladaptive humor as well as those who do not use humor at all. Perhaps adaptive humor is the superior form of humor because of its evolutionary benefits such as facilitating cooperation and collaboration among people (Jung, 2003) and providing an alternative to resentment and frustration (Dixon, 1980), and because laughter is known to reduce stress and anxiety (Polimeni, 2006). Thus, this study tests the hypotheses:

H1: Friends who perceive their friends using adaptive humor styles (i.e., affiliative and/or self-enhancing) to defuse/deescalate conflict are more inclined to have higher relational satisfaction with their friendships than those with friends who use maladaptive humor styles (i.e., aggressive and/or self-defeating) to defuse/deescalate conflict.

H2: Friends who perceive the use of adaptive humor styles to defuse/deescalate conflict are more inclined to have improved life satisfaction than those with friends who use maladaptive humor to defuse/deescalate conflict.

H3: Relational satisfaction will mediate the relationship between perceived humor styles used in conflict with friends and one’s life satisfaction.

The hypotheses are visualized in Figures 1 and 2, below:
Method

Participants

Four hundred and eighty-nine participants began the survey. After vetting through the responses, 74 participant submissions were used. The average age of the participants was 40.46 years (SD = 15.53), and the vast majority of participants (83.8%) were White. Other ethnic demographics include: Black participants (6.8%), Latino participants (4.1%), and Asian
participants (1.4%). Additionally, 68.9% of respondents were female, 21.61% were male, 8.1% were non-binary, and 1.4% preferred not to disclose their gender.

**Procedure**

This study sought to recruit participants who were 18 years old or older and had at least one close friend. Each participant was required to have access to either a smart phone or computer in order to complete the questionnaire. Participants for this study were recruited through convenience sampling by asking friends and family to post the following paragraph to their social media accounts with a link to the survey:

“Hello! My friend from the University of Montana is conducting a study for her master’s thesis. She is studying how humor impacts conflict between friends. If you are interested in participating, are 18 years old or older, and have at least one close friend, please click on the link to the survey below. She would really appreciate your time and responses for this quick survey. If you have any questions please contact Sheena Bringa at sheena.brown@umconnect.umt.edu Thank you!”

This study collected cross-sectional questionnaire data. Participants clicked on the Qualtrics link and were prompted to read and agree/disagree to an informed consent statement. If they selected “No, I do not consent to participate in this research project,” they were redirected to the following message: “Thank you for your responding to this survey. If you have any questions regarding this survey, you may contact Sheena Bringa at sheena.brown@umconnect.umt.edu.” Participants who selected “Yes, I consent to participate in this research study” were permitted to enter the survey.

Before beginning the questionnaire, participants were asked to answer a few demographic questions and then to write a few sentences about a time where they experienced conflict with a
friend. Instead of writing out the friend’s name, they were asked to put their initials. This established which friend they answered questions about and worked as the primary event to focus their questionnaire responses on. This portion of the survey was designed to guide the participants throughout the rest of the questionnaire.

Participants then proceeded to questionnaire part of the survey. First, they completed the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Respondent's Affection questionnaire, then they completed the Humor Styles Questionnaire, and, after that, they completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale.

After finishing the survey, participants saw following message: “Thank you for participating in this survey. Your responses have been recorded. Through your willingness to volunteer, we are able to learn more about how friends use humor while in conflict. If you have any questions regarding this survey, you may contact the Primary Researcher Sheena Bringa at sheena.brown@umconnect.umt.edu.”

Instruments

Self-report instruments were adapted from Martin et al. (2003); Diener et al., (1985); and Mendelson and Aboud (1999) to test whether adaptive humor styles defuse/deescalate conflict and relate with relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction.

Humor Styles Questionnaire

Humor Styles were measured using a revised version of Martin et al.’s (2003) Humor Styles Questionnaire. This instrument is a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=Totally Disagree, 7=Totally Agree) consisting of 32 items. The items measure affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, self-defeating humor, and aggressive humor. Sixteen of the items are positively phrased measuring perceived adaptive humor styles, while the other 16 items are negatively phrased measuring perceived maladaptive humor styles. The 32 items were modified to fit within the
context of conflict with a friend. Two modified examples are of adaptive humor are “My friend doesn't have to work very hard at making me laugh --they are a naturally humorous person even in a conflict/disagreement” (affiliative humor) and “My friend's humorous outlook on life keeps them from getting overly upset or depressed about conflicts/disagreements” (self-enhancing humor). Two modified examples of maladaptive humor are “If my friend is mad at me, they often use humor or teasing to put me down. (aggressive humor) and “My friend often goes overboard in putting themself down when they are making jokes or trying to be funny to deescalate conflict” (self-defeating humor) (Martin et al., 2003).

**Life Satisfaction**

Life Satisfaction was measured using The Satisfaction with Life Scale created by Diener et al., (1985). Participants indicated how much they agree or disagree with each of the 5 items using a 7-point scale that ranges from 7 = Strongly Agree to 1 = Strongly Disagree. The instrument includes statements such as “In most ways my life is close to my ideal” and “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing” (Diener et al., 1985).

**Friendship Satisfaction**

Friendship satisfaction was measured using the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Respondent's Affection created by Mendelson and Aboud (1999). The friendship satisfaction questionnaire is a 9-point-Likert-type scale which will measure level of agreement (1= Strongly Disagree to 9 = Strongly Agree). The instrument’s 16 items are designed to measure affection for a friend and satisfaction with the friendship. Some of the statements included in the questionnaire are: “I want to stay friends with ______ for a long time” and “I am content with my friendship with ______” (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999).
Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for All Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive Humor (Humor Styles Questionnaire)</td>
<td>4.53 (.95)</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maladaptive Humor (Humor Styles Questionnaire)</td>
<td>3.45 (.95)</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Satisfaction (McGill Friendship Questionnaire)</td>
<td>5.38 (1.04)</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction (Satisfaction with Life Scale)</td>
<td>4.70 (1.33)</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

The survey was open on Qualtrics from December 19th, 2022 to January 31st, 2023. 489 participants responded to the survey. 415 participants were eliminated because they did not meet the initial criteria, understand the prompt, or finish the survey. Some participants were eliminated because they felt their conflict was unresolved. 74 participants responses were used for this survey. SPSS was used to run several simple mediation models using Hayes’ PROCESS and a Model 4 bootstrapped mediation test.

Results

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that perceived use of adaptive humor styles (affiliative and/or self-enhancing) to defuse conflict would relate with higher reported relational satisfaction in friendships than when maladaptive humor styles (aggressive and/or self-defeating) were perceivably used to defuse conflict. A Pearson-Product Moment Correlation coefficient was first calculated to examine whether adaptive humor was associated with life satisfaction. The results
showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = .45, p = .00, r^2 = .20$). For maladaptive humor, a weak negative correlation was found ($r = -.28, p = .02, r^2 = .08$). Then, a multiple regression model was constructed with the adaptive and maladaptive humor styles entered as independent variables and relational satisfaction entered as the dependent variable. The results indicated that perceived adaptive humor related to higher levels of relational satisfaction ($\beta = .50, p = .00$, LLCI = .27, and ULCI = .73). Perceived maladaptive humor, on the other hand, related to lower levels of relational satisfaction ($\beta = -.31, p = .02$ LLCI = -.55, and ULCI = -.06).

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis predicted that friends who perceived the use of adaptive humor styles (affiliative and/or self-enhancing) to defuse conflict are more likely to have improved life satisfaction than those with friends who use maladaptive humor styles (aggressive and/or self-defeating) to defuse conflict. First, a Pearson-Product Moment Correlation coefficient was calculated to examine the association between adaptive humor and life satisfaction. The results showed zero correlation ($r = .00, p > .00, r^2 = .00$). For maladaptive humor, a weak negative correlation was found ($r = -.17, p > .02, r^2 = .03$).

Then, a multiple regression model with the same independent variables entered as hypothesis 1, but the dependent variable was life satisfaction. The results indicated that adaptive humor did not predict levels of life satisfaction ($\beta = -.12, p = NS$, LLCI = -.48, and ULCI = .25), nor did maladaptive humor predict lower levels of life satisfaction ($\beta = -.19, p = NS$, LLCI = -.53, and ULCI = .14).

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis predicted that relational satisfaction would mediate the effect of humor styles on life satisfaction. Hypothesis three was tested with several simple mediation
models using Hayes’ PROCESS for SPSS; Model 4 bootstrapped mediation test. Perceived adaptive and maladaptive humor were the independent variables, relational satisfaction was the mediator, and life satisfaction was the dependent variable. Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Results indicated that there was no statistical significance between perceived adaptive humor or maladaptive humor on life satisfaction as a function of relational satisfaction. Specifically, there were no total, direct, or indirect effects of adaptive humor or maladaptive humor on life satisfaction as a function of relational satisfaction. As a function of relational satisfaction, no effect was found between perceived adaptive humor and life satisfaction ($\beta = .00, p = .53, LLCI = -.33, ULCI = .33$) or perceived maladaptive humor and life satisfaction ($\beta = -.23, p = .15, LLCI = -.56, ULCI = .09$). There was also no direct effect of perceived adaptive humor or maladaptive humor on life satisfaction as a function of relational satisfaction. The proposed mediated model was not supported for either perceived adaptive humor ($\beta = .00, p = .53, LLCI = -.48, ULCI = .27$) or maladaptive humor ($\beta = -.19, p = .25, LLCI = -.53, ULCI = .14$). Perceived adaptive humor did not have an indirect effect on life satisfaction as a function of relational satisfaction, $\beta = .11, LLCI = -.06, ULCI = .27$. In addition, no indirect effects were found on perceived maladaptive humor and life satisfaction as a function of relational satisfaction, $\beta = -.04, LLCI = -.18, ULCI = .06$.

Table 2
Correlation Matrix for Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Adaptive Humor</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Maladaptive Humor</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Relational Satisfaction</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Life Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Discussion

Although a vast amount of research exists on humor, friendship, and conflict no single study connects all three of these concepts together. This study attempted to fill this gap by examining how humor might help resolve/deescalate conflict among friends. This study tested whether adaptive/maladaptive humor had a positive/negative effect on relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction. Hypothesis 1 received full support, but hypotheses 2 and 3 were unsupported.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that friends who perceived that their friends used adaptive humor styles to defuse conflict would have a higher relational satisfaction than those with friends who perceivably used maladaptive humor styles to defuse conflict. Whereas adaptive humor was related to higher relational satisfaction, reported use of maladaptive humor related to lower relational satisfaction.

This study demonstrates that there is a correlation between adaptive humor during conflict and increased relationship satisfaction. According to Campbell (2008), friends who perceived the use of adaptive humor rather than those who perceived the use of maladaptive humor are more likely to be satisfied in their relationships. Campbell (2008) also found that comedy can calm and preserve a relationship during times of conflict because humor can “communicate underlying feelings of affection despite overt disagreements to relieve tension during an argument, or as a means of backing down gracefully from a confrontation” (p. 1). If friends are in an argument and one shows affection for the other, they may recognize that the issue is not as important as it originally seemed. On the other hand, if a friend cracks a joke during an argument, it may reduce the tension and allow the friend to save face.
Another reason H1 was supported could be because adaptive humor can be used to alleviate adverse interpersonal stress (Martin et al., 2003). Adaptive humor is a “non-hostile, tolerant use of humor that is affirming of self and others and presumably enhances interpersonal cohesiveness and attraction. This style of humor is expected to be related to […] predominantly positive moods and emotions” (Martin et al., 2003, p.1). Because the goal of adaptive humor is to promote cohesion and positive emotions, distress during conflict between friends might be less likely to occur. Furthermore, relationships with less maladaptive stress responses could be considered more positive and enjoyable (Jamieson & Hangen, 2021).

As discussed in the rationale for this study, evolutionary theory helps explain that humor diminishes stress responses while enhancing an individual’s ability to navigate and overcome external stressors (Polimeni, 2006). While stress can be helpful when one is in a dangerous situation, adverse stress responses or distress during conflict among friends is not ideal. If individuals are distressed, they are likely to be distracted and/or overwhelmed when problems arise. However, stress responses are inevitable. If one improves their stress responses, they could be better at problem solving during conflict (Jamieson & Hangen, 2021).

Furthermore, humor’s underlying evolutionary purpose may originally have been to enable cooperation among people (Jung, 2003). If individuals cooperate when issues arise, they are more likely to continue being friends. Friends who successfully work through conflict demonstrate they are able to understand each other, come to a solution, and/or show they care about each other more than the source of the conflict. Humor allows friends to take a step back and assess the conflict from a new angle. In this scenario, both friends recognized what they were arguing about was not worth the trouble and moved on.
Adaptive humor can also enhance relationships by strengthening interpersonal ties, promoting open communication, and reducing conflict and uncertainty (Dyck & Holzman, 2013). Friends who feel comfortable joking together may feel more comfortable sharing thoughts and concerns with each other as well, thus preventing conflict or creating an open line of communication when conflict inevitably arises.

The findings for H1 also show that individuals with friends who use maladaptive humor were less satisfied in their friendships than friends who used adaptive humor. The research indicates that if one’s friend uses aggressive or self-defeating humor, they have lower relational satisfaction. These findings align with Dyck and Holtzman’s (2013) observation that aggressive humor and self-deprecating humor have a negative impact on relational satisfaction. This may be because individuals who use aggressive humor are more likely to be harsh and/or belligerent (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013), or that people who use aggressive humor are less adept at resolving conflict or providing emotional support (Kuiper et al., 2004; Yip & Martin, 2006). Trying to resolve a conflict with someone who is rude poses a unique challenge that may result in escalated emotional outbursts rather than resolution. Resolving conflict with friends who use self-defeating humor is also difficult because people who use self-defeating humor are more likely to be depressed and/or anxious (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). They also tend to be less capable of correctly reading emotions or asserting themselves (Cann et al., 2008, Yip & Martin, 2006). If one is depressed, they may be apathetic to conflict with a friend. If they are anxious, they may be overly concerned about perceived slights and unrelated scenarios to focus on the issue at hand.

Overall, perceived use of adaptive humor seems to be more beneficial for resolving conflicts among friends. Friends who use affiliative or self-enhancing humor are probably more
enjoyable to be around because adaptive humor promotes better stress responses, tension reduction, the ability to save face, and increases comfort between friends.

**Hypothesis 2**

Hypothesis 2 predicted that friends who perceived the use of adaptive humor to defuse conflict are more likely to have improved life satisfaction compared to friends who perceived the use of maladaptive humor styles to defuse conflict. This hypothesis was unsupported; neither type of humor reportedly used during conflict among friends predicted reports of life satisfaction.

The reason H2 is unsupported may be because, as some researchers believe, life satisfaction is fundamentally influenced by a person’s predisposition rather than the types of interactions they have in their friendships. For example, Diener et al. (2003) found differences in individuals’ personality traits have a moderate to strong genetic component. They also showed that core personality traits, such as extraversion and neuroticism, are tied to overall life satisfaction. Thus, they posit that overall life satisfaction has a moderate to strong genetic component.

Perhaps whether one is happy-go-lucky or morose lies in their genetic makeup rather than their relationships with others. This idea is supported by Costa and McCrae (1998), who found that certain personality dimensions such as openness to experiences, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness had a strong positive association with life satisfaction. Perhaps if one is open to experiences, conscientious, and agreeable they will be satisfied in life even if they are more introverted, and even if they find themselves in conflict with a friend from time to time.

Another explanation for why one’s friend’s humor style during conflict did not impact one’s life satisfaction could be that larger environmental, personal, social, economic, political, and/or cultural factors have a greater impact on life satisfaction than the occasional conflict with a friend. For instance, Masuda et al. (2021) found that more free time and higher income are
associated with greater levels of life satisfaction. If one is overworked and/or low-income, they may be distressed and unhappy even if they do have friends who use adaptive humor. On the other hand, if one is happy with their workload and income, they may be unaffected by their friend’s adaptive or maladaptive humor style.

Finally, another factor for why one is unaffected by their friend’s humor style during conflict may be their own unhappiness due to factors such as loneliness. Loneliness is negatively related to life satisfaction (Goodwin, Cook, & Yung, 2001). Although having at least one friend was a requirement for the study, many people may feel that they do not have a wide enough social network. People who are lonely are at greater risk for depression (Eisses et al., 2004), mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015) and suicidal thoughts (Kidd, 2004). Lonely individuals may be unaffected by their friend’s humor style if they are preoccupied with their negative mental state.

**Hypothesis 3**

The third hypothesis predicted that relational satisfaction would mediate the effect of humor styles on life satisfaction. This hypothesis was unsupported. Because humor use did not predict life satisfaction in the first place, it is unlikely a mediator variable would change this outcome.

**Limitations**

This study sought to find whether adaptive/maladaptive humor had a positive/negative effect on relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction. There were several limitations for this study. Although the survey had a total of 489 participants, only 74 participants completed the entire survey. There are several possible reasons for the 15.13% completion rate. The first reason is due to survey fatigue. The survey consisted of a total of 65 questions which required introspection, and this could have been tiresome for participants. Given the smaller sample size,
these findings may not be reflective of the general population. It is possible that people who decided to/decided not to fully participate in the survey are unique in some way from the general population.

Another factor that could have impacted the overall results is the modification of Martin et al.’s (2003) Humor Styles Questionnaire. This questionnaire was modified to reflect how their friend feels about/uses humor during conflict. Questions such as “My friend finds that thinking about some amusing aspect of a situation is often a very effective way of coping with conflict” and “If my friend is by themself and feeling unhappy, they make an effort to think of something funny to cheer themself up” may be difficult for an individual to answer on behalf of their friend.

Areas for Future Research

This study was limited to individuals who have a friend and believed that humor has been involved in resolving a conflict with that friend. In future studies, researchers may want to look into whether friends believe humor is an effective way to resolve conflict. It would be interesting to research conflicts among friends in general and determine how many of them resolve their argument/spats with humor. While researching conflict resolution methods, humor was rarely mentioned in past research. If future research finds that humor is a valuable tool for resolving conflict, perhaps conflict resolution communication can incorporate this additional method into its curriculum. Humor is a free tool at anyone’s disposal. Understanding how to effectively incorporate humor into conflict resolution would benefit society as a whole because it would allow people to resolve issues in an affable way.

Conclusion

While a substantial amount of research exists on humor, friendship, and conflict, no single study connects all three of these concepts together. This study sought to fill this gap by
analyzing how humor might help resolve/deescalate conflict among friends. Friendship is one of the most valuable and impactful relationships in one’s life. Although my findings found no connection between humor styles during conflict among friends and life satisfaction, it appears humor styles do impact relational satisfaction.

It is important for friends to effectively deal with conflict when it inevitably arises. The perceived use of adaptive humor to defuse/deescalate conflict is related to higher relational satisfaction. Thus, friends should consider practicing affiliative/self-enhancing humor while in conflict with a friend rather than aggressive/self-defeating humor.
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