

## The Relationship between Narcissism, Self Esteem and Humour Style

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**Abstract-** The aim of the present study was to examine the correlation between Narcissism, Self Esteem and Humor in a sample of 49 people from the age group of 18-21 and 22-25 years old. For that purpose, Narcissistic Personality inventory, Rosenberg's Self-esteem scale and Humor Style questionnaire were used. Narcissism was positively correlated with self-esteem and affiliative humor, whereas Self-esteem was positively correlated with affiliative humor and negatively correlated with self-defeating humor. Findings are discussed in terms of the role self-esteem plays in the humor regulation of individuals with narcissistic personality.

**Keywords:** Narcissism, self-esteem, humor

### INTRODUCTION

Narcissism, self-esteem and humour styles are some of the most intriguing facets that make up a person's personality and can tell us a lot about their behavioural tendencies, their opinions about themselves and how they perceive themselves, not in their own eyes but in front of others as well.

When we think of the term "narcissism," words such as grandiosity, attention, seeking admiration, instantly pop up in our minds. The American Psychological Association has defined narcissism as "an excessive self-love or egocentrism," further stating that "in psychoanalytic theory, the taking of one's own ego or body as a sexual object or focus of the libido or the seeking or choice of another for relational purposes on the basis of his or her similarity to the self" is what is typically meant by narcissism.

Narcissism and its link to different aspects of human behaviour have long fascinated the researchers. Sedikides et al. (2004) concluded that is inversely related to daily and dispositional depression, daily and dispositional loneliness, daily anxiety and dispositional neuroticism while there exists a positive association between

narcissism and daily and dispositional subjective well-being and couple well-being. The research also showed that self-esteem fully accounts for narcissism and psychological health, that is to say that narcissism is good for psychological health as long as it is associated with a high self-esteem.

Narcissism increases as self-esteem decreases (Pantic et al, 2017). Self-esteem was first proposed by William James, who stated that people who met their personally important goals or standards in their life, develop high self-regard. Throughout the twentieth century, self-esteem was considered as an important psychological construct. Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist who introduced this concept in his need hierarchy, arguing that one cannot achieve fulfilment without first achieving the need for self-worth and self-respect. Similarly, Carl Rogers, a humanistic theorist focused on self-esteem as the congruence between one's current self and one's ideal self. Coopersmith (1967) and Branden (1969) linked self-esteem and confidence, academic achievement, and mental health. The following decades saw the development of self-esteem movements in western societies. In recent times, thousands of empirical studies have been done on self-esteem, its correlates and consequences.

Hyatt et al (2018) found that self-esteem is an adaptive construct which is negatively correlated to internalising psychopathology and is unrelated to externalising behaviours while narcissism is related to maladaptive behaviours such as grandiosity, entitlement and demeaning others. Heimstra et al (2019) found that those children who show narcissistic traits tend to perceive themselves as aggressive, independent of their level of self-esteem.

Being such important facets of the human personality, narcissism and self-esteem have also been studied in the light of another such facet, humour. In personality psychology, research on humour styles majorly focuses on what leads to the development of certain humour styles that are used by people as well as what do people find humorous which may involve factors like culture, age and political orientation (Sabato, 2019). Although there are multiple approaches and forms of humour, and not much specific information is available how each of these forms work, one thing is for certain, humour styles remain consistent throughout life (Willibald, 1998).

According to George Eman Vaillant's (1977) categorization, humour is a level IV Defense mechanism overt expression of ideas and feelings (especially those that are unpleasant to focus on or too terrible to talk about) that gives pleasure to others. Humour also plays the role of an interpersonal signal, crucial for interpersonal relationships (Zeigler-Hill, Besser & Jett, 2013). Examinations of this main aspect of interpersonal relationship, i.e., humour styles, have shown that maladaptive humour styles are associated with the aspects of narcissism such as impulsivity and entitlement, suggesting that narcissism levels could even be potentially lowered through alteration in humour styles (Lobbestael & Freund, 2021). When it comes to self-esteem, adaptive humour styles

(affiliative and self-enhancing) are significant predictors as well as mediators of self-esteem unlike madaptive humour styles (aggressive and self-defeating) (Yue et al, 2014) though McCosker and Moran (2012) found that even aggressive humour is associated with high self-esteem. Instability in self-esteem, therefore, has also been linked to the kind of humour style a person is using, such as more common occurrence of affiliative humour in people with high-self esteem (Vaughan, Zeigler-Hill & Arnau, 2014).

Previously, Zeigler-Hill and Besser (2011) attempted to study the relationship between narcissism, self-esteem and humour using humour style as a mediating variable suggesting that humour styles are responsible for mediating the association between pathological narcissism and self-esteem.

Keeping in mind the available literature and what all has been done in the past, the present study attempted to study the interrelation between these three variables and to investigate the mediating effect of humour styles on narcissism and self-esteem in the context of young (18-25) urban youth/college students of India.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Narcissism and Self-esteem**

It bears attention that narcissism has been found to have a correlation with a low and fragile sense of self-esteem, however empirical data has been somewhat inconsistent between this relation. Geukes et al. (2017) attempted to study this relation by investigating two distinct facets of narcissism, namely, admiration (such as high evaluation of self) and rivalry (such as devaluing others) with level and variability of self-esteem. Using mixed-effects location scale models, they concluded that narcissism is positively correlated to the level and variability of self-esteem. It is noteworthy that admiration was related to high and stable levels of self-esteem whereas rivalry was related to rather low and fragile self-esteem. Self-esteem is a one of the core components of self-concept. Self-esteem includes the judgements we make about our self-worth and the feelings we associate with those judgements. In essence, self-esteem is about a realistic evaluation of self's competencies and characteristics as these evaluations affect our emotional experiences, regulate our future behavior as well as long-term psychological adjustments (Berk, 2014). Tracy et al. (2019), in a study titled "Authentic and Hubristic Pride: The Affective Core of Self-esteem and Narcissism," empirically distinguished between narcissism and genuine self-esteem through two distinct self-regulatory processes- narcissistic self aggrandizement and genuine self-esteem. They found that genuine self-esteem is positively associated with successful social relationships and mental health, whereas narcissistic self-aggrandizement is positively related

to aggression and other antisocial behaviours. Watson et al. (1995) examined self-reported narcissism, self-esteem, and perceptions of parents as nurturing in a sample consisting of 459 undergraduates using the NPI. They found interrelationships and linkages between dimensions of narcissism with self-esteem and parental nurturance, proving that narcissism falls along a continuum of mental health. It was also revealed that some aspects of narcissism were mediated by a healthier self-functioning for self-esteem, suggesting that narcissism must be conceptualized within frameworks that include a healthy self-esteem. The role of external environment in affecting a narcissist's self-esteem was studied by Zeigler-Hill et al. (2010) using multilevel random coefficient models. It was found that narcissists reported a greater decrease in their state self-esteem on days with more negative achievement events as compared to the non-narcissists. It implicates that narcissists may be more prone and reactive to mundane achievements and failure experiences, which leads to a decrease in self-esteem.

### **Self-esteem and Humour**

Self-esteem is positively correlated with adaptive humor but not with maladaptive humour. Previous studies showed that healthy humour style will lead to higher self-esteem (Martin et al., 2003). Particularly, affiliative humour style was proved to be positively related to various measures of self-esteem (Martin et al., 2003, Kuiper et al., 2004). Meanwhile, self-defeating humour style was negatively associated with self-esteem (Thorson et al., 1997). People who prefer self-defeating humour 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-evaluation standards. Increase in endorsement of positive self-evaluation standards increases the use of affiliative humour, hence, causing higher levels of social self-esteem. Meanwhile, increased endorsement of negative self-evaluation standards leads to more frequent use of self-defeating humour and results in lower levels of social self-esteem (Martin et al., 2003). Self-esteem has a strong correlation with humor not only because a high level of self-esteem leads to humour and productive lives, but it also directs predictive power on humour (Baumeister, et., 2003). The research revealed that higher self-esteem would lead to greater humour. 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, the opposite conclusion found in other studies, indicates the negative effects of self-esteem are mainly felt in good times. While others still found that high self-esteem brings humour outcomes regardless of stress and other circumstances (Baumeister et al., 2003).

## Narcissism and Humour

Narcissism is an unpredictable and multifaceted development that mixes feelings of grandiosity with an increased affectability to encounter that undermine their inflated feelings of self-worth (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Given recent research concerning the role of humor in outcomes associated with pathological narcissism (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, submitted for publication). Our advantage in humor originates from the recognizable proof of humour styles that might be either useful for well-being (i.e., adaptive humour) or on the other hand hindering to well-being (i.e., maladaptive humor; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Psychologists have examined various ways in which personality might relate to the characteristics of humour. For example, Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir (2003) identified different ways in which the personality trait of humour could be explained. Recently, the HSQ has additionally been utilized to find that humour styles have an association with the Dark Triad, the name for the mix of the personality characteristics of Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy (Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010; Watts, 2017). Veselka et al., (2010) demonstrated that psychopathy and Machiavellianism positively and significantly correlated with maladaptive humour styles, and narcissism positively and significantly associated with adaptive humour styles.

Besser and Zeigler-Hill (submitted for publication) found that vulnerable narcissism is positively correlated with maladaptive humour, and negatively correlated with adaptive humour styles. The same study shows that grandiose narcissism is positively correlated with adaptive humour styles, and negatively correlated with maladaptive humour styles. This suggests that grandiose and vulnerable narcissists may use somewhat different styles of humour in their interactions with others.

Also, according to a study by Martin et al., (2012), vulnerable narcissism was significantly and positively correlated with aggressive humour, which is a rear incongruity.

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

To study the linkage between narcissism, self-esteem and humour styles.

## **HYPOTHESES**

H<sub>1</sub>: Narcissism is positively associated with affiliative humour.

H<sub>2</sub>: Narcissism is positively associated with self-enhancing humour.

H<sub>3</sub>: Narcissism is positively associated with aggressive humour.

H<sub>4</sub>: Narcissism is negatively associated with self-defeating humour.

H<sub>5</sub>: Self-esteem is positively associated with affiliative humour.

H<sub>6</sub>: Self-esteem is positively associated with self-enhancing humour.

H<sub>7</sub>: Self-esteem is negatively associated with aggressive humour.

H<sub>8</sub>: Self-esteem is negatively associated with self-defeating humour. H<sub>9</sub>: Narcissism is negatively associated with self-esteem.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample:**

A total of 49 adults in the age range of 18 to 25 participated in the study out of which females accounted for 55.1% and males for 44.9%.

### **Design:**

The design of the research is correlational where narcissism and self-esteem were taken as predictor variables and humour style was taken as criterion variable. A regression analysis was also performed between the three.

**Tools used:****Narcissistic Personality Inventory:**

The narcissistic personality inventory was developed by Raskin and Terry in the year 1979, based on the definition of narcissistic personality disorder in the DSM-III, but has been advised to not be used as a tool for diagnosing NPD (Raskin & Terry, 1988). It is one of the most widely used measures to assess narcissism. It consists of 40 items which enquire about multiple traits which are considered as facets of narcissism. As far as the scoring of the NPI is concerned, participants can obtain a score between 0-40. The average score has been found to be approximately 15 across extensive studies on the US adults.

**Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale:**

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES) was developed by a sociologist Morris Rosenberg (1965). It is a ten item Likert type scale which uses a scale ranging from 0-30, where a score less than 15 may indicate low self-esteem. This scale measures both positive and negative feelings about self and is considered a reliable and valid quantitative tool for self-esteem assessment. Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale has been translated and adapted in various languages like Persian, Chinese, Portuguese, German, Italian, Spanish and French. Also, it has been used in cross-cultural studies in up to 53 nations.

**Humor Styles Questionnaire:**

The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) was developed by Rod Martin and Patricia Doris in the year 2003 to measure individual differences in styles of humor. The Humor Styles Questionnaire is a 32-item self-report inventory used to identify how individuals use humor in their lives. Participants respond to the degree to which they agree with each statement (e.g., "I enjoy making people laugh") on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The HSQ primarily measures adaptive humour styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) and maladaptive humour styles (aggressive and self-defeating). Thus far, more than 150 studies have used the HSQ for research in personality, social, clinical, industrial-organizational, and developmental domains of psychology.

**Procedure:**

Due to the pandemic constraints, the study was conducted online, after converting the three inventories into three separate Google Forms. Zoom video calling app was used through the laptop to establish contact with the participants while they took the tests. After establishing contact via Zoom, it was made sure that the participant was seated comfortably in a room without external disturbances. The participant was instructed that they would be given a set of 3 questionnaires consecutively, that they would have to fill in carefully with utmost honesty. The Google form link to NPI was sent to the participant via chat. After that participant's response was received, the link to RSES was sent and the same process was

repeated for HSQ. After the completion and collection of the responses of all three questionnaires, the participant was duly thanked.

## **RESULTS**

The data was analyzed using SPSS 22.0 to compute descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analysis.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
NPI Score	15.143	6.2048	49
Rosenberg Self Esteem	28.000	6.0000	49
HSQ- Affiliative humour	40.633	8.2303	49
HSQ- Self-enhancing humour	35.490	7.2976	49
HSQ- Aggressive Humour	28.898	5.9695	49
HSQ- Self defeating humour	29.327	9.3483	49

HSQ- HUMOUR STYLE QUESTIONNAIRE

The table given above constitutes the mean and standard deviation values obtained by all the variables under this study. As it is indicated above, the mean value obtained by the sample on the personality trait neuroticism is 15.143, with a standard deviation of 6.2048. On Rosenberg self-esteem, the mean score of the sample was 28.00, with a standard deviation of 6.00. The mean and standard deviation on sub scales of HSQ were 40.633 and 8.2303 respectively for HSQ- Affiliative humor, for HSQ- Self-enhancing humor were 35.490 and 7.2976 respectively, for HSQ- Aggressive humor were 28.898 and 5.9695 respectively and 29.327 and 9.3483 respectively, for HSQ-Self-defeating humor.

**TABLE 2. Correlation Analysis:**

		NPI Score	Rosenberg Self Esteem	HSQ-Affiliative humour	HSQ-Self-enhancing humour	HSQ-Aggressive Humour	HSQ-Self defeating humour
NPI Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.550**	.340*	.121	.056	.008
Rosenberg Self Esteem	Pearson Correlation	.550**	1	.479**	.216	-.070	-.283*
HSQ-Affiliative humour	Pearson Correlation	.340*	.479**	1	.163	.039	.044
HSQ-Self-enhancing humour	Pearson Correlation	.121	.216	.163	1	-.064	.093
HSQ-Aggressive Humour	Pearson Correlation	.056	-.070	.039	-.064	1	.272
HSQ-Self defeating humour	Pearson Correlation	.008	-.283*	.044	.093	.272	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The table indicated above represents the correlation coefficients obtained for the correlation analysis of neuroticism, self-esteem and Humor styles. As it is clearly understood, a positive correlation was found between Narcissism and Self-esteem ( $r = .550, P < .01$ ), between Narcissism and affiliative humor ( $r = .340, P < .05$ ), and between Self-esteem and affiliative humor ( $r = .479, P < .01$ ). Also, a negative correlation was found between Self-esteem and Self-defeating humor ( $r = -.283, P < .05$ ). Other than these, no other significant correlation is found. Post correlation analysis, regression analysis was also performed. Which showed that approximately 28.8% of

variance in self-esteem and 9.7% of variance in affiliative humour could be attributed to narcissism, whereas 21.3% of variance in affiliative humour and 6.1% of variance in self-defeating humour could be attributed to self-esteem.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Narcissism and self-esteem**

The aim of this study was to determine the link between narcissism, self-esteem and humour style. It was hypothesized that there is a negative correlation between narcissism and self-esteem.

The Pearson correlation coefficient established a positive relation between narcissism and self-esteem ( $r = .550$ ,  $P < .01$ ). Since a positive correlation was found, the hypothesis that there is a negative correlation between narcissism and self-esteem is rejected, implicating that a high level of narcissism is linked to high self-esteem. One of the possible reasons for finding a positive correlation between narcissism and self-esteem could be the fact that RSES is essentially a self-report measure and individuals have a tendency to give socially desirable responses to such questionnaires. In tandem with this finding, Zajenkowski et al., (2018) attempted to examine the link between two types of narcissism, namely, grandiose and vulnerable with emotional intelligence (both self-reported and ability). They concluded that while vulnerable narcissism leads to defensive, avoidant and hypersensitive attitude in interpersonal relations, there is a linkage between high self-esteem, dominance and a tendency to overestimate one's own capabilities in those people who rank high on grandiose narcissism.

In another instance, Rogoza et al., (2018) found that those people who get high scores on vulnerable narcissism and rivalry tend to have fragile self-esteem, in addition to which high scores on admiration is a predictor for optimal self-esteem, suggesting a positive correlation between the two. Therefore, it would not be unfounded to say that narcissists, in fact, do have a high self-esteem, although unlike individuals with a secure sense of high self-esteem, narcissists tend to have a "fragile high self-esteem" which is a form of high self-esteem dependent on external validation and self-deception (Rose, 2019).

### **Self-esteem and humor**

In order to study the correlation between self-esteem and humor styles, it was hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between self-esteem and affiliative humor whereas a negative one between self-esteem and self-defeating humor.

The present study found that affiliative humor is positively associated with self-esteem ( $r = .479$ ,  $P < .01$ ), and a

negative association between self-esteem and self-defeating humor was also obtained ( $r = -.283, P < .05$ ). Therefore, both the hypotheses are accepted. Similar results have been found in the past literature. Steiger et al., (2010) comprehensively investigated humor styles and their relationship to explicit and implicit self-esteem. The study suggests that participants high on affiliative humor are also high on implicit self-esteem. Their findings also revealed self-defeating humor may be less beneficial, even detrimental to mental health. It was also found that people with damaged self-esteem tend to use more self-defeating humor. Vaughan et al. (2014) attempted to study the relationship between self-esteem and different humor styles in 499 undergraduates and concluded that individuals with stable levels of

self-esteem reported high levels of affiliative humor and the lowest levels of self-defeating (and aggressive), suggesting that individuals with stable and unstable forms of self-esteem use different styles of humor. In another study conducted on 237 Hong Kong undergraduate students, Yue et al., (2014) reported that adaptive humor styles, namely, affiliative and self-enhancing humor significantly predict self-esteem whereas maladaptive humor styles, including self-defeating humor, are the “worse predictors” of self-esteem as well as subjective happiness.

Narcissism and Humour. As the present study hypothesized that narcissism is positively associated with self-enhancing humor, affiliative humor and aggressive humour. It also hypothesized that narcissism is negatively associated with self-defeating humor. The findings of the present study suggest that narcissism and affiliative humor are correlated significantly ( $r = .340, P < .05$ ). No other significant correlation was found between Narcissism and humor (Table 2). Findings similar to the present study by Veselka, Schermer, Martina, & Vernon (2009) suggested that narcissism correlates positively with self-affiliative humor. It also suggests that narcissistic individuals may further themselves, heighten their self-esteem, and increase their popularity by building relationships with others in part through the use of affiliative styles of humor. Also, according to Morf and Rhodewalt (2011), narcissistic individuals have a tendency to gain social approval and self-affirmation in order to bolster their grandiose self, whereas Affiliative humor which is used to enhance social bonds by laughing with others or telling jokes. Thus, Affiliative humor can be the one-way narcissistic individuals use in order to promote positive social interactions. A study by Vernon, Martin, Schermer, & Mackie (2007) found that affiliative and self-enhancing humor both correlated positively with extraversion. In contrast, aggressive and self-defeating humor correlated positively with neuroticism and only self-enhancing humor correlated negatively with narcissism.

## **CONCLUSION**

The aim of the study was to investigate the linkage between narcissism, self-esteem and humour style. The study was designed keeping in mind the current pandemic situation which would have prevented access and optimal usage of psychology labs and intervention-based experiments.

There has been some attempt at studying the link between narcissism and self-esteem using humour as a meditation variable but in this study, an attempt was made to understand the link between narcissism and humour style through self-esteem.

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