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# Humor as a Hidden Strength: A Positive Predictor of Student Growth

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the predictive role of sense of humor in fostering personal growth and success among university students in Pakistan. Rooted in the framework of Positive Psychology and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the research focused on humor as a unique yet often overlooked strength in youth development. The Study was to assess the relationship between sense of humour and the personal growth of university students. Methodology of the study includes using a multistage random sampling technique, data were collected from 900 university students through the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) and the Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (PGIS-II). Statistical analyses including correlation and simple linear regression were employed to explore the impact of humor on personal growth. Descriptive statistics like frequencies and percentages were also determined. Findings revealed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between sense of humor and personal growth ( $r = .899$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Regression analysis further indicated that humor was a highly significant predictor ( $\beta = .899$ ,  $p < .001$ ), explaining 80.8% of the variance in personal growth. These results highlight humor as a powerful inner resource, reinforcing its role as a hidden strength that contributes meaningfully to student development and success. Humor significantly fosters personal growth in university students, promoting emotional well-being and adaptability during academic life.

**Key Words:** Sense of Humor, Personal Growth, Student Success, Positive Psychology

## Introduction

The importance of personal growth, or growth of individual potential, in assisting students in overcoming this transition and coping with university life, however, cannot be stressed enough. Personal development implies all these fields: intellectual, psychological, emotional, social, and moral maturity (Sharma et al., 2022). A cheerful outlook on development can be one of the central factors that lead to personal growth. Those positive attitudes would be optimism, resilience, and a growth mindset. Of course, these attitudes create a healthier academic climate, but they also help to develop students' ability to stick with challenges and setbacks. Positively motivated students are more likely to take proactive steps like asking for help when they need it, maintaining high academic standards, and creating helpful social networks (Iqbal et al., 2023). Posttraumatic growth serves as the foundation for the idea of personal growth. Personal growth refers to the perception of positive outcomes in several aspects of life following the loss of a significant individual. It may refer to a bereaved person's ability to face challenges by changing their personality. Positive attitudes and emotional intimacy with others are also linked to personal growth in students and young adults (Tan & Andriessen, 2021).

University students also need behaviors associated with personal growth and positive attitudes to shape their experience. The relation between higher academic achievement and personal well-being has been reported with initiative-taking behaviors, including goal-setting, time management, etc. (Nguyen et al., 2022). These behaviors are equally important in facilitating productive interpersonal relationships necessary for social integration and emotional support (Roberts & Tucker, 2023). Additionally, students who practice self-reflection and mindfulness tend to associate

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better behavioral patterns, be more empathic, and be more emotionally intelligent with their peers (Kwon et al., 2022). Individual factors play into this as well, but so does the larger university environment. Personal growth is affected by social support, mentorship, and campus resources. Environments in universities that proudly focus on promoting inclusivity, diversity, and emotional well-being encourage students in such environments to feel valued and supported in their development (Stewart et al., 2023).

The phrase "*sense of humor*" in modern psychology describes humor as a persistent personality characteristic (Ruch, 2007). However, academics use the term in a variety of ways, and there is little agreement on how to define and quantify the sense of humor as a feature (Martin, 2009). Thus, a sense of humor can be considered a habitual pattern of behavior (a tendency to laugh frequently, to crack jokes and make other people laugh, to laugh at other people's jokes), an ability (a tendency to make other people laugh, to make other people laugh, to "get the joke," to remember jokes), an unpredictable trait (habitual cheerfulness), an aesthetic reaction (enjoyment of certain types of amusing material), an attitude (a positive attitude toward humor and amusing people), a world view (a bewildered outlook on life), or a coping mechanism (a tendency to maintain a humorous perspective in the face during adversity). According to related research, comedy can also enhance one's physical and mental health (Lefcourt et al., 1990). Additionally, research has shown that humor can alleviate the stress associated with education and that those who have a good sense of humor also have favorable traits. Additionally, several studies have demonstrated that individuals with a strong sense of humor can cope with the stress of school, typically feel less anxious, are physically well, and have positive relationships with others (Martin et al., 2009).

In a study of undergraduate students, both groups had been dealing with a comparable number of daily issues over the previous two months; participants in the high sense of humor group suffered from less stress and current anxiety than those in the low sense of humor group (Abel, 2002). Contrary to the low humor group, the greater humor group seemed more inclined to have employed problem-solving coping mechanisms and positive reappraisal. A sense of humor, often regarded as a positive attitude, has significant effects on personal growth, particularly for university students who are navigating academic challenges and personal development. Humor contributes to emotional resilience, strengthens social relationships, and promotes a positive outlook, all of which are essential for students' personal and academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As students face stress from coursework, social interactions, and future career planning, a well-developed sense of humor enables them to cope with pressure, enhance mental well-being, and improve their social connections.

A sense of humor has been identified as an important coping mechanism, enabling individuals to navigate challenging situations with emotional flexibility. The ability to see humor in adversity has been correlated with lower anxiety levels and improved mental health outcomes. Humor is the admiration of amusing behaviors or products, whether verbal or nonverbal. Sense of humor is a psychological trait that differs from person to person, indicating a preference for creating or enjoying humor (Martin, 2007). Mak and Deneen (2012) define humor as utterances that use para-linguistic and discourse hints to amuse and are seen as entertaining by some participants. According to Hawkins (2008), humor is a method of communication used to provide enjoyment and relieve tension. Humor, in addition to being intended to amuse, can serve a variety of purposes in human life (Lang and Lee, 2010). Humor can serve multiple emotional and cognitive objectives while initially seeming as a playful and joyful style of communication. According to Mak and Deneen (2012), humor can help immigrants integrate into their new context and establish acceptable behaviors. Previous research suggests that using humor to cope with stressful situations and communicate effectively can increase cohesiveness, generate consensus, and convey messages across power and authority. This situation is less scary and encourages change, a link between it and university students' emotional well-being and social adjustment. Humor has a good impact on social cohesiveness and acceptability in higher education (Cruthirds, 2006).

According to Duarte and de Barros (2017), humor and learning strategies in college students investigated the connection between the self-referential sense of humor and the learning strategies of college students. The study looked at the relationship between academic achievement and methods and self-referential comedy. 224 university students who attended from the first to the third academic year of their graduation made up the sample, 127 of whom were in

the Economics department (56.7%) and 97 of whom were in the Management department (43.3%). The median age was 20, while the mean was 19.94. Of the pupils in the global sample, 104 (46.4%) were male and 120 (53.6%) were female. Duarte (2007) utilized the Inventory of Learning Processes for University Students (IPA-u) to measure learning, while Barros (2012) used the Humor scale of an adapted version of the Self-Perception Profile for College Students, or SPPCS, to evaluate self-referential sense of humor. To find associations between variables, the data were examined using Pearson correlations. Both Surface Learning Strategies (rote learning) and Surface-Achieving Approaches to Learning (motivated by external pressures, competitions, and excellent grades) were found to be negatively correlated with self-referential comedy. Organizing Strategy 2-Management (personal management), self-referential sense of humor, and Deep Approach to Learning (positive emotions in learning, understanding, interrelating knowledge, and critical thinking) were found to positively correlate with academic success. Despite receiving little attention from prior research, a study titled "The Influence of Humor Styles on the sense of belonging among university students" explored how human nature is deeply ingrained in the desire for belonging (Sukor et al., 2020). When members of a group or community look out for and support one another, a sense of belonging is developed. The purpose of this study is to determine how humor-style conduct affects a feeling of community. The study involved 108 full-time, local postgraduate students at a Malaysian public university. The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) and the Psychological Sense of Belonging Inventory (SOBI-P) were the tools used. According to a regression analysis, humor styles have a major impact on postgraduate students' sense of belonging. Studies show that whereas violent humor reduces postgraduate students' sense of belonging, self-enhancing comedy increases it. Martin's theory regarding the role of maladaptive and adaptive humor in social interactions, especially in the context of education, is supported by this study.

## Material and Methods

### Participants and Procedure

Correlational cross-sectional research was used to investigate the effects of sense of humour on the personal growth of university students. Correlational research design measures the nature as well as the strength of the relationships between two or more variables that occur naturally (Shaughnessy et al., 2015). Multistage random sampling was used to ensure that the sample accurately represents the diverse student population at both universities. A representative sample of a total of 900 students (514 female and 386 male) from all the faculties and departments of the University of Gujrat, Hafiz Hayat Campus, and the University of Chenab participated in the present study. Students ranged in age from 18 to 25 years, and 809 students were day scholars while the remaining 91 students were boarders.

### Instruments

Regarding the research instruments, psychological scales used in the study required formal permission. These permissions were obtained via email communication with the original authors before data collection. Multidimensional Sense of Humor is developed by Thorsan and Powell (1993). It's a self-report scale. It is designed to measure different aspects of humor in person's life. This instrument assesses various dimensions of humor, including humor creation, appreciation, use of humor in social interactions, and attitudes toward humor. The MSHS is a 24 items scale with 5-point Likert Scale. Eighteenth statements are positive while 6 statements are negatively phrased. It has good internal reliability Cronbach's alpha 0.92. The Personal Growth Initiative Scale II (PGIS-II) was developed by Robitschek (2012). It involves in to measure an individual's intentional changes to improve oneself. The PGIS-II is made of 16 items and consists of a 6-point Likert Scale. PGIS-II has good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 to 0.90, with discriminant, cultural, and convergent validity. Personal growth initiative was assessed using the Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (PGIS-II; Robitschek et al., 2012). The PGIS-II is a 16-item multidimensional measure with four subscales: readiness for change (RC), planfulness (P), using resources (UR), and intentional behavior (IB). Respondents score their level of agreement with these statements on a 6-point Likert scale, from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher PGIS-II subscale scores imply more personal initiative. The study's four subscales had alpha values of 0.80, 0.85, 0.85, and 0.85, respectively.

## Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All ethical considerations were followed by the American Psychological Association (APA) that are applicable in research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and procedures. The aim of the present study, along with confidentiality of participants' personal information and its usage only for research purposes, was spelled out to them both orally and in written consent. Students were briefed that their participation is free and voluntary without any negative consequences for their refusal, and they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. All the participants and authorities were thanked personally for their cooperation.

## Results and Discussion

The majority of students fall between the ages of 18 and 25, with 21 years being the most common age (26%). The gender distribution shows the majority of female students (516) compared to male students (386), 55.6% of students belong to the University of Gujrat, while 44.4% are from the University of Chenab.

**Table 1**

*Frequency and Percentage of Demographics of University Students (N=900)*

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-21	557	61.9
22-25	343	38.1
Gender		
Boy	386	42.9
Girl	514	57.1
University		
University of Gujrat	500	55.6
University of Chenab	400	44.4

The results revealed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between sense of humor and personal growth among university students ( $r = .899$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This indicates that students who reported higher levels of humor also experienced greater personal growth. The mean score for sense of humor was 83.07 (SD = 11.27), while personal growth had a mean of 61.02 (SD = 11.15), showing relatively high average levels and moderate variability in both constructs.

**Table 2**

*Correlation Between Sense of Humor and Personal Growth (900)*

Variables	M	SD	1	2
Sense of humor	83.07	11.27	-	.899**
Personal growth	61.02	11.15		-

The strength of the correlation suggests that humor plays a significant role in students' psychological development, supporting the idea that it serves as a hidden strength that positively influences their growth.

The regression analysis revealed that sense of humor is a highly significant and strong predictor of personal growth among university students. With a correlation coefficient (R) of .899 and an  $R^2$  of .808, the results indicated that sense of humor alone accounted for approximately 80.8% of the variance in personal growth.

**Table 3***Predictive Linear Relationship of Sense of Humor with Personal Growth (N=900)*

Variables	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$\beta$	B	t	<i>p</i>
Sense of humor	.899	.808	3772.4	.899	.899	61.42	.000
Personal growth	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The model was statistically significant, as shown by the high F-value (3772.4,  $p < .001$ ), and both the unstandardized ( $B = .899$ ) and standardized ( $\beta = .899$ ) coefficients demonstrated a substantial positive effect. The high t-value (61.42,  $p < .001$ ) further confirmed the robustness of this relationship. These findings support the idea that humor serves as a powerful personal strength that meaningfully contributes to students' overall growth. The result suggests that students who can approach life with humor may be better at handling stress, building relationships, and staying emotionally balanced, skills that are vital for adapting and growing during university life. This finding supports earlier research that links humor with psychological resilience and overall well-being (Martin & Ford, 2018).

### Conclusion

The study concluded that sense of humor plays a vital role in promoting personal growth among university students. With a strong positive correlation and significant predictive power, humor emerged as a hidden psychological strength that contributes to students' emotional resilience, self-awareness, and adaptability. These findings emphasize the importance of recognizing humor not just as a coping tool, but as a core component of student success and psychological development.

### Limitations and Recommendations

This study highlights the importance of integrating sense of humor into student development programs as a key psychological strength. Educational institutions are encouraged to promote humor through reflective activities, peer mentoring, and a supportive campus culture that values emotional well-being and resilience. Regular assessments of personal growth should be implemented to monitor student development. However, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal interpretations. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, and the sample, drawn from only two universities in Pakistan, limits the generalizability of the findings. Cultural specificity also confines the applicability of results to similar contexts. Future research should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural methods and investigate how peer dynamics and social environments influence the development of humor and personal growth over time.

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