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## Review

# Cultural differences in humor: A systematic review and critique

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**Abstract**

Humor is universal but also culturally nuanced. This review (including 31 empirical articles in English) systematically examines cultural differences in humor perception and use. Most notably, North Americans tend to perceive humor more positively, rate themselves as more humorous, and use humor more than East Asians. Moreover, this review highlights complex cultural differences in the use of four humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating). Finally, I discuss limitations of the cross-cultural literature on humor and propose future research directions. Theoretically, more studies should move beyond comparing East Asian and North American cultures, examine the *consequences* of cultural differences in humor, and track changes in humor perception and use over time. Methodologically, more studies should employ experiments to strengthen causality, recruit larger and more representative samples, and preregister theory-driven hypotheses.

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Whereas Westerners are seriously humorous, Chinese people are humorously serious.

—Judge John C. H. Wu (as quoted in Kao, 1974, p. xviii)

Humor is defined as a social communication intended to be amusing [1]. Like other aspects of human life, humor is shaped by culture—defined as “a system of symbols (what is represented), beliefs (what is considered true), values (what is considered important), norms (what is considered standard), and practices (what is performed) shared among a collection of

interconnected individuals” [2]. In an era of globalization, it is increasingly important to understand cultural differences in humor. This article systematically reviews cultural differences in how people perceive humor (Table 1) and use humor (Table 2).<sup>1</sup>

**Cultural differences in humor perception (Table 1)**

Much research suggests that compared to East Asians, North Americans tend to perceive humor more positively and rate themselves as more humorous (see Table 1). In a priming experiment, biculturals primed with Western cultural icons evaluated a humorous person more positively than biculturals primed with Chinese cultural icons [3]. Another study found that Canadian students rated humor as more important and perceived themselves as more humorous than Chinese students did [3]. Similarly, a study on American and Chinese students found that both groups perceived Americans as more humorous than Chinese individuals [4]. These differences are often attributed to cultural variations in collectivism-individualism, one of the most influential cultural dimensions [5,6]. North Americans tend to value individualism (which emphasizes independence, uniqueness, and self-expression) [5], and perceive humorous individuals as charismatic and competent because humor helps individuals stand out from others [7]. By contrast, East Asians tend to value collectivism (which emphasizes conformity, harmony, and restraint) partly due to the influence of Confucianism, which maintains that “a man has to be serious to be respected”; thus, East Asians often shun humor [7,8].

Meanwhile, East Asian cultures are also influenced by Taoism and Buddhism, which hold different attitudes toward humor than does Confucianism. Taoism regards humor as an attempt at having “witty, peaceful, and harmonious” interactions with nature, while Buddhism encourages humor as a symbol of enlightenment [9]. The interplay of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism may contribute to some East Asians’ ambivalence toward humor [7]. One study found that although American and

<sup>1</sup> The literature search was conducted in the following databases: Google Scholar, PsycINFO, ProQuest, Science Direct, Scopus, and Web of Science. Moreover, I contacted the corresponding authors of these papers to ensure that no seminal papers had been overlooked.

Table 1

## Cultural differences in humor perception.

Comparison	Study	Samples	Key Findings	Study Design
Compared to North Americans, East Asians tend to hold less positive and more ambivalent attitudes toward humor and rate themselves as less humorous.	Yue et al. (2016) Study 1 [3]	96 bicultural Hong Kong college students	Bicultural primed with Western cultural icons evaluated a humorous person more positively than biculturals primed with Chinese cultural icons.	Experimental
	Yue et al. (2016) Study 2a [3]	121 Chinese undergraduates and 121 Canadian undergraduates	Canadian students rated humor as more important and perceived themselves as more humorous than Chinese students did.	Correlational
	Jiang et al. (2011) [4]	53 Chinese undergraduate students and 33 American exchange students	Although Chinese and American students did not show significant differences in <i>explicit</i> attitudes toward humor, Chinese students were more likely to <i>implicitly</i> associate humor with negative adjectives and Americans were more likely to associate humor <i>implicitly</i> with positive adjectives. Both groups perceived Americans as more humorous than Chinese people.	Correlational
	Chen et al. (1992) [8]	480 Chinese children and 296 Canadian children	Chinese children were more likely to perceive humor as aggression and disruption to social relationships, whereas Canadian children were more likely to perceive humor as a positive leadership attribute.	Correlational
	Yue (2011) [10]	Chinese undergraduates (159 in Hong Kong and 178 in Huhohot)	Chinese undergraduates: (a) valued humor but perceived themselves as lacking humor, (b) perceived humor as incongruent with being an orthodox Chinese, and (c) tended to nominate comedians (professionals) rather than ordinary people as representatives of humor.	Correlational
	Yue & Hiranandani (2014) [11]	159 Hong Kong undergraduates, 178 Hangzhou undergraduates, and 120 Canadian undergraduates	Hong Kong and Hangzhou students nominated more comedians (professionals) as representatives of humor, whereas Canadian students nominated ordinary people more.	Correlational
	Yue et al. (2016) Study 2b [3]	121 Chinese undergraduates and 121 Canadian undergraduates	Chinese students nominated more comedians (professionals) as representatives of humor, whereas Canadian students nominated ordinary people more.	Correlational

Beyond East Asians vs. North Americans: Other cultural differences in humor perception	Charoensap-Kelly et al. (2022) [38]	198 American college students and 196 Thai college students	Thai students perceived aggressive humor as more comprehensible, humorous, and appropriate than American students. American and Thai students perceived affiliative humor as equally comprehensible, humorous, and appropriate. American students perceived self-defeating humor as more comprehensible.	Correlational
	Erdodi & Lajiness-O'Neill (2012) [39]	27 Americans who were native English speakers, 25 Transylvanians who were native Hungarian speakers, 39 bilinguals (13 English-dominant bilinguals, and 26 Hungarian-dominant bilinguals)	Hungarian speakers perceived ethnic stereotype jokes as funnier than native English speakers and bilinguals. Hungarian-dominant bilinguals preferred jokes in Hungarian, while English-dominant bilinguals slightly preferred English jokes.	Correlational
	Hiranandani & Yue (2014) [29]	101 Hong Kong university students and 102 Indian university students	Indian students valued humor more and perceived themselves as more humorous than Hong Kong students.	Correlational
	Kuiper et al. (2010) [40]	Study 1: 173 Canadian undergraduates Study 2: 198 English-speaking Lebanese undergraduates Study 3: 243 Arabic-speaking Lebanese undergraduates	Canadians, English-speaking Lebanese, and Arabic-speaking Lebanese all responded more negatively to aggressive humor than the other three humor styles. Canadians responded more positively to self-enhancing and affiliative humor than self-defeating humor. English-speaking and Arabic-speaking Lebanese did not show significant differences in response to affiliative, self-enhancing, and self-defeating humor.	Correlational
	Martin & Sullivan (2013) [31]	50 Australian undergraduates, 50 North American undergraduates, and 42 British undergraduates	British students held more negative attitudes toward humorous people than did Australian students.	Correlational

Table 2

## Cultural differences in humor use.

Comparison	Study	Samples	Key Findings	Study Design
Cultural differences in the function and style of humor use	Chen & Martin (2007) [13]	354 Chinese university students and 388 Canadian university students	Chinese students used all four humor styles (affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating) less than Canadian students. Canadian students were more likely to use aggressive humor to manage life stress than Chinese students.	Correlational
	Yue et al. (2014) [41]	159 Hong Kong college students and 178 Hangzhou college students	Hong Kong students used aggressive and self-defeating humor more, while Hangzhou students used affiliative and self-enhancing humor more.	Correlational
	Yue et al. (2010) [42]	300 Hong Kong students and 500 mainland Chinese students	Hong Kong students used aggressive and self-defeating humor more, while mainland Chinese students used affiliative and self-enhancing humor more.	Correlational
	Hiranandani & Yue (2014) [29]	101 Hong Kong university students and 102 Indian university students	Both Hong Kong and Indian students used affiliative and self-enhancing humor more than aggressive and self-defeating humor. Indians used affiliative and self-enhancing humor more and feared being laughed at less than Hong Kong students.	Correlational
	Kaoliny et al. (2006) [17]	197 American college students and 157 Arabian college students (Lebanese and Egyptian)	Americans used more self-defeating and self-enhancing humor than Arabs. Americans and Arabs did not differ significantly in the use of affiliative and aggressive humor.	Correlational
	Khramtsova & Chuykova (2016) [43]	90 US students and 106 Russian students	Affiliative humor was the most commonly used humor style for both US students and Russian students. However, Russian students used self-defeating humor more than US students, whereas US students used affiliative and self-enhancing humor more. There was no significant cultural difference in the use of aggressive humor.	Correlational
	Schermer & Kfrerer (2020) [44]	339 Canadians, 165 Americans, 4012 British, and 1888 Australians	Americans scored highest in affiliative and self-enhancing humor use, whereas the British scored highest in both aggressive and self-defeating humor use. Australians scored lowest in the use of all four humor styles.	Correlational
	Schermer et al. (2023) [18]	8361 participants from 28 countries	The use of each of the four humor styles varied across countries, but affiliative humor was the most common for all countries. For example, among all countries, Indonesians used self-enhancing humor the most while Japanese used self-enhancing humor the least.	Correlational
	Romero et al. (2007) [19]	232 participants from Alaska, 156 from Minnesota, 209 from northwest Texas, and 236 from southwest Texas	There were significant differences between US regions "regarding affiliative and self-defeating humor, the creation and performance of humor, the use of humor in coping and in social situations, and attitudes toward humor." There were no significant regional differences in self-enhancing humor or aggressive humor.	Correlational
	Chen et al. (2013) [45]	272 Chinese undergraduates	Use of affiliative and self-enhancing humor was positively related to horizontal collectivism and saving other-face. Use of self-enhancing humor was positively related to horizontal individualism and horizontal collectivism. Use of aggressive and self-defeating humor was positively related to saving self-face. Use of aggressive humor was positively related to vertical individualism.	Correlational

	Kazarian & Martin (2004) [16]	401 Lebanese college students, 181 Belgian high school and college students, 258 Canadian college students	Lebanese used less affiliative humor than Belgians and Canadians, less aggressive humor than Belgians, and less self-enhancing humor than Canadians. Affiliative humor was more prevalent in horizontal collectivistic cultures, self-defeating humor was more prevalent in vertical collectivistic cultures, and aggressive humor was more prevalent in vertical individualistic cultures.	Correlational
	Kazarian & Martin (2006) [24]	278 Armenian Lebanese, 181 Belgian high school and college students, 258 Canadian college students	Armenian Lebanese used all four styles of humor (affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating) less than Belgians and Canadians. Use of aggressive humor was related to higher vertical individualism and lower horizontal and vertical collectivism. Use of self-enhancing humor was related to higher horizontal individualism.	Correlational
Cultural differences in humor use in products	Cruthirds et al. (2012) [46]	60 US commercials and 37 Mexican commercials	US commercials used more aggressive and self-defeating humor than Mexican commercials, whereas Mexican commercials used more self-enhancing humor. Self-enhancing humor was the predominant humor style in Mexican commercials, while aggressive humor was the predominant humor style in US commercials. US and Mexican commercials used similar levels of affiliative humor.	Correlational
	Weinberger & Spotts (1989) [30]	450 American commercials and 247 British commercials	Both British and American commercials favored humor use, but British commercials used humor more widely and contained a larger proportion of puns, irony, and satire than American commercials.	Correlational
	Alden et al. (1993) [25]	52 US advertisements, 48 German advertisements, 51 Thai advertisements, and 51 Korean advertisements	Advertisements in collectivistic cultures (Korea and Thailand) contained more group-oriented humorous situations than advertisements in individualistic cultures (Germany and the US). German and Thai advertisements used humor contrasts more than US and Korean advertisements.	Correlational
	McCullough & Taylor (1993) [47]	270 American advertisements, 203 British advertisements, and 192 German advertisements	"There were no differences in humor frequency among the three nationalities. Humor use varied by industry, and there was significant interaction between nationality and industry in humor ratings."	Correlational

Chinese students were similarly positive in their *explicit* attitudes toward humor, Chinese were more likely to associate humor *implicitly* with negative adjectives whereas Americans were more likely to associate humor *implicitly* with positive adjectives in an Implicit Association Test [4]. In another study [10], Chinese undergraduates valued humor but perceived themselves as lacking humor. Relatedly, studies have found that East Asians tend to name comedians rather than their friends or relatives as humorous individuals, whereas the opposite pattern is true for Canadians [3,10,11].

In sum, compared to North Americans, East Asians tend to hold less positive and more ambivalent attitudes toward humor, and rate themselves as less humorous. Beyond this contrast between East Asian and North American cultures, Table 1 also summarizes differences in humor perception between other cultures. These studies found complex patterns that merit future research.

### Cultural differences in humor use (Table 2)

Given that East Asians perceive humor less positively than North Americans, it is plausible that East Asians also use humor less often. In particular, whereas North Americans commonly use humor as a form of catharsis to mitigate negativity in life [12], East Asians are less inclined to do so [13,14]. For example, one study found that Chinese students were less likely to use humor as a coping strategy for stress than their Canadian counterparts [13]. A similar study found that Chinese students in Singapore were less likely than American students to use humor when coping with difficulty [14].

While these East Asian–North American comparisons exemplify cultural differences in the *function* of humor use as a coping mechanism, there are also notable cultural differences in the *style* of humor use. One influential typology distinguishes between four humor styles: humor used to enhance the self (self-enhancing), to enhance one’s relationships with others (affiliative), to enhance the self at the expense of others (aggressive), and to enhance relationships at the expense of the self (self-defeating) [15]. Some scholars [7,13] propose that aggressive humor is more prevalent in individualistic cultures (which emphasize independence and assertiveness), whereas affiliative humor is more prevalent in collectivistic cultures (which emphasize interdependence and harmony). Although this proposition sounds intuitive, empirical findings are mixed (see Table 2). For example, although Lebanon is considered more collectivistic than Belgium and Canada,<sup>2</sup> Kazarian and Martin [16] found that Lebanese individuals used *less* affiliative humor than Belgians and Canadians. Meanwhile, Kaoliny

and colleagues [17] found that American students used significantly more self-defeating and self-enhancing humor than students from Egypt and Lebanon (two cultures more collectivistic than the US), but there were no significant differences in the use of affiliative and aggressive humor. Analyzing 8361 participants from 28 countries, Schermer and colleagues [18] found that the use of each of the four humor styles varied across countries, though affiliative humor was the most commonly used style for all countries.

Such mixed findings may be explained by three reasons. First, there is large heterogeneity within each national culture. For example, within the US, there are significant regional differences in humor use [19]. Second, other cultural dimensions, including power distance and uncertainty avoidance [5], can also contribute to cultural differences in humor use [20]. For example, because humor use can be risky [21], people from high uncertainty avoidance cultures may refrain from using humor to avoid offending others [22]. Third, individualism and collectivism are multifaceted constructs that can be further classified as “horizontal” (emphasizing equality) or “vertical” (emphasizing hierarchy), yielding four configurations: horizontal individualism (e.g., “My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me”), vertical individualism (e.g., “It is important that I do my job better than others”), horizontal collectivism (e.g., “To me, pleasure is spending time with others”), and vertical collectivism (e.g., “It is important to me that I respect the decisions made by my groups”) [23]. Thus, a person’s humor use may be influenced by their position on horizontal individualism (independence and equality), vertical individualism (independence and hierarchy), horizontal collectivism (interdependence and equality), and vertical collectivism (interdependence and hierarchy) [23]. Consistent with such conceptualizations, one study [16] found that horizontal collectivism was positively associated with affiliative humor, vertical collectivism was positively associated with self-defeating humor, and vertical individualism was positively associated with aggressive humor (cf. [24]).

For comprehensiveness, besides the aforementioned cultural differences among *people*, Table 2 also summarizes cultural differences among *products* created by people. For example, one study found that advertisements in collectivistic cultures were more likely to contain group-oriented humorous situations than advertisements in individualistic cultures [25].

### Limitations of past research and future directions

This review of the cross-cultural literature on humor also revealed theoretical and methodological limitations, which point to future research directions.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=belgium%2Ccanada%2Clebanon\\*](https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=belgium%2Ccanada%2Clebanon*).

### Theoretical limitations

**Beyond East Asians vs. North Americans.** More studies should move beyond comparing East Asian and North American cultures. Notably, scholars sometimes over-generalize such cultural differences as “Easterners vs. Westerners” (e.g., “Easterners do not associate humor with positivity as Westerners do”; [7])—even though neither Easterners nor Westerners are a monolithic group. Among Easterners,<sup>3</sup> East Asians (e.g., Chinese) and South Asians (e.g., Indians) are culturally disparate. For example, South Asians tend to be more assertive and expressive [26–28], so it is possible that they appreciate and use humor more than East Asians. This possibility is supported by a study which found that Indian students valued humor more and perceived themselves as more humorous than Hong Kong students [29]. Among Westerners, British people were found to use drier and more sarcastic humor than Americans [30] and hold more negative attitudes toward humorous people than Australians [31].

**Consequences of cultural differences in humor.** While some research has examined the consequences of humor [1,21], future research could also examine the consequences of *cultural differences* in humor. For example, given that (a) humor is a valued leadership attribute in the US [8] and (b) East Asians are perceived as lacking humor [3], low perceived humor may be one mechanism behind East Asians’ low leadership emergence in the US [27,32,33]. In other words, it is possible that the “Bamboo Ceiling” exists partly because East Asians are (perceived as) less humorous than other cultural groups.

In addition, it would be informative to explore how cultural differences in humor can lead to miscommunication. For example, to showcase the effectiveness of its laundry detergent in a “humorous” way, a Chinese company created a commercial video, in which a Black man emerges from a washing machine with lighter skin [34]. Perhaps because racism is not a sensitive topic in racially homogenous China, this commercial aired in China for months without much controversy until it caused widespread outrage abroad. This story highlights the risky nature of humor in cross-cultural communication [21].

**Temporal changes in humor.** Future research could also explore how humor perception and use are changing over time across cultures. As individualism rises across the globe [35], humor appreciation and use may be increasing in many countries. For example, stand-up comedy has become highly popular in China over the last decade, coinciding with the rise of individualism in the country [36].

<sup>3</sup> “Eastern” refers to “the people or countries of the East, such as India, China, or Japan” (Collins English Dictionary).

### Methodological limitations

**Study design.** To date, most of the cross-cultural studies on humor have been correlational. To strengthen causality, more experiments are needed [3,37].

**Sample.** Most of the past studies used convenience samples comprised of students. To better understand cultural differences in humor, future studies should use larger and more representative samples across various life stages (e.g., children, working adults, elders).

**Preregistration.** Some of the studies seemed *results-driven* with post-hoc interpretations rather than *theory-driven*. To promote open science and minimize biases, future studies should be preregistered. For example, researchers could preregister their theory-driven hypotheses regarding cultural differences *before* administering the Humor Styles Questionnaire [15].

### Conclusion

Humor is universal but also culturally nuanced. This article has systematically reviewed past research on cultural differences in humor perception (Table 1) and humor use (Table 2). In addition, I critically analyzed the limitations of the extant literature and proposed future research directions. As more rigorous cross-cultural research is conducted on this topic, there will be more aha moments in the science of haha.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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