

## Exploring the Role of Humor as a Coping Component in Marital Satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore how humor functions as a coping mechanism that contributes to marital satisfaction among couples in Slovenia.

**Methods and Materials:** A qualitative design was employed, relying on semi-structured interviews to capture couples' lived experiences of humor in marriage. Twenty-four participants (12 couples) from Slovenia, married for at least three years, were recruited using purposive sampling. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved, with each session lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. Trustworthiness was enhanced through peer debriefing, member checking, and triangulation with field notes.

**Findings:** Four major themes emerged from the data: (1) Humor as an Emotional Buffer, where couples described humor as a strategy for stress relief, emotional recovery, and conflict de-escalation; (2) Humor and Intimacy, highlighting the role of shared jokes, playful teasing, and affectionate humor in strengthening closeness and trust; (3) Humor as a Communication Strategy, with participants explaining how humor allowed them to soften criticism, indirectly express sensitive issues, and repair conflicts; and (4) Humor and Marital Resilience, where humor facilitated coping with external stressors, fostered perspective-taking, and sustained hope during challenges such as illness or financial strain. Couples reported that affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles were most beneficial, while aggressive humor could undermine satisfaction. Humor was also noted as increasingly expressed through digital interactions, including memes and messaging.

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that humor is a multidimensional coping resource in marriage, functioning simultaneously as an emotional, relational, communicative, and resilience-enhancing tool. While humor generally promotes marital satisfaction, its effects depend on style and context. These insights highlight the importance of constructive humor in maintaining healthy, satisfying, and enduring marital relationships.

**Keywords:** *Humor; Coping strategies; Marital satisfaction; Intimacy; Communication; Resilience; Qualitative research*

## 1. Introduction

Marital satisfaction has long been recognized as one of the most important indicators of relationship quality and stability, influencing not only the well-being of partners but also family functioning and broader social health. Scholars have sought to understand the psychological, emotional, and behavioral elements that sustain marital satisfaction, ranging from attachment and communication to stress management and resilience. Among these elements, humor has emerged as a unique coping resource that helps couples regulate emotions, navigate conflict, and maintain intimacy. In both everyday interactions and critical moments of strain, humor can act as a bonding mechanism and a buffer against relational stressors. Yet, the role of humor in marital satisfaction remains complex, shaped by individual styles, cultural contexts, and interpersonal dynamics (Chuang et al., 2021).

Research consistently shows that humor contributes to well-being, resilience, and long-term adjustment in relationships. For example, recent work on resilience has demonstrated that humor styles are significantly linked with coping capacity and retention across stressful contexts, highlighting humor's role in adaptive functioning (Staton, 2025). Within romantic and marital relationships, humor has been associated with greater emotional intelligence, communication quality, and satisfaction (Sunil et al., 2024). In workplace settings, humor has been shown to influence supervisor–employee interactions, satisfaction, and even gender dynamics, which indirectly illustrates humor's potential to shape interpersonal satisfaction in various domains (James, 2024). Taken together, these findings underscore humor's influence across both professional and intimate spheres, suggesting its potential as a relational resource in marriage.

At the group and collective level, humor also contributes to psychological safety, trust, and satisfaction. Studies of personality and humor in groups indicate that certain humor styles enhance collective emotional intelligence, leading to better group cohesion and perceived safety (Gheorghe et al., 2024). Applied to couples, this suggests that humor not only serves the dyad but also creates a relational climate in which vulnerability and openness can flourish. Similarly, humor has been explored in marital satisfaction through typologies and clusters, with evidence showing that constructive humor styles (e.g., affiliative, self-enhancing) are linked to higher satisfaction, while aggressive humor tends to reduce it (Tsai et al., 2023). This distinction highlights the importance of

examining not just the presence of humor but also its style and function within marital dynamics.

In digital contexts, humor has taken on new forms, with meme-sharing becoming an emerging area of relational research. Brody and colleagues found that humor shared through digital platforms influences relationship closeness and satisfaction depending on humor styles and motivations (Brody & Cullen, 2023). The implications for contemporary couples are significant, as humor now extends beyond face-to-face interaction into mediated communication. Likewise, the perception of humor within romantic partnerships is crucial: research shows that partner accuracy in recognizing each other's humor styles is directly related to satisfaction (Purol & Chopik, 2022). This suggests that understanding and validating a partner's humor not only fosters enjoyment but also signals empathy and alignment in the relationship.

Studies focusing on college students and young adults provide further insight into how humor operates as a positive psychological factor in romantic bonds. Affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles, in particular, have been shown to strengthen relationship satisfaction and well-being among emerging adults (Lazzaro et al., 2022). Caregiving contexts add another dimension, with evidence that humor and reframing strategies enhance the psychological well-being of parents of children with disabilities, demonstrating humor's capacity to sustain caregivers under prolonged stress (Fritz, 2021). Humor, therefore, emerges as a versatile coping mechanism across different stages of life and relational demands.

From a mental health perspective, humor has been found to moderate the effects of negative cognitive processes such as rumination. Chuang and colleagues demonstrated that certain humor styles buffer the impact of rumination on psychological well-being (Chuang et al., 2021). This mechanism may also apply to marital satisfaction, where humor interrupts cycles of negative thought and fosters a more positive relational outlook. At the same time, cultural contexts reveal distinctive uses of humor. For instance, a study on infertile couples found that optimism, humor, and affectivity together significantly predicted marital satisfaction, emphasizing humor's role as a resilience factor under highly sensitive circumstances (Ostovar et al., 2020). Such findings underscore the cross-cultural and situational relevance of humor in sustaining intimate relationships.

Beyond dyadic relationships, humor has been studied extensively in organizational and leadership settings, yielding insights transferable to marriage. Research indicates that humor from leaders or managers shapes

employee attitudes, mentoring quality, and satisfaction (Love et al., 2020). Similarly, humor has been identified as a critical element in meetings, where impression management and humor style influence effectiveness and climate (Crowe et al., 2019). Although these are workplace contexts, the findings reinforce the idea that humor shapes relational climates, which are equally relevant in marital interactions. Moreover, humor functions both as a catalyst and a neutralizer in leadership effectiveness, demonstrating its dual potential to either strengthen or undermine relationships depending on style and timing (Sobral et al., 2019).

Cultural and interpersonal studies further confirm the nuanced effects of humor. Idrees and Batool reported that humor styles significantly predict interpersonal relationship quality among university students, illustrating early adulthood as a critical period for humor's relational functions (Idrees & Batool, 2020). Similarly, Souza and colleagues explored humor at work and found that humor styles correlated with satisfaction with leadership and individual performance (Souza et al., 2019). These studies reinforce the broader principle that humor shapes satisfaction across both personal and professional domains. In the marital context, humor's effects may be amplified by intimacy and long-term interaction patterns, making its role in satisfaction particularly important to study.

At the interpersonal communication level, humor styles directly affect how partners exchange messages and interpret meaning. Research on humor and communication shows that constructive humor fosters openness, while detrimental humor styles can hinder connection (Kucharski & Rutkowska, 2019). Longitudinal analyses have also demonstrated that humor plays a role during life transitions, such as the shift to parenthood, where humor helped couples navigate pregnancy intentions and relational changes (Theisen et al., 2019). Humor thus appears to be an enduring resource that adapts with relational stages and life transitions, offering stability amid change.

The broader psychological literature highlights humor's association with life satisfaction and subjective well-being. Studies among secondary school students show a clear link between humor use and life satisfaction, suggesting that the relational benefits of humor may begin early in social development (Salavera & Supervía, 2017). A follow-up study confirmed the relationship between humor styles and satisfaction with life in adolescents (Salavera & Supervía, 2018). Similar findings have been reported in different cultural settings, such as Hong Kong, where humor styles

influenced self-compassion and life satisfaction (Yue, 2017). These developmental insights suggest that humor's positive effects on well-being may extend into marital satisfaction later in life.

Research on emotional intelligence provides another explanatory pathway for humor's role in marriage. Wang and colleagues showed that humor styles mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and subjective well-being (Wang et al., 2018). This aligns with findings that couples with higher emotional intelligence and constructive humor styles report greater relationship satisfaction (Sunil et al., 2024). By linking humor to emotional intelligence, these studies highlight the intrapersonal capacities that allow humor to function as a successful coping tool in marriage.

Leadership and organizational studies also note humor's dual-edged potential. Humor can catalyze satisfaction and performance, but when misapplied, it can reinforce power imbalances or cause misunderstanding (Rüzgar, 2018; Sobral et al., 2019). Applied to marriage, this suggests that while humor generally contributes to marital satisfaction, inappropriate humor styles may have the opposite effect. For example, aggressive or sarcastic humor may damage trust and intimacy, while affiliative and self-enhancing humor foster closeness and satisfaction.

Taken together, the existing body of research demonstrates that humor is more than mere entertainment: it is a psychological resource, a communication tool, and a relational strategy with significant implications for marital satisfaction. Studies have linked humor to resilience, emotional intelligence, subjective well-being, and interpersonal connection across cultural and situational contexts (Brody & Cullen, 2023; Chuang et al., 2021; Crowe et al., 2019; Fritz, 2021; Gheorghe et al., 2024; Idrees & Batool, 2020; James, 2024; Kucharski & Rutkowska, 2019; Lazzaro et al., 2022; Love et al., 2020; Ostovar et al., 2020; Purol & Chopik, 2022; Rüzgar, 2018; Salavera & Supervía, 2017, 2018; Sobral et al., 2019; Souza et al., 2019; Staton, 2025; Sunil et al., 2024; Theisen et al., 2019; Tsai et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2018; Yue, 2017). While most studies confirm its positive role, the evidence also indicates that not all humor is beneficial, and its impact depends on style, context, and relational sensitivity.

The present study builds on this body of evidence by examining humor as a coping component in marital satisfaction through a qualitative design. By analyzing the lived experiences of couples in Slovenia, the study aims to provide deeper insights into how humor is used, perceived, and integrated into everyday marital life. This focus allows

for an exploration not only of humor's positive functions but also of its boundaries and challenges. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to illuminate the ways in which humor contributes to the maintenance of marital satisfaction, resilience, and intimacy in contemporary relationships.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of how humor functions as a coping component in marital satisfaction. The design was exploratory in nature, chosen to capture the complex, subjective, and context-dependent experiences of couples. Participants were recruited from Slovenia using purposive sampling, ensuring that they met the inclusion criteria of being legally married and having at least three years of marital experience. A total of 24 participants (12 couples) took part in the study. The sample was diverse in terms of age, length of marriage, and educational background, allowing for a variety of perspectives. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

### 2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided participants the flexibility to express their experiences while allowing the researcher to probe for deeper insights. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions focusing on the role of humor in daily marital interactions, conflict management, stress reduction, and emotional bonding. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in participants' homes or at neutral meeting places, depending on their preferences, to ensure a comfortable and safe environment for disclosure. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture nonverbal cues and contextual observations.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo 14 software. A thematic analysis approach was applied to identify, code, and categorize patterns within the data. Initially, open coding was conducted to capture all potentially relevant aspects of participants' narratives. Axial coding was then used to organize these codes into broader categories reflecting different dimensions of humor as a coping mechanism. Finally, selective coding was employed to integrate categories into core themes related to marital satisfaction. The process was iterative, involving constant comparison between interviews to refine themes and ensure coherence. To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation was applied by comparing field notes with interview transcripts, and peer debriefing was conducted with two qualitative research experts. Member checking with a subset of participants further ensured the accuracy and credibility of interpretations.

## 3. Findings and Results

A total of 24 participants (12 couples) from Slovenia took part in the study. The participants ranged in age from 28 to 61 years, with a mean age of 42.5 years. The sample included 12 men (50%) and 12 women (50%). Most participants ( $n = 15$ ; 62.5%) had completed university education, while six participants (25%) had secondary education and three (12.5%) held postgraduate degrees. Regarding marital duration, five couples (41.7%) had been married between 3 and 10 years, four couples (33.3%) between 11 and 20 years, and three couples (25%) for more than 20 years. In terms of employment status, 16 participants (66.7%) were employed full time, five (20.8%) were employed part time, and three (12.5%) were unemployed or retired. The diversity in age, education, and marital duration provided a broad range of perspectives on the role of humor in marital satisfaction.

**Table 1**

*Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts from the Study*

Category (Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Humor as an Emotional Buffer	Stress Relief	Laughing during arguments; Joking after tense moments; Using sarcasm playfully; Humor to diffuse anger
	Emotional Recovery	Reframing problems with jokes; Making light of failures; Turning tears into laughter; Humor as distraction



	Anxiety Reduction	Shared jokes before stressful events; Playful exaggeration of fears; Laughter to calm nerves
	Conflict De-escalation	Breaking silence with humor; Teasing instead of shouting; Switching mood with laughter
	Coping with Daily Hassles	Joking about housework; Humor in parenting struggles; Laughing at financial stress; Light sarcasm over chores
	Resilience Building	Using humor to “bounce back”; Finding funny side in crises; Seeing humor as survival tool
	Humor as Escape	Joking to avoid serious talks; Using comedy shows together; Turning off tension with humor
2. Humor and Intimacy	Bonding through Shared Jokes	Inside jokes as secret language; Recalling funny memories; Personalized nicknames
	Playfulness in Relationship	Tickling games; Mocking accents; Silly dances at home; Childlike humor
	Sexual Intimacy	Playful teasing before intimacy; Joking about sexual awkwardness; Humor during romantic moments
3. Humor as a Communication Strategy	Affection Expression	Funny compliments; Using humor instead of “I love you”; Ironical flattery
	Emotional Closeness	Sharing humorous perspectives; Laughing together daily; Feeling safe to be silly
	Trust and Safety	Joking without offense; Knowing partner’s humor limits; Laughter as sign of comfort
	Avoiding Escalation	Humor instead of criticism; Joking to redirect conversation; Playful sarcasm to soften message
	Indirect Expression	Saying sensitive things humorously; Criticism masked in jokes; Humor as safe honesty
4. Humor and Marital Resilience	Persuasion & Negotiation	Humor to make requests; Joking to win favors; Teasing to encourage compliance
	Conflict Resolution	Humor as apology; Laughing at misunderstandings; Ending fights with jokes
	Everyday Interaction	Starting day with jokes; Humor in text messages; Funny nicknames in conversations
	Coping with External Stressors	Humor about in-laws; Laughing at work stress; Joking about political/economic issues
	Perspective Taking	Finding humor in setbacks; Using humor to see partner’s side; Laughing at self
	Long-Term Stability	Humor in aging; Laughing about health struggles; Nostalgic funny stories
	Positive Outlook	Joking about future challenges; Humor in uncertainty; Seeing laughter as optimism
	Collective Identity	Family humor traditions; Passing jokes to children; Humor as family culture
	Shared Growth	Learning to laugh together; Humor in problem-solving; Growing closer through humor
	Hope Maintenance	Humor in hopeless moments; Joking during illness; Finding laughter despite hardship

### Category 1: Humor as an Emotional Buffer

**Stress Relief.** Couples consistently highlighted humor as a way to reduce stress during marital tensions. They described joking during arguments or after a disagreement to soften the emotional weight. One participant explained, “Whenever things get heated, I crack a silly joke, and suddenly, we’re both laughing instead of fighting.” Humor provided a release valve that turned potentially harmful moments into manageable exchanges.

**Emotional Recovery.** Beyond immediate relief, humor helped partners recover from emotionally difficult experiences. Participants described reframing negative events with jokes or making light of failures. A wife noted, “When I messed up the family budget, my husband joked about me being the ‘minister of funny finances,’ and it made me feel lighter.” This reframing allowed emotional healing to occur more smoothly.

**Anxiety Reduction.** Humor was also employed to alleviate anxiety before stressful events. Couples mentioned playful exaggerations of fears or joking about worst-case scenarios. For example, one participant shared, “Before my surgery, my

wife kept saying she’d demand a robot upgrade if the doctor messed up. It calmed me down instantly.”

**Conflict De-escalation.** Humor often transformed the tone of conflicts. Instead of raising voices, partners broke silence with light teasing or laughter. A husband admitted, “I sometimes make a funny face in the middle of an argument—it’s impossible to keep shouting after that.” This strategy diffused tension and restored dialogue.

**Coping with Daily Hassles.** Couples frequently joked about everyday struggles such as housework, parenting, or financial challenges. “When the bills come in, we say, ‘Oh look, our favorite charity again!’ and we laugh,” reported one couple. This approach reframed hassles as shared humorous challenges.

**Resilience Building.** Humor was considered a survival tool during crises. Several participants described bouncing back from setbacks through laughter. One spouse reflected, “When the roof leaked, instead of crying, we called it our indoor waterfall—it helped us keep perspective.”

**Humor as Escape.** Some couples used humor to escape or avoid serious topics temporarily. Watching comedy shows together or using jokes to push aside heavy conversations

was reported. A participant explained, *"Sometimes, we laugh our way out of tough talks until we're ready to handle them."*

### Category 2: Humor and Intimacy

*Bonding through Shared Jokes.* Inside jokes and personal nicknames created a private world for couples. One participant said, *"We have this one silly phrase that no one else understands—it always makes us feel closer."* Humor served as a secret language, reinforcing intimacy.

*Playfulness in Relationship.* Couples often maintained childlike playfulness, such as silly dances or accent imitations. A wife reflected, *"He still tickles me like a teenager—it keeps us young."* These playful acts preserved joy within the relationship.

*Sexual Intimacy.* Humor reduced awkwardness during intimacy. Participants described playful teasing or joking about imperfections. One participant shared, *"When things don't go as planned in bed, we just laugh—it makes everything easier."*

*Affection Expression.* Humor sometimes replaced conventional verbal affection. Instead of "I love you," couples exchanged funny compliments or ironic flattery. A husband noted, *"She calls me her 'handsome disaster,' and honestly, it feels more intimate than just saying love."*

*Emotional Closeness.* Shared laughter fostered vulnerability and emotional safety. One spouse explained, *"I can be silly and not worry about judgment—it makes me feel truly close to her."* Humor thus deepened trust and intimacy.

*Trust and Safety.* Couples stressed that humor only worked when mutual trust existed. A participant stated, *"We joke a lot, but I know where her limits are. Laughter is only fun if both of us feel safe."*

### Category 3: Humor as a Communication Strategy

*Avoiding Escalation.* Humor was often a substitute for criticism. Instead of escalating conflicts, partners joked to redirect tension. *"When he forgets chores, I just say, 'You'd make a great magician—things disappear!' and we laugh,"* one wife explained.

*Indirect Expression.* Couples acknowledged that humor enabled them to express sensitive issues indirectly. A participant said, *"If I'm upset about his driving, I tease him about needing a Formula One license. He gets the point without feeling attacked."*

*Persuasion and Negotiation.* Humor was used in lighthearted bargaining. Spouses reported joking to request favors or win cooperation. *"When I want him to help with dishes, I joke that it's 'free gym training'—and it works,"* shared a participant.

*Conflict Resolution.* Humor often served as an informal apology or a way to close arguments. *"After a fight, I usually say something funny about myself. If she laughs, I know we're okay again,"* explained one husband.

*Everyday Interaction.* Humor infused daily conversations, both in person and through digital communication. Couples mentioned sharing funny memes, giving each other humorous nicknames, or starting the day with a joke. *"My wife sends me funny emojis every morning—it's her way of saying good morning,"* said one participant.

### Category 4: Humor and Marital Resilience

*Coping with External Stressors.* Couples laughed together about challenges like work stress, in-laws, or broader economic issues. A husband explained, *"We joke about inflation by saying our love is the only thing that hasn't devalued."* Humor provided solidarity against external pressures.

*Perspective Taking.* Humor helped partners adopt different viewpoints, especially in conflicts. One participant reflected, *"When she jokes about my stubbornness, I see it from her eyes without feeling attacked."*

*Long-Term Stability.* Humor was seen as essential for enduring marriage. Couples shared nostalgic funny stories and laughed about aging. *"When we both forgot our anniversary, we laughed and called it the 'memory loss club,'"* one spouse recounted.

*Positive Outlook.* Humor provided optimism in uncertain times. *"Even when we don't know what the future holds, we laugh and say we'll survive as clowns together,"* said a wife. This positive framing maintained hope.

*Collective Identity.* Families often developed shared humorous traditions that strengthened unity. *"Our kids already repeat our silly jokes—it feels like humor is part of our family DNA,"* explained one parent.

*Shared Growth.* Humor contributed to marital growth by enabling problem-solving and adaptation. A participant shared, *"We've learned to laugh our way through problems—it makes us stronger as a team."*

*Hope Maintenance.* Finally, humor was described as sustaining hope during crises such as illness. One spouse said, *"Even in the hospital, we joked about the food—it gave us the strength to go on."*

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study highlight the multifaceted role of humor as a coping component in marital

satisfaction. Across the interviews, humor emerged as a powerful emotional buffer, a tool for intimacy building, a communication strategy, and a resilience resource. Couples described humor as central to managing stress, maintaining closeness, and reframing conflicts, while also acknowledging its potential to avoid difficult conversations. These results align with a growing body of literature that positions humor as both a personal resource and a relational process.

One of the key findings of this study is the function of humor as an emotional buffer. Participants frequently emphasized that laughter reduced tension in moments of conflict and provided relief during daily stressors. This resonates with previous research demonstrating that humor styles are closely linked to resilience and retention across challenging circumstances (Staton, 2025). Humor allowed couples to reframe problems and cultivate optimism, consistent with studies showing that optimism and humor together predict marital satisfaction, particularly under stressful conditions such as infertility (Ostovar et al., 2020). By alleviating negative affect and creating opportunities for recovery, humor acted as a psychological resource that promoted emotional stability within the marital context.

Another central theme identified was the role of humor in enhancing intimacy. Couples described shared jokes, playful teasing, and humorous rituals as strategies to foster closeness and safety. These findings support the view that affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles positively affect romantic satisfaction and well-being (Lazzaro et al., 2022). Humor was not simply entertainment but a relational glue, a private language through which couples signaled love, trust, and acceptance. This echoes research on emotional intelligence and humor, which shows that couples with higher levels of humor-based playfulness report greater satisfaction (Sunil et al., 2024). Furthermore, the finding that couples emphasized the importance of knowing boundaries when joking aligns with previous studies showing that humor styles influence whether humor strengthens or weakens interpersonal bonds (Idrees & Batool, 2020; Tsai et al., 2023).

Humor also functioned as a communication strategy in the marriages studied, allowing couples to express difficult emotions indirectly, de-escalate arguments, and negotiate everyday matters. This mirrors findings that humor styles moderate the relationship between negative cognitive tendencies like rumination and overall well-being (Chuang et al., 2021). Just as humor interrupts negative cycles at the individual level, it helps couples interrupt spirals of escalating conflict by softening criticism or transforming

confrontation into laughter. In line with earlier studies on humor in workplace and group contexts, where humor has been shown to improve psychological safety and collective satisfaction (Crowe et al., 2019; Gheorghe et al., 2024), our findings suggest that humor creates a safer communication climate in marriage as well. Humor not only facilitated self-expression but also provided couples with a flexible tool to communicate difficult truths without causing defensiveness, echoing research on partner accuracy in humor perception and its positive associations with satisfaction (Purol & Chopik, 2022).

The findings further revealed that humor serves as a long-term resilience resource in marriage. Couples reported using humor to cope with external stressors, adapt to aging, and maintain hope during crises such as illness. This finding is consistent with the notion that humor contributes to long-term relational stability by fostering optimism and perspective-taking (Fritz, 2021). In particular, the use of humor during hardships reflects its role as a catalyst for resilience, similar to evidence in organizational research showing humor as both a catalyst and neutralizer of leadership effectiveness (Sobral et al., 2019). Applied to marriage, this means humor can inspire resilience when used constructively but can also create avoidance if it minimizes serious issues. Indeed, several couples in this study acknowledged that humor sometimes became a way of deflecting difficult conversations, underscoring humor's dual-edged nature.

The results of this study converge with prior work emphasizing that not all humor styles are equally beneficial. Affiliative and self-enhancing humor consistently emerged as constructive, whereas aggressive or avoidance-based humor could strain relationships. This pattern corresponds with cross-cultural studies on humor styles and satisfaction, which demonstrate that positive humor correlates with marital and life satisfaction while aggressive humor undermines these outcomes (Salavera & Supervía, 2017, 2018; Yue, 2017). Furthermore, humor's impact on marital satisfaction appeared closely tied to emotional intelligence and perspective-taking, echoing findings that humor mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and subjective well-being (Wang et al., 2018). These convergences highlight the importance of humor's quality and context in determining its effectiveness as a coping resource.

The qualitative narratives collected in this study also emphasize the evolving forms of humor in contemporary relationships. Couples mentioned the use of humorous



digital communication such as memes, emojis, and inside jokes shared through social media or messaging apps. This reflects research on meme-sharing in relationships, which found that humor exchanged digitally reinforces closeness depending on the alignment of humor styles (Brody & Cullen, 2023). The integration of digital humor into marital life suggests that the functions of humor adapt to cultural and technological contexts while maintaining their core role in fostering satisfaction and intimacy.

Interestingly, the study highlighted that humor was often employed as a substitute for formal apologies or a tool for relational repair. Couples noted that conflicts frequently ended when one partner made a humorous gesture. This echoes findings in longitudinal research on humor during life transitions, which showed that humor helped couples navigate the stress of pregnancy and transition to parenthood (Theisen et al., 2019). Humor's role as a repair mechanism thus appears robust across different contexts, whether in early parenthood or in the general marital life cycle. Similarly, participants' accounts of using humor to navigate power dynamics in their relationships mirror organizational findings that humor shapes perceptions of leadership and authority (Love et al., 2020; Rüzgar, 2018; Souza et al., 2019). In marriage, these dynamics play out in everyday negotiations, where humor softens hierarchical tendencies and maintains equality between partners.

Taken together, the findings of this study reinforce the theoretical proposition that humor is a multidimensional relational process. It operates at the emotional level by buffering stress, at the interpersonal level by enhancing intimacy, at the communicative level by softening expression, and at the structural level by fostering resilience and long-term stability. These roles align with previous research showing that humor contributes to satisfaction across multiple life domains—romantic, familial, and organizational (Crowe et al., 2019; Gheorghe et al., 2024; James, 2024; Sobral et al., 2019). Importantly, this study adds qualitative depth by illustrating how these processes unfold in the lived experiences of couples, particularly within the cultural context of Slovenia.

## 5. Suggestions and Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size, while sufficient for qualitative inquiry, was limited to 24 participants from Slovenia, which constrains generalizability. Cultural factors may have shaped how

humor is used and perceived, and findings might differ in societies with different humor norms. Second, the reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants may have portrayed their use of humor in a more positive light. Third, the study relied on semi-structured interviews without observational data, limiting the ability to triangulate self-reported humor use with actual behaviors. Finally, while NVivo facilitated systematic coding, researcher interpretation inevitably influenced theme construction, highlighting the potential for subjective bias in analysis.

Future studies could address these limitations by employing mixed-method designs that combine interviews with observational or diary-based approaches to capture humor in real time. Cross-cultural comparisons would also be valuable, as humor is deeply embedded in cultural norms and may play different roles in marital satisfaction across societies. Longitudinal designs could explore how humor functions across different stages of marriage, particularly in times of transition such as parenthood, retirement, or illness. Additionally, quantitative studies could examine mediating and moderating mechanisms, such as emotional intelligence or conflict styles, that shape the relationship between humor and marital satisfaction. Finally, future research should investigate the role of digital humor in modern marriages, given the increasing prevalence of meme-sharing and online communication.

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest that marital counseling and relationship education programs could benefit from incorporating humor-based interventions. Couples could be encouraged to develop affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles while being mindful of the potential harms of aggressive or avoidance-based humor. Practitioners may also guide couples in using humor intentionally during conflicts, as a strategy for repair and de-escalation. Training partners to recognize and validate each other's humor styles could foster empathy and alignment. Finally, encouraging couples to create shared humorous rituals—whether face-to-face or digital—may strengthen intimacy and provide a sustainable coping resource for managing the stresses of married life.

## Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

## Declaration



In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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