



Leader positive humor and employee creativity: The mediating role of work engagement

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How to cite: Yang, G. (2021). Leader positive humor and employee creativity: The mediating role of work engagement. *Social Behavior and Personality: An international journal*, 49(7), e10215

Leader humor plays an important role in organizations because it affects employees' attitude and behavior. The positive effect of humor in organizations has been widely touted; however, research on the effect of leader humor on employee creativity is still rare. This study addressed how leader positive humor affects employee creativity and whether work engagement mediates this relationship. Data were collected from 233 supervisor–subordinate dyads in 23 Chinese high-tech companies. Results of structural equation modeling indicate that leader positive humor was positively related to work engagement, and that work engagement was positively related to employee creativity. Additionally, work engagement mediated the relationship between leader positive humor and employee creativity. Thus, organizations should encourage managers to use positive humor to enhance employees' engagement at work, which will, in turn, lead to creative outcomes. This research extends understanding of the leader positive humor–employee creativity relationship.

Keywords

positive humor; leader humor; leadership; employee creativity; employee outcomes; work engagement; humor style

Humor is used in various aspects of our daily life (Nijholt, 2015). Since the 1980s, humor has been considered an important managerial tool for organizations to improve workplace effectiveness (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). There are four *humor styles*, which are defined as individual differences related to the use of humor (Masui & Ura, 2016): affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. Affiliative and self-enhancing styles are characterized as positive, whereas aggressive and self-defeating styles are characterized as negative (Martin et al., 2003). Scholars have suggested that positive humor styles can bring about positive outcomes, but that negative humor styles will lead to negative effects (Malone, 1980; Tarvin, 2012). Leader positive humor has been found to be positively related to positive subordinate outcomes, such as high levels of job satisfaction, employee commitment (Decker, 1987; Hughes & Avey, 2009), and work performance (Avolio et al., 1999).

Recently, researchers have begun to explore the association between leader humor and aspects of *extrarole performance* (e.g., employee creativity), which refers to actions not included as part of formal job requirements that increase the well-being of the organization or its members (Bowling, 2010). For example, Lee (2015) investigated the influence of leader humor style on employee creativity, and found that self-enhancing humor was positively related to subordinate creativity, whereas aggressive humor was negatively related to subordinate creativity. Using data from a large sample of academics, Kocak (2018) revealed that self-enhancing and affiliative humor styles were positively related to academics' creativity, but that aggressive humor was negatively related to creativity. However, studies on the relationship between leader humor and employee creativity are still rare. It is important to address this gap in the literature given that

the success of an organization depends largely on the creativity of its employees (Thompson, 2003).

Leaders play an important role in their followers' work engagement and performance (Gutermann et al., 2017). Sense of humor is a positive personality characteristic (Martin, 1998) that can be used to reduce stress, improve communication, and enhance group cohesiveness; therefore, it is a valuable managerial tool to motivate employees (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Lee (2015) suggested that future researchers seek to disentangle different mediators to determine the impact of leader humor on employee creativity. Work engagement is an important psychological mechanism driving innovative behavior (Agarwal, 2014). Thus, this study examined the connection between leader positive humor and employee creativity, and how work engagement mediates this relationship. To my knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the mediating role of work engagement in the leader positive humor–employee creativity relationship.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Researchers have found that good leadership can promote innovative and creative behavior (Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017; Tian & Zhang, 2020); thus, leader behavior is an important antecedent of employee creativity (Redmond et al., 1993). Priest and Swain (2002) investigated the association between humorous leaders and leadership effectiveness, reporting that good leaders tend to be rated highly on positive humor use. Leader positive humor, as a communicative tool, could be a crucial precursor to creative outcomes through amusing employees (Cooper, 2005) and reducing criticism of mistakes or new ideas (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), such that humor can be used to facilitate employee extrarole behavior by building a high-quality leader–subordinate relationship (Cooper, 2005). Studies have linked supervisor–subordinate relationship quality to employee creativity (Joo et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2014). Moreover, positive humor can help to build a positive group atmosphere (Curseu & Fodor, 2016), in which employees are motivated to show creative behavior (Dul & Ceylan, 2011). Hence, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 1: There will be a positive relationship between leader positive humor and employee creativity.

Humor is considered a personality trait (Martin, 2007), and positive humor, as a favorable leader characteristic, can provide a positive emotional experience to subordinates, which will lead to greater employee engagement (Goswami et al., 2016). Leaders can use positive humor to reduce employees' stress and aggression and make the workplace more welcoming, which then increases employee engagement (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Shah, 2018). *Work engagement* refers to “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). When employees are enthusiastic about and fully engrossed in their work, they will think creatively and employ creative energy in their jobs (Gichohi, 2014). Researchers have concluded that work engagement functions as a mechanism to fuel creative performance (Liu & Ge, 2020). Hence, I anticipated that employees working with humorous leaders would tend to have high levels of work engagement and would subsequently be more likely to be involved in creative efforts. Thus, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 2: The positive relationship between leader positive humor and employee creativity will be mediated by work engagement.

Method

Participants

Among the respondents, 97 (41.6%) were women and 123 (58.4%) were men, and their mean age was 27.2 years ($SD = 3.84$, range = 22–33). In terms of level of education, 145 (62.2%) had a bachelor's degree and 88 (37.8%) had a master's or doctoral degree. Within the leader sample, 88 (37.8%) were women and 145 (62.2%) were men, and their mean age was 38.7 years ($SD = 2.54$, range 35–42). In terms of level of education, 80 (34.3%) had a bachelor's degree and 153 (65.7%) had a master's or doctoral degree.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from 23 high-technology companies in Pearl River Delta, China, which are members of the Guangdong High-Tech Enterprise Association. The chief executive officers of these firms helped to randomly select employees and their direct leaders. The study was approved by the ethics committee of Dalian Maritime University.

Two sets of questionnaires were developed. One was for employees, who were asked to rate their perceptions of leader positive humor and work engagement. The other was for their direct leaders, who were asked to rate the employees' creativity. A questionnaire, together with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, was sent to each respondent via email. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and were informed that they could withdraw from the survey at any time. Of 380 questionnaires distributed to employees, 315 valid responses were received. Two weeks later, 315 supervisor-subordinate paired questionnaires were distributed. After removing questionnaires with missing values and/or obviously inaccurate responses, 233 valid responses were obtained from employees and their leaders (response rate = 61.3%).

Measures

Two bilingual researchers translated the original English items into Chinese, then back-translated them into English. Three professors in the field of organizational behavior checked the equivalence of meaning across the two cultures, and some wording was changed in the Chinese version. All measures were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Leader Positive Humor

Employees rated leader positive humor using five items from Decker and Rotondo's (2001) Positive Supervisor Humor Scale. Sample items are "My supervisor communicates with humor" and "My supervisor has a good sense of humor."

Work Engagement

Employees rated their own work engagement with nine items from Schaufeli et al.'s (2006) Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. The scale includes three dimensions, each of which is measured with three items: vigor (e.g., "At my work, I feel bursting with energy"), dedication (e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my job"), and absorption (e.g., "I get carried away when I am working").

Employee Creativity

Direct leaders rated their subordinates' creativity using Farmer et al.'s (2003) four-item scale. A sample item is "This employee seeks new ideas and ways to solve problems."

Results

Reliability and Validity of the Measures

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to verify the internal reliability of the measures. As shown in Table 1, the reliability coefficients of leader positive humor, work engagement, and employee creativity exceeded the criterion of .70, indicating good internal consistency of the scales.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations Coefficients, and Internal Consistency Reliability of Study Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Leader positive humor	3.56	0.65	.90		
2. Work engagement	3.75	0.70	.39**	.85	
3. Employee creativity	3.29	0.59	.40**	.35**	.88

Note. Cronbach's alphas are reported on the diagonal.

** $p < .01$.

I performed a confirmatory factor analysis with Amos 24.0 to assess the discriminant validity of the research model. The results show that the three-factor model, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .04, comparative fit index (CFI) = .97, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .95, did fit the data better than the single-factor model in which all items were combined into one factor, RMSEA = .25, CFI = .54, TLI = .41. These results support the discriminant validity of the constructs.

Testing of Hypotheses

Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses (see Figure 1). Results show that leader positive humor was not significantly related to employee creativity. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. However, leader positive humor was positively related to work engagement, work engagement was positively related to employee creativity, and the indirect effect of leader positive humor on employee creativity through work engagement was .11, 95% confidence interval [.02, .21]. An alternative model was built by removing the path from leader positive humor to work engagement, and the results show that the alternative model had a poor fit to the data, RMSEA = .13, CFI = .85, TLI = .83. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

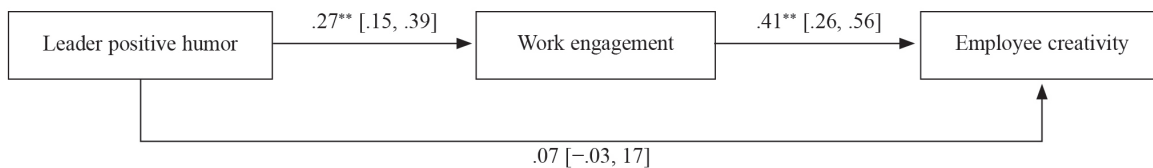


Figure 1. Standardized Path Coefficients for the Hypothesized Model

Note. Confidence intervals are shown in square brackets.

** $p < .01$.

Discussion

Humor is often viewed as a critical component of leadership effectiveness (Cooper, 2005; Priest & Swain, 2002). Prior research has alluded to the significant effect of leader positive humor on employee creativity (Kocak, 2018; Lee, 2015). I found in this study that leader positive humor enhanced employee creativity via work engagement, which furthers understanding of how the leader positive humor–employee creativity relationship occurs.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

First, inconsistent with Kocak (2018) and Lee (2015), my results did not support the existence of a direct relationship between leader positive humor and employee creativity; thus, the positive relationship between leader positive humor and employee creativity that has been found in other countries may not be generalizable to the Chinese cultural context. Chinese people are regarded as conservative, cautious, and unwilling to take risks (Chen, 1998). Therefore, the link between leader positive humor and employee creativity may be more complicated than has been found in previous research. My results indicate that in China, leader positive humor is not enough to stimulate employees to exhibit creative behavior unless it increases their work engagement at the same time.

Second, this study sheds light on the intervening process through which leader positive humor is associated with employee creativity. My findings show that work engagement fully mediated this association, which suggests that work engagement is of great importance in this context (Baumgardner & Myers, 2012). If subordinates realize that their supervisors have a good sense of humor, this leads to enhanced engagement with work (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Shah, 2018), resulting in greater employee creativity (Liu & Ge, 2020). These findings extend research on the leader positive humor–employee creativity relationship by clarifying the underlying process in this linkage. Further, I have contributed to the literature on the effects of leader humor by supporting the view that leader humor influences follower outcomes via psychological mechanisms (Hu et al., 2017).

This study also has practical implications for organizations. First, managers should emphasize the use of positive humor in their interactions with employees and should integrate positive humor into their leadership style. Organizations may encourage managers to communicate with their subordinates in a more humorous way, instead of exhibiting the paternalistic leadership behavior that has been considered a basic characteristic of Chinese organizations (Zhou & Long, 2005). Second, the results underscore the importance of work engagement in promoting employee creativity. That is, if work engagement is low, leader positive humor is not likely to facilitate creative outcomes. Thus, organizations should focus on enhancing creativity by increasing employees' work engagement.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current research has several limitations. First, I collected cross-sectional data; thus, caution should be exercised in inferring cause–effect relationships. Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to test the causal effects. Second, employee creativity was assessed by the employees' leaders in this study. Future research could use objective indicators (e.g., number of creative suggestions made) to measure creativity. Third, I did not incorporate leadership styles in my research model. Goswami et al. (2016) suggested that the favorable influence of leader positive humor is reliant on the leadership style that is used. Future research could address this issue by considering different leadership styles.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the General Topics of Liaoning Province Social Sciences Planning in 2019 (L19BZZ003) and the Economic and Social Development Project of Liaoning Province in 2021 (20211SLYBKT-034).

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