



Minnesota State University, Mankato

## Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato

---

All Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other  
Capstone Projects

Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other  
Capstone Projects

---

2020

### The Effects of Positive and Negative Humor at Work

Trevor Frey

*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds>



Part of the [Industrial and Organizational Psychology Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Frey, T. (2020). The Effects of positive and negative humor at work [Master's thesis, Minnesota State University, Mankato]. Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds/1041>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other Capstone Projects at Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

The Effects of Positive and Negative Humor at Work

Trevor Frey

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of a Master of Arts in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at Minnesota State University, Mankato

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

Graduated May 2020

April 27, 2020

The Effects of Positive and Negative Humor at Work

Trevor Frey

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

---

Andi Lassiter, Ph.D.

---

Kristie Campana, Ph.D.

---

Marilyn Fox, Ph.D.

## Table of Contents

Statement of the Problem.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Humor Defined .....	3
Humor & Physical & Mental Health .....	7
Humor & Organizational Functioning.....	8
Humor and Leadership.....	10
Method .....	13
Study Sample .....	13
Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) .....	14
Satisfaction with My Supervisor Scale (SWMSS) .....	15
Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) .....	15
Results.....	15
Reliability.....	15
Data Analysis .....	16
Hypothesis Testing.....	17
Discussion.....	24
Limitations .....	29
Practical Implications and Future Research.....	31
Conclusion .....	32
References.....	34

**THE EFFECTS OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE HUMOR AT WORK****TREVOR FREY**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN  
INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY  
MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO**

**MANKATO, MINNESOTA****MAY 2020****Abstract**

The relationship between humor and work has been an extensively studied subject in psychology related to work. Past research has found a positive relationship between positive humor and work outcomes and a negative relationship between negative humor and work outcomes, though less research has been conducted in the realm of negative humor. This study aims to contribute towards research by replicating past studies when it comes to humor and job satisfaction – the relationship between positive supervisor humor was found to be positively related to job satisfaction for employees while negative supervisor humor was found to be negatively related to job satisfaction for female employees. There was also an interaction between shared supervisor and employee negative humor – employees who had a high sense of negative humor and worked for a supervisor who also had a high sense of negative humor were more satisfied with their jobs than employees with a low sense of negative humor who worked for a supervisor with a high sense of negative humor. Findings suggest positive humor consistently has a positive impact on job satisfaction and negative humor (specifically aggressive humor) may have a negative impact on female employees, except for when employees share the same sense of negative humor with their supervisor. If there is a shared sense of negative humor, employees are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Humor is a multi-faceted construct that can have significant effects on the workplace. It has been studied extensively in a variety of areas, from how individuals can use it to cope with stress and improve overall health (Kuiper et al, 1993; Martin et al, 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Mathew & Vijayalakshmi, 2017), how it plays a role in organizational functioning (Vitug & Kleiner, 2006; Plester 2009; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Mathew & Vijayalakshmi, 2017), and how it impacts the relationships between employees, notably between leaders and their subordinates (Decker & Rotondo, 1999; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Sobral & Islam, 2015; Robert et al, 2016; Mathew & Vijayalakshmi, 2017). Over time, researchers have clearly defined these multiple facets of humor (Martin et al 2003) and have created assessments that can be used to match individuals to the style(s) of humor they gravitate towards (Martin et al, 2003; Scheel et al, 2016). Previous studies have allowed researchers to investigate humor as an operationalized construct and have identified where gaps in our understanding of humor currently exist. The clearest gap currently rests between the depths researchers have gone to study positive humor versus negative humor, with a majority of the research focusing on the positive side of humor at work.

The present study will focus on the more under-researched side of humor (negative humor) and how it impacts leadership. Specifically, this study will examine how both positive *and* negative humor impacts the relationship between leaders and their subordinate(s). Existing literature on humor has found that positive humor generally yields positive results for individuals, organizations, and how leaders are perceived

(Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Mathew & Vijayalakshmi, 2017). This is not the case for negative humor, which is understudied in comparison with less consistent findings than positive humor. Does negative humor simply have a negative relationship to everything that positive humor has within an organization, or can it have positive implications as well?

## **Literature Review**

### *Introduction*

Humor at work has only recently been an area of interest in psychology. Some of the earliest studies on workplace humor first came out in the 1950s and 1960s (Roy, 1960; Sykes, 1966). Although studies existed during this time, more rigorous and empirical testing did not start until the 1980s (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012). This area of research was further bolstered in the years to come during the time of positive psychology's beginnings (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Since the 1980s there has been a growing number of researchers who have studied humor at work. Although they all study the same overarching construct, there are different focuses when studying humor at work (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012). Additionally, across studies there was not a clear indication whether or not a researcher was studying the *use* of humor or simply having a *sense* of humor; both terms have been used interchangeably. Steps have been taken in the past 20 years to operationalize and clearly define humor so it may be studied more thoroughly (Martin et al, 2003, Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012, Scheel et al, 2016, Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017).

### *Humor Defined*

The construct of humor itself has been extensively studied and has been well-defined as a multi-faceted, measurable construct. Humor has various definitions across different researchers. It can be defined as a communicative activity with positive emotional reactions by perceivers (Martin et al, 2003), a trait-like cheerfulness (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012), or a multidimensional construct that can include the abilities to produce, recognize, appreciate, and use humor as a coping strategy (Scheel et al 2016). It has also been theorized to take the form of multiple constructs that serve various purposes, such as achieving superiority over others, resolving incongruity between bodies of disparate knowledge, or the release of built up tension and stress (Romero & Arendt, 2011). To define it further, Martin et al (2003) described humor as a construct that can be split into four facets in a 2x2 model, with one side of the model focusing on the self or others and the other being positive or negative. This leaves four styles of humor that can be studied, two of which being positive or negative and the other two being focused on the self or on others.

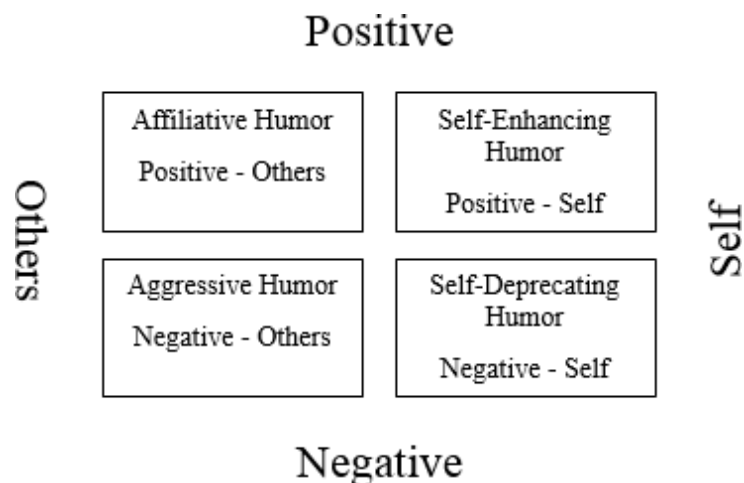
These four styles are:

1. Affiliative humor (positive, others): this style of humor refers to the tendency to joke around with others, say witty things, tell amusing stories, laugh with others, and/or amuse others. People who have exhibit this style of humor tend to be socially extroverted, cheerful, emotionally stable, and are concerned for others.
2. Self-enhancing humor (positive, self): this style of humor focuses more on perspective-taking humor, a tendency to maintain a humorous outlook on life and



uses humor in emotional regulation and coping. This style most represents the traditionally viewed view of “humor” as being a coping mechanism or even adaptive defense in response to stressful events. Individuals who exhibit this style are more likely to be able to cope with negative events and avoid stress-related outcomes like burnout.

3. Aggressive humor (negative, others): this style of humor contains compulsive expressions of humor without regard for the effects on others. This style can be seen in behaviors like sarcastic remarks, teasing, or otherwise using humor to criticize or manipulate others. Men are more likely to use this style of humor than women.
4. Self-deprecating humor (negative, self): this style of humor has tendencies to use humor in an excessively self-disparaging and ingratiating way. Examples of behaviors that exhibit this style of humor include allowing oneself to be the butt of others’ jokes or using humor as a form of defensive denial to conceal negative feelings. This style is also more likely to be employed by men than women.



*Figure 1: 2x2 Humor Styles Model (Martin et al, 2003)*

Both styles of positive humor can provide an adaptive function in work contexts (Scheel et al, 2016), whether that's through improved organization cohesion and functioning (Plester 2009; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017) or coping with stress (Kuiper et al, 1993; Romero & Arendt, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Scheel et al, 2016; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). Following each definition, affiliative humor is seen more when team cohesion and communication is improved while self-enhancing humor is seen in individuals coping with a stressful event. Both styles of negative humor are positively related to emotional exhaustion and negatively related to resilience and social competence (Scheel et al, 2016). Aggressive and self-defeating humor also showed associations with hostility, aggression, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Veselka et al, 2010) whereas self-defeating humor solely showed associations with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Scheel et al, 2016). Finally, aggressive humor was found to be negatively related to satisfaction with co-workers, team cooperation, job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Scheel et al, 2016).

Although research has identified constructs of aggressive and self-deprecating humor, these have not been researched as extensively as affiliative or self-enhancing humor. This is likely due to the fact that humor has traditionally been viewed as a positive construct that generally brings on positive effects or changes in individuals (Robert et al, 2016). It is unclear whether negative humor is simply negatively related to

the positive effects that are associated with positive humor because it is negative in nature or if there are some positive outcomes that can result from negative humor (Romero & Arendt, 2011). What's more unclear is that negative humor can have different effects on outcomes such as negligent behavior or job satisfaction when other factors are included. High supervisor negative humor use (along with high positive humor use) was found to be positively related to job satisfaction for subordinates if their relationship quality is high but not when the relationship quality is low (Robert et al, 2016). Subordinates who exhibited the same style of negative humor as their supervisors also reported a higher LMX (leader-member exchange) with their supervisors (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). Plester (2009) investigated the boundaries of humor at work. The findings suggest organizations that used more aggressive humor (i.e., banter, cursing, risqué humor) strengthened bonding and group identity when the organization displayed these distinctive characteristics, but was liable to ostracize people in outside groups, particularly women (Plester, 2009). However, these negative effects can be reduced by implementing boundaries at work and are more likely to succeed if it is ingrained in the culture than if it came from a new policy (Plester, 2009).

Negative humor use seems to differ between private and work contexts as well (Martin et al, 2003; Scheel et al, 2016). Generally, self-defeating humor is used less frequently than aggressive humor in individuals, although this order is often reversed in work settings with aggressive humor being used less frequently than self-defeating humor (Scheel et al 2016). Additional sex differences show that men typically report having a stronger sense of humor than women in self-reports (Decker & Rotondo, 1999). This is

more likely due to the fact that women tend to focus on *only* using positive humor as opposed to men who use both positive *and* negative humor on average, not because men are inherently funnier than women (Decker & Rotondo, 1999). These findings were discovered while investigating three key areas in the research of humor at work: humor's effects on psychical and mental health, organizational functioning, and leadership.

#### *Humor & Physical & Mental Health*

Humor as a general concept has been linked to several health benefits both mentally and physically. This is especially true when applied to work. Biologically, laughter can positively affect cardiovascular functioning (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012). Positive emotions that are generated by humor can have analgesic or immuno-enhancing effects as well (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). Humor can help reduce burnout by helping employees deal with difficult situations, release tension, regain positive perspective on their jobs, and facilitate an optimistic reinterpretation of events (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012). This optimistic reinterpretation of events can lead individuals high in a sense of humor to reappraise negative events as benign (something funny) to protect themselves from the adverse effects of the experience (Kuiper et al, 1993). This change of outlook on stressful events can help individuals gain a sense of control which in turn reduces stress further (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). One study mentioned that coping humor was found to buffer the effects of traumatic stressors on burnout and PTSD in firefighters (Scheel et al 2016). Individuals with a sense of humor are also more likely to be socially competent and interpersonally adaptive, characteristics that facilitate the construction and maintenance of a wide social network (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012).

### *Humor & Organizational Functioning*

Humor's role has also been extensively studied within an organization. Humor improves the quality of functioning and performance under stress, fosters mental flexibility, attention, and memory, and increases openness to constructive feedback and motivates people to stretch beyond their assumed limits. Specifically, these effects include improving group cohesion and the efficiency of an organization. Laughter in the face of adversity can also serve as the glue that holds a team together on tough days (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). This cohesion is assisted with humor by generating positive affect among group members with its use, emphasizing shared values when something humorous is shared, and masking the unpleasant content of messages and thus reducing friction in interactions by tying a joke to that message (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012). Humor serves as a great communication tool, being a social lubricant that can increase group harmony, build group consensus and allows the group to withdraw momentarily from present, more serious concerns (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012). Humor can be used to communicate information or make a point in a positive way, which reduces social distance between group members, facilitate higher levels of trust, and assist in creating the group's identity (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012). Group members can often joke to express feelings for which there is not a socially acceptable or readily available outlet (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). Humor can also be used to deliver boring/dull information in a more engaging way by keeping the listener alert and focused on the presenter (Vitug & Kleiner, 2006).

Productivity can be increased in an organization by boosting team creativity with humor. If messages that were made in a positive manner took the form of constructive feedback, group members would be more likely to share new ideas or information with the group. This is likely due to the ambiguous nature of humor, which can allow for its users to critique others without producing negative interpersonal effects (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). This joking environment can create an open atmosphere by awakening positive emotions that enhance listening, understanding, and acceptance of messages (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). Humor used as a mediation tool in conflicts can help change perspectives, alter disabling expectations, reframe relationships, and provide several points of view on the topic (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017).

Organizations themselves can also have an effect on the type of humor that exists there. In a study of organizations and the type of humor being used, more professional organizations were more likely to restrict its use or rely on more light-hearted, positive humor than other organizations that had a less professional culture (Plester, 2009). All in all, to the extent an employee enhances communication and promotes constructive social interactions, positive work-related outcomes are likely to result (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012).

Humor has also extensively been studied through measuring how it relates to employee job satisfaction (Roy, 1960; Decker & Rotondo, 1999; Plester, 2009; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Sobral & Islam, 2015; Scheel et al, 2016; Robert et al, 2016; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). Use of positive humor within an organization has been linked to a positive association with job satisfaction (Plester, 2009;

Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Sobral & Islam, 2015; Scheel et al, 2016; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). Additionally, negative humor use (particularly among leadership to subordinates) is negatively related to job satisfaction (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Sobral & Islam, 2015). Although a resounding amount of literature exists that places positive and negative humor in clear cut relationships with job satisfaction, that relationship can become less clear when additional variables are considered, particularly among leadership-subordinate relationships.

### *Humor and Leadership*

Humor and its role in leadership has also received a substantial amount of research. Humor is a characteristic frequently associated with leadership and a leader's ability to affect change in followers (Avolio et al, 1999; Mao et al, 2017). Humorous leaders help reduce tension in teams and help subordinates get along better (Avolio et al, 1999; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017), especially when using humor in situations when conflict already exists between employees (Mao et al, 2017) The use of humor in leaders can reduce perceived social distance in subordinates as well, since a humorous leader will seem more relatable (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). Easing this social distance can make the boss-subordinate relationship more positive and less tense which could lead to a reduction in negligent behavior or intention to quit from subordinates. Links between leadership humor use and various measures of improved performance have also been found (Avolio et al, 1999; Mao et al, 2017). Leaders who use humor may also sound more persuasive to their subordinates (Vitug & Kleiner, 2006; Sobral & Islam, 2015). Generally, subordinates are more likely to report a higher sense of job satisfaction and to

rate their supervisor's qualities more positively than those who rated their supervisors as having a low sense of humor (Decker & Rotondo, 1999). Subordinates tend to view jokes coming from their boss as being funnier than if it can from another sender (Vitug & Kleiner 2006). It also humanizes their boss and softens the image of them (Vitug & Kleiner, 2006). Use of positive humor seemed to be even more beneficial for female supervisors than for males as well (Decker & Rotondo, 1999). Leaders do not need to become funnier or increase their levels of humor and/or laughter either. It is also beneficial to understand the significance of humor that already exists and to channel it in productive directions (Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017).

The style of humor used is also important to consider. Sobral & Islam (2015) conducted a study which found that the use of negative humor towards their subordinates was negatively related to job satisfaction and intention to stay while also being positively related to negligent behavior at work. Decker and Rotondo (1999) found that while individual subordinate differences influence their use of positive humor at work, their leader's greater use of negative humor at work influenced them to use negative humor more frequently as well. This could be due to the fact that negative humor is seen as more socially risky to use and is more dependent on social cues to use than positive humor. The subordinate's style of humor is also important to consider. Subordinates who reported a tendency to use positive humor (both for self and others) liked their leader more, had more respect for their leader, perceived more loyal support and were more willing to exert themselves to contribute to mutual goals (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). In contrast, subordinates who reported a tendency to express humor without regard for its



effect on others liked their leader less and reported having less respect for them (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014).

What is interesting to note, however, is that while humor styles have can have very specific outcomes, these outcomes can change when additional variables are considered. Although negative humor can hurt work relationships, researchers found that leaders high in self-defeating (negative) humor had higher LMX with subordinates with high self-defeating humor as well. This was not the case for subordinates who did not have high self-defeating humor (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). The reason for this could be an inability to take their leaders seriously if they exhibited this style of humor and the subordinates did not. Additionally, Robert et al (2016) found that both positive and negative humor were positively associated with job satisfaction when the leader/subordinate relationship was positive while both styles of humor were negatively associated with job satisfaction when the relationship was negative. Subordinate tenure also moderated the effect of humor and the leader/subordinate relationship, finding that the longer a subordinate stayed with a leader, the more positive effects they felt as a result of positive humor use from their leader while negative humor use was not significant (Robert et al, 2016).

Leadership can also influence which style of humor is used by subordinates, which could influence how humor styles affect their relationship. Decker & Rotondo (1999) found that individual differences served as a greater predictor for positive humor use while environmental differences served as a greater predictor for negative humor use. One of these environmental differences can take the form of a leader using negative

humor. A subordinate may feel more at ease to use a more socially “risky” form of humor if their supervisor also uses it. If this shared humor style is identified in a leader/subordinate relationship, this may lead to a different outcome in job satisfaction than what has traditionally been found to be true with negative humor. To test this theory and to attempt to replicate past research, three hypotheses have been created:

*Hypothesis 1:* Job satisfaction in subordinates will be positively related to positive humor used by their supervisor.

*Hypothesis 2:* Job satisfaction in subordinates will be negatively related to negative humor used by their supervisor.

*Hypothesis 3:* There will be an interaction between a shared sense of negative humor between subordinates and leaders and subordinate job satisfaction. That is, subordinates who report a higher sense of negative humor will report higher job satisfaction than subordinates with a lower sense of negative humor when their supervisor has a high sense of negative humor.

## **Method**

### *Study Sample*

The data was gathered from an online survey delivered to a sample acquired from Qualtrics. The participants were recruited from various sources, including website intercept recruitment, member referrals, targeted email links, gaming sites, loyalty web portals, permission-based networks, and social media. Participants were compensated by

Qualtrics in a variety of ways not specifically disclosed by the organization, but it included cash payment, gift cards, and loyalty points to outlet stores. The final sample consisted of 209 respondents. The age and gender were recorded for each participant: 104 of the participants were male and 105 were female and the median age was 40 years old with a standard deviation of 14.06 years. All participants were currently employed at the time of taking this survey and were working under a direct supervisor.

#### *Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ)*

The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) is an assessment of humor created by Martin et al (2003) and has been examined further by researchers in studies (Veselka et al, 2010; Martin et al, 2012; Scheel et al, 2016). This scale has been the gold standard for measuring humor by researchers studying humor in organizations since its publication (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Sobral & Islam, 2015; Robert et al, 2016). This assessment is a 32-item questionnaire that assesses each style of humor (8 items per humor style) on a range of 8-56 for each style. This assessment will determine the humor styles of each participant. To assess the humor styles of the participants' supervisor, the items will be reworded to assess supervisor humor styles from the participants' point of view. The end result would be participants recording their own humor styles and recording the humor style that they perceive that their supervisor has. Since this scale will be reworded, it will be tested for internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha before any data is analyzed.

### *Satisfaction with My Supervisor Scale (SWMSS)*

The Satisfaction with My Supervisor Scale (SWMSS) is an assessment of an employee's satisfaction with their immediate supervisor created by Scarpello and Vandenberg (1987). 18 items assess satisfaction with an employee's immediate supervisor on a 5-point Likert-type scale. This scale will take a more direct look at job satisfaction as it relates to one's supervisor.

### *Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ)*

The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) is a measure of general job satisfaction created by Weiss, Dawis, England and Lofquist (1967). The questionnaire comes in two forms, a "long form" which consists of 100 items that make up 20 subscales measuring satisfaction across multiple facets of work, and a "short form" which consists of 20 items that make up a frequently used measure of general job satisfaction (Weiss et al, 1967). The 20-item test will be used to assess participants' general job satisfaction. This will be done to see if there are any differences between satisfaction at work in general and with their supervisor, which could be a result of shared or unshared humor styles.

## **Results**

### *Reliability*

Cronbach's  $\alpha$  tests for internal consistency were run for all humor styles subscales as well as the job satisfaction questionnaires prior to testing any hypotheses. All subscales with the exception of the aggressive humor subscale exhibited moderate to strong reliabilities, and their reliabilities were shown to be greater after an item of each

subscale were deleted. Table 1 describes the items that were removed from each subscale.

Table 2 describes the overall reliabilities of each subscale.

Table 1: Items removed to improve reliability

HSQ Item Removed	Item Statement
Affiliative 2 Self	I don't have to work very hard at making other people laugh - I seem to be a naturally humorous person.
Affiliative 2 Boss	My supervisor doesn't have to work very hard at making other people laugh - they seem to be a naturally humorous person.
Self-Enhancing 6 Self	If I am feeling sad or upset, I usually lose my sense of humor.
Self-Enhancing 6 Boss	If my supervisor is feeling sad or upset, they usually lose their sense of humor.
Aggressive 2 Self	People are never offended or hurt by my sense of humor.
Aggressive 2 Boss	People are never offended or hurt by my supervisor's sense of humor.
Self-Defeating 4 Self	I don't often say funny things to put myself down.
Self-Defeating 4 Boss	My supervisor doesn't often say funny things to put themselves down.

Table 2: Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for each subscale

Subscale	Cronbach's $\alpha^*$	Cronbach's $\alpha$ After Item Deleted**
Aggressive Humor – Self	.492	.546
Aggressive Humor – Boss	.486	.510

\* $N = 8$

\*\* $N = 7$

### Data Analysis

Correlations would be run to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 to determine the relationships between the perceived supervisor humor styles and employee job satisfaction. To test Hypothesis 3, a 2x2 ANOVA would be conducted with employee (participant) humor styles being one factor while supervisor humor styles would be the other factor, with the dependent variable being measures on a job satisfaction scale. This

would specifically be testing an interaction to see if employees who had a high negative humor style were more satisfied with their jobs when their supervisors also had a high negative humor style as opposed to when their supervisors did not have a high negative humor style or when the employee scored low on a negative humor style while their supervisor scored high on the same scale. Below list the scales used to measure humor styles and job satisfaction.

### *Hypothesis Testing*

Hypothesis 1 stated that there would be a positive relationship between employee job satisfaction and positive humor use by their supervisor. To test this, correlations were run on the two positive humor styles that the participants rated their supervisor to have (self-enhancing and affiliative humor) as well as the two work satisfaction questionnaires. Moderately positive and significant relationships were found between supervisor self-enhancing humor and both measures of work satisfaction (MSQ and SWMSS, see Table 3). There were also significant, positive relationships between supervisor affiliative humor and both the MSQ and SWMSS, although the relationship between supervisor affiliative humor and the MSQ was weaker. Table 3 describes the relationships between humor use and job satisfaction. These findings show a relationship exists between positive humor use by a supervisor and employee satisfaction at work. These findings are also consistent with past humor research and show support for Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 stated the opposite of Hypothesis 1; that negative humor use by a supervisor and employee job satisfaction would be negatively correlated. This hypothesis was tested similarly to Hypothesis 1, with the exception of correlating job satisfaction

with supervisor negative humor styles – aggressive and self-defeating humor. The results found from these correlations do not support this hypothesis (see Table 3). There was a slightly significant positive relationship between supervisor self-defeating humor use and the MSQ and no significant relationship between supervisor self-defeating humor and the SWMSS. Additionally, small negative relationships existed between supervisor aggressive humor use and both satisfaction questionnaires, but neither were significant.

Table 3: Correlations between perceived humor styles of participants’ supervisors and work satisfaction scales.

Humor Style	MSQ	SWMSS
Affiliative	.18*	.32**
Self-Enhancing	.41**	.34**
Self-Defeating	.16*	.11
Aggressive	-.08	-.10

\*\* $p < .01$

\* $p < .05$

However, when controlled for gender, there appears to be a slight difference in Hypothesis 1 and partial support for Hypothesis 2. Some differences do exist for male and female participants and their supervisor’s humor styles and satisfaction at work. Specifically, a stronger correlation exists between male participants’ supervisor self-enhancing humor and their satisfaction levels, and significant negative correlations exist between female participants’ supervisor aggressive humor and both job satisfaction questionnaire responses. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is partially supported when controlling for gender – a negative relationship exists between supervisor aggressive humor use and job satisfaction *only* for female subordinates.

Table 4: Two-tailed correlations between perceived humor styles of participants’ perceived supervisor humor style and work satisfaction scales separated by participant gender.

Gender & Perceived Supervisor Humor Style	MSQ	SWMSS
Male Affiliative	.17	.31**
Female Affiliative	.19	.34**
Male Self-Enhancing	.48**	.38**
Female Self-Enhancing	.35**	.30**
Male Self-Defeating	.26*	.19
Female Self-Defeating	.05	.01
Male Aggressive	.05	.02
Female Aggressive	-.22*	-.25*

\*\* $p < .01$

\* $p < .05$

Hypothesis 3 tested whether or not a shared sense of negative humor between a supervisor and employee translated to higher job satisfaction. That is, if an employee identified as having a high negative sense of humor and their boss also had a high negative sense of humor, then they would exhibit higher job satisfaction than those who had a low negative sense of humor who worked under supervisors who had a high negative sense of humor. To test this, participants' and their supervisors' humor styles were split into two different levels – low and high levels of humor for their ratings of aggressive and self-defeating humor. These levels were created based on whether or not their scores landed below or over a cutoff score at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of the sample for each humor style. After these humor styles were recoded to high or low scores, a series of 2x2 ANOVAs were run measuring mean differences in satisfaction scores on the MSQ as well as the SWMSS using supervisor and participant negative humor styles as factors. Interactions between these tests were then tested for significant results. Table 5 describes the series of ANOVAs run to test Hypothesis 3:

Table 5: The series of 2x2 ANOVAs run to test Hypothesis 3.



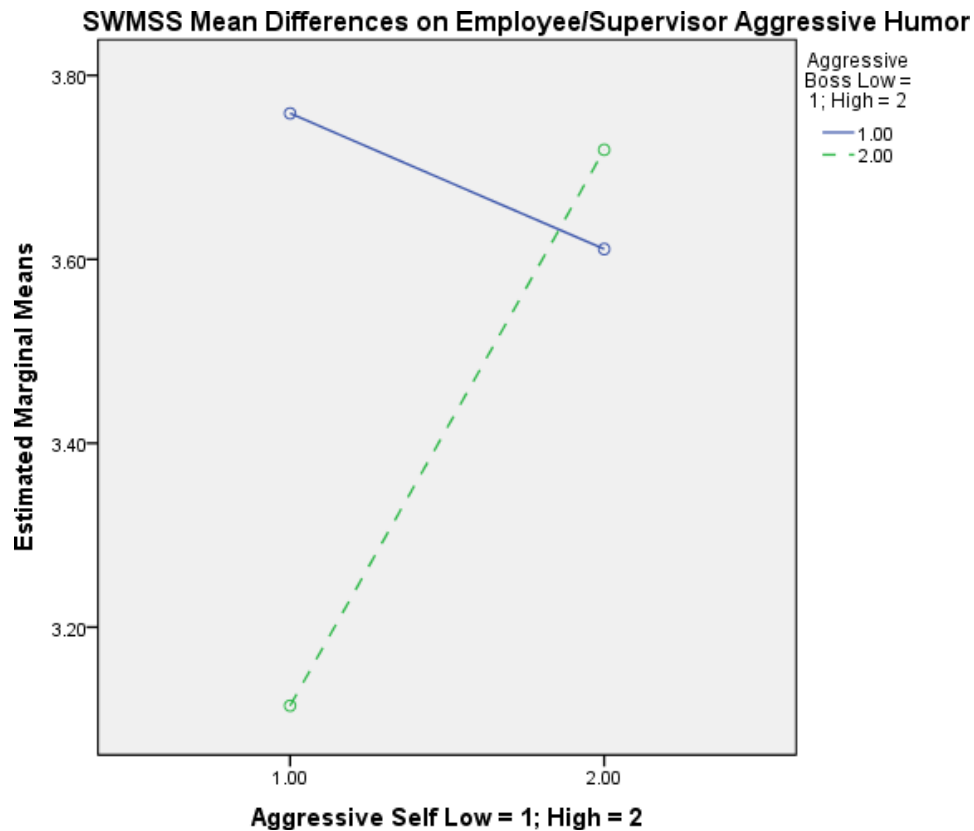
Test #	Factors	Levels	Dependent Variable
1	Supervisor x Participant Aggressive Humor	High/low aggressive humor	MSQ
2	Supervisor x Participant Aggressive Humor	High/low aggressive humor	SWMSS
3	Supervisor x Participant Self-Defeating Humor	High/low self-defeating humor	MSQ
4	Supervisor x Participant Self-Defeating Humor	High/low self-defeating humor	SWMSS

Hypothesis 3 specifically looked at negative humor styles – aggressive and self-defeating humor. The results show partial support for this hypothesis with shared aggressive humor styles. According to a 2x2 ANOVA, a significant interaction was found between shared aggressive humor styles and the SWMSS  $F(1, 161) = 4.06, p = .046$ . Specifically, participants who scored high on aggressive humor were more satisfied with their supervisor than participants who scored low on aggressive humor when their supervisor also scored high on aggressive humor. There were no significant main effects for this ANOVA. Table 6 below describes the mean differences between each group and Figure 2 provides a graph of the interaction.

Table 6: Means and standard deviations of SWMSS scores for aggressive humor styles.

Aggressive Humor Self Score	Aggressive Humor Supervisor Score	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low	Low	3.76	.84
	High	3.11	.93
High	Low	3.61	.78
	High	3.70	.94

Figure 2: Graph of mean differences of SWMSS on employee and supervisor aggressive humor on a scale of 3.20-3.80.



The results of self-defeating humor support Hypothesis 3 for both the MSQ and SWMSS. According to a 2x2 ANOVA, a significant interaction was found between shared self-defeating humor styles and scores on the MSQ,  $F(1, 165) = 12.19, p = .001$ . Specifically, participants who scored higher on the self-defeating humor scale were more satisfied at work generally than participants who scored lower on the self-defeating humor scale when their supervisors also scored high on a self-defeating humor scale. Although the significance was small, it should also be noted there was a main effect in this ANOVA. In the same 2x2 ANOVA, a significant main effect was found among employee self-defeating humor scales and job satisfaction  $F(1, 165) = 4.05, p = .04$ . Specifically, participants who were rated as having a high sense of self-defeating humor

had higher job satisfaction ratings on the MSQ ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = .84$ ) than participants who had a low sense of self-defeating humor ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .65$ ). Table 7 describes the mean differences between each group in the interaction and Figure 3 provides a graph of the interaction. The same test was run except measuring mean differences on the SWMSS which also contained a significant interaction. According to a 2x2 ANOVA, a significant interaction was found between shared self-defeating humor styles and scores on the SWMSS,  $F(1, 166) = 10.85$ ,  $p = .001$ . Specifically, participants who scored higher on the self-defeating humor scale were more satisfied with their supervisors than participants who scored lower on the self-defeating humor scale when their supervisors also scored high on a self-defeating humor scale. Similar to the previous ANOVA, there was a significant main effect as well for self-defeating humor among employees and satisfaction levels on the SWMSS  $F(1, 166) = 4.23$ ,  $p = .04$ . Specifically, participants who were rated as having a high sense of self-defeating humor had higher job satisfaction ratings on the SWMSS ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) than participants who had a low sense of self-defeating humor ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = .87$ ). Table 8 describes the mean differences between each group in the interaction and Figure 4 provides a graph of the interaction.

Table 7: Means and standard deviations of MSQ scores for self-defeating humor styles.

Self-Defeating Humor Self Score	Self-Defeating Humor Supervisor Score	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low	Low	3.74	.63
	High	3.16	.53
High	Low	3.54	.71
	High	3.91	.86

Figure 3: Graph of mean differences of MSQ on employee and supervisor self-defeating humor on a scale of 3.00-4.00.



Table 8: Means and standard deviations of SWMSS scores for self-defeating humor styles.

Self-Defeating Humor Self Score	Self-Defeating Humor Supervisor Score	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low	Low	3.64	.62
	High	2.99	.53
High	Low	3.44	.74
	High	3.87	.79

Figure 4: Graph of mean differences of SWMSS on employee and supervisor self-defeating humor on a scale of 2.8-4.00.



### Discussion

Humor is a multi-faceted construct that has been the subject of considerable research when investigating the potential effects it may have at work. This study aimed to replicate and contribute to this research by testing three hypotheses: 1) positive humor used by a supervisor will be positively related to subordinate job satisfaction, 2) negative humor used by a supervisor will be negatively related to subordinate job satisfaction, and 3) a subordinate would experience high job satisfaction if they shared the same negative humor use with their supervisor, but not when their supervisor used negative humor and they did not. All of these hypotheses were supported or partially supported by participants' responses.

Positive humor has been the primary focus of much of the literature behind humor at work, often due to its ties with its role as a coping mechanism and improving organizations through boosting areas such as engagement, creativity, feedback, and job satisfaction (Kuiper et al, 1993; Martin et al, 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Mathew & Vijayalakshmi, 2017). It should then come to no surprise that both affiliative and self-enhancing humor were found to be positively related towards measures of job satisfaction. Specifically, supervisor affiliative humor was positively related to subordinate satisfaction with one's supervisor (SWMSS), and supervisor self-enhancing humor was positively related to both subordinate overall job satisfaction (MSQ) as well as satisfaction with their supervisor (SWMSS). The supervisor self-enhancing humor also reflected a slightly higher relationship for males than for females on both measures of job satisfaction (an increase of .13 for the MSQ and an increase of .08 on the SWMSS). The positive relationship between positive humor and job satisfaction was largely expected to already exist before they were tested; these discoveries from the current study replicated previous research (Kuiper et al, 1993; Martin et al, 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Mathew & Vijayalakshmi, 2017). From these results, people appear to be more satisfied with their work when humor is a part of it, particularly when that humor is used in an affiliative or self-enhancing manner from their leader(s).

On the other hand, the role of negative humor at work has been researched less and its results are often conflicting with past research (Romero & Arendt, 2011; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Robert et al, 2016). In this study, only supervisor self-defeating humor had a significant relationship with overall job satisfaction (MSQ). It should also be noted

that this relationship (although small) was positive, which was in direct contrast with Hypothesis 2 – predicting a negative relationship with negative supervisor humor and job satisfaction. However, upon further investigation, participants were split up by gender and both groups were run separately. Those results partially supported the original hypothesis – there was a negative relationship between supervisor aggressive humor and female participants’ job satisfaction (MSQ and SMWSS). The other significant relationship between supervisor self-defeating humor and the MSQ only existed among male participants. These partially supported results appear to be somewhat consistent with past research that described a negative style of humor having a negative relationship with job resources that share a positive relationship with positive humor, including job satisfaction (Roy, 1960; Decker & Rotondo, 1999; Plester, 2009; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Sobral & Islam, 2015; Scheel et al, 2016; Robert et al, 2016; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). The gender differences from both results of Hypotheses 1 and 2 will be explored further after looking at the interaction between shared negative humor use by the subordinate and their supervisor and job satisfaction.

Although negative humor has been tied to negative outcomes at work (Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Sobral & Islam, 2015; Scheel et al, 2016; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017), employees sharing the same sense of negative humor with their supervisor also seemed to negate or even show the opposite of those outcomes (Romero & Arendt, 2011; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Robert et al, 2016).). That is, a shared negative sense of humor with an employee and their supervisor seemed to be tied to positive outcomes at work. Evidence from this study supported both of these outcomes

– when employees were separated into high or low groups for an aggressive humor style, they all indicated a similar satisfaction with their supervisor from the SWMSS with the exception of employees who scored low on aggressive humor while their supervisors scored high. That group scored nearly an entire point lower on the SWMSS than all other groups. The results for self-defeating humor were more dramatic: employees had similar ratings on the MSQ and SWMSS regardless of whether they were high or low in self-defeating humor when their supervisor was low in self-defeating humor but when their supervisors rated high in self-defeating humor, employees who rated low in self-defeating humor had the lowest satisfaction scores from both scales out of the four groups. This is in direct contrast to employees who rated high in self-defeating humor, who had the highest satisfaction scores from both scales out of the four groups. Gender was also controlled for just like in Hypotheses 1 and 2 to see if any of these distinctions were more prevalent in men or women, but the results were very similar with the original findings. Although there may be a distinction between men and women and this negative humor interaction, these results were severely limited by a decreasing sample size when separating men and women into each of the four categories. Based off of these results, it would appear that having a manager at work who has a negative sense of humor would put an employee in a position of being less satisfied at work. The exception to this, however, would be if that employee also had a negative sense of humor, which in that case the employee would actually be more likely to be satisfied with their jobs.

It is also worth mentioning that there were small yet significant main effects for participants who rated highly on self-defeating humor and job satisfaction. Participants



who had a higher sense of self-defeating humor had a higher job satisfaction on average than participants who did not, regardless of their supervisor. This may be due to the fact that self-defeating humor is the negative version of self-enhancing humor, which is a known coping mechanism and has shown to improve job resources for employees including job satisfaction (Kuiper et al, 1993; Romero & Arendt, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus et al, 2012; Scheel et al, 2016; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017). Just as individuals with a high sense of self-enhancing humor may cope by seeing the humor in an adverse situation, individuals with high levels of self-defeating humor may simply do the same when in the same situation but instead use themselves as the butt of the joke.

Gender differences are prevalent in this study and are mostly consistent with what the literature has suggested (Decker & Rotondo, 1998; Plester, 2008). The two differences found in this study were that there was a slightly stronger relationship between supervisor self-enhancing humor and job satisfaction for male participants than female participants and that a negative relationship existed between a supervisor humor and job satisfaction for only female participants (this was actually the opposite for male participants for the other form of negative humor – supervisor self-defeating humor was positively related to male participant job satisfaction). Past research has found that men report having a stronger sense of humor than women in self reports (Decker & Rotondo, 1999) which may help explain why there was a slightly stronger relationship between job satisfaction and their supervisor's self-enhancing humor. While these differences existed, it is worth mentioning that the differences were small and that is more likely happening from Decker & Rotondo's findings is that men are more likely to engage in negative

humor use than women. This notion is more likely the case when seeing the negative relationship with supervisor aggressive humor and job satisfaction (both from the MSQ and SWMSS) only among women while there is a positive relationship with overall job satisfaction (just the MSQ) and supervisor self-defeating humor only among men, with insignificant relationships between supervisor aggressive humor and both job satisfaction questionnaires. A different theory as to why there were differences in the relationships with humor styles and job satisfaction (especially among negative humor) between men and women comes from Plester (2009) in which there were clear observed differences in unspoken rules and norms when it came to what was acceptable humor between men and women at work (Plester, 2009). Men and women may experience different humor at work depending on the context, and if that humor goes against norms already established, they may be less likely to be satisfied at work. Regardless, these differences are difficult to attribute to one specific reason or explanation from the existing data. Gender differences and humor, both in and out of work, are areas worth investigating for further research.

### *Limitations*

This study suffered from four main limitations that could have yielded more consistent results if they were corrected for future research: 1) participants were the ones rating their supervisors' humor instead of the supervisors themselves, 2) the aggressive humor scale had poor reliability, 3) there was no controlling for the type of industry being studied, and 4) the participants did not identify the gender of their supervisors.

Since participants were the individuals rating their supervisors' humor styles, this study relied on perceptions of an individual's sense or style of humor. The participants' perceptions of their supervisor's sense of humor may have been easy to recognize (especially for humor styles involving others like affiliative and aggressive humor) but may have been different from how their supervisors would have rated their own humor styles, especially considering that participants only saw their supervisors' senses of humor at work and not outside the office which may have been different (Martin et al, 2003; Scheel et al, 2016).

When tested for reliability, the aggressive humor participant as well as supervisor scales from the HSQ had poor reliability in comparison to the rest of the humor scales. Had the scale contained greater reliability, Hypothesis 2 and 3 may have yielded significant and stronger results, especially when looking at gender differences and humor.

Participants who work in different industries may expect different styles of humor at their place of work which may have affected how they rated their job satisfaction. Participants who worked in an industry where humor is used and encouraged such as in the service industry may perceive negative humor differently than participants who work in an industry where humor use may be downplayed or may even be discouraged such as in an office or professional setting. A lack of controlling for this variable may have led to different results had it been controlled for. While it may have been controlled for, a far larger sample would have had to have been acquired.

One final limitation was that participants did not identify the gender of their supervisor. This may have helped further explore and explain the gender differences in job satisfaction and supervisor humor. Similar to the previous limitation, however, this would have required a far greater sample size even if participants had identified the gender of their supervisor in the first place.

#### *Practical Implications and Future Research*

Previous research has found (Avolio et al, 1999; Mathew & Vijayalakshimi, 2017), positive humor use from leaders can improve the lives of employees, regardless of whether or not it is affiliative or self-enhancing. While there is a negative relationship among job satisfaction and aggressive humor use from leaders among women, employees overall were more satisfied with their supervisor when that supervisor had a high negative style of humor when the employee also had a high negative style of humor as well. With that being said, negative humor appears to only improve job satisfaction if a leader uses it among people who clearly also have this style of humor. It would be best for the leader to consider who they are making jokes with before they say something in a negatively-oriented manner. While it could improve job satisfaction for some, it could make it worse for others.

Future research should further explore gender differences and humor at work and differences of humor in different industries. Supervisor genders and industries were not disclosed by participants in the survey, but findings from this study indicate these areas may show additional differences between humor and satisfaction at work. Additionally, a new humor scale could be developed that looks specifically at perceived supervisor (or

perceived subordinate depending on your sample) humor styles since supervisor humor was gauged through the HSQ with slightly reworded items. Rewording these items may have led to poorer reliabilities, particularly in the aggressive humor scale. Had a shorter or less similar version been created, aggressive humor may not have suffered as poor of a reliability as it did in this study.

### *Conclusion*

Humor use at work can impact various aspects of employees' lives in both positive and negative ways. The results from this study suggest that supervisors who have a stronger sense or style of positive humor are more likely to have employees who are satisfied with their jobs and their supervisor. The results also suggest that supervisors who have a stronger sense or style of negative humor (particularly aggressive humor) are more likely to have employees who are dissatisfied with their jobs and their supervisor among female employees. This does not seem to be the case for male employees. Regardless of gender, however, if a supervisor has a high negative sense of humor and their employees do as well, the employees are more likely to be satisfied with both their jobs and their supervisor while the opposite is true for employees with a lower sense of negative humor working for a supervisor with a high sense of negative humor. Leaders of organizations should be mindful of not only how their humor comes across to others (positive or negative), but also should consider who they are making jokes with (whether they share the same sense of humor or not). While positive humor seems to improve employee job satisfaction, negative humor can decrease job satisfaction unless employees also share that same style of humor. Leaders should consider these effects next time they

want to inject more humor into the office, although they probably shouldn't think too hard about it. As the saying goes, analyzing humor is a lot like dissecting a frog. You learn a lot in the process, but in the end, you still end up with a dead frog.

### References

- Avolio, B.J., Howell, J.M., & Sosik, J.J. (1999) A funny thing happened on the way to the bottom line: humor as a moderator of leadership style effects. *Academy of Management Journal*, 42,(2), 219-227.
- Decker, W.H. & Rotondo, D.M. (1999). USE OF HUMOR AT WORK: PREDICTORS AND IMPLICATIONS. *Psychological Reports*, 84, 961-968.
- Kuiper, N.A., Martin, R.A. & Olinger, L.J. (1993). Coping Humour, Stress, and Cognitive Appraisals. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 25(1), 81-96.
- Mathew, H.M. & Vijayalakshimi, V. (2017). Changing Definitions of Work and Play: Importance of Workplace Humour. *Psychol Stud*, 62(1), 12-20.
- Mao, J., Chiang, J.T., Zhang, Y., & Gao, M. (2017). Humor as a Relationship Lubricant: The Implications of Leader Humor on Transformational Leadership Perceptions and Team Performance. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 24(4), 494-506.
- Mesmer-Magnus, J., Glew, D.J., & Viswesvaran, C. (2012). A meta-analysis of positive humor in the workplace. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 27(2), 155-190.
- Plester, B. (2009). Crossing the line: boundaries of workplace humour and fun. *Employee Relations*, 31,(6), 584-599.
- Robert, C., Dune, T.C., & Iun, J. (2016). The Impact of Leader Humor on Subordinate Job Satisfaction: The Crucial Role of Leader-Subordinate Relationship Quality. *Group & Organization Management*, 41(3), 375-406.
- Rodrigues, S.B. & Collinson, D.L. (1995). 'Having Fun'?: Humour as Resistance in Brazil. *Organization Studies*, 16(5), 739-768.
- Romero, E.J. & Arendt, L.A. (2011). VARIABLE EFFECTS OF HUMOR STYLES ON ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES. *Psychological Reports*, 108(2), 649-659.
- Roy, D.F. (1960). Banana time: Job satisfaction and informal interaction. *Human Organization*,

18, 158-168.

- Scarpello, V. & Vandenberg, R.J. (1987). The Satisfaction With My Supervisor Scale: Its Utility for Research and Practical Applications. *Journal of Management*, 13(3), 447-466.
- Scheel, T., Gerdenitsch, C., & Korunka, C. (2016). Humor at work: validation of the short work-related Humor Styles Questionnaire (swHSQ). *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 29(3), 439-465.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive Psychology, An Introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14.
- Sobral, F. & Islam, G. (2015). He Who Laughs Best, Leaves Last: The Influence of Humor on the Attitudes and Behavior of Interns. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 14(4), 500-518.
- Sykes, A. J. M. (1966). Joking relationships in an industrial setting. *American Anthropologist*, 68, 188-193.
- Weiss, D.J., Dawis, R.V., & England, G.W. (1967). Manual for the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire. *Minnesota Studies in Vocational Rehabilitation*, 22, 120.
- Wisse, B., & Rietzschel, E. (2014). Humor in leader-follower relationships: Humor styles, similarity and relationship quality. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 27(2), 249-269.
- Veselka, L., Schermer, J.A., Martin, R.A., & Vernon, P.A. (2010). Relations between humor styles and the Dark Triad traits of personality. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 48, 772-774.
- Vitug, M. & Kleiner, B. (2006) How can comedy be used in business? *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 56(2), 155-161.