Integrated Approach of Self-Focused Humor Styles at Workplace: The Role of Trust in Leader

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Abstract

Our sense of humor is a crucial element of our lives, and it is a valuable tool for dealing with unpleasant life circumstances. Several studies have shown that humor is a multidimensional concept comprised of both beneficial and detrimental humor types, according to the most recent findings. The current study assimilates two (self-centered) humor styles, one being positive (self-enhancing) and the other one negative (self-defeating). Self-defeating humor seems to be less effective or even damaging to the attitudinal result of followers, while self-enhancing humor appears to be advantageous. The various processes and reasons for this relationship are addressed in this study, and also include suggestions for future LMX study fields as well as suggestions for methods to improve the empirical and theoretical and contributions of LMX in the future. Using data from 384 hotel sector workers, researchers discovered that integrating self-focused (self-enhancing and self-defeating) humor styles had a substantial impact on the task performance of followers. According to the findings of this research, leader humor has a considerable influence on both the LMX and the task performance of followers. The PLS-SEM method was employed for the analysis, and SmartPLS Version 3.3.3 was used. Thus, according to the findings of this research, task performance by followers is more likely to be attained when leaders use humor effectively while building quality connections based on trust. The results are groundbreaking because they show how important humor is to leadership in Pakistan's hotel business.

Keywords: Leader Humor, LMX, Task Performance, and Trust in Leader

Introduction

Social connections are essential to the success of any business (Allen and Eby, 2012). Numerous empirical studies demonstrate that positivity in relationships always helps subordinates to develop positive attitudes and behaviors toward their jobs in the workplace (Grant & Parker, 2009). Although the impact of such connections is widely established (Dulebohn et al., 2012), we are much less aware of the circumstances that promote or impede the formation of good working relationships. Professional relationships between employees and their immediate bosses are of special importance, while employees are interacting with colleagues and customers (Masih et al., 2020). Leaders have official authority over resources like incentives and job chances. Moreover, the connection between leaders and followers affects the interaction between coworkers within a team (Bono & Yoon, 2012). Also, owing to their official position, workers cannot avoid having a connection with their boss, whether good or bad. We need more study on the origins of good leader-follower interactions.

This research explores the interaction between a leader and a follower through an investigation of the role of humor styles. We concentrate on the function of leaders' humor (positive and negative) based on LMX theory. LMX defines the relationship quality between leaders and their followers based on trust, esteem, and reciprocated commitment (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The LMX is often used in studies on leader-follower relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Humor in leadership is usually described as a leader's communication strategy (Crawford, 1994), centered on amusing subordinates by sharing humorous occurrences (Cooper et al., 2018). Martin et al, (2003) figured out the four distinct types of humor, out of which affiliative and self-enhancing humor is positive, whereas

aggressive and self-defeating humor is negative. Affiliative and aggressive humor focuses on others, whereas self-enhancing and self-defeating humor is self-centered. Self-enhancing humor is similar to buffering humor (Martin et al., 2003) in that it employs humor to sustain a good connection between leaders and followers and enhance the positive behavior of followers. On the other side, self-defeating humor entails ridiculing or humiliating oneself to earn favor with others, a style linked to low-quality relationships between leaders and followers (Martin et al., 2003) and affects the followers' attitudes negatively. This research investigates the role of integrated humor style (self-enhancing and self-defeating) on the attitudinal outcome of followers' i-e- task performance, which is the significant individual attitudinal outcome (Lee et al., 2015).

While recent research on humor has improved our knowledge of leader humor at work, numerous critical questions remain unresolved. The methods through which leader humor improves the attitudinal outcomes of followers are poorly understood. This study highlighted the importance of LMX to understand the dyadic interaction between a leader and followers. Researchers investigated the origins of LMX extensively after realizing its importance. A leader's humor was postulated as an antecedent to excellent quality exchange interactions between leaders and followers (Yam et al., 2019). According to LMX research, leaders and members trust each other perfectly. Thus, most research on LMX focuses on how followers' trust in a leader moderate the relationship between the antecedent of LMX and LMX (Byun et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2016). The exceptional level of relationship that exists between a leader and his or her followers brings the improvement in the performance of followers. Leaders who use positive humor with their followers, develop a better relationship, which results in improved performance of followers. This study theorizes the task performance as an outcome of LMX like many researchers have used the task performance as an attitudinal outcome of followers (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006; Wang & Chen, 2020).

Considering that the impacts of leader humor on followers' task performance vary depending on the study (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), it's critical to understand the settings in which leader humor promotes highly favorable work outputs (Liu et al., 2019). In order to better understand the characteristics that amplify or diminish the influence of leader humor on followers' outcomes, specific environments in which followers are located should be investigated (Decker, 1987). According to Robert et al. (2016), receivers of humor analyze the humor's delivery reasons, which might alter the humor's efficacy. Trust in the leader is one aspect that influences followers' judgments of leader humor. According to research, trust in a leader has a substantial impact on how followers view their leaders' management activities (Mayer et al., 1995; Tremblay, 2017). As a result, the impact of a leader's humor on followers' results may differ depending on the leader's degree of trust. This "social interaction" viewpoint adds an essential and distinctive dimension to our understanding of how leader humor affects followers' outcomes.

This article concentrate on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), a fundamental element of which concentrate on the professional relationship between a leader and followers, particularly, the quality of dyadic relationship. The LMX theory may be regarded as a process approach, as it focuses on the dynamic dyadic relationship between a leader and followers, and the transactional approach, as both the parties leader and followers, are active players (Hollander, 1980). Finally, it's worth looking at how and when leader humor affects followers' outcomes (i.e. task performance). To meet these objectives, this article explores the mediating impacts of LMX and the moderating function of trust in a leader on the link between leader humor and follower outcomes. The focus of our study is on the relationship between leaders and followers in terms of LMX. Further, this study proposes the combined effect of the leader's self-focused negative and positive humor styles (self-enhancing and self-defeating), related to LMX. Figure 1 provides an overview of the research model. This study extends to the corpus of research in a significant way by following Graen & Uhl-Bien, (1995) framework; current research adds to leader-member exchange theory through building the relational process model of humor styles and attitudinal outcome of followers.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

The Self-Focused Humor Styles of a Leader

Previous researches highlighted the importance of humor in leadership and its classifications. Self-focused (self-enhancing and self-defeating) types of humor were identified by Martin et al. (2003). According to him, self-enhancing humor occurs when the person has "a generally humorous outlook on life, a tendency to be frequently amused by the incongruities of life and to maintain a humorous perspective". It is kind and friendly and brings amusing moments in life, life in spite of depression and challenges (Kuiper et al., 2010). For example, someone spills tea unintentionally over his clothes and then jokes that he does this every day to make sure that tea is hot. It is a type of coping humor, as users of this humor continually see the amusing side of an incident and change their sad feelings to the amusement (Martin et al., 2016). Self-defeating humor is harmful to self and "attempts to amuse others by doing or saying funny things at one's own expense as a means of ingratiating oneself or gaining approval" (Martin et al., 2003). For example, failing to meet a tight schedule and confessing to coworkers saying, "sorry guys, I warned you I was an idiot". This form of humor contains severe self-deprecation and self-amusement. Self-defeating humor is used to earn favor with someone and improve personal and social connections (Kuiper et al., 2010). Self-defeating humor reduces conflict among relationships, Yet, it may harm the focused person's thoughts and emotions, affecting relationships with others, and harming both others and oneself. This study investigates the two self-focused humor styles of a leader i-e- self-enhancing and self-defeating humor and integrated both to see the effect of leader humor on LMX and consequently on the attitudinal outcome.

We propose that the integration of self-focused humor styles (self-enhancing and self-defeating) in a leader directly affects the leader-member relationship and attitudinal outcome of followers, i-e- task performance. Studies previously conducted on leader humor highlighted the several benefits related to the psychological health of followers (Martin et al., 2003) and reduction of stress and depression (Chen & Martin, 2007). Followers may not immediately benefit from a leader's self-focused humor, but a more enjoyable workplace provides a good work environment. Leaders who use self-focused humor demonstrate less stress and anxiety at the workplace and maintain a quality relationship with followers and thus improving the attitudinal outcome of followers (Byun et al., 2017). A soothing setting would also encourage beneficial interactions (such as LMX), which might enhance the ability to perform better (He et al., 2019).

Hypothesis 1: Leader's humor (self-enhancing and self-defeating) is positively associated with task performance of followers

Hypothesis 2: Leader's humor (self-enhancing and self-defeating) is positively associated with LMX

LMX as an Intervening Variable

A major focus of LMX and outcomes research is how LMX affects the attitudes and behaviors of individuals, such as deviant work behavior, change-oriented OCB, and task performance. LMX is associated with improved subordinate task performance in several studies (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Han et al., 2018). Improved access to important resources and assistance is made possible by a greater exchange link with a leader, which allows and inspires followers to accomplish superior results, particularly higher task performance. Followers are likely to execute at a higher performance when their leader provides them with supplies, guidance, and opportunities (Wijewardena et al., 2017). Leaders also demonstrate an increased proclivity to award better evaluations to the achievement of their followers in a high-quality LMX, maybe as a way of showing their appreciation for the devotion and companionship they have received from members (Decker & Rotondo, 2001).

The trust that followers have in a leader has a significant impact on the actions, intents, and results of those followers (Lord et al., 2017). To be more specific, when followers place their faith in a leader, the leader displays a constructive interest in the outcome, which leads to the followers behaving in keeping with these anticipations, which is a confirmation of the Pygmalion effect, which states that greater expectations lead to increased productivity

(Eden, 1990), and/or the self-fulfilling prophecy (Brower et al., 2009). Other than expectations, mutual trust among a leader and followers increases the provision of visible and invisible support and resources, which enhance the relationship quality and lead toward the improvement of attitudinal outcome of followers (Pierce, and Gardner, 2004). Furthermore, from the standpoint of social exchange, followers who have trust in their leaders feel comfortable and respond by attempting to enhance their task performance in return (Lau & Liden, 2008). As LMX theory is a dyadic relationship, therefore Martin et al. (2012) recommend investigating the likely mediating influence of LMX at the individual level, since humor and quality of the relationship is also a dyadic process. Furthermore, loyal followers feel obligated to preserve trust and respond by improving task performance (Lau & Liden, 2008). Scheel et al. (2016) claim that since LMX theory is based on leaders creating excellent connections with their followers, it is reasonable to examine LMX's possible mediating function at the individual level.

All of these studies and reasons point to LMX being a mediator between a leader's humor and followers' task performance. This association may have additional mediators, such as self-efficacy. Contrary to what is implied by the foregoing, it is likely that the LMX might capture both the leader's positive psychological effect on followers and the movement of actual supplies from leader to followers. We, therefore, hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3: Leader's humor (self-enhancing and self-defeating) has a positive impact on followers' task performance indirectly, through the mediation of LMX

Trust in Leader as a Moderator

Humor is frequently misunderstood, as followers may take leader humor in many contexts, based on the source's goals. Inappropriate humor may be used by leaders to degrade or disparage staff, while good humor can be used to influence them. Our hypothesis is based on trust theories (Mayer et al., 1995) and trust's moderating effect (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001) that followers respond more favorably to productive humor climates and less positively to

offending humor climates when their leader is seen as trusted.

Followers' trust in their leader denotes their belief that their leader will behave in their best interests and will not take advantage of their vulnerabilities (Baer et al., 2015). A relational and character view, according to Dirks & Ferrin, (2002), are two theoretical approaches on trust that may be separated. The character viewpoint examines the target character's notion of trust and how it affects a follower's susceptibility in various leveled relationships. Especially in leader-follower interactions, where there is typically power disparity between followers and the leader, followers may feel vulnerable. A greater level of trust in a leader enhances faith that the leader will not abuse followers' vulnerabilities and has good intentions. These attributes include honesty, reliability, fairness, compassion, and aptitude Dirks & Ferrin, (2002).

The second viewpoint is relationship trust. A key criterion for the creation of social capital inside the unit is relationship-based trust (Ferres et al., 2004). Followers have faith in their leaders to help them, not to exploit and keep their promises (Byun et al., 2017; Ferres et al., 2004). High leader trust may be seen as a willingness to build caring, mutually beneficial relationships (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). When followers believe that their leader demonstrates high levels of trust, care, and consideration, according to the relationship-based trust perspective, which is based on reciprocity perspective (Gouldner, 1960) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), they are more likely to believe that their organization supports inclusion and motivates them to work together with other coworkers (Lau & Liden, 2008). In accordance with the findings of (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001), we propose that trust serves as a border requirement for evaluations of the humor atmosphere in the workplace. According to these researchers, trust influences attitudes and behavior in two ways: predicting the future behavior of another party and interpreting previous acts and reasons. Assuming they would be treated properly and their contributions will not be exploited, persons who assign good behavior to a leader, are more inclined to commit all of their efforts to role incorporation and task performance. Subordinates, who believe their leader is unreliable will dedicate

most of their energy to self-defense. In such instances, leaders' attempts to include may fail due to a lack of confidence in them. Dirks & Ferrin, (2001) claim that people who don't trust others are less inclined to collaborate and more prone to participate in deviant behavior. In reality, these actions may be seen as a lack of inclusion intention, which is more likely to emphasize exclusion (Twenge et al., 2001).

Dirks & Ferrin, (2001) identify the second step of trust as the evaluation of a partner's conduct. To trust someone, you need to be able to comprehend their actions. A person with strong trust is more likely to react positively to a partner's unfavorable behavior, from this viewpoint. They imply that the same behavior might be regarded differently based on trust. In unclear circumstances, individuals are more inclined to trust trustworthy persons. This shows that a leader's trustworthiness reduces the severity of offensive humor. Previous research indicated that people reacted better to negative comments from trusted leaders than untrustworthy leaders (Earley, 1986; Fedor, 1991). Fedor, (1991) found that subordinates who trusted their immediate leader were more motivated to improve when given unfavorable comments. According to Derfler-Rozin et al. (2010), People who trust other individuals are more likely to feel their efforts will be rewarded and to be enthusiastic about their potential inclusionary status in the future. Positive contacts with offenders are rare when interpersonal trust is poor, strengthening the workers' sense of alienation. So, we predict:

Hypothesis 4: Followers' trust in a leader moderates the association between Leader's humor (self-enhancing and Self-defeating) and LMX such that this relationship is stronger if trust in a leader is high
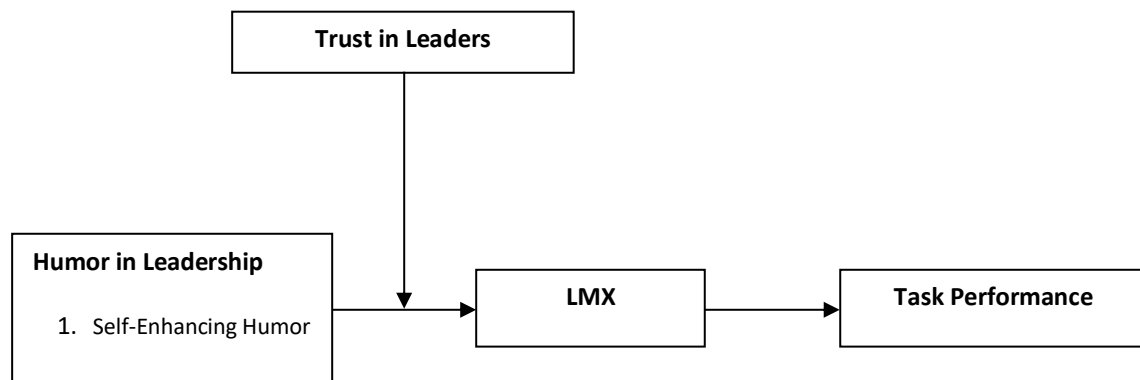

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Methodology

Sample and procedure

The data was gathered from the followers to rate their leaders in a two-wave survey with a time lag of six weeks, through an online survey. We designed this method of data collection in two phases to control the issue of biases of common method, as mentioned by many researchers (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We tested our model of humor and LMX in the hotel industry of Pakistan, as the relationship between a leader and followers is of immense importance there for sustainability. For the current study, we collected a sample from hotel service employees who participated in our study, and the final number of samples is 384. The major part of the sample includes the employees working on front-line service (59%), following the employees working in the back-office. 43% of the participants were female. Participants responded in the first phase (Time 1) to rate their leader's humor and their trust in the leader, and the second phase (Time 2) came after six weeks, where they rated LMX, and task performance. We chose the gap of six weeks to cater to the anticipation, that LMX may be changed within six weeks (Liden et al., 1993).

Participants were ensured about the anonymity of their information and were provided the basic

information about the purpose of the study. Participants were also ensured about the aggregate publication of the result of the data collected. These steps helped us to make the participants comfortable and to improve the rate of response, respondents were given reminders who did not turn back. Participation of respondents was purely voluntary and we did not offer any monetary or non-monetary reward to participants. We selected the different hotels for the data collection based on persona connections, and the appropriate sampling method was convenience sampling.

Measurement

Martin et al. (2003) designed a scale to assess self-enhancing (6 items) and self-defeating (5 items) humor, which was utilized in this research to evaluate both. An example of an item of self-enhancing humor is "If my leader is feeling sad or upset, He usually loses his sense of humor", and an example item of self-defeating humor is "Letting others laugh at my leader is his way of keeping his friends and family in good spirits". The trust in the leader was evaluated using the five items scale developed by McAllister, (1995). Followers' were approached to rate their leader. One sample item includes "I can talk freely to my immediate supervisor about difficulties I am having at work and know that (s)he will want to listen". We measured the LMX by a six-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien, (1995). A sample item was "My supervisor is a lot of fun

to work with". Task performance was assessed using a scale (3-item) from Farh et al. (2010). The items were, "High quality, low errors, and high accuracy in main job responsibilities", "High efficiency, fast execution, and high quantity in main responsibilities", and "Achieves high goals and in key job responsibilities." The Participants reported all of their answers on a Likert scale of five points.

Results and Interpretation

Measurement model

PLS-SEM uses hierarchical component models (HCMs) to assess second-order models with two-layer structures. For the assessment of the hierarchal component model, disjoint two stages were employed (Becker et al., 2012). The disjoint two-stage method only evaluates the lower-order components of the higher-order construct, which are intimately connected to all other constructs. To use the disjoint two-stage technique, researchers must store just the lower-order construct scores. Stage two uses these scores to assess the higher-order construct (Sarstedt et al., 2019). Figure 2 depicts that two exogenous constructs (self-enhancing and self-defeating humor) are the lower-order constructs. Task performance is an endogenous construct, and LMX as an intervening and trust in leadership is a moderator between the two exogenous constructs (self-enhancing and self-defeating humor) and LMX.
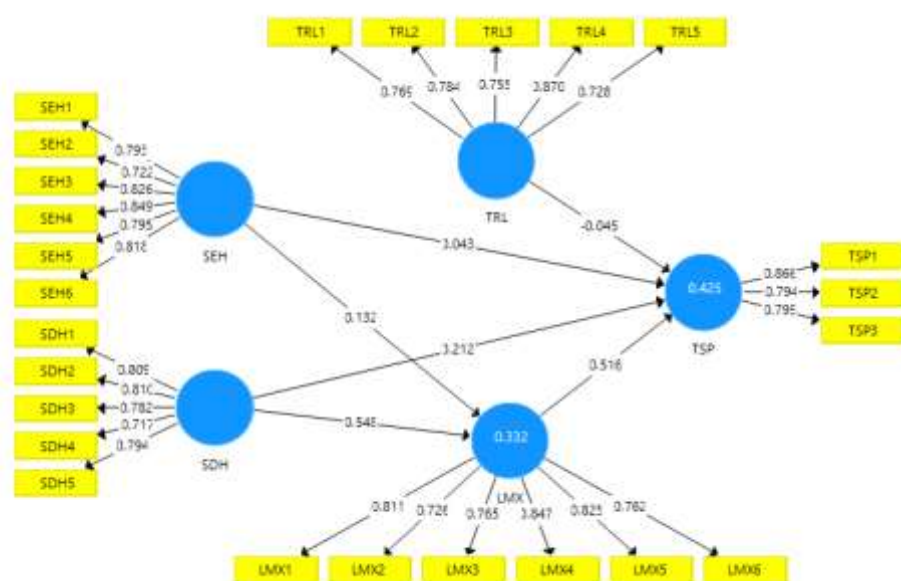

Figure 2: Measurement Model Assessment

The model is evaluated first for lower-order reflective measurement models that meet all requirements (internal consistency, convergent, and discriminant validity). In the first step convergent validity was determined to evaluate the measurement model. convergent validity includes the Cronbach's alpha, rho values, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. Table 1 depicts these values and provides that self-enhancing humor, self-defeating humor, LMX, trust in leader, and task performance does not have any validity and reliability issue. The achieved values meet the threshold requirement. According to Hair et al. (2017), the threshold value for Cronbach's alpha, rho, and composite reliability is greater than 0.70 and for average variance extracted, greater than 0.50.

Table 1: Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	**rho_A**	**CR**	**AVE**
LMX	**0.879**	**0.883**	**0.909**	**0.625**
SDH	**0.842**	**0.850**	**0.888**	**0.613**
SHE	**0.889**	**0.913**	**0.915**	**0.642**
TRL	**0.846**	**0.899**	**0.887**	**0.613**
TSP	**0.754**	**0.757**	**0.859**	**0.671**

Note: CR=Composite Reliability, AVE=Average Variance Extracted

When assessing the discriminant validity of measures, it is critical to remember that they should not be construed as a reflection of other variables; this is shown by the measure of interest's poor correlation with other concept measures. Fornell and Larcker's criteria in Table 2 describe the discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The square root of AVE is the diagonal bold values of Table 2, and it should be greater than the remaining horizontal and vertical available values. The values that remained were the correlation coefficients between the constructs (Hair et al., 2012).

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (Fornell and Larcker)

	LMX	**SDH**	**SEH**	**TRL**	**TSP**
LMX	**0.791**				
SDH	0.561	**0.783**			
SEH	0.184	0.096	**0.801**		
TRL	0.288	0.524	-0.055	**0.783**	
TSP	0.630	0.482	0.161	0.213	**0.819**

The sensitivity problem was discovered in the Fornell and Larcker criterion by the researchers. As a result, a new approach for assessing discriminant validity was developed that has no limitations and takes into account the most recent method available. The Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio is shown in Table 3 to determine discriminant validity, where all values should be less than 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). We concluded that there was no discriminant validity problem between the constructs using the Fornell and Larcker as well as the HTMT.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (Heterotrait-Monontrait Ratio)

	LMX	SDH	SEH	TRL	TSP
LMX					
SDH	0.642				
SEH	0.199	0.116			
TRL	0.327	0.609	0.137		
TSP	0.773	0.600	0.192	0.246	

In Table 4, the variance inflation factor was employed to measure multicollinearity, as recommended by Hair et al. (2017). This study assessed the multicollinearity by using the conservation approach of less than 3, as there are two thresholds to assess VIF, which is VIF <3 and <5, and found no issue of multicollinearity.

Table 4: Variance Inflation Factor

	LMX	SDH	SEH	TRL	TSP
LMX					1.497
SDH	1.009				1.848
SEH	1.009				1.052
TRL					1.400
TSP					

Structural Model

When using a disjoint two-stage approach, the latent variable score is used as input for second-order constructs in the second stage of the two-stage technique (Becker et al., 2012). As shown in Figure 3, there are two determinants of leader humor in this model, i-e- self-enhancing and self-defeating humor. The moderation effect was generated by multiplying the moderator and independent construct.
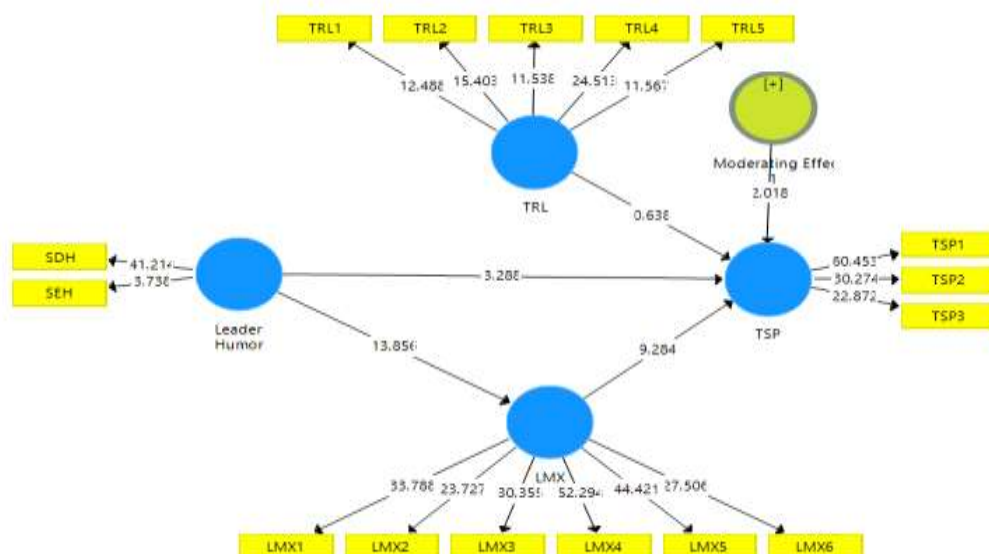
Figure 3: Structural Model Assessment

Table 5 demonstrates the findings of the hypothesis testing and study discovered the positive and significant result between the direct relationship of leader humor and LMX, and leader humor and task performance of followers. Furthermore, LMX also has a positive and significant effect on the task performance of followers. The association between leader humor and LMX is significantly moderated by trust in the leader, which is a key moderating factor.

Table 5: Hypothesis Testing

	Path	Std. Dev.	t-value	p-values
LMX -> TSP	0.519	0.056	9.284	**0.000**
Leader _Humor -> LMX	0.576	0.041	13.856	**0.000**
Leader _Humor -> TSP	0.194	0.060	3.288	**0.001**
TRL* Leader _Humor -> TSP	0.091	0.045	2.018	**0.044**

Table 6 demonstrates the specific indirect effect in our study model. According to the statistics, leader humor significantly influences task performance in presence of LMX.

Table 6: Specific indirect effect

	Path	Std. Dev.	t-value	p-values
Leader _Humor -> LMX -> TSP	0.298	0.036	8.368	**0.000**

Discussion & Conclusion

This study integrated the two self-centered humor styles of leaders to measure the attitudinal outcome of followers. Data was collected from followers to measure the leader's humor, LMX between leader and followers, followers' trust in leader, and task performance of followers. We developed a model in which leader humor (integration of self-enhancing and self-defeating) is related to followers' task performance and influence directly and also has indirect impact through LMX, and trust in leader is the moderator on the relationships between leader humor and task performance of followers. Several inferences may be drawn from the findings of this investigation. First, leader humor is positively and significantly related to LMX and task performance of followers. Second, leader humor is indirectly related to the task performance of followers through LMX. Third, the relationship between leader humor and LMX is stronger when trust in the leader is high. Our results are consistent with previous studies, where leader humor is beneficial to improve the attitudinal outcomes of followers (Kim et al., 2016; Tremblay, 2017). Our study contributes to the area of humor in leadership by integrating the self-focused humor styles to see the effect on leader-member exchange to measure the attitude of followers.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present research has many limitations. First, the data was collected from followers to measure their task performance, which is an element of common method bias. Future researchers may collect the data from the leaders to measure the task performance of followers. The sample collected for data analysis was from the hotel industry only, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future researchers may collect the data from different industries instead of one to enhance the generalizability of the results.

According to Podsakoff et al. (2003), the self-reported data creates biases, which is the limitation of this study. Future studies can reduce this bias by incorporating the interviews with respondents along with a questionnaire survey. This study used only one variable as an outcome, that is attitudinal outcome. Future studies may use more than one variable as an outcome of LMX. They can incorporate the behavioral and attitudinal variables as an outcome.

Although this study has limitations, still it is useful for its practical implications. It can help the hotel management to implement humor styles to enhance the quality of leader-member exchange, which will ultimately increase the task performance of employees.

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