

The More Humorous the Leaders are, the More Proactive the Employees will be? The Mediation Role of Emotional Exhaustion

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Abstract—From the prospective of Conservation of Resources theory, this paper discusses leader humor’s impact on employee proactive behavior and the mediation role of emotional exhaustion in Chinese situation. By building a structural equation model to analyze the field data collected from 175 employees, the empirical results show that leader humor exerts a significantly positive effect on employee proactive behavior and specifically, leader humor will improve employee proactive behavior by reducing employee emotional exhaustion. Chinese leaders are suggested to pay more positive attention to humor’s positive effect and supposed to take advantage of humor to increase employee proactive behaviors in future competition.

Keywords—leader humor; employee proactive behavior; emotional exhaustion Introduction

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of positive psychology in the 1980s and its application in the field of management, people are paying more attention to how to create a pleasant, happy and healthy working environment [1]. In this context, humor is increasingly seen as an effective management tool by leadership. Previous studies have shown that 97% of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies recognize the important role of humor in business, and CEOs need to cultivate more sense of humor [2]. However, in Chinese context, humor is contrary to the promotion of serious traditional ideas, and it is often seen as an expression of “unfairness”. Therefore, compared with the West, domestic leaders are less likely to show humor in formal occasions. Less humor does not mean that leaders lack a sense of humor. In fact, it is common for leaders to use humor to deal with conflicts. Humorous leaders are very popular with employees. Enterprise competition is becoming increasingly fierce and employee pressure is increasing day by day so that the demand for a relaxing and pleasant working environment is becoming more and more urgent. The call for leader humor is growing stronger. Undoubtedly, more researches on leader humor in Chinese context should be done to expand the leader humor literature.

II. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

A. Literature Review

As one of the most common features in work group, humor plays an increasingly important role in the organizations. Leader humor is a concept that is gradually formed when humor research penetrates into the field of organizational management. While many scholars highlight the effect of humor and regard humor as a "double-edged sword" [3], there are also many scholars who regard leader humor as a management tool for communication, emphasizing the deliberate nature of leader humor, such as Cooper [4], etc. Following Cooper’s definition of leader humor, our study regards humor as a kind of intentional social communication way in which leaders amuse the subordinates on purpose. Cooper and her colleagues have confirmed that leader humor is beneficial to employee organization citizenship behaviors (OCB) [5]. Though there is lack of researches concerning of the relationship between leader humor and employee proactive behavior, however, Cui has argued that both OCB and proactive behavior share some similarities [6]. They are both self-issued and cross-cutting in content. Therefore, leader humor may exert some similar effect on proactive behavior with OCB. Our study is trying to figure out the relationship between leader humor and proactive behavior.

B. Leader Humor and Employee Proactive Behavior

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory argues that the generation of stress stems from an imbalance between resource inputs and outputs [7][8]. Employees have incentives to acquire, maintain, and protect individual resources to cope with stress. Employee proactive behavior is such a behavior that employees actively respond to environmental challenges, confronted of high levels of uncertainty [9]. In environment with huge changes and high uncertainty, employees must consume large amount of resources when assuming proactive behaviors. If the loss of such resources could not be effectively supplemented, employees will be under pressure. Leader humor is regarded as a kind of interpersonal resource [5], which is mainly manifested in two ways. Firstly, one of the most important

functions of humor is building relationship [10]. Leader humor helps build high-quality leader-member relationship [11][12][13][14], and these relationships help to improve employees' psychological security [15] so that leader humor can be seen as a social resource. Secondly, leader humor enables employees to generate emotional resources by bringing about positive emotions [16]. To sum up, leader humor, as a kind of interpersonal resources, is capable of timely supplementing the employee's resource loss and maintain the dynamic balance of staff resources. Humor is the "lubricant" of social interaction [17], which enables employees to feel the trust and support of leaders [18], which complements employees' loss of resources while assuming proactive behaviors. Thus, the hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Leader humor has a significantly positive impact on employee initiative.

C. Leader Humor and Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is a state of exhaustion of emotional and physiological resources, and a feeling of exhaustion of individual emotional resources and related physiological resources [19]. According to the COR theory, as a kind of interpersonal resource [6], leader humor helps to cultivate employees' positive emotions [16]. When leaders communicate with employees in a humorous, amusing, and funny way, they will generate more positive emotions [6]. These positive emotions help employees build cognitive resources, social resources and psychological resources [20]. In addition, leader humor also helps improve employees' psychological security [15]. Obviously, leader humor constantly provides employees with a variety of psychological resources so that it will reduce the likelihood of employee emotional exhaustion. Thus, the hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Leader humor has a significantly negative impact on emotional exhaustion.

D. Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Proactive Behavior

Emotion is one of the individual factors that affect an employee's proactive behavior. Positive emotions can increase the proactive behaviors while negative emotions can inhibit the proactive behaviors [21]. Emotional exhaustion is the feeling that the emotional resources experienced by employees are exhausted [19], which is an inevitable result of accumulation of negative emotions. On the one hand, emotional exhaustion can easily lead to impaired self-esteem, frustration, nervousness, etc. [22], which will directly weaken the intrinsic motivation of employees and make employees reluctant to take the initiative to change or improve their work performance [23], finally resulting in a reduction in employee proactive behavior. On the other hand, according to the COR theory, the pool of resources for individuals engaged in different activities is limited [8][9]. Investing more resources in one activity means investing less in another. Studies have shown that reduction in emotional exhaustion will reduce job burnout, and reduction in job burnout means that employees have more resources to engage in in-role and extra-role behaviors [24]. Employees' proactive behaviors involve risks and uncertainties [7]. Assuming such the initiative, I will take the initiative immediately" and so on. The Cronbach's α value is 0.93.

behaviors requires employees to invest a large amount of cognitive resources, emotional resources and social resources. When an individual experiences emotional exhaustion and emotional resources are exhausted, employees lack the necessary resources to assume a proactive behavior. Based on this, the hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Emotional exhaustion has a significant negative impact on employee initiative.

In summary, when leaders treat their subordinates in a humorous way, they will trigger more positive emotions of their subordinates [6], more positive emotional responses [25]. As a result, it brings about more emotional resources and less emotional exhaustion. Emotional resource loss caused by emotional exhaustion is effectively supplemented, and employees have sufficient resources to develop response to challenges in highly uncertain environment, rather than passively accept it. Thus, the hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between leader humor and employee proactive behavior.

III. METHOD

A. Sample and Procedure

This study used field questionnaires to collect data. In December 2018, we investigate three companies in Guangzhou. With the assist of their leaders, 200 paper questionnaires were distributed and 183 were actually collected. We get rid of the invalid questionnaires by checking whether there are lots of blanks and same answers for all items. Finally, 175 valid questionnaires were obtained. Among them, 46.3% are male and 53.7% are female. In terms of age, 56% range from 18 to 25 years old, 21.1% from 26 to 35, 13.7% from 36 to 45, and 9.1% are 46 and above. In terms of education, there are 15.4% high school and below, 40% junior college, 32.0% undergraduate, and 12.6% master's degree and above. In terms of leadership gender, male leaders account for 60.0% and female leaders account for 40.0%. In terms of leaders age, 26.3% are under 30, 45.1% are 31-40, 17.7% are 41-50, and 10.9% are over 50.

B. Measures

Leader humor: We use the scale developed by Cooper et al.. The scale consists of three items, which are scored by subordinates using a 5-point likert scale. From 1 to 5 means from "completely disagree" to "completely agree." The items such as "My leader often jokes with me" "In many situations, my leader will use humor to communicate with me" "At work, my leader often expresses humor to me." The Cronbach's α value is 0.90.

Proactive behavior: We adopt the scale developed by Frese et al, which contains 7 items, using a 7-point scoring method. It is assessed by employees. From 1 to 7 means from "completely disagree" to "completely agree." The items include "I offer to solve the problem". "Whenever there is a problem, I will immediately seek a solution." "Even if others do not take

Emotional exhaustion: We take the scale developed by Maslach et al, which includes 9 items, using a 7-point scoring

method. It is assessed by employees. From 1 to 7 means from "completely disagree" to "completely agree." The items include "I can't bear my job." "My job makes me feel frustrated." "My job makes me feel exhausted." The scale has a Cronbach's α value of 0.94 and has good reliability.

Control variables: Based on past research, this study controls individual factors that may be indicative of employee behavior, including gender, age, and education [26]. It also controls individual factors that may influence the mechanism of leader humor, including the gender of leadership and the age of leadership and the time of working with leaders [14].

IV. RESULTS

A. Common Method Bias Test

Since the study only measures the variables from the perspective of the employees, it is likely to lead to common method bias problem. In order to reduce the common method bias, the study firstly took some steps by procedural controlling it. For one thing, we used different likert scale to assess the variables. Specifically, leader humor is assessed with a 5-point likert scale while emotional exhaustion and proactive behavior are assessed with a 7-point scale. For another, we took different directional statement for some items [23]. Procedural control does not necessarily completely eliminate common method bias, so a common method bias test is also required. In this study, the Harman single factor method was used to test the common method bias. Investing all the three variables into an unrotated exploratory factor analysis, it is possible to precipitate three factors whose eigenvalues are over 1, accumulating a total of 67.80% variance. The first factor takes up 38.88 %. Zhou and Long argued that if there is only one factor or a factor can explain most of the variance, there exists a severe common method bias problem [27]. Therefore, the common method bias in our study is not quite severe.

In order to test the discriminant validity between leader humor, emotional exhaustion and employee proactive behavior, this study used AMOS 24.0 for confirmatory factor analysis to compare different models. As shown in the Table I, the three-factor model has the best fitting effect, indicating that the three variables involved in this study have good discriminant validity.

B. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table II lists the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient of variables. According to the correlation analysis results, there is a significant negative correlation between leader humor and emotional exhaustion ($r=-0.40$, $p<0.01$), and leader humor is significantly positively correlated with employee proactive behavior ($r=0.33$, $p<0.01$). Nevertheless, emotional exhaustion and employee proactive behavior are significantly negative correlated ($r = -0.28$, $p < 0.01$).

C. Hypotheses Test

In our study, we first used SPSS24.0 to make a linear regression test to see whether the control variables significantly affect our dependent variable. The result showed that not

significance existed there. Then Amos24.0 was used to construct a structural equation model to test the main effect and the mediation effect. First, the leader humor and employee proactive behavior were included in the structural equation model to test the main effect. The data showed that leader humor was significantly positively correlated with employee proactive behavior ($\beta=0.35$, $p<0.01$), supporting H1. Next, it was assumed that the paths involved in H1, H2, H3, and H4 were all placed in the same structural equation model for mediation effect testing. The results showed that there was a significantly negative correlation between leader humor and emotional exhaustion ($\beta=-0.38$, $p<0.01$), supporting H2; emotional exhaustion was significantly negatively correlated with employee active behavior ($\beta=-0.27$, $p<0.01$) so that hypothesis H3 was supported; and leader humor was significantly positively correlated with employee proactive behavior ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$). As shown in the Table III, after introducing emotional exhaustion as a mediation variable, the main effect of leader humor on employee active behavior was weakened (from 0.35 to 0.25), so emotional exhaustion played a partial mediation role between leader humor and employee proactive behavior. According to Baron & Kenny (1986) [28], this study used Bootstrapping method to further test the mediation effect of emotional exhaustion. The results showed that the mediation effect of emotional exhaustion reached a significant level in the 95% confidence level range ($\beta=0.10$, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.21]), supporting H4.

V. GENERAL DISCUSSION

A. Theoretical Significance

Firstly, based on the COR theory, this study explores the mediation role of emotional exhaustion between leader humor and employee proactive behavior. Our study used Cooper's definition of leader humor and regard leader humor as an interpersonal resource. When leaders communicate with employees in a humorous way, they provide effective interpersonal support for employees. Leader humor helps reduce employee emotional exhaustion, and enables employees to have sufficient resources to proactively respond to environment with risks and high levels of uncertainty, as a result of which, they will take proactive actions.

Secondly, this study enriches the study of domestic leader humor and verifies the applicability of leader humor in Chinese context. Kalliny et al. pointed out that the lack of proper use of humor in a specific cultural context not only caused misunderstanding, but also undermined the productivity of employees in the workplace [29]. Yang et al. compared leader humor's different influence on relationship building in China and North America [30]. These studies have shown that leader humor in Chinese context will show particularities. Based in Chinese context, this study explored the relationship between leader humor and employee proactive behavior. Studies have shown that Chinese leaders will also use humor in the workplace and gradually break the traditional notion that "leaders must be serious". Humor has gradually become a tool for management.

TABLE I. CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS

Model		χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	CFI	TLI	IFI
Three-factor model	LH ; EE ; EPB	6.06	0.17	0.68	0.73	0.69	0.73
Two-factor model	LH+EE ; EPB	8.03	0.20	0.60	0.61	0.56	0.62
Single factor model	LH+EE+EPB	11.27	0.24	0.43	0.43	0.35	0.43

^a NOTES: LH indicates leadership humor; EE indicates emotional exhaustion; EPB indicates employee active behavior.

TABLE II. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS

Item	M	SD	1	2	3
LH	2.90	1.11	1		
EE	3.52	1.47	-0.40**	1	
EPB	4.71	1.28	0.33**	-0.28**	1

^b NOTES: LH indicates leadership humor; EE indicates emotional exhaustion; EPB indicates employee active behavior.

^c N=175. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

B. Practical Significance

Firstly, leaders in the organization should pay attention to the important role of humor. Faced with a highly competitive society, the pressure on employees is increasing, and many employees are on the verge of emotional exhaustion. As a consequence, employees have an urgent need for a relaxing and pleasant work environment. Leader humor can create a relaxing and pleasant environment to a certain extent, which will reduce employees' pressure and reduce the emotional exhaustion. Leaders should pay attention to the important role of humor in the organization, breaking the traditional concept of "leader seriousness", and treating subordinates in a humorous and funny manner.

Secondly, in a rapidly changing world, organizations motivate employees to proactively improve themselves rather than passively accept [31]. The organization should create conditions for employees to assume proactive behaviors. Leaders should communicate with their subordinates in a humorous way. In the service industry, for example, employees face the ever-changing customer needs, and employees must be able to respond proactively rather than just follow the instructions of the job description or leadership [31], which requires that leaders should be tolerant of their employees when they make mistakes. Even criticism should be humorous rather than harsh. Leader humor helps to strengthen employees' psychological empowerment [32], increase employees'

psychological security [33], reduce employee emotional resource exhaustion and give employees more resources used to assume proactive behaviors.

C. Limitaion and Future Research

There are some shortcomings in our study. Firstly, our study only measures the variables from the perspective of employees, and even though we procedurally control the common method variance, there exists a little bit common method bias. Future research can adopt leader-employee matching questionnaire to control the bias. Secondly, based on the COR theory, our study only considers the mediation role of emotional exhaustion between leader humor and employee proactive behavior but there may exist other mechanism. From different perspectives or basing on different theories, future research can take different mediators into consideration, which will help deeply understand the mechanism between leader humor and proactive behavior. For example, the role of leader-member exchange between leader humor and employee proactive behavior can be explored based on social exchange theory. Third, our research uses the foreign mature scales to measure the variables, which may have a little cross-cultural difference problem. As a result, domestic leader humor scale as well as proactive behavior scale can be developed in the future.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the Conservation of Resources theory, our study explores the mediation role of emotional exhaustion between leader humor and employee proactive behavior. Specifically, leader humor exerts a significant negative effect on employee emotional exhaustion and emotional exhaustion has a negative influence on employee proactive behavior. By reducing emotional exhaustion, leader humor can improve employee proactive behavior. Not only does our research verify the validity of leader humor in Chinese context, but it also shows a good way to improve employee proactive behavior.

TABLE III. MEDIATING EFFECT TEST RESULT

Effect	χ^2/df	GFI	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA	β	95% CI lower limit	95% CI limit	Significance
Direct Effect	6.06	0.68	0.73	0.73	0.69	0.17	0.25	0.08	0.43	0.005
Indirect Effect							0.10	0.03	0.21	0.001

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