



Leadership & Organization Development Journal

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Ashita Goswami Prakash Nair Terry Beehr Michael Grossenbacher , (2016), "The relationship of leaders' humor and employees' work engagement mediated by positive emotions", Leadership & Organization Development Journal, Vol. 37 Iss 8 pp. 1083 - 1099

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-01-2015-0001>

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The relationship of leaders' humor and employees' work engagement mediated by positive emotions

Moderating effect of leaders' transformational leadership style

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine affective events theory (AET) by testing the mediating effect of employees' positive affect at work in the relationships of leaders' use of positive humor with employees' work engagement, job performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs); and the moderating effect of transformational leadership style on the relationship between leaders' use of positive humor and subordinate's positive affect at work.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were obtained from 235 full-time employees working for a large information technology and business consulting corporation. Moderated mediation (Hayes, 2013) was performed to test the proposed model.

Findings – Leaders' positive humor was related to creation of subordinates' positive emotions at work and work engagement. Positive emotions at work did not mediate between leaders' humor and performance or OCBs. In addition, leaders' use of transformational leadership style made the relationship between leaders' positive humor and employees' positive emotions at work stronger.

Research limitations/implications – This study provides evidence of the positive relationship of leaders' positive humor with employees' positive emotions at work and work engagement. Such knowledge may help to inform the training workshops in humor employed by practitioners and potentially create a more enjoyable and fun workplace, which can lead to greater employee engagement.

Originality/value – AET helps explain effects of leader humor, but the effects are complex. Leader's use of even positive humor is most likely to have favorable effects mainly depending on their leadership style (transformational) and if their humor successfully leads to positive emotions among employees.

Keywords Affective events theory, Transformational leadership, Work engagement, Positive emotions at work, Positive humor, Work behaviours

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

Leaders engage in behaviors at the workplace that are intended to influence their subordinates' actions (Avolio *et al.*, 2009; Hiller *et al.*, 2011); and leadership is an interpersonal activity that has been studied extensively in the workplace. The present

study examines one of the most commonly studied leadership behavioral styles not for its direct effects on employee effectiveness behaviors but instead for a secondary benefit that it may have. It may make the leader's use of humor more effective in motivating employees by encouraging their engagement with their work.

Leaders' use of humor is an interpersonal activity, just as the larger construct of leadership itself is. In the present study, we conceptualize leaders' humor as a relatively stable disposition or trait. When people perceive humor in another, they attribute the trait of a good sense of humor to that person. We posit that humor in the leader can make the subordinate experience positive emotions, which will result in a more engaged employee. There are many types of humor; however, affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Some of these are more positive and some are more negative in character. The present study specifically examines positive humor as a potentially favorable leader characteristic. Positive humor is defined as a trait or individual difference linked to attempt to amuse others with a benign and benevolent intent (Decker and Rotondo, 2001), and it can result in enjoyment in telling jokes, increasing interpersonal cohesiveness, and reducing stress (Martin *et al.*, 2003). If it has these effects, then applied to leadership, positive humor can be an individual difference in leaders that enhances their leadership effectiveness with subordinates in the social setting of the workplace (Decker and Rotondo, 2001).

Little examination of humor has been undertaken in leadership research, but positive humor used by leaders in interactions with their subordinates has been gaining some attention recently (Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012) because of its apparent favorable impact on work outcomes (Hughes *et al.*, 2008; Vecchio *et al.*, 2009), such as leadership effectiveness ratings (Decker and Rotondo, 2001), creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), individual and group performance (Avolio *et al.*, 1999), group cohesion (Cooper, 2008; Martin and Lefcourt, 1983; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012), and leader-subordinate relations (Decker and Rotondo, 2001; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012). Managers who use positive humor in day-to-day interaction are perceived favorably by their employees (Messmer, 2006); and the younger workforce in the present day places higher importance on a workplace culture; that is, tension free, fun, and positive (Wiltham, 2007), suggesting that humor might be more important for post-baby-boom workers. A few organizations such as Southwest Airlines and Sun Microsystems pay heed to that demand by giving the potential recruits humor assessments in the selection procedure (Barbour, 1998; Holmes and Marra, 2002; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006; Romero and Pescosolido, 2008).

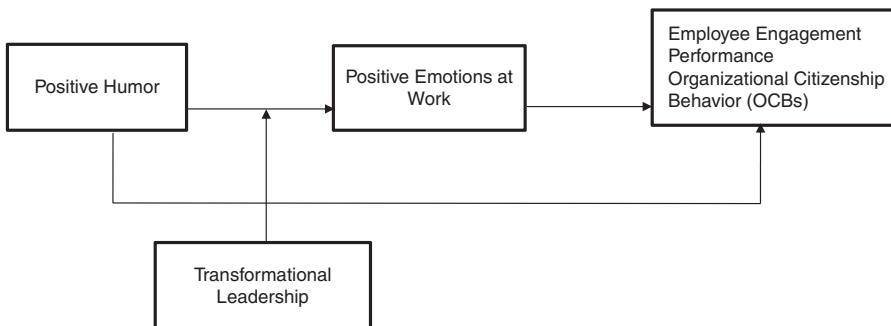
Although some previous studies have examined leadership style and humor (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Vecchio *et al.*, 2009), very few studies have examined mechanisms that could potentially explain the relationship between leaders' humor and outcomes that could affect overall organizational functioning. This is important if employers are to understand humor enough to implement practices based on its effects. The present study attempts to associate leader's positive humor with important outcome variables, subordinates' work engagement and their actions resulting in job performance and good organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). Engagement is a motivational variable in that it includes high energy and focus, and it is important because it is related to a variety of other meaningful individual outcomes such as employee burnout (Crawford *et al.*, 2010), organizational commitment, turnover intent, and job satisfaction (Saks, 2006). Further, it has also been linked to organization-level outcomes including productivity, profit, and employee turnover, demonstrating fiscal benefits (Harter *et al.*, 2002).

Affective events theory (AET) helps to explain how leaders' humor can result in employee engagement. AET states that occurrences or events at work result in prompt positive or negative affect in the employees, and the present study focuses on positive emotion (affect) as the explanatory variable for effects of leaders' humor on subordinates' engagement. Positive affect is important in AET because it is expected to influence important work attitudes and behaviors (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). In other words, emotions at work (positive affect) mediate the relationship between work environment and work outcomes such as engagement in the present study. Therefore, the present study tests is a mediation model wherein leaders' positive humor may induce positive affect or emotions at work (that act as an intervening variable), which in turn may positively influence work engagement, performance, and OCBs. In addition, however, we propose that this mediation works better when the leaders use transformational leadership behaviors (i.e. transformational leadership is a moderator; see Figure 1).

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 *Humor, affect at work and work engagement*

Although research on humor has only recently caught on in the management and leadership literature (Cheng and Wang, 2014; Cooper, 2005), research on humor had been a topic for a few decades in the areas of social psychology, personality psychology, and health research. For example, some of the earlier studies focused on stress buffering effects of positive humor (Lefcourt and Martin, 1986; Martin and Dobbins, 1988; Martin and Lefcourt, 1983). An earlier study by Martin and Lefcourt (1983) found people with low positive humor had a positive relationship between life event stressors and mood disturbances. Some studies have found positive effect of humor on their health outcomes (Celso *et al.*, 2003; Fry, 1995). Other studies have established positive associations between humor, personality, and individual differences. For example, a study by Kuiper *et al.* (1995) explored the connections between positive humor, cognitive appraisals and extraversion and emotionality, finding positive associations between humor, positive affect and task motivation. Gradually humor entered integrated into management literature as management scholars and organizational psychologists further expanded the research by exploring humor as leader trait or characteristic (Decker and Rotondo, 2001) relating to trust in



Note: Moderated mediation with positive work experiences as a mediator and transformational leadership as a moderator of the indirect path between humor and engagement

Figure 1. Summary of hypotheses

leaders reported by subordinates (Hampes, 1999), creativity (Holmes, 2007), and leadership effectiveness ratings (Priest and Swain, 2002). These earlier studies focused on humor of the focal persona and outcomes of that person. The present study examines cross-person effects instead, that is, the potential effects of one person's humor (the leader) on another person (the subordinate or follower).

Positive humor can help leaders by shaping the work environment in ways that are favorable for leadership (Decker and Rotondo, 2001). As stated previously, humor can be considered a trait or an individual difference of the person that can express itself in a social setting. Based on the wheel model of humor (Roberts and Wilbanks, 2012), the expression of humor can start and perpetuate a cycle of positive emotions (Roberts and Wilbanks, 2012); humorous events produced by a humorous person help to create positive affect in members of the audience through a social contagion process. Based on this model of humor, leaders' humor in the workplace could enhance positive affect or emotions experienced by employees. There may be something primal about humor, because the presentation of humor has been associated with activation of dopaminergic reward centers in the brain and, consequently, the creation of positive emotions (Goel and Dolan, 2007). Two recent studies by Cheng and Wang (2014) found that humor influenced persistence behavior through generating emotions. This further gives support to the premise that the use of humor influences affect and emotions.

Additionally, we posit that subordinates' positive affect at work could be related to their work engagement. Work engagement, a work attitude, and motivational variable, refers to a positive state of mind that involves high levels of energy while working, and having a high sense of enthusiasm and concentration at work (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Positive humor generally influences work engagement that involves enthusiasm, energy, and being engrossed in work (Konovsky and Pugh, 1994; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Leaders' positive humor has been found to be positively associated with work attitudes such as subordinate job satisfaction and commitment (Burford, 1987; Decker, 1987). A recent study by Sullivan (2013) on a sample of 148 athletes found a positive relationship between positive humor and athlete satisfaction with team task performance and team integration. Work engagement can be considered – an especially strong form of employees' attitudinal reaction, a motivational variable that includes high energy and absorption in one's tasks (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006; Webster *et al.*, 2014). Performance of duties and responsibilities are a part of job descriptions (Williams and Anderson, 1991). An earlier study demonstrated that leader's humor had a positive influence on individual performance (Avolio *et al.*, 1999). OCBs are defined as discretionary behaviors that may or may not be explicitly required or rewarded but contribute to organizational functioning (Organ *et al.*, 2006). In turn, OCBs have been shown to be positively related to productivity, performance, efficiency, and job and customer satisfaction (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2009).

A recent meta-analysis by Mesmer-Magnus *et al.* (2012) found that leaders' positive humor was positively associated with subordinate job performance and satisfaction, workgroup cohesion, and perceptions of leader performance, and was negatively related to work withdrawal. The criteria in the present study, positive emotions, work engagement, job performance, and OCBs are argued to be energetic positive psychological and behavioral outcomes, which makes them especially likely to be related to leaders' positive humor, the predictor in the present study:

H1a. Leaders' positive humor will be positively related to employees' positive emotions at work.

H1b. Leaders' positive humor will be positively related to employees' work engagement.

H1c. Leaders' positive humor will be positively related to employees' job performance.

H1d. Leaders' positive humor will be positively related to employees' OCBs.

Leaders'
transformational
leadership style

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Positive affect at work is a state generated at the work place and through events and conditions encountered there, including leadership behavior (consistent with AET; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). It involves emotions such as high energy, excitement, enthusiasm, pleasure, satisfaction, feelings of being happy, and pride generated at the job (Van Katwyk *et al.*, 2000). The effect of positive emotions on health has been studied extensively (Fredrickson, 2000; Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002; Ong *et al.*, 2006), but the work or job as a generator employee's emotions is relatively understudied (Brief and Weiss, 2002; Bono *et al.*, 2007; Erez and Isen, 2002; Gopinath, 2011). AET proposes that certain features of the workplace and the nature of the job cause an employee to experience emotions that trigger job-related attitudes and behaviors. Thus the positive emotions generated by leaders' humor could influence work outcomes (such as work engagement). A study of call center workers, for example, found that occurrence of positive emotions at work partially mediated the relationship between some specific situations at work (autonomy, welfare participation, supervisory support) and an employee reaction, job satisfaction. Likewise, we propose that subordinates' positive emotions will mediate the relationship between another feature of work (encountering a leader with humor) and the stronger employee reaction of work engagement. Additionally, we expect humor to indirectly influence performance and OCBs through positive affect at work. A few recent studies have also suggested the influence of positive affect on work behaviors (Bledow *et al.*, 2013; Rich *et al.*, 2010). Thus we propose in addition to work engagement, positive affect at work will be a mediator for the relationship of leader's humor with subordinate's performance and OCBs:

H2a. The leaders' positive humor-employees' work engagement relationship will be mediated by positive work emotions at work.

H2b. The leaders' positive humor-employees' performance relationship will be mediated by positive work emotions at work.

H2c. The leaders' positive humor-employees' OCB relationship will be mediated by positive work emotions at work.

2.2 Transformational leadership as a moderator

Humor can be associated with leadership (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Clouse and Spurgeon, 1995), and it should be able to both generate positive affect at work (Roberts and Wilbanks, 2012) and influence subordinates to do a variety of beneficial behaviors (Hogan *et al.*, 1994) such as express ideas and reduce conflict (Lippitt, 1982; Martin *et al.*, 2003; Sliter *et al.*, 2014). We also expect transformational behaviors that leaders display would function to moderate the link between leaders' humor and positive affect at work. Transformational leadership is a personalized leadership style that involves providing a vision and mission, creating high expectation, embracing values, and showing care and concern for the subordinates (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1990). Leaders high on transformational leadership style create unique connections with their followers, and they go beyond minimum leadership duties to satisfy the needs of their followers (Avolio and Yammarino, 1990). Followers have trust, respect, and confidence in high transformational leaders, because these leaders tend to take care of affective and emotional needs of their followers (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978).

In the current model, transformational leadership may act as a moderator to facilitate positive affect at work. The combination of leaders' positive humor combined with their transformational behaviors could trigger positive emotions at work (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). Employees who perceive high transformational leaders trust them to have the subordinate's well-being in mind and are more free to enjoy and react positively to the leaders' humor; they would be less likely, for example, to feel the humor is a criticism of them or making fun of them because of their trust in the leader. Therefore the leaders' humor would be viewed as positive and the emotional reaction would more likely be positive, consistent with AET (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996).

These positive emotions in turn will favorably affect work engagement as explained earlier in relation to the first hypothesis. Therefore, a leader who uses positive humor, and displays transformational behaviors in addition, should be able to create positive emotions at work, which in turn will increase subordinates' work engagement (Konovsky and Pugh, 1994) performance and OCBs (Williams and Anderson, 1991). Based on this, the following is proposed:

- H3a.* Transformational Leadership will moderate the indirect relationship between leaders' positive humor and work engagement through subordinates' positive emotions at work.
- H3b.* Transformational Leadership will moderate the indirect relationship between leaders' positive humor and performance through subordinates' positive emotions at work.
- H3c.* Transformational Leadership will moderate the indirect relationship between leaders' positive humor and OCB through subordinates' positive emotions at work.

The hypotheses are summarized by the illustration in Figure 1.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and procedure

Participants were full-time working employees from a global corporation headquartered in India. Initially, 850 randomly selected employees were sent invitations to participate in an online survey hosted by the company's website, with 100 employees finishing the survey (randomly chosen) being offered a free book as incentive to participate. A sample of 366 employees participated in the online survey. Of 366 employees, 131 participants did not complete at least 80 percent of the survey and were deleted from the data set. Matching supervisors and subordinates resulted in 235 dyads. The sample was mostly male (65 percent), averaged 41.1 hours of work per week, and was an average of 27.14 years old. The mean tenure in the organization was 3.30 years. The average age of their supervisors was 32.61 years, and they were mostly male (60.3 percent).

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Leaders' positive humor. Five items were used to assess positive humor from the Positive Supervisor Humor Scale developed by Decker and Rotondo (2001; $\alpha = 0.81$). Employees rated items such as "my supervisor has a good sense of humor" were rated on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree.

3.2.2 Transformational leadership. Participants' supervisors' transformational leadership style ($\alpha = 0.87$) was measured with the Transformational Leadership

Questionnaire (Podsakoff *et al.*, 1990). In all, 24 items addressing being a role model, fostering group goals, high performance expectations, individual support, and intellectual stimulation were formed the transformational leadership measure. They were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Respondents reported the degree that they agreed with each statement such as "Provides a good model for me to follow." Higher scores indicated greater transformational leadership behaviors.

3.2.3 Positive emotions at work. Positive emotions at work were assessed with the Van Katwyk *et al.* (2000) ten-item Job-related Affective Well Being Scale (JAWS; $\alpha = 0.91$). Responses were provided on seven-point frequency scale that ranged from "never" to "extremely often." Subordinates indicated the degree to which they felt emotions originating from their job. An example item was "My job made me feel satisfied."

3.2.4 Employees' work engagement. We measured subordinate's work engagement ($\alpha = 0.93$) using a 17-item scale (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006). Items such as "At work, I feel bursting with energy" were answered on a seven-point scale ranging from 5 (always) to 1 (never).

3.2.5 Performance. Job performance ratings were made by supervisors. A seven-item scale was used to measure performance (William and Anderson, 1991). We utilized five of the seven items, as the two reversed coded items lowered the internal consistency reliability of the scale. With the two items deleted, α rose from 0.42 to 0.85. An example item is "Performs tasks that are expected of him/her," and responses were indicated on a scale ranging from "never" (scored 1) to "daily" (scored 7).

3.2.6 OCB. OCB was assessed using Williams and Anderson's (1991) 14-item scale. Supervisors were asked to rate how often his or her subordinate (the participant) engages in activities such as "Helps others who have been absent" and "Conserves and protects organizational property" using a seven-point scale ranging from "never" to "daily." This scale exhibited a Cronbach's α of 0.71.

3.2.7 Control variables. Two control variables were utilized in the present study: supervisor's age and gender, as suggested in studies by Abel (1998), Decker and Rotondo (2001), Dyck and Holtzman (2013), and Vitulli (2005).

4. Results

4.1 Measurement model testing

Prior to testing our model, we tested the variables for possible common method bias, as the data were collected from a single source and at a single time point. We conducted Harmon's one-factor test using SPSS, as recommended by Podsakoff *et al.* (2012), loading all the items on one factor and examining the amount of variance explained. Only 15.21 percent of variance was explained by this factor. Usually common method variance is considered problematic when one factor explains more than 50 percent of the variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). In addition, we note that the median correlation for the four substantive variables in the study was 0.20. Common method variance was unlikely to be a strong problem in the data.

Further, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were performed on all the subordinate-reported variables using LISREL 8.54 (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 2002) for all 56 items with four factors: leaders' positive humor, transformational leadership style, positive emotions at work, and work engagement. The proposed four-factor model demonstrated an acceptable fit: $\chi^2(1,478) = 3,098.23$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.09$, CFI = 0.96, IFI = 0.96, NFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). In addition to the four-factor model, we examined two competing models with three factors each. In one of

the three-factor competing models we combined the items of affect at work place and employee work engagement into one factor while transformational leadership style and leaders' positive humor were retained as distinct factors: $\chi^2(1,481) = 3,719.84, p < 0.001, \chi^2/df = 2.51, CFI = 0.94, IFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.10, SRMR = 0.08$. The best competing model was the second three-factor model, where items of transformational leadership and positive humor were loaded onto one factor: $\chi^2(1,481) = 3,461.87, p < 0.001, \chi^2/df = 2.09, CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, NFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.07$. A χ^2 difference test indicated that the a priori four-factor model produced significantly better fit $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 363.64, p < 0.01$. The CFAs therefore also suggested that common method variance was not a serious problem, even among the self-reported (subordinate-reported) variables. We thus tested our hypotheses with the four-factor model. Table I reports descriptives, correlations, and α 's of all the study variables.

4.2 Hypotheses testing

H1a, that leaders' positive humor would be positively related to employees' positive affect at work was supported (Table II; $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$). Supporting *H1b* and *H1c*, we found leaders' humor was positively related to employees' work engagement (Table II; $\beta = 0.15, p < 0.05$) and performance (Table III; $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.05$), respectively. However, leader's humor was not positively related to OCBs (Table III; $\beta = 0.05, p > 0.05$). Thus *H1d* was not supported.

H2, stated that employees' positive emotions at work would mediate the relationships of leaders' positive humor with employees' work engagement, performance and OCB as outcomes, we used bootstrapping to examine the strength of the indirect effect (Hayes, 2013). We also controlled for two variables-leaders' gender and age, while testing mediation. Table II shows that, consistent with *H2*, there was a significant indirect effect for employee emotions in the relationship between leaders' positive humor and employees work engagement (point estimate = 0.11; 95 percent bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals excluded 0, 0.02, and 0.21). However, positive affect at work failed to mediate the relationships of humor with performance and OCBs. The indirect effects of humor on performance (Table III; point estimate = -0.003) and OCB were extremely weak (Table IV; point estimate = -0.007). Thus *H2b* and *H2c* were not supported.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	32.65	5.37	-							
2. Gender			-0.20**							
3. Positive humor	4.71	1.19	0.02	-0.19**	(0.81)					
4. Transformational leadership	4.65	0.86	-0.04	0.01	0.43**	(0.87)				
5. Positive emotions at work	3.05	0.81	0.16*	-0.07	0.19**	0.11	(0.91)			
6. Employee work engagement	5.09	1.35	0.06	0.02	0.21**	0.08	0.56**	(0.93)		
7. Performance	5.84	0.90	-0.06	0.07	0.12***	-0.003	-0.01	-0.08	(0.85)	
8. Organizational citizenship behavior	4.90	0.62	0.02	-0.10	0.09	-0.08	-0.05	-0.09	0.45**	(0.71)

Notes: $n = 235$. Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female. Values in the diagonal are α coefficients. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.10$

Table I.
Descriptive statistics
and correlations
among study
variables

We tested our overall moderated mediation model (Figure 1) through the PROCESS custom dialogue for testing moderated mediated models (Hayes, 2013). Again we controlled for gender and age. *H3a*, that transformational leadership style would moderate the link between leaders' positive humor and employees' positive emotions at work such that linkage is stronger and more positive under conditions of high transformational leadership style, was supported. The results (Table V) show that transformational leadership style moderated ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$) this relationship.

Table VI presents the conditional indirect effects of leaders' positive humor on work engagement, as mediated by positive emotions at work. For *H3*, the indirect effects of

	Step 1: positive emotions at work				Step 2: work engagement (WE)			
	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Positive humor (PH)	0.12**	0.04	0.04	0.21	0.15*	0.02	0.50	2.81
Positive emotions at work					0.90**	0.09	0.72	1.08
Age	0.02*	0.01	0.003	0.04	-0.002	0.01	-0.03	0.02
Gender	0.28	0.18	-0.08	0.65	0.29	0.19	-0.08	0.65
Direct effect of PH on WE	0.14	0.06	0.01	0.27				
Indirect effect of PH on WE	0.11	0.04	0.02	0.21				

Notes: $n = 235$. LLCI, lower level class interval; ULCI, upper level class interval. Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female. In all, 95 percent level of confidence for all confidence intervals was used. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table II.
Positive emotions at
work as a mediator
between positive
humor and work
engagement

	Step 1: positive emotions at work				Step 2: performance				
	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI	
Positive humor (PH)		0.13**	0.05	0.04	0.21	0.12*	0.05	0.01	0.22
Positive emotions at work						-0.03	0.08	-0.17	0.12
Age		0.02*	0.009	0.003	0.04	-0.006	0.01	-0.03	0.02
Gender		-0.02	0.14	-0.28	0.24	0.24	0.15	-0.07	0.54
Direct effect of PH on performance		0.12	0.05	0.01	0.23				
Indirect effect of PH on performance		-0.003	0.01	-0.03	0.01				

Notes: $n = 235$. LLCI, lower level class interval; ULCI, upper level class interval. Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female. In all, 95 percent level of confidence for all confidence intervals was used. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table III.
Positive emotions at
work as a mediator
between positive
humor and
supervisor-rated job
performance

	Step 1: positive emotions at work				Step 2: OCB				
	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI	
Positive humor (PH)		0.13**	0.05	0.04	0.21	0.05	0.04	-0.02	0.12
Positive emotions at work						-0.06	0.05	-0.16	0.04
Age		0.02*	0.009	0.003	0.04	0.003	0.008	-0.01	0.02
Gender		-0.02	0.13	-0.28	0.24	-0.08	0.10	-0.07	0.12
Direct effect of PH on OCB		0.05	0.04	0.02	0.12				
Indirect effect of PH on OCB		-0.007	0.007	-0.03	0.003				

Notes: $n = 235$. LLCI, lower level class interval; ULCI, upper level class interval. Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female. In all, 95 percent level of confidence for all confidence intervals was used. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table IV.
Positive emotions at
work as a mediator
between positive
humor and
supervisor-rated
OCB

LODJ 37,8	Positive emotions at work				Work engagement (WE)				
		SE	LLCI	ULCI		SE	LLCI	ULCI	
1092	Positive humor (PH)	0.31	0.19	-0.70	0.06	0.14*	0.06	0.02	0.27
	Transformational leadership style (TL)	0.39	0.20	-0.79	0.01				
	PH × TL	0.10*	0.04	0.01	0.18	0.90**	0.09	0.72	1.08
	Age	0.02*	0.01	0.001	0.04	-0.002	0.01	-0.03	0.02
	Gender	0.001	0.13	-0.25	0.25	0.28	0.18	-0.08	0.64
	R^2	0.08**				0.32**			
	F	4.03**				28.19**			

Notes: $n = 235$. LLCI, lower level class interval; ULCI, upper level class interval. Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female. In all, 95 percent level of confidence for all confidence intervals was used. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table VI.
Moderated mediation for the relationship of leaders' positive humor with work engagement via positive emotions at work across levels of transformational leadership style

Transformational leadership	Conditional indirect effect	SE	95% confidence interval	
			Lower limit	Upper limit
Low (3.79)	0.04	0.07	-0.09	0.18
High (5.51)	0.19	0.07	0.06	0.36

Notes: $n = 235$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

leaders' positive humor on work engagement through positive emotions at work was positive but weaker and non-significant for lower (0.04; 95 percent CI: -0.09 to 0.18) and stronger for higher (0.19; 95 percent CI: 0.06 to 0.36) transformational leadership style (Figure 2). As we failed to find mediation for performance and OCB as outcomes, we did not examine moderated mediation for them.

5. Discussion

Although the effect of positive emotions at work has been examined before (Bono and Ilies, 2006; Bono *et al.*, 2007), those studies ignore emotions generated by the job, which is an important issue for AET about employees' workplace reactions. By examining events of leaders' positive humor, workplace positive emotions, transformational leadership, and employees' work engagement, we were able to explain effects of leaders' positive humor on employees' work engagement. Support for the moderated mediation model furthers our understanding why and under what conditions this relationship occurs. Leaders' positive humor was correlated with positive emotions at work, which in turn was related with employees' work engagement; importantly leaders' humor is most likely to result in employees' positive emotions when the leader also exhibits high transformational leadership style. Transformational leadership is often theorized as a likely direct cause of favorable employee reactions (e.g. Bass and

Avolio, 1994), but it also can enhance the positive effects of other leadership variables, in this case, when combined with leaders' humor. We did not find support for mediation for performance and OCB as outcomes with positive affect as a mediator. Probably positive affect may not be an appropriate mediator for workplace behaviors. For humor research, these results extend prior research to indicate that leaders' use of humor may have important implications, as it had an indirect effect on employee engagement but not on workplace behaviors such as performance and OCBs. If leaders' humor results in subordinates' positive emotions, the organization may benefit from the employees' efforts that are inherent in their work engagement. This interpretation lends support to AET for work engagement, which states that workplace situations or features elicit affective responses which in turn influence work outcomes (Weiss and Crapanzano, 1996). Previous studies by Avolio and others (1999) examined direct relationships between transformational leadership and humor. However, we extend the research on positive humor by examining transformational leadership as a moderator in moderated mediational framework.

5.1 Contributions of the study

This study advances research on positive humor in several critical ways. One major contribution of the study was evidence of AET in explaining relationships among leadership variables (including humor) and employee engagement through effects on affect or emotions. The moderated mediational model suggested that affective events such as the leaders' use of humor could indeed lead to emotional reactions and eventually to important work outcomes (employee engagement in this study).

In a seminal study by Avolio and others (1999) some inconsistent results were found. Transformational leadership was associated with individual performance, but the relationship was strongly positive in the low humor condition instead of the high humor condition the study did not employ any controls, however (as noted by Decker and Rotondo, 2001; Abel, 1998; Dyck and Holtzman, 2013; Vitulli, 2005). Thus, the present study attempts to provide a unique test of leaders' positive humor and transformational leadership with employee engagement. More research is needed to determine the extent to which the differing results are due to differing use of controls, different criterion variables, different samples, or some other factor.

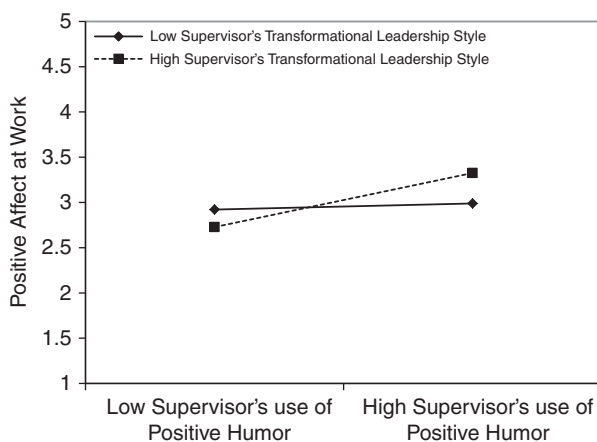


Figure 2.
Interaction between
positive humor
and supervisor
transformational
leadership predicting
positive emotions
at work

Another contribution of present study is that we found support for AET with work attitude as an outcome but not for work behaviors. Perhaps positive affect at work was not a potent enough or driving force to influence work behaviors. Research has found positive relationships between employees' positive affectivity and behaviors such as performance (Avey *et al.*, 2011) and OCB (Janssen *et al.*, 2010).

A final contribution of the present study is the investigation of affect as generated at work using an appropriate measure. Studies analyzing work-relevant affect (Bono *et al.*, 2007) have examined leaders' behaviors eliciting affective reactions (Brown and Keeping, 2005; Liang and Chi, 2013; McColl-Kennedy and Anderson, 2002; Rubin *et al.*, 2005; Webster *et al.*, 2014); however, none of these studies utilized an affect measure that had work as a referent at the item level. The majority of the studies utilized the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule developed by Watson *et al.* (1988) to assess general affect with work mentioned at the instruction level. We present a better measurement by using the JAWS scale, which was developed specifically for use in work-related research, with the word "work" in every item level to offer us a better understanding of affect at work place. Having an item-level referent discourages careless responding in survey data (Meade and Craig, 2012).

5.2 Limitations

The present study has some limitations, however. It was conducted in India, and differences may exist between cultures regarding humor at work. Further, as different organizations have their own formal and informal rules for what is appropriate, the fact that only one organization was sampled may limit the generalizability of findings. The leaders' expression of humor could be an issue of national or organizational culture, which is a recommended topic for future research. Nevertheless, nothing in the model or results suggest that the setting (India) produced unusual, unexpected, or unlikely effects.

Although the data were collected at single time point our analyses indicated that common method variance is unlikely to be a serious problem in this study (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). We, however, do encourage future research to incorporate data at different time points and from different sources for longitudinal analyses to infer causation. Regarding the moderating effect in the present study, Siemsen *et al.* (2010) have shown that such interaction effects cannot be artifacts of common method variance.

5.3 Implications and recommendations for future research

The present results suggest implications for future research and practice. Specifically, because organizations can be expected to benefit from employee work engagement, the appropriate use of positive humor by leaders is likely to help, but especially if they are using a transformational leadership style as well. As stated earlier, employee work engagement is related both to employee outcomes such as job satisfaction and commitment (Saks, 2006) and to organizational outcomes such as productivity and profit (Crawford *et al.*, 2010). The favorable effects occur through leaders' humor eliciting positive emotions in employees. A humor training program, seminar, or workshop might be feasible, but future research would need to evaluate the effectiveness of such intervention attempts.

In addition to this, research could also investigate the joint perception of leader humor rated by their subordinates and leaders themselves. Research utilizing polynomial regression or congruence analysis (e.g. Edwards, 2002), would help illuminate both the joint and specific relationships that each source of humor has with important workplace outcomes. Specifically congruence between leaders' expression of

humor and an employee's perception of the expressed humor being related to outcomes, could lead to interesting insights in humor research regarding the workplace. We recommend continued investigation of positive emotions generated at the job or work due to positive humor, based on AET.

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