

Managing with humour during COVID 19: Managers' humour style and its influence on team members' stress and job satisfaction using non-hierarchical cluster analysis

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on exploring the usage of humour by the managers while connecting with their teams. The objective is to study which humour style is effective in reducing the stress level and increasing the job satisfaction level of the team members using K- means cluster analysis. 120 team members evaluated their manager's humour. K- means cluster analysis reported specific humour clusters. The results confirm that affiliative humour and self-enhancing humour decreases the stress level of the team members and increases the job satisfaction. The findings suggest that managers who apply self-defeating and aggressive humour are most likely to damage the manager and team member's relationship. It is also observed that usage of negative humour is most likely to be causing strain than not using humour at all, while interacting. This study helps managers to identify

the most effective humour styles to be adopted, while engaging with their teams.

Keywords

Managerial humour, humour, cluster analysis, team, team engagement

Introduction

Humour is a phenomenon that brings out laughter or amusement within us. Every human regardless of all cultures and ages responds to humour in their unique ways. Most people who can experience humour express it in different ways like: they respond with a smile or consider something funny and laugh at it and thus are considered experiencing a sense of humour. Ultimately our personal tastes decide humour. Culture, geographical location and maturity influences our choice of considering something humorous. These are just a few factors among the numerous factors that determines what is humorous or not among individuals This study mainly focuses on the impact of managerial humour styles on the stress level and job satisfaction of employees.

Humour is an element which helps to reduce stress and improve the interpersonal relationships in both work and non-work life. At work, for a healthy and good relationship between manager and team members, one of the basic ingredients that can be considered is humour. Several empirical research studies in management literature explores the connection between humour and job-related facets. During COVID-19 pandemic situations, employees are experiencing new normal ways of working, mostly with tight work from home schedules, distributing their work between work from home and selective days in a week, in the office. Connecting with the team members and keeping them engaged with work and maintaining positive environment is a daunting task for every team manager during COVID 19. Managers adopt different styles for this and managing the team with humour is one of such styles.

Humour Styles

Humour is ideologically a positive and is a multifaceted tool leading to both positive and negative outcomes (Evans, Goodman & Jowett, 2014). In management literature, growing empirical research is gaining prominence that explores the association between humour and workplace facets. Significant progress in humour research has led to the emergence of unique categories of humour styles. It is observed that significant distinction among humour styles, applied to enhance us or used with an intention to enhance relationships with others (Martin *et al.*, 2003) will be received and reciprocated positively or negatively. Martin *et al.* (2003) proposed four types of humour styles namely affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing and self-defeating. The most common category of humour is affiliative humour as it is considered positive and focuses on enhancing good relationship towards others. Aggressive humour is negative humour and thought to be used for being very critical (Hodson, Rush & MacInnis, 2010). Martin (1996) observes that self-enhancing humour is the use of positive humour to enhance our own self. Finally, self-defeating humour is considered as negative humour that enhances the self, with the wrong intention of getting acceptance from other individuals (Stieger, Formann & Burger, 2011).

- (a) **Affiliative humour:** People who tend to possess this kind of humour tend to express something funny, jokes, engage themselves in fun atmosphere, help to facilitate relationships, and reduce interpersonal tensions (Lefcourt, 2001). They are likely to engage in self-deprecating humour, saying funny things about themselves and not taking themselves too seriously, while maintaining a sense of self-acceptance (Vaillant, 1977). This style of humour is expected to be related to extraversion, self-esteem, positive moods and emotions.
- (b) **Self-enhancing humour:** The manager possessing this kind of humour style involves a generally humorous outlook of life, a tendency to be frequently amused by the instances of life, and to maintain a humorous perspective even in the face of stress or adversity (Kuiper, Martin & Olinger, 1993). Closely allied to the concept of coping humour (Martin, 1996), this relates to perspective-taking humour as stress coping mechanism (Lefcourt *et al.*, 1995), and the use of humour as an emotion regulation or coping mechanism (Dixon, 1980; Martin *et al.*, 1993). It helps one to avoid negative emotions while maintaining a realistic perspective on a potentially aversive situation
- (c) **Aggressive humour:** This type of humour style applies humour with an intention to change others by means of an implied threat (Janes & Olson, 2000). In general, it relates to the tendency to express humour without regard for its potential impact on others (e.g., sexist or racist humour), and includes compulsive expressions of humour in which one finds it difficult to resist the impulse to say funny things that are likely to hurt or insult others. This dimension of humour is positively related to hostility, anger, and aggression, and negatively related to relationship satisfaction, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.
- (d) **Self-defeating humour:** This managerial humour style is oriented to apply humour to defensively deny certain things happening in life or in the surrounding, or as a remedy to hide our negative emotions, or restrain from positively dealing with our problems (Kubie, 1971). It may look like people who use this humour style often appear to be amusing or witty like class clowns, and the irony is, they may be desperate in emotional neediness, experiencing low self-esteem and practising avoidance by adopting, self-defeating humour style (Fabrizi & Pollio, 1987). Also, previous research studies have found positive association between self-defeating humour style and neuroticism and emotions like depression, anxiety which are negative emotions and negative association with psychological well-being, relationship satisfaction and self-esteem.

Stress

Stress may lead to several negative health consequences in the organisation (Martin, 2002; Schat, Kelloway & Desmarais, 2005). Studies that happened earlier have proved that humour can be considered as a coping mechanism or it could be a moderator that reduces the impact of repetitive stressors on the employees (Lefcourt, 2002; Martin, 2003; Svebak, 2010). Martin and Lefcourt (1983) reported three studies stating that sense of humour could balance the harmful effects of stress on life events of individuals, and this gained lot of attention among researchers. Davis and Kleiner (1989) revealed that by applying humour, leaders could achieve three results 1) decrease the stress at workplace 2) help subordinates

understand leader's management roles through proper communication and 3) inspire subordinates to work in the organisation

Job Satisfaction

Employees feel satisfied with their job only when they have a positive work atmosphere which allows them to be self-motivated. The job satisfaction happens only when employees are promised with career growth, comfortable work environment and is assured support from their supervisors. As per Lizote, Verdinelli, and Nascimento, (2017) referring to Siqueira's earlier research studies, Job satisfaction as a multidimensional concept is composed of variables sensitive to worker's perceptions about the nature of work, their work environment and the management policies and practices which involve five theoretical dimensions: comfort working with co-workers, contented with the compensation received, satisfied with the rapport with the higher authority, satisfaction with work culture and satisfaction with benefits provided". Managers with good humour style can help the employees to perform well in the organisation. A satisfied employee always aims to perform well in their workplace hence it is a challenge for every manager to support the employees to do their best in the organisation.

The research paper comprises of six sections. After this introduction (considered as first section), the second section focuses on the objectives, third focuses on research methodology, followed by results, discussions, and conclusion.

Objectives

First, the study tries to understand the association between the humour styles and the stress level of the team members. Second, the study focuses on understanding the influence of four humour styles used by the team managers on the job satisfaction level of their team members. Third and final, this study using K- means cluster analysis, explores the emergence of distinctive clusters bringing out the relationship among the three variables studied namely managerial humour style, team members' stress level and job satisfaction level. The overall purpose is to identify which humour style is effective in reducing the stress level and increasing the job satisfaction level of the team members.

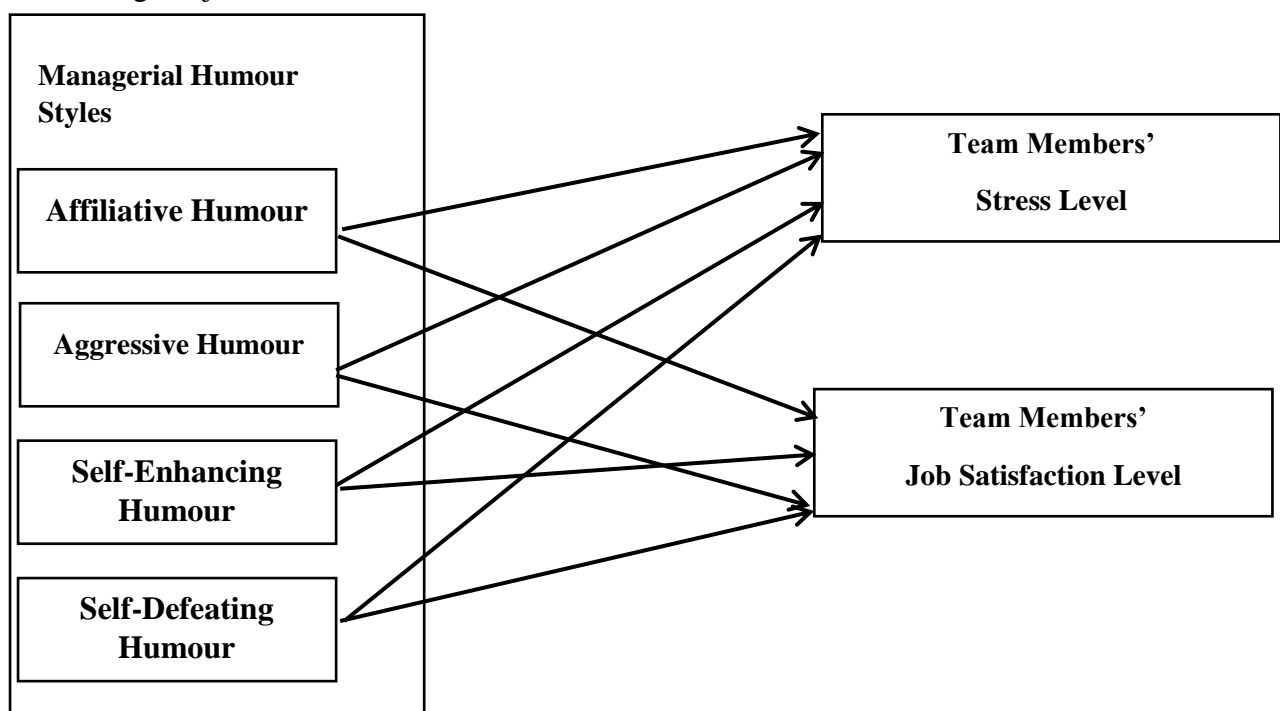


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Figure 1 highlights the four styles of managerial humour. All the four styles have impact on team member’s job stress and job satisfaction. Hence it is a greater challenge for the managers to select a type of humour style which could decrease the stress level of the employees and increase the job satisfaction and so that they could have a very positive manager – team member relation which could directly help employees to perform well in the organisation.

Methodology

Research Procedure

A survey comprising of questions regarding their managers was answered by 120 team members with work experience ranging from six months to five years in service organisations. The sample for the study included 64 men and 56 women. 100 members among the sample worked full time and 20 members had opted part time job. The sample was predominantly from the service sector. Most of the members who responded belonged to the age group of 21 years to 25 years. Participants’ managers were more of men compared to women. The data was collected through online mode from individuals willing to report their perceptions of their managers’ humour styles.

Instruments

All the participants were sent a survey toolkit comprising of three instruments. The Humour Style Questionnaire had 32 questions (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Seven-point Likert-scale is used with options from totally agree to totally disagree. For checking the reliability, we calculated cronbach alpha and the results are 0.88, 0.89, 0.95 and 0.98 respectively for each of the humour style. Appendix A includes the questionnaire.

Job Satisfaction scale was adapted from Wright and Cropanzano (1998). It is a five-item scale. The scores given for all the five items are totalled to get the final job satisfaction score. Likert scale with seven-point was adopted, with options strongly disagree on one end and strongly agree on the other end. To check the internal consistency, cronbach alpha was calculated which was 0.87 for the currently. Appendix B includes the scale items.

The perceived stress scale was adopted from Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein (1983), which have 14 questions to be marked on likert scale from never to very often. Reported cronbach’s alpha is 0.89. The questionnaire used is in Appendix C

Results

Table 1: Calculated Means, Standard Deviations (SD), Correlation and Cronbach Alpha of the variables studied

		Means	SD	Alpha	AH	SEH	AgH	SDH	Stress	JS
1	Affiliative Humour (AH)	23.68	3.03	.88	-	.223*	.109	.134	-.002	-.106

2	Self-Enhancing Humour (SEH)	23.09	3.34	.98		-	.379**	.440**	.235**	.025
3	Aggressive Humour (AgH)	28.73	9.88	.899			-	.917**	.703**	.019
4	Self-Defeating Humour (SDH)	29.19	9.74	.955				-	.656**	.022
5	Stress	23.28	2.46	.89					-	-.021
6	Job Satisfaction (JS)	12.38	3.04	.875						-

*p < .05. **p < .01; AH: Affiliating Humour; SHE: Self-Enhancing Humour; AgH: Aggressive Humour; SDH: Self-Defeating Humour; JS: Job Satisfaction

Table 2: Z scores for Cluster Structures (Cluster 3 and Cluster 4) using K- means clustering

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	
Individuals per cluster	27	69	24	
Percentage of total	23	57	20	
Affiliative humour	-1.09	0.41	0.05	
Self-enhancing humour	-0.89	0.14	0.61	
Aggressive humour	-0.61	-0.43	1.92	
Self- defeating humour	-0.77	-0.32	1.79	
	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Number per cluster	21	24	24	51
Percentage of total	17	20	20	43
Affiliative humour	0.10	-1.27	0.05	0.53
Self-enhancing humour	1.20	-0.80	0.61	-0.40
Aggressive humour	-.39	-0.62	1.92	-0.45
Self- defeating humour	-0.21	-0.76	1.79	-0.40

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Stress and Job Satisfaction for each cluster

	Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Stress	-0.40	0.62	-.34	0.80	1.43	0.42
2. Job Satisfaction	-0.19	1.13	0.06	0.88	0.02	1.19

Chart 1: Cluster Emergence

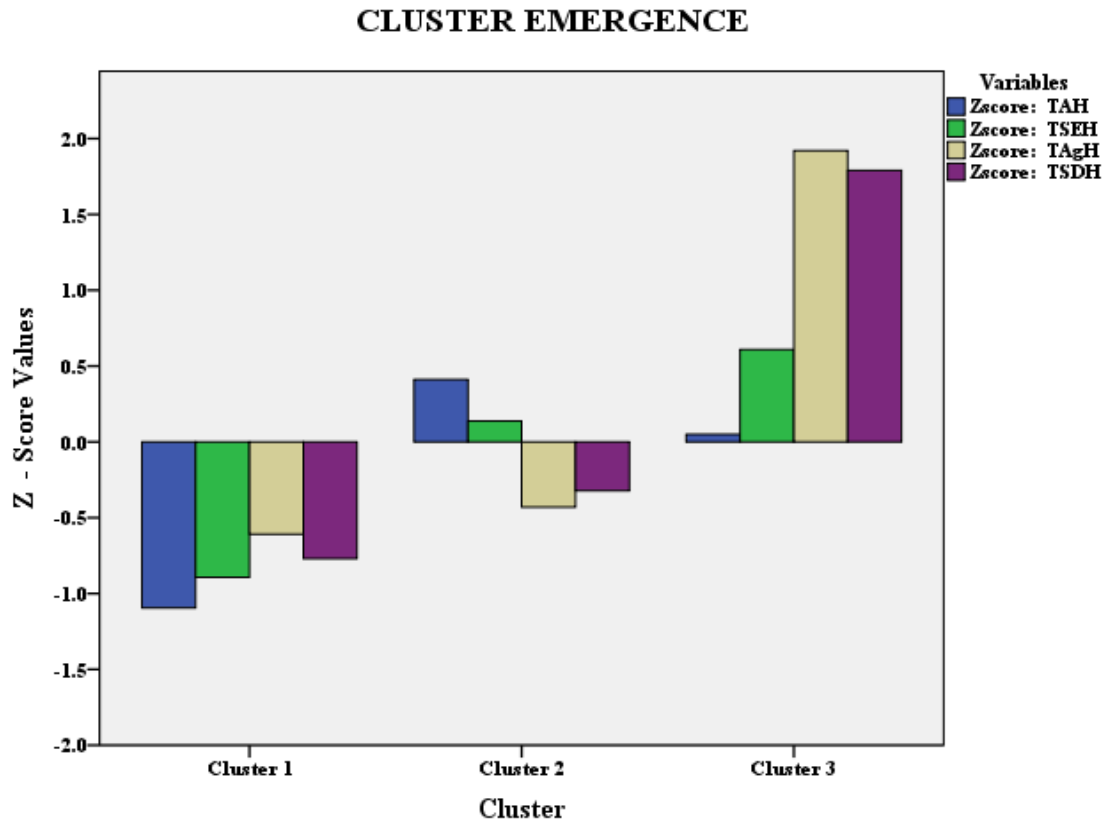


Chart 2: Mean Plot for job stress for 3 clusters

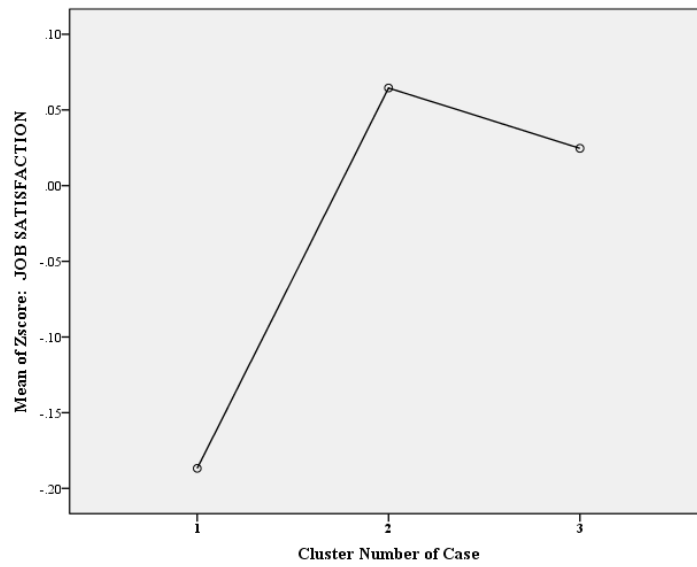
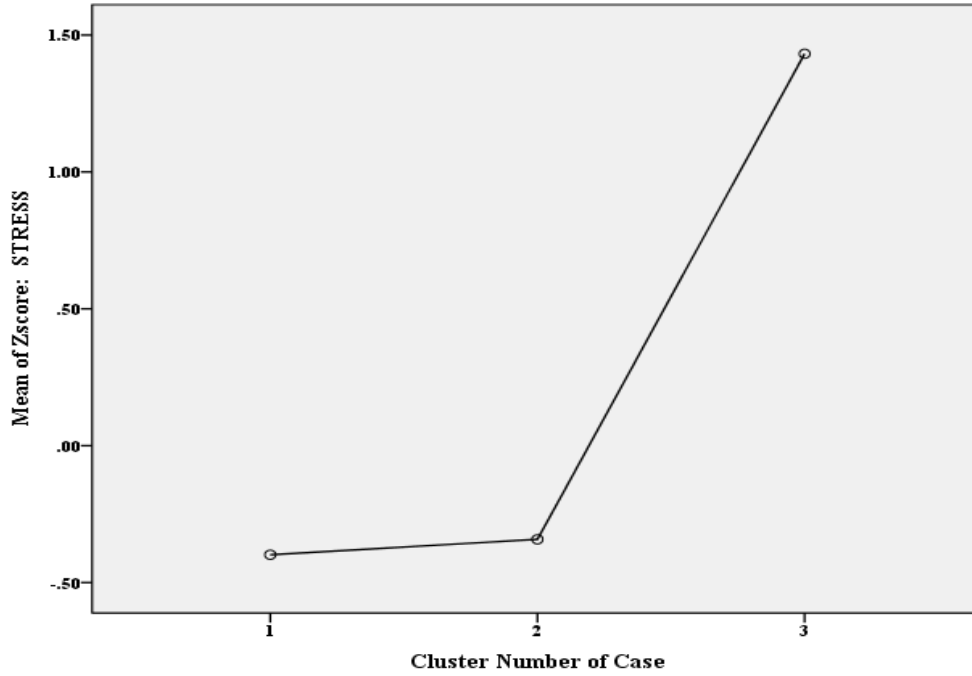


Chart 3: Mean Plot for job satisfaction for 3 clusters

Firstly, we calculated the standardized values (Z scores) for all the variables studied, to avoid the imbalance in the scale values. The standardized values were used for calculating the K-means cluster analysis. Secondly, we calculated the mean, standard deviation, internal reliability measure, cronbach alpha and the correlation coefficient of all the variables studied which are presented in Table 1. Thirdly, we used dendrogram in hierarchical cluster analysis to check the number of clusters that emerges from it. Using that as a base, we decided to go for three clusters and did the K-means clustering in which three unique clusters emerged out clearly. Cluster 1 represented those individuals who used all the four humour styles infrequently and very much lesser than the average. Participants of Cluster 2 use self-enhancing and affiliative humour which are positive humour much more compared to the average and negative humour namely self-defeating and aggressive humour infrequently and less compared to the average. Cluster 3 are those participants who used negative humour very often and who used self-defeating and aggressive humour much more compared to the average. Chart 1 depicts the cluster emergence with the z scores. We also tested for alternative two K-means cluster and four K-means cluster to check for more interpretations. Table 2 presents the results of three and four K-means clusters. After checking all the two, three and four K-means clusters, we decided to stay with three K-means clusters. Compared to other K-means cluster, the three K-means cluster is more parsimonious (Galloway, 2010), easily interpretable, judged to be the most appropriate and based on the dendrogram results. As the fourth and final step, using the cluster number generated we conducted analysis of variance which is multivariate to understand whether the clusters are significantly different among each other in stress and job satisfaction. Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation for the variables stress and job satisfaction, for each of the three clusters identified. Chart 2 and 3 depicts the visual representation of the mean results. From the results, we can observe that significant differences do exist between the clusters with respect to stress, $F(2, 117) = 62.69, p < .001$. Exploring the Tukey post hoc tests on stress, we observed that cluster 3 is significantly different from Cluster 1 and 2, in terms of the stress experienced, which is depicted in Chart 2 also. Participants belonging to Cluster 3 experience enormous stress compared to the individuals representing Cluster 1 and 2. The ANOVA results for job satisfaction is not statistically significant with a p value of 0.541

Findings and Discussions

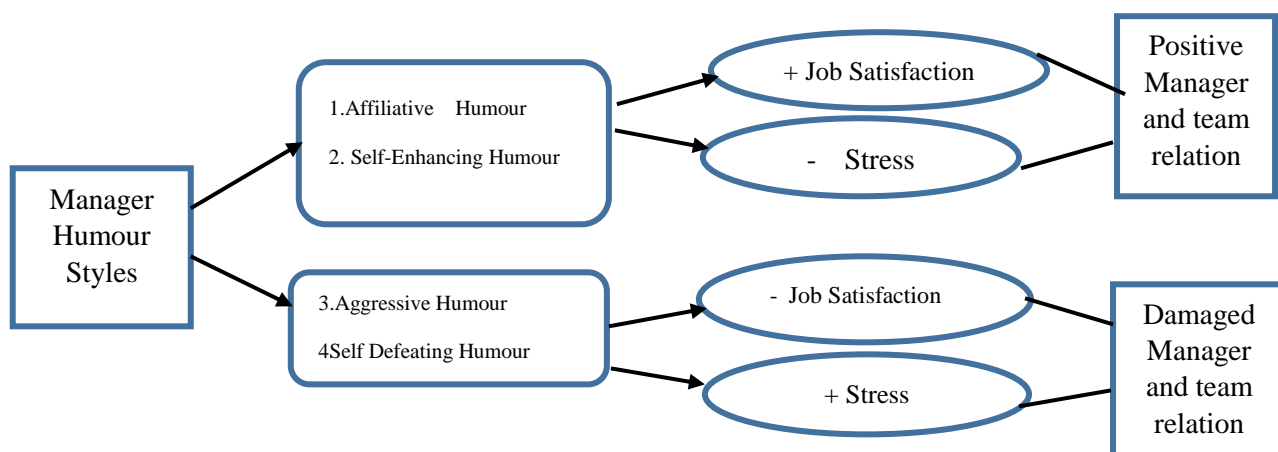
1. Participants belonging to Cluster 3 experience enormous stress compared to the individuals representing Cluster 1 and 2. When we observe Cluster 3, we could see that aggressive humour is used abundantly by their managers, followed by self-defeating humour, then followed by self-enhancing humour and the least used humour is affiliative humour. Overall, in Cluster 3, the usage of aggressive and self-defeating humour is comparatively high and very strongly felt by their sub-ordinates who are the participants of this current study. Research findings by Evans and Warren (2015) also confirms this where they have mentioned that negative humour style is likely to cause organizational damage, without the use of positive humour.
2. Observing Cluster 1 and 2, we see that the participants' stress level is very low and more

- or less similar, but the humour styles are unique. In Cluster 2, participants experience their managers using affiliative humour more, followed by self-enhancing humour. Also, the z-score values of aggressive humour and self-defeating humour is below zero. It indicates that second cluster represents those managers who are using aggressive and self-defeating humour styles below-average and affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles above-average in their behaviour. Cluster 2 is similar to “self-enhancers” identified by Leist and Muller (2013) and their results showed that the participants experienced high self-esteem and life satisfaction with Cluster 2 humour style pattern. The current research documents the participants experiencing low stress with “self-enhancers” pattern.
3. Cluster 1 is similar to “humour deniers” labeled by Leist and Muller (2013). The z score for all the humour styles is below zero reflecting a behaviour pattern that humour is rarely used by their managers in the workplace. In Leist and Muller (2013) study, it was found that humour deniers experienced low level of self-esteem and well-being. The current result observes that the participants’ stress level is very low when humour is seldom used by their managers. Participants may find this scenario better than a behaviour pattern where humour is used carelessly or without further reflection, that might be harmful for them or the team.
 4. Comparing humour styles and the job satisfaction experienced by the participants, Cluster 2 indicates high satisfaction level where affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles are used above average, by the managers on contrary to the usage of aggressive and self-defeating humour styles. But the ANOVA results for job satisfaction is not statistically significant.

Conclusions, Limitations and Future Directions of research

Connecting with the team members is very much important for any manager and keeping them engaged using various strategies, to cheer them up becomes a part of the managerial job. Humour is considered as one of the prominent ways of connecting with any human-being and keeping the environment lighter and filled with fun. But in the workplace, do the team members prefer that from their managers is the primarily question we raised for this research. The subordinate looks up to the manager for motivation, career guidance, clarity of the task to be done and to be treated with dignity, among many factors they expect from their managers. What is the role of humour in this? The research tried to probe the usage of humour and its association with team members’ stress level and job satisfaction.

Figure 2: Relationship established among the variables studied



The study specifies the importance of self-enhancing and affiliative humour as it decreases the stress level of the team members and increases the job satisfaction which helps to enhance a good workplace relationship (Figure 2). The findings also suggest that usage of aggressive and self-defeating humour will be damaging to the relationship between the manager and the team members as it increases the stress level. The usage of negative humour is most likely to be causing strain than not using humour at all, while interacting. This study helps managers to identify the most effective humour styles to be adopted, while engaging with their teams. A good manager-team member relationship increases the employee commitment and would reduce the attrition rate. It will also help to increase the motivation level of employees and hence there will be less chances of workplace conflicts, better workplace culture and increased trust and confidence. Hence the manager who uses self-enhancing and affiliative humour style will succeed in keeping the employees happy in the workplace.

The current research focussed only on quantitative data and its analysis. How a manager's humour affects the team members morale level and in what way it affects the team members has to be captured to have a better understanding of this construct. We recommend future researchers to follow mixed method for data collection and focus on qualitative data also, along with quantitative data to understand the influence of managerial humour among the team members. Also, apart from stress and job satisfaction, there are several variables that are influenced by managerial humour namely positivity in the workplace, commitment and involvement, performance, employee engagement, to name a few. These variables also need an extensive study, which is not covered in the current study.

Does managerial humour affect the way the team members perceive their manager? Does managerial humour influence the managerial image among the team members? These variables are not captured in the current research but can have a mediating and moderating effect on the variables studied. Future research studies can explore these dimensions.

Employees view workplace code of conduct and social code of conduct differently. Apart from organisational prescribed code of conduct, employees will have their own do's and don'ts in their workplace. How humour is perceived by the employees in a workplace is influenced by this self-prescribed code of conduct and that indirectly influences the employee's acceptance to humour. This factor has to be explored as a mediating or moderating variable in future research studies. Usage of humour can be a part of the managers personality and attitude towards it. Similarly, acceptance of managerial humour can be a part of the team members attitude towards humour as a construct. This personality and attitude towards humour will moderate the relationship between usage of humour and its impact in the workplace which is not captured in the current study. Future researchers can explore this perspective. Finally, humour is associated with taking things lightly or lightening a particular situation, at least in a few cultures or among a generation of employees (Generation X). Among the generation where work is viewed with a serious mindset, usage of humour might connote wrong message that work is not viewed seriously. This mindset will act as a

moderating variable to the relationship studied in the current research which can be a new area to explore in the future research studies.

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Appendix: A

Humour Styles Questionnaire

1. My manager usually doesn't laugh or joke around much with other people*
2. Even if my manager is feeling depressed, he or she can usually cheer us up with humour.
3. If someone makes a mistake, my manager will often tease them about it.
4. My manager let people laugh at him or make fun at his expense more than expected
5. My manager doesn't have to work very hard at making other people laugh— My Manager seem to be a naturally humourous person.
6. Even when my manager is by himself, he is often amused by the absurdities of life.
7. People are never offended or hurt by my manager's sense of humour*
8. My manager will often get carried away in putting himself down if it makes his team members laugh.
9. My manager rarely makes other people laugh by telling funny stories about self*
10. I have observed that even if my manager is feeling upset or unhappy, he usually tries to think / express of something funny about the situation to make us feel better.
11. When telling jokes or saying funny things, my manager usually is not very concerned about how other people are taking it.
12. My manager often try to make people like or accept him more by saying something funny about his own weaknesses, blunders, or faults*.
13. My Manager laughs and jokes a lot with my team.
14. My manager's humourous outlook on life keeps the team from getting overly upset or depressed about things.
15. My manager do not like it when people use humour as a way of criticizing or putting someone down*.
16. My manager doesn't often say funny things to put himself down
17. My manager usually doesn't like to tell jokes or amuse people*.
18. I have observed that even if my manager is by self and feeling unhappy, he or she try to think of something funny to cheer us up.
19. Sometimes my manager thinks of something that is so funny that he can't stop himself from saying it, even if it is not appropriate for the situation.
20. My manager often go overboard in putting himself down when he is making jokes or trying to be funny.
21. My Manager enjoy making people laugh
22. If my manager is feeling sad or upset, he usually loses his sense of humour*.
23. My manager never participates in laughing at others even if all my team members are doing it*.
24. When my manager is with our team members, I often see that other people make fun of or joke about him directly.
25. My manager don't often joke around with my team*

26. I have observed that my manager communicates some amusing aspect of a situation often to make us cope with problems.
27. If my manager doesn't like someone, he often uses humour or teasing to put them down.
28. If my manager is having problems or feeling unhappy, he often covers it up by joking around, so that my team member doesn't know how he really feels.
29. My manager usually can't think of witty things to say while with other people*.
30. I have observed that my manager need not be with other people – he finds things to laugh about even when he is on his own.
31. I have observed that even if something is really funny to him, he will not laugh or joke about it if someone will be offended*.
32. Letting others laugh at him is his way of keeping the team in good spirits.

**Reverse questions*

Appendix B

Job Satisfaction Questionnaire

The following statements describe your feelings toward certain job-related issues regarding the organization you currently work for. For each, please indicate the extent to which you agree/ disagree with the statement by circling the appropriate number on the likert scale

1. All in all, I am satisfied with the work of my job.
2. All in all, I am satisfied with my co-workers.
3. All in all, I am satisfied with the supervision.
4. All in all, I am satisfied with my pay (total wages and tips).
5. All in all, I am satisfied with the promotional opportunities.

Appendix C

Perceived Stress Questionnaire

Items and Instructions for Perceived Stress Scale

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate how often you felt or thought a certain way. Although some of the questions are similar, there are differences between them, and you should treat each one as a separate question. The best approach is to answer each question quickly. That is, don't try to count up the number of times you felt a particular way, but rather indicate the alternative that seems like a reasonable estimate.

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?
- 4*a In the last month, how often have you dealt successfully with irritating life hassles?
- 5.a In the last month, how often have you felt that you were effectively coping with important changes that were occurring in your life?

- 6.a In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
- 7.a In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
8. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
- 9.a In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
- 10.a In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of thing
11. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?
12. In the last month, how often have you found yourself thinking about things that you have to accomplish?
13. In the last month, how often have you been able to control the way you spend your time?
14. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

* a - reverse scale questions