



The Impact of Humor on Work Efficiency at Workplace: An Empirical Examination in Tourism and Hospitality Sector in The United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Despite the ubiquitous observance of humor at workplace, there is paucity of scholarly attention in terms of the manner in which it affects the behaviour of employees. This study aims to explore the relationship between sense of humor and work efficiency by utilizing the benign violation theory (BVT) to posit that elaborative social information is attributed to in the humor of superiors across organizations. Additionally, the social information processing (SIP) theory was applied for forming the hypotheses. Despite the fact that superiors' humor is suggested to have a positive correlation with superior-subordinate interchange and as a consequence, work efficiency, it could also point at the norm violation's tolerability in a workplace environment. These insights, in turn, have a positive correlation with the deviance of subordinates. Furthermore, these indirect impacts are suggested to have been mediated by the violent humor of superiors. Data was sourced from three-wave field that were conducted in United Arab Emirates (UAE). The findings suggest that the humor can evince unexpected negative behavioral patterns.



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Introduction

The BVT was drawn to explicate why and when the humor of a superior impacts the workplace both negatively and positively (Kant & Norman, 2019). Put succinctly, BVT posits that exhibiting humor oftentimes requires the violation of a benign norm. The current study entails the integration of SIP with BVT (Zoogah, 2011) to propound

that the sense of humor of a superior portends the perceived violation tolerability. This, in turn, causes subordinates to indulge in heightened workplace deviance or other voluntary behaviors that breach significant organizational norms, thus jeopardizing an organization's well-being and its members (O'Connor *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the framework of this study goes beyond extrapolations

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on humor's positive outcomes. It is argued that a superiors' humor builds interpersonal rapport by indicating permissive dispositional qualities and relational openness by violating benign norms in their interactions with subordinates, thereby suggesting that this humor on part of the superior can indirectly impact work efficiency and subordinate' deviance through Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) and Perceived Violation Tolerability, respectively.

Furthermore, a more complete comprehension of the element of the aforementioned humor's "mixed blessing" is provided by evaluating the moderating role of the style of humor that tends to be leveraged by a superior. To that end, this work conceptualizes humor as a construct of "broad bandwidth", and styles of humor as more precise "narrow facets" denoting within-person consistency in to the proclivities to exhibit a sense of humor using certain behavioral patterns (Thelen, 2019). Although humor is bereft of valence, it is possible for a superior to display

specific proclivities to interpersonally express their sense of humor either positively or negatively. The study builds on the literature through its emphasis on the proclivity to utilize dark styles of humor (e.g., Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012). In turn, this helps provide a far more precise and nuanced view of the impact of the humor of a superior on subordinates. In particular, this research propounds that the utilization of dark humor will fortify the indirect relationship of superior humor with deviance of subordinate, why weakening the relation of superior humor with subordinate work efficiency (Nusbaum, Silvia & Beaty, 2017); this negatively valenced humor style is alluded to as teasing using a humorous undertone (Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, it is also theorized that the overarching impact of the superior's humor on the perceptions of subordinates would get constrained using dark humor style, and eventually be linked to the subordinate' outcomes (see Figure 1).

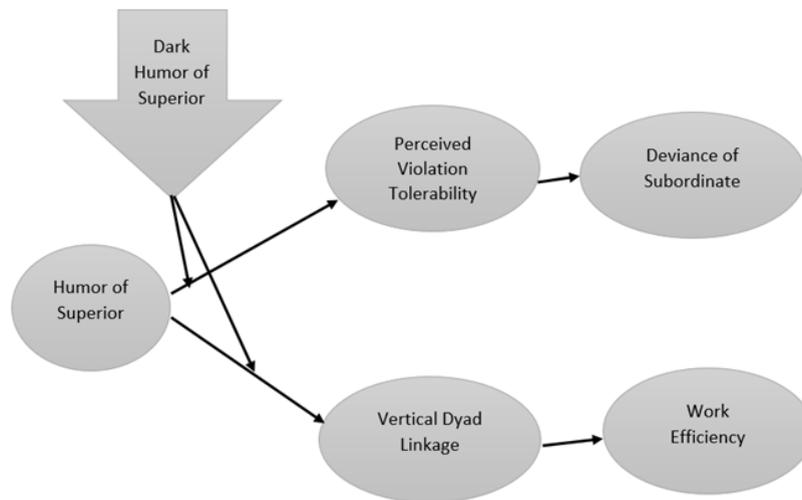


Fig.1: Proposed Theoretical Model

The hypotheses of this study would be tested using two three wave field studies involving full-time employees based out of UAE. The first study entails an examine the underlying proposition of the indirect effect of a superior's humor on the deviance of subordinate via signals of violation tolerability.

In the second study, these results are extended by gauging the theoretical framework using a moderated mediation model along with negative and

positive subordinate outcomes. Several theoretical as well as practical contributions are made by this work. First, in organizations, humor research has been termed as sporadic (Koo, Kim, and Kang, 2018). This is partially due to the fragmented nature of extant literature and the absence of an overarching theoretical framework. It is notable that the majority of scholarly work on superiors is essentially theoretical (Morgan, Smith, and Singh, 2019; Goswami *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, there

is paucity of empirical research to have examined the humors of superiors. In this context, Crawford (1994) observed that the utilization of humor is the least understood but most promising communicative strategies leveraged by superiors.

As a result, scholars of leadership are unable to comprehend the existing phenomenon in organizations in its entirety, thus underscoring the need for new investigations. Through the introduction of BVT (Kant & Norman, 2019), which has gained the support of several empirical studies in social psychology (Kant & Norman, 2019; McGraw, Warren & Kan, 2015; Leonard, Warren & McGraw, 2011; McGraw, Warren & Berger, 2011), this research provides a framework to understand humor in organizations. Second, departing from the findings of previous research, this study asserts that although the humor of a superior may enhance work efficiency amongst subordinates, it could also augment subordinate deviance. Third, the study makes another contribution to the literature of superiors' humor by underpinning when and why these effects manifest, both of which are vital elements to build and test theory (Seo, Noh, & Ardichvili, 2019). With regard to why, it is posited that subordinate' perceived violation tolerability is the mechanism that underpins the negative association of a superior's sense of humor using subordinate deviance, while increase heightened VDL underpins the positive correlation of humor of superior with work efficiency. With respect to when, dark humor — concerning which the impacts would be the strongest or dissipate — would be identified. Finally, these findings illuminate the advantages and disadvantages of superior humor within the workplace, thus enabling practitioners to gain a more well-rounded yet nuanced understanding of this mixed blessing while serving as a guide to maximise the positive outcomes of superior humor while minimizing its negative effects.

Theoretical Background Benign Violation Theory

Kant & Norman (2019) suggested BVT with a view to explicate what is deemed humorous. According to BVT, humor consists of three interlinked facets. First, it is important for a norm violation to take place via allegoric or physical violations, ranging from moral to social norm breaches. For example, laughter is often induced as a result of tickling (i.e., breaching a

physical norm), or upon hearing humor-laden jokes breaching a typically expected social norm. Second, it is important for the violation of norm to be perceived as being benign in nature. To illustrate, people typically laugh after being tickled by their loved ones as opposed to strangers (i.e., not perceived as benign or non-threatening). Furthermore, excessive norm breaches that threaten or cause the perceiver to feel offended can dilute the intended impact of humor. Third, humor necessitates the simultaneous interpretation of both conditions (McGraw, Warren & Berger, 2011). As is the case with all other theories, one of BVT's critical boundary conditions is that no attempt is made to elucidate all kinds of humor generation. In contrast, BVT contends that utilizing benign violations produces the largest purview of humor.

Empirical investigation is majorly supported by the forecasts of BVT. To illustrate, when participants are spatially, socially, or hypothetically distant from the breaches, they tend to regard these violations as benign and as a result, humorous (McGraw, Warren & Kan, 2015). For example, a longitudinal study points out that participants did not find the jokes relating to the destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy to be humorous during the crisis (that is, when the psychological distance is close. However, they found it progressively funnier over time because the threatening facet of this disaster was offset by increasing the psychological gap between the participants and the event itself (Leonard, Warren & McGraw, 2011). BVT has also found some support from neuroscientific studies. As a case in point, Goel and Dolan (2001) observed that juxtaposing norm violation and benignity triggers neurological activity in the ventral medial prefrontal cortex, which is linked with affective responses, and the experiences involving humor. In addition to empirical studies, numerous anecdotes have also supported BVT. A poignant example is the criticism directed at John Stewart and David Letterman for joking soon after the September 11 attack.

Since humor typically necessitates violations, exhibiting humor would probably convey the message that in interpersonal interactions, that norm violations are tolerable. This is especially pertinent in highly social environments such as organization settings where norms are constantly learned, communicated and signalled (Opp, 2018). In the

subsequent sections, BVT will be integrated with SIP (Zoogah, 2011) to indicate that two significant implicit messages are sent by a superior's humor to subordinates: 1) the perceived violation tolerability that will have positive linkage with subordinate deviance; and 2) permissiveness and relational openness, which will be positively linked to high quality VDL that, in turn, work efficiency.

Integrating Social Information Processing and Benign Violation Theories

In order to better decipher the outcomes and ramifications of humor in organizational settings, it is important to integrate BVT with theories that are specific to the workplace's innate dynamics (Kanfer & Chen, 2016). SIP (Zoogah, 2011) posits that employees do not function in isolation or in a vacuum at the workplace. Instead, they actively look to behave in concordance with the expected norms laid down by their organizations. From the standpoint of SIP, superiors are viewed as role models of how to get things done for their subordinates who are then guided to make sense of their work environment (Babcock-Roberson & Strickland, 2010). Thus, it can be seen that the interpersonal styles of superiors can transmit powerful social cues to their subordinates. By processing such cues, subordinates can then know what kind of behavior is rewarded and punished in the organization they work in (Othman *et al.*, 2017). The ability to process this information enables subordinates to lower uncertainty by helping them make sense of their workplace-related normative environment (Anselme, Robinson & Berridge, 2013). According to SIP, subordinates establish superior behaviors' cognitive representations within specific interactions as pointers of the values and expectations of an organization. As also called schemas (Marin, Medin, & Ojalehto, 2017), scripts (Aizawa, 2017), or molar perceptions (Iljins, Skvarciany, and Gaile-Sarkane, 2016), these symbolic cognitive representations are general, as opposed to specific. As subordinates try to make sense of their environment, they would tend to view superiors' behaviors in particular scenarios as gestalt representations of rudimentary principles that can be applied in several situations (Ho *et al.*, 2018). Thus, superior behavior denotes a symbol of how things are completed (Lemmergaard, 2017; Banks *et al.*, 2016). Thus, the integration of BVT and SIP posits that when superiors exhibit their humor through their engagements with

subordinates, subordinates realize that humor is not only expected, but also rewarded which is why they would behave accordingly; as a result, a meaningful message is relayed about an organization's values: behaving counter-normatively is the way to get things completed. As mentioned before, this study contends that superiors who exhibit their humor while interpersonally engaging with subordinates communicate two major signals. Firstly, violating norms is tolerable, and its ramifications on subordinate deviance be deleterious. Secondly, superiors develop a permissive exchange relationship with their subordinates, which can positively impact the latter's work efficiency.

Implications for Perceived Violation Tolerability and Deviance

Within organizations, norms get institutionalized as informal perceived descriptive norms (for example, be civil to your coworkers) or formal rules (e.g., organizational codes of conduct; Gao *et al.*, 2019; Sorokin, 2017). When superiors breach norms by displaying their humor, subordinates are likely to perceive breaching norms is socially tolerable for two major reasons. First, such superiors purportedly signal to subordinates that it is tolerable to engage in mild norm violations within the organizations. Second, when superior behaves or acts humorously, others are likely to give an implicit indication of approval by reacting with amusement/laughter (Qian, 2017) because when a violation is enforced and perceived by others humorously, it is unlikely to be taken very seriously (Mallett, Ford, & Woodzicka, 2016). This hypothesis finds some support in extant research. As a case in point, Mallett, Ford, & Woodzicka (2019) observed that men who had once been exposed to sexist humor subsequently opine that the tolerance of breaching sexism norms increases as compared to those who were not. Meanwhile, another study observed that participants who were exposed to racist jokes were more likely to espouse prejudice against outgroups vis-à-vis participants belonging to the control condition (Hodson, Rush, & MacInnis, 2010). According to both studies, racist or sexist comments that were not conveyed humorously did not yield the same impacts, thus suggesting that humor extends the predetermined boundaries of appropriate behaviors by producing new norms that tolerate otherwise deviant behaviours. Thus, the following hypothesis is reached:

Hypothesis 1

Humor of superiors has a positive relationship with the perceived violation tolerability of subordinates.

By definition, workplace defiance entails the breach of organizational guidelines that jeopardize the overall comfort of a company and its employees (He and Li, 2019). Deviance can be categorized into two facets: interpersonal and organizational deviance. An example of interpersonal deviance is ridiculing a co-worker. Similarly, an example of organizational deviance includes arriving late at work without seeking prior permission (He and Li, 2019). While the focus of both dimensions is on different targets, on the emphasis in the current study is on overall workplace deviance, which is an alignment with previous research (e.g., Nordmo *et al.*, 2019; Chen, Fah & Jin, 2016; Peng *et al.*, 2016; Scott, & Ilies, 2006) given that both dimensions have intersecting antecedents (Johnson *et al.*, 2018).

subordinates who take cues from their superiors who display a humor are likely to be encourage to behave in a deviant manner. This is primarily attributed to the socially engineered perception of norm violations being tolerable. For instance, while bribery breaches the law in certain countries, people engage in this practice continue to engage in such behaviors as they are widely tolerated by superiors and peers (Walsh *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, role models exhibiting antisocial behaviors are known to have a stronger impact on antisocial proclivities of other individuals in work groups in comparison to group members that are not perceived as role models (Russell & Odgers, 2016). Furthermore, to the extent that norm violation is deemed socially tolerable, subordinates are likelier to persist with such behaviors since they believe such behaviors would do unpunished. As a case in point, employees are likelier to behave unethically in organizations with poorly conceived community codes and guidelines (Ning & Zhaoyi, 2017; Barber & Budnick, 2016). Thus, the following hypothesis is reached:

Hypothesis 2

The perceived violation tolerability moderates the correlation between humor of superiors and subordinate workplace deviance.

Study 1: Methods

Sample and Procedure

In this study, 290 workers from different sectors in UAE were contacted for the purpose of participating in this study. All these participants were professionally engaged full time in several organizations of tourism and hospitality sector (hotels, travel agents, ministry of tourism and airports) in UAE. During the initial contact with participants, they were provided with a broad overview of the study without divulging any specific hypotheses relating to research. A total of 231 participants (the average age was 35.75, the average years of experience was 6.63 years, and 63.1% male) filled all three waves of the questionnaires, with a response rate of 73.10%. This comparatively high response rate was attributed to consistent communication between the participants and authors. Each wave was separated by nearly 20 days. Participants filled a measure of the humor of superiors at Time 1, before completing a measure of perceived violation tolerability at Time 2. Finally, they self-reported their interpersonal and organizational deviances.

Measures

Humor of Superior

This was measured using a seven-item scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .94$) after adopting it from a study done by Srivastava & Maurya (2014). For this study, the items were reworded so that they reflected the views of humor of others, given that the original scale was designed to measure one's recognition as humorous. A sample included "my superior practices humor to entertain subordinates."

Perceived Violation Tolerability

This was measured using a five-item scale (1 = not at all tolerable to 5 = highly tolerable; $\alpha = .78$), the development of which is credited to Stamkou *et al.*, (2019). Participants were asked to mention the extent to which they thought it was tolerable for an individual to be "unethical," "sociable," "offensive," "improper," and "courteous (reverse-coded)" in the organization. The reason why these five adjectives were selected because they denote generic social norms observed in several organizations and throughout the course of daily lives.

Deviance

This was measured using a 15-item scale (Guay *et al.*, 2016). Self-reporting was done on the part of participants on both organization deviance (for example, “taken property from the organization without consent”) and interpersonal (e.g., “teased a colleague at work”) committed by them on a

frequency scale (1=not at all to 5=quite often, $\alpha = .89$). The reason why a self-report was preferred over other measures was due to deviance since many deviant behaviors at the workplace are often enacted privately. Furthermore, deviance has commonly been self reported in previous research studies (see Mackey *et al.*, 2017).

Table 1: Correlations Among Study 1 Variables

Variables	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Humor of Superior (T1)	4.32	1.62	.95				
Perceived Violation Tolerability (T2)	1.92	1.10	.21**	.79			
Deviance of Subordinate (T3)	1.61	.89	.23**	.34**	.95		
Age of Subordinate (T1)	32.15	5.63	.01	.05	-.04	(-)	
Gender of Subordinate(T1)	1.63	.50	.10	.14*	.12	.17*	(-)

*p < .05

**p < .01

^a1 = Female, 2 = Male

Note: Alphas are shown on the diagonal.

T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3

Results

Analysis Strategy

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for Study 1. Before hypothesis testing, a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted with a view to ensuring the well-defined factor structure of three key variables used in this study. The proposed three-factor model comprised of humor of superior, perceived violation tolerability, and deviance, which was proven as a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(117) = 316.80$, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .96. It was preferred over alternative models, which includes a two-factor model wherein deviance the humor of superior were loaded on a single factor ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 759.92$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .17, CFI = .73); a two-factor model wherein deviance and perceived violation tolerability were loaded on a single factor ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 594.14$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .17, CFI = .72); as well as a two-factor model wherein Humor of Superior and perceived violation tolerability were loaded on a single factor ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 756.01$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .19, CFI = .77).

Following Becker *et al.*, (2016), all the analyses undertaken in this study were run with and without demographic controls. The findings were largely identical after including these variables. In addition, prior research on humor has been unable to

identify meaningful differences with respect to sense of humor across age or gender (Moran, Rain, Page-Gould, & Mar, 2014; Thorson & Powell, 1993). To ensure presentational brevity, the results are presented without controls, but their bivariate correlations are provided with the study variables in Table 1.

Tests of Hypotheses

Ordinary least squares regression was used in this study for the purpose of testing Hypothesis 1. At Time 1, humor of superior was positively linked to the perceived violation tolerability at Time 2 (adjusted $R^2 = .05$, $\beta = .21$, $p < .01$, Table 2). For testing Hypothesis 2, a bootstrapping-based mediation test was carried out via the PROCESS macro (Alfons, Ates & Groenen, 2018). As an extension of the Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) this procedure is generally preferred over others (e.g., Bachl, 2017) given that simulation studies have demonstrated that it is a more statistically robust and valid model as compared to conventional methods (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2016). In line with the recommendations of Preacher and Hayes (2008), the indirect effect of humor of superior on subordinate deviance was estimated through perceived violation tolerability via unstandardized coefficients along with a

bootstrapping procedure that involved as many as 5,000 resamples, yielding a 95% confidence interval. As per the findings, humor of superior was linked to heightened subordinate deviance and moderated by perceived violation tolerability in the

organizations (indirect effect = .03, SE = .01, 95% CI = .02 to .08; direct effect = .09, SE = .02, 95% CI = .02 to .14; total effect = .12, SE = .03, 95% CI = .05 to .18). Collectively, these findings illustrate support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Table 2: Study 1: Regression Analyses

Variables	DV = Perceived Violation Tolerability			DV= Deviance of Subordinate		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Humor of Superior	.18	.05	.21**	.08	.03	.18*
Perceived Violation Tolerability				.23	.05	.32**
Adjusted R ²		.05			.14	

*p < .05

**p < .01

Discussion

Study 1

In Study 1, a three-wave field study in UAE supported hypotheses 1 and 2. All three aforementioned variables were separated temporarily for reducing the effects of common method (Fuller *et al.*, 2016). However, Study 1 only conducted the test on the negative path of humor of superior to outcomes of subordinates. In the following sections, it will be argued that humor can also be a “mixed blessing.” That is, despite being positively correlated with subordinate deviance, the leader’s sense of humor can also cause positive subordinate outcomes like work efficiency and VDL. It is also contended that the leader’s style of humor mediates all paths. Another study was conducted to examine the entire model.

A Mixed Blessing: Implications for VDL and Work efficiency

There are three reasons why BVT and SIP indicate a positive path for superior humor. Firstly, humor lowers the social distance between superiors and their subordinates (Hunter, Fox, & Jones, 2016; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012) because superiors with a sense of humor implicitly convey a message that they are deemphasizing the hierarchical gap between themselves and their subordinates owing to their willingness to breach typical organizational hierarchy (de Souza *et al.*, 2019). Secondly, this enactment of humor on the part of superiors also indicates that the superior is allowing tolerance of counter-normative behavior with their subordinates. In turn,

this indicates that their relationship with particular subordinates is open, friendly and uncomplicated. Prior studies in behavioral ethics point out that ethical and moral superiors are perceived to be less permissive and warm (Wellman *et al.*, 2016). Thirdly, superiors exhibiting humors showcase their penchant for vulnerability since they are breaching norms openly, as a result of which they are less likely to be guarded while interacting socially with their subordinates. Equally importantly, this suggests that the normative and the atmosphere within which this interaction occurs is safe and friendly. On their part, subordinates may perceive leaders who de-emphasize hierarchy and are willing to be vulnerable as more amenable to building relationships (Evans *et al.*, 2019; de Souza *et al.*, 2019), which augurs well for their relationship. In general, it is perceived that humor helps superiors to maintain positive work associations with subordinates (Gkorezis, Petridou, & Xanthiakos, 2014; Pundt & Venz, 2017).

Furthermore, extant literature indicates that such people are more enjoyable to be around because they amplify the positive affect on others. For instance, humorous people tend to find greater success in building friendships (Dunbar *et al.*, 2012) and romantic relationships (Amani & Shabahang, 2018). At workplaces, humor has been reported to be an efficacious tactic of integration to develop positive interpersonal relationships and in effect, social capital (Goswami *et al.*, 2016). For this reason, the current study hypothesises that such superiors

will create heightened VDL levels (Robert, Dunne, & Lun, 2016), thus indicating the quality of relationship between superiors and their subordinates (Kazmi, 2017; Bakar, 2020).

Hypothesis 3

Humor of Superior has a positive relationship with VDL.

On account of its impact on VDL, it is suggested that leader humor is expected to enhance subordinate work efficiency, which is referred to as a comparatively enduring mind space when it comes to investing personal energies to enhance work performance (Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2016). It is for this reason that work efficiency entails the holistic utilization of physical, emotional and cognitive energy (Mróz & Kaleta, 2016). To that end, empirical research studies opine that it is possible to cultivate subordinate work efficiency by the behaviour of superiors, including VDL (Li *et al.*, 2018). However, an employee needs to feel safe and comfortable to express themselves in order to do so (Szejniuk, 2019). A high-quality VDL caused by a humor of superiors would help ensure that employees feel comfortable enough to be themselves, and then put in personal energies in their respective roles. Furthermore, whenever a superior exhibits humor, the accompanying high-quality VDL lowers the negative impacts of stress and provide social support. Correlated with a positive reinterpretation of negative scenarios, humor can help people cope better using heightened social support (Robert, 2016). Although the role of superior humor on subordinate work efficiency is yet to be examined by studies, some evidence does seem to imply that humor may help lower burnout (Scheel *et al.*, 2016), which is a close antipode to work efficiency. Put succinctly, it is posited that superior humor increases VDL quality. As that happens, subordinates begin to express greater willingness and ability to invest their personal energy in their work.

Hypothesis 4

Humor of Superior Has A Positive Relationship with Subordinate Work Efficiency, Moderated By Increased Vdl

The Moderating Role of Dark Humor of Superior

Although the four aforementioned hypotheses mentioned about the impacts of superior humor, the eventual outcomes would partly be predicated

on the specific humor style adopted by the superior. Integrating BVT and SIP with extant literature on various styles of humor (Chan *et al.*, 2018; Nusbaum, Silvia & Beaty, 2017; Veselka *et al.*, 2010), this study contends that dark humor displayed by the leader will aggravate the negative effects on subordinate deviance while diluting the positive effects of on subordinate work efficiency.

Although a sense of humor denotes an overall proclivity to exhibit any kind of humor (Scheel & Gockel, 2017), conventional expressions of dark humor allude to a specific humor style that is aimed at ridiculing or teasing others, which is also called disparagement humor (Mendiburo-Seguel & Ford, 2019; Nusbaum, Silvia & Beaty, 2017). In organizations however, such overtly dark humor that is solely aimed at making fun of others is rarely observed (Cain, 2012). Instead, superiors tend to use milder forms of dark humor, including satire or sarcasm to humorously convey their disapproval to their subordinates. However, this study does not focus on determining whether or not a humorous leader deploys dark humor toward a specific subordinate, but rather a generic proclivity to use this style of humor toward all subordinates.

The current research argues that when the style of humor is dark vis-à-vis other humor styles, then that sense of humor is a signal of serious violations. Pairing sense of humor with a dark style of humor breaches norms in two ways: 1) it involves humor—a benign violation; and 2) it conveys violation of norms of courtesy. Dark humor implies that the tolerated social norm of respecting each other can be disregarded. Thus, such a superior sends out an implicit message that it is socially tolerable to breach organizational norms for the above-mentioned reasons; and breaching norms associated with “human decency” is tolerable. Theoretically, Chen & Ayoun (2019) classified dark humor as a style of hostile behavior. As a case in point, sarcasm is typically linked with exacerbated interpersonal conflicts in a workgroup given that it relays contempt and humor-laden scorn (Sun *et al.*, 2016; Martinko *et al.*, 2013). On account of its visceral hostility, this malign norm violation is expected to build on the benign violation of norms demonstrated by the nature of superior humor. In turn, this intensifies the perception that even several violations of norms can be tolerated. For this reason,

it is argued that a humorous superior who tends to deploy dark humor would convey an even stronger perceived violation tolerability in the workplace to subordinates, eventually nurturing increasingly deviant behaviours. Accordingly, the fifth hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 5

The indirect effect of humor of superiors on subordinate deviance, is mediated by dark humor of superior through perceived violation tolerability such that this effect is stronger when dark humor of superior is high, while weakening when dark humor of Superior is low.

On a similar note, it can also be argued that a humorous superior who tends to use dark humor is less likely to develop effective superior-subordinate relationships. Therefore, this eventually attenuates the purported positive impact of a superior's sense of humor on subordinate work efficiency. This assumes significant since even in mild forms, dark behaviours are often conducted at the expense of with a superior's relation with subordinates. Therefore, an bad joke is detrimental to interpersonal relationships at the dyadic level even if it is perceived to be humorous (Singer, 2019). For example, conveying well-intended remarks badly, such as sarcastically saying "your work ethic is obviously awful" to an employee who is known to work diligently is not as well received in comparison to the same message being conveyed with a more positive connotation (i.e., "your work ethic is clearly exemplary" (Pexman, Reggin & Lee, 2019). In general, dark humor is more likely to trigger conflicts (Măciucă, Ghinea & Cantaragiu, 2019) as compared to other forms of humor because it is perceived as more contemptuous (Machlev, and Karlin, 2017).

The deleterious impacts of dark styles of humor on the linkage between superior humor and subordinate VDL might also extend the targeted subordinate, and come up with an interpretation that has an impact on behaviour (Zoogah, 2011). According to extant research, subordinates often times response negatively to their superiors when they latter mistreat their peers (Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015), even in cases where the subordinates themselves are treated well (Yam *et al.*, 2018; Christian, Christian, Garza, & Ellis, 2012:). This, in turn, indicates that

merely observing superiors who use dark humor styles toward other subordinates will slightly attenuate the positive effects of a superior's sense of humor on interpersonal outcomes. Therefore, it is hypothesized that if the superior tends to make use of dark humor, VDL is less likely to be formed:

Hypothesis 6

The indirect effect of humor of superiors on subordinate work efficiency is mediated by dark Humor of superior through VDL such that this effect is stronger when dark humor of superior is high, while weakening when dark humor of superior is low.

Study 2: Methods

Sample and Procedure

380 full-time employees from several sectors were contacted to take part in this study. As in Study 1, the participants were provided with an overall overview of the research without divulging any specific research hypotheses to participants. Participants were also informed about the need to interact daily with their superiors so as to participate in this study. Thereafter, 279 participants expressed their willingness to participate. Among them, 260 participants (Average of age = 36.29, average of years of experience with superiors = 6.99 years, and 53% male) completed all three waves of questionnaires, with a response rate of 65.77%.

All three waves were separated by a gap of around 20 days. Participants concluded measures of dark humor of superior and humor of superior at Time 1. They then concluded measures of VDL and perceived violation tolerability at Time 2. Finally, they self-reported their own work efficiency deviance at Time 3.

Measures

Humor of Superior. Humor of superior was measured just as how it was done in Study 1 (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .96$).

Dark Humor of Superior

This was measured using a seven-item scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .95$) that was adapted from the study conducted by Chen & Ayoun (2019). For this study, the items were reworded to reflect the perceptions relating to the dark humor of leaders, given that the original scale was aimed at self-report. Notably, a sample item is as

follows: “my superior’s humor often insults others.”. Perceived Violation Tolerability. This was measured in line with Study 1 (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .90$).

Vertical Dyad Linkage

This was measured using the seven-item measure, the development of which is credited to Yawei and Huayun (2017). Sample items include “I know where I stand with my superior” and “I generally know how satisfied my superior is with me” (1 = strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree; $\alpha = .94$).

Deviance

This was measured in line with Study 1 (1 = strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree; $\alpha = .93$).

Work Efficiency

In order to measure work efficiency, Mróz&Kaleta (2016) 16-item scale was adopted. Work efficiency is posited to have three sub-elements—emotional (for example, “I am excited in my work”), physical (for instance, “I work hard on tasks”), and cognitive engagement (e.g., “I pay attention to my tasks”). However, since this theorization was unable to separate the three kinds of engagement and due to their strong correlation (rs ranged from .74 to .89, $ps < .01$), the average score was used for developing a broad composite of work efficiency (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .91$).

Table 3: Correlations Among Study 2 Variables

Variables	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Humor of Superior (T1)	3.78	1.40	.96								
Dark Humor of Superior (T1)	3.04	.97	.07	.95							
Perceived Violation Tolerability (T2)	2.21	1.05	.27**	.16*	.90						
VDL (T2)	5.24	1.51	.16*	-.11 [†]	-.03	.94					
Deviance of Subordinate (T3)	1.58	.56	.14*	.05	.22**	-.141	.93				
Work Efficiency (T3)	6.99	1.29	.24**	-.06	.01	.18**	-.16*	.91			
Age of Subordinate (T1)	36.29	14.13	-.35**	-.12 [†]	-.12 [†]	-.08	-.08	-.18*	(-)		
Gender of Subordinatea (T1)	1.40	.47	-.03	.04	.13 [†]	-.12	-.13 [†]	-.04	-.07	(-)	

[†]p < .10

*p < .05

**p < .01

^a1 = Female, 2 = Male

Note: Alphas are shown on the diagonal.

T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3

Results

Analysis Strategy

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for controls and study variables in Study 2.

Here again, a series of CFAs were carried out to ensure the distinctive factor structure of the important variables involved. The proposed six-factor model comprised of humor of superior, dark humor of superior, perceived violation tolerability, VDL, deviance, and work efficiency, which was proven as a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(307) = 599.80$, RMSEA = .09, CFI = .94. In addition, it was observed

to be a better option than other five-factor models, which also included a five-factor model wherein the dark humor of superior and humor of superior were loaded on a single factor $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 760.02$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .15, CFI = .71); a five-factor model wherein perceived violation tolerability and VDL were loaded on a single factor $(\Delta\chi^2(5) = 762.05$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .12, CFI = .73); as well as a five-factor model wherein work efficiency and deviance were loaded on a single factor $(\Delta\chi^2(5) = 1235.14$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .16, CFI = .65). For the purpose of making sure that this temporal distinction had no impact on the factor structure, the six-factor model was further

compared with a three factor model wherein the grouping of variables was done based on time (i.e., perceived violation tolerability and VDL; humor of superior and dark humor; and deviance and work efficiency). According to the findings, the six-factor model was found to be a better fit than this model ($\Delta\chi^2(13)=2235.60, p<.01, RMSEA=.23, CFI=.42$). As in Study 1, Becker *et al.*, (2016) was followed and all the analyses undertaken in this study were run with and without demographic controls. The findings were observed to be largely identical after including these variables. To ensure presentational brevity, the results are presented without controls.

Test of Hypotheses

An ordinary least squares regression was performed to test Hypothesis 1. At Time, humor of superior 1 was positively linked with perceived violation tolerability at Time 2 ($\beta = .24, p<.01$). A bootstrapping-based mediation test was performed using the PROCESS macro to test hypothesis. Results exposed that humor of superior was linked with increased deviance of subordinates, mediated by perceived violation tolerability (indirect effect= .01, SE = .02,95%CI = .001 to .05; direct effect= .02, SE=.03, 95% CI = 2.08 to .07; total effect=.05, SE = .02, 95% CI = .02 to .09). These results can be considered as additional support for hypotheses 1 and 2. PROCESS macro was performed again to test hypotheses 3 and 3, as well as to test the positive

pathway of humor of superior. It was found that humor of superior had a positive relationship at Time 1 with VDL at Time 2 ($\beta = .81, p<.05$). In addition, the findings show that humor of superior was linked with improved work efficiency, mediated by increased VDL (indirect effect= .01, SE = .03,95%CI =.002 to .07; direct effect=.10, SE = .05, 95% CI = .05 to .27; total effect=.18, SE = .07, 95% CI = .08 to .29), and this support Hypotheses 3 and 4.

In order to test Hypothesis 5, first, the interactive effect of dark humor and the humor of superior on perceived violation tolerability was examined. At the beginning, both humor of superior ($\beta = .25, p<.01$) and dark humor of superior ($\beta = .16, p<.05$) were positively linked with perceived violation tolerability (Table 4). Then, findings proposed that after the interaction term addition, the model described significantly more variance (adjusted $R^2 = .15; \Delta R^2=.03, p<.05$). After that, PROCES macro was utilized to test hypothesis 6. The mediated model was significant when the dark humor of superior was high (conditional indirecteffect= .02, SE = .01, 95% CI = .003 to .06). On the other hand, the mediated model was non significant when the dark humor of superior was low (conditional indirecteffect = .03, SE = .03, 95% CI = .03 to .08). Additionally, the moderatedmediation index was also significant (Index= $-.01, SE = .02, 95% CI = .002$ to .03), and this is supporting Hypothesis 5.

Table 4: The Negative Path of Humor: Regression Analyses for Study 2

DV = Perceived Violation Tolerability						
Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
VDL	-.05	.05	-.07	-.03	.05	-.03
Humor of Superior	.19	.04	.25**	.18	.03	.27**
Dark Humor	.14	.06	.16*	.14	.08	.11 [†]
Humor of Superior X Dark Humor				.14	.03	.22**
Adjusted R ²			.08			.15
ΔR^2						.03**

[†]p < .10
*p < .05
**p < .01

The same method was followed to test Hypothesis 6. At the beginning, there was a positive relationship between humor of superior ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$) with VDL, while the relationship was negative between the dark humor ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .10$) and the DVL (see Table 5).

Table 5: The Positive Path of Humor: Regression Analyses Study 2

Variables	DV = VDL					
	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Perceived Violation Tolerability	-.9	.10	-.08	-.05	.10	-.03
Humor of Superior	.13	.07	.18*	.14	.07	.15*
Dark Humor	-.17	.10	-.16 [†]	-.18	.10	-.11 [†]
Humor of Superior				.13	.08	.17*
X Dark Humor Adjusted R2		.04			.05	
ΔR^2					.01*	

[†]p < .10

*p < .05

Then, findings proposed that the model described significantly more variance after the interaction term addition, (adjusted R2 = .05; $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $p < .05$). For Hypothesis 6, PROCESS macro was conducted and it was found that the mediated model was non significant when dark humor was high (conditional indirect effect = -.01, SE = .03, 95% CI = -.02 to .03). On the other hand, the mediated model

was significant when the dark humor was low (conditional indirect effect = .03, SE = .03, 95% CI = .03 to .08). Also, moderated mediation index was significant (Index = -.03, SE = .01, 95% CI = 0.3 to 0.8), and this support Hypothesis 6 (see Table 6). Thus, it is suggested that humor of superior is certainly a mixed blessing and exposed the vital moderating role of dark humor of superior.

Table 6: Bootstrapped Indirect Effects

Paths & effects	Estimates	SE	95% confidence intervals
Humor of superior → Perceived Violation Tolerability → Deviance of subordinate			
Indirect effects	.03	.01	[.008, .071]
Moderated mediation			
High dark humor	.03	.02	[.002, .092]
Low dark humor	.01	.01	[-.002, .045]
Indirect difference	.03	.02	[.002, .092]
Humor of superior → VDL → Work efficiency			
Indirect effects	.02	.01	[.002, .070]
Moderated mediation			
High dark humor	-.01	.03	[-.022, .042]
Low dark humor	.03	.03	[.007, .101]
Indirect difference	-.03	.01	[-.141, 2.014]

General Discussion

In both these three-wave field studies conducted across UAE, consistent support was found for the hypotheses that humor of superior denotes a mixed blessing. Although it does convey the perceived violation tolerability across organizations, which, in turn, has a positive correlation with subordinate deviance, it also enhances VDL, which has a positive linkage with subordinate work efficiency. It was also demonstrated that the superiors' styles of humor moderated these mediated effects. To be more precise, humorous superiors who tended to incorporate dark humor were least likely to encourage subordinate work efficiency and most likely to promote subordinate deviance. The next sections encompass a discussion on this study's theoretical and practical contributions and recommends future research directions.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several significant theoretical contributions to the existing body of research on humor and leadership. Despite the fact that humor is a ubiquitous phenomenon in the work place, there is a severe paucity of research on the usage of humor in organizations for many decades. The same inference could be made about the fields of sociology and psychology as well. To illustrate, Davis (1995) termed the research on humor as a "stillborn field." These sporadic attempts to research could partly be attributed to the absence of a cogent theoretical framework. Through the introduction of BVT (Kant & Norman, 2019) to literature pertaining to organizations, future researchers could possibly conduct a systematic evaluation of the impact of humor within work settings. More significantly, while BVT was originally intended to explicate the things that produce humor, this theory is integrated with SIP, which means that it can be extended to understand the negative ramifications on processing superior humor.

Equally, the current study makes a significant contribution to the relational facet of leadership. More precisely, the "mixed blessing" approach has proven that the impacts of superior humor entail a lot more nuance than what has been assumed thus far. According to the findings of the current study, superiors humor has a linkage with greater subordinate deviance. In addition, referring to prior research on humor's relational benefits (e.g., Tsai,

Wang & Tseng, 2016; Dikkers, Doosje & De Lange, 2012), it was demonstrated that superior humor has an association with heightened subordinate work efficiency.

In doing so, the results of this study suggest that superiors might inadvertently augment perceptions of the violation tolerability as well as deviance despite improving the quality of their relationships with subordinates' work efficiency using humor. As a result, this study offers a far more comprehensive understanding of the superior humor's effects, also underscoring the importance for adopting a dialectical viewpoint on the implications of using humor in organizations. Third, the current study builds on the extant empirical research on workplace humor by undertaking an examination of style. Although prior research on superior humor oftentimes aggregated many kinds of humor (Thomas, 2019), it is observed that humor style is a more specific factor that must be taken into consideration to decipher the implications of superiors' humor.

As indicated in the findings of the current study, humor was found to have a positive relationship with work efficiency and deviance, dark humor neutralises or amplifies these impacts. Moreover, prior studies on specific humor styles tended to emphasize on its more positive forms (see Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012). In this context, the current study is one of the very few ones that have underscored the significance of dark humor, which is regarded as a negative type of humor, as a moderating factor between humor of superior and subordinate outcomes. Therefore, this work makes a significant contribution to literature on humor by exploring proclivities to use humor in conjunction with dark humor. It is believed that this approach is ideally suited to inform practitioners and scholars as to the scenarios where superior humor offers the least and maximum amount of benefits to their subordinates. Finally, it also makes a significant contribution to the existing work on organizational norms (Sorokin, 2017) by positing that violation of norms could have far-reaching effects on behavior because they could be viewed as domain general.

According to the findings of Study 1 and Study 2, a linkage was found between superior humor and a broad array of deviant behaviors which may be unable to get mapped on specific types of superior humor. While previous studies on normative beliefs

and humor indicate that humorous norm violations could be transferred within domains, for example, sexist jokes can build the perception that sexism is tolerable (e.g., Mallett, Ford, & Woodzicka, 2016), the present study extends this notion by proposing that it is possible interpret norm violations more broadly than the one being breached by a humour joke.

Practical Implications

Although previous studies have pointed out that successful superiors can indeed leverage humor to encourage their subordinates to improve their performance (e.g., Thomas, 2019; Robert, Dunne & Lun, 2016), the current study highlights a potential hazard that humorous superiors would do well to consider. This is not to suggest that superiors must no longer exhibit humor in the workplace. Instead, as demonstrated by this study's mixed blessing model, superiors must create an environment where norm adherence is encouraged. The current study cautions that dark humor has the potential to damage the quality of superior-subordinate relationship quality and evincing more norm-breaching behaviors on the part of subordinates. For this reason, superiors are encouraged to minimize the use of dark humor to the maximum possible extent. Although specifying the kind of humor that is tolerable for a leader to exhibit is an onerous task. However, leaders can be educated on the potentially harmful implications of dark humor and encouraged to use more positive types of humor via organizational training (Ford, Lippi & Holden, 2016). Through such training, it is indeed possible for humorous superiors to reap the benefits of humor (for example, more engaged subordinates) while minimizing the possible negative results (i.e., deviant subordinates). In comparison to other structural policies (for example, employee retreats to boost engagement), humor of superior could indeed prove to be a costless strategy in creating a friendlier and relaxed workplace.

Despite the above postulations, the current study observed both direct and indirect impacts of humor of superior on subordinate deviance even in cases when dark humor is disregarded. For this reason, it is paramount to socialize employees for the purpose of espousing normative values in a company or refraining from indulging in deviant tendencies. Enforcing a formalized code of conduct for workplace interactions among colleagues is one

way of achieving this goal. Reinforcing employees' identification with the organization is another way of attaining this objective because they are then less likely to behave in a manner that can be determinant to either the organization or its members (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). It is possible to mitigate the impacts of superiors' displays of humor on subordinate deviance with strong socialization programs for newcomers and a culture that promotes identification with the organization.

As a broader implication, superiors would do well to review their position as role models and remain aware of the fact that their actions can trigger both negative and positive outcomes because they are taken seriously by their subordinates. Therefore, superiors must strive to augment their self-monitoring skills in a manner that enables them to be more aware of how they are portrayed to their subordinates in various scenarios.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the many strengths and unique contributions of the present study, it is not bereft of limitations. To begin with, despite the fact that a validated measure was adopted for assessing humor of superior (Thorson & Powell, 1993) in both studies, it is possible that this measure may not have been free of valence since some items seemingly capture both a superior's propensity to leverage humor and predisposition of using positive humor. While the null correlation between dark humor and humor of superior ($r = .07$, $p = .42$) in Study 2 as well as this supplemental work does indicate that the measure of humor of superior is indeed free of valence, future researches are strongly recommended to develop new and rigorous humor assessments, particularly with respect to organizational studies.

Second, this study only evaluated a single boundary condition of the association between a humor of superiors and outcomes in subordinates: dark humor of superior. Therefore, future research is recommended to examine whether or not other forms of superior humor can possibly regulate the impacts of humor of superior on subordinate results. As a case in point, due to its non-threatening nature, self-deprecating humor could emerge as the best humor style to develop high-quality VDL (Chen & Ayoun, 2019).

Owing to the fact that a well-rounded perspective of leadership entails leader as well as subordinate attributes (Menges *et al.*, 2018; Choi, 2011), future researchers are recommended to evaluate additional subordinate traits as possible moderators. To illustrate, subordinates with high perspective taking ability (Sun *et al.*, 2016) might be able to decipher the higher-order messages being signalled by humorous superiors (that is, a more engaged workplace as opposed to mere violation of norms) and therefore, be less likely to indulge in deviant behavior.

Third, in the context of organizational behavior, the research on humor is largely sporadic (Koo, Kim, and Kang, 2018). Therefore, future researchers are recommended to continue exploring all possible implications of superior humor along with their underlying processes. Meanwhile, considering the norm violating nature of most forms of humor, the sense of humor of a leader may encourage subordinates to develop their creative faculties (de Souza *et al.*, 2019). However, one potential downside is that subordinates may begin to emulate superiors' exhibition of dark humor to their peers, thus resulting in heightened group relational conflict and attenuated group coherence. In order to mitigate these negative ramifications, evaluating both self and other- reported sources would be a good idea given that the latter self- (e.g., deviance) can potentially be fraught with biases linked to social desirability (Mackey *et al.*, 2017) or motivated forgetting (Kouchaki & Gino, 2016).

Fourth, of the measure of deviance used in the two studies is self-reported. Although it is true that several deviant behaviors are enacted privately, which is why other formats would have been inapplicable, future research control is suggested for factors including biases of social desirability that might probably produce a floor effect for this measure.

Finally, some organizations might possibly encourage deviance and norm violation despite their

unfavorable perception. For example, employees in the tourism industry are often left with no choice but to exhibit humor. In such industries, the sense of humour of a superior may actually represent adherence to norm rather than its violation. For this reason, future studies must examine the implications of humor of superior in disciplines where humor is actively encouraged and promulgated.

Conclusion

This research entailed the integration of BVT and SIP. The overarching finding is that humor of superior is a mixed blessing, which results in increases both work efficiency and subordinate deviance. While it is true that the current study imbues much-needed clarity on the correlation between humor of superior and subordinate outcomes, it is duly conceded that only one step has been taken toward developing a more holistic understanding of the impacts of a superior's humor in organizations. There are a number of questions that future studies would do well to address. Nonetheless, it is hoped that a rudimentary introduction to BVT and the present study would be able to catalyze further research on humor in organizational behavior.

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Conflict of Interest

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