

WHEN HUMOUR WORKS: IMPACT OF HUMOUR STYLE SIMILARITY ON SUPERVISOR-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

With rising levels of work-related stress and its dramatic consequences, organizations are increasingly investing in finding solutions to promote employee well-being. As an effective approach to stress management, humour has begun to attract the attention of practitioners and researchers. This study proposes to look at humour as a further managerial tool to improve workplace relationships and associated positive outcomes. It examines how the humour style of supervisors and subordinates affects the leader-follower relationship. Specifically, the effects of humour style (dis)similarity on leader-employee exchanges are examined. Data were collected in 2022 from 128 supervisor-subordinate dyads ($N = 53$ supervisors; $N = 128$ subordinates) in an international organization headquartered in Switzerland. Our polynomial regression analysis reveals that leader-member exchange (LMX) is positively influenced by congruence in affiliative, self-enhancing and self-defeating humour. These findings contribute to the discussion on the impact of humour style similarity on workplace relationships and the importance of considering dyadic interactions.

Implications for Central European audience: The results suggest that leaders should take humour seriously and consider including it in their managerial toolkit to improve workplace relationships. It is important to differentiate between humour styles and their effects and apply them with respect to the situation and desired outcomes. Joking together improves LMX, which is why leaders should consider supporting their employees in humorous behaviour to strengthen bonds. Since leaders' behaviour is perceived as a reference and considering the numerous positive effects of humour in organizations, leaders may practice humour at work more often to lead by example and integrate it into the group culture.

Keywords: LMX; humour styles; similarity; well-being; leadership

JEL Classification: M54, M59

Introduction

In recent years, the work environment has become increasingly stressful. According to the Job Stress Index (Gesundheitsförderung Schweiz, 2022), the stress level of employees in Switzerland keeps rising. In 2022, over 30% of employees felt emotionally exhausted at work and 28.2% experienced critical levels of stress. The physical and psychological consequences of work-related stress have cost the Swiss economy CHF 6.5 billion in 2022, as estimated by the study authors. The picture is similar in other countries: the global WPO Workplace Stress Index 2022 (Workplace Options, 2022) showed that 31% of employees are stressed by their daily work; 27% struggle with work-life balance.

The negative effects of work-related stress have been extensively demonstrated in research (Cooper et al., 1996; Sabri & Aw, 2020). At the individual level, stress can cause mental and physical illnesses, including heart disease, certain cancers, migraines and various psychosomatic syndromes (Cooper et al., 1996). Furthermore, it has a long-term impact on attitudes and behaviour, with significant implications for organisations: stress among employees reduces commitment, job satisfaction and performance (Cooper et al., 1996) while increasing turnover, absenteeism and the occurrence of errors. The costs of stress are dramatic for both individuals and organisations around the world and should be proactively addressed to initiate positive change (Hoel et al., 2001). Given the labour shortages reported by many industries around the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022), investing in employee well-being may become critical for organisations.

Well-being has been characterised as the result of subjective evaluation of all positive and negative experiences, with positive effects prevailing (Diener et al., 1997). Applied to the work context, it can be viewed as "people's feeling about themselves in relation to their job" (Warr, 1999), whereby positive feelings must outweigh negative ones. Multiple studies have demonstrated beneficial outcomes of employee well-being for organisations, such as increased job satisfaction (Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008), improved performance and productivity (Kopelman et al., 1990), lower absenteeism and turnover intentions (Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008). Accordingly, organisations are increasingly implementing various tools to improve employee well-being (Grawitch et al., 2006) to offset the negative effects of stress in times of increasing ambiguity and uncertainty.

Well-being is a compound construct with multiple components, such as mental health, physical health and positive social interactions, all of which influence subjective well-being (Eid & Larsen, 2008). According to Diener & Seligman (2002), good social relations are particularly valuable to an individual's happiness. In the workplace, the role of the leader in social interaction is vital for employee engagement (Therkelsen & Fiebich, 2003). The relationship with the direct supervisor affects employees in many ways and is considered one of the important factors in subordinates' well-being (Danna & Griffin, 1999). It has been argued that it is necessary to equip leaders with strong communication skills to effectively navigate teams through change and stress (Rony et al., 2020).

One of the aspects of communication is humour; it is an integral part of human interaction (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Research has shown that humour and positive emotions in the workplace have beneficial effects on employee well-being (Ünal, 2014; Guenter et al., 2013).

Humour is a coping mechanism and a bonding tool; it improves communication and enhances creativity (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) and promotes innovative behaviour (Pundt, 2015) and knowledge-sharing behaviour (Abdillah, 2021). In addition, humour helps reframe stressful situations so that they are perceived as less threatening and easier to cope with, which increases psychological safety (Potipiroon & Ford, 2021). Accordingly, this study suggests that humour should be considered a further leadership tool to promote employee well-being. However, it is important for leaders to recognize that, firstly, humour is a skill and a communication method that can be used intentionally (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014) and secondly, improper use of humour can lead to undesirable or negative outcomes (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). The aim of the study, therefore, is to investigate when the use of humour in the workplace is beneficial for the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship, which is an important prerequisite for employee well-being.

The article is structured as follows. Following the current introduction, the second section reviews the theoretical background of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), the role of humour in the workplace and humour style similarity in supervisor-subordinate relationships. The literature review is concluded with hypotheses developed based on existing research. The third section highlights the methodological approach and results and is followed by a discussion and conclusion.

1 Literature Review

1.1 LMX and humour

Multiple studies have shown that workplace social relationships play an important role in employee perceptions and attitudes (Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008; Diener & Seligman, 2002). In particular, the quality of the relationship with the immediate supervisor has been shown to have a significant impact on employee well-being (Epitropaki & Martin, 1999). In an exploratory study by Lagace et al. (1993), a better relationship with a supervisor was found to be positively related to employee motivation and negatively related to stress levels. In Sparr & Sonnentag's (2008) study, the quality of the employee-supervisor relationship predicted higher job satisfaction, while lower turnover intentions and levels of job depression, as components of employee well-being.

The impact of the supervisor-subordinate relationship on various organizational outcomes was explained by the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which suggests that leaders develop unique relationships with each of their followers (Liden et al., 1993). High LMX characterizes a relationship that extends beyond the employment contract (Liden & Maslyn, 1998) and implies mutual trust, respect and obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). When LMX is high, the leader can rely on the follower to take on additional tasks when needed and to act in the best interest of the relationship, while the follower benefits from receiving better career opportunities, support and encouragement (Burns, 1978). This, in turn, positively impacts employee motivation and has been associated with higher job satisfaction, performance, commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour, creativity (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014) and other components of employee well-being.

LMX develops and establishes itself through interactions; the more positive these interactions are, the better the quality of the relationship between leader and member can be achieved (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien 2001, Bippus et al. 2011). As a communication tool, humour can contribute to the development of a positive relationship. Effective use of humour can also reduce the negative effects of stress on employee well-being (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012).

Although the topic of humour in the workplace has received little attention in the past, recently the trend to make work more humorous has spread among practitioners (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). The Red Cross, Google, Southwest Airlines and many other organizations of all types and sizes around the world are using humour in job advertisements, employee communications, recruiting, engagement and other human resource management (HRM) practices (Cooper, 2008; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008; Tarvin, 2019).

Furthermore, today's workers expect work to be fun. An international study revealed that 97% of employees find it important for managers to have a sense of humour, as it improves the work climate and relationships within the team (Witham, 2007). Another survey of more than 700 CEOs found that 98% of them preferred job candidates with a sense of humour (Tarvin, 2019). Apparently, the absolute majority of employees wish for a positive and cheerful team, regardless of job title. In line with that, a growing body of evidence confirms that the use of humour in the workplace is associated with numerous positive outcomes (Abel, 2002; Morreall, 1991; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Humour strengthens group cohesion by psychologically reducing external threats (Francis, 1994), improves communication through positive emotions and reduced tension (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), decreases stress (Abel, 2002) and promotes creativity and innovation (Morreall, 1991). In addition, humour can play an important role in leadership to either secure power or reduce the social distance between leader and follower (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

Humour is not only about making jokes. It has been defined as "any communicative instance which is perceived as humorous" (Martineau, 1972), or "amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions" (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). As an element of social interaction, humour elicits psychological, cognitive and behavioural responses and therefore impacts individuals and teams (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). Furthermore, humour is a trainable skill (Tarvin, 2019) and managers can intentionally use a particular style of humour to achieve favourable organizational outcomes (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Yet humour is a matter of perception, as different individuals experience it in different ways (Cooper, 2008). When humour is perceived negatively, it can deteriorate the work atmosphere and the leader-member relationship (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). Taking into consideration different dimensions of humour, Martin et al. (2003) developed a 4-greed matrix of humour styles. The framework distinguishes between two positive and two negative humour styles as well as between two self-directed and two other-directed humour styles.

Two positive humour styles are affiliative humour and self-enhancing humour. Affiliative humour is a positive, socially oriented dimension. It characterizes the behaviour of cheering others to lighten the mood, relax the situation and facilitate relationships (Martin et al., 2003). Those who use affiliative humour tend to be liked by others because it helps build a positive environment and enhances in-group interaction (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Leader use of affiliative humour in the workplace is positively related to employee well-being (Kim et al.,

2016), employee voice (Liu et al., 2020), trust (Neves & Karagonlar, 2020) and LMX (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). Accordingly, affiliative humour is often considered one of the most beneficial for organizational settings (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Self-enhancing humour is a positive, self-directed dimension. This humour style can be seen as a generally positive attitude and ability to cope with stressful situations through emotional regulation (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Due to one's ability to withstand challenges by reframing them into a more positive view or adopting a humorous perspective on circumstances, self-enhancing humour is perceived to be negatively related to anxiety and positively related to psychological well-being (Martin et al., 2003), as well as negatively related to job stress (Oktug, 2017).

Two negative humour styles are self-defeating humour and aggressive humour. Self-defeating humour is a negative, self-directed dimension. It refers to being funny or laughing at oneself to amuse others in a way that is harmless to them, can, however, also be seen as a defence mechanism to avoid or hide one's own negative feelings (Martin et al., 2003). Leaders' moderate use of self-defeating humour reduces social distance and makes them more approachable for their followers (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Aggressive humour is a negative, socially oriented dimension. Examples of this humour style include sarcasm, teasing, putting others down and other ways of making fun of others, typically with disregard for their feelings (Martin et al., 2003). Aggressive humour that offends group members is likely to harm the relationship or lead to unhealthy competition among group members (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Furthermore, leader use of aggressive humour has been positively associated with employee deviant behaviour (He & Li, 2019), avoidance orientation (Carnevale et al., 2022) and workplace stress (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2018). Therefore, an aggressive humour style is generally not recommended for organizational settings and should be avoided (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

1.2 Humour style similarity in a supervisor-subordinate relationship

The attraction-selection-attrition model suggests that organizations strive for homogeneity (Schneider, 1987). According to Schneider (1987), it is not the structure or the technology of the company, but the attributes of the people working in it that have the greatest influence on organizational behaviour. The framework represents a cycle of organizational processes, especially in building teams and structures. The attraction phase refers to the self-selection of certain individuals for the organization based on their perception of fit; selection represents the organizational side of recruitment and their perception of fit; attrition means that an employee leaves the organization if the fit was perceived to be wrong. Accordingly, a better fit between the individual and the organizational environment, e.g., in terms of culture, communication, processes and structures, contributes to higher job satisfaction and longer tenure. In contrast, those who are less similar to others feel dissatisfied and are more likely to leave (Schaubroeck et al., 1998). People feel more comfortable around similar people because similarity reduces the risk of conflict occurring, improves understanding and validates one's views (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). Therefore, the similarity between leader and follower likely contributes to higher LMX (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014).

LMX theory states that the relationship between leader and followers is dyadic and consists of three elements, each of which must be considered: Leader, follower and their relationship. Therefore, building on the leader-member exchange theory and the attraction-selection-attrition model, this study investigates how similarities or differences in the humour styles of supervisors and employees affect the leader-member relationship. Effective and shared humour helps individuals overcome attitude dissimilarity (Romero, & Pescosolido, 2008) and increases the cohesiveness of diverse groups (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Accordingly, a shared and similar sense of humour should contribute to positive organizational outcomes. Following previous studies that have examined the impact of humour style similarity on LMX (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Tremblay, 2021) and identified the need for further research on similarity effects, this study suggests that the (dis)similarity of humour styles would have an impact on LMX.

Affiliative humour facilitates interpersonal bonds (Saroglou et al., 2010), enhances communication (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) and is associated with higher subordinate performance and satisfaction with supervisor (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). In addition, it contributes to the development of an in-group feeling, which helps reduce tension and combat stress (Martineau, 1972). Positive effects of affiliative humour on LMX have been demonstrated at both the individual level (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015) and the dyadic level (Tremblay, 2021). The nature of interactions within a team is usually driven by a supervisor (Chen et al., 2016). Accordingly, managers who engage in humorous behaviour validate and reinforce similar behaviour among employees (Tarvin, 2019). In addition, employees seek reciprocal exchanges in the workplace, i.e., they return comparable resources to those they have received (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Exchanges experienced as reciprocal lead to greater satisfaction and loyalty (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Affiliative humour, as a positive and other-related dimension, can be viewed as a valuable resource for improving group cohesion, reducing social distance and enhancing communication (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Supportive leadership through affiliative humour combined with members' tendency to reciprocate would likely lead to improved dyadic exchanges. In general, greater similarity between individuals in the organizational setting contributes to higher job satisfaction (Schneider, 1987) and leader-member relationship (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). Accordingly:

- *Hypothesis 1: Congruent levels of supervisor and subordinate affiliative humour will be associated with higher levels of LMX.*

Self-enhancing humour is a valuable approach to reducing stress and coping with challenging situations by reframing them into manageable ones (Abel, 2002). Therefore, it has been argued that self-enhancing humour helps develop positive connections within a group and strengthens group cohesion (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). From a leadership perspective, research has demonstrated a positive relationship between the leader's self-enhancing humour style and follower satisfaction with the leader (de Souza et al., 2019), as well as supervisor favourability and job satisfaction (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2018). Self-enhancing humour is a positive dimension directed toward oneself that enables a person to cope with stressful situations or generally maintain a positive attitude (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). On the one hand, such humorous behaviour may lead individuals to cooperate more easily with others because of their stable and positive attitude. On the other hand, when comparing their

own behaviour and personality with those of the leader, followers experience better LMX when they feel more similar to the leader (Avolio et al., 2022). Therefore, supervisors' and subordinates' matching ability to use self-enhancing humour is likely to be related to a better perceived dyadic relationship. Accordingly:

- *Hypothesis 2: Congruent levels of supervisor and subordinate self-enhancing humour will be associated with higher levels of LMX.*

Although the self-defeating humour style typically falls into the category of negative humour (Martin et al. 2003; de Souza et al., 2019), findings on its effects are controversial. Self-defeating humour, a form of laughing at one's own weakness, can be used to gain acceptance from others and make oneself more approachable (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Research has shown that leaders who used self-defeating humour were perceived by their followers as less stressful and more supportive (Smith & Powell, 1988). However, leaders' excessive use of self-defeating humour may be perceived as a lack of self-esteem (Martin et al. 2003) and reduce followers' satisfaction with the leader (de Souza et al., 2019), whereas subordinates' use of self-defeating humour may lead to a reduction in their credibility (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). To examine these divergent results, similarity effects could be analysed. When employees exhibit higher levels of humour while their supervisors exhibit less humorous behaviour, they may perceive such a relationship as emotionless and not pleasant (Chen et al., 2016). On the other hand, if the leader exhibits high levels of self-defeating humour while the follower does not, the leader is likely to be perceived as less self-aware (Martin et al., 2003) and therefore not taken seriously, which should lead to lower levels of LMX. Similar levels of self-defeating humour in supervisors and subordinates should therefore be associated with better dyadic relationships. In line with that, Wisse & Rietzschel (2014) showed that LMX was higher when both supervisors and subordinates exhibited high levels of self-defeating humour, supporting Schneider's (1987) notions of fit. Accordingly:

- *Hypothesis 3: Congruent levels of supervisor and subordinate self-defeating humour will be associated with higher levels of LMX.*

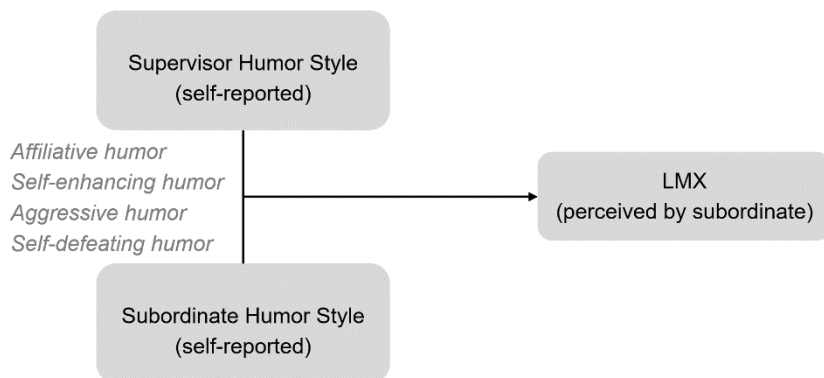
Aggressive humour has been associated with particularly negative effects on interpersonal relationships, such as decreased satisfaction (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014), lower level of followers' constructive voice and work engagement (Carnevale et al., 2022), increased workplace anxiety (Chen et al., 2022), which may also result in reduced performance (Neves & Karagonlar, 2020). Used to offend or manipulate others, aggressive humour is likely to harm group relationships, increase unwanted competition and alienate individuals in the organization (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Aggressive humour can be considered an exception to the generally positive role of similarity in relationship quality. By its very nature, aggressive humour aims to put others down in order to make oneself feel better (Martin et al., 2003). Therefore, subordinates who experience higher levels of aggressive humour from their supervisors would likely feel victimized and less satisfied, regardless of their own level of this humour style. On the other hand, when employees use aggressive humour, their relationship with colleagues and supervisor deteriorates (Chen & Ayoun, 2019), because regardless of one's own behaviour, being the target of aggressive humour may be perceived as a violation of mutual respect (Goswami et al., 2015). This, in turn, decreases collaboration

and support (Chen & Ayoun, 2019) and is reflected in the quality of workplace relationships. However, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) suggested distinguishing between aggressive humour and mild-aggressive humour, the latter referring to satire in a playful form that is perceived as more neutral and can be beneficial in cohesive teams. Therefore, it is expected that:

- *Hypothesis 4: Discrepant levels of supervisor and subordinate aggressive humour will be associated with lower levels of LMX. In particular, LMX would be lower if the supervisor exhibited a high level of aggressive humour while the subordinate exhibited a low level of aggressive humour.*

The research model is demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 | Research model



Source: Own processing

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

A quantitative survey was conducted from May to June 2022 in an international organization headquartered in Switzerland. Data collection took place globally among white-collar employees at various functional levels in the organization's subsidiaries in Europe, North America, South America and Asia. Based on the fact that the organizational communication language is English and in consultation with the human resource (HR) department of the organization, the distributed online questionnaire was in English. Employees were invited to participate in the survey by their supervisors and/or HR representatives via email; additional information was provided at staff meetings. Participation was voluntary; no incentives were offered for completing the questionnaire. Before starting the survey, participants had to agree with the informed consent stating that the survey data would be kept strictly confidential, analysed anonymously and presented in summary form so that no conclusions could be drawn about individual employees. A total of 296 employees completed the online questionnaire, corresponding to a response rate of 16.4%.

In addition, objective data on all employees such as full name, email address, location, department and supervisor name was obtained from HR and used to identify supervisor-subordinate dyads among respondents. Based on the email addresses and HR data provided by the HR department, 128 supervisor-subordinate dyads were identified ($N = 128$ subordinates, $N = 53$ supervisors). The age of the supervisors ranged from 27 to 62 years; $M = 47.76$; $SD = 9.27$. On average, they had been working at the organization for 12 years ($SD = 9.74$), had 6 employees under their supervision ($SD = 3.91$) and had a high level of education (77.3% had a bachelor's degree or higher). Of the supervisors, 79.2% were male and of the subordinates, 66.4% were male. The age of subordinates ranged from 20 to 64 years; $M = 45.47$; $SD = 10.43$. On average, they had been with the organization for 10 years ($SD = 9.18$) and had a high level of education (66.1% had a bachelor's degree or higher).

2.2 Measures

Humour styles. Self-reported humour styles of both supervisors and subordinates were used for data analysis. The short work-related Humour Styles Questionnaire (Scheel et al., 2016) was used to measure the humour styles. The 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) consists of 12 items, three for each of the four humour styles. A sample item for Affiliative Humour: "I enjoy making my colleagues laugh"; sample item for Self-Enhancing Humour: "If I am feeling depressed at work, I can usually cheer myself up with humour"; sample item for Self-Defeating Humour: "Letting others laugh at me is my way of keeping my colleagues in good spirits"; sample item for Aggressive Humour: "If someone makes a mistake at work, I will often tease them about it" (McDonald's Omega for self-enhancing humour: 0.79; affiliative humour: 0.67; aggressive humour: 0.64; self-defeating humour: 0.68). The internal consistency of some of the subscales was not optimal, with two variables falling slightly short of the acceptable level and another slightly below that. This could be related to the small number of items (3 items per subscale), which is known to have a negative effect on scale consistency. As a rule, consistency improves with a larger number of items or by excluding problematic items from the subscale, which was not possible in this case for scales with 3 items. However, because the current scale is a validated construct that has shown acceptable levels of consistency in the past (Chen & Ayoun, 2019; Scheel et al., 2016), it was used in the data analysis.

LMX. Subordinates' perceived LMX was measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), "When you think about your exchange with your supervisor, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?" (adapted from Liden et al., 1993; used in Paglis, & Green, 2002). Sample item: "My supervisor understands my problems and needs". Consistent with previous studies, the reliability of the scale was strong (McDonald's Omega: 0.91).

2.3 Method

Since polynomial regression with response surface analysis is a common method to analyse the impact of difference or similarity between two independent multi-source variables on an independent one (Edwards, 2007), it was applied to analyse the data. This approach allows us to examine the extent to which congruence or discrepancy between two variables affects the outcome (Shanock et al., 2014). Congruence refers to a level of agreement between

predictor variables in relation to the outcome; discrepancy demonstrates how the extent to which predictor variables differ from each other affects the outcome variable (Shanock et al., 2014). The general equation of polynomial regression is: $Z = b_0 + b_1X + b_2Y + b_3X^2 + b_4XY + b_5Y^2 + \varepsilon$. In this equation, X and Y represent two independent variables (supervisor's self-rated humour styles and subordinate's self-rated humour styles); Z represents the outcome variable (LMX level reported by subordinate).

Since some employees in the sample belonged to multiple dyads, additional tests were conducted to determine if there were unit-level interdependencies between dyads that may have influenced the results. Similar to Templer's (2018) approach, a group size variable was created to measure the number of dyads to which each supervisor belonged. A dummy variable was created to determine whether supervisors had one or more subordinates in the sample. Consequently, the outcome variable was controlled for group size and a dummy variable. There were no significant changes in the significance of the effects, therefore no dyads were excluded from further analysis.

To test the hypotheses about the effects of (dis)similarity of four supervisor and subordinate humour styles on LMX, the procedure recommended by Shanock et al. (2014) was followed. First, it was assessed whether there were sufficient discrepancies between the two predictors (supervisor's humour style and subordinate's humour style). The scores for both predictors were standardized, after which the frequencies of the leader's humour style being in agreement, below or above the follower's respective humour style were measured. More than half of the supervisors in the sample scored either higher or lower than their subordinates on each humour style, warranting further investigation of the effects of discrepancies on the outcome variable (Shanock et al., 2014). The results of the discrepancies evaluation are presented in Table 1.

Second, as is recommended for polynomial regression with response surface analysis (Edwards, 1994), the predictor variables were centred around the midpoint of the scales to reduce the risk of multicollinearity. Humour styles were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), therefore four (4) were subtracted from each score. Third, three new variables for each of the humour styles were calculated: (a) the squared value of the centred leader's humour style variable; (b) the squared value of the respective centred follower's humour style variable; (c) the interaction of leader's and follower's centred humour style variables.

Table 1 | Frequencies of leader humour styles levels over, under and in agreement with followers' respective humour styles.

	Affiliative Humour	Self-Enhancing Humour	Aggressive Humour	Self-Defeating Humour
Leader HS greater than follower HS	43.8%	41.3%	34.4%	43.3%
In agreement	25.8%	26.2%	34.4%	22.8%
Leader HS less than follower HS	30.5%	32.5%	31.3%	33.9%

Note. HS = Humour Style; Source: Own processing

Next, four polynomial regressions, one for each of the humour styles, were run in SPSS. From Table 2, the model with affiliative humour and the higher-order polynomials explained a total of 10% of the variance in follower-reported LMX; the model with self-enhancing humour and the higher-order polynomials explained a total of 9% of the variance in follower-reported LMX; the model with aggressive humour and the higher-order polynomials explained a total of 5% of the variance in follower-reported LMX; the model with self-defeating humour and the higher-order polynomials explained a total of 7% of the variance in follower-reported LMX. Following the procedure outlined by Edwards (1994) and in line with prior research (Gooty et al., 2019), instead of directly interpreting the regression results, the coefficients derived from each of the regressions were filled into the Shanock et al. (2014) Excel template to conduct response surface analysis. This allowed slopes and curves to be tested for statistical significance to show the effects of congruence or discrepancy on the outcome variable (Shanock et al., 2014) and provide a three-dimensional visual representation of respective effects.

Table 2 | Response surface analysis on the effects of leader-follower humour styles (dis)similarities on follower-reported LMX

Variable	Estimate	SE	t-ratio	p-value	R ²
Affiliative Humour					0.10
Constant	5.11	0.16	31.27	p < 0.01	
Leader affiliative humour	-0.22	0.19	-1.17	0.24	
Follower affiliative humour	-0.06	0.18	-0.32	0.75	
Leader-follower affiliative humour interaction	0.18	0.12	1.54	0.13	
Leader affiliative humour squared	0.08	0.07	1.14	0.26	
Follower affiliative humour squared	0.07	0.08	0.94	0.35	
Surface Tests					
a1: Congruence slope along supHumor = subHumor	-0.28	0.27	-1.02	0.31	
a2: Congruence curvature on supHumor = subHumor	0.34	0.14	2.43	0.02	
a3: Discrepant slope on supHumor = subHumor	-0.16	0.24	-0.67	0.51	
a4: Discrepant curvature on supHumor = subHumor	-0.02	0.18	-0.11	0.91	
Self-Enhancing Humour					0.09
Constant	5.08	0.13	40.45	p < 0.01	
Leader self-enhancing humour	-0.10	0.10	-0.94	0.35	
Follower self-enhancing humour	-0.12	0.09	-1.32	0.19	
Leader-follower self-enhancing humour interaction	0.10	0.07	1.42	0.16	
Leader self-enhancing humour squared	0.14	0.06	2.43	0.02	
Follower self-enhancing humour squared	0.03	0.05	0.71	0.48	
Surface Tests					
a1: Congruence slope along supHumor = subHumor	-0.21	0.13	-1.65	0.10	
a2: Congruence curvature on supHumor = subHumor	0.27	0.09	2.95	p < 0.01	
a3: Discrepant slope on supHumor = subHumor	0.02	0.14	0.14	0.89	
a4: Discrepant curvature on supHumor = subHumor	0.08	0.11	0.70	0.48	
Self-Defeating Humour					0.07
Constant	5.16	0.14	37.58	p < 0.01	
Leader self-defeating humour	0.22	0.14	1.63	0.11	
Follower self-defeating humour	0.22	0.12	1.89	0.06	
Leader-follower self-defeating humour interaction	0.02	0.07	0.27	0.79	
Leader self-defeating humour squared	0.11	0.06	1.85	0.07	
Follower self-defeating humour squared	0.12	0.06	1.93	0.06	
Surface Tests					
a1: Congruence slope along supHumor = subHumor	0.45	0.18	2.46	0.01	
a2: Congruence curvature on supHumor = subHumor	0.25	0.08	3.02	p < 0.01	
a3: Discrepant slope on supHumor = subHumor	0.00	0.18	0.00	1.00	
a4: Discrepant curvature on supHumor = subHumor	0.21	0.14	1.52	0.13	
Aggressive Humour					0.05
Constant	5.27	0.46	11.51	p < 0.01	
Leader aggressive humour	-0.06	0.22	-0.30	0.77	
Follower aggressive humour	0.12	0.36	0.33	0.74	
Leader-follower aggressive humour interaction	0.12	0.09	1.29	0.20	
Leader aggressive humour squared	-0.09	0.06	-1.51	0.13	
Follower aggressive humour squared	0.01	0.09	0.09	0.93	
Surface Tests					
a1: Congruence slope along supHumor = subHumor	-0.05	0.48	0.11	0.91	
a2: Congruence curvature on supHumor = subHumor	0.04	0.14	0.30	0.76	
a3: Discrepant slope on supHumor = subHumor	-0.18	0.36	-0.52	0.61	
a4: Discrepant curvature on supHumor = subHumor	-0.20	0.15	-1.33	0.18	

Note. N = 128 dyads.

Source: Own processing

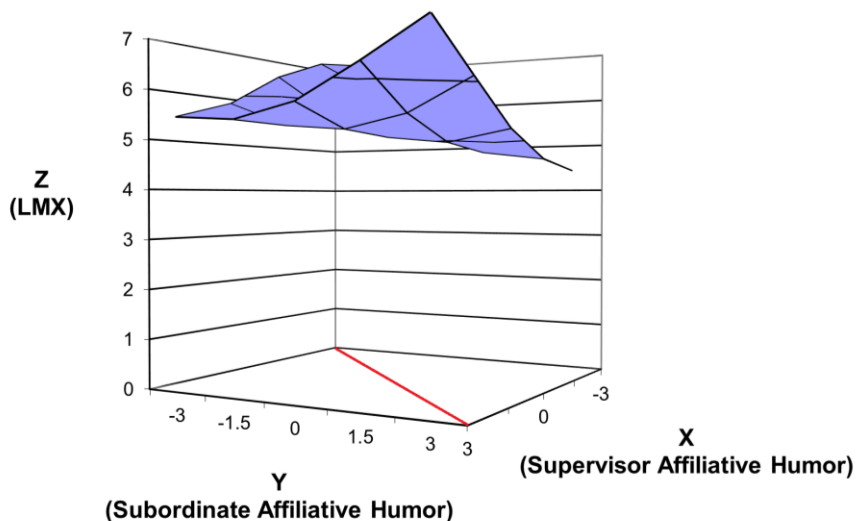
3 Results

The LMX reported by subordinates had a mean value of 5.26 ($SD = 0.94$). The mean value of affiliative humour reported by supervisors was 4.83 ($SD = 0.96$) and among subordinates 4.82 ($SD = 0.88$). The mean value of self-enhancing humour reported by supervisors was 4.35 ($SD = 1.14$) and reported by subordinates 4.28 ($SD = 1.25$). The mean value of self-

defeating humour reported by supervisors was 2.91 ($SD = 1.23$) and reported by subordinates 3.06 ($SD = 1.13$). The mean value of aggressive humour reported by supervisors was 2.02 ($SD = 0.99$) and the reported by subordinates was 1.98 ($SD = 0.88$). T-tests revealed no significant differences in the mean values of leaders' and followers' humour styles. The results of polynomial regression with response surface analysis are presented in Table 2; a three-dimensional visual representation of respective effects is demonstrated in Figures 2-5. In the figures, the X-axis demonstrates the level of the leader's self-reported level of humour style; the Y-axis shows the level of followers' self-reported level of respective humour style. Since these variables were centred around the midpoint of the scales as recommended for polynomial regression analysis (Edwards, 1994), X- and Y-axes have positive and negative values. Negative values represent lower levels of respective humour style, with the value "-3" demonstrating the lowest possible level. Positive levels refer to higher levels of respective humour style, with the value "+3" demonstrating the highest possible level. Midpoint of the scales is demonstrated on "0" levels of X- and Y-axes. The Z-axis demonstrates the level of follower-reported level of LMX with the leader in the dyad as predicted by congruence or discrepancy between leader-follower leadership styles.

The first hypothesis, that congruent levels of supervisor and subordinate affiliative humour will be associated with higher levels of LMX, was confirmed. In particular, positive significance along the curvature of congruence was identified ($a_2 = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$). Test for positive curvature of the predictors $X = Y$ in relation to the value of the outcome variable Z demonstrates whether two predictors being in agreement has a linear effect on the outcome (Shanock et al., 2014); that is, the higher the predictor's values, the higher the outcome value. The significance of the test demonstrates that this relationship is not linear. In Figure 2, the change of the congruence between predictor variables on the outcome variable can be followed in relation to the red diagonal line or the "line of perfect agreement" (Shanock et al., 2014). As demonstrated in Figure 2, LMX (Z-axis) is at the highest when both supervisor and subordinate score high in affiliative humour (X- and Y-axes respectively). However, LMX tends to get lower at the moderate levels of supervisor-subordinate agreement in affiliative humour, while rising again at lower levels of affiliative humour, which demonstrates the non-linear similarity effect (middle levels of both X and Y as related Z compared to low or high values of both X and Y as related to Z).

Figure 2 | LMX as Predicted by Supervisor-Subordinate Affiliative Humour Congruence (Positive curvature along $X = Y$ as related to Z)



Source: Own processing

The second hypothesis, that congruent levels of supervisor and subordinate self-enhancing humour will be associated with higher levels of LMX, was also confirmed. Similarly to the effect of affiliative humour, significance along the curvature of congruence was identified ($a_2 = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$), which demonstrates that higher similarity in self-enhancing humour leads to higher LMX (Figure 3) and this relationship is non-linear. The change of the congruence between predictor variables on the outcome variable can be followed in relation to the red diagonal line or the “line of perfect agreement” (Shanock et al., 2014). In particular, LMX increases more significantly in either higher or lower levels of self-enhancing humour agreement, rather than on medium levels of agreement.

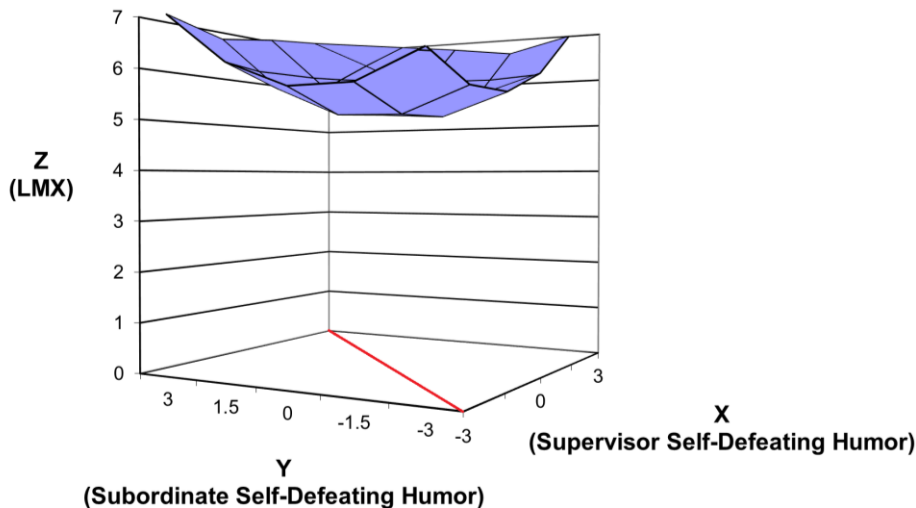
Figure 3 | LMX as Predicted by Supervisor-Subordinate Self-Enhancing Humour Congruence (Positive curvature along $X = Y$ as related to Z)



Source: Own processing

The third hypothesis, that congruent levels of supervisor and subordinate self-defeating humour will be associated with higher levels of LMX, was confirmed. Analysis indicated a significant effect of both slope ($a1 = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$) and curvature ($a2 = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$). These effects are shown in Figure 4 and demonstrate that LMX is at its highest when both supervisor and subordinate demonstrate high levels of self-defeating humour. The change of the congruence between predictor variables on the outcome variable can be followed in relation to the red diagonal line or the “line of perfect agreement” (Shanock et al., 2014). In particular, LMX increases more significantly in either higher or lower levels of self-defeating humour agreement, rather than on medium levels of agreement. In addition, the significance of the slope test demonstrates how agreement on different levels of predictors impacts the level of the outcome variable (Shanock et al., 2014). Figure 4 indicates that LMX increases more sharply when the supervisor-subordinate agreement in self-defeating humour is on a high level of this humour style (back corner or X- and Y-axes, where their values are at the highest) and less sharply on a lower level of this humour style agreement. Put differently, LMX increases when, first, both supervisor and subordinate exhibit similarly high or similarly low levels of self-defeating humour; second, LMX increases more markedly when both supervisor and subordinate exhibit higher levels of self-defeating humour.

Figure 4 | LMX as Predicted by Supervisor-Subordinate Self-Defeating Humour Congruence (Positive curvature along $X = Y$ as related to Z ; positive slope along $X = Y$ as related to Z)

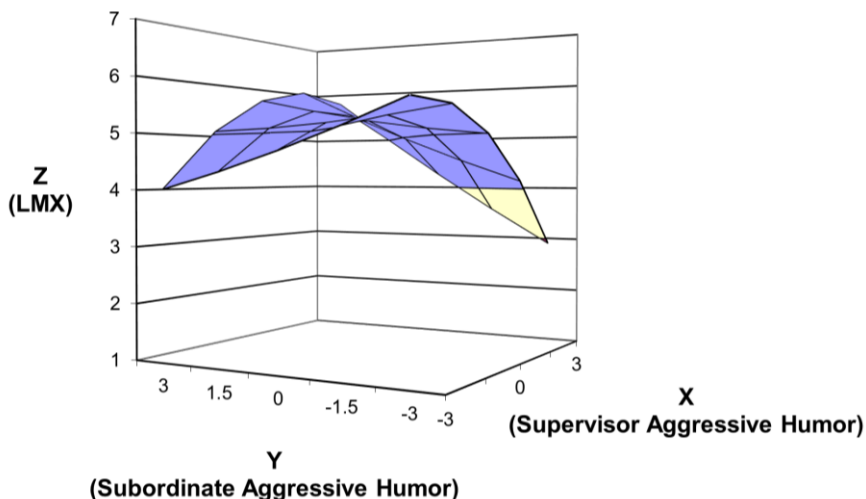


Source: Own processing

The fourth hypothesis suggested that discrepant levels of supervisor and subordinate aggressive humour will be associated with lower levels of LMX. In particular, it was argued that LMX would be lower if the supervisor exhibited a high level of aggressive humour while the subordinate exhibited a low level of aggressive humour. The response surface analysis (Figure 5) demonstrates that LMX is at its lowest when the supervisor's aggressive humour is high, while the subordinate's aggressive humour is low. However, this effect is not statistically significant, thus Hypothesis 4 must be rejected.

The internal consistency of some of the humour subscales in this study was not optimal, which could be related to the small number of items (three items per subscale). Therefore, the validity of the results has limitations. Nevertheless, it has been argued that the internal consistency of the scales in one study does not undermine the validity of the developed scales (McCrae et al., 2011). To measure humour styles, the current study used a validated construct that has shown acceptable levels of consistency in the past (Chen & Ayoun, 2019; Scheel et al., 2016). Given that the internal consistency values in this study did not dramatically deviate from the acceptability level and the results in this paper are consistent with previous research on this topic, the subscales were used for the analysis but should be evaluated with validity levels in perspective.

Figure 5 | LMX as Predicted by Supervisor-Subordinate Self-Defeating Humour Discrepancy (Negative curvature along $X = -Y$ as related to Z)



Source: Own processing

Discussion and Conclusions

Increasing levels of stress and uncertainty come at a high cost for employees and organizations (Hoel et al., 2001). Decreased engagement and productivity, higher turnover intentions and absenteeism are among the multiple negative outcomes of stressful work environments (Cooper et al., 1996). Accordingly, organizations are increasingly investing in practices that promote employee well-being (Grawitch et al., 2006). The quality of interpersonal relationships has been recognized as one of the important factors in workplace well-being (Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008; Diener & Seligman, 2002). It has been argued that employees' relationships with their direct supervisors play a particularly significant role (Epitropaki & Martin, 1999). Therefore, today's leaders are expected to masterfully navigate team relationships and develop the communication skills required to do so (Rony et al., 2020). As an integral part of communication and evidence as a means of counter-balancing stress and improving well-being, humour has attracted increasing attention from practitioners and researchers. Organisations implement it in various HR practices, while scholars investigate mechanisms that contribute to the most beneficial outcomes. Building on previous research on the role of LMX in employee well-being (Epitropaki & Martin, 1999; Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008), the current paper used LMX as its proxy and proposed to address humour as a further managerial tool to promote workplace relationships and related positive outcomes.

It was hypothesized that congruence in affiliative, self-enhancing and self-defeating humour would positively affect LMX, whereas discrepancy in negative humour style would negatively

affect LMX. The hypotheses were confirmed with several additional findings revealed from response surface analysis. Supervisor-subordinate congruence in affiliative, self-enhancing and self-defeating humour styles demonstrated similar effects on LMX. In particular, LMX increased more significantly in either higher or lower levels of these humour styles agreement, rather than on medium levels of agreement.

Consistent with social exchange theory, these results indicate that positive supervisor-subordinate interactions through humour lead to better leader-member exchange. Furthermore, following the attraction-selection-attrition model, this study shows that similarity in humour style leads to better supervisor-employee relationships, whereas dissimilarity has a negative impact on LMX. Overall, this study contributes to the discussion on the impact of similarity on workplace relationships and the importance of considering dyadic interactions (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014; Tremblay, 2021).

These findings demonstrate that leaders can use humour as a leadership tool that contributes to a better relationship in a team. According to previous studies, leaders might apply affiliative humour to improve the in-group atmosphere and reduce stress (Abel, 2002; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006); they can practice self-enhancing humour to increase group cohesion, or self-defeating humour to reduce social distance and status differences (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). These factors contribute to higher LMX. The results of the current study were consistent with previous findings and extended them with additional similarity effects.

The limitations of the study provide a venue for further research. First, LMX is a multidimensional concept, which might be affected by factors that were not considered in this research design. Therefore, future studies could address the interrelationships between the different components of LMX and how they might be influenced by humour. Furthermore, LMX in this study was measured only from the follower's perspective, which is typical for an outcome variable in a polynomial regression (Chen et al., 2016; Barbuto et al., 2011) but does not include the leader's perspective. Accordingly, further studies might consider including both supervisor and subordinate ratings of LMX in the research model. Second, the data are based on self-reported humour style and not on how subordinates perceive their supervisors' humour. Accordingly, further research could include subordinates' perspectives in the analysis. Third, due to the nature of the data collection, which entailed broad distribution, voluntary participation and no incentives, the response rate was relatively low, which is known to raise concerns about representativeness. Following other authors with a similar approach to data collection and resulting response rates (Epitropaki et al., 2021) and due to the dyadic, self-reported nature of the data and the consistency of the current results with previous studies, the current sample was used for data analysis. Nevertheless, future studies may aim to obtain a higher response rate to further test the effects. Finally, due to the nature of the empirical design of the study, the effects of humour style similarity on LMX were revealed, while the reasons for them may vary. To further the findings on this topic, future studies could be conducted with a qualitative or experimental design.

The results have several implications. First, they suggest that leaders should start taking humour seriously and consider including it in their managerial toolkit to promote employee well-being. Second, it is important to differentiate between humour styles and their effects and apply them with respect to the situation and desired outcomes. Thus, affiliative and self-

enhancing humour can be used to reduce tension and stress and self-defeating humour allows for making leaders more approachable. Third, joking together improves the quality of the leader-member relationship (LMX was at the highest when affiliative, self-enhancing, or self-defeating humour of both subordinate and supervisor was high), which is why leaders should consider accepting and supporting their employees in humorous behaviour to build stronger bonds. As a part of communication, humour is a skill that can be developed; moreover, it is known to be contagious (Hunter et al., 2016). Therefore, finally, since the role of leaders is crucial and their behaviour is perceived as a reference (Tarvin, 2019) and considering the numerous positive effects of humour in organizations, leaders may practice humour at work more often to lead by example and integrate it into the group culture.

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