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Humor Style Clusters: Exploring Managerial Humor

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Abstract
The current study is the first to explore the relationships between managerial humor and workplace facets using cluster analysis. Two-hundred and two employed adults rated their managers' humor and workplace facets online. K-means cluster analyses identified three managerial humor clusters, mostly replicating those found in the existing literature. A significant pattern of differences in stress, communication, creativity, perceptions of leader power, and job satisfaction were found between the clusters. Findings suggest negative humor use is most likely to be damaging to organizations when not used alongside positive humor types, and it is not merely the frequency with which a manager uses an individual humor type, but the holistic view of their humor, which is of importance in gauging valence of organizational facets. Using cluster analysis was beneficial in challenging assumptions from the existing literature, further contextualizing our understanding of humor and reinforcing the importance of humor use in the workplace.

Humor is a verbal or nonverbal social communicative event which is purposely initiated to amuse an "audience" or which unintentionally becomes perceived as amusing (Crawford, 1994; Lynch, 2002; Martineau, 1972; Robert & Yan, 2007). Despite being considered "ideologically positive" (Billig, 2005, p. 10), humor is a multifaceted tool which can be used to achieve both positive and negative outcomes, for example, the communication of prejudices (Evans, Goodman, & Jowett, 2014) and hatred (Billig, 2001). The processes underlying the impacts of humor upon groups, and ultimately society, are not well understood however (McCann, Plummer, & Minichiello, 2010; Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). Novel approaches are needed to accommodate for complexity when expanding our understanding of humor and to therefore better facilitate harnessing its power.

A significant development in the field of humor research has been the classification of different humor styles. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) reported important distinctions between humor directed to enhance the self or to enhance relationships with others and when intended/received positively or negatively. As such, four humor types were proposed: affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating. Affiliative humor is the most common type of humor as it is both positive and intended to enhance relationships with others (Martin et al., 2003). Aggressive humor is negative humor intended to enhance relationships with others, and depending on cavalier humor beliefs (Hodson, Rush, & MacInnis, 2010), thought to be used for being critical. Self-enhancing humor is the use of positive humor to enhance the self, often thought to support coping and well-being (Martin, 1996). Finally, self-defeating humor is negative humor to enhance the self, with the aim of gaining acceptance from others (Stieger, Formann, & Burger, 2011). Distinctions between these humor styles have received substantial validation across numerous fields (e.g., Martin, 2007; McCosker & Moran, 2012).

The Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003), a 32-item questionnaire to capture the four humor styles, was developed besides the aforementioned theoretical categorization. As theoretically expected, the positive humor scales typically correlate highly together, as do the negative scales (Martin, 2007). The typology and questionnaire developed by Martin et al. (2003) have been used on research spanning the field of psychology, with many reporting links to well-being, culture, gender, and personality constructs (Martin, 2007).

Due to the importance of communication upon many workplace outcomes, and thus organizational success (Ruck & Welch, 2012), workplace research exploring the impact of humor has also been especially popular and fruitful (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012). Managerial humor is of significant consequence to business (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Dikkers, Doosje, & de Lange, 2012) due to the impacts upon the manager and subordinates, for example, stress, withdrawal, and turnover (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). The majority of researchers (Lang & Lee, 2010; Romero & Arendt, 2011) including the present authors (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2014) have utilized correlation-based research projects, persuading managerial staff of the importance of affiliative humor use, and the potential for negative impacts from aggressive humor use.

While significant developments in understanding of humor have been made from correlation studies, concern is growing over the quantity of basic research analyses currently being conducted (Galloway, 2010; Robert & Yan, 2007). The need for alternative methodologies to explore humor is especially strong for the business context due to the complexity and intricate dynamics of the workplace (Cowan, 2012). Without acknowledging or capturing this "interference," the accuracy of research findings are likely to be compromised by measurement error (Aubé & Rousseau, 2011). Deviating from the traditional correlational design, Galloway (2010) utilized cluster analysis to explore the differences in personality traits between different humor style clusters. By adopting a clustering technique, the interactions between, and complexities of, humor types could be acknowledged (Everitt, Landau, Leese, & Stahl, 2011). The Humor Styles Questionnaire was administered to an Australian sample of 318 individuals, formed of students and general population. Galloway identified four meaningful groups of individuals—those who used all types of humor more than the average individual, those who used all types of humor less than the average, those who used positive (affiliative and self-enhancing) humor more than the average and negative (aggressive and self-defeating) humor less than the average, and individuals who used negative humor more than the average and positive humor less than the average. Galloway then proceeded to explore the differences in personality traits between clusters. By not offering a detailed explanation as to how such clusters were chosen over alternative structures, or how such clusters can be meaningful for applied research, further progress was needed to explore the consequences, complexities, and social implications of humor.

Responding to such criticisms, Leist and Müller (2013) explored the relationship between humor clusters, as measured by a German translation of the Humor Styles Questionnaire, and the self-esteem, self-regulatory strategies, and life satisfaction of a German sample. Three humor clusters, equivalent to the first three clusters identified earlier by Galloway (2010) were replicated, labelled "humor endorsers," "humor deniers," and "self-enhancers," respectively. A consistent pattern of relationships with outcomes emerged where humor endorsers had slightly above-average well-being scores, humor deniers had below-average well-being scores, and self-enhancers had above-average well-being scores. Using analyses

of variance, humor clusters were better predictors of the well-being outcomes than the component humor scales, all except for self-enhancing humor and flexible goal adjustment. Such findings highlight the value of exploring humor clusters, and not simply humor types alone, and provide valuable impetus for exploring clusters with other factors and more complex environments, for example, the workplace.

The current study will build upon Galloway (2010) and Leist and Müller (2013) by exploring the relationships between managerial humor clusters and workplace facets. The first aim of the current study is to explore the consistency of the aforementioned cluster structures using a sample of British workers' ratings of managerial humor types. The current study will be vital to determine whether styles of humor use are independent of methodological, cultural, and contextual biases. For example, as the current study has adopted a subordinate rating of humor, and aggressive interactions are common within the workplace (Ward & Evans, 2015), greater reporting of aggressive humor could be expected (Coyne, Chong, Seigne, & Randall, 2003).

The second aim of the current study is to explore differences between managerial humor clusters on numerous important organizational outcomes. Inspired by the organizational humor model (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) and a large meta-analysis on the consequences of workplace humor (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), job satisfaction, communication, stress, creativity, and perceptions of leader power will be explored. The current study takes an exploratory approach, and while no causal effects can be assumed, results are expected to provide insight into the efficacy of humor as an organizational communication method, and inspire practical recommendations for workplace humor use (Hobbs, 2007; Huo, Lam, & Chen, 2012; Isaksen & Akkermans, 2011).

Method

Participants

Two-hundred and two participants, currently employed in the United Kingdom and over 18 years, completed a questionnaire evaluating their work environment and managers' humor. One-hundred and forty-two females and 60 males were convenience sampled using a student research participation scheme, work colleagues and social network contacts, and requests at a local fire-service. No payment or compensation was offered. One-hundred and twenty-four individuals from the sample worked part-time and 78 worked full-time. The sample was predominantly from retail (94) or public service (72), although office workers, management, and manual workers were included (22, 9 and 5, respectively). Participants' managers were slightly more likely to be male (108) and the length of time working alongside their current manager ranged from 1 month to 11 years, with a mean of 20 months (*SD* = 21.42). Relationships with their managers were considered "negative" by 18 participants.

Procedure

All data were collected online from individuals willing to report perceptions of their workplace and managers' humor styles. No identifying information was captured and practices were approved by an ethics committee before data collection began. Participants received an information sheet and consent form before demographic questions and the battery of questionnaires was administered and written debrief was provided.

Materials

The following battery of questionnaires was given to all participants.

   The peer-report Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003) captured managerial use of affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating humor. The questions only differ from the original Humor Styles Questionnaire by use of the term "my manager" to replace personal pronouns. There were eight questions per humor scale with 7-point Likert-type responses ranging from *totally agree* to *totally disagree.* Reported Cronbach's alphas are .80, .77, .81, and .80, respectively.

   The Pressure subscale of the Stress in General Scale (Stanton, Balzer, Smith, Parra, & Ironson, 2001) captured general stress levels. Eight words are responded to with either *describes my job*, *cannot decide*, or *not describing my job*, scored as 30, 15, and 0, respectively (weighted as recommended by authors). Cronbach's alpha is reported as .88.

   The Communication subscale of the Job Satisfaction Survey (Spector, 1985) captured satisfaction with clarity of communication in general. With a reported Cronbach's alpha of .71, the scale has four questions with a 6-point Likert-type response ranging from *disagree very much* to *agree very much.*

Table 1. The Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alphas, and Relationships Between All Variables.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Affiliative Humor	39.58	10.00	*.87*	.08	.79**	.37**	−.17*	.37**	.47**	.44**	.23**
2. Aggressive Humor	30.75	8.65		*.74*	−.08	.20**	.13	−.12	−.17*	−.11	−.24**
3. Self-Enhancing Humor	33.06	9.81			*.90*	.48**	−.10	.31**	.47**	.35**	.25**
4. Self-Defeating Humor	26.07	7.88				*.76*	−.06	.08	.24**	.07	.01
5. Stress	113.83	70.92					*.82*	−.33**	−.18**	−.10	−.31**
6. Communication	16.32	5.11						*.83*	.41**	.39**	.40**
7. Creativity	2.69	1.40							*.76*	.44**	.37**
8. Leader Power	7.33	2.44								*.77*	.17*
9. Satisfaction	39.45	13.46									*.91*

*p < .05. **p < .01. Figures in italics represent Cronbach's Alpha scores.

   Literature-cultivated questions used by Brion, Mothe, and Sabatier (2010) captured perceived autonomy to be creative. The four questions were responded to with an agree/disagree dichotomous response. Reported Cronbach's alpha is .77.

   The Leadership subscale of the abridged Big Five–dimensional circumplex model (Hofstee, de Raad, & Goldberg, 1992) captured perceptions on the managers' strength of leadership. The 10 questions had an agree/disagree dichotomous response and a reported Cronbach's alpha of .82.

   The Job in General Scale (Ironson, Smith, Brannick, Gibson, & Paul, 1989) captured general job satisfaction. The scale has 18 words which could describe a job, and participants

respond *yes*, *no*, or *?* scored as 3, 0, and 1, respectively, as recommended by the authors. Cronbach's alpha is reported at .92.

Results

The mean, standard deviation, and internal reliability of the scales are presented in Table 1. As all measures did not achieve normal distribution and relationships were not expected to be completely linear, the relationships between variables were captured by Spearman's rho and are also presented in Table 1. Multicollinearity was tested using variance inflation factors. All values were less than 5 (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011), indicating that relationships between factors were sufficiently small to not over-weight any one variable during clustering.

All humor scales were first transformed into *z* scores to facilitate interpretation. K-means clustering was conducted using SPSS (IBM, 2013), to explore the aforementioned three-cluster solution previously identified. Three humor styles became apparent: Cluster 1 representing those who used positive humor types frequently and negative humor infrequently, Cluster 2 of aggressive but otherwise infrequent humor users, and Cluster 3 formed from those who used all humor types more than the average. To gauge whether more interpretable clusters were possible, tests for an alternative four K-means cluster was conducted, the results of which can be found in Table 2. The three-cluster solution was chosen for further analysis due to its parsimony and similarity to the previous literature (Galloway, 2010; Leist & Müller, 2013), and is graphically represented in Figure 1.

Table 2. Details of Three- and Four-Cluster Structures Using K-Means Clustering.

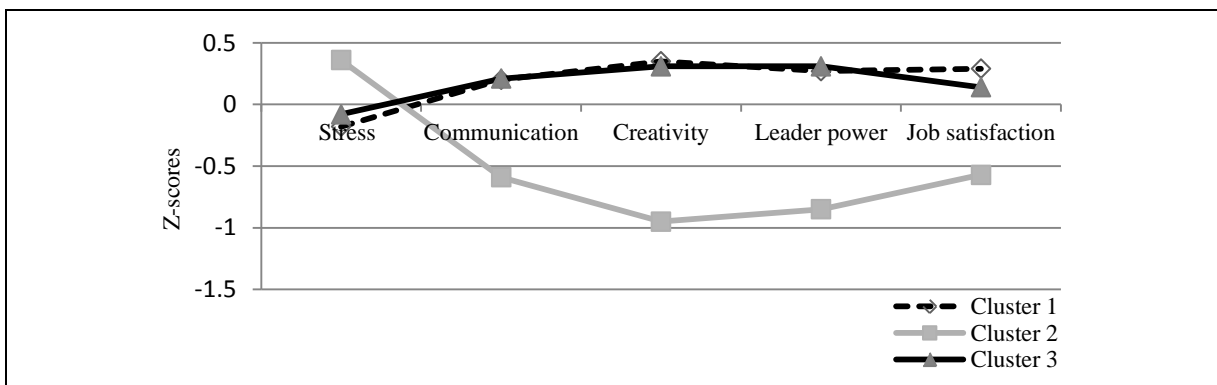|	Clusters			
	1	2	3	4
Number in group	47	44	52	59
Percentage of total *N*	23	22	26	29
Humor Styles				
Affiliative	−1.30	0.69	0.00	0.52
Aggressive	0.19	1.01	−0.94	−0.08
Self-Enhancing	−1.35	0.31	0.10	0.75
Self-Defeating	−0.78	−0.01	−0.48	1.05
Number in group	62	52	88	
Percentage of total *N*	31	26	43	
Humor Styles				
Affiliative	0.09	−1.18	0.63	
Aggressive	−0.84	0.34	0.39	
Self-Enhancing	0.19	−1.27	0.62	
Self-Defeating	−0.46	−0.77	0.78	
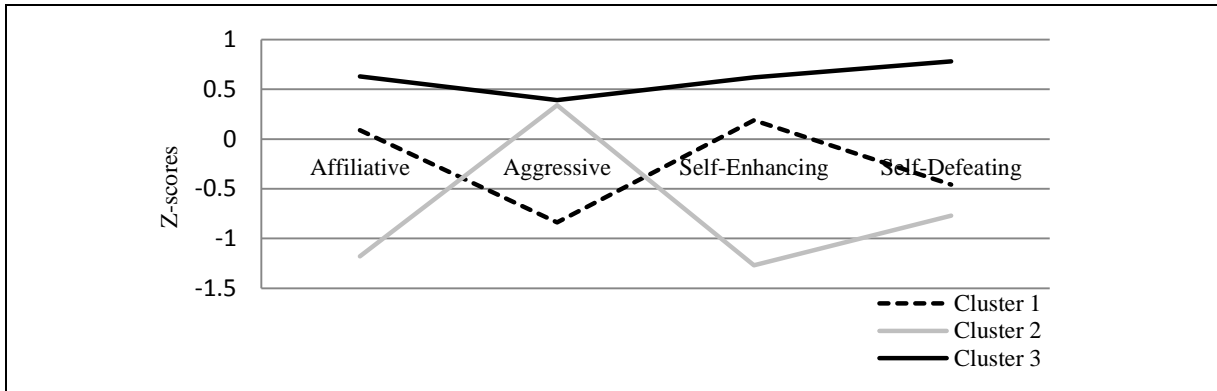
Figure 1. Values of humor styles in the three-cluster solution.

The five organizational facet variables were then transformed into *z* scores. Using the three humor clusters, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to identify significant differences in organizational factors between clusters. The means and standard deviations of the organizational variables by cluster can be found in Table 3, along with a visual representation of mean results in Figure 2. Significant differences were found between clusters on stress, $F(2, 199) = 4.88$, $p < .001$, communication, $F(2, 199) = 13.70$, $p < .001$, creativity, $F(2, 199) = 45.07$, $p < .001$, perceptions of leader power, $F(2, 199) = 33.51$, $p < .001$, and satisfaction, $F(2, 199) = 13.37$, $p < .001$. Exploring Bonferroni post hoc tests on all outcomes, a significant difference was found between Cluster 2 and Clusters 1 and 3. No significant differences were found between Clusters 1 and 3 on any organizational facet.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Organizational Facets by Cluster.

	Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Stress	−0.18	0.99	0.36	1.06	−0.08	0.93
Communication	0.20	0.88	−0.59	1.00	0.21	0.95
Creativity	0.35	0.73	−0.95	0.97	0.31	0.82
Leader power	0.27	0.71	−0.85	1.20	0.31	0.73
Job satisfaction	0.29	0.87	−0.57	1.19	0.14	0.82

Figure 2. Values of humor clusters and organizational facets.

Discussion

The current study was the first to examine humor clusters within the workplace context. First, the current study explored whether the structure of clusters identified by the existing literature (Galloway, 2010; Leist & Müller, 2013) could be replicated. Despite methodological, cultural, and contextual differences in sample, the pattern of clusters identified converged. The first cluster identified was analogous to the "self-enhancers" noted by Leist and Müller (2013), with above-average use of positive humor styles, and below-average use of negative humor styles. The third cluster identified was analogous to the "humor endorsers" in the previous literature (Galloway, 2010; Leist & Müller, 2013) with above-average use of all humor types. The second cluster represented managers who used all humor types below-average except aggressive humor. This pattern is similar to the "humor deniers" identified by Leist and Müller (2013), and the individuals who used above-average negative humor types and below-average positive types identified by Galloway (2010). The use of peer-report humor may account for the identification of the aggressive cluster in the current study and why it was not consistently found by past research using self-report humor, for example, Leist and Müller (2013). The current study utilized subordinate-reported humor, not self-report, the former of which is capable of capturing "failed humor": that which was not received as intended (Holmes, 2000). As individuals cannot always be sure when comments made in a humorous manner are interpreted as positive communications by the receiver, self-ratings are less likely to incorporate misunderstandings and thus report aggressive behavior (Coyne et al., 2003).

The pattern of clusters identified in the current study diverges only slightly from those of the existing literature from Germany and Australia (Galloway, 2010; Leist & Müller, 2013). Despite the fact humor use and appreciation can differ significantly between cultures (Bell, 2007; Kalliny, Cruthirds, & Minor, 2006; Kuiper, Kazarian, Sine, & Bassil, 2010), the pattern of humor styles captured through clusters appears to be mostly consistent across the literature. Such findings suggest that although the frequency in use of individual humor types may differ across cultures, the styles in which we use humor may be generalized more widely than previously considered. Similarly, the results appear to be mostly consistent across self- and other-report methodology, with minimal positivity/negativity bias (Paunonen & O'Neill, 2010). Replications and further cross-cultural and multimethod research is needed to validate these suggestions.

The second aim of the current study was to explore the differences between the managerial humor clusters in five workplace facets: stress, communication, creativity, leader power, and job satisfaction. Concurrent with expectations, individuals with managers holding an "aggressive" humor style, using aggressive humor but little of the other humor types, reported experiencing the most workplace stress and had the lowest scores on all other workplace facets (Huo et al., 2012). As this cluster did not represent managers with the highest aggressive humor scores, such negative organizational facets cannot be attributable to aggressive humor alone. Contrary to previous assumptions that humor types should be assessed in isolation, the current findings suggest it is the way in which multiple humor types are perceived, not the frequency of use of an individual humor type, which is of greatest relation to the valence of workplace facets. Such findings diverge from previous recommendations of the current author (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2014), and the extant literature (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), which simply suggest using positive humor types more, or aggressive humor less, is needed for the betterment of organizational outcomes. Contradicting these basic assumptions, the current findings suggest that using aggressive humor may only be of negative consequence if not accompanied by

positive humor types. Use of positive humor types may therefore mitigate the negative implications of aggressive humor use.

Based on the current findings and those of Leist and Müller (2013), it is recommended that for the most preferential outcomes, managers should be encouraged to use more positive humor types than negative humor types. Contradicting previous recommendations, this suggests that use of aggressive humor is not too problematic if accompanied with affiliative humor, and is concurrent with suggestions that aggressive humor use may have positive functions when used appropriately (Hobbs, 2007). Recommendations based upon the current study are made cautiously, however, as cause could not be attributed, and thus work to replicate and build upon the current study is encouraged to validate conclusions and recommendations. Further work should focus on establishing whether the aggressive manager profile is a methodological finding, reflection of stable individual communicative preferences, or the consequence of, or reaction to, events from within the workplace. Such findings could facilitate better prediction of the true impacts of such managerial actions and determine the practicality of workplace interventions. Future research should also begin integrating other fields of occupational psychology for greater contextualized understanding. For example, workplace frustration negatively affects an organization in numerous ways, including costly counterproductive workplace behaviors (Belot & Schröder, 2013), and managerial contact is often attributed as a major cause of such frustrations (Ward & Evans, 2015). Integrating an understanding of aggressive managerial humor, frustration, and counterproductive work behaviors, for example, could produce significant savings in the human and organizational costs associated with problems of aggressive communicative styles, negative emotions, and their consequences.

The current study has advanced the initial progress of Galloway (2010) and Leist and Müller (2013) by exploring humor clusters within a business context, and is concurrent in demonstrating how examining humor clusters, not just individual types, can be a novel and valuable approach for understanding humor. As such, it may be that the vast amount of correlation-based works and current models (e.g., Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) will eventually become inadequate for exploring or understanding the complexity of humorous interactions within the workplace. The current authors therefore recommend researchers begin longitudinal work, and to adopt a holistic approach that might more effectively accommodate the web of interacting factors within the workplace (Aubé & Rousseau, 2011). Based upon the current results, and reinforced by general consensus from the current literature (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), it appears to be of significant personal and organizational benefit for managers to be more aware of humor and its potential implications.

Conclusions

The current study was the first to use cluster analysis upon the Humor Styles Questionnaire to explore humor style clusters in a business context. Managerial humor styles and workplace facets, captured by subordinates, were explored. Mostly replicating humor cluster patterns identified by Galloway (2010) and Leist and Müller (2013), three humor clusters emerged. The most prominent cluster was that of the "aggressive" managers; those who were reported to use high levels of aggressive humor but were scored well below average on all other humor scales. Their subordinates reported significantly poorer working environments compared with the others sampled and perceived their managers to be significantly weaker leaders. Results suggest that managerial use of aggressive humor is particularly damaging in the absence of other

(positive) humor styles. Using cluster analysis to form humor profiles was beneficial in contextualizing our understanding of humor, and future work should plan to replicate and expand the current research using a holistic perspective, to integrate related fields.

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