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Are humorous frontline employees hotels' secret weapons? Investigating when and why employee sense of humor promotes service performance

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing efforts devoted to exploring humor, the extant humor literature neglects the impact of employee sense of humor in the workplace, especially in the hospitality industry, an important yet understudied context. Based on person–environment fit theory, our research examines why and when employee sense of humor can influence frontline hospitality employees' service performance. Our multi-wave research of 232 frontline hospitality employees in two Chinese hotels unveils that employee sense of humor promotes service performance by enhancing person–service job fit. Moreover, customer contact frequency strengthens the direct impact of employee sense of humor on person–service job fit and the indirect effect of employee sense of humor on service performance through person–service job fit. Our research underlines the pivotal role of humorous frontline employees in hospitality organizations.

1. Introduction

Humor has become increasingly important in today's organizations. For example, Herb Kelleher, the founder of Southwest Airlines, advocated hiring employees high in sense of humor and integrated this hiring criterion into the company's core culture (Quick, 1992; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). Katherine Hudson, CEO of the Brady Corporation, also acknowledged the transformative potential of displaying humor within the organization (Hudson, 2001). In recognition of the valuable insights that humor may offer into management and organizational behavior (Avolio et al., 1999), scholars have increasingly shifted their focus to exploring the effects of humor in organizational settings.

While many efforts have been devoted to behavioral humor, the role of sense of humor is underestimated (Bowling et al., 2004). Compared to behavioral humor, which represents "narrow facets" that reflect particular ways of humor expression, sense of humor is a "broad bandwidth" trait characterized by a stable tendency to create humorous stimuli (Yam et al., 2018). This suggests that trait humor could be an asset for employees to continuously remain competitive in organizations (Collinson, 2002). An intriguing and crucial follow-up question is how sense of humor functions in the workplace. Despite significant progress toward a holistic understanding of sense of humor, two notable gaps

remain in the existing literature. *First*, prior studies have primarily focused on leader trait humor but paid little attention to employee trait humor. Since the findings of leader sense of humor may not be generalized to employee sense of humor, further studies should be conducted to investigate whether sense of humor is a desirable trait for employees. *Second*, empirical studies on sense of humor have predominantly been conducted in the general management field or psychology field, and little is known about its effects in the hospitality industry, especially for employees positioned at the organization–customer interface (Liao and Chuang, 2004). Sense of humor is valuable for frontline hospitality employees because it helps stimulate customers positive emotions, catch customers attention to improve communication efficiency, and create a relaxing atmosphere to interact with customers (Grandey, 2003; Greatbatch and Clark, 2002; Hampes, 1999). As a result, such employees can perform better in their service jobs. Therefore, the first purpose of this study is to explore the impact of frontline employees' sense of humor on service performance in the hospitality context.

Moreover, we further investigate the mechanism underlying the association between employee sense of humor and service performance. Ruch (1998) demonstrated that person–environment (P-E) framework is a critical approach to investigate the effect of humor. Based on these arguments, we adopt P-E fit theory and propose person–service job fit, a

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pivotal type of P-E fit at work, as an essential conduit for translating employee sense of humor into service performance. Person–service job fit reflects the level of consistency between frontline hospitality employees' characteristics and service job characteristics (Edwards, 1991). As noted by the theory, the extent of fit relies upon the congruence between individuals and their environments, and the extent to which individuals experience fit strongly influences their behaviors (Edwards, 1996). Employee sense of humor enables the instinctive use of interesting elements to amuse customers and cool down angry customers, both of which are compatible with the emotion display rules in the service job (Grandey, 2003; Li et al., 2016). Humorous frontline hospitality employees are thus likely to obtain stronger person–service job fit, which in turn makes them engage more in service jobs and attain superior service performance (Chen et al., 2014). Therefore, our second purpose is to investigate the mediating effect of person–service job fit on the association between frontline hospitality employees' sense of humor and their service performance.

Furthermore, as sense of humor works through social communications, the degree to which it influences individuals highly depends on the social context. Drawing upon P-E fit theory, individuals prefer the environments that make it possible for them to manifest their advantageous traits (Su et al., 2015). As suggested by Mayer et al. (2009), customer involvement during service encounters shapes the difficulty of service. One of the core service attributes reflecting customer involvement intensity is customer contact frequency, which captures the number of interactions between service providers and customers during a fixed period (Crosby et al., 1990). In this research, we propose that customer contact frequency may strengthen the impact of employee sense of humor. When customer contact frequency is high, frontline hospitality employees need to actively interact with customers and satisfy customers' diverse requirements (Mayer et al., 2009). Given that sense of humor can reduce social distance and stimulate perspective shifts to solve emergencies (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), the capabilities humorous employees possess are compatible with the requirements of high-contact service jobs, making them a better fit for these roles and likely to achieve higher levels of service performance. Hence, our final purpose is to investigate the moderating effect of customer contact frequency in the associations between frontline hospitality employees' sense of humor, person–service job fit, and service performance.

This research makes several main contributions. First, we echo Yam et al.'s (2018) call to expand fragmented humor research and shift focus from behavioral humor to trait humor. Despite the top-down perspective toward how leader sense of humor influences employees, we focus on employees themselves and examine the effect of employee sense of humor on employee work outcomes. This contributes to service management literature by identifying the role of trait humor in promoting service performance. Second, by examining the mediating effect of person–service job fit, the current research not only provides a new theoretical framework to unravel why employee sense of humor influences service performance, but also introduces employee sense of humor as a new antecedent of person–service job fit. Finally, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of employee sense of humor by introducing customer contact frequency as a critical boundary condition, offering insights for hospitality organizations. Fig. 1 illustrates the key theoretical relationships in the conceptual model.

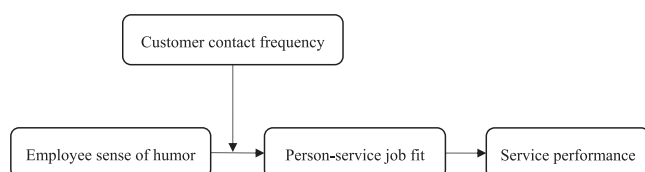


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

2. Hypothesis development

2.1. Employee sense of humor

As an essential element of communication, humor provokes amusement, mirth, and laughter during social interactions (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). There are mainly two perspectives on the definition of humor (Kong et al., 2019). One is the *behavioral perspective*, which describes behavioral humor as a type of social communication enacted by individuals to amuse the targets (Cooper et al., 2018). The other is the *trait perspective*, which focuses on *sense of humor* and views humor as the habitual individual differences in humor-related behaviors, attitudes, and abilities (Martin, 2001).

In theoretical settings, sense of humor differs from humor styles. Humor styles, referring to individuals' behavioral inclination to use humor (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006), determine how humor is expressed and perceived by others (Chen and Ayoun, 2019). Individuals can adopt different humor styles or combine several of these styles in terms of functions in diverse social settings (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). Focusing on the functions that humor serves, humor styles capture only one facet of sense of humor (Martin et al., 2003). Compared to temporal variation caused by psychological states in the use of humor (behavior) and the variation in the ways individuals use humor (humor styles), habitual individual variation in humor (trait) is more stable and is less likely to change during a short period (Ruch, 1996). Accordingly, Yam et al. (2018) suggest that an area worth exploring further is how sense of humor affects employees' behaviors in organizations.

2.2. Employee sense of humor and service performance

Despite the accumulated findings on behavioral humor (Cooper et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2022), the effectiveness of trait humor at work remains largely unexplored. A growing body of studies have paid attention to trait humor from the perspective of leaders, but fail to explicitly examine whether employee sense of humor affects work-related outcomes. For instance, Yam et al. (2018) have investigated how leader sense of humor impacts employee work engagement and employee deviance. Yang and Wen (2021) have also indicated that leader sense of humor could promote team performance. To our knowledge, only one empirical research has examined the buffering effect of employee sense of humor on the associations between workplace stressors and employee well-being and absenteeism (Sliter et al., 2014). Given that employee sense of humor may be more powerful in influencing employee themselves than leader sense of humor (Li et al., 2014), it is crucial to figure out the role of employee sense of humor in organizations and further investigate its impact on employee behaviors.

Frontline hospitality employees' service performance—the behaviors of employees to serve and help customers—is a key indicator reflecting customers' evaluation of service encounters (Liao and Chuang, 2014). Representing their organization to customers, frontline hospitality employees are required to ask effective questions, meet customers' diverse needs, and adapt their service to customers' expectations (Liao and Chuang, 2014). During the service delivery process, customer experience depends heavily on the employee–customer interaction quality. Customers who experience high-quality service tend to be highly satisfied and increase the frequency of future visits, both of which are critical for an organization's long-term growth (Wu et al., 2020).

Due to the pivotal role of service performance for hospitality employees, we propose that employee sense of humor promotes frontline hospitality employees' service performance. First, those employees high in sense of humor can stimulate customers' positive moods by engaging them in witty conversations. This positive emotional delivery during interactions is effective to enhance service quality (Grandey, 2003), leading to higher service performance. Second, employee sense of humor can promote customer communication efficiency by emphasizing

key segments (e.g., the policies of the hotel membership system) with attention-getting signals and by conveying information in an interesting way (Greatbatch and Clark, 2002). As customers tend to focus more on inherently interesting information, humorous remarks can thus help achieve a quick workflow with less repetition or extra explanation, which is crucial for enhancing service performance. Third, employee sense of humor can create a relaxing and warm atmosphere for communication. Customers may feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and be more willing to seek help from humorous frontline hospitality employees (Hampes, 1999). Accordingly, humorous employees tend to achieve higher performance in their service jobs (e.g., finding out what the customers need and giving them suggestions). Hence, we propose:

Hypothesis 1. Employee sense of humor is positively related to service performance.

2.3. The mediating role of person–service job fit

Past studies have employed social information processing theory to demonstrate that leader sense of humor influences employee outcomes and team outcomes through the transmission of social cues (Yam et al., 2018; Yang and Wen, 2021). Given the value of trait humor in the workplace, this theoretical framework may not fully capture how sense of humor works in organizational settings. Addressing Ruch's (1998) call to adopt person–environment framework in humor research and Christiansen et al.'s (2014) call to integrate personality traits with person–environment fit to explain work outcomes, we apply P-E fit theory to further our understanding of employee trait humor.

As suggested by P-E fit theory, the level of congruence between individuals' characteristics and the characteristics of work environment can predict individuals' perceptions of how well they fit their environment (Kristof, 1996). It is based on two key assumptions: (1) the individual and the environment should be compatible; and (2) the combined roles of individuals and their environments, rather than merely individuals' differences or environmental characteristics, affect individual behavior (Kristof, 1996). Prior research has indicated that in contrast to objective assessments of fit based on external judgments about the match between individuals and environments, P-E fit is a subjective judgment made by individuals (Lee et al., 2017). In different environments, the fit can be divided into various types, such as person–job fit, person–supervisor fit, person–group fit, person–organization fit, and person–culture fit.

From a task-related perspective, person–job fit is the most decisive factor affecting employees' attitudes and behaviors, especially in the hospitality industry characterized by around-the-clock service and a "culture of face time" (O'Neill and Xiao, 2010, p. 653). Past research has outlined two forms of person–job fit: *demands–abilities fit*, referring to the degree to which an employee's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) match their job demands; and *needs–suppliers fit*, defined as the degree to which job rewards fulfill the employee's needs (Cable and DeRue, 2002). Based on the key features of employee trait humor, we define person–service job fit from a *demands–abilities* perspective, which concerns the match between frontline hospitality employees' KSAs and their job requirements. Person–service job fit is achieved when a frontline hospitality employee possesses necessary KSAs to accomplish tasks required by service roles.

Guided by the theoretical considerations outlined above, we propose that employee sense of humor boosts person–service job fit in the following two ways. *First*, employee sense of humor triggers employees' automatic and instinctive reactions to make customers happy rather than mechanical repetition at the behest of the organization. As employees in hospitality organizations are expected to show desired emotions when serving customers, humorous frontline employees can display genuine emotions more easily through deep acting than employees with a "service mask" through surface acting (Frank and Ekman,

1993; Lam and Chen, 2012). Through the sincere display of positive emotion, frontline hospitality employees high in sense of humor are inclined to be welcomed by customers and to experience less emotional exhaustion and burnout than the "actors" (Grandey, 2003). As their ability to produce positive customer reactions through their natural cheerfulness is in line with the job requirement to please customers, humorous frontline hospitality employees will perceive high levels of fit with their service jobs. *Second*, employee sense of humor can assuage customers' anger and help manage customers' complaints. When humorous frontline hospitality employees deal with disgruntled or intractable customers, they can include funny elements in the conversation to reduce customers' negative feelings (Kobel and Groeppel-Klein, 2021). Such employees take a peacemaking role in service failure situations, which may make customers more tolerant of mistakes and enable a compromise with the hospitality organization to be reached quickly. Therefore, frontline hospitality employees high in sense of humor are better adapted to the challenging aspects of service jobs, resulting in higher person–service job fit. Taken together, we posit:

Hypothesis 2. Employee sense of humor is positively related to person–service job fit.

According to P-E fit theory, individuals and environments have a combined effect on desirable outcomes, and better P-E fit can lead to better outcomes (Hoffman and Woehr, 2006; Su et al., 2015). In this study, we propose that higher person–service job fit yields better service performance. With high levels of fit with the service job, frontline hospitality employees possess the capabilities to satisfy their job requirements and solve problems (Cable and DeRue, 2002). Such employees tend to fully engage in the job (Chen et al., 2014), resulting in desirable service performance. However, employees low in person–service job fit may feel overwhelmed by problems in a service job that requires their capabilities to reach a high threshold (Shen et al., 2018). Their work process may easily descend into chaos, leading to poor service performance (Boon et al., 2011). These arguments are consistent with the finding of past empirical studies that high person–service job fit is associated with superior service performance (Lan et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2017).

Based on the above arguments, person–service job fit may serve as an important mediator linking employee sense of humor and service performance. Taking person–environment fit theory as our lens, we propose that humorous frontline hospitality employees are inclined to perceive a better fit with service jobs due to the good match between their abilities and job demands. Such favorable perception may make them devote more time and effort to the service job, which further leads to better service performance. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. Person–service job fit mediates the relationship between employee sense of humor and service performance.

2.4. The moderating role of customer contact frequency

Although existing research has identified the moderating roles of supervisor characteristics and team practices in the relationships between leader sense of humor and follower outcomes and team outcomes (Yam et al., 2018; Yang and Wen, 2021), we have little knowledge about the boundary conditions on the effect of employee sense of humor. As trait humor is embedded in social interactions, an open question is under which circumstance the impact of employee sense of humor would be strengthened.

Based on P-E fit theory, individuals prefer environments that allow them to express their characteristics behaviorally (Su et al., 2015). When individuals are in an environment where they can express the full scope of their characteristics, they may form a favorable perception of that environment (Kristof, 1996; Su et al., 2015). Thus, the extent to which they fit with work environment may vary depending on the work context. Because interaction with customers is the key attribute of

service delivery in hospitality organizations (Dietz et al., 2004), employee sense of humor may work more efficiently when the employee-customer interaction is intensive. Hence, in our research, we explore whether the effect of employee sense of humor varies in situations characterized by different customer contact frequencies.

Customer contact frequency describes the intensity of interaction between employees and customers (Crosby et al., 1990). High customer contact frequency implies intensive customer-employee interaction and diversified customer demands, which may increase uncertainty (Mayer et al., 2009). In contrast, under low customer contact frequency conditions, there are fewer opportunities to connect with customers and less variability in customer demands (Dietz et al., 2004), resulting in greater standardization of service production processes.

Drawing upon P-E fit theory, we expect the impact of employee sense of humor on person-service job fit to be stronger under high customer contact frequency conditions. The environmental characteristics of such conditions are advantageous for humorous frontline hospitality employees because these employees are inherently socially attractive to gain customers' trust and reduce social distance with interesting jokes (Hampes, 1999; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Moreover, they can adapt to unpredictable events such as emergencies during service encounters because employee sense of humor can inspire unconventional or innovative perspective shifts to solve problems (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Hence, the capabilities of humorous employees are what service jobs need when customer contact frequency is high, and such employees may develop higher levels of person-service job fit.

In contrast, employee sense of humor is not as valuable to control service processes under low customer contact frequency conditions. The weak interpersonal exchange between frontline hospitality employees and customers in this situation suggests a homogeneous and standardized customer service delivery process (Mayer et al., 2009). Employees with a strong sense of humor cannot make the most of their abilities under such conditions. Therefore, humorous frontline hospitality employees are less necessary for the service job, and the association between employee sense of humor and person-service job fit will be weaker under low customer contact frequency conditions. We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. Customer contact frequency moderates the association between employee sense of humor and person-service job fit such that the positive association is stronger in situations characterized by high (vs. low) customer contact frequency.

Taking into account the above arguments, we expect a more pronounced indirect effect of employee sense of humor on service performance via person-service job fit in situations characterized by high customer contact frequency. When customer contact is frequent, humorous frontline hospitality employees can use humor to entertain customers and adapt effortlessly to the unpredictable service environment. Such employees may perceive stronger person-service job fit because their trait humor is manifested and proved valuable during the service encounter. They may involve themselves in the service job and perform better when serving customers. Conversely, under low customer contact frequency conditions, even though the frontline hospitality employees are especially humorous, they may have difficulties taking full advantage of trait humor to interact with limited customers, which subsequently hinders their perceived alignment with the job and engagement in delivering high-quality service. Hence, we posit a moderated mediation model and hypothesize:

Hypothesis 5. Customer contact frequency moderates the indirect effect of employee sense of humor on service performance via person-service job fit such that the indirect effect is stronger in situations characterized by high (vs. low) customer contact frequency.

3. Method

3.1. Sample and procedures

We collected data from full-time frontline employees and their direct supervisors in two five-star hotels located in Fujian, China. The questionnaires were administered in three separate phases, each with a one-month interval. At Time 1, the employees reported their demographics, perceived organizational support, performance pressure, sense of humor, and customer contact frequency. After one month, at Time 2, they rated their person-service job fit. A month later, at Time 3, the supervisors provided service performance evaluations for the employees who had filled out the second-phase survey.

With help of the two hotels' human resource managers, we acquired the names of frontline hospitality employees and randomly selected 420 employees and their 90 direct supervisors. To match the employee and supervisor data, we assigned codes to all of the participants and marked the questionnaires and envelopes with these codes before distributing them. Each participant was instructed to return a sealed envelope containing a completed survey to a collection box in their hotel's human resource department. They were also told that the purpose of the survey was to gain a comprehensive picture of individual differences and that the data would only be used for research.

In Phase 1, the return of 362 questionnaires from frontline hospitality employees yielded a response rate of 86.19%. In Phase 2, 298 employees completed the questionnaires (a response rate of 82.32%). In Phase 3, 254 valid responses were received from supervisors (a response rate of 85.23%). The unmatched responses from employees and supervisors were excluded, and our final sample comprised 232 sets of matched questionnaires. As shown in Table 1, of the 232 frontline hospitality employees, 57.80% were female and 42.20% were male. 54.32% were between the ages of 18 and 34 years. 48.70% have been worked in the organization for more than 2 years. Their average age and job tenure were 34.49 years ($SD = 12.23$) and 2.29 years ($SD = 2.67$), respectively. In terms of their education level, 43.10% of the participants had finished high school.

3.2. Measures

The scales adopted in our survey were originally developed in English. We translated all items into Chinese using back-translation (Brislin, 1986) and confirmed that the items were appropriate for the hospitality industry by consulting frontline hospitality employees in the target hotels. All of the items apart from customer contact frequency were measured on 5-point Likert scales with anchors ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Table 1
Demographics of the frontline hospitality employees.

| Sample characteristics | | N | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----|---------|
| Hotel | Hotel 1 | 92 | 39.66% |
| | Hotel 2 | 140 | 60.34% |
| Gender | Male | 98 | 42.20% |
| | Female | 134 | 57.80% |
| Age | 18-24 years | 63 | 27.16% |
| | 25-34 years | 63 | 27.16% |
| | 35-44 years | 39 | 16.81% |
| | 45-54 years | 59 | 25.43% |
| | More than 54 years | 8 | 3.45% |
| Education | High school degree or below | 132 | 56.90% |
| | Associate degree | 70 | 30.17% |
| | Bachelor's degree or above | 30 | 12.93% |
| Job tenure | Less than 2 years | 119 | 51.29% |
| | 2-4 years | 82 | 35.34% |
| | More than 4 years | 31 | 13.36% |

3.2.1. Employee sense of humor

Employee sense of humor was assessed using a 7-item scale created by Thorson and Powell (1993) and validated in Chinese settings by Yam et al. (2018). A representative item is “I can ease a tense situation by saying something funny ($\alpha = .93$)”.

3.2.2. Person–service job fit

A 3-item scale created by Cable and DeRue (2002) and adapted by Vogel and Feldman (2009) was adopted to measure person–service job fit. The scale has been verified as reliable in Chinese settings (Chen et al., 2014). A representative item is “My personal abilities and education provide a good match with the demands that my job places on me ($\alpha = .87$)”.

3.2.3. Customer contact frequency

In line with past studies (Dagger et al., 2009; Mayer et al., 2009), we adopted a single-item scale and asked the frontline hospitality employees “How often do you interact face-to-face with customers?” The response options were as follows: rarely, a few times, sometimes, often, and continuously.

3.2.4. Service performance

Service performance was measured with a 7-item scale created by Liao and Chuang (2004). The scale has been applied to Chinese samples and verified as reliable (Ye et al., 2019). A sample item is “This employee is able to help customers when needed ($\alpha = .96$)”.

3.2.5. Control variables

Because numerous studies have demonstrated that demographics can significantly influence employee performance (Eisenberger et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2021), employees’ gender (1 = male, 2 = female), age, education (1 = high school degree or below, 2 = associate degree, 3 = Bachelor’s degree or above), and job tenure were controlled to rule out alternative explanations. We created a dummy variable to control for potential effects arising from differences between the two hotels. To better identify the effect of employees’ characteristics (i.e., employee sense of humor) on person-service job fit and service performance, we controlled for two typical types of workplace contextual characteristics (i.e., perceived organizational support and performance pressure) (Stenmark and Mumford, 2011; Wang and Xu, 2019). Perceived organizational support was assessed with Eisenberger et al.’s (1986) 8-item scale. A representative item is “The organization is willing to help me when I need a special favor ($\alpha = .94$)”. Performance pressure was measured with Mitchell et al.’s (2017) 4-item scale. A representative item is “I feel tremendous pressure to produce results ($\alpha = .89$)”. Prior research has shown that perceived organizational support could exert a significant influence on person–job fit and service performance (Chiang and Hsieh, 2012; Tseng and Yu, 2016), and high-performance pressure may also affect employee job performance significantly (Gardner, 2012). Hence, controlling for them can help set a high standard for employee sense of humor to predict person-service job fit and service performance over and above the existing constructs. Table 2 presents all the measurement items.

4. Results

4.1. Confirmatory factor analyses

To examine the distinctness of the key constructs with multiple items (sense of humor, person–service job fit, service performance, perceived organizational support, and performance pressure), we conducted confirmatory factor analyses. As reported in Table 3, the baseline model including five variables ($\chi^2(367) = 869.02, p < .01; CFI = .90, TLI = .91; RMSEA = .08$) yielded a better fit to the data than the other models, providing strong evidence of discriminant validity. Table 2 indicated that the factor loadings of all constructs were significant. The

Table 2
Scale items and validation.

| Constructs | Items | Standardized Factor Loadings |
|---|--|------------------------------|
| Employee sense of humor ($\alpha = .93$) | 1. I says thing in such a way as to make people laugh. | .80 |
| | 2. I am regarded as someone of a wit by others. | .71 |
| | 3. I use humor to entertain others. | .82 |
| | 4. I crack people up with the things he/she says. | .89 |
| | 5. I can ease a tense situation by saying something funny. | .91 |
| | 6. I can exert control over a group by uses of humor. | .72 |
| | 7. I say clever things that amuse others. | .81 |
| Person–service job fit ($\alpha = .87$) | 1. The match is very good between the demands of my service job and my personal skills. | .83 |
| | 2. My abilities and training are a good fit with the requirements of my service job. | .89 |
| | 3. My personal abilities and education provide a good match with the demands that my service job places on me. | .79 |
| Service performance ($\alpha = .96$) | 1. This employee is friendly and helpful to customers. | .85 |
| | 2. This employee approaches customers quickly. | .84 |
| | 3. This employee asks good questions and listens to find out what a customer wants. | .87 |
| | 4. This employee is able to help customers when needed. | .87 |
| | 5. This employee points out and relates item features to a customer’s needs. | .89 |
| | 6. This employee suggests items customers might like but did not think of. | .84 |
| | 7. This employee explains an item’s features and benefits to overcome a customer’s objections. | .88 |
| Perceived organizational support ($\alpha = .94$) | 1. Help is available from my organization when I have a problem. | .71 |
| | 2. My organization really cares about my well-being. | .85 |
| | 3. My organization strongly considers my goals and values. | .81 |
| | 4. My organization cares about my opinions. | .71 |
| | 5. My organization would forgive an honest mistake on my part. | .87 |
| | 6. My organization would never take advantage of me. | .93 |
| | 7. My organization is willing to help me if I need a special favor. | .87 |
| | 8. My organization shows a lot concern for me. | .87 |
| Performance pressure ($\alpha = .89$) | 1. The pressures for performance in my workplace are high. | .81 |
| | 2. I feel tremendous pressure to produce results. | .88 |
| | 3. If I don’t produce at high levels, my job will be at risk. | .86 |
| | 4. I would characterize my workplace as a results-driven environment. | .76 |

average variance extracted (AVE) values of employee sense of humor, person–service job fit, service performance, perceived organizational support, and performance pressure were .66, .70, .74, .69, and .68, respectively, which all exceeded the suggested threshold of .50. Hence, the convergent validities of the five variables were also supported.

Table 3
Model fit results for CFA.

| Model | χ^2 | df | TLI | CFI | RMSEA |
|--|----------|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| The baseline model (five-factor model) | 869.02 | 367 | .90 | .91 | .08 |
| Four-factor model 1: Employee sense of humor and person-service job fit were combined into one factor | 1201.28 | 371 | .84 | .85 | .10 |
| Four-factor model 2: Person-service job fit and service performance were combined into one factor | 1220.23 | 371 | .84 | .85 | .10 |
| Four-factor model 3: Employee sense of humor and service performance were combined into one factor | 1996.81 | 371 | .69 | .71 | .14 |
| One-factor model: All variables were combined into one factor | 4429.11 | 377 | .23 | .28 | .22 |

Notes: N = 232; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation.

4.2. Descriptive statistics

As shown in Table 4, employee sense of humor was positively correlated with person-service job fit ($r = .32, p < .01$) and service performance ($r = .20, p < .01$). Person-service job fit was positively correlated with service performance ($r = .26, p < .01$). Moreover, each construct's AVE value was higher than the squared values of the correlations, which further confirmed the discriminant validity of the variables.

4.3. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1 postulated that employee sense of humor positively

Table 4
Descriptive statistics and correlations.

| Variables | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|------|------|
| 1. Gender | 1.58 | .50 | 1.00 | | | | |
| 2. Age | 34.49 | 12.23 | .18** | 1.00 | | | |
| 3. Education | 1.58 | .78 | .06 | -.26** | 1.00 | | |
| 4. Tenure | 2.29 | 2.67 | .01 | .24** | .08 | 1.00 | |
| 5. Hotel | .60 | .49 | .04 | .24** | -.09 | -.04 | 1.00 |
| 6. Perceived organizational support | 3.70 | .82 | -.07 | .05 | -.09 | .05 | .01 |
| 7. Performance pressure | 2.55 | .86 | .02 | -.06 | .05 | .09 | .01 |
| 8. Employee sense of humor | 3.09 | .80 | .02 | .30** | .11 | .01 | .05 |
| 9. Person-service job fit | 3.34 | .76 | -.04 | .19** | -.05 | .15* | -.05 |
| 10. Service performance | 3.63 | .71 | .02 | .11 | .00 | .12 | -.10 |
| 11. Customer contact frequency | 3.27 | 1.27 | -.10 | .06 | .22** | .05 | .02 |

| Variables | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| 6. Perceived organizational support | (.83) | | | | | |
| 7. Performance pressure | -.03 | (.82) | | | | |
| 8. Employee sense of humor | .12 | .01 | (.81) | | | |
| 9. Person-service job fit | .04 | -.01 | .32** | (.84) | | |
| 10. Service performance | .07 | .04 | .20** | .26** | (.86) | |
| 11. Customer contact frequency | -.06 | .01 | .05 | -.02 | .10 | 1.00 |

Notes: N = 232; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed), * $p < .05$ (two-tailed); bracketed values on the diagonal are the square root of the average variance extracted value of each scale.

influences service performance. We performed a hierarchical multiple regression analysis to examine this hypothesis. Results in Table 5 indicate that employee sense of humor was significantly associated with service performance ($\beta = .19, p < .01$, Model 6). Hence, Hypothesis 1 received support.

We used the PROCESS macro to examine Hypothesis 2–5 regarding mediation, moderation, and moderated mediation (Hayes, 2013). We adopted Model 7 and performed bootstrapping based on a sample size of 5000 and a 95% confidence interval. In support of Hypothesis 2, results in Table 6 show that employee sense of humor was positively associated with person-service job fit ($\beta = .25, SE = .07, p < .01$). Person-service job fit was positively associated with service performance ($\beta = .18, SE = .06, p < .01$). Overall, there was a significant indirect effect between employee sense of humor and service performance (indirect effect = .05, $SE = .02, 95\% CI = [.0082, .0903]$). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 received support, suggesting that person-service job fit fully mediates the effect of employee sense of humor on service performance.

When examining the moderating effect of customer contact frequency, we centered employee sense of humor and the moderator before creating the interaction (Aiken and West, 1991). Table 6 shows that the interactive effect of employee sense of humor and customer contact frequency was significantly related to person-service job fit ($\beta = .14, SE = .05, p < .01$). As depicted in Fig. 2, employee sense of humor exerts a significant influence on person-service job fit when customer contact frequency was high ($\beta = .34, p < .01$), and the above influence is nonsignificant when customer contact frequency was low ($\beta = .06, n.s.$). Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Hypothesis 5 proposed that customer contact frequency strengthens the indirect association between employee sense of humor and service performance through person-service job fit. As reported in Table 7, the conditional indirect effect of employee sense of humor on service performance was significant when customer contact frequency was high (indirect effect = .08, $SE = .03, 95\% CI = [.0150, .1445]$) but not when it was low (indirect effect = .01, $SE = .02, 95\% CI = [-.0259, .0566]$). The moderated mediation was significant (index = .03, $SE = .01, 95\% CI = [.0021, .0564]$). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 received support.

5. Discussion

This research investigates whether, why, and when frontline hospitality employees' sense of humor positively shapes person-service job fit and influences service performance in the hospitality context. Drawing upon P-E fit theory, our research demonstrates that employee sense of humor positively influences service performance via person-service job fit. Customer contact frequency strengthens both the direct effect between employee sense of humor and person-service job fit and the indirect effect between employee sense of humor and service performance via person-service job fit. In situations characterized by low customer contact frequency, the effect of sense of humor on person-service job fit and the indirect effect of employee sense of humor on service performance are not significant. To be specific, low customer contact frequency implies low heterogeneity of interaction between frontline hospitality employees and customers, resulting in low requirements for service quality. For humorous employees, sense of humor is underutilized when customer contact is low because the manifestation of sense of humor highly relies on social interaction and communication. When sense of humor is not regarded as a powerful tool to please customers, it may not exert the same influence as it does when customer contact is intensive.

5.1. Theoretical implications

First, we shift our focus from behavioral humor to trait humor, highlighting a new perspective for future humor research. Prior research on trait humor has predominately shed lights on the impacts of leader sense of humor (Yam et al., 2018; Yang and Wen, 2021), neglecting the

Table 5
Hierarchical regression results.

| | Person-service job fit | | | | Service performance | | | |
|--|------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | M ₁ | M ₂ | M ₃ | M ₄ | M ₅ | M ₆ | M ₇ | M ₈ |
| Control variables | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | -.07 | -.06 | -.06 | -.06 | .00 | .01 | .02 | .02 |
| Age | .20** | .07 | .08 | .09 | .12 | .05 | .08 | .03 |
| Education | -.01 | -.08 | -.07 | -.06 | .02 | -.02 | .02 | -.01 |
| Tenure | .10 | .14* | .14* | .13* | .08 | .10 | .06 | .08 |
| Hotel | -.09 | -.08 | -.08 | -.09 | -.13 | -.12 | -.11 | -.10 |
| Perceived organizational support | .02 | -.02 | -.03 | -.01 | .06 | .04 | .06 | .04 |
| Performance pressure | -.01 | -.02 | -.02 | -.04 | .04 | .03 | .04 | .03 |
| Independent variable | | | | | | | | |
| Employee sense of humor | | .31** | .31** | .26** | | .19** | | .13 |
| Mediator | | | | | | | | |
| Person-service job fit | | | | | | | .23** | .20** |
| Moderator | | | | | | | | |
| Customer contact frequency | | | -.04 | -.03 | | | | |
| Interaction | | | | | | | | |
| Employee sense of humor × Customer contact frequency | | | | .18** | | | | |
| R ² | .06 | .14 | .14 | .17 | .04 | .07 | .09 | .11 |
| ΔR ² | .06 | .08 | .00 | .03 | .04 | .03 | .05 | .03 |
| F | 2.06* | 4.55** | 4.07** | 4.53** | 1.38 | 2.17* | 2.84** | 2.91** |

Notes: N = 232; **p < .01 (two-tailed), *p < .05 (two-tailed).

Table 6
PROCESS results.

| | Person-service job fit | Service performance |
|--|------------------------|---------------------|
| Control variables | | |
| Gender | -.09 (.10) | .03 (.09) |
| Age | .01 (.00) | .00 (.00) |
| Education | -.06 (.07) | -.01 (.06) |
| Tenure | .04*(.02) | .02 (.02) |
| Hotel | -.15 (.10) | -.15 (.10) |
| Perceived organizational support | -.01(.06) | .04 (.06) |
| Performance pressure | -.03(.05) | .03 (.05) |
| Independent variable | | |
| Employee sense of humor | .25** (.07) | .12 (.06) |
| Mediator | | |
| Person-service job fit | | .18** (.06) |
| Moderator | | |
| Customer contact frequency | -.02 (.04) | |
| Interaction | | |
| Employee sense of humor × Customer contact frequency | .14** (.05) | |
| R ² | .17 | .11 |
| F | 4.53** | 2.91** |

Notes: N = 232; ** p < .01 (two-tailed), * p < .05 (two-tailed).

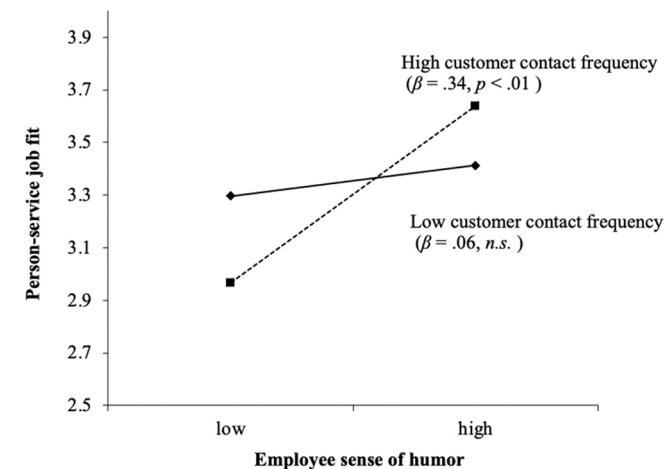


Fig. 2. Interactive effect of employee sense of humor and customer contact frequency on person-service job fit.

Table 7
Conditional indirect effects of employee sense of humor on service performance via person-service job fit at ± 1 SD of customer contact frequency.

| | Effect (SE) | Boot LL 95% CI | Boot UL 95% CI |
|---|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| Low customer contact frequency (−1 SD) | .01 (.02) | -.0259 | .0566 |
| Mean customer contact frequency | .05 (.02) | .0082 | .0903 |
| High customer contact frequency (+1 SD) | .08 (.03) | .0150 | .1445 |

Notes: N = 232; Bootstrap sample size = 5000; Bootstrapped estimates for standard errors are shown in parentheses; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; CI = confidence interval.

impacts of employee sense of humor. Moreover, researchers have largely overlooked the pivotal role of employee sense of humor in the hospitality context. We respond to Yam et al.'s (2018) call to explore sense of humor and fill these voids by investigating the association between employee sense of humor and service performance. Our research represents an initial attempt to empirically examine the association between employee sense of humor and service performance in the hospitality context. We also provide empirical evidence supporting Mesmer-Magnus et al. (2012) theoretical argument that sense of humor is associated with effective functions at work. This research adds to the humor literature by extending the outcomes of employee sense of humor, advances the service performance literature by identifying a pivotal trait-related antecedent, and to service management literature by demonstrating the benefits of employee sense of humor.

Second, building on P-E fit theory, we unpack the mechanism by which employee sense of humor influences service performance. Our findings show that person-service job fit fully mediates the impact of employee sense of humor on service performance. Such findings advance the humor literature by offering a P-E fit perspective to explain the mediating mechanism through which employee sense of humor promotes service performance. Person-job fit research been generally established on job attributes (Van Vianen, 2018), our study further explored how personal attributes shape fit perceptions, thus providing a more complete understanding of congruence. Since Christiansen et al. (2014) have suggested that individual trait has been neglected in the P-E fit literature, our research extended the nomological network of person-job fit by introducing a new type of antecedent. Prior research on the trait-related antecedents of person-service job fit primarily focused on employees' big-five personality and proactivity personality (Ehrhart, 2006; Quratulain and Khan, 2015). One major omission is the

examination of trait humor, an important and common job-related trait, especially in the hospitality industry. Our research fills this gap by showing that employee sense of humor enables frontline hospitality employees to achieve a better fit with their service jobs.

Finally, our research identifies the relationships between employee sense of humor, person–service job fit, and service performance by testing the moderating effect of customer contact frequency. In accordance with P-E fit theory (Kristof, 1996; Su et al., 2015), our findings show that when customer contact frequency is high, humorous frontline hospitality employees are more likely to form strong customer–employee ties and manage uncertainty during service encounters (Hampes, 1999; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), which enables them to develop higher person–service job fit and eventually attain superior service performance. In contrast, under low customer contact frequency conditions, frontline hospitality employees spend most of their time delivering a standardized service (Mayer et al., 2009). Employee sense of humor is thus less effective in promoting person–service job fit and service performance. Hence, we extend the humor literature by substantiating a critical boundary condition of employee sense of humor in the hospitality industry.

5.2. Managerial implications

First, our results indicate that humorous frontline hospitality employees tend to match better with service jobs and obtain superior service performance. Hence, hospitality organizations can treat sense of humor as an important criterion when selecting frontline hospitality employees. For employees low in sense of humor, organizations can provide training programs regarding communication skills or service etiquette. They can also invite some outstanding role models to share their experience in the service delivery process and encourage employees low in sense of humor to imitate the effective service mode. By integrating these resources provided by organizations, such employees can reinforce their automatic reflections toward service delivery and improve their communication skills during daily interactions with customers. Additionally, integrating humorous elements into hospitality organizations' culture could be an effective way to create a favorable atmosphere that promotes employees' customer service quality, customer satisfaction, and ultimately hospitality organizations' long-term success (Yam et al., 2018).

Second, our findings indicate that person–service job fit is critical for promoting frontline hospitality employees' service performance. To enhance frontline hospitality employees' person–service job fit, hospitality organizations should provide these employees with easy access to supportive programs to ensure that they have the KSAs needed for service jobs. Frontline hospitality employees' perceived fit with their service jobs can also be monitored by regular conversations and appraisals (Tims et al., 2016). Managers should keep an eye on employees with low person–service job fit and give them enough support (e.g., empowerment, and psychological support) to help them better adapt to the service job (Babakus et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2014).

Finally, our results indicate that employee sense of humor is more valuable when customer contact is frequent, which is in line with the notion that employee sense of humor serves as a “social lubricant” that helps to reduce social distance, control uncertainty, and resolve interpersonal conflicts (Hampes, 1999). Hence, employees with low levels of sense of humor can be assigned tasks with low customer contact frequency and highly standardized processes to reduce unpredictability during the service delivery process, such as room assignment, information checking, and hotel policy support. When there are vacancies for service jobs that require intensive contact with customers, hospitality organizations should choose humorous employees to fill these positions, because they can match the service job requirements better and achieve higher performance.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

First, though we conducted a multi-source and time-lagged survey design, our results may be affected by common method variance, as we asked frontline hospitality employees to self-report their sense of humor, person–service job fit, and customer contact frequency. To assess the influence of common method variance, we performed factor analysis and construct validity tests. The results demonstrated that common method variance did not significantly bias our results. Nevertheless, future studies can apply a longitudinal or experimental approach to prevent the potential effects.

Second, other types of traits were not captured in our research. Although our findings indicated that employee sense of humor can promote person–service job fit and service performance, other types of traits could be considered because past studies have substantiated the beneficial effects of other traits on employee performance. For instance, proactive personality, which describes an individual tendency for proactive behaviors (Thompson, 2005), may make employees take the initiative to create an environment conducive to good performance in their service delivery process (Fuller and Marler, 2009). Additionally, employee agreeableness, which captures individuals' care for social harmony and communion (Digman, 1990), plays a critical role during the service encounters where cooperation or joint actions are required (Witt et al., 2002). Hence, future research could figure out whether the influence employee sense of humor exerts on person–service job fit and service performance will be the same when controlling these traits. We also call for scholars to integrate other different traits in a conceptual model to determine the unique contribution of employee trait humor to employee work outcomes.

Third, our research was conducted in China. Prior research has indicated that humor is much more ubiquitous in Western countries than in China because Chinese traditional social norms value seriousness (Yue et al., 2016). Hence, frontline hospitality employees with good sense of humor in China may be more conspicuous and more likely to give full play to their advantage of this trait to develop employee–customer rapport when serving customers. Future research is thus warranted to establish the generalizability of our results across cultures.

Fourth, in addition to service performance, other employee service outcomes could explain the impact of employee sense of humor, such as proactive customer service performance and prosocial service behavior. Since past research has noted that sense of humor serves as a positive force to help individuals feel relaxed and make benign appraisals of events (Kuiper et al., 1995), it would be fruitful for scholars to delve into the beneficial impact of employee sense of humor on employees' attitudes and well-being in the workplace.

Fifth, other complementary theoretical frameworks may be useful to explain the association between employee sense of humor and service performance. For instance, behavioral theory and network research suggest that members of organizations rely on informal networks to fulfill their goals and that network development is highly dependent on individual characteristics (Wei et al., 2012). In line with this theory, employees with a strong sense of humor can amuse customers or co-workers and make a good impression, thereby developing good network relationships. They are thus more likely to acquire and utilize valuable network resources, which are crucial for their goal achievement and work performance (Mehra et al., 2001). Hence, we urge scholars to explore whether internal and external network resources link employee sense of humor to employee work outcomes.

Sixth, additional boundary conditions of employee sense of humor should be explored. Task interdependence, defined as the degree to which tasks are interconnected for completion (Van der Vegt and Janssen, 2003), may be a potentially important boundary condition. When task interdependence is high, humorous frontline hospitality employees are able to cope with disagreements among employees and enhance cooperation by creating an easy-going atmosphere (Chen and Ayoun, 2019; Holmes, 2006), which may result in better employee

outcomes. Hence, a promising avenue of research is to examine whether high task interdependence is an effective condition to obtain better work outcomes for humorous employees.

Finally, we encourage future research to move beyond the employee-centered model and investigate the joint effects of supervisor and subordinate sense of humor. As Zhang et al. (2012) suggested, dyadic congruence in supervisor-subordinate personality can influence work outcomes. For example, when a subordinate is aligned with a supervisor at a high level of sense of humor, they may respond to workplace events in a similar pattern. Subordinates whose actions are consistent with their leaders may feel psychologically safe and invest more effort in their work (Xu et al., 2019). Hence, future research could incorporate supervisor sense of humor into the theoretical model to explore how supervisor-subordinate sense of humor congruence and asymmetrical incongruence shape service performance in the hospitality context.

6. Conclusion

Drawing upon P–E fit theory, we examine whether, why, and when employee sense of humor affects service performance in the hospitality context. Our results demonstrate that employee sense of humor exerts a positive influence on service performance. Moreover, person–service job fit fully mediates the impact of employee sense of humor on service performance. Furthermore, customer contact frequency is a pivotal boundary condition for the impact of employee sense of humor. When customer contact frequency is high, employee sense of humor engenders higher person–service job fit and eventually superior service performance. Through multi-phase and multi-source data, our research not only reveals some intriguing areas that expand the understanding of sense of humor but also underlines the importance of humorous front-line employees in the hospitality industry.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare and this article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kwan Ho Kwong: Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Ye Yijiao:** Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Wu Long-Zeng:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Liu Xinyu:** Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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