# A Review of the Classification and Application of Workplace Humor

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**Abstract:** Given the prominent social and strategic positions that humor occupies in human society, especially within various organizations, a substantial number of entrepreneurs recognize its crucial role in the work environment. This research conducts a comprehensive exploration of the concept of humor. Firstly, it delves deeply into its origin. Subsequently, it provides a detailed elaboration of its definition. Next, it undertakes an in-depth analysis of its classification, categorizing humor into two types, namely positive humor and negative humor. Finally, it combs through the empirical research on the impact results of positive humor and negative humor. The ultimate aim is to provide theoretical support for the management of workplace humor, the facilitation of team collaboration, and the optimization of employee resource utilization.

**Keywords:** Humor; Positive humor; Negative humor; Team performance; Leadership humor; Self-deprecating humor

## 1. Introduction

"Laugh and you'll be ten years younger." Humor, serving as a ubiquitous social behavior and strategic means within human society, assumes a significant role in organizational contexts [1]. A survey targeting entrepreneurs listed on the Fortune Global 500 reveals that over half of them acknowledge the crucial function of humorous expression in the workplace. Notwithstanding the extensive recognition and application of humor in work settings, its expression demands circumspect handling, as inappropriate humorous manifestations may precipitate unforeseen adverse consequences. The academic realm has reached a concordant view on this matter and, predicated on the pivotal positive and negative attributes of workplace humor, scientifically categorizes it into positive humorous expression and negative humorous expression. It exhibits diverse forms of manifestation, such as scenarios, narrative vignettes, puns, and anagrammatic wordplay. Among these, positive humorous expression pivots around affirmative interpersonal functions, which not only facilitates the development and sustenance of interpersonal relationships but also aids in fostering a positive self-awareness [2]. Conversely, negative humorous

expression is imbued with elements of teasing, sarcasm, and gloating, rife with hostility and provocation, and is frequently employed to ostracize, harm, or even dominate other members within the organization. Instances of such negative expression encompass attacks on individual physical idiosyncrasies (e.g., derogating physical impairments or eccentric apparel), gender-based assaults (e.g., vulgar jokes involving gender deprecation), and racial taunts (e.g., juxtaposing the imagery of dark individuals with that of primates). In summation, given the disparate natures of workplace humorous expressions, the multifarious and convoluted impacts they engender are both thought-provoking and meritorious of continuous scrutiny. In light of the aforementioned considerations, this project zeroes in on the nascent theme of humorous expression motivation, dissecting its connotation and structural underpinnings. Resolving these issues can furnish theoretical directives for the administration of workplace humor and also proffer a managerial foundation for mutual understanding and cooperation among team members, as well as the optimized utilization of employee resources.

## 2. The origin and definition of the concept of humor

### 2.1. The origin of the concept of humor

The connotation of the word "humor" has evolved several times in history, generally showing two major trends: one is the gradual evolution from physiological characteristics to behavioral traits; the other is the gradual transformation from a negative to a positive conceptual representation. The first to propose the concept of "humor" was Hippocrates, the "Father of Medicine" in ancient Greece around 400 BC. He believed that humor was a kind of body fluid beneficial to people's physical health. Sigmund Freud, the founder of the psychoanalytic school, was the first to explain humor from the perspective of psychotherapy. He regarded humor as an internal defense mechanism for the human body to experience pleasure and incorporated humor and jokes into the system of psychotherapy.

The earliest appearance of the word "humor" in China was in the poem "Jiu Zhang Huai Sha" written by Qu Yuan during the Warring States period. However, the "humor" in this poem meant a quiet expression, not the commonly used meaning today. In 1923, Lin Yutang published a literary review on humor in the Morning Post. He translated the word "humor", presenting an expression method that made people feel funny and pleasant. This was consistent with the way people in China expressed humor at that time, that is, by telling jokes and performing comical shows. Since then, domestic academic circles have conducted a lot of discussions and research on humor, and the effectiveness of humor in different situations still needs to be strengthened and deepened.

### 2.2. The definition of the concept of humor

Currently, the definition of the concept of humor is mainly elaborated based on two levels: personality traits and interaction behaviors. Defining humor from the perspective of personality traits mainly refers to an individual's sense of humor, which is manifested as a relaxed and witty psychological characteristic, such as the ability to generate, recognize, and use humor as a coping strategy. From the perspective of interaction behaviors, Martineau defined humor as "any form of communication and interaction with fun." This kind of interaction includes both verbal and non-verbal forms and generates "positive emotional and cognitive feedback" among the audience.

In recent years, workplace humor has received increasing attention. Many scholars have also tried to define humor in the workplace. Cooper defined workplace humor as any interesting event shared by the humor sender with the humor receiver, and the humor receiver can also feel that this is a deliberate behavior of the humor

sender [3]. At the same time, he proposed a relational process model of humor in the workplace, stating that humor can create, maintain, hinder, or damage interpersonal relationships at work. Based on Cooper et al., Dikkers et al. proposed an organizational humor model based on the level of interactive communication, defining organizational humor as non-serious incongruous behaviors that occur in the work environment to deliberately amuse individuals, groups, or the organization. In recent years, scholars have continuously tried to define the concept of humor in the workplace context, and the specific content is shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Definition of the concept of humor

| Author (Year) | Content of the concept definition |
|---|---|
| Crawford (1994) | Humorous expression is a communication process that can obtain a positive perception from the other party. |
| Cooper (2005) | Any event shared with others, aiming to make others laugh is regarded as an intentional behavior by others. |
| Cooper (2008) | Any interesting event shared by the humor sender with the humor receiver, and the humor receiver can also feel that this is a deliberate behavior of the humor sender. |
| Pundt & Herrmann (2015) | Humor is a strategy for leaders to adopt certain behaviors to achieve good social relationships. |

## 3. The classification of the concept of humor

For the classification of the concept of humor, there are currently the following mainstream classification criteria:

Decker and Rotondo divided humor into positive humor and negative humor. Positive humor is mild, benign, and non-hostile. It refers to using humorous expressions, such as telling jokes and making kind-hearted jokes, to promote communication. Negative humor is expressed through telling dirty jokes and using insulting language for ridicule.

Martin et al. classified humor into self-enhancing humor, affiliative humor, aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor [4]. Self-enhancing humor means maintaining a positive attitude when facing negative situations and large stressors. Affiliative humor is positive and well-intentioned humor, such as sharing interesting jokes and stories. Aggressive humor is a negative form of humor, using making fun of others as a specific way to express humor. Self-defeating humor involves excessive self-depreciation and self-mockery to please others.

Gkorezis and Bellou, based on the classification of Martin et al., classified self-enhancing and affiliative humor as positive humor, and self-mocking and self-defeating humor as negative humor.

Zhu Yi divided humorous leadership into five types: self-enhancing, self-defeating, affiliative, aggressive, and self-mocking. Self-mocking humor means that leaders take their shortcomings and mistakes as the object of humor to narrow the relationship distance with employees.

Regardless of how scholars classify humor, it includes two key attributes: positive humor and negative humor. Positive humor is centered around positive interpersonal functions. It can not only promote the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships but also help maintain a positive self-perception. Negative humor, on the other hand, is full of hostility and provocation. It is mainly used to exclude, harm, or even control other members of the organization to consolidate one's own position.

## 4. Empirical research results of humor

### 4.1. Impact results of positive humor

Positive humor is generally regarded as having positive impacts on both team and individual levels. At the team

level, firstly, in terms of team atmosphere, positive humor can enhance team cohesion. In addition, according to the Wheel Model of Humor proposed by Roberts and Wilbanks, leader humor can facilitate the formation of an organizational humorous atmosphere. Secondly, from the perspective of team performance, positive humor can boost team performance. For instance, Kangasharju and Nikko found that leaders' use of humor can create a favorable meeting atmosphere, introduce meeting topics in a relaxed manner, relieve employees' tension, help solve difficult problems, improve organizational performance, and achieve organizational goals. Lehman-Willenbrock and Allen, based on the context of company meetings, further proposed that the relationship between humor and team performance should be considered within the entire organizational social environment, and the importance of team communication needs to be emphasized.

At the individual level, firstly, in the aspect of work attitude, Decker examined employees' evaluations of leaders' humorous styles and found that positive leader humor can effectively promote employees' job satisfaction, enabling employees to be highly engaged in tasks and maintain a state of full concentration, thus enhancing employees' work engagement. Secondly, in the aspect of work behavior, the relaxed and pleasant working atmosphere created by leaders' positive humor is conducive to promoting the exchange and interaction of information within the organization, allowing employees to express their work ideas effectively and independently. Moreover, in the leader-follower relationship, according to the Relational Process Model of Leader Humor proposed by Cooper, leader humor helps to establish a positive relationship between leaders and followers [5]. By using positive humor, leaders can also enhance personal relationships with followers, which may contribute to the improvement of the quality of the leader-follower relationship [6–7]. Finally, in the aspect of work performance, Mesmer et al. found through meta-analysis that leaders' positive humor can significantly improve employees' work performance.

## 4.2. Impact results of negative humor

Firstly, humor with aggressive and invasive characteristics from the leadership level would make it difficult for employees to extricate themselves from such situations, subjecting them to significant internal stress. Eventually, this may lead to addictive behaviors such as excessive Internet use, drinking, and smoking, as well as uncivilized behaviors. Yam et al. discovered that aggressive leadership humor exacerbates employees' acceptance of norm violations, thus resulting in deviant behaviors. Moreover, when leaders engage in negative humor, it may reduce followers' likability, further diminishing their willingness to seek advice from the leader, and aggravating followers' deviant behaviors [8]. Simultaneously, it may prompt followers to develop an avoidance tendency, thereby weakening their desire to voice themselves and reducing their commitment to the team [9].

Negative humor also exerts negative impacts on teams and colleagues. For example, Gheorghe et al. demonstrated how different types of humor shape team conflicts and their transformation processes. In the supervisor-subordinate relationship, Hsiao et al. pointed out that aggressive leadership humor indirectly exacerbates workplace exclusion through supervisor rejection. In the context of colleague relationships, Zhang Mingyu et al., based on the new employee scenario, posited that the more severely new employees are subjected to aggressive humor from colleagues, the higher their level of self-depletion.

However, some scholars have also uncovered the potential positive effects of negative humor. For instance, Wang et al., based on the social information processing theory, argued that leaders' self-deprecating humor shortens the hierarchical distance, facilitating the formation of an intimate relationship between leaders and subordinates, demonstrating leaders' tolerance and honesty regarding their own failures. Furthermore, leaders' self-

deprecating humor can relax subordinates, reduce anxiety, and increase positive emotions, creating a non-hostile and inclusive atmosphere. When subordinates perceive leaders' self-deprecating humor, they are more likely to accept positive evaluations from the leader as signals of self-acceptance and self-affirmation. Therefore, they are more willing to learn from failures.

## 5. Retrospect and prospect

To sum up, humor is an emerging theme in the research fields of organizational behavior and human resource management. Through analyzing and sorting out relevant literature, this research field presents the following three characteristics.

Firstly, the attention paid to the impact results of humor is rather contradictory and one-sided. In existing studies, the main focus has been on the positive impacts of positive humor, such as triggering positive emotions and self-awareness and enhancing recipients' innovative behaviors and organizational citizenship behaviors. However, negative effects have also been discussed, such as increasing the acceptability of recipients' norm violations and inducing self-depletion of senders under the impression management motivation. Negative humor, although it may reduce recipients' psychological security and lead to uncivilized and exclusionary behaviors, existing studies have also found that negative humor can enhance leadership identification and promote subordinates' learning from failures. Such seemingly contradictory conclusions indicate that the research on workplace humor requires further exploration from a double-edged sword perspective to more comprehensively understand the role of humor in the workplace.

Secondly, previous studies have paid relatively little attention to the motivation of humorous expressions. Recently, some scholars have begun to focus on the impression management motivation of humor. However, existing literature provides only limited insights into the motivation of humorous expression, and the system is incomplete and unsystematic. Previous research perspectives have concentrated on attitudes, cognitions, and organizational factors. Nevertheless, the current research on the motivation of humor is rather scarce, and scholars have gradually realized that the more complex psychological mechanisms and motivations behind humor need to be further explored.

Thirdly, existing studies have focused on a single object of humor and have not incorporated both receivers and senders into a unified framework for discussion. In the current academic discussions, most studies have only focused on the single position of either the receiver or the sender of humor, failing to systematically examine the effect and mechanism of how the motivation affects subsequent attitudes and behaviors of positive and negative humor in the workplace. This one-sided research perspective limits the comprehensive understanding of the humor phenomenon. Researchers need to respond to the calls of scholars and expand and make up for the current deficiency in the research on the influence mechanism of workplace humor motivation.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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