

When and how does leader humor promote customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior in hotel employees?

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Abstract

This study explores whether leader humor can encourage staff to exceed job expectations in their positive behavior toward customers, even in the notoriously stressful context of the hospitality industry. Based on our findings, leaders who use humor are more likely to prompt employees to engage in customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Leader humor affects customer-oriented OCB through the mediating effect of relational energy. In addition, employee traditionalism and relational energy differentiation moderates the process. Using time-lagged data collected from 456 employees in 71 teams in China's hotel industry, this study adds significant knowledge to the under-researched area of humor and leader humor in the hospitality industry. The findings suggest that hospitality leaders can implement humor to obtain positive effects by raising relational energy and triggering customer-oriented OCB, particularly among less-traditional workers and in situations of low relational energy differentiation.

Keywords: leader humor; customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior; relational energy; traditionalism; relational energy differentiation

1. Introduction

The numerous benefits of workplace humor have long attracted the attention of practitioners and academics (Cooper, Kong, & Crossley, 2018; Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012). Research has increasingly focused on leader humor, driven by the realization that leaders can play a defining role in establishing how humor is used in the workplace (Cooper, 2005) as well as in facilitating employees' positive attitudes and behaviors (Kong, Cooper, & Sosik, 2019). In particular, leaders can harness humor to boost employee performance in customer service contexts by enhancing organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; Cooper et al., 2018), service creativity (Peng, Lei, Guo, & Qiu, 2020), and proactive conduct (Wu, Ye, Cheng, Kwan, & Lyu, 2020).

It remains unclear to what extent leader humor is able to impact workers in the hospitality industry, despite the substantial literature supporting its benefits. Only Chen and Ayoun (2019) and Wu et al. (2020) have explored this gap; the two studies demonstrated the benefits of leader humor in increasing employees' job embeddedness and performance, respectively. Given the hospitality sector's significant contribution to the global economy (Dogru, McGinley, & Kim, 2020), the potential contribution that leader humor can make to such an irreplaceable industry should be resolved. This issue must also be considered in the hospitality sector since this industry values workplace fun more than others. Its most distinctive feature is the ability to create enjoyment for customers. To accomplish this goal, it is imperative for businesses in this industry to provide high quality service and meet the needs of customers. As direct service

providers, employees play an important role in this process (Liao & Chuang, 2004; Tang & Tang, 2012). In spite of this, the hospitality industry has a higher incidence of stress because of the work-related tasks involved in the job. For instance, employees are expected to display a professional smile even when dealing with uncivilized customers. In turn, this reduces their ability to perform at their best in the workplace (Cheng, Dong, Zhou, Guo, & Peng, 2020; Kim, 2008). As such, it is necessary to re-energize employees after customers have been served by engaging them in other interpersonal interactions at work, such as communicating with their leaders (Boukis, Koritos, Daunt, & Papastathopoulos, 2020). It is our intent to uncover why and how leader humor can stimulate employees' customer-oriented OCB (CO-OCB) to fill the existing knowledge gap. CO-OCB refers to employee behaviors that exceeds the prescribed job expectations of the organization while providing benefits to the customers. Such actions can significantly contribute to service quality and customer satisfaction (Bienstock, DeMoranville, & Smith, 2003; Dimitriades, 2007; Wu, Tse, Fu, Kwan, & Liu, 2013). Therefore, by addressing this issue, we can better understand how leader humor influences employees' CO-OCB and assist hospitality managers in cultivating their employees' CO-OCB.

A significant question regarding how leader humor can influence employees' CO-OCB also arises. Previous research has been conducted on how leader humor contributes to positive workplace outcomes by improving employees' positive emotions (Cooper et al., 2018), affective organizational commitment (Pundt & Venz,

2017), work engagement (Yam, Christian, Wei, Liao, & Nai, 2018), harmonious passion (Wu et al., 2020), leader–member exchanges (Yam et al., 2018), and trust (Neves & Karagonlar, 2020). In spite of this research, there have been few studies examining how leader humor can facilitate the development of interpersonal resources.

To address this critical issue, our model proposes that leader humor can enhance employees' relational energy, which captures enhanced resourcefulness in employees' psychological functioning triggered by workplace interactions and can increase capacity (Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016). A theoretical foundation for this assumption lies in the *conservation of resources (COR)* theory, which defines *resources* as factors, such as work engagement (Zhou, Ma, & Dong, 2018), that can assist individuals in achieving desirable outcomes (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014). The theory further illustrates that people are diligent in their efforts to obtain, retain, and extend valuable resources (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Therefore, leaders are among the most vital sources from which employees can obtain resources at work (Zhou et al., 2018). Considering the logic presented above, leader humor can also assist employees to gain psychological resources, enhance motivation, and actively encourage them to participate in CO-OCB and provide better customer service.

Additionally, with the development of hotel internationalization, managers must be aware of the critical role played by cultural differences among its employees. Hence, in addition to hypothesizing that leader humor raises employees' relational energy, we

consider how cultural values—such as traditionality—moderate this process. Furthermore, we address the need for deeper investigation into how leader humor's impact is influenced by cultural differences (Kalliny, Cruthirds, & Minor, 2006; Kong et al., 2019; Yang, Kitchen, & Bacouel-Jentjens, 2017) and individual characteristics (Pundt & Venz, 2017; Wu et al., 2020). *Traditionality* refers to individuals' inclination to uphold traditional values (Schwartz, 1992). A key characteristic of these individuals is the high tendency they have to submit to authority and to perceive themselves as powerless (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). High levels of traditionality also motivate employees to respect hierarchical relationships (Farh et al., 2007; Yang, 2003). Such employees are less open to leader humor, thereby reducing the amount of relational energy that can be generated.

Conversely, staff members with low traditionality are typically more open-minded in hierarchical relationships. It follows that they are more likely to respond positively to leader humor, resulting in heightened relational energy. In this regard, we seek to confirm that traditionality significantly moderates the extent to which leader humor can increase relational energy.

Moreover, despite the positive outcomes of relational energy for employees (Fan, Wei, & Ko, 2021; Owens et al., 2016; Wang, Owens, Li, & Shi, 2018), leaders do not consistently develop relationships of the same quality with all team members (Li & Liao, 2014). This disparate treatment can be described as relational energy differentiation, which captures the degree of variation in relational energy within a

group (Yang et al., 2019). Such differentiation impacts employee behavior. In this study, we propose that relational energy differentiation influences the degree to which relational energy affects CO-OCB.

Overall, with this study, we aim to enrich the hospitality literature on leader humor. First, this study extends the outcomes of leader humor by introducing employees' CO-OCB as a potential consequence. Second, we identify relational energy as a crucial underlying mechanism, demonstrating how leader humor can influence employees' CO-OCB. This clarification includes the fact that evidence is provided regarding both the impact of leader humor on relational energy and the positive influence of relational energy on employee CO-OCB. Third, we put forth employees' traditionalism as an effective moderator between leader humor and CO-OCB. In this way, this study provides insight into the influence of individual traits on the results of leader humor. Fourth, we advance the literature by identifying how relational energy differentiation can mitigate the effects of relational energy on CO-OCB. Finally, we examine when and how leader humor can trigger such behavior in a specific context within the hospitality sector, adding valuable insight regarding the under-researched topics of humor and leader humor in tourism.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1 Leader humor

Before discussing the proposed associations in our model, we first must define leader humor. Most studies have focused on two forms of leader humor: trait and

behavioral (Kong et al., 2019). The former regards leader humor as an individual dispositional feature (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). Comparatively, the latter identifies the frequency and extent of leaders' expressions of humor during their interactions with employees (Cooper et al., 2018). As behavioral perspectives are more closely associated with predicting employees' attitudes and behaviors, we adopted a behavioral perspective (Kong et al., 2019). Hence, *leader humor* refers to leaders' humorous behaviors toward employees intended to amuse them, such as verbal humor and sharing jokes (Cooper, 2005; Cooper et al., 2018).

Despite the substantial evidence demonstrating the benefits of leader humor for employees, there is a need for further research on how it influences hospitality employees (Chen & Ayoun, 2019; Wu et al., 2020). Moreover, the quality of service is determined by direct interactions between employees and customers. Hence, it is crucial to encourage employee behaviors that contribute to customer satisfaction (Bienstock et al., 2003). Thus, we investigated how leader humor influences employees' CO-OCB in the hospitality sector to determine whether it continues to benefit employee outcomes.

2.2 Leader humor and CO-OCB

As a new customer-centered concept, CO-OCB is derived from OCB, which relates to voluntary staff conduct outside of the organization's structured reward system and is capable of enhancing the latter's effectiveness (Dimitriades, 2007; Organ, 1997; Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). More specifically, CO-OCB refers to employee-initiated, non-mandated conduct that exceeds the expectations outlined in

one's job description and is directed at serving customers and improving customer–employee service interactions (Bienstock et al., 2003; Dimitriades, 2007). Typical CO-OCB includes leaving customers happy and valued, solving their problems, and providing extra assistance not required by the organization. Customer–employee service interactions increase customer satisfaction and service quality and are, therefore, vital to the hospitality industry (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). It is thus crucial to identify factors that contribute to successful customer–employee interactions.

Evidence from the hospitality literature suggests that different leadership styles can have a variety of effects on CO-OCB. For example, servant leadership, authentic leadership, and ethical leadership can promote employees' CO-OCB (Garba, Babalola, & Guo, 2018; Wu et al., 2013), whereas abusive supervision can hinder it (Lyu, Zhu, Zhong, & Hu, 2016). In accordance with this logic, as a positive workplace interaction, leader humor can also promote employees' CO-OCB by helping staff gain and retain valuable resources. First, employees who experience leader humor are able to obtain additional interpersonal and emotional resources. For example, employees may feel happy when their leaders share funny stories or jokes with them. Moreover, leader humor can help employees generate pleasant feelings (Chow, 2020) and foster superior exchange relationships with their leaders (Cooper et al., 2018). A greater number of resources will be available to employees as a result.

The COR theory has stated the following: individuals who have access to abundant resources will take advantage of them to improve their status in the future (Halbesleben

et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2001). Further, CO-OCB portrays out-of-role behavior that exceeds the parameters of an employee's job description and is not mandated by the organization (Wu et al., 2013), requiring employees to devote additional resources to the service process. In this regard, only employees with ample resources tend to exhibit CO-OCB. As such, employees who interact with humorous leaders will likely engage in CO-OCB as they can gain resources from leader humor. Through CO-OCB, such resources can be leveraged for access to future resources, such as higher reward allocation (Podsakoff et al., 2009) from their leader. Second, leader humor can reduce conflict and create a positive work environment (Norrick & Spitz, 2008; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Thus, employees will have more time and energy to devote to their work and perform CO-OCB rather than coping with stress. Hence, relational energy inspired by leader humor can further motivate employee CO-OCB.

2.3 Relational energy

Relational energy stems from heightened psychological resourcefulness and refers to a resourceful psychological state that can be achieved through interpersonal interactions at work; it is highly motivated and vigorous and can positively affect employees' work capacity (Owens et al., 2016). When leaders demonstrate humility and spiritual leadership to their employees, they can elicit greater relational energy, which results in better performance (Wang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019). In certain leadership styles, leaders are able to transfer relational energy to their staff. Given these findings, we propose that, as a highly effective mode of interaction, leader humor can

enhance CO-OCB by increasing relational energy.

In addition, leader humor can provide positive psychological resources to employees via humorous interactions such as sharing interesting stories with employees, thereby making them feel relaxed, happy (Cooper, 2008; Robert & Wilbanks, 2012), and highly energized (Baker, 2019). In other words, employees can gain abundant psychological benefits from leader humor, which can subsequently be transformed into plentiful relational energy. Moreover, leader humor can increase employees' trust in leaders and foster high-quality relationships (Pundt & Venz, 2017), enabling employees to gain more energy from their leaders (Fan et al., 2021). In this manner, we argue that leader humor increases employees' psychological resources and creates a significant amount of relational energy. This assertion is consistent with previous literature, which has indicated that positive workplace interactions have the potential to influence employees' energy levels (Fritz, Lam, & Spreitzer, 2011).

Relational energy increases job (Yang et al., 2019), task (Wang et al., 2018), and service (Fan et al., 2021) performances at work and promotes employees' out-role behavior such as their voice behavior (Ma, Wu, Chen, Jiang & Wei, 2020). Based on these findings, we further propose that employees who gain resources from their leader's sense of humor will invest them back into their work. As relational energy levels rise, psychological resources such as strength and stamina will be gained (Owens et al., 2016), motivation will increase to carry out activities that will facilitate future resources gains (Podsakoff et al., 2009), and the ability to complete tasks will improve

(Fan et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2018). They are thus likely to have more energy to fulfill customer needs and offer them additional help. In summary, relational energy can inspire employees to engage in more CO-OCB.

Leader humor can increase relational energy and further encourages a high frequency of engagement in CO-OCB. We formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between leader humor and CO-OCB is mediated by relational energy.

2.4 Traditionality and relational energy differentiation

Researchers have found that leadership humor can be effective depending on employees' cultural values (Kong et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2017), as how individuals view their workplace roles and relationships with their leaders is determined by their culture (Yang, 2003). Despite cultural shifts in China, traditional values strongly influence individual behavior (Hon, Bloom, & Crant, 2014; Hui, Wong, & Tjosvold, 2007; Wu, Kwan, Wu, & Ma, 2018). Moreover, traditionality is among the most significant moderators in terms of influencing the impact of leadership—such as differentiated empowering leadership (Li et al., 2017), abusive supervision (Hon & Lu, 2016), and transformational leadership (Spreitzer, Perttula, & Xin, 2005)—on employees' attitudes and behavior. In light of this, we posit that traditionality can hinder the positive impact of leader humor on relational energy.

Chinese individual traditionality is personal adherence to conventionally held norms (Farh et al., 2007). It is assessed based on typical trait patterns associated with

motivation, evaluation, attitude, and temperament (Yang, 2003). Employees who strongly support traditional values are more likely to perceive relationships with people in authority from a hierarchical perspective (Farh et al., 2007), obey traditional social norms (Schwartz, 1992), and view the workplace as a formal, highly structured environment (Yang et al., 2017). As a result, they are more prone to view leader humor as a violation of norms (Yam et al., 2018) rather than a method for obtaining resources. Leader humor may elicit a muted response or even no response at all from them. In turn, this will result in them gaining less relational energy.

Contrary to this, employees who are less traditional usually do not pay as much attention to traditional workplace hierarchies. Employees of this type tend to view leaders exhibiting humor as a means of replenishing themselves and may actively participate to gain precious resources. As a result, they gain more relational energy from leader humor than do employees who are more inclined toward traditionality. Our second hypothesis is grounded in the logic outlined above:

Hypothesis 2: Traditionality moderates the effects of leader humor on relational energy, and such a relationship is more robust when employees' traditionality level is lower.

Relational energy differentiation refers to the process by which leaders provide followers with varying degrees of psychological resourcefulness within a team (Yang et al., 2019). COR theory asserts that individuals are concerned about their current resources and prospective losses (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Therefore,

relational energy differentiation, which reflects the intensity of competition for resources from leaders (Yang et al., 2019), can moderate the effects of relational energy on employees' CO-OCB.

As previously discussed, relational energy differentiation describes a group's variation in relational energy (Yang et al., 2019). According to this definition, leaders' diverse interactions with employees are indicative of high levels of differentiation of relational energy. For example, leaders may provide rich psychological resources to some employees, such as in-group members, while distributing fewer resources to others, such as outsiders (Ma & Qu, 2010). Due to this type of unequal distribution, a competitive environment can be created for obtaining resources from leaders. No matter how much they have already received from their leaders, employees in such a situation may worry about their ability to access sufficient resources in the future (Fan et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2019). An atmosphere of uncertainty leads resource-insecure employees (Tangirala & Alge, 2006) to prefer to safeguard their current resources to minimize possible depletion. That is, they maintain relational energy by reducing their CO-OCB. Low levels of relational energy differentiation signal that leaders similarly interact with employees, helping them feel confident that they will receive resources from their leaders in the future. Consequently, employees are prone to utilizing their current resources to improve their performance, for example, by harnessing relational energy to perform CO-OCB. We developed the following hypothesis following this logic:

Hypothesis 3: The path from relational energy to CO-OCB is moderated by relational energy differentiation, and the relationship between them is more robust when relational energy differentiation is lower.

Combining Hypothesis 1 (leader humor motivates CO-OCB by generating relational energy) with Hypothesis 2 (high levels of employee traditionality weaken this positive association), we posit that staff with elevated traditionality levels who experience leader humor will generate less relational energy. CO-OCB is therefore reduced in this situation. Based on this, we suggest that employees' traditionality moderates the indirect influence of leader humor on CO-OCB through relational energy (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). In particular, among employees who tightly adhere to traditional values, leader humor exerts a weaker direct influence on their CO-OCB as well as a weaker indirect effect on such behavior via relational energy. Employees with low traditionality exhibit the opposite effect. Leader humor has a magnified influence on CO-OCB and an enhanced indirect effect on such behavior through relational energy. We thus posited:

Hypothesis 4: Employees' traditionality moderates the indirect effect of leader humor on CO-OCB through relational energy. The association between them is more robust when employees' traditionality level is lower.

Similarly, we hypothesized that leader humor can enhance relational energy, which further motivates employee CO-OCB and the extent of how relational energy influences such behavior is determined by relational energy differentiation. It follows that in

workplaces where relational energy differentiation is elevated, relational energy levels decrease when employees experience leader humor, reducing CO-OCB. As such, relational energy differentiation moderates the mediating influence of relational energy in the pathway from leader humor to CO-OCB (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Specifically, high levels of relational energy differentiation can diminish the effect of relational energy on CO-OCB and reduce the effectiveness of leader humor by decreasing such behavior through relational energy. Alternatively, low levels of relational energy differentiation strengthen relational energy's effect on CO-OCB and enhance the indirect influence of leader humor on this behavior through relational energy. Accordingly, we proposed the following:

Hypothesis 5: Relational energy differentiation moderates the indirect effect of leader humor on CO-OCB through relational energy. The association between them is stronger when relational energy differentiation is lower.

An illustration of the two-level conceptual model is provided in Figure 1. Specifically, leader humor, relational energy, CO-OCB, and traditionality are at Level 1, which denotes the employee level and captures employees' perceptions or features. Relational energy differentiation is at Level 2, which is the team level and reveals the characteristics of a team.

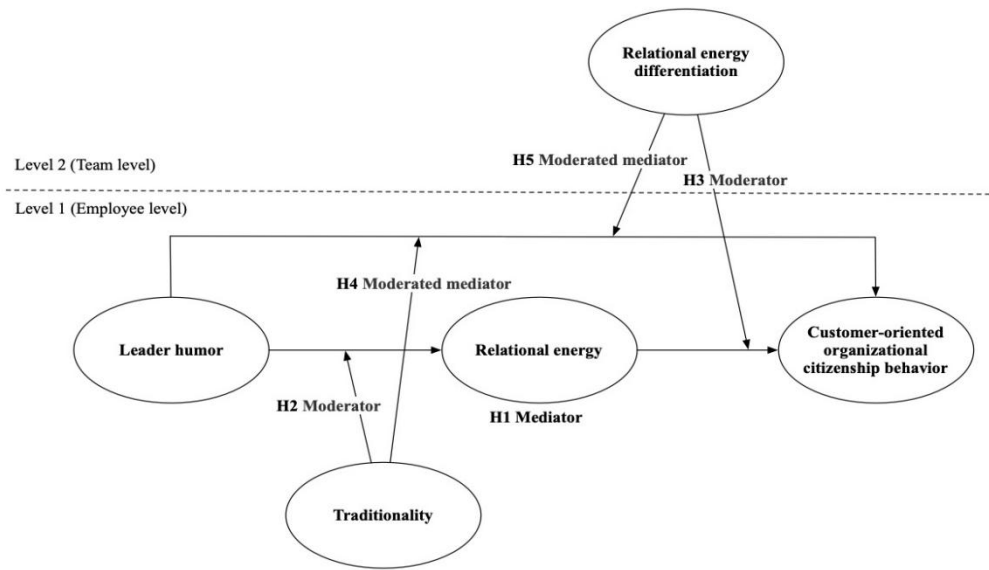


Figure 1. The conceptual model of this study

3. Method

3.1 Sample and procedures

First, we randomly selected 10 hotels from among lists of the top 20 most popular hotels in Zhuhai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen according to the list of “Our top picks” for each city on Ctrip for the purpose of obtaining an adequate number of participants. Ctrip is the leading website for user reviews and recommendations of the best hotels and restaurants in China. Next, we contacted the 30 selected hotels by email and telephone and invited them to join our study. Our invitation was ultimately accepted by 15 hotels. Four hotels had a 3-star rating, five had a 4-star rating, and six had a 5-star rating. We received assistance in distributing our questionnaires to employees from their human resource managers. We put our questionnaires in sealed envelopes and sent them to randomly selected employees from departments in which staff are required to interact with customers. Among the participants were frontline employees and their supervisors

from the departments of the concierge, front office, and food and beverage (Zhou et al., 2018). We immediately collected the envelope upon completion of the survey. We employed a three-wave data collection method, allowing one month to pass between stages to ensure an adequate time lag, aiming to reduce the impact of common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). As a means of matching the three waves of employee questionnaires, we used the last four digits of the employee's mobile phone number. In Wave 1 (June 2020), we invited the employees to report their perceptions of leader humor, their level of traditionality, and their demographic details. In Wave 2 (July 2020), we asked the participants to indicate their feelings regarding relational energy. Finally, in Wave 3 (August 2020), we invited the participants' direct supervisors to rate their employees' CO-OCB.

In Wave 1, we distributed questionnaires to the 920 employees who volunteered to participate; we obtained 653 usable replies from 81 work teams for a response rate of 70.98%. During Wave 2, we sent the survey to only the 653 respondents who completed Wave 1. An overall response rate of 79.48% was achieved, with 519 valid responses. Finally, we provided the questionnaires to the 519 participants' direct supervisors. Ultimately, we received 456 valid replies from 71 work teams, representing a response rate of 87.86%. We included 456 employee-supervisor dyads from 71 teams in the final sample. Each team had an average of 6.42 participants, ranging from three to 12. Among the 456 employees, 32.8% were 21–30 years old, 16.7% were 31–40, and 13.4% were 41–50. Regarding education, 69.1% held a high school

diploma or lower, and 21.5% held a junior college degree. Nearly half (48.7%) had joined their current organization 1–3 years earlier, 41.9% had been under the supervision of their current leader for 1–3 years, and 40.1% were the same gender as their leader. The details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample

Respondents' demographics	Frequency and percentage
Age	
20 or younger	83 (18.2%)
21–30	150 (32.8%)
31–40	76 (16.7%)
41–50	61 (13.4%)
51 or older	86 (18.9%)
Education	
High school diploma or lower	315 (69.1%)
Junior college degree	98 (21.5%)
Bachelor's degree	32 (7.0%)
Master's degree or higher	11 (2.4%)
Organizational tenure	
1 year or less	66 (14.5%)
2–3 years	222 (48.7%)
3–5 years	64 (14.0%)
5–7 years	84 (18.4%)
7 years or more	20 (4.4%)
Time spent working with leader	
1 year or less	163 (35.7%)
1–3 years	191 (41.9%)
3–5 years	75 (16.4%)
5–7 years	25 (5.5%)
7 years or more	2 (0.5%)
Same gender as leader	
Consistency	183 (40.1%)
Inconsistency	273 (59.9%)

Notes: $N=71$ (supervisors); $N=456$ (employees)

3.2 Measurements

Apart from demographic traits and relational energy differentiation, to answer our research questions, across all variables, we used Likert scales with five points (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). During our literature review, we carefully examined relevant scales and selected those for which validity had been assessed and recognized in earlier studies and that, where possible, had also been used in subsequent studies. We did not adapt any of the scales in any way for the present study to avoid skewing the results. Due to the fact that the questionnaires were initially developed in English and then translated into Chinese before being distributed to the participants, we utilized back translation to ensure that the semantic equivalents were maintained (Brislin, 1970). Specifically, translation was performed by two Ph.D. students with a background in tourism management overseas. It was the responsibility of one student to translate into Chinese and that of the other student to retranslate into English. The first author and the two Ph.D. students discussed disagreements during translation and ultimately approved all item translations.

Further, we conducted a pre-test and invited 93 employees from two hotels to evaluate the reliability and validity of our survey. Following Heggestad et al.'s (2019) suggestion, we first performed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to scrutinize the factor structure of our measurement scales ($n=93$). During the EFA, four factors were extracted: leader humor with three items, traditionality with five items, relational energy with five items, and CO-OCB with seven items. Favorable construction validity

is demonstrated by all factor loadings exceeding 0.60. Cronbach's alphas for leader humor, traditionality, relational energy, and CO-OCB were 0.92, 0.93, 0.95, and 0.90, respectively. We also performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to detect the goodness of fit of the four-factor model, which showed an acceptable model fit [χ^2 (164)=280.75; IFI=0.92; CFI=0.92; TLI=0.91; RMSEA=0.08]. After the pre-test, we carried out formal data collection. Please refer to Appendix A for detailed information regarding the items used in the study.

To measure leader humor, we adopted Cooper et al.'s (2018) three-item scale. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale in our study was .89; We used Yang, Yu, and Yeh's (1991) five-item scale to measure traditionality. This scale has been employed several times by other researchers (e.g., Wu et al., 2018; Xie, Schaubroeck, & Lam, 2008). This scale exhibited a Cronbach's alpha of .85 in our study; We used the five-item scale that was validated by Owens et al. (2016), to measure relational energy. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale in our study was .88. In line with previous studies (Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010; Yang et al., 2019), we calculated the standard deviation of the team members' scores for relational energy for all 71 work teams in the dataset to measure relational energy differentiation. The higher the standard deviation, the higher the relational energy differentiation. We measured CO-OCB using the seven-item scale developed by Dimitriades (2007). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale in our study was .88.

From the literature review, we found that servant leadership may affect CO-OCB (Wu et al., 2013). Furthermore, employee demographics, including age and educational

background, can influence employee CO-OCB (Wu et al., 2013). Organizational tenure, time spent working with a leader, and gender consistency are likely to influence the effect of leader humor (Chow, 2020; Cooper, 2005; Gkorezis, Hatzithomas, & Petridou, 2011). Therefore, we set all of these variables as control variables. We adopted the scale developed by Liden, Wayne, Liao, and Meuser (2014) to measure servant leadership. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .77 in our study.

3.3 Data analyses

We performed descriptive analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0. In addition, we implemented the robust maximum likelihood estimator in Mplus 7.4 to analyze the multilevel structural equation models and generated confidence intervals (CIs) using the bootstrapping method in R version 4.0.3.

As an additional step, we examined the data and tested the model without control variables included. The results were identical to the model with control variables, demonstrating the robustness of our findings. To assess our hypotheses more rigorously, we report results incorporating these control variables (Li, Liu, Lin, Wei, & Xu, 2021).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Presented in Table 2 are the results of the descriptive statistics. Leader humor had a positive association with relational energy ($r=.34, p<.01$) and CO-OCB ($r=.23, p<.01$). A positive association between relational energy and CO-OCB ($r=.25, p<.01$) was also evident.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Level 1									
1. Organizational tenure	2.50	1.08	1						
2. Time spent working with leader	1.93	0.88	.73**	1					
3. Perceived servant leadership	3.63	0.54	.09	.04	1				
4. Leader humor	3.14	0.84	-.16**	-.11*	.00	1			
5. Traditionality	3.41	0.78	.01	.00	.25**	-.10*	1		
6. Relational energy	2.54	0.84	-.27**	-.24**	-.09*	.34**	-.07	1	
7. CO-OCB	3.33	0.64	-.16**	-.17**	.13**	.23**	.00	.25**	1
Level 2									
8. Relational energy differentiation	0.51	0.27							

Notes: $N=71$ (supervisors); $N=456$ (employees); * $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$

4.2 Measurement model and common method bias

Using CFA, we examined the hypothesized measurement model (including leader humor, traditionality, relational energy, and CO-OCB). This model had a good fit (χ^2 [164]=478.80, CFI=.93; TLI=.91; RMSEA=.07; SRMR=.05) and good construct validity; the factor loadings of each item are presented in Appendix B. In addition, a smaller value of χ^2/df represents a better model fit with the data (Barnard et al., 2009).

As shown in Table 3, several alternatives to assess discriminant validity were compared to the hypothesized measurement model. Comparing the model fits of the hypothesized four-factor model to those of the alternative models, the hypothesized model demonstrated the best fit, indicating that its structure was the best. As the model fits worsened as more variables were combined, discriminant validity was further supported.

In addition, the square root of the average variance extracted of every variable exceeded

its correlation coefficients with other variables, indicating good discriminant validity (see Appendix B; Hair, 2009). Lastly, the variance of the single factor was 26.1%, which falls below the maximum permissible value of 50% advised by Harman's test, indicating that the impact of common method bias was acceptable in this study.

Table 3. Comparisons of measurement models

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
1. Four-factor model	478.80	164	2.92	.93	.91	.07	.05
2. Three-factor model ^a	1165.70	167	6.98	.78	.75	.12	.09
3. Three-factor model ^b	1640.66	167	9.82	.67	.63	.14	.13
4. Two-factor model ^c	2228.24	169	13.18	.54	.49	.16	.14
5. One-factor model ^d	3118.76	170	18.35	.35	.27	.20	.18

Notes: $N=71$ (supervisors); $N=456$ (employees); CO-OCB, customer-oriented organizational citizen behavior; ^aCombining leader humor with relational energy; ^bCombining CO-OCB with relational energy; ^cCombining leader humor with CO-OCB and relational energy; ^dCombining all variables into one factor.

4.3 Hypothesis testing

We established a mediation model using the bootstrap approach. The indirect effect of leader humor on CO-OCB through relational energy was significant ($\beta=.036$, $p<.05$), and the 95% bias-corrected CI of this effect (.022, .054) did not include zero with 20,000 bootstrap samples. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

As the moderator relational energy differentiation was at the group level, we calculated intraclass correlation ($ICC(1)$) to test whether the multilevel analysis applied to the data. The results revealed significant between-group variances in relational energy [$ICC(1)=.517$], indicating a 51.7% variance between groups, and CO-OCB [$ICC(1)=.246$], revealing a 24.6% variance between groups. We confirmed that a multilevel analysis was feasible on the basis of these results (Molina-Azorín, Pereira-

Moliner, López-Gamero, Pertusa-Ortega, & Tarí, 2020; Yang et al., 2019).

Next, we constructed a two-level moderated mediation model with control variables. Table 4 shows these results. The model estimation outcomes indicated that the interplay between leader humor and traditionality was significant for relational energy ($\beta = -.21$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$). Based on the approach employed by Aiken and West (1991), we plotted the interactive effect at two levels of traditionality (see Figure 2). As shown in Figure 2, leader humor has a stronger correlation with relational energy when traditionality is at a lower level ($\beta = .45$, $p < .01$) than when it is at a higher level ($\beta = .13$, *n.s.*). Accordingly, Hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

Table 4. Results of the two-level moderated mediation model

	Relational energy		CO-OCB	
Individual level	β	SE	β	SE
Control variables				
Age	-.02	.03	-.04	.02
Education	.07	.04	-.05	.04
Organizational tenure	-.09	.05	-.03	.04
Time spent working with leader	-.12	.07	-.01	.05
Same gender as leader	.11	.09	-.07	.08
Perceived servant leadership	-.10	.07	.12	.07
Predictive variable				
Leader humor	.29**	.04	.09*	.04
Traditionality	-.02	.06	-.01	.04
Leader humor $\times$ traditionality	-.21**	.06	.16**	.06
Relational energy			.14**	.05
Group level				
Relational energy differentiation			-.21	.16
Relational energy differentiation $\times$ relational energy			-.31*	.13

Notes: $N=71$ (supervisors); $N=456$ (employees); * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; CO-OCB, customer-

oriented OCB

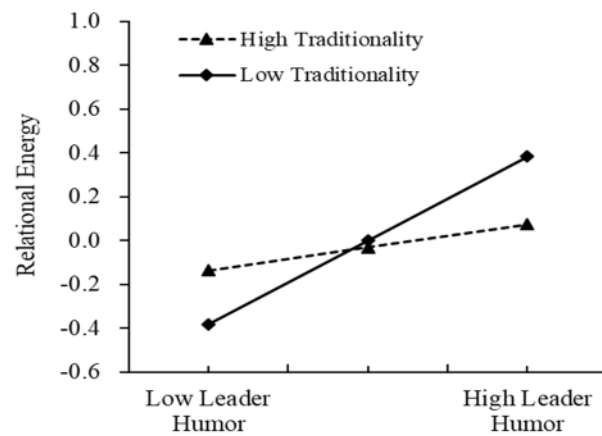


Figure 2. The moderating effect of traditionality on the relationship between leader humor and relational energy

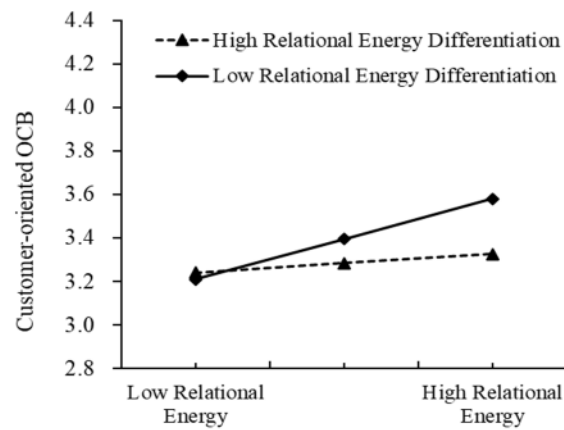


Figure 3. The moderating effect of relational energy differentiation on the relationship between relational energy and CO-OCB

From Table 4, we saw that the cross-level interaction between relational energy and relational energy differentiation was significantly negative for CO-OCB ($\beta = -.31$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .05$). Following Aiken and West's (1991) suggestion, we plotted the interactive effect on CO-OCB at two levels of relational energy differentiation (see Figure 3). The results revealed that relational energy differentiation strengthened the relationship between relational energy and CO-OCB only at lower ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$) rather

than higher levels of relational energy differentiation ($\beta=.05$, *n.s.*). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

As shown in Table 5, the indirect effect of leader humor on CO-OCB through relational energy was stronger with lower traditionality ($\beta=.061$, $p<.05$, 95% CI [.018, .110]) than with higher traditionality ($\beta=.017$, 95% CI [−.000, .043]). The difference between the two conditions was significantly negative ($\Delta\beta= -.043$, $p<.05$, 95% CI [−.090, −.010]). Based on these results, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Table 5. Indirect effect at various moderator levels

	Indirect effect	95% CI
Traditionality		
High (+ 1 <i>SD</i>)	.017	[−.000, .043]
Low (−1 <i>SD</i>)	.061*	[.018, .110]
Difference	−.043*	[−.090, −.010]
Relational energy differentiation		
High (+ 1 <i>SD</i>)	.015	[−.019, .051]
Low (−1 <i>SD</i>)	.063*	[.027, .105]
Difference	−.049*	[−.094, −.008]

Notes: $N=71$ (supervisors); $N=456$ (employees); * $p<.05$; indirect effect=estimated mediation effect; 95% CI=confidence interval based on 20,000 bootstrap resamples.

The results also suggest that the indirect impact of leader humor on CO-OCB through relational energy is more substantial under conditions of low relational energy differentiation ($\beta=.063$, $p<.05$, 95% CI [.027, .105]) than under conditions of high differentiation ($\beta=.015$, 95% CI [−.019, .051]). The difference between the two conditions was significant ($\Delta\beta= -.049$, $p<.05$, 95% CI [−.094, −.008]). These findings

are consistent with Hypothesis 5.

5. Conclusion

Adopting COR theory as the basis for this study, we examined whether leader humor can enhance CO-OCB through the mediator of relational energy, with traditionality and relational energy differentiation serving as moderators. To verify our model, we conducted a time-lagged survey in three waves, with one month between one wave and the next; 456 employees and 71 supervisors in Chinese hotels composed the sample. After carefully selecting scales from prior studies, we investigated their clarity, relevance, and validity. On analyzing the data, we discovered a significant association between leader humor and CO-OCB, in addition to a strong correlation between leader humor and elevated levels of relational energy. These results strongly suggest that traditionality and relational energy differentiation moderate this process. Through this study, we verified that leader humor could enhance customer service. Therefore, leaders should consider implementing humor during workplace interactions, with the most effective outcomes likely to be observed among employees with low levels of traditionality and those in situations where relational energy differentiation is low. Consequently, our findings contribute to enriching the literature on leader humor and elucidate effective managerial practices.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study advances knowledge regarding leader humor and its effects on CO-OCB in the hospitality industry. Leader humor has been found to have positive effects;

however, more attention should be paid to how it can affect hospitality employees (Chen & Ayoun, 2019; Wu et al., 2020). Employees in this sector often experience high stress levels (Kim, 2008; O'Neill & Davis, 2011) and need to rejuvenate themselves through interactions with their leaders. Hence, leaders are expected to provide sufficient support to their employees to ensure positive employee work outcomes. Our results indicate that leader humor can exceptionally inspire employees to perform more CO-OCB.

Moreover, this study goes a step further by expanding the benefits of leader humor from employee performance and work attitudes (Chen & Ayoun, 2019; Wu et al., 2020) to employees' out-role behavior, namely CO-OCB. In addition, while researchers have considered the influence of leadership styles—including servant leadership, ethical leadership, and abusive supervision—on CO-OCB (Garba et al., 2018; Lyu et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2013), uncertainty exists about whether employees' CO-OCB can be impacted by leader humor. As such, this study provides new insight to add to the existing literature on promoting employees' CO-OCB using leader humor.

Second, this study illuminates the vital mediating role of relational energy through which leader humor can trigger CO-OCB. Prior research has emphasized how leader humor can assist employees by facilitating positive work-related emotions and attitudes toward leaders and organizations (Cooper et al., 2018; Neves & Karagonlar, 2020; Pundt & Venz, 2017). This study extends past research by revealing how employees can gain resources through direct leader–follower dyadic interactions (Wang et al.,

2018). In particular, this study confirms how leader humor can transfer psychological resources in service settings (Owens et al., 2016) through the lens of COR theory. This process further encourages employees to conduct desirable behaviors that can provide benefits to their respective organizations (Podsakoff et al., 2009). In addition, studies have been limited in this area on relational energy in the hospitality context. In a study conducted by Fan et al. (2021), the researchers demonstrated that relational energy mediated the effects of feeling trusted on service performance. Hence, by examining the mediator role of relational energy between leader humor and CO-OCB, we broaden the current hospitality literature on relational energy by identifying its antecedents and outcomes.

Third, this study provides fresh insight into leader humor by exploring two essential boundary conditions: traditionality and relational energy differentiation. In assessing how traditionality alters the effects of leader humor on relational energy, we highlight how cultural values alter the effects of leader humor. In particular, leader humor impacts less traditional employees, who are more likely to accept it as a form of communication. Therefore, these employees respond positively, raising their relational energy and leading to more CO-OCB. As such, our findings endorse earlier studies that identified traditionality as a necessary boundary condition regarding leadership in the Chinese context, for example, in areas such as empowering leadership (Li, Huo, & Long, 2017), ethical leadership (Liu, Kwan, Fu, & Mao, 2013), and abusive supervision (Hon & Lu, 2016). This study confirms a contextual factor that has been overlooked in studies

examining the relationship between relational energy and CO-OCB by confirming the moderating role of relational energy differentiation: Under conditions of high relational energy differential, relational energy will have a weaker effect on this behavior.

5.2 Managerial implications

Considering our findings, we offer three practical suggestions to managers of hospitality organizations. First, employees in the hospitality sector are typically under a great deal of stress, and organizations have emphasized finding effective strategies to re-energize them, as their behavior can determine customer satisfaction. Leader humor appears to boost employees' motivation and improve the effectiveness of leadership (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Hence, we assert that organizations can benefit from the use of this concept, as leader humor helps employees gain valuable resources and, therefore, supports engagement in extra-role behavior. Thus, we recommend that organizations find effective ways to encourage leader humor. An organization may, for instance, hire candidates who are humorous. As one option, organizations can ask candidates to report their sense of humor using questionnaires when hiring new staff (Thorson & Powell, 1993). As a possible alternative, organizations can include coworkers' evaluations of employees' senses of humor as support for promotions, such as when the candidate frequently uses humor to encourage coworkers. Organizations can also provide training programs to emphasize the significance of humor to leaders. When leaders appreciate humor's positive functions, they are open to employing this management strategy. Introducing humor training to employees through companies or

universities offering such services is also possible. For example, Stanford provides a course called “Humor: Serious Business” that aims to help leaders develop a sense of humor (Neves & Karagonlar, 2020).

Further, we have found that leader humor has a greater impact on employees with low traditionality. Based on this, leaders should seek to assess each team member’s degree of traditionality and adopt different strategies accordingly to ensure that they interact appropriately with individual employees. For example, if employees demonstrate a low degree of traditionality, leaders can utilize humor to replenish their psychological resources, enabling them to engage in CO-OCB more effectively. When managing employees who deeply respect traditional values, our findings indicate that leaders should develop alternative ways of providing resources such as by providing care.

Third, the operation of a hospitality organization relies on various teams. For this reason, team leaders must motivate each employee to ensure a high level of work efficiency. As an elevated level of relational energy differentiation diminishes the positive effect of relational energy on CO-OCB, our findings indicate the need for increased awareness of whether leaders treat individual team members differently. Only leaders’ careful control of relational energy differentiation can motivate employees to transfer relational energy to CO-OCB. Imagine, for example, that leaders require assistance in motivating energized employees to devote more resources to their work. In such a circumstance, they should consider whether they have adequately distributed

resources to their employees. They then should, for example, communicate directly with the staff concerned and take action to ensure that all employees are treated equally.

5.3 Limitations and future research directions

It is important to note that several factors limit this study. First, the design carries the theoretical risk of common method bias as leader humor, relational energy, and traditionality are self-reported by employees. Thanks to the implementation of procedural controls, such as measuring CO-OCB from the perspective of supervisors, statistical tests revealed that common method bias had little impact on results. However, future research may need to make use of more objective methods. Second, we examined the influence of leader humor on only CO-OCB, even though it may also encourage positive interpersonal behaviors (e.g., helping behavior) toward co-workers (Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988). Third, our exploration of leader humor is limited to the Chinese context; there is potential for future research to investigate whether certain forms of leader humor have similar effects in different cultural settings (Kong et al., 2019). Fourth, the association between relational energy and CO-OCB may be aggravated or mitigated by other factors, such as the service climate (Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010), which should be evaluated in future research.

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Appendix A:

Items

Leader humor

Item 1: My supervisor often expresses humor with me at work.

Item 2: I've seen my supervisor inject humor into many types of situations when interacting with me.

Item 3: My supervisor jokes around with me.

Traditionality

Item 1: When people are in dispute, they should ask the most senior person to decide who is right.

Item 2: Children should respect those people who are respected by their parents.

Item 3: The best way to avoid mistakes is to follow the instructions of senior persons.

Item 4: Before marriage, a woman should subordinate herself to her father, and after marriage, to her husband.

Item 5: The chief government official is like the head of a household: Citizens should obey his decisions on all state matters.

Relational energy

Item 1: I feel invigorated when I interact with my supervisor.

Item 2: After interacting with my supervisor, I feel more energy to do my work.

Item 3: I feel increased vitality when I interact with my supervisor.

Item 4: I would go to my supervisor when I need to be "pepped up."

Item 5: After an exchange with my supervisor, I feel more stamina to do my work.

Customer-oriented organizational citizen behavior

Item 1: To serve the customers, this employee volunteers for things that are not required.

Item 2: This employee attends to functions that are not required but that help customer service.

Item 3: This employee makes innovative suggestions to improve customer service.

Item 4: This employee exchanges ideas with colleagues on how to improve customer service.

Item 5: This employee assists co-workers to deliver high-quality customer-oriented services.

Item 6: This employee expends considerable energy to come up with creative ways to assist customers facing problems.

Item 7: This employee deals tirelessly with customer problems until they are resolved.

Servant leadership

Item 1: My manager gives me the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that I feel is best.

Item 2: My manager can tell if something work-related is going wrong.

Item 3: My manager makes my career development a priority.

Item 4: I would seek help from my manager if I had a personal problem.

Item 5: My manager emphasizes the importance of giving back to the community.

Item 6: My manager puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.

Item 7: My manager would not compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.

Appendix B:

Table 6 Factor loadings, composite reliability, average variance extracted, means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis.

Variables	Items	Loading	CR	AVE	Square root of AVE	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Leader humor	Item1	0.829	0.890	0.729	0.854	3.16	0.949	-0.300	-0.349
	Item2	0.893				3.19	0.913	-0.238	-0.350
	Item3	0.838				3.09	0.930	-0.196	-0.565
Traditionality	Item1	0.729	0.853	0.538	0.733	3.42	0.936	-0.305	-0.174
	Item2	0.806				3.52	0.930	-0.522	0.034
	Item3	0.709				3.27	1.056	-0.281	-0.698
	Item4	0.755				3.23	1.019	-0.080	-0.617
	Item5	0.659				3.63	1.012	-0.880	0.488
Relational energy	Item1	0.702	0.881	0.598	0.773	2.64	1.108	0.007	-1.121
	Item2	0.786				2.55	0.955	0.161	-0.588
	Item3	0.783				2.50	1.001	0.133	-0.849
	Item4	0.839				2.50	1.063	0.199	-0.806
	Item5	0.751				2.50	1.008	0.071	-0.767
CO-OCB	Item1	0.666	0.879	0.509	0.713	3.13	0.785	-0.263	0.301
	Item2	0.690				3.22	0.911	-0.390	-0.111
	Item3	0.649				3.13	0.786	-0.341	0.541
	Item4	0.713				3.20	0.811	-0.445	0.349
	Item5	0.749				3.58	0.832	-0.788	0.738
	Item6	0.772				3.53	0.876	-0.593	0.301
	Item7	0.748				3.55	0.903	-0.669	0.242

Notes: N=456; CR=composite reliability; AVE=average variance extracted.