

How can leader humor enhance subordinates' service creativity? The moderator of subordinates' SFIT and the mediator of role modeling

Leader humor
and service
creativity

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Abstract

Purpose – As an essential personality charm of leaders, humor can bring a series of positive outcomes to both users and receivers. However, there is also evidence that the impact of leaders' humor (LH) is constrained by individuals, teams and organizational factors. The aim of this research is to investigate the relationship between LH and subordinates' service creativity. Based on social learning theory and previous literature on LH, this paper identifies role modeling as the mediator and suggests that subordinates' sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment (SFIT) moderates these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to test the proposed moderated mediation model, this study employed hierarchical multiple regression and path analyses with valid data of 348 samples.

Findings – Results revealed that LH positively affects role modeling and service creativity of subordinates, while subordinates' SFIT positively moderates the relationship between LH and subordinates' service creativity via role modeling.

Practical implications – In compliance with these findings, this research suggests that enterprises should pay attention to the role of humor from middle managers and strengthen managers' role modeling through multiple measures to establish a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere in the workplace.

Originality/value – Built on the conceptual framework, this study contributes to the literature on LH and employees' service creativity by treating role modeling as the mechanism and SFIT as the moderator. This research is one of the first few empirical studies to investigate the relationship between LH and service creativity of service personnel in the service industry.

Keywords Leaders' humor, Social learning theory, Role modeling, Sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment, Service creativity

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done.
—Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969)



Orders just command others, but models can attract them.
—William Alexander (1767–1816)

Humor is considered as an extremely important component of organizational atmosphere and culture within the organization. More than half of managers advocate that rigorous management should be combined with humor (Chen and Chen, 2011). Humor contains the following two main functions: (1) entertainment (i.e. creating joy and laughter) and (2) communication functions (i.e. conveying information) (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Humor, as an entertaining form of interpersonal communication, can induce positive emotions and strongly promote interpersonal interaction within the organization (Cooper, 2005), thus producing positive job output via addressing cognitive or emotional challenges at work (Cooper and Sosik, 2012), such as trust (Hughes and Avey, 2009), subordinates' job satisfaction and commitment (Vecchio *et al.*, 2009) and work teams' performance (Avolio *et al.*, 1999). Leaders who are tolerant and optimistic are more likely to build closer relationships with their subordinates and are more likely to be potential role models in the workplace (Weaver *et al.*, 2005; Brown and Treviño, 2014).

Creativity is usually defined as the generation and use of novel and helpful ideas or concepts by individuals or groups in the organizational context (Zhou and Hoever, 2014), and service creativity refers to the creativity of employees who deal directly with customers in company, such as salesperson and service personnel (Dong *et al.*, 2015). The products or services provided by service enterprises are intangible, inseparable and differentiated, which poses many challenges to frontline personnel of service enterprises. As the communication bridges between the service enterprise and the customer, the frontline service personnel naturally assume the role mission of meeting the personalized and differentiated needs of customers (Sok *et al.*, 2018). Only when the service staff is creative enough to consistently meet customers' increasingly differentiated needs, they can truly satisfy customers and not just repeat their daily work. Therefore, for service enterprises, it has become an issue that managers have to face and solve to find out the reasons for employees' higher creative performance. How to inspire and motivate the creativity of service personnel at the lowest cost? This is an essential issue that performance-oriented companies are keen to solve. In order to address the abovementioned problem, this research investigates that as a key motivator, how does the immediate supervisor influences the subordinate's creativity? Whether there are boundary conditions?

Existing research offers some convincing evidence for the positive impact of leaders' humor (LH), whereas the current research study on LH in the service industry is still limited and rather fragmentary (Collinson, 2002; Cooper *et al.*, 2018). Humor is a common phenomenon in organizations, especially in service industry, whereas an increasing number of studies have shown that it can bring mixed outcomes (e.g. Huo *et al.*, 2012; Yam *et al.*, 2018), which can lead to higher leader–member exchange (LMX) and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), as well as deviant behavior and lower leadership. Moreover, the effect of humorous behavior is also influenced by cultural context, which is significantly weakened in the Chinese context (Huo *et al.*, 2012; Yang *et al.*, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2018). Humor may undermine the authority of leaders and ambiguous jokes would generate negative or even disastrous consequences for managers (Collinson, 2002). For instance, Yam *et al.* (2018) found that humorous leadership may lose authority in the eyes of subordinates and positively affect followers' deviant behaviors via perceived norm violation. That is, whether a leader's humorous behavior is “good” or “bad” still is a contradiction in the existing literature. And, the boundary conditions deserve further exploration from various perspectives.

Existing studies on LH overly focus on the perspective of LMX (e.g. Cooper *et al.*, 2018; Yam *et al.*, 2018), positing that humor, as a management tool, can promote the relationship between the exchange within the organization and enhance the relationship quality between superiors and subordinates. However, the long-term effect of humor on organizational atmosphere has

neglected that individuals may unconsciously observe, learn and mimic the leaders' behavior, to treat the colleagues, friends and family around them with similar behaviors (Collinson, 2002). Successful leaders in business organizations have a profound and remarkable influence on their subordinates, who could express the values and beliefs they want their subordinates to follow through personal behaviors (Yaffe and Kark, 2011). Bandura (1977) noted that human behaviors, especially complex human behavior, were acquired mainly through observing the behavior of the models (i.e. the learning of indirect experience). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) refers to the observational or imitative learning, which posits that individuals learn how to interpret and respond to external environmental stimuli by observing and imitating role models (e.g. leaders). Rich (1997) found that in the management of sales personnel, the role modeling of sales managers was more powerful than that of other department managers because sales personnel were more likely to emulate their supervisor' work habits, positive attitudes and goals. Therefore, this research will investigate the effect of role modeling on subordinates' service creativity in the context of service personnel management.

This research makes threefold contribution. First, we integrate the relationship between LH and subordinates' service creativity. This study not only contributes to previous work in the humor field but also responds to calls for more empirical research on the role of LH as an antecedent for employees' service creativity. Meanwhile, as the improvement of service creativity can provide innovative solutions for external customers, this study also builds a closed-loop relationship between superiors, employees and customers, promoting sustainable development of the relationship between enterprises and customers. Second, this study constructs a bridge between LH, role modeling and subordinates' service creativity. According to social learning theory, leaders are the main objects for subordinates to learn and for humorous leaders, subordinates are more willing to observe, learn and imitate their behaviors, in turn, and show similar humorous behaviors to colleagues and customers. Last but not least, we propose that sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment (SFIT) moderates the relationship between LH and perceived role modeling. Existing studies have shown that individual characteristics of information receivers can affect the learning effect. As the receivers of humor signals, employees' individual differences determine their perception of humor, which will affect their evaluation of leaders' behaviors and inspiration of creativity. Subordinates with high SFIT are more likely to perceive the kindness released by humor and prefer to learn and imitate the behaviors from leaders, so that role modeling of leaders will be stronger.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 *Leaders' humor and subordinates' service creativity*

Humor refers to a multilevel phenomenon that does not correspond to into a single broad definition. On the one hand, a part of scholars, from the trait perspective, have identified humor as a stable and enduring personality quality of leaders (Avolio *et al.*, 1999), namely, sense of humor (Mao *et al.*, 2017; Yam *et al.*, 2018). Based on the abovementioned viewpoints, Mesmer-Magnus *et al.* (2012) believed that humor is an important personality charm of leaders, which is conducive to winning loyalty and followers. On the other hand, some scholars suggest inferring the initiator's intention from their behavior. That is, from the perspective of behavior, humor is a kind of intentional behavior in the process of interpersonal communication and management of leaders (Cooper *et al.*, 2018). The purpose of humorous action is to develop pleasant interpersonal relationships, mitigate conflicts, attract attention or impress the audience (Dubinsky *et al.*, 1995). Humor is an interpersonal behavior that can arouse emotional resonance between users and audience; it prompts both parties to laugh naturally instead of smiling falsely (Bergson, 1912; Schmidt and Rosenberg, 2014). In combination with the context and theory of this paper, we define LH as the degree to which a leader uses humor with his subordinates and makes them laugh (Cooper *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the style of humor can be classified into positive and negative humor. Among

them, scholars generally classify affiliative and self-enhancing humor as positive humor, while self-deprecating and aggressive humor as negative humor (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Positive humor does the effectiveness of leadership a favor, whereas negative humor with sarcasm, attack, insult and discrimination will damage the relationship among leaders and subordinates (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Decker and Rotondo, 2001).

This multisource research has examined the importance of humor to employees, leaders, work teams and organizations. Humor is a behavior of high praise that demonstrates that humor can elicit a psychological response of pleasure in the recipient (Gulas *et al.*, 2010; Eisend, 2007). In organizations and teams, proper use of humor can improve management efficiency (Decker and Rotondo, 2001), promote team learning, motivate employees and reduce work stress (Barbour, 1998; Collinson, 2002; Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). Fraley and Aron (2004) found that humor can resolve interorganizational relationship conflicts because it can make criticism more acceptable. Early studies on the influence of LH focused on the improvement of employees' performance and job satisfaction (e.g. Vecchio *et al.*, 2009; Robert and Wilbanks, 2012; Mao *et al.*, 2017), neglecting extra-role behavior such as creativity. The research study by Avolio *et al.* (1999) showed that LH can enhance the positive prediction effect of transformational leadership and units' performance. Only when leaders show more humor, they can be more favorable to the performance of transformational leadership, thus resulting in a higher level of units' performance. Leaders use unique humorous communication strategies to motivate employees, so that employees make a more positive evaluation of leaders and take the initiative to complete the assigned tasks (Decker, 1987). Mao *et al.* (2017) found that LH was positively related to perceptions of transformational leadership, which in turn had a positive effect on the team's performance. In recent years, more and more scholars begin to explore the impact of LH on extra-role behaviors, such as OCB and creativity. The use of LH can affect the individual creativity of subordinates; the self-enhancing LH can improve the subordinate's creativity, while the aggressive humor can dampen subordinates' creativity (Lee, 2015). Cooper *et al.* (2018) found that LH, as a social emotional resource, can observably facilitate employees' OCB from the three mechanisms of social exchange, conservation of resources and broaden-and-build theories. Evans *et al.* (2019) found that the use of humor by male leaders leads to higher perceived status, while the opposite outcomes for women. To sum up, it can be found that LH can help to improve the effectiveness of leadership, help leaders successfully manage the team and play a very important role in employees' in-role and extra-role behaviors.

Previous studies have examined that LH is linked to employees' creativity (Slåtten *et al.*, 2011; Lee, 2015). Individuals have a tendency to infer their status in a particular group based on interpersonal cues in the social environment and determine subsequent behaviors (Tyler and Blader, 2003; Ye *et al.*, 2019). As a clue of interpersonal friendship, humor can promote harmonious communication between superiors and subordinates and make subordinates feel more kindness and care from leaders. The friendly signals released by leaders to subordinates can enhance subordinates' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations; subordinates generate more positive emotions and a strong sense of work and thus spend more time and energy and increase additional work input (Qian and Jiang, 2017). Affinity conveyed by leaders through humorous strategies will make employees feel a relaxed and pleasant organizational atmosphere (Gkorezis *et al.*, 2014), and employees in a relaxed atmosphere are more willing to exchange new ideas and try new strategies. In addition, humorous employees can better interact with consumers and obtain consumers' opinions and suggestions on service quality, thus improving service quality and service creativity. Employees who use humor in difficult situations are more likely to engage in creative activities (De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia, 2019). To sum up, hypothesis 1 was proposed.

H1. LH positively affects subordinates' service creativity.

2.2 Leaders' humor, social learning and role modeling

Existing research defines role modeling as a “cognitive construction of an individual based on the attributes of a person in a social role, and he or she perceives to be similar to him or herself in some way and hopes to the similarity to those attributes through imitation” (Gibson, 2004, p. 136). Bass and Avolio (1994) described role modeling as the extent to which the leader provides cases and templates for employees. From an observer's perspective, role modeling is a process of learning from and emulating the models (Weaver *et al.*, 2005), and a workplace mentor is an important source of role models for employees (Brown and Treviño, 2014).

A large body of research has confirmed the positive impact of role models in the workplace. Rich (1997) explored that in the context of sales management, the role modeling of the sales manager can effectively promote the trust of subordinates and improve the job satisfaction and overall performance of employees. In the entrepreneurial context, Scherer *et al.* (1989) found that individuals unconsciously imitate the behavior of role models by observing their role models, thus performing stronger similarity with role models. Furthermore, Barnir *et al.* (2011) found that contacting with role models of entrepreneurs could positively influence their entrepreneurial career intention and self-efficacy plays a mediating role. Koch and Binnewies (2015) explored the impact of superiors as work-life-friendly role modeling on employees' work-home segmentation behavior and well-being in work-home boundary management.

Social learning theory proved that individuals consciously or unconsciously observe, learn and emulate the behaviors of people around them and unconsciously express similar behaviors, which includes four stages of attention, retention, replication and reinforcement (Bandura, 1986). The literature on social learning has shown that learning is associated with excellent leadership traits and behaviors (Bandura, 1991; Gardner *et al.*, 2005), such as ethical (Brown and Treviño, 2014), transformational (Avolio *et al.*, 1999) and servant leadership (Dong *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, when leaders are attractive, reliable, legitimate and endowed with other admirable qualities (such as status, power and ability), only then they will be seen as role models by employees (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). By observing, learning and emulating these positive traits and behaviors, these subordinates can lead to some favorable outcomes, such as OCB (Cooper *et al.*, 2018), prosocial behavior and work engagement (Yam *et al.*, 2018).

As a positive personality trait and behavior, LH can promote the role modeling of leaders in the eyes of subordinates and improve their evaluation of superiors. In teams and organizations, compared with ordinary employees, leaders are considered to be an important source of employees' role models (Brown and Treviño, 2014). Since high status and position's power offer leaders with status and legitimacy, they directly determine the vital interests of employees, such as performance evaluation, task assignment and position promotion (Barczak and Wilemon, 1989; Beatty and Lee, 1992; Farris, 1988). Thus, leaders have an extraordinary influence over employees, making them potentially attractive role models (Mayer *et al.*, 2009). Subordinates have a strong incentive to study and imitate the patterns of thinking and behavior of leaders, and they exhibit similar behaviors to customers in practice. Humorous behaviors of leaders can help to establish a humorous example for subordinates, and they will subconsciously observe, learn and imitate the humorous behaviors of superiors. Humor from the immediate superior will have a more profound impact on the personality and working style of the followers, who thus will be more tolerant and humorous to other colleagues and customers. That is, when service personnel become more tolerant and patient, they will be more patient, active and innovative to solve customers' problems. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H2. LH positively influences role modeling.

H3. Role modeling mediates the relationship between LH and subordinates' service creativity.

2.3 *The moderating role of sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment*

SFIT refers to the employees of the sensitive extent of favorable and friendly interpersonal interaction relationship in workplace (Bunk and Magley, 2011), which reflects employees' cognitive and affective perception and reaction ability to others psychological states (e.g. cognition, emotion and motivation). Decety and Batson (2007) interpreted interpersonal sensitivity, a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, from the perspective of social neuroscience through combining biology and psychology. Decety and Batson (2007) presented three stages of interpersonal sensitivity: feeling what another person feels (i.e. catching another person's emotional state), feeling for another person (i.e. compassion or [reactive] empathy) and caring for another person (i.e. love or attachment).

Molton *et al.* (2008) found that cognitive-behavioral stress management intervention can promote sexual recovery, and this effect was moderated by interpersonal sensitivity, specifically, individuals with higher interpersonal sensitivity can benefit more from it. Boyce and Parker (2011) developed a self-report scale to measure interpersonal sensitivity, which contains interpersonal awareness, need for approval, separation anxiety, timidity and fragile inner self, and they found that interpersonal sensitivity seemed to be related to measures of neuroticism and low self-esteem. Wedgeworth *et al.* (2017) explored the relationship between interpersonal sensitivity, social support and living quality and found that interpersonal sensitivity and social support positively predicted living quality. Ye *et al.* (2019) explored hostile attribution bias, where sensitivity to perceived interpersonal mistreatment positively moderates the negative relationship among workplace gossip and organizational identification.

Previous studies have shown that the individual characteristics of subordinates are the key boundary conditions of social learning effect and the influence of leaders cannot be separated from subordinates' accurate understanding and interpretation of their behaviors (Howell and Dorfman, 1981). Eberly and Fong (2013) investigated and confirmed the positive moderating effect of subordinates' interdependence on the trickle-down effect of positive/negative emotions. They pointed out that because subordinates with high interdependence are more sensitive to the leader's emotion, the positive emotion of the leader is more likely to be transmitted downward. Conversely, subordinates with low interdependence cannot distinguish the positive and negative emotions of the leader, so the trickle-down effect is hard to happen. The sensitivity of employees to the interpersonal relationship in the workplace is an important situational factor influencing the force of leaders' behavior. Concretely, high levels of interpersonal sensitivity of the employees are more likely to perceive beneficial and friendly interpersonal interaction, but low sensitivity of employees' relationship finds more difficult to detect the favorable and friendly interpersonal interaction and the ability for known interpersonal interaction response is weaker (Bunk and Magley, 2011; Dong *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, when facing humorous behavior of leaders, subordinates with high SFIT will more quickly and deeply interpret the beneficial and friendly signals from humorous behavior and tend to show friendly and positive responses by learning and emulating leaders' humorous behaviors. Conversely, subordinates with low SFIT are less likely to perceive the positive signals from their superiors' humor and may take such humorous behaviors for granted, with less willingness to learn and imitate. Accordingly, we proposed hypothesis 4.

H4. SFIT positively moderates the relationship among LH and role modeling.

2.4 *The moderated mediation effect*

Combining H2, H3 and H4, we propose a moderated mediation model as shown in Figure 1. Employees with high SFIT have a high perception of favorable signals of LH and a strong willingness to observe, learn and emulate the behaviors of leaders that amuse others. Therefore, the role modeling of leaders is more susceptible to the influence of LH. Meanwhile,

the indirect effect of LH on subordinates' service creativity via role modeling is stronger. Oppositely, employees with low SFIT have a low perception of favorable signals of LH and a weak willingness to observe, learn and emulate leaders' behaviors of amusing others. Therefore, the role modeling of leaders is less susceptible to the influence of LH. Meanwhile, the indirect effect of LH on subordinates' service creativity via role modeling is weaker. Accordingly, we put forward [hypothesis 5](#).

H5. The indirect effect between LH and subordinates' service creativity through role modeling becomes stronger for subordinates who have high SFIT than those having low SFIT.

3. Methods

3.1 The sample and design

In order to examine these proposed hypotheses, we collected a sample consisting of 25 questions which contain LH, role modeling, SFIT, service creativity and demographic characteristics. A total of ten service enterprises in China were invited to participate in the data collection. All participants were recruited who had direct contact with customers (such as sales and service staff) within the enterprises. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed and 348 valid samples were collected with a recovery rate of 87% (male = 53.2%). See [Table 1](#) for details, in terms of age distribution, 0.6% of the subjects were 18 years old or below, 7.2% were 19–25 years old, 26.4% were 26–30 years old, 49.1% were 31–40 years old, 14.9% were 41–50 years old and 1.7% were 51–60 years old. In terms of tenure distribution, 6.9% were within 1 year, 14.4% were within 1–2 years, 35.9% were within 3–5 years, 30.5% were within 6–10 years and 12.4% were over 10 years, of which 78.7% were more than three years, so it was relatively stable. In terms of educational distribution, 3.7% had high school degree or below, 20.7% had an associate degree, 69.8% had bachelor's degree and 5.7% had master's degree or above. In terms of team size, 1.1% for less than 3 people, 11.5% for 3–5 people, 27% for 6–10 people, 23.3% for 11–15 people, 15.5% for 16–20 people and 21.6% for more than 20 people.

3.2 Measures

Leaders' humor: LH was assessed by subordinates using a three-item scale from [Cooper et al. \(2018\)](#) on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), a sample item was "how frequently does your superior express humor with you at work, overall?" ($\alpha = 0.914$). ~~The factor loadings of the three items are, respectively, 0.933, 0.928 and 0.911.~~

Role modeling: We adopted the five-item scale from [Rich \(1997\)](#) to measure role modeling with a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), a sample item was "my superior provides a good model for me to follow" ($\alpha = 0.937$).

Sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment: Employees used a four-item scale adapted by [Dong et al. \(2018\)](#), which was originally developed by [Bunk and Magley \(2011\)](#), to report their SFIT from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), a sample item was "I would remember when my supervisor treats me with respect" ($\alpha = 0.73$).

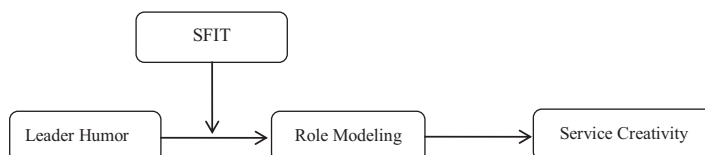


Figure 1.
The conceptual model

Variable	Classification	Respondents	
		<i>N</i>	%
Gender	Male	185	53.2
	Female	163	46.8
Age	18 years old or below	2	0.6
	19–25 years old	25	7.2
	26–30 years old	92	26.4
	31–40 years old	171	49.1
	41–50 years old	52	14.9
	51–60 years old	6	1.7
Education	High school or below	13	3.7
	Associate degree	72	20.7
	Bachelor's degree	243	69.8
	Master's degree or above	20	5.7
Tenure in current company	<1 year	24	6.9
	1–2 years	50	14.4
	3–5 years	125	35.9
	6–10 years	106	30.5
	>10 years	43	12.4
	Team size	<3	4
3–5		40	11.5
6–10		94	27
11–15		81	23.3
16–20		54	15.5
>20		75	21.6

Table 1.
Sample demographic

Service creativity: Service creativity was rated by subordinates using an eight-item scale from [Dong et al. \(2015\)](#) on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), which appropriately changed based on the research study by [Zhou and George \(2001\)](#) and in combination with the specific situation of the service industry. A sample item was “I would come up with creative solutions to problems my clients encountered” ($\alpha = 0.905$).

The abovementioned scales used throughout this research were translated and retranslated by professional English–Chinese translators and professors from the school of management ([Hambleton, 1996](#)).

Control variables: In addition to collecting data related to the gender, age and education level of the employees, we also measured their tenure in the current company and the size of their team.

4. Results

4.1 The confirmatory factor analysis

Since the data of LH, role modeling, SFIT and service creativity were collected from the same source (i.e. subordinates), we first used Mplus 8.3 to conduct a series of confirmatory factor analyses to test the discriminate and convergent validity of these four key variables before testing the proposed hypotheses. As shown in [Table 2](#), the fit indices revealed that compared with other alternate models, the hypothesized four-factor model, with LH, role modeling, SFIT and service creativity, has a best fit ($\chi^2 = 387.412$, $df = 164$, $CFI = 0.949$, $TLI = 0.949$, $SRMR = 0.048$, $RMSEA = 0.063$). Meanwhile, Harman's single-factor test was conducted and we found that the cumulative percentage of the first component was under 40% (36.56%), which indicated that common method bias of the data is not serious.

4.2 Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics, intercorrelations and construct validity for all variables are shown in Table 3. As Table 3 shows, service creativity is positively correlated with LH, role modeling and SFIT ($r = 0.439, 0.557, 0.494, p < 0.01$). In addition, role modeling is significantly correlated with LH ($r = 0.541, p < 0.01$).

4.3 Hypotheses testing

All hypotheses were examined using the hierarchical multiple regression analysis. We organized the multiple regression analysis to test hypothesis 1 (see Table 4). This paper first sets service creativity as the dependent variable and puts in all control variables, followed by IV (LH) in step 2, then the moderating variable (SFIT), two-way interaction term (LH*SFIT) and the mediator (role modeling) were put into the independent variable in turn. The results indicated that LH positively affected service creativity ($b = 0.243, p < 0.001$) in step 2, so hypothesis 1 was supported. In step 3, SFIT positively affected service creativity ($b = 0.441, p < 0.001$), and the interaction effect was not significant ($b = -0.02, p > 0.05$) in step 4. However, when the mediator was included in step 5, neither the main effect of LH ($b = 0.012, p > 0.05$) nor SFIT ($b = 0.24, p > 0.05$) was significant, while the effect of role model on service creativity was significant ($b = 0.225, p < 0.01$), supporting hypothesis 3.

To validate hypotheses 2 and 4, we set role modeling as a dependent variable and put all control variables in step 6, followed by IV (LH) in step 7, then moderating variable (SFIT) and the interaction (LH*SFIT) were put into the independent variable in turn. The results revealed that the two-way interaction of LH and SFIT appeared as a significant negative effect on role modeling ($b = -0.155, p < 0.001$), supporting H4. To demonstrate the moderator of SFIT, a simple slope analysis was performed as suggested by Aiken and West (1991). A simple effect analysis is shown in Figure 2, the relationship among LH and service creativity is positively significant when SFIT is high ($b = 0.2456, p < 0.01$), which is also positively significant when SFIT is low ($b = 0.4633, p < 0.01$).

4.4 The moderated mediation effect analysis

To test H3 and H5, Mplus 8.3 was used in this study to examine the conditional indirect link among LH and employee's service creativity via role modeling at higher (+1 SD) and lower (-1 SD) values of SFIT. Results in Table 5 revealed that the conditional association between

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Four-factor model	387.412	164	0.949	0.941	0.048	0.063
Three-factor model 1	436.271	167	0.937	0.93	0.059	0.068
Three-factor model 2	488.053	167	0.927	0.917	0.065	0.074
Three-factor model 3	578.711	167	0.906	0.893	0.099	0.084
Three-factor model 4	912.087	167	0.830	0.807	0.072	0.113
Three-factor model 5	1,485.18	168	0.700	0.660	0.164	0.150
Two-factor model	1,657.44	169	0.660	0.618	0.107	0.159
One-factor model	1,681.44	170	0.655	0.615	0.108	0.160

Note(s): $N = 348$. "Three-factor model 1": sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment and role modeling were combined into one factor, "three-factor model 2": sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment and service creativity were combined into one factor, "three-factor model 3": leaders' humor and sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment were combined into one factor, "three-factor model 4": leaders' humor and role modeling were combined into one factor, "three-factor model 5": role modeling and service creativity were combined into one factor, "two-factor model": leaders' humor, role modeling and service creativity were combined into one factor

Table 2.
Results of the
confirmatory factor
analysis

Table 3.
Mean, standard deviation and correlation values of all variables in this study

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.47	0.500								
2. Age	3.76	0.875	-0.209**							
3. Education	2.78	0.604	0.244**	-0.201**						
4. Tenure	3.27	1.072	0.091	0.343**	0.178**					
5. Team_size	4.05	1.361	-0.019	0.093	0.161**	0.263**				
6. LH	4.37	1.454	-0.137*	0.041	0.069	-0.076	0.043			
7. Role modeling	5.49	1.228	-0.214**	0.111*	-0.001	-0.095	0.070	0.541**		
8. SFIT	5.74	0.700	-0.180*	0.191*	-0.087	-0.102	0.005	0.350**	0.516**	
9. Service creativity	5.57	0.850	-0.118*	0.237**	0.011	0.012	0.145**	0.439**	0.557**	0.494**

Note(s): $N = 348$. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Variables Control variables	Service creativity					Role modeling			
	Step1	Step2	Step3	Step4	Step5	Step6	Step7	Step8	Step9
Gender	-0.114	-0.014	0.032	0.029	0.085	-0.469**	-0.292*	-0.227*	-0.251*
Age	0.262***	0.231***	0.159**	0.161**	0.149**	0.192*	0.136	0.036	0.053
Tenure	-0.099	-0.058	-0.019	-0.02	-0.005	-0.185**	-0.111	-0.056	-0.067
Education	0.114	0.035	0.049	0.05	0.034	0.180	0.040	0.059	0.071
Team_size	0.087*	0.075*	0.075**	0.074**	0.064*	0.073	0.053	0.053	0.046
<i>Predictor</i> Leaders' humor		0.243***	0.175***	0.29	0.012		0.430***	0.334***	1.233***
<i>Moderator</i> SFTT			0.441***	0.523***	0.24			0.62***	1.258***
<i>Interaction</i> LH*SFTT				-0.02	0.015				-0.155***
<i>Mediator</i> Role modeling					0.225***		0.249	0.102	0.021
ΔR^2	0.091	0.165	0.108	0.001	0.058	0.077	0.325	0.428	0.449
R^2	0.091	0.257	0.365	0.365	0.424	0.077	0.314	0.416	0.436
Adjusted R^2	0.078	0.244	0.352	0.350	0.408	0.063	0.314	0.416	0.436
F	6.885***	19.621***	27.877***	24.398***	27.605***	5.693***	27.415***	36.315***	34.541***

Note(s): $N = 348$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4.
Results of regression
analyses

LH and employee’s service creativity through role modeling was significant (estimate = 0.163, 95% CI: [0.073, 0.301]), when SFIT was high (estimate = 0.148, 95% CI: [0.068, 0.271]) and when it was low (estimate = 0.177, 95% CI = [0.077, 0.329]). Overall, H3 was empirically supported. Furthermore, the difference in the indirect effect was significant (estimate = -0.029, 95% CI: [-0.059, -0.009]). Therefore, H5 was supported significantly (see Table 5).

5. Discussion

Built on social learning theory, this research explored the impact of LH on service creativity of subordinates via role modeling and examined the moderating effect of SFIT. LH positively affects role modeling and service creativity of subordinates, while SFIT moderates the relationship between LH and subordinates’ service creativity via role modeling.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This paper has some theoretical contributions for LH, role modeling, SFIT and service creativity literature studies in service personnel management. First and foremost, this study enriches the literature on LH. Previous literature on LH mainly explore the meaning behind the leaders’ behavior from the perspective of social exchange theory (e.g. Gkorezis et al., 2014; Lee, 2015; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2018), focusing on the direct effect of LH on interpersonal relationships within organizations but neglect the long-term imperceptible influence of humor on the behavior of organization members. Hence, this study decided to explore the effect of LH on subordinates’ service creativity via the perspective of social learning theory. Humorous behaviors of leaders can effectively improve the subordinates’ evaluation of their superiors and better enhance leaders’ non-statutory power within the organization. Moreover, this study also validated the critical role that leaders play in promoting organizational and team learning (Barbour, 1998; Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). Such humorous behaviors from middle managers can more directly affect grassroots

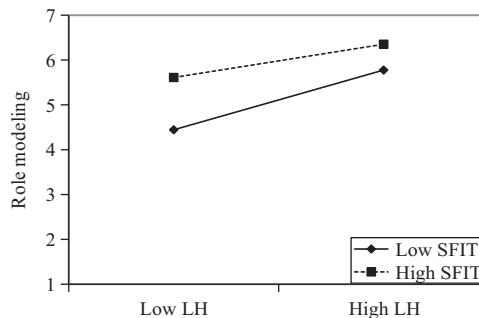


Figure 2. Results of the simple effect analysis of sensitivity to favorable interpersonal treatment as a moderating variable

Effect	Estimate	S.E.	p-value	95% CI
IND	0.163	0.056	0.004	(0.073, 0.301)
INDH	0.148	0.050	0.003	(0.068, 0.271)
INDL	0.177	0.062	0.004	(0.077, 0.329)
DIFF	-0.029	0.012	0.019	(-0.059, -0.009)

Table 5. Results of the moderated mediation effect analysis

Note(s): “IND”: indirect effect of leaders’ humor on subordinates’ service creativity via role modeling, “INDL”: when SFIT is low, “INDH”: when SFIT is high, “DIFF”: “INDH” – “INDL”

employees, contributing to the improvement of employees' creativity and thus ensure the long-term, stable and sustainable development of the organization.

Second, this current research investigates the specific antecedent variable of role modeling from the humorous behaviors of the superiors. Existing research has suggested that leaders' positive behaviors or traits can influence their role modeling in subordinates' minds (e.g. [Brown and Treviño, 2014](#); [Koch and Binnewies, 2015](#)), but there is little exploratory research of distinctive traits and behaviors. This study builds a bridge between LH and role modeling through social learning theory and stresses the importance of humor in establishing leaders' image.

Third, the present paper supplements the boundary conditions of social learning theory. Previous literature on social learning theory believes that individual difference, team, work characteristics, environment and other factors can affect the learning ability within an organization, but there are relatively few research studies focusing on the individual level ([Yaffe and Kark, 2011](#); [Eberly and Fong, 2013](#); [Wang et al., 2018](#)). This paper explores the influence of individual characteristics of humor receiver (i.e. employees) on a trickle-down effect through validating the moderating effect of employees' SFIT on LH and role modeling.

Last but not least, this research complements the literature on service creativity. The existing research studies on the creativity of frontline employees in the service industry are relatively scarce. [Dong et al. \(2015\)](#) developed and validated the service creativity scale according to the characteristics of the service industry, and this study once again examined the effectiveness of the scale. Moreover, previous empirical studies show that the factors influencing creativity include the following two aspects: (1) individual factors, such as personality, cognitive style and motivation and (2) environmental factors, including work-related (e.g. complexity of tasks, time limit and work feedback), team-level (e.g. team innovation atmosphere, authorization, LMX and leadership style) and organization-level factors (e.g. organizational culture and organizational atmosphere) ([Zhou and George, 2001](#); [Dong et al., 2015](#); [Eberly and Fong, 2013](#)). This paper verifies that LH can facilitate subordinates' service creativity via role modeling, which not only echoes existing studies but also enriches the antecedent variable of service creativity.

5.2 Practice implications

According to the research conclusion, there are three implications worth noting. First of all, this paper emphasizes that organizations should attach importance to the long-term role of humor. According to a survey of *Harvard Business Review*, "laughter is severely lacking among adults at work, with people over 35 laughing just 15 times a day." Work generally becomes an impersonal endeavor that lacks basic happiness ([Beard, 2014](#)). Dull and mechanical work can lead to depression, lower motivation and higher turnover intention ([Cooper et al., 2018](#)). As a social emotional resource, humor does not incur economic costs, but it is conducive to improving subordinates' attitudes and behavioral responses, such as employees' well-being and work performance ([Cooper et al., 2018](#)).

Second, this study emphasizes that organizations should give attention to the influence of middle managers on team learning. In the enterprise, the frontline staff is the cornerstone, while middle managers are the link to support the normal operation of the whole enterprise. In addition to top managers, workplace mentors are also a crucial source of individual role models and role modeling of middle managers is essential for organizations to create a new atmosphere of lifelong learning. Role modeling has three functions: motivation, self-definition and learning ([Gibson, 2004](#)). By setting excellent leaders as examples, organizations can attract employees to learn from and emulate their attitudes, behaviors, goals and other aspects, so as to improve the overall quality of employees.

Finally, this paper emphasizes to increase the sources and channels of creativity in enterprises. Existing studies have proved that service creativity can help to resolve the pain points of customers' demand, improve customers' satisfaction and repurchase intention. Therefore, service creativity is part of the foundations to maintain and reinforce the competitiveness of service enterprises. Accordingly, leaders should increase the frequency of humor to build a harmonious and relaxed atmosphere for the team and enhance service creativity of subordinates. In addition, the literature on team leadership suggests that vicarious learning may be an important team process (Kozlowski, 2018), through which the role modeling of the leader can enhance the team's contribution to corporate performance goals (e.g. Zaccaro *et al.*, 2001).

5.3 Limitations and future research

These contributions should be qualified in light of several limitations. First, the data in this study were obtained from the same source at one point in time. Although the data had passed the common method bias test, some scholars believe that the longitudinal data are more scientific than cross-sectional data. Future studies could consider measuring at multiple points in time as well as from different sources.

Second, built on social learning theory, this paper investigated the long-term subtle influence of LH. Future research may consider exploring from other theoretical perspectives, such as social identity, benign violation and affective events theories.

Third, although this study examined the moderating role of employees' SFIT, existing studies suggest that in addition to the characteristics of recipients, humor producers and the environment also affect the learning effect. Future research could explore other potential moderators, such as the characteristics of leaders (e.g. emotional intelligence and the interpersonal sensitivity of leaders) and teams' innovation climate.

Last but not least, this study revealed that the effect of LH on role modeling was more significant in individuals with low SFIT. This phenomenon is well worth for exploring in future. We have come up with an explanation that employees with low SFIT can feel the humor of leaders, which indicates that the degree of humor is quite high. Moreover, employees with low SFIT seldom feel the friendly signals from others and will generate a stronger reaction when confronted with the humor from leaders. A Chinese proverb may explain this phenomenon to a certain extent: "a man dies for his confidant." Abovementioned interesting issues are worthy of further exploration.

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Further reading

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