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Does Humor Really Enhance Innovative Work Behavior? A Case Study of Thai Commercial Bank Employees

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Abstract:

This study aimed to explore the relationship between humor styles and innovative work behavior of Thai commercial bank employees. Modified versions of Human Style Questionnaire (HSQ) and Innovative Work Behavior Scale (IWB) were used as the instruments for data collection. The validity and reliability of research instruments were evaluated and yielded the high scores for both instruments. Questionnaires were distributed to one hundred eighty-three employees of the documentary analysis unit of a selected commercial bank in Bangkok, Thailand. One hundred sixty-six questionnaires were returned with the completion, which showed a response rate of 90.7 %. The results of stepwise regression analysis indicated that self-enhancing humor style of Thai commercial bank employees explained 13% of variance ($R^2 = .131$, $F(2, 166) = 24.73$, $p < .01$). The finding found that self-enhancing humor style had a significantly positive effect on innovative work behavior ($\beta = .362$, $p < .01$). On the other hand, this present study found no significant differences between other humor styles and innovative work behavior. Limitations and recommendations for further studies were also discussed.

Keywords: *Humor styles, innovative work behaviors, Thai commercial bank employees*

1. Introduction

To cope with rapidly changing environment and gain a competitive advantage, organizations need to do something differently. Innovation is being perceived as a major driving force that distinguishes successful and unsuccessful companies and enhances an opportunity for survival. Some empirical evidences pointed out that innovation tied directly to organizational performance (Prajogo, 2006; Atalay, Anafarta, & Sarvan, 2013). Previous research indicated that more innovative organizations have tendency to grow faster than non-innovative companies (Mutlu, 2014). To boost innovation, organizations need to increase the level of creative and innovative thinking atmosphere and require creative and innovative employees to do this job. In particular, innovative work behavior of employees (e.g. developing, adopting, and implementing new ideas, products, processes, and procedures) is a vital key that enables an organization to create innovation that can outperform its rivals in the highly competitive environment. In the past decades, innovative behavior has become increasingly important and been placed an emphasis on the previous research since innovation is initiated as a consequence of employee productivity (Chang & Liu, 2008; Yuan & Woodman, 2010). Innovative work behavior goes beyond the ability of employees to generate new and useful ideas but it also includes the implementation of ideas to create value and impact for the organization (King & Anderson, 2002).

To increase innovative behavior, organizations need to understand what influential factors that play a critical role in developing employees' creativity and innovative thinking. Past research has been investigated antecedent factors that enhanced innovative behavior of employees such as psychological aspects, organizational commitment leadership, organizational supportiveness, team climate inventory, and work characteristics (Yuan & Woodman, 2010; Li & Zheng, 2014; Kabasheva et al., 2015; Chatchawan et al., 2017). Yet, previous research also showed that employees who have a sense of humor during their work can enhance productivity and innovation in the workplace (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Thus, numerous studies attempted to place their focus on the relationship between humor styles and innovative work behavior, and found both significantly positive and negative effects of some humor styles on employee's innovative behavior (Tang, 2008; Kuiper & McHale, 2009; Ho et al., 2011; Amjed & Tirmzi, 2016). However, some studies stated that cultural differences can have an impact on the expression of humor styles, and suggested the focus on investigating cross-cultural comparison between distinctive industries or countries (Amjed & Tirmzi, 2016). In addition, the study on the relationship between humor styles and innovative work behavior of employees in Thai business is somewhat new, and has been underdeveloped based on the literature reviews. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between humor styles and innovative work behavior of Thai commercial bank employees.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Humor Styles

In western society, humor was firstly viewed as negative personality, and finally perceived as positive behaviors (Ho et al., 2011). Past studies attempted to explore the effect of humor on psychological and physical factors with the notion that sense of humor can have a positive effect on people life, especially psychological well-being and health benefits. For example, Abel (2002) found that people with a high sense of humor reported less stress and anxiety than those who had a low sense of humor. Herzog and Strevey (2008) also found that humor appreciate was a predictor for emotional well-being. However, the longitudinal study of Friedman et al. (1993) found that children with a high sense of humor were more likely to have unhealthy habits such as smoking or drinking alcohol when they grew up, and prematurely died as compared to those who had less sense of humor. These findings implied that those who had a high sense of humor might generally have less serious outlook on unhealthy and risky behaviors, and ultimately involved with those harmful behaviors. The contradictory results of previous research challenged the notion of humor. In the light of this fact, Martin et al. (2003) developed the structure for humor styles, which encompassed four different humor styles that were established on the combination of two facets "to oneself or to others" and "beneficial or detrimental" to measure individual humor styles based on the HSQ scale. Four different humor styles were introduced and could be roughly divided as positive and negative humor behaviors as follows: 1) **Affiliative humor** perceived as a positive humor style demonstrates concern and care about other people. People who use this style in the organization attempt to diminish the outlandish feeling and lessen the distance between mutual parties in order to bring a positive atmosphere. 2) **Self-enhancing humor** viewed as a positive humor style refers to the hilarious perception on oneself. People who use this style try to maintain their positive attitude when dealing with stress and anxiety. 3) **Self-defeating humor** is perceived as a negative humor style. People who use this style tend to make jokes about their inferiority or negative stories to impress the others. And, 4) **Aggressive humor** is viewed as a negative humor which can hurt others' feelings. People who use this humor style try to focus on their superiority over the others when they make fun. The speaker is satisfied when he/she sees others' suffering according to their jeer, sneer, and irony.

2.2. Innovative Work Behavior

Innovative work behavior can be described as the action of employees to initiate, develop, adopt, and implement new ideas in the organization for the benefits of increasing individual performance and organizational effectiveness and fulfilling the needs of customers (Li & Zheng, 2014). Innovative work behavior has been influenced by the four key factors including opportunity exploration, idea generation, championing, and application (Chatchawan et al., 2017). Hartman (2006) stated that motivation was a major force that encouraged employees to develop and apply innovative ideas and behaviors in the workplace.

2.3. Humor Styles and Innovative Work Behavior

Tang (2008) examined the relationships between use of humor by leaders, employee communication, group cohesiveness, and employee innovative behavior by collecting data from 239 employees who worked in R&D department in 31 Taiwan's manufacturing firms. Five-item of the use of humor scale developed by Avolio et al. in 1999 was used to measure the use of humor by leaders whereas nine-item of IWB scale developed by Janssen in 2000 was used to assess innovative work behavior of employees in R&D department in the different manufacturing firms. The reversed translation was conducted to ensure the meaning of these instruments. Construct validity and reliability were also tested to verify the quality of the instruments. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the research hypotheses. The results found that the use of humor by leaders had a significantly positive influence on employee's innovative work behavior. In addition, Ho et al., (2011) scrutinized the effect of humor on the innovative behavior of leaders and their leadership effectiveness. This study gathered data from Taiwan's corporate leaders. The humor style questionnaire developed by Martin et al. in 2003 and innovative behavior scale compiled by Scott and Bruce in 1994 were used as the instruments in this study. Internal consistency of these scales was reported with high Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Findings showed that self-enhancing humor style had a significantly positive effect on innovative behavior. On the other hand, this study reported a significantly negative influence of aggressive humor style on Taiwanese leaders' innovative behavior. Also, these two humor styles could influence leadership effectiveness through leaders' innovative behavior as well. Amjed and Tirmzi (2016) studied the relationship between employees' humor style and creativity with moderating role of transformational leadership behavior. Participants were collected from employees of software houses in Pakistan. Humor style questionnaire of Martin et al. in 2003, leadership style questionnaire developed by Bass and Avolio in 1992, and creativity questionnaire based on Janssen in 2001 were used for data collection. The reliability of these scales was reported with an acceptable alpha score. Humor style questionnaire was sufficiently reliable as each style of this scale had Cronbach's alpha of 0.6 on the average. Results of this study indicated that the use of humor had both positive and negative effects on employees' creativity. Affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor styles had significantly positive effect on creativity. In contrast, self-defeating humor style was reported the negative influence on employees' creativity. Yet, this study did not find the relationship between aggressive humor style and creativity. Cayirdag and Acar (2010) found the negative correlation between aggressive humor style and creativity of Turkish students with different age groups. This finding supported the results of Romero and Cruthirds (2006), which the negative relationship between aggressive humor style and organizational outcome was found.

Based on the literature reviews, this present study's hypotheses were proposed as follows:

H1: Affiliative humor style had a positive effect on employees' innovative work behavior.

H2: Self-enhancing humor style had a positive effect on employees' innovative work behavior.

H3: Self-defeating humor style had a negative effect on employees' innovative work behavior.

H4: Aggressive humor style had a negative effect on employees' innovative work behavior.

3. Methodology

This study was an exploratory study. A total of 183 employees who worked at the documentary analysis unit of a selected Thai commercial bank was chosen for data collection. Questionnaires were distributed to all employees of this unit in a hard copy form with the assistance of a graduate student in RMUTP's MBA program who presently worked as an employee in this unit. Within two weeks, 166 completed questionnaires were returned to a researcher, which showed a response rate of 90.7%. A modified version of Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ) originally developed by Martin et al. (2003) was used to measure humor styles of Thai commercial bank employees. Participants were asked to rate each item of this modified version of scale to the extent in which they agreed or disagreed based on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). While Innovative Work Behavior Scale (IWB) developed by DeJong and Den Hartog (2008) was modified to use for measuring innovative work behavior of participants. Respondents were inquired to rate their innovative work behavior to the extent in which they always performed or never performed the behavior in each statement based on a 5-point scale. To ensure the meaning of these instruments when translated into Thai version, the reversed translation method was done by a professional translator. In addition, the index-objective congruence (IOC) was used to assess the content validity of each item of these scales by three experts in management field. The results of evaluation showed that no item of these scales had score lower than 0.5, which was acceptable and being valid. Also, the internal consistency of these instruments was measured with Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficients of a modified version of HSQ and IWB were 0.804 and 0.860, respectively. According to Nunally (1978), the Cronbach's alpha of 0.8 or higher was highly acceptable. To test research hypotheses, multiple regression analysis was used.

4. Results

As of one hundred sixty-six Thai commercial bank employees who completed the questionnaires, there were 104 male employees (62.7%) and 62 female employees (37.3%). Almost a half of them aged between 20-30 years (45.8%). For their education, 92.2 percent of employees hold an undergraduate degree. According to their work experience, 73 employees (43%) reported that they had work experience with this bank less than 5 years whereas 51 employees (30.7%) had more than 15 years of work experience with this bank. Table 1 demonstrated that 'affiliative humor style' received the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 3.56$, S.D. = .750) among the four different humor styles. The second highest mean score was 'self-enhancing humor style' ($\bar{x} = 3.49$, S.D. = .722) following by 'self-defeating humor style' ($\bar{x} = 2.91$, S.D. = .690), and 'aggressive humor style' ($\bar{x} = 2.42$, S.D. = .750), respectively. For innovative work behavior, the mean score was in the moderate level ($\bar{x} = 3.47$, S.D. = .842).

Humor Styles	Mean	S.D.	Rank
Affiliative Humor Style	3.56	.750	1
Self-Enhancing Humor Style	3.49	.722	2
Aggressive Humor Style	2.42	.750	4
Self-Defeating Humor Style	2.91	.690	3
Innovative Work Behavior	3.47	.842	

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Humor Styles and Innovative Work Behavior

To test the suitability of using multiple linear regressions, the Durbin-Watson was tested to check autocorrelation in regression data, the value of 1.751 could be assumed that there was no linear auto-correlation (Groebner, Shannon, & Fry, 2014). Also, multicollinearity was checked to see the correlation between predictors. A result of VIF revealed no violation in conducting regression. Stepwise regression analysis was used to test if four humor styles significantly predicted Thai commercial bank employees' rating of innovative work behavior (See Table 2). The results indicated that self-enhancing humor style of Thai commercial bank employees explained 13% of variance ($R^2 = .131$, $F(2, 166) = 24.73$, $p < .01$). This suggested that there were other variables that could explain innovative work behavior of employees in Thai commercial bank that had not been included in this present study. The result found a low correlation between self-enhancing and innovative work behavior ($r = .362$, $p < .01$). In addition, the finding found that only self-enhancing humor style had a significantly positive effect on innovative work behavior ($\beta = .362$, $p < .01$). In sum, the more employees can express their self-enhancing humor style, the more likely they have innovative work behavior. Thus, research hypothesis #2 was confirmed. On the other hand, this present study found no significant differences between other humor styles and innovative work behavior. Therefore, research hypothesis #1, #3, and #4 were rejected.

	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig	Correlation
Model 1	B	Std. Error	Beta			
Constant	1.993	.302		6.592	.006	.362
Self-Enhancing	.422	.085	.362	4.972	.000	
n = 166						
F = 24.725 df = 2 p-value < .01 R ² = .131 Adjust R ² = .126						
Durbin-Watson = 1.751						

Table 2: Stepwise Regression Analysis of Four Humor Styles on Innovative Work Behavior

5. Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

This study aimed to examine the relationship between humor styles and innovative work behavior of Thai commercial bank employees. The findings indicated that Thai employees preferred to use affiliative humor style more than other humor styles. This implied that they were concerned and cared others' feelings when they made a joke or told the funny stories to develop social interaction and minimize mutual distance. On the other hand, Thai commercial bank employees were less likely to use aggressive humor style as they felt this style was inappropriate style to make fun on others' sufferings. This is because Thai people have been socialized and taught to be aware of sensitivity of others when making a relationship or working together. In addition, most of this group of employees was the typical employee who did not serve as a management role; therefore, they needed to be careful when they tried to tease those who were in the same level with the aggressive humor. To test research hypotheses, multiple regression analysis with stepwise method was conducted. Results found a significantly positive effect of self-enhancing humor style on innovative work behavior, which supported the research hypothesis #2. However, the results did not find the relationship between other humor styles and innovative work behavior. Therefore, research hypothesis #1, #3, #4 were rejected. The finding of this present study was consistent with Kuiper and McHale (2009) who found the positive influence of self-enhancing humor style on the organizational climate and atmosphere that increased employees' creativity and innovation. In addition, this present study's finding partially confirmed Ho et al., (2011) who found a significantly positive effect of self-enhancing humor style on innovative behavior, and partly confirmed Tang's work (2008) which indicated the positive correlation between the use of humor by leaders and employee's innovative work behavior due to the different scales used in these two studies. Also, this present study partially supported findings of Amjed and Tirmzi (2016) that demonstrated significantly positive influences of affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor styles on creativity, and a significantly negative effect of self-defeating humor style on employees' creativity. The appropriate reason to explain why self-enhancing played a critical role in enhancing innovative work behavior of Thai employees in a commercial bank was based on the findings of Martin et al. (2003) who found a negative relationship between self-enhancing and anxiety. This may be because Thai employees were able to cope with stress effectively, and felt more relaxing when they performed their jobs. As a consequence, the use of this humor style finally led to innovative work behavior. To answer the research objective, this present study found that self-enhancing humor of employees could increase innovative work behavior.

Like other studies, this present study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample size was undersized and not enough to generalize the findings; therefore, the further study needs to be expanded the sample size. Secondly, this present study collected data from employees who worked at a specific unit of a selected Thai commercial bank only, thus the future study should place more emphasis on the different units in the same commercial bank or the other commercial banks. Lastly, as this present study focused on the relationship between humor styles and innovative behavior, the other independent variables that may have an influence on employee's innovative behavior should be investigated in the further study. For the research implication, Thai commercial bank employees should be trained to better understand the concept of how to use humor in the purpose of enhancing organizational creativity and innovation.

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