

The Relationship between Leader Humor and Performance in Teams: A Literature Review

Joan M. Kouwenhoven (2080936)

Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Tilburg University

761990-B-12: Bachelor's Thesis HRS-People Management

Supervisor: Marie Steinkampf

Second assessor: Marinus Verhagen

June 1st, 2025

Abstract

This systematic literature review explores the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams, focusing on sixteen empirical studies published since 2015. All articles are retrieved from the Web of Science database. Performance in teams is examined across three dimensions: performance effectiveness, member attitudes, and behavioral outcomes. Drawing on the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, the review shows that affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles positively influence trust, psychological safety, and creativity within teams. These positive forms of humor help leaders build stronger relationships with their employees, promote openness, and foster a more supportive team climate. In contrast, aggressive or self-defeating humor can damage trust, reduce psychological safety, and discourage collaboration, especially when used in low-quality leader-member relationships. The findings emphasize that humor in leadership is not universally beneficial; its impact depends on context, delivery style, and how it is perceived by team members. While humor can enhance performance in teams, it must be used intentionally and appropriately. This review contributes to leadership theory by positioning humor as a relational leadership behavior and highlights the practical value of training leaders to use humor effectively.

Keywords: Leader humor, performance, LMX theory, creativity, performance effectiveness, member attitudes, behavioral outcomes

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In today's dynamic work environment, due to rapidly growing technological changes and globalisation, organizations are facing more and more competition in their industry (Kamkankaew et al., 2022). This has led to increased pressure to achieve organizational success, thereby making performance in teams a critical factor (Erialdy, 2024). Research shows that both individual and team performance are essential indicators of organizational outcomes (Stashevsky & Koslowsky, 2006). Enhancing performance in teams is not solely beneficial for organizations, but also aligns with employees' intrinsic motivation to improve their performance and develop their skills (Terracciano, 2017). However, as Hirokawa et al. (2000) emphasize, strong individual competencies or expertise alone are not sufficient for high performing teams. The quality of interpersonal relationships among members in a team plays an equally important role (Hirokawa et al., 2000). Humor can serve as a means to develop and strengthen these relationships (Graham., 1995). Humor can foster a sense of connection, reduce stressors, and stimulates an open and collaborative environment in teams (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). Its influence has even more of an impact when used by leaders, who help shape team dynamics and set the tone for communication and organizational environment (Kan, 2024). Leader humor is often used as an effective management tool to signal approachability, break down hierarchical barriers, and strengthen their relational ties with their employees (Cooper et al., 2018).

Defining Leader Humor and Performance in Teams

As written by Simpson and Weiner (1989, p. 486, as cited in Martin, 2007), the Oxford English Dictionary defines humor as a characteristic in behavior, speech, or writing that provokes amusement or laughter, often through elements of playfulness, witty, irony or fun. This definition further highlights two underlying components of humor: the perception of humor (the ability to recognize a joke) and the expression of humor (the ability to make a

joke). Martin (2007) elaborates that the expressive aspect of humor, which is observable through behaviors such as laughter and smiling, plays a critical role in social interactions. Essentially, humor is a social phenomenon that can emerge in any setting. It involves the creative processing of environmental cues or remembered information to produce an amusing comment, which in turn evokes a positive emotional reaction rooted in our brain's biochemistry (Martin, 2007).

What differentiates leader humor from general humor is its use in serving specific functions. According to Cooper et al. (2018), leader humor can be defined as the intentional use of humorous communication by a leader for the purpose of amusing their employees. This can involve a range of different behaviors, such as spontaneous humorous comments, light teasing or telling funny anecdotes (Cooper et al., 2018). Leader humor has increasingly been recognized as a meaningful behavioral strategy through which leaders can influence dynamics and performance within teams (Kong et al., 2019; Wijewardena et al., 2024). Rather than being a superficial or solely entertainment-based trait, humor can foster a more open, trusting and psychologically safe climate (Potipiroon & Ford, 2021). Humor is a perception-based phenomenon; what one individual finds amusing may be perceived as inappropriate or confusing by another (Yan, 2025). Therefore, leader humor is most effective when tailored to the preferences and sensitivities of the team.

Martin et al. (2003) introduced a framework consisting of four humor styles based on two underlying dimensions: the target (whether it is directed at oneself vs. others) and the intent (kind-hearted vs. potentially harmful). These styles include: self-enhancing, affiliative, aggressive, and self-defeating humor. Self-enhancing humor refers to good-hearted and self-directed expressions. Similarly affiliative humor is well-intentioned, but directed towards others. Aggressive humor is directed towards others, but without the consideration of its effects, thus potentially harmful. Lastly, self-defeating humor is directed towards oneself, at

the expense of emotionally hurting oneself. It is important to recognize that these humor styles are not mutually exclusive and can be used independently of one another (Martin et al. 2003).

Performance refers to the effectiveness and contribution a team makes to an organization, focusing on the collective efforts to achieve its mission and strategic goals (Lin et al., 2022). Mathieu et al. (2008) use the input-process-output framework to explain that performance goes beyond output and productivity. This framework incorporates both tangible outcomes, such as the quality and quantity of results, and intangible outcomes, such as team members' satisfaction and commitment (Mathieu, et al., 2008). In this literature review, performance is conceptualized into three dimensions: performance effectiveness, member attitudes, and behavioral outcomes (Beyer et al., 2024).

Performance effectiveness refers to the quality and quantity of produced outputs, reflecting task-specific and short-term achievements such as creativity, productivity, innovation, and service quality (Bayer et al., 2024). It reflects how well a team meets its goals and is often the most visible indicator of team success. Leader humor contributes to this dimension by fostering cognitive flexibility reducing stress, and creating an environment where members feel comfortable sharing new ideas (Bellemare-Pepin & Jerbi, 2024; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008).

Member attitudes capture the emotional and psychological states of team members, including job satisfaction, trust, engagement, and organizational commitment (Bayer et al., 2024). Leaders who use humor effectively foster a supportive environment, thereby enhancing these affective dimensions (Gkorezis & Petridou, 2011). Through humor, leaders signal that it is acceptable to be oneself, be playful, and contribute openly (Yam et al., 2017). These are factors that drive positive member attitudes.

Behavioral outcomes encompass measures that reflect longer-term indicators of team functioning (Bayer et al., 2024), such as organizational citizenship behavior or knowledge sharing. These behaviors can arise when members feel supported and psychologically safe (Siemsen et al., 2008). LMX theory suggests that when humor is used to strengthen the leader-member relationship, employees become more inclined to engage in behaviors that exceed their formal job requirements (Yunita & Anita, 2022), contributing to long-term team success.

Together, these dimensions demonstrate that performance within teams is a multifaceted construct influenced by both immediate results and enduring relational factors.

Contextual Factors influencing the Relationship

As previously discussed, humor can be categorized into four different styles. The specific type of humor applied depends on both individual differences and the contextual environment in which it is expressed (Martin et al., 2003). Self-enhancing humor is most commonly used in situations involving stress or discomfort, where it functions as a coping mechanism that allows individuals to regulate negative emotions by reshaping challenges or stressors in a humorous light (Ford et al., 2017; Kuiper et al., 1993). Whereas self-enhancing humor is primarily used as a way to manage stress or maintain a positive mindset, affiliative humor is more relational dependent and serves as a tool to reduce tension and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Martin et al., 2003). For instance, when a leader tells an amusing comment and both the leader and employees laugh together, this use of affiliative humor illustrates its role in fostering positive interpersonal relationships. Self-enhancing and affiliative humor have both been linked to beneficial outcomes, including improved self-esteem, stronger relational satisfaction and greater sense of happiness (Martin et al., 2003).

In contrast, according to Martin et al. (2003), aggressive and self-defeating humor are generally linked to adverse outcomes. Aggressive humor, which includes sarcasm or ridicule,

harms interpersonal relationships and can be used to express hostility, display authority, or deliver critical messages with “so-called” humor (Kim et al., 2015; Cann et al., 2015). While aggressive and self-defeating humor both can lead to negative consequences, self-defeating humor differs in that it is often used with the intention of strengthening interpersonal relationships (Kim et al., 2003). As Kim et al. (2003) explain, individuals use this type of humor by making themselves the target of jokes in effort to gain social approval and thus strengthen relationships, even if it comes at the expense of their own emotional well-being.

Given the central role that interpersonal relationships play in the effects of different humor styles, the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory is used as foundational framework to further elaborate on the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams. The LMX theory emphasizes the dyadic relationship between a leader and each of his employees as a primary determinant of work outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) describe high-quality leader-member exchanges as relationships built on mutual trust, shared respect and mutual support. In such relationships, leaders tend to provide more support, autonomy and resources, which in turn enhances employees’ motivation and leads them to respond with greater engagement, commitment and performance (Martin et al., 2015). Leader humor is a crucial leadership tool that can be used within this framework. When leaders use humor, specifically affiliative or self-enhancing styles, they often signal their approachability by reducing hierarchical distance and demonstrating openness and playfulness through their own behavior (Yam et al., 2017). This, in turn, strengthens the LMX relation, which facilitates positive team behaviors such as open communication, collaboration, and extra-role contributions, ultimately improving performance in teams (Cooper et al., 2018). Thus, leader humor is not just a tool for entertainment, but a relational tool that strengthens interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, the LMX theory helps explain why leader humor is not a one-size-fits-all tool, but its effectiveness in practice may depend on several factors, such as the relational context. When humor is used by a leader it can either have positive or negative effects on the team. High-quality LMX relationships ensure that humorous exchanges are interpreted more favourably, due to a higher personal bond and lower social distance (Cooper, 2008). Jokes made by a trusted leader are more likely to be seen as playful and friendly (Cooper et al., 2018), while the same behavior by a distant or distrusted leader may be interpreted as inappropriate or cause discomfort, resulting in a negative effect on the team. An example that highlights this difference is a leader's remark: "*I see you've exercised your jaw muscles more today than you've actually worked"*. When this remark is commented by a leader with whom the employee has a high, interpersonal relationship, it can be taken as a playful comment that keeps the atmosphere lighthearted and can even lead to a moment of laughter. In contrast, if the same comment comes from a leader with whom the employee has a shallow relationship or negative experiences, it can quickly be interpreted as sarcastic, patronizing or even accusatory. In such a case, discomfort or irritation is more likely to arise, which damages the relationship and can be damaging to trust and openness within the team, resulting in a psychological unsafe environment (Wang et al., 2024).

Lastly, humor can act as a buffer against workplace stress by reframing challenges and using humor as a coping mechanism (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). This resilience, emerging from strong LMX relationships, enables teams to perform well even under pressure.

Research Focus and Contribution

Although previous studies have explored the effects of leader humor on performance in teams, they often do so by examining only one specific outcome dimension in isolation, such as creativity, job satisfaction, or organizational citizenship behavior (Hu et al., 2023; Robert et al., 2015; Yang & Zhang, 2022). This fragmented approach provides limited insight

into the broader relationship between leader humor and overall team functioning. As performance is a multidimensional construct, consisting of performance effectiveness, member attitudes, and behavioral outcomes (Beyer et al., 2024), it is important to consider how leader humor influences these elements collectively. This literature review addresses this gap by synthesizing the existing research across these dimensions, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams.

The aim of this thesis is to clarify the definition of leader humor, investigate its direct and indirect impacts, and identify the contexts where it most effectively enhances team outcomes. Thus, the research question of this systematic literature review is:

What is known in the scientific literature about the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams?

This review offers both theoretical and practical contributions by synthesizing how leader humor affects the three key dimensions of performance: effectiveness, attitudes, and behavior. Theoretically, this review aims to contribute to leadership theory by framing leader humor as a relational leadership behavior, rather than as a fixed personality trait. By examining how different humor styles interact with contextual and interpersonal factors, this review seeks to expand the theoretical understanding of leader humor as dynamic and context-dependent leadership tool. Additionally, by raising awareness of the risks associated with aggressive or self-defeating humor, the review promotes a more thoughtful and inclusive use of humor in team settings. Practically, this review intents to inform leadership development and organizational training programs by highlighting the potential of humor as strategic leadership skill. By considering the insights generated from this review, such programs can be more effectively designed to support leaders in applying humor in ways that foster positive team dynamics and enhance performance.

Methods

To gather existing insights on the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams, an extensive literature search was carried out. This section outlines the methodological approach used to identify and evaluate relevant studies, covering elements such as the study design, search strategy, selection criteria and process and analytical approach.

Study Design

A systematic review was chosen as the research method to consolidate and evaluate existing empirical studies on the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams. A systematic review involves formulating a precise research question and employing systematic, explicit methods to collect, critically assess, and analyze relevant studies (Chapman, 2021). By thoroughly analysing and synthesizing the existing literature, this approach offers scientists an opportunity to make a significant contribution to the field of social sciences (Chapman, 2021). Moreover, according to Snyder (2019), this type of research is a well-established method for evaluating existing knowledge, identifying research gaps, and informing future investigations on a particular topic.

Search Strategy

To identify relevant articles for this review, a structured and systematic search strategy was applied. The search targeted studies that examine the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams. A variety of terms were used to capture the construct leader humor, ensuring the inclusion of both leader- and manager-related studies, as well as accounting for spelling variations (e.g., humor vs. humour). Similarly, multiple terms were applied to search for performance in teams, reflecting its multidimensional nature. For example, terms such as performance, productivity, and creativity are related to performance effectiveness, whereas terms like satisfaction, commitment or psychological safety refer to member attitudes and behavioral outcomes. All keywords (Table 1) were combined in one single search to account

for variations in terminology. The keywords were combined using the boolean operator "AND" to link the variables leader humor and performance in teams, while "OR" was used to include the various related terms for each variable in the search simultaneously. This means that studies were included only if they contained at least one keyword related to leader humor and one keyword related to performance in teams. This approach ensured that the results were specifically focused on the intersection of both constructs, rather than addressing them in isolation. Additionally, the asterisk symbol (*) is used to increase the comprehensiveness of the search and to account for spelling variations across studies.

Tabel 1

Search Phrases

Leader Humor	Leader* Hum*r, Hum*rous Leadership, Manage* Hum*r, Humurous Management
Performance in Teams	Performance, Effectiveness, Engagement, Productivity, Task Efficiency, Job Outcom*, Team Outcom*, Creativity, Satisfaction, Job Commitment, Employee Commitment, Employee Turnover, Trust, Psychological Safety

Selection Criteria and Process

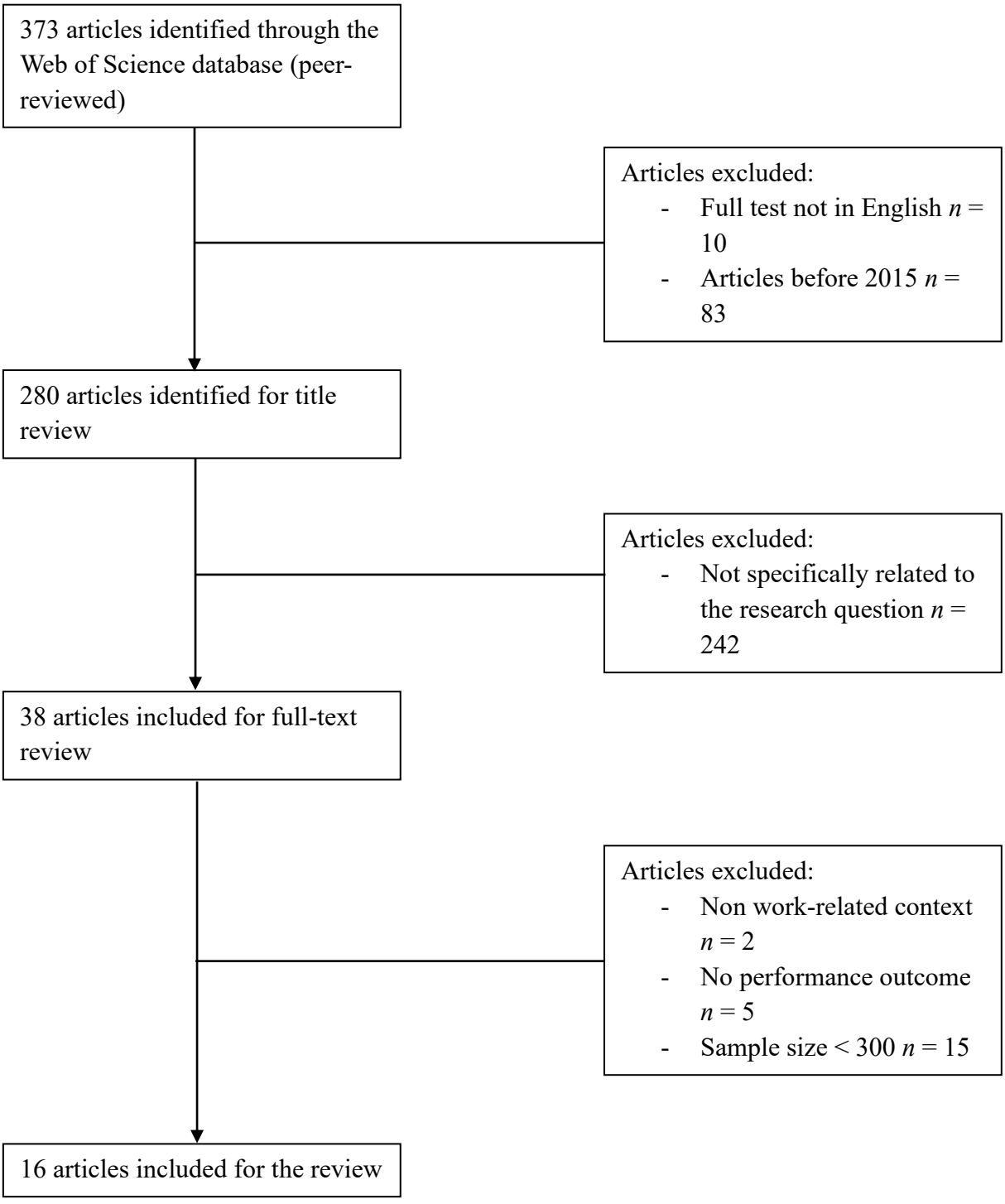
To ensure the relevance and quality of the articles included in this review, several inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. First, only peer-reviewed articles were selected to guarantee academic reliability, which initially resulted in 373 articles. Next filters were applied for language and publication date: 10 articles were excluded because they were not written in English, and 83 articles were excluded because they were published before 2015. These criteria were used to ensure relevance to current research developments. This narrowed the pool down to 280 articles for title and abstract screening. After reviewing the titles and

abstracts, 242 articles were excluded because they did not directly address the research question. This exclusion was based on whether the articles included the relevant keywords; for example, studies that focused on group humor rather than leader humor were not considered relevant. This left 38 articles for a full-text review. During the full-text screening, three additional criteria were applied. First, only studies conducted in work-related settings were considered; studies in educational contexts, such as student-teacher interactions, were excluded (*n*=2). Second, articles were excluded if they did not include a concrete performance-related outcome (*n*=5). Lastly, a minimum sample size of 300 participants was required. Studies with a smaller sample size were excluded (*n*=15). This threshold was chosen to ensure sufficient statistical power and enhance the generalizability of findings across organizational settings.

After applying all criteria, a total of 16 articles remained and were included in the final literature review.

Figure 1

Flowchart representing the Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria Process



Analysis

A thematic approach was applied to analyze the relationship between different types of leader humor and performance in teams. Articles were categorized based on whether they examined positive humor (e.g. affiliative, self-enhancing) or negative humor (e.g. aggressive, self-defeating). This categorization was chosen to distinguish how different humor styles may lead to varying outcomes, based on the ground that the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003) differentiates between positive and negative humor styles. These styles are theorized to influence emotional and social mechanism in distinct ways (Samson & Gross, 2011). In addition, articles were distinguished by the dimension of performance targeted: performance effectiveness, member attitudes, or behavioral outcomes. This distinction was made to reflect the multidimensional nature of performance (Beyer et al., 2024). By separating these dimensions, the analysis accounts for the fact that humor may influence not only what teams achieve, but also how team members feel and behave. This framework allows for a structured comparison of not only whether humor has an effect, but also how and on what aspect of performance the effect occurs. By using these categories, the analysis aims to identify consistent patterns and differences across the existing body of literature.

Results

The existing literature offers important insights into the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams. In the following section, sixteen scholarly articles are critically analysed. To answer the research question, the definitions of leader humor and performance in teams from the selected studies are first compared. Then the effects of humor on performance in teams are examined, with particular attention to the distinction between different types of humor and the different types of dimensions of performance.

Leader humor

In reviewing the scientific literature on leader humor and its relationship with performance in teams, one fundamental aspects stands out as to interpreting the findings: the definition of "leader humor" itself. Although many studies converge around a core understanding of the concept, closer comparison reveals subtle but meaningful differences that have important implications for the broader conclusions that can be drawn from this field.

Leader humor is consistently described in all studies as a form of amusement. This form of amusement is mainly used to improve the relationship with their employees, thus influencing the broader team climate (Yang & Wen., 2021). Interestingly, many studies use the definition for leader humor from Cooper et al., 2018 (Büyükyılmaz., 2022; Tan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021; Zhang & Su., 2020; Peng et al., 2020), making it a key conceptual anchor within the literature. According to Cooper et al., (2018), leader humor refers to an intentional behavior displayed by a leader toward their employees, with the aim of entertaining or amusing them. This frame highlights several important characteristics: leader humor is intended to amuse, is used deliberately, and is perception-based, thus relying heavily on the employees' interpretation rather than solely on the leader's intent.

Other scholars, such as Yang et al. (2021), build upon this definition but shift the focus slightly towards the functional outcomes of humor. Yang et al. (2021) define leader humor not only as behavior intended to amuse but also as a mechanism for energizing employees through enhanced relational energy. This view ties humor directly to psychological resource theories, framing it not merely as a social lubricant but as a proactive behavior that facilitates the development and activation of psychological resources. Similarly, Tan et al. (2020) use the definition of Cooper et al., (2018), and builds on this by explicitly emphasizing the dyadic relationship between leader and employee. He states that a leader's use of humor will ensure a

high-quality relationship with his employees. Moreover the influence on the quality of the relationship will be dependent on employees' individual characteristics (Tan et al., 2020).

However, some studies diverge more significantly from this behavior-focused view. Notably, Zheng et al. (2022) conceptualize leader humor as a "leadership trait", suggesting that humor is an embedded and stable characteristic of certain leaders, rather than a flexible behavior that can be adopted or set aside. This trait-based view stands in contrast to the more commonly accepted behavioral perspective, which sees humor as a deliberate tool that leaders can strategically apply or withhold based on situational demands. The distinction between humor as a trait and as a behavior is also explored in several other studies (Yang et al., 2024; Li et al., 2019), highlighting an ongoing debate within the field.

An especially distinct approach is taken by Wang et al. (2024), who specifically investigate negative forms of leader humor, such as aggressive humor. Their study does not look at the positive aspects of leader humor, but sees humor as a tactic to bring down, insult and humiliate employees (Wang et al., 2024). This finding stands in great contrast to affiliative or self-reinforcing humor described in other studies (Ali et al., 2021; Büyükyılmaz (2022; Yang & Wen, 2021; Li et al.,2019). It suggests that the effects of leader humor cannot be fully understood without distinguishing between different styles of humor.

Thus, while the majority of studies converge around a behavioral grounded, positive, intentional model of leader humor, notable differences in definitions exist that are of significant importance for theoretical and practical implications. Definitional differences determine, for instance, whether humor is viewed as a skill that leaders can learn and strategically apply or as a relatively stable characteristic trait. These differences also determine whether humor is seen as naturally beneficial or potentially harmful, depending on how it is used and perceived.

Performance in Teams

Among the reviewed studies, only Yang and Wen (2021), Mao et al. (2017), and Tan et al. (2020) explicitly investigate the full construct of performance in their research. Yang and Wen (2021) and Mao et al. (2017) focus on overall performance at the team level, while Tan et al. (2020) investigates performance at the individual employee level. Furthermore, both Mao et al. (2017) and Tan et al. (2020) assess performance using items that focus on how well employees meet specific responsibilities and achieve assigned goals, thereby adopting a task- and outcome-oriented view. Whereas, Yang and Wen (2021) maintain a more general approach by measuring overall performance in teams using broader evaluative items, such as "rate the overall level of performance". Despite their different approaches, all three studies consistently confirm a positive relationship between leader humor and performance in teams.

The remaining studies focus on specific constructs that fall within one of the three performance dimensions (performance effectiveness, member attitudes, and behavioral outcomes).

Performance Effectiveness

Performance effectiveness, particularly creativity and innovation-related behaviors, dominate the empirical focus. Especially, creativity has emerged as the dominant performance indicator across the reviewed studies, with more than half explicitly examining its relationship to leader humor (Ali et al., 2021; Büyükyılmaz, 2022; Cao et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2024; Hu & Luo, 2020; Huang, 2022; Li et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021; Zhang & Su, 2020; Zheng et al., 2022). The majority of findings suggest that leader humor, particularly affiliative and self-enhancing forms, significantly enhances employee creativity by fostering environments that encourage risk-taking, open idea sharing, and cognitive flexibility (Yang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019; Hu & Luo, 2020; Zhang & Su, 2020).

Although a general consensus emerges across the studies regarding the positive effects of leader humor on creativity, differences remain in the mechanisms through which these effects occur and the levels of analysis at which they are examined. Creativity, often is measured as an indicator of how well individuals or teams perform in generating new ideas or solving problems (Büyükyılmaz, 2022; Huang, 2022). While some studies focus on individual creativity (e.g. Huang, 2022; Hu & Luo, 2020), studies like Yang et al. (2024) and Zhang et al. (2023) assess team-level creative output, taking into account the broader social dynamics that humor may influence. Across these findings, it becomes clear that while leader humor consistently fosters creativity, the pathways and boundary conditions can vary, pointing to the importance of mediators like relational energy (Yang et al., 2021), psychological empowerment (Zheng et al., 2022), and psychological safety (Li et al., 2019), and moderators such as leadership style (Hu & Luo, 2020).

Despite these variations, the general trend strongly supports leader humor as a potent driver of creativity, solidifying its central role in discussions of performance in teams. The focus on creativity is perhaps unsurprising, given the conceptual alignment between humor and creative cognition. Both processes involve cognitive flexibility, divergent thinking, and the playful recombination of ideas (Hu, 2023; Bellemare-Pepin & Jerbi, 2024), making creativity a natural behavioral manifestation of the psychological states fostered by leader humor.

While creativity captures the idea generation process, innovation behavior reflects the actual implementation of those ideas, making it a more action-oriented measure of performance effectiveness. Studies by Zhang and Su (2020) and Zheng et al. (2022) address this distinction by exploring how leader humor influences innovative behavior. Although Zhang and Su (2020) focus on formal innovation and Zheng et al. (2022) examine informal,

bootleg innovation, both studies demonstrate that leader humor positively influences employees' innovative behavior.

Member Attitudes

Several studies explore how leader humor is linked to member attitudes. Interestingly, most of these studies use attitudinal constructs as mediators rather than outcomes in themselves (Ali et al., 2021; Hu & Luo, 2020; Wang et al., 2024; Zhang & Su, 2020; Zheng et al., 2022). For example, Ali et al. (2021) and Zheng et al. (2022) examine psychological empowerment as a mechanism through which leader humor enhances creativity and innovation. Similarly, Hu and Luo (2020) investigate affective commitment, showing that humor strengthens employees' emotional attachment to the organization, which in turn fosters creative behavior.

Behavioral Outcomes

Only one of the reviewed studies directly addresses behavioral outcomes, understood as long-term indicators of team sustainability. Wang et al. (2024) examine organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), which refers to voluntary, extra-role behavior that supports the functioning of the organization. Their findings reveal that aggressive leader humor negatively affects both cognitive and affective trust, which in turn reduces employees' willingness to engage in OCB. This study highlights how negative humor styles can have damaging long-term consequences for a team. Although behavioral outcomes are understudied in this literature, Wang et al. (2024) show that humor from leaders, especially in the aggressive form, can undermine not only immediate performance, but also the sustainable collaborative behaviors on which organizations depend.

In sum, despite differences in focus and measurement, a unifying pattern emerges: leader humor generally displays a positive influence on performance in teams. This becomes

particular clear in the dimension of performance effectiveness, which has received the most empirical attention, especially through the link between leader humor and enhanced creativity.

Underlying Mechanism affecting the Relationship

An emerging pattern from the literature concerns the mechanisms through which leader humor is linked to performance in teams. A recurring theme is the mediating role of psychological states and processes (Yang & Wen, 2021; Yang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2022). Yang et al. (2021) identify relational energy as a key mediator, suggesting that humor boosts the vitality and improves employees' enthusiasm, enabling greater creative engagement. Li et al. (2019) emphasize the role of psychological safety, suggesting that leader humor fosters psychological capital by boosting employees' self-confidence, encouraging open communication, and helping them cope more effectively with workplace challenges. Zheng et al. (2022) introduce psychological empowerment as a mechanism, where humor strengthens employees' sense of autonomy and self-efficiency. Lastly, Yang and Wen (2021) focus on team performance by showing that leader humor reduces loneliness climate within teams, which in turn enhances performance in teams. Their study highlights the social-emotional climate as a key pathway.

Almost universally, studies argue that leader humor does not influence performance in teams directly. Rather, it operates by shaping the interpersonal climate and individual psychological resources that ultimately support improved outcomes. Humor, in this view, functions as a driving force for building trust, energizing team members, promoting openness, and encouraging creative risk-taking.

Positive use of Humor

Positive humor, particularly affiliative and self-enhancing humor, has received substantial attention in the literature due to its generally positive associations with team dynamics and performance outcomes (Ali et al., 2021; Büyükyılmaz 2022; Yang & Wen, 2021; Li et al.,

2019). Across the reviewed studies, positive humor is consistently associated with increased creativity (Ali et al., 2021; Büyükyılmaz, 2022; Cao et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2024; Hu en Luo., 2020; Huang., 2022; Li et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021), improved psychological safety (Li et al., 2019), higher levels of employee engagement (Peng et al., 2020), innovation behavior (Zhang & Su., 2020; Zheng et al., 2022) and performance (Yang & Wen., 2021; Mao et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2020).

Büyükyılmaz (2022) differentiates between affiliative and self-enhancing humor in his examination of leadership styles. His results indicate that affiliative humor ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$) has a significantly stronger impact on organizational creativity than self-enhancing humor ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that relationship-oriented humor may be more effective in fostering a creative climate in teams than humor primarily aimed at individual coping.

Although most effects are positive, Hu and Luo (2020), suggest that the effectiveness of positive humor may depend on leadership style and/or personal factors. Specifically, the role of employees' perspective taking as key personal factor is highlighted. According to Hu and Luo (2020), employees who possess strong perspective-taking skills are better equipped to comprehend the intended meaning of leader humor, while those with lower perspective-taking skills may misunderstand it or miss out on its motivational value. In addition, its effectiveness of positive humor can depend on boundary conditions. Yan et al. (2022) emphasized that even when humor is intended to be playful, if it crosses personal boundaries or cultural norms, it can be perceived in a negative way. Some employees may perceive such behavior as inappropriate or unprofessional, potentially reducing its positive impact on leader-employee relationships.

Negative use of Humor

It is notable that most studies focus primarily on positive humor, while relatively few include negative forms of humor in their research. Negative humor, specifically aggressive or self-defeating styles, have distinctly different effects from positive humor.

Wang et al. (2024) showed that aggressive leader humor, involving behaviors such as teasing, belittling, and mocking employees, significantly undermined both cognitive and emotional confidence among employees. As a result, employees were less likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), highlighting the detrimental impact such humor can have on team dynamics. Moreover, Wang et al. (2024) found that aggressive humor not only is harmful to their direct target, but also negatively impacts observers, thus creating a unsafe environment in teams, where trust and collaboration decline. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2023) reported that exposure to negative humor decreased psychological safety within teams.

While some studies, such as Zheng et al. (2022), suggest that leaders may sometimes use humor, even in a more aggressive tone, as a way to cope with stress, most research agrees that negative forms of humor generally lead to harmful outcomes (Wang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023; Büyükyılmaz, 2022). For instance, Wang et al. (2024) and Zhang et al. (2023) show that aggressive or sarcastic humor can reduce trust, lower psychological safety, and discourage employees from speaking up or collaborating, which ultimately harms performance in teams. Moreover, Büyükyılmaz (2022) found that aggressive humor had a significantly negative effect on organizational creativity, however, contrary to expectations, no significant relationship was observed between leader self-defeating humor and organizational creativity.

Table 3

Study Results

Author & Year of Publication	Sector / Population	Design + Sample Size	Main Findings	Type of Humor	Dimension of Performance
Li et al. (2019)	IT companies in China	Quantitative, cross-sectional design *N* = 355 dyads	Humorous leadership positively influences employee creativity, with this effect being partially explained by employee psychological capital (EPC), which includes self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism. The link between EPC and creativity is further reinforced by higher levels of work autonomy, supporting a moderated mediation model. However the supervisor-subordinate dyadic tenure was not found to significantly moderate the relationship.	Affiliative humor; Self-enhancing humor	Performance effectiveness
Hu & Luo (2020)	High-tech sector in China	Quantitative, two-wave survey design *N* = 358 dyads	Leader humor is positively Associated with employee creativity, both through a direct and indirect effect: - Affective commitment - Task resources Perspective taking enhances the strength of both mediating paths, with a particular strong	General	Performance effectiveness; Member attitudes

			effect on the task resource mechanism.		
Büyükyılmaz (2022)	Various sectors in Turkey (banking, public administration, health, manufacturing, education, and services)	Quantitative, cross-sectional survey *N* = 335 employees	Affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles showed positive associations with organizational creativity, whereas aggressive humor was negatively related to creativity. No significant relationship was found between self-defeating humor and creativity. Organizational tenure had a moderating factor: - The positive effect of affiliative humor was stronger for short-tenured employees. - The negative effect of aggressive humor was stronger for long-tenured employees.	Affiliative humor; Self-enhancing humor; Self-defeating humor; Aggressive humor	Performance effectiveness
Huang (2022)	Tech firms and manufacturers in Taiwan	Longitudinal, three-wave, two-source survey design *N* = 320 dyads	Leader self-deprecating (SD) humor enhances employees' identification with their leader, which in turn promotes employee creativity. The effect of SD on creativity is entirely indirect, operating through leader identification as a full mediator. Additionally, team harmony	Affiliative humor	Performance effectiveness

			was found to weaken the relationship between SD humor and leader identification, whereas organizational pride strengthens the positive impact of leader identification on employee creativity.		
Yang et al. (2021)	Tech companies in China	Quantitative, three-wave survey design *N* = 302 dyads	Leader humor has a positive effect on employee creativity, with relational energy acting as a partial mediator. The strength of this effect is influenced by employee traditionality; when traditionality is low, the link between leader humor and relational energy (and thereby creativity) is stronger. In contrast, high levels of traditionality diminish the energizing and creative benefits of leader humor.	General	Performance effectiveness; Member attitudes
Cao et al. (2023)	Various organizations in China	Quantitative, three-wave survey *N* = 812 employees	Leader humor has a positive influence on both incremental and radical forms of creativity, with these effects being mediated by two distinct types of employee voice behavior: - Promotive voice → incremental creativity	General	Performance effectiveness

			- Prohibitive voice → radical creativity The impact of leader humor on prohibitive voice (but not promotive) is strengthened by employees' tendency for contradictory thinking. strengthens the effect of humor on prohibitive voice (but not promotive).		
Peng et al. (2020)	Service enterprises in China	Quantitative, cross-sectional survey *N* = 348 employees	Leader humor contributes positively to role modelling behaviors, which in turn enhances employees' service creativity. This indirect effect is moderated by employees' Sensitivity to Favorable Interpersonal Treatment (SFIT); when SFIT is high, the positive impact of leader humor on creativity through role modelling becomes stronger.	General	Performance effectiveness
Yang et al. (2024)	Two large companies in China	Quantitative, three-wave, multi-source survey design *N* = 890+ employees	Leader humor fosters team creativity by enhancing the team knowledge integration capability (TKIC). This relation is strengthened when humor is perceived as affiliative, but weakened in the presence of aggressive humor. Moreover, the positive	Affiliative humor; Aggressive humor	Performance effectiveness

			impact of leader humor on creativity is stronger in organic team structures (flexible, decentralized), while it becomes non-significant in mechanistic teams.		
Zhang & Su (2020)	Five high-tech companies in Eastern China	Quantitative, two-wave, two-source survey design *N* = 383 dyads	Leader humor shows a positive association with employees' innovative behavior, which is partially mediated by their level of work engagement. This mediating relationship is further influenced by supervisor organizational embodiment (SOE); specifically, the positive effect of leader humor on work engagement is stronger when employees perceive their supervisor as strongly representing the organization.	General	Performance effectiveness; Member attitudes
Zhang et al. (2023)	High-tech companies in Southwest China	Quantitative, two-wave, multi-source survey. *N* = 380 employees	Leader humor has a positive effect on team creativity via team psychological safety (mediated effect). This indirect relationship is strengthened when leaders demonstrate high behavioral integrity. However, when leader humor is perceived as inconsistent or unequally	General	Performance effectiveness

			distributed among team members (leader humor differentiation), the positive link between humor and psychological safety and the overall indirect effect on creativity is weakened.		
Ali et al. (2021)	Software sector in Pakistan	Quantitative, cross-sectional survey *N* = 630 employees	Leader humor is a double-edged sword: it promotes employee creativity via LMX and psychological empowerment, but also increases unethical behavior via perceived acceptability of norm violation and perceived power. Self-deprecating humor moderates these effects: it enhances the positive (creativity) and reduces the negative (unethical behavior) outcomes of leader humor.	Affiliative humor	Performance effectiveness; Member attitudes
Zheng et al. (2022)	IT and manufacturing technology companies in China	Quantitative, two-wave survey N = 324.	Leader humor is positively associated with bootleg innovation, with psychological empowerment (sense of meaning, autonomy, self-efficacy, and impact) acting as mediator. This indirect relationship is moderated by emotional trust in leadership; the effect	General	Performance effectiveness; Member attitudes

			becomes stronger when employees have higher levels of trust in their leader.		
Wang et al. (2024)	Entertainment and service companies in Northwest China	Quantitative, multi-source, multi-wave survey *N* = 506	When leaders use aggressive humor directed at coworkers, it negatively influences observers' organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), which is mediated by both cognitive and affective trust in the leader. The quality of the LMX relationship moderates the mediation effect: high-quality LMX buffers the negative effect on affective trust and OCB, but does not buffer the decline on cognitive trust. Observers with strong LMX relationships appear more tolerant of aggressive humor, whereas those with weaker LMX relationships experience more negative effects.	Aggressive humor	Member attitudes; Behavioral outcomes
Yang & Wen (2021)	Various organizations in China	Quantitative, multi-source, multi-wave field studies *N* = 302 employees	Leader humor is negatively associated with the workplace loneliness climate, which in turn contributes to improved team performance. This indirect effect is moderated by the level of team bureaucratic practices; the effect is stronger	Affiliative humor; Aggressive humor	Overall performance

			in teams characterized by low centralization and formalization. Moreover, affiliative humor strengthens the beneficial impact on reducing loneliness climate, whereas aggressive humor weakens it.		
Mao et al. (2017)	Manufacturing company in Northern China	Quantitative, two-wave survey design with multi-source data *N* = 815 employees	Leader humor is positively related to subordinates' perceptions of transformational leadership. These perceptions serve as a mediating mechanism linking leader humor to team performance. The strength of this indirect relationship increases under conditions of high quality relationship conflict, suggesting that humor becomes particularly effective in improving leadership perceptions and team outcomes when tensions between leader and employees are present.	General	Overall performance
Tan et al. (2020)	Real estate company in China	Quantitative, multi-wave, multi-source *N* = 391 dyads	Leader traditionality is negatively associated with the use of humor in leadership. In turn, leader humor positively contributes to employee job performance. Leader humor	General	Overall performance

	behavior mediates the relationship between traditionality and performance, with this mediating effect being stronger when the leader and subordinate are of different genders.	

Discussion

This study aimed to address an important gap in the existing literature regarding the overall effects of leader humor on performance in teams. Previous research often focused on isolated aspects, such as humor's influence on creativity or job satisfaction, without offering a comprehensive overview of its broader impact on multiple dimensions of functioning in teams (Robert et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2023). Moreover, inconsistencies existed regarding the differential effects of positive and negative humor styles (Yam et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2024). To address this, the research question guiding this systematic literature review was: '*What is known in the scientific literature about the relationship of leader humor and performance in teams?*'. A systematic approach was used to identify and analyze sixteen empirical studies from 2015 onwards, focusing specifically on leader humor and indictors of performance in teams.

Interpretation of Results

The findings demonstrate that leader humor, especially affiliative and self-enhancing styles, has a predominantly positive influence on performance in teams through mechanisms such as relational energy, trust, and psychological empowerment (Yang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2022). Leaders who use humor intentionally foster a more open and supportive climate in teams, which aligns with LMX-theory, emphasizing trust, respect, and mutual commitment (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Humor acts as a relational catalyst, reinforcing high-quality dyadic relations between leaders and team members (Ali et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2017), which in turn enhances team creativity, commitment, and engagement (Hu & Luo, 2020; Zhang & Su, 2020). Humor helps to lower hierarchical barriers and promotes a more relaxed and open communication environment (Cao et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021), encouraging members to voice their ideas, engage in problem-solving, and offer support to one another.

However, results also highlight the potential dark side of humor, particularly aggressive and self-defeating styles. Negative humor undermines cognitive and affective trust, reduces psychological safety, and diminishes organizational citizenship behaviors (Wang et al., 2024; Y. Zhang et al., 2023). This confirms earlier warnings by Yam et al. (2018) that humor is a 'mixed blessing' in leadership. Leader humor that involves sarcasm, ridicule, or other aggressive forms can undermine perceptions of leader competence and professionalism, leading employees to question the leader's credibility and reduce their trust in leadership (Wang et al., 2024).

While several studies have pointed to the potential dark side of humor, it is also important to recognize that its effects are shaped by contextual factors. The impact of humor partly depends on the context in which it is used. For instance, leader humor appears to enhance perceptions of transformational leadership among team members, which in turn contributes to improved performance in teams (Mao et al., 2017), whereas more traditional and hierarchical work environments may limit its benefits (Tan et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021). Thus, individual differences among team members can influence how leader humor is received and interpreted. These findings highlight the importance of considering boundary conditions when evaluating the role of humor in leadership.

Interestingly, Zheng et al. (2022) found that leader humor can also stimulate "bootleg innovation", where employees develop new ideas outside formal organizational structures. This suggests that humor not only supports formal creativity but may also encourage individuals to take independent initiative and explore unconventional approaches. While such behavior can be valuable in dynamic, innovation-driven environments, it also highlights a potential tension between employee empowerment and organizational control. Humor can increase feelings of autonomy by lowering perceived hierarchical boundaries. However, if not

managed thoughtfully, it may also encourage behaviors that deviate from formal goals or established processes.

Thus, leader humor should be used as a relational strategy that must be used thoughtfully, tailored to the team's cultural context, the leader's style and the demands of the situation. Leaders must be sensitive to the type, frequency and reception of their humor to ensure that it contributes to, rather than harms, performance in teams. These findings expand upon earlier theoretical assumptions in the introduction, confirming the relational role of humor (Martin et al., 2003; Kong et al., 2019) while adding nuance regarding its potential risks, boundary conditions, and the complex interplay between humor, team dynamics, and organizational outcomes. Overall, leader humor emerges as a powerful but delicate leadership tool that requires situational awareness, emotional intelligence, and adaptability to be used effectively.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the strengths of this study is its broad approach to the research area. Unlike previous studies that were limited to single performance outcomes, such as creativity or engagement, this study systematically considers three core dimensions in relation to leader humor: performance effectiveness, member attitudes and behavioral outcomes. In addition, the inclusion of both positive and negative humor styles provides a more balanced perspective that helps identify not only the potential benefits, but also the risks, of certain types of humor. Finally, the use of strict inclusion criteria ensures that the insights are based on recent, relevant and methodologically sound research. While these strengths provide a solid foundation for the study's contributions, it is also important to acknowledge several limitations that may influence the interpretation and generalizability of the findings.

First, a key limitation of this study lies in the selection of literature. Despite a systematic search, the included studies were predominantly conducted in non-western

organizational contexts. A leader's impact may be perceived differently depending on the surrounding cultural norms and values (Pasa, 2000). These cultural differences suggest that humor, particularly affiliative or self-enhancing styles, may not have the same relational impacts in Western, low power distance cultures, where humor is interpreted differently. Future research should therefore replicate similar studies across various cultural contexts, such as Europe, North America, and multicultural teams, to assess the extent to which these findings can be generalized. Conducting cross-cultural comparative research may provide valuable insights into whether leader humor consistently enhances performance in teams, or whether these effects differ depending on specific cultural dimensions.

Secondly, although the selected studies offer valuable insights, the majority of them rely heavily on self-reported data, particularly from subordinates rating their leaders' humor and associated team outcomes. This dependence on perceptual measures introduces the risk of common method bias and social desirability effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Team members may respond in ways that reflect personal biases or expectations, rather than objective evaluations of leader behavior or performance. As a result, the strength or direction of the observed relationships may be overstated. Future research should aim to incorporate multi-source data, such as peer evaluations, behavioral observations, or objective performance indicators, to enhance the robustness and validity of findings related to leader humor.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this review contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating that humor is not merely a personality trait or interpersonal skill, but a relational leadership behavior that can actively shape team processes and outcomes (Cooper et al., 2018; Kong et al., 2019). Specifically, it positions leader humor as a mechanism within the LMX framework that can foster psychological safety, relational energy, and team creativity. Furthermore, humor acts as an informal signal of leader approachability and supportiveness (Tan et al.,

2020), which may promote team members' willingness to engage in extra-role behaviors, such as creativity, innovation, and knowledge sharing. By integrating humor into the broader understanding of relational leadership dynamics, this review opens new avenues for theory development, suggesting that leader humor should be viewed as a dynamic and context-dependent relational strategy rather than a static personality trait. This is supported by the findings in this review, which show that the effects of humor vary depending on humor style, cultural context, and leadership style, indicating that humor is not fixed, but rather shaped by interpersonal and environmental factors (Hu & Luo, 2020; Yang et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2020).

Practically, the insights from this review offer valuable implications for leadership development and organizational training programs. Rather than using humor solely to entertain employees, leaders should be trained to apply affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles strategically, with the aim of fostering a positive climate in teams and enhance interpersonal relationships. In line with the LMX theory, leaders in practise observed that humor can strengthen the relationship with their employees, who in turn tend to demonstrate greater commitment and share ideas more openly, fostered by a psychological safe and open environment that humor helps to create (Appendix 1). Moreover, leaders have noted that the use and effectiveness of humor is highly dependent on the quality of their relationships with employees. For instance, gender is often taken into account when making jokes, as it can influence how certain comments are perceived (Appendix 1). Being aware of such dynamics allows leaders to adjust their humor to the sensitivities and preferences of their employees.

Emphasizing humor as a leadership skill, similar to emotional intelligence, would allow organizations to include humor training modules in leadership development programs. Such training would help leaders better understand when and how to use humor appropriately, considering team diversity, situational context, and cultural differences (Wijewardena et al.,

2024). Furthermore, organizations should foster a climate in which the use of humor is encouraged, while ensuring that it aligns with principles of respect and inclusivity. Given that humor can function as a double-edged sword, it is essential that leaders are made aware of the potential risks associated with aggressive or self-deprecating humor. Such forms of humor may undermine trust and psychological safety, ultimately harm performance in teams.

Interestingly, the interview findings from practice reveal a notable contrast with the academic literature. While most scholarly articles describe leader humor as a strategic tool that can be intentionally developed and applied, leaders in practice tend to perceive humor primarily as a personality trait rather than a skill that can be learned (Appendix 1). Despite this perception, they expressed openness and interest in receiving training on how to use humor effectively across different situational contexts, particularly in learning when humor can enhance leadership impact, and when its use might be inappropriate or counterproductive.

In addition, leaders indicated that receiving 360-degree feedback would be valuable, as it would provide insights into how their humor is perceived by others and help them better understand its impact on team dynamics and performance.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the relationship between leader humor and performance in teams. Leader humor generally has a positive effect on performance in teams, especially when affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles are used. However, when humor is applied inappropriately, particularly in the form of aggressive or self-defeating styles, it can harm trust and reduce performance in teams. While many studies examine this relationship directly, the findings suggest that humor displays its influence through interpersonal mechanisms such as team climate and psychological resources like energy, safety, and empowerment. These insights emphasize that leader humor is not universally beneficial, but when used intentionally and with awareness of context, it can

serve as a powerful relational tool for enhancing team functioning and minimizing potential risks, such as misinterpretation, exclusion of team members or reduced psychological safety within the group.

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Appendix 1

To bridge the gap between theory and practice, two interviews were conducted with professionals in the field. The anonymity of the participants has been carefully safeguarded to ensure their privacy and encourage openness.

Respondent 1

This interview was conducted with the Head of the Engineering Department at SPIE, hereafter referred to as respondent 1. He manages a team of approximately 25 employees and works closely with the HR department.

The interview began with a brief explanation of my research, in which it was outlined that positive forms of humor, such as affiliative and self-enhancing humor, are often linked in the literature to improved performance in teams, increased employee engagement, and enhanced creativity. While respondent 1 could theoretically relate to these findings, he noted that he does not directly observe these effects in practice. He shared that he regularly uses humor in his leadership, often in a sarcastic tone. Reflecting on his own style, he shared some doubts: '*Sometimes I make a joke while trying to get a point across, but then I wonder if the actual message gets lost because of the joke'*. For instance, he sometimes uses jokes to convey a message but feels that the core message may lose its impact because the humor distracts from its seriousness.

Nonetheless, he emphasized the importance of fostering a team climate in which humor is appreciated. In his view, a relaxed and informal atmosphere contributes to better working relationships and higher motivation. He observed that humor strengthens his relationships with employees, and in response, they tend to show greater commitment. He stated: '*You can simply notice that colleagues with whom you have a stronger relationship are more likely to take on extra tasks or engage in joint problem-solving'*. Notably, he stated that the frequency and type of humor he uses vary depending on the relationship he has with each

team member, he jokes more with those he feels closer to. He further emphasized that the impact of humor is highly context-dependent and influenced by the recipient's sense of humor and the situational dynamics. Therefore, jokes may easily be misinterpreted, which can pose a risk to team cohesion. He noted that he is aware of this and tries to consider individual differences in his communication.

When discussing possible HR interventions like a training about the possibility of developing humor as a leadership skill, respondent 1 expressed some scepticism. '*I see humor as something that's part of someone's personality*', he explained. '*But maybe you can learn when to use it and when not to'*. However, he acknowledged that it might be possible to learn when and how to use humor appropriately or when to avoid it. He indicated that he would be interested in participating in a workshop on leader humor, provided it offers practical guidance. In particular, he would like to see examples of situations where humor is effective or potentially risky.

Lastly, respondent 1 stated that he is curious about how his humor is actually perceived by his team. He stated: '*Sometimes I notice people laughing a bit too hard at my jokes, and then I start wondering, are they really laughing because it's funny, or because I'm their leader?*'. For this reason, he is would like to implement 360-degree feedback within his department, as he believes it would provide valuable insights into how his use of humor, is experienced by others.

Respondent 2

This interview was conducted with the director of a small non-profit foundation, hereafter referred to as respondent 2. He leads a team of 11 employees and is responsible for both strategic direction and day-to-day team management.

The conversation began with a brief introduction to the theoretical framework of my thesis, including the distinction between different humor styles and the reported benefits of

positive humor in the academic literature. When presented with findings linking affiliative and self-enhancing humor to improved performance in teams, creativity, and employee engagement, respondent 2 expressed a nuanced agreement. '*I can see how humor contributes indirectly*,' he stated. '*A good atmosphere makes people more open. They're not afraid to throw ideas on the table, even if they're still rough. That's how creativity starts*.' According to him, humor helps build a psychologically safe environment, which encourages participation and reduces fear of judgment.

Respondent 2 emphasized that his use of humor is highly dependent on the relationship he has with each team member. '*With someone I really connect with, you naturally make more jokes*,' he explained. '*But with someone where you feel the hierarchical distance more, it's harder to joke around. Humor needs to flow both ways.*' He added that mutual playfulness is essential for humor to be received positively, suggesting that humor is not only about what is said but also about how the relational dynamic allows it to land.

A key point he raised was the influence of gender dynamics on humor in the workplace. He explained that people need to be more cautious with humor nowadays. He goes on: '*Men often joke in a blunt way, and that's seen as 'men's humor,' but it doesn't always translate well to female colleagues—or vice versa*'. He noted that what is intended as lighthearted can easily be misunderstood, especially when colleagues differ in communication styles.

After I explained the four main humor styles from Martin et al. (2003), Respondent 2 identified most strongly with affiliative and self-enhancing humor. As an example of self-enhancing humor, he described situations where he jokes about his own mistakes to diffuse tension. He gives an example of a time when he was late to a meeting: '*On one occasion, I arrived late to a meeting and made a light-hearted comment, saying something along the lines of, I figured I'd give everyone a calm start before joining in'.* He elaborates that the comment

was intended to ease the tension in the room and create a more relaxed atmosphere. In relationships where he feels more trust and rapport, he occasionally uses sarcastic humor: '*When they know me well enough, they don't take it literally. They get the tone'*.

He expressed curiosity about the potential value of a leadership workshop on humor, noting that he would be interested in what such a program could teach him, particularly because he views humor as highly context-dependent. He acknowledged that what works well in one situation might not be effective in another. He was open to learning how humor could be used more intentionally, not just to entertain but to achieve communication goals. *'I think humor could help in delivering certain messages more smoothly*'.