

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH FOR INVESTIGATING THE ADOPTED STYLES OF HUMOR IN THE OMANI PUBLIC SECTOR

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Abstract

This paper investigates the adopted styles of humor within the Omani public work environment. The four styles of humor were determined and considered for implementation by managers within the Omani public sector. By utilizing the case study approach as the strategy for the research, the evidence collection device and the narrative perspectives, formed in a questionnaire and an interview, were used to gather data. The results indicated that the aggressive humor style is not favoured by Omani public managers and they instead fostered affiliative humor style for building and strengthening relationships. It was also found that jeopardizing dignity by using humor is not tolerated which denotes to the fact that Omani public managers do not favour self-defeating humor style. On the other hand, they praise positivity and good source of conduct within themselves and with others which refers to the self-enhancing humor style. Further details in terms of the instances for each style were provided.

Keywords: Humor, humor styles, aggressive humor, affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, self-defeating humor, Oman

1 INTRODUCTION

Humor at work is viewed as the modern tool that professional leaders and managers shall utilize in order to achieve such affirmative and ample results starting from drawing a smile on the face up to high performance rates. It was the normal understanding though that humor is a trivial act or behavior in work environments be it a private enterprise or a governmental agency where reasons for such exertion were provided by literature and corporate implementations. However, little attention was given for the suitable styles of humor in terms of their implementations that shall be utilized at work. Hence, this paper provides a preliminary investigation for the applications of the humor styles in a public work environment formed in the Omani public sector.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining Humor at Work

Generally, any activity of laughter, fun, or amusement used in the work environment is termed workplace humor [1]. Other scholars however, had argued that humor is a communicational medium between people [2] [3] [4] which entail that workplace humor should be explained in the context of the relationships among the organizational members.

These relationships can take any form such as weekend parties, birthday parties, sport days, camping and barbecue plans, and others [5] but humor is much deeper than just refreshing activities. In fact, it is tied to the sensitive relationships between peers and their bosses [6] where drives or reasons for such humor usage are evident [7] and more generally it produces positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, and organization [8]. As a trivial instance, an employee always praises his/her boss by telling silly jokes where the boss, in return, might make the employee his/her right hand and involve him/her in some of the decision making process [1] or might be lenient in giving away the employee few days off without reducing his/her leave account [9]. Hence, these examples and more are natural in any work setting that it was thought of humor and work as mutually exclusive activities. Hence, it is evident that workplace humor is associated with relationships among employees and their managers where it is controlled by specified determinants [7].

2.2 Managerial Humor

Despite the arguments in the previous subsection, the majority of researches had turned to studying humor usage among subordinates which led to a deemed understanding that the source of organizational humor is the employee [4] [10] where they exert humor among themselves due to many reasons [11] [12]. Many organizations had adopted this thought as an evidence of humor usage such as Kodak's "Employee Humor Room" and Ben and Jerry's "Joy Gang" [13] [14]. These organizations felt the difference in performance by observing the joking behavior among employee groups where it was hypothesized that it improves group cohesiveness [1] [15]. Thus, it was evident that the literature is focusing on humor among employees as depicted in Figure 1 where less attention has been paid to management and their role in fostering humor at work [10]. Managers are required to accept humor as a significant form of communication in order to understand why both they and employees engage in humor, and strive to understand also its contributions and dysfunctions relative to the organizational purpose and the general societal standards of work [16]. Researchers yet had emphasized on studying management and leadership styles as the sources for organizational humor since they are the key players in reducing the signs of the workplace humor pitfalls [1] [3] [6] [10] [15] [17] [18] [19] [20]. Therefore, it was admitted that it was a mistake focusing on subordinates rather than managers as humor generators [8] [10] [21].

2.3 Humor Styles

Many attempts were sought in order to explain humor usage in terms of the characterizing styles; however, it is cumbersome since each explanation was not truly providing what it was expected. For example and as previously stated by Barsoux (1993) that humor at work was explained in terms of its purposes [9] but those were not styles per se. Others as in the early words of Leap and Smeltzer (1984) had simply explained it by the topic [22] but yet, it is not evident to be a style of such an attitude [23]. Therefore, such attempts shall be tied to the attitude of humor not the reason or the effect and yet, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) had elaborated the state by the required attitudes as they proposed the following five styles of humor [8]:

- Aggressive Humor; which is built on the aim of manipulating others by implying threat or humor that entails using sarcastic and disparaging humor
- Mild Aggressive Humor; which is stated in the form of a playful description of disagreement or a notification towards an act or a work practice
- Affiliative Humor; which is built on the objective of amusing others and building relationships in order to have a positive environment

- Self-Enhancing Humor; which is built on the notion of positive thinking in order to cope with stress and maintain a humorous sense during difficulties
- Self-Defeating Humor; which is aimed at making the person more approachable by others and that is by using self-disparagement and status tolerance

It is significant to note that Romero and Cruthirds (2006) had built their arguments upon the work of Rod Martin and his colleagues (2003) as they had proposed only four of the previous styles where they had stated that there is only one aggressive style of humor [24] [25]. This justifies that there is no meaning in having a style named mild-aggressive humor since it is a degree of another original one that is named aggressive humor. Yet, it shall be concluded that the above humor styles are the ones well documented but it shall be evident to rely on the original four styles that were developed and researched by Martin and his colleagues [24].

2.4 Humor in the Public Sector

Most of the researches on workplace humor were directed towards the private sector organizations where it was thought that humor brings more flexibility in the organizational system and guarantees better performance rates [1] [15] leaving the public sector organizations with the impression of rigidity [26] and with no hope for change or development [27]. On the contrary, management scholars pointed that public organizations are having a unique status in exercising communications, behaviours, and attitudes [16] [28] [29] [30]. Thus, it was apparent to distinguish the public sector employee from the private sector employee when it comes to exerting humor at the work environment [18] [31] [32] [33].

Scholars had provided notes that conceptualized the notion of public sector being another place for humor usage than the classical private image where Glasser (1994) emphasized on the significance of the psychological benefits if it was wished the civil service employees to do quality work. Therefore, behavior is the proper key for having better civil service organizations [18] [34]. This thought contradicts with the statement that there is no chance for humor in a machine type of organization as in the government [35] where Steven Aufrecht (2001) stated that: "Humor exists in all public agencies, but mostly it is part of the unofficial realm of administration." [36,1]. Hence, in public administration systems, humor is hidden in some way or another due to many reasons such as work system and culture [26] [32], particularly when the interest is upon work pleasance and satisfaction [31].

2.5 The Omani Humorous Culture

One of the unique cultures is the Arab world where religion works as an influential force in regulating individuals, their behaviours, and their present and future outlook as it applies the same in the case of the Arabian countries [37] [38]. Behaviourists had emphasized on the matter that every nation goes back to its origins and yet should be treated in terms of its own cultural blend [39]. Hence, the stated themes by the international organizations oriented the image of the Arabian culture being humanistic in its dealings [40]. On the other hand, other scholars claim that Arab management theories and organizations are a result of the contemporary Arab environment [41]. The six Arab Gulf states in fact, that are: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Kingdom of Bahrain, represent a practical example of humanistic Arabia where hospitality and friendliness is the major feeling you get the moment you are on any ground of the six Gulf countries [39]. This is clearly viewed in any of the Gulf State managers where their job was characterized as making the employees feel good in their workplace [42]. Aside from that, Sultanate of Oman

has its own cultural themes embedding the above characteristics which placed it apart from the other five countries in many aspects [43].

As a matter of fact, there was no thorough research on the cultural aspects of Omanis except for few observations in other humanitarian fields that studied the Omani culture from one angle. By assimilating them, it can be said that the Omani culture praises human beings by building good relationships with others [44]. Omanis were known long ago for their good manners as Prophet Mohammed (blessings and peace be upon him) had narrated in one of his "*hadeeths*" that Omani people are not rude and they are friendly where the messenger of Allah (blessings and peace be upon him) said to one of his companions when an Arabian tribe had beaten him: ((If the people of Oman you had went to, they would not swear at you nor beat you)) [45:650]. This "*hadeeth*" is a testimony from the Messenger of Allah (blessings peace and be upon him) about the thematic characteristic of Omani people. All in all, and on a technical grounding, the Omani cultural aspects could be understood by the following characteristics:

- **Friendliness:** Omanis are known for being friendly with everybody. In fact, it ranked first as the image of Oman in a tourism research holding 43% of the total respondents [46]
- **Hospitality:** It is a consecrated feeling and duty of any Omani to invite a stranger to at least have a coffee with him/her implying an excellent source of conduct with others [47]
- **Cooperation:** Omanis are very cooperative in any mean even with people they do not know. They might show such cooperation with some sort of objective or subjective support [48] [49]

The mentioned aspects, though not sufficient enough, entails preliminary evidence that Omanis are very humanistic in nature and despite, there was no serious research on the cultural characteristics of the Omani society on humor, it was evident that Omanis had a humorous sense in their lives by observing their daily life activities [49]. They joke all time on anything and in any occasion, particularly in large-gathering ceremonies such as "*Eid*" [48]. Also, they joke with their families and peers in order to strengthen the bonds among them [50]. At their work placements, they are known for loving their jobs and creating their own fun-atmosphere by sharing funny moments and throwing silly jokes even with the presence of red-taping and increased bureaucratic practices [50] [51]. In short, Omani humor is conceptualized in the daily chats and poetries that embed silly jokes and anecdotes aimed at forcing others to laugh [47] [48].

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The case study strategy was adopted for conducting this study as it facilitates the adoption of different research techniques in the phenomenological research paradigm [52] [53]. The evidence-collection and the narrative approaches were chosen as the frameworks for gathering the data. The research is referred to being an exploratory research where the main objective of the study is to explore and describe the styles of humor that are adopted and used by Omani public managers within their work milieus. Hence the research question is: What styles of humor is exerted within the Omani public environment?

3.2 Data Collection

The sought data is quantitative even the research orientation is qualitative where a questionnaire was used to collect direct data upon the research question and a series of interviews were conducted to document the instances where humor styles were used within the Omani public work environment that is formed in the ministries that serve under the national civil service charter. The questionnaire contains fourteen (14) statements placed arbitrarily. The statements are questioning upon the usage of humor in the work environment as they were derived from the literature, namely the humor styles questionnaire [24] and the humor at work questionnaire [50].

The questionnaire statements cover the four styles that were proposed by Martin *et al.*, (2003) and neglecting the fifth style (mild-aggressive style) that was proposed by Romero and Cruthirds (2006) since it reflects a degree of one of the four original styles that is the aggressive humor style and there is no meaning for dividing the aggressiveness into levels since aggressiveness in a behaviour is always referred as being aggressive regardless of its degree. Hence, there are four (4) statements in the questionnaire that question on the usage of aggressive humor at the Omani public work environment, and six (6) statements on the usage of the affiliative humor style. The self-enhancing and the self-defeating styles are represented by two (2) statements for each. As for the interviews, there were nine "lead the interviewee" question types covering the major work hours that humor shall be experienced at, which will elaborate upon the different instances that utilize any of the humor styles.

3.3 Sampling

The sample was decided to constitute the managers who serve in the three supervisory levels (director general, director, section head) in the public entities that follow the Omani civil service charter. The information for such managers was provided from the grand statistics of the Ministry of civil service. The stratified statistical sampling technique was used for the questionnaire sample-components and a systematic sampling technique was used for the interview sample-components. Hence, the sample was 1470 managers for the questionnaire survey and 30 managers as components for the interviews.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The response rate on the questionnaires was 20.2% and 70% of the sampled interviews were attained. The reason for such a response on the questionnaire was due to many logistical circumstances and contingencies that the researchers were not able to control. However, the responses are researchable for deriving conclusions as it is qualitative in nature where table one (1) Illustrates the responses on each statement pertaining to each of the four humor styles. The Cronbach's alpha factor for the questionnaire was (0.749) which denotes to a higher reliability. The questionnaire responses and the interview inputs are combined in the following subsections to attempt to the topic in detail for each of the humor styles and eventually, answering the research question and for the purpose easing discussions, the term "Omani public managers" will be used to refer to the sampled components (director general, director, section head) and their responses.

Table 1: Humor Styles Preference by Omani Public Managers

Humor Style	Statement	Agreed (%)
Aggressive	8	18.2
	9	12.9
	11	30.7
	13	8.5
Affiliative	1	73.7
	2	50.6
	3	49.7
	4	97
	12	36.5
	14	19.3
Self-Enhancing	7	55.1
	10	84.8
Self-Defeating	5	73
	6	24.7

4.1 Aggressive Style

From Table 1, the statements 8, 9, 11, and 13 are addressing the aggressive humor style where 82% of the Omani public managers had disagreed upon their usage of ethnic humor with their subordinates as in statement 8. Just about 5% more than that was found in the responses on statement 9 where 87% of the Omani public managers had disagreed upon the acceptance of their subordinates towards using embarrassing humor at work which denotes to sexual topics. These results consort with the nature of human beings in not favoring abused humor (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). As a matter of fact, about 80% of the interviewees had disagreed on using racial and sexual humor stating that it represents a true disobedience towards the religious teachings for not degrading other human beings. However, about 45% of them (interviewees) agreed that racial and ethnic humor among Omanis is accepted and they reasoned that to the fact that the Omani culture still embodies the generations that faced the days of racism and discrimination as it is hard for modern civilization to wipe it easily [54]. One director had framed it by saying: "Racism is still present in the Omani man, it is in his blood". On the other hand, there is no enough evidence on the other gender's opinion on this matter since this research did not focus on the females that occupy the three supervisory positions; even with the provided input from the female interviewees as they also agreed that they share the same thought with men of using racial humor because they were raised by their families in embracing those thoughts. This was also concluded by Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) as they emphasized that females enjoy as males the aggressive and sexual humor exerted among them [55].

In the early days though, Leap and Smeltzer (1984) had narrated that while some perceived such humor being offensive, harassing, and inappropriate, others considered it a normal form of hazing and harmless activity at work [22]. They further argued that the exertion of such humor in the workplace does not violate the American laws and regulations for fair employment unless the work environment is polluted with such humor and the management are the main source of it. This could be the case in Oman as one of the interviewees had affirmed by saying: "Sexual and ethnic humor is accepted in the Omani work environment given that the person you are exposing your humor towards is known to you and you have

studied his personality before opening yourself to him". He further explains that by saying: "There are very rare lawsuits raised in the court of administrative cases regarding such subjects at the civil service sector because this is understood as a normal practice if it is not too much or the environment is spoiled by such humor; the more of anything makes it bad as the axiom says". By the same token, the only interviewed director general had mentioned that having racial humor at work is sometimes beneficial since it provides a channel for discussing such a subject among work groups and individuals who perceived it as a gray area. This opinion was supported by what was concluded by Foxworth (2008) as she found that using racial humor at work offered a great opportunity to discuss racial issues further which resulted in altering the employees' held belief about a certain race or group [56]. The only concern at this argument would be the opposing result on statement 8 and 9 since it does not support what the interviewed Omani public managers said and other writers had notated. This could be understood from what Duncan *et al* (1990) had explained where they said that managers will always respond negatively to a query on using racial or sexual humor at work but in reality they will limit the usage within their personal relationships among their employees and sometimes intensively [1]. Hence, Omani public managers responded negatively to the statements because they believed in its negative effects but in reality they do use it within their known ones at work.

As for statement 11, there were almost 31% of the Omani public managers who agreed that workplace humor is a good way to express his/her disagreement towards a work matter in front of the superior. In fact, two interviewed directors had demonstrated that confronting mistakes or disagreements towards a decision from Omanis is a cultural aspect than a practice where they provided few instances from their experiences about this fact and it was supported by the words of Romero and Cruthirds (2006) and Barsoux (1996). However, another perspective was provided from the interviewed director general since he had explained the attained result on statement 11 by emphasizing on the skills of communication. He elaborated on the proper ways of delivering organizational information by using the appropriate amount and style of humor where he states that it differs from a manager to another based on the work experience and length of the relationship between the two communicational parties. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) had supported this perspective by stressing that humor is a profound communicational tool in the organization.

Affirming with the previous results, statement 13 had provided a further documented result where aggressive humor was perceived logically by Omani public managers since about 92% of them had denied that their superiors favor aggressive topics in their humor. Martin *et al.*, (2003) and Romero and Cruthirds (2006) had explained this matter by referring aggressive humor to the reasons that it shall drive managers to use it in the work environment which denotes to a situational scheme. In other words, it is the situation or the occasion that decides upon our humorous actions and behaviours [1] [7] [9]. The interviewees had agreed that aggressive humor is not used in the Omani public environment since Omanis respect others but few instances were provided with no literal meaning of aggressiveness that entails that Omani public managers do understand the difference between aggressive topics and aggressive attitudes. The interviewed director general explained the difference by emphasizing, as previously said, on the real intention of using such humor with the subordinates. He stressed on the matter that aggressive humor could only be envisioned in the case of communicating inferior work practices or results to your subordinate but without harming the feelings.

4.2 Affiliative Style

As a starting point, the response on statement 1 was 74% denoting that Omani public managers had agreed that they are always be humorous with their friends. This is referred to the reason that the friendship zone takes more concern before building a friendship with someone [57] but for Omani public managers it is still a good way of building relationships as the previous figure denotes. By the same token, twenty (20) interviewees had stated that humor is a very useful tool in creating good friendships in the work environment especially that Omanis are known for being humorous. However, that is not always the case as Omani public managers seem to be conservative when it comes to being always humorous with their subordinates as 50% of them had agreed on statement 2. This means that sometimes they are not humorous with their subordinates or at least they are not sure of that. The only interviewed director general had provided a sound reasoning for the difference between what the interviewees had stated and what the questionnaire results assured and that is in knowing the difference between using humor and the intention of being humorous with others. He explains that it is always the intention of a human being to become friendly with others and he/she would also like others to treat him/her in a friendly way but that intention is expressed in different ways of humor as the situation might entail. He provided a live instance of himself when he was newly appointed having an intention to become friendly with his five subordinates (directors) but he found that four of them were easily approachable and the fourth (in sequence) was very stubborn in accepting others where he (the fourth director) was always serious and he demanded the director general to treat him in that way, and they eventually became friends without using humor but serious friends as the director general said. This in fact, supports what Barsoux (1993) had emphasized on this matter when he discussed the third (values) purpose of using humor at organizations. The last fact was also justified in statement 3 when almost 50% of the Omani public managers had assured that they are humorous by nature with their subordinates. The latter two figures though, assured that the Omani public managers do not differentiate between the meaning of a firm usage of humor and the usage of humor by nature, which also falls in with what was stated by the scholars [3] [4].

The response on statement 4 hammers specifically on the relationship between the superior and the subordinate where 97% of the Omani public managers affirmed that they celebrate with their subordinates when a subordinate receives good news. This result supports what Ford *et al* (2003) had stated that sharing the good moments with the subordinate is a good way for spreading humor at the work environment. However, and from a managerial perspective though, it was found that 36.5% of the Omani public managers had agreed that their superiors joke with other subordinates just to get along with the subordinate as in statement 12. According to Martin *et al.*, (2003), this statement would indicate the level of the affiliative humor style adopted by the Omani public managers but it also justifies the concept of situation since humor is used for a certain purpose in a certain time and place which entails a situation-tied humor. Barsoux (1993) had explained this issue from the purpose perspective as he named it "values". The result indicates that there is a considerably less usage of humor by Omani public managers in the situation where they are intending to know others. In fact, this conclusion is accepted from a cultural point of view since Omanis are formal when it comes to meeting new people. The interviewees provided a much clearer picture on this matter by elaborating on the Omani culture being respectful to the new ones especially work peers. They provided many instances on how they dealt with others when they meet them at the first time where they agreed that they cannot be open in terms of being humorous with them unless they get to know them in the first place. One interviewed director had elaborated further on this matter by saying: "We –Omanis – are sensitive nation as we care about other

people's feelings. We do not give a wrong signal to other ones about our character such as being humorous with a person we met him for the first time. I do not like him to degrade me even though I like to joke with others but I do not know what type of person he is or does he understand my personality, I really doubt it". Hence, the latter argument and the previous results demonstrate that Omani public managers are highly affiliative among themselves and conservative about their relationships with others.

4.3 Self-Enhancing Style

The response on statement seven (7) determines the degree of using the self enhancing humor style as an effective method to counter work stress. In fact, more than half of the Omani public managers agreed that they make themselves laugh on anything when they feel stressed at work. According to Martin *et al.*, (2003), this is tied with the person being positive and his/her ability to develop a strong self-esteem. In fact, the response on statement ten (10) supports the previous result since about 85% of the Omani public managers claimed that they are positive in their lives. The magnitude between the two results could be explained according to what Romero and Cruthirds (2006) had narrated and that is by the fact that every human being likes to claim good attitudes and positive source of conduct about themselves. However, reality imposes different factors that would make it cumbersome for few managers to determine a way of defeating such negative feelings due to the job obligations [8]. The response on statement seven (7) also provides a hint on the cultural richness of Omani public managers in countering work stress by fostering self-humor where it is clear that many of them do not know how to make themselves laugh even though they claim that they are positive in their lives. The interviewed director general had stated that: "Omanis are not trained much on self motivation and developing positive work spirit because they do not know how it really works; it comes out from them naturally since an employee likes to chill out after a dozen of work tasks that resulted in anxiety and stress". A live example was sensed from three of the interviewed directors whom emphasized that they cannot see themselves in a position of making themselves laugh without a stimuli especially when they are stressed, and hence they count on other employees or peer superiors within their premises who are known for being a hoot in their work environment to make them laugh and reduce their inner tensions. Therefore, it shall be stated that Omani public managers prefer self-enhancing humor style in their work settings due to its benefits but it depends on the personal ability for expressing such a behavior.

4.4 Self-Defeating Style

The responses on statements 5 and 6 followed the previous pattern of the self-enhancing style in terms of the magnitude between the two results where 73% of the Omani public managers claimed that they allow their subordinates to be humorous with them in opposed to about 25% for statement 6. According to Barsoux (1996) though, it is humor that allows managers to be more approachable by the subordinates and yet the attained result gives a hint on the subject matter. However, Duncan (1982) and Collinson (2002) had narrated that allowing the subordinate to be humorous with the management differs in logic since managers do not really allow such activities with them as they claim that it might jeopardizes their reputation and their organizational image [1] [10]. However, the Omani public managers stressed on not taking humor further to the level of laughing about them on their faces as about 75% demonstrated their disagreement upon that where it is a trivial opinion as no one likes others to have them as the joking subject in front of others [58]. In fact, all interviewees (21) had also expressed their disagreement towards being laughed upon by their subordinates as they affirmed that it demonstrates disrespect and a clear violation to the role of conduct and work

ethics. This was supported by Duncan and Feisal (1989) and Barsoux (1996) where they stated that managers do not favour humor in their work environment because it can easily lead to having them being the butt of the silly jokes at the workplace. The interviewed director general stated that: "Humor is expected to narrow the distance between myself and the employees but not to sacrifice my dignity in front of my subordinates in hope for their company". Hence, it shall be said that Omani public managers do not favour self-defeating humor style in their work environment.

5 CONCLUSION

This study provided a descriptive evidence for the exertion of humor at work by managers formed in its styles within the Omani public environment. The exertion of humor per se is understood in its styles that shall be utilized in any situation where four of such were determined. It was found that managers in the Omani public sector did not express their interest towards using the aggressive humor style with their subordinates, instead; they favoured developing more bonds and strengthened relationships with their subordinates, which denotes to the affiliative humor style. It was also found that Omani public managers would not like to be humorous at their workplace with the expense of losing their dignity as the self-defeating humor style proposes but they are much towards the self-enhancing humor style since it promotes positivity at work. Yet, the study is a preliminary research on the subject matter and it gives an enriched potential for further studies on the topic given the different cultural compositions.

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