

HOW SERVANT AND HUMOROUS LEADERSHIP LINK TO INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR: EXPLORING THE MODERATING ROLE OF WORKPLACE FUN ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract. *This study aims to assess the link between servant leadership and humorous leadership with innovative behavior and a workplace fun environment as a moderator between the two paths. Survey design was used and data was collected from those who work in the service industry of Pakistan. Sample size was 350. The data was analyzed using Smart PLS. As per results, servant leadership and humorous leadership are linked significantly to innovative behavior. Moreover, a workplace fun environment moderates the link between the servant and humorous leadership and innovative behavior. Our study adds to the direction of leadership styles and innovative behavior in the service industry along with identifying the new aspect of the workplace's fun environment. Under the canopy of social exchange theory, servant leadership presence provides a platform for the growth and development of employees in the presence of a workplace fun environment which leads to improved innovative behavior. Thus, employees repay positively the exchanges received from their leader and environment. Finally, using the social information processing theory, the presence of humor and fun at the leadership level and workplace environment is a meaningful way to affect innovative behavior. This study contributes by providing managers an insight into the use of workplace fun environments and leadership styles as a strategy to improve innovative behavior.*

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1. Introduction

In the era of innovativeness, organizations are required to innovate their products and services. Thus, a greater level of pressure is being faced by organizations to remain competitive via the inclusion of innovativeness (Fatemi et al., 2021) achieve this, knowledge workers play a key role by sharing innovative ideas to gain an edge over others. So, organizational leadership can shape this process by appreciating innovativeness (Elidemir et al., 2020; Mutonyi et al., 2022). As a result, knowledge workers feel motivated to display innovative behavior (Mehmood et al., 2022). Therefore, among all the myriad factors, one factor that perhaps affects innovative behavior (hereafter, IB) among knowledge workers is the leadership role (Elsetouhi et al., 2023; Ha, 2022).

The notion of leadership has changed its stance to manage the strategic and operational aspects to servant and humorous leadership aspects to manage employees' behavior (Stone & Patterson, 2023; Tan et al., 2021). Referring to leadership style, humorous leadership (hereafter, HL) is an interpersonal communication process used by the leader to share information or things consciously to entertain subordinates (Robert et al., 2016), resulting in influencing IB and creativity (Zhang & Su, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). On the other side, servant leadership (hereafter, SL) focuses on developing subordinates not just to please them but to amplify IB (Wang et al., 2019), by satisfying their needs (Xiu et al., 2023). Therefore, both leadership styles might affect IB.

However, there is a plethora of research and evidence related to leadership styles and IB from the lens of different moderators and mediators (Hoang et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2022; Rongbin et al., 2022); yet the explanation does not suffice related to fun in a work environment. Further investigation is needed related to IB, workplace fun environment (hereafter, WFE), and leadership styles like SL and HL as the already undertaken studies did not deliberate on the mentioned factors.

To be more innovative employees need the unrelenting evolution in the environment like the presence of fun to neutralize the work pressure (Lee et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2022). Fun in the environment can have a positive impression on employees' minds (Jyoti & Dimple, 2021). In this regard, Leaders are responsible for creating WFEs; it leads to forming a sense of positive psychological feeling among employees to adapt to changes (Jing et al., 2021; Tsaur et al., 2019), henceforth helps in amplifying IB. Nevertheless, Jalilianhasanpour et al. (2021) elaborated that SL focuses on giving credit; this latter is best attained by creating an environment full of humor, fun, and gratitude can lead to generating positive employee behavior (Boekhorst et al., 2021; Eva et al., 2019). As per social exchange theory (SET), employees

usually repay the exchanges positively or negatively depending on the response received from their supervisor and environment (Settoon *et al.*, 1996). For instance, positive exchange signifies positive behavior. Therefore, the coworker, supervisor, and environment exchange also require more attention to extend the scope. On the adjacent side, another side that has not yet been explored by the researchers in the extant literature is the moderating role of a WFE between SL and IB.

In addition, as per the social information processing theory (SIPT), humor is a form of using appropriate and meaningful social information for knowledge workers to understand the social context of the workplace environment and adjust their behavior and attitude accordingly (Khassawneh & Mohammad, 2022; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Zalesny & Ford, 1990). However, the investigation regarding the above-mentioned link is missing in the literature. Therefore, to fill this gap, this study assesses by using SIPT to view how the link between HL and IB might be affected in the presence of a WFE as a moderator.

Our study meets the subsequent objectives. Firstly, to examine the SL role in stimulating IB at work. Secondly, to unveil that IB can be affected by HL. Thirdly, to assess the moderating role of a WFE between SL, HL, and IB. Fourth, to broaden the SET and SIPT scope by evaluating WFE as a moderator between SL, HL, and IB. Lastly, this study provides empirical evidence that adds to the servant and humorous leadership, IB, and WFE literature in the context of a developing country like Pakistan.

Review of Literature

Servant Leadership and Innovative Behavior

For the development of innovative products and services, creativity acts as a foundational aspect (Woodman *et al.*, 1993); as a result, innovation grows when it is handled with care (Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Thus, creativity and innovation can be distinguished. For instance, creativity pinpoints the idea's radicalness and novelty on the other side IB incorporates socio-psychological processes at the individual level for idea realization and implementation (Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Lee *et al.*, 2020; Rank *et al.*, 2004). Apart from this, IB is delineated as the intentional proposal and implementation of that idea to bring improvement in processes, policies, and practices which help to augment the organizational strategic position by managing the environmental changes (Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Kwon & Kim, 2020). Seeing IB from the view of intentional and practical sides requires initiative, planning, and direction to manage the changes by implementing ideas (Iqbal *et al.*, 2020). Frequent changes and implementation of new ideas make IB a risky adventure because of the failure associated with it (Yang *et al.*, 2017; Yuan & Woodman, 2010)

whereas change often faces resistance among peers and top management due to risk and time involvement in the implementation of new ideas.

For instance, IB is divided into two gears: firstly, idea creation and secondly idea implementation. Likewise, different skills are needed for both such as cognitive skills for idea creation and sociopolitical skills for the idea's implementation. Here comes the role of supportive and encouraging leadership; as it plays a facilitating role to help and direct employees to embark upon IB - a risky escapade. The above-mentioned argument will suffice the need for SL which plays a facilitating role.

The SL notion was introduced by Greenleaf (2002). SL tend to be more empathetic and accept the person by focusing on how to develop them by critically evaluating their performance and focusing on their growth and development (Page & Wong, 2000), which might help them to become what they want (Eva *et al.*, 2019). The cracks of SL focus on motivating employees for their growth and development. From the employee-centered perspective, SL makes sure that the employee's growth is at the center of attention by executing practices (Rabiul *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the supporting role of SL augments employee's emotional side positively (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014), and enhance cognitive abilities to generate more creative ideas.

From the implementation of ideas, employees need support from stakeholders. Success chances may increase when the sociopolitical stage is expedited. So, SL tries to implant a mutual thought to encourage knowledge workers to work for others (Greenleaf, 2002; Manz & Sims, 1987; Page & Wong, 2000). Here comes the point, SL can play a facilitation role in entrenching workers' sociopolitical skills by expediting the process further to focus on community development at its core (Laub, 2018, 1999; Liden *et al.*, 2008). Henceforth, this could bring change in employees' behavior to get support from others for the implementation of innovative ideas. In the extant literature, few studies found the usefulness of SL in influencing IB (Ekmekcioglu & Öner, 2023; Nguyen *et al.*, 2023). Based on the above-mentioned reasoning, the subsequent hypothesis was framed.

H1: Servant leadership links to innovative behavior in the workplace.

Humorous leadership and Innovative Behavior

Humor is seen as an individual personality trait (Martin, 2001), a form of social communication (Cooper *et al.*, 2018), verbal and non-verbal forms of communication (Pundt & Venz, 2017), engaging employees in a friendly manner by telling jokes (Karakowsky *et al.*, 2020), to foster positive transactions (communication) between leaders and employees (Kuiper *et al.*, 2010). In the face of financial and economic instability, leaders are responsible for motivating employees through information sharing that pleases them to

perform well (Xu, 2020). Humor is seen as an effective tool for leadership in such cases where so many variations are happening in the external and internal environment. The humor word comes from the Latin word “homorem” which means “liquid or fluid” (Li *et al.*, 2019). The notion of humor has now entered into the organizational behavior field because the sense of humor is a critical factor for a leader to be successful (Sobral & Islam, 2015). Therefore, the use of humor by the leader in transactions can add value in terms of quantity and quality by showing concern and care (Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2022), as a result, it can help alleviate employees' frustration, boredom, and fatigue leading to improved leader and employee relationship (Li *et al.*, 2019).

But one question arises whether humor is always fruitful or not. To answer this question numerous scholars shared their views such as Martin *et al.* (2003) elucidated that people view humor as a trustworthy and reliable trait of a personality to augment innovative performance and behavior (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012; Zhang & Su, 2020), engagement (Yam *et al.*, 2018), employee voice (Potipiroon & Ford, 2021), creativity (Hu & Luo, 2023), positive emotion (Cooper *et al.*, 2018), bootlegging (Zhang *et al.*, 2023) and organizational citizenship behavior (Cheng *et al.*, 2023).

Humor can be perceived positively or negatively by employees depending on the way it is communicated (Holmes, 2007). On the other side, humor may have different forms that can affect the physical and psychological health of employees negatively or positively (Ho *et al.*, 2011). Primarily, from the leader's perspective, the process of humor can be comprehended as an important tool. On the other side of the veil, from the employee's view, as the recipient of humor from the leader, they not only appreciate this act (Yam *et al.*, 2018) whereas they also learn from the positive attitude of the leader (Cooper *et al.*, 2018). As a result, employees feel more confident to creatively solve problems and issues (Su *et al.*, 2019), and face difficulty confidently by sharing innovative ideas to solve the problem (Baas *et al.*, 2013). Subsequently, in promoting IB; HL plays a major role. Therefore, the following hypothesis was framed for assessment.

H2: Humorous leadership links to innovative behavior in the workplace.

Moderating Role of Workplace Fun Environment

Creating a pleasant and positive environment within the organization can be a fundamental factor (Ugheoke *et al.*, 2022), for fun activities inclusion in socialization, and job responsibilities. As a result, employees' involvement in the creative process be improved (Michel *et al.*, 2019; Qureshi *et al.*, 2022). So employees need a pleasant and comfortable environment that tends to produce positive outcomes as compared to an unfavorable environment

(Huang *et al.*, 2015; Sutaguna *et al.*, 2023). Workplace fun may be seen as a strategy to meet the employee's psycho-emotional needs to work effectively under pressure (Tews *et al.*, 2015). WFE presence can act as a catalyst (Karl *et al.*, 2005; Tews *et al.*, 2015) between Humor in leadership (Huang *et al.*, 2023), manager and leader support for fun (Tews *et al.*, 2015) and IB. Besides, humor from the employee perspective is the subcomponent of the social dimension of fun. From the leader or manager's perspective, workplace fun is viewed as a support for spurring positive outcomes such as IB (Ba *et al.*, 2023), task performance and satisfaction (Zia-ur-Rehman *et al.*, 2023) and creative behavior (Yang and Chen, 2023), work engagement (Plester & Hutchison, 2016), job satisfaction (Chan & Mak, 2016), team performance (Han *et al.*, 2016) and learning (Tews *et al.*, 2017).

In addition, humor is thus used to enhance social transactions to provide a cushion against stressful conditions by managers (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006; Sizemore and O'Brien, 2023). Here the role of leadership suffices. For instance, the leader is responsible for creating a pleasant workplace environment to share interesting things by using humor (Kim *et al.*, 2016), this might help relieve the risks and uncertainties faced by the employees during the implementation of innovative ideas and afterward behavior (Pundt, 2015; Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). On the other side, fun in a work environment is an effective way to build relationships between humorous leaders and employee behavior (Hooper, 2017; Tan *et al.*, 2021). However, it remains inconclusive how the WFE can moderate the link between HL and IB in the literature.

Looking at the SL style, two attributes exist. Firstly, the caring and stewardship qualities of a leader that focus on moral conduct. Secondly, the management aspect is where the leaders improve employees' behavior by creating a pleasant workspace (Andersen, 2018). Likewise, servant and humorous leadership can help employees maintain good leader and subordinate relationships by building a strong sense of trust (Pundt, 2015; Ramdani, 2023) which results in affecting the IB positively or negatively. However, it remains inconclusive how the WFE can moderate the link between SL and IB in the literature. Therefore, based on the prior arguments, a WFE can be a moderator between SL, HL, and IB. Subsequently, the following hypothesis was framed and the research framework is mentioned in Figure 1.

H3: A workplace fun environment moderates the link between servant leadership and innovative behavior in the workplace.

H4: A workplace fun environment moderates the link between humorous leadership and innovative behavior in the workplace.

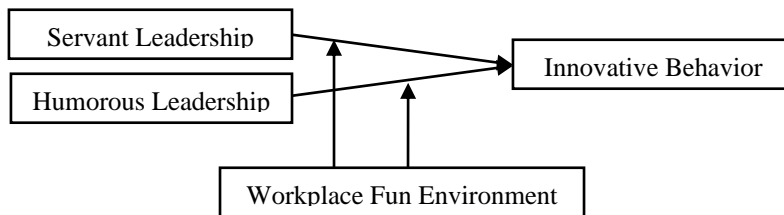


Figure 1: Research Framework

Methodology

In the current study, for data gathering, service sector (knowledge) workers in Pakistan were contacted. Consent was taken from workers regarding their participation. The questionnaire was administered among 600 workers, and only 350 filled out the questionnaire. To examine SL, Liden *et al.* (2008) scale was used with seven items. One sample item is “My leader can tell if something work-related is going wrong”. To measure HL a seven-item scale was used developed by Thorson and Powell (1993). The sample item is mentioned as “My leader uses humor to help me master difficult situations”. WFE is measured through fourteen items including fun activities, environment, and socializing (Tews et al., 2014). The sample item is stated as “My managers emphasize employee fun in the workplace”. IB was assessed through six items taken from the scale of Scott and Bruce (1994). The sample item is specified as “Employee searches out new technologies, processes, techniques, and/or ideas”.

Results

Respondents Profile

The respondent’s profile is mentioned in table 1. According to the results, 73.1 % were male representation in the study whereas 26.9 % were female representation in the study. However, 18.6% of respondents had having bachelor whereas 50.9% with master's, and the remaining 30.5 % with Ph.D. education.

Table 1 *Respondents Profile*

Variables		Percentage
Gender	Male	73.1%
	Female	26.9%
Education	Bachelor	18.6%
	Master	50.9%
	PhD	30.5%
Experience	<5 Years	76.9 %
	5-10 Years	18.9%
	>10 Years	4.2%

Validity and Reliability

To examine the measurement model, the validity and reliability were examined. As per the table 2 results all variables have Alpha and CR values > 0.70, which indicates the reliability of the items (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Besides, all the item loadings were >0.70 (Alzahrani, 2020; Hair *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, convergent validity was assessed using the average variance extracted, which indicates a value > 0.5 for all the variables (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratios were used to examine discriminant validity. Hence no issues of validity as the pair's ratios were less than 0.85 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

Table 2 *Validity and Reliability*

Variables	Alpha	CR	AVE	Min. loadings
SL	0.827	0.865	0.743	0.764
HL	0.782	0.789	0.694	0.835
WFE	0.925	0.928	0.817	0.877
IB	0.779	0.781	0.684	0.801
HTMT ratio	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
HL (1)				
IB (2)	0.504			
SL (3)	0.226	0.368		
WFE (4)	0.076	0.151	0.421	----

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 indicates mean and standard deviation values. As per the results, each variable values are as follows, SL (mean= 3.71, Std. deviation= 1.155), HL (mean=3.53, Std. deviation= 1.020), IB (mean=3.77, Std. deviation= 1.195) and WFE (mean=3.74, Std. deviation= 1.013). The correlation values indicate the meaningful link among all the variables.

Table 3 *Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis*

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.		
SL	3.71	1.155		
HL	3.53	1.020		
WFE	3.74	1.013		
IB	3.77	1.195		
Correlation	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
SL (1)	1			
HL (2)	0.445 (.000)	1.00		
WFE (3)	0.362 (.000)	0.513 (.000)	1.00	
IB (4)	0.275 (.000)	0.417 (.000)	0.645 (.000)	1.00

Structural Model

Based on the results mentioned in table 4. SL links to IB was supported ($\beta = 0.358$; $p < 0.05$). On the other side, HL links to IB was also significant ($\beta = 0.242$; $p < 0.05$). In addition, in our study, two moderating paths were analyzed. The first link i.e., WFE was found to significantly moderate the link between SL and IB ($\beta = 0.174$; $p < 0.05$). However, the second path related to WFE weakened the link between HL and IB ($\beta = -0.126$; $p < 0.05$). Moreover, plotted interactions are shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Table 4 *Structural Model*

Hypotheses	Beta	Std Error	t value	P value
SL \rightarrow IB	0.358	0.121	2.940	0.003
HL \rightarrow IB	0.242	0.083	2.900	0.004
SL * WFE * IB	0.174	0.071	2.464	0.014
HL* WFE* IB	-0.126	0.055	2.267	0.023

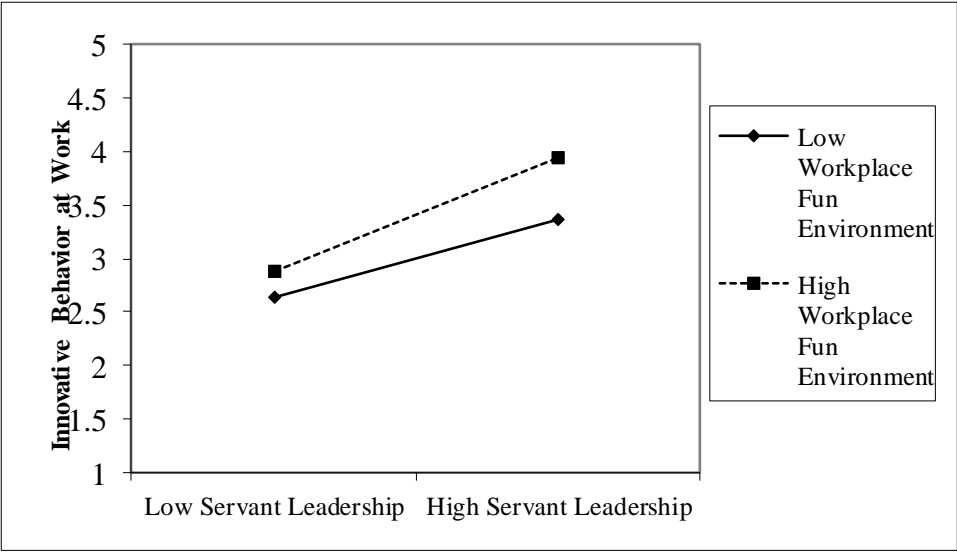


Figure 2: Moderating Role WFE Between SL and IB

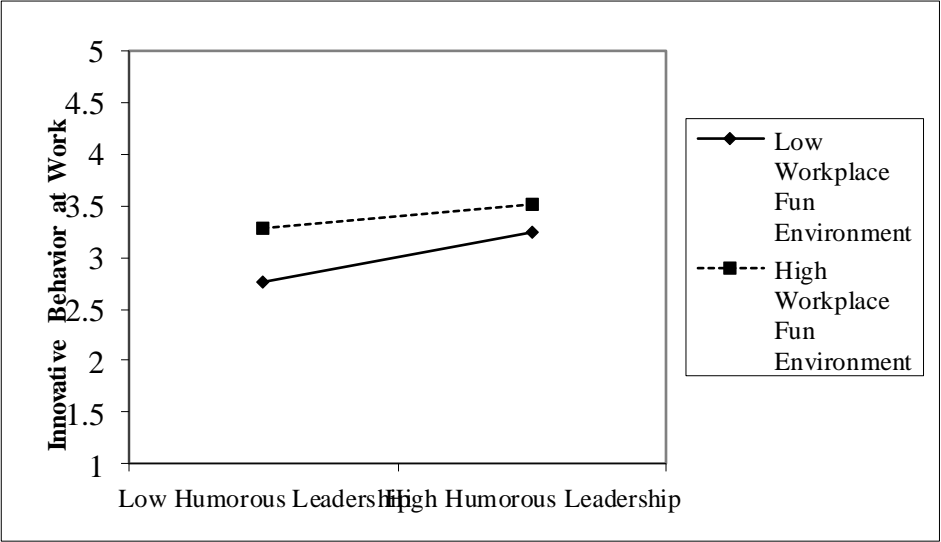


Figure 3: Moderating Role WFE Between HL and IB

Discussion

Our study is primarily focused on meeting the following objectives. Firstly, to examine the SL role in stimulating IB at work. As per the result of the study, this objective was met; SL plays a crucial role in improving IB in the workplace. The results of our study are in accord with the studies of (Ekmekcioglu & Öner, 2023; Nguyen *et al.*, 2023). Secondly, IB can be

affected by HL. Thus, as per the results, HL was found to be an essential predictor in spurring IB. Study results are in line with the views and results shared by prior researchers (Cooper *et al.*, 2018; Holmes, 2007; Su *et al.*, 2019; Yam *et al.*, 2018). This indicates that humor as a means of social communication can help to create a synergy among employees which leads to improved IB at the workplace. Thirdly, to assess the moderating role of a WFE between SL, HL, and IB at work. As per the study outcomes, WFE moderates the link between SL and IB. Therefore, the provision of WFE can aid in strengthening the link between SL and IB in the workplace. Results are in line with the study of Ramdani (2023). On the other side, a WFE weakens the link between HL and IB. Therefore, an HL must be vigilant when using humor in the transaction and WFE needs to be balanced in the presence of an HL, otherwise, it may create a negative perception among employees, thus affecting their behavior negatively as studies also highlighted that fun and humor can have a positive and negative side as well (Kim *et al.*, 2016; Pundt, & Herrmann, 2015; Ramdani, 2023).

Lastly, our study expands the SET scope. Henceforth, employees usually repay positively all the exchanges received from their leader and environment (Settoon *et al.*, 1996). Finally, results support the SIPT that the presence of humor and fun at the leadership level and work environment is a meaningful aspect for employees to display their positive or negative behavior and attitude and it depends on the perception level of receipts (Khassawneh & Mohammad, 2022; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Zalesny & Ford, 1990).

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study makes a theoretical contribution in the following ways. First, our study unearthed the moderating role of a WFE between SL and IB in the workplace as limited studies exist in this regard. This study provides empirical evidence related to SL and HL to spur IB in the presence of a WFE in a developing country like Pakistan. Our study indicates that WFE acts as a catalyst between leadership styles and IB. Thus, SL led to focus on employee-centered practices through socializing with people and standing back in case of failure. WFE can add fun and help employees in socialization to deal with stress and display innovative behavior. So, SL can garner positive outcomes in the form of IB display by knowledge workers in the presence of WFE. As per the earlier discussion, a positive environment can enable both cognitive as well as sociopolitical processes to innovate effectually.

Secondly, this study elucidated the link between HL and IB with a moderator that is WFE. It has been evident that WFE weakens the link between HL and IB. The provision of workplace fun can equip employees to better deal with pressure and come up with more innovative ideas in the presence of HL.

However, it can affect negatively as well so management due diligence is needed to create a balance between when and how to share information by providing training to prevent the prevalence of negative perceptions among employees.

This study offers several implications from the practical side. As the service industry is facing dynamic changes in this regard, servant and humorous leadership can be used to augment IB. Moreover, managers must focus on the growth and development of knowledge workers to help them display IB. Besides, managers and employees need to be trained regarding the effective use of humor as per the situation demands to help and facilitate change and stressful conditions to come up with innovative ideas and display IB effectively whereas employees need to cooperate with the leaders in the context of change. To counter the negative outcomes linked to a WFE, managers must be trained to set boundaries and create an environment about when and how to use humor or fun to deal with stress and work pressure to have better leader and employee relationships. Henceforth, the service approach and positive transaction can enable knowledge workers to display IB at the workplace.

Limitations and Direction for Future Researchers

Likewise, every study this study also has some limitations. As the data was congregated from a single source the chances of common method bias can be there. So future researchers can examine the proposed model using multi-source data for analysis. In addition, only one moderator was examined. Future researchers may incorporate mediators and another contextual factor affecting the link between SL, HL, and IB.

Conclusion

Our study has assessed the link between SL and HL with IB along with the moderating role of a WFE in the service industry of Pakistan. As the service industry is facing dynamic changes from the environmental and customer sides, this requires employees to innovate and remain competitive. In this regard, servant and humorous leadership can be used to augment IB. In addition, creating fun at the workplace can help to break the traditional mindset to follow at work. Despite the fact, that workplace fun is a necessary aspect and it is important to mention here, that the other side of workplace fun can be dysfunctional, to counter the negative outcomes linked to a WFE; managers and employees must be trained to set boundaries when using humor or fun for the creation of a pleasant environment in a developing country like Pakistan to have more positive outcomes.

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