Laughter in the workplace: How supervisor humour relates to employee knowledge sharing and hiding

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Abstract

Purpose - This study investigates the impact of different humour styles on two employee knowledge behaviours, namely knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding. Such relationships have received limited attention in the literature.

Design/Methodology/Approach - The theoretical framework of this study uses *quid pro quo* dynamics and categorises humour into four distinct styles: affiliative, self-defeating, aggressive, and self-enhancing. We examined the differential effects of these styles on knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding. Data from 220 Indian employees, who rated their supervisors' humour styles and their own knowledge behaviours, were analysed using structural equation modelling.

Findings - It was found that supervisor humour styles are generally related to knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding. Affiliative humour promotes knowledge sharing, while self-defeating humour discourages it. Additionally, aggressive humour increases knowledge hiding, while self-enhancing humour has no significant effects.

Practical implications - The findings suggest that, to optimise employee knowledge behaviours in the workplace, greater emphasis should be placed on preventing supervisors from using negative humour styles (especially aggressive and counterproductive ones) rather than on promoting positive humour styles. As such, it is more advisable for organisational managers to develop training programmes that make supervisors aware of the drawbacks of using negative humour, rather than focusing on the benefits of positive humour styles, as the former has been found to have a much more significant impact.

Originality/Value - This study contributes to both the humour and knowledge literatures by revealing the previously unknown relationship between supervisor humour and knowledge

behaviours. It also highlights the appropriateness of employing various supervisor humour

styles as a collective strategy for overseeing knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding. This

provided further insight into how different humour styles and knowledge constructs interact in

complex, non-parallel ways.

Keywords: supervisor humour; knowledge sharing; knowledge hiding; humour styles

1. Introduction

In today's competitive environment, where changes —especially technological ones— are occurring at a frenetic pace, knowledge is unquestionably a vital asset for organisations (Asrar-ul-Haq and Anwar, 2016; Prentice *et al.*, 2025). It fuels creativity, innovation, and informed decision-making, which facilitates daily operations, problem-solving, and the development of ground-breaking ideas (Ahmad and Karim, 2019; Wang and Noe, 2010). Also, as a competitive resource, knowledge is 'rare, inimitable and non-substitutable' (Zhi *et al.*, 2024). As such, it is critical to improve innovativeness, financial and non-financial performance, growth, durability and competitiveness (Marzo *et al.*, 2024). These benefits have spurred growing interest in identifying the factors influencing employee knowledge-based behaviours (Anand *et al.*, 2020; Connelly *et al.*, 2019). Among these factors, leadership has consistently been found to play a significant, pivotal role (Marzo *et al.*, 2024; Mishra and Pandey, 2019). However, research has yet to examine whether supervisor humour (henceforth, SH), an increasingly relevant leadership behaviour, can drive employee knowledge-related behaviours (Cooper *et al.*, 2018; Tan *et al.*, 2020).

SH refers to a supervisor's ability to make themselves and their subordinates laugh or smile, thereby lightening difficult situations and fostering optimism (Cooper *et al.*, 2018). Workplace humour has been shown to reduce stress and tension, promote open communication, and strengthen teamwork (Cooper, 2005; Li *et al.*, 2024; Yang *et al.*, 2021). Such a positive environment may encourage employees to explore creative ideas and share them without fear of misunderstanding, opposition, and even ridicule (Yang *et al.*, 2021). It also fosters other desirable voluntary behaviours such as organizational citizenship behaviours (e.g. Choi *et al.*, 2022; Cooper *et al.*, 2018), innovative behaviour (e.g. Khattak *et al.*, 2024; Li *et al.*, 2024) and job crafting (Tan *et al.*, 2020). This occurs because, when receiving SH, subordinates feel that they are facilitated their participation and involvement in their jobs,

since humorous supervisors encourage them look at the brighter side of work and reduce stress (Khattak *et al.*, 2024).

Given the unique attributes of knowledge—such as path dependency, causal ambiguity, and resistance to imitation—successful knowledge behaviours require practices directed at creating, sharing, utilising, and safeguarding knowledge (Yeboah, 2023). Among these behaviours, knowledge sharing (KS) and knowledge hiding (KH) are particularly critical (Ahmad and Karim, 2019; Wang and Noe, 2010). KS is defined as 'the act of making knowledge available to others within the organization' (Ipe, 2003, p. 341). In contrast, KH is defined as 'the intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person' (Connelly *et al.*, 2012, p. 65), positing a significant barrier to organisation knowledge utilisation. While organisations have made strides in encouraging KS (Ahmad and Karim, 2019; Wang and Noe, 2010), efforts to reduce KH remain limited (Anand *et al.*, 2020; Zhi *et al.*, 2024). Understanding how leadership behaviours like SH influence both KS and KH is therefore crucial for optimising knowledge management practices that lead to innovative capacity, performance, competitive advantages, etc. which altogether contribute to organisational existence (Baş *et al.*, 2024).

To address this gap, this research builds on Martin et al.'s (2003) humour framework, which distinguishes between positive (affiliative and self-enhancing) and negative (aggressive and self-defeating) SH styles. Positive styles are hypothesised to promote KS and mitigate KH, while negative styles are expected to hinder KS and exacerbate KH. Despite its potential significance, the relationship between SH and knowledge-related behaviours remains underexplored. Only two studies have examined the role of SH in KS (Abdillah, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2024), with none addressing KH or considering all four SH styles. The reasons for focusing on SH as a determinant of these knowledge-related behaviours are the following. Firstly, humour is widespread in workplace life, and its relational component can be used to

generate ideas that contribute to organizational effectiveness and desirable employee outcomes (Khattak *et al.*, 2024; Neves and Karagonlar, 2020). Therefore, it is gaining importance in management research, as recently stated by (Kong, 2024; Prentice *et al.*, 2025). Secondly, KS and KH avoidance are voluntary employee behaviours that require a healthy environment to occur (Prentice *et al.*, 2025). Since SH acts as a social lubricant, leading employees to perceive their supervisors as relationship-oriented and the work environment as reliable and psychologically safe, it entails positive effects and fosters a cycle of positive affect (Khattak *et al.*, 2024) that leads to the required conducive environment. Thirdly, SH has an almost immediate emotional impact compared to other leadership-related behaviours (e.g. transformational or transactional leadership). Humor creates almost instant connections by reducing tension, creating a relaxed environment and strengthening social bonds. Such quick emotional response facilitates openness, which is crucial for employees to engage in KS and avoid KH.

Thus, this study aims to explore whether and how SH influences employee knowledge behaviours, particularly KS and KH. By grounding in *quid pro quo dynamics*, this study investigates how SH styles shape socioemotional exchanges that drive KS and KH. Positive SH styles are expected to foster favourable socioemotional exchanges in subordinates, increasing their KS and reducing their KH. Conversely, negative SH styles may weaken these exchanges, thereby reducing KS and increasing KH. This contribution seeks to advance the understanding of SH as a novel leadership mechanism for optimizing knowledge management practices (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. Knowledge sharing and hiding and Martin et al.'s (2003) humour styles

Given that knowledge behaviours aim to streamline information within the organisation, achieving optimal levels of them are crucial to affirming successful knowledge management. In this regard, two behaviours play a crucial role in successful knowledge management, namely KS and KH. On the one hand, knowledge sharing (KS) is defined as the act of making knowledge available to others within the organisation, and involves the collective sharing of individual information, ideas, advice or skills among others (Gagné *et al.*, 2019; Ipe, 2003). On the other hand, knowledge hiding (KH) can be defined as the voluntary attempt to conceal knowledge when another person requests it (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2021; Connelly *et al.*, 2012). Since knowledge is 'unique, path dependent, causally ambiguous, and hard to imitate' (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002, p. 668), KS plays a key role in enhancing organisational knowledge, while KH gets in the way of it (He *et al.*, 2021). It is also worth highlighting that, although KS and KH are negatively correlated, they are not two poles of the same construct, but are independent, and they have different origins (Gagné *et al.*, 2019). Thus, to optimise these knowledge-related behaviours, managers should make different decisions and implement different strategies.

Supervisor humour (SH) has been proposed to create playful ambiguity, wit that exposes inauthenticity, pomposity, or privilege, and a cheerful disposition that fosters resilience in the face of challenges. Martin et al.'s (2003) framework captures this situation and divides humour into two contexts: (a) self-directed intrapsychic humour (which can be either self-enhancing or self-defeating) and (b) interpersonal or relational humour (which can be either affiliative or aggressive). When using intrapsychic humour, supervisors either enrich themselves by elegantly recognising their own mistakes in jest, e.g. 'I hope this chart makes

sense… because if I'm the only one who understands it, we're in trouble', or self-deprecate,

e.g. 'Well, if you don't *like* my presentation, at least you'll *like* to laugh about it at lunch'.

Interpersonal SH is directed at employees instead, and might reveal, for instance,

aggressiveness through a sarcastic comment, as in, 'Wow, you really nailed your presentation.

I'm sure that your statements and figures convinced everyone... except me'. On the contrary,

through the expression, 'Don't worry about the deadline; we'll get it done somehow. After all,

Rome wasn't built in a day', a supervisor attempts to use humour to nurture team resilience

by lightening a tough situation and promoting optimism.

Elaborating on the above-mentioned SH examples and possible others, Martin *et al.*

(2003) categorise humour styles as either theoretically positive or helpful (affiliative and self-

enhancing) and negative or harmful (aggressive and self-defeating).

In the case of positive SH styles, particularly affiliative ones, supervisors share jokes

or funny stories that are not offensive or hurtful. These actions can contribute to the building

of social bonds and the reduction of tension by showing an optimistic or light-hearted attitude

towards life, the ability to laugh at themselves, and the ability to cope with their own stress.

Affiliative humour is amusing, non-hostile, tolerant, and affirming of oneself and others (Kong

et al., 2019; Martin *et al.*, 2003; Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). According to Jun and Lee (2024),

subordinates frequently view supervisors who use this humour style as likeable, attractive,

and enjoyable. Regarding self-enhancing SH, in addition to serving as a coping mechanism

for dealing with difficult work situations (Martin *et al.*, 2003), supervisors may use this

humour style to communicate significant information to their subordinates about themselves

and their expectations (Hu, 2023). Thus, when a supervisor makes fun of his/her own

mistakes, he/she is showing that he/she is tolerant towards failure. Regarding negative

humour styles, Martin *et al.* (2003) distinguish between aggressive and self-defeating. When

using aggressive humour, supervisors tease others, use sarcasm, offend, and/or show hostility

or superiority. Alternatively, self-defeating SH involves using intrapsychic humour to gain

acceptance by making self-deprecating jokes or willingly becoming the target of others'

jokes. This could indicate a needy or even pathological desire for attention, potentially

preventing subordinates from receiving socioemotional resources.

2.2. Research hypotheses

This paper utilizes *quid pro quo* logics or dynamics to explain and justify subordinates'

reactions to SH in the workplace, thereby elucidating the attribution of socioemotional

resources to individuals at work. Certainly, there is previous work on SH invoking theories

grounded on these *quid pro quo* dynamics (Cooper *et al.*, 2018; Kong *et al.*, 2019; Yang and

Zhang, 2022). This umbrella encompasses three theories that are commonly employed to

elucidate SH reactions: social exchange theory, conservation of resources theory, and

broaden-and-build theory. According to social exchange theory, which postulates that the

organisation-employee relationship takes place according to the main principle of reciprocity

(Blau, 1986; Cooper *et al.*, 2018), supervisors' attitudes and behaviours might determine

whether subordinates feel appreciation towards them and the organisation they represent, thus

corresponding with behaviours that might be beneficial or detrimental for the organisation

(Cooper *et al.*, 2018). In this case, positive SH styles are perceived by subordinates as sincere

forms of support, friendliness and relationship-building efforts (Hu, 2023), which act as

socioemotional resources that engender high-quality relationships, and will be voluntarily

reciprocated (Cooper *et al.*, 2018). On the contrary, negative SH styles make supervisors be

perceived as socially distant, which causes the contrary. Consequently, subordinates will

reciprocate with KS to positive SH styles, whereas they will respond with KH to negative

humour styles.

According to conservation of resources theory, which posits that individuals are motivated to acquire, retain, and protect resources in order to facilitate their well-being and alleviate their stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), SH, especially positive styles, acts as a socioemotional resource because it allows the cultivation of closer supervisor-subordinate relationships, and also creates a relaxed, open environment that reduces work stress, provides feedback to employees and bolsters their self-confidence (Gkorezis, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2024). Following the theory's tennets, employees who receive positive SH styles will acquire resources that allow them to perceive the work environment as less stressful (Cooper *et al.*, 2018), which fosters KS and reduces motives for KH. On the contrary, receivers of negative SH styles do not acquire any socioemotional resources, or might even lose resources that they already have, which increases stress and encourages undesirable behaviours such as KH.

Lastly, according to broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), SH generates positive emotions in subordinates through mood contagion (Hu, 2023; Jun and Lee, 2024). Thus, when exposed to these positive emotions, subordinates broaden their awareness and thought-action repertoire. As time goes by, such repertoire contributes to build cognitive, social and psychological resources, which according to (Chiu *et al.*, 2018), creates the urge to share knowledge, thus fostering KS and hindering KH. In other words, SH as a socioemotional resource helps create other resources.

In sum, this paper posits that subordinates with higher KS and/or lower KH may indicate that they receive socioemotional resources from SH at work, while employees with lower KS and higher KH may indicate that they believe SH is not providing them with sufficient socioemotional resources in return. Using the above argument as a guide, this paper anticipates that, depending on whether the organisation provides or fails to provide socioemotional resources in terms of SH, employees who are facing SH themselves are

embedded in a *quid pro quo* dynamic that will lead them to pay the organisation back in terms of KS/KH using its own coin.

2.2.1. Affiliative and self-enhancing humour and knowledge behaviours

Affiliative and self-enhancing SH can act as providers of socioemotional resources for subordinates. Group members often perceive affiliative SH is as fostering team spirit and a sense of belonging (Tremblay and Gibson, 2016). As such, a supervisor who employs affiliative SH signals supportiveness and friendliness towards their subordinates, as well as their willingness to build higher-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships (Cooper *et al.*, 2018; Hu, 2023). Additionally, affiliative SH reduces stress and workplace tension (Gkorezis, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2024) and fosters positive emotions that can spread among individuals through mood contagion (Hu, 2023; Jun and Lee, 2024; Khattak *et al.*, 2024). Employees in relaxed work environments can observe the encouragement of their creativity, communication, and cooperation in this way.

Therefore, the use of affiliative SH by supervisors may lead employees perceive themselves as possessing greater positive socioemotional resources. In exchange, subordinates might reciprocate in kind by engaging in KS and refraining from displaying KH. Therefore,

H1a. Supervisor's affiliative humour is positively related to knowledge sharing (KS).

H1b. Supervisor's affiliative humour is negatively related to knowledge hiding (KH).

Supervisors, like people in general, often utilise coping mechanisms to manage challenging work situations. Individuals either usually seek support (e.g. co-workers, spouses, friends) or use relaxation or distraction techniques (e.g. taking a hot shower, engaging in physical activity). They also try to tackle these challenging work situations cognitively, thus

accepting that they are part of the job (i.e. occupational risks) or bringing positive aspects in

the future. Lastly, of interest to this study, it is not uncommon that they also rely on humour

to face those situations (Middleton *et al.*, 2021).

Certainly, self-enhancing SH can serve leaders to handle challenging work situations.

Self-enhancing SH, which is associated with emotion regulation mechanisms, facilitates stress

coping by the maintenance of a positive outlook, even in the face of adversity (Martin *et al.*,

2003). Furthermore, self-enhancing SH can also assist followers in handling challenging work

situations. As such, employees may view the effort that supervisors put forth to use self-

enhancing SH as a selfless act deserving of praise and, consequently, as a socioemotional

resource they gain. Lastly, not only can self-enhancing SH strengthen subordinates' trust in

the supervisor and psychological security, but also foster a workplace climate in which they

can feel free to explore creative, innovative ideas. This could be the case because self-

enhancing SH fosters camaraderie with the supervisor and within the team (Rajeswari and

Venugopal, 2024), potentially preventing employees from feeling judged or ridiculed (Yang

et al., 2021).

In sum, self-enhancing SH might provide enough socioemotional resources that

subordinates become more willing to reciprocate to supervisors who use it, ultimately

benefiting both the supervisor and the organisation by promoting KS and preventing KH.

Therefore,

H2a. Supervisor's self-enhancing humour is positively related to knowledge sharing (KS).

H2b. Supervisor's self-enhancing humour is negatively related to knowledge hiding (KH).

2.2.2 Aggressive and self-defeating humour and knowledge behaviours

Previous research has found that aggressive and self-defeating SH are forms of

negative SH that can harm leader-follower relationships (Huo *et al.*, 2012; Yam *et al.*, 2018).

Particularly, aggressive SH is considered the most derogatory and conflict-inducing among all SH styles (Yam *et al.*, 2018). Although it is often concealed behind a façade of innocent humour play (Martin *et al.*, 2003), aggressive SH is far from being light-hearted or friendly teasing (Robert *et al.*, 2016). By contrast, it involves mercilessly mocking and ridiculing others, criticising, and disparaging them for their mistakes (Pundt and Herrmann, 2015), to the point that this humour style has been qualified as a further form of abusive or disrespectful leadership (Huo *et al.*, 2012).

Indeed, aggressive humour is offensive, intimidating, and humiliating (Martin *et al.*, 2003), thus generating negative emotions in subordinates such as anger, outrage, and fear (Huo *et al.*, 2012; Yam *et al.*, 2018). Aggressive SH, therefore, rather than providing positive socioemotional resources, increases stress and contaminates both the work environment (Wei *et al.*, 2022) and the relationships between supervisors and subordinates (Cooper *et al.*, 2018; Yam *et al.*, 2018). Neves and Karagonlar (2020) argue that this deterioration of the supervisor-subordinate relationship may result from aggressive SH because it makes supervisors appear unreliable to subordinates (see also Kim et al., 2016). Moreover, since subordinates generally cannot retaliate directly against the supervisor due to his or her higher position (Huo *et al.*, 2012), some authors have identified that employees targeted by aggressive SH reciprocate indirectly, e.g. with the intention of leaving (Pundt and Venz, 2017) or by keeping silent (Wei *et al.*, 2022). This study hypothesises that being reluctant to share valuable knowledge (Asrar-ul-Haq and Anwar, 2016; Wang and Noe, 2010) and prone to hiding knowledge (He *et al.*, 2021) are further ways by which employees might indirectly and silently retaliate against aggressive SH.

Therefore,

H3a. Supervisor's aggressive humour is negatively related to knowledge sharing (KS).

H3b. Supervisor's aggressive humour is positively related to knowledge hiding (KH).

In broad terms, self-defeating SH involves self-deprecating jokes or a willingness to become the butt of others' jokes to gain acceptance (Martin *et al.*, 2003). If used excessively and over time, subordinates might interpret this SH style as a sign of their supervisor's decreased self-esteem (Stieger *et al.*, 2011), need for acceptance (Büyükyılmaz, 2022; Martin *et al.*, 2003), and even depression (Kuiper and McHale, 2009). This might happen because self-defeating humour could be used to compensate for a lack of skills or self-confidence (Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018; Neves and Karagonlar, 2020) or to avoid stressful situations (Richards and Kruger, 2017). In fact, people continuously seek mental health, such as well-being and quality of life, and therefore try to be in balance with their sociocultural environment (Sánchez-García *et al.*, 2020). Employees who encounter self-defeating SH hesitate to interact with their supervisors, as this humour style disrupts their balance within their sociocultural work environment, potentially putting their own mental health at risk (Sánchez-García *et al.*, 2020). Robert and Wilbanks' (2012) wheel model of humour supports this idea by suggesting that self-defeating humour can trigger negative emotions and attitudes in subordinates, such as insecurity, low self-esteem, and negative moods (Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018; Romero and Arendt, 2011; Wisse and Rietzschel, 2014), which are detrimental to their mental health. Furthermore, previous research has claimed that a mentally unhealthy environment significantly reduces participation in decision-making, work flexibility, communication, and interpersonal bonds at work (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), as well as employees' levels of support for their workplace (Rose *et al.*, 2023; Xie *et al.*, 2021).

In response to such a lack of socioemotional resources, this article posits that subordinates might react against self-defeating SH by reducing KS and increasing KH to express their dissatisfaction with self-defeating SH and to restore a healthy *quid pro quo* balance.

Therefore,

H4a. Supervisor's self-defeating humour is negatively related to knowledge sharing (KS).

H4b. Supervisor's self-defeating humour is positively related to knowledge hiding (KS).

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Procedure and sample characteristics

An online survey served as the basis for this study. Overall, data collection followed a rigorous process. A carefully designed questionnaire, aimed at capturing all possible nuances of SH styles and knowledge-related behaviours, was used. This methodological rigour was complemented by the precision of the questionnaire, which was grounded in empirically validated scales, and tailored to assess key variables.

Data gathering took place over a period of eight weeks in three metropolitan cities in India: Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. With the support of an alumni database from a business school, one of the study authors approached decision-makers of 14 manufacturing and service business firms. These sectors were selected because they are key contributors to the Indian economy (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024), and employees working in these sectors tend to engage in knowledge-intensive and collaborative tasks. The 14 approached firms employed approximately 500 employees each. This initial sample size was chosen to ensure a sufficient, diverse representation of both sectors while maintaining the study's manageability, but also because the firms are relevant to their corresponding industries, and their operations align with the study's focus on knowledge-related behaviours among employees. The author held in-person meetings with HR managers of these firms. During these meetings, the study objectives, implications, and data collection procedures were explained. Eventually, six firms agreed to participate: three in the manufacturing sector (i.e.

valve, air conditioning and car engine firms) and three in the service business sector (i.e. consultancy, finance and IT-ITES firms).

Upon the researchers' request, HR managers of the participating organisations invited a sample of 300 full-time employees each, who represented different departments and job levels. The 300-sample size was determined by stratified random sampling. Participation was voluntary, and there were no incentives for responding. Initially, a total amount of 420 employees volunteered to participate in the study.

The questionnaire used to gather participants' responses was written in English, since it is the preferred language for communication in the Indian industry. One trap item was included in the questionnaire ('Please choose "7" for this item') as an attention filter to address participant disengagement typical of online data collection (e.g. careless reading of the completion guidelines and/or items). Eventually, 287 volunteer employees completed the questionnaire. Several actions were taken to avoid social desirability bias and prevent common method variance (CMV). Firstly, the researchers explicitly assured each participant of their anonymity. In the e-mail that respondents received, the researchers emphasised that personal information would remain confidential. Secondly, respondents were assured that their answers would never be disclosed to third parties. Thirdly, the questionnaire was carefully designed to frame questions appropriately. For instance, the section on KH was introduced in a roundabout way, and where possible, the phrase 'not sharing knowledge' was used instead of 'hiding knowledge'. Fourthly, the questionnaire separated items related to KS and KH.

After excluding those with erroneous or incomplete data, 220 of the initial 287 employee responses were retained for further analysis. The final sample consisted of 71.9% male and 28.1% female employees, of whom 4.6% were aged 54 or above, 49.0% were aged between 25 and 54, and 46.4% were aged 25 or less. This sample distribution offered a good

representation of the study population. The Indian workforce has significantly more male than female participation, the ratio being 75% male and 25% female approximately, and most of the working population (approximately 65%) is between 15 and 59 years old (Verma and Srivastava, 2021). Regarding the relationship with their firms, respondents reported different tenures (sector, firm, and position): more than two years in the sector, 55%; in their current firm, 46.4%; and in their current position, 27.7%. Finally, 77.1% had an undergraduate-level education.

3.2. Measures

As described above, empirically validated scales were used to assess the key variables in this research. Table I presents the 7-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Firstly, SH was measured using Martin *et al.*'s (2003) Humour Style Questionnaire, a 32-item scale that assessed the four humour styles established in their framework. When necessary, the items were rephrased to focus on the supervisor (e.g., 'I let people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should', was replaced by 'My supervisor lets people laugh at him/her or make fun at his/her expense more than he/she should'). This scale was expected to assess four dimensions: affiliative SH (e.g. 'My supervisor enjoys making people laugh'), self-enhancing SH (e.g. 'When feeling depressed, my supervisor can usually cheer himself/herself up with humour'), self-defeating SH (e.g. 'My supervisor often tries to make people like or accept him/her more by saying something funny about his/her own weaknesses, blunders, or faults'), and aggressive SH (e.g. 'If my supervisor does not like someone, he/she often uses humour to put them down').

Next, Srivastava et al. (2006) developed a 7-item scale to measure employee KS. A sample item is: 'I help others in developing relevant strategies'. In addition, KH was gauged

by relying on Connelly *et al.* (2012). A sample item is: 'I offer some other information instead of what is really required'. Lastly, based on previous papers on SH (e.g. Gkorezis *et al.*, 2014; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018), gender (1=male, 2=female) and age (1=up to 25 years old; 2=between 25 and 34; 3=between 35 and 44; 5=over 55 years old) were considered as control variables.

3.3. Statistical analysis

Data were analysed using the AMOS 22 software for structural equation modelling (SEM), and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. To evaluate the validity of the measures, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with control variables was first performed (see Table I). All items loaded in the expected six-factor structure (the four SH styles, KS and KH). The polarity score of nine SH items was reversed because they were initially reverse scored. CFA included three fit indices: comparative-fit (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). The fit of six-factor CFA in Table I supports the uniqueness of the six variables (Cmin=1,722.850; df=930; p<.001; Cmin/df=1.857; CFI=.906; SRMR=.062; RMSEA=.059), with CFI above .9, and SRMR lower than .08, as recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). RMSEA failed to be below .05. However, as Browne and Cudeck (1993) indicate, below .08 it still indicates adequate fit.

Tables I and II also show the usual processes used to check for discriminant and convergent validity. In this vein, average variance extracted (AVE) and other standard methods were used. AVE values ranged from .762 to .550, so they were all equal to or greater than .50. According to Bagozzi and Yi (1991) and Fornell and Larcker (1981), this indicates strong support for convergent validity. To assess discriminant validity, the square roots of AVE values were calculated (range: .890 - .742, as observed on the main diagonal in Table

II), and cheeked to see if they consistently exceeded the correlations (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). These results would suggest that there is no correlation between the expectedly unrelated measures. As Table II shows, the square roots of AVE values for KS, KH, and the four SH styles were higher than the corresponding correlations between each other. This supports that the humour styles can be told apart. Then, following Hair and Alamer (2022), the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was calculated to further check discriminant validity. To obtain this ratio, the average of the heterotrait-heteromethod correlations (A) was divided by the square root of the product of the averages of the monotrait-heteromethod correlations for each construct ($A \times B$). This method assesses discriminant validity by comparing correlations between constructs. The HTMT value was .53, less than .90, which is consistent with the recommendations of Henseler et al. (2015), and supports the discriminant validity of the model. Lastly, Table I also shows that the Cronbach alpha (α) coefficient ranged from .949 to .884, above the recommended cut-off point of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

[Insert Table I here]

[Insert Table II here]

4. Results

Table II shows significant intercorrelations, but not all of them in the expected directions, which provides contrasting initial support for the hypotheses. Despite the consistent negative correlation between KS and KH, there were weak positive intercorrelations between KH and positive SH (affiliative and self-enhancing). They seem to confirm the heterogeneous complexity of SH (Kim *et al.*, 2016; Tsukawaki and Imura, 2023)

and knowledge constructs (Connelly *et al.*, 2012; He *et al.*, 2021). To test the research

hypotheses (Figure 2), a SEM model was constructed including the four SH styles, KS, and

KH. The model was then tested (Cmin=1,739.607; df=931; p<.001; Cmin/df=1.869;

CFI=.904; SRMR=.064; RMSEA=.061). Model fit results showed that the CFI fit index was

above .90, SRMR was below .80, and even RMSEA was slightly higher than .05, proving to

be acceptable (Browne and Cudeck, 1993). The standardised beta (β) paths relating the four

SH styles to KS (affiliative: β=.192; p<.05, self-enhancing: β=.166; p ns, self-defeating: β =–

.270; p<.01, and aggressive: β =–.065; p ns), and to KH (affiliative: β=–.099; p ns, self-

enhancing: β=.118; p ns, self-defeating: β=.137; p ns, and aggressive: β=.535; p<.001)

showed that affiliative SH was the only positive SH style significantly and positively related

to KS (β=.192; p<.05), whereas self-defeating was the only negative style significantly and

negatively related to KS (β=–.270; p<.01). In addition, aggressive SH was the only negative

SH style that was significantly and positively related to KH (β=.535; p<.001). The remaining

paths did not show statistical significance.

Therefore, these results support H1a, and H3b, and H4a, leaving H1b, H2, and H3a

and H4b unsupported.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

5. Discussion

The main goal of this study was to determinate whether positive SH styles, like

affiliative and self-enhancing, would be positively correlated with KS and negatively

correlated with KH. Conversely, it was hypothesised that negative SH styles, specifically

aggressive and self-defeating, would foster KH and hinder KS. These hypotheses were

supported on *quid pro quo dynamics* (i.e. socioemotional exchanges between supervisors and

subordinates) which propose that employees that receive socioemotional resources from SH would engage in KS and prevent KH, while those not receiving enough socioemotional resources from SH would reciprocate with KH and refrain from KS. In general, the findings partially supported these initial expectations. A positive relationship between affiliative SH and KS, and a negative relationship between self-defeating SH and KS, were found. Support was also found for a positive relationship between aggressive SH and KH. This indicates that the hypotheses concerning affiliative SH and KH, self-enhancing SH with both KS and KH, self-defeating SH with KH, and aggressive SH with KS did not receive empirical support. Stemming from these findings, both theoretical implications and practical contributions are offered in the following paragraphs.

5.1. Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this article supports recent calls for further research on the factors influencing KS and KH decisions (Anand *et al.*, 2020; Connelly *et al.*, 2019). More particularly, SH has been proposed as a determinant of KS and KH, and the way this relationship works is theoretically grounded on *quid pro quo* dynamics, since SH, KS and KH are discretional behaviours. These research calls are motivated by the fact that efforts to reduce KH in organisations remain insufficient (Anand *et al.*, 2020; Zhi *et al.*, 2024). Although KS and KH are negatively correlated, they are not two poles of the same construct but independent constructs with different origins (Gagné *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, to optimise these knowledge-related behaviours, managers might need to make different decisions and implement different strategies.

The R-squared values in Figure 2 show that the KH model is more significant than the KS model. SH relationships explain 42.7% of the variance in the case of KH, but only 12.1% in the case of KS. Additionally, as shown in Figure 2, this study contributes to the field by

revealing that the positive link between aggressive SH and KH was stronger than the positive

relationship between affiliative SH and KS. Specifically, the proposed model shows that SH

strategies in organisations offer more valuable insights for combating KH than for

encouraging KS, which contributes to fill the above-mentioned literature gap.

Secondly, previous research highlights a complex, contradictory relationship between

KS and KH (Connelly et al., 2012; He et al., 2021), suggesting that they are distinct

constructs that can coexist. The present study challenges these prior findings by revealing a

significant, negative intercorrelation between KS and KH (see Table II), indicating that

further research in this area is necessary.

Moreover, in the context of SH, this study aligns with previous findings on the

complex interaction between humour constructs (Heintz and Ruch, 2015; Jiang et al., 2020).

Li et al.'s (2023) model illustrates that SH styles are distinct constructs despite their

correlation. Table II shows significant positive intercorrelations among all SH constructs,

consistent with previous research (Heintz and Ruch, 2015). However, none of the four types

of SH had simultaneous significant effects on both KS and KH, and neither KS nor KH

received two SH impacts at the same time with the same sign. Thus, the proposed model

conceives SH as a holistic phenomenon in which each humour style has unique effects on

both KS and KH. Even the failed impact of self-enhancing SH on both KS and KH supports

the idea that SH styles interact with KS and KH in unique, non-parallel ways.

As a result, this research also contributes to the literature on workplace SH by

highlighting the appropriateness of employing various SH styles as a collective strategy for

overseeing employee KS and KH. KS and KH were indeed subject to opposing effects from

different SH styles. This provides further insights into how different SH styles (Kim et al.,

2016; Tsukawaki and Imura, 2023) and knowledge constructs (Connelly et al., 2012; He et

al., 2021) work together in complex and non-parallel ways.

Lastly, this paper responds to Kong et al.'s (2019) call for more extensive research on a wider array of humour styles —an area that has received insufficient attention to date. Early research on workplace humour primarily focused on positive humour styles, often affiliative, which were perceived as pleasant acts by employees (e.g. Cooper *et al.*, 2018; Peng *et al.*, 2020). Such focus was due to the greater applicability of positive humour in the complex leader-subordinate context (e.g. Choi *et al.*, 2022; Pundt and Herrmann, 2015). It is only recently that these studies have categorised humour into positive and negative styles, regardless of the humour's target (e.g. Gkorezis *et al.*, 2014). The findings of this research endorse the view that negative SH styles have adverse consequences in the workplace (e.g. Huo *et al.*, 2012; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018; Yam *et al.*, 2018), while also expanding existing knowledge by showing that SH as a whole produces contrasting negative effects. These adverse consequences exist both when SH is negatively associated with a positive target, such as KS, and when it is positively associated with a negative target, like KH.

In this vein, regarding the unobserved effects of self-directed SH styles, which have received significant less attention than interpersonal styles (Kong *et al.*, 2019; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012), a possible reason why self-enhancing SH did not affect KS and KH could rely on the essential lack of relational nature of such humour style, which might prevent supervisors from establishing social bonds in the workplace. Indeed, *quid pro quo* dynamics, especially those supported by social exchange theory (Blau, 1986) and conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), emphasise relational aspects, making self-enhancing SH appear irrelevant to employee KS and KH when they are engaged in a *quid pro quo* process. In other words, it might be that self-enhancing humour provides noticeable socioemotional resources for the supervisor, but not as evident to subordinates. Seemingly inconsistent, self-defeating SH, despite also not being a relational humour style, did reduce KS. The negative nature of self-defeating SH, in contrast to the positive nature of self-

enhancing SH, explains this inconsistency. Following *quid pro quo* dynamics, the idea behind negative SH styles was that employees would respond negatively to them because they do not provide enough socioemotional resources such as enhanced relationships with their supervisors (social exchange theory), stress alleviation (conservation of resources theory) and/or the expansion of their though-action repertoire (broaden-and-build theory). However, unlike self-enhancing SH, self-defeating SH may be more strongly linked to humour ethics than to socioemotional exchanges. Therefore, self-defeating SH may be more likely to trigger a KS/KH response based on humour ethics, particularly in relation to organisational justice. Given the extensive research on how employees react to (un)fair treatment from their supervisors (e.g. Colquitt and Zipay, 2015; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2016; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Suárez-Acosta, 2014), it might be that the impact of SH needs to be explored within a justice framework. Interpersonal justice (Greenberg, 1990), also referred to as (dis)respect (Tyler and Blader, 2000) or interpersonal treatment (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001), seems to be present in SH and is therefore particularly significant in shaping how subordinates might respond to it. In this context, this article proposes a new explanation of the connection between SH and KS/KH beyond simply stating that employees engage in KS/KH, while experiencing SH because they receive social and emotional resources in return. In this vein Folger's (2001, 2012) deonance theory might provide a basis to explain why SH influences employee KS/KH reactions. According to this theory, depending on whether SH is perceived as fair or unfair, it might trigger feelings of moral obligation in employees to respond with KS/KH, even if doing so involves personal costs (Turillo *et al.*, 2002). Thus, employees who perceive self-defeating SH might be acting in line with deontic theory, which posits that, when faced with unfairness, individuals may be morally compelled to react, even if this reaction incurs a personal cost rather than a benefit.

5.2. Practical implications

Although SH is an easily accessible leadership resource, it can still significantly enhance a leader's overall effectiveness in managing KS and KH. Because the findings of this article highlight the importance of incorporating affiliative SH in increasing KS, simply having a cheerful attitude towards life can help leaders better manage knowledge-related behaviours. In addition to the focus on affiliative SH, this article finds that avoiding aggressive or self-defeating SH is even more effective in promoting KS and preventing KH. Refraining from actions such as making fun of others, using sarcasm, ridiculing, or displaying hostility or superiority through aggressive SH, as well as avoiding self-deprecation or self-criticism to gain approval or prevent rejection through self-defeating humour, are the most impactful strategies to prevent harm to KS and KH. This approach is far more effective than promoting KS and KH by simply sharing jokes or funny stories.

Encouraging a supervisor to use affiliative SH while avoiding aggressive and self-defeating SH is no simple task. Given that this study focuses on workplace dynamics, it is recommended to implement supervisor training actions for this purpose through personalised programmes, seminars, and workshops, as well as incorporating specific strategies in the supervisor selection processes. To enhance affiliative SH through training, it is important to point out that the goal is not to turn supervisors into comedians (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). While humour is always intended to be funny (Cooper, 2005), training managers must ensure that SH is developed only to the extent that it enables employees to obtain socioemotional resources, which they can later reciprocate to the organisation by increasing KS.

Also, it should be highlighted that affiliative SH is, to a large extent, a voluntary and discretionary behaviour, frequently stemming from the leader's own personality. Therefore, affiliative SH or the avoidance of negative SH should not be imposed, as this could

potentially result in unwanted paradoxical effects. To help supervisors unlearn negative SH styles, it would be more realistic to encourage them to: 1) recognise that these humour styles are indeed counterproductive, as they promote undesirable levels of KS and KH; and 2) undergo training to effectively avoid using aggressive and self-defeating humour. Indeed, biases in these perceptions are common. Supervisors do not always recognise that negative SH styles are inappropriate or offensive to subordinates, or that they may be seen as counterproductive. Instead, leaders might perceive them as harmless and personal, considering it a private matter between themselves and their followers. While it may be relatively easy to instil into leaders that positive SH contributes to a more satisfying and efficient workplace for KS and KH, it is often more challenging to make them realise that negative SH is neither professional nor appropriate. More importantly, they might struggle to understand that negative SH cannot coexist with KS and KH without causing harm to them.

Lastly, it is worth remembering that an appropriate organisational culture facilitates the training process. At the cultural level, Mesmer-Magnus *et al.* (2018) suggest integrating humorous elements into the organisation's mission, vision, and value statements, proposing, for example, phrases like: 'If doctors recommend laughing 10 minutes a day, we laugh 11'. In addition to developing learning programmes, it can be beneficial to integrate specific strategies for leadership recruitment and selection. A key requirement for promoting the correct use of humour through training is to establish appropriate humour profiles during the selection processes. In this regard, Shellenbarger (2017) notes that candidates with a 'sense of humour' are not difficult to identify, as they are typically more self-confident, competent, and of higher status. She also points out that a sense of humour requires intelligence and sensitivity. In fact, beyond humour as a form of expression, the 'sense of humour' is considered a personality trait (Martin *et al.*, 2003; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012) that influences -though not decisively- the final behavioural improvements achieved through

training. It is anticipated that individuals with a natural sense of humour will find affiliative

SH learning easier. However, people prone to employing self-defeating humour are also

identifiable, as they are often perceived as needy, attention-seeking, insecure, and lacking in

self-esteem (Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018; Romero and Arendt, 2011; Wisse and Rietzschel,

2014). Finally, it is encouraging to note that the tendency to use humour is relatively stable in

everyday life (Kong *et al.*, 2019), which makes it easier to better detect and predict during the

selection process.

5.3. Limitations, future research, and conclusion

This study has several limitations. Firstly, its cross-sectional design requires caution

when interpreting the results. Secondly, the study exclusively focused on Indian employees,

whose unique cultural context may shape their working conditions. This context-specificity

could result in potential variations in the performance of the variables used when compared to

other countries, which raises concerns about the generalisability of the findings. Lastly, the

authors acknowledge that the research model, often perceived as a simplified representation of

reality, has oversimplified the complexity of reality by focusing only on direct relationships.

This limits the study's ability to empirically support mechanisms through which SH

influences KS and KH. Future research should consider including a more diverse range of

companies to enhance the conclusions of this study. Additionally, rather than focusing solely

on the pursuit of socioemotional resources, future research could also investigate whether

employees perceive their supervisor's SH actions as fair or unfair and how this perception

might motivate them to increase or decrease KS/KH out of a sense of moral obligation.

In conclusion, this study reveals that SH has a greater influence on KH than on KS.

The findings highlight the detrimental impact of negative SH styles in the workplace,

expanding the existing knowledge by showing that these SH constructs produce contrasting

adverse effects. Until recently, humour styles were primarily categorised as positive, making

this study particularly relevant in supporting the significant effects of negative SH on proper

KS/KH, with these effects proving more substantial than those of positive SH. This study also

shows that negative SH styles (particularly aggressive and self-defeating) have stronger

effects on KS/KH compared to positive SH styles. These adverse consequences arise when

they are associated with a positive outcome like KS and also when they are associated with a

negative outcome like KH. Consequently, this study reinforces the idea that KS/KH, similar

to positive and negative SH, possess unique characteristics despite their negative correlation.

The results suggest that merely raising leaders' awareness and ability to avoid negative SH

patterns and promoting positive SH styles is insufficient to drive proper KS/KH. Since there

is no clear pattern linking positive or negative SH with KS/KH, the findings point towards the

need for tailored strategies that address the specific SH problems that each type of SH each

organisation faces in managing desired knowledge-related behaviours.

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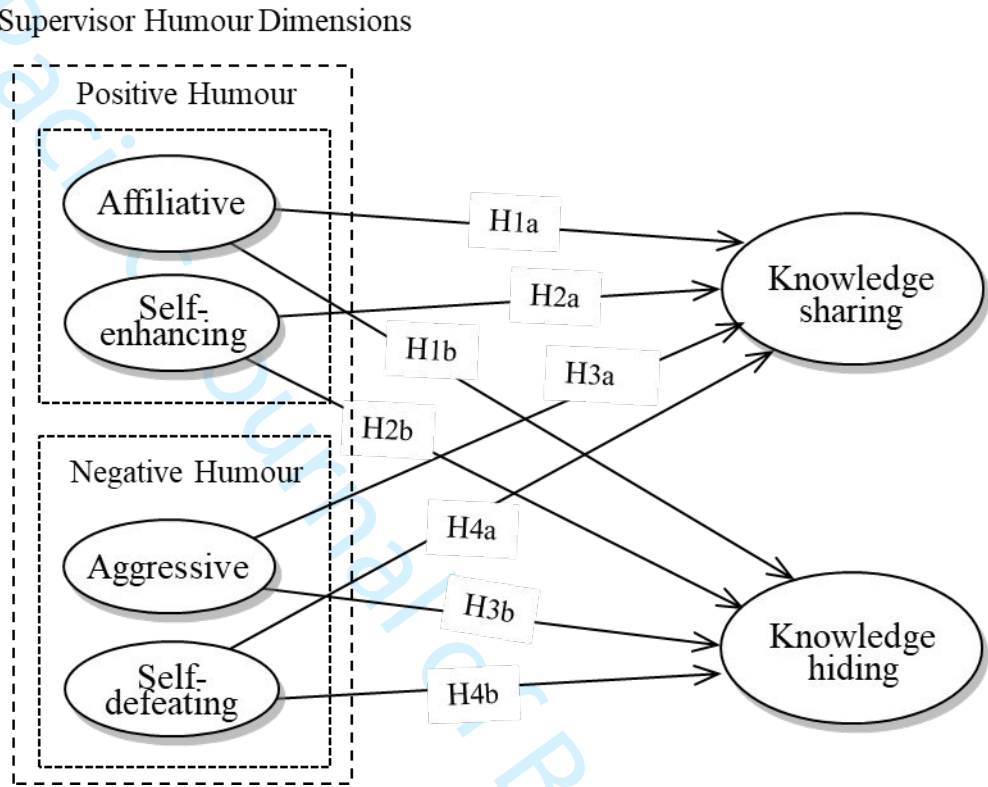
Figure 1. Hypothesised model

Table I. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

	Factor loading	SMC*	CR**	AVE***
(F1) Affiliative humour (α=.931)			.932	.691
My supervisor…				
X01 Does not usually laugh or joke around much with us (R)	.743	.553		
X02 Does not have to work very hard at making us laugh—he/she seems to be a naturally humorous person	.711	.506		
X03 Rarely makes other people laugh by telling funny stories about himself/herself (R)	.780	.608		
X04 Laughs and jokes a lot with his/her closest friends	.689	.475		
X05 Usually does not like to tell jokes or amuse people (R)	.848	.719		
X06 Enjoys making people laugh	.868	.753		
X07 Does not often joke around with his/her friends (R)	.884	.781		
X08 Usually can't think of witty things to say when he/she is with us (R)	.818	.668		
(F2) Self-enhancing humour (α=.949)			.949	.762
X09 When feeling depressed, my supervisor can usually cheer himself/herself up with humour	.791	.625		
X10 Even when he/she is by himself/herself, my supervisor is often amused by the absurdities of life	.841	.708		
X11 If my supervisor is feeling upset or unhappy usually, he/she tries to think of something funny about the situation to make himself/herself feel better	.844	.713		
X12 His/her humorous outlook on life keeps him/her from getting overly upset or depressed about things	.841	.717		
X13 If he/she is by himself/herself and is feeling unhappy, my supervisor can make an effort to think of something funny to cheer himself/herself up	.885	.784		
X14 When feeling sad or upset, my supervisor usually loses his/her sense of humour (R)	.811	.659		
X15 My supervisor believes that thinking some amusing aspect of a situation is often a very effective way of coping with problems	.881	.781		
X16 My supervisor does not need to be with other people to feel amused – he/she can usually find things to laugh about even when he/she is by himself/herself	.799	.638		
(F3) Aggressive humour (α=.942)			.941	.741
X17 If someone makes a mistake, my supervisor teases him/her about it	.681	.466		
X18 People are never offended or hurt by my supervisor's sense of humour (R)	.761	.585		
X19 When telling jokes or saying funny things, my supervisor is usually not very concerned about how other people are taking it	.821	.681		
X20 My supervisor does not like it when people use humour as a way of criticising or putting someone down (R)	.821	.682		
X21 Sometimes my supervisor says things that are not appropriate for the situation	.880	.774		
X22 My supervisor never participates in laughing at others even if all his/her friends are doing it (R)	.811	.664		
X23 If my supervisor does not like someone, he/she often uses humour to put them down.	.851	.733		
X24 Even if something is really funny, my supervisor will not laugh or joke about it if someone will be offended (R)	.890	.792		
(F4) Self-defeating humour (α=.949)			.949	.760
X25 My supervisor lets people laugh at him/her or make fun at his/her expense more than he/she should	.798	.636		
X26 My supervisor will often get carried away in putting himself/herself down if it makes the family or friends laugh	.879	.776		
X27 My supervisor often tries to make people like or accept him/her more by saying something funny about his/her own weaknesses, blunders, or faults	.831	.690		
X28 He/she does not often say funny things to put himself/herself down (R)	.872	.761		
X29 He/she often goes overboard in putting himself/herself down when he/she is making jokes or trying to be funny	.883	.780		
X30 When he/she is with friends or family, he/she often seems to be the one that other people make fun of or joke about	.843	.710		
X32 If he/she is having problems or feeling unhappy, he/she often covers it up by joking around, so that even his/her closest friends don't know how he/she really feels	.787	.619		
X32 Letting others laugh at him/her is his/her way of keeping his/her friends and family in good spirits	.793	.634		

(F5) Knowledge sharing (α=.884)			*.894*	*.550*
Y33 I share my special knowledge and expertise with others	.803	.645		
Y34 If I have some special knowledge about how to perform the task, I am likely to tell others about it	.812	.660		
Y35 I exchange information, knowledge, and sharing of skills with my coworkers	.841	.707		
Y36 I freely provide other members with hard-to-find knowledge or specialised skills	.678	.459		
Y37 I help others in developing relevant strategies	.788	.621		
Y38 I share lot of information with others	.684	.468		
Y39 I offer lots of suggestions to others	.537	.288		
(F6) Knowledge hiding (α=.887)			*.934*	*.704*
In a specific situation with my co-worker…				
Y40 I'll tell that I would help out later but postpone as much as possible	.768	.589		
Y41 I offer some other information instead of what is really required	.807	.651		
Y42 I pretend that I do not know the information though I do	.831	.691		
Y43 I say that I am not very knowledgeable about the topic though I am	.800	.641		
Y44 I explain that the information is confidential and only available to people on a particular project even though it's not the case	.899	.808		
Y45 I tell that the supervisor would not let anyone share this knowledge even though it's not the case	.919	.845		

Note: Reverse scored items (r) were automatically inversely coded before proceeding to the CFA
SEM model output: Cmin=1,722.850; df=930; p<.001; Cmin/df=1.857; CFI=.906; SRMR=.062; RMSEA=.059.
[*] SMC=Squared multiple correlation; [**] CR=Composite reliability; [***] AVE=Average variance extracted

Table II. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Affiliative humour	4.09	1.30	(.831)					
2. Self-Enhancing humour	3.99	1.34	.694***	(.890)				
3. Aggressive humour	2.70	1.46	.277***	.203**	(.861)			
4. Self-defeating humour	2.80	1.42	.426***	.420***	.711***	(.872)		
5. KS	5.42	.97	.210**	.204**	−.130	−.130	(.742)	
6. KH	5.45	1.00	.166*	.196**	.604***	.525***	−.283***	(.839)

N =220; *p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001

Note: Data on the diagonal correspond to the AVE for each factor, as shown in Table I, once the square root was extracted

Figure 2. Tested SEM model
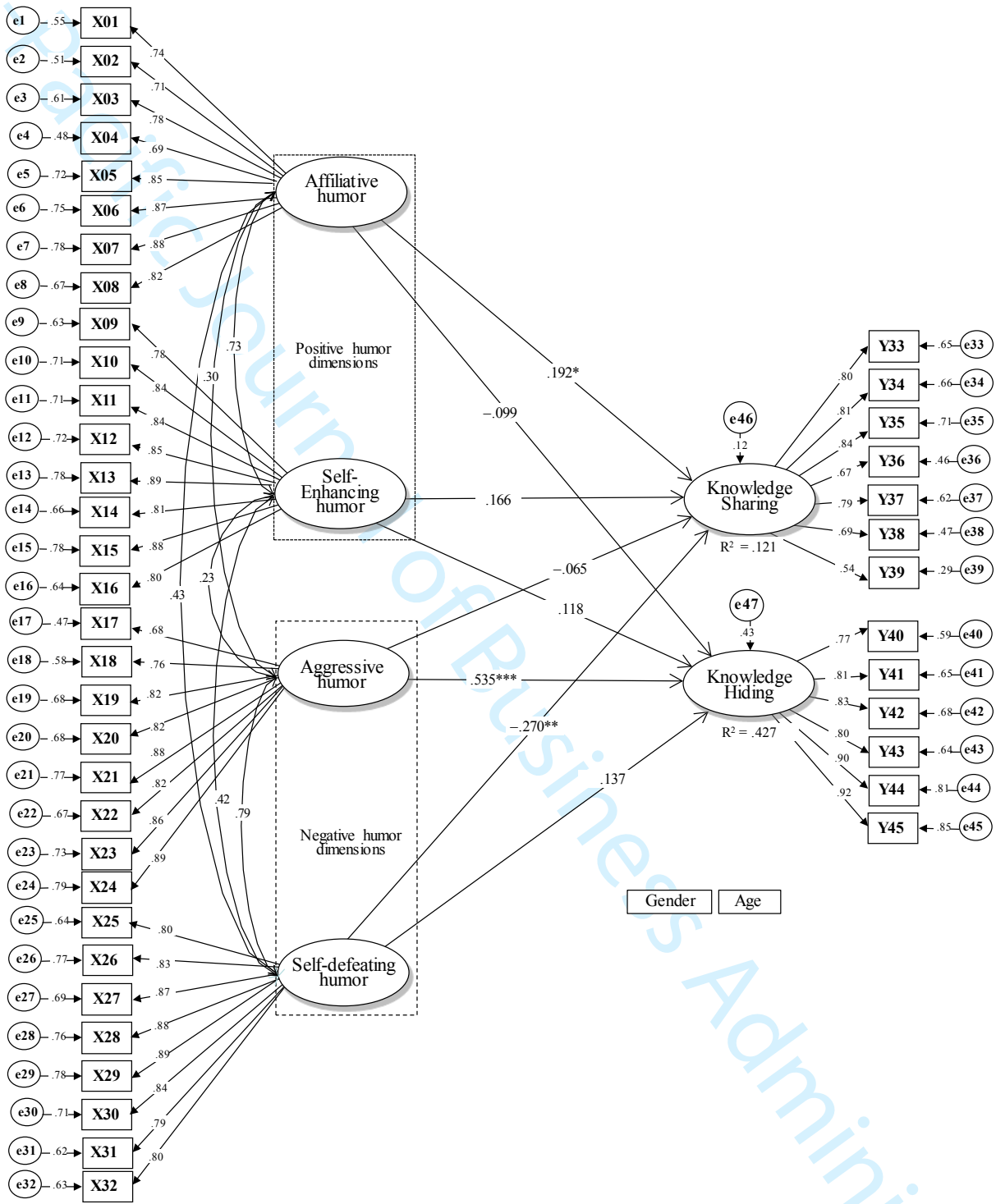
Cmin=1,739.607; df=931; p<.001; Cmin/df=1.869; comparative-fit index (CFI)=.904; standardised root mean square residual (SRMR)=.064; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=.061
R^2 = R-squared value
N =220; *p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001