Leader humor effectiveness – The divergent dynamics of leader humor over time in East Asia and North America

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Abstract Management research on humor, which has mainly been conducted in Anglo-Saxon regions, generally tends to assume that the use of humor by a leader towards his or her subordinates has positive effects. However, despite the popularity of such studies in Anglo-Saxon regions, less attention has so far been paid to the aspects of the cultural context of leader humor, particularly in regard to time. We argue that leader humor is not so effective in East Asia because of different preferences in relation to communication style and divergent expectations and value sets during early-phase leader–member interactions. On the other hand, however, we also argue that leader humor may become equally if not more effective in the mature phase of leader–member interactions. While cultural differences, along with the current popularity of positive emotions, including humor, at work, are much more apparent at the early stage of a relationship, our exploration uncovers areas that are important for effective cross-cultural communication training and the development of managers for global assignments.

Keywords: Global leadership, international HRM, humor, culture, relationship building, uncertainty reduction, emotions, East Asia, North America, informal institutions
Introduction

In line with recent interest in the role that fun plays in the workplace (Michel, Tews, & Allen, 2019), research on humor, including leaders’ behavior with regard to humor, has been popularized in academia and in the management consulting industry (e.g., Cooper, 2008; Robert Dunne, & Iun, 2015). Humor is regarded as an important condition for the creation of social bonds (Godfrey, 2016), and a leader’s humor is widely regarded as an indicator of the leader having likable characteristics. It is claimed that humor has a strong positive influence on the quality of the relationship between a leader and his or her subordinates (Cooper, 2008), which is pivotal for successful leadership (Graen & Uhl-bien, 1995). Studies argue that the use of humor influences the effect of both transformational (loyalty) and transactional (professional respect) leadership styles on individual and unit-level performance (e.g., Cooper, 2004).

Although studies have overwhelmingly suggested that leader humor has a positive effect, the main assumptions of the research on leader humor have been made for organizations in the Anglo-Saxon cluster, and especially in North America. Moreover, most of them have not considered time dynamics, that is, the different phases of the leader–member relationship. The question therefore remains of whether positive effects of leader humor are stable across time and in different contexts (see also Budhwar, Varma, & Patel, 2016). The culture and time could shape a member’s value and norm system. Accordingly, cultures different from those in the Anglo-Saxon cluster and different stages of a relationship could be important contexts for the humor dynamics of a relationship, and studying them would yield interesting insights. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore, conceptually, the effects of leader humor in East Asia (narrowly defined as China, Korea, and Japan) in the early and mature stages of a relationship.

We have chosen the East Asian region for our comparison with the Anglo-Saxon cluster for two reasons. First, individualism (IND)/collectivism and power distance (PD) have strong relevance to leadership in relation to hierarchy and teams, respectively. East Asian countries represent a cultural cluster in which IND is low and PD highly pronounced, in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon cluster where IND is high and PD low (Varma, Budhwar & Pichler, 2011). Secondly, and related to the first reason, studies have claimed that there are culturally-specific leadership styles in East Asia such as paternalistic leadership (Aycan, 2006; Aycan, Schyns, Sun, Felfe, & Saher, 2013) or collective leadership (e.g., I. Yang, 2006). Studies have also suggested the importance of indigenous concepts (e.g., guanxi, defined as particularistic relationships in China,
face, etc.) in explaining management and leader behavior in East Asia. As there have been many studies on leader humor in the context of the Anglo-Saxon cluster, the exploration of the leader humor dynamic in the East Asian context will offer important insights into whether and how seemingly universally accepted behaviors are perceived differently in different cultural contexts.

We distinguish the early from the mature relationship phase in considering leader humor. By the early relationship phase, we mean the time when those who are interacting are still strangers to each other, and personal information about them is not yet available (Cooper, 2005). In the early stage of a relationship, interactions are strongly influenced by the prevailing cultural norms, as no shared norms at dyad or team level have yet been developed. Without any attributions or impressions, initial expectations and (dis)confirmations in early relationships, based on leader prototypes, offer clear distinctions that are also influenced by culture (Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982; I. Yang, 2014).

We are interested in relationship building across cultures, which is a task for every expatriate manager. Leader–subordinate relationship building has an impact on intrinsic motivations, including positive emotions for members or subordinates that subsequently influence work performance (I. Yang & Horak, 2019a). Accordingly, we adopt leader–member exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) as the main framework for looking at the effects of leader humor.

The overarching question guiding this article is the following: How do cultural context and time influence the usage and effects of leader humor in organizations in East Asia? In answering this question, we examine the motivation for leaders to use humor, as well as the impact of leader humor on members in the early process of relationship building and over time. Given that the aim of this paper is to look explicitly at the East Asian cultural context in connection with the role played by time, and also because of limitations on the length of the article, in the Anglo-Saxon context we only consider leader humor in mature relationships for comparison. We assume that in an Anglo-Saxon context the effects of leader humor do not change much over time, relative to the case in an East Asian context.

This paper contributes to the literature on global leadership and international human resource management (HRM) by illustrating that what seems to be popular leader behavior (in this case, leader humor) may not have the same effect across different cultures. Since it is important for leaders to understand how to increase the effectiveness of their actions, this study highlights
the importance of awareness. This is particularly important in the early stage of leader–member relationships. During this period, behavioral expectations in interactions between individuals or groups are strongly influenced by the respective national culture (Kwon & Farndale, 2018) rather than by developed and shared norms. Thus, the insights developed in this study can be used to train and develop managers for global assignments more effectively by raising the awareness of the role humor plays in different cultures and what implications this has for leader-member relationships. Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of being aware of different contexts, as recently pointed out in the international HRM literature (Farndale et al., 2017), if leaders’ behavior is to be effective in influencing members and their psychological well-being and job performance.

In what follows, we establish a conceptual model looking at the different foci of leadership, i.e., leader–member interactions, culture, and time. We start by reviewing the extant studies conducted in the Anglo-Saxon cultural context to illustrate the motivation for a leader to engage in humor, and the way in which this behavior influences followers in the early phase of relationship building. Next, we integrate culture and time into our model, as we consider these to be important context-affecting factors. We present multiple propositions that make up our conceptual model for the divergence in the dynamics of leader humor across time between East Asia and North America. In this part, we consider typical indigenous notions that would influence leaders’ humor in East Asia. Finally, the theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Motivation for leader humor – Ingratiation
The concept of humor is not easy to define. An elegant approach describes it as similar to beauty, as it does not readily lend itself to a single definition (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Different definitions of humor stress different aspects. With a focus on its results or the receiver’s interpretation, humor is defined as something that most people believe they know when they see (Godfrey, 2016). With a focus on the sender’s intention, on the other hand, humor is defined as any behavior used to entertain others (Bressler, 2006). With a focus on the goals of humor, Martin and colleagues (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) classify humor into four different styles, which are affiliative (to create a sense of fellowship), self-enhancing (to feel good about oneself), self-deprecating (to put oneself down), and aggressive humor (to put others down).

Along with this wide range in the nature of humor, it is suggested that the role humor plays is quite broad, ranging from influencing personal psychological well-being (e.g., coping: Abel,
improving or harming relationships with others (Martin et al., 2003). Here we define humor as any interaction or remark that is intended to elicit amusement and/or that has that result (see also Cooper, 2005; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). This is in line with our interest in the role of leader humor in building relationships, and also reflects the complications of gauging the nature of humor by studying receivers in the early stage of a relationship (cf. Pundt & Herrmann, 2015).

Studies suggest that one of reasons for leaders to use humor is because it allows them to ingratiate themselves (Cooper, 2005). Ingratiation is an attempt by an individual to increase their attractiveness in the eyes of others, to be liked and/or to influence others’ behavior (Cooper, 2005; Jones, 1964). It can put the target person in a good mood or induce him/her to think favorably of the ingratiateor (Yukl & Tracey, 1992). LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) suggests that it is mainly for the leader to engage in an initial offer to develop a relationship with a member. The theory also contends that when a leader provides a more positive environment for members, the members will reciprocate with positive work-related behaviors and attitudes.

When a leader’s humor is motivated by ingratiation, it becomes an initial offer that could be highly appreciated by a member (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). That is, although a leader does not necessarily need to engage in ingratiating behavior, because of her or his hierarchical position and power, leader humor could be used in an attempt to make an initial offer to a member. In a similar vein, studies in western contexts show that the frequent use by leaders of positive humor will help to generate positive LMX (Cooper, 2008), while people find it easier to initiate and maintain social relationships with humorous others (Fitts, Sebby, & Zlokovich, 2009).

So how does such leader humor influence members? Humor is useful for the development of positive relationships, and interpersonal interactions activate both cognitive and affective mechanisms (Trichas, Schyns, Lord, & Hall, 2017). Therefore, in the section below we consider the mechanisms by which a leader’s humor could reduce uncertainty (cognition), give rise to positive emotions (affect) in a subordinate, and encourage the subordinate’s identification with the leader (cognition and affect alike) in the early relationship-building phase.

Effects of leader humor on members

Uncertainty reduction through attributional confidence
Communication to reduce uncertainty is crucial to a leader and the members, given their on-going and future interactions. Uncertainty reduction has primarily been used to examine initial
interactions (e.g., Walker et al., 2013). Relationships develop as people learn more about each other and ultimately gain attributional confidence (Elangovan, Auer-Rizzi, & Szabo, 2007). Like the perceived adequacy of information, attributional confidence explains the occurrence of behavior and predicts appropriate future behaviors. Attributional confidence is seen to be effective in reducing uncertainty (Fairbairn & Sayette, 2014).

Communication that reduces uncertainty includes self-disclosure, interrogative strategies, non-verbal immediacy, and self-disclosure by the other. Among these, self-disclosure results in uncertainty reduction, at least in part, because of its reciprocal effect. Research shows that self-disclosure as a method of uncertainty reduction communication has a pan-cultural effect on attributional confidence, while the other types of uncertainty reduction communication appear to be more culture-specific (Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison, & Diehn, 2016). Leaders’ humor is one form of self-disclosure through which leaders share personal information at work that they are not required to share (Cooper, 2008).

Moreover, leaders’ humor is particularly useful in the early stage of relationships, because it has the function of reducing subordinates’ perceived uncertainty. That is, leaders’ humor can be seen as one of the acceptable ways in which a leader discloses something about themselves before moving on to topics of a more personal nature (Cooper, 2005). When a leader openly shows followers what he or she finds funny, it gives the followers the chance to get to know the leader at a deeper level (Cooper, 2008).

Generating positive emotions
Numerous studies involving humor have indicated that it has the ability to induce positive affect (e.g., Cooper, 2005, 2008; Robert et al., 2015; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This is because humorous expression is enjoyable and amusing, as one of its main purposes is to entertain others. We also expect that a leader will generate positive emotions in his or her followers, since the leader’s humor signifies an initial offer by him or her. That is, a leader’s humor could be perceived as ingratiating and a relationship-oriented initial offer indicating that the leader values the relationship with his or her followers. Given the fact that leaders are key decision makers, governing their followers’ salaries and promotions, a leader’s invitation in the form of leader humor to reduce the hierarchical distance could also become a positive affective event for a subordinate (cf. Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).
Increasing identification with a leader

Identity is a schema of an individual that describes, ties together, and explains his or her relevant personal features, characteristics, and experiences, whereas identification with a leader involves the inclusion of this relationship into the definition of the individual, and an extension of his or her self (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Social identification has both cognitive and affective dimensions that reciprocally reinforce each other (e.g., Johnson, Morgeson, & Hekman, 2012). The two main reasons why people identify with another person or with a group are, first, to reduce social uncertainty (Reid & Hogg, 2005) and, secondly, to feel better about themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The reduction of uncertainty is associated with cognitive identification, as cognitive identification defines one’s place in the social environment (Johnson et al., 2012). Affective identification concerns an individual’s positive feelings, such as pride, excitement, joy, or love, experienced from being with others (Johnson et al., 2012).

With its functions of both uncertainty reduction and the generation of positive emotions, as discussed earlier, we would expect that a leader’s humor would give rise to identification with the leader (e.g., Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). A positive identity is also established in the process of ingratiation (Jones, 1964), which is perceived to be represented by a leader’s humor. Moreover, uncertainty reduction and further identification with a leader can result from a reduced hierarchy, as well as from the perception of similarity that arises through the leader’s humor. Leaders who use humor show their followers that they are willing to encounter their followers on the same level (Cooper, 2008), breaking down the interpersonal barriers associated with a formal hierarchy or status. Such diminished hierarchy and self-disclosure through the use of a leader’s humor could also contribute to the perception of similarity (Cooper, 2008). People further associate similarity concerning beliefs and values with attractiveness and trustworthiness in the identity-building process (Van Knippenberg & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

Thus far, we have considered the effects of leader humor on members after looking at the motivation for a leader in a North American context to use humor, without considering aspects of cultural context and time. In the next sections, we will develop research propositions about leader humor in an East Asian context by contrasting the perceptions of leader humor in the East Asian and the Anglo-Saxon context, while additionally distinguishing between the early and mature relationship phases.
The role of cultural context and time

In the East Asian context, we argue that leader humor may not be as effective as is suggested by the previous studies mentioned above. This may appear to be at odds with the claim that in East Asian countries effective leadership is very much relationship-oriented (Uchida, Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009). However, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon contexts, humor is in general used in a rather latent and suppressed manner in East Asia (I. Yang, Kitchen, & Bacouel-Jentjens, 2017). Moreover, there are cultural differences in leaders’ behaviors and followers’ expectations, in relation to power distance (PD) and individualism (IND), between East Asia and the Anglo-Saxon clusters (Hofstede, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1998).

PD orientation is about how comfortable people are with inequality of status and hierarchies, and it substantially influences what individuals expect from leaders (Lian, Brown, Tanzer, & Che, 2011). Individuals with low PD orientation view leaders as approachable (Hofstede, 2001), and are more likely to expect and develop equal relationships with them (C. Li, Zhao, & Begley, 2015). In more hierarchical East Asian cultures, with high PD, those who are at the top of the hierarchy are expected to take charge, give orders, and know what is right (Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, & Lawler, 2000).

At the same time, in collectivist East Asian cultures, relations with others fundamentally define the concept of self, and relational harmony is strongly emphasized (Horak & Yang, 2018; Park & Nawakitphaitoon, 2017; Uchida et al., 2009). In individualist Anglo-Saxon cultures, a person is an independent, self-reliant, and self-oriented being (Uchida et al., 2009). Moreover, embellished self-perceptions and the expression of self-enhancement are reinforced in individualist cultures, whereas self-diminishment or self-criticism is more usual in collectivist cultures, which encourage modesty (Cullen, Gentry, & Yammarino, 2015). Given also the stronger in-group member relational ties in East Asian culture, one can conclude that a leader displays interdependence and collaboration in a collectivist culture, whereas in an individualist culture a leader is independent and strong-willed (Dorfman, 1998).

Given that humor is a form of communication, the well-known notions of high context culture and low context culture, illustrating contrasting communication styles, need to be taken into account (Hall, 1976). While high PD and low IND are highly correlated (Hofstede, 2001), in a high context culture there is implicit and indirect communication, which ensures harmony between people with low IND. In a high context culture, communication takes place in a very
subtle and subdued manner, whereas it is fairly explicit and direct in a low context culture. Accordingly, in a high context culture the receiver’s role becomes very important in interpreting what has been said by the sender, reflecting the status and history shared between them.

This phenomenon can be further explained by the indigenous notion of face in East Asian countries. The notion of face is also useful in explaining the low level of motivation for, and appreciation of, leader humor in East Asia, as illustrated below.

**Weak motivation for leader humor due to face concerns in East Asia**

East Asians are known for having a face culture, which is a fundamental social ideal and behavioral norm. Face is a psychological and social construct referring to the social dignity or public image conferred by virtue of a person’s relative position (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Face is mostly external, and can be gained or lost; the maintenance of one’s face is an on-going process, as face can be gained or lost via the fulfillment of one’s role (Leung & Cohen, 2011).

In an East Asian context, face is characterized as relation-based, other-directed, and emotional (Chang & Holt, 1994). People are reluctant to engage in direct or explicit communication, to avoid losing face in embarrassment and shame (Merkin, 2009). Silence in conversation is valued as a sign of humility and modesty (Shim, Kim, & Martin, 2008). The major focus is primarily on saving face or not losing face, to maintain one’s social position (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Also associated with high PD in East Asia, the notion of hierarchy is deeply embedded in the face concept and concerns a wish to avoid overstepping status boundaries (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Interpersonal communication, when there are face concerns for social status and social harmony, follows situation-oriented patterns (Merkin, 2009).

Face concerns are greater when interacting with someone who is not close, because there is a lack of understanding of the other’s real self (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1993). Similarly, formal situations and public contexts exert a strong effect on face loss that is greater than the effects of status differences and the personal context (Shim et al., 2008). Accordingly, we argue that in East Asia there is less motivation for a leader to use humor in the early stage of a relationship. In the early stage of a relationship, in which the leader and members do not really know each other, face work is actively employed to protect the leader’s image of his or her position. A person in a certain position has more face and is under stronger constraints to maintain face (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Face work by a leader follows the script of a set of directions and expected behavior, and the main target is to uphold the leader’s hierarchical position and status in formal interactions. At this point
in time, leader humor behavior is not congruent with the expectations of the status of someone in a high position.

Moreover, the culture of face relies on a high context communication style that values silence, and this is at odds with the emphasis on verbal communication in leader humor. Similarly, as oral competence and cognitive skills (e.g., incongruence via humor) are quite important in executing humor (Eisend, 2009), there is a high risk of a leader experiencing loss of face through embarrassment from failed humor. Even when a leader is comfortable with expressing humor, the comprehension of humor demands cognitive abilities from the listeners (i.e., the members). This is particularly true in high context cultures, in which the context of a relationship affects smooth communication, with a clear distinction between in-group and out-group culture (e.g., Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). This is because humor is often based on multiple and ambiguous interpretations, and humor might be understood in a variety of ways, which means that misinterpretation is always a possibility (Collinson, 2002). Studies also point out the risk of humor if there is no shared history among the participants (Ford, Teeter, Richardson, & Woodzicka, 2017).

Given the discussion on culture and face so far, therefore, our first proposition is the following:

**Proposition 1:** *In the early stage of a relationship in an East Asian context, there is low motivation for a leader to use humor.*

**Low effect on uncertainty reduction in East Asia**

Along with low motivation and the consequent infrequent use of leader humor, as discussed earlier, the notion of face also influences how members appreciate humor. We argue that members’ low appreciation of leader humor further influences their uncertainty, positive emotions, and identification with the leader in the early stage of a relationship. As discussed earlier, LMX theory suggests that, while initial offers could be task-based or affective-based, a leader’s humor is one of the most effective tools for affect-based initial offers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). However, the success of initial offers in building a relationship depends on the appreciation by the target or the member, and the question here is whether or not, in the East Asian context, leader humor in the early stage of a relationship would be valued.

The theory of implicit leadership explains that the prototypes and expectations of leader behavior differ across cultures. They are based on deeply embedded assumptions and schemas of
what it means to be a leader and what is expected of a leader (Cullen et al., 2015). Individuals whose behavior matches these prototypical prescriptions are identified as effective leaders (Foti & Luch, 1992). Accordingly, although the use of humor to release tensions in a team might be one of those behaviors that members expect of a typical or a good leader (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015) in Anglo-Saxon contexts, the use of humor by a leader is not very effective when people appreciate seriousness as a work ethic, as is typically the case in East Asia.

For example, in the United States, personal relationships are characterized by common interests and spontaneity (Stewart & Bennett, 1991), and having a sense of humor is an important criterion on which people usually assess one another (Randler, 2008). However, in low IND cultures, where relation-based reference is more applicable to future interactions, leaders’ humor, as an indication of how funny they can be, is not so relevant a contribution to relationship building. That is, leaders’ characteristics of authority, morality, and benevolence, the main components of the paternalistic leadership that is the prototypical leadership type (Aycan, 2006; Aycan et al., 2013), would be more relevant in the East Asian context. While a leader’s humor in the early relationship phase illustrates verbal skills and discloses personal perspectives, it does not offer meaningful information as to whether members can trust and rely on the leader in future interactions (Fee & Michailova, 2020). Therefore, even if a leader’s humor still reduces the uncertainty about the leader to some extent, its impact is relatively weak.

Moreover, leader humor could be viewed as an inappropriate use of time and a distraction when a leader is expected to uphold his or her status and to be distant (because of face ideals). Hence, leader humor at the beginning of a relationship is not an effective mechanism for reducing uncertainty in the East Asian context. We thus propose the following:

**Proposition 2:** *In the early relationship phase in East Asian contexts, a leader’s humor is not very effective in reducing uncertainty.*

**Weak effect on inducing positive emotions in East Asia**

In addition to what has been suggested above, we argue that the effects of leaders’ humor on generating positive emotions are not so obvious in the early phase of a relationship in the East Asian context. First of all, while leaders using humor aim to generate positive emotions in members, this effect will be short-lived and weak, since it is not as pertinent for people from countries scoring low for IND, especially in relation to the self. Emotions relating to the self vary across cultures and are connected to the discussion about identification with a leader. Positive
emotions generated by humor are self-focused and internally experienced, and people from countries scoring high in IND associate them more with feelings of happiness. However, in countries in which IND is less pronounced, people are more likely to associate feelings of happiness (i.e., positive emotions) with relational and shared experiences with others, such as belonging and harmony (Uchida et al., 2009). Similarly, studies show that in judging emotions, people in East Asian cultures (e.g., Japan) consider multiple sources and contexts in assessing the relationship between others and themselves, whereas people in high IND cultures (e.g., the United States) tend to consider self-reflection experienced individually (Uchida et al., 2009).

Second, given the low opinion of the expression of positive affect in East Asian clusters (Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008), especially in public, humor with which a leader displays positive affect would not be highly appreciated, and would therefore be less effective in generating positive emotions in members. East Asians are often characterized as quiet and reserved, which is in line with their culturally endorsed low emotional arousal states; this is different for North Americans, who value excitement, enthusiasm, and other high arousal positive states (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). Both positive and negative emotions are less (negatively) correlated among East Asians than among North Americans (Shiota, Campos, Gonzaga, Keltner, & Peng, 2010), and feeling negative is more strongly associated with poor mental and physical health in the US than in Japan (Curhan et al., 2014). Hence our third proposition is the following:

**Proposition 3:** In the early phase of a relationship in East Asian contexts, leader’s humor is not very effective in inducing positive emotions for members.

**Weak effects on identification with a leader**

How do subordinates identify with a leader? The idea of implicit leadership suggests that the subordinates’ expectations and the fulfillment of those expectations by the leader contribute to identification (Lord et al., 1982). However, a more fine-grained view is needed because of cultural differences. Members in high IND cultures value an expression of the need for self-sufficiency (Liu, Hui, Lee, Kwan, & Wu, 2013). A leader’s humor that conveys his or her pleasure-seeking nature is idiosyncratic to a high IND culture, and rests on independent and autonomous grounds. Also, individuals with low PD do not view the organizational hierarchy as reflecting any existential difference in status (Lian et al., 2011), and are therefore less attuned to status distinctions, valuing equal participation and involvement (Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009). Meaningful interactions, such as friendship with a leader, allow members to feel more equal to the leader and
this is a sign of empowerment, which is in line with the pursuit of autonomy and the independent self in a horizontal IND culture (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007).

In contrast to the above, in low IND cultures, members’ identification with a leader is a function of their membership of the group, rather than a direct relationship with the leader him or herself (Gomez, Kirkman, & Shapiro, 2000). The prototypes of leadership ideals in low IND cultures value group harmony and altruistic motivation as desirable moral norms for appropriate leader behavior (cf. House, 1995). In addition, the reduction of hierarchical distance through the leader’s use of humor is not desirable or practical, bearing in mind the leader’s need to maintain face in a high PD culture. Those who are at the top of the hierarchy are expected to take charge, be in control, and give orders (Robert et al., 2000), and it is a virtue for members to show respect to their leaders (I. Yang, 2006, 2014, 2016). Disclosing behavior does not always lead to being liked, particularly when the disclosure violates normative expectations (Chiu & Staples, 2013). Accordingly, leader humor in the early phase of a relationship is at odds with cultural expectations in East Asia. Our fourth proposition is the following.

**Proposition 4:** In the early phase of a relationship in East Asian contexts, leader’s humor is not very effective for identification with a leader.

So far, we have argued that leader humor in the early phases of a relationship can be assumed to be less effective in the East Asian cluster than in the Anglo-Saxon cluster. However, time is another important context that should be considered. There are clear distinctions between strangers (i.e., out-group members) and those who belong to the in-group in a low IND culture, based on the relationship that has been built over time. In line with the characteristics of high context communication in low IND cultures, much (positive) history and many experiences need to be shared before leader humor can be appreciated. Moreover, harmony amongst in-group members is developed and maintained informally through intensive socialization during and after working hours (e.g. in lunch hours and frequent after-work social gatherings) (Chen & Fahr, 2001; Chen, Yu, & Son, 2014). Relationship maturity and informality are closely interrelated, since the significances of the formal and informal domains are strongly time-bound in the East Asian context. That is, the formal domain is dominant in the early stage of a relationship and the informal domain starts to exert a greater influence—even over the formal domain—as the relationship develops further (Horak, 2014; Horak & Yang, 2016; I. Yang & Horak, 2019a). There is strong involvement of affection in the informal domain (I. Yang, 2006), with the cultivation of personal relationships.
involving more after-work activities (C. Yang, 2014). Further arguments will be presented in the following section.

**Time: The role of leaders’ humor in the later stages of relationships in East Asia**

Appreciation of humor depends on many emotional and social factors, such as a warm atmosphere, situational norms, and group membership (Meyer, 2000). Along these lines, the effects of a leader’s humor depend on both time (early stage versus mature relationship) and on whether the context is formal or informal. In East Asia, where IND is low, the more mature the relationship, the more informal it becomes. We expect leader humor will be more effective in a mature relationship than in the early stage of a relationship. There is a potential reservation concerning leaders’ humor in the early stage of a relationship, as there are few mechanisms for understanding leader intention and subsequent leader humor. Since uncertainty reduction is no longer needed in a mature relationship, leader humor would be effective in generating positive emotions and in strengthening identification with a leader. This is mainly because leader humor in a mature relationship is perceived as a sign of the positive quality of the relationship (Robert et al., 2015) and as improving personal relationships with members.

People in East Asia with low IND cultures take note of subtle indications of quality in ongoing relationships, as there is a strong in-group and out-group distinction. As the nature of the relationship becomes more informal over time, a leader using humor will become more acceptable as the timeframe moves along. While strong respect for hierarchy is emphasized in formal settings, at the same time, a leader is expected to show human qualities, such as an acknowledgement of his or her own shortcomings, vulnerability, and even weakness, in informal settings (Cheung & Chan, 2008). As affect-based exchange is quite crucial in LMX in East Asia (Chen et al., 2014), such leader humor subsequently increases the positive emotions of, and the identification by, the members. Hence our fifth set of propositions is as follows:

**Proposition 5a:** In the mature phase of a relationship in an East Asian context, leader humor becomes more effective in generating positive emotions than in the early phase.

**Proposition 5b:** In the mature phase of a relationship in an East Asian context, leader humor becomes more effective for identification with the leader than in the early phase.

These tendencies are somewhat different in the Anglo-Saxon context, where the effects of leaders’ humor decline over time. Contrary to situations in East Asia where formal and informal domains are more likely to intertwine (C. Li et al., 2015; Ling & Powell, 2001; I. Yang, 2006,
2014, 2015, 2016), the work sphere (the formal domain) and the private sphere (the informal domain) are not expected to mix, and an overlap is usually avoided in Anglo-Saxon contexts with a high IND culture. Accordingly, although leader humor contributes to affect-based LMX, which is most helpful in building a relationship, members in a mature relationship would appreciate a more task-based LMX in a high IND culture. That is, once the relationship is established and members of the dyad have formed impressions of each other (Cooper, 2005; Gkorezis, Hatzithomas, & Petridou, 2011), people’s interest moves on to the task and to “getting things done.” Therefore, leader humor is viewed more as a distraction at work (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999), and its effects for the leader in generating the positive emotions of, and identification with, members lessen over time. Hence our sixth set of propositions is the following:

**Proposition 6a:** *In the mature phase of a relationship in the Anglo-Saxon context, leader humor becomes less effective in generating positive emotions than in the early phase.*

**Proposition 6b:** *In the mature phase of a relationship in the Anglo-Saxon context, leader humor becomes less effective for identification with a leader than in the early phase.*

**Table 1.** Effectiveness of leader humor in different phases in North America and East Asia

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<th>Leader’s humor behavior</th>
<th>In Anglo-Saxon countries</th>
<th>In East Asian countries</th>
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<td>In early relationship</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Less effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader’s motivation</td>
<td>Low power distance</td>
<td>High power distance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty reduction</td>
<td>Ingratiation (initial offer)</td>
<td>Less from face concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions (for members)</td>
<td>Information from leader’s self-disclosure</td>
<td>Less relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification with leader (by members)</td>
<td>Initial offer by leader’s humor</td>
<td>Less relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In mature relationship</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Less effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>High individualism</td>
<td>High collectivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader’s motivation</td>
<td>Sign of quality of relationship</td>
<td>Sign of quality of relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>Less effective because of perceived distractions of humor</td>
<td>From quality of relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification with leader</td>
<td>Less relevant</td>
<td>From in-group membership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 summarizes the different effects of leader humor in different phases of the relationship and in different domains. Power distance is the main dimension of cultural value distinguishing the Anglo-Saxon cluster and the East Asia cluster in the early stage of the relationship, as it has distinct implications for how to manage hierarchical distance in leader–member relationships. Values of individualism and collectivism become more relevant in the later stage, along with the question of how members are motivated (e.g., individual recognition through rewards versus group harmony). Overall, in the early phase of a relationship both the cognitive and the affective mechanisms of leader humor that we discussed are stronger in the Anglo-Saxon context than in the East Asian context, but this is reversed in the more mature phase of the relationship. That is, in the early as opposed to the mature phase, there is less motivation for a leader to use humor, and less positive emotion and identification with the leader generated among members in East Asia. By contrast, in East Asia, when the informal domain and personal interactions become more significant in mature relationships, there is stronger motivation for a leader to use humor, and more positive emotions and identification with a leader generated among members. However, in the Anglo-Saxon cluster, these effects will be diminished once the relationship stabilizes.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual model presented by the propositions. In sum, we bring in culture and time as new antecedents affecting the effectiveness of leader humor. We suggest that the conventional universal view on the effectiveness of leader humor needs to be extended by taking the cultural context and time into account. First of all, as these are currently dominant in the literature, we referred to the extant studies conducted in the Anglo-Saxon context as the basis on which to build up our argument about leader humor. We then considered the cultural differences between the Anglo-Saxon and the East Asian context, to propose that in the East Asian context there is less motivation for a leader to use humor, and that leader humor is less effective in reducing uncertainty, generating positive emotions and generating identification with the leader (P1-P4). Further, the time dimension, in conjunction with cultural values, affects the effectiveness of leader humor on members (P5-P6) as illustrated in figure 1.
Figure 1. Effects of leader humor across different contexts

Figure 2 illustrates the divergent dynamics of leader humor over time in an East Asian and an Anglo-Saxon context. Following the discussion above, the figure shows that, in an East Asian context, leader humor is not very effective in the early stage of the relationship but, in contrast, it is more effective in a mature relationship. In an Anglo-Saxon context, we propose a reverse trend.
Discussion and outlook

It has been more than two decades since House (1995) noted that almost all the prevailing theories of leadership, and most of the empirical evidence, derive from North America (i.e., the Anglo-Saxon context). According to House (1995), extant theories draw on notions of being “individualistic rather than collectivistic; emphasizing assumptions of rationality rather than ascetics, religion, or superstition; stated in terms of individual rather than group incentives, stressing follower responsibilities rather than rights; assuming hedonistic rather than altruistic motivation and assuming centrality of work and democratic value orientation” (1995, p. 443). For example, the notions of charismatic and authentic leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), as well as ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), propose that certain attitudes and behaviors of leaders are fundamental and universal to successful leadership and relationship building. However, although these leadership theories suggest that positive interactions with a leader will contribute to interpersonal attraction and ultimately to relationship building, the empirical findings from East Asia are in conflict in terms of the degree or even the direction of the impacts (Chen & Fahr, 2001; Leong & Fischer, 2011; J. Li, Tan, Cai, Zhu, & Wang, 2013; C. Yang, 2014).

Similarly, looking at LMX theory, scholars suggest that there are differences between Anglo-Saxon and East Asian countries, in that affect-based exchange is much more significant for
LMX in East Asia (Chen et al., 2014; Horak, Taube, Yang & Restel, 2019). Along this line, theories of paternalistic leadership (Aycan, 2006; Aycan et al., 2013) and of collective leadership (I. Yang, 2006) further propose that East Asian organizations are unique in their specific underlying cultural ideals (Horak & Yang, 2016; McDonald, 2012; I. Yang, 2006). However, despite some leadership research drawing attention to the importance of cultural differences in relation to certain leadership and management practices (e.g., Chen & Fahr, 2001; Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997; J. Li et al., 2013), in-depth knowledge of the subtle but distinctive differences and their meanings, which would develop the concepts of leader behavior, is still tentative at best, if not absent (as in the case of leader humor research).

Numerous studies show the benefits of leader humor in relation to stress, creativity, and general performance (Cooper, 2005, Pundt & Herrmann, 2015; Robert et al., 2015). The appreciation of humor has been further strengthened by the notion of positive emotional contagion, which benefits organizations as it enhances cooperativeness in groups (Barsade, 2002; Deal & Kennedy, 2000). With such overwhelming findings of positive effects in both practice and research, one may be tempted to transfer these ideas directly to another culture. However, this paper cautions against such a universal approach for leaders’ humor behavior, and proposes a conceptual model that explicitly integrates cultural factors and the role they play in different phases of the relationship. We believe that more research in this direction would help to give a better understanding of how even a similar aim (i.e., relationship building) could be realized differently depending on contextual factors including culture as well as time. If this was done, the implications of this paper could help to ensure that training for international leaders (e.g., expatriates) is more effective, in terms of their knowledge of the destination country and the efforts they make to adjust to a new environment, by highlighting the importance of context (Kang & Shen, 2018; Kumar, Budhwar, Patel, & Varma, 2018; Ran & Huang, 2017). In addition to understanding the different priorities for value itself (e.g., Hofstede’s cultural dimensions), understanding how certain leader behaviors are perceived in different contexts would help in the process of leader–member exchange in day-to-day interactions.

Similarly, indigenous notions (e.g., face) in East Asia and the role of informal domains that are explored in this paper help to illustrate further how and why certain leader behaviors such as leader humor are or are not appreciated. Although cultural dimensions are useful in an initial comparison of different cultures, directing attention to specific environments (e.g., indigenous
notions, religions, history, etc.) could shed some light on and clarify the causes and outcomes of East Asian leadership and leader behaviors. Also, face and the informal domains discussed in this paper offer views that are complementary to the leadership styles and behaviors oriented towards Anglo-Saxon culture. The interplay and the dynamics between formal and informal domains are important in understanding East Asian leadership ideals, as well as East Asian management more broadly (Horak, 2020; Yang, 2006). While informal aspects exist in Anglo-Saxon management, the main context of management and leadership practices is more focused on formal domains. Informality in East Asia could be quite beneficial in mature leader–member exchanges. Such differences in the basis of management (i.e., formal versus informal domains) should be taken into consideration when transferring management practices originating from the Anglo-Saxon world to an environment represented by eastern values.

Future studies on the use of leaders’ humor in the East Asian and Anglo-Saxon contexts could build on our ideas and apply empirical research in a cross-cultural and/or intercultural setting. The propositions developed in this paper and illustrated in figure 1 could be tested in the frame of a cross-cultural comparative research design using respondents from Anglo-Saxon and East Asian countries, and could take time (early versus mature leader–member relationship phases) into account. The use of humor by leaders could be explored with in-depth interviews and observations of interactions (e.g. motivation). The significance of informal domains, and the dynamics of time and formal domains in relationships in East Asia, is by nature difficult to explore with quantitative approaches (e.g. leader humor, positive emotions, identification with a leader). Here, we recommend an ethnographic approach, using in-depth interviews complemented by participant observation.

We have debated leader humor in relation to members’ dependence on the leader for resources and the subsequent power imbalance between members and the leader. However, the relationship among members also influences members’ positive emotions, which subsequently relate to their satisfaction with and performance at work. Therefore, future research could explore contextual factors in relation to members’ humor. Similarly, next to culture and time as the main contexts, other factors such as industry, organizational culture and the maturity of the organization also potentially affect the effectiveness of leader humor. Also, although we have adopted the dichotomy of East Asian versus Anglo-Saxon clusters for the sake of generalizability, this dichotomy, especially in an era of globalization and a growing level of interconnectivity between
societies, can never be accurate. Given these developments, it would be timely for researchers to examine differences within each cluster in order to understand better whether values change among the generations and possibly align or diverge globally.

Overall, despite the differences in contexts, global leadership and organizational development and training should develop a keen awareness of contexts when designing effective development programs for workforces. Finally, our arguments around leader humor have been built in a situation within the same culture and with everyone using the same language. However, in cross-cultural interactions, the role of language, beyond the high versus low context culture question, should be considered. For example, a non-native speaker may not be able to understand double meanings or subtle inflections of language when foreign leaders, or expatriates in general, are conversing humorously.

**Conclusion**

We have examined the effectiveness of leaders’ humor in East Asia in comparison with the Anglo-Saxon context. We have illustrated that initial offer behavior is the main motivation for leaders’ humor, while uncertainty reduction, positive emotions, and identification are the main effects of leaders’ humor on members. Furthermore, we have challenged these mechanisms because they are based on the assumptions of individualist Anglo-Saxon cultures. Collectivism and the concept of face explain the cultural contingency of leaders’ humor. While formal and informal contexts are mixed together in East Asia, unlike the Anglo-Saxon cultures in which they are clearly distinguished, we have teased out the different significances of the timing for each domain. In summary, we suggest that in East Asia the dominance of the formal context in the early stage of the relationship will make a leader’s humor less effective, whereas the growing significance and role of the informal context in a mature relationship makes the leader’s humor more effective. We believe our model of early/mature-phase leader humor takes note of the different standards and ideals guiding the use of humor and determining its effectiveness in East Asia and across cultures more broadly. Thus, we highlight the importance of context for the effectiveness of leader behaviors, and recommend that this is considered in the design of organization training. Overall, we argue that “(leader) humor is in the ears of the beholder,” and that this is particularly true in an East Asian context.
References


