# *When Aggressive Humor Impairs Job Engagement? It Depends on the Perceived Injury Motivation*

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***Keywords:*** aggressive humor, job engagement, work motivation, emotional exhaustion, injury motivation.

***Abstract:*** While positive humor and its intriguing effect have attracted great attention from researchers, researches on aggressive humor seem to be largely ignored. This paper proposes a model based on resource theory and attribution theories to examine the influence and mechanism of supervisors' aggressive humor on employee engagement. Data is collected from the online survey platform (http://www.wjx.cn) and includes 162 Chinese respondents. The results showed that aggressive humor in the workplace could diminish the job engagement of employees and emotional exhaustion played a mediation role in the process. Furthermore, the moderating effect of injury motivation on the relationship between aggressive humor and job engagement via emotional exhaustion was also examined in this research. This study offers both practical implications and theoretical contribution to the researches related to aggressive humor, emotional exhaustion, injury motivation, and job engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Workplace humor has received increasing attention in the recent literature. Researchers have identified two types of workplace humor, namely positive humor, and aggressive humor. However, compared to the research on positive humor which defined as a sense that can decrease depression and stress, as well as enhance one's mood and job satisfaction, the research on aggressive humor has been largely ignored. Aggressive humor refers to one kind of humor which is used to supervise others by belittling, teasing, denigrating, criticizing, embarrassing, or ridiculing them with the aim of expressing one's superiority to others and improving the impression of the self (Bono et al. 2007) [1]. Recent research has demonstrated that aggressive humor leads to different employee outcomes, such as hurting or ridiculing with others (Martin et al. 2003) [2]. Despite these outcomes, it is still unclear whether aggressive humor will impair employees job outcomes. In addition, limited research has focused on the underlying mechanism and boundary condition of aggressive humor. This omission is significant because it may prevent us understanding the whole picture of how aggressive humor affects employee outcomes.

In response to the above research gaps, this study has three purposes. First, in the workplace, although humor can increase the performance of employees under some situation, the improper use of humor may become an underlying stressor that could cause negative effects such as loss of job engagement at work (Spector & Goh 2006) [3]. However, due to the fact that aggressive humor and

its relationship with job engagement have not been studied thoroughly in recent studies, the underlying mechanism of why aggressive humor affects job engagement is unclear. Therefore, it is crucial to examine aggressive humor and how it related to job engagement comprehensively. Second, integrating conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll 1989) [4], we propose emotional exhaustion as the mediator between aggressive humor and job engagement. According to Kim et al. (2015) [5], aggressive humor may make employees feel stressed out, and emotional exhaustion can exacerbate the symptom as supervisors find it harder to manage their emotions while suffering emotional depletion. Third, we propose perceived injury motivation as a boundary condition. We argue that the effect of aggressive humor depends on the perceived motivation of such behavior. When employee perceives injury motivation of leader's aggressive humor, the effect of aggressive humor will lead to negative outcomes of employees.

This study intends to contribute to the literature in three ways. First, we investigate the impacts of aggressive humor on job engagement, which extends the research on the outcomes of aggressive humor. Secondly, we integrate conservation of resource theory and attribution theory, and propose a mediation model to explain the relationship between aggressive humor and job engagement. Third, we propose a moderator (i.e., perceived injury motivation) as the moderator, which enhances the literature by demonstrating the boundary condition.

## 2. Hypothesis

There is sufficient evidence showing that affiliative humor of supervisors is intensely related to employees' positive behaviors and emotions, such as job performance and employee psychological well-being (Kim et al. 2015 ; Hou et al. 2012 ; Wisse & Rietzschel 2014) [5,6,7]. Analogous to that, we can indicate that there is also a positive relationship between aggressive humor and negative behaviors at work (Goswami et al. 2015) [8]. To be specific, aggressive humor could cause dysfunctional resistance and a high level of strain (Hou et al. 2012; Goswami et al. 2015) [6,8].

The study has argued that aggressive humor receivers tend to involve in various undesirable behaviors because of a feeling of being mistreated by supervisors (Goswami et al. 2015) [8]. For example, they may smoke, drink or surf the Internet during working time. Then, they claim that they are too busy to finish their work and even think of taking forgetting those tasks as an excuse, which are the indicators of reduced job engagement and poor work attitude (Goswami et al. 2015) [8]. This is consistent with research suggesting that aggressive humor can be regarded as a workplace stressor that contributes to easy-going work attitudes (Hou et al. 2012) [6]. In other words, employees reduce their job engagement when they feel more and more stressed over time due to aggressive humor caused by employers. Negative emotions caused by aggressive humor, such as anger and outrage, bring about accumulated strain, which is followed by less job engagement (Kim et al. 2015; Hou et al. 2012) [5,6]. Based on the above discussion, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1: Aggressive humor is negatively related to job engagement.**

According to the Conservation of Resource Theory (Hobfoll 1989) [4], resources are considered to be items that people attach importance to or the process of getting those things. These resources can be physical (e.g., money or housing), social (e.g., social support or status) or psychological (e.g., sense of achievement or self-actualization). Human being's resources are limited, so people have to try to utilize their current resources to pursue new ones while avoiding loss of existed resources as well. Once there is an occurrence or a threat of resource loss, individuals have to use the remaining insufficient resources to achieve their goals, which may lead to the failure of their target accomplishment and the vicious circle of increased resource loss, thus causing their nervousness and stress (Hobfoll 1989) [4]. In addition, Byrne (1991) [9] and Lackritz (2004) [10] found that the

consequence variable of workplace stress in most cases is emotional exhaustion, which is defined as a state of exhaustion of psychological and emotional resource and has a negative impact on organizations. It was found that emotional exhaustion was mainly caused by long-term working stress which leads to a series of negative emotions and attitudes such as physical fatigue and tension.

Leaders' aggressive humor can cause resource loss to employees. Employees may generate some negative sentiments such as stress and outrage while suffering from aggressive humor due to a feeling of being mistreated by supervisors (Kim et al. 2015; Goswami et al. 2015) [5,8] and have to use their extra emotional energy to combat those adverse sentiments which may disturb their normal work or life greatly. In addition, they may not get resource replenishment from the leaders and thus have to unceasingly consume their remaining energy, which is predicted to eventually lead to emotional exhaustion. Simply put, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 2: Aggressive humor is positively related to emotional exhaustion.**

According to Kahill (1988) [11], emotional exhaustion may cause harm to people's well-being. When people feel emotionally overextended and exhausted for a long time, they may suffer from symptoms like insomnia, anxiety and depression, thereby causing numerous negative effects such as easily getting irritated and hard to control their emotion.

Since aggressive humor may make employees feel stressed out, emotional exhaustion may worsen the situation as employees find it harder to control their emotions while suffering emotional depletion. Due to those symptoms, employees may find it annoying to interact with others in the workplace, which is harmful for them to get involved in their work. In addition, Chia et al. (2003) [12] also found that employees who felt psychologically and emotionally drained might have a low sense of organizational commitment and workplace satisfaction and a high rate of absenteeism and job-hopping behavior. Moreover, they may even become hostile to their supervisors. Those negative effects of emotional exhaustion exacerbate the stress and dissatisfaction caused by aggressive humor and thus prevents people from achieving appropriate job engagement. As a result, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 3: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between aggressive humor and job engagement.**

According to attribution theory, with the aim of effectively controling and adapting to the environment, people often make causal explanations for the behaviors around them during social interactions, which means inferring other unknown characteristics in the whole cognitive process according to particular personality traits or certain behavior characteristics of others, in order to seek causal relationship between various features (Heider, 1958; Martinko et al., 2007) [13,14]. Consequently, when confronting abuse, subordinators tend to develop causal attributions for the reason or the intention of the leader's abuse, which lead to their action response. Tepper (2007) [15] stated that subordinates may attribute abusive behaviors to two different causal motives—to cause injury and to achieve an objective such as promoting better performance. Taking into account both attribution and aggressive humor literature, we further advocate that subordinates'causal attributions for aggressive humor of team leaders may affect the ways they interpret and react to supervisors' humor, specifically influencing employees' job engagement.

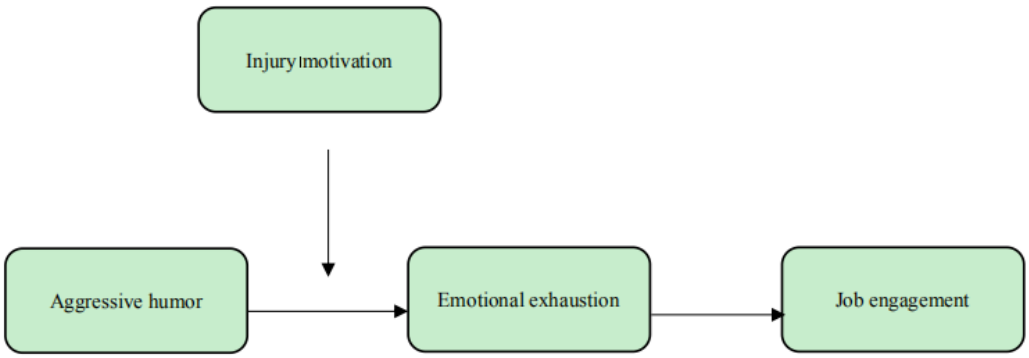
While subordinates consider leaders' aggressive humor as caused by the positive goal of enhancing their performance and thus as beneficial to their individual development, it was less likely for the employees to develop passive sentiments and get tired of their jobs. Consequently, they may be less facilitated to withdraw from active participation and involvement in their job. Therefore, supervisors' negative humor is less negatively related to employees' job engagement in the presence of employee–attributed positive motivations. On the contrary, perceiving leaders to using aggressive humor with the adverse aim of causing injury more likely leads to employees'

various negative feelings and loss of interest for their work. In other words, injury motivation of supervisors may increase the probability of employees to be angry, frustrated and helpless (Goswami et al. 2015) [8]. Consequently, employees who make injury-motive attributions while suffering from aggressive humor should show a quicker depletion of emotional resources. Employee–attributed injury motivations thus exacerbate the negative impact of leaders' aggressive humor on employees' emotion and well-being. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 4: Perceived injury motivation moderates the relationship between aggressive humor and emotional exhaustion. When injury motivation is high, the negative relationship between aggressive humor and emotional exhaustion is stronger.**

Considering the above hypotheses, we have the fifth hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 5: Perceived injury motivation moderates the indirect effect between aggressive humor and job engagement via emotional exhaustion. When injury motivation is high, the negative indirect effect is significant.**




*Source: created by the authors.*

Figure 1: The conceptual model.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Participants and Procedures

Data were collected from an online survey platform (http://www.wjx.cn), which is operated by a well-known online research service company in China. The company was recruited to collect the survey data from the people who have working experience. We paid for around 1.5 US$ for each respondent. 170 online questionnaires were returned. After deleting the questionnaires which contained a large percentage of missing data and outliers, we include 162 questionnaires in the final sample. Regarding the respondents of final sample, 31.5% were male and 68.5 were female employees. The average age was 27.6 years old. 30.9% of the respondents have high school or below education level, 57.4% have a bachelor degree and 11.7% have the master or above degree.

### 3.2. Measures

Because all the questionnaires were presented in Chinese, we adopted the translation and back-translation method. All of the variables were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Aggressive humor was measured using an 8-item scale adapted from Martin et al.'s (2003) [2]. Sample items include "If I make a mistake, my immediate supervisor will often tease me about it.". (Cronbach's alpha = .75).

Emotional exhaustion was measured using a 9-item scale adapted from Schaufeli et al. (1996) [16]. Sample item includes "I feel used up at the end of the workday" and "I feel burned out from my work". (Cronbach's alpha = .94).

Injury motivation was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Liu et al. (2012) [17]. Respondents were asked to rate the perception of why their supervisors have aggressive humor behaviors. Sample items include "Desire to cause injury on me" and "Desire to hurt my feelings". (Cronbach's alpha = .95).

Job engagement was measured using a 9-item scale adapted from Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) [18]. Sample item includes "I am enthusiastic about my job". (Cronbach's alpha = .93).

In this study, we controlled for four demographic variables, including gender, age, organizational tenure and education level.

### 3.3. Results

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) by the use of all four key variables (i.e. aggressive humor, emotional exhaustion, injury motivation and job engagement). The CFA results indicated that the baseline model had an acceptable fit ($\chi 2 = 943.92$, df = 428, $p \leqslant .01$; root mean square error approximation [RMSEA] =0.087, comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.95, Tucker-Lewis index [TLI] = 0.95). All the factor loadings were significant, indicating the convergent validity. The baseline model also had a better fit than all the other alternative models, which were created by randomly combining any two key variables. Therefore, the results supported for the discriminant validity. All the four key variables were used in the further analysis.

Table 1 showed the means, SD and correlations of all the variables. The results showed that aggressive humor was positively correlated to emotional exhaustion (r=.47, p<.01) and negatively correlated to job engagement (r=-.23, p<.01). In addition, emotional exhaustion was negatively correlated to job engagement (r=-.39, p<.01).

Table 1: Means, SD and correlations.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Gender | | | | | | | | |
| 2.Age | .00 | | | | | | | |
| 3.Education | .14 | -.25** | | | | | | |
| 4.Tenure | -.01 | .83** | -.29** | | | | | |
| 5.Aggressive humor | -.08 | -.02 | .11 | -.02 | | | | |
| 6.Injury motivation | -.07 | .11 | -.02 | .09 | .58** | | | |
| 7.Emotional exhaustion | -.02 | -.25** | .11 | -.26** | .47** | .59** | | |
| 8. Job engagement | .11 | .25** | -.10 | .18* | -.23** | -.32** | -.39** | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mean | 1.69 | 27.57 | 3.63 | 4.91 | 2.58 | 2.29 | 2.23 | 3.27 |
| SD | .47 | 9.38 | .98 | 7.19 | .71 | .99 | .97 | .83 |

Notes: N=162. **p<.01;*p<.05.
*Source:* own calculations.

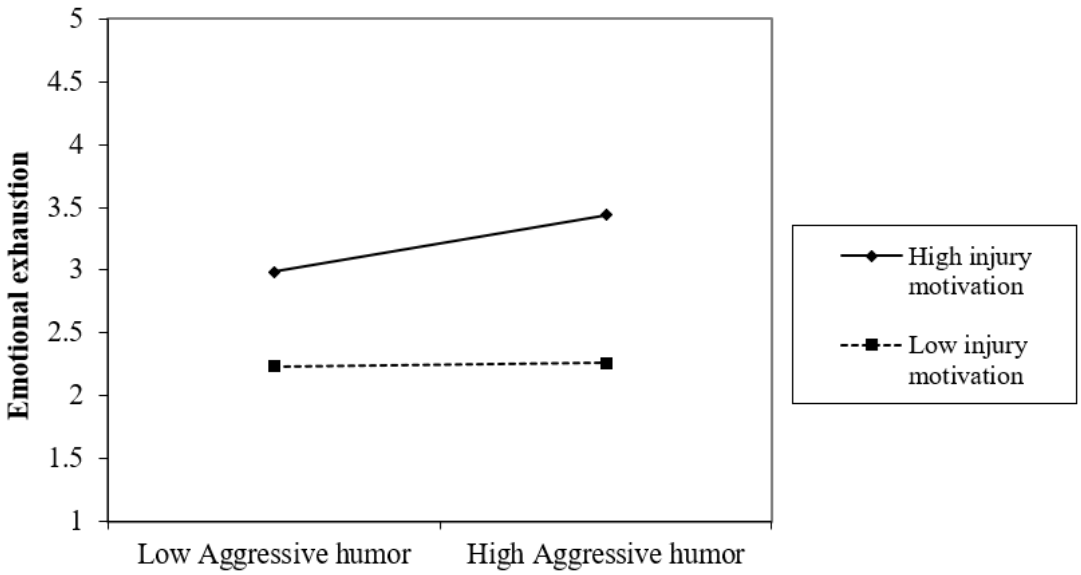
We further conducted hierarchical linear regression to test the four hypotheses. According to the results showed in Table 2, aggressive humor was significantly and negatively related to job engagement (B=-.21, p<.001, M4), and positively related to emotional exhaustion (B=.47, p<.001, M1), supporting Hypothesis 1 and 2 respectively. Mediation effect was tested by the use of Baron and Kenny (1986)'s four steps mediation method [19]. In order to establish a significant mediating effect, four conditions need to be met: 1. The independent variable should be significantly related to the mediator; 2. The independent variable should be significantly related to the dependent variable; 3. The mediator should be significantly related to the dependent variable; 4. After controlling the effect of the mediator, the effect of independent variable the on the dependent variables can be non-significant (full mediation) or reduced (partial mediation). According to the results shown in Table 2, aggressive humor was significantly related to emotional exhaustion (condition 1) and job engagement (condition 2). In addition, emotional exhaustion was significantly related to job engagement (B=-.35, P<.001, condition 3). After controlling the effect of emotional exhaustion, the effect of aggressive humor on job engagement became non-significant (B=-.06, n.s. M6), indicating full mediation effect. We also conducted a bootstrapping method to test the significance of the indirect effect. A 1,000-resample bootstrapping analysis indicated that the indirect effect was significant at a 95% confidence interval (-.301, -.075). The results supported Hypothesis 3.

Table 2: Regression results.

| | Emotional exhaustion | | | Job engagement | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M1 | M2 | M3 | M4 | M5 | M6 |
| Gender | .03 | .03 | .03 | .10 | .12 | .11 |
| Age | -.13 | -.18 | -.20 | .40** | .35** | .36** |
| Education | -.03 | .01 | -.00 | -.08 | -.10 | -.09 |
| Tenure | -.15 | -.15 | -.16 | -.20 | .26* | -.25* |
| Aggressive humor | .47*** | .15* | .12 | -.21** | | -.06 |
| Injury motivation | | .53*** | .50*** | | | |
| Interaction term | | | .17** | | | |
| Emotional exhaustion | | | | | -.35*** | -.32*** |
| $R^2$ | .29 | .47 | .49 | .14 | .21 | .21 |
| Δ | | .18*** | .02** | | .07*** | .07*** |

*Notes: N=162. **p<.01;*p<.05;***p<.001.*
*Source:* own calculations.

We further tested the moderating effect of injury motivation on the relationship between aggressive humor and emotional exhaustion. We followed the procedure suggested by Aiken and West (1991) [20], and created the interaction term by the product of mean-centered aggressive humor and injury motivation. The regression results showed that the interaction term was positively and significantly related to emotional exhaustion (B=.17, p<.01, M3), indicating the significance of the moderating effect. The simple slope test showed that the effect of aggressive humor was significant when injury motivation is high (B=.23, p<.01), but not significant when injury motivation is low (B=-.01, n.s.). These results supported Hypothesis 4.




*Source:* created by the authors.

Figure 2: The moderating effect.

We conducted a bootstrapping analysis for the conditional indirect effect. The results in Table 3 indicated that the indirect effect between aggressive humor and job engagement through emotional exhaustion was significant when injury motivation was high (at 95% level of confidence interval: -.178, -.033), but not significant when injury motivation was low (at a 95% level of confidence interval: -.075, .069). Hence, Hypothesis 5 got supported.

Table 3: Bootstrapping results.

| | Boot | Low CI | High CI |
|---|---|---|---|
| Low injury motivation | -.01 | -.075 | .069 |
| High Injury motivation | -.09 | -.178 | -.033 |

*Note: based on 1,000 re-samples.*
*Source: own calculations.*

## 4. Discussion

Our respondents told us that when facing aggressive humor at the workplace, they always felt unsatisfied or under pressure because of embarrassment and the feelings of being humiliated caused by the humor. However, in various organizations, many leaders still like to use the method of making jokes to their subordinates with the aim of enhancing the cohesion and employees' commitments within the organizations and benignly poking fun at others do have a positive impact on strengthening cohesiveness in a team (Martin 2003) [2]. Thus, our attitude towards humor in the workplace should be more objective and comprehensive instead of making conclusions lightly by judging the consequences of one certain kind of humor. We need to evaluate different kinds of humor separately. In our research, we emphasized the aggressive humor and its impact on the employees in the workplace.

As we have pointed out in the discussion of this study's limitations, the impact of aggressive humor on different industries may differ. However, our research just estimated the average level of impact of aggressive humor by analyzing respondents in various industries. As a result, it might be

that the matter of aggressive humor is a far more serious or minor issue for the respondents in our research that might be the case for workplaces in some certain industries.

The baseline model in our analysis validated the notion that aggressive humor is negatively associated with job engagement, which is consistent with the study stating that aggressive humor can be regarded as a workplace stressor that leads to casual working attitudes (Huo et al. 2012) [6]. Furthermore, our study also found that aggressive humor was also negatively related to emotional exhaustion and the negative effect could be moderated by the level of emotional exhaustion. When employees are feeling psychologically and emotionally drained, they are less willing to actively engage in their work, even when the usage of aggressive humor in the workplace is not frequent. It is consistent with the research revealing that emotional exhaustion will exacerbate low job engagement and organizational commitment of employees (Chia et al. 2003) [12]. Additionally, we also found that the effect of aggressive humor on emotional exhaustion is moderated by perceived injury motivation and thus we could further conclude that perceived injury motivation can also moderate the indirect effect of aggressive humor on job engagement via emotional exhaustion according to the above findings. When injury motivation is high, aggressive humor may lead to more severe emotional exhaustion and indirectly result in less job engagement via the mediation of emotional exhaustion.

## 5. Theoretical Contributions

Humor is a popular topic for the research of workplace performance; however, in comparison with positive humor which has been studied by numerous researchers, negative humor is still not well examined (Goswami et al. 2015) [8]. More researchers are interested in studying the positive behaviors in the workplace and their benefits to the workplace performance and ignore the fact that effective control and management of negative conducts in the workplace can also help improve the productivity and efficiency of employees. As a result, this study of aggressive humor and its influence on employees' performance provides some novel theoretical contributions. Firstly, the study demonstrates that aggressive humor may diminish job engagement. Based on the notion that aggressive humor can cause pressure and dissatisfaction of employees which may result in their casual working attitudes (Huo et al. 2012) [6], this research links aggressive humor to job engagement, thus facilitating the broader study on work psychology.

Secondly, by incorporating the psychological knowledge of conservation of resources theory and attribution theory into the research, we develop a mediation model to help explain the mechanism of how aggressive humor can affect workplace engagement, which not only facilitates the work psychology literature but provide a promising novel direction for further research as well.

Lastly, the study opens the black box of the relationship among perceived injury motivation, aggressive humor in the workplace and employees' job engagement. It initially demonstrates that perceived injury motivation may exacerbate the effects of aggressive humor on emotional depletion. As the results validated, the correlation between aggressive humor and emotional exhaustion can be strengthened by employers' injury motivations to the employees, making them more stressed and unsatisfied. The study then makes the further conclusion that the perceived injury motivation may aggravate the negative impact of aggressive humor on job engagement via emotional depletion according to the above two theories. In fact, there are few researches studying the moderating effect of perceived injury motivation on the relationship between aggressive humor and job engagement, which provides significant insight into work psychology and broadens the literature through describing the boundary condition.

## 6. Practical Contribution

This study also provides significant instructions for practice, especially for supervisors. First, it is recommended that leaders should hold a cautious attitude toward the use of aggressive humor. Our results show that aggressive humor can decrease the job engagement of employees. Although the use of aggressive humor is positively associated with the emerge of ethnocentrism (Miczo & Welter 2007) [21] so that many leaders may be accustomed to using it, they still need to consider the following results caused by aggressive humor, such as low level of well-being and reduced organizational effectiveness (Kim et al. 2015) [5]. These are signs of decreased job engagement. Hence, employers should try to pay attention to the use of aggressive humor in case of reduced job engagement and work performance. Moreover, it is necessary for supervisors to consider their motivation of using aggressive humor. Our results indicated that perceived injury motivation is proven to be a moderating variable between aggressive humor and job engagement. If a leader is under a high injury motivation, aggressive humor will have more negative effects on job engagement. In contrast, if a supervisor has a prosocial motivation, the negative effects caused by aggressive humor may be alleviated. Therefore, in order to maintain a high level of job engagement of employees, supervisors need to avoid using aggressive humor, especially aggressive humor out of injury motivation. Finally, the essay indicates that aggressive humor affects job engagement mainly by causing emotion exhaustion. Hence, when faced with leaders using aggressive humor frequently, it is significant for employees to think about how to replenish energy in order to alleviate emotion exhaustion. As a result, they could devote themselves into their work.

## 7. Conclusion

This study advances the research of workplace psychology in a different direction through focusing on the aggressive humor of supervisors instead of positive humor. The study suggests that in the workplace, aggressive humor from supervisors decrease job engagement of employees and emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between aggressive humor and job engagement. Moreover, the findings also show that perceived injury motivation is a moderator of the relationship between aggressive humor and emotional exhaustion, and thus further conclude that perceived injury motivation moderates the indirect effect between aggressive humor and job engagement via emotional exhaustion. When the injury motivation is high, the negative effect of aggressive humor on job engagement will be more significant. Finally, the study emphasizes that if the enterprise cares about job engagement, it should pay attention to the use of aggressive humor, especially aggressive humor with injury motivation. The above results not only contribute to the research on humor in the workplace, but also provide practical implications for managers and leaders of enterprises.

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