

Administrators' Humor Styles and Teachers' Thriving at Work in a Chinese University: Inputs for a School Wellness Program

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Abstract: This study is a quantitative, non-experimental correlational research that tries to determine the relationship between school administrators' humor styles and teachers' thriving at work in a Chinese university with a purpose of developing a school wellness program. The data gathered from the questionnaires is to be analyzed by quantitative survey tools, ensuring the study to explore the correlation of the research variables. The findings of the study have theoretical and practical implications for better utilizing administrators' humor styles and enhancing teachers' thriving at work, which can become the inputs of a school wellness program. The school wellness program developed aims to integrate health literacy into the comprehensive development of a university by taking the well-being and wellness of teachers and students as the goal, and adapting to the basic requirements of the construction of a healthy China.

Keywords: administrators' humor styles; teachers' thriving at work; school wellness program.

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1 Introduction

Humor was a relatively untapped resource that could lead to increased job satisfaction and productivity. School administrators' humor styles could reduce barriers and foster mutual trust, which improved the communication atmosphere and had a favorable effect on teachers, students, and the school. Therefore, it had drawn growing attention in the past decades. Research in this area had provided evidence that administrators' humor styles could significantly influence employees' job performance (Goswami et al., 2016) and job satisfaction (Yam et al., 2018), enhance work engagement (Neves & Karagonlar, 2020) and creativity (Hu & Luo, 2020), as well as trust in leadership (Gkorezis & Bellou, 2016). However, existing studies had not paid enough attention to the relationship between administrators' humor styles and teachers' psychological states in Chinese universities (Jing & Zhou, 2019; Peng et al., 2019), and some important variables still needed to be further explored, such as teachers' thriving at work (Cooper et al., 2018).

In the field of a school wellness program, teachers' thriving at work was becoming an important element need to be considered by the administrators. For teachers who worked in Chinese universities in particular, learning was constantly being addressed by new generations, cutting-edge technologies, and shifting task distributions in the classroom. Therefore, administrators in universities should develop a comprehensive humor climate and a school wellness culture so that teachers' health was approached with coordinated, strategic manner that in line with universities' vision and mission while also taking into account the demands and priorities of the teachers and students that would be engaged in them. It also improved the school educational leadership along the lines of wellness promotion and deepen the reform of school administration and education, thus gradually forming a model for developing school wellness programs with Chinese characteristics.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Definition of humor styles*

Humor styles were the variety of approaches by which individuals applied humor to communicate and cope with challenging situations. Martin et al. (2003) developed the humor styles framework around two axes: whether humor was used to enhance the self or one's relationship with others and whether humor was relatively benign and benevolent or potentially detrimental or injurious to the self or one's relationship with others, to be specific: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating. Based on 2×2 model of humor functions, that was, their uses in interpersonal and intrapersonal settings and on being adaptive or maladaptive to relationships,

cohesiveness, identity and feelings of well-being, Martin et al. (2003: 51–52) posited four dimensions relating to individual differences in humor use. The two adaptive humor styles were affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor; the two maladaptive humor styles were aggressive humor and self-defeating humor (Martin et al. 2003: 53–54). These four dimensions of humor would be relatively independent of one another (Martin et al. 2003: 54).

Affiliative humor was used to improve social relationships and to attain interpersonal benefits by telling jokes and engaging in witty banter to amuse and entertain people and to ease tensions in social situations. Self-enhancing humor referred to having a lighthearted viewpoint on life, finding comedy in the absurdities and incongruities of life and overcoming challenging situations by doing so. They utilized humor to obtain intrapersonal benefits and improve their psychological well-being. Aggressive humor used humor as a way to advance oneself by criticizing or manipulating others. They ridiculed and mocked people to flaunt their superiority, with little care for their well-being. Self-defeating humor involved excessive self-sarcastic humor, making light of their own flaws, and joining in when they were being made fun of in order to gain the favor of others. They regarded humor as a coping strategy to avoid dealing with difficulties and uncomfortable emotions.

2.2 Definition of thriving at work

As for globalization and complex environmental changes, universities must make swift improvements to remain competitive, one of which was thriving at work. Spreitzer (2005) socially embedded model with an advanced two-dimensional conceptualization concerning the concept of thriving, which consisted of vitality and learning, defined as “the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning or getting better at work” (Spreitzer et al., 2005: 538). Thriving expressed a sense of making progress or moving forward in one’s self-development by implying a joint of vitality and learning. Spreitzer et al. (2014: 250) suggested that thriving matters because it enhanced the health and personal development of employees.

2.3 Studies on humor styles

Researches on administrators’ humor styles mainly focused on the following aspects. First, administrators’ humor styles in society, mainly about social relationship. These studies demonstrated the positive impacts of administrators’ humor styles, and its appreciation or implications as well as effects on organizations. Kuiper et al. (2010) demonstrated the critical need to distinguish between several different humor styles, since these styles had differential effects on social relationships. Zeigler-Hill et al. (2013) discussed the role that humor might play in interpersonal perception and relationships, and suggested that individuals with benign humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles) were evaluated more positively than those targets with injurious humor styles (aggressive and self-defeating humor styles). Chan et al. (2018) contributed to the understanding of the neural correlates of appreciating different humor styles, including humor that facilitated social relationships. Second,

administrators' humor styles in education, mainly about personality and mental health. The researchers concentrated on the relationship between different humor styles and personal traits, as well as their implication in classroom and effect on mental health. Cui et al. (2018) put forward that humorous leadership was more effective for people with high humorous tendencies. Andarab & Mutlu (2019) investigated university instructors' perceptions of the roles of humor in ELT classroom, and teachers' preferences in respect of using humor types. Third, administrators' humor styles in workplaces, especially for employees and teachers. The researchers examined their effects on the quality and affection of commitment, job burnout and satisfaction, innovation and performance. Tremblay (2017) found that employees' perception of inclusion was influenced much more by an offensive humor climate than by a positive one. Chinese scholars examined that administrators could utilize more humor in their relationships with their employees, which were closely related to their creative behavior and served as a reminder that administrators should constantly utilize humor in a more suitable way (Shi et al. 2017, Liu et al. 2020 & Jiang et al. 2022). As humor styles were connected with both positive and negative employee attitudes in universities, research on school administrators' humor styles and its influence on teachers' thriving at work had the potential to yield some very fascinating and valuable findings.

2.4 Studies on thriving at work

Recent researches on teachers' thriving at work mainly concentrated on the following two parts. On the one hand, its implication and influence on teachers' behavior, human resource management, innovative work and effects. The environment of education had significantly changed, and the university had become more complicated and intellectually demanding, requiring a more flexible, highly competent, and enthusiastic force to grow and flourish. Porath et al. (2012) showed how the two dimensions of vitality and learning combined to create the higher-order construct of thriving at work and compared thriving to related constructs. Meanwhile, this study further examined the validity of thriving at work by verifying its relationships in an effort to establish its distinctiveness. Jiang et al. (2019) identified that the effect of learning goal orientation on teachers' thriving was mediated by exploration at work. In other words, learning goal orientation made teachers thrive partly because it also served as a motivator for them to engage in exploratory behaviors. Oliveira (2021) contended that the combination of thriving and agism literature contributed to further understand sustainable development. Guan et al. (2023) considered that performance-oriented human resources practices have a significant positive effect on teachers' thriving at work. On the other hand, its relationship with challenge stressors, job burnout, taking charge, courage and equality. Murray and Bosch (2021) explored professional's thriving and found that gender quality and non-discrimination, support, non-traditional gender roles, career trajectories and self-empowerment were factoring those women attributed to their thriving at work. Norberth & Delia (2022) demonstrated that thriving at work was positively associated with psychological capital and employees' well-being, and showed that an energetic correctional officer, who learned new strategies at work, tended to be more hopeful in achieving work goals, with a positive attitude and resilience to overcome any obstacle.

3 Method

This study was correlational research on the humor styles of administrators and its effect on teachers' thriving at work in a Chinese university. Based on the above-mentioned literature and discussion, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. Is there a significant difference in the teachers' assessment of their administrators' humor styles when their profiles are taken as test factors?
2. Is there a significant difference in the teachers' assessment of their thriving at work when their profiles are taken as test factors?
3. Is there a significant relationship between the teachers' assessment of their administrators' humor styles and their thriving at work?

3.1 *Participants*

Shaoxing University had a total number of 950 teachers from 14 colleges. According to Cochran's equation together with a population correction to calculate sample size as follows, the appropriate sample size given the population size and specified combination of precision, confidence and variability was 274.

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{(n_0 - 1)}{N}}$$

Precision Level: $\pm 5\%$

Confidence Level: 95%

Estimated Proportion: 0.5

Small Population Size: 950

These participants were teachers from 14 colleges in Shaoxing University and they completed an online questionnaire evaluating their thriving at work and administrators' humor styles after indicating informed consent. The researcher used stratified random sampling, which enabled to obtain a sample population that best represents the entire population being studied, making sure that each subgroup of interest was represented. No payment or compensation was offered to those participants.

3.2 *Materials*

Questionnaire was used as a research instrument in this study to collect, measure, and analyze data related to administrators' humor styles and their impact on teachers' thriving at work in Shaoxing University, including the following three parts. The scales adopted in the questionnaires were standardized scales developed in the literature and had been fully used in hundreds of papers. A 4-point Likert Scale (1 = totally disagree, 4 = totally agree) was

applied to all the items in the scales. The first part of the questionnaire was teacher respondents’ profile in the light of gender, age, education level, college and years of teaching experience as control variables. The second part aimed to assess the humor styles of administrators from the teachers’ perspective using Humor Styles Questionnaire of Martin et al. (2003) in four dimensions, that was, affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. The questions differed from the original Humor Styles Questionnaire by use of the term “administrators in my university” to replace personal pronouns. There were six questions per humor scale. Cronbach’s alpha value were reported respectively as .80, .81, .77 and .80. The third part used the Thriving at Work Questionnaire of Porath et al. (2012) with the 10-item scale in two dimensions, that was, learning and vitality. Reported Cronbach’s alpha value of the scale was .85.

4 Results

4.1 Profile of the respondents

Table 1 presented the profile of the teacher respondents based on gender, age, education level, college and years of teaching experience. As shown in table, 157 or 51.8% of the teacher respondents were male, while 146 or 48.2% were female. This indicated that majority of the respondents were male. This table also showed the distribution of the teacher respondents based on age. The majority of teacher respondents were within the age bracket of 26–35 years old and they were almost equally represented by gender and college. Most of these respondents had doctoral degree with 6–10 years of teaching experience. As the field of higher education became more competitive, the demand for younger and more highly educated teachers was gradually increasing. Universities needed teachers who were able to communicate and collaborate across cultures, and the younger generation was more adaptable to this international environment and was more familiar with and willing to use modern technology to improve teaching methods and make courses more engaging and interactive.

Table 1 Frequency Distribution of the Teacher Respondents’ Profile

Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	157	51.8%
Female	146	48.2%
Total	303	100%
Age		
25 years old & below	55	18.2%
26–35 years old	115	38.0%
36–45 years old	88	29.0%

Profile	Frequency	Percentage
46–55 years old	29	9.6%
56–65 years old	13	4.3%
66 years old & above	3	1.0%
Total	303	100%
Education Level		
Bachelor's degree	31	10.2%
Master's degree	95	31.4%
Doctoral degree	168	55.4%
Post-Doctoral degree	9	3.0%
Total	303	100%
College		
College of Liberal Arts	18	5.9%
College of Marxism	12	4.0%
College of Foreign Languages	23	7.6%
College of Life Science	21	6.9%
College of Chemistry & Chemical Engineering	21	6.9%
College of Mathematical Information	28	9.2%
College of Mechanical & Electrical Engineering	29	9.6%
College of Textile & Garment	18	5.9%
College of Medicine	24	7.9%
College of Fine Arts	27	8.9%
College of Calligraphy Arts	7	2.3%
College of Education	27	8.9%
College of Architecture & Construction	21	6.9%
College of Business Administration	27	8.9%
Total	303	100%
Years of Teaching Experience		
5 years & below	86	28.4%
6–10 years	113	37.3%
11–15 years	54	17.8%
16–20 years	28	9.2%
21–25 years	13	4.3%
26–30 years	6	2.0%
31 years & above	3	1.0%
Total	303	100%

4.2 The assessment of teacher respondents as regards their administrators' humor styles

As shown in table 2, aggressive humor (3.16) was the most humor style manifested among the administrators, followed by self-defeating humor (3.14), while self-enhancing humor (3.13) found to be the third in rank. Affiliative humor (3.12) was the least assessed humor style among the administrators. Generally, an over-all mean value of 3.14 revealed that humor style was moderately manifested among the administrators based on the assessment of the teacher respondents.

In the study of Tremblay (2021: 412), it was examined that leader-member exchange was higher when leader and subordinate both display high-affiliative and low-aggressive humor behaviors. The findings revealed that leader-member exchange mediated the relationship between (dis)similarity in humor styles and employee energy. The administrators displayed a variety of humor styles, including affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, and occasionally, aggressive or self-defeating humor. This diverse range of humor styles indicated that administrators employed different approaches to humor depending on the context and their personal characteristics. The teacher respondents' assessment suggested that the administrators' use of humor had a noticeable impact on teachers. Affiliative humor had contributed to a positive and friendly atmosphere, fostering strong relationships and a sense of camaraderie. Self-enhancing humor helped administrators maintain a positive outlook and resilience in the face of challenges.

Table 2 Teachers' Assessment as Regards their Administrators' Humor Styles

Humor Styles	Mean	Qualitative Description	Interpretation	Ranking
1. Affiliative Humor	3.12	Agree	Moderately Manifested	4
2. Self-Enhancing Humor	3.13	Agree	Moderately Manifested	3
3. Aggressive Humor	3.16	Agree	Moderately Manifested	1
4. Self-Defeating Humor	3.14	Agree	Moderately Manifested	2
Over-all Mean	3.14	Agree	Moderately Manifested	

Legend: 3.51–4.00 Totally Agree/Highly Manifested; 2.51–3.50 Agree/Moderately Manifested; 1.51–2.50 Disagree/Slightly Manifested; 1.00–1.50 Totally Disagree/Not Manifested

However, it was important to note that while humor style was moderately manifested, there might still be room for improvement and further exploration in this area. Administrators should strive to strike a balance between humor and professionalism, ensuring that humor was used in a way that was inclusive, respectful, and conducive to a positive educational environment. Understanding and adapting humor styles could enhance communication, build rapport and contribute to a more cohesive and supportive educational community. Continued research and awareness of humor style among administrators could provide valuable insights for fostering positive relationships and effective leadership in universities.

4.3 The assessment of teacher respondents as regards their thriving at work

Based on the results in table 3, vitality latent factor (3.07) was the higher extent among the teachers, while learning latent factor (3.02) found to be the next in rank. Generally, an over-all mean value of 3.05 revealed that teachers’ thriving at work in terms of learning latent factor and vitality latent factor was of high extent based on the self-assessment of the teacher respondents.

In terms of learning latent factor, teachers perceived a high extent of personal and professional development. They actively sought opportunities for continuous learning, embraced new teaching methodologies, and strove to enhance their instructional practices. This commitment to ongoing growth fostered a stimulating learning environment and contributes to teachers’ and students’ academic achievement and success. Additionally, as for vitality latent factor, teachers demonstrated a strong sense of energy, enthusiasm and passion in their work. They approached their teaching responsibilities with vigor, finding fulfillment in their ability to inspire and positively impact students’ lives. This vitality not only benefited teachers’ overall well-being but also created a dynamic and engaging learning and working environment that enhanced teachers’ motivation and students’ learning outcomes.

Table 3 Teachers’ Assessment of their Thriving at Work

Factors	Mean	Qualitative Description	Interpretation	Ranking
1. Learning Latent Factor	3.02	Agree	High Extent	2
2. Vitality Latent Factor	3.07	Agree	High Extent	1
Over-all Mean	3.05	Agree	High Extent	

Legend: 3.51–4.00 Totally Agree/Very High Extent; 2.51–3.50 Agree/High Extent; 1.51–2.50 Disagree/Little Extent; 1.00–1.50 Totally Disagree/No Extent

In the study of Norberth & Delia (2022: 8067), they investigated the relation between psychological capital and employees’ thriving at work through quantitative research, and found that an enthusiastic correctional officer who learned new tactics at work was more likely to succeed at work, with a positive attitude and the ability to overcome any challenge. According to Ni et al. (2022: 23), the most significant factor of stress impacting university professors’ ability to thrive at work was a shortage of time. The high extent of teachers’ thriving at work in terms of both the learning and vitality latent factors reflected their dedication and commitment to their profession. It highlighted their ability to balance continuous learning and personal growth with a vibrant and positive approach to teaching. And it involved providing professional development opportunities, fostering a supportive and collaborative school culture, and recognizing and valuing teachers’ contributions and expertise, which was essential for creating a thriving educational environment.

4.4 Significant relationship between the teachers’ assessment of their administrators’ humor styles and their thriving at work

As indicated in Table 4, administrators’ humor styles in terms of affiliative humor were correlated with

teachers’ thriving at work in terms of learning latent factor (0.21) and vitality latent factor (0.45). It was showed that humor styles of administrators in terms of affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, and aggressive humor were found to be positively correlated to a low degree with the teachers’ thriving at work in terms of learning latent factor, while moderately correlated in terms of vitality latent factor. While administrators’ humor style in terms of self-defeating humor was found to be moderately correlated with teachers’ thriving at work in terms of both learning latent factor, and vitality latent factor. This revealed that administrators’ humor style could somehow influence the teachers’ thriving at work.

Table 4 Relationship Between the Teachers’ Assessment of their Administrators’ Humor Styles and their Thriving at Work

Administrators’ Humor Styles	Teachers’ Thriving at Work Factors	Computed r	Sig	Decision on Ho	Interpretation
1. Affiliative Humor	Learning Latent Factor	0.21	0.00	Rejected	Significant
	Vitality Latent Factor	0.45	0.00	Rejected	Significant
	Average	0.39	0.00	Rejected	Significant
2. Self-Enhancing Humor	Learning Latent Factor	0.28	0.00	Rejected	Significant
	Vitality Latent Factor	0.46	0.00	Rejected	Significant
	Average	0.44	0.00	Rejected	Significant
3. Aggressive Humor	Learning Latent Factor	0.25	0.00	Rejected	Significant
	Vitality Latent Factor	0.43	0.00	Rejected	Significant
	Average	0.40	0.00	Rejected	Significant
4. Self-Defeating Humor	Learning Latent Factor	0.32	0.00	Rejected	Significant
	Vitality Latent Factor	0.42	0.00	Rejected	Significant
	Average	0.44	0.00	Rejected	Significant
Over-all Humor Styles	Over-all Thriving at Work	0.47	0.00	Rejected	Significant

In the study of Shi et al (2017: 17), they investigated the relation among the humor styles, the employee’s satisfaction with their administrators, and job atmosphere, which resulted that humor promoted a free, easygoing, and creative environment for employees. Administrators who exhibited affiliative or self-enhancing humor style could foster a sense of collaboration and harmony among teachers. This type of humor promoted a supportive and collaborative culture, where teachers felt valued, appreciated and motivated to excel in their roles. It created a positive atmosphere that encouraged open communication, creativity, and teamwork. On the other hand, administrators who employed aggressive or self-defeating humor style might inadvertently undermine teacher well-being and job satisfaction. Sarcastic or belittling remarks, teasing or mocking could create a hostile or tense atmosphere, erode trust, and diminish teacher motivation and engagement. Such humor styles could negatively impact teacher morale, communication and collaboration, hindering the overall thriving of teachers.

Administrators’ humor style also influenced the perception of their approachability and leadership



effectiveness. In the study of Kong et al (2019), they argued that administrators' humor brings such benefits because it was a relational currency that followers cherished. Teachers might be more inclined to seek guidance and support from administrators who exhibited a positive and inclusive humor style, as it created an environment where teachers felt comfortable expressing their ideas and concerns. Recognizing the impact of humor style, administrators should strive to cultivate a positive and respectful humor culture within workplace. This involved being mindful of the types of jokes, humor and language used, ensuring they align with the values of inclusivity, respect and professionalism. Neves & Karagonlar (2020: 118) investigated the relationship between administrators' humor styles and teachers' work engagement, with the result that school administrators' sense of humor could break down barriers and develop mutual trust for the wellness of the school. Administrators could promote a thriving work environment for teachers by encouraging a healthy and appropriating use of humor, fostering a sense of community, and providing opportunities for teachers to express their own humor styles. By creating a positive and supportive atmosphere, administrators positively influenced teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and ultimately, student success.

5 Conclusion

This study investigated the humor styles of administrators and its effect on teachers' thriving at work in a Chinese university with an aim to propose inputs for a school wellness program. The majority of teacher respondents were younger teachers who were more willing to engage in research or that the study primarily targeted this age group. Understanding the age distribution of respondents could help contextualize the research findings. The teacher respondents assessed that their administrators' humor styles are moderately manifested in terms of affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor, which meant that the administrators were not extreme in any one style but exhibited a moderate level of each.

No significant difference existed in the teachers' assessment of their administrators' humor styles in terms of affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor when their gender, age, education level, college and years of teaching experience were taken as test factors. The teacher respondents assessed that teachers' thriving at work in terms of learning latent factor and vitality latent factor was of high extent. It implied that the workplace environment for teachers, at least as perceived by the respondents, was conducive to learning and vitality. This could have several positive implications, including higher job satisfaction, better student outcomes, and a more positive school culture. No significant difference existed in the teachers' assessment of their thriving at work in terms of learning latent factor and vitality latent factor when their gender, age, education level, college and years of teaching experience were taken as test factors. In other words, teachers' sense of well-being and job satisfaction, as related to learning and vitality, appeared to be consistent across these factors.

It was revealed that administrators' humor styles in terms of affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor and

aggressive humor were positively correlated to a low degree with teachers' thriving at work in terms of learning latent factor, but moderately correlated in terms of vitality latent factor. While administrators' self-defeating humor style was found to be moderately correlated with teachers' thriving at work in terms of both learning and vitality latent factors. The outputs of this study had theoretical and practical implications for proposing a school wellness program, which aimed to incorporate health literacy into the overall growth of a university by focusing on the wellness of teachers and students, and adjusting to the fundamental criteria of the creation of a healthy teaching and working environment.

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