

# 유머러스한 기업 구성원: 유머, 문화, 그리고 인상관리

## A Joker's Image: Humor, Work Impressions, and Culture in Korean Workplaces

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### 요약

한국 기업과 사회에서 변화하는 문화적 흐름에 따라 유머는 유용한 인상관리 기법이 될 수 있다. 본 연구의 목적은 유머를 성공적인 인상관리 기법으로 활용하기 위하여 이해해야 되는 요소들을 확인하는 것에 있다. 본 연구는 참여적 관찰(participant observation) 과 인터뷰(semi-structured interviews) 를 통한 질적 연구를 진행하였다. 참여자들은 유머를 통한 인상관리가 대부분 유교문화에 기반을 둔 상대적 역할에 맞춰 사용되며, 상급자(superior) 가 더 적극적이고 다양하게 사용한다고 인식하였다. 그러나 상대적으로 젊은 참여자들은 유머가 기업의 역할에서 벗어날 수 있는 독창적인 인상관리 기법이 될 수 있으며, 이 과정에서 유머가 다양한 해석 및 결과를 나타낼 수 있다는 인식이 참여자들에게 불안감과 스트레스를 주는 것으로 나타났다. 이는 유머를 사용할 때 환경과 소통하는 대상의 문화적 성향을 고려하고, 기업들은 효과적인 인상관리 기법에 대한 교육을 도입해야 의도하지 않은 결과를 피하여 긍정적인 결과를 얻을 것이다.

■ 중심어 : | 유머 | 인상관리 | 문화 | 한국 기업 | 질적 연구 |

### Abstract

Humor is often considered as a positive phenomenon, and thus frequently employed as an impression management technique for individuals. However, humor may create unexpected outcomes in terms of impression management. This study investigates the relationship between humor and impression management of individuals within three South Korean organizations. A qualitative methodology is employed and data collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest that humor may be used more frequently by workers in superior positions, and it may be dangerous for individuals in subordinate positions to initiate humor, as negative impressions such as lack of professionalism and work competence may be crafter through humor. In particular, traditional Confucian values and expectations may lead to perceptions that humor is inappropriate and even rude when it is used by individuals in subordinate positions. However, humor may help to craft an independent identity, and help alter user's impressions as desired. This suggests that while perceptions towards humor as an impression management tool may embed significant risks, humor may help individuals to influence their impressions and diverge from a stereotypical expectations and impressions of workers(according to their hierarchical status), which may be interpreted in multiple ways. This implies that organizations should be careful in encouraging workers to use humor as an impression management tactic, as the relational outcomes may be complex, depending on the cultural understanding of hierarchy and relationships between communicators.

■ keyword : | Humor | Impression Management | Culture | Korean Workplaces | Qualitative Research |

## I. Introduction

Humor is often portrayed as a communication method that helps to craft a good impression for individuals[1]. Impression management is especially important in the globalized workplace environment, and the increased mobility of workers means that fast adjustment is necessary for workers. In this process, humor may be an effective impression management technique to develop positive impressions for individuals who newly enter into workplace settings.

Humor may help to diminish social distance between individuals, and help to provoke feelings such as enjoyment and attraction[2]. The ubiquitous nature of humor means that humor interactions may occur in any situations and across all cultural contexts, where humor is likely to influence the impressions of individuals involved[1][2], whether it is the humor initiator(joker), the target(victim), or others listeners. While humor may help to craft a desirable image for workers, perceptions towards what is desirable may differ according to the organizational and cultural context.

Similar to the norms of the wider South Korean(hereinafter Korean) society, Korean workplaces embed traditional values based on Confucianism[3]. Korean workers are expected to communicate and behave according to the hierarchical relationship structure prescribed by Confucian values[4], and this also influences how workers communicate[5]. Thus, using culturally inappropriate communicative signals may craft an impression different to the intentions of the speaker. While impression management is a long researched area, most of these studies are based on Western organizational contexts, and the understanding

of humor as an impression management and its implications are limited. This paper responds to Bolino, Long, and Turnley's(2016) call for the need to further understand the cross-cultural implications of impression management, and provides non-Western empirical evidence on impression management through organizational humor. Therefore, this research attempts to investigate the overarching question: what is the relationship between humor and impression management in Korean workplace contexts and what are the implications for the individuals involved?

## II. Literature

### 1. Humor and impression management

Humor is often considered as a positive process that creates happiness, enjoyment, and constructive outcomes for interacting individuals [7]. However, humor is a complex and contextual phenomenon[8] that exists in all cultures[7]. Humor may influence individuals' perceptions through a series of mental and social processes[9] delivered via communication and laughter[10]. Martin and Ford(2018) describes humor as a process that contributes to creating amusement and the associated emotional aspects. Therefore, this multifaceted nature of humor means that humor may be interpreted differently by each individual[11] and affect the perceptions and emotions of those involved in dynamic ways. Despite such uncertainty involved in using humor, organizations still emphasize humor as a favorable form of interpersonal communication that provides positive outcomes within work groups[12].

Organizational members may use humor to identify social norms, develop cultural identities, and clarify power relations[13]. Managers and employees may use humor for different purposes[10][14], as the ambiguous nature of humor may help individuals to safely communicate beyond the social roles and constraints within the organizational context [10]. While humor may influence diverse organizational behaviors and relationships, we focus on the influence of humor on the impressions of individuals.

Impression management may be defined as a process in which individuals attempt to manipulate other people's perceptions[15]. Creating positive impressions is important, as it can help to gain status, power, and admiration by others[16]. Individuals may display assertive impression management behaviors to promote a favourable and desirable image of self, while defensive impression management behaviour may avoid unfavourable impressions and protect oneself[17]. In particular, dimensions of warmth and competence are considered important in impression management literature [16], where warmth describe individuals as trustworthy, helpful, and friendly. Competence describes characteristics of being confident, able, intelligent, and creative[18]. Humor may be a useful strategy to achieve desirable impressions by reducing the social distance between communicators[19], and allow individuals to deliver(positively) manipulated information smoothly[18]. Furthermore, humorous disclosures may influence impression management process so that undesirable statements about the joker may not impact their impressions negatively[18]. In contrast, O'Donnell, Jung, and Critcher(2016) suggest that

self-deprecating humor may be taken at face value, and thus create negative impressions towards other interacting individuals. This means that regardless of the intention of the joker, not all humor may be useful in cultivating positive impression in workplace contexts, especially across different cultures[8].

## 2. Humor and impressions in Korean workplaces

The use of humor in impression management may be influenced by the cultural context[21], and may be an important part of determining effective impression management practices for individuals[22]. However, humor is contextual and may be approached differently according to the cultural context[8][23]. Korea is one of the East Asian countries that have been influenced by Confucianism[3], where Confucian philosophy believes that hierarchical relationship structure helps to maintain peace within the society[24]. Ideas such as harmony, interdependency, and respect are believed important under Confucian values, and these influence the behaviors and communication of individuals within organizations[25]. Relational hierarchy is considered as a natural way to determine the behavior or organizational members[26], and thus superiors and subordinates are expected to use different forms of communication to work and reinforce their given status[25][27]. Within such relationship, superiors are expected to provide guidance and protection towards their subordinates, and subordinates are expected to show respect and obedience[26][27] through silence[28]. This means communication medium such as humor may not be favoured in non-Western contexts[23] such as Korea, and in

particular, the boundary-crossing function of humor[10][14] may create problems by potentially violating the hierarchical relationship structure between organizational members.

Regardless of such potential risks embedded in using humor, individuals still use humor within Korean organizations[29]. The few humor studies in Korean workplace contexts suggest that humor interactions are mostly initiated by hierarchically superior workers[29] in attempt to diminish the social distance between organizational members and help enhance employee well-being[30]. Such communication pattern may be due to the hierarchical relationship structure within Korean workplace contexts[4]. Furthermore, cross-cultural research suggests that perceptions and expectations towards humor is different across West and East[23], and it is more likely that communicating individuals may misperceive and misinterpret the humor shared[31]. This may also be reflected in how humor may be used as an impression management tactic, where the social status and identity of communicators are likely to influence the impression management process[32]. Desirable impression management styles may be influenced by the cultural expectations of the individuals involved[33], and thus understanding the cultural values of the workplace context may be an important part to using humor as an impression management tactic. However, these are rather limited and most existing studies investigate humor and impression management in Western contexts. [Table 1] below provides some details on past studies that illustrate humor as an impression management tactic.

**Table 1. Humor and impression management studies**

Researcher	Cultural context	Approach towards humor and impression management
Bitterly and Schweitzer (2019)	United States	Positive, influences veracity
O'Donnell, Jung, and Critcher (2016)	United States	Negative, self-deprecation is taken at face value
Plester and Orams (2008)	New Zealand	Positive, creates a unique status
Cooper (2005)	Theoretical	Positive, ingratiation behavior
Holmes (2000)	New Zealand	Positive, signals politeness and power

Impression management should be carefully considered according to the context, and reflect the attributes accepted by the wider society[34]. Such attributes may vary across cultures, and the 'desired image' strived by individuals is unlikely to be universal[35]. Similarly, Krieg, Ma, and Robinson(2018) suggest that there is a distinct difference in how Japanese, Korean, US workers use impression management techniques, and that Korean workers tend to use diverse impression management strategies most frequently amongst the three cultural groups. Furthermore, Korean workers were also found to use such strategies differently according to the hierarchical difference between the interacting individuals. Therefore, while it is evident that humor may be a powerful impression management tool[18], the process in which humor influences the impressions of the user may be more complex in contexts that embed multiple layers of hierarchy amongst individuals, such as those influenced by Confucianism. This means that within Confucian-based workplaces with strict hierarchical differences, humor may not effectively serve its purpose as an impression management technique. Therefore, it is questionable how humor interactions in

Confucian-based cultural contexts such as Korea may affect the process of impression management within the workplace.

### III. Methodology

#### 1. Research methodology and data collection

This exploratory study adopts a qualitative research approach, to investigate the relationship between humor, impression management, and Confucian values within the studied Korean organizations. As humor is contextual phenomenon that may be used and interpreted differently by each individual[36], and such use of humor may affect the perceptions of people's impressions is diverse ways, a multi-voiced interpretivist approach has been adopted[37][38]. By exploring the diverse stories and perceptions of individuals and their situations, this study attempts to capture different perceptions and ideas of participants[39].

Companies in different industries and culture were selected to illustrate unique stories. Therefore, company selection was based on the idea that data from diverse companies that allow greatest learning by illuminating different situations and ideas[40]. We collected data from three Korean companies, which have been renamed Wisepath, Mintrack, and Truscene. Wisepath is a metal recycling company with approximately 63 employees. Employees at Wisepath were relatively older in average age in comparison to the other two participant companies. Mintrack is an online gaming company with 33 employees. Truscene is an Informational Technology company with 49 employees. All three companies had a larger

proportion of male employees than female employees. Furthermore, these three companies operate under a seniority system, meaning that employees progress with tenure than performance. Therefore, organizational hierarchy was generally reflected with age of the workers.

We employed participant observation and interviews to collect and analyse in-depth data on humor and impression management within three Korean companies. Consent for observation and interview was collected separately. Participation was voluntary, and all research participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms prior to data collection to assure security and safety of their information, which would be used only for the purpose of the research and disposed afterwards. While all of the employees within the three companies agreed to the observation, 46 participants agreed to be interviewed. Participants were provided with pseudonyms for anonymity purposes, and all research process was conducted in accordance with the standards of affiliating institution's Human Ethics Committee. A summary of the participant companies and interviewees are listed below.

**Table 2. Summary of participant companies**

Company	Industry	No. of workers	Age
Wisepath	Manufacturing	63	20's to 60's
Mintrack	Online Gaming	33	20's to 60's
Truscene	IT	49	20's to 40's

**Table 3. Summary of interview participants**

Company	No. of interview participants	Gender	Age
Wisepath	7	5 male, 2 female	30's to 60's
Mintrack	14	10 male, 4 female	20's to 40's
Truscene	25	20 male, 5 female	20's to 40's

The data was collected across a period of 3.5 months, from March 2014 to June 2014. The

researcher was fully immersed within each of the participant companies during this period. The researcher involved herself in both formal and informal activities within the firms, to capture rich in-depth data. The researcher recorded interviews and made hand-written notes for observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and questions were guided by existing literature and theories of organizational humor, impression management, and organizational relationships. Duration of each interview was between 1 to 2 hours. Impromptu questions were also asked during the interview and observations. Data collected were cross-checked after the data collection period, where participants were provided with a summary of their data and given the opportunity to provide further details and feedback on the data collected. Furthermore, a reflective diary was used by the researcher to note on observations and personal reflections during the data collection process, in attempt to organize ideas and minimize bias in conducting research. While this process is believed to enhance transparency, the qualitative nature of this study implies that the findings may not be generalizable to other Korean or Confucian-based organizational contexts.

## 2. Analysis

The data was collected and analysed in multiple stages, using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves thoroughly interpreting the collected data to identify similar(or conflicting) descriptions and meanings that emerge, and craft categories and themes that show an overarching story[41]. Analysis for this particular study was conducted across four

phases: during data collection period(within each participant company), after data collection period(within each participant company), combined analysis after data collection(across all participant companies), and reorganization and categorization of data across all companies and participants involved. NVivo was used to help organize and analyse the data.

## IV. Findings

Observation and interview data revealed 3 themes and 8 categories. First theme *tradition and harmony* discusses humor as a process to maintain impressions based on the idea of traditional values and harmony between individuals. Second theme *freedom and change* discusses humor as a method to provide freedom for individual workers and alter their impressions, especially within the changing organizational environment. Third theme *uncertainty and stress* discusses how individuals perceive humor interactions to create stress, as humor creates high uncertainty in how it may affect user's impressions. These themes and categories are summarized in [Table 4] below.

**Table 4. Themes and categories**

Themes	Categories
Tradition and harmony	Relational roles (32 sources, 102 references)
	Unprofessional and incompetent (27 sources, 98 references)
	Peace and harmony (40 sources, 87 references)
Freedom and change	Independent identity (36 sources, 94 references)
	Alter impressions (32 sources, 49 references)
	Generational difference (12 sources, 52 references)
Uncertainty and stress	Risk and uncertainty (20 sources, 45 references)
	Stress (13 sources, 19 references)

## 1. Tradition and harmony

### 1.1 Relational roles

Observation data showed 163 instances of humor used by superiors to subordinates, and 25 instances of humor used between participants of same hierarchical level, and 40 instances by subordinates to superiors. This suggests that within the studied Korean workplaces, humor may be more often used by superiors to subordinates than at any other directions. Some interview participants suggested that such difference may be because the impact of humor on user's(joker's) impressions depends on the relational roles between the communicators:

"It depends on the person. I'm one of youngest workers here, so nearly everyone is my senior. But seniority(of the joker) does affect my responses and perceptions [...] Joking suggests that he(manager) cares [...] so it's kind of a good thing." (Ivory, Mid 20's, Mintrack)

"Age and hierarchy is important here and [...] I feel that they(managers) care." (Coral, Mid 60's, Wisepath)

Ivory suggests that as a listener, the joking individual's relational status(in this case, a senior) affects how she responds and perceives the joker's humor. Ivory also implies that the senior's humor provides a '*caring*' impression(*joking suggest that he cares*) and it is viewed positively. Coral also supports this idea by suggesting that 'age and hierarchy is important' and a senior's humor creates a perception that s/he '*cares*' for the subordinates. This implies that the type of

humor used may not be an important part of understanding the impact of humor in impression management, but the relational status of individuals involved. Participants in subordinate positions were more cautious in responding to a superior's humor to manage their impressions rather than initiating humor, and related to the idea of Confucian based relationships:

"If it's your senior [...] just laugh, and everything will be fine." (Peridot, Early 30s, Mintrack)

"When it comes to communicating with a superior, you need to be careful [...] so I do things carefully. Including humor. You don't want to look rude by responding inappropriately, and that's just bad for you." (Emerald, Late 20's, Mintrack)

"We have this Confucian-based ideas, and we need to act based on these basic ideas. Subordinates need to be respectful, and not be rude. And making jokes can look quite rude." (Chalcedony, Late 20's, Truscene)

In contrast to the reactions participants displayed towards a superior's use of humor, individuals in subordinate positions suggested that they need to '*do things carefully, including humor*'. Participants emphasize how they need to carefully react to a superior's humor(i.e. 'just laugh'), and implies that individuals in with a relationally lower status should not use humor frequently. This is explained to relate to '*Confucian-based ideas*'. Emerald suggest that a subordinate's use of humor towards a superior may signal

rudeness and inappropriate, and thus affecting the subordinate's(joker) impressions negatively('that's just bad for you'). This reflects a hierarchical relationship structure between the organizational members, where superiors have the freedom to use humor with other workers without damaging their impressions. However, subordinates do not seem to enjoy the same freedom, where humor is even labelled as inappropriate or bad, and thus limiting the spectrum of their behaviour in terms of impression management.

### 1.2 Unprofessional and incompetent

The idea of competency and professionalism was raised by 24 participants and observed across the three participant companies. These participants suggested that using humor in the workplace is considered to provoke an unprofessional image and even signal incompetency in work:

"Work is usually formal and serious. So humor, it's not so appropriate [...] it(humor) may make people look like they are not doing work." (Citrine, Early 30s, Mintrack)

"I like having fun, but you have to be careful when you work. Work is work, and you don't want to look unprofessional because of humor." (Apatite, Mid 20s, Truscene)

Both interview participants above suggest that the use of humor makes people look informal and that they are 'not doing work'. These descriptions relate to the joker being perceived as unprofessional and incompetent, regardless of the actual work performance of the joking

individual. Such perceptions seem to embed the idea that work needs to be formal, and thus humor which provokes laughter and informality may create an opposing impression to what is desired or expected(serious and formal), leading to negative perceptions towards the ability of joking individuals.

### 1.3 Peace and harmony

Participants also perceived that humor may help to avoid conflict, and cultivate an impression of peace and harmony. Avoiding aggressive situations to promote harmonious workplace relationships was implied as an important part of work, and thus may be a favourable impression to achieve within the studied workplaces. This idea was frequently raised by participants across multiple organizational levels:

"I'm a very peaceful person. One of my strategies to maintain this image is to make my feedback less serious, make it humorous. Not extensively, but to some point. I'm like a peaceful white dove in this company, avoiding conflict when it could develop into a big thing." (Onyx, Early 40s, Truscene)

"I don't like all the serious atmosphere, where people feel very edgy and aggressive. Sometimes I joke around to relieve that feeling, avoid aggressiveness, fights, and all the bad stuff. My seniors told me that they now get the impression that I consciously make a joke of myself just to relieve people's tension, which is true." (Garnet, Late 20s, Mintrack)

## 2. Freedom and change



## 2.1 Independent identity

Some of the participants suggested that humor may help to create an independent impression. The idea of independence is different to work independence or competency, but crafting a unique image different from the members of the collective work group. This idea of independence may be interpreted both positively and negatively, and participants emphasized the idea of separation of the joking individual's identity from other organizational members:

"I consider myself quite funny. I make jokes often, and people generally like my sense of humor. Younger kids here like me as you can see [winks at a subordinate that enters the interview room]. So I have this unique, independent presence to people here. Of course, some of the senior managers don't like it when I joke around, so I always check who's around before I make a scene. But they(senior managers) usually lets me go (in using humor) because, well, it's just me, doing my usual thing." (Biron, Late 20s, Truscene)

Biron describes himself as '*unique*' and has an '*independent presence*'. This is implied to show a status different to the rest of the organizational members, regardless of whether they enjoy the jokes initiated by Biron. As a result, Biron suggests that people '*usually let's go*' of him in using humor, which may not be allowed for other workers. Similarly, one interview participant describes how one of his subordinates use humor to develop an independent impression different to other workers, and describes his perceptions towards such use of humor in the workplace:

"Diamond is a... unique character. You've seen how he behaves. He's a funny guy, humorous, fun, and yeah. I guess that 'funny' identity gives him an image different to other workers, and allows him to kind of do whatever he wants. Arrogant punk that one [laughs], smart too. Last week he joked around saying how he ordered some pinks shoes and it was delivered to his place(house) during working hours. He jokingly made a song about his pink shoes, then disappeared for like an hour. We later found out that he went home to get those shoes. It's inappropriate, but I guess his image of being the funny guy kind of lets him do things out of the ordinary." (Spinel, Early 30s, Mintrack)

Spinel implies that because one of his subordinates(Diamond) has developed an impression of being the '*funny guy*', it allows Diamond to behave beyond what is prescribed under organizational norms('kind of do whatever he wants'). This includes behaviors such as using work hours for personal purposes('he went home to get those shoes'). However, Diamond is not punished for such behaviour, where going home in the middle of work hours would be generally perceived as inappropriate for most workers.

## 2.2 Alter impressions

Using humor was also implied as a convenient skill that helps to change the impressions of the joker towards a more desired image. Participants focussed on the idea of control that humorous interactions may provide to the user, and perceived that humor helps individuals to intentionally change their image within the workplace:

“I think you can get along well, or faster, when there is humor. So humor creates a good image and helps you to lead a better work life.” (Emerald, Late 20’s, Mintrack)

“Humor can be really convenient, for someone in my position(senior manager). I think humor helps me to develop different image, like a fun friendly image, and soft gentle manager image, and allows me to shift it(impression) around quickly and effectively” (Jasper, Late 40’s, Wisepath)

### 2.3 Generational difference

Some of the participants suggested that humor used by individuals in terms of impression management differ according to the age of the workers. In particular, younger workers under mid-30’s suggested that humor is more frequently accepted as a positive impression management technique for young employees, while older workers(late-30’s and above) may not prefer humor even as an impression management tool:

“I guess I could think favorably of that person, because it’s funny. But not everyone thinks that way, especially the older managers.” (Aquamarine, Early 20’s, Truscene)

“There’s an old saying, you can’t spit on a smiling face. So you make them smile by smiling and laughing first. That usually gives them a favourable impression as well.” (Peridot, Early 30’s, Mintrack)

However, observations showed contradictory behaviour by some of the older workers, where their dislike towards humor as an impression

management technique did not seem applicable to themselves(refer to section 3.1.1). Superiors used humor especially to signal warmth and care towards subordinates, yet did not consider subordinate’s humor to achieve a similar effect. This may signal that older workers within the studied Korean workplaces do not necessarily consider humor as an inappropriate impression management technique in general, but only inappropriate to those in subordinate positions(i.e. relationally lower status than self), and thus showing a generational division in terms of worker perception towards humor use.

## 3. Uncertainty and stress

### 3.1 Risk and uncertainty

While participants suggested that humor may affect impressions of individuals, they also implied that there is some uncertainty in the outcomes of humor used. Participants displayed anxiety in how humor may be misinterpreted, and thus result in an unintended outcome:

“Sometimes people overdo jokes, and [...] the consequences are quite unpredictable.” (Zircon, Early 40s, Mintrack)

“I’m relatively new here(company), so I wanted to make a good impression. So I played along to people’s jokes when possible. But there is a lot of risk involved, I don’t know how things work here, and how to respond properly. Humor is fun, but you can never be sure how it’s going to end. Already, I know one of my seniors really don’t like how I joke with other workers.” (Moonstone, Early 20s, Truscene)

### 3.2 Stress

Although positive emotions may be experienced through humor, participants also suggested that stressful situations may be experienced by individuals. This includes the joker, target(of humor), and other listeners involved. A conversation between young workers illustrates how humor used by a senior member(intended to create a positive impression) actually resulted in stress for his subordinates:

Employee: "He(manager) was joking, but you know, people like us can't take that just as a joke. It was so uncomfortable. It stressed me out." (May 27, Wisepath observation notes)

Similarly, participants in lower hierarchical positions suggested that concerns about how humor may affect the management of their own impressions may create stress:

"I got told off several times for joking around. Now when a senior starts a joke, I need to check whether it's alright for me to actually enjoy and laugh. It can be stressful, and it's not really me, stressing out about jokes." (Aquamarine, Early 20s, Truscene)

"The seniors usually use humor, and I laugh along to enjoy the joke with them. It seems straightforward, but not responding adequately might affect how they(seniors) think of me, and it can be stressful at times, trying to calculate how my behaviour will impact my impressions within the workplace." (Marcasite, Early 30s, Wisepth)

## V. Discussion

Organizational humor may help to craft an enjoyable workplace environment, positive interpersonal relationships, and also influence interpersonal impressions[2][4]. Findings suggest that humor may be a useful impression management technique when cultural differences between the communicators are considered, and age was an important part of understanding the relationship between humor and impression management.

Findings suggest that participants within the studied Korean workplaces perceive humor to help construct positive impressions for workers when humor interactions reflect traditional values of hierarchy and harmony. The influence of humor on individual's impressions seemed to depend on whether the humor interaction is appropriate based on the relational role of the communicating individuals, such as whether the joker is in the superior or subordinate role. Participants suggested that 'seniority(of the joker) does affect my responses and perceptions' and a superior's use of humor was often described to relate to positive impression management, while a subordinate's humor was perceived negatively. This may relate to the 'caring' role that is prescribed to superiors under the Confucian hierarchical relationship structure. Humor used by superiors(such as senior managers) may be perceived as a form of assertive impression management technique and signal that superiors are successfully performing their relational role within the workplace. This is also supported by the observation data, where significantly higher number of humor instances was initiated by superiors to subordinates, than towards any other directions.

Furthermore, findings suggest that regardless

of the hierarchical position of the joker, humor was perceived to craft an unprofessional image, and even signal incompetency for some individuals. This provides an alternative explanation to Krieg et al.'s(2018) study, where Krieg et al.(2018) suggests that Korean workers' impression management reflects the high sensitivity towards hierarchy, and that self-promotions are likely to be used towards superiors than subordinates. In this current study, humor is often perceived as a form of non-work focussed impression management tactic(thus more on personal attributes than professional skills). This means the act of using humor is less likely to contribute to creating an image of professionalism or competence, but perhaps craft a perception of warmth for the user. As humor used by superiors are likely to provide an impression of warmth, it may serve some positive purpose as an impression management technique, but for individuals in subordinate positions, humor may not provide positive outcomes.

However, findings also suggest that humor may help to develop an independent identity, and thus providing an impression that the joker is different to the other group members. For example, an interview excerpt from Mintrack showed that Diamond(a 'joker' in Mintrack) was able to use his work hours to take care of personal errands, but was not punished for his behaviour since his actions are perceived as unusual and funny. The use of humor may allow individuals to avoid the hierarchical roles prescribed within the workplace(i.e. superior or subordinate) and thus leading to other organizational members accepting behaviour outside the norm. This relates the social identity based impression management

model[42], where knowledge of stereotypes may be used to negotiate different social identities of individuals, and thus highlight the positive aspects while diminishing negative impressions. The stereotypical image of a 'joker' may help to craft an impression that the joking individual is funny, enjoyable, and thus their behaviour is more acceptable since it is 'only a joke' within the workplace. This is similar to Plester and Oram's(2008) findings, where a joker's unique status may allow the joker to extend boundaries, which may be not be permitted to other organizational members. Therefore, developing such impressions within the workplace may be considered to establish a special status for the joking individual, to hold temporal power that allows individuals to act beyond the acceptable workplace boundaries[14].

While the use of humor may help to craft either a traditional or independent impression for the users, findings also suggest that there may be a generational difference in how individual workers perceive humor interactions in term of impression management. While the younger workers consider humor more positively, and thus affect the user's impressions in a constructive manner, the older workers tended to be more based on the traditional Confucian-based roles, and thus humor used by subordinates were more likely to affect their image negatively. This extends Ingelhart's(1997) study, where Ingelhart suggested that Korea is one of the countries that are experiencing greatest cultural differences across generations[43]. Therefore, such different cultural values between generational groups may include their perceptions towards humor, and how it may affect the impressions of

workers.

One of the implications for such differences in worker perception is the increased risk and uncertainty experienced by workers when humor is used as a part of impression management. Participants suggested that they recognize the risk and uncertainty in using humor in the workplace, as humor may be interpreted differently to the intentions of the joker[11]. This process was suggested to create stress for individuals, especially as individuals who recognize and signal such uncertainty are those in subordinate positions, and their dependency (towards superiors) limits how workers express their concerns[44]. Therefore, we argue that humor may be an effective impression management technique within Korean workplaces, but its impact may be influenced by on the hierarchical status of the communicators and reflect the changing cultural values of workers.

## VI. Conclusion and implications

This paper provides a contextual analysis of humor and impression management within Korean workplaces. We argue that humor may be perceived to strongly influence the image of communicators, which may provide both positive and negative outcomes, based on the Confucian-based hierarchical relationship structure. A superior's humor may be a constructive impression management tactic, but a subordinate's humor may be detrimental. This is similar to past studies such as Kreig et al.(2018) where Confucian-based hierarchy may influence the impression management tactics used by organizational members. However, this

study provides new insights as to how humor used as an impression management tactic across different hierarchical positions may result in conflicting outcomes. Furthermore, subordinate employees may perceive humor to help create a sense of independence, and thus when used appropriately, may help to cultivate a unique impression. Therefore, humor interactions may be an effective tactic to utilize within the changing Korean organizational environment, when different cultural values and perceptions of the communicators are carefully considered.

There are several theoretical and practical implications. First, theoretical implications include contributions to the cross-cultural and organizational studies, that provides an in-depth analysis of humor and impression management. In particular, this is one of the very few organizational studies that examine humor and impression management from a non-Western perspective(Confucian-based), and thus extends the theoretical understanding of Confucian values and associated hierarchical relationship structure with the more Westernized concepts of humor and impression management. Furthermore, this current study also provides a deeper understanding of organizational humor in Korean workplaces, and its impact in non-Western cultural contexts. In practice, understanding the different cultural values that contributes to the impression management behaviour may provide value to the globalized workplace environment, and especially for expatriates who enter Confucian-based cultures. Impression management is an important part of expatriates and new employees, and thus this study may help to provide a guideline in managing

impressions successfully across cultures. Furthermore, this study may help workers to engage in humor interactions more carefully, and consider the implications of hierarchy in depth. Crafting a positive impression is an important part of work life, and thus implications from this study may help multinational organizations to provide training and education to workers positioned in culturally diverse environments.

This study has several limitations. First, due to the qualitative research methodology, the findings from this study may not be generalizable[45] to all Confucian or Korean organizations. Furthermore, while this research was structured based on existing theories and literature, the methodology used may create reliability and replicability issues. Therefore, future studies may adopt a quantitative research to study humor and impression management further in depth. Second, as the phenomenon of interest was studied within its naturally occurring environment, this study incurs validity issues in terms of findings. Future research may find further value by controlling other potential variables which may influence the results. Third, the small number of participant companies means that our data is not representative of other Korean companies. Future studies may aim to explore diverse firms in terms of industry and size, in order to investigate the idea of humor and impression management in further depth. Last, the quality of interpersonal relationship between the communicators may affect the perceptions towards humor and impression management. While humor interactions may influence the quality of interpersonal relationships[2], the already existing relationship between the

communicators may also affect how individuals use and perceive humor. Therefore, future research may provide further value by examining humor based on the different organizational relationships between participants(i.e. new entrants).

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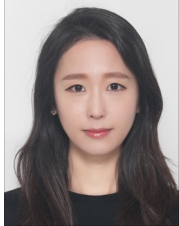
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