Gender, formal organizational status and humor use: perceptions of social acceptance

Timothy R. Moake
Management, Middle Tennessee State University,
Murfreesboro, Tennessee, USA, and
Christopher Robert
Management, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, USA

Abstract

Purpose – Humor can be a useful tool in the workplace, but it remains unclear whether humor used by men versus women is perceived similarly due to social role expectations. This paper explored whether female humorists have less social latitude in their use of aggressive and affiliative humor in the workplace. This paper also examined how formal organizational status and the target's gender can impact audience perceptions.

Design/methodology/approach – Two scenario-based studies were conducted where participants rated the foolishness of the humorist. For Study 1, participants responded to a scenario with an aggressive, humorous comment. For Study 2, participants responded to a scenario with an affiliative, humorous comment.

Findings – Results suggested that high-status female humorists who used aggressive humor with low-status women were viewed as less foolish than low-status female humorists who used aggressive humor with low-status women. Conversely, status did not impact perceptions of male humorists who used aggressive humor with low-status women. Results also indicated that high-status women who used affiliative humor were viewed as less foolish when their humor was directed toward low-status men versus low-status women. Conversely, no differences existed for high-status men who used affiliative humor with low-status men and women.

Practical implications – Narrower social role expectations for women suggest that interpersonal humor can be a riskier strategy for women.

Originality/value – This study suggests that women have less social latitude in their use of humor at work, and that organizational status and target gender influence perceptions of female humorists.

Keywords Humor, Gender, Status, Social roles, Leadership, Expectancy violation theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners have argued that humor is a valuable workplace behavior and an important tool for managers (Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018; Duncan, 1982). Humor can be defined as a form of communication in which a "humorist" intentionally incorporates humorous incongruities (e.g. sarcasm, puns) in messages to an audience (Robert and Yan, 2007). The most common form of workplace humor is interpersonal humor, or humor that is directed or targeted toward someone else (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Interpersonal humor styles are distinguished as affiliative or aggressive. Affiliative humor is defined as positive interpersonal humor "used to enhance one's relationships with others in a way that is relatively benign and self-accepting," while aggressive humor is negative and "used to enhance the self . . . at the expense and detriment to one's relationship with others" (Martin *et al.*, 2003, p. 52). Affiliative humor is associated with performance, job satisfaction and cohesiveness (Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012), while aggressive humor tends to have negative effects on outcomes (de Souza *et al.*, 2019; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018).

Recently, researchers began examining whether contextual factors influence the impact of workplace humor (e.g. Evans *et al.*, 2019; Yam *et al.*, 2018). For example, researchers have explored how characteristics of the humorist, such as gender, influence humor use and audience responses to humor. For instance, Evans *et al.* (2019) found that when men use

humor, it is more functional and less disruptive than when women use humor. They also found that female humorists are rated as having lower perceived status than females who do not engage in humor, while male humorists are rated as having higher perceived status than those who do not use humor. However, other research has shown that when using positive humor, female managers were rated higher than their male counterparts on relationship behavior and leader effectiveness (Decker and Rotondo, 2001). These divergent findings indicate that additional research is needed to unpack how humorist gender influences humorist perceptions.

In this paper, we integrate social role theory with expectancy violation theory (EVT) to explore the notion that society expects men and women to use humor differently, and that violations of expectations can influence perceptions of those humorists. These two theories are particularly informative for this research because social role theory provides an explanation for why behavioral expectations differ for men and women humorists (i.e. expectations about behaviors derive from the societally agreed upon roles for men and women; Eagly, 1987), while EVT provides an explanation for why some humorists' violations of behavioral expectations result in more positive evaluations, while others result in more negative evaluations (Burgoon, 2016). We also extend prior research by considering how differences in a humorist's formal organizational status influence behavioral expectations and perceptions of the humorist, whereas previous research has primarily focused on how manager humor impacts employees or on a humorist's perceived status as a dependent variable (e.g. Evans *et al.*, 2019; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018; Yam *et al.*, 2018).

We present two studies examining whether behavioral expectations differentially impact perceptions of women who use humor at work relative to men and whether formal status is an important contextual condition impacting those perceptions. Study 1 explored predictions concerning the use of aggressive humor. In Study 2, we shifted our focus to examine predictions concerning the use of affiliative humor.

Social roles

Research on gender differences has shown that men and women generally exhibit different behaviors in social settings (e.g. Eagly and Steffen, 1986). According to social role theory, these behavioral differences stem from men's and women's divergent social roles (Eagly, 1987). Male gender roles are associated with agentic attributes such as being assertive, independent and controlling. Conversely, female gender roles are associated with communal attributes such as caring for others and being sensitive, selfless and emotionally expressive (Eagly, 1987). Because of their masculine and feminine leanings, agentic and communal attributes dictate normative expectations for how men and women should behave (Heilman and Chen, 2005), and these attributes have been found to influence behaviors and outcomes such as men's and women's career pursuits and occupational success (Sczesny *et al.*, 2019).

Unfortunately, gender-stereotyped beliefs often disadvantage professional women, particularly in terms of leadership emergence (Lanaj and Hollenbeck, 2015). According to male gender prescriptions, it is socially acceptable for men to act agentically; however, men are also allowed to exhibit communal behaviors, such as chivalry and courteousness (Eagly and Crowley, 1986). This dual prescription gives men a great deal of behavioral latitude. In contrast, it is less acceptable for women to act agentically. The exception is when the agentic behavior is viewed as positive and not in conflict with perceptions of communality. For example, Schaumberg and Flynn (2017) found that self-reliance, which they argue is a socially desirable trait in American culture (see also Prentice and Carranza, 2002) and not inconsistent with communality, was positively associated with leader evaluations in women. But when women engage in agentic behaviors that conflict with perceptions of communality (i.e. counterstereotypical), they encounter societal backlash

(e.g. Rudman, 1998). For example, Rudman *et al.* (2012) found that women experienced backlash in the form of hiring discrimination for exhibiting dominance behaviors, which are agentic but inconsistent with communal prescriptions for women. Backlash for agentic women also manifests itself in social repercussions such as uncivil treatment (Gabriel *et al.*, 2018) and being judged as socially deficient (Rudman and Glick, 2001). Overall, women face more rigid behavioral expectations than men, and understanding these expectations and the costs associated with their violation can be crucial for a woman's social acceptance (Rudman and Glick, 2001).

Humor and social roles
Humor researchers have categorized interpersonal humor into affiliative humor and aggressive humor (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Martin *et al.* (2003) describe affiliative humor as positive humor that amuses and affirms others and is explicitly geared toward supporting positive affect and enhancing relationships (de Souza *et al.*, 2019; Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). In contrast, aggressive humor is negative and involves sarcasm, ridicule, criticism and disparagement (Zillman, 1983). Aggressive humor is often seen as a means of social control that enables high-status individuals to clarify and sustain the social order. This includes put-down humor that is only socially approved for high-status individuals (Coser, 1960; Holmes, 2000).

Earlier humor research indicated that when men and women are in mixed social groups, men are more likely to initiate humor than women, and women laugh more than men (e.g. Coser, 1960; Neitz, 1980). Such findings supported a stereotype that women lacked the ability to be funny and initiate humor (Walker, 1988). However, later research clarified that when social situations are comprised solely of women or solely of men, women initiate humor as often as men (Hay, 2000). Thus, despite their ability to initiate humor, women are stereotypically less likely to do so in mixed company. Regarding type of humor, researchers have found that women are more likely to initiate affiliative humor than aggressive humor, and men are more likely to engage in aggressive humor than are women (Martin *et al.*, 2003). These behavioral patterns may drive stereotypes about humor by men versus women. One possible explanation for these differences is that initiating any humor can be viewed as an edgy or aggressive act (Grotjahn, 1957), which violates communal prescriptions related to being sensitive and caring for others, making it a counterstereotypical act. Accordingly, we explore how observers to humorous episodes might differentially perceive male and female humorists based on violations of gender-driven expectations for humor behavior.

Social norms for humor use influence the way in which the audience to humor (i.e. those who hear or observe others using humor) perceives the humorist. Wyer and Collins' (1992) theory of humor elicitation suggests that the degree to which an audience finds humor amusing is determined in part by the characteristics of the situation, including characteristics of the humorist. The theory suggests that observers evaluate humor more positively when they focus on the humor itself and elaborate cognitively on the inherent incongruities in the humor. However, if the situation within which the humor is embedded distracts the audience from focusing on the humor itself and causes the audience to focus on aspects of the context that are unrelated to the humor (e.g. characteristics of the humorist), the humor and humorist will be perceived more negatively or as "foolish." Indeed, humor was historically perceived as a low form of behavior (Malone, 1980) in which humorists were negatively referred to as "fools" or "buffoons" because their behavior was viewed as socially inappropriate (Wyer and Collins, 1992). Unfortunately, for women, this analysis suggests that audiences will judge humorists in accordance with gender role stereotypes, which are more constraining for women (Heilman and Chen, 2005).

Expectancy violation theory, gender, status and aggressive humor
EVT (Schauberg and Flynn, 2017) provides a useful lens through which to view violations of
behavioral expectations, particularly when expectations might be codetermined by
additional roles such as leadership positions and when predicting whether those violations
will result in negative or positive evaluations. Indeed, while the social role theory literature
focuses on how women are disadvantaged by behavioral stereotypes, EVT is helpful for
understanding situations in which violations of gender-role driven expectations sometimes
result in outcomes favoring women, such as in the overemergence of women as leaders when
they enact agentic behaviors (Lanaj and Hollenbeck, 2015). According to the theory,
observers react most strongly to behaviors, both positive and negative, that are
counterstereotypical. Specifically, if an individual's behavior is positive and
counterstereotypical, the individual will be viewed especially positively, and if the
behavior is negative and counterstereotypical, the individual will be viewed especially
negatively (Prentice and Carranza, 2004; Schaumberg and Flynn, 2017).

To derive hypotheses regarding behavioral expectations for humorists, we consider how
stereotypes associated with the humorist's gender and his/her formal organizational status
can influence others' perceptions of him/her. On the one hand, men, regardless of their formal
status, have stereotypes of using more humor and have gender-related stereotypes that allow
them to engage in agentic and communal behaviors. On the other hand, women have
stereotypes of not using humor, especially humor that runs counter to their restrictive gender-
based communal prescriptions. For men, aggressive humor, a negative behavior, would be
perceived by others as a negative stereotypical behavior based upon men's less restrictive
behavioral stereotypes. Alternatively, for women, aggressive humor would be perceived by
others as a negative counterstereotypical behavior because it runs counter to women's
gender-related stereotypes of not using humor or engaging in noncommunal behaviors.
However, studies have also identified a pattern suggesting that high-status organizational
members are allowed to joke and tease low-status individuals without reprisal, often in an
aggressive manner that is designed to maintain formal status differentials (e.g. Duncan,
1982). Additionally, high-status women have stereotypes of treating low-status women
harshly (Derks *et al.*, 2016; Sterk *et al.*, 2018).

The stereotypically harsh treatment of low-status women by high-status women stems
from longstanding gender inequality and discrimination women have faced in the workplace.
Because leader prototypes are masculine (Nye and Forsyth, 1991; Scott and Brown, 2006),
women have had more difficulty being identified as capable of leadership and advancing
through the corporate hierarchy (Ely *et al.*, 2011). As such, to demonstrate their leadership
potential and competence, women have had to sometimes go against their communal
prescriptions by acting agentically (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rudman, 1998). For high-status
women, one unfortunate consequence associated with overcoming this agentic-based
leadership hurdle is the stereotype that it is acceptable for female leaders to act harshly
toward low-status women (Derks *et al.*, 2016; Sterk *et al.*, 2018).

In summary, because aggressive humor runs counter to communal prescriptions
described by social role theory, it would be considered a negative counterstereotypical
behavior for women. However, when we take into consideration formal status and consider
that high-status individuals have more latitude to tease lower-status individuals and that
high-status women have stereotypically treated low-status women harshly, the expectancy
violation for using aggressive humor changes for high-status women from negative
counterstereotypical to negative stereotypical. As such, we propose that low-status women
who target other low-status women with aggressive humor will be perceived more negatively
than will high-status women who target low-status women. However, because men,
regardless of their organizational status, have more behavioral latitude to utilize aggressive
humor, we posit that formal organizational status will not influence perceptions of high- and

low-status male humorists who use aggressive humor toward low-status women. Table 1 provides a summary of the interaction prediction based on the logic of EVT.

H1. Formal organizational status will interact with humorist gender such that high-status female humorists who use aggressive humor toward a low-status female target will be perceived as less foolish than low-status female humorists, though no such difference will be observed for high- versus low-status male humorists.

Gender, leadership and affiliative humor
Affiliative humor is a particularly effective tool for high-status individuals to use with workers because it affirms others, boosts perceptions of warmth and is a positive form of communication (Bitterly and Schweitzer, 2019; de Souza *et al.*, 2019). Because high-status men stereotypically have more behavioral latitude to engage in all types of humor with everyone, for high-status men, affiliative humor use with their male and female workers would be perceived by others as a positive stereotypical behavior. For high-status women, affiliative humor use aligns with communal behaviors as women typically use affiliative humor more than aggressive humor (Martin *et al.*, 2003). However, despite this apparent alignment, the stereotype is that women do not use humor in mixed-gender situations (Coser, 1960; Neitz, 1980) and engage in affiliative humor with other women (Hay, 2000). Accordingly, women who use humor in the workplace, a typically mixed-gendered environment, encounter more backlash than women who do not use humor (Evans *et al.*, 2019).

According to EVT, when individuals engage in counterstereotypical behaviors that are positive, they are viewed more favorably than individuals who engage in positive stereotypical behaviors (Prentice and Carranza, 2004; Schaumberg and Flynn, 2017). This occurs because the stereotype violator receives the benefits associated with both their group membership and the positive qualities they are expressing that are counterstereotypical to their membership (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2001; Prentice and Carranza, 2004). Because affiliative humor is a positive form of communication that aligns with communal prescriptions but is stereotypically only used by women with other women (Hay, 2000), we propose that high-status women who utilize affiliative humor in the workplace with low-status men (a positive counterstereotypical behavior) will be viewed more favorably (less foolishly) than high-status women who engage in affiliative humor with low-status women (a positive stereotypical behavior). Conversely, we propose that high-status men will have more behavioral latitude to utilize affiliative humor with both low-status men and women because it represents a positive stereotypical behavior for them (see Table 1).

Humorist	Target	Expectation
Study 1: Aggressive humor		
High-status female humorist	Low-status female target	Neg. Stereotypical
Low-status female humorist	Low-status female target	Neg. Counterstereotypical
High-status male humorist	Low-status female target	Neg. Stereotypical
Low-status male humorist	Low-status female target	Neg. Stereotypical
Study 2: Affiliative humor		
High-status female humorist	Low-status female target	Pos. Stereotypical
High-status female humorist	Low-status male target	Pos. Counterstereotypical
High-status male humorist	Low-status female target	Pos. Stereotypical
High-status male humorist	Low-status male target	Pos. Stereotypical

Note(s): Negative counterstereotypical and positive counterstereotypical behaviors are expected to result in particularly negative and particularly positive evaluations (respectively) of the humorist

Table 1.
Study 1 (aggressive humor) and study 2 (affiliative humor) predictions using expectancy violation theory

H2. Target gender will interact with humorist gender such that high-status female humorists who initiate affiliative humor toward a low-status female target will be evaluated as more foolish than when the target is a low-status male, whereas no differences will be observed for high-status men who initiate affiliative humor toward low-status men or women.

We conducted Study 1 to test Hypothesis 1 and Study 2 to test Hypothesis 2. In Study 1, we examine perceptual differences for high- and low-status male and female humorists who engage in aggressive humor with low-status women. In Study 2, we examine high-status male and female humorists who engage in affiliative humor with low-status men and women.

Study 1 method
Participants and procedure
MBA students from a large Midwestern university in the USA were recruited in-person to participate in this voluntary study for no reward. Ninety-six students consented to participate and 92 participants (42 men, 39 women, 11 unreported) provided complete data. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 44 with an average age of 25 years old (15 unreported, SD = 4.23). Participants were asked to read a single-paragraph scenario about a social situation and to imagine they were observing the scenario as it unfolded. The scenario ends with a male or female character (humorist) making an aggressive humorous comment toward a female target. We chose a female target because the literature indicates that women tend to use more affiliative humor with each other, so using aggressive humor toward a female target maximizes the degree to which the behavior is negative and counterstereotypical. The use of humor in this scenario and in the subsequent study is intended to represent spontaneous conversational humor used in the flow of social interaction, which is far more common than the use of canned jokes (Robert and da Motta Veiga, 2017). Importantly, conversational humor uses a form of humor such as sarcasm, overstatement or parody and is recognized as having a humorous form, but is not necessarily "laugh out loud" funny. Indeed, some research examining aggressive humor acknowledges that the humor is often not intended to be perceived as funny or amusing (e.g. Huo *et al.*, 2012). Rather, as Miron-Spektor *et al.* (2011) noted, the active ingredient in humor is the incongruity that is embedded in it, not the audience's amusement. Indeed, spontaneous conversational humor is seldom overtly amusing, but is recognized by its form (see, e.g. Holmes and Marra, 2002).

The scenarios were developed by the authors and involved several rounds of feedback and edits with colleagues. To confirm the aggressiveness of our humorous comment, we enlisted 50 MTurk participants. We provided them with a definition of aggressive humor and affiliative humor (from Martin *et al.*, 2003), presented our scenario and asked them to rate how aggressive and affiliative the humorous comment was using a seven-point scale. Respondents reported that the humorous comment was significantly more aggressive than affiliative [$t (49) = 16.10, p < 0.01$].

Measures
After reading a randomly assigned scenario, participants indicated the extent to which several descriptors related to our perceptual outcome of "foolish" fit the humorist, using a seven-point scale (1 – "not at all," 7 – "very well"). *Foolish* was assessed using the descriptors foolish, stupid and pathetic ($\alpha = 0.80$). This outcome reflects negative perceptions of the humorist and captures the extent to which the humorist violated social expectations and norms.

The design for Study 1 was a 2 (humorist gender) by 2 (status of humorist: high, low) between-subjects design. In this scenario, members of a hospital staff are meeting to discuss

how to overcome recent failures that resulted in patient deaths. As a female nurse (target) struggles to share her ideas to address the problem, she is interrupted by a high-status, male/female doctor or low-status male/female student intern who attempts to make an aggressive humorous comment (i.e. "Oddly enough, Mary, the more you talk, the less sense you make. I think your idea groaned, rolled over, and died three minutes ago"). To reiterate, the punchline was not designed to be funny in the way that a stand-alone joke might be funny, but rather uses satirical incongruity to belittle the target and contextual verbiage suitable for a hospital.

We also asked participants about the status-level of the humorist using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 – "low status" to 7 – "high status." Participants viewed the high-status humorist as significantly higher in status than the humorist designated as low-status [t (87) = 6.89, p < 0.01].

Study 1 results

Means, standard deviations and correlations for our foolish perceptions variable and participant demographics are presented in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 predicted that high-status women who used aggressive humor toward low-status women (the target in all scenarios in this study) would be perceived as less foolish than low-status female humorists who used aggressive humor, whereas there would be no difference for high- versus low-status male humorists. Results from our two-way ANOVA showed a significant two-way interaction [F (1, 88) = 7.22, p < 0.01, η_p^2 = 0.08]. Simple effects analyses (see Table 3) indicated that high-status women who used aggressive humor were rated as less foolish than low-status female humorists [F (1, 88) = 10.90, p < 0.01, η_p^2 = 0.11], whereas no such difference existed for high- and low-status male humorists [F (1, 88) = 0.28, ns, η_p^2 < 0.01]. Further confirming support for Hypothesis 1, we also found that low-status women were rated as more foolish than low-status men [F (1, 88) = 5.46 p < 0.05, η_p^2 = 0.06].

Study 2 method

Participants and procedure

We recruited full-time employees via Qualtrics research panel services to participate for compensation in our second study. We randomly assigned participants to read our single-paragraph scenario where a high-status man or woman used affiliative humor targeted toward a low-status man or woman. In this scenario, the team had a very profitable year, so the company decides to have a small party for the team to celebrate. The low-status individual was tasked with organizing the party with short notice. Unfortunately, in his/her haste, he/she forgets to pick up forks for the cake. The team's leader notices and says, "No forks, Olivia/John? You're ALWAYS looking for ways to boost profits, are not you?" Because we were manipulating the gender of the humorist and the gender of the target [i.e. a 2 (humorist gender) by 2 (target gender) between-subjects design], only those participants who

Variables		M	SD	1	2
1	Foolish perceptions	4.66	1.36	(0.80)	
2	Age	25.91	4.23	−0.19	
3	Gender	0.52	0.50	−0.23*	−0.04

Note(s): N = 92 for foolish perceptions. N = 77 for age. N = 81 for gender. Internal reliability (alpha coefficient) for foolish perceptions is listed in parentheses. Gender is coded as 0 for female participants and 1 for male participants
*p < 0.05

Table 2.
Study 1 means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations

	M	SD	n	Results
Comparing gender				
Female humorist	4.74	1.38	47	$F(1,88) = 0.48$, ns
Male humorist	4.57	1.34	45	
Comparing status				
High-status humorist	4.40	1.23	48	$F(1,88) = 3.71$, ns
Low-status humorist	4.94	1.45	44	
Comparing female humorists				
1 High-status female humorist	4.13	1.12	24	$F(1,88) = 10.90$, $p < 0.01$
2 Low-status female humorist	5.38	1.36	23	
Comparing male humorists				
3 High-status male humorist	4.67	1.29	24	$F(1,88) = 0.28$, ns
4 Low-status male humorist	4.46	1.42	21	
Comparing low-status humorists				
2 Low-status female humorist	5.38	1.36	23	$F(1,88) = 5.46$, $p < 0.05$
4 Low-status male humorist	4.46	1.42	21	
Comparing high-status humorists				
1 High-status female humorist	4.13	1.12	24	$F(1,88) = 2.09$, ns
3 High-status male humorist	4.67	1.29	24	
Manipulation test for humorist status				
Status of high-status humorist	5.24	2.21	46	$t(87) = 6.89$, $p < 0.01$
Status of low-status humorist	2.28	1.80	43	
Manipulation test for humor				
Aggressiveness of humor	6.28	0.97	50	$t(49) = 16.10$, $p < 0.01$
Affiliativeness of humor	1.84	1.15		

Table 3.
Study 1 simple effect comparisons and manipulation test results

Note(s): DV = Foolish perceptions. To maintain sample size, no controls were included in simple effects analyses. Manipulation test for humor was conducted with a separate sample

successfully answered the manipulation checks regarding gender of the humorist and gender of the target were allowed to proceed and provide their perceptions about the humorist. Our final sample included 240 full-time male ($N = 118$) and female ($N = 122$) workers ranging in age between 19 and 83 years with the average age being 44 (SD = 12.61).

Measures
To increase the construct validity of our studies, we identified an alternative measure of foolish perceptions in this second study. We assessed *foolish* ratings of the humorist using three items on a seven-point scale derived from Scharrer (2001). Contrasting semantic differential choices included foolish and wise, dumb and smart, and a buffoon and sensible ($\alpha = 0.89$).

We included manipulation checks for the status of the humorist, status of the target and affiliativeness of the humor. Results indicated that participants rated the status of the humorist significantly higher than the status of the target [$t(239) = 13.61$, $p < 0.01$]. Our manipulation check for affiliativeness of the humor indicated that participants rated the humorous comment significantly more affiliative than aggressive [$t(239) = 4.04$, $p < 0.01$].

Study 2 results
Means, standard deviations and correlations for our foolish perception variable and participant demographics are presented in Table 4. Results from our two-way ANOVA

showed a significant two-way interaction [F (1, 234) $=$ 4.45, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$]. Simple effects analyses (see Table 5) indicated that high-status women who used affiliative humor directed toward low-status women were rated as more foolish than when that humor was directed toward low-status men [F (1,234) $=$ 10.84, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$], whereas no such difference existed for high-status men who directed their affiliative humor toward low-status women or men [F (1,234) $=$ 0.20, ns, $\eta_p^2 < 0.01$], providing support for Hypothesis 2.

Interestingly, we also found that when the affiliative humor was directed toward low-status men, high-status women were perceived as less foolish than high-status men [F (1,234) $=$ 7.90, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$]. This result aligns with Decker and Rotondo's (2001) finding that female managers who used positive humor were rated more positively than their

Variables		M	SD	1	2
1	Foolish perceptions	3.80	1.35	(0.89)	
2	Age	44.38	12.61	−0.15*	
3	Gender	0.49	0.50	−0.10	0.27**

Note(s): $N = 240$. Internal reliability for foolish perceptions is listed in parentheses. Gender is coded as 0 for female participants and 1 for male participants
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Table 4.
Study 2 means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations

	M	SD	n	Results
Comparing gender of high-status humorist				
High-status female humorist	3.64	1.42	114	F (1,234) $=$ 3.84, ns
High-status male humorist	3.94	1.27	126	
Comparing gender of low-status target				
Low-status female target	4.02	1.45	125	F (1,234) $=$ 7.14, $p < 0.01$
Low-status male target	3.56	1.19	115	
Comparing high-status female humorists				
1 High-status female humorist (low-status female target)	4.01	1.52	63	F (1,234) $=$ 10.84, $p < 0.01$
2 High-status female humorist (low-status male target)	3.18	1.14	51	
Comparing high-status male humorists				
3 High-status male humorist (low-status female target)	4.02	1.39	62	F (1,234) $=$ 0.20, ns
4 High-status male humorist (low-status male target)	3.86	1.15	64	
Comparing low-status male targets				
2 High-status female humorist (low-status male target)	3.18	1.14	51	F (1,234) $=$ 7.90, $p < 0.01$
4 High-status male humorist (low-status male target)	3.86	1.15	64	
Comparing low-status female targets				
1 High-status female humorist (low-status female target)	4.01	1.52	63	F (1,234) $=$ 0.01, ns
3 High-status male humorist (low-status female target)	4.02	1.39	62	
Manipulation test for status of humorist vs Status of target				
Humorist status	5.56	1.40	240	t (239) $=$ 13.61, $p < 0.01$
Target status	3.78	1.41		
Manipulation test for humor				
Affiliativeness of humor	4.72	1.73	240	t (239) $=$ 4.04, $p < 0.01$
Aggressiveness of humor	3.87	1.94		

Note(s): DV $=$ Foolish perceptions. Controlling for participant gender and age

Table 5.
Study 2 simple effect comparisons and manipulation test results

male manager counterparts (a female leadership advantage). It also aligns with EVT because for female humorists, initiating affiliative humor with a man is a positive counterstereotypical behavior, while for male humorists, initiating affiliative humor with another man only represents a positive stereotypical behavior (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2001; Prentice and Carranza, 2004).

General discussion
Our results suggest that social role expectations for women and the violations of those expectations differentially influence audience perceptions of female humorists based on the type of humor used, the formal organizational status of the humorist and the humor target's gender. In our first study, consistent with our EVT-based predictions, our results suggested that aggressive humor resulted in negative perceptions of low-status female humorists (i.e. "foolish") relative to high-status female humorists, whereas no such differences were observed for low- and high-status male humorists. In our second study, again in line with EVT, we found that high-status women were perceived more favorably when they used affiliative humor with male targets as compared to female targets, while no differences existed for the high-status male humorists.

Overall, our pattern of results indicates that women have stricter social role expectations and that those expectations are influenced by formal organizational status and the type of humor employed. Navigating the humor landscape appears more complex for women than it is for men, especially for women who lack formal status.

Theoretical and practical implications
The current study highlights the notion that for women, engaging in interpersonal humor can be a precarious endeavor. However, the use of an EVT framework also helped identify at least one set of conditions under which women who used humor were evaluated less negatively than men (i.e. when high-status women used affiliative humor with low-status men). This paper demonstrates the utility of integrating literature that highlights differences in expectations across social groups. For example, while social role theory describes how gender stereotypes drive expectations for men's and women's tendencies toward agentic and communal behavior, simple hypotheses such as "women should not engage in agentic humor" lack sufficient nuance to account for the complex combinations of contextual conditions likely to be found in the real world. In this research, we drew on a combination of social role theory, the literature on women in leadership roles and literature on differences between men's and women's humor use, to hypothesize when certain behaviors are likely to be viewed as positive or negative and either stereotypical or counterstereotypical. In that regard, the EVT framework is flexible and could be used in the future to help develop hypotheses drawn from findings in other literatures. For example, research on racial bias, or generational differences, could be integrated with literature on humor to develop hypotheses regarding when certain behaviors are likely to be counterstereotypical and either negative or positive.

This research also makes contributions to the literatures on humor and leadership. First, although the literature has demonstrated that the use of humor can be risky, particularly for women (Evans *et al.*, 2019), and can negatively impact perceptions of status as an outcome variable (e.g. Bitterly *et al.*, 2017), the current research extends that work to show that formal status (as an independent variable) can mitigate and in some cases reverse that effect. Indeed, whereas Bitterly *et al.* (2017) found that successful humor influenced perceptions of the humorist through its impact on perceived competence, the current study extends that research by demonstrating that formal status, arguably a signal of competence, influences the way in which the humor itself is perceived. In addition, the current research contributes to the controversial literature on a female leadership advantage (Decker and Rotondo, 2001; Rosette and Tost, 2010) by identifying conditions under which such an advantage might be observed.

The practical implications of our findings are a little disturbing. On the one hand, women with high-status organizational roles might be able to "get away with" using the same types of aggressive humor that might be expected from men, while low-status women who use aggressive humor will receive societal backlash. On the other hand, high-status women who use affiliative humor can gain advantages over their male counterparts when they use that humor with male but not female subordinates. Unfortunately, the sometimes-subtle distinctions between affiliative and aggressive humor used during spontaneous conversations or interactions at work can make the risk of backlash not worth the potential reward for women to attempt humor. To the extent that women sense or are aware of these biases, they may simply decide to avoid initiating most humor altogether, particularly in contexts where observers are likely to focus on contextual factors such as gender. Unfortunately, this effectively deprives women of a valuable tool (e.g. Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018), unless they are aware and skilled at navigating the complex social expectations. Alternatively, organizations might develop content to be included in organizational socialization or training efforts, such as in mandatory diversity training. Content could highlight stereotypes about women not being agentic and describe how men are typically given broader behavioral latitude. Indeed, potential double standards in perceptions of humor use could be used to effectively illustrate how such biases become enacted.

Limitations and future directions

We chose to use a scenario-based experimental methodology to achieve maximal control over the manipulation of our independent variables (humorist gender, formal status, target gender). However, this methodology has limitations. First, written scenarios are clearly limited in terms of realism and in terms of various social cues that would typically be present in real social situations (Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). In addition, the construction of scenarios that simulate everyday spontaneous conversational humor is challenging, given the embeddedness of conversational humor within the social context. It is also difficult to know whether manipulations such as ours were able to isolate the type of humor without other contaminating characteristics such as humor complexity. For example, our manipulation of humor in Study 1 involved the delivery of a somewhat long and complex sentence. It is difficult to know how such a manipulation might differ from shorter or less complex humor, such as brief quips or puns. Future research might utilize observational methods that can capture actual humor in real contexts and examine more subtle reactions to aggressive and affiliative humor by both men and women of different formal statuses (Phelan and Rudman, 2010). In addition, research could examine differences in perceptions for those who use interpersonal humor versus those who do not use humor to convey aggressive and affiliative comments. Likewise, future research could examine whether familiarity with the humorist influences perceptions of the humorist, such that familiar humorists are afforded more consideration than strangers.

Another limitation of our studies was that we did not manipulate all possible combinations of our variables in both studies. For example, in our first study, we did not manipulate the gender of the target of the aggressive humor. Rather, our scenarios for both aggressive and affiliative humor were designed in a way that highlights the value of an EVT approach by underscoring key discrepancies between male and female humorists. In so doing, we may have missed other interesting patterns of results.

We also note that in Study 1 the participants were young adults ($M = 25.91$ years), and it is difficult to know whether our pattern of results might replicate in older generations. In Study 2, which included a broader range of ages, controlling for age did not impact the pattern of results. Future research might explicitly examine generational differences in beliefs about social roles. The sense of humor of the perceiver might also play an important role; perhaps

individuals who use and appreciate humor themselves are generally less likely to form negative perceptions of others who use humor. Additionally, research could look at other characteristics such as race and ethnicity, which could provide additional insights for diversity management.

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Corresponding author
Timothy R. Moake can be contacted at: timothy.moake@mtsu.edu