**When workplace humour turns into conflict: Exploring HR practices in the case of conflict management.**

# **Abstract**

***Purpose*** - Although humour and conflict are popular topics in management, little attention has been paid to the negative effects of humour in terms of how workplace humour could turn into unexpected conflicts. From the perspective of conflict management, HR need to better understand this dynamic transition process. The purpose of this research is to explore the transition from humour to conflict and how HR perform when addressing humour-related issues.

***Design/methodology/approach*** - A secondary data, multiple case study approach is adopted. Case studies are analysed qualitatively and thematically through a content analysis matrix.

***Findings*** - Aggressive humour is closely related to conflict. Humour content and the context in which it takes place are important influential factors contributing to the transition from humour to conflict. It is challenging for HR to deal with humour-related issues: most victims are unwilling to report the issue at an early stage until they cannot bear the joke, forcing HR to perform reactively.

***Originality/value*** - This study highlights the dynamics and complexity of the transition from humour to conflict, providing new insights for HR in terms of effective conflict management.

***Practical implications*** - Workplace humour-related issues should not be overlooked. HR should adopt an early, proactive approach to prevent severe conflict from developing and relationships deteriorating.

***Keywords*** - Workplace humour, conflict management, HR practices, Case Study

# **Introduction**

Workplace humour has been widely studied as many management scholars have found that it could serve as a powerful managerial tool in the organisation context (for example, [Holmes and Marra, 2002](#Holmes2002)). Practitioners also have a strong interest in the successful utilization of humour in the workplace, which is evidenced in several organisations such as Google, Southwest Airlines, and Facebook ([Baldonado, 2015](#Baldonado)). Use of humour at work which contributes to a “culture of fun” appears to develop a relatively higher level of attraction for young talents (see [Fleming, 2005](#Fleming)); with higher staff satisfaction, task performance ([Miller *et al.*, 2018](#Miller)) as well as supporting informal learning ([Lee *et al*., 2022](#Lee)). [Mousa (2020)](#Mousa) identifies that these organisational practices are also being adopted in developing countries too, emphasising the widespread implications for the use of humour at work.

However, little attention has been paid to the negative impacts of humour, let alone those related to workplace conflict. In fact, using humour could be very serious in the workplace, especially when it is used as an excuse to allow insult, disrespect, or ridicule to enter dialogue “in disguised and deniable forms” ([Crawford, 2003:1420](#Crawford)) and can foster conflicts associated with discrimination, bullying or harassment. Such conflicts could inflict severe damage: for employees, negative conflicts undermine one’s job performance and productivity, and may trigger physical and mental injury; for employers and stakeholders, if not handled well, there is a strong possibility that conflicts will lead to undesired outcomes such as financial loss and damage to corporate image ([CIPD, 2020](#CIPD)).

Generally, insufficient attention has been paid to the negative impacts of workplace humour. Particularly when it comes to exploring HRM practices of humour-related conflict in the contemporary workplace, so far, little is known. However, in the modern workplace with a diverse and complex workforce, it is of great necessity for HR to better manage such conflicts effectively in terms of fostering a healthier workplace.

Thus, it is this imbalance between existing literature and practical importance that drives us to provide a more thorough answer to the following research questions:

1. How does humour relate to potential or actual workplace conflicts?
2. How do HR perform when managing humour-related conflicts?

This article applies a multiple case study approach with secondary data collection, targeting HR practices in handling humour-related conflicts in the UK workplace. Five selected cases are thematically analysed to describe and explore how workplace conflict emerges from humour, and how HR act to handle these issues. This study contributes to the relevant literature in several ways. First, it reveals the importance of exploring the negative influences of workplace humour, which has been neglected in previous literature to a large extent. Second, it enriches the understanding of the complex and multidimensional nature of humour-related conflict in organisational contexts. Third, the findings highlight the influential factors in the transition from humour to conflict. Therefore, the theoretical scope is broadened to provide practical implications for HR practitioners in terms of how they can function better to address humour-related conflicts in a more diverse and complex workforce and facilitate a healthier workplace.

# **Literature Review**

## *Definitions of humour*

While early research (such as relief theories and superiority theories) focused mostly on the functional interpretation of humour, much of the literature since the late 1980s (for example, incongruity theories and the benign violation theory) shifted to the psychological process in which humour arises. The maturity of the definitions of humour is parallel with the theoretical developments in this area. Despite the word “humour” being most commonly used to refer specifically to expressions that are perceived as funny or cause others to experience amusement, attention has also been given to conceptualizing it more broadly - the processes underlying the perception and appreciation of humour should be taken into account. For example, [Suls (1972)](#Suls) poses a two-stage model for humour appreciation - humour will not be experienced unless an incongruity (how much the contents violate the listener’s expectation) is identified at the first stage and this incongruity is resolved or understood at the second stage. [Holmes (2000)](#Holmes2000) defines instances of humour from a linguistic perspective, stating that they are utterances with which the speaker intends to amuse others, and these utterances are perceived to be amusing by at least some listeners. [Sev'er and Ungar (1997)](#Sever) emphasise that humour entails “a dynamic process”, where the teller and the audience interact with the embedded meaning of the expressions to determine whether efforts are funny or not. Similarly, [Romero and Cruthirds (2006)](#Romero) highlight this interaction by describing humour as “an amusing communication” that produces emotions and cognition at the individual, group, or organisation level. More recently, as [Martin and Ford (2018: 3)](#Martin2018) rightly contend,

*“Humour is a broad, multifaceted term that represents anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it.”*

## *Functions of humour*

In the existing literature, the benefits of using humour at work can be categorised into three levels, namely the individual, interpersonal, and organisational levels. First, on the individual level, using humour is beneficial to employee well-being. For example, it could make work-life more pleasant by reducing stress ([Hudson, 2001](#Hudson)), and offer relief from boredom in the workplace ([Plester and Sayers, 2007](#Plester2007)). Second, on the interpersonal level, researchers delve into the underlying mechanisms that explain how supervisors’ use of humour affects employee outcomes ([Kim *et al.*, 2016](#Kim); [Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018](#Mesmer2018)). Further, humour has been investigated as an important characteristic associated with leadership ([Shamir, 1995](#Shamir)). How leader humour influences follower outcomes is of popular interest in this area ([Vecchio *et al.*, 2009](#Vecchio); [Neves and Karagonlar, 2020](#Neves)). [Decker and Rotondo (2001)](#Decker) point out that humour supports attempts to enhance leadership effectiveness. More recently, [Wijewardena *et al*. (2017)](#Wijewardena) regard managerial humour as “affective events” - when perceived by employees as positive, manager’s humour produces positive employee emotional reactions. Third, as for the organisational level, humour “can serve as a toolkit, complete with a range of specific tools that can be selectively used and applied by management” ([Romero and Cruthirds, 2006:58](#Romero)). Relevant literature ([Kuiper and Maiolino, 2018:153](#Kuiper2018)) has also demonstrated that humour tends to be constructive to develop group cohesiveness. Through delivering organisational values and communicating behavioural norms ([Romero and Cruthirds, 2006:63](#Romero)), humour can be regarded as a significant component to create and maintain organisational culture ([Holmes and Marra, 2002](#Holmes2002); [Plester 2009](#Plester2009)).

While few can deny that humour could be a powerful managerial tool within the organisational context, it is not necessarily benign. Adverse impacts exerted by humour could result in multiple undesired and dysfunctional organisational outcomes, which may include poor employee morale and decreased productivity, as well as causing significantly destructive consequences such as instigating legal activities or cultural clashes ([Hemmasi](#Hemmasi) *[et al.](#Hemmasi)*[, 1994:1115](#Hemmasi); [Kim *et al.*, 2016:136](#Kim)). Expressions may be perceived as humorous by one yet quite an insult to others. For example, [Topić (2020)](#Topić) argues that female employees recognise they suffer from career barriers in workplace cultures that are grounded in masculine banter. Gender-based jokes in the workplace can even be regarded as sexist humour, or sexual harassment ([Hemmasi](#Hemmasi) *[et al.](#Hemmasi)*[, 1994)](#Hemmasi). It is worth mentioning that by disguising expressions of prejudice in a cloak of fun and frivolity, humour occasionally appears harmless and trivial with the implicit message that “it doesn’t count as hostility or prejudice because I didn’t mean it - it’s just a joke” ([Ford, 2016](#Ford)). However, psychologists suggest the opposite - that it allows insult, disrespect, ridicule, and slur to enter dialogue “in disguised and deniable form” ([Crawford, 2003: 1420](#Crawford)) and can foster discrimination, bullying or harassment. Whether or not the humour is offensive is from the recipient’s point of view, not the one saying the joke; and the saying “it’s just a joke” is not a watertight defence in most cases. Indeed, legislation in the UK (see [Equality Act 2010](#EqA)) protects employees from the banter that has the effect of violating one’s dignity or creating a hostile or offensive work environment. However, practitioners may find that “fun is ambiguous and paradoxical” ([Plester](#Plester2015) *[et al](#Plester2015)*[., 2015](#Plester2015)) and it is very tricky to mark appropriate boundaries between ‘just a bit of fun’ and harmful - potentially even unlawful - banter. As [Mulkay (1988:217)](#Mulkay) argues, “*because the language of humour is necessarily implicit and allusive, and because its signals mean that serious intent can be easily denied, social actors regularly use the humorous mode, not as a self-contained alternative to serious discourse, but as a useful resource for accomplishing serious tasks”*, whilst being able to dismiss the intent as ‘misunderstanding’.

## *Humour style*

Although there are relatively fewer studies concentrating on the negative roles of humour compared with those investigating its positive roles ([Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2012](#Mesmer2012); [Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2018:697](#Mesmer2018)), scholars attempt to classify distinct styles of humour to answer which type of humour could produce good or poor results. For example, [Martin *et al.* (2003)](#Martin2003) develop a 2\*2 conceptualization of functions of humour. This conceptualization distinguishes humour styles from two dimensions: a) *self-*versus-*others*; b) *benign*-versus-*detriment*. In this way, four humour styles are formed, namely self-enhancing (relatively benign uses of humour to enhance the self), affiliative (to enhance one’s relationships with others), self-defeating (to enhance relationships at the expense of self), and aggressive humour (using humour to enhance the self at the expense of others) ([Martin *et al.*, 2003](#Martin2003)).

Self-enhancing humour focuses on the self and is benevolent ([Martin *et al.*, 2003](#Martin2003)). People may use self-enhancing humour to discover the funny side of an event and cheer up when experiencing difficulty ([Kuiper *et al.*, 2004](#Kuiper2004); [Kim *et al.*, 2016](#Kim)). Thus, it correlates with the concept of relief theories, in which individuals use humour to release negative emotions. Affiliative humour is perceived as adaptive and benign to others with a focus on promoting interpersonal relationships ([Martin *et al.*, 2003](#Martin2003)). Telling/sharing a joke to evoke amusement for others is a typical example of affiliative humour. Therefore, with the characteristics of being beneficial and non-hostile, it appears to enhance effective communication and foster a pleasant workplace. Self-defeating is a type of humour used to amuse others by disparaging oneself ([Martin *et al.*, 2003](#Martin2003)). People may use it to gain recognition from others and have better interpersonal relationships, even at the expense of impairing their own benefits. Unlike these three types of humour, aggressive humour is potentially detrimental to others ([Martin *et al.*, 2003](#Martin2003)). Generally, it seems to be closely related to superiority theories ([Keith-Spiegel, 1972](#Keith); [Morreall, 1983](#Morreall)), which particularly focus on the interpersonal motives of self-esteem enhancement, proposing that amusement is generated from the feeling of superiority over others. Therefore, when aggressive humour is used to elevate oneself at the expense of hurting others, it seems to be most likely to cause workplace conflict.

Within organisations, where the operational activities are dominated by the rules of human interaction, understanding the interpersonal and intrapsychic functions that humour serves for people in their workplace, can contribute to effective human resource management. That is, when it comes to preventing and managing workplace conflicts, it is a useful skill for HR to link specific humour styles to potential organisational outcomes.

## *Humour and workplace conflict*

Historically, workplace conflicts are considered to be the result of a fundamental disparity of interest within the employment relationship; the employers expect higher output, stricter control, and reduced labour costs whilst the employees want protection from overload, a higher level of autonomy, and higher wages ([Heery and Noon, 2017](#Heery)). Contemporarily, the manifestations of conflict have altered over time, and conflict arises “not only because of formal labour-management disagreements over wages, hours, and working conditions, or disputes between ... [other parties], but more fundamentally because individuals differ in their values, interests, and beliefs” ([Lipsky *et al.*, 2016](#Lipsky)). This individual difference also affects the subjective perceptions of humour ([Clancy and Linehan, 2019](#Clancy)). Academics have found that various kinds of individual differences could lead to different perceptions of humour. For example, gender ([Crawford, 2003](#Crawford); [Holmes, 2006](#Holmes2006); [Moake and Robert, 2021](#Moake); Lee *et al*., 2022), race ([Maples *et al.*, 2001](#Maples)), age ([Tehan Stanley](#Tehan) *[et al.](#Tehan)*[, 2014](#Tehan)), power and status differences ([Kim *et al.*, 2016:128](#Kim); [Moake and Robert, 2021](#Moake)) have been evidenced as influential factors in perceptions of humour. When an employee, with certain individual differences, perceives he or she has been disrespected or even offended by someone’s “joke”, conflict could occur. Therefore, the outcome of humour is determined by the humour style, content, and context as well as the perception of the recipient. Researchers such as [Suls (1972)](#Suls) and [Wyers and Collins (1992)](#Wyer) identify the importance of recipient interpretation and the process that takes place in order for a joke to be appreciated, emphasising the subjectivity inherent in humour.

A large majority of studies in management focus on how to utilise humour to prompt desired managerial outcomes, but [Pundt (2015)](#Pundt) calls for further investigation into different humour styles rather than just positive humour. And whilst a few studies mention that humour at work may cause conflict, little is known about how humour relates to workplace conflict and how HR manage humour-related conflict. However, in the modern workplace with a diverse and complex workforce, it necessitates HR to better manage this kind of conflict in terms of fostering a healthier workplace.

# **Methodology**

This research utilises a case study approach in which five secondary data case studies that focus on humour and conflict are qualitatively analysed.

## *Data collection and selection*

The secondary data case studies are collected based on the following criteria:

1. Real cases that took place in the UK’s workplace in the last ten years,
2. Either potential or actual workplace conflict(s) occurred,
3. The conflict(s) related to different perceptions of humour,
4. The events and HR practices were recorded in detail.

Five cases are analysed: two cases have been taken from teaching case studies in Harvard Business Review (HBR) and three from tribunal law reports (see Table I). These sources enable the outcomes of data selection to reflect a concern for construct validity and reliability, thereby becoming valuable for further analysis ([Yin, 2018](#Yin)).

**(Insert Table** I **here)**

**Table** I**. Case overviews**

## *Rationale*

Since the way in which a member of an organisation attaches his or her own individual meaning to workplace humour cannot be underestimated, a qualitative approach enables the study to pay greater attention to the subjective perceptions of different parties in humour-related conflicts.

The multiple case study approach fits the descripto-explanatory purpose of this research, utilizing description as a precursor to explanation to answer the “how” research questions. Given that humour-related conflict occurs within “a dynamic process” in which different parties (such as the joke-speaker and the listener) interact with the underlying meaning of the expressions ([Sev'er and Ungar, 1997:87](#Sever)), multiple cases will allow the study to dig deeply into different interaction process.

Like many research projects that began at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, methodological choices, particularly relating to primary data collection, were restricted ([Parsons *et al*, 2022](#Parsons)). Furthermore, secondary data allows us to see the whole process of humour, conflict and the role of HR from start to finish in multiple situations and organisations. Primary data collection would not have allowed this full process as we cannot know when humour and conflict will emerge together in organisations. Therefore, the adopted method facilitates the exploration of humour-related workplace conflict in different contemporary workplace scenarios, ensuring that HR practices and humour-related conflict are not being explored through merely one lens, “but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” ([Baxter and Jack, 2008:544](#Baxter)).

## *Data analysis*

A step-by-step thematic analysis is adopted in the data analysis process. First, dominant categories - humour, conflicts and HR practices are identified, which are derived from existing literature and the research questions. These categories are then broken down into seven themes (Table II), and they are identified by logically tracing a changing process, trying to show how humour deteriorates into conflict, then how HR act in the conflict.

**(Insert Table** II **here)**

**Table** II**. Derived themes**

Further, qualitative content analysis is conducted to analyse the text in five cases through a category system. Using the general inductive approach, the analysis restructures the material into a content analysis matrix to filter out the most relevant and crucial information presented in the cases. In this way, the data are reduced after an “extraction” process, and a new basis of information separated from the original text has been reconstructed ([Kohlbacher, 2006](#Kohlbacher)). This analysis process is assisted by the software MAXQDA 2020 (See supplementary material for Content Analysis Matrix).

# **Findings**

The relationship between the seven themes is presented in Figure 1, which shows that the transition from humour to conflict is affected by humour style, humour content, and the context in which it takes place. The changing feelings of the joke recipient parallel the conflict intensity: conflict is less likely to occur when the recipient regards the joke as acceptable, whereas when he/she feels angry and thinks the joke is unacceptable, actual conflict is likely to occur. Findings suggest that HR practices could be categorised as proactive if these actions are taken before conflict takes place, or reactive if they happen after actual conflict arises. Here, we discuss the findings based on the themes.

**(Insert Figure 1 here)**

**Figure 1. Factors that influence the transition from humour to conflict, and corresponding HR practices**

## *Humour style*

Conflicts are more likely to occur when the humour style can be identified as aggressive humour, which in [Martin](#Martin2003) *[et al.](#Martin2003)*[’s (2003)](#Martin2003) humour styles model, is used to *enhance oneself* but *at the expense of others*. Four of the five cases relate to aggressive humour. As cases C and E show, using humour *at the expense of others* tends to cause dissatisfaction among those being joked about - the victims in these cases felt offended by the jokes regarding their traveller background and transgender status.

However, the data also demonstrates that opinions regarding whether the joke is made *at the expense of others* vary. For example, in Case B, Sema felt that when her boss referred to her as “Dot”, he was making a joke at her expense:

*“Humour? To* *ridicule someone’s physical appearance. It’s now become acceptable for the entire team to make fun of my size. Last week he called me Dot in a meeting with Harold! And in front of a client!”*

Sema’s husband and other colleagues did not think this humour was aggressive or hurtful to Sema and simply felt it was friendly, British humour. Therefore, opinions in Case B varied on whether the joke was being made at Sema’s expense. Whether a joke is made *at the expense of others*, depends heavily on the joke recipient’s view rather than the speaker’s or any others’ perspective.

To summarise, there is a close relationship between aggressive humour and conflict - conflict is more likely to occur when the joke speaker intends to achieve a sense of superiority by putting others down and/or the recipient feels that this is the case.

## *Humour content*

In five cases, although there is no explicit indication about what kind of humour content would cause conflicts at work, teasing one’s personal characteristics could be problematic. When the humour content targets or relates to someone’s protected characteristics (such as the transgender employee in Case E), it could amount to suspected discrimination, bullying or harassment. However, it does not mean that teasing certain personal characteristics that are not directly listed in protected characteristics cannot induce conflict. Teasing someone’s physical appearance is more likely to offend him/her since it would be perceived as an accurate personal attack. In four cases (A, B, C and D), the victims’ appearance, size, accent, and hair colour had been respectively targeted to poke fun at and had caused conflicts. Therefore, no matter what the humour content is about or whether the individual characteristics are under direct legislation protection, to joke about one’s individual characteristics would be particularly sensitive, especially when he/she differs from most others in an organisation.

## *The reactions in context*

In the majority of cases, it is clear that most often the victim of the joke tries to ignore the negative effects of the joke and keep silent at the beginning. The cases suggest that they are reluctant to act out of concern for consequences such as the impact it might have on their career or employment. For example, in Case B, the victim of the joke was concerned she would be considered a loner in their team if she were to raise a concern regarding the humour that had been used. Similarly, in Case C the joke victim was concerned that he would lose his job if he spoke with HR about his negative experiences of workplace humour by a senior colleague, Mr Barnes:

*“When it was put to the claimant that the best way to have challenged alleged behaviour by Mr Barnes would have to been to say that he was offended and to ask Mr Barnes to stop, the claimant replied, ‘and I’d have lost my job because that’s the real world’.” (Case C)*

Keeping silent and avoiding action when humour is regarded as upsetting or offensive might mean that the humour is repeated, as is the case for the joke victim in Case C, who found that, once the ‘joking’ began*, “very disparaging and racist comments became very much a part of his way of speaking to me.” (Case C)*. Such repeated inappropriate humour is also noted in Case B:

*“Although Sema was energized by the work, she’d grown increasingly uncomfortable ... He still called her Dot all the time. It was a joke that wouldn’t die.” (Case B)*

Hence, seemingly harmless jokes could still upgrade to conflict because the joke is repeated, despite the victims’ initial attempts not to create trouble and to remain silent at the early stage.

In all five cases, the joke victims or bystanders felt increasingly uncomfortable when the joke was made on formal occasions in front of others such as their supervisors, clients, or colleagues. Therefore, the inappropriate context of using humour is another important factor that triggers the transition from humour to conflict.

## *Changing feelings*

Despite different content, context and the victims’ individual differences, the feelings of the victims or bystanders changed similarly. Their surprise at the beginning when the jokes were made turned into anger afterward (Cases A, B and E). In Case A, a bystander, explains how he felt after hearing someone in a work meeting make a ‘joke’ that a female colleague was selected for a leadership program because of her *“good looks*”,

*“[He] immediately felt a knot in his stomach ... [Later] His confusion turned to anger. Why had Jackson put him in this position?” (Case A)*

Similarly, in Case B, when Jack called Sema “Dot” at the first meeting, she *“was completely taken aback by Jack’s remark”*. After being called “Dot” several times, especially at a team-building event, *“She turned away, cheeks hot with anger, tears welling in her eyes”*, indicating that the feeling toward the joke has changed since the first time. These two cases also reveal that the change from surprise to anger could be attributed to the inappropriate context (Case A) or the increasing times of joking (Case B).

The change of feelings can also be found in Case E. When Alexandra was called “Alexander”, she asked the colleague to stop but this didn’t work, and she found this upsetting. After the jokes upgraded into practical pranks - the perfume incident and the toilet incident, she made formal complaints but failed to receive reasonable protection, she became angry,

*“The toilet incident was fully investigated??? Really! It was so investigated that the same girl walked past me when I was seated outside HR ... and she laughed at me. Please don’t insult me. I think it disgusting that people can say whatever they like, and your company does nothing about it ... I cannot work in a place where my gender is an issue ... [I] would not return to work unless [the company] did something about the people who had been bullying [me].” (Case E)*

As a result, this change of feelings is important to understand the dynamics of humour-conflict transition, indicating that accompanied by the shift in feelings, the situation is becoming more and more unacceptable to the victim and the possibility that humour develops into conflict is increasing as a result of time and persistency.

## *HR practices*

HR’s interventions are categorised into reactive and proactive approaches.

### Reactive feedback control

As employees are usually unwilling to report issues at the early stage in relation to issues with humour, HR are forced to adopt feedback control, which means control is taken after an activity or process is completed. As feedback control refers to reacting afterward, it can be implemented only after the occurrence of inappropriate action. Grievance procedures and processes, to a large extent, can be seen as feedback control (particularly prominent in Cases C and E).

Employees appear to be initially reluctant to report the humour-related issue until they cannot bear the joke any longer; at this point, these intolerable feelings indicate a conflict may have already occurred. For example, in Cases B, D and E, the humour-related issue has not been reported to HR in the first place and HR were not made aware until things had become much worse and thus are forced to behave reactively. The complex and subjective nature of humour means that HR often behave reactively which impacts their ability to successfully undertake conflict management.

### Proactive measures

Proactive measures of prevention do exist in a few cases, for example, a clear formal policy against misconduct such as discrimination/harassment and relevant training for employees and managers. However, the effect of these proactive measures is open to question.

In Case A, Teaira (whose appearance has been jokingly commented on by Jack), was concerned about the harshness of the company’s zero-tolerance policy and hesitated to make a formal complaint against Jack with the worry that Jack would be fired.

*“Teaira had been proud that her company was taking a stand. Now, though, she wondered whether such a hard line was really a good thing.” (Case A)*

This suggests that, particularly when considering humour, it is difficult to have such one-size-fits-all policies. Furthermore, even when proactive/preventative approaches have been introduced, they are not always successful. For example, in both cases D and E, staff had received training, but this did not reduce the issues of conflict:

*“The managers discussed the issue and did not escalate it to HR because they did not think it [amounted to] a sexual assault”. (Case D)*

*“[Store manager] ... had been trained on conducting disciplinaries and grievances, [but he] did not speak to HR.” (Case E)*

Therefore, while we did see some examples of proactive approaches in the cases, most attempts to manage conflict were done after the conflict had taken place and proactive approaches were not always effective.

# **Discussion & Conclusion**

While the relationship between humour and conflict has been examined in a number of previous studies, academics appear to have put more emphasis on how to use humour to resolve conflict, but few have systematically investigated how humour can turn into conflict in the workplace. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the complexity of the change from humour to conflict, suggesting that HR should attach more importance to humour-related conflict to manage undesired risks.

Taken together, the findings suggest that there is a close association between aggressive humour and conflict. Conflict is more likely to take place when aggressive humour has been used. Intention, content, and context all impact the extent to which humour develops into conflict. Specifically, the intention of the humour speaker, to a large extent, impacts the joke recipient’s perspective of whether the joke is acceptable or not - when the recipient thinks that there is no intention to offend in the joke, it would be less likely to cause conflict. As for the content, it seems that joking about one’s individual differences is particularly sensitive. Context is also a significant factor - especially if the sayings are repeated on inappropriate occasions - that contributes to the shift from humour to conflict. Notably, the victims/bystanders with various individual differences experienced a very similar change of feelings in the process where humour turns into conflict, even though the humour contents were totally different under distinct contexts.

We also find that most victims seem to be unwilling to express their discomfort when the humour is just taking place. Instead, they are more likely to hide their true feelings to avoid potential negative effects on their career, which means HR are forced to adopt feedback control and perform reactively. As for the implementation outcomes of existing proactive measures regarding policymaking and training, such measures might not have exerted the perceived positive influence of preventing conflict from intensifying. This could be better explained by dynamic power negotiation during the whole change process from humour to conflict: pre-set guidance may not be effective when the power position shifts in the conversation. The findings also point to the theoretical implications that a deeper understanding of humour-conflict transition is of necessity for HR, as well as practically considering what actions can be taken by HR to handle these situations.

## *Theoretical implications*

Congruent with the findings of previous studies ([Kuiper *et al.*, 2004](#Kuiper2004); [Yip and Martin, 2006](#Yip)), we have found that the underlying hostile attitudes of aggressive humour negatively impact interpersonal relationships and can potentially escalate to conflict. This research also supports [Martin *et al.*’s (2003)](#Martin2003) model that the intention when making a joke is an important factor that affects the perception of humour. This intention to use humour could possibly cause conflict if the joke speaker intends to use humour to gain his/her sense of superiority (superiority theories). However, it has been found that the intention is subject to the subjective opinion of the joke recipient rather than the joke speaker. Whether the recipient perceives the joke is intended to offend or not, will largely determine his/her level of acceptance toward the joke - the joke with no intention to offend would be easier to be accepted and less likely to induce conflict. That is, whether a joke is “benign or detriment” in [Martin *et al.*’s (2003)](#Martin2003) model, is largely affected by the joke recipient’s subjective idea and is not an issue of dichotomy. This poses some serious implications for how we manage or consider workplace humour if the subjective idea of intent held by the joke teller is a key indicator of the likelihood of conflict developing, it will potentially be hard to provide guidance for the speaker in terms of avoiding conflict.

Further, consistent with previous research ([Maples *et al.*, 2001](#Maples); [Crawford, 2003](#Crawford); [Holmes, 2006](#Holmes2006)), this study shows that individual differences (gender, culture, etc) will affect the perception of humour. However, these influential factors seem not confined to these individual differences that have already been studied in academic research. For example, minor individual differences such as regional accent, hair colour, height, and so on could be the targets. Jokes related to such individual differences, especially those that can be verified objectively, could be particularly problematic.

The findings also reveal that the change of feelings is an important signal implying the shift from humour to conflict. It extends the understanding of humour-related conflict in the workplace and is valuable to provide indications for HR’s intervention. Interestingly, the changing feelings of the victim or bystander during the humour-conflict transition were largely similar in most cases, moving from being surprised to being angry. To some extent, the original surprise can be explained by incongruity theories that the perception of incongruity is necessary for people to consider the comments as humorous ([Morreall, 1983](#Morreall)). When the joke becomes gradually more unacceptable, people may feel angrier; conflict is then more likely to arise.

Since research on the positive effects of humour in the workplace dominates in this field, this study contributes to relevant domains by uncovering the importance of studying the negative effects of workplace humour. As the findings indicate, workplace humour is not a simple issue; we cannot dismiss it as meaningless or “just kidding”, it is a serious one that has potential to lead to undesired conflict that could harm both the employee and the organisation. Thus, it is necessary for HR to better understand the underlying linkage between workplace humour and conflict in terms of effective conflict management. Further, it broadens the scope of existing literature by disclosing the complex and multidimensional nature of humour-related conflict in organisational contexts, as well as the complexity of the transition from humour to conflict, which have received little attention previously, therefore, this research helps to narrow the cognitive gap regarding humour-related conflict. Finally, it helps to identify the influential factors (as noted, humour style, content and context, the intention of the speaker, etc) that affect the transition from humour to conflict. In this case, these theoretical contributions to this field provide practical implications for HR to better handle humour-related issues in the workplace.

## *Practical implications*

Considering the negative influences humour could exert on workers and organisations, HR and front-line managers should realise the importance of conflict management in this context and should work to prevent conflict from arising. However, HR face two major challenges: 1) Identification of the employee’s feelings. The findings suggest that it could be assisted with identifying the humour style, context, and reactions of those who listen to the joke. HR should be particularly aware of those jokes which refer to specific individual differences and have been repeated on formal occasions that may contribute to the upgrade from humour to conflict. 2) The reluctance of the joke victim to report the issue which forces HR to act reactively when the conflict has already taken place. The findings indicate the need for HR to strategically develop an organisational approach that promotes early and collaborative ways to resolve conflict, instead of merely considering handling individual disputes when the conflict has already occurred ([CIPD, 2020:5](#CIPD)). We suggest using the changing feelings as a signal of the gradual transition, so potential conflicts can be recognised and intervened by HR from an early stage to prevent conflict deterioration. Therefore, drawing on theories of workplace bullying, we recommend organisations create a ‘conflict management climate’ (CMC) to prevent and neutralise conflict escalation ([Hamre *et al.*, 2022](#Hamre)). It is important that management deliver a clear message that any type of unfair treatment (bullying, discrimination, harassment, etc.) is not tolerated ([CIPD, 2022](#CIPD2022)). Further, humour is situated within relations of power that help determine speech and actions (i.e., [McCabe, 2023](#McCabe)); in this case, organisational power relations impact employees’ willingness to express their discomfort. HR should endeavour to foster a high-quality, egalitarian relationship within the office to welcome formal and also informal open dialogues. We argue that HR and employers should help to foster positive emotions and minimise negative emotions experienced by employees ([Wijewardena *et al*.,2017](#Wijewardena)) and consider implementing new internal policies on communication and behaviour ([Topić, 2020](#Topić)) to help cultivate a more inclusive and respectful culture to prevent inappropriate behaviour starting. These procedures should be developed in collaboration with employees, co-creating policies on conflict and humour together. Employees need to be given assurances that the organisation will indeed be trustworthy, fair, and consistent in such situations ([Hamre et al, 2022](#Hamre)).

## *Limitations and future research*

Whilst this research provides valuable contributions to the understanding of humour, both theoretically and practically, there are several limitations to this research that are worthy of consideration. Subject to the methods employed, one limitation is the use of secondary data that has been collected by other researchers or for a different purpose. The quality of the case may depend on the original writer or the purpose of writing it ([Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996](#Frankfort)). For example, several of the cases that have been used from law reports focus on issues of unfair dismissal. Indeed, humour-related conflict and how HR respond to the conflicts are not the main focus of these reports, which means information relevant to humour-related conflict is shown from a sideways angle. Therefore, individual cases may seem to be insufficiently correlated to contribute perfectly to all themes we analyse even if they fit every criterion during data collection. Also, using secondary data limits the study to fully considering factors like organisations’ size, while HR in large organisations with more resources may have significantly different ways to handle workplace conflict compared to SMEs. Thus, future studies may consider exploring humour-related conflicts at work with other methodologies using primary data to answer questions concerned directly. Furthermore, instead of differentiating successful humour and failed humour (see [Hay, 1996](#Hay)), this study mainly considers humour that has turned into conflict, despite whether it succeeds to achieve its original goal or not. More information about the relationship between conflict and failed humour as well as successful humour - which has not been revealed in this study - would help us to establish a greater degree of understanding of humour-related conflict.

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