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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Linking Leader's Positive Humor and Employee Bootlegging: Empirical Evidence from China

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**Purpose:** With the increasingly fierce market competitions, non-linear development of organizations through bootlegging has become a key path for enterprises to advance competitiveness. Motivating employees to carry out bootlegging in an organization is becoming an important issue many enterprises face now. This paper aims to analyze the relationship between leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging. We introduced norm violation acceptability as the mediating variable and trust in leader as the moderating variable to propose a theoretical model and verified it by structural equation modeling (SEM) and multiple regression analysis separately.

**Patients and Methods:** Based on both the emotion as social information theory and the social information processing theory, a sample of 278 professional employees working in an information technology (IT) enterprise of China was used to test the moderated mediation model. We used SPSS and AMOS to further verify the research model through structural equation modeling (SEM) and multiple regression analysis.

**Results:** The results indicate that there is a positive relationship between leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging, which is partially mediated by norm violation acceptability. Moreover, trust in leader not only moderated the relationship between leader's positive humor and norm violation acceptability but also strengthened the influence of leader's positive humor on employee bootlegging through norm violation acceptability.

**Conclusion:** These findings have implications in identifying factors which contribute to employee bootlegging and providing a theoretical foundation for leaders in an organization.

**Keywords:** leader's positive humor, trust in leader, norm violation acceptability, employee bootlegging

## Introduction

With the increasingly turbulent environments, heightened competition and unpredictable technological change,<sup>1</sup> more and more managers have reached the consensus that enterprises can realize nonlinear growth through employee bootlegging.<sup>2-4</sup> Employee bootlegging refers to employees' out-of-role behavior wherein employees believe their innovative behavior will bring benefits to the organization, even if they go against the will of their superiors or organizational norms, but continue to dig deeper through informal channels.<sup>5-8</sup> The endless "Black Swan Events" from the global market can often bring unprecedented growth to companies and amaze the market at the same time. Entrepreneurs have gradually realized that adhering to organizational norms and rules strictly is becoming a shackle that constrains employees' innovation and hinders the growth of enterprises.<sup>9</sup> Hence, employee bootlegging has increasingly become an important informal path to realizing breakthrough for companies. According to a recent survey, more than 80% of the respondents admit that employee bootlegging universally exists in their daily work.<sup>10</sup> For employee bootlegging to occur in organizations, managers need to support and promote it, as they are the individuals who are most knowledgeable about which employee work outcomes should be creative and they have considerable influence over the context within which employee bootlegging can occur.<sup>11</sup>

Although a number of studies have investigated the impact of leaders on employee bootlegging, these investigations have largely focused on issues of leader motivation and their attitude towards employee bootlegging.<sup>12</sup> More recently, researchers have begun investigating broader theories of the leadership behavior in link with employee bootlegging, such as agile leadership and leader's pro-social behavior.<sup>13–15</sup> Noticeably missing from research attention has been leader's positive humor, despite suggestions by researchers that scholars should focus greater effort on leadership approaches that can address the elemental underpinnings of employee bootlegging.<sup>16</sup> Humor, as a means of social communication,<sup>17</sup> can animate atmosphere, trigger positive emotions, and then shorten the distance between each other.<sup>18,19</sup> Leader's positive humor conveys leader's care and kindness, making employees feel breaking the routine and boundaries of the organization is "benign violation", thereby helping employees to carry out bootlegging. So, there are major reasons to expect leader's positive humor to have a positive impact on employee bootlegging. Therefore, a major purpose of this study was to build and test theory that addresses the connection between leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging, including several important intervening variables.

In building a model linking leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging, we further posited the mediating mechanism with high potential to help explain linkage between leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging: norm violation acceptability. Norm violation acceptability is defined as employee's self-perception of how well violation of organizational norms can be accepted by the organization.<sup>20</sup> According to the emotion as social information theory, leader's positive humor is an important kind of social information for employees. Leaders express their kindness and tolerance towards employees through positive humor. What is more, social information processing theory helps to build a route on how employees interpret messages from their leaders which lead to bootlegging. We thus explored the mediating effect of norm violation acceptability between leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging. However, how employees accurately interpret the information conveyed by leaders is largely influenced by the trust relationship between leaders and employees. So, we further complemented this theoretical model by positing and testing a potentially important moderator: trust in leader. Trust in leader is the extent to which an individual understands and trusts in his leader, which is the internal root of employee's interpretation of leadership characteristics and behaviors.<sup>21,22</sup> A moderated mediation model was constructed to further explore the mechanism and boundary conditions of leader's positive humor on employee bootlegging.

Overall, based on both the emotion as social information theory and the social information processing theory, our purpose was and is to build theory by conceptually and empirically introduce norm violation acceptability as a mediating variable and trust in leader as a moderating variable in answer to calls for a more comprehensive understanding of leader's positive humor as it relates to employee bootlegging.

## Literature Review and Assumptions

Humor, which was first referred to as jokes and slapstick, gradually attracted the attention and emphasis of scholars as they introduced it into the study of organizational behavior.<sup>18,23</sup> The current research on humor is focused mainly on topics such as leader's humor,<sup>20,24</sup> group's humor,<sup>25</sup> and organizational humor.<sup>26,27</sup> Leader's humor is one kind of communication behavior in an organization, which is issued by the leader to please his subordinates and can be perceived by the subordinates.<sup>18</sup> Decker and Rotondo (2001) divided leader's humor into two types, as positive and negative ones, based on the way humor was used.<sup>28</sup> Leader's positive humor refers to leader entertaining subordinates by telling funny stories and making good-natured jokes to provoke positive emotional response from them.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, leader's negative humor refers to the negative interpersonal interactions triggered by the use of crude, sarcastic, and inappropriate jokes. As an important type of leadership style, leader's positive humor has attracted the attention of an increasing number of scholars. Empirical research has demonstrated that humor is closely related to organizational innovation, socialization, employee relationships, job satisfaction, work engagement, team cohesion, and so on.<sup>29</sup>

Bootlegging, which is derived from deviant behavior in organizations, was first proposed by Knight, a scholar of Stanford University. In his study, bootlegging was defined as an informal approach to innovation within organizations.<sup>30</sup> Bootlegging is divided into two types in previous studies. One type is considered to be the innovation done privately without the permission of superiors and is expected to benefit the organization, which is denoted by "bootlegging".<sup>5</sup> Another kind refers to the behavior of employees who believe their innovative behavior is beneficial for organizational

performance and persists in it even when prohibited by their superiors explicitly, denoted as “creative deviance”.<sup>6</sup> The difference between these two types is whether leader is aware and explicitly opposes employee innovation. In Chinese companies, where hierarchy is well defined and power distance is large, it is not common for employees to openly violate their leaders in the organization.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in this study, we investigated from the first perspective. Since employee bootlegging plays such an important role for organizations to develop, many scholars begin to explore what factors trigger employees to adopt bootlegging in their daily work. At present, the research on the antecedents of employee bootlegging mainly focuses on three aspects: individual factors, leadership characteristics and organizational environment.<sup>4</sup>

## Leader's Positive Humor and Employee Bootlegging

It is clear to see from the former research on humor and bootlegging that internal mechanisms of these two are quite similar. Humor is formed on the premise that at least two or more elements of cognitive contradiction or dissonance exist,<sup>25</sup> and bootlegging is built based on going against the established rules of the organization.<sup>32</sup> The Benign Violation Theory (BVT) of humor holds that violation of established organizational rules is benign and beneficial, which is encouraged and promoted by the organization.<sup>33</sup> According to the emotion as social information theory, leaders' words and behaviors convey a lot of information for the employees.<sup>34</sup> Employees can get enough information by leader's positive humor which combines kindness and tolerance with humorous words and behavior. Employees can get the signal whether it is acceptable to violate the established rules in the organization easily.

What is more, the social information processing theory provides a theoretical perspective to explain the mechanism of employee behavior, which proposes a dynamic connection among the environment, self-perception, and behavior of the individual.<sup>35</sup> According to the social information processing theory, individual attitudes and behaviors are largely influenced by the social environment surrounded, and individuals decide which attitudes and behaviors to adopt by processing and interpreting specific social information. On the one hand, leaders with positive humor interact positively with employees by enabling the employees to realize that it is “no big deal” to violate organizational norms through the demonstration effect of “benign violation”.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, humorous leaders are affable and kind-hearted. They can reduce the distance and disconnection with employees by improving leader-member exchange so that employees feel violating organizational rules will not be taken seriously instead their out-of-role behavior can be accepted by the organization.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, humor is the ability to bring disparate things together and create joy.<sup>37</sup> It can be induced from this sense that humor itself is one kind of innovation. Therefore, leaders with positive humor tend to have a more flexible mindset and are more capable of subtly linking otherwise unrelated things. As the agents of the organization, leaders hold significant power and core resources in the organization.<sup>38,39</sup> The cognitive perspective and behavioral style of the leader are respected and emulated by the members of the organization. Leaders with positive humor often encourage employees to question convention, be creative, and use inventive and disruptive approaches to solve problems, all of which inspire employees to try to innovate outside the box.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H1: Leader's positive humor is positively related to employee bootlegging.

## Mediating Role of Norm Violation Acceptability

Norm violation acceptability is an employee's self-perception of how well violation of organizational norms can be accepted by the organization.<sup>20</sup> Organizational norms here can refer to the formal rules and regulations of the organization, such as a code of conduct for employees in the organization, or informal perceived norms, such as being friendly with colleagues.<sup>41</sup> Yam put forward norm violation acceptability and applied it to study the relationship between leader sense of humor and workplace deviance. With a survey of 700 full-time employees through Qualtrics, a third-party online survey administration company in the United States, their study confirmed that leader sense of humor was positively associated with followers' perceived acceptability of norm violations.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Chinese scholars have found that when violation of organizational norms occurred and was interpreted in a playful and humorous way, employees would form

a perception that the violation of organizational norms will not be seriously rejected. In other words, the tolerance of the entire organization for norm violation would be improved.<sup>42</sup>

According to the Benign Violation Theory of humor,<sup>33,43</sup> violation of the established rules in the organization can also be benign and beneficial. Leaders convey the signal to employees that violating the rules of the organization is acceptable through the use of positive humor, enhancing employees' perception of acceptability of the violation. Meanwhile, humor in an organization can reduce disconnection and shorten the distance between people through a light-hearted and pleasant approach. Leaders with positive humor close the distance with their colleagues by telling funny jokes and amusing anecdotes. By interacting humorously with the leader, employees are more likely to define themselves as "insiders" of the leader,<sup>26</sup> feel more secure and are more easily understood by the leader while breaking organizational rules.

In addition, when faced with positive humor from their leader, employees tend to respond with same humor or laughter, which invariably creates joyful and open atmosphere of the organization. Under the influence of organizational atmosphere, employees become more flexible. Some behaviors achieve legitimacy even if they violate organizational rules, and employees' perception of the acceptability of violations in the organization is thereby enhanced. Ford et al found that men who were exposed to sexist humor had greater tolerance for violations of sexist norms.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Hodson et al confirmed this finding that members who had been previously exposed to outgroup humor had higher acceptance of outgroup bias violations.<sup>45</sup> Both studies found that gender or racial discrimination that was not expressed through humor failed to achieve similar effects, suggesting that humor can indeed change perceptions of behavior previously viewed as abnormal by creating new norms and increasing tolerance of norm violations.<sup>20</sup>

According to the social information processing theory, individuals adjust their attitudes and behaviors by processing and interpreting information in the environment,<sup>35</sup> so their behavior is influenced by a combination of individual self-regulation and the external environment. Employees constantly measure and adjust their behavior in the organization through the interaction and feedback of their leaders.<sup>46</sup> The emotion as social information theory shows that leader's humor is an important source of employees' social information. Leaders convey signals to employees that violating the rules in the organization can be forgiven through the use of positive humor, thereby enhancing employees' acceptability of norm violation. When the employees' behavior is limited by organizational resources or norms, employees are more likely to act in a deviant manner while inspired by leader's positive humor. Furthermore, in response to the positive humor of their leaders, employees will actively push the boundaries of organizational resources and norms to quietly adopt innovative behavior and identify solutions that contribute to the well-being of the organization. Employees with high acceptability of norm violations bear rich emotional resources and strong resilience, believing that violation of organizational rules can be forgiven, and their value is more likely to be accepted through bootlegging. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Leader's positive humor is positively related to norm violation acceptability.

H3: Norm violation acceptability is positively related to employee bootlegging.

H4: Norm violation acceptability mediates leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging.

## The Moderating Role of Trust in Leader

Trust is a state of mind wherein individuals are willing to expose their weaknesses without fear of being exploited, based on positive expectations of others' intentions or behavior.<sup>47</sup> In the Chinese organizational context, the power distance between leaders and employees is huge, and leaders have full authority to determine the allocation of organizational resources as well as the rewards and punishments of employees.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, leaders' perceptions and behavior are much more important to employees than other points in the organizational rules.<sup>49</sup> According to the social information processing theory, the relationship between leaders and employees influence employees' interpretations of leader characteristics and behavior, which in turn influence employee behavior.<sup>50</sup> Current research has shown that as a highly directed psychological mechanism, employees' trust in the organizational environment (especially the leaders of the

organization) affects a range of employee perceptions, attitudes, and behavior,<sup>51</sup> so as to play an important role in explaining leadership effectiveness.

For the same leader's humor, employees are likely to interpret it in very different ways because of the different levels of trust in leader.<sup>26,52</sup> When employees show a high level of trust in their immediate leaders, they will regard their leader's humor as an affirmation and encouragement.<sup>53</sup> With the belief that they will be treated fairly in the future, employees have confidence that their team will not take advantage of their efforts. Therefore, they integrate more resources into their performances and respond more positively in the follow-up. Instead, if employees believe their leaders are unreliable, even positive humor will be interpreted as a sign of unreliability and insincerity. Resources will be used mostly for self-protection and defensiveness against the leader, while employees tend to develop insecurity and anxiety in the organization.

Current research suggests that the effectiveness of a leader's humor depends not only on the interpretation of humor but also on how employees react to or interpret leader's motivation.<sup>54</sup> The trust relationship formed between employee and leader motivates them to express their concern for each other's welfare with sincerity, which affects the employees' evaluations of their leaders' humorous motivations. Moreover, because emotions can be contagious, the positive emotions experienced by leaders with positive humor are easily passed on to employees with a high level of trust in their leaders.<sup>20</sup> In this organizational environment, employees are more likely to interpret leader's positive humor as the support and understanding on the violations of organizational norms. Employees do not need to worry that violations will be punished and met with hostility from the organization. Therefore, it can be inferred that the effect of a leader's positive humor on the acceptability of norm violations is more pronounced when employees exhibit a higher level of trust in their leaders. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Trust in leader plays a moderating role between the leader's positive humor and norm violation acceptability. The higher level of trust in leader, the stronger the positive effect of leader's positive humor is on employee's norm violation acceptability.

## Moderated Mediation Role

The previous analysis showed that trust in leader moderates the relationship between leader's positive humor and acceptability of norm violation, while norm violation acceptability mediates the relationship between leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging, thereby creating a "moderated mediation role". Alternatively, trust in leader not only moderates the relationship between positive humor and acceptability of norm violation but also positively moderates the mediating chain of "positive humor– acceptability of norm violation–employee bootlegging". So as to say, the mediating role of norm violation acceptability is moderated by trust in leader. When employees have a high level of trust in their leader, the mediating role of norm violation acceptability on leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging is stronger, whereas when employee's trust in leader is low, the mediating role of acceptability of norm violation is significantly weaker. Accordingly, we propose the follows:

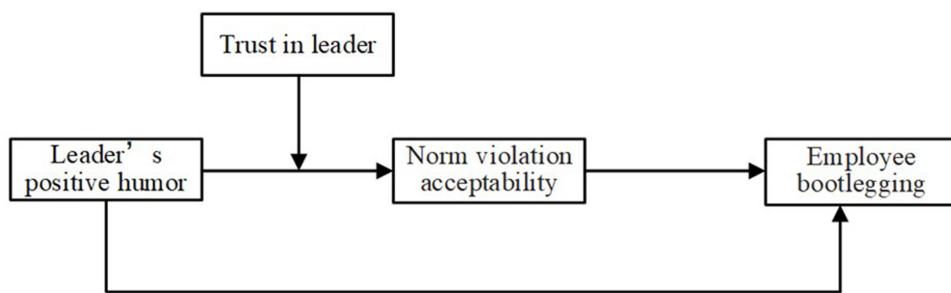
H6: The mediating role of norm violation acceptability on leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging depends on the degree of trust in leader. The higher degree of trust in leader, the stronger the mediating effect of norm violation acceptability is between these two.

Therefore, we constructed a moderated mediation model, and the theoretical framework is shown as Figure 1.

## Research Methods

### Data Collection

This study was conducted in a major information technology (IT) company headquartered in the People's Republic of China (PRC), which has engaged in enterprise e-commerce hosting, online store decoration services, information hosting maintenance, and other information service businesses for many years. A survey of employees from departments of product design, marketing and strategic management at the organization's headquarters was conducted from March to June of 2020. In these departments, innovative ideas are frequently used and creative work is quite involved in



**Figure 1** Theoretical framework.

employees' daily work. To ensure the survey results to be objective and realistic, so as to prevent the problem of single source bias meanwhile, we used multiple reverse questions in the questionnaire, and conducted this survey in two periods. In the first stage, the positive humor of their immediate leaders was rated by the participating employees. Employees' demographic characteristics and the extent to which they trust in their leaders were measured. The second phase of the survey was conducted two months later, in which the acceptability of employee's norm violation and the degree of bootlegging were measured.

With the help of the company's human resources department, the questionnaire was conducted by on-site distribution and recycled in two stages. Specifically, a list of all the employees in the above three departments was provided by the company's human resources department. A total of 400 employees were randomly selected for the survey. All the questionnaires were numbered, with the last four digits of the employees' phone number who took part in this survey. All the questionnaires were distributed and collected by the members of our research team, without any staff from the company. In addition, the results of the questionnaires were only used for scientific research to protect employees' confidentiality and anonymity. In the first stage, a total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, and 328 valid questionnaires were obtained after excluding those written incompletely or not filled out properly. In the second stage, a second questionnaire was distributed to 328 employees who completed the questionnaire in the previous stage, and 278 valid questionnaires were finally obtained, with a valid collection rate of 84.76%.

## Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all the variables in our study were measured by participants' responses to questions on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "7 = strongly agree". The measurement tools used in this study were all mature scales studied home and abroad. The entire survey was translated into Chinese and then back-translated into English by two independent bilingual individuals to ensure equivalency of meaning. The specific measures were described below, along with the results of calculation of Cronbach alpha coefficients of the variables.

### Leader's Positive Humor

We measured leader's positive humor with a 7-item scale developed by Thorson and Powell (1993). The participants responded using a 7-point scale ranging from "1" representing "strongly disagree" to "7" representing "strongly agree".<sup>55</sup> Sample item is, "My leader uses humor to entertain coworkers". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.90.

### Norm Violation Acceptability

Norm violation acceptability was mildly revised according to the scale compiled by Van Kleef et al including 4 items in total, with numbers "1–7" representing the degree to which behavior can be accepted by the company, "1" represents "completely unacceptable", "7" means "completely accepted". Sample item is, "Doing some work outside the responsibilities of the post".<sup>56</sup> Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.84.

### Trust in Leader

A 5-item scale adapted by Yang et al was used to assess the degree employee trusts in his/her leader.<sup>57</sup> The scale asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement about trust in their leader. Respondents rated

their perceived extent of trust on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “1” (strongly disagree) to “7” (strongly agree). Sample item is, “I am sure my leader always considers my personal needs at work”. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.93.

### Employee Bootlegging

Employee bootlegging was measured with a 5-item scale developed by Criscuolo et al. Employees responded on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all characteristic” to “very characteristic”. Sample item is, “I like to think about new ideas outside of my main job”.<sup>32</sup> Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.85.

### Control Variables

We controlled for three demographic variables in our analyses as previous research has found to be closely correlated with employee bootlegging. Age was measured in years. Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable coded as “0” for male and “1” for female. Education was measured as “0–3” to represent high school education or below, associate degree, bachelor degree and graduate degree or above, respectively. All the measures of the variables are listed in Table 1.

## Analysis

Structural equation modelling (SEM) and multiple linear regression analysis were both used in our study with SPSS 22 and Amos 22 utilized to examine the hypothesized model. The advantage of SEM is that it offers a simultaneous test of an entire system of variables and thus enables assessment of the extent to which the model is consistent with the data.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, multiple linear regression analysis method can calculate the unique result through simple method so that to improve the effect of the prediction model. The measurement model was first confirmed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and then we performed SEM based on the measurement model to estimate the fit of the hypothesized model to the data. To test the model fit, chi-square values ( $\chi^2$ ) were reported. In addition, we also reported the comparative fit index (CFI), the incremental fit index (IFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) to gauge model fit. The results showed that  $\chi^2/df = 2.485$ , CFI = 0.931, IFI = 0.931, TLI = 0.921, RMSEA = 0.073, indicating a good fit of the model.

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to examine the moderated mediation model, especially hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the role of trust in leader as a moderator of the relationship between leader’s positive humor and norm violation acceptability. What is more, PROCESS macro in combination with the Bootstrap method proposed by Hayes et al was used to further examine the conditional indirect effect of leader’s positive humor on employee bootlegging through norm violation acceptability.<sup>59</sup>

## Empirical Results

### Reliability and Validity

The employees who participated in our survey were relatively balanced in gender, male employees accounted for 49.6% and women accounted for 50.4%; 23.7% of the employees aged below 25, 10.8% of the employees were between 26 and 30, 4.7% between 36 and 40, and 0.8% of the employees were over 40. In terms of educational structure, 64.7% were junior college and below, 31.7% were undergraduate and 3.6% were postgraduate and above.

**Table 1** Variable Measures

Type	Variable	Number of Items	Source	Cronbach’s $\alpha$
Independent variable	Leader’s Positive Humor	7	Thorson and Powell (1993)	0.90
Mediating variable	Norm Violation Acceptability	4	Van Kleef et al (2011)	0.84
Moderating variable	Trust in Leader	5	Yang et al (2010)	0.93
Dependent variable	Employee Bootlegging	5	Criscuolo et al (2014)	0.85
Control variables	Age Gender Education	Measured in years. Measured as a dichotomous variable coded as “0” for male and “1” for female. Measured as “0–3” to represent high school education or below, associate degree, bachelor degree and graduate degree or above respectively.		

As shown in **Table 1**, the Cronbach's alphas for all multi-item scales were greater than 0.84, indicating good reliability. Next, convergent and discriminant validity were evaluated to examine the measurement model. The factor loadings  $\lambda$  of all multi-item constructs were higher than 0.55, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each variable was greater than 0.54, and the composite reliabilities (CR) was greater than 0.84, indicating that each measurement construct had great convergence validity. In addition, as shown in **Table 2**, the square root of AVE of each variable on the diagonal was greater than the correlation coefficient of the variables presented in the same row or the same column. Therefore, the variable construction of the four multi-index measurements had good discriminant validity.

## Common Method Bias

Common method bias is the deviation between the measured variable and the true value due to the same sample source, measurement method, measurement tool, etc. In order to reduce the impact of common method bias as much as possible, a variety of pre-controls were used in this study, such as staged questionnaire collection, anonymous filling, and setting reversed items. At the same time, using Harman's single-factor test, the results show that all items were automatically aggregated into 4 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the cumulative variance contribution rate was 69.380%. Among them, the first factor explained 22.575% of the variance of all items but did not account for 40% of the total variance explained, indicating that the problem of homologous method bias in the data in this paper has been effectively controlled.

## Results

The means, standard deviations and correlations for each study variables are shown in **Table 2**. All the correlation results were in the expected direction. Results presented in Model 2 and Model 3 of **Table 3** showed that after controlling for the

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Reliabilities (N = 278)

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>1 GE</b>	0.504	0.501	1						
<b>2 Age</b>	1.626	0.921	-0.067	1					
<b>3 ED</b>	2.367	0.609	-0.016	0.445**	1				
<b>4 LH</b>	5.555	0.990	-0.125*	-0.277**	-0.224**	1			
<b>5 TL</b>	6.032	0.949	-0.047	-0.180**	-0.183**	0.723**	1		
<b>6 NVA</b>	4.301	1.172	-0.164**	0.055	0.076	0.172**	0.047	1	
<b>7 EB</b>	4.848	0.879	-0.151*	0.132*	0.079	0.269**	0.251**	0.263**	1

**Notes:** The square roots of AVE for the four variables were given in bold on the diagonal. \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01.

**Abbreviations:** GE, gender; ED, education; LH, leader's positive humor; TL, Trust in leader; NVA, Norm violation acceptability; EB, Employee bootlegging.

**Table 3** Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	EB	EB	NVA	EB	EB	NVA	NVA
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
<b>GE</b>	-0.143*	-0.097*	-0.135*	-0.105*	-0.072	-0.128*	-0.113*
<b>Age</b>	0.109	0.185**	0.059	0.106	0.173**	0.066	0.094
<b>ED</b>	0.028	0.068	0.090	0.012	0.051	0.085	0.061
<b>LH</b>		0.323***	0.191**		0.287***	0.301***	0.322***
<b>TL</b>						0.150*	0.027
<b>NVA</b>				0.239***	0.188**		
<b>LH*TL</b>							0.260***
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.038	0.132	0.065	0.093	0.165	0.076	0.124
<b>F</b>	3.643*	10.334***	4.755***	7.032***	10.711***	4.459***	6.379***

**Notes:** \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001.

**Abbreviations:** GE, gender; ED, education; LH, leader's positive humor; TL, Trust in leader; NVA, Norm violation acceptability; EB, Employee bootlegging.

impact of demographic variables, leader's positive humor was positively related to employee bootlegging ( $\beta = 0.323$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and norm violation acceptability ( $\beta = 0.191$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). According to Model 4, norm violation acceptability was also positively related to employee bootlegging ( $\beta = 0.239$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings are in line with H1–H3.

Model 2 and Model 5 in Table 3 showed the results of mediation hypothesis. It can be seen that when we included both leader's positive humor and norm violation acceptability as independent variables and employee bootlegging as the dependent variable, norm violation acceptability had a positive impact on employee bootlegging ( $\beta = 0.188$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while leader's positive humor continued to have a significant impact on employee bootlegging, although the predictive effect was significantly attenuated ( $\beta = 0.287 < 0.323$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This indicated that there is a partial mediation effect. Thus, H4 was supported.

In order to test the moderating effect of trust in leader, these two variables of leader's positive humor and trust in leader were firstly processed, the product term of leader's positive humor and trust in leader was constructed, and then the hierarchical regression analysis was used to test. As can be seen from Model 7, the effect of the interaction between leader's positive humor and trust in leader was found to positively predict norm violation acceptability ( $\beta = 0.260$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Figure 2 shows that when the level of trust in leader is high, norm violation acceptability of employee increases more, and when the level of trust in leader was low, the increase was small. It can be intuitively seen that trust in leader strengthened the positive effect of leader's positive humor on norm violation acceptability. Thus, overall, H5 was supported.

Finally, PROCESS macro in combination with the Bootstrap method proposed by Hayes et al were used to further examine the conditional indirect effect of leader's positive humor on employee bootlegging through norm violation acceptability, at two levels of trust in leader (+1SD above the mean and -1SD below the mean).<sup>57</sup> In Table 4, results showed that the conditional indirect effect of leader's positive humor on employee bootlegging via norm violation

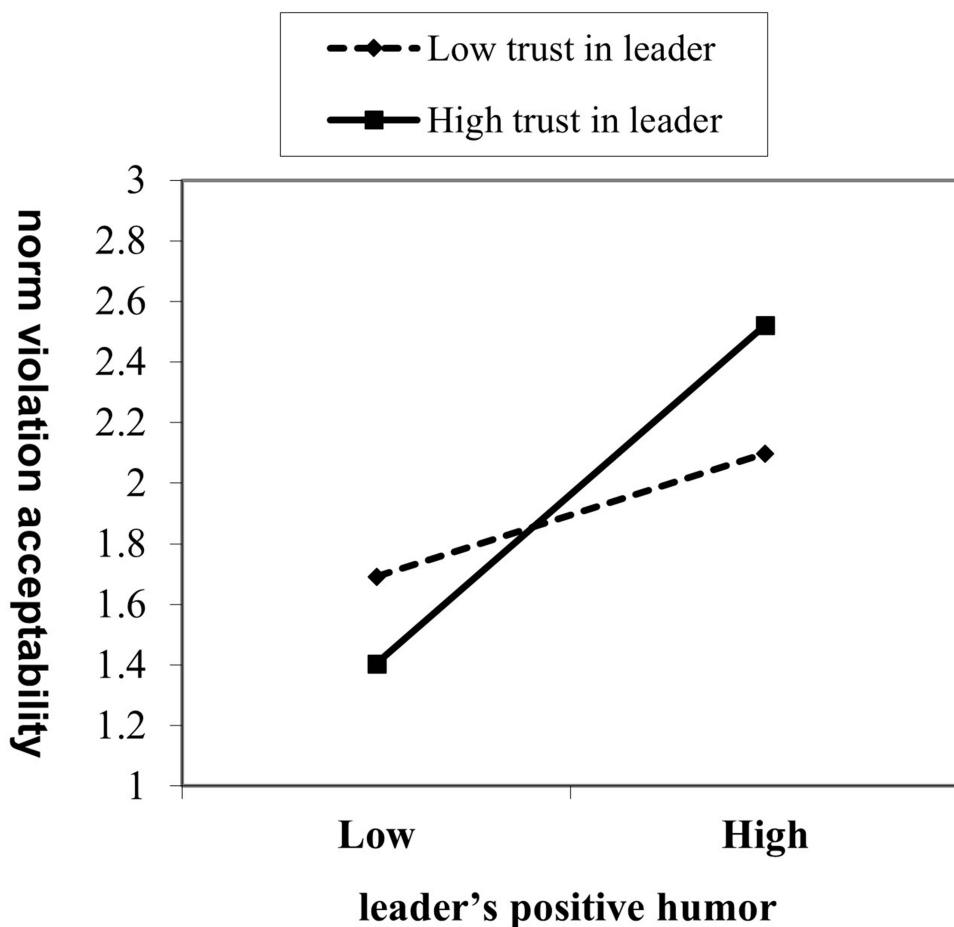


Figure 2 Moderation effect of trust in leader.

**Table 4** Bootstrap Test Results of Moderated Mediating Effect

Dependent Variable	Indirect Effect					Moderated Mediating Effect			
	Norm Violation Acceptability	Effect	SE	95%LLCI	95%ULCI	INDEX	SE	95%LLCI	95%ULCI
Employee Bootlegging	Low	0.030	0.020	0.001	0.086	0.025	0.012	0.006	0.054
	High	0.078	0.033	0.026	0.159				

**Note:** N = 5000, Confidence interval 95%.

acceptability was 0.078 with a 95% CI of [0.026, 0.159] when the level of trust in leader was high, versus 0.03 with a 95% CI of [0.001, 0.086] when the level of trust in leader was low. Additionally, the moderated mediation index was also significant (*Index* = 0.025), with a 95% CI of [0.006, 0.054].

## Discussion

### Theoretical Contributions

Our primary theoretical contribution is that we enriched the literature of humor as an antecedent variable to promote employee bootlegging from a new perspective of leader–employee interaction. Bootlegging is an organic combination of innovation and deviance in the organization, similar to the idea of “love and hate”, showing both attributes. The rationality of the goal makes it constructive to a certain extent, while the deviation of the behavior makes it quite destructive.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, leadership styles, such as agile leadership and leader’s pro-social behavior, as well as organizational attitudes/behaviors towards employee bootlegging, such as encouragement, forgiveness, and rewards, have been explored widely as the facilitators of employee bootlegging by scholars.<sup>5,60</sup> Noticeably missing from research attention has been leader’s positive humor, despite suggestions by researchers that scholars should focus greater effort on leadership approaches that can address to employee bootlegging.<sup>16</sup> Leader’s positive humor conveys leader’s care and kindness, making employees feel breaking the routine and boundaries of the organization is a “benign violation”, thereby helping employees to carry out bootlegging. So, there are major reasons to expect leader’s positive humor to have a positive impact on employee bootlegging. In our study, the role of leader’s positive humor acted as one kind of positive leader behavior, was investigated as one kind of “benign violation”, providing a new theoretical perspective. It not only responded to the existing research on leadership style and employee behavior but also enriched the research findings on the factors improving employee bootlegging.

Our research also provided a better understanding of the etiology of employee bootlegging by considering an important mechanism of norm violation acceptability to link positive leader behavior with employee bootlegging in the organization. What is more, the emotion as social information theory and the social information processing theory were both applied to deepen the mechanism of leader’s positive humor on employee bootlegging. According to the emotion as social information theory, leader’s positive humor was an important source of social information, which conveys friendliness and tolerance. What is more, the social information processing theory provided evidence on how employees interpret the message from the leader and further trigger the behavior of the employee. And employee behavior was the result of a combination of conditions, such as the organizational environment and employees’ psychological state.<sup>35</sup> As the agent of the organization, the characteristic of the leader was an important factor influencing employee behavior. Leader’s words and behaviors conveyed important signals to employees that violation was acceptable through positive humor. Previous studies had examined employee bootlegging unilaterally from the perspective of leaders or employees,<sup>5,61</sup> few studies had examined it from the perspective of the interaction between these two. In this study, we focused on employee bootlegging from the perspective of leader–employee interaction. Leader’s positive humor was regarded as an important environmental factor in the organization, and norm violation acceptability was taken as employees’ self-perception of their behavior after violating organizational norms. Employee’s perception of trust in his/her leader was introduced as a moderating variable, while leadership factors and employee’s perception were placed in the same analytical framework simultaneously to explore how and when leader’s positive humor affect employee bootlegging.

## Limitation and Implications for Future Research

This paper provided a robust understanding of the relationship between leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging with the mediating role of norm violation acceptability and the moderating role of trust in leader. With the help of a combination of the emotion as social information and the social information processing theory, our study enriched the literature of humor as well as the literature of employee bootlegging. Although the findings of this study were generally supportive to the hypotheses, our research design had limitations that could be addressed in future research. Firstly, although we investigated the questionnaire in two stages, all the variables including leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging were measured and collected mainly through employee self-reports. The use of mutual evaluation among colleagues and leader-employee pairing can be applicable for future research to further enhance research reliability and validity.

Secondly, the participants of the survey were all from a large information technology company in Hangzhou of Zhejiang Province. The employees who participated in the survey come from the three departments of product design, marketing and strategic management of the company headquarters, and their work involves a lot of innovative content, which is quite consistent with the research situation of employee bootlegging in the organization. We predict that employees from different industries and companies in different sizes will show quite different performance on this subject. Future research can broaden the sources of research objects. Innovation workers from different industries and companies can be selected to enhance the diversity of the research samples.

What is more, according to the theory of humor, in addition to positive humor, leaders also show negative humor through belittling, sarcasm, mockery and other ways. Our research has proved that positive humor can improve employees' insider perception of norm violation acceptability and thus affect employee bootlegging. Then, what impact does negative humor of leader have on employees? What are the mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions? There is no specific research on this issue in our paper, which can be further explored in the future. Finally, our research shows that norm violation acceptability partially mediates the relationship between leader's positive humor and employee bootlegging, which means there are other mediating mechanisms between these two. From the perspective of employees, psychological capital, organizational commitment and job prosperity are all important mechanisms that effectively connect employees and organizations. Whether they constitute the mechanism between positive humor of leaders and employee bootlegging needs to be further studied in the future.

## Managerial Implications

According to the results presented in our study, leader's positive humor plays an important role on the attitude and behavior of the employees. As the organization's helmsman, leaders should focus on their ability to master and apply humor. According to the behavioral view of humor, humor is defined as ability which can be developed and enhanced through regular training. So, leaders as well as managers of the organization should highlight and continue to strengthen positive humor in practice. Influenced by the traditional culture of "differentiation between superior and inferior" for a long time, Chinese leaders are often expected to be humble, cautious, and unsmiling.<sup>29,62</sup> Our research has confirmed that leader's positive humor not only enhances leader-member interactions but also helps organizations to develop positive and open culture that promotes positive and innovative exploration by employees. Therefore, leaders must be brave enough to breakthrough the shackles of traditional perceptions, especially in today's era wherein company destiny is dominated by technological innovation. A deep understanding of the importance of positive humor to employees and organizations should be gained.

Meanwhile, companies should focus on creating an open and inclusive organizational culture with a high degree of fault tolerance. Employees in an organization often decide their behavior after considering multiple factors, such as the behavior of other colleagues, attitude of the leader and organizational norms.<sup>63</sup> When employees believe they will not be punished severely even if they violate the rules in organization and their leader will tolerate their mistakes and failures, they are endowed with a stronger sense of psychological security and are more likely to explore something beyond their jobs. As Wang Xiaochuan successfully developed the Sogou Browser despite the strong opposition of his boss, this

seemingly out-of-bounds behavior is likely to give birth to epoch-making products, thereby helping companies embark on the “road to prosperity” of technological innovation.

Finally, leaders should not only pay attention to obtain positive humor but also build a reliable image among employees to strengthen the level of trust, so that leader’s positive humor can play a full role. As the “post-95” and “post-00” generation of employees continue to become the main force in the workplace, they have distinct personalities, strong self-awareness and great desire to express themselves.<sup>64</sup> There is a natural generation gap between the new generation of employees and leaders born in the 1980s or even the 1970s. When employees have full trust in their leader, they will regard themselves as the insider of their leaders. The behaviors of leaders will be more understood and recognized by employees,<sup>65</sup> so that they will respond with positive organizational behaviors including employ bootlegging.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we built and tested a moderated mediation model to analyze the relationship between leader’s positive humor and employee bootlegging. Employee bootlegging is usually considered to be intra-organizational behavior of “loyal” and “rebellious” by both scholars and entrepreneurs. In today’s turbulent market, Chinese tech enterprises are facing more pressure of innovation. Employee bootlegging is proved to be an important form for tech enterprises to obtain major breakthroughs. Therefore, how to promote employee bootlegging in organizations has become an important issue most tech enterprises face. Although a number of studies have investigated factors which can promote employee bootlegging, leader’s positive humor has been surprisingly absent from consideration. Yet, as we have argued and uniquely modeled, there are strong theoretical reasons to expect leader’s positive humor to be well positioned to improve employee bootlegging in the context of Chinese tech company.

Our research makes a number of theoretical contributions to the literature on humor and employee bootlegging from the perspective of leader–employee interaction. Utilizing both the emotion as social information theory and the social information processing theory, we introduced norm violation acceptability as a mediator variable, linking the behavior of leader with employee psychology and behavior. At the same time, we also introduced trust in leader as situational factor to study the moderating effect of the model. As hypothesized, empirical data confirmed employee bootlegging can be positively promoted by leader’s positive humor and norm violation acceptability played a partial mediation role between leader’s positive humor and employee bootlegging. At the same time, trust in leader positively moderated the relationship between leader’s positive humor and norm violation acceptability. When the employee has a high level of trust in his leader, leader’s positive humor has greater influence on norm violation acceptability. Furthermore, when trust in leader is high, acceptability of norm violations has a stronger mediating effect on the link between leader’s positive humor and employee bootlegging.

Last but not the least, this study not only filled the gap of positive leadership behavior especially leader’s positive humor on employee bootlegging in theory but also provided some practical references for Chinese high-tech enterprises. Focusing on leader’s positive humor, this article provided a new perspective on how to promote employees to carry out innovative activities in the organization. What is more, our study analyzed the mechanism of leader’s positive humor on employee bootlegging through enhancing employee’s perception of norm violation acceptability. This also revealed a new route on how to reduce employees’ worries and concerns about innovation failure at source so as to enhance the possibility and confidence of employee innovation in the organization.

## Ethical Statement

The ethics for this study were approved by the Zhejiang University of Technology Academic Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki were followed.

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## Author Contributions

Thanks to the cooperation of all the authors of this article, each author has a clear division of work, among which Lihua Dai is mainly responsible for writing and revising the first draft of the paper. Zhengwei Li is responsible for the conception of the paper. Yadan Zheng is responsible for model construction and measurement in the paper. Kai Zeng is mainly responsible for paper submission suggestions, and Cindy is responsible for language expressing and translation polishing. All authors made substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; took part in drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; gave final approval of the version to be published; have agreed on the journal to which the article has been submitted; and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work.

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