Sense of Humour and Work Culture: A study based in the luxury hotels in Bangalore, India

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Abstract | Employee well-being has been a focus area for Human Resource managers as well as top management alike. The belief that healthy, happy employees would be more efficient, and consequently contribute more, has verily driven the research to understand the implications of different aspects of an employee's health and happiness. Based on the work of key humour researcher Dr. Paul McGhee, it has been established that humour does play a key role in ensuring a happy and healthy workforce. The current study attempts to evaluate the benefits of the use of humour at the workplace, primarily in terms of influencing the work culture. The data for the study has been collected from the hotel sector and has been analysed to understand the use of humour and its influence on the work culture. The findings suggest that the presence and use of humour has a strong positive impact on work culture. The researchers also found that, contrary to previous literature, the use of humour did not depend on demographic variables like age, tenure in the current organization or total work experience. Furthermore, the study also attempts to understand how the use of humour would impact the work culture. In this regard, the researchers found that certain dimensions of humour at the workplace, had a stronger impact on the culture and it is expected that the findings would guide the behaviour of leaders and managers in the creation of a mutually beneficial workplace.

Keywords | Humour, hospitality, hotels, India

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1. Introduction

Humour, as a topic of interest, was established in academic research by Dr. Paul McGhee, in the 1970s. He began his study by choosing it as a topic for his doctoral dissertation in 1968. Since then, his work in the area has established the importance of humour and its relation to other constructs like well-being and health. In his earlier studies, he chose to study children and the impact of humour on their lives. Later, he expanded his scope of study to include adults and seniors. His work, along with the efforts of Tony Chapman and Hugh Foot have resulted in an increased interest in understanding the role of humour in life.

The first International Conference on Humour and Laughter was convened in Cardiff, Wales, in 1976. Subsequently, the number of studies focusing on humour has increased; and several journals focusing on the dissemination of knowledge in the area, were created. The Humour: International Journal of Humour Research began publication in 1987 and was one of the first to highlight this area of study to academicians everywhere. This was followed by the European Journal of Humour Research, the Israeli Journal of Humour Research and Rivista Italiana di Studi sull'Umorismo.

Researchers in the area of Organizational Studies have also attempted to explore how humour influences the workplace. Substantial work has been done to understand how employees use humour as a coping mechanism, to counter the levels of stress (Cann et al. 2000). In the current study, the researchers explore how the use of humour can contribute to the work culture in hotels. The hotel sector was chosen for the study, primarily because it is an employee driven sector and is extensively dependent on human interaction between people (Câmara, Signoretti, Costa & Soares, 2018).

2. Theories of humor

As per Plester (2009), humour may be explained using three key theories. These have been labelled by Raskin (1985) as cognitive-perceptual, social-behavioural and psychoanalytical theories. The cognitive-perceptual theory suggests that humour occurs when something unexpected happens, like a person missing the table and dropping something or missing the chair and falling (Bergson, 1911).

Social-behavioural theories draw from the human tendency to laugh when one feels momentarily superior. These are also more popularly termed as superiority theories (Douglas, 1999). These theories explain why one would find slapstick comedies funny or someone else's misfortunes amusing.

The psychoanalytical group of theories, made popular by Freud (1905) suggest that humour is mainly a release mechanism. It is a function of relief or release from tension. It is a technique to let out any bottled-up emotions that one may have. Douglas (1999) suggests that humour provides a safe avenue for venting our feelings and promotes harmonious functioning. He suggests that people are constantly filtering their actions and responses and humour allows them a chance to actually say what they feel. These theories are also termed as the relief or release theories and are particularly applicable to the use of humour in the workplace.

3. Humor at work

Humour has been studied in the context of organizations and the workplace for close to two decades. Research has identified that humour at the workplace can help in the formation of harmonious relationships (Cooper, 2008). Terrion and Ashforth (2002) explained the role of humour as quite similar to that of a lubricant in Mechanics. They proposed that the primary role of humour is the

same at the workplace as in any social setting; to construct and maintain smooth and harmonious relationships. It has been found to break barriers and even improve supervisor and team member, inter-personal relationships. Drawing from the theory of release, Holmes (2000) proposed that humour is used for expressing negative thoughts and feelings in a more positive and acceptable manner, thereby substantially reducing levels of stress and tension within the group.

One key area in which humour has been studied in the workplace, is its role in the supervisor-subordinate relationship. Decker and Rotonda (2001) proposed that the use of humour is an unspoken sign of support; and implies that the supervisor or leader values the relationship with the subordinate. In line with their findings, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) suggested that the use of humour at the workplace produces positive emotions and thoughts amongst team members.

Martin et. al. (2003) suggest that humour must be viewed as a two-dimensional construct. The first dimension describes the focus of the humour; self or others. The second dimension is used to describe whether the humour is positive or negative in nature. Based on the two dimensions, humour may be categorised as four types or two styles; two positive and two negatives.
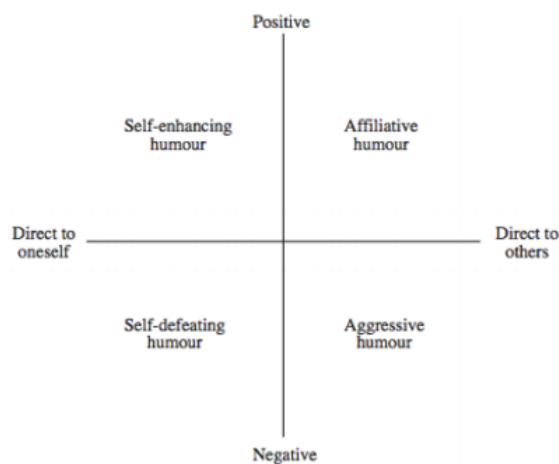

Figure 1 | Dimensions of humour
Source: Martin et. al. (2003)

Self-enhancing humour and affiliative humour are positive styles while self-defeating and aggressive humour are negative styles. Whilst, affiliative and aggressive humour are directed at others and impact the relationship, self-enhancing and self-defeating styles are directed at oneself. Affiliative style is used to attract others and creating positive relations. Aggressive humour styles are used to have fun at the cost of others. Organizational studies propose the use of affiliative styles of humour to improve team cohesion and create a positive work environment (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Additionally, studies also suggest that employees who use affiliative styles of humour are more committed, cooperative and more satisfied at the workplace (Romero & Arendt, 2011).

Jeong et. al. (2016) studied frontline hotel employees and found that the use of humour amounted to workplace fun and facilitated group cohesion and increased interpersonal trust. The use of humour added substantially to positivity at the workplace and reduced the number of interpersonal conflicts and issues. Chen and Ayoun (2019) suggest that the use of the affiliative humour style

by employees was strongly related to their perception of the level of supervisory support for fun and socializing. Since the profession requires frequent interactions with co-workers, the study proposed that the use of affiliative style would strengthen relationships and improve performance. Additionally, much contradictory to conclusions of previous research, Chen and Ayoun (2019) proposed that even the use of aggressive style of humour in the form of sarcasm or irony, was considered less insulting in the hotel environment and, did to a great extent, indicate inclusiveness. The recipients of this brand of humour also indicated that the use of aggressive behaviour made them feel like they were an integral part of the group. Terrion & Ashforth (2002) concluded that the use of aggressive humour did foster a sense of identity and community. This in turn, further contributed to the hotel employee's relationship with their organization.

Svensson (2011) studied the role of the work culture in fostering innovative and creative behaviour, in frontline employees of hotels. He has based his study on the work of Schneider (1980), who proposed that in the case of a service organisation, the Culture was crucial. Schneider (1990) describes culture as a combination of processes, practices and behaviours. This definition presupposes the importance of the relationships at work, the attitude towards the organization and general atmosphere at the workplace. The established impact of the use of humour on supervisor-subordinate relations, co-worker relations, performance, attitude towards the organization, levels of commitment, loyalty and belongingness to the organization; led the researchers to arrive at the hypotheses of this study, enumerated below.

H1a: The use of Humour at the workplace is significantly and positively related to the Work Culture.

In addition to testing the above hypothesis, the researchers also explored the use of humour in a hotel environment. This involved assessing whether the use of humour varies with various demographic variables; as well as the correlation between the dimensions of humour and the dimensions of the work environment. As per Hofstede (1984), in cultures with high power distance and which are largely collectivist, the use of humour is rare and more prominent only at the higher levels of the management. Dwyer (1991) found that the relative positional hierarchy in the workplace would determine who, more often, uses sense of humour. Similarly, the dimension of tightness/looseness would predict the use of humour for expression of feelings. This would suggest that a more constrained culture like the Indian or Chinese culture, would be characterised by higher levels of self-regulation, and consequently lesser levels of humour. This has led us to our assumptions that the use of humour in workplace would be dependent on demographic factors like age, number of years in the organization and total work experience.

H2a: Use of humour varies with the age of the respondents

H3a: Use of humour is dependent on the total work experience of the respondents

H4a: Use of humour at the workplace is dependent in the tenure in the current organization.

4. Methodology

The population for this study comprised of employees working in luxury hotels in Bangalore. A list of hotels was procured from the Karnataka Hotels and Restaurants Association website. Seven hotels agreed to participate in the study.

Instruments

The tools for measurement were adapted from other studies in the area. The instrument used to measure work culture was adapted from the

work of Zeyneb Aycan, Koc University, Istanbul. The instrument measures the dimensions of malleability, proactivity, obligation towards others, responsibility seeking, participation, autonomy, feedback, goal setting, performance – extrinsic reward contingency, task significance, empowerment, self-control, supervisory control and skill variety on a six-point scale, through 39 statements. The instrument was found to have a good reliability score of 0.72.

The Sense of Humour Scale by McGhee (1996) was adapted to assess the use of humour in everyday work life. The scale contains 40 questions and measures eight dimensions that include Enjoyment of Humour, Seriousness/Negative Mood, Playfulness/Positive Mood, Laughter, Verbal Humour, Finding Humour in Everyday Life, Laughing at Yourself, and Humour under Stress. Respondents were asked to mark their responses on a seven-point scale. The scale had a reliability score of 0.7.

Participants

The researchers followed judgemental sampling and questionnaires were distributed to the participants during the day shift. All participants were management level employees. A total of 170 responses were received from the employees of the participating hotels, of which 14 responses were discarded because of incomplete data. This resulted in a final sample size of 156.

The participants belonged to the age group of 21 to 50, with a majority falling in the category of 31 to 40 years. The sample consisted of 81%

males and 19% females, a fair representation of the proportion of male to female employees in the sector.

The sample included members from all departments, with F&B service employees forming the majority. A large majority of those included had spent more than three years in the current organisation and has a total work experience of 4 to 6 years.

Data collected was analysed using IBM SPSS and the results are presented in the next section.

5. Analysis and discussion

The first step of the analysis involved understanding the descriptive statistics of the variables, as shown in Table 1.

The mean score for the 'Sense of Humour' scale, in the sample, was found to be 165.42 and for 'Work Culture', the mean value was found to be 137.72. An analysis of the dimensions revealed that the highest score was found to be for Positive/Negative mood, followed by Playful/Serious attitude. Analysis of the dimensions of Work Culture showed that the dimension of Malleability had the highest mean value, followed by Proactivity.

Analysis of the skewness and kurtosis values suggested that the data could be considered normal and that parametric tests could be employed. The next step of the analysis was the ANOVA to evaluate the variance of the usage of Humour across age groups. The summary of the analysis is provided in Table 2.

Table 1 | Descriptive Statistics

	Attributes	Mean	Std. Dev
Sense of Humour	Playful/Serious Attitude	31.87	6.67
	Positive/Negative Mood	34.81	5.65
	Enjoyment of Humour	17.10	3.52
	Laughter	15.41	3.76
	Verbal Humour	16.79	3.19
	Finding Humour in Everyday Life	15.64	3.51
	Laughing at Yourself	16.51	3.75
	Humour at Stress	17.29	3.86
Total Sense of Humour Score		**165.42**	**21.81**
Work Culture	Malleability	17.87	3.30
	Proactivity	16.70	2.99
	Obligation Towards Others	15.34	2.60
	Responsibility Seeking	14.99	2.79
	Participation	14.56	2.93
	Autonomy	6.04	1.69
	Feedback	3.52	1.03
	Goal Setting	7.58	1.74
	Extrinsic Reward Contingency Performance	7.10	1.86
	Intrinsic Reward Contingency Performance	3.79	1.15
	Task Significance	6.10	1.81
	Empowerment	7.13	2.09
	Self-Control	6.99	1.77
	Supervisory Control	6.57	1.76
	Skill Variety	3.44	1.47
Total Work Culture Score		**137.72**	**13.47**

The variance of the dimensions of Sense of Humour scale did not significantly vary across the different categories of age of the respondents. The only dimension which showed a significant variance was that of Enjoyment of Humour, which appeared to reduce with increase in age.

The second variable was the total work experience, in number of years. The researchers assumed that the scores would vary depending on the respondent's total number of years of work experience. Based on literature, senior employees were more likely to use humour. The result of the analysis has been provided in Table 3. The results suggest that the number of years of experience did not influence the use of humour or attitude of the respondents.

Table 2 | Sense of Humour vis-a-vis Age of Respondents

Sense of Humour – Attributes	Age Group	N	Mean	Sig.
Playful Serious Attitude	21 – 30	44	31.25	0.70
	31 – 40	69	31.88	
	41 – 50	43	32.47	
	Total	156	31.87	
Positive Negative Mood	21 – 30	44	36.20	0.12
	31 – 40	69	34.57	
	41 – 50	43	33.77	
	Total	156	34.81	
Enjoyment of Humour	21 – 30	44	18.16	0.05
	31 – 40	69	16.87	
	41 – 50	43	16.37	
	Total	156	17.10	
Laughter	21 – 30	44	16.05	0.41
	31 – 40	69	15.23	
	41 – 50	43	15.05	
	Total	156	15.41	
Verbal Humour	21 – 30	44	17.55	0.12
	31 – 40	69	16.29	
	41 – 50	43	16.81	
	Total	156	16.79	
Finding Humour in Everyday Life	21 – 30	44	16.14	0.40
	31 – 40	69	15.65	
	41 – 50	43	15.12	
	Total	156	15.64	
Laughing at Yourself	21 – 30	44	17.16	0.35
	31 – 40	69	16.10	
	41 – 50	43	16.51	
	Total	156	16.51	
Humour at Stress	21 – 30	44	17.48	0.85
	31 – 40	69	17.35	
	41 – 50	43	17.02	
	Total	156	17.29	

Sense of Humour - Attributes	Total Experience	N	Mean	Sig.
Playful Serious Attitude	1-3 Years	59	31.53	0.80
	4-6 Years	68	31.62	
	7-9 Years	27	32.52	
	Total	**154**	**31.74**	
Positive Negative Mood	1-3 Years	59	34.42	0.86
	4-6 Years	68	34.97	
	7-9 Years	27	34.89	
	Total	**154**	**34.75**	
Enjoyment of Humour	1-3 Years	59	17.34	0.09
	4-6 Years	68	17.38	
	7-9 Years	27	15.74	
	Total	**154**	**17.08**	
Laughter	1-3 Years	59	14.76	0.18
	4-6 Years	68	15.96	
	7-9 Years	27	15.07	
	Total	**154**	**15.34**	
Verbal Humour	1-3 Years	59	16.66	0.88
	4-6 Years	68	16.91	
	7-9 Years	27	16.63	
	Total	**154**	**16.77**	
Finding Humour in Everyday Life	1-3 Years	59	15.59	0.97
	4-6 Years	68	15.59	
	7-9 Years	27	15.41	
	Total	**154**	**15.56**	
Laughing at Yourself	1-3 Years	59	17.15	0.18
	4-6 Years	68	15.93	
	7-9 Years	27	16.30	
	Total	**154**	**16.46**	
Humour at Stress	1-3 Years	59	16.86	0.32
	4-6 Years	68	17.82	
	7-9 Years	27	16.89	
	Total	**154**	**17.29**	

The final demographic variable was the tenure in the current organization. The analysis of the variance across the different groups suggested that the use of humour or attitude towards humour was not dependent on the respondent's tenure in the current organization. The results of the analysis are provided in Table 4.

Table 4 | Sense of Humour vis-a-vis Tenure in the Organization

Sense of Humour – Attributes	Present Experience	N	Mean	Sig.
Playful Serious Attitude	0-2 Years	69	32.01	0.80
	> 3+ Years	87	31.75	
	Total	156	**31.87**	
Positive Negative Mood	0-2 Years	69	34.46	0.50
	> 3+ Years	87	35.08	
	Total	156	**34.81**	
Enjoyment of Humour	0-2 Years	69	17.30	0.51
	> 3+ Years	87	16.93	
	Total	156	**17.10**	
Laughter	0-2 Years	69	15.07	0.32
	> 3+ Years	87	15.68	
	Total	156	**15.41**	
Verbal Humour	0-2 Years	69	16.55	0.41
	> 3+ Years	87	16.98	
	Total	156	**16.79**	
Finding Humour in Everyday Life	0-2 Years	69	15.58	0.85
	> 3+ Years	87	15.69	
	Total	156	**15.64**	
Laughing at Yourself	0-2 Years	69	17.03	0.13
	> 3+ Years	87	16.10	
	Total	156	**16.51**	
Humour at Stress	0-2 Years	69	16.83	0.18
	> 3+ Years	87	17.67	
	Total	156	**17.29**	

The last section of the analysis evaluated the influence of humour in the workplace on the organization's culture. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 | Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adj. R Square	F	Sig.
1	0.548	0.3	0.296	66.021	0
2	0.544	0.296	0.282	21.281	0

In model 1. the correlation between the variables was found to be strong with an r of 0.548. The variable of sense of humour was found to explain 30% variance in the work culture. In model 2, the dimensions of the Sense of Humour scale explained 30% variance in the variable of Work Culture. Both models were found to be a good fit (p<0.05).

The table of coefficients of Model 1 suggest that the presence of humour is significant in predicting the quality of the work culture and the values for the equation have been presented in Table 6.

Table 6 | Regression Coefficients for Model I

	Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
(Constant)	81.768	6.946		11.772	0.000
Total Sense of Humour	0.338	0.042	0.548	8.125	0.000

The regression equation representing the relationship is given below

*Work Culture = 81.768+ (0.338 * Sense of Humour). . . . . (1)*

The analysis of coefficients for Model 2 suggest that only 3 dimensions were significant in predicting the work culture; Positive/Negative Mood, Finding Humour in everyday life and Humour at Stress. The dimension of Finding Humour in Everyday Life was found to have the strongest impact on the work culture, followed by the mood of the employee and the use of humour in stressful situations. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7 | Regression Coefficients for Model II

	Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
(Constant)	84.442	6.771		12.471	0.000
SH2.Positive Negative Mood	0.725	0.174	0.304	4.164	0.000
SH6.Finding Humour in Everyday Life	1.025	0.268	0.267	3.818	0.000
SH8.Humour at Stress	0.694	0.255	0.199	2.727	0.007

The regression equation representing the second relationship is given below

*Work Culture = 84.442+ (0.725 * Positive/Negative Mood) + (1.025 * Finding Humour in Everyday Life) + (0.694 * Humour at Stress). . . . . (2)*

A summary of the results of the hypotheses testing has been provided in Table 8.

Table 8 | Summary of hypotheses testing

	Hypothesis	p	Decision
H1a	The use of humour at the workplace is significantly and positively related to the work culture	p<0.05	Accepted
H2a	Use of humour varies with the age of the respondents	p>0.05	Rejected
H3a	Use of humour is dependent on the total work experience of the respondents	p>0.05	Rejected
H4a	Use of humour at the workplace is dependent on the tenure in the current organization.	p>0.05	Rejected

The analysis of the use of humour across samples revealed that the use of humour was not significantly dependent on any demographic variables. While in the current sample, the age group of 21-30 years scored the highest on the Sense of Humour scale, the variance across the age groups was

not statistically significant. Except for the dimension of 'Enjoyment of Humour', none of the other dimension of the sense of humour scale varied with demographic variables of Age, Tenure in the Current Organization or Total Work experience. This was contrary to the expectations set by the study on impact of cultural and demographic dimensions on the use of humour by Hofstede (1984). The 'Enjoyment of Humour' was found to reduce with increase in age. This could be attributed to the perceived need for seriousness or the belief that work must be taken seriously. However, the lack of dependence of the use of humour on the demographic variables of experience and tenure in the organization, are in contradiction to the suggestions of Hofstede (1984) and Dwyer (1991). Both these studies suggested that as the person gets more comfortable with the work environment and grows in seniority, the use of humour is likely to increase.

The contradiction should not be surprising as previous studies in the hotel sector have proven that the results of studies in non-hospitality sectors do not necessarily hold true in the hotel sector (Chen & Ayoun, 2019). While the use of aggressive humour or sarcasm has been found to have a negative impact on work relations; in the hotel sector it has been found to indicate inclusion into the 'inner circle' or as a sign of acceptance. According to Decker and Rotonda (2001), this would also indicate that the managers greatly value their relationships with their subordinates. This is likely to help the manager to relate better with employees, which would result in creating a more stimulating work environment (Cornell, 2019).

The relationship between the use of humour and the work culture was expected to be significant and positive. This relationship has been supported by the findings of the study. The findings suggest that the use of humour can positively impact the work culture. Existing literature provides adequate evidence for the proposition that the use of humour can increase group belongingness, re-

duce the number of conflicts and improve interpersonal relationships in the organization (Jeong et. al., 2016). The current study carries that relationship one step further by analysing the impact of the use of humour on dimensions of the organization culture. According to Carter McNamara, (2000), culture is the element that dictates the levels of work pleasure, the quality of interactions and the work processes. The dimensions of culture included in the current study are malleability, proactivity, obligation towards others, responsibility seeking, participation, goal setting, extrinsic/intrinsic reward contingency, task significance, empowerment, self-control and supervisory control (Aycan et. al., 2000). These dimensions would result in employee reaction and responses that may be categorised as cognitive, behavioural and affective (Martin, 2000). The employee responses would eventually impact the performance of the organization.

The researchers then attempted to analyse the dimensions of humour that would have the strongest impact on the work culture (McGhee, 1996). Out of the eight dimensions studied, only three dimensions were found to have a significant impact on the work culture. The regression analysis revealed that the dimensions of Positive/Negative mood, finding humour in everyday life and humour in stress had significant impact on the work culture. Finding humour in everyday life was found to have the strongest impact on the work culture, suggesting that everyday interactions and enjoying the daily routine was important in creating a positive culture.

The dimension of Positive/Negative mood was found to be the next strongest. Thus, the ability to switch moods and adopt a more positive or playful mood was found to have an advantage in the workplace. The ability to find humour in a stressful situation was also found to have a significant impact on the work culture. This suggests that the ability to laugh and find a light moment, even in a stressful situation would help in creating

a positive and productive work culture.

The purpose of the study was to understand how employees perceive the usage of humour at their workplace. The findings suggest that for the sample, the usage of humour is dependent on the age group, with younger employees participating more than the senior employees. The findings of the study suggest that humour can significantly impact the work culture and that the use of humour, especially in stressful situations would help in creating a beneficial work culture. In the context of a personal-interaction intensive industry like hotels, the culture becomes even more crucial, given that the employee is the point of contact and, in the true sense, reflects the brand (Schneider 1980).

6. Conclusions

The fundamental aspects of sense of humour and its relationship with work culture have been investigated in this study. The study finds that there exists a direct relationship between the use of humour at the workplace and the work culture of the organization. The use of humour appears to have a positive impact on the work environment, especially in times of stress and crisis. Theoretically, it was expected that the age or the level of experience would influence the tendency to use humour. However, the study found that other than for the dimension of 'Enjoyment of humour', the use of humour was independent of demographic variables. For the current sample, the enjoyment of humour was found to decrease with reference to age. The other two assumptions were rejected as the results suggested that Use of Humour did not vary with Work Experience or Tenure in the Organization. Practically, the findings suggest that the hospitality industry can benefit from encouraging the use of humour in daily activities, identify methods to promote positivity at the workplace and encourage leaders to allow the use of humour

to dissipate a crisis situation.

7. Limitations and scope for future research

One of the major limitations in this study was related to the sample composition. The lack of female respondents would suggest that the views collected were more representative of the male mindset. The inclusion of more females would have also provided insights into gender differences with regards to the use of humour at the workplace.

The second limitation was with regards to the method of data collection. The researchers relied on the perception data rather than observation. While the method is accepted in management studies, especially in the area of organizational behaviour, the validity of the study in predicting a causal relationship would have been higher through observation.

The current study is unique in terms of the variables and the proposed relationship between the variables. The hotel sector in India has not been the target population of many studies and this study attempts to provide some insights into the population. The industry is one of the major employers in the country but also records a high attrition rate of approximately 45%. The researchers hoped that by further understanding the industry and opening the industry to more analysis, there could be some improvement in the working environment and retention rates in the sector.

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