Make Me Laugh and I'm Yours

A qualitative case study on how managerial humor influences organizational commitment

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Abstract

Title	Make Me Laugh and I'm Yours: A qualitative case study on how managerial humor influences organizational commitment.
Course	BUSN49, Degree Project in Managing People, Knowledge and Change
Authors	Lucie Procházková and Manon Brouwer
Supervisor	Monika Müller, PhD
Purpose	To develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of managerial humor in the workplace and find out *how* it influences employees' commitment in contemporary organizations.
Methodology	This report contains qualitative research in the interpretivist tradition in the form of a single case study. Ten in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather the empirical data and learn about employees' perceptions. Using an abductive approach allowed us to go back and forth between theory and empirical findings.
Theoretical Background	Our literature review outlines existing research about humor, its theories and styles, and both the positive and negative effects of managerial humor in the workplace. Additionally, we explore existing research about different types of commitment and the Leader-Member Exchange theory. Finally, we examine how the concepts interplay.
Conclusion	As both humor and commitment involve an affective component related to feelings and emotions, our findings indicate that managerial humor can positively influence affective commitment, meaning the emotional attachment, to the organization through the increased quality of the leader-member relationship, that is, the affection between managers and their employees, and the positive perception of employees' work environment and organizational support.
Keywords	Humor, Managerial Humor, Commitment, Organizational Commitment, Affective Commitment, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

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We hope you enjoy reading our thesis!

Best regards,
Lucie Procházková & Manon Brouwer

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1   Introduction

Humor. When boiled down to its essence, humor is merely an attempt to communicate with others while also having the message perceived as funny. However, despite its compelling power, it remains a subject that is difficult to analyze (Meyer, 2000). After all, a joke that has to be explained is probably no longer funny. Yet, the captivating, enigmatic force of humor draws researchers back to it as a topic of study time and time again, because humor is so prevalent while also being so entertaining and pleasant. But what is it about humor that makes it so gratifying and rewarding? In general, humor is considered to be a social phenomenon as it can be considered as the consequences of other people's acts or behaviors on one's own conduct (Meyer, 2000). For example, when watching a funny television show alone, people tend to laugh less than when watching the same show with a group of others laughing hysterically.

The audience is, as with any form of communication, central in humor as it represents the decisive factor in determining the success or failure of humor (Meyer, 2000). This receiver-centered character of humor, which focuses on a message's intended effect on the audience, implies that it has an impact on audiences. Laughter is one of the most common indicators of this impact of humor, but it is not the only one. A smile, or perhaps a grin from a strong exhale, might suggest such an experience. However, even though laughter indicates we perceive humor, we laugh just as readily out of nervousness, relief, scorn, intoxication, etc. The fact that, aside from such nonlinguistic signs, the sole proof of humor experience comes from remarks made by the individual experiencing it, emphasizes the perception- or audience-centered aspect of humor (Meyer, 2000). There are various factors that determine if a humorous comment is perceived by the listener in the context in which it was delivered (Lynch, 2002 cited in McIlheran, 2006). Because it is the consequence of someone's perception of a message or encounter, communication plays a significant role (Meyer, 2000).

While humor is often used in a positive manner, humor can be harmful and divisive when used improperly (Alberts et al., 1996 cited in McIlheran, 2006; Young and Bippus, 2001 cited in McIlheran, 2006). Humor is therefore considered a double-edged sword; the perception of

humor is subjective and unpredictable and therefore, some people might find an event funny while others might find it annoying or offensive (Malone, 1980). As such, the effects and influences of humor are very diverse depending on several factors such as the person using it, the audience perceiving it, the type of humor, etc.

1.1 Humor in an Organizational Context

Today's business world is a constantly changing, competitive, and intense environment full of structures, policies, and control, and companies try to find a competitive advantage to succeed and differentiate themselves from their competitors (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017; Mercurio, 2015). Especially in knowledge-intensive firms (e.g. banks), competitive advantage is accomplished mainly through employees and human resource management as they are part of the knowledge creation and knowledge sharing process, and therefore a key asset for the organization (Hislop et al., 2018). Thus, leaders strive to find the right tools to recruit, maintain and effectively manage their talented and knowledgeable employees and increase their productivity, job satisfaction, engagement, and overall commitment so they can help the company succeed, outperform their rivals, and maintain a competitive advantage (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017; Mercurio, 2015).

Humor and its effects have been studied for centuries, however, not until the 1980s have researchers focused on managerial humor and its workplace outcomes (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). According to Malone (1980), managerial humor is a beneficial but relatively underexplored organizational resource because humor used to be associated with comedians or ignorant and foolish people, not with a position of authority. Moreover, since humor is associated with fun and play, it is often perceived as irrelevant and something that does not fit with the serious nature of business (Brender-Ilan & Reizer, 2021) and does not belong to the workplace (Hughes & Avey, 2009). This perception, together with context-dependency and potential adverse outcomes, such as (unintended) insults and humiliation (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), make humor a risky and unpredictable tool for managers to use (Malone, 1980).

Nevertheless, the scholarly interest in managerial humor has recently grown, and despite the remaining perception that the workplace atmosphere needs to be serious to accomplish

organizational goals, managerial humor is now considered one of the tools that can help to increase leadership and workplace effectiveness (Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Hughes & Avey, 2009; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Wijewardena et al., 2017). Researchers have shown positive effects of managerial humor on many individual, leadership, and organizational outcomes, such as positive emotions, psychological well-being, trust, performance, job satisfaction, employee engagement, or organizational commitment (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Humor can be used to create a pleasant workplace atmosphere, positively affect interpersonal relationships, and create a sense of belonging, which relates to the concept of organizational commitment (Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Hughes & Avey, 2009; Isaac & Tambari, 2021; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Rosenberg et al., 2021; Wijewardena et al., 2017).

Managers consider employee's commitment to be one of the most desired outcomes due to its positive effect on achieving organizational goals and objectives (Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020). Organizational commitment is characterized by three factors, which are "a desire to remain in the organization, willingness to exert considerable effort on its behalf, and belief in and acceptance of its goals and values" (Hughes & Avey, 2009, p. 545). It refers to the employees' feelings, connection, and attitude toward the organization and has been argued to be crucial for the organization's success as positive (e.g. productivity) and negative (e.g. absenteeism) organizational behavior stems from employees' level of commitment (Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Isaac & Tambari, 2021). Thus, managers look for effective strategies to ensure a high level of employee commitment (Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020).

Managerial humor has been argued to be one of the factors that influence organizational commitment in several academic publications (e.g. Burford, 1987; Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Hughes & Avey, 2009; Marco, 2020). However, despite the many workplace benefits, the empirical research and even theoretical understanding of managerial humor remains sparse (Brender-Ilan & Reizer, 2021; Karakowsky et al., 2020). More specifically, there is limited knowledge about "the psychological mechanisms that mediate the impact of leader humor on employees" (Karakowsky et al., 2020, p.170). Meaning that while the literature highlights many positive effects of managerial humor on employees, such as organizational commitment, the reasons behind the connection, that is the processes through which

managerial humor influences employees' perceptions and behaviors, have not been fully identified (Brender-Ilan & Reizer, 2021; Karakowsky et al., 2020).

1.2 Purpose of Research and Research Question

In today's world and society, humor is ever present. Hence, it is not strange that a lot of research has been done to determine why humor exists and what the causes and effects of humor are. However, although several papers have acknowledged the connection between managerial humor and organizational commitment (Burford, 1987; Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Hughes & Avey, 2009; Marco, 2020), we could not identify in the current literature concrete ways through which this relationship between managerial humor and organizational commitment is created. In particular, we were not able to identify many sources dealing with the question of *how* exactly managerial humor affects employee commitment.

The purpose of this thesis is to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of managerial humor in the workplace and how it influences employees' commitment in contemporary organizations. More specifically, this research tends to answer the question of:

"How does managerial humor influence employee commitment in contemporary organizations?"

According to Romero and Arendt (2011), most of the literature about managerial humor is theoretical, and additional empirical research is needed. Especially to address how (Romero & Arendt, 2011) and why humor contributes to those positive outcomes (Cooper, 2008). The majority of studies were performed quantitatively, and humor was measured through different self-report surveys (e.g. Hughes & Avey, 2009; Romero & Arendt, 2011). However, we believe that the question of *how* managerial humor influences commitment can be most accurately assessed through qualitative interviews where participants share their stories and opinions.

Our interest in this phenomenon of managerial humor and organizational commitment led to the case study of Funny Bank (pseudonym). Even though the banking sector is generally perceived as a serious environment usually not associated with humorous approaches, we argue it is interesting to see how managerial humor influences organizational commitment in such a knowledge-intensive firm where employees play a significant role in achieving organizational goals. We conduct a qualitative study, which can help us to gain a deeper understanding of employees' perceptions.

2   Theoretical Background

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and, as a result, create the theoretical foundation for our research. It is divided into three main sections: Humor in Organizations, Organizational Commitment, and The Link Between Managerial Humor and Organizational Commitment.

First, the concept of humor will be elaborated on by exploring different definitions, theories, and styles. As a double-edged sword, both positive and negative effects of humor in the workplace will be explored, especially focused on humor as part of the managerial toolbox. Second, we will look into the concept of organizational commitment. Several different definitions will be presented as well as the different types (affective, normative, and continuance) of commitment. Affective commitment will be explored in more detail, including definitions and several antecedents and organizational consequences. Also, the Leader-Member Exchange theory (LMX) will be described and how it can contribute to organizational commitment. Lastly, we will connect the concepts of humor and organizational commitment and talk about the relationship between managerial humor and its effects on organizational commitment.

2.1 Humor in Organizations

In this first section, we will introduce both the general definitions of humor and also managerial humor. Next, we will present four humor theories (relief, superiority, incongruity, and comprehension-elaboration), followed by the positive (affiliative, self-enhancing) and negative (aggressive, self-defeating) humor styles with corresponding examples for both sections. We will conclude with introducing some of the positive and negative effects of managerial humor on employees and organizational processes, such as stress relief, enhanced communication and group cohesiveness, trust, motivation and productivity, and problem-solving and creativity. For negative effects, we will focus on status and respect in more detail.

2.1.1 Definition of Humor

Humor has been studied from various perspectives and fields, including personality psychology, health research, sociology, communications and also business and management (Goswami et al., 2016; Wijewardena et al., 2017). The complexity of humor starts with its characteristics as researchers hold mainly two different opinions on the definition (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Some researchers consider humor as a personality trait described as "way of looking at the world" (Thorson & Powell, 1993, p.13), being naturally joyful, and the tendency to create fun for others (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). On the other hand, other researchers consider humor more as a social phenomenon, that is "a communication shared between individuals" (Cooper, 2008, p.1090), and therefore a skill that can be learned (Rosenberg et al., 2021).

Moreover, humor and sense of humor are considered two separate things but often used interchangeably, and therefore making the definition process harder (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). There are several definitions of humor, such as "any communicative instance which is perceived as humorous" (Martineau, 1972 quoted in Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012, p.157) or "any event shared by an agent (e.g., an employee) with another individual (i.e., a target) that is intended to be amusing to the target and that the target perceives as an intentional act" (Cooper, 2005, p.766-767). Similarly, Kong et al. (2019) defined a sense of humor as "the likelihood of an individual experiencing or expressing a humorous state" (p.6). Also, because a sense of humor is a multi-faceted concept, it can be defined as a cognitive ability, an aesthetic response, an habitual behavior pattern, an emotion-related temperament trait, an attitude, a coping strategy, or a defense mechanism (Martin et al., 2003).

Managerial humor definition

Combining several humor definitions, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) identified organizational humor as "amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization" (p.59). More specifically, Wijewardena et al. (2017) defined managerial humor as "any form of intentional and amusing communication, both formal and informal, that is created by the manager for the employee" (p.1318). According to Cooper (2005), humor can create interpersonal attraction through affective and cognitive

processes. She states that the affective component of attraction considers the different emotions and their intensity evoked as a response to the agent and that "individuals are attracted to people based on the extent to which they elicit positive affect or are associated with another stimulus that elicits positive affect" (p.768), meaning that people like others if they increase one's positive feelings. And since managerial humor can elicit emotions, it represents an affective event that, if perceived positively, enhances employees' positive emotions (Wijewardena et al., 2017). The cognitive component of attraction further considers the extent to which the agent can provide further benefits, such as doing something the target enjoys (Cooper, 2005).

2.1.2 Humor Theories

Humor is a multidimensional-concept that can be applied in any situation. There are no specific theories relating to organizational humor. Instead, general theories are used to understand humor as a phenomenon. The most used and cited theories are the relief, superiority, and incongruity theory (Cooper, 2008; Meyer, 2000; Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). Cooper (2008) characterized humor theories as those that explain a person's motivation to express humor (relief, incongruity, superiority) and additionally how people assess humor, that is why they find something funny (comprehension-elaboration theory).

<u>Relief theory</u>

A relief theory, which is also called a psychoanalytical theory, was proposed by Sigmund Freud who argued that humor works as a defense mechanism by the ego and super-ego to avoid and protect oneself from unpleasant reality (Cooper, 2008; Plester, 2009). For example, when a criminal makes jokes to relieve stress before he is executed (Cooper, 2008). This theory explains that one experiences laughter and humor as a relief when a tension or stress has been released (Meyer, 2000). A relief can be in the form of "a cognitive release from anxiety or a physical release of tension" (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009, p.351). This theory also supports the fact that employees use humor to cope with workplace stress (Plester, 2009). In the business environment, managers might use this theory to start a meeting about budget cuts with a joke such as "Well, it turns out we still can afford to have lunch - but I don't think the cook is accepting complaints" (Meyer, 2000, p.312) if they know employees feel nervous and threatened by budget cuts. This is an effective way to create humor and induce laughter

because people wish to and find pleasure in reducing dissonance (Festinger, 1957 cited in Meyer, 2000). Additionally, jokes represent a glimpse of unconsciousness to break through and help people to relax the conscious everyday control and social norms, be themselves and create entertainment (Plester, 2009). Nevertheless, humor might also serve as a stress- or tension- relief for the initiator (e.g. a manager) in a negative form towards oneself or others. For example, when a Head Chef accidentally hits his shoulder against a pillar that has always been there and says to himself: "Why the f*** did you put that pillar there, Johnny?" (Brown & Keegan, 1999, p.54). Or suppose a manager is working with a close deadline and an employee comes to their office and asks a foolish question. In that case, the manager might use sarcastic humor as a relief to respond to the employee, such as: "Wow, you are an expert in asking questions at the least convenient time. Where have you learned that?"

Superiority theory

Superiority theory or socio-behavioral theory explains that people experience humor and laugh both outwardly or inwardly when they feel a sense of superiority over other people or the former version of themselves, even though they might not actually be superior (Cooper, 2008; Meyer, 2000; Plester, 2009). Superiority originates, for example, when one is correct and the other is wrong, or one is triumphant and the other is defeated (Meyer, 2000). This theory seems to be associated with unpleasant and aggressive humor towards others such as, ethnic or sexual jokes, insults, etc. (Meyer, 2000). However, it is not always the case. Sometimes people laugh at themselves for making some sort of mistake or parents kindly laugh at the vague sayings of their children (Cooper, 2008; Meyer, 2000). According to Wilkings and Eisenbraun (2009), superiority humor has two societal functions. First, laughter, instead of aggression, is used to make people comply with rules and social order. When we are laughed at, we experience an uncomfortable feeling described as a threat to our identity which is evoked by a sense of superiority (or inferiority in this case) (Meyer, 2000). Second, laughing at ridiculed people, such as television shows, increases group cohesiveness (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009).

Incongruity theory

Instead of focusing on the conditions that motivate people to express humor, the incongruity theory (also called cognitive-perceptual theory) focuses on the object of humor and argues

that an object is humorous when there is some degree of incongruity. That means, the difference between what is expected and what actually occurs (Cooper, 2008; Plester, 2009). People laugh at things that are unexpected or odd in a non threatening way. The element of surprise is the key in incongruity theory which explains the fact that jokes are less funny when people already know the punch line. However, one needs to first understand the normal state of reality in order to identify differences (Meyer, 2000). The focus in this theory is on cognition rather than physiological or emotional effects of humor (Meyer, 2000). People need to first rationally understand the reality, that is, having one view of the situation in mind that is typical, before they can acknowledge some differences, that is, having another view of the situation that breaks the natural standard (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). Without understanding the incongruity, a situation is not perceived as humorous. This violation of socially or culturally agreed norms is crucial for understanding why humor is considered a social phenomenon (Meyer, 2000). An example of an incongruity is when an employee asks their boss if they could work some days from home and their manager answers: "Yes, you can work from home two days a week. Over the weekend."

Comprehension-elaboration theory

This fourth theory has been recently discussed in the psychology literature. Instead of focusing on why people experience humor, the comprehension-elaboration theory explains the conditions under which people assess an event as funny or offensive (Cooper, 2008). Therefore, it explains why humor is considered a double-edged sword. This theory acknowledges the situational context and states that the enjoyment of humor depends first on "how difficult the humor is to comprehend and, second, by the cognitive elaboration the target performs after comprehending the humor" (Cooper, 2008, p.1097). Therefore, a joke or a humorous event might immediately elicit enjoyment in the comprehension stage, but a person then goes to the elaboration stage where they further analyze the event and ask three questions. First, what motivated the person to tell the joke? Second, is the particular humor socially appropriate in a current situation? And third, is the humor offensive to me or other people in the group? Consequently, the amusement might increase if the humor is categorized as appropriate or it might decrease if one finds it inappropriate or hurtful (Cooper, 2008). For example, if a manager makes a joke about lay-offs: "We appreciate employees' suggestions for improvements, and therefore we would like to know what jobs should be eliminated

because we need to reduce the company's expenses." At first, in the comprehension stage, people might be amused because they easily understand the point of a joke. However, in the elaboration stage, their amusement might decrease because they might get worried about losing their job.

2.1.3 Humor Styles

Humor is often assessed based on humor styles (e.g. Romero & Arendt, 2011; Wijewardena et al., 2017). By far, the most used and referenced self-report measure is the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) developed by Martin and colleagues (2003), researchers from the psychology field focusing on humor. HSQ is a 32-question self-report questionnaire about the uses and functions of humor in everyday life where participants answer to what degree (on a scale from 1 to 7) they agree with each statement. HSQ measures and evaluates four dimensions (styles) of humor in relation to well-being and highlights individual differences in the use of humor. Those styles are captured in a two-dimensional framework of humor functions and organized based on the nature of humor as either benign/positive or potentially detrimental/negative, and the focus of humor to either enhance the self or the relationship with others (Martin et al., 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). The framework produces four styles - affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor. It is also the first self-report measure that evaluates ways in which humor negatively affects the users' well-being (Martin et al., 2003).

<u>Affiliative humor</u>
Affiliative humor is characterized as positive non-hostile humor aimed to enhance the atmosphere and relationships with others (Martin et al., 2003). People who use this style of humor tend to say funny things and tell jokes to amuse others and increase group cohesiveness. Examples include funny stories and responses, jokes about everyday life, spontaneous quips, or inside jokes often seen in organizational departments, teams, etc. For example, when an annoyed employee says: "I think we should really add a rule to our company bylaws that forbids scheduling meetings after noon on Friday". People might also engage in slightly self-deprecating humor and joking about themselves with the goal to amuse others, yet still maintain a sense of self-acceptance (Martin et al., 2003). It represents a social

lubricant that promotes a positive atmosphere, thus, people using this humor tend to be popular in groups and perceived as non-threatening (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

<u>Self-enhancing humor</u>

Self-enhancing humor represents the other positive humor which is, in this case, aimed to enhance oneself. People joke about themselves and are not afraid to laugh at themselves because they use humor to make themselves feel better. It is characterized as a generally positive view of the world, a coping mechanism to deal with stressful situations without hurting the self or others, or the ability to remain positive in adverse situations and avoid negative emotions (Martin et al., 2003; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). For example, if an employee forgets something at home and laughs at themselves: "I'm glad it is impossible to forget my head because if it were, then I probably would."

<u>Aggressive humor</u>

Aggressive humor is a negative style of humor directed at others. Individuals using aggressive humor tend to be sarcastic, ridicule others, and use humor without thinking about the negative impact on other people's emotions, e.g. sexist or racist jokes. People find it hard to resist the urge to say funny things even when it can potentially hurt someone's emotions (Martin et al., 2003). This humor style is closely related to the superiority theory of humor where people laugh at the expense of others to experience a sense of superiority status (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Examples include sarcastic comments, aggressive teasing or disparagement humor (Zillman, 1983 cited in Martin et al., 2003). Nevertheless, friendly or mild teasing within one's own group can be perceived positively and classified as affiliative humor which enhances group cohesiveness and strengthens a relationship bond (Martin et al., 2003).

<u>Self-defeating humor</u>

Self-defeating humor is negative humor towards oneself. Individuals tend to amuse others by ridiculing themselves or letting other people laugh at them and disparage them. They strive to gain others approval or acceptance at the cost of their dignity (Martin et al., 2003). Although people using this humor are perceived as witty and amusing, such as "class clowns", they use humor as defensive denial to hide negative emotions and avoid dealing with problems (Kubie, 1971 cited in Martin et al., 2003; Fabrizi & Pollio, 1987 cited in Martin et al., 2003).

2.1.4 Humor as Part of the Managerial Toolbox

Based on employees' perceptions, managerial humor can affect employees, managers, themselves, and the organizational setting either positively or negatively.

2.1.4.1 The Positive Effects of Managerial Humor

Humor and its effects have been studied for centuries, however, not until the 1980s have researchers focused on managerial humor and its positive outcomes in a workplace (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Despite the incongruity in humor definitions, researchers have agreed on the countless positive effects on leadership and organizational effectiveness (e.g. Avolio et al., 1999; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). The use of humor by managers eases tension and reduces stress, increases, among others, group cohesiveness, interpersonal attraction, motivation and productivity, improves communication, creates trust and enjoyable work environment, enhances creative thinking and leadership through lowering hierarchical differences, and promotes organizational culture (Avolio et al., 1999; Goswami et al., 2016; Holmes & Marra, 2006; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

Stress relief

As already mentioned in the relief theory description, humor helps to release tension and cope with workplace stress (e.g. Meyer, 2000). Workplace stress can stem from situations such as deadlines, errors or mistakes, interpersonal conflicts or unexpected change of events and plans. Plester (2009) states that "although humor may not actually change organizational situations, it makes them more bearable" (p.91). It is because employees can distance themselves from the situation, have a sense of dominance, and take control over it, which makes the situation less threatening (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Shared laughter helps focusing on the positive aspects rather than negative emotions, improves the mood, and creates a pleasurable atmosphere (Plester, 2009). Affiliative humor also creates the "we are in this together" mindset where everyone faces the same situation and shares all the stressors together (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). The positive atmosphere and reduced stress then improve productivity as employees can focus better and finish more tasks faster (McGhee, 1999).

Group cohesiveness and communication

Humor is an effective communication tool that can be beneficial in an organizational setting (Wood et al., 2007). It creates a positive atmosphere and makes social interactions less tense (Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Leaders can therefore effectively use humor to promote collegiality and cohesiveness by engaging in collaborative humor with subordinates (Holmes & Marra, 2006). Naturally, there is a superiority relationship between employees and their managers that includes power and authority, however humor helps to lower those status differences and break the invisible barrier between them (Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Karakowsky et al., 2020; McGhee, 1999). Humor flows quicker than formal communication, and therefore gives more opportunities for a conversation (Wood et al., 2007). When a manager engages in office humor with their employees, laughs with them, and is not afraid to make fun of themselves, they are letting employees know they are a regular person which can make them seem approachable and perceived more as a friend rather than a superior (Collinson, 2002; Duncan & Feisal, 1989; McGhee, 1999). It is because the manager is willing to put aside their formal status and assume an informal role of a humorist, which involves a degree of vulnerability (Karakowsky et al., 2020). Consequently, employees might start using humor themselves and create a closer bond with both their manager and colleagues, which might make them feel accepted and included, comfortable to share more, and contribute to better teamwork on projects (Duncan & Feisal, 1989; McGhee, 1999). Additionally, using humor creates an open atmosphere that improves communication among employees but also with the management, where employees are not afraid to speak freely and share their opinion even if it differs from the manager's (McGhee, 1999; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Lastly, a shared sense of humor represents a stronger influence on group cohesiveness than attitude similarity as it can develop "a cohesive group with diverse individuals" (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, p.61).

Trust

In the past, it was not unusual for employees to put organizational interests before their own, however, today, managers and leaders need to build trust with employees for them to behave transcendentally (Hughes & Avey, 2009). Mayer and Gavin (2005) defined trust as "the willingness to be vulnerable to another party when that party cannot be controlled or monitored" (p.874). According to Romero & Cruthirds (2006), affiliative humor creates trust

among group members for its positive emotions, which also further increases group cohesiveness. Similarly, Hughes & Avey (2009) confirmed that the use of humor by a leader increases employee's trust in them. According to Karakowsky et al. (2020), managerial humor can influence both employees' affect-based trust, that is the manager's benevolence, and cognition-based trust, which refers to the trust in manager's skills and competence. They state that affect-based trust makes employees comfortable sharing personal and sensitive information, and cognition-based trust reflects the manager's high status and competence because they are considered confident for assuming the risk of not being funny, being perceived negatively, or for using humor in stressful situations or times of uncertainty (Avolio et al., 1999; Marchezi de Souza et al., 2019). Neves and Karagonlar (2020) support the idea of humor as a managerial tool that can both develop and destroy trust in a supervisor based on its positive or negative nature. They state that a leader's affiliative and self-enhancing humor helps employees develop trust in their supervisors and improve their performance, whereas aggressive humor style decreases trust in a supervisor and subsequently employee's performance.

<u>Motivation and productivity</u>

Managerial humor and shared laughter can create a fun and relaxing office atmosphere and a workplace environment where people enjoy working (Goswami et al., 2016; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). For example, mocking and horseplay showed effectiveness for relieving boredom and improving the perception of monotonous boring jobs of factory workers and improving their motivation (Plester, 2009). Dienstbier's (1995) study of humor on college students showed that humor increases the feeling of energy and positive mood without increasing tension, and students felt motivated to perform more challenging studying activities. Goswami et al. (2016) confirmed that managerial humor can help increase employees' energy and enthusiasm about their work. The improved and positive atmosphere together with stronger employee relationships and increased motivation also positively influences job satisfaction (McGhee, 1999; Plester, 2009). Vartabedian and Vartabedian (1993) state that leaders can increase productivity if they know how and when to use humor while still achieving organizational goals. Furthermore, they state that as humor creates a positive atmosphere, employees feel happier, enjoy interaction with their coworkers, and trust and support each other, which leads to increased productivity.

Also, humor, such as friendly teasing, can hide negative aspects of a message and reduce tension in arguments, which helps a manager to use humor as a tool to gain compliance or convey negative evaluative comments while maintaining their authority and respect and subordinates' self-esteem and dignity (Butler, 2015; Holmes & Marra, 2006; Plester, 2009). This corresponds with the argument of Punyanunt (2000), who analyzed students' perceptions on teachers using humor as a compliance tool. She said that using humor might make a "compliance-gaining tactic more socially acceptable and motivational" (p. 35).

Problem-solving and creativity

People use humor to distance themselves from problems and negative situations and take control over them which increases productivity and has a positive effect on problem-solving (Avolio et al., 1999). People feel more relaxed which increases risk taking behavior and makes them more open to new ideas (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Additionally, a person's humor might prompt others to look at the problem from a new perspective and trigger unique and different thinking processes (McGhee, 1999). For example, the study of Lang and Lee (2010) shows how liberating humor positively affects organizational creativity. Humor is generally indirect and ambiguous and can be interpreted differently by different people. Liberating humor promotes openness and acceptance of differences or unusual ideas. For example, in a culturally diverse workplace, liberating humor allows employees to discuss sensitive or taboo topics more openly and create new perspectives or social meanings which further promotes innovation and creative thinking.

2.1.4.2 The Negative Effects of Managerial Humor

The perception of humor is subjective and unpredictable, leading to humor being considered a double-edged sword as some people might find an event funny while others might find it annoying or offensive (Malone, 1980). According to Robert & Yan (2007 cited in Plester, 2009), to understand workplace humor, people must think about the motivational aspects, cognitive mechanisms, and emotional factors of humor. That is, to consider the motivation why people use humor, to know how humor works, and lastly, how it affects behavior and emotions of initiators and people around them and also organizational consequences.

The majority of studies have focused on the positive effects of managerial humor however, humor also has negative effects on employees' well-being and organizational atmosphere. Humor can, among others, lower self-confidence and cause stress, negatively affect organizational culture and its norms, exclude employees from groups, serve as a tool for control, or negatively influence manager's power status and respect (Butler, 2015; Romero & Pearson, 2004; Wood et al., 2007). Next, we will explore the potential loss of respect and status in more detail.

<u>Status and respect</u>

Bitterly et al. (2017) state that humor can help managers create but also lose status and respect because the success of humor depends on the perception of confidence and competence. In the literature, negative outcomes with regard to the loss of respect and status are typically tied to negative humor styles, that is self-demeaning or aggressive humor of managers or leaders (Goodchilds, 1959). Therefore, generally only positive humor styles can help to increase competence, credibility and respect (Bitterly et al., 2017; Goodchilds, 1959; Neves & Karagonlar, 2020). Bitterly et al. (2017) further stated that both positive and negative humor can be perceived as confident, but only managers whose humor is perceived as positive or appropriate can be considered as confident, competent, and high status. Although self-defeating humor can help reduce status differences and make managers look more approachable, it can also negatively affect manager's status, respect and credibility in situations when it is needed (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Goodchilds (1959) researched the social influence of sarcastic wits (aggressive humor) characterized by ridiculing others, and clowning wits (self-defeating humor), which represent silly and frivolous humor. She found out that a person who uses sarcastic humor appears more powerful and influential but less liked within a group, whereas a person using clowning is usually liked and popular within a group but has little to no respect or power to influence. Therefore, managers need to be careful with expressing self-defeating humor (Hu et al., 2017). If a manager is in a situation that requires them to appear credible and have respect, self-defeating humor and acting like a class clown could cause the opposite and be counterproductive. Employees would not take them seriously and they would lose respect and credibility which should not happen for a person in a managerial position who is expected to lead and have the power to influence their subordinates (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Hu et al. (2017) supports this argument by stating

that making employees laugh and lowering status differences through self-defeating humor might be beneficial for the office atmosphere and employees' positive feelings, however managers need to be cautious about the timing and the situational context. They state that using too much self-defeating humor decreases employees' positive evaluation of the leader because they do not consider them effective and competent which leaves the manager without respect.

2.2 Organizational Commitment

In this second section, we will first explore the concept of organizational commitment by introducing definitions and its three components of affective, normative, and continuance commitment. Next, we will focus in depth on affective commitment and its antecedents and consequences. We conclude this section with the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory and its relation to organizational commitment.

<u>Organizational commitment</u>

Organizational commitment, also referred to as an employee commitment, is a broad concept yielding many diverse definitions across scholars and practitioners. According to Mercurio (2015) and his literature review about the core component of organizational commitment, there is still confusion and disagreement about what commitment is, how it develops, and how it affects employee's behavior. Organizational commitment is a multidimensional concept generally characterized by three factors: "a desire to remain in the organization, willingness to exert considerable effort on its behalf, and belief in and acceptance of its goals and values" (Hughes & Avey, 2009, p.545). The generally agreed definition of organizational commitment is that it represents an employee's relationship, loyalty, or degree of identification with the organization and their motivation to stay and work towards its success (Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Hughes & Avey, 2009; Marco, 2020). Additionally, according to Martin and Nicholls (1987 cited in Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020), commitment consists of three pillars. First, the sense of belonging to the organization, which is characterized by an employee's loyalty and involvement in achieving organizational goals. Second, employee's excitement about their job as it leads to effectively completing assigned tasks. And third, confidence in management.

Meyer and Allen (1991) considered organizational commitment from two already established perspectives, attitudinal and behavioral, described by Mowday et al. (1982 cited in Meyer & Allen, 1991) as:

> "Attitudinal commitment focuses on the process by which people come to think about their relationship with the organization. In many ways it can be thought of as a mind set in which individuals consider the extent to which their own values and goals are congruent with those of the organization. Behavioral commitment, on the other hand, relates to the process by which individuals become locked into a certain organization and how they deal with this problem." (p.62)

Combining these two commitment definitions, Meyer and Allen (1991) developed a widely cited three-component framework of organizational commitment stating that organizational commitment, as a psychological state, involves three separate components. First, affective commitment (the "want") that represents the "employees' emotional attachment to an organization" (Hughes & Avey, 2009, p.545) or the desire to remain at the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Second, normative commitment (the "must") occurs when an employee feels like they are morally obligated to stay with the organization (Hughes & Avey, 2009; Mercurio, 2015; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Lastly, a continuance commitment represents the "need" to stay with an organization because the costs of leaving the organization outweigh the potential benefits gained somewhere else (Hughes & Avey, 2009; Mercurio, 2015; Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Affective commitment

Affective commitment, also referred to as the emotional attachment to the organization, have been argued to be the core or even the only essence of organizational commitment (Mercurio, 2015; Solinger et al., 2008). It is defined as "[...] affective attachment to the goals and values, and to the organization for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth" (Buchanan, 1974 cited in Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.64), "the relative strength of an individuals's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Mowday et al., 1979 cited in Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.64), or as a more intimate relationship between the employee and their organization, the employee enjoys working there because of pleasant experiences and is

therefore reluctant to leave (Suryani, 2018). Therefore, employees want to or enjoy working for the organization. Compared to normative and continuance commitment, where employees feel morally obligated (must) to stay with the company or that they need to stay because the cost of leaving is too high.

Solinger and colleagues (2008) published an article as a critique of the three-component framework of organizational commitment arguing that affective commitment is most closely related to organizational commitment because only affective commitment represents an attitude towards the organization, whereas normative and continuance commitment are attitudes about specific behaviors, such as staying or leaving. Additionally, they confirmed that affective commitment represents "the most reliable and strongly validated dimension of organizational commitment" (p.71) because it correlated more strongly with absence, performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors than normative and continuance commitment. Additionally, they stated that affective commitment correlated with behavioral variables, such as working extra hours, helping others or information sharing, whereas normative and continuance did not.

Antecedents and consequences

According to Mercurio (2015), organizations have realized that employee turnover and withdrawal were the most relevant problems related to organizational commitment, and therefore researchers have started focusing more on investigating the consequences of high and low affective employee commitment. The primary negative consequences of low organizational commitment relate to employee turnover and absenteeism. Furthermore, they argued that high affective commitment is positively correlated with displaying organizational citizenship behavior and also recognized as a mediator of workplace stress. Consequently, after learning about those consequences, researchers also started focusing on the antecedents of affective commitment. Work experience variables, including interpersonal relationships, socialization, and high-commitment human resource practices, have been most strongly correlated, and therefore argued to be the primary antecedent of affective commitment. Other significant antecedents are perceived organizational support (POS) and interpersonal (bottom-up) and systemic (top-down) trust (Mercurio, 2015). Additionally, Garg and Dhar

(2014) stated that POS and the quality of leader-member relationship can contribute to commitment, whereas job stress can affect commitment negatively.

According to Allen and Shanock (2013), perceived organizational support (POS) refers to the employee perception "of the degree to which the work organization values her [their] contributions and cares about her [their] well-being" (p.353). It represents a social exchange between the employee and their organization where the employee considers the company's favorable or unfavorable treatment as an indicator that the organization considers them valuable and a deserving member. As a response, they develop a positive perception and emotional attachment to the organization and because of the norm of reciprocity, which forms the base of mutual obligation and states that people feel obligated to return a favor when they receive some benefit, an employee will feel a need to return the favor to the company with their behavior, effort, and commitment (DeConinck, 2011; Tse et al., 2013). An organizational support can be, for example, positively perceived organizational norms and policies, rewards, job conditions, or experiences and support from supervisors (Allen & Shanock, 2013; Eisenberger et al., 1986).

LMX: Leader-member exchange theory

Organizational relationships are an inherent part of the overall organizational life (Allen & Eby, 2012 cited in Pundt & Herrmann, 2015) as employees interact and create relationships with customers, coworkers, working teams and also their superiors (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). The leader-member exchange (LMX) focuses on the quality of the professional relationship between the organizational leader and their subordinates, and represents a relationship-based leadership approach that is based on three dimensions - mutual respect, trust and obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

LMX is based on social exchange theory where both parties form perceptions of each other and influence the quality of their work relationship and form mutual dependencies (Dulebohn et al., 2012). LMX includes aspects of both transactional and transformational leadership as "it begins as transactional social exchange and evolves into transformational social exchange" (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p.238). The development of the leader-member relationship is captured in the Leadership Making model. At the beginning, the leader and their followers

represent "strangers" who engage mainly in the economic and material exchanges, such as receiving monetary compensation for fulfilling contractual responsibilities. This stage is characterized as a lower-quality LMX with only formal interactions and involves a managership rather than a leadership. At this stage, either party can make a relationship "offer" and when it is accepted, meaning there is a mutual interest in building the relationship further, the "acquaintance" stage occurs. In this stage, participants experience more social exchanges both on personal and work level and this stage is classified as a medium-quality LMX. The last stage is called "mature partnership" with the highest social exchanges and the highest levels of mutual respect, trust and obligation, and members expect each other's loyalty and support. This stage represents a high-quality LMX and is similar to transformational leadership where the obligation or reciprocity is not solely contractual but more based on personal, emotional and affection-based relationship (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Tse et al., 2013). Therefore, managers can provide their employees with encouragement and support and employees might provide them with additional time and help beyond their contractual duties (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

As the trust, respect, and obligation between the leader and their subordinates increases, so does the quality of LMX and therefore, the relationship becomes more personal and leads to several positive outcomes within the organization (DeConinck, 2011). For example, increased job performance, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, or proactive work behavior, which allows employees to take charge or use their voice to speak up and share their ideas and opinions for the company's benefits (DeConinck, 2011; Marco, 2020). Furthermore, it increases organizational identification, that is the feeling of belonging to the organization, which leads to higher customer-orientation, affective attachment between the superior and their follower, and overall organizational commitment (DeConinck, 2011; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Garg & Dhar, 2014; Lindsey Hall et al., 2016; Marco, 2020).

2.3 The Link Between Managerial Humor and Organizational Commitment

Now that we have described both concepts of humor and organizational commitment, it is time to explore the connection between the two. Several quantitative studies have acknowledged a relationship between supervisor's humor and organizational commitment. For example, Hughes & Avey's (2009) study showed that humor had a moderating effect on

the relationship between transformational leadership and affective commitment. Evwierhurhoma & Oga (2020) concluded that managerial humor practices had statistically a significant and positive impact on employee commitment at a bank as humor contributed to the perception that organizational work seemed more enjoyable. Marco (2020) argued that using the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, positive humor had a slight positive correlation to organizational commitment and there was a negligible correlation between negative humor and commitment. Burford (1987) stated that the teachers' assessment of the principal's sense of humor affected their loyalty to the supervisor which further affected the perceived school effectiveness. Furthermore, Romero and Arendt (2011) found out that generally positive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) were positively related to organizational commitment, whereas aggressive humor was related negatively. Lastly, Marchezi de Souza et al. (2019) stated that managerial humor increased satisfaction with management which can trigger organizational commitment.

3   Methodology

In this chapter, the steps undertaken to address our research question as well as a broad underpinning to the chosen research methods are explored. The chapter starts with our philosophical grounding and an elaboration of the overarching approach to the study. After, the case organization Funny Bank is introduced to the reader which is followed by a detailed explanation of the specific techniques used to collect, process, and analyze the obtained information. In addition, we present the critical considerations as well as some limitations of our research.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

Gog (2015) argues how the findings and discussion of a research question is affected by the philosophical approach the research takes. It is critical to be clear about one's research philosophy and to be conscious of it, because various philosophies might lead to different outcomes (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The purpose of this thesis is to develop a deeper understanding of the role of managerial humor in a workplace, how it is used and perceived, and how it influences employees' commitment in contemporary organizations. More specifically, we aim to gain an understanding of the perception of individuals on how managerial humor influences employee's commitment. Employees' subjective experiences will be used to help us address our research question. Furthermore, because humor and commitment are the result of a combination of individual and communal subjective interpretations of meaning, our method is based on the interpretivism philosophy, which stresses the significance of subjective meanings in reality production (Prasad, 2018).

In particular, we are interested in how individual experiences relate to the larger whole. Since this is about 'understanding', we will follow the interpretivist tradition of hermeneutics where the text's appearance, in our case the findings presented in excerpt-commentary units, is frequently seen as concealing deeper and more significant meanings (Prasad, 2018). The term *hermeneutics* means "the process of explaining and clarifying with the intent of making the obscure more obvious" (Bauman, 1978 cited in Prasad 2018, p. 32). Hence, our goal is to decipher the text's latent and hidden meanings by going beyond its evident interpretation

(Prasad, 2018). By going back and forth between our previous understanding and new understanding of managerial humor and commitment, we progressively deepen our grasp on the concept.

3.2 Research Approach

The purpose of a study determines whether qualitative or quantitative methods should be used (Schein, 2017). Since our study seeks to gain understanding of employees' perceptions of managerial humor in relation to commitment rather than measuring something, qualitative methods were found to be most appropriate. In this fashion, we were able to collect extensive data on individual employee experiences, social interactions, processes, and social phenomena in the context of their emergence (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

As mentioned before, the epistemological approach of interpretivism inspired our research. All interpretative traditions strive to comprehend these processes of subjective reality building in all aspects of life. This is also known as the *verstehen* principle, which emphasizes comprehension of meaning and intentionality over causal explanations (Prasad, 2018; Weber, 1947). In our study, the *verstehen* approach is anchored as the goal here is to engage in our study participants' social environment and understand it from their perspective.

By combining both inductive and deductive components, we participate in abduction to theorize our results. In line with the hermeneutic approach, the abductive approach is argued to be the best fit as it allows us to go back and forth between the theory and empirical material to create a new possible theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Moreover, Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) emphasize the significance of dialogue and language in this approach which is in line with the above-mentioned concept of *verstehen*. It allowed us to obtain a better grasp of existing theory before gathering actual data, it broadened our theoretical understanding throughout the empirical investigation by introducing new theoretical notions, as well as it helped us to conceptualize the findings in the analysis and discussion.

3.3 Introducing Funny Bank

Before going into depth about how we gathered our empirical data, we think it is vital to first introduce our case company, Funny Bank, to give our empirical research some context. 'Funny Bank' is a pseudonym created to protect both the firm as a whole and the individual research participants who work for it.

As a personal relationship bank for private individuals, entrepreneurs and companies, Funny Bank started operating in the Netherlands in 2002. The Scandinavian roots of the company and highly decentralized way of working make Funny Bank a unique organization within the Dutch banking sector, where most banks have Dutch roots and operate in centralized units. Currently, Funny Bank employs around 400 people, all of whom strive to provide high-quality, personalized service and a personalized approach. Because of the bank's decentralized model, the company consists of a headquarters and 29 branches (local offices) scattered throughout the Netherlands. Each of the 29 branches functions as a local company, which means that employees are familiar with their clients and have a thorough understanding of the local market and community. Moreover, many banking decisions such as decisions on loans and mortgages, staff salary and branch location, are being made by the branches themselves. Only for the very biggest loans approval from the headquarters is required.

As one might wonder why we choose to conduct this research in this particular organization and industry, we will provide a substantiation of the various reasons that prompted us to do so. Firstly, the banking sector is generally perceived as a serious environment usually not associated with humorous approaches. Therefore, we argue it to be interesting to see how (managerial) humor is present and how this relates to the commitment of employees. Secondly, one of us researchers, Manon, can acknowledge the presence of managerial humor at the site due to her previous work experience at Funny Bank. It is a unique and interesting opportunity to conduct our research there as Manon's experience will provide additional help with interpretation and overall analysis.

Consequently, because one of us researchers used to work there as an accountmanager, contacting Funny Bank was straightforward. The first point of contact we had was with

Isabel, Manon's former manager, via an email in which we introduced ourselves and our research topic. Isabel reacted very positively and contacted and requested approval from Anna, the head of Human Resources. After we got approval, we scheduled another phone call during which we discussed our strategy and proposed research topic in more depth, as well as what the requirements from Funny Bank would be. We believe that, as a result of the foregoing, this case is relevant to our research.

3.4 Data Collection

Because the findings of our research will be based on the acquired empirical data, i.e. the raw material, it is essential to reveal how this raw material was obtained (Styhre, 2013). Our raw material was gathered in conjunction with Funny Bank by means of conducting ten semi-structured interviews.

Interviews

In line with the interpretivist tradition and abductive approach of our research, we decided to conduct interviews to collect the raw material. Since the aim of this study is to gain insight into how managerial humor influences employee commitment, in-depth interviews were the most appropriate source of data collection (Saunders et al., 2016). The interviews conducted were semi-structured hence allowed for unanticipated responses and issues to emerge through the use of open-ended questioning (Saunders et al., 2016). Moreover, it enables for a sequence of less structured questions and permits the exploration of suggested issues raised by the interviewee (Ryan et al., 2009).

Sampling

Before starting the interviews, first a sample of relevant interviewees had to be found. Baskarada (2014) and Creswell (2003) argue in Asiamah et al. (2017), that the emphasis in qualitative studies is on relatively few participants who can identify their views and/or expertise about certain research questions or phenomena. To be purposeful, we needed to develop criteria that would result in a group of respondents that were relevant to our study. Hence, the following criteria were set: interviewees needed to have been working at Funny Bank for at least twelve months. As we were interested in exploring the influence of managerial humor on employee commitment, we looked for employees with a certain amount

of experience within Funny Bank. Moreover, even though it was not set as a strict criterion, employees who had experienced interactions with different managers within the organization were especially interesting for our research to obtain a better and more in-depth insight. Lastly, to get a varied view, we set the criteria that the employees from the entire organization, i.e. account managers, internal appraisers, and support functions such as finance and IT, should be represented.

These criteria resulted in a group of ten Funny Bank employees, all with different positions at the headquarters and in different branches (Amsterdam Zuid, Haarlem, Eindhoven, and 't Gooi). Because we conduct research into how managerial humor influences employees and their commitment to the organization, we have made the explicit choice to only interview employees. It is therefore important to mention that the ten interviewees all concern employees that do not carry out managerial tasks or functions. An overview of the interviewees and their current function can be found in appendix 7.1.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Consequently, the semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom due to Covid-19 restrictions. A time span of two weeks allowed us to do brief analyses after every interview and revise our interview questions, which prompted us to delve deeper into intriguing themes during the other interviews, giving us even more in-depth and insightful information. On average, the interviews lasted around half an hour and were recorded with the interviewees' permission. As such, we did not take extra notes during the interviews but instead both researchers focussed on facilitating the dialogue. The number of interviews was based on the point of saturation which is, according to Urquhart (2013) cited in Saunders et al., (2017), defined as the point in coding when no new codes occur in the data. At this point, the new data tends to be redundant of data already collected. In this case, the researcher can stop collecting information and can start analyzing what has been collected (Grady, 1998 in Saunders et al., 2017). In the course of this research, the saturation point was reached after conducting ten interviews.

For our study, which is focused on individual experiences and feelings, it is important that interviewees have unstrained conversations and are able to freely express themselves.

However, as we were not acquainted with the participants, this feeling is not self-evident. Hence, by demonstrating trustworthiness and maintaining integrity in the researcher-participant relationship, we tried to maintain confidentiality (Rogers, 2006). Moreover, to encourage the interviewees, they were assured of their anonymity at the start of each interview.

3.6 Data Analysis

After the empirical material was collected by means of ten semi-structured interviews with employees from Funny Bank, we generated transcripts of each interview recording. The purpose of this process was to be able to smoothen the sorting and coding process of the raw material. To be able to draw conclusions from the large amount of empirical data, adopting a strategy on how to deal with it is arguably wise. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) divided this process of qualitative analysis in three stages: sorting, reducing, and debating. Below, the three stages will be discussed in greater detail as they served as a guide for the complex process of theorizing.

<u>Sorting</u>

With sorting, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) refer to a method of dealing and getting familiar with the qualitative empirical material by reading it repeatedly and categorizing it. After compiling transcripts of each interview recording, we 'spent time' with the material in order to get familiar with the data. We skimmed it through looking for recurring topics. Afterwards, we carefully read the interviews line by line. Whilst doing so, we focused on topics that were brought up regularly and topics that are connected to academic literature. We coded each interview into themes based on its content and form (whats and hows) to sort the information (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Strauss and Corbin (1998 cited in Styhre, 2013, p.59) define coding as "the analytical processes through which data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory". We decided to manually code the interviews instead of using a program to do it for us as we wanted to stay as close as possible to the interviewees' point of view.

<u>Reducing</u>

The first step after the sorting process consisted of categorical reduction. This process entailed emphasizing particular categories at the expense of others with less theoretical importance (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). By doing so, we were able to reduce the amount of categories and topics we regarded to be outside the scope of our research (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). This was done by combining and eliminating certain codes.

<u>Arguing</u>

Besides sorting and reducing the material, it is also important to reflect and discuss the findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Arguing means creating our independent position considering our previous knowledge and developing a concept representing our findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In our case, the following themes will be presented: *'Managerial Humor in the Workplace', 'The Manager-Employee Relationship'*, and *'Humor Affects the Way of Working'*. These concepts will be further elaborated upon in the discussion where, to increase theoretical relevance, the concepts will be linked to existing theories, concepts, and models.

3.6 Credibility and Reflexivity

Before moving on to the presentation of our empirical findings, we think it is important to show reflexivity to illustrate the abductive nature of our research. As mentioned before, this study is carried out in the interpretivist research tradition. Hence, rather than finding objective truths, we aimed to explore and gain subjective meanings. Because this study cannot be seen independently from the context and because this study is influenced by the subjective meanings of our interviewees and our own interpretations, we try to avoid generalizing our findings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010).

With regard to our research, there are several critical considerations that need to be kept in mind when drawing conclusions from the empirical material. An important aspect is that the case study was conducted by means of 'only' ten interviews. One could argue that this relatively small sample compared to the size of the organization could influence the outcome of the study. Undoubtedly, it would have been beneficial if we would have performed a larger number of interviews to probe the credibility of our respondents. However, due to the time

span of the study in combination with the busy schedules of the Funny Bank employees this was not possible. Nevertheless, our findings reveal that the interviewees were quite candid. Moreover, overall we believe that none of the interviewees seemed to have any intention of deceiving us by making false claims. Nonetheless, it is important to remain critical towards our interviewees. We understand that respondents may not be expressing genuine feelings, but rather preferred realities that are politically driven or correspond to "institutionalized standard talk" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1269). Furthermore, interviewees may structure their responses in order to meet our (the writers') interests (Alvesson, 2011).

Additionally, due to Covid-19 measures, the interviews were set up in a digital format. This means that we were not, or minimal, able to take into account body language, mimic, and appearance. Because we were in the same situation as our interviewees, this was reassuring and somehow created a feeling of cohesiveness and the attitude among all employees to make the best out of it. Moreover, the interviews were mostly (7 out of 10) held in English. As this was not the native language of any of the participants, this could have limited them to speak their thoughts openly as well as it might have deprived us, the researchers, of important nuances in descriptions whilst translating. Using globally recognized humor and a cheerful attitude, on the other hand, compensated for possible language limitations.

Even though a case study is argued to be most appropriate, conducting the study at only one organization could limit the insights and different perspectives with regard to exploring our research question. Regarding this case-based approach, another consideration to keep in mind is that even though managerial humor appears to be present within Funny Bank, this does not guarantee the presence in the entire banking industry. Especially, since Funny Bank is stated to be an unique organization compared to other banks within the banking industry in the Netherlands.

Lastly, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2010) argue for more reflexivity among researchers in their book on qualitative methodology. This means that it is important that both the object that is studied as well as the researchers themselves should be critically questioned within their context. The way our findings and results are presented are determined by our, the researchers, interpretations. These interpretations and (pre-) understandings with which we

interpreted the empirical material were influenced by our personal background. Facets such as nationality, study background, and professional experience play a significant role. Nonetheless, simply being aware of this is the first step in challenging whatever assumptions we may have made. We regarded the possibility to push each other reflexively and explore our individual perspectives as a benefit of writing the master's thesis together. Manon, for example, has worked for Funny Bank for two years and hence may have been influenced in her interpretations of individual interviewees. Lucie's ability to serve as a more impartial opponent was advantageous because she only came into touch with Funny Bank whilst conducting the interviews and had no prior relationship with the company. Moreover, we also took care to maintain an abductive approach, which meant that we sought to detach ourselves to the point that we were open to new and unexpected ideas (Alvesson, 2003). Lastly, by describing our methodology in detail, we aim to provide third parties with as much information as possible with regards to our research approach and ways of working. By doing so, we aimed to increase the quality of our study with a high degree of transparency in addition to our goal of being reflexive (Mason, 2002).

4   Empirical Findings

In this chapter, we will present the empirical material by drawing upon quotes which we derived from the interviews. Based on the analysis of the empirical material, we divided the chapter into three sections (themes) with corresponding sub-themes. The first theme, *'Managerial Humor in the Workplace'*, presents that although working in a bank is generally perceived as boring, most employees in the Funny Bank seemed to experience humor with their managers and co-workers frequently. Furthermore, we will present how positively perceived humor can be a part of the managerial toolbox but also how managerial humor can negatively influence employees' feelings and their perception of the manager. This section is followed by the second theme, which is '*The Manager-Employee Relationship'*. Here we will present how managerial humor can positively influence the bond between managers and employees through a perceived positive atmosphere, cooperation, increased trust and respect to the degree where managers and employees feel like more than just colleagues. Lastly, in the third theme called *'Humor Affects the Way of Working'*, we present data on how a manager's positive and humorous approach can both enhance and diminish productivity through natural breaks and distractions and also enhance problem-solving processes.

4.1 Managerial Humor in the Workplace

The Serious Nature of Work

Banks are often considered corporate and serious environments and are usually not associated with humorous approaches. Our interviewees overall confirmed this preconception but when we asked employees Morgan and Melanie how they experience humor in their bank, they responded:

> *"So, indeed, you have these prejudices from banks that can be very boring and very gray, gray suits and all these but I really don't feel like that. Maybe I'm also very lucky with my colleagues that they are similar to me and want to have some fun"* (Morgan)

Melanie elaborated.

"It's a serious environment because of the work we do, it requires a lot of attention and focus. But jokes are definitely allowed, we actually laugh a lot" (Melanie)

Even though Morgan's response seemed to confirm the preconception that banks are 'boring', she also argued that she does not encounter this on a day-to-day basis. She referred to her colleagues who make her work more fun and therefore indicated that humor is present in her office. Similarly, Melanie's statement indicated that the banking industry is perceived as a serious environment due to the nature of the job because banks are involved, among other things, in taking care of payment transactions, providing credit to individuals and companies, and managing savings. As such, banks are indispensable for the proper functioning of the economy. However, she also added that despite its serious nature, there is space and time for humor in her department.

Due to the serious nature of the bank job, several employees emphasized the necessity of humor.

"We really need to be able to see the humor in some things in such a corporate environment. It really contributes to the atmosphere, motivation et cetera" (Sebastian)

Sebastian highlighted that he considers it important to use humor in a bank and said that humor within his workplace positively influences the atmosphere and other aspects, such as motivation. The necessity of humor in a bank was confirmed by another employee Barbara.

"Yeah. Otherwise it would be boring, right? Because the job is very serious. You know, sometimes it can also break the serious atmosphere." (Barbara)

On top of the serious nature of the bank work, Barbara seemed to also consider the work atmosphere to be boring without humor. Benjamin confirmed that humor is not expected to be present within such an environment but argued that it is even better when it is there.

"No, that's right. But then the humor is all the better when it is there. After all, we are all human. Same at a funeral, for example. Then if someone makes a joke, everyone will laugh, no matter how bad the joke is." (Benjamin)

With the sentence "after all, we are all human", Benjamin seemed to consider humor to be a natural response to many different kinds of situations even though some environments seem to create the perception that humor is not appropriate to use. Moreover, Benjamin used the analogy of jokes at a funeral and compared it to situations when jokes are made in a bank. Both banks and funerals are typically considered serious environments. Yet, funerals have a lighter side too if jokes are made to relieve the tension. In addition, being in an environment where humor is not expected, such as a funeral or bank, even the slightest humor attempt could induce laughter and improve the atmosphere, if it is not completely inappropriate. Although the bank atmosphere can be often considered serious, several employees talked about how their manager used humor and how it positively affected their mood and the workplace atmosphere. Benjamin answered the following:

"That's good for togetherness. He [the manager] doesn't take himself too seriously. It becomes a lot less serious, and that is relaxed. It's often serious enough. I often try to figure out how to get over his joke to make it better. Bring myself down even more." (Benjamin)

Benjamin appeared to like that his manager does not take himself too seriously and tries to create a certain cohesion amongst the employees. According to Benjamin, this results in a relaxed atmosphere where the manager encourages Benjamin to make jokes himself too. Additionally, by saying "I often try to figure out how to get over his joke to make it better", he implied that his manager was not afraid to use self-deprecating humor which seemed to encourage Benjamin to come up with even funnier joke even though it would mean to use a similar self-deprecating humor and make fun of oneself.

Emma mentioned how managerial humor helped her with stress relief.

> *"Yeah, it's important because… You need it because sometimes we have so much stress with our deadlines and it's good if the manager or somebody else says something funny that you think 'okay, I have time to send this report' […] Yeah, I think it's very important for us to have some fun." (Emma)*

Some departments within the bank work with strict deadlines which can cause stress amongst employees. With this quote, Emma indicated how important it is for her to have fun in her office space, especially when dealing with deadlines. When her manager tries to release the tension of the deadlines by introducing some fun and jokes within the department, Emma stated that she considers it to have a positive effect on her well-being as well as the atmosphere in terms of it being more relaxed.

And Maarten continued.

> *"Like he [the manager] is a human like us, and that he's also trying to have a good day, you know, he's not just trying to do his work, but that the atmosphere in the office is also important to him. And [...] we actually say that out loud also often that it's [the atmosphere] really super important." (Maarten)*

Maarten implied that whenever his manager uses humor, he seems to lower the status differences and makes employees perceive him as human and not some superior figure who does not like humor. Although the manager seems to focus mainly on his work tasks, he also tries to create a pleasant office environment. Therefore, he seems to use humor as a tool to enlighten the working atmosphere.

Barbara confirmed that her manager also uses humor to improve the mood in the office.

> *"And of course, if he [the manager] sees that the whole team is a bit down or whatever, or something is going on and he needs to cheer it up, he is doing that. So I think he's indirectly using it as a managerial tool without knowing this." (Barbara)*

Barbara seemed to imply that her manager cares about employee's feelings and tends to use humor purposefully to make them feel better at work.

In the following statement, Maarten described how important a humorous atmosphere is for him when choosing his employing company.

> *"But for me, I wouldn't settle easily for a place where I don't have fun. That would be a bit of a waste of my time, I think, things should be in balance. I need to be able to have a fulfilling… that your ambitions can be fulfilled, that you feel satisfied about what you do and the content, the challenge of that. But the atmosphere around it is for me just as important. So that also really should be good." (Maarten)*

Maarten stated that it is important for him that humor is allowed and used in the office. He stated that things should be in balance and therefore he seems to appreciate the positive atmosphere and coworker interactions that are created with humor, while being able to fulfill his ambitions and do a job that he likes. He seemed to place value on those aspects because he appeared to be someone who does not consider the company only as work or a place that is detached from his personal life.

Humor as a Part of the Managerial Toolbox

Even though managers seemed to use humor both consciously and unconsciously to improve the overall atmosphere, it also became evident that it was important for employees to have a certain degree of a shared sense of humor with their manager.

> *"For me personally it [having a similar sense of humor with a manager] is important. Especially now when I noticed the difference between David and Robert [former and current manager]. I think it's very important because of the humor a manager has, a certain atmosphere is created in which you have the feeling you can be yourself. […] If your humor and the humor of your manager is not aligned, it's the same as within a relationship. It is important that you share the same humor as your partner, right? If you look at it from a manager-employee perspective, I believe it's the same." (Melanie)*

Melanie stated that both her current and former managers had a positive relationship with humor, meaning they encouraged using humor in the workplace and tried to joke with employees. However, their humorous attempts were perceived differently. She further stated that her sense of humor was similar to David's, her former manager, rather than Robert's, her current manager. She used the analogy of a romantic relationship to stretch the importance of an alignment of the type of humor between managers and employees. Her response implied that the same type or style of humor creates a stronger bond. She seemed to connect better with her former manager because they perceived and understood his humorous attempts the same.

Melanie elaborated:

"In general, [a sense of] humor should be the same. And that's hard. Obviously no one ever has the same exact type of humor and I don't think that is possible. But if you, as a manager, have a more 'general' and 'broad' sense of humor, chances are bigger that employees share the same sense. If you as a manager use your specific sense of humor, let's say being very sarcastic, which nobody understands..." (Melanie)

Sam, who has worked with several managers, also acknowledged that when the sense of humor between employees and managers does not seem aligned, it could cause friction. However, he said that it rarely happens.

"It helps. If you really don't appreciate a certain kind of humor, you will consider it annoying. I think there are always many similarities in the humor section. It must be really crazy if you really don't appreciate it." (Sam)

In the next comment, Sebastian further elaborated on how he feels about his current manager's sense of humor that does not seem to be aligned with his.

"To motivate people he [the manager] tries to do some kind of fun to increase motivation or something. But that just doesn't come across well or then the joke just

isn't good enough. Which makes you think: 'what kind of weird comment is this?'"
(Sebastian)

It appeared that their different senses of humor created a certain kind of distance and negatively affected the atmosphere because instead of laughing and enjoying the jokes, Sebastian had to think about them to really understand them which is not the point of jokes. Furthermore, he indicated that when the jokes from his manager do not come across well, the atmosphere becomes uncomfortable.

Furthermore, it appeared that when managers used humor during conversation, employees felt more encouraged and safe to express themselves and also make jokes themselves.

"And I think this is very important in an organization. That you don't have the feeling of being pressured or that you can't be yourself in the sense of making jokes yourself."
(Melanie)

And Melanie continued.

"I had the feeling that I could make jokes that I could make around my friends as well." (Melanie)

Melanie said that she considers managerial humor as a tool that can help to create an open atmosphere where she feels like she does not have to act differently than she does outside of the office and can also express her sense of humor. Furthermore, in her second statement she talked about the atmosphere that her former manager David created with his positive humor. She seemed to consider him a friend because she felt safe to make jokes she makes with her friends in her private life. Sebastian shared a similar thought.

"But I do think it's important that a manager has a certain kind of humor, yes. Absolutely. Not that you're afraid to say something funny, you know? That you will be looked at strangely." (Sebastian)

Sebastian said he considers it important for a manager to have a similar sense of humor as then he seems to feel comfortable to initiate jokes in front of them without being afraid of creating an uncomfortable situation where the manager does not understand the joke.

Morgan elaborated.

> *"I would say it only has an influence on me because I really like my work and I enjoy going to the office and if there isn't this atmosphere where I can make a joke or it'll be perceived by him [manager] like 'what is she saying?', then I think I would enjoy my work way less because you always need to have this connection with your environment and that also gives you energy." (Morgan)*

Morgan indicated that apart from feeling comfortable enough to be herself and make jokes herself, she believes that her manager's humor contributes to her overall pleasant workplace experience because it improves the connection with him and other coworkers.

Negative Forms of Humor

The following statements refer to accounts of employees' experiences when humor from one of their managers had a negative effect on them. These statements show that besides the positive effects, managerial humor could also have negative effects.

> *"In the past when I worked at Funny Bank and I came to work a little later in the morning, I had a manager who would always make the same joke. He always asked if I had slept well. You know. At a certain point you try to improve that and then things go well for a long time, but then that atmosphere and that image remains. Then you have to put in a lot of effort to do that… The moment a manager makes jokes about it, it stings. You do not hope that you will hear that during an assessment interview." (Sebastian)*

Sebastian mentioned how his manager's repeated sarcasm negatively affected both the office atmosphere and his self-confidence. Even when Sebastian started arriving on time, the negative feeling from his manager's humor remained. His manager's sarcastic humor also

seemed to make him anxious about his assessment interview, an event that should have a motivating effect.

Sam continued.

> *"Humor becomes annoying, I think, if you pick one person out and all the jokes are about him or her. Then it feels like it's always about you. That's annoying. But if jokes are made and it rotates in the group about who they are about, I wouldn't take that as annoying. Because everyone is joked about sometimes." (Sam)*

In this statement, Sam described his opinion on managers who constantly pick out the same employee to make jokes about. Based on his response, he seems to generally consider joking and teasing to be amusing and normal among co-workers and that he does not mind being the "butt of a joke" sometimes. However, he would perceive it negatively if he felt like his manager only makes fun of him and not other employees. Therefore, according to Sebastian and Sam, repeated sarcasm and repeated picking on the same employees appeared to be perceived negatively as harmful or annoying instead of funny.

4.2 The Manager-Employee Relationship

Building the Connection

In Funny Bank, employees believe that when managers use and allow humor in the office, they create a more personal relationship with them. With the statement below, Sam indicated how humor influences his relationship with his manager.

> *"When managers use humor, working together becomes nicer. It also makes things [dealing with boring administrative things] a bit easier in one way or another. It is not only humor but humor also ensures that you build a bond with each other faster." (Sam)*

Sam felt that using humor can positively influence the relationship with a manager. He stated that when a manager uses humor, working together and being around the manager becomes

more enjoyable. He also stated that a humorous approach positively influenced his perception of routine and administrative work.

The following statement provided further insights into the effects of humor on the relationship between a manager and an employee.

> *"If you have someone [a manager] who is always very funny or has a good sense of humor, you feel more of a connection or bond with them than someone who is not funny, reacts stiffly or has no humor at all." (Sebastian)*

Sebastian pointed out how different manager's reactions and behavior contribute to building a connection with a manager on a more personal level. He felt that humor and jokes allow for extended and relaxed conversations compared to formal conversations or one-word responses. He implied that if his manager would not use humor or not share the same type of humor, Sebastian would be less inclined to get in touch and create a deeper connection.

Benjamin further confirmed that humor can create a relaxed atmosphere where people tend to share more.

> *"It [atmosphere] becomes more open. More relaxed. There is less stress on relationships. So would I say it creates a bond? Yes absolutely." (Benjamin)*

Benjamin's response implied that humor makes the atmosphere more relaxed, people tend to loosen up and might put less emphasis on the formal manager-employee relationship for a while.

Barbara considered humor as something through which she can express her feelings and she further confirmed that when she and her manager used humor, they would learn more about each other and create a bond.

> *"Well, it is creating a bond actually. You are feeling more free to also express yourself what you are really feeling without using the right words or something like that. I*

mean, it is good to have a good perspective. Because I also worked at another branch and there the situation was a bit different. There the manager was very formal, there was space for jokes but he was not participating in them. So, indirectly you are creating a kind of space with your manager when that happens. So I am very happy that my manager now is also making jokes, participating in the group regarding humor etc. In my opinion it is also something to bond with each other, feeling free to express yourself." (Barbara)

Barbara mentioned two managers; one who included humor in his managerial style and one who avoided jokes and overall participation in humor. She put emphasis on the fact that humor allowed her to express herself more openly. Certainly, the atmosphere was not always great and cheerful, humor was not always present, however, she confirmed that she feels closer to her current manager because of the connection they had built with the contribution of humor.

In the next statement Sebastian indicated what kind of connection he has with his new manager Robert, who has been in the office only for a short time so far.

"You are used to a certain leadership style. David's [former manager] leadership style contained a lot of humor, we laughed a lot and because of that we could share a lot with each other at the same time. Also things that bothered you. And if another manager [Robert] comes in who does that differently or who doesn't have it, you are less inclined to get in touch. You are going to solve your own problems or try to see the fun sides yourself." (Sebastian)

Sebastian is another employee who experienced managerial styles of both David and Robert. He felt that David's humorous approach allowed them to break the serious office atmosphere and create a more trusting relationship where they could share both positive and negative experiences. Later during the interview, Sebastian stated that he felt more comfortable approaching David with a problem and asking for help. Compared to Robert, whose managerial style is more professional, Sebastian told us that he did not feel comfortable enough to share his thoughts and feelings with him.

Benjamin had worked with his manager only for eight months so far but described the close relationship he had built with him.

> *"I think that's quite a special relationship myself. He [the manager] really could have been a buddy of mine if he hadn't been my colleague. Because we click very well on all aspects, not just humor. We have the same view of this wonderful world. We have a common focus. He really could be a buddy of mine but he's a colleague, so I call him my comrade."* (*Benjamin*)

According to Benjamin, Johan was more than just a manager to him. The term *comrade* is a synonym for a *'mate'* or *'ally'* and is also used in military forces. Although humor was not the main and only reason they became close, Benjamin seemed to believe it certainly contributed to their close relationship because it was something they shared together and connected over.

When asked about the relationship with her manager, Barbara stated that humor allowed them to create a sort of manager-employee friendship.

> *"Thanks to humor, we are kind of friends, actually. We are having fun. We are sharing personal things with each other now. Well, of course I cannot say that we are friends, like being friends with your… you know, your besties or something like that. But I think that there is a good space."* (Barbara)

Humor allowed Barbara to create a more personal bond with her manager. Humor did not itself create their bond however, it seemed to be the key that allowed them to open the door and cross the boundary of a strictly professional relationship and showed them it is safe to share and discuss other than work-related topics. In the next statement, she shared an opposite experience from the branch she worked at before.

> *"In my view, in the Funny Bank Branch I worked before, it [atmosphere] was more work related. No jokes or anything. So we did not share that much personal things with each other. So you're creating a space, uh, that, you know, the mindset is more*

like 'okay, we need to work'." (Barbara)

In this statement, Barbara implied that jokes involve pieces of a person's private life, allow other people to look behind the "office personality", allow one to lose a little bit of self-control and reveal details about a personal life. In Barbara's previous branch, she did not experience opportunities for any of this and the conversation was kept on a professional basis. Her response implied that she does not mind sharing information about her private life with people she trusts. However, in her previous branch, there seemed to be a distance between her and her manager. She did not consider him a friend thus, she did not seem comfortable sharing with him or getting to know him better.

Maarten provided a positive work-related outcome of the close bond he created with his colleagues with a contribution of humor.

"And it [the overall humorous atmosphere] helps because your relationship with your colleagues gets better. So, in terms of being cooperative with each other, I think it has a positive impact on that. I'm sure that with colleagues that I have more fun with, more personal contact with also then, it creates a bondage where you are easily, easier helping each other in a moment that the other one is too busy or something, or that…like now I'm going on a long weekend… So I have a few things that have to be done by somebody, and I know that there will be no problem. In general, I think it wouldn't be a problem, but I think that the relationship that you build up with a bit of humor and things definitely contributes to that. Yeah. Because making jokes and having fun like that is similar to what you do with your friends. So you build up a sort of colleague friendship." (Maarten)

Managerial humor was not directly involved in this example. However, Maarten's response implies that his manager does not insist on keeping a serious office atmosphere and allows for humor in the office. Maarten said that shared humor helped to build a colleague-friendship and improved cooperation and the overall office atmosphere. He also mentioned that he and his co-workers help each other when they struggle or are busy which helped him with finding someone to cover his work when he took some days off. In this case, the close relationship

helped with the perception of doing someone else's work where it could be considered a favor for a friend instead of an extra work or an assigned task from the manager.

In the following statements participants indicated how they would feel if their manager asked them to stay overtime to help them finish their work tasks which would be outside of their work responsibilities.

> *"I think you can say that your willingness is greater if someone just has a bit of humor. Because humor creates a bond. Then you have more for each other and it won't be that bad. So then you are more likely to do it." (Benjamin)*

Sebastian followed with a similar opinion.

> *"At least with the manager with whom you have the better connection. And that connection is of course created by the atmosphere. And then I think that you tend to stay longer with a somewhat funnier or humorous manager. Because often the atmosphere is good or because it is cozy. And not that serious undertone that takes that away. Then I am certainly inclined to stay longer with the manager who is more humorous." (Sebastian)*

Once again, based on Benjamin's and Sebastian's responses, they appeared to feel that humor created a certain bond with their manager that goes beyond the formal relationship with a superior figure. However, not only humor but several other variables could contribute to the willingness to stay overtime and help. For example, an employee's generally helpful attitude for those in need, a team spirit or a promised monetary compensation.

Furthermore, many of the employees of Funny Bank experienced different managers within the company and some of them even worked under the same managers at one point in time. In the following statement Sam indicates which manager he would prefer to stay overtime with and why.

"I think David [former manager] is a perfect example. I think his strongest point is his humor and approachability. Whether he's a great manager… I don't know. But he's a nice dude. And that makes it very pleasant to work with him. I don't think he really consciously uses it to become a better manager. I think it's a bit of personality. Robert [former manager] is different there. He's a little less… He seems a little more serious. Maybe it's because we see each other less often. That could be… I would do it [stay overtime] with both anyway. But… If I had to give an answer I would choose David. That's also because we were in the office five days a week at the time, so we really had a bond. That's more difficult now." (Sam)

Sam described David as very social, with a cheerful personality and a positive relationship with humor which allowed him to make jokes and use humor naturally and not only when he felt comfortable around people. Sam indicated how Robert's personality is more serious and that he does not use humor often. Sam said that he would stay overtime with both managers because they are still his superiors and he seems like a responsible employee. Nevertheless, if he had to choose, he would prefer David. Apparently for more personal reasons because they have known each other longer and their relationship seems stronger. Their shared sense of humor and David's naturally humorous personality contributed to this bond and Sam knew that he would enjoy the overtime more with him.

Melanie's experience with David and Robert offered a similar response when she indicated whether would stay overtime if David asked her.

"He [David] didn't even have to state it…Yeah. I would [stay overtime]. This was definitely the case because in the period that he was still my manager I stayed more often overtime and I had more hours besides my normal hours. But with Robert, for example, I would be like "Okay, it's 17:00h, time to go home!" (Melanie)

She said that she would automatically stay overtime if David needed her help. Whereas when Robert was her manager, she would leave work on time and finish any excess work the next day during her working hours. She did not seem to feel any deeper connection to Robert, her job or the organization.

<u>Interpersonal Trust and Respect</u>

The findings showed that managers can use humor in many ways, for example, to approach problems and mistakes that happen. Sebastian indicated how he feels more encouraged and less afraid when his manager reacts "lightly" and with humor when confronted with a problem.

> *"But as a manager, you can also become very angry about it [a work mistake] and send an email about it really seriously... But then it takes on a negative tone. That doesn't help in the end, because that also determines the atmosphere. If you solve these kinds of things in a fun way, you get a certain bond, commitment with each other." (Sebastian)*

Sebastian seemed to appreciate how his manager reacts when he makes a mistake or needs to resolve a problem because humor removes the seriousness of that moment. According to Sebastian, he feels closer to his manager and is not afraid he will be angry or will punish him when he messes something up. Reacting positively made his manager look more as a leader which seemed to build trust and create a deeper bond.

Sam and Sebastian provided a similar response when describing how it makes them feel when a manager uses humor in the office.

> *"But humor with your manager also makes him or her much more accessible. So again, if you're having trouble or you want to discuss something... It makes it easier if your manager has a good dose of humor... The jokes make him approachable and transparent... You could call him just as well as anyone else." (Sam)*

Sebastian elaborated.

> *"You will be more daring. You dare to say more. You know that if you're dealing with a problem, don't keep it with you for too long and you're more likely to share it." (Sebastian)*

Sam appeared to feel more comfortable confiding in his manager because he would not be afraid to share things that bother him and would not be ashamed to ask for help. Moreover, Sebastian indicated during the interview that the next time a work problem arises, it is likely that he will go straight to his manager instead of keeping it from them and trying to fix it himself.

The interviews also showed that managers can still keep their respect even when they loosen up and joke with their subordinates. The next statement provided Maarten's insights into the relationship with his manager, Peter, and how they use humor in their conversations.

> *"And we can also respectfully make fun of him [the manager], let's say. And the other way around. So we have a very good relationship with him also… I guess, but it's also doable with Peter without losing respect, because he would definitely not allow you to do that. He's a pretty strong person. So if you go too far, he would also definitely… you wouldn't ever do that. It's like there is a healthy balance." (Maarten)*

Maarten's response implied that his manager has a high self-esteem and also respect from others. According to Maarten, Peter is able to joke with his employees, make fun of them and let them make fun of him without him losing that respect or power. It seems that he makes jokes whilst trying not to hurt or disrespect anyone which could explain the employees' respect. It also seems that he does not mind being made fun of but only to a healthy limit. This statement showed that Maarten and his co-workers appreciate Peter's positive relationship to humor and would not take advantage of it to laugh at and disrespect him. It also implies that Peter and his employees have a close relationship where they know what things to joke about without going too far or offending anyone. They seem to use humor to create a sense of cohesiveness and not to exclude others from a group.

The following statement provides a negative example of managerial humor regarding respect.

> *"I did have a manager who had jokes that were not funny. However, because the jokes were so bad everyone around him started to laugh at him, which made the situation funny. Then you will not be taken seriously. I don't know if you've ever experienced*

that. But sometimes people try incredibly hard to be funny and that's why they aren't."
(Benjamin)

Benjamin's previous manager used humor and joked with his employees. However, the manager did not seem to be experienced in using humor or did not know his employees enough to know what to joke about because his jokes did not come across as funny. The manager and his employees did not seem to share the same sense of humor either. It appears as if it was not natural for him to use humor but he tried to use it anyway. He tried too hard, which, unfortunately, resulted in employees laughing at him instead of laughing at the jokes and therefore him getting into an inferior position and losing respect.

More than just Colleagues
Many interview statements reflected that managerial humor helped to create a good work atmosphere which helped to build a connection and allowed employees to get to know their manager on a more personal level even outside of the office. Sam's statement showed how close he became with his manager and how they spend time together outside of work as well.

> *"With Robert [current manager] it is friendly too, but for example I know a lot more about David [former manager] in private. We joked around and connected at work so then you can also build an intimate relationship with each other in private life. For example, I could just drop by his [David's] house for coffee or a beer. That makes the bond a bit stronger." (Sam)*

And he continued.

> *"I saw David when there was a fair in the village where we live. We often went to drink beer together. It creates much more of a bond. And humor is a big part of that." (Sam)*

Although Sam described the relationship with his current manager Robert as friendly, he felt closer to his previous manager David. As previously mentioned, Sam indicated that he had more similarities in terms of humor with David than with Robert. He also said that David's

generally humorous personality strengthened their bond at work and they became friends which motivated them to start spending time outside of work as well. The more time they spent together, the more they seemed to learn about each other and created an even closer relationship where the boundaries of a professional and private life became less visible.

Chris shared a similar example where his manager's humor contributed to their closer relationship and also overall team cohesiveness.

> *"[...] there's a lot of laughter. It's not sarcastic, he [the manager] would never make fun of us, but we really have fun and joke around quite a lot. And, let's say for instance, every Friday we [manager and some employees] have these after-work drinks, so we have a great laugh and it's not disrespectful or something. But we are just having fun in our department. Just like a regular, having fun and working together." (Chris)*

According to Chris, his manager uses mostly positive humor without any negative or sarcastic comments. He implied that humor is quite a big part of their work environment and positively contributes to a pleasant atmosphere and a closer relationship with his manager and other co-workers. Because of the closer relationship, they started seeing each other outside of work as well.

However, sometimes managerial humor was apparently not enough to create a closer bond.

> *"Well, it's just more formal [in the headquarters]. And I like to be more in the corporate area. At the local branch, it is family and fun and that's really great but in the end we are just coworkers." (Max)*

Max experienced both the branch and headquarters atmosphere at Funny Bank. He perceived the headquarters as more serious and formal with only occasional managerial humor attempts, whereas at the branch, humor occured on a daily basis. Since there were only a few people at the branch, it gave him a family feeling where it was more relaxed and easier to get to know everyone. Nevertheless, he seemed like a person who likes to be more serious at work and

keep it separate from his private life. Moreover, he indicated that he does not necessarily want to turn his colleagues into friends or spend time with them outside of work. Besides, he stated that he prefers the headquarters where work is simply work. And although he enjoyed the humorous atmosphere at the branch, humor does not play the key role in his professional life.

4.3 Humor Affects the Way of Working

<u>Enhanced Working Productivity</u>

Sometimes, the nature and repetitiveness of certain tasks within the bank seemed to lead to work becoming boring and to employees being enthusiastic about their work. Sebastian explained how having the right atmosphere through (managerial) humor contributed to the perception of the organization's work environment.

> *"If you have to go to work every day and you have a boring office job, it is very nice if you have a manager or a number of colleagues with whom you can laugh and break the day with. Absolutely sure. The atmosphere this creates really determines the way you feel about your work, colleagues, and the whole organization." (Sebastian)*

Sebastian indicated how humor could make the less fun or monotonous tasks a bit easier to deal with. According to Sebastian, humor can ensure a positive atmosphere within the organization where he can better focus while working on less enjoyable tasks. As Sebastian indicated, the humorous atmosphere had a significant influence on the way he perceived and felt about his job.

Furthermore, Sebastian pointed out that a relaxed atmosphere with a bit of humor seems generally better for working.

> *"If there is more laughter and the atmosphere in the office is good, that's what it's all about. In my opinion, if you create a good atmosphere in the office, productivity is better than when the atmosphere is bad or when there is little to laugh about." (Sebastian)*

Sebastian seemed to believe that humor positively affects productivity compared to no humor. He said that it creates a good atmosphere, which could mean he perceives the atmosphere as less boring and with less or no tension. Barbara elaborated on this thought.

"Well, actually I do not know if it is also contributing to my productivity. It makes you feel good in your space. It makes you feel valued. I mean, you are also free to give your opinion or view on something. So I think it is creating a healthy space where you can have a good discussion with your manager. I don't know if that is also related to productivity, maybe not. But yeah, it has a positive effect on my way of working I guess." (Barbara)

When Barbara's manager uses humor, it appeared like she perceives him as more open and approachable which makes her feel more comfortable voicing her opinion and having a discussion with him and. Moreover, she indicated that she is not worried that the manager would ignore her or not listen to her, and therefore she seemed to feel more included and involved in problem-solving. Managerial humor also seemed to make her feel good at the office where she can focus on her tasks.

In the following statement Sebastian indicated how managerial humor could lead to increased collaboration and faster working.

"I think David [manager] understands very well that this is really necessary in the workplace. Especially now that we've had the entire CDD and ODD project [important but stressful projects in the bank]. That is no fun. If you have to do less fun tasks all day long, but you do that in a team where everyone does the same and is in the same boat, then you better make a party of it. That is of course much better than sitting at home alone behind your computer. David made it a really good atmosphere in the office. Your motivation will increase as a result, you will work faster… You are more easily inclined to consult with others…" (Sebastian)

Sebastian's response implied that humor can make the less enjoyable projects more bearable. He felt that because of humor, the atmosphere became better and the collaboration with his

coworkers improved because they would all deal with the same stressful tasks. He also stated that the manager's humor increased his motivation which led to faster working.

Melanie stated that although they had a lot of fun at her office, they always knew when to get back to work.

> *"Because it [humor] was allowed, we made sure that we did our work and that we did it in a proper way. We didn't finish it just to be done, we did it in a proper way." (Melanie)*

As Melanie mentioned, her manager included humor in his leadership style. Especially when employees had to perform less interesting tasks, he seemed to know how to use humor to motivate employees. However, employees would always know "when we would have to get back to work". This implies that despite his humorous approach, the manager was able to retain a certain authority. As a result, employees knew where they stood and when the fun was over and they had to go back to work. Moreover, Melanie emphasized that employees would not just do their job to be finished but would still do it the best way they could. This working approach showed employees' respect for David, the manager, and a motivation to achieve good results.

Sam further elaborated on this aspect.

> *"We also worked very hard with David [the manager] and there were also days when you still had to get through the evening and finish things. Only that doesn't feel so heavy because it's also a nice moment together and you laugh at things. It makes the annoying things a bit lighter. Even if you have to get rid of a lot of administration or you are busy with things that you don't really like…" (Sam)*

Again, this quote indicated how the humorous approach of his manager had a positive impact on the overall work atmosphere and work process. Sam stated that finishing tasks in the evening is not something he does for fun and is not something he enjoys. However, he felt that David's humor made "the annoying things a bit lighter" and enjoyable.

Humor as (Un)helpful Distraction

The following statements show how humor indirectly contributed to employees' positive feeling about their work because it can act as a natural break from work.

"... But I feel also less good in the end of the day if I'm not careful with having breaks, because the nice thing about being in the office with everyone is that you have a lot of natural breaks with these kind of talk moments that you talk and that you make jokes and that you have like a bit of fun. And it's relaxing, it has a relaxing element and that helps also, I guess, in the long-term to do your job well and feel good with it, feel good with working." (Maarten)

Maarten seemed to consider humor and jokes as a natural break and a relaxing element while he works which further influences his mood and long-term productivity. He stated that he is glad to be back in the office after remote working policies because those natural breaks did not happen when he worked alone from home and he therefore felt overworked. He indicated how jokes make his thoughts shift away from work for a while and allow him to recharge and continue with his tasks. It is interesting to see how he realizes the value of humor in the long-term perspective.

Sam and Benjamin continued with this thought when they talked about how humor affects their productivity.

"I do think that you… If you have to do tasks that you find annoying, for example administration, but it is fun in the office and jokes are made and it gets you out of your mind for a second… That makes things like that easier. You go home with a better feeling. I don't think they [humor and productivity] would explicitly influence each other but measured over a longer period of time, you do feel happier with what you do. So do I feel more productive? Yes, I do in that sense." (Sam)

"To my productivity… That's hard for me to say myself. On the one hand, the moment the joke is made you are not working, but it also causes your thoughts to be shifted for a while. You have a different focus for a while and that can increase your productivity,

so to speak. It also creates more of a bond, so you walk to each other a little faster for business questions. The threshold gets lower." (Benjamin)

Sam made a reference to humor helping with the boring administrative tasks we discussed earlier. He felt that when there is a positive atmosphere, administrative work does not seem so heavy. Benjamin pointed out that humor can both help but also hurt productivity because in the particular humorous moment he is not focusing on his work. However, both Ben and Benjamin stated that it could help in a longer perspective because they let their minds have a break which gives them more energy for further thinking and problem-solving.

Emma also believed humor affects her productivity especially when solving a complex problem.

"Sometimes it helps because sometimes you're so focused and you have a problem you cannot solve. And then you get a little bit relieved. And then you think it's funny and then you start over again to solve the problem. So it really helps to have some, because I always think…because it especially comes from one colleague and if he would leave, it would be very quiet." (Emma)

Emma felt that jokes in the office seem to help her to relieve tension when she struggles with a problem. She allows herself to laugh and take a small break which then helps her to focus better on the problem again.

Nevertheless, some employees said that managerial and office humor in general can also hurt productivity or contribute to errors due to lack of concentration.

"I think both, it does and it doesn't. It doesn't because sometimes when you have a lot of fun and you sometimes take a bit more time in a way. Say in the personal stuff in the end, because it's not really work topic-related most times, or if you lose the content, which is really an important priority." (Maarten)

Although Maarten stated that humor can help his productivity in the form of natural breaks and shifting his focus, he also admitted that too much humor can be counterproductive. He implied that there is a thin line between helpful and hurtful distraction. He said that sometimes if he gets too excited and distracted with humor, he stops paying attention to his responsibilities and becomes less productive. Max confirmed.

> *"... But most of us just sat in one big space. And then you can just talk and work at the same time. The funny thing is that because we were sitting there and he [the manager] was working there, sometimes you would do something wrong because we were all laughing about some stupid joke. And then the collateral mistake happens like I just said, you know, the financing did not succeed at the end and that kind of stuff…. then if you make a mistake, you just know, okay, well I will be working two hours extra then."*
> *(Max)*

Max admitted that humor has contributed to some mistakes that would not have otherwise happened. At his previous work place, he shared a big working space with other employees and also with their manager. There seemed to be a relaxed atmosphere and everyone, including his manager, liked to tell jokes and have a good time. However, Max stated that sometimes they were too distracted with jokes and made mistakes. Nevertheless, Max's response implies that none of the mistakes has ever been serious enough to hurt the company in any way. Some employees "only" needed to spend extra hours and correct their work.

Solving Problems with Humor

It appeared that within Funny Bank, managerial humor and the positive atmosphere it helped to create further influenced the ways of solving problems.

> *"That was the difference between David and Robert [former and current manager]. If something bothered me, David could just make it very light-hearted as a joke, so you could go into the depths again. Without first having a manager who will give a reaction first, who gets angry or whatever…. Who looks at the negative side first. If you're so positive and you're really funny or have a good sense of humor, if someone comes to you with some kind of problem. Those people may first be able to do it a little*

more lightly and from a more positive thought and then go in depth to solve it."
(Sebastian)

Sebastian highlighted David's positive approach to dealing with negative situations. He said that by making a joke about a problem first, David wanted to assure his employees that no problem is too bad and there is always a solution. Sebastian indicated how David makes him feel safe to ask for help which seemed to allow him to build a trust in him.

Several employees mentioned that when their managers used humor to deal with problems and mistakes, they perceived it as more effective.

"If you have a manager who is very funny and is also always very positive about all kinds of things, you also know that you can also contact him with some negative things or negative news. You know that he can react lightly to that or can first dismiss it with a joke, and then dive into the depths."(Sebastian)

Benjamin confirmed.

"Because more can be said, yes. That you approach someone faster." (Benjamin)

Sebastian indicated that he generally feels that managers are more approachable when they use humor and are always very positive. He also seemed like he is not afraid to approach his manager with a problem because of his open attitude. Both Sebastian and Benjamin admitted that they tend to approach their manager faster if they are not afraid of the manager's negative reaction because they trust them to have a meaningful conversation. And Sebastian continued.

"... You create a better atmosphere of course. With humor you can achieve a lot, a good atmosphere et cetera. And therefore, when the atmosphere is good, you can solve a problem or difficult situations in a different way." (Sebastian)

Sebastian also believed that humor and relaxed atmosphere can help with creativity and finding new ways to solve problems.

Melanie and Sebastian worked at the same branch when Sebastian made a mistake that resulted in losing a few thousand euros. In the following statements, they described this incident and the manager's positive and humorous approach from their perspective.

> *"And then they were in a meeting with the client and when he looked at the contract, he surprisingly said: 'You waived the fee entirely. That's so generous of you!'. At this moment my colleague [Sebastian] panicked as this was obviously a pretty serious mistake. So then he had to go and tell David [the manager]. And for your information, we are talking about approximately 14 thousand euros, which is quite a lot [...]"* (Melanie)

Sebastian shared his perspective.

> *"You can actually call that a kind of business error… What do you call that… A process error that accidentally results in less money coming in and David [the manager] initially has… It wasn't bad. Because yes… We earned a little less because of that, but okay, that can happen. But he [manager David] solved that in a funny way by pretending it was very bad and I had to report to the management. But soon after, he let it be known that it was a joke. In that sense I have learned from it because I will of course never forget it."* (Sebastian)

> *"And what if he had handled it differently?"* (Interviewers)

> *"Then I probably wouldn't have learned it the way I did now. Every time I think about the closing fee now, it makes me laugh."* (Sebastian)

Sebastian seemed to be surprised by the manager's unusual approach of solving problems and it appeared to increase the manager's value and competency in Sebastian's eyes. The mistake could be classified as serious because it resulted in earning less money however, the manager reacted with humor and turned this incident into a funny memory. And although Sebastian was not actually penalized for this mistake, he still seemed to have learned his lesson and will

be more careful in the future as he will try to avoid making the same mistake.

Melanie continued to explain her point of view regarding David's attitude.

> *"[...] Because he [Sebastian] lost this amount of money, David [the manager] was like: 'Well, from now on you have to pay for your own lunch'… And every time now someone is making this document for another client, we jokingly ask: 'Did you put in the fee? Or are you gonna act like we work for free?'"* (Melanie)

David's positive and humorous managerial attitude implied that mistakes are acceptable at his Funny Bank branch because they are part of work and cannot be avoided, only minimized. He seems to promote confidence and also reduce fear that employees would be punished for making mistakes. Melanie said that the teasing comment was perceived positively and turned into an office joke with an unsaid warning "make sure you include the fee" for employees to be careful when handling the fee in the future. Additionally, the joke appeared to result in enhanced cohesiveness and funny office atmosphere.

Sam also shared his experience about how David reacted when he approached him about a mistake he made.

> *"An example with David [the manager]… When I made a mistake in the financing application, I walked up to David… And the first thing he did was make a joke… Then you know that you can look for a solution together. If he had reacted very seriously then you would be a little more careful. It breaks a certain tension."* (Sam)

Based on all these statements, David appeared to represent a sort of "hero manager" for everyone who has ever worked with him because of his ability to approach even serious mistakes with some amount of humor. Sam, similarly to other people, seemed to appreciate David's positive attitude because it made him less scared to approach him and admit he made a mistake. It also changed the overall atmosphere where instead of focusing on the mistake, they focused on finding the solution.

5   Discussion

This study was initiated out of curiosity for the phenomenon of humor in an organizational context. More specifically, we were interested in the role of managerial humor and its effects on employee organizational commitment. The existing literature showed and confirmed a positive relation between these two aspects (Burford, 1987; Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Hughes & Avey, 2009; Marco, 2020) however, the question of *how* exactly managerial humor influences organizational commitment, meaning the processes through which managerial humor influences employees' perceptions and behaviors (Brender-Ilan & Reizer, 2021; Karakowsky et al., 2020), remained unanswered. In this chapter, we aim to discuss and answer this question by elaborating on our findings that showed two ways in which managerial humor can influence organizational commitment. More specifically, we focus on the affective component of commitment which is one of the three components of commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The two ways are the increased quality of the manager-employee relationship and the positive employee perception of the workplace environment and organizational support. These two factors represent our findings but should not be regarded as mutually exclusive nor as the only factors that could contribute to organizational commitment.

By providing these perspectives, we aim to contribute to the understanding of managerial humor and organizational commitment in the literature. We commence this chapter with the definition of organizational commitment, thereby focusing on the affective component of commitment. Thereafter, we begin discussing our first aspect influencing affective commitment where we will go more in depth on how managerial humor increases trust, respect, and mutual obligation between a manager and an employee, and how those enhanced aspects increase the quality of manager-employee relationship using the leader-member exchange theory (LMX). The following section will focus on the second aspect affecting organizational commitment, that is how managerial humor influences employees' perceptions of their work environment and perceived organizational support (POS). Specifically, the influence of managerial humor on productivity and feeling valued and supported by the organization, and how these factors positively influence affective commitment.

5.1 Managerial Humor and Organizational Commitment

The definitions of employee organizational commitment are diverse across the literature and individual practitioners (Mercurio, 2015). Generally, employee commitment is defined as the employee's relationship, loyalty, or degree of employee identification with the organization and their motivation to stay and work towards its success (Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Hughes & Avey, 2009; Marco, 2020). Additionally, the majority of literature supports the Meyer & Allen's (1991) three-component framework of organizational commitment with affective, normative and continuance commitment (e.g. Hughes & Avey, 2009 or Mercurio, 2015). As previously mentioned in the literature review, affective commitment can be defined as, for example, the "employees' emotional attachment to an organization" (Hughes & Avey, 2009, p.545), the desire to remain at the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991), "[...] affective attachment to the goals and values, and to the organization for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth" (Buchanan, 1974 cited in Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.64), "the relative strength of an individuals's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Mowday et al., 1979 cited in Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.64), or that the relationship between the employee and their organization is more intimate, the employee enjoys working there because of pleasant experiences and is therefore reluctant to leave (Suryani, 2018).

We have decided to focus our discussion and highlight the definition of affective commitment for the following reasons. First, we believe that the definition of affective commitment most closely correlates with the overall definition of organizational commitment. We support Solinger et al.' (2008) argument that only affective commitment represents an attitude towards a particular organization, whereas normative and continuance components consider specific behaviors (such as staying or leaving). Moreover, our findings suggest that managerial humor strongly influenced employees' emotions and feelings, and therefore seemed to influence the affective part or organizational commitment, that is the emotional attachment to the organization and the people within.

5.1.1 Organizational Commitment Through the Manager-Employee Relationship

Several articles tend to highlight the positive connection between managerial humor and organizational commitment (Burford, 1987; Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Hughes & Avey, 2009; Marco, 2020). Our findings indeed point to this connection but also show that one specific focus in this connection is the relationship between employees and managers that use humor. When our respondents talked about the perceived impacts of managerial humor, they mostly focused on the relational aspects with their manager or how managerial humor influenced their work-related outcomes.

In the majority of cases, our participants recalled situations where managers used positive humor. Employees either described their manager as a generally humorous person or as someone who uses primarily positive humor in various organizational situations. According to Martin et al. (2003), positive humor styles include affiliative humor which is used to enhance the relationships and cohesiveness with others through, for example, funny stories or spontaneous quips, or self-enhancing humor, which is used to enhance oneself, and people use this humor to deal with stress, remain positive, and avoid negative emotions. Managers mentioned in the interviews used primarily affiliative humor in the form of situational jokes, funny responses or mild teasing comments. Although aggressive teasing is generally perceived as a negative humor style, mild teasing in a friendly group or closely related individuals can take on the role of an affiliative humor and enhance group cohesiveness and strengthen participants' relationship (Martin et al., 2003). Therefore, in this first section, we will discuss how positive managerial humor influenced the trust, respect, and mutual obligation between the manager and employees and subsequently increased the quality of a leader-member exchange relationship (LMX).

5.1.1.1 How Managerial Humor Influences Trust, Respect, and Mutual Obligation

Trust

Our interviewees stated that when their manager used positive humor, they perceived them more as a human. Perceiving the manager as a human seemed to take away the invisible superiority status and made employees realize that their manager is human like them and not a robot who does not enjoy having fun. According to Karakowsky et al. (2020), the superiority

status is lowered because the leader is willing to assume the risk that their humor might be perceived as boring or offensive by the employees. That is, they put aside their formal status as a leader and instead take on the informal role of a humorist which involves a level of vulnerability. Consequently, as vulnerability is closely related to trust, employees perceive their manager as more approachable, trustworthy and more as a friend rather than a superior, which helps them to develop an affect-based trust and make them more comfortable sharing sensitive and personal information (Collinson, 2002; Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Karakowsky et al., 2020; McGhee, 1999). Our interviewees shared that when their manager used positive humor, it made them comfortable to express themselves. They felt safe making jokes themselves and were not afraid of being looked at strangely or judged.

Through positive managerial humor, employees increased trust in their manager and felt comfortable sharing both positive and negative personal experiences that bothered them, felt safe to share their opinion about work related topics and to have a meaningful discussion with their manager. These experiences are consistent with the humor literature that shows that managerial humor creates trust and an open atmosphere where employees feel safe to express their true selves, share personal information, and are not afraid to voice their opinion (Marco, 2020; McGhee, 1999; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Many interviewees further revealed that they developed a close enough relationship with their manager to the point where they considered them more than just colleagues but as friends or buddies instead.

We also identified that through the manager's positive humor approach, especially to deal with work-related problems, employees' trust in the manager and their leadership skills increased. Interviewees disclosed that when they approached their manager about a work-related complication or a mistake and their manager used positive humor to deal with it or solve it, they perceived them as more effective, competent and trustworthy. This approach seemed to relieve employees' stress about causing a mistake and affected employees' confidence that they can approach and confide in their manager with any problem without worrying that they would react negatively, which seemed to promote the manager's competency and character in the employee's eyes. Karakowsky et al. (2020) characterized employees' trust in their manager's skills and the manager's perceived competence as a cognition-based trust because employees feel reassured and their admiration and satisfaction with management increases

when the leader is confident to use humor in stressful situations or times of uncertainty (Avolio et al, 1999; Marchezi de Souza et al., 2019).

Competency and respect

Karakowsky et al. (2020) further stated that generally only individuals of high status/competence or high self-confidence are brave enough to participate in humorous behavior and assume the risk of not being funny or being perceived as less professional. This argument was seen in our findings as employees stated that when their manager's humor was perceived positively, they could also respectfully make fun of them without hurting their competency and status because those managers held high self-esteem and self-confidence and would not let their employees to negatively laugh at them. Therefore, humor is more likely to be used by a high-competence leader because those who do not feel competent or do not have complete confidence in their professional position feel less comfortable to use humor and risk experiencing employees' negative perceptions or loss of status and respect (Karakowsky et al., 2020). Therefore, when employees perceive their humorous manager as competent, it might be because she or he is. Consequently, as employees often see their supervisors as agents of the organization, their positive perception of their manager might apply to the overall perception of the organization (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

It is important to mention that only positive managerial humor helps to build trust and is associated with competence, credibility and respect (Bitterly et al., 2017; Goodchilds, 1959; Neves & Karagonlar, 2020). Bitterly et al. (2017) state that although both appropriate and inappropriate humor attempts are perceived as confident, only people whose humor is perceived as positive or appropriate are considered as confident, competent and of high status. In our empirical findings, we identified an example where the manager's self-deprecating humor (negative humor style) improved the atmosphere and elicited laughter, however, employees were laughing more at the manager rather than with the manager. Consequently, the manager's perceived competency and status seemed to decrease. This example corresponds with Goodchilds (1959) who argued that people using self-defeating humor in the form of clowning wits are well-liked in the group but their respect and power to influence might decrease. Therefore, using humor is risky and the situational context needs to be considered in order to avoid negative perceptions (Bitterly et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2017).

<u>Mutual obligation</u>

Lastly, we have also identified signs of employees' increased obligation to their managers. For example, our respondents stated that although they enjoyed when their manager used humor to generally elevate the office atmosphere or to motivate them while working on less exciting tasks, they would not prioritize having fun over their work responsibilities or finishing their tasks with the highest possible effort. They appreciated the positive managerial approach and because they respected their manager, they wanted to show gratitude or felt obligated to "pay back" in the form of performing their responsibilities thoroughly and achieving good results. Another example could be employees' willingness to stay over time and help their manager to finish extra work. Although one employee admitted that they would have stayed with any of their past or current managers because of their superior status, they and other employees stated that they would have preferred to stay with the manager who used humor to enlighten the atmosphere or whose humor contributed to a stronger relationship bond. In this case, they would reciprocate the positive managerial humor approach with their behavior by staying overtime and helping them out. Both examples involve a norm of reciprocity, which forms the base of mutual obligation where people feel obligated to return a favor when they receive some sort of a benefit (Tse et al., 2013).

5.1.1.2 The Increased Quality of Manager-Employee Relationship

With affective and professional trust, respect, and mutual obligation, the manager and their employee became closer and improved their professional and also personal relationship. Their relationship changed from the purely transactional to more transformational, and the quality of their relationship increased, as also stated in the literature (DeConinck, 2011; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) and the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, the quality of the leader-member relationship is based on the level of three dimensions - mutual respect, trust and obligation. As those relational and social exchange aspects increase, the manager-employee relationship changes from a low-quality or a generally contractual relationship to a higher-quality relationship or a mature partnership that is closely related to transformational leadership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As the quality of the LMX relationship increases, both parties have a higher mutual trust and respect and feel obligated to reciprocate the support they receive (DeConinck, 2011). In the high-quality LMX

relationship, reciprocity is not built solely on obligatory contractual compliance or manager's hierarchical status (material exchange), but on a more personal emotion-based relationship or a partnership (social exchange) that the managerial humor can help to build (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Tse et al., 2013). Therefore, employees can count on their manager for needed support and encouragement while the manager can rely on their employees for additional non-contractual help, such as staying overtime, if needed (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

High-quality LMX relationships are known to be positively related to an employee's overall organizational commitment (DeConinck, 2011; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Garg & Dhar, 2014; Marco, 2020). From our research, we can explain this connection to organizational commitment through increased attachment to the supervisor. Managerial humor positively influenced the employee perception and attachment to their managers and increased their loyalty to them. Since leaders or managers can be perceived as the agents or proxies of the organization who reflect organizational values, beliefs, intentions or behaviors, employees might associate their manager's behavior and qualities with the overall organization. Consequently, employees' emotional connection and loyalty to their managers might lead to a stronger employees' attachment (affective commitment) to the organization and also their propensity to stay in the organization (Dulebohn et al., 2012, Tse et al., 2013). Garg and Dhar (2014) also concluded that the quality of LMX relationship, perceived organizational support (POS), and decreased job stress positively influenced organizational commitment. With our empirical data, we have provided examples how managerial humor positively influenced all three factors, that is improved the manager-employee relationship, decreased stress in several situations, and to some extent provided encouragement and support (we will further discuss POS later).

Furthermore, Tse et al. (2013) argued that the high and positive LMX relationship might represent the "pull-to-stay" factor that makes employees more likely to stay in the organization because by leaving the organizations, employees would have to leave the high-quality relationship with their supervisor which would cause a psychological and emotional loss. Therefore, our case demonstrated how managerial humor contributed to a

high-quality LMX which could further positively influence overall organizational commitment and employees' propensity to stay.

5.1.2 Organizational Commitment Through Positive Employees' Perceptions

In our study, managerial humor as a form of interpersonal communication positively influenced the quality of manager-employee relationships. Additionally, we also identified a positive influence on employees' individual perceptions of their work and work environment and organizational support. For example, interviewees stated that positive managerial humor created an atmosphere of levity, which positively influenced the perception of boring administrative tasks or work tasks in general in the way that the atmosphere became more enjoyable and the tasks seemed more bearable, which is consistent with the literature (Evwierhurhoma & Oga, 2020; Plester, 2009). As Goswami et al. (2016) and Romero and Cruthirds (2006) stated, managerial humor can contribute to a more enjoyable and fun workplace and increase employees' levels of energy and enthusiasm about their job, which can further increase organizational commitment. Also, managerial humor can contribute to employees' perceptions of favorable treatment and feelings of being valued and supported by the organization (Allen & Shanock, 2013).

5.1.2.1 Managerial Humor and the Employees' Perception of the Work Environment

There are several factors or antecedents that could lead to or positively influence an employee's organizational commitment (e.g. Garg & Dhar, 2014; Mercurio, 2015). In the sections below, we will describe how positive managerial humor favorably influenced employees' perception of their productivity and how the managers' humorous approach to problem-solving and in general contributed to employees' feeling of being valued in the organization. Positive feelings about employees' work environment and perceived organizational support (POS) through positive experiences with managers and feeling valued might positively contribute to affective commitment (Allen & Shanock, 2013).

Productivity

As the positive managerial humor contributed to a more fun atmosphere where employees enjoyed working, they felt more productive and open to new ideas, as also shown in the literature (Avolio et al., 1999; McGhee, 1999; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Humorous

conversations provided them with a helpful distraction and allowed them to take natural breaks so they could forget about their work for a while, gain energy to further continue with their work, or take on a new perspective to continue solving a problem. Additionally, humor can help employees feel more relaxed, distance themselves from problems and negative situations, and take control over them, as well as making employees more open to new ideas and increasing productivity (Avolio et al., 1999; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Although interviewees admitted that sometimes humor did not contribute to their productivity in that particular humorous moment due to increased distraction, it helped them with their productivity in the long-term perspective as they enjoyed their work more.

Feeling valued

As described earlier, when a manager used positive humor, our respondents experienced a feeling that they could be themselves, voice their opinion, and have a meaningful discussion with their manager because they felt their opinions were heard. Therefore, employees felt valued and appreciated. Furthermore, when managers used positive humor to solve problems or deal with mistakes without adopting a negative attitude, employees perceived them as more competent and trustworthy and seemed to become more comfortable confronting them about further mistakes and problems. Therefore, managerial humor influenced employees' perceptions of the workplace working and collaborative atmosphere and support. Although sometimes a manager used teasing humor, which is generally perceived negatively (Martin et al., 2003), they used mild teasing without the intention to hurt their employees. In those situations, the manager was able to inform the employee about the seriousness of the mistake, but also assure them that mistakes happen in the workplace. The manager used mild teasing to convey a negative message in a positive way which reduced the tension and they maintained their authority and respect without hurting employees' self-esteem and dignity, as also shown in the literature (Butler, 2015; Holmes & Marra, 2006; Plester, 2009). Employees perceived the positive and humorous managerial approach as supportive and favorable treatment. Consequently, this approach could positively influence the employee's perception of the workplace collaboration and also make them feel valued as their managers did not punish them but instead helped them solve their problem. Trust and perceived encouragement and support from the manager could potentially lead to increased employees' motivation and productivity in the future, as well as the faster-problem solving process where instead of

trying to conceal mistakes or problems, employees would approach their manager directly and sooner.

5.1.2.2 Enhanced Perception of the Work Environment and Organizational Support

According to Suryani (2018), one aspect of affective commitment is that employees enjoy working in their organization because of their pleasant experiences. Employees in Funny Bank stated that managerial humor contributed to a more enjoyable, fun, and collaborative workplace atmosphere, which also helped employees to feel more productive. Therefore, their positive emotions and perceptions of enhanced productivity contributed to their feeling of joy about working in the organization and positively influenced their affection towards it. Moreover, their manager's humorous approach to problem-solving or in general contributed to their feeling of being valued or appreciated. Feeling valued and experiencing favorable treatment and support from a manager produces positive emotions and views about the whole organization, which increases perceived organizational support (POS) (Allen & Shanock, 2013). When employees feel that the organization cares about their well-being, values their work and contribution, and supports them, their positive emotions and affection towards the organization and its environment contribute to affective commitment (Allen & Shanock, 2013). Therefore, improving employees' working experiences through managerial humor positively influenced their affective commitment to the organization.

6   Conclusion

In this last chapter, we will answer our research question, highlight the limitations of our research, and provide recommendations for further research.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The aim of this study was to explore the multidimensional phenomenon of managerial humor and to find out *how* it influences employee commitment in contemporary organizations. More specifically, we aimed to answer the following question:

"How does managerial humor influence employee commitment in contemporary organizations?"

Although some literature highlighted the relationship between managerial humor and organizational commitment, we could not identify in the current literature concrete ways through which this relationship is created. Using an interpretive case study at Funny Bank, a unique company in the Dutch banking sector, we discovered two relevant aspects when studying this research question. Since both humor and commitment involve an affective component related to feelings and emotions, our findings indicated that managerial humor can positively influence the affective commitment to the organization through the increased quality of leader-member relationship, that is the affection between managers and their employees, and the positive perception of employees' work environment and organizational support. As the workplace relationships and the workplace environment are closely connected, our two findings should be regarded as complementary and not as mutually exclusive or isolated from each other.

Since humor represents a communication shared between individuals, the similar perception of humorous attempts or shared sense of humor contributed to the closer relationship between the manager and their employees as they have learned about their personal similarities. Our

findings showed that the closer connection resulted from the managerial humor's positive effects on increased affective and professional trust, respect, and mutual obligation. Therefore, the connection to organizational commitment can be explained by the affective component and a higher attachment to the supervisor. Managerial humor positively influenced the employee attachment to their managers and increased their loyalty to them. Employees' loyalty to their managers might increase their attachment (affective commitment) to the whole organization and their propensity to stay in the organization because leaders or managers can be perceived as agents or proxies of the organization who reflect organizational values, beliefs, intentions, or behaviors. Therefore, employees' positive perception of their manager might apply to the overall perception of the organization.

Additionally, our findings showed that managerial humor positively influenced employees' perceptions of their work environment and support from the organization. Specifically, the positive influence of managerial humor on the positive and fun environment and enhanced productivity and joy about employees' work contributed to the employees' affection and perception of the organization as a place where they enjoy working. Furthermore, the manager's humorous approach, especially to problem-solving, allowed employees to express their true selves and opinions and have a meaningful discussion with their managers because they felt heard. Adopting a humorous approach towards problems and mistakes was considered as a favorable treatment, which positively influenced employees' perception of the workplace collaboration and made them feel valued. Therefore, the manager's humorous approach and favorable treatment produced positive emotions, positively influenced affection, the perception of an enjoyable workplace atmosphere, and the perceived support from the organization, and contributed to the affective commitment.

Our thesis contributes to the understanding of the connection between managerial humor and organizational commitment by emphasizing the affective component included in both humor and commitment, and explaining how managerial humor influences individuals' feelings and affection towards the organization through the relationship with a manager and the perception of the work environment and support. Therefore, managerial humor seems to more specifically influence the affective component of organizational commitment.

6.2 Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

As with any research, also ours does not come without limitations of which most we have addressed in section 3.6. Keeping in mind the limited time and breadth of our study, we would like to provide some recommendations for future research. Overall, our case study provided significant depth in the understanding of managerial humor and how it influences organizational commitment, something that complements the current scarce literature with regards to this connection. Nonetheless, the study's narrow breadth merely scratches the surface. The limited sample of ten interviews refrain us from empirical generalization. Hence, additional contributions in the form of case studies would be beneficial to the subject matter, adding both breadth and depth to the arguments made in this paper. Moreover, in addition to interviews, observations could provide more depth to substantiate the outcome.

Furthermore, since this case study focused on managerial humor within a bank, it would be intriguing to investigate this phenomenon in other types of knowledge intensive firms/corporate organizations such as, for example, law firms. This way, scholars will be able to learn more about the effects of managerial humor on employee commitment which could be advantageous and enhance both literature and organizations.

Moreover, since research shows that there are a lot of factors that possibly can influence organizational commitment, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study or studies to see what the effects of managerial humor, besides the manager-employee relationship and positive employees' perceptions, are on employee commitment. Besides, managerial humor is proven to not only influence employee commitment but also other aspects, for instance, engagement, productivity, and organizational identity. Hence, an in-depth study in which is explored how managerial humor influences these kinds of concepts would greatly enrich current literature.

7   References

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8 Appendix

8.1 Overview of Interviewees and their Current Function at Funny Bank

Employee	Function	Location
Melanie	Corporate Account Manager	Amsterdam Zuid
Morgan	Private Account Manager	't Gooi
Sebastian	Private Account Manager	Amsterdam Zuid
Sam	Corporate Account Manager	Amsterdam Zuid
Barbara	Credit Analyst	Headquarters
Max	Financial Crime Prevention	Headquarters
Maarten	Corporate Account Manager	Eindhoven
Emma	Financial Administration	Headquarters
Benjamin	Internal Valuator	Headquarters
Chris	IT Specialist	Headquarters