일탈적 행위, 유머: 한국 기업 구성원의 일과 개인 공간의 지각
Fun Space or workplace? The Role of Humor in Navigating Work-personal Space in South Korean Organizations

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요약

유머는 일반적으로 긍정적이고 유용한 커뮤니케이션 기법으로 소개된다. 그러나 유머의 모호한 성격과 사용법은 장소와 시간에 따라서 다르게 해석될 수 있으며, 이는 특히 재택근무와 온라인 업무가 많아진 기업 상황에서 의도하지 않은 영향을 줄 수 있다. 본 연구의 목적은 기업 구성원의 공간 개념에 대한 유머의 영향을 알아보고자 하며, 총 62명의 참여자에 대한 질적 연구를 인터뷰와 참여적 관찰을 통해 진행하였다. 연구 참여자들은 유머를 업무와 관련이 없는 일탈적인 행동으로 인식했으며, 일부 사용되는 유머는 무례하고 부적절하다는 인식 또한 존재했다. 그러나 유머라는 일탈적 행위를 실행함으로써 업무의 시작 혹은 종료를 신호하는 의식으로도 사용했다. 참여자들의 유머는 다른 구성원들과 함께 사용함으로써 분위기 및 상황적 인식을 변화하는데 도움을 제공하며, 특히 유머를 통해 만들어지는 즐거운 기분이나 분위기가 기업 구성원의 관계를 (긍정적 혹은 부정적으로) 변화시키고, 업무와 개인적인 활동의 경계를 모호하게 만든다. 따라서, 유머는 사용자의 의도와 관계없이 업무적인 공간과 개인적인 공간의 인식 변화에 영향을 주는 것으로 보인다. 이를 통해 기업들은 변화하는 업무 공간과 관련된 이슈들을 이해하고 관리 방법을 찾는데 기여할 수 있을 것이다.

■ 중심어 : | 유머 | 공간 | 일탈적 행위 | 한국 기업 | 질적 연구 |

Abstract

Organizational humor is generally perceived as a phenomenon that helps to develop happy feelings and positive workspace. While humor may affect organizational members in diverse ways, the ambiguous nature of humor may create uncertainty and unexpected outcomes. In particular, humor used by and between organizational members in diverse organizational situations (including physical office context and work hours) may influence individual's perception of space. Findings suggest that humor interaction acts as a form of deviant behavior that diverts from work. This momentary non-work event (humor) may serve as a ritual to influence individual's perception of space, from work to personal domain, and vice versa. The quality of interpersonal relationships between the communicators may also be influenced by humor. This shift in the nature of interaction (from work to non-work) may lead to blurring boundaries of work and work experiences. Therefore, organizational humor may provide insights into how workers interact, perceive, and manage work and personal space within organizational contexts.

■ keyword : | Humor | Organizational Space | Deviant Behavior | Korean Workplaces | Qualitative Research |

I. Introduction

Humor exists across all cultures[1], and organizations. Organizations often enjoy the constructive role of humor, such as developing organizational relationships[2], increasing creativity[3], and enhancing worker communication. Humor may also help to identify and redefine management boundaries [4] to influence worker behavior. Laughter serves as a safety shield that allows workers to 'test' appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and navigate through unclear or changing rules within the workplace. This may be important in organizational contexts that continuously require its employees to adapt to the changing workplace environment and associated expectations. Therefore, humor may be considered as a safe mechanism to determine workplace boundaries.

The emergence of Covid-19 has influenced organizations and workers significantly. Remote and online work is now commonly observed across industries, and the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have accommodated this process. Workers are expected to communicate and connect both online and offline, thus, physical workspace may no longer be a significant part of an organization.. This means boundaries of work, worker relationships, and workspaces are blurred. Such blurred boundaries mean that individuals may experience confusion in the nature of 'space' that they are working in. The idea of space may be subjective, and thus homes and cafes may serve as a working-zone in place of company offices. Furthermore, continuous connections to work (either online or offline) that influences worker productivity and efficiency[5], can also manipulate how

individual's decision on when, where, and how they work. Understanding how individual workers perceive work and personal space is an important part of organizational management, as organizations may prepare for the changing needs of their organizational members and provide a working environment that best promotes work efficiency and effectiveness.

The ambiguous nature of humor means that individuals may respond to humor more easily than other communication mediums [2] as the fun and light nature of humor serves as a safety mechanism in organizational interactions[6]. Boundaries in terms of work and work relationships may be pushed through humor [4], creating different work environment and working zones in comparison to traditional organizational contexts. Humor may play an important role in redefining workspace, by cultivating subjective work zones that may shift according to the needs of the joker. This study is one of the first studies that attempts to explore the role of humor in defining and altering the idea of work space (or 'zones'), to provide insights into the changing organizational environment by investigating four South Korean (hereinafter Korean) workplaces.

II. Literature

1. Organizational humor

Organizational humor is a contextual phenomenon[1] that is perceived as a form of interaction that provokes enjoyment and laughter to users[7][8]. However, humor is difficult to define. Humor may be described as

a mental process that identifies a feeling of amusement, leading to multiple emotional outcomes[9]. However, humor may also be defined as a multi-faceted phenomenon that includes unexpected situations, amusement, laughter, and negative feelings[10]. Despite such complexities, humor may be an effective communication medium in delivering the communicator's intent[5].

Organizations often emphasize the positive role of humor in the workplace, and thus humor is frequently encouraged to be used between workers[11]. Humor may help to develop interpersonal relationships by emphasizing similarities and constructing positive experiences. Cooper's relational process theory (2008) suggests that humor may help to influence the quality of organizational relationships through processes of affect-reinforcement, similarity-attraction, self-disclosure, and hierarchical salience. This means that individuals may develop positive work relationships regardless of hierarchical differences, as they create a feeling of similarity and attraction through laughter[12-14], while sharing a non-work (humor preferences) aspect of their individual characteristics at the same time[2]. Therefore, positive and enjoyable humor interactions between work colleagues may lead to the development of more personal relationships (i.e. friendship) within the workplace.

Humor may perform diverse roles within the workplace, such as developing social norms[15], cultivating identities, and reinforce power relations[16]. From a managerial perspective, humor is frequently used by managers as a medium to display authority and control[17]. However, He and Li's (2019) study on Chinese organizations suggest that leader's use of humor may lead to employee's ego depletion, and result in worker deviance[18]. Similarly, Neves and Karagonlar (2020) suggests that humor used between workers with low trust can increase deviant behaviors within the workplace[19]. This implies that humor interactions may change behavioral boundaries and craft an unconstructive office environment.

Employees may also utilize humor to contest management[4], as the ambiguous nature of humor ensures safety for workers who contents managerial boundaries[6], regardless of the contents embedded in the humor instance[20]. Formality and organizational constraints may be blurred through humor[21], and organizational norms in terms of acceptable behaviors within the workplace may be temporarily alleviated. However, outcomes of humor may be unpredictable as contextual factors influence the delivery[22] and interpretations of workplace humor[23]. This means humor interactions in diverse situations such as inside and outside the physical office, and work hours, may be engaged in a different manner.

2. Work 'space'

The development of technology and the increase in remote work (work from home) have diversified the idea of workspace. Individuals are no longer bound to the physical office to perform work tasks and have expanded the boundary of work to their homes. The use of ICTs means that individuals may connect to work anywhere and at any time. While this change suggests that individuals may be able to gain flexibility in where and how they work, it also means that workers are

(potentially) constantly connected to work regardless of their intentions.

The idea of work 'space' describes physical space such as office structure and building, but also includes the notion of private (personal) and public (work) areas where individuals can work. Baxter and Kroll-Smith (2005) suggests that the boundary between work and private space also correlates with time, where work space links with work time and private space with personal time. The traditional notion of work and space were clearly divided and thus ideas of private and public space were portrayed as two ends of a continuum[24] and only a few professional occupations such as medical doctors were considered to have more flexible, but integrated life[25]. However, the work environment is rapidly changing (i.e. due to Covid-19) and this need of flexibility is now a necessity for most workers. Flexibility in this sense does not only mean work is taken to home settings- but 'personal' activities such as taking naps are also introduced to workspace [26][27] to further blur the boundary between work and private space. Therefore, behaviors that are traditionally perceived as deviant and none-work activities may be a part of achieving such flexibility or workers, which as a result blur the boundaries of professional and private life. This means that performing deviant behaviors may manipulate worker perception, and temporarily shift workspace into personal space.

Taylor and Spicer (2007) summarize the idea of organizational space into three areas of physical distance, display of power relations, and lived (subjective) experience. Under this integrated review, organizational space may no longer mean physical walls, desks, and buildings

[28]. Therefore, the traditional static view of space may no longer be meaningful within the workplace, but a need to incorporate a multidimensional view (physical, relational, and subjective) of organizational space is necessary to understand organizational processes and phenomenon. In particular, as the recognition of space includes relational and subjective interpretations, interactions and communication between workers may contribute significantly to the structuring of space for organizational members.

Virtual work environments may be created by adopting technological mediums at home (such as online meetings) and this may also blur the idea of traditional work 'space'. Workers mentally construct the idea of work with their colleagues through online connections and collaborations, to build trust and surveillance that act as a source of control for work performance[29]. This means that this subjective experience of workers of being connected with other workers alters the notion of workspace, and individuals may experience their private homes as workspace indifferent to company offices. Baxter and Kroll-Smith (2005) suggest that behaviors which were traditionally identified as deviant behaviour may be the key to reconfigure the relationship between home and work, and private and public space and time. Such change may assist in creating a more flexible work environment, which may serve an important role in times of organizational change.

3. Humor, space, and boundaries

Organizational humor is a communication medium which may influence interpersonal

boundaries[2]. Humor may be a mechanism that acts as a symbolic boundary between individuals and social groups[30], and identify different in-groups and assure group membership. Furthermore, using in-group humor that signals group belongingness can help individual workers to cope and endure work related stress[31], which may diminish organizational turnover.

Lynch's (2009) study of hotel kitchens suggest that humor may be used to maintain worker identity and professional autonomy. This implies that humorous communication between kitchen workers may enhance the perceived status of the (kitchen) in-group members in comparison to other hotel workers. Furthermore, this may be an attempt to craft an environment or space that is soley controlled by the chefs, independent from hotel management [32]. Therefore, humor may be an indirect form of boundary defining behavior that helps individuals to take ownership of particular work areas or spaces. Similarly, humor may be used to control, cope, and change the mental perceptions of individuals in stressful work situations[33]. For example, Brcic, Suedfeld, Johnson, Huynh, and Gushin's (2018) study of astronauts illustrate that using different styles of humor in highly unpredictable and stressful situations can help to complete different work tasks by acting as a coping mechanism that diminishes the distress derived from the particular situation by allowing the user to temporarily mentally escape from the stressful situation.

The quality of interpersonal relationships and depth of social belonging between the interacting members may influence the perception towards the associated space (i.e.

work office) differently. Hochschild (2010) describes this as 'place-work', where interacting individuals may have different views on defining the physical location (that both individuals are positioned in) and thus needs to negotiate the meaning of a particular place. This interactional process is influenced by the power held by communicating individuals, but may constantly be redefined as the predetermined meaning of place may be resisted by other members[34]. In this particular study, we suggest that humor may be a medium that may help to redefine space between organizational members. As work spaces or physical offices have distinct meanings (of 'work' and professionalism) set by those with power (such as senior managers), organizational members may use humor to safely and temporarily redefine space as needed. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the experiences and perceptions towards humor used by organizational members, in defining work and personal space and its implications within the studied Korean workplaces.

III. Methodology

This exploratory study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate humor interactions and perceptions towards different workspaces. As humor is contextual and each individual may interpret humor differently[35], a multi-voiced interpretivist approach [36][37] is used to explore diverse interpretations of humor by individuals, and to capture their unique perceptions in humor events.

Two separate data sets have been combined and analyzed in this study. Each data set was

collected as a part of fulfilling a doctoral degree of two different Ph.D. students, from the same tertiary institution. One of these studies was conducted in 2014 collecting data from three Korean companies, and the other study was conducted in 2018, in one Korean company. Both studies used a qualitative research methodology, and collected data using participant observation and semi-structured interviews across the four Korean organizations. For anonymity purposes, these four participant companies were renamed as Wisepath, Mintrack, Truscene, and Freecon. Individual participants were also given pseudonyms.

The researcher spent 1 month in each of the participant companies (in full emersion) to observe the communication process (including humor instances) and participant behaviour. Duration of the interviews was approximately 1 hour per participant, and questions with regards to workplace humor interactions, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions towards (non) appropriate behavior in diverse work and non-work situations. Interviews were conducted using specific topics and questions based on the existing literature. While certain questions and its sequence followed the prepared interview schedule, these questions were asked flexibly and altered depending on the participant's reactions during the dialogue. This was to enable each participant to address the questions in greater depth in relation their experiences. Follow up questions were also asked when the participant found a specific topic more relatable, and thus encouraged the interviewee to provide rich, in-depth recall of their personal experiences and perspectives.

All participants were provided with information sheet and consent form about the research, and all communication with the participants were conducted in Korean language. Participation was voluntary, and all employees across the four companies agreed with the observation, while 62 individuals were interviewed across the four companies. The research was structured and approved in accordance with the affiliating institution's Human Ethics Committee standards. Details of the participant companies and interview participants are summarized below.

Table 1. Summary of participant companies

Company	Industry	Size	Age
Truscene	Information Technology	49	20-40
Mintrack	Online Gaming	33	20-60
Wisepath	Manufacturing	63	20-60
Freecon	Social Media Agency	66	20-40

Table 2. Summary of interview participants

Company	Gender	age	Organizational hierarchy	Total
Truscene	20 male, 5 female	20's - 40's	Junior staff - Top management	25
Mintrack	10 male, 4 female	20's - 40's	Junior staff- middle manager	14
Wisepath	5 male, 2 female	30's - 60's	Junior staff- Senior manager	7
Freecon	1 male, 15 female	20's - 40's	Junior staff	16

The data was recorded using field notes and audio recording methods. Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder, and written notes were also made by the interviewer on the non-verbal response of the interviewee. Observation notes were recorded whenever possible, without disrupting the natural communication and interactions between the observed participants. Therefore, some of these field notes were recalled and recorded at the end of the day, and reorganized by the researcher. The collected data was then

transcribed after the data collection period. The collected data was then analysed using thematic analysis to outline themes and categories that illustrate unique stories. Data analysis was conducted in four steps, where initial analysis occurred during the data collection period. The researcher grouped and categorized the collected data during the day, and also at the end of the day, when obvious patterns were noted. Second, the analysed categories were organized for each of the participant company after the data collection period. Third, data across the three participant companies were combined and coded, and last, themes were arranged and some recoding of data was conducted using NVivo program. In this process, diverse categories were crafted by grouping similar ideas, keywords, and descriptions that help to illustrate the different dimensions of a particular phenomenon. Then these categories were again grouped into two larger themes, deviant behavior and social co-creation.

IV. Findings

The organizational culture and characteristics of the participant companies provide important information in understanding the data, as context influences worker perceptions and behaviors significantly. The three participant companies operate in different industries and have different organizational cultures. First, Truscene is an Information Technology (IT) company with 49 workers, and the workers were observed to use some humor in the workplace. However, this was limited to those in superior positions or shared between

individuals at the same hierarchical level. Second, Mintrack is an online gaming company with a relatively young average age. With 33 workers, employees in Mintrack used humor actively between organizational members. While the style of humor differed, individuals at diverse hierarchical levels employed humor in everyday conversations. Third, Wisepath is a manufacturing company that operates two different divisions of factory and office. With a total of 63 workers, Wisepath displayed most patriarchal behaviors, such as using full honorifics to seniors and showing full obedience to managers. Last, Freecon is a social media marketing agency with very young employees largely consisting of social media celebrities. With 66 workers, the nature of social media business inclined the follower (consumer) – celebrity relationship to involve humor as a norm.

Two broad themes emerged from the collected data. The first theme deviant behavior discusses how humor is perceived as an unprofessional behavior that does not relate to work. Humor may be considered as a rude and inappropriate form of interaction, and used as a ritual to engage or disengage work. Second theme social co-creation suggests that humor is an interactive process that helps to create alternative interpretations for workers. Individuals may interpret humor instances differently which may create various uncertainties, especially in unfamiliar situations. In this process, the quality of interpersonal relationships may change through the humor experience, and boundaries between interacting individuals and also with the idea of work may temporarily change, thus reconfiguring individual's perception of space

(either work or personal). This interactive process may have either positive or negative impact on the individual. [Table 3] below provides a summary of these themes and categories.

Table 3. Themes and categories

Themes	Categories
Deviant behavior	Rude and inappropriate (32 sources, 69 references)
	Unprofessional (26 sources, 68 references)
	Ritual (34 sources, 67 references)
Social co-creation	Interpersonal relationships (54 sources, 285 references)
	Changing boundaries and experiences (51 sources, 158 references)
	Uncertain and situational humor (40 sources, 119 references)

1. Deviant behavior

1.1 Rude and inappropriate

Humor may also be perceived to be rude and inappropriate, regardless of the context. This may include humor shared within organizational, personal, online, and offline spaces. One interview participant explained her experience of hearing a colleague's rude and dangerous humor at a formal company meeting. Pearl recalled that the colleague's humor involved telling a 'funny story' of his friend's one-night-stand, and how miscommunication can be created during sex:

"It was inappropriate. It was awkward […] Using humor at a meeting was wrong, and sexual humor was even more wrong." (Pearl, 29, Truscene)

Pearl suggests that '*sexual humor*' and '*humor at a meeting*' is inappropriate. While it is unclear whether she feels that humor used at a formal work meeting is particularly more inappropriate, her description of the joke being

'*wrong*' and '*awkward*' illustrates the discomfort experienced. Similarly, another interview participant describes her experience of a client's inappropriate joke, in an online context:

"I remember one of my clients joking about how I look different from my KakaoTalk profile photo. It wasn't supposed to be offensive, and he later corrected that I look better in person. Still, someone making a comment at one of my most personal digital profile made me feel uncomfortable." (Ador, 19, Freecon)

As Ador is a social media celebrity, she is open to her clients viewing her social media accounts (including KakaoTalk- a Korean instant message service application). However, a seemingly unoffensive joke ('*it wasn't supposed to be offensive*') by a client is described as '*uncomfortable*'. Regardless of the joke being intended as a compliment or not, humor about the interviewee's personal photos, especially by a client may be considered rude and inappropriate.

1.2 Unprofessional

In investigating humor within the studied organizations, 26 interview participants suggested that humor is generally perceived as an unprofessional behavior that does not relate to work. This perception towards humor is described as neither positive or negative, but a behavior separate from work.

"Humor isn't crucial. Not having it won't stop you from having decent conversations." (Turquoise, 35, Truscene)

"Work is the focus, when you come into work. Not things like humor and joking around." (Opal, 24, Mintrack)

Both interviewees above imply that humor is not the focus of work, and is an unnecessary part of organizational communication ('*it won't stop you from having decent conversations*'). Therefore, these participants suggest that no significant role is played by humor within the studied workplaces.

1.3 Ritual

While many participants suggest that humor is perceived negatively, humor still occurred frequently (343 observed instances) within the studied workplaces. Some participants implied that humor may be a ritual to change the atmosphere, and signal start or end of work. One manager describes his effort in using humor when he is monitoring his subordinates at work:

"I know that I'm not a funny person, but as a manager, I try my best in certain situations. For example, when I'm visiting the factory line (workers), I joke to refresh the air and help them to get back to work." (Moss, 60, Wisepath)

Moss is a senior manager, and it can be assumed that other workers may feel nervous or uncomfortable when Moss comes around the office or factory to monitor workers. Within this context, Moss suggests that humor is his '*best*' attempt to '*refresh the air*' and '*help them to get back to work*'. This is description suggests that although humor may not be favored or a natural part of Moss's personal characteristics ('*I'm not a funny person*'), it is

used as a signal to encourage workers to '*get back to work*' as usual.

Humorous interactions may also be used as a ritual to embark professional or personal identities of individuals. Such use of humor may trigger different behaviors for individuals, such as being more serious and professional, or more playful and casual. One participant from Freecon explain the cases of 'name-calling', where their friends and families make jokes out of their digital names.

"My friends literally shout my (account name) to embarrass me in a bar. Okay, I'm not that famous, but it's embarrassing. I sometimes wish to ban my real friends from my YouTube channel (laugh). I can be over-reactive but it sobers me up to act like the person I'm presented on my social media." (Hoodie, 20, Freecon)

Above participant show how individuals may distinguish their work and play identities through the use of different names, that serves as a ritual. Regardless of the intention of the performer (of the ritual), the humorous name-calling seems to provoke actions that relates to the participant's professional identity ('*to act like the person I'm presented on my social media*'). This implies that although such humor may not be welcomed or preferred by the communicator, it may be repetitively used (ritualized) and serve as a signal to engage in work-like behavior.

2. Social co-creation

2.1 Interpersonal relationships

Participants also emphasized the social aspect

of humor used within the studied organizations. Some participants suggested that the quality of interpersonal relationships may be influenced by the use of humor, and thus help the socializing process of the communicating individuals. For example, one junior worker describes his positive feelings in sharing humor with a senior person at work:

"I talk to my manager often, even when he is away on a business trip. He talks in a funny way, and makes me feel quite close (to him). Of course, not all of his jokes are funny, but he's good. For me, that make him feel like a brother, or an uncle." (Apatite, 24, Truscene)

The above example suggests that the manager's humor ('he talks in a funny way') helps to diminish social distance ('makes me feel quite close') even if the jokes are not funny. This implies that the positive experience of enjoying humor together, or the effort for a manager to create such positive experience helps to develop the relationship between the workers. However, some participants also suggested that humor may isolate individuals and distance their relationships:

"For me, I separate people this way I guess- frequently joking about what only we know, with my 'friends'." (Moss, 60, Wisepath)

Moss suggests that humor is used to '*separate people*' between his '*friends*' and non-friends. This seems to be a conscious act to distance other workers that Moss do not wish to befriend, or develop closer interpersonal relationship with. Therefore, humor may be used as an exclusive, friends-only

communication mechanism ('*joking about what only we know*') that creates an informal or personal social context between the communicating workers. However, this may also create a clear barrier to individuals not included in the joke.

2.2 Changing boundaries and experiences

In discussing the experience of humor within the studied organizations, 51 participants implied that humor may temporarily alter the boundaries of work and non-work, and thus influence the idea of space for individuals. One participant describes his experience of responding to a manager's text message after working hours to create a sense of 'work' even at home:

"Sometimes the manager sends us a funny link (webpage). Sometimes it's funny, sometimes not so much. It's not work, but I still have to respond back even during weekends." (Topaz, 24, Truscene)

This example suggests that while the fun nature of humor may provoke individuals to connect and communicate light-heartedly ('it's not work') even after working hours, such connections with work colleagues may create a feeling that the communicating individual is still at work. Another interviewee explained how as a superior's joke about her personal issues during work hours resulted in a non-work experience, during working hours:

"The CEO talks a lot about my age, and when I will get married. I guess he's concerned about my personal life (marriage), so he often comments about it in a jokingly way. Honestly,

he's just using humor to be nosey about my personal life [shakes head], but because he's laughing and joking, it seems weird to get back at him [⋯] Sometimes it feels like I'm at madam ddu's office." (Citrine, 33, Mintrack)

Citrine suggests that the CEO uses humor to talk about her '*personal life*' which is unrelated to work. '*Madam ddu*' is a Korean wording for traditional (female) matchmaker, which is highly personal and private. In the above example, the CEO seems to attempt to play a matchmaker role, while placing Citrine as the client. Citrine describes that she feels like she's '*at madam ddu's office*', and implies that the CEO's humor temporarily alters Citrine's experience at work (with the CEO) to somewhere more personal (a matchmaking consulting company). This may be because her marriage is not a work-related topic that would usually be discussed at work. Therefore, the 'light' nature of humor may help to create non-work like experiences, going outside of normal (acceptable) workplace boundaries, even during working hours or within workspaces.

While such experience of pushing boundaries may be engaged by those in managerial positions, personal friends may also use humor to change work boundaries. For example, one YouTube creator discusses how humor used by friends may blur work and personal boundaries.

"I don't appreciate my real-life friends making fun of my contents on my YouTube. I know it looks ridiculous and different from 'real me', but my YouTube channel is my workspace." (Carys, 20, Freecon)

The above respondent emphasizes the intrusive role of humor within his workspace (YouTube channel). Although Carys mentions that his friends are only '*making fun*', he also suggests that such behavior is not appreciated ('*I don't appreciate my real-life friends making fun*'). This implies that the friend's use of humor within his workspace pushes the acceptable boundaries that Carys wants to maintain in his work. Humor used by his friends seems to shift Carys' view of his workspace into a more personal space, regardless of Carys' intentions. Thus, this suggests that humor may serve as a medium to merge or shift the boundaries between workspace and personal space for individuals, regardless of the communicator's intentions.

2.3 Uncertain and situational humor

Humor interactions may create diverse social consequences, as perceptions towards humor may differ within the workplace (either positive or negative). Humor may be interpreted differently according to the context or space (such as formal or informal situations), and thus lead to uncertain outcomes. Some participants suggested that there are situational differences in using humor, especially depending on work or non-work hours:

"Work is usually formal and serious [⋯] so people usually joke during lunchtime, breaks." (Citrine, 33, Mintrack)

This interviewee suggests that work hours should involve communication that is '*formal and serious*' (thus no humor) but non-work hours such as '*lunchtime*' and '*breaks*' are considered as appropriate situations to use

humor. Thus, this implies that humor may be approached and interpreted differently according to the when and where humor is used- whether its during working hours and within workspaces- or not.

Similarly, one of the observation examples illustrates how workers may respond differently to humor interactions. This example involves workers at Mintrack attending a company 'workshop' during the weekend. This workshop involved workers spending two days at a holiday house to play games, drink alcohol, and socialize. All expenses were paid by the workers and no support was provided by the company. This particular example focuses on the behaviour of Tourmaline, a young male worker that was frequently pranked (target of humor) within the workplace:

While everyone is still eating and drinking in the outdoor BBQ area, Diamond stands next to the BBQ grill, where Iolite is cooking the last few sausages left. They discuss about religion, and Diamond suddenly questions Iolite in a loud voice, holding up a bottle of beer in his hand.

Diamond: "Of course, I believe in God! I was born a Christian! Do you even know who Abraham is?"

Tourmaline: "Lincoln."

Tourmaline, who is passing by the BBQ grill with an empty plate in his hand answers Diamond's question. Diamond looks startled, as Tourmaline has suddenly appeared behind him. Diamond and Iolite frown, stare at Tourmaline for a few seconds, and both laugh hysterically. Diamond nearly drops his beer bottle, and then grasps the bottle with both hands while breathing heavily in an exaggerated way. Iolite laughs while shaking his head from side to side, as if disapproving of the situation, but continues to cook the sausages on the grill. (May 23, Mintrack Observation notes)

In the above example, Tourmaline voluntarily responds and engages in humor with his seniors (by saying 'Lincoln' to Diamond's question and creating an incongruity). In normal workplace situations (i.e. in office) Tourmaline does not react to any humor initiated by the managers, even if he is the target of the joke. Therefore, such abrupt engagement may not be acceptable to Diamond and Iolite who are positioned at a more senior level than Tourmaline. However, rather than rejecting Tourmaline's statement, Diamond and Iolite both laugh and signals consent to Tourmaline's action. Such behaviors of Tourmaline, Diamond, and Iolite are contrasts with their usual in-office behaviors, where Tourmaline would not respond to a superior's humor, and Diamond and Iolite (as managers) would not accept Tourmaline's attempt to rebut a senior's joke (due to the hierarchical relationship). Therefore, this observation suggests that use and responses to humor may differ according to the situation (especially between work and social space), which may not always be predictable.

V. Discussion

Humor is a contextual phenomenon that may be interpreted differently within organizations

[1]. This study suggests that humor may be perceived as a deviant behavior that helps to blur workplace boundaries and perceptions of space. Within the studied workplaces, humor is generally perceived as a non-work-related behavior. Interview examples from Truscene suggest that humor is 'inappropriate' and 'wrong', while an interviewee from Mintrack describe that humor is 'not crucial'. These descriptions of humor implies that humor may be perceived as a deviant behavior that that may potentially damage work processes and performance. Appelbaum, Iaconi, & Matousek, (2007) suggest that workplace deviance may be determined by organizational norms which influence the core ethical values- helping to differentiate appropriate and inappropriate behaviors of workers[38]. While humor phenomenon may seem harmless and thus not relate to the idea of ethics, this may be dependent on the individual values and organizational situations[39][40]. Therefore, humor interactions may be recognized as deviant or non-deviant behavior within the organization, which may be different for each individual. This subjective experience of humor may lead to different interpretations of the situation, such as feeling comfort or discomfort within the same organizational space.

Findings also suggest that such performance of humor may be used as a ritual to start or finish work. Participants from this study suggested that humor may help to switch in and out of work and personal life. For example, an interview excerpt from Freecon showed how Hoodie uses humorous name-calling as a ritual to get back into 'work identity'. This implies that regardless of the physical location of the individual, certain cues or rituals may place individuals into a work. This does not necessarily mean a formal start or finish to a workday (such as 9am start in the morning and a 5pm finish), but used as a personal signal during the day, and in between work tasks that triggers an experience of work to the user. Plester and Inkson (2018) discusses the institutionalization of humor within organizations, where humor and humor interactions are ritualized to signal different ideas and situations. These rituals of humor may be structured but also spontaneous[38]. Therefore, repeating such rituals may develop to signal engagement or disengagement in work, which may sometimes be obvious to other members, which could potentially incur negative (performance or relational) outcomes.

Humor observed within the studied workplaces is also illustrated as a social process, that influences the perception of space within the organizational settings. Regardless of the physical location of the communicator, the temporal intimacy developed by sharing humor with work colleagues diminishes the social distance between workers. This temporal decrease in social distance may also create a sense of private (personal) space, as if the communicators are friends conversing on non-work issues. This extends Taylor and Spicer's (2007) notion of organizational space, where humor used between organizational members may create a friend-like social experience within the office context. As the humorous experience is rather social than professional, this experience temporarily redefines the physical office space into a friendly, personal space.

Baxter and Kroll-Smith's (2005) study on public and private space and time suggests that

when traditional non-work behavior becomes normalized within organizations, this may help to blur boundaries of appropriate behaviors at work, and create ambiguities in identifying the difference between public and private space. Findings from this study not only provides an extension to the idea of appropriate workplace behavior, but also contributes to developing workplace relationships beyond that of work colleagues by increasing the level of interaction between individuals after working hours and outside of work space. The 'fun' nature of humor means that workers may connect whenever and wherever more flexibility, and allows individuals to subconsciously navigate between work and private time and space. This may be significant as the increased need to work from home, and adopt flexible working conditions have creased problems of adjusting to constant and signification organizational change.

However, participants from this study noted that using humor may be situational and uncertain, and thus cause limitations in using humor within their workplaces as it may result in different interpretations to the intentions of the joker[42]. Therefore, we argue that while humor may be useful in altering individual's perceptions of workspace, this may not always be fully controllable due to the ambiguous nature of humor, and can potentially result in misinterpretations and unintended outcomes.

VI. Conclusion and implications

This paper investigates the role of humor in identifying workspace and boundaries within Korean organizations. We argue that humor may help to develop different perspectives to work and personal space, depending on the relational and situational contexts. Humor may be perceived as a deviant behavior that is unsuitable to use within the workplace, but this study suggests that such deviant humor may be used as a ritual to signal work and non-work for individuals. This relates to past studies such as Baxter and Kroll-Smith (2005) where presumably deviant behaviors may help individuals to divert individual's perception of their physical workspace to a personal place.

Furthermore, while individuals may be unable to fully predict the outcomes of humor (due to contextual factors), humor may help to influence the quality of interpersonal relationships between organizational members [2], and develop a sense of intimacy or friendship, that differs from normal work-based relationships. Such shift in organizational relationships may further change the quality of humor experience of individual workers, and thus temporarily shift the perception of workspace into a personal and more private domain. Therefore, organizational humor may be a useful mechanism to shift individual's perception of space, from work to personal, and vice versa, to cope with the changing workplace environment.

This study provides diverse theoretical and practical implications. Theoretical implications include contributing to humor and organizational studies, that provides a detailed analysis on the role of humor is work perception of space. In particular, as most organizational humor studies are based on Western contexts[41], this study is one of the few research that investigate humor in Eastern organizational contexts, and extend the

understanding of organizational humor in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, this study provides an in-depth understanding of humor as a deviant behavior, that may contribute to the coping process of workers within the changing organizational environment.

Practical implications include helping to understand the role of humor as a management tool, in quickly assisting workers to adapt to changing work settings and expectations. Due to the increase in remote work and instabilities caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, many organizations experience a shift in work processes, and in particular, when and where employees should conduct their work tasks. This instability may mislead individuals to misbehave beyond management control. As this study suggests that humor may help to quickly shift the idea of space from work to private space (and vice versa) smoothly, this may help to provide new guidelines on remote work, and how orgnaizations may direct workers to effectively control their work hours even within personal spaces. Nevertheless, findings from this study may also help to develop training programs for multinational organizations that are required to operate beyond normal 9-5 work hours. Workers that need to perform tasks with international clients or partners may experience difficulties in controlling when and where they work. Thus, developing skills that allows workers to quickly shift their mental perception of personal space into working space may contribute to enhancing worker concentration and efficiency.

There are several limitations to this research. First, the findings from this study may not be generalizable, due to the qualitative nature of the methodology used[43]. Future studies may enhance generalizability and replicability of the study by structuring the study more systematically by adopting a quantitative study of humor and space. Second, the number of participant companies within this study is relatively small, thus future studies may incorporate a larger number of firms from diverse industries in order to provide a more representative data to the idea of humor and space. Last, using data from two separate studies may embed unexpected issues due to the different research environments, which may affect the data collection process and thus the reliability of the data presented. While the current study attempted to minimize this issue by using studies that incorporate similar data collection methods with similar duration, future research could eliminate such uncertainty by collecting data from diverse companies within a single research project.

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