

Have you experienced fun in the workplace?

An empirical study of workplace fun, trust-in-management and job satisfaction

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Abstract

Purpose – This purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between workplace fun, trust-in-management, employee satisfaction and whether the level of fun experienced at work moderates the effects.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from a sample of 240 frontline staff in a large-scale retail store in Hong Kong.

Findings – The results show that trust-in-management mediates the relationship between workplace fun and employee job satisfaction. Additionally, employees who experience a high level of fun in the workplace have a greater effect on workplace fun, trust-in-management and job satisfaction.

Research limitations/implications – The main limitation of this study is that it collects data from a self-reported single source in a cross-sectional survey design.

Practical implications – Because workplace fun helps organizations promote employee trust and job satisfaction, organizations should provide more enjoyable activities for employees to participate in.

Originality/value – This study provides a new insight into the effects of workplace fun on employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction.

Keywords Job satisfaction, Workplace fun, Experienced fun, Trust-in-management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent years, researchers have paid an increasing amount of attention to the importance of fun in the workplace (Becker and Tews, 2016; Owler *et al.*, 2010; Plester and Hutchison, 2016). Workplace fun is described as a work situation that encourages, supports and is surrounded by a variety of enjoyable activities for employees (Ford *et al.*, 2003). These activities include social gatherings, parties, team competitions, recognition awards and participation in informal fun events (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a). A fun workplace environment not only provides a place for pleasure and relaxation but also helps to motivate employees at work (Plester, 2009).

Empirical studies have begun to examine the effect of workplace fun (Peluchette and Karl, 2005; Stromberg and Karlsson, 2009) on enhancing employee motivation, productivity and performance (Karl *et al.*, 2005; Lamm and Meeks, 2009). Baptiste (2009)

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and Karl and Peluchette (2006b) examined the significance of workplace fun and how it influences employee well-being at work. Pryor *et al.* (2010) further found that workplace fun had a positive affect on employee creativity and innovation, work performance and organizational commitment. Thus, the first objective of this study is to examine the effects of workplace fun by testing a model for employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction.

Building on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the quality of exchange between management and employees is related to higher levels of trust between them. This explains why it is important for management to show concern and respect for employees by providing an enjoyable fun workplace. Management and employees' positive interactions with each other create a level of trust (Cohen, 1992). Trust-in-management is an indication of the employees' reaction to the support and encouragement provided to them (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). Despite these findings, very little research has examined the underlying process of workplace fun on employee job satisfaction. Thus, the second purpose of this study is to explore whether trust-in-management mediates workplace fun and employee job satisfaction.

Research has begun to probe the conditions of workplace fun on employee outcomes (Tews *et al.*, 2014). Previous studies have primarily examined the ways in which workplace fun and constituent attachment interact, and they have developed potential moderators such as coworker socialization and manager support of fun (Tews *et al.*, 2012, 2014). The literature also suggests that the effects of workplace fun on employee job satisfaction are influenced by how employees experience enjoyable practices implemented in the workplace (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a). Employees are more satisfied when they enjoy their work tasks and when they work in an amusing environment. Hence, having fun may alter the effect of how the workplace relates to employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction. Accordingly, the third purpose of this study is to examine whether the level of fun experienced at work moderates the effect of workplace fun and job satisfaction.

There are three main contributions of this study. First, this study contributes to the workplace research pertaining to the effects of fun on employee job satisfaction (Karl and Peluchette, 2006b; Pryor *et al.*, 2010). This study responds to the question of whether there is a relationship between workplace fun and employee job satisfaction. Second, this study investigates the "black box" of whether trust-in-management is mediated by workplace fun and employee job satisfaction. Third, although workplace fun is positively related to employees' responses to it (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a, 2006b), such studies have not taken the level of fun experienced at work into full account. This study examines how the level of experienced workplace fun affects the relationship between workplace fun, employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction.

Theory and hypotheses

Workplace fun

In the literature, workplace fun has been viewed as a broad construct in which the issue of whether it is encouraged and initiated by employers has been raised. Tews *et al.* (2014) reviewed the prior research conceptualizing and defining workplace fun and found it to be defined as, "any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of playful or humorous nature which provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure" (Fluegge, 2008, p. 15). In a similar vein, Ford *et al.* (2003) described workplace fun as being "a variety of enjoyable and pleasurable activities that positively affect the attitude and productivity of individuals and groups" or, more succinctly, that creates "a work

environment that makes people smile” (Ford *et al.*, 2003, p. 22). From this point of view, workplace fun is intentionally promoted by organizations. Alternatively, Tews *et al.* (2014) suggested that workplace fun should involve activities that are not specifically related to the job. From this orientation, the features of the work environment should provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment or pleasure. Fun activities in the workplace should therefore not just be organizationally sponsored, but individuals should initiate them to bring enjoyment and pleasure into the work environment themselves (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009).

More recently, Plester and Hutchison (2016) recognized three forms of workplace fun: managed fun, organic fun and task fun. Managed fun refers to the official or packaged fun that can be deliberately organized to fulfill a company’s strategic objectives (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Organic fun refers to the phenomenon that occurs naturally with individuals (Plester *et al.*, 2015). Task fun suggests that the work itself is a form of fun and that job responsibilities can be enjoyable (Tews *et al.*, 2012, p. 108). In this study, workplace fun is defined as a multi-dimensional aspect of fun, which involves, encourages and is supported by different playful and humorous types of social activities in the work environment (Ford *et al.*, 2003; Plester and Hutchison, 2016; Tews *et al.*, 2012, 2014). These relaxing work time activities include things such as team competitions, preparing and sharing food, praising and recognizing hard work and planning entertaining events (Karl and Peluchette, 2006b).

Bolton and Houlihan (2009) developed a matrix to study managerial motivations for introducing fun at work, which included HR strategies and management orientations. They viewed activity as having four main dimensions. Fun at work was, thus, classified into fun as a developmental reward, fun as engagement, fun as alleviation and fun as containment. A review of workplace fun included an evaluation of how engaged the employees were, their motivations and processes and the outcomes of the fun activities. Chan (2010) also developed a usable typology of workplace fun by dividing it into staff-oriented, supervisor-oriented, social-oriented and strategy-oriented approaches in the service industry. Becker and Tews (2016) examined the effect of fun activities on employee engagement, constituent attachment and employee turnover. The concept of workplace fun has, in fact, been widely accepted by organizations in different sectors. Choi *et al.* (2013) considered it in the context of the hospitality industry. Karl *et al.* (2005) explored fun at work across the public, non-profit, and private sectors. The public-sector employees evaluated the activities as being less fun. Plester (2009) examined workplace fun across the boundaries of the workplace in both informal and formal organizations.

Studies have pointed out the attraction to job applicants of engaging in fun activities, socializing with workers and having job responsibilities that are fun (Tews *et al.*, 2012). These findings have predicted that attraction to a workplace in which there is fun would be relatively greater than other benefits such as pay, career growth or opportunities. Fluegge-Woolf (2014) developed a “Play Hard, Work Hard” conceptual model of workplace fun that examined the positive affect of work engagement. Workplace fun within the corporate culture created positive job satisfaction. Having a fun environment motivated the employees performing their job duties.

Workplace fun and employees’ job satisfaction

Other research has revealed the positive effects of workplace fun and employees’ attitudes (Tews *et al.*, 2014). Job satisfaction has been defined as a feeling in which

employees achieve the fulfillment of their job's values (Graham and Messner, 1998). This represents the employees' good feelings or denotes their attitude toward the job (Rogers *et al.*, 1994). There are many factors that are favorable to enhancing employee job satisfaction, such as having challenging work and good working conditions (Graham and Messner, 1998; Locke, 1983). A fun culture shared by the employees who engage in it is one of the characteristics of a work environment that fosters a positive affect (Fluegge-Woolf, 2014) and job satisfaction (Newstrom, 2002).

Karl and Peluchette (2006a) found that workplace fun was positively associated with employee commitment, citizenship behavior and job satisfaction. Other research has indicated that different generational cohorts respond differently toward workplace fun (Lamm and Meeks, 2009). The previous findings suggest that workplace fun is the most positive among the newest workers and is associated with a greater effect for employees who strongly support organizational citizenship behavior (Aldag and Sherony, 2001). Employees who place a high value on workplace fun are likely to be satisfied with their work:

H1. Workplace fun is positively related to employees' job satisfaction.

Workplace fun, trust-in-management and job satisfaction

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) posits that employees are motivated to increase their work responsibilities when their relationships with management are based upon trust. The quality of the work environment for employees is regarded as a critical factor in trust-in-management. Trust-in-management fosters the creation of a fun workplace. In return, workplace fun provides employees with enjoyable working conditions. Bolton and Houlihan (2009) reported that employee trust in management is a supportive mechanism in the work setting.

Existing studies have reported the effect of trust-in-management on employee behavior (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Employee behavior is partly explained by the trustworthiness of top management. A fun workplace environment can foster trust by relinquishing some of the control to employees. Employees respect managers who provide a fun workplace. When employees trust their management, they are more likely to be satisfied with their own work. The effect of workplace fun on employee job satisfaction is, therefore, mediated by trust-in-management. This notion implies that trust-in-management generates a kind of satisfaction for employees:

H2. Trust-in-management mediates the relationship between workplace fun and job satisfaction.

The moderating role of experienced fun

Although previous research has provided evidence on the importance of workplace fun, researchers have not fully explained the conditions that may affect workplace fun and employees' attitudes. Experienced fun explains the effect of workplace fun. Employees who experience a high level of fun at work provide better customer service and even increase their work performance (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a).

Experienced fun is an individual's perception of the existence of fun in the workplace. Employees who enjoy a high level of workplace fun may help other employees develop trust-in-management and eventually experience job satisfaction (Karl and Peluchette, 2006b). The more an employee experiences workplace fun, the more likely he or she is to engage in additional fun activities. Employees will remember the pleasant experience of

having fun at work, which may lead to higher trust-in-management and job satisfaction. In other words, a high level of experienced workplace fun enables employees to recognize the importance of the workplace for enhancing their job satisfaction:

H3. The positive relationship between workplace fun and trust-in-management is stronger when employees experience a high level of fun at work.

Experienced fun has been examined as a condition to the effect of workplace fun on employee trust-in-management and job satisfaction. Trust-in-management mediates the relationship between workplace fun and job satisfaction. Workplace fun is, therefore, likely to enhance employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction when they experience higher levels of fun at work. We propose that the joint effect of workplace fun and the level of experienced fun on employees' job satisfaction is mediated by trust-in-management. Therefore:

H4. Trust-in-management mediates the interactive effects of workplace fun and the level of experienced fun on employees' job satisfaction.

Figure 1 presents the theoretical relationship of workplace fun on employees' trust in their leader and job satisfaction, moderated by the level of fun experienced at work.

Methodology

Sample and data collection

Data for the sample were collected from 240 frontline staff of a retail firm in Hong Kong. The respondents received a survey package, which included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, a questionnaire and a return envelope. To ensure confidentiality, the respondents were instructed to seal the completed questionnaires in the envelopes and return them directly to the researchers. There were 240 usable questionnaires out of the 260 returned, with a usable response rate of 92.3 per cent.

Translation of the questionnaire items

A bilingual academic translated and back translated the original questionnaire items from English into Chinese (Brislin *et al.*, 1973). The back translation ensured that the items were comparable with a high degree of accuracy (Cohen and Cohen, 1983).

Measures

Workplace fun. The scale created by Karl *et al.* (2005) was used to measure workplace fun. Workplace fun was measured with five items (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Items included: "Having fun at work is very important to me"; "I prefer to work with people who like to have fun"; "I don't expect work to be fun – that's why they call it work"; "Experiencing joy or amusement while at work is not important to me"; and "If my job stopped being fun, I would look for another job". The coefficient alpha for the scale was 0.91.

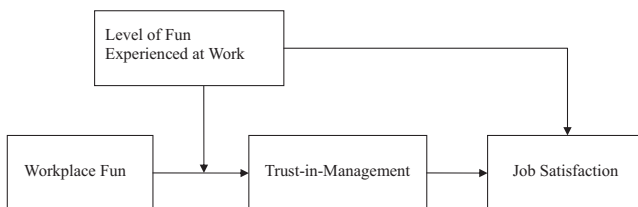


Figure 1.
Research framework

The level of fun experienced at work. Karl *et al.*'s (2007) scale was used to measure the level of fun experienced at work. It was measured using five items (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The items were: "This is a fun place to work"; "At my workplace, we try to have fun whenever we can"; "Managers encourage employees to have fun at work"; "We laugh a lot at my workplace"; and "Sometimes, I feel more like I am playing than I am working". The coefficient alpha for the scale was 0.88.

Trust-in-management. Cook and Wall's (1980) scale was used to measure trust-in-management. It was measured using seven items (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). The items included "Management is open and upfront with me"; "I am not sure I fully trust-in-management"; "I believe management has high integrity"; "Management is not always honest and truthful"; "I don't think management treats me fairly"; "I can expect management to treat me in a consistent and predictable fashion"; and "In general, I believe my management's motives and intentions are good". The coefficient alpha for the scale was 0.93.

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was assessed using a three-item job satisfaction scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) by Seashore *et al.* (1983). Items included "Overall, I like to work in this organization"; "I am satisfied with my current job"; and "I am satisfied with my job". The coefficient alpha for the scale was 0.90.

Control variables. Employees' gender, education level, age, organizational tenure and leader-follower dyad tenure were controlled as they directly influence employees' attitudes. Gender was dummy coded (0 = female; 1 = male). Age was reported using six categories, which ranged from less than 20 to more than 45 (1 = < 20; 2 = 20-25; 3 = 26-30; 4 = 31-35; 5 = 36-40; 6 = 41-45). The educational levels of the respondents were measured by six categories (1 = secondary school; 2 = high school; 3 = high school diploma; 4 = college degree; 5 = master's degree; 6 = others). Organizational tenure was measured by six categories (1 = less than three months; 2 = three months to less than a year; 3 = a year to less than three years; 4 = three years to less than five years; 5 = five years to less than ten years; 6 = more than ten years).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table I presents the means, standard deviations and the zero-order Pearson correlations of all of the key variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.80	0.39	–							
2. Age	2.80	1.23	–0.13**	–						
3. Education	3.48	1.73	–0.05**	–0.01	–					
4. Organization Tenure	3.01	1.42	–0.04*	0.56**	–0.07**	–				
5. Workplace Fun	3.71	0.94	0.13**	–0.11**	0.10**	–0.04*	0.91			
6. Experienced Fun	4.35	0.98	0.00	–0.02	0.01	0.00	0.18**	0.88		
7. Trust-in-management	4.94	1.14	0.00	0.00	0.06**	–0.06**	0.13**	0.44**	0.93	
8. Job Satisfaction	4.66	1.01	0.05*	0.11**	0.03	0.06	0.17**	0.32**	0.49**	0.90

Notes: ^a $n = 240$; ^b the correlation coefficients are significant at * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; ^c reliability coefficients (italic) appear along the diagonal

Table I.
Means, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities of measures^{a,b,c}

Tests of the hypotheses

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to test whether workplace fun was related to employees' job satisfaction (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Cohen and Cohen, 1983). The results indicated that workplace fun was positively related to employees' job satisfaction and it was significant ($\beta = 0.16$; $p < 0.001$), as shown in Table II. As such, *H1* was supported. *H2* predicted that trust-in-management would mediate the relationship between workplace fun and employees' job satisfaction. After entering all of the control variables, the influence of the mediating variables (trust-in-management) on the independent variable (workplace fun) was regressed. The results showed that workplace fun was positively related to trust-in-management ($\beta = 0.12$; $p < 0.001$), thereby meeting the first requirement for mediation. In *H1*, the effect of workplace fun on employees' job satisfaction was significant. Therefore, these results met the second requirement for mediation. We then entered trust-in-management in Table II to test the possible mediating effect on the relationship between workplace fun and job satisfaction. Trust-in-management was found to significantly mediate the relationship between workplace fun and employees' job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$; $p < 0.001$). After adding the effect of trust-in-management, the beta of workplace fun was less significant with regard to employees' job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.13$; $p < 0.05$), which indicated that a partial mediation was present. *H2* was, thus, partially supported.

H3 predicted that the positive relationship between workplace fun, on the one hand, and employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction, on the other, would be stronger when employees experienced a higher level of fun at work. As shown in Table II, after entering all of the control variables, we entered the independent variable (workplace fun) and the moderating variable (experienced fun) into the model. The interactive effects of workplace fun and experienced fun on employees' trust-in-management ($\beta = 0.20$; $p < 0.05$) and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$) were significant. The interactive effects of workplace fun and experienced fun on job satisfaction are plotted in Figure 2. The graphs for the interactive effects on trust-in-management were largely identical to Figure 2 and are therefore not shown. Although the hypothesized moderating effect of experienced fun on the relationship between workplace fun and job satisfaction and trust-in-management was significant, the pattern of the results was somewhat different from what we had expected.

In testing *H4*, the magnitude of the regression coefficients for the interactive term of workplace fun on employees' job satisfaction (from $\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.01$ to $\beta = 0.17$; $p < 0.01$) were reduced, after entering the mediator (i.e. trust-in-management). The results suggest that trust in the leader partially mediated the interaction effects on employees' job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.36$; $p < 0.001$). *H4* was, therefore, partially supported, because trust-in-management mediates the interactive effects of workplace fun and experienced fun on employees' job satisfaction.

Discussion

This study makes three main contributions. First, there has been a need for an explanation of the level of fun experienced at work, including why and when workplace fun may influence trust-in-management, which in turn influences employee job satisfaction. The results provide positive insights on the use of workplace fun. This study has therefore addressed an important research gap on the effect of workplace fun, because job satisfaction is likely to provide a good basis for workplace fun. This extends

Table II.
Regression summary
for mediating role
trust-in-management
on the interactive
effect of workplace
fun and experienced
fun on job
satisfaction

Variables	Trust-in-management				Job satisfaction					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Control variables</i>										
Employees' gender	0.05	0.07	0.05	0.05	0.12	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02
Employees' age	0.12	0.12	0.17*	0.16*	0.05	0.13	0.13	0.16*	0.17*	0.11
Employees' education	0.06	0.07	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.02	0.03
Organization tenure	0.06	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.09	0.07
<i>Independent variable</i>										
Workplace fun		0.12**	0.02	0.06		0.16**	0.13*	0.25**	0.17**	0.15**
<i>Moderator variables</i>										
Experienced fun			0.38**	0.25**				0.27**	0.45**	0.36**
<i>Interactive effects</i>										
Workplace fun × Experienced Fun				0.20*					0.29***	0.17**
<i>Mediator variable</i>										
Trust-in-management							0.38**			0.36**
N	240	240	240	240	240	240	240	240	240	240
Overall R ²	0.02	0.03	0.16	0.18	0.02	0.05	0.15	0.11	0.12	0.23
Change in R ²	0.02	0.01	0.13	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.01	0.11

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

the current workplace fun research by explicating how employees' job satisfaction is one of the outcomes of the workplace fun process (Tews *et al.*, 2014).

Second, this study has opened the "black box" by identifying how trust-in-management mediates the relationship between workplace fun and employee job satisfaction. Trust-in-management plays an important role in employees' job satisfaction as explained through the social exchange theory. The implementation of fun in the workplace can result in higher trust in the management, and this enhances job satisfaction.

Third, this study has explored the moderating role of the level of fun experienced at work by explaining how workplace fun is associated with trust-in-management and employee job satisfaction. When employees experience fun at work, fun workplace practices are easier to implement, and this is even more important to employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction. In particular, employees who experience fun at work expect their organization to provide more fun activities, which in turn provides them with positive encouragement. The level of fun experienced by employees is therefore positively affected by the perceptions of employees pertaining to the importance of workplace fun.

Theoretical and managerial implications

This study extends the fun in the workplace literature in terms of how it affects employee trust-in-management and job satisfaction (Tews *et al.*, 2014). Consistent with the results of Plester and Hutchison (2016), workplace fun is positive, engaging and encouraging, which works well in the context of organizations. Researchers should devote greater attention to the workplace fun phenomenon, which offers a way to observe the dynamics of the activities constituting fun at work. Employees could also benefit from the perception that their workplace is fun and from enjoying fun activities at work. Our results confirm that the effects of workplace fun on employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction may be influenced by whether the employees experience fun at work or fun activities in their working careers. In other words, workplace fun can help to promote employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction, particularly when employees do not have any prior experience participating in fun activities.

With regard to the managerial implications, workplace fun helps to build trustworthiness between managers and employees. It helps individuals enjoy work tasks, allows them to re-design a job's characteristics and allows organizations to create a better workplace. Organizations should foster a business culture based on enjoyment, pleasure, play and fun. It is worthwhile for organizations to invest in this new work

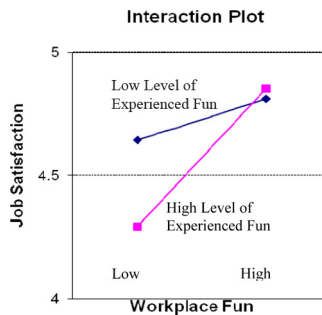


Figure 2.
The moderating
effect of experienced
fun on the link
between workplace
fun and job
satisfaction

culture to provide a healthy work environment. Employees can still experience enjoyment at work while concurrently undertaking their job tasks, for instance, by having an opportunity to participate in community volunteerism.

When workplace fun is implemented in organizations, employees experience higher levels of job satisfaction. Managers should pay attention to this, initiate fun workplace projects organized by their companies and support the fun activities that naturally occur to employees. Employees should experience a variety of fun activities at work, such as those involving food and games, recognition of birthdays, weddings and outside social gatherings with peers. These activities might be useful to developing higher satisfaction and motivation to work, but they may also extend to the organization.

Workplace fun has long been prevalent in Western society. However, this study provides new implications for practitioners suggesting that the effect of workplace fun is positive for Chinese employees as well. Chinese employers can learn from the experience of Western companies, such as Google, that having a culture of fun in the workplace is conducive to work in the Chinese society. The concept of workplace fun is not limited by culture when an organization has a fun working climate and launches workplace programs that are fun.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to this study. The participants were self-reported, and the research design used a cross-sectional approach. The data were collected from a single source (Alper *et al.*, 1998). Future research can collect data from multiple sources and multiple data collection waves to be reasonably confident and to avoid common method variance. Further, we collected data from frontline staff in an international retail firm. The characteristics of the respondents in a retail firm are quite different from the office setting. Accordingly, the findings cannot be applied to others in the general population, such as those with administrative functions and a different type of workforce. Future research should also include a broader representation of full-time and part-time workers. Additionally, this study only examined trust-in-management as the mediating variable of workplace fun and job satisfaction. Future research should examine other mediators, which could alter the effect of workplace fun, such as work engagement (Plester and Hutchison, 2016).

To conclude, this study has provided new implications for the relationship between workplace fun and both employees' trust-in-management and job satisfaction. The mediating mechanism of trust-in-management on the relationship between workplace fun and job satisfaction has been examined, and useful suggestions for encouraging employees to enjoy their work have been offered.

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