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**Sarcasm in Organizations: A Review and Research Agenda**

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### Abstract

Although sarcastic remarks have important implications for both employees and organizations, research on sarcasm has not received adequate attention in the organizational behavior literature. The current study aims to highlight the importance of dedicating more studies to this critical variable, stressing the theoretical foundations of linking sarcastic behavior to industrial and psychological variables. Specifically, the current study seeks to discuss this concept and indicate its psychological roles in organizations. Moreover, it investigates some research avenues that deserve scholars' effort in the form of a research agenda. This agenda offers a number of propositions that could advance conceptual insights on this important topic. They address the issue of measuring sarcastic behavior and explore the potential relationships between sarcastic remarks and employees' withdrawal and innovative behaviors. Furthermore, this review proposes a research model in which hindrance and challenge stressors mediate the relationships between sarcastic remarks and withdrawal/innovative behavior. It also presents a number of dispositional and situational variables that could moderate the relationships between sarcastic remarks and hindrance and challenge stressors, and ultimately withdrawal/innovative behavior.

**Keywords:** Sarcasm; Sarcastic remarks; Hindrance/Challenge stressors; Withdrawal behavior; Innovative behavior



## Introduction

Sarcasm is verbal irony that *mainly* aims at demonstrating negative and critical attitudes toward persons or situations (Cheang & Pell, 2008). Sarcasm is considered the lowest form of wit; however, it bears a higher level of cognitive abilities (Diao et al., 2020) and involves more emotional implications than traditional verbal communication tools (Filik, Turcan, Ralph-Nearman, & Pitiot, 2019). Although sarcasm is not a formal communication technique, it is ubiquitous in organizations. Compared to other types of non-literal communication such as metaphor and idioms, sarcasm has not received researchers' appropriate attention although it needs more social context than the previously mentioned types. This is particularly relevant in business organizations where complexity of context has become a norm given that organizations increasingly encounter more workforce diversity and differences in values, norms, and cultural background.

Sarcasm is an effective way of communication as people usually perceive sarcastic remarks as less aggressive than direct critical remarks (Gerrig & Goldvarg, 2000; Toplak & Katz, 2000). However, this perception varies from an individual to another based on the extent to which sarcasm is used, the situation in which it occurs, and the characteristics and mode of the receiver (Filik et al., 2019; Katz, Blasko, & Kazmerski, 2004). Nevertheless, communication specialists warn that sometimes sarcastic behavior could harm or even destroy interrelationships among organization members and also could lead to bad performance in teams (Huang, Gino, & Galinsky, 2015).

Sarcastic behaviors could give us a good idea about the nature of an organization. These behaviors help us get insights into various organizational profiles, including employees' perception of justice, and how they react to unpleasant issues they encounter in organizations (Alcadipani, Hassard, & Islam, 2018). Sarcastic behaviors also could help us know about employees' pattern of resistance to stress. Moreover, sarcasm lets us know the role sense of humor could play in organizational communication, which is an important aspect of organizational culture (Huang et al., 2015). In this respect, organizational psychologists are concerned with two important issues related to sarcastic behavior in particular. First, what is the motivation behind an individual's sarcastic remarks? Second, the impact sarcastic remarks could cause (Bowes & Katz, 2011). Sarcastic patterns are so complicated such that they could serve multiple objectives and be directed to many targets. For example, it could be that individuals make themselves the target of sarcastic remarks to attain different goals, including making fun of themselves,

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conveying anger toward a certain issue, or sending a memorable message (Cheang & Pell, 2008; van Mulken, Burgers, & van der Plas, 2010).

Thus, having introduced the concept of sarcasm, this paper consists of the following topics. First, it reviews the literature with the purpose to address the nature and causes of sarcastic behavior in organizations. Second, it handles the specific functions and roles sarcastic behavior could play in organizations. Third, it presents research agenda in terms of research propositions that discuss the issue related to the measurement scale of sarcastic behavior and the potential relationships between sarcastic behavior and a number of important individual and organizational variables. These propositions are important given that these research avenues are under-researched and that investigating such relationships would provide us further inside into the sarcastic behavior phenomena. Specifically, linking sarcastic behavior to work withdrawal behavior would be fruitful given that when employees negatively perceive sarcastic remarks, that would let them see such sarcastic remarks as uncivil behavior. This, in turn, may lead employees to develop negative responses to cope with these stressors, including withdrawal behavior (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012).

Withdrawal behavior is associated with disengagement from the organization and is negatively related to emotional ties and the sense of obligation characteristics of organizational commitment (Somers, 2009). Concerning innovation, organizations set a higher priority for innovative behavior of their members to enhance competitive advantage. To this end, organizations seek to determine the factors that could encourage employees' innovative initiatives. One of the less-researched variables to predict innovative behavior is sarcasm. It has been argued that sarcasm can facilitate creativity through boosting abstract thinking and also enhance interpersonal trust that would help organizations better take advantage of the ideas and cognitive capabilities of their employees.(Huang et al., 2015). Another study has demonstrated that individuals' experience of sarcastic remarks helped them sharpen their ability to get involved in complex thinking and solving of creative problems (Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, Rafaeli, & Schwarz-Cohen, 2011). However, the few studies that addressed the possible link between sarcastic behavior and innovative behavior have been quasi-experiments. This attracts our attention to the need for more research work toward investigating this relationship, particularly this research effort that promotes field studies through establishing a proper conceptual framework.



### Sarcasm: Its nature and causes

Sarcasm is an ubiquitous practice in organizations and sarcastic remarks could lead to individual and organizational detriments and benefits. A variant of irony (Katz et al., 2004), sarcasm has special communication functions. The clear falseness of sarcastic behavior expresses pragmatic insincerity, which is used by the speaker to have some effect on the listener (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995; Toplak & Katz, 2000). Based on the speaker's intent and the listener's interpretation, sarcastic remarks are perceived as a message that may bear negative effect, aggressiveness, offensiveness, anger-provoking, humor, mocking, politeness, face-saving implications, and condemnation dilution or enhancement. In addition, that intonational cues are not required for people to easily understand sarcasm (Gibbs & O'Brien, 1991) is maybe another reason that urges individuals to use sarcastic expressions as an alternative to direct criticism.

Research has shown that personality traits are fundamental determinants of sarcasm. Specifically, there is a positive relationship between how much a person employs sarcastic remarks in his/her communication and personality traits. Those who report a higher score on tendency to communicate malicious humor against others are more inclined to frequently use sarcastic expressions (Filik, Howman, Ralph-Nearman, & Giora, 2018). On the other hand, the level of sense of humor employees have is one of the predictors of an individual's frequency of using sarcastic remarks (Seckman & Couch, 1989). Moreover, literature has demonstrated that there are different reasons why individuals may use sarcastic remarks in their conversations. Sarcastic remarks help persons effectively convey their messages and, at the same time, save their faces (Toplak & Katz, 2000).

Additionally, sarcasm is also a tool people may use when there are some reasons that deprive them from openly or explicitly expressing their feelings. In this regard, the way that these sarcastic remarks are expressed would shape their intended meanings (Gibbs, Leggitt, & Turner, 2002). Specifically, sarcastic behavior represents one of the coping strategies that employees may employ to mitigate the stress and dissatisfaction they perceive in the workplace (Cooper, 2005). Accordingly, employees may opt to this type of communication to express their anger emotions. However, coworkers could perceive sarcastic remarks as a form of incivility (Paulin & Griffin, 2016). Furthermore, persons use sarcasm as a way to facilitate group cohesion and affirming group solidarity. That is, sarcastic remarks determine the boundaries of a certain group members and those who are outside it (Gibbs, 2000). Based on the above, the reasons and motivations behind a

person's usage of sarcastic remarks vary depending on what functions sarcasm could perform.

### **The functions of sarcasm**

Sarcasm is a type of figurative language individuals use with the purpose to achieve different functions. People could employ sarcasm in their conversations to indirectly send a certain message and/or emphasize their understanding of a topic of interest (Gibbs et al., 2002). As indicated above, individuals employ sarcastic remarks in their communication to convey various messages that could be humorous or aggressive (Blasko & Kazmerski, 2006; Bosco, Parola, Valentini, & Morese, 2017). Additionally, through using sarcasm, speakers may want to mock or tease (Bowes & Katz, 2011). Nevertheless, sarcastic remarks that individuals make could function as a positive intention when their cues represent compliments, rather than negative or critical statements (Filik et al., 2019). Moreover, individuals may express their feeling of anger using sarcasm. When individuals use sarcastic remarks to convey negative messages, they would state a positive message while they apparently mean a negative one (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). In this respect, this function of sarcasm could be extended to convey aggressive behavior. In this case it reflects the fact that communication heavily depends on implicit information usage (Cheang & Pell, 2008). Hence, sarcastic behavior is a sort of communication that emphasizes and enhances the critical message speakers intend to convey (Colston, 1997).

It is important to note that sarcastic remarks are light versions of direct repression of anger through indirectly communicating this feeling (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). That is, anger communicated through sarcasm could be less severe as sarcasm involves humor and figurative speech (Gibbs, 2000; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). Importantly, sarcasm could function to provide resistance to job stress that one experiences (Alcadipani et al., 2018). Additionally, managers could opt to sarcastic remarks to exercise power and practice a lower level of aggressive behavior against subordinates where those employees would perceive these lashing remarks less negatively than direct criticism (Bowes & Katz, 2011). Another role that sarcasm plays is enhancing the way an individual condemns a certain action or situation.

Nevertheless, it is argued that the extent to which sarcastic remarks are less aggressive than direct criticism is contingent on some conditions related to the speaker, receiver, and the situation per se. It could be that a certain sarcastic remark, due to its severity, harms an individual's feeling much more than if the content of this remark is said directly (Dews & Winner, 1995). For example, there is a debate over the impact of sarcastic remarks,



compared to clear criticism, on various individual and organizational variables. Research posits that sarcastic criticism could be perceived as being more verbally aggressive and offensive than clear criticism (Colston, 1997; Toplak & Katz, 2000). Under such circumstances, sarcasm is seen as a negative aggressive statement that is directed to a certain victim and accordingly this person would feel more criticized than when direct criticism is used (Toplak & Katz, 2000).

To summarize, sarcastic behavior is a complicated form of communication. It bears both positive and negative features. Sarcastic behavior could contribute to effective communication and, in turn, may lead to favorable individual and organizational outcomes. On the other hand, sarcastic remarks may result in barriers and miscommunication and, hence, cause negative consequences and harmful impact on individuals and organizations. In the next section this paper presents a research agenda through which it explores and investigates significant issues related to sarcasm. The purpose of this research agenda is to provide more insights into developing a scale of sarcastic behavior and conceptually linking this concept to a number of important organizational behavioral outcomes.

### **Research Agenda**

Based on the previous discussion that stressed the various functions and roles that sarcastic behavior plays in organizations, it is clear that sarcastic behavior could have important implications for a wide number of individual and organizational variables. However, the current review study focuses on special topics. As a first priority, it discusses the conceptual and methodological issues of measuring the construct of sarcastic behavior as the organizational literature lacks scales that assess an individual's sarcastic behavior, whether perceiving or practicing. On the other hand, due to the interrelationships between sarcasm and some other related concepts, including irony and organizational cynicism, this review presents some suggestions and propositions that aim to help researchers develop a valid scale of sarcastic behavior.

Moreover, and importantly, this study investigates the potential relationships between sarcastic behavior and two important variables due their critical impact on the effectiveness of an organization— namely, an employee's withdrawal and innovative behaviors. Although sarcastic behavior is expected to have informative relationships with a number of individual and organizational relationships such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, task performance, etc., the current study focusses on withdrawal and innovative behaviors as these two variables, as

the study will propose, could show opposing patterns of relationships with sarcastic behavior based on how employees perceive sarcastic remarks.

### **Measuring sarcastic behavior: Problems and suggestions**

A common understanding that is generally related to *science* is that we can't manage what we can't measure (Drucker, 1954)! This actually applies much to the concept of sarcastic behavior where there has not been yet a valid and reliable scale of sarcastic behavior that appropriately reflects sarcasm in the management arena. Regarding sarcasm reception, almost all the studies that sought to identify the effect of sarcasm process on various individual and organizational outcomes employed the experimental paradigm. Therefore, developing a survey tool that would tap how much employees perceive sarcastic behavior would be a contribution to the organizational literature. Moreover, it seems that the construct of sarcasm needs particular consideration as it somewhat crosses with non-sarcastic irony. Specifically, research has indicated that there are specific areas in a human's brain that are responsible for social cognition. However, sarcastic remarks have an emotional component that non-sarcastic irony lacks (Filik et al., 2019). An inherent component in sarcasm is caustic style (Katz et al., 2004). This, in turn, leads to a higher negative effect when it comes to sarcastic criticism (Bosco et al., 2017). Moreover, although irony and sarcasm are used interchangeably, scholars make a distinction between these two concepts based on that sarcasm has usually a specific victim to whom sarcastic remarks are directed but there is frequently no particular victim for irony (Creusere, 1999; Katz et al., 2004).

In contrast to the general concept of irony, where a situation may exist independently of whether or not it is verbally noted, the assumption that sarcasm involves language is fundamental in the definition of sarcasm (Creusere, 1999; Katz et al., 2004). Across their three experimental studies, Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) found that as persons judged counterfactual statements referring to an explicit victim they rated these statements as sarcastic more often than counterfactual statements without a victim. Therefore, a main concern when preparing a scale for sarcastic behavior is to ensure that the developed statements would accurately reflect these conceptual differences, i.e., issues related to construct validity. This is both theoretically and methodologically fundamental given that there is research evidence that sarcasm is a special case of irony. Moreover, the findings of a recent empirical study have revealed that there have been differences in the neural mechanisms in charge of comprehending sarcasm versus irony (Filik et al., 2019). Hence, the current status of not differentiating between these





two constructs would slow down our understanding of a significant component of non-literal communication and may lead to misleading results.

Furthermore, in developing a scale for perception of sarcastic remarks we should also address the conceptual differences between sarcasm and organizational cynicism. Organizational cynicism is a negative attitude that expresses employees' belief that an organization lacks integrity. It also reflects an employee's negative expectancy of the organization's intentions whether in the present or future (Wilkerson, Evans, & Davis, 2008). This, in turn, leads employees to disparage and criticize their organizations (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998). Although organizational cynicism is considered a personality trait expressing one's beliefs about other persons, groups, and society (Kwantes & Bond, 2019), it is generally more a state variable than a trait-based dispositional variable as organizational cynicism is heavily affected by situational characteristics determining the trustworthiness of the organization (Chiaburu, Peng, Oh, Banks, & Lomeli, 2013). One of the main differences between sarcasm and organizational cynicism is that organizational cynicism reflects a continuous negative attitude about the organization (Evans, Goodman, & Davis, 2011). Thus, compared to sarcastic remarks, which have significant positive outcomes besides the negative ones, organizational cynicism is usually perceived as destructive criticism. Based on the above, we should expect a proper scale of perceived sarcastic remarks to show discriminant and predictive validity in relation to ironic remarks and organizational cynicism.

**Proposition 1:** *A developed scale of an individual's perception of sarcastic remarks should demonstrate discriminant and predictive validity in relation to ironic remarks and organizational cynicism.*

In the same vein, the issue of the frequency of involvement in sarcastic behavior should not be neglected. This is an important research inquiry to investigate as the frequency that employees utilize sarcastic behavior is informative. For example, research indicated that sociocultural characteristics of speakers determine how much individuals utilize sarcastic remarks (Creusere, 1999). Therefore, the scale tapping sarcasm should contain two, though related, distinct scales of sarcastic behavior. In other words, this scale should seek to assess the two sides of sarcasm, i.e., the extent to which individuals employ sarcasm (sending) and how individuals perceive sarcasm (receipt). Developing these separate scales would be informative as each of these scales is expected to provide us with important different perspectives on organizational climate and culture.

Specifically, research has provided some evidence that any sort of sarcastic exchange has important implications for organizational communication (Huang et al., 2015). As indicated earlier, usage of sarcastic remarks could be beneficial or detrimental based on various factors. However, we should consider the importance of investigating the frequency of the use of sarcastic remarks in light of research evidence revealing that most sarcastic remarks, compared to other non-sarcastic communication, have a *muting* effect. That is, across different studies, individuals perceived the sarcastic comments as more humorous, less insulting, rude, and critical (Bowes & Katz, 2011). This is consistent with another line of research showing that the use of sarcastic remarks functions to alleviate an insult into a diluted insult or even a compliment (Voyer & Vu, 2016). Therefore, when organizations are aware of the nature of two-way sarcastic behavior, they may be able to take initiatives and intervening actions to make the most of these behaviors and improve organizational communication.

**Proposition 2:** *Developed scales of sarcastic behavior should include how much an employee utilizes sarcastic remarks and how well an employee perceives sarcastic remarks.*

### **Sarcastic behavior and withdrawal behavior**

Sometimes sarcasm is a sort of uncivil behavior when it lacks regard for others (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). In this case sarcastic remarks often convey contempt implications that undermine relationships and negatively affect communication among employees (Huang et al., 2015). Negative sarcastic statements are characterized by a relatively higher level of confusion than direct criticism and could be often be misinterpreted. Additionally, sarcastic comments are most likely perceived as more caustic by the victim than by the speaker (Katz et al., 2004). Experimental findings showed that the speaker usually uses sarcasm as a means of verbal aggression, while for the affected person (victim) sarcastic remarks would be interpreted as a job stressor. Thus, a sarcastic remark may be taken as a more severe form of criticism than when criticism is directly expressed (Toplak & Katz, 2000). Job stressors threatening employees' wellbeing lead to strain that, in turn, results in varying harmful psychological, physiological, or behavioral outcomes (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001). When strain causes negative emotions and cognitions, one way to cope with this undesirable experience is emotional and physical withdrawal from work (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007).



Following feeling of disrespect, employees are expected to try to restore their lost self-esteem by punishing the perceived source of that injustice, ultimately triggering desire for revenge (Meier & Spector, 2013). As another way to response to this stress, employees demonstrate practices such as withholding information or spreading rumors as subtler forms of retaliation (Meier & Spector, 2013). These patterns of behavior are consistent with the emotion-centered model of Spector and Fox (2002) which suggests that a person does not necessarily deal with negative emotions by directly addressing its sources. Alternatively, it is also possible for this person to engage in withdrawal behaviors, such as wasting work time, or avoiding work situations involving the source of negative emotions.

**Proposition 3:** *An employee's perception of severe negative sarcastic remarks in the workspace is expected to increase withdrawal behavior.*

### **Sarcasm and innovative behavior**

Although sarcastic remarks are associated with a number of negative consequences, sarcasm could be linked to positive implications (Huang et al., 2015). Specifically, as individuals send negative emotional loads to others through sarcastic remarks, sarcastic remarks may bear beneficial outcomes. This is unsurprising since sarcastic remarks convey disagreement and show conflict in a less threatening manner compared to direct anger (Măciucă, ghinea, & Cantaragiu, 2019; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). Based on Kuppens, Van Mechelen, and Meulders (2004), individuals are inclined to express and direct their angry to persons who are hoped to change their own attitudes and behavior. As one expresses his/her anger, he or she frequently tries to attract the receivers' attention to the need to change their behavior (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Research has indicated that sarcastic comments could enhance employees' creative abilities as they sharpen their abstract thinking (Huang et al., 2015) and also help them handle complex thinking more effectively (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). In contrast to concrete thinking, which is related more to common and accessible problem solutions, abstract thinking is associated with more fresh and novel solutions (Măciucă et al., 2019; Ward, Patterson, & Sifonis, 2004).

Nevertheless, it seems that a critical research inquiry relates to the apparently contradictory relationships representing the effect of sarcastic remarks on withdrawal behavior and innovative behaviors. Actually, the extent to which sarcastic remarks are perceived as positive or negative could

justify this issue. When employees perceive sarcastic remarks as a severe job stressor, they would try their best to cope with this negative experience using available resources. If they failed to appropriately respond to this stress so that they restore the status of their psychological balance, they would face an anger-provoking condition. That, in turn, would lead to work counterproductive behavior, including withdrawal behavior (Geddes & Callister, 2007). On contrary to this, when employees tolerate sarcastic remarks, the content of criticism elicits employees' cognitive effort and helps them get involved in lateral thinking. Specifically, sarcastic remarks sent let individuals practice complex thinking, increase their attention span and broaden their sensitivity to peripheral cues, and ultimately enhance their creativeness by helping them gain more insight into workplace problems (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). Sarcastic remarks used to express anger may activate tolerable conflict, which in turn engenders openness to problems and lets employees have different perspectives to handle them (Măciucă et al., 2019).

**Proposition 4:** *An employee's perception of negative sarcastic remarks in the workspace is expected to stimulate innovative behavior.*

Based on the above, we could argue that an employee's perception determines the extent to which how he/she perceives another's sarcastic remarks and, in turn, whether these remarks would lead to positive or negative outcomes. This section is dedicated to discuss the mechanism by which sarcastic remarks are related to positive or negative outcomes and the factors that help employees develop either withdrawal or innovative behavior from sarcastic remarks.

### **Elaborating on the relationships between sarcastic remarks and withdrawal/innovative behavior: The mediating and moderating variables**

The way that an employee perceives sarcastic remarks has important implications for the concepts of hindrance and challenge stressors. Hindrance stressors are those stressors that individuals tend to appraise as constraining their personal development and work-related accomplishment, while challenge stressors are those individuals perceive as enhancing their personal growth and achievement (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000; Podsakoff et al., 2007). When individuals see workplace stressors as obstacles in their way to attain their goals, they feel highly



stressed and negative consequences are expected to occur, including withdrawal behavior. This usually happens when employees perceive sarcastic remarks as very personal and severe.

On the contrary, sometimes it is necessary for employees to experience job demands that let them encounter workplace challenges allowing them to seize opportunities and to learn and grow. Some examples of these challenge stressors are workload, complexity of work and responsibility (Rodell & Judge, 2009). Mild sarcastic remarks could belong to challenge stressors. This typically occurs as sarcastic remarks could attract employees' attention to some shortages in their performance or some gaps in work environment even if these remarks are somewhat uncomfortable. Some research findings have provided us with promising evidence concerning the potential effect of challenge stressors on innovative behavior (Huang et al., 2015; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011).

Hindrance stressors are positively related to exhaustion, ultimately increasing withdrawal behavior and decreasing innovative initiatives due to heavily consuming one's psychological resources. On the other hand, although challenge stressors could consume one's energy, they are stimulating. When employees do not harshly react to sarcastic remarks, sarcastic remarks could stimulate employees to think nontraditionally to address criticizing messages sarcastic remarks convey. As a challenge stressor, sarcastic remarks are linked to vigor, which is a main component of work engagement (Van den Broeck, De Cuyper, De Witte, & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Engagement provides employees with more psychological meaningfulness, which, in turn, engenders more personal initiatives (Bhatnagar, 2012).

Sarcastic remarks that could enrich one's feeling of challenges and job requirements are considered a type of positive communication. Although sarcastic remarks could be perceived to be contemptuous, employees use sarcastic remarks to send positive messages, and increase the level of productive conflict. This conflict could enhance one's cognitive exercises and abstract thinking (Huang et al., 2015). Although sarcastic remarks are positively associated with stress (Alcadipani et al., 2018; Paulin & Griffin, 2016), sarcastic remarks that are perceived as constructive or productive stimulate nontraditional thinking. Sarcastic remarks that present nonpersonal conflict facilitate employees' abilities to cope with stressful situations in the workplace. In other words, sarcastic remarks and their humorous implications function to change the meaning of even very demanding situations and make them no longer stressful, and hence reducing withdrawal behavior (Sibe, Martijn De, Lorenz Van, & Jeffrey, 2010).

**Proposition 5.** *Hindrance and challenge stressors mediate the relationships between sarcastic remarks and withdrawal/innovative behavior such that (a) perceived criticizing sarcastic remarks increase challenge stressors, which increase innovative behavior and decrease withdrawal behavior, and (b) perceived aggressive sarcastic remarks increase hindrance stressors, which increase withdrawal behavior and decrease innovative behavior.*

The next logical issue to consider is how employees perceive sarcastic remarks as hindrance or challenge stressors and the conditions that shape their perception of workplace stressors. In this part the paper will explain a number of moderating variables that provide us with further insights into an employee's perception of the impact of sarcastic remarks on withdrawal and innovative behaviors through hindrance/challenge stressors. Specifically, the current paper will discuss some important personal and situational variables that could buffer or enrich the link between sarcastic remarks and withdrawal and innovative behaviors.

As indicated earlier, personality traits are critical determinants of sarcastic behavior. There has been abundant research evidence that personality traits are one of the most fundamental antecedents of one's perception (Wu & Lebreton, 2011). Although there have been various personality traits in the extant psychology literature, this study limits its discussion to the Big-five trait taxonomy as this taxonomy is considered one of the most valid and acceptable personality system frameworks among psychological and organizational scholars (John & Srivastava, 1999). These five personality traits are expected to determine, at least partially, how employees perceive sarcastic remarks. Those who score low on these personality factors are inclined to harshly receive sarcastic remarks. Individuals who have lower levels of such personality traits possess limited amount of psychological resources that are needed to properly handle workplace stressors (Sulea, Fine, Fischmann, Sava, & Dumitru, 2013). However, those who score high on these personality traits are expected to make the most of these criticizing remarks and positively address the content of the message sarcastic remarks convey.

More specifically, extraversion provides individuals with better ways to interact and understand others, helps them build positive relationships, and fosters their stress tolerance (Kerr, Kerr, & Xu, 2018). Agreeable individuals also have been found to appropriately and cooperatively deal with conflict and strive for common understanding, and try to keep social affiliations (Witt, Burke, Barrick, & Mount, 2002). For conscientiousness, research has revealed that conscientiousness helps individuals solve problems and cope



with various stressors. Importantly, conscientiousness has also been found to be strongly negatively related to disengagement responses to stressors (Abbas & Raja, 2018; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). It is also linked to intrinsic motivation, which enhances achievement orientation and increases employee's desire for attaining their challenging goals (Kerr et al., 2018).

Individuals who have a high level of emotional stability are expected to less negatively perceive job stressors, compared to those scoring low on this personality trait where their nervous system could be activated even with minor external stimuli (Cieslak, Knoll, & Luszczynska, 2007). Furthermore, those who are open to others' experience tend to better treat complex problems (Silvia & Sanders, 2010) and demonstrate better interpersonal interaction (Tsai, Chen, & Chen, 2012).

**Proposition 6.** *Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience moderate the relationships between sarcastic remarks and withdrawal and innovative behaviors such that higher perception of these personality traits will buffer the positive effect of sarcastic remarks on hindrance stressors and foster the positive effect of sarcastic remarks on challenge stressors.*

Apart from the influence of personality traits, there are some situational variables that are expected to affect employees' perception of sarcastic remarks. Initially, employees evaluate the stressors in the workplace in light of how they view work environment (Sacramento, Fay, & West, 2013).

Organizational culture has various elements that make organizations unique and indicate how they operate and how employees are expected to behave inside organizations. These elements include values, norms, assumptions, expectations, experiences, and attitudes. The current study focusses on the aspect of humor as a potential moderator in the proposed relationships between sarcastic remarks and withdrawal/innovative behavior. Humor is not just a concept related to fun; rather, it is a significant component of organizational culture of successful organizations (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). An organization that is characterized by a higher level of humorous exchange helps its members develop positive relationships and mutual understanding (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015), letting employees hold positive assumptions about their coworkers' intention and more positively perceive sarcastic remarks.

On the other hand, organizational justice, i.e., how much fairness in procedures and distribution of rewards, has a possible buffering effect on the relationships between sarcastic remarks and their perceived stress.

Moreover, how employees perceive how much their organization keep their dignity, or interactional justice, affects the level of stress employees experience (He, Zhu, & Zheng, 2014). As individuals view their organization violate fairness expectations, their wellbeing is harmed. Organizational justice has been found to mitigate employees' responses to stressful working conditions (Wang, Lu, & Siu, 2015). Moreover, organizational justice is related to building trust and commitment among employees and inducing positive emotions and feelings in organizations (Pérez-Rodríguez, Topa, & Beléndez, 2019).

Another potential situational moderator is how much supportive communication exists in the workplace. Literature has shown that social support through communication that coworkers and supervisors provide for employees helps them manage workplace stressors and reduce role ambiguity and conflict (Monnot & Beehr, 2014; Reb, Chaturvedi, Narayanan, & Kudesia, 2019). One way to understand how supportive communication functions to manage stressful situations created by sarcastic remarks is that supportive communication encourages employees to reappraise how sarcastic remarks are interpreted, inducing them to perceive sarcastic comments as an opportunity to make positive changes rather than a threat-based communication (Chadwick, Zoccola, Figueroa, & Rabideau, 2016).

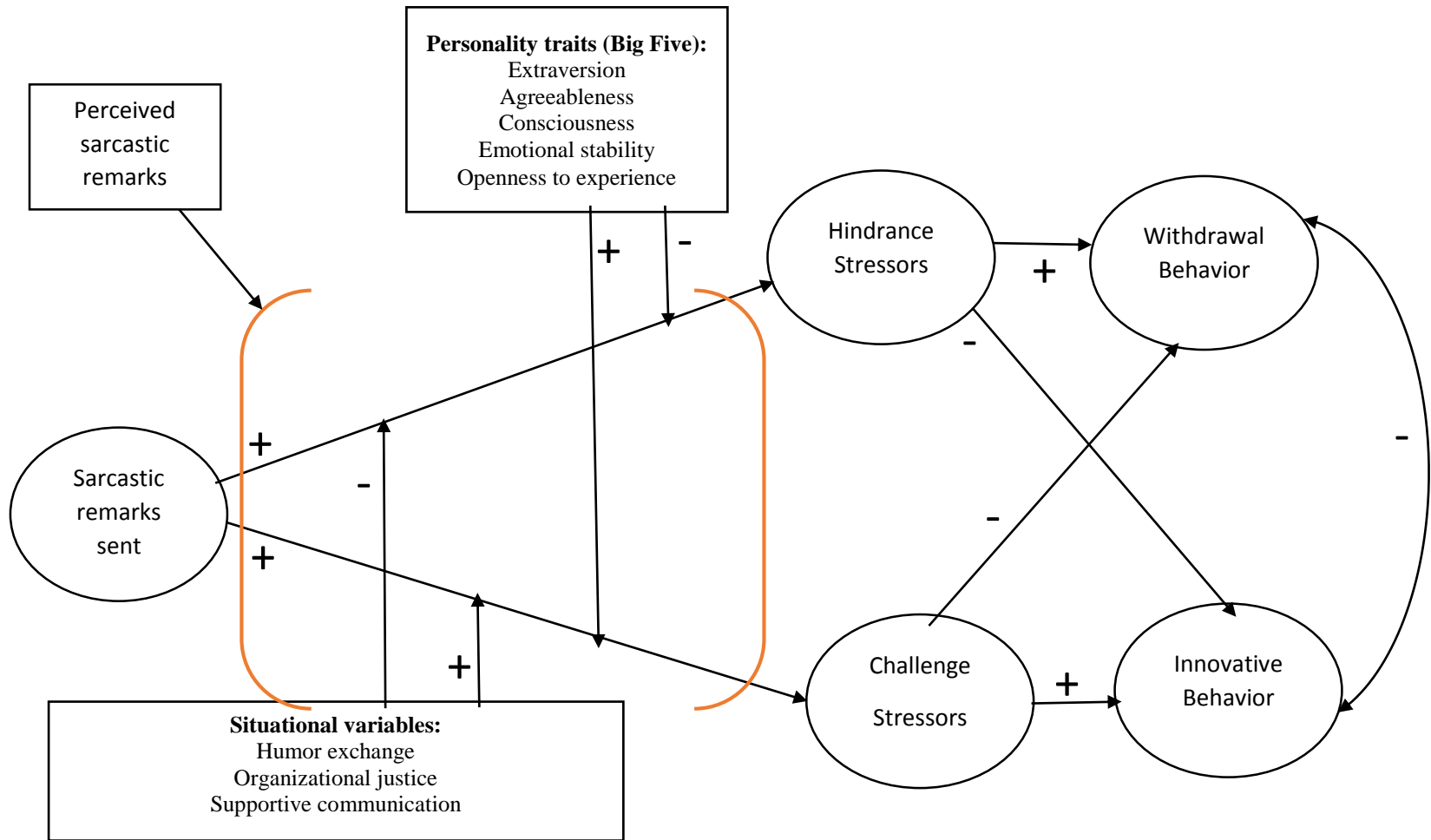
**Proposition 7.** *Humor exchange, organizational justice, and supportive communication moderate the relationships between sarcastic remarks and withdrawal and innovative behaviors such that higher perception of these situational variables will buffer the positive effect of sarcastic remarks on hindrance stressors and foster the positive effect of sarcastic remarks on challenge stressors.*

The previous suggested relationships represent a research model that could be conceptually extended and empirically examined. Figure 1 indicates this proposed model. It is noteworthy that the theoretical framework the current study provides does not intend to develop a comprehensive research model. Rather, it aims to provide more insights into the potential negative and, particularly, positive impact sarcastic behavior could have on various outcome variables. Moreover, it stresses the importance of studying sarcastic behavior as an under-researched topic.





**Figure 1. Proposed model of the factors that shape the effect of sarcastic remarks on withdrawal and innovative behaviors**



## **Conclusion**

This study reviewed the concept of sarcasm with the purpose to enrich our understanding of its implications in the workplace. It discussed what is meant by sarcasm, compared to non-sarcastic irony and organizational cynicism, and indicated the different roles and functions sarcastic remarks have in organizational communication. Reviewing literature indicated that organizational literature lacks a suitable scale that particularly could be used in organizations. The current study presented a number of propositions and suggestions that are hoped to help develop a valid scale of sarcastic behavior. It also proposed and explained the way sarcastic remarks could be linked to withdrawal and innovative behaviors. Importantly, it also presented a research model suggesting that the hindrance-challenge stressor framework works as a mediator in the prior relationships. Moreover, it proposed a number of personality traits and situational variables that are expected to either buffer or enhance the relationships between sarcastic remarks and hindrance/challenge stressors, and, in turn, withdrawal/innovative behavior. Researchers are encouraged to further investigate these propositions and empirically evaluate such relationships.

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