When Humor Backfires: Revisiting the Relationship Between Humorous Marketing and Brand Attitude

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Report Summary

Marketing researchers and practitioners believe that humorous advertising is beneficial. Cautioning against a wholly positive view of humorous advertising, research outside of marketing demonstrates that humorous experiences often have a negative underpinning. Caleb Warren and A. Peter McGraw build on the idea that humor arises, in part, from the perception of something threatening or wrong (i.e., a violation) to document how marketing communications that attempt humor can backfire and elicit negative feelings—even when seemingly successful (i.e., when consumers are amused).

An initial set of three studies show that negative feelings, more than perceptions of humor, determine whether a humor attempt helps or hurts brand attitude. Study 1 manipulated whether marketing students attempted to create an advertisement that was humorous, creative, or persuasive, and found that even though ads attempting to be funny were perceived to be more humorous than ads attempting to be creative or persuasive, they also elicited more negative feelings and ended up hurting consumers’ attitudes towards the advertised brand. Studies 2 and 3 investigated the relationship between perceived humor, negative feelings, and brand attitude in samples of real print advertisements (study 2) and advertisements published in prior academic studies (study 3). As in study 1, consumers’ attitudes towards the advertised brand depended on the negative feelings the ad elicited, not on whether or not consumers considered the ad humorous. Moreover, humorous advertisements increased brand attitudes when the increase in humor corresponds with a decrease in negative feelings, but decreased brand attitudes when the increase in humor corresponds with an increase in negative feelings.

Three subsequent studies tested a framework to help explain when humor attempts are most likely to backfire by eliciting harmful negative feelings. Collectively, the inquiry reveals that humorous marketing is especially risky when content (1) features highly threatening attempts at humor rather than mildly threatening attempts at humor rather than mildly threatening attempts, (2) threatens specific people rather than people in general, and (3) motivates avoidance rather than approach. Thus, equally humorous advertisements can have very different effects on brand attitudes depending on how the ad creates humor.

Marketers should continue to create humorous marketing communications in order to attract attention and entertain consumers, but they need to be careful not to inadvertently hurt their brand in the process. To do so, the authors recommend that marketers create humor by depicting benign violations that are not too severe, don’t ridicule a specific person or group, and are unlikely to prompt avoidance.

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WHEN HUMOR BACKFIRES: REVISITING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMOROUS MARKETING AND BRAND ATTITUDE

There is a strong belief among both practitioners and academics that humorous advertising is beneficial (Beard 2005; Flaherty, Weinberger, and Gulas 2004). Although there is compelling evidence that humorous ads attract attention and entertain consumers (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006), prior studies investigating the effect of humorous advertising on brand attitudes reveal mixed results. Nonetheless, reviews of the literature conclude that humor benefits brand attitudes as well (Eisend 2009, 2011). The belief that humorous advertising enhances brand attitudes helps explain why humor is commonly pursued in advertising (Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger 2010), as consumers are far more likely to purchase and recommend favorably evaluated brands (Herr and Fazio 1993; Keller 1993).

We urge marketers to be cautious with their humor attempts by highlighting conditions in which humorous advertising can backfire and hurt consumers’ evaluation of the brand. We draw on recent advancements in humor theory, which propose that humor occurs when something that subjectively threatens a person’s well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (i.e., a violation) simultaneously seems acceptable or okay (i.e., benign; McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012). The presence of a violation – the same factor that gives rise to humor – suggests that humor attempts may elicit negative feelings independent of perceived humor.

We build on the insight that humor attempts may elicit negative feelings to make three new predictions. One, humorous advertisements can decrease brand attitudes by eliciting negative feelings – even when consumers consider the ad to be humorous. Two, the relationship between attempting humor and brand attitude depends on whether the humor attempt increases or decreases negative feelings. Thus, equally humorous ads can have opposite effects on brand attitude depending on whether the ad increases or decreases negative feelings. Three, attending to the way that advertisements generate humor helps explain whether a humorous ad is more or less likely to backfire. Ads that generate humor using highly threatening stimuli (as opposed to only mildly threatening ones), threaten specific people or groups of people (as opposed to people in general), and motivate avoidance (as opposed to approach) have a higher risk of also causing negative feelings that hurt attitudes towards the brand. We conclude by offering a checklist to help managers create humorous marketing communications that attract attention and entertain.
consumers without inadvertently hurting brand evaluations.

**Humorous Marketing And Brand Attitude**

There is no agreed on definition of humor (Gulas and Weinberger 2006). Martin (2007, p. 5) explains that “humor is a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing situation, and also the affective responses involved in the enjoyment of it.” Thus, the term could refer to either (1) a psychological response characterized by the appraisal that something is funny, the positive emotion of amusement (or mirth), and the tendency to laugh, or (2) the stimuli that elicit this response (Martin 2007; Veatch 1998). We distinguish between the stimulus and response by referring to the stimulus intended to elicit a humorous response as a *humor attempt*. When a humor attempt successfully elicits its intended response, we refer to the stimulus as *humorous* and the response as *perceived humor*. We operationalize the extent to which an advertisement is humorous as being a socially constructed, continuous variable, such that one ad is more humorous than another to the extent that it elicits higher ratings of funniness, amusement, and/or laughter from the consumers exposed to the ad.

Advertisers frequently attempt to be funny (Beard 2005; Gulas and Weinberg 2006). Humorous social media, like the “Evian Roller Babies” video and the Old Spice’s “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” campaign, elicit millions of views and generate buzz both online and off. Humorous content also pervades more traditional media, appearing regularly in television, print, and radio advertisements, and by 2009 was featured in over 75% of the advertisements in the Super Bowl (Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger 2010). Academic research encourages humorous marketing by highlighting the benefits of humorous advertising, such as increased attention and more favorable consumer attitudes towards the advertisement (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006). The effect that humorous ads have on brand attitude is less clear, as some studies find humorous advertising increases brand attitude, but other studies do not (see Eisend 2009 and Gulas and Weinberger 2006 for reviews). Literature reviews, nonetheless, conclude that humor attempts – at least those that successfully elicit perceived humor – benefit brands, although the magnitude of the benefit depends on several moderating
variables. A recent meta-analysis concludes, “Practitioners should keep in mind, though, that humor basically enhances $A_{BR}$ [i.e., brand attitude], and it is simply the strength of the effect that varies” (Eisend 2009; p. 200). In contrast, we argue – and will demonstrate – that certain types of humorous advertisements risk hurting brand attitudes.

**Humor’s Negative Underpinnings**

Although perceiving humor is a positive experience, literature outside of marketing suggests that humor has a negative underlying source. Researchers from a variety of theoretical perspectives contend that humor requires disparagement (Zillman 1983), maladjustment (McDougall 1922), the release of repressed, anti-social drives (Freud 1928), something demeaning happening to someone else (Gruner 1999), an initial impression be reinterpreted as less valued than it at first seemed (i.e., diminishment; Wyer and Collins 1992), something irrational or improper (Morreall 1983), a perceived threat (Ramachandran 1998), or a challenge (Gulas and Weinberger 2006).

We draw on a theoretical account that synthesizes such claims by explaining that humor occurs when a person experiences a *benign violation* (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012; Veatch 1998). A benign appraisal is the subjective perception that something is normative, acceptable, sensible, or okay (McGraw and Warren 2010). A violation appraisal refers to anything that subjectively threatens a person’s well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (Veatch 1998). Violations include physical (e.g., tickling) and identity threats (e.g., teasing), as well as behaviors that break cultural (e.g., inappropriate attire), social (e.g., flatulence), moral (e.g., bestiality), conversational (e.g., sarcasm), linguistic (e.g., wordplay), and logic norms (e.g., absurdities; McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998). Marketing communications depict a wide range of violations, including everything from linguistic violations that capitalize on a word’s double meaning (e.g., John Deere’s “Nothing runs like a Deere”) to excessive physical aggression (e.g., Reebok’s campaign in which an “office linebacker” tackles disobedient employees).

The benign violation theory holds that humor is perceived only when a person appraises a violation as benign. For example, tickling evokes laughter when a trusted aggressor levies a playful attack (Veatch 1998). Tickling oneself doesn’t evoke laughter because there is no
violation. Nor does tickling evoke laughter if the tickler seems creepy or is too aggressive. In this case, the violation wouldn’t seem benign. Several experiments offer empirical support for the theory (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012). In one study, people who judged a behavior, like snorting the remains of a deceased relative, as being both wrong (i.e., a violation) and acceptable (i.e., benign) tended to laugh and show signs of amusement, whereas people who judged the behavior as strictly wrong or strictly acceptable did not (McGraw and Warren 2010).

**Affective Reactions To Humor Attempts**

The possibility that a violation underlies humor suggests a potential risk of using humorous advertising: violations often elicit negative feelings rather than perceived humor. Uncontrollable negative occurrences often elicit fear, sadness, or distress (Roseman 2013), controllable mistakes tend to elicit shame or guilt (Weiner 1985), behaviors that harm or impinge on a person’s rights tend to elicit anger (Rozin et al. 1999), and impure, moral transgressions tend to elicit disgust (Chapman et al. 2009; Rozin et al. 1999). Given that the same factor (i.e., a violation) that seems to be a ripe source of perceived humor can also produce negative reactions, might humor attempts elicit negative affect instead of or in addition to perceived humor?

Understanding consumers’ affective reactions to humor attempts is important because research demonstrates that affective reactions to advertisements influence brand attitudes (Edell and Burke 1987; Holbrook and Batra 1987). Affect refers to elementary, consciously accessible feelings that are not directed at anything in particular (Russell and Barrett 1999). The most prominent dimension of affect is valence, which refers to whether the feelings are positive or negative (Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo 2001). Positive affective reactions include amusement, the emotional component of perceived humor, as well as joy, pride, awe, excitement, and other positive feelings. Negative affect similarly includes a range of emotions (e.g., fear, disgust, confusion, etc.). Research shows that positive affective reactions to an advertisement typically help the brand and negative affective reactions typically hurt it, a point echoed in the humor literature (Eisend 2011). The influence of attempting humor on brand attitudes, therefore, should depend on whether the humor attempt elicits perceived humor, negative affect, or both.

As previously noted, the benign violation theory proposes that humor attempts are humorous when the consumer perceives a benign violation. Successfully creating benign violations seems
particularly important to advertisers because the literature finds that only advertisements that are actually humorous are beneficial (Flaherty, Weinberger, and Gulas 2004). Being successfully humorous is also important because failed humor attempts, like an insulting advertisement or an ill-timed joke, can elicit negative feelings, such as fear (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000) or offense (Beard 2008). Failed humor attempts may hurt a brand by evoking negative feelings instead of perceived humor.

An important question, though, is what affective reactions will consumers have when the humor attempt does succeed? Some suggest that successful humor attempts should always elicit strictly positive affective reactions (e.g., amusement), yet others find that successful humor attempts may elicit both perceived humor and negative feelings. Consistent with a view that positive and negative feelings are opposites (e.g., Russell and Barrett 1999), most theories describe perceived humor and negative feelings as mutually exclusive (e.g., Gruner 1997; Rothbart 1973; Veatch 1998). In this view, positive affective reactions, including relief and amusement, replace any negative feelings initially elicited by a humor attempt. The marketing literature largely ascribes to view that perceived humor and negative feelings are opposites, arguing that humor attempts increase positive affective reactions and decrease negative affective reactions (Eisend 2009; 2011). However, despite this conclusion, we were only able to find three empirical studies that measured negative affective reactions to humorous advertisements, and the results of these studies were inconsistent (Conway and Dube 2003; Pelsmacker and Geuens 1999). Overall, there appears to be little data directly addressing whether humorous ads are more or less likely to elicit negative feelings than non-humorous ads.

In contrast, there are compelling reasons why successful humor attempts may elicit negative affective reactions in addition to perceived humor. Accumulating evidence in psychology shows that positive and negative affective reactions are not mutually exclusive, but are independent and sometimes co-occur (e.g., Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo 2001). Mixed affective reactions are especially common when people have multiple appraisals of the same situation or stimulus (Larsen et al. 2004). Perceiving something as both a violation and benign, of course, requires multiple appraisals; thus, the same multiple appraisals that yield perceived humor may evoke mixed feelings. Indeed, several studies document cases in which people exhibit both signs of perceived humor and negative affect. People laugh but also feel pain when tickled and report both amusement and disgust when exposed to toilet humor or harmless, amoral behaviors (Harris
and Alvarado 2005; Hemenover and Schimmack 2007; McGraw and Warren 2010). Thus, the belief that humorous marketing communications decrease negative affective reactions may be unfounded. Some ads may elicit both perceived humor and negative feelings.

Our inquiry builds on three findings to predict that humor attempts risk eliciting negative feelings independent of perceived humor: (1) successful humor attempts occur in response to the perception of a benign violation; (2) violations often elicit negative feelings; and (3) multiple appraisals, including perceiving something as both a violation and benign, can yield mixed affective reactions.

H1: Humor attempts can elicit negative affective reactions independent of perceived humor.

If humorous ads can elicit negative feelings, as H1 suggests, then the effect of a humorous marketing communication on brand attitude will depend both on (1) the extent to which the marketing communication elicits negative feelings independent of perceived humor, and (2) the relative influence of perceived humor and negative feelings on brand attitude. We return to the discussion of when humor attempts are more or less likely to elicit negative affective reactions after study 3. Now, we focus on the relative influence of perceived humor versus negative feelings on brand attitude.

While the literature has not discussed the relative influence of perceived humor and negative affect on brand attitudes, many studies have compared the relative influence of positivity to negativity, in general. Negative stimuli tend to have a greater influence than positive stimuli on impression formation, physiological arousal, attention, learning, moods, and many other psychological phenomena (Baumeister et al. 2001; Rozin and Royzman 2001). The tendency for negativity to be more influential than positivity suggests that negative affective reactions should have a greater influence on brand attitude than perceived humor. A second reason that negative feelings may have a greater influence is that amusement, the emotional component of perceived humor, is only one of many possible positive feelings. Negative affective reactions, in contrast, include a wide range of feelings including disgust, anger, offense, fear, contempt, embarrassment, sadness, irritation, and boredom. Therefore, perceived humor may be less likely to influence brand attitude than negative feelings because its emotional component is narrower, encompassing only one of many positive feelings. For both reasons, we hypothesize that the effect of a humor attempt on brand attitude will depend more on the extent to which it elicits negative feelings than the extent to which it successfully elicits perceived humor.
H2: Negative affective reactions have a larger influence on brand attitude than perceived humor.

Overview of studies

We organize the paper into two parts. The first part of the paper follows the methodological example set by Holbrook and Batra (1987; see also Alden et al. 2000; Madden and Weinberger 1982) by testing H1 and H2 across samples of advertisements created by marketing students (study 1), marketing professionals (study 2), and academic researchers (study 3). The three studies confirm that humor attempts can elicit negative affective reactions independent of perceived humor, and that these negative feelings, rather than perceived humor, determine the effect of the humor attempt on brand attitude. Importantly, the studies illustrate that some humorous advertisements hurt brand attitude by inadvertently increasing negative feelings in addition to perceived humor.

The second part of the paper addresses the question of which humor attempts are most likely to elicit harmful, negative affective reactions. Humor attempts eliciting negative feelings risk hurting brand attitude, but humor attempts that elicit perceived humor without generating negative feelings may benefit marketers by attracting attention and entertaining consumers without also inadvertently hurting the brand. Therefore, we build on the insight that humor requires a violation to hypothesize and test factors that moderate negative affective reactions – and hence brand attitude – to humor attempts. Specifically, three experiments (studies 4-6) show that accounting for the characteristics of a humorous violation – particularly, its severity (H3), target (H4), and type (H5) – helps explain why similarly humorous marketing communications have different effects on brand attitude.

Study 1: Attempting Humor Can Increase Negative Feelings

Our first study examined whether attempting humor might inadvertently backfire by comparing advertisement headlines attempting to be humorous with headlines attempting to be creative or persuasive. Because a violation is a necessary ingredient in humor (McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998), we expected that even though humor attempts would be perceived as more humorous, they would also elicit more negative feelings than advertisements attempting
to be creative or persuasive. If negative feelings have a stronger influence on brand attitude than perceived humor, as predicted, then the humor attempts should yield lower brand attitudes than the ads that do not attempt humor.

**Design**

The study included two phases. In the first phase, 102 undergraduate marketing students wrote advertisement copy for a consumer product. In the second phase, a different sample of 77 students from the same population rated their affective reactions to the advertisements or their attitudes towards the advertised brand.

*Phase 1: Ad creation.* Participants created a headline for one of two consumer products: Dyson Bladeless Fans or Meuller Premium Sausages. We manipulated the objective of the advertisement such that participants attempted to be humorous, creative, or persuasive. Thus, the study used a 3 (objective: humor, creativity, persuasion) x 2 (product replicate: fan, sausage) between-subjects design. Participants read the following instructions, which varied as indicated across the conditions: “The purpose of this study is to see how [humorous/creative/ persuasive] you can be. Specifically, we want you to spend the next 5 to 10 minutes writing a [humorous/creative/persuasive] advertisement for the product pictured on the next page.” On the following page, participants viewed either the image of the bladeless fan or sausage shown in table 1 and spent at least five minutes writing advertisement copy for the brand. Example headlines for the bladeless fan include: “This bladeless fan will you keep you twice as cool which may cause side effects of increased significant others” (humorous); “The Dyson bladeless fan: a new way to stay cool” (creative); and “With its elegant design the Dyson bladeless fan now uses less to provide more / Dyson Labs have just discovered a new and safer way of giving you what you need when you need it” (persuasive).

*Phase 2: Ad evaluation.* Different participants rated the advertisements created during the first phase. In order to reduce the number of ratings required, participants either rated only the fan ads or the sausage ads. Additionally, to reduce the possibility that the mere act of evaluating affective reactions would influence brand attitude ratings or the mere act of evaluating brand attitude would influence affective reaction ratings, participants either rated their affective reactions (i.e., perceived humor, positive affect, negative affect) or brand attitudes, but not both.
Thus, we used a 2 (product: fan, sausage) x 2 (measure: affective reactions, brand attitudes) design to assign participants to rating conditions in the second phase of the study.

Consistent with previous studies that have asked respondents to rate a sample of advertisements (e.g., Alden et al. 2000; Holbrook and Batra 1987), we used single item scales to assess perceived humor, positive affect, and negative affect. Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which each advertisement “is funny,” “arouses positive feelings (i.e., happiness, amusement, joy, elation, excitement, awe, serenity, contentment, etc.)” and “arouses negative feelings (i.e., discomfort, offense, disgust, embarrassment, anger, fear, irritation, etc.)” on a seven-point scale anchored by “less than average” and “more than average.” We averaged the ratings across participants to calculate a score of perceived humor, positive affective reactions, and negative affective reactions for each advertisement. Other participants rated their attitude towards the brand for each advertisement on three seven-point scales anchored by “Dislike/Like,” “Unfavorable/ Favorable,” and “Less interested in the brand/More interested in the brand.” We averaged the ratings across participants to calculate a score on “like,” “favorable,” and “interested” for each advertisement. We averaged across items to calculate an overall rating of brand attitude ($\alpha_{\text{fan}} = .99; \alpha_{\text{sausage}} = .99$).

**Results**

*Perceived humor.* First, we examined whether the ads attempting to be humorous successfully elicited perceived humor. A 3 (objective: humorous, creative, persuasive) x 2 (product: fan, sausage) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of objective ($F_{2,96} = 26.49, p < .001$) and a significant interaction between objective and the ad replicate ($F_{2,96} = 4.21, p < .05$; means reported in table 1). Contrast tests confirmed that for both products the ads attempting humor were perceived to be more humorous than the ads attempting to be creative (fan: $F_{1,48} = 9.92, p < .01$; sausage: $F_{1,48} = 10.69, p < .01$) and the ads attempting to be persuasive (fan: $F_{1,48} = 17.43, p < .001$; sausage: $F_{1,48} = 34.90, p < .001$). The interaction occurred because participants perceived the ads attempting to be creative as more humorous than the ads attempting to be persuasive for the sausage ads ($F_{1,48} = 6.95, p < .05$), but not for the fan ads ($F_{1,48} = 1.05, p > .3$). Importantly, however, on average the humor attempts were successfully humorous eliciting more perceived humor than ads attempting other objectives for both products.
**Positive affective reactions.** Although the humor attempts successfully elicited higher levels of perceived humor, they did not increase positive feelings more generally relative to the ads trying to be creative or persuasive (main effect of objective: $F_{2,96} = 2.28, p > .1$). We suspect that the reason for the insignificant difference is that ads attempting to be creative or persuasive likely elicited other positive affective reactions aside from perceived humor. The reason for the insignificant difference is irrelevant to our argument. The fact that this difference was insignificant is relevant, however, because it illustrates that differences in positive affective reactions cannot account for the observed effects on brand attitude reported below.

**Negative affective reactions.** A 3 (objective: humorous, creative, persuasive) x 2 (product replicate: fan, sausage) ANOVA revealed only a significant main effect of objective ($F_{2,96} = 8.30, p < .001$). Because it did not interact with the product replicate, we collapsed across the replicate to assess the effects of the objective manipulation. Consistent with the prediction that humor attempts can elicit negative feelings, in addition to eliciting more perceived humor, the ads attempting to be humorous elicited more negative affective reactions than both the ads attempting to be creative ($F_{1,99} = 9.28, p < .01$) and the ads attempting to be persuasive ($F_{1,99} = 14.88, p < .001$). The difference in negative affective reactions between ads attempting to be creative and ads attempting to be persuasive was not significant ($F_{1,99} = .66, p > .4$).

Additionally, in contrast to the perspective that perceived humor and negative feelings are opposites, negative affective reactions were positively correlated with perceived humor ($r = .32, p < .001$). The significant positive correlation is an even stronger result than predicted by our hypothesis that humor attempts can elicit negative affective reactions independent of perceived humor (H1), but it provides strong evidence that successfully eliciting perceived humor does not preclude also eliciting negative feelings.

**Brand attitude.** Next, we conducted a 3 (objective: humorous, creative, persuasive) x 2 (product replicate: fan, sausage) ANOVA to assess the relationship between attempting humor and brand attitude. There was a significant main effect of objective ($F_{2,96} = 16.34, p < .001$) and a marginally significant main effect of product replicate ($F_{1,96} = 3.64, p = .06$). Because the interaction was not significant ($F_{2,96} = .58, p > .5$), we collapsed across the product replicate to assess the effects of the objective manipulation. Consistent with our claim that humor attempts can backfire by hurting brand attitudes, ads attempting to be humorous led to lower brand attitudes than both ads attempting to be creative ($F_{1,99} = 22.95, p < .001$) and ads attempting to be
persuasive ($F_{1,99} = 25.17, p < .001$). Attitudes towards the ads attempting to be creative and the ads attempting to be persuasive did not significantly differ ($F_{1,99} = .05, p > .8$).

**Mediation.** We tested H2 by assessing whether either perceived humor or negative affect mediated the effect of attempting humor on brand attitude. In order to represent the effect of attempting humor as a one-degree-of-freedom contrast, we calculated the difference between the ads attempting humor (coded as “2”) and the ads attempting to be either creative or persuasive (both coded as “-1”). Because ads attempting humor did not generate any more or less positive affect than ads not attempting humor, positive affect could not have mediated the effect and we did not include it in the analysis. Consistent with H2, a bootstrapping approach (Preacher and Hayes 2008) revealed that the effect of attempted humor on brand attitude was mediated by negative affect (indirect effect = -.12, 95% CI = -.21 to -.06), but not by perceived humor (indirect effect = -.02, 95% CI = -.09 to .03). A multiple regression analysis revealed a strong significant effect of negative affect on brand attitude ($b = -.83, t = -7.07, p < .001$) controlling for both the objective manipulation and perceived humor. The effect of perceived humor on attitude was not significant ($b = -.09, t = -87, p > .3$). Thus, negative affective reactions, but not perceived humor, explain why the humor attempts hurt brand attitude.

**Discussion**

Our first study shows that attempting humor in marketing communications can hurt brands. Advertisements attempting to be humorous were perceived to be more humorous than ads attempting to be creative and ads attempting to be persuasive; however, they also elicited more negative feelings and, consequently, led to lower brand attitudes. The finding that humor attempts increase negative feelings but do not influence positive feelings diverges from previous research, which argues that humorous marketing increases positive feelings and decreases negative feelings (Eisend 2009, 2011). A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that prior research has not clearly distinguished between attempted humor and perceived humor, nor has it explicitly tested the effect of attempting to be humorous relative to other advertising objectives (e.g., being creative or persuasive) across a sample of advertisements. Instead of using a sample of advertisements to assess affective reactions to humor attempts, prior studies have typically compared specific humorous ads with specific control ads. By directly manipulating attempted humor across a sample of advertisements, our study provides a more general and direct test of
the effect of attempting humor on negative affective reactions and brand attitude. One potential concern with our approach, however, is that the humor attempts were created by marketing students rather than professional agencies, as is the case with real advertisements, or academic researchers, as is the case with most of the ads tested in previous studies. To ensure that our hypotheses generalize, our next two studies investigate whether negative affective reactions occur independently of perceived humor (H1) and whether negative affective reactions have a relatively stronger influence on brand attitude (H2) across samples of real print advertisements (study 2) and print advertisements published in previous academic studies (study 3).

Study 2: Negative Feelings Predict Brand Attitudes Better Than Perceived Humor

Our second study examined hypotheses 1 and 2 using a sample of real print advertisements. One challenge with using real print advertisements is that it is impossible to manipulate whether or not the ads attempt humor. It is also difficult to assess which advertisements attempt humor and which do not. However, it is possible to measure affective reactions, including perceived humor and negative feelings, to a range of advertisements in order to investigate whether negative feelings and perceived humor are negatively correlated, as suggested in the literature (e.g., Eisend 2009, 2011), or occur independently, as we predict (H1). Measuring the affective reactions (perceived humor, negative feelings, etc.) also permits a test of whether negative affective reactions have a larger influence than perceived humor on brand attitudes (H2) even when the ads were created by professionals.

Design

We used Google Images searches in order to assemble a sample of real print advertisements using a procedure that would remove our own biases from the stimulus selection process (see appendix A for details). To find ads that would elicit a range of affective reactions, a research assistant conducted three searches using a "moderate" filter and the following terms: "funny print advertisement," "offensive print advertisement," and "print advertisement."

Participants recruited on Amazon’s mTurk (56% female, $M_{\text{Age}} = 38$; all in the US) rated each of the 60 advertisements on one of the following: perceptions of humor ($n = 24$), negative affective reactions ($n = 25$), positive affective reactions ($n = 24$), or their attitude towards the
advertising brand \((n = 26)\). We measured perceived humor by averaging responses to three seven-point scales anchored by “Not humorous/Humorous”, “Not funny/Funny,” and “Not amusing/Amusing” \((\alpha: \text{mean} = .95)\). We measured negative affective reactions by averaging responses to three seven-point scales anchored by “No negative feelings/Strong negative feelings,” “No negative emotions/Strong negative emotions,” and “No negative reactions/Strong negative reactions” \((\alpha: \text{mean} = .97)\). We measured positive affective reactions by averaging responses to three seven-point scales anchored by “No positive feelings/Strong positive feelings,” “No positive emotions/Strong positive emotions,” and “No positive reactions/Strong positive reactions” \((\alpha: \text{mean} = .97)\). Finally, we measured brand attitude by averaging responses to three seven-point scales anchored by “Bad/Good,” "Negative/Positive,” and “Unfavorable/Favorable” \((\alpha: \text{mean} = .98)\).

**Results**

Because of a programming error, we did not collect the negative affect ratings for one of the advertisements. We computed mean scores for each of the remaining 59 advertisements by averaging the ratings of humor \((\text{Mean} = 2.90; \text{SD} = 1.13)\), negative affective reactions \((\text{Mean} = 2.42; \text{SD} = 1.06)\), positive affective reactions \((\text{Mean} = 3.78; \text{SD} = .80)\), and brand attitude \((\text{Mean} = 4.19; \text{SD} = 1.02)\) across participants.

Using the advertisement as the unit of analysis, we first tested the relationship between perceived humor and negative affective reactions to the ad. Consistent with the hypothesis that negative feelings can occur independently of humor (H1), the ratings were not significantly correlated \((r = .10, p > .4)\). Perceived humor was, however, significantly correlated with positive affective reactions \((r = .40, p < .001)\), which makes sense given that amusement, the emotional component of perceived humor, represents a subset of positive affective reactions.

Next, we assessed the effects on brand attitude by entering perceived humor, positive affective reactions, and negative affective reactions as predictor variables in a regression analysis. Both positive \((b = .57, t = 5.59, p < .001)\) and negative \((b = -.54, t = -7.74, p < .001)\) affective reactions influenced brand attitude, but perceived humor did not \((b = .07, t = 1.24, p > .2)\). Because of the colinearity concern due to the correlation between perceived humor and positive affective reactions, we ran a second regression analysis using only perceived humor and negative affective reactions as predictor variables. In this analysis, both perceived humor and
negative affective reactions influenced brand attitude, although the effect of perceived humor ($b = .25, t = 4.69, p < .001$) was far weaker than the effect of negative affect ($b = -.83, t = -14.42, p < .001$). Moreover, and consistent with H2, the negative correlation between negative affective reactions and brand attitude was significantly larger in magnitude ($r = -.85$) than the positive correlation between perceived humor and brand attitude ($r = .21; Z = 5.47, p < .001$). The effects of perceived humor and negative affect on brand attitude were independent of one another (interaction: $b = -.02, t = -.35, p > .7$), persisted when we controlled for the search criteria used to find the ad (humor: $b = .28, t = 4.30, p < .001$; negative affect: $b = -.86, t = -13.46, p < .001$), and did not interact with search criteria ($p_s > .5$). Thus, negative affective reactions had a stronger effect than perceived humor on brand attitude irrespective of whether the search yielding the ad used the term “funny,” the term “offensive,” or neither (see table 2).

Discussion

Study 2 provided further support for H1 by showing that negative affective reactions to real advertisements occur independently of perceived humor. In our first study, perceived humor and negative affective reactions were positively correlated, but here they were independent. The discrepancy likely occurred because the first study explicitly manipulated the objective of the advertisement to be humorous or creative or persuasive, but the second study used real advertisements, which likely have multiple objectives, such as attempting to be both humorous and persuasive. Of more relevance to our inquiry, the insignificant correlation between perceived humor in and negative affective reactions to real ads suggests that being humorous does not necessarily lead to negative feelings. However, it does suggest that being humorous does not eliminate the risk of also eliciting negative feelings, even for ads created by professionals.

The results also affirmed H2 by showing that negative feelings exert a stronger influence on brand attitude than perceived humor. The data tentatively suggest that negative affective reactions have a stronger influence on brand attitude than perceived humor because perceived humor represents only one of many possible positive feelings, as positive affective reactions in general did exert a strong influence on brand attitude. More importantly from a practical perspective, the observation that perceived humor occurs independently from negative affective reactions and that the latter exert a stronger effect on brand attitudes suggests that accounting for negative reactions to a humor attempt might help explain the inconsistent effect that humorous
advertisements have on brand attitude. Humorous ads that decrease negative feelings may help brand attitudes, whereas humorous ads that increase negative feelings may hurt them.

**Study 3: Negative Feelings Explain When Humor Attempts Hurt Brand Attitudes**

Study 3 examined whether accounting for negative affective reactions helps explain which humorous advertisements help brand attitudes and which hurt them. In order to examine whether negative affective reactions can account for the inconsistent relationship between humorous advertising and brand attitude reported in the literature, the study attempted to replicate H1 and H2 in a sample of advertisements taken from previous academic studies. We expected that humorous ads that decrease negative feelings would help brand attitudes, but humorous ads that increase negative feelings would hurt brand attitudes.

**Method**

To obtain stimuli for the study, we contacted authors who used print advertisements in previous studies reporting a relationship between humor and brand attitude. Our search yielded 21 advertisements (12 humor attempts and 9 control advertisements) originally published in articles by Brooker (1981), Cline and Kellaris (1999), Gelb and Picket (1983), and Zhang (1996; some authors did not respond or retain their stimuli). Participants on Amazon’s mTurk (N = 308; 60% female; M_Age = 35.2; all currently in the US) rated one of the 21 advertisements on perceived humor, negative affective reactions, and brand attitude. We measured perceived humor with three seven-point scales anchored by “Not humorous/Humorous”, “Not funny/Funny,” and “Not amusing/Amusing” (α = .97). We measured negative affect with three seven-point scales anchored by “No negative feelings/Strong negative feelings,” “No negative emotions/Strong negative emotions,” and “No negative reactions/Strong negative reactions” (α = .96). We measured brand attitude with three seven-point scales anchored by “Negative/Positive,” “Bad/Good,” and “Unfavorable/Favorable” (α = .98).

**Results**

Because each participant evaluated only one advertisement, we were able to assess the effect of each humor attempt individually, using the participant as the unit of analysis (N = 308.
respondents), and to assess the overall effect of attempting humor by using the mean ratings for the advertisement as the unit of analysis (N = 21 ads). On average, the humor attempts were successfully humorous eliciting a higher level of perceived humor than the control ads. The increase in perceived humor was highly significant overall (M_Humor = 3.33, M_Control = 1.84; F_{1,19} = 14.3, p < .001), directional for each of the eleven humor attempts, and significant for 8 of the attempts (see table 3). Conversely, the effect of attempting humor on negative feelings varied considerably (table 3). Five of the humor attempts significantly increased negative feelings relative to the comparative control ad, whereas six of the humor attempts had no effect on negative feelings (overall: M_Humor = 2.74, M_Control = 2.73; F_{1,19} = .02, p > .8). The effect of attempting humor on brand attitude was also inconsistent (table 3). Four of the humor attempts significantly decreased brand attitude, two significantly increased brand attitude, and five had no effect (overall: M_Humor = 4.84, M_Control = 4.42; F_{1,19} = .92, p > .3). Importantly, however, accounting for negative feelings helped explain the inconsistent relationship between the humor attempts and brand attitude. All four of the humor attempts that decreased brand attitude also significantly increased negative affect (ps < .05). Conversely, both of the humor attempts that increased brand attitude directionally decreased negative affect relative to the control ad (ps > .1). Analyzing the results at the level of the advertisement again showed that negative affective reactions occurred independent of perceived humor (r = .22; p > .3). Moreover, a regression analysis revealed that negative affect significantly predicted brand attitude (b = -.95, t = -5.65, p < .001), whereas perceived humor (b = -.04, t = -.24, p > .8) and attempted humor (coded +1 for humor attempts and -1 for control ads; b = .25, t = 1.39, p > .1) did not.

Discussion

Humor attempts do not necessarily increase or decrease negative feelings. It depends on the specific humor attempt. However, even among the advertisements used in previous humor research, some humor attempts increased negative affective reactions independent of perceived humor (H1), and negative affective reactions predicted brand attitudes better than perceived humor (H2). Because humor attempts elicit different levels of negative affect and negative affect drives brand attitudes, marketers attempting humor need to understand which humor attempts are most likely to risk increasing negative feelings. Our remaining studies investigate this question.
Factors Moderating Negative Affective Reactions To A Humor Attempt

Humor attempts can inadvertently damage brand attitudes by increasing negative feelings. Therefore, marketers hoping to benefit from humorous marketing should try to create perceived humor without also increasing negative feelings. In the remainder of the paper we leverage the idea that humor requires a violation to investigate which humor attempts pose the highest risk of eliciting negative feelings, thereby hurting brand attitudes. There are many different violations capable of generating perceived humor; however, different violations generate different levels and types of negative feelings. Our next three studies discuss characteristics of violations that moderate the negative affective reactions to the humor attempt and, consequently, its effect on brand attitude. The studies use brief experiments designed to illustrate how accounting for three characteristics of a humorous violation – particularly, its severity (study 4), target (study 5), and type (study 6) – helps explain why similarly humorous marketing communications can have different effects on brand attitudes.

Study 4: Highly Threatening Humor Attempts Are Riskier For Brands

Violation severity refers to the extent to which a violation threatens one’s well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (McGraw et al. 2012). Like the presence of a violation, severity is a subjective perception that varies on a continuum from no perceivable violation (e.g., the normal children’s shirt in the left column of table 4), to mild (e.g., the children’s shirt portraying a goofy smiley face in the center column of table 4) to severe (e.g., the children’s shirt containing nipple tassels in the right column of table 4). Violations can seem less severe because they don’t diverge as much from the norm. For example, losing a small amount of money would be less severe than losing a large amount of money, just as a physical assault with a wet noodle would be less severe than an assault with a machete. Violations can also seem less threatening because a person does not care as much about the violated norm. For example, most people would consider a misspelled word a less severe violation than a death threat because they consider survival more important than proper spelling. According to the benign violation theory, both mild and severe violations can elicit perceived humor, provided the violations seem benign (McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998). However, because they are more threatening, more
severe violations are more likely to elicit negative affective reactions than mild violations. As illustrated in our initial studies, negative affective reactions have a stronger effect on brand attitude than perceived humor. Therefore, we predict that humorous tactics depicting more severe violations will have a less favorable effect on brand attitudes than humorous tactics depicting less severe violations.

**H3:** Humorous marketing tactics depicting more severe violations will be more likely to elicit negative affective reactions and, therefore, have a less favorable effect on brand attitudes than humorous marketing tactics depicting less severe violations.

**Method**

We tested H3 by showing 112 participants recruited outside the library at a US university one of the advertisements for a children’s shirt pictured in table 4. We manipulated violation severity in the ad, which was ostensibly for a clothing retailer named Richardson’s, by depicting a shirt with no violation (left column), a shirt with a mild violation (center column), or a shirt with a severe violation (right column). Participants reported perceived humor (“is this funny?” yes/no), negative affective reactions (“does this arouse any negative feelings?” yes/no), and their attitude towards Richardson’s (7-point scales anchored by bad/good and unfavorable/favorable; $\alpha = .96$). We also confirmed the success of the violation severity manipulation by asking 81 different participants from the same subject population to rate the extent to which they disagreed or agreed (scale from 1 to 7) with the following statements: “This shirt is different from what I think shirts should look like” and “This shirt violates fashion norms” ($r = .67$; see table 4 for the manipulation check results).

**Results and Discussion**

As intended, both the mild violation ($\chi^2 = 15.59; p < .001$) and the severe violation ($\chi^2 = 25.80; p < .001$) increased perceived humor relative to the control (see table 4). The mild and severe violations were equally humorous ($\chi^2 = .06; p > .8$). Importantly, the severe violation also increased negative affective reactions relative to both the control ($\chi^2 = 21.59; p < .001$) and the mild violation ($\chi^2 = 23.41; p < .001$). Consequently, the humorous severe violation hurt brand attitude relative to the non-humorous control ($F_{1,108} = 25.65, p < .001$), but the humorous mild violation did not ($F_{1,108} = .002, p > .9$). Mediation tests using Preacher and Hayes’s (2008)
bootstrapping procedure confirmed that the increase in negative affective reactions to the severe violation mediated the decrease in brand attitude relative to the mild violation (indirect effect = -.44, 95% CI = -.79 to -.19). Perceived humor did not (indirect effect = .02, 95% CI = -.06 to .13). In sum, the data supported H3 by showing that the effect of a humorous advertisement on brand attitude depends on whether the humor attempt depicts a severe or a mild violation, as more severe violations are more likely to hurt the brand by eliciting negative feelings in addition to perceived humor.

Study 5: Humor Attempts With Specific Targets Are Riskier For Brands

Violations differ not only in terms of how threatening they are (i.e., severity), but also in terms of who or what is threatened (see Chapter 3 in Gulas and Weinberger 2006). We define a violation’s target as the person, people, or norm threatened by the violation. In laymen’s terms, the violation target is the butt of the joke. Sometimes a violation targets an individual or a group of people. Other times the violation targets the situation or humanity in general. We refer to violations that focus on specific individuals or groups as being exclusive, because they single out a specific person or group of people in some potentially negative way. Conversely, we refer to violations that focus on the situation or humanity in general as being inclusive. The advertisement in the right column of table 5, is an example of a violation with an exclusive target because the slogan suggests that a specific group of people (in this case, women) drive poorly. The advertisement in the center column of table 5, on the other hand, is an example of a violation with an inclusive target because the slogan suggests that people in general are poor drivers.

The literature shows how violation target often influences perceived humor. For example, the people or groups targeted by exclusive violations typically perceive less humor than those who are not targeted (La Fave et al. 1976), presumably because those who are targeted have more difficulty perceiving the violation as benign (McGraw and Warren 2010). However, even those who are not targeted by an exclusive violation often respond to the humor attempt with negative feelings in addition to perceived humor (McGraw and Warren 2010, study 4). This may be because singling out a specific person or group of people makes exclusive violations seem insulting, aggressive, disparaging, racist, sexist, or otherwise politically incorrect. Along these lines, some research refers to exclusive violations as mean-spirited or negative humor (Martin et
al. 2003; Samson and Gross 2012). Conversely, humor evoked by inclusive violations tends to focus on the absurdity of a situation, the foibles of the world, or the imperfections of human nature. Because inclusive violations are less likely to seem disparaging or mean-spirited, some research refers to them as benevolent or positive humor (Martin et al. 2003; Samson and Gross 2012). Research suggests that although both inclusive and exclusive violations can elicit humor, the former tend to have more favorable effects on coping and well-being (Martin 2007; Samson and Gross 2012). Similarly, because of their more “benevolent” nature, inclusive violations seem less likely to elicit negative affective reactions than exclusive violations and, therefore, should have a more favorable effect on brand attitude.

**H4:** Humorous marketing tactics depicting exclusive violations will lead to more negative affective reactions and, therefore, less favorable brand attitudes than humorous marketing tactics depicting inclusive violations.

**Method**

We randomly assigned 71 male participants from Amazon’s mTurk to evaluate an advertisement for a fictional insurance company named “Johnson & Sons” (see table 5). We made different versions of the advertisement to create three between-subjects conditions: no violation (left column), inclusive violation (center column), and exclusive violation (right column). We based the advertisement in the exclusive violation condition on a Volkswagen ad from 1964, which showed a picture of a car accident accompanied by the slogan, “Sooner or later, your wife will drive home.” Our version of the ad used a humorous picture of a car accident accompanied with the slogan, “Everyone drives like a woman sometimes.” The inclusive violation condition used the same picture, but the slogan evoked an inclusive target: “Everyone drives like an idiot sometimes.” Note that both violation conditions involve what prior literature would label disparagement humor (Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Speck 1987). However, the ad in the exclusive condition directs the disparagement at a particular group of people (i.e., women), whereas the ad in the inclusive condition directs the disparagement at everyone. The control ad showed a less humorous picture of an accident with the slogan, “Accidents happen sometimes.” Participants viewed the advertisement and then rated their attitude towards the brand on seven-point scales anchored by bad/good, dislike/like, and negative/positive (α = .96), their perceived humor, and their negative reactions. We measured
perceived humor (amused me, was funny, made me laugh; α = .96) and negative affective reactions (made me uncomfortable, offended me, was disturbing, was insulting; α = .89) using seven-point agree/disagree scales.

**Results and Discussion**

As intended, both the ad containing the inclusive violation ($F_{1,68} = 21.68, p < .001$) and the ad containing the exclusive violation ($F_{1,68} = 9.54, p < .01$) were perceived to be more humorous than the control ad (see table 5). Importantly, although the ads containing violations were similarly successful at eliciting humor ($F_{1,68} = 3.92, p > .05$), they had different effects on brand attitude ($F_{1,68} = 10.39, p < .01$). The ad containing a humorous inclusive violation improved brand attitude relative to the control ad ($F_{1,68} = 5.79, p < .05$), but the ad containing a humorous exclusive violation did not ($F_{1,68} = .33, p > .5$). Consistent with the idea that exclusive violations are more mean-spirited and negative than inclusive violations, the ad featuring an exclusive violation elicited more negative affective reactions than the ad featuring an inclusive violation ($F_{1,68} = 6.86, p < .05$). As in previous studies, negative affective reactions mediated the difference in brand attitude between the humorous ad featuring an inclusive violation and the humorous ad featuring an exclusive violation (indirect effect = -.20, 95% CI = -.57 to -.01).

Perceived humor influenced brand attitude more in this study than in previous studies, but the indirect effect of the advertisement on brand attitude through perceived humor did not quite reach conventional levels of significance (indirect effect = -.22, 95% CI = -.60 to .00).

Study 5 suggests that the influence of a humorous advertisement on brand attitude depends on whether the ad creates humor by directing a violation at a specific group of people, in this case women, or at humanity in general. Although exclusive violations often elicit humor when the consumers are not themselves the target, they tend to evoke more negative affective reactions and yield less favorable brand attitudes than inclusive violations.

**Study 6: Humor Attempts That Spur Avoidance Are Riskier For Brands**

The effect of a humor attempt on brand attitude may depend not only on the magnitude of negative reactions, but also on the type of negative reactions. Different types of violations elicit different negative feelings (e.g., Rozin et al. 1999), some of which are more likely to motivate
avoidance than others. Violations that tend to elicit disgust, offense, fear, or shame, for example, are more likely to prompt avoidance than violations that tend to elicit anger, anxiety, envy, or pity (Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009; Chapmen et al. 2009). Other violations, such as logic violations that elicit confusion, may actually motivate approach (in this case because people will want to explain the source of confusion).

As an example, consider the advertisements pictured in table 6, which we adapted from a real campaign for a popular cola brand. The advertisements in the center and right columns both feature violations. The ad in the second column depicts a purity violation by showing a cartoon lime urinating into a glass of cola, whereas the ad in the third column depicts a harm violation by showing a cartoon lime decapitating another cartoon lime. Although the playful and hypothetical graphics likely make both violations seem benign, thereby prompting perceived humor, the violations will likely prompt different negative reactions. Purity violations elicit disgust, an emotion that developed to prevent the oral ingestion of contaminants and prompts avoidance, especially from food and drink (Chapman et al. 2009; Rozin et al. 1999). Harm violations, on the other hand, tend to elicit anger, which research suggests motivates approach rather than avoidance (Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009). Because purity violations are more likely to prompt avoidance than harm violations, we predict that the humor attempt depicting a purity violation will be more likely to hurt brand attitude than the humor attempt depicting a harm violation.

More generally, we hypothesize that humorous violations that elicit negative feelings associated with avoidance will lead to less favorable brand attitudes than humorous violations that elicit negative feelings associated with approach.

**H5:** Humorous violations that elicit negative affective reactions associated with avoidance (e.g., purity violations) will lead to less favorable brand attitudes than humorous violations that elicit negative affective reactions that are not associated with avoidance (e.g., harm violations).

**Method**

152 undergraduate students\(^3\) at a large US university viewed one of the three advertisements in table 6: an ad not containing a violation (left column), an ad containing a harm violation (center column), or an ad containing a purity violation (right column). We digitally altered three real advertisements from a popular soft drink brand by eliminating the violation in the control ad (the lime was urinating into the cola in the original ad) and removing any recognizable branded
content (thereby reducing effects related to existing brand attitudes; Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990). Participants rated their attitude towards the advertised brand on seven-point scales anchored by unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive, and bad/good ($\alpha = .96$). Participants also rated perceived humor (“funny” and “humorous;” $\alpha = .97$), harm (“harmful” and “violent;” $\alpha = .62$), and impurity (“gross” and “disgusting,” $\alpha = .91$) on six-point scales from 0 (“not at all”) to 5 (“a lot”). To assess the extent to which the ads motivated approach or avoidance towards the advertised product, we asked participants which beverage they would choose to drink right now if given a choice between cola, diet cola, or one of three non-cola options (water, juice, and iced tea).

Results and Discussion

Participants’ appraisals of harm and impurity suggested that the manipulations worked as intended (see table 6). Additionally, both the ad containing the purity violation ($F_{1,142} = 19.59, p < .001$) and the ad containing the harm violation ($F_{1,142} = 9.10, p < .01$) were more humorous than the control ad. Importantly, although the purity and harm violations were equally humorous ($F_{1,142} = 1.76, p > .2$), they had different effects on brand attitude ($F_{1,142} = 8.72, p < .01$). The ad containing a humorous purity violation hurt brand attitude relative to the control ($F_{1,142} = 6.39, p < .05$), but the ad containing a humorous harm violation did not ($F_{1,142} = .15, p > .6$).

Additionally, and consistent with the contention that purity violations are more likely to prompt avoidance than harm violations, a smaller percentage of participants wanted to drink cola or diet cola after viewing the ad containing a purity violation than after the ad containing a harm violation ($\chi^2 = 9.76, p < .01$). In sum, study 6 illustrates that the effect of a humorous marketing communication on brand attitude depends on the type of violation used to create humor. A humorous violation that prompted avoidance had a less favorable effect on brand attitude than a humorous violation that did not prompt avoidance.

General Discussion

Despite the clear benefits of humorous marketing, our inquiry suggests that managers should be aware of a risk: their humorous marketing communications can elicit negative feelings, which hurt brand attitudes. In contrast to the prevailing belief that humorous advertisements reduce
negative feelings, our studies show that humor attempts can elicit negative affective reactions independent of perceived humor. Additionally, it is these negative affective reactions, rather than perceived humor, that primarily determine whether a humor attempt helps or hurts brand attitude. Consequently, even successful humor attempts can backfire by increasing negative feelings that lead to lower brand attitudes. On the other hand, because perceived humor and negative feelings are independent, some humorous tactics may help brand attitudes by decreasing negative feelings. Therefore, rather than consider whether or not to attempt humor, managers should consider how to execute the humor attempt.

A recent theoretical perspective suggests that benign violations underlie humor (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012); however, some humor-inducing benign violations are more likely to elicit negative reactions than others. How can markers know which ads risk eliciting negative feelings and hurting the brand? We suggest that by attending to the characteristics of the violation portrayed in a humor attempt, managers will be more capable of identifying ads that generate perceived humor without also increasing harmful, negative affective reactions. In order to reap the benefits of humorous advertising while minimizing the risks, we suggest that managers ask five questions when attempting humor: (1) Is the humor attempt funny? (2) Is the underlying violation too severe? (3) Who does the target of the humor attempt? (4) Will the humor attempt prompt avoidance? (5) What is the context for the humor attempt?

**Q1: Is the humor attempt funny?**

Managers could start by considering the likelihood that their humor attempt will successfully amuse the audience. The literature suggests that reaping any potential benefits from attempting humor requires the marketing communication to actually be humorous (Flaherty, Weinberger, and Gulas 2004; Gulas and Weinberger 2006). Recent developments in psychology suggest that the way to create perceived humor is to portray something that threatens the target audience’s well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (i.e., portray a violation) that they will simultaneously perceive to be benign. However, it can be difficult to know a priori what the audience will see as a violation and what violations they will see as benign. Therefore, creating humor likely requires a deep understanding of the desires, identity position, and cultural belief structure of the target audience. Even then, some humor attempts are bound to fail. One way to help succeed in this endeavor is to employ rigorous market testing before launch.
Q2: Is the underlying violation too severe?

Next, managers should consider what will happen if the humor attempt is considered funny, as some humorous ads influence brand attitude differently than others. Brands are more likely to benefit from humor attempts using mild violations than severe violations, as the latter are more likely to elicit negative reactions and have a less favorable effect on brand attitude. Not surprisingly, previous studies that have found a positive relationship between humorous advertising and brand attitude have tended to feature mild violations, like a statue of a historical figure blowing a gum bubble (Cline and Kellaris 1999) or a cartoon involving clever wordplay (Zhang 1996). Marketers likewise should rely on tactics that evoke humor using mild violations, like the smiling shirt in study 4, rather than severe violations, like the tasseled shirt in study 4.

Q3: Who is the target of the humor attempt?

It is also be important for managers to consider the target of the humor attempt (i.e., who or what is the butt of the joke). In general, inclusive violations, which target a universal norm or people in general, are a safer way for marketers to create humor. For example, study 5 illustrated that a humorous ad that disparages drivers in general had a more favorable effect on brand attitude than an ad disparaging a particular group of drivers (i.e., women). Successful humor attempts in the marketplace similarly often create humorous ads using violations with inclusive targets. For example, one likely reason for the success of the classic Budweiser frogs advertisement from the 1995 Superbowl is that the humor evoked by the frogs croaking the name “BUD-WEIS-ER” didn’t come at the expense of anyone in particular. In contrast, exclusive violations, which target a specific person or group, are less beneficial to brands. For example, Groupon’s satirical 2011 Superbowl advertisement about Tibet’s struggle for freedom prompted backlash from viewers and the press, likely because the humor-inducing violation had an exclusive target: Tibetans.

The relationship between the target of a humorous violation and brand attitude may be even more nuanced than implied by our simple dichotomy between inclusive and exclusive violations. Exclusive violations can have different targets, including the firm, the audience, or a third party (Gulas and Weinberger 2006). Marketing research would benefit from further inquiries about whether brand attitude depends on which specific person or group the violation targets. Using
violations that target the customer or the advertised brand seem like a bad idea because even if consumers are amused by the ad, they may also have negative reactions directed at the advertised brand. On the other hand, when a violation targets a third-party who customers consider an out-group, negative reactions to the violation may be directed at the third-party instead of the advertised brand. If so, using exclusive violations that target a competing brand may be a beneficial way to create humorous marketing. For example, one reason for the success of Apple’s Mac vs. PC advertising campaign could be because PC commits humorous violations while Mac plays the straight guy. By using humorous violations that target a competitor, Apple created ads in which negative reactions to the humorous violations harmed PC rather than Mac.

Q4: Will the humor attempt prompt avoidance?

Managers should also consider the type of violation used to create humor, as some violations are more likely to prompt avoidance than others. As an example, study 6 showed how purity violations that evoke disgust are a particularly risky way to create humor for food and beverage brands. We similarly expect that humorous social violations that elicit embarrassment may be damaging for socially visible brands, like clothing and jewelry. There are likely other avoidance prompting violations that are similarly risky for brands. In contrast, logic violations (i.e., nonsense humor), are likely less risky because they tend to prompt approach. An important area for future research would be to more explicitly investigate which types of humorous violations are more or less likely to motivate avoidance and, consequently, hurt brands.

Q5: What is the context for the humor attempt?

The previous questions, which are consistent with the focus of our research, discuss how different ways of attempting humor can have different effects on brand attitudes. Prior research, however, shows that marketers should also consider contextual factors related to the humor attempt, including the characteristics of the target consumer, the product category, the media outlet, and whether the humor attempt is related to the message in the ad (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Speck 1987). Attempting humor has a more positive effect on brand attitude when target consumers are less involved with the message, have a lower need for cognition, and a more favorable prior attitude towards the brand (Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990; Speck 1987; Zhang 1996). Attempting humor also appears to be more beneficial for products
that are low risk (e.g., bubblegum) as opposed to high risk (e.g., medicine), and that offer hedonic (e.g., a television) rather than functional benefits (e.g., a washing machine), although the benefits of attempting humor for the different product types appear to also depend on the media outlet of the communication and the relevance of the humor attempt (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006). In sum, managers should attend not only to the way a humorous advertisement is created, but also to the context in which the consumer will be exposed to it.

**Conclusion**

Humor is a pervasive marketing tool with potential risks and rewards. Marketers can create humor by depicting benign violations. But some caution is in order, as benign violations may elicit harmful negative affective reactions in addition to perceived humor. Because humorous content typically attracts attention and entertains consumers (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006), marketers should continue to create humorous marketing communications. However, they need to be careful not to inadvertently hurt their brand in the process. Therefore, we recommend that marketers create humor by depicting benign violations that are not too severe, don’t ridicule a specific person or group, and are unlikely to prompt avoidance.
References


McDougall, William (1922), “Why Do We Laugh?” *Scribners*, (March), 359–262.


FOOTNOTES

1. In order to assess the discriminant validity between perceived humor, negative affect, and brand attitude, we performed a Fornell-Larcker test (Fornell and Larcker 1981) using confirmatory factor analysis. The average variance extracted by the items measuring perceived humor ($VE_{\text{humor}} = .91$), negative affect ($VE_{\text{negative}} = .90$), and brand attitude ($VE_{\text{Abrand}} = .93$) far exceeded the squared correlation estimate between any of the two constructs ($r^2_{\text{humor,negative}} = .02; r^2_{\text{humor,Abrand}} = .07; r^2_{\text{negative,Abrand}} = .39$), thereby reducing concerns related to discriminant validity.

2. The severity of a violation is typically negatively associated with the extent to which it seems benign, but this is not always the case. It is possible for very severe violations to seem benign (e.g., harmless and psychologically distant bestiality; McGraw and Warren 2010) or for mild violations to not seem benign (e.g., a misspelled word).

3. Following a procedure advocated by McClelland (2000), we removed data from seven participants identified as outliers. Specifically, we calculated a deleted studentized residual score for each participant predicting brand attitude as a function of condition and eliminated responses that fell abnormally far from the predicted mean ($p < .01$). The resulting sample size was 145. Outliers did not present a problem in any of the other studies, so we used this procedure only in this one.
Table 1. Average ratings of perceived humor (Humor), positive affect (Positive), negative affect (Negative), and brand attitude (Attitude) in Study 1 for the fan and sausage ads that attempted to be humorous (Humorous), creative (Creative), and persuasive (Persuasive). Different subscripts indicate that the means across the objective manipulation differed significantly within the product ($p < .05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product / Image</th>
<th>Dyson Bladeless Fan</th>
<th>Meuller Sausages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Humorous</td>
<td>Creative</td>
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<td>Humor</td>
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<td>2.99$^B$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
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<td>3.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2.82$^A$</td>
<td>2.41$^B$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>3.53$^A$</td>
<td>4.46$^B$</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Correlations between perceived humor (Humor), positive affective reactions (Positive), negative affective reactions (Negative), and brand attitude ($A_{Brand}$) in Study 2 depending on the search criteria used to identify the advertisement. An asterisk indicates the correlation is significant at $p < .05$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Criteria</th>
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<th>Negative</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>$A_{Brand}$</td>
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<td>$A_{Brand}$</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$A_{Brand}$</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.79*</td>
<td>-.63*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.64*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$A_{Brand}$</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.84*</td>
<td>-.85*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Mean ratings of perceived humor, negative affective reactions, and brand attitude for the advertisements in study 3, all of which had been published in a previous study. Asterisks indicate a significant difference from the corresponding control condition (* for \( p < .10 \); ** for \( p < .05 \)). The final column (Rel.) indicates the observed relationship between attempting humor and brand attitude for each manipulation (+ for positive; - for negative; NS for not significant; NA for not applicable because there was no corresponding control ad).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Humor</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>( A_{Brand} )</th>
<th>Rel.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhang 1996</td>
<td>Camera</td>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelb and Picket 1983</td>
<td>Anti-tobacco</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cline and Kellaris 1999</td>
<td>Chewing gum</td>
<td>Control (weak claims)</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (weak claims)</td>
<td>3.40**</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>4.13*</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Control (strong claims)</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (strong claims)</td>
<td>4.07*</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.78**</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooker 1982</td>
<td>Toothbrush</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (joke)</td>
<td>3.26**</td>
<td>3.31**</td>
<td>4.67**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (one-liner)</td>
<td>3.62**</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (pun)</td>
<td>2.33*</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (limerick)</td>
<td>4.38**</td>
<td>3.18**</td>
<td>4.38**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear (physical)</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>5.76</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear (social)</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>2.78**</td>
<td>4.92**</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vaccine</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (joke)</td>
<td>3.04**</td>
<td>3.47**</td>
<td>4.09**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (one-liner)</td>
<td>3.38**</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (pun)</td>
<td>2.16**</td>
<td>3.06**</td>
<td>4.47**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humor (limerick)</td>
<td>4.79**</td>
<td>3.17**</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear (physical)</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>4.41**</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear (social)</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Results for study 4. The “Severity” row reports the average level of severity rated by pretest participants. The “Humor” and “Negative” rows report the percentage of respondents indicating perceived humor and negative affect, respectively. The “Attitude” column indicates the average attitude (and standard deviation) reported by participants. Different subscripts indicate significant differences between conditions ($p < .05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>No Violation</th>
<th>Mild Violation</th>
<th>Severe Violation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NEW SHIRTS FOR GIRLS!</td>
<td>NEW SHIRTS FOR GIRLS!</td>
<td>NEW SHIRTS FOR GIRLS!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ages 2 - 6</td>
<td>ages 2 - 6</td>
<td>ages 2 - 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Mean (SD) / %</td>
<td>Mean (SD) / %</td>
<td>Mean (SD) / %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity (1 to 7)</td>
<td>2.46&lt;sup&gt;C&lt;/sup&gt; (1.28)</td>
<td>3.98&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt; (1.36)</td>
<td>5.54&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt; (1.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>11%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>53%&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>56%&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>11%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>26%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>83%&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude (1 to 7)</td>
<td>4.16&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt; (.91)</td>
<td>4.17&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt; (1.43)</td>
<td>2.59&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt; (1.43)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Results for study 5. The initial columns report the mean ratings (and standard deviations) of perceived humor (Humor), negative affective reactions (Negative), and brand attitude (Attitude; all scales from 1 to 7). Different subscripts indicate significant differences between conditions ($p < .05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Inclusive Violation</th>
<th>Exclusive Violation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>$2.45^B (1.43)$</td>
<td>$5.10^A (1.74)$</td>
<td>$4.08^A (1.40)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>$3.00^{A,B} (1.42)$</td>
<td>$2.52^A (1.26)$</td>
<td>$3.70^B (1.85)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>$3.42^A (1.47)$</td>
<td>$4.65^B (1.38)$</td>
<td>$3.14^A (1.90)$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. Results for study 6. The initial columns report the mean ratings (and standard deviations) of harm, impurity, perceived humor (Humor), and brand attitude (Attitude). The final row reports the percentage of participants who expressed a preference to drink cola or diet cola over three non-cola beverages. Different subscripts indicate significant differences between conditions ($p < .05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>No Violation (Control)</th>
<th>Benign Purity Violation</th>
<th>Benign Harm Violation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harm</td>
<td>.06$^B$ (.2)</td>
<td>.30$^B$ (.5)</td>
<td>1.46$^A$ (1.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impurity</td>
<td>.15$^B$ (.6)</td>
<td>1.49$^A$ (1.2)</td>
<td>.40$^B$ (.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>1.44$^B$ (1.4)</td>
<td>2.71$^A$ (1.6)</td>
<td>2.32$^A$ (1.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>.83$^A$ (1.2)</td>
<td>.17$^B$ (1.4)</td>
<td>.93$^A$ (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference</td>
<td>21$^{A,B}$%</td>
<td>9$^B$%</td>
<td>35$^A$%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX: ADVERTISEMENT SAMPLE IN STUDY 2

To identify a sample of advertisements that our respondents may encounter and comprehend, a research assistant (unaware of our hypotheses) identified the first twenty ads in each of the three search categories (funny print advertisement, offensive print advertisement, and print advertisement) that met the following requirements: (1) the image was a print advertisement for a product or service; (2) the advertisement was in English; (3) the advertisement was published in either the United States or Europe; (4) the brand name of the advertiser was visible and legible; (5) the primary headline was legible; and (6) the advertisement looked as though it could have been published in the last ten years. In order to avoid repeats we only selected one advertisement for any one brand. We include one advertisement from each of the search categories below. Electronic copies of the full sample are available from the authors upon request.

Sample advertisements from the three different searches:

“Funny print advertisement”  “Offensive print advertisement”  “Print advertisement”