

# When Does Humorous Marketing Hurt Brands?

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## ABSTRACT

Humorous advertisements attract attention and entertain consumers. Nonetheless, attempting humor is risky because consumers may be offended by failed humor attempts. We propose another reason that attempting humor is risky: humorous advertisements can hurt brand attitudes by eliciting negative feelings — even when consumers find the ad funny. Three experiments and one correlational study demonstrate that humorous marketing is more likely to hurt the advertised brand when it (1) features a highly threatening humorous ad rather than mildly threatening ad, (2) makes fun of a subset of the population rather than people in general, and (3) motivates avoidance rather than approach. We conclude by offering five guiding questions for marketers who want to use humor to attract attention and entertain consumers without inadvertently hurting brand attitudes.

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BEING humorous is an effective way for brands to attract attention and entertain consumers (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Madden and Weinberger 1982). Marketers are increasingly turning to provocative, even controversial, marketing communications in an effort to deal with growing competition in the marketplace (Blackford *et al.* 2011; Swani *et al.* 2013). Snicker's popular Super Bowl ad, for instance, featured an octogenarian, Betty White, being brutally tackled. Recent research shows that the percentage of violent comedic Super Bowl ads has increased fivefold from 1989 to 2009 (Gulas *et al.* 2010). Edgy comedy attempts are also common in social media

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strategies, at least in part due to a belief that consumers are more likely to share humorous content (Porter and Golan 2006; Warren and Berger 2011). Charmin's popular #tweetfromtheseat Twitter hashtag, for example, commonly features scatological comedy.

Humor attempts, provocative or not, are risky because failing to be funny can backfire and upset an audience (Beard 2008; Flaherty *et al.* 2004). A straightforward solution to this problem is to create advertisements that successfully amuse consumers, as marketing research suggests that ads that are successfully humorous do not harm the advertised brand (Eisend 2009). We propose, however, that being funny is not enough. Humorous advertising can backfire and hurt the brand because some humor attempts, despite being funny, can elicit negative feelings, and thereby decrease consumers' attitudes towards the brand.

Building on theories suggesting that humor is often triggered by some kind of threat (Gruner 1997; McGraw and Warren 2010; Ramachandran 1998; Veatch 1998; Warren and McGraw 2015), we show that advertisements are more likely to hurt brand attitudes when they create humor (1) using highly threatening (as opposed to mildly threatening) stimuli, (2) by threatening specific people (rather than all people), and (3) by relying on threats that prompt avoidance (rather than approach). Our results suggest that the current trend towards increasingly provocative humor attempts may be ill advised, as these communications pose the highest risk of decreasing brand attitudes even while amusing consumers. Because being funny is not enough, we offer a checklist intended to help marketers identify humorous advertisements that attract attention and entertain consumers without inadvertently hurting brand attitudes.

## Humorous Advertising

There is no universally accepted definition of humor (Gulas and Weinberger 2006). Humor can 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; McGraw and Warren 2010). We distinguish between stimulus and response by referring to the stimulus as a *humor attempt* and the response

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as *perceived humor*. We refer to a stimulus as *humorous* when it elicits higher levels of perceived funniness, amusement, or laughter from an audience than some other stimulus.

Marketing research generally suggests that humorous advertising is beneficial. Relative to non-humorous advertisements, humorous ads typically attract attention, entertain consumers, and improve attitudes towards the ad (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Madden and Weinberger 1982). Attention and entertainment, however, are not marketers' only objectives. Marketers also want to improve brand attitudes (Park *et al.* 2010). Cultivating a favorable brand attitude is important because brand attitudes influence consideration sets, purchasing behavior, and receptivity to a range of marketing tactics, including brand extensions and persuasion attempts (Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990; Herr and Fazio 1993; Keller 1993). We thus focus on how humorous ads influence brand attitudes.

### ***Humorous Advertising and Brand Attitudes***

Studies demonstrate that the effect of humorous advertising on brand attitudes depends on a variety of moderating factors, including the relevance of the humorous stimuli (Lee and Mason 1999; Speck 1987), the product category (Weinberger and Campbell 1990), the strength of argument in the ads (Cline and Kellaris 1999), and the consumer's level of processing (Zhang 1996), need for levity (Cline *et al.* 2003) and prior brand attitude (Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990). A meta-analysis of published studies concludes that humorous advertisements generally improve brand attitudes, although the degree of improvement depends on the aforementioned moderators (Eisend 2009).

An obvious caveat to the view that humor helps marketers is that failing to be funny can backfire by eliciting negative feelings (e.g., Beard 2008; Flaherty *et al.* 2004). A well-intentioned joke that falls flat can ruin a dinner party or the effectiveness of a Super Bowl commercial. The literature offers a straightforward way to avoid the risks of attempting humor: be funny. Most research contends that being successfully humorous eliminates the risk of offending, confusing, or disgusting consumers (Suls 1972; Veatch 1998). We suggest, however, that being funny is not sufficient for marketers to benefit from humorous advertising. Even marketing communications that are successfully humorous can hurt brand attitudes by triggering negative reactions in addition to laughter and amusement.

### ***Positive and Negative Reactions Humorous Advertising***

Certain stimuli, such as a politically incorrect joke or a socially awkward comment, can trigger both perceived humor and a negative emotional reaction. For example, people laugh but also feel uncomfortable when tickled (Harris and

Alvarado 2005). People are also both amused and disgusted when exposed to scatological comedy or harmless, immoral behavior (Hemenover and Schimmack 2007; McGraw and Warren 2010). This research speaks to a broader debate between theorists who argue that positivity and negativity do not co-occur (i.e., when a person is happy, that person cannot be sad; Russell and Barrett 1999) and those who show that that positivity and negativity can co-occur (Caccioppo and Berntson 1994; Larsen *et al.* 2001; Rozin *et al.* 2013). And just as people can feel both happy and sad while viewing a tragicomedy, such as *Life is Beautiful* (Larsen *et al.* 2001), they may similarly find an advertisement funny and discomfoting, be amused and disgusted, or laugh despite being offended (Warren and McGraw 2013). Because negative feelings typically hurt brand attitudes (Holbrook and Batra 1987), we suggest that some humorous ads may hurt brand attitudes by triggering negative reactions in addition to laughter and amusement.

Why might advertisements be both humorous and offensive (or upsetting, disgusting, embarrassing, etc.)? There are many explanations of humor, including incongruity theories (Elpers *et al.* 2004; Suls 1972), superiority theories (Ferguson and Ford 2008; Gruner 1997), relief theories (Freud 1928; Spencer 1860), arousal theories (Berlyne 1972; Rothbart 1976), and reversal theories (Apter 1982; Wyer and Collins 1992). Each theory offers important insights, but most do not explain why the same stimulus might trigger both negative feelings and perceptions of humor. An exception is the benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw *et al.* 2015; Warren and McGraw 2016).

### ***Benign Violations and Humor Perception***

Building on theories which suggest that emotions result from specific appraisals of a situation or stimulus (Han *et al.* 2007; Roseman 2013), the benign violation theory proposes that humor results from consumers simultaneously holding two specific appraisals: (1) there is a violation, and (2) the violation is benign (McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998; Warren and McGraw 2015). The theory suggests a similar process of humor comprehension as prior work which contends that humor occurs when an initial interpretation of a situation or stimulus is partially reinterpreted or replaced with a second, incongruous interpretation (e.g., Koestler 1964; Martin 2007; Warren and McGraw 2016; Wyer and Collins 1992). However, the benign violation theory additionally draws on superiority and relief theories (e.g., Freud 1928; Gruner 1997), by arguing that one of the interpretations is that there is a *violation*, and arousal-safety and reversal theories (e.g., Apter 1982; Rothbart 1976), by arguing that the other interpretation is that the violation is in some way *benign*.

A violation appraisal refers to the interpretation that something subjectively threatens a person's well-being, identity, or normative belief structure

(Veatch 1998). For brevity, we use the term violation to denote any stimulus that evokes a violation appraisal. 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). Humorous marketing communications depict a wide range of violations — from linguistic violations that capitalize on a word's double meaning (e.g., John Deere's slogan, "Nothing runs like a Deere") to excessive physical aggression (e.g., Reebok's campaign in which Terry Tate the "office linebacker" tackles disobedient employees). As the John Deere slogan reveals, the "threat" in a violation can be quite mild, such as misspelling a word to make a pun.<sup>1</sup>

Things that are threatening or wrong typically elicit negative affective reactions, such as anger, fear, or disgust (Roseman 2013; Rozin *et al.* 1999). To evoke perceived humor a threatening stimulus needs to also seem benign (McGraw and Warren 2010). A benign appraisal occurs when the stimulus or situation is subjectively interpreted as being normative, acceptable, sensible, or okay. The reason why people might appraise a violation as benign depends on how the violation threatens them. Physical and identity threats can seem benign because they are harmless (McGraw and Warren 2010; Rothbart 1976) or because the threat seems inconsequential or unimportant (McGraw *et al.* 2012). For example, viewers of the Reebok ads featuring a football player tackling office workers know that the violence is staged and that no one is actually being hurt. Norm violations, including improper etiquette, illogical behavior, and language errors, tend to seem benign when an alternative norm suggests that the behavior is acceptable, sensible, or correct (McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998). For example, the misspelling of *deer* in the slogan, "Nothing runs like a *Deere*," correctly spells the second half of the brand name "John *Deere*." Similarly, in the Reebok advertisement, the poor etiquette of the office workers helps viewers appraise the tackles as a just punishment.

### ***Severe Violations are Riskier for Brands***

According to the benign violation theory, humorous advertisements should include one or more violations. However, these violations vary in their severity.

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<sup>1</sup>Note that the term *violation* refers to something that threatens a person's subjective sense of how things *should be*, not merely something that diverges from the person's expectations of how things typically are. Thus, although violations are often surprising, some violations are expected (e.g., consumers familiar with Allstate's "Mayhem" campaign have learn to expect something bad to happen in the ad), just as some surprises do not involve a violation (e.g., there is nothing negative or threatening about unexpectedly winning the lottery; Warren and McGraw 2016).

Violation severity refers to the degree to which a violation threatens one's well-being, identity, or normative belief structure. Provided they seem benign, both mild and severe violations can evoke perceived humor (McGraw *et al.* 2012; Veatch 1998). People are amused by the relatively mild linguistic and communication violations common in "knock-knock" jokes and puns (e.g., "Nothing runs like a Deere"), yet people are also amused by relatively severe physical and moral violations described in "dead baby" jokes and violent advertisements (e.g., Reebok's "office linebacker" ad). Although severe violations are more difficult to see as benign, feeling psychologically removed or immune from the threat can make even severe violations, including vignettes describing bestiality, photographs of deformed faces, and tweets about Hurricane Sandy, seem funny (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw *et al.* 2012, 2014). Advertisements can similarly elicit perceived humor using severe violations, such as a catastrophic car wrecks (e.g., Allstate's Mayhem ads), by making the violations seem staged, hypothetical, or inconsequential, or by having the violation afflict a disliked character or group of people.

Although advertisements can create humor by depicting either mild or severe violations, in practice the trend is moving towards using attention-getting advertisements that feature relatively severe violations involving violence and aggression (Blackford *et al.* 2011; Swani *et al.* 2013). Creating humor using severe violations, however, may make the ads more likely to elicit negative affective reactions in addition to perceived humor. Because negative reactions tend to hurt the advertising brand (Holbrook and Batra 1987; MacKenzie *et al.* 1986), we predict that humorous advertisements with more severe violations will have a less favorable effect on brand attitudes than similarly humorous ads with less severe violations (see Table 1).

Violation severity is a subjective perception that varies on a continuum from no perceivable violation (e.g., a plain red children's shirt), to mild (e.g., a children's shirt with a goofy smiley face on the front), and to severe (e.g., a children's shirt with nipple tassels; see Failblog.org 2014). Our studies thus compare the effects of non-humorous advertisements with humorous ads containing mild (benign) violations and with humorous ads containing severe (benign) violations. We predict that even though consumers will find ads with mild and severe violations more humorous than control ads, the ads featuring severe violations will have a less favorable effect on brand attitudes. We operationalize violation severity in three ways: the degree to which the violation diverges from consumers' beliefs about how things should be (study 1), whether the violation threatens a specific person or group of people rather than people in general (study 2), and whether the violation motivates avoidance rather than approach (study 3). Study 4, which measures all three operationalizations in a sample of real print advertisements, examines whether violation severity helps explain which humorous ads have a more favorable effect on brand attitudes.

Table 1: Examples of mild and severe violations likely or unlikely to be appraised as benign (top row and bottom row, respectively).




	No violation	Mild violation	Severe violation
Benign	A healthy baby Correct spelling (“Nothing runs like a deer.”)	A spelling error forming a pun (“Nothing runs like a Deere.”)	A dead baby joke <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More negative affect</li> <li>• More humor</li> <li>• <i>Less favorable effect on brand attitudes</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No negative affect</li> <li>• No humor</li> <li>• <i>Baseline brand attitude</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less negative affect</li> <li>• More humor</li> <li>• <i>More favorable effect on brand attitudes</i></li> </ul>	
Not Benign	Not applicable	A spelling error (“Nothing runs like a <u>dere</u> .”)	A dead baby <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More negative affect</li> <li>• Less humor</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less negative affect</li> <li>• Less humor</li> </ul>	

**Description:** The table lists the predictions on ratings of affective reactions, perceived humor, and brand attitudes depending on whether a violation seems benign, not benign, mild, or severe. The table also illustrates how both mild and severe violations are capable of eliciting or failing to elicit humor (top row and bottom row, respectively). Because our inquiry examines effects of humorous advertising on brands, our studies exclusively sample advertisements that most consumers consider benign (i.e., the cells in the top row).

### Study 1: Highly Inappropriate Humorous Ads are Riskier for Brands

Violations seem more severe when they depict greater divergence from consumers’ view of how things should be. For example, an Allstate “Mayhem” ad in which a car suffers a minor fender-bender when the driver gets distracted by an attractive woman evokes humor using a less severe violation than an Allstate ad in which a car catches fire and explodes after a tailgating party. Our first study thus compares an advertisement featuring a normal product with an ad featuring a product that seems slightly inappropriate (mild violation) and an ad featuring a product that seems highly inappropriate (severe violation). We predicted that both the ad featuring the mild violation and the ad featuring the severe violation would elicit more humor than the ad without a violation, but that the ad with a severe violation would lead to less favorable brand attitudes than the ad with a mild violation.

Table 2: Means (standard deviations) for violation severity (Severity), perceived humor (Humor), positive affective reactions (Positive), negative affective reactions (Negative), brand attitudes (Attitude), and purchase intentions (Intent) by condition in study 1 (all scales from 1 to 7).

	No violation	Mild violation	Severe violation
	NEW SHIRTS FOR GIRLS!	NEW SHIRTS FOR GIRLS!	NEW SHIRTS FOR GIRLS!
			
	ages 2 - 6	ages 2 - 6	ages 2 - 6
Measure	Mean (SD)		
Severity	2.64 <sup>C</sup> (1.37)	4.38 <sup>B</sup> (1.56)	5.96 <sup>A</sup> (1.18)
Humor	1.98 <sup>B</sup> (1.36)	3.12 <sup>A</sup> (1.67)	3.13 <sup>A</sup> (2.18)
Positive	2.83 <sup>B</sup> (1.47)	3.46 <sup>A</sup> (1.58)	2.49 <sup>B</sup> (1.69)
Negative	2.46 <sup>C</sup> (1.60)	3.41 <sup>B</sup> (1.76)	4.80 <sup>A</sup> (1.73)
Attitude	3.58 <sup>A</sup> (1.17)	3.27 <sup>A</sup> (1.58)	1.90 <sup>B</sup> (1.30)
Intent	2.23 <sup>A</sup> (1.18)	2.32 <sup>A</sup> (1.28)	1.51 <sup>B</sup> (.92)

**Note:** Different superscripts indicate significant differences between conditions ( $p < .05$ ) with “A” indicating a higher mean than “B,” and “B” indicating a higher mean than “C.”

**Method**

Study 1 showed 383 undergraduate students of a US university in one of the advertisements for a children’s shirt pictured in Table 2. We manipulated violation severity in the ad, which was ostensibly for a clothing retailer named Richardson’s, by depicting a shirt that seemed normal (left column), a shirt that seemed mildly inappropriate (center column), or a shirt that seemed severely inappropriate (right column). Participants reported perceived humor on three agree–disagree scales: “is humorous,” “makes me laugh,” and “is funny;”  $\alpha = .96$ . They next reported positive and negative affective reactions on scales anchored by “no positive [negative] feelings”/“extreme positive [negative] feelings” and “I don’t feel any positive [negative] emotion”/“I feel a lot of positive [negative] emotion,” ( $\alpha_{pos} = .90, \alpha_{neg} = .94$ ). Our primary hypothesis was that the humorous severe violation would elicit more negative affective reactions, which would, in turn, decrease brand attitudes relative to the humorous mild violation. We measured positive affective reactions as a control variable.



Participants also reported their attitude towards Richardson's (scale anchors: dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable, and positive/negative;  $\alpha = .96$ ) and purchase intentions by indicating their likelihood of engaging in the following behaviors: "shop at Richardson's," "buy clothing from Richardson's," and "purchase a shirt like this for a young girl," ( $\alpha = .82$ ; seven-point scales anchored by "unlikely"/"likely"). We counter-balanced the order of the questions such that some participants first indicated their affective reactions, whereas others first indicated their attitudes and purchase intentions. Because measurement order did not influence anything ( $p$ 's  $> .25$ ), we collapse across order when describing the results. Finally, participants completed a manipulation check by indicating the extent to which they agree or disagree that the advertised product "is inappropriate," "is different than what I think shirts should look like," "violates fashion norms," and "looks worse than a typical girl's shirt" ( $\alpha = .90$ ). All of the measures used seven-point scales.

### ***Analysis and Reporting Strategy***

We analyzed the data for the first three experiments using ANOVA. We first tested for effects on perceived humor, and then tested for effects on affective reactions. We next tested for effects on our focal dependent variable: brand attitudes. For the sake of brevity, we only report significance tests for the hypothesized contrasts in the text while reporting means, standard deviations, and any remaining significance tests in the table corresponding to the study. Finally, in studies 1 and 2 we examined whether perceptions of humor, positive affective reactions, and negative affective reactions mediated the difference in brand attitudes between the ad featuring a mild violation and the ad featuring a severe violation.

### ***Results***

Ratings of violation severity indicated that the severity manipulation worked as intended (see Table 2). Additionally, as intended, both the ad containing a mild violation ( $F_{1,380} = 26.65, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .75$ ) and the ad containing a severe violation ( $F_{1,380} = 27.02; p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .63$ ) increased perceived humor relative to the control ad. The ads with mild and severe violations were equally humorous ( $F_{1,380} = .001, p > .9$ ). Importantly, although the ad containing a severe violation elicited a similar level of positive affective reactions as the control ad ( $F_{1,380} = 2.90, p > .05$ ), it increased negative affective reactions relative to both the control ( $F_{1,380} = 121.44, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = 1.40$ ) and the ad containing a mild violation ( $F_{1,380} = 42.58; p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .80$ ). Consequently, the humorous ad with a severe violation hurt brand attitudes relative to both the non-humorous control ad ( $F_{1,380} = 98.43, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = 1.36$ ) and the humorous ad

with a mild violation ( $F_{1,380} = 64.71, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .95$ ). Similarly, participants reported lower purchase intentions after viewing the ad with a severe violation than after viewing the non-humorous control ad ( $F_{1,380} = 25.58, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .68$ ) or the humorous ad with a mild violation ( $F_{1,380} = 31.55, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .72$ ). In other words, two equally humorous advertisements had different effects on brand attitudes and purchase intentions depending on the severity of the humor-inducing violation in the ad.

Next, we examined whether an increase in negative affective reactions, positive affective reactions, and perceived humor mediated the difference in brand attitude and purchase intentions between the two humorous advertisements. Because brand attitudes and purchase intentions were highly correlated ( $r = .69, p < .001$ ), we averaged them to create a single dependent measure for the mediation analysis. Analysis using Preacher and Hayes's (2008) bootstrapping approach revealed that the difference in attitudes and intentions between the two humorous advertisements was mediated both by negative affective reactions (indirect effect =  $-.10$ , 95% CI =  $-.16$  to  $-.06$ ) and positive affective reactions (indirect effect =  $-.19$ , 95% CI =  $-.29$  to  $-.11$ ) but not by perceived humor (indirect effect =  $-.0001$ , 95% CI =  $-.01$  to  $.01$ ).

### **Discussion**

Study 1 found that the effect of a humorous advertisement on brand attitudes depends on whether the humor attempt depicts a severe or a mild violation. Even when humorous, ads featuring highly inappropriate content are more likely to elicit negative feelings and less likely to elicit positive feelings than ads that create humor with mildly inappropriate content. As a result, humorous severe violations are more likely to hurt the advertising brand.

One limitation of study 1 (as well as studies 2 and 3) is that although both the ads featuring violations were humorous relative to the control ad, neither received high absolute ratings on perceived humor. In our pretests we found it difficult to identify print advertisements that cleanly manipulated violation severity and that all (or even a majority of) participants considered highly humorous. Therefore, we decided to select advertisements that clearly varied in terms of violation severity but that also (a) produced higher levels of humor than a non-humorous control ad and (b) similar levels of humor as one another.

### **Study 2: Humorous Ads with Specific Targets are Riskier for Brands**

Study 2 attempted to replicate study 1 using a different operationalizing of violation severity: whether or not the violation threatens a specific person or group. Violations differ not only in terms of the extent to which they diverge in a threatening manner, but also in terms of whether they exclusively threaten a

specific person or a group of people (exclusive violations) or inclusively threaten universal norms or people in general (inclusive violations). Ads attempt humor using both exclusive and inclusive violations. A 2013 Doritos Super Bowl ad in which a father and his football buddies dress in little girls' clothes in order to get a bag of Doritos is an example of a violation with an exclusive target because the humor comes from a specific group of people (i.e., men) making fools of themselves. On the other hand, the 2011 Doritos Super Bowl ad in which a house sitter brings a fish, plant, and deceased relative back to life using Doritos crumbs is an example of an inclusive violation because the humor comes from violating general logic norm rather than from disparaging or threatening any particular person or group of people.




Singling out a specific person or group of people can make exclusive violations seem insulting, aggressive, disparaging, racist, sexist, politically incorrect, or in other words, more severe. Along these lines, some research refers to exclusive violations as mean-spirited or negative comedy (Martin *et al.* 2003; Samson and Gross 2012). Conversely, inclusive violations avoid disparaging specific people or groups, which makes them less severe. Inclusive violations tend 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 mean-spirited, some research refers to them as benevolent or positive comedy (Martin *et al.* 2003; Samson and Gross 2012).

Because exclusive violations are more severe, we hypothesized that an ad featuring a relatively humorous exclusive violation will be more likely to elicit negative affective reactions and, thus, have a less favorable effect on brand attitudes, than a similar ad featuring a relatively humorous inclusive violation. We tested this hypothesis by varying whether an ad humorously disparaged the driving ability of a specific group of people (see the right column in Table 3) or disparaged the driving ability of people in general (center column in Table 3). We predicted that the ad with an exclusive violation would have a less favorable effect on brand attitudes than the ad with an inclusive violation.

### **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 3). We limited the sample to men because prior research suggests that groups personally disparaged by a violation (in this case, women) are less likely to perceive humor (La Fave *et al.* 1976). We varied violation severity by creating three different versions of the advertisement to use in the between-subjects experiment: 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, which showed a picture of a car accident accompanied by the slogan, "Sooner or later,

Table 3: Results for study 2.

Condition	Control	Inclusive violation	Exclusive violation
			
Measure	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Humor	2.45 <sup>B</sup> (1.43)	5.10 <sup>A</sup> (1.74)	4.08 <sup>A</sup> (1.40)
Negative	3.00 <sup>A,B</sup> (1.42)	2.52 <sup>A</sup> (1.26)	3.70 <sup>B</sup> (1.85)
Attitude	3.42 <sup>A</sup> (1.47)	4.65 <sup>B</sup> (1.38)	3.14 <sup>A</sup> (1.90)

**Description:** 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 superscripts indicate significant differences between conditions ( $p < .05$ ).

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 disparages a particular group of people (i.e., women), whereas the ad in the inclusive condition disparages 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 ( $\alpha = .96$ ), perceived humor, and negative reactions. We measured perceived humor (amused me, was funny, made me laugh;  $\alpha = .96$ ) and negative affective reactions (made me uncomfortable, offended me, was disturbing, was insulting;  $\alpha = .89$ ) using seven-point agree/disagree scales.

### Results and Discussion

As intended, subjects rated the ad containing the inclusive violation ( $F_{1,68} = 21.68, p < .001$ ; Cohen’s  $d = 1.65$ ) and the ad containing the exclusive violation ( $F_{1,68} = 9.54, p < .01$ ; Cohen’s  $d = .91$ ) as more humorous than the control ad (see Table 3). Importantly, although the ads containing violations

were similarly successful at eliciting perceived humor ( $F_{1,68} = 3.92, p > .05$ ), they had different effects on brand attitudes ( $F_{1,68} = 10.39, p < .01$ ; Cohen's  $d = .91$ ). The ad containing a humorous inclusive violation improved brand attitudes relative to the control ad ( $F_{1,68} = 5.79, p < .05$ ; Cohen's  $d = .87$ ), 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 than inclusive violations, the ad featuring an exclusive violation elicited more negative affective reactions than the ad featuring an inclusive violation ( $F_{1,68} = 6.86, p < .05$ ; Cohen's  $d = .75$ ). As in study 1, negative affective reactions mediated the difference in brand attitudes between the humorous ad featuring an inclusive violation and the humorous ad featuring an exclusive violation (indirect effect =  $-.20$ , 95% CI =  $-.572$  to  $-.009$ ). The indirect effect of the advertisement on brand attitude through perceived humor approached but fell short of standard levels of significance (indirect effect =  $-.22$ , 95% CI =  $-.603$  to  $.005$ ), which tentatively suggests that humorous ads may benefit brands as long as the humorous violation does not also increase negative feelings.

Study 2 provided additional evidence that ads relying on severe violations to evoke humor are riskier than ads relying on mild violations. Specifically, the study found that the influence of a humorous advertisement on brand attitudes depends on whether the ad creates humor with an exclusive violation that threatens a specific group of people or an inclusive violation that threatens humanity in general. Although exclusive violations often elicit humor when the consumers are not themselves the butt of the joke, they also yield more negative affective reactions and less favorable brand attitudes than inclusive violations.

### **Study 3: Humorous Ads that Prompt Avoidance are Riskier for Brands**




Another component of violation severity is the extent to which the violation motivates avoidance behaviors. There are many different types of violations that marketers can use to create humorous advertisements. Some violations motivate approach. Others motivate avoidance. Violations that tend to elicit disgust, offense, fear, or shame, for example, are more likely to prompt avoidance, and hence are more severe, than violations that tend to elicit anger, envy, or confusion (Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009; Chapman *et al.* 2009; Lerner and Keltner 2000). We thus predict that ads that evoke humor with violations that motivate avoidance will have a less favorable effect on brand attitudes than ads that evoke humor with violations that motivate approach. As an example, consider the advertisements pictured in Table 4, which we adapted from a real advertising campaign for a popular cola brand. The

advertisements in the second and third columns both feature violations. The advertisement in the second column depicts a harm violation by showing a cartoon lime decapitating another cartoon lime, whereas the advertisement in the third column depicts a purity violation by showing a cartoon lime urinating into a glass of cola. Although the playful and hypothetical graphics likely make both violations seem benign, thereby evoking humor, the violations will likely prompt different motivational tendencies. Because purity violations are more likely to prompt avoidance than harm violations, we predicted that the ad depicting a purity violation would have a less favorable effect on brand attitudes than the ad depicting a harm violation.

**Method**

Undergraduate students ( $N = 152$ ) at a large US university viewed one of the three advertisements in Table 4: an ad not containing a violation

Table 4: Results for study 4.

Condition	No violation (control)	Benign harm violation	Benign purity violation
			
Measure	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Harm	.06 <sup>B</sup> (.22)	1.44 <sup>A</sup> (1.38)	.29 <sup>B</sup> (.50)
Impurity	.22 <sup>B</sup> (.78)	.40 <sup>B</sup> (.80)	1.53 <sup>A</sup> (1.28)
Humor	1.42 <sup>B</sup> (1.37)	2.27 <sup>A</sup> (1.46)	2.82 <sup>A</sup> (1.61)
Attitude	.70 <sup>A,B</sup> (1.31)	.87 <sup>A</sup> (1.32)	.29 <sup>B</sup> (1.56)
Preference	20% <sup>A,B</sup>	35% <sup>A</sup>	12% <sup>B</sup>

**Description:** The initial rows 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 superscripts indicate significant differences between conditions ( $p < .05$ ).

(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 4). Additionally, both the ad containing the purity violation ( $F_{1,149} = 22.20, p < .001$ ; Cohen’s  $d = .94$ ) and the ad containing the harm violation ( $F_{1,14} = 8.52, p < .01$ ; Cohen’s  $d = .61$ ) were more humorous than the control ad. Importantly, although the purity and harm violations were similarly humorous ( $F_{1,149} = 3.14, p > .05$ ), they had different effects on brand attitudes ( $F_{1,149} = 4.55, p < .05$ ; Cohen’s  $d = .41$ ). Attitudes towards the brand in the control ad fell directionally between the other ads, but were not significantly different than attitudes resulting from either the humorous purity violation ( $F_{1,149} = 2.18, p > .1$ ) or the humorous harm violation ( $F_{1,149} = .41, p > .5$ ). 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 ( $\chi^2 = 7.25, p < .01$ ).

In sum, study 3 offers further support that the efficacy of humorous advertising depends on the severity of a violation in the ad. Specifically, the study found that a cola ad evoking humor with a purity violation, which is especially likely to prompt avoidance from food and drink products (Chapman *et al.* 2009), led to less favorable brand attitudes than a similar cola ad evoking humor with a harm violation, which is less likely to motivate avoidance (Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009).

## Study 4: Violation Severity Predicts the Effectiveness of Real Humorous Ads

The purpose of our final study was to test whether the three aforementioned dimensions of violation severity (e.g., the extent of threat, the target of the threat, and the motivational tendency associated with the threat) could differentiate humorous ads that lead to more favorable brand attitudes from humorous ads that lead to less favorable brand attitudes. We expected to conceptually replicate our earlier studies by showing that humorous ads are associated with more favorable brand attitudes when they create humor using violations that seem less severe (i.e., slightly as opposed to extremely inappropriate, inclusive as opposed to exclusive, and less as opposed to more likely to motivate avoidance).

### *Method*

In order to assemble a sample of humorous print advertisements, we had a research assistant who was unaware of the study's hypothesis search the phrase "humorous print ad" on Google Images. The assistant conducted the search using a "moderate" safety filter on October 6th, 2012 and retained the first 60 images that depicted print advertisements for a consumer product in which the brand name was legible and the copy (if there was any) was written in English. Figure 1 illustrates examples of two of the ads in the sample (the full sample of ads is available upon request).

We measured brand attitudes by having 34 respondents on Amazon's mTurk rate their attitude towards each of the 60 advertised brands (order randomized) on three seven-point scales anchored by bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, and negative/positive (inter-coder reliability:  $\alpha = .81$ ). Although the advertisements in the sample were considered humorous (according to Google), it is unlikely that the ads were all equally humorous. Because we wanted to assess what drives differences in brand attitude between similarly humorous advertisements, we measured the level of humor evoked by the ads by having a separate sample of 24 respondents on mTurk rate the extent to which they perceived each of the 60 ads as humorous on a seven-point scale anchored by *not humorous/humorous* ( $\alpha = .87$ ). We controlled differences in perceived humor across advertisements by using the average rating of perceived humor as a covariate.

Coding the severity of the violations in the advertisements required more involved respondents, so we trained eight undergraduate student research assistants (all were unaware of the hypotheses) on how to identify a humor-eliciting violation.<sup>2</sup> We then asked them to code the extent of the threat (1 =

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<sup>2</sup>The practice of using trained research assistants to code the characteristics of advertisements is common in the humor literature (e.g., Alden *et al.* 1993, 2000).



mild, 2 = moderate, 3 = severe;  $\alpha = .77$ ), whether the violation exclusively threatened an individual or group (1 = inclusive, 2 = some inclusive elements and some exclusive elements, 3 = exclusive;  $\alpha = .87$ ), and the extent to which the violation motivated avoidance (1 = unlikely to prompt withdrawal, 2 = could prompt withdrawal, 3 = likely to prompt withdrawal;  $\alpha = .70$ ; see the Appendix for the coding instructions).

### **Results and Discussion**

Consistent with our finding that humorous ads vary in effectiveness, we found high variance in brand attitudes across the sample of humorous advertisements (range = 3.08–5.55;  $SD = .57$ ). We investigated whether the three operationalizations of violation severity could help explain this variance using regression analyses. Specifically, we tested whether violations that seemed more threatening, exclusive, and avoidance-motivating predicted brand attitudes while controlling for perceived humor. Because the different dimensions of violation severity were correlated ( $\alpha = .63$ ), we added the ratings of violation extremity, exclusivity, and avoidance tendency together to create a composite measure of violation severity.

We conducted a regression analysis using the advertisement as the unit of analysis ( $N = 60$ ) brand attitude rating for the ad (averaged across the 34 mTurk respondents) as the dependent variable and both the average perceived humor rating (averaged across the 24 mTurk respondents) and the combined severity score (averaged across the eight coders) as independent variables. Consistent with the previous studies, controlling for the extent to which the ad seemed humorous, ads depicting more severe violations were associated with less favorable brand attitudes than advertisements depicting milder violations ( $b = -.23, t = -4.30, p < .001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .24$ ). Controlling for violation severity, more humorous ads were associated with more favorable brand attitudes ( $b = .22, t = 3.62, p < .01$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .20$ ). Consistent with our assertion that both mild and severe violations are capable of triggering humor, ratings of violation severity and humor were not significantly correlated ( $r = .06, p > .6$ ).

The regression analysis finds that ads that seem funnier are less likely to hurt brands than ads that seem less funny. Importantly, however, over and above this effect, humorous ads depicting more severe violations are more likely to hurt brands than humorous ads depicting milder violations. As a concrete example, consider the advertisements for Google and Ovaltine in Figure 1. The two ads were equally humorous, receiving average humor ratings of 4.04 and 4.17, respectively. However, the Google ad evokes humor using a mild violation (severity rating = 3.38). An airplane with legs protruding from it is a logic violation that the ad text (“Did you mean? *jetlag*”) suggests is a result of accidentally typing “jetleg” instead of “jetlag.” The logic violation



A: Ovaltine Ad (relatively severe violation)



B: Google Ad (relatively mild violation)

Figure 1: Example advertisements from study 4.

does not seem particularly threatening, does not threaten any particular group of people (anyone can make a typo), and invites consumers to make sense of — an approach behavior — the illogical picture. Conversely, the Ovaltine ad evokes humor using a more severe violation (severity rating = 6.00). Not being able to reach an oxygen mask during a plane crash would present a substantial threat, the ad text (“sucks to be short”) illustrates that the violation exclusively

threatens the vertically challenged, and the frightening scene portrayed in the ad motivates avoidance. Consequently, despite being equally humorous, the Google ad is associated with more favorable brand attitude ratings than the Ovaltine ad (4.53 vs. 3.10, respectively).

In sum, study 4 illustrates that the severity of the violation used to create humor can explain which humorous advertisements are more likely to help rather than hurt brands. Humorous advertising leads to more favorable brand attitudes when the ad creates humor with violations that are less threatening, prompt approach, and do not threaten anyone in particular.

## General Discussion

Humorous advertisements offer well-documented benefits, but also risk hurting the brand — even when they are funny. For example, Ameriquest's 2006 Super Bowl ad in which unexpected turbulence launches two airline passengers into a compromising position landed on Forbes's list of "Worst Super Bowl Commercials Ever" despite many consumers finding it funny (Smith 2014). As the Ameriquest ad illustrates, being funny is not enough to assure that ads won't backfire and hurt the brand by eliciting negative feelings in addition to humor.

In addition to considering whether an advertisement attempting humor is humorous or not, marketers should also consider *how* to execute a humor attempt in a way that minimizes negative reactions from consumers. In order to reap the benefits of humorous advertising while minimizing the risks, we suggest that managers consider five questions: (1) Is the humor attempt funny? (2) Does the ad create humor in a way that is highly threatening? (3) Does the ad create humor by threatening a specific person or group? (4) Will the ad create humor in a way that also motivates avoidance? (5) What is the context for the humor attempt?

### *Is the Humor Attempt Funny?*

Managers should start by considering the likelihood that a humor attempt will successfully amuse the audience. The literature and our final study both suggest that reaping any potential benefits from attempting humor requires an advertisement actually be considered humorous by consumers (Flaherty *et al.* 2004; Gulas and Weinberger 2006). To successfully evoke humor, contemporary humor theories suggest that advertisements need to portray something that threatens the target audience's well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (i.e., a violation) in a way that is simultaneously perceived to be benign (McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998; Warren and McGraw 2015). However, it may be difficult to know a priori what the audience

will see as a violation and which violations they will see as benign. Successfully creating humorous ads requires a deep understanding of the desires, cultural beliefs, and identity of the target audience. Even then, some humor attempts are bound to fail. One way to help succeed is to employ rigorous market testing before launch.

### ***Is the Underlying Violation Too Threatening?***

Next, managers should consider what will happen if the advertisement is considered funny, as some humorous ads are more likely to help (or hurt) brand attitudes than others. Brands are more likely to benefit from humorous ads that use less threatening benign violations rather than more threatening benign violations, as the latter are more likely to elicit negative reactions and result in less favorable brand attitudes. Not surprisingly, previous studies that have found a positive relationship between humorous advertising and brand attitude tend to feature mild threats, like a statue of a historical figure blowing a gum bubble (Cline and Kellaris 1999) or a cartoon involving clever wordplay (Zhang 1996). In contrast, marketers are increasingly relying on violence, sex, and other relatively threatening violations in order to create humorous advertising (Gulas *et al.* 2010; Swani *et al.* 2013). Our research suggests that marketers should reverse this trend by creating content that evokes humor by depicting something mildly inappropriate, like the smiling shirt in study 1, rather than highly inappropriate, like the tasseled shirt in study 1.

### ***Does the Humorous Violation Exclusively Threaten a Particular Person or Group?***

It is also important for managers to consider whether an ad creates humor by threatening a specific person or group of people (i.e., an exclusive violation) rather than people in general (i.e., an inclusive violation). Inclusive violations, which target a universal norm or people in general, are a safer way to create humor. For example, study 2 illustrated that a humorous ad that disparages all drivers had a more favorable effect on brand attitudes than an ad disparaging a particular group of drivers (e.g., women). Effective humorous ads typically use violations with inclusive targets. For example, one reason for the success of the classic Budweiser frogs advertisement from the 1995 Super Bowl is that the humor evoked by the frogs croaking the name “BUD-WEIS-ER” did not 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 Super Bowl advertisement about Tibet’s struggle for freedom prompted backlash from viewers and the press likely because the humor-inducing violation threatened a specific group: Tibetans.

### ***Will the Humorous Violation Prompt Avoidance?***

Managers should also consider the likelihood that violation used to create humor motivates avoidance. As an example, study 3 showed how purity violations that evoke disgust, an emotion that motivates avoidance from contaminants (Chapman *et al.* 2009), 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, such as the airplane with legs pictured in the Google ad in Figure 1, are less risky because they tend to motivate 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.

### ***Who are the Consumers and What is the Context for the Humor Attempt?***

The previous questions, which are consistent with the focus of our inquiry, discuss how similarly humorous ads can have different effects on brand attitudes depending on the severity of the violation used to create humor. Prior research, however, shows that to know when humorous ads are effective marketers also need to consider contextual factors, including the characteristics of the target consumer, the product category, the media outlet, and whether the humor-inducing benign violation 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 attitudes 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 may also depend on the media outlet of the communication and the relevance of the humor-inducing benign violation (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006). In sum, managers should attend not only to whether the ad is humorous and the severity of the violation in the ad, but also to the context in which the consumer will be exposed to it.

### ***Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research***

One limitation of our work is that it focuses on the severity of the violation that an advertisement uses to create humor without exploring other differences that may similarly shape whether a humorous ad influences brand attitudes.

Future research could examine whether the relevance of humorous content, the communication medium, the complexity of the humor attempt, and other variations in humorous advertisements yield different effects on brand attitudes and consumer choice. For example, Kelly and Solomon (1975) offer a classification scheme describing six ways of evoking humor: puns, understatement, jokes, ludicrous, satire, and irony. Although research illustrates that marketers are most likely to portray ludicrous situations (Weinberger and Spotts 1989), it is unclear whether ludicrous humor attempts are more or less likely to harm brands than puns, understatement, jokes, satire, or irony.

Our studies are also limited by reliance on explicit, scale-rating measures of humor, affective reactions, and attitudes. Although the use of such measures is common in the literature, finding that the results generalize to a wider range of behavioral (e.g., laughter), physiological (e.g., fMRI; facial EMG), and implicit (e.g., reaction time) measures would further boost confidence in the results. The generality of our findings may also be limited because of the specific stimuli and participants we used. Another opportunity for future research could be to examine whether the effects generalize across different media, cultures, targets, and languages.

## **Conclusion**

Being humorous is a potentially effective way for advertisements to cut through the clutter and increase ad liking. However, marketers should proceed with caution. Humorous advertisements may elicit harmful negative affective reactions in addition to perceived humor. Because humorous content attracts attention and entertains consumers, marketers can benefit from humorous advertising. However, marketers need to be careful not to inadvertently hurt their brands in the process. Therefore, we recommend that marketers create humor by depicting benign violations that are mildly threatening, do not ridicule a specific person or group, and are unlikely to prompt avoidance.

## **Appendix: Coding Instructions for Study 4**

A violation is anything that threatens a person's sense of how things should be. People hold many beliefs about the way the world is and the way people should behave in it. When something does not fit a person's beliefs about how things should be, it is a violation. Another way of thinking about violations is that they occur any time something differs from your expectations or the norm in an undesirable way.

There are many different types of violations, including physical violations, identity violations, communication/linguistic violations, social/cultural violations, and logic violations:

- **Physical violations** include anything that harms or could potentially harm someone's health, body, or physical well-being; e.g., signs of danger, disease, contaminants, and many instances of violence and physical aggression (although there are some contexts in which violence or physical aggression might seem appropriate).
- **Identity violations** include anything that insults or questions the value, dignity, or image of a person or a group of people; e.g., insults, negative stereotypes, embarrassing behaviors, poor performance, or criticism.
- **Communication/linguistic violations** include anything that breaks a communication or linguistic norm, respectively. Typically these violations make it more difficult to communicate or to understand communication from someone else; e.g., unusual or improper pronunciation, speech errors, verbal irony, sarcasm, misleading statements, lies, poor grammar, stuttering, or non-sequiturs.
- **Social/cultural violations** include anything that parts from a social or cultural norm, provided the norm is generally perceived to be valid. Stated differently, behaviors that part from norms that do not seem merely descriptive or arbitrary (i.e., injunctive norm violations); e.g., bad fashion, bad manners, not following customs, unfair behaviors, betrayal, taboo topics (sex, excrement, etc.), disgusting acts, dirty language not directed at someone else, and disrespectful behaviors.
- **Logic violations** include anything that disrupts a person's view of the world as a consistent, reasonable, or rational place; e.g., logic errors, impossibilities, illusions, or anything else that doesn't make sense.

The purpose of the above list is to give you a sense of what a violation is and how to recognize one. The ads in the attached PowerPoint [the sample described in study 4] all attempt to create humor by depicting some sort of violation. We want you to identify the violation in the humor attempt. To identify the violation, look for part of the ad that seems not right or that could potentially produce a negative reaction (in you or others). Once you have identified the violation, we want you to code it on each of the dimensions described below.

### **I. Severity**

Violation severity refers to the degree to which a violation threatens one's sense of how the world should be. Violations are more severe if they seem more threatening, bad, or negative. Another way about thinking about violation severity is that it refers to the extent to which a stimulus parts from the norm in a negative way. Mild violations part from the norm less than severe violations. For example, losing a smaller amount of money would be a less severe violation than losing a larger amount of money, just as a male wearing one article of women's clothing would be a less severe violation than a man dressing completely in drag.

Please code the severity of the violation attempting humor in each of the ads using the following scale:

- (1) Mild violation: little threat or a small departure from the norm.
- (2) Moderate violation.
- (3) Severe violation: a higher level of threat or a large departure from the norm.

### **II. Behavioral Prompt**

Some violations prompt people to move away from the stimulus, whereas others do not. Whether or not a violation motivates withdrawal depends on the specific negative reactions that the violation elicits. Violations that elicit disgust or fear, for example, tend to elicit withdrawal, whereas violations that elicit pity or anger do not. Other violations, such as logic violations that elicit confusion, may actually motivate approach (in this case because people will be motivated to explain the source of confusion).

Please code the extent to which each of the violations attempting humor is likely to prompt withdrawal using the following scale:

- (1) Violation unlikely to prompt withdrawal.
- (2) Violation could prompt withdrawal.
- (3) Violation likely to prompt withdrawal.

### **III. Target**

Violations differ in terms of who or what is the target or object of the violation. Sometimes a threat or negative stimulus is directed at an individual or a group of people, other times the threat or negative stimulus is directed at the situation or at the way people are in general. Another way of thinking about a violation target is who or what is being laughed at? We refer to violations that focus on the situation or humanity in general (rather than singling out



specific groups of people) as having an inclusive target. Conversely, we refer to violations that focus on specific individuals or groups of people as having an exclusive target. Any humor that makes fun of one specific person or group of people relies on an exclusive violation. For example, humor that might be considered insulting, disparaging, racist, sexist, or any other kind of “ist” likely uses an exclusive violation. Conversely, humor that makes fun of the absurdity of a situation, the foibles of the world, or the imperfections of human nature uses an inclusive violation. For example, jokes about the weather, the universe, language in general (but not specific languages), or society in general (but not specific societies) likely use inclusive violations.

Please code the target or object of the violation using the following scale:

- (1) Violation is inclusive.
- (2) Ambiguous: the violation has some inclusive elements but some exclusive elements.
- (3) Violation is exclusive.

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