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## **The Influence of Humor on Sharing**

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We explore the influence of humor on social transmission. Drawing from the benign violation theory of humor, we show that violation severity and benignity jointly influence the perceived humor and, consequently, the virality of youtube videos and text messages. The relationship between humor and sharing may depend on the recipient.

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## The Influence of Humor on Sharing

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Consumers frequently share content through email, text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media (Allsop, Bassett, and Hopkins 2007). Because social transmission has a powerful influence on attitudes, product adoption, and sales (Asch 1956; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Godes and Mayzlin 2009), understanding why some content is shared and other content is not is important for marketers and consumers researchers.

We investigate if and when humor influences the likelihood that something is shared. There are at least two reasons to suspect that humor increases sharing. First, consumers share content as a way to build and maintain social relationships, and research suggests that humor is an effective way to invite further social interaction (Martin 2007). Second, humor typically involves a positive emotional response to potentially negative stimuli (McGraw and Warren 2010; Ramuchandran 1998; Veatch 1998). Consequently, humorous content may be shared more both because negative information attracts more attention than positive information (Baumeister et al. 2001) and because consumers are more likely to share content that elicits positive rather than negative emotions (Berger and Milkman 2011).

The benign violation theory argues that humor occurs when a violation simultaneously seems benign (Warren and McGraw 2010). Violations are threats to your beliefs about how things should be (Veatch 1998). They include threats to physical well-being (e.g., attacks), self-concept (e.g., insults), social norms (e.g., flatulence), cultural norms (e.g., not wearing pants), linguistic norms (e.g., unusual accents), and moral norms (e.g., bestiality). In order to be humorous, violations must simultaneously seem benign, or okay. Three factors that increase the benignity of a violation are: (1) alternate norms suggesting the violation is acceptable, (2) weak commitment to the violated belief, and (3) psychological distance from the violation (McGraw and Warren 2010). We predict that the violation severity (i.e., the extent to which something seems wrong) and benignity (i.e., the extent to which it seems okay) of content jointly determine its humorousness and that more humorous content is more frequently shared than less humorous content.

Our first study investigated the relationship between violation severity, humor, and sharing in a sample of Youtube videos. Importantly, these videos are psychologically distant. Most are hypothetical and nearly all portray other people at some other place and time. Consequently, we suspected that the videos would seem benign and that the ones depicting more severe violations would be funnier and, thus, shared more often (i.e., have a high number of views) than videos depicting milder violations.

We assembled a sample of 76 videos by using two generic pronouns as search words on youtube.com: “the” and “a.” Trained coders rated the level of humor ( $\alpha = .694$ ) and violation severity ( $\alpha = .751$ ) in each of the videos. The number of views was highly skewed, so we took its log as the main dependent variable. As hypothesized, videos with more severe violations were seen as more humorous ( $b = .46$ ) and were shared more frequently ( $b = .36$ ). Further analysis using Preacher and Hayes’s (2008) bootstrapping algorithm shows that humor mediated the effect of violation severity on sharing (mean indirect effect = .31; 95% CI = .14 to .61).

While these results indicate that more severe violations are shared more, this strategy may not apply when content feels psychologically closer. When psychologically close, severe violations may be difficult to see as benign, and, thus, seem less humorous than milder violations (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2011). Consequently, violation severity might decrease the virality of psychologically close content, like a text message from a friend.

We tested this by asking 93 student participants to rate the violation severity, humor, and their likelihood of sharing several text messages posted on a website (socially distant condition) or sent by a friend (socially close condition). As expected, when the texts were ostensibly from a friend, milder violations (e.g., “tell me why there is a bowl of oatmeal from starbucks in my purse”) were seen as more humorous ( $M = 5.3$  vs.  $2.1$ ) and were more likely to be shared ( $M = 4.0$  vs.  $1.9$ ) than severe violations (e.g., “He waited till after we had sex to tell me he had herpes... Ugh I hate being drunk”). However, when the texts were ostensibly on a website, there was little difference between the mild and severe violations on perceived humor ( $M = 3.4$  vs.  $2.6$ ) or sharing ( $M = 2.9$  vs.  $2.5$ ). We suspect that unlike the Youtube videos in the previous studies, the severe text messages may not have seemed benign even at a distance.

Another important question is *when* does humor increase sharing? Because perceptions about what is wrong (i.e., a violation) and what is okay (i.e., benign) vary considerably across individuals, not all consumers share the same sense of humor. Consequently, the recipients of shared content may not find the same things humorous as the sender, and this is especially likely when the recipient and sender are dissimilar. Recipients may fail to perceive humor in transmitted online content either because they do not perceive a violation (benign content) or because they perceive a violation that does not seem benign (malign violation). Because the costs of sharing a failed humor attempt are likely higher for malign violations than for benign content (Warren and McGraw 2011), we suspect that consumers will be hesitant to share severe violations with dissimilar recipients even when they personally consider the violations humorous. Thus, we also plan to investigate whether the recipient of the shared content moderates the relationship between humor and sharing.

Consumers often share content that they find humorous, and humor depends on the consumer’s perception that a violation is benign. Consequently, the severity of a portrayed violation, the consumer’s psychological distance, and the consumer’s similarity to the intended recipient jointly influence the likelihood that something is shared.

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## **Can I Pay More?: The Moderating Effect of Gender and Self-Esteem Following Consumer Rejection**

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Human beings look to communicate with others and to belong to a group. Unfortunately, though, there are many situations that make people feel rejected and, therefore, feel pain and sadness (Blackhart 2009). Rejection occurs when a person is deliberately excluded by a group (Blackhart 2009). Some consumer researchers demonstrated that rejected consumers are more conservative with their spending (Baumeister et al. 2005), but others evidenced that excluded consumers spend their money more selectively and more lavishly (Mead et al., 2011). Excluded consumers tend to spend more for products that are more symbolic and enhance their group membership. Further, excluded people are willing to spend money on products that enhance their feeling of acceptance and attractiveness (Baumeister et al. 2005, Mead et al. forthcoming). The goal of this research is to investigate the boundary conditions of whether exclusion affects spending positively and negatively. We particularly examined the moderating effects of self esteem and gender, two understudied factors in prior research.

The literature reveals that consumers use their money to impress others and as a way to enhance their status with friends and other groups (Ariely and Levav 2000; Berger and Heath, 2007). This idea leads excluded persons to spend their money to gain social status, so there is a trade-off between one's social well-being and one's monetary well-being (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Also from the literature, it is known that social exclusion reduces a person's level of self-regulation (Baumeister et al., 2005). Based on this, it is presumed that impaired self-regulation leads to spending money unwisely. Although higher levels of self-esteem do not guarantee better performance and success, people with higher self-esteem have greater self-regulation (Baumeister et al., 2005). From the previous research, it is known that social exclusion can lead to a decrease in self-regulation (Baumeister et al. 2005) and lower levels of self-regulation may lead consumers to spend more.

In addition to the effects self-esteem may have on consumer's spending following rejection, the literature suggests gender may also play a moderating role. Research on gender differences with respect to positive and negative emotions revealed that men and women have equal levels of happiness towards stimuli (Myers 1993), but regarding sadness, it seems that women are more willing to show sadness and negative emotions than men (Fujita, Diener and Sandvik 1991). In addition women not only show more negative emotions regarding unpleasant events, but also have a greater tendency to ruminate in comparison to men, therefore causing difficulties in solving current problems (Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson and Grayson 1999). When consumers are rejected, this negative event requires a solution, a way to repair one's negative feelings. Therefore, it is expected that women will be more likely than men to experience negative emotion following a rejecting event. However, this response is expected to be moderated by self-esteem.

Therefore, it is expected that when women with higher self-esteem face rejection, they will try to boost their negative emotion by spending money for products, but women with lower self-esteem will be less likely to make a significant attempt to overcome this negative emotion through spending. In comparison with women, the influence of rejection on men will be attenuated.

### **EXPERIMENT**

This study was a 2 (rejection: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (Self-esteem: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (gender: female vs. male) between-subjects design with a total of 155 participants (49% Male and 51% Female). Rejection was manipulated by asking participants to imagine an interaction with a salesclerk where they were going to buy a jacket and all participants receive a store credit card offer from clerk. Half of the participants were told that they applied for the store credit card and then after a few minutes the clerk tells them they were rejected (rejection) and the other half of participants were told that they decided not to apply for the store credit card (no rejection). Self-esteem was measured through a self-report scale (Rosenberg 1965). Individuals were categorized as high or low in self-esteem by a median split. The dependent variable was participant's willingness to pay for a small household appliance (a toaster).