



CHICAGO JOURNALS

Journal of Consumer Research, Inc.

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Source: *Journal of Consumer Research*, (-Not available-)

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678904>

Accessed: 08/09/2014 21:51

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# Humorous Complaining

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## Abstract

Although complaints document dissatisfaction, some are also humorous. The paper introduces the concept of humorous complaining and draws on the benign violation theory – which proposes that humor arises from things that seem simultaneously wrong yet okay – to examine how being humorous helps and hinders complainers. Six studies show that humorous complaints benefit people who want to warn, entertain, and make a favorable impression on others. Further, in contrast to the belief that humor is beneficial but consistent with the benign violation theory, humor makes complaints seem more positive (by making an expression of dissatisfaction seem okay), but makes praise seem more negative (by making an expression of satisfaction seem wrong in some way). Finally, a benign violation approach also reveals that complaining humorously has costs. Because being humorous suggests that a dissatisfying situation is okay, humorous complaints are less likely to elicit redress or sympathy from others than non-humorous complaints.

*“I should have flown with someone else or gone by car... ‘cause United breaks guitars.”*

People express their dissatisfaction by complaining, but some complaints also make good comedy. When United Airlines refused to compensate Dave Carroll for his damaged Taylor guitar, the musician did what many people are doing – he turned to the Internet to air his complaint. But rather than taking a strictly negative tone, his YouTube video, “United Breaks Guitars,” humorously parodied his negative experience with the company (Carroll 2009). Carroll’s complaint attracted millions of views, creating a public relations disaster for United and a surge in popularity for the musician (Ayres 2009; Deighton and Kornfeld 2010).

We examine the intersection of complaining, with its negative associations, and humor, with its positive associations, to introduce *humorous complaining* and explore its implications. Consistent with a broad literature documenting its benefits, humor can help complainers, such as Dave Carroll, reach a broader audience in a way that is witty rather than whiney. However, consistent with an emerging perspective that humor results from the perception of a benign violation, being humorous doesn’t always benefit complainers.

The benign violation theory suggests that things are humorous when people perceive something as wrong yet okay. Building on the theory, our inquiry also reveals that humor 1) is more common in complaints than praise, 2) increases the positive feelings perceived in complaints but increases the negative feelings perceived in praise, and 3) hinders complainers who hope to obtain redress or sympathy from others.

## COMPLAINING

Whether due to bad weather, a rude barista, or an unmet brand promise, complaining is a common, important part of social life (Alicke et al. 1992; Bearden and Teel 1983; Oliver 1980, 1987). Across literatures, complaining is broadly defined as a behavioral expression of dissatisfaction (Alicke et al. 1992; Fornell and Westbrook 1979; Kowalski 1996; Landon 1980). Early marketing research focused on complaints directed towards brands or third parties (e.g., Better Business Bureau), via letters and calls, or towards friends and family, via conversation (i.e., word-of-mouth; Bearden and Teel 1983; Bennett 1997; Day and Landon 1977; Richins 1982, 1983). However, the proliferation of social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) and websites containing consumer reviews (e.g., Amazon, Yelp) has greatly expanded the reach of consumer-to-consumer communications (Dunn and Dahl 2012; Ward and Ostrom 2006). Complaints on social media and reviews sites typically target friends and strangers, though companies often monitor these public forums (Taube 2014).

Complaints serve many possible purposes. People often complain to make small talk or vent frustrations, which can alleviate the detrimental effects of suppressing negative thoughts and feelings (Alicke et al. 1992; Gross 1998; Kowalski 1996; Nyer 1999; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster 1998). People also complain in order to influence the perception and behavior of others. Complainers may wish to warn people about a negative experience (Day and Landon 1977; Richins 1983; Singh 1988), obtain redress (Alberts 1988; Kowalski 1996), or solicit sympathy and moral support (Alicke et al. 1992; Kowalski 1996). Finally, complainers may want to demonstrate refined tastes or high standards in order to communicate a desirable image (Alicke et al. 1992; Jones and Pittman 1982; Kowalski 1996). Because of complaining’s benefits – obtaining compensation, receiving sympathy, or creating a positive image – people sometimes complain even when they are satisfied (Kowalski 1996).

Complaining, however, is not always beneficial. People who complain frequently or about trivial matters are viewed negatively – as grumpy, argumentative, or boring (Forest and Wood 2012; Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill 2014; Kaiser and Miller 2001; Sperduto, Calhoun, and Ciminero 1978). Other times, people believe that complaining will not have the desired effect or they don't have time to seek redress (Day and Landon 1977). Because of complaining's costs, people sometimes don't complain even when they are dissatisfied (Bearden and Oliver 1985; Day 1984; Kowalski 1996; Richins 1983; Zhang, Feick, and Mittal 2014).

## HUMOR

Humor, like complaining, is a common, important part of social life (Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Martin 2007; Provine 2001). We define humor as a psychological response characterized by the positive emotion of amusement, the appraisal that something is funny, and the tendency to laugh (Gervais and Wilson 2005; Martin 2007; McGraw and Warren 2010). Defining humor as an outcome rather than a stimulus (i.e., a humor attempt) is important because the same stimulus may seem humorous to one person but not to another. The consequences of humor, therefore, depend on the psychological appraisal and emotional reaction of those perceiving (or not perceiving) humor rather than the stimulus per se.

Being humorous offers vast interpersonal benefits. Humor facilitates conflict resolution by making it easier to accept criticism and confront unpleasant situations (Dews, Kaplan, and Winner 1995; Fraley and Aron 2004). A good sense of humor is considered a highly desirable trait. Funny people are ascribed a wide range of positive characteristics, including intelligence, friendliness, imagination, charm, and emotional stability (Martin 2007; Sprecher and Regan 2002). Being humorous is also instrumentally beneficial. People attend to, remember, and are entertained by humorous stimuli (Madden and Weinberger 1982; Schindler and Bickart 2012; Schmidt 1994, 2002). People are inclined to attend social events that feature humorous invitations (Scott, Klein, and Bryant 1990) and are more likely to share advertisements, videos, and news stories that elicit positive responses, especially humorous ones (Berger and Milkman 2012; Berger 2013). Humor even enhances the liking of ads, which people otherwise tend to find annoying (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000; Eisend 2009).

Although being humorous can be positive and beneficial, scholars for millennia have also recognized that negative situations and stimuli often trigger humor (Martin 2007; McGraw and Warner 2014; Warren and McGraw 2013a). As a theoretical foundation, we draw on the benign violation theory, which suggests that the same negative, disappointing situations that trigger complaints are also a ripe source of humor. The theory proposes that humor occurs when something that is perceived to threaten a person's well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (i.e., a violation) simultaneously seems okay or acceptable (i.e., benign; McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012; Rozin et al. 2013; Veatch 1998). Developmentally, violations are likely first perceived as physical threats, such as a parent's disappearance in peek-a-boo, but later expand to include threats to identity (e.g., insult humor), logic (e.g., elephant jokes; absurdities), communication rules (e.g., sarcasm; puns), and social conventions (e.g., breaking a dress code).

Violations, however, are only humorous when they seem playful or non-serious (Eastman 1936; Gervais and Wilson 2005). The benign violation theory builds on prior humor theories that highlight how humorous reactions are associated with the appraisal that a situation is acceptable, harmless, normal, okay, or otherwise benign (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren and McGraw

2014; Veatch 1998). The perception that something that is wrong is actually okay can transform an otherwise negative experience to a positive experience characterized by laughter and amusement (Apter 1982; Rothbart 1973). Consistent with the theory, laughter signals to others that a potentially threatening situation is safe or that an inappropriate act is not intended to be serious (Gervais and Wilson 2005; Ramachandran 1998). Play fighting and tickling are prototypical benign violations; both are physically threatening but harmless attacks (Gervais and Wilson 2005; Veatch 1998). Puns and other wordplay similarly violate one language norm while conforming to another (McGraw and Warren 2014).

## HUMOROUS COMPLAINING

We examine humor in the domain of complaining. We define humorous complaining as a behavioral expression of dissatisfaction that elicits a response characterized by the positive emotion of amusement, the appraisal that something is funny, and the tendency to laugh. Despite communicating dissatisfaction, many widely circulated complaints are humorous:

While waiting on hold with Comcast, a cable repairman fell asleep in a customer's home. The customer filmed the man sleeping, added relaxing music to the scene, and posted it on YouTube (DoorFrame, 2006). The humorous video was viewed more than 1.5 million times and the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* reported the story.

When a Houston Double Tree hotel failed to honor a guaranteed reservation, two businessmen created a humorous PowerPoint presentation dubbed, "Yours is a Very Bad Hotel." The document was widely spread by email and *The Wall Street Journal* and the *National Post* reported the story.

Amusing negative Amazon reviews for Sugarless Haribo Gummy Bears captured the attention of BuzzFeed (2014). The reviews warned that the product causes acute intestinal distress, featuring titles such as "Gastrointestinal Armageddon" and "Fully Weaponized Gummy Bears." The story received more than three million views.

Humorous complaining has likely existed since people first started complaining. Long before Jon Stewart began humorously pointing out problems with politics and the media, Lysistrata, the oldest documented satire, humorously critiqued Greece's participation in the Peloponnesian War. Even now, people will go to great lengths to complain humorously, creating satirical videos, such as "United Breaks Guitars," or parody websites, such as Untied.com, which refers to United Airlines as "an evil alliance member" (Ward and Ostrom 2006). More commonly, however, people fill their Facebook and Twitter feeds with witty grievances about annoying pop stars, bumper-to-bumper traffic, and poor cellular service. People also make cracks about products and services in Amazon and Yelp reviews; the latter website even recognizes that reviewers can be humorous and asks readers to rate if reviews are funny.

## HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

In addition to highlighting the role that humor plays in a new consumer context, we contribute to the literature by offering a more nuanced perspective on humor. As previously

noted, the marketing literature emphasizes humor's positive effects on a range of communication outcomes, including attracting attention, entertaining people, and motivating sharing behavior (Berger 2013; Eisend 2009). In contrast to a purely positive or "humor as halo" perspective, the benign violation theory suggests that humor's influence on consumer-to-consumer communications depends on the valence of the communication (complaints vs. praise).

### Complaints vs. Praise

A complaint articulates a perception that something is wrong, threatening, or amiss, whereas praise articulates the opposite. We examine if humor has a similar influence on communications with a positive valence (i.e., praise) as it does on complaints. Because a halo perspective focuses on the positive effects of humor, it suggests that humor will make complaints and praise more positive. A halo perspective also suggests that humor should be more common in praise (a positive communication) than complaints (a negative communication).

By proposing that humor requires both a negative component and a positive component, the benign violation theory makes different predictions. If humor occurs when a violation simultaneously seems benign, then in order to make a complaint humorous, the complainer has to portray the source of dissatisfaction (i.e., the violation) in a way that makes it seem okay (i.e., benign). On the other hand, making praise humorous may require adding something negative (i.e., a violation) to an otherwise purely positive, benign experience. Thus we hypothesize that being humorous will make complaints seem more positive but praise seem more negative. Additionally, because experiencing a violation is more likely to trigger dissatisfaction than satisfaction, humor should be more common in consumer communications that have a negative valence (i.e., complaints) than a positive valence (i.e., praise).

### Goals of the complainer

There are many reasons why people are more or less motivated to complain. For example, people won't complain if they fear the audience will consider the complaint annoying, but they will complain if they believe the complaint will help them cultivate a positive impression, warn others, prompt reparative action, or cope with negative experiences (Alicke et al. 1992; Day and Landon 1977; Kowalski 1996). Complainers, therefore, succeed at 1) avoiding annoyance when the audience enjoys the complaint, 2) impression management when the audience holds a more favorable attitude towards them, 3) warning others when the audience attends to and shares a complaint, 4) prompting reparative action when the person responsible for the negative experience offers redress, and 5) coping when the audience offers sympathy. A benign violation perspective suggests that humorous complainers will be successful in some cases but not others.

*Entertaining Others.* People enjoy humorous experiences. Humor's pursuit fills theaters, attracts TV audiences, and causes countless hours of aimless Internet browsing (Warren and McGraw 2013b). When people perceive something as humorous they experience positive emotion (amusement), which is pleasant and enjoyable. Because humor introduces a positive component to an otherwise negative communication, we predict that humorous complaints will be more likely to entertain and be liked by an audience than non-humorous complaints.

*Impression Management.* People want to be viewed positively – and a good sense of humor is an effective way to accomplish this goal (Miller 2000; Wilbur and Campbell 2011). Among many other benefits, being humorous conveys intelligence (Greengross and Miller 2011; Howrigan and MacDonald 2008; Lippa 2007; Miller 2000), predicts social status (Warnars-Kleverlaan, Oppenheimer and Sherman 1996), and is highly desired in friends and loved ones (Wilbur and Campbell 2011). Therefore, people may complain humorously as a way to express dissatisfaction while also cultivating positive reactions from others. Moreover, complaining humorously requires the challenging yet appealing skill of taking something wrong and finding a way to make it seem okay. Thus, we predict that people who complain humorously will cultivate a more favorable impression than people who complain non-humorously.

*Warning Others.* People sometimes complain to warn others – and attracting attention and maximizing the number of people attending to a complaint is an effective way to reach a large audience. Advertisers have long recognized that humor can be a powerful way to cut through the clutter and gain the attention of consumers (Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Madden and Weinberger 1982). Humorous content is typically processed more carefully and remembered better than non-humorous content (Schmidt 1994, 2002). Humor may also help complainers warn others because people are more likely to share humorous than non-humorous content with others (Berger 2013). Thus, we predict that humorous complaints will more effectively warn others by capturing more attention and being shared more often than non-humorous complaints.

*Obtaining Redress.* People may complain in order to encourage someone to right a wrong (Fornell and Westbrook 1979). Negative situations, including complaints, typically call for reparative action. However, if humor occurs when something that is wrong is perceived to be okay (i.e., a benign violation), then complaining in a humorous manner may signal that the complainer considers the negative situation acceptable (McGraw and Warren 2010; Ramachandran 1998). Therefore, humor may inhibit redress by blunting the perceived need to respond to the complaint. Consistent with this notion, related studies in compliance, moral judgment, and persuasion all suggest that humor can decrease the perceived urgency of addressing a problem. People are less likely to 1) comply with advice when it is delivered humorously (Bussiere 2009), 2) condemn immoral behavior after listening to humorous audio clips (Strohinger, Lewis, and Myer 2011), and 3) judge a social issue as an important problem after watching a humorous public service announcement (McGraw, Schiro, and Fernbach 2012). We therefore predict that people will be less likely to obtain redress in response to a complaint when delivered humorously rather than non-humorously.

*Sympathy.* Complaining may help people cope with negative experiences by expressing emotion (i.e., venting) and garnering social support (i.e., sympathy; Alicke et al. 1992). We focus on the effect of complaining on obtaining sympathy from others. By being humorous, the complainer suggests that the negative situation triggering the complaint is in some way not serious (McGraw, Schiro and Fernbach 2012; McGraw and Warren 2010; Ramachandran 1998). The audience of a complaint may perceive less need to offer sympathy or moral support when someone complains humorously. Thus, we predict that humorous complaints will be less likely to elicit a sympathetic response than non-humorous complaints.

## OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

Six studies investigate the effects of being humorous when people communicate using social media updates and online reviews. In addition to demonstrating the clear benefits of being humorous, the studies also show when and how humor hinders complainers. Study 1 examines consumer reviews on Yelp and reveals that website visitors more frequently judge negative reviews to be funny than positive reviews. Study 2 examines Facebook status updates and finds that, consistent with a benign violation perspective, humorous complaints are considered more positive than non-humorous complaints, but humorous praises are considered less positive than non-humorous praises. Studies 3 - 6 examine whether humor facilitates complaining goals by comparing responses to humorous and non-humorous complaints. Study 3 finds that being humorous helps people who complain on Facebook to achieve entertainment, warning, and impression management goals. However, the next two studies find that being humorous hinders people who complain in order to receive redress (study 4) or sympathy (study 5). Study 6 shows that humorous Amazon reviews more effectively achieve the goals of warning, entertainment, and impression management but hinder the goals of acquiring redress and sympathy.

### STUDY 1: COMPLAINING AND PRAISING ON YELP

Yelp, which hosts more than 42 million reviews (Yelp 2013), is like many online review sites that ask people to write about their consumption experience. The site is unique because it allows readers to indicate if they find a review is funny. We test whether humor is more commonly associated with positive or negative reviews on Yelp.

#### Method, Results, and Discussion

Our first study analyzed a dataset that Yelp provides to academic researchers (Yelp 2012). The dataset contains 330,071 reviews written by 130,873 users for 13,490 businesses (e.g., restaurants, bars, spas) proximate to 30 US colleges and universities. We focus our analysis on two characteristics of individual reviews: 1) the star rating made by its writer (one through five), and 2) the number of times the review was judged funny by readers. (Reviews can also be judged as “cool” and “useful.” Our analysis controls for those variables.) If negative situations that trigger complaints are also good sources of humor, as hypothesized, reviews expressing greater dissatisfaction are more frequently judged to be funny.

Our initial analyses examined the relationship between star rating and humor after collapsing across businesses users, and reviews. Negative reviews were more frequently judged to be funny than positive reviews (figure 1). Consistent with our contention that humorous complaints are not rare, many negative Yelp reviews were considered funny at least once. Of the 60,484 one or two stars reviews, 28% were rated as “funny” by at least one reader (compared to 20% of the 208,010 four or five star reviews in the dataset).

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Insert figure 1 about here

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To provide a statistical test for the data, we fit a multilevel model with crossed random effects of users and businesses. We explored the effect of star rating on funny votes, controlling for the usefulness and coolness of a review. Reviews are treated as the unit of replication, with

users and businesses partially crossed. Reviews with lower star ratings received more funny votes, controlling for usefulness and coolness ( $b = -.053$ ,  $Wald Z = -51.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the interest of brevity, we provided additional analytical details in a web appendix.

Finally, our reading of the humorous complaints indicated that many appeared to be intentionally funny. To test our observation more objectively, we collected the 25 funniest one or two star reviews and asked two research assistants (blind to our hypotheses) to judge whether the complaint was intended to be humorous. The judges found 64% of the reviews to be intentionally humorous ( $Kappa = .83$ ). Our remaining studies use stimuli intended to be humorous and more directly examine the effects of positive and negative communications on the audience.

## STUDY 2: COMPLAINING AND PRAISING HUMOROUSLY ON FACEBOOK

We conduct two related studies. Study 2a explores consumers' intuitions about whether humor helps or hinders the complainer. Study 2b examines differences between humorous and non-humorous complaints and praise and tests the prediction that humor makes complaints seem more positive but praise seem more negative.

### Method and Results

*Sample.* We recruited active Facebook users on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mTurk) to participate in a survey about online behavior. The recruitment conditions specified that respondents must "regularly use Facebook and post status updates on Facebook at least once a week." Study 2a had 202 respondents, and study 2b had 205 respondents (54% female; mean age = 30.11 years, range = 18 – 67). On average respondents reported spending between 2 and 5 hours a week on Facebook, posting 3 to 5 status updates per week, and having 359.66 Facebook friends ( $SD = 344.38$ ). We eliminated one respondent in study 2b who claimed to have 23,845 Facebook friends (+14 standard deviations), thus reducing the sample to 204 respondents.

*Procedure.* Respondents opened their Facebook timeline. They then reported the most recent status update in which they complained about something or someone, and the most recent status update in which they praised something or someone (order counterbalanced). The survey defined a complaint as "anything that expresses dissatisfaction or discontent about an object, person, or institution" and praise as "anything that expresses satisfaction or approval about an object, person, or institution." Respondents reported the two status updates verbatim (substituting names with pronouns or pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity). Respondents then answered a series of questions, which differed between studies 2a and 2b, as described below. Respondents answered all of the questions about the first status update before answering questions about the second status update.

*Study 2a.* Study 2a asked respondents an open-ended question: "Why did you post this status update? What did you intend to accomplish by complaining (articulating praise) in the way that you did?" The study subsequently asked respondents if they intended the status update to be "humorous" or "non-humorous." Two research assistants, who were unaware of the study's hypotheses, coded whether or not the status update seemed humorous and the reason that the respondent posted the status update. The assistants classified the reason for posting the status update into one or more of the following motivations: warning others, encouraging action,

connecting with others, entertaining others, communicating expectations or standards, venting (complaints only), rewarding others (praise only), and other. Appendix A provides the specific coding instructions for each of the classifications. The coders agreed on 80% of the classifications. We asked a third research assistant (who was unaware of our hypotheses) to resolve the disagreements.

Replicating study 1, coders perceived humor in a higher percentage of updates containing complaints than praise (41% vs. 22%;  $\chi^2 = 16.66, p < .001$ ). Respondents were similarly more likely to indicate the intention to be humorous in complaints than in praise (33% vs. 21%;  $\chi^2 = 7.20, p < .01$ ). Because our focus was primarily on complaining, we examine respondents' reasons for complaining below. (Reasons for giving praise are presented in table 1.) Respondents' reason for complaining varied depending on whether the complaint was humorous or non-humorous (table 1). They were more likely to complain humorously than non-humorously if they had an entertainment goal (57% vs. 8%;  $\chi^2 = 57.49, p < .001$ ), but were less likely to complain humorously if they had a goal to raise awareness (6% vs. 27%;  $\chi^2 = 13.37, p < .001$ ) or to motivate reparative action (4% vs. 21%;  $\chi^2 = 13.49, p < .001$ ). Respondents were about equally likely to attempt humor when they had social motivations for complaining, including seeking connection with or sympathy from others (26% vs. 31%;  $\chi^2 = .66, NS$ ) or impression management concerns (18% vs. 27%;  $\chi^2 = 1.90, NS$ ).

*Study 2b.* Study 2b asked respondents a series of closed-ended questions about the two status updates. First, respondents indicated the object of the complaint (praise) by selecting from a list of response options, which included "a commercial object," "a business or service provider," and six non-commercial options. Next, respondents indicated whether they intended the complaint (praise) to be either "humorous" or "non-humorous." They subsequently indicated the emotions conveyed in the status update by answering two yes/no questions: (1) "Not including humor, does this status update convey any other positive emotions (happiness, joy, pride, gratitude, adoration, excitement, serenity, awe, compassion, hope, etc.)?" and (2) "Does this status update convey any negative emotions (anger, frustration, annoyance, disappointment, sadness, fear, shame, regret, envy, anxiety, confusion, betrayal, boredom, etc.)?" Next, respondents indicated the extent to which the complaint (praise) seemed negative (positive) on a five-point scale with endpoints labeled "not negative (positive)" and "extremely negative (positive)." Finally, respondents reported the number of times the status updates were liked (i.e., likes) and commented on (i.e., comments; reported in table 1b) by others.

Unlike study 2a, respondents were equally likely to try to be humorous when they complained or offered praise (28% vs. 31%;  $\chi^2 = .58, NS$ ). We asked a research assistant (who was unaware of our hypotheses) to indicate whether each update was humorous or not. Consistent with our hypotheses and the first two studies, the coder was more likely to detect humor in the complaints than the praise (21% vs. 11%;  $\chi^2 = 7.41, p < .01$ ). In short, although respondents were equally likely to attempt humor in complaints and praise, the complaints were more likely to be perceived as humorous by an outside observer.

Twenty three percent of the status updates were about a commercial product, business or service. The object of the communication (commercial vs. non-commercial) did not interact with whether or not the communication was intended to be humorous for any of the outcome variables. In other words, the results were similar regardless of whether or not the complaint (or praise) was about a commercial product or service.

We tested the hypothesis that humor makes complaints more positive but praise more

negative by comparing status updates that attempted humor with those that did not. Humorous complaints were more likely to convey other positive emotions than non-humorous complaints (32% vs. 14%;  $\chi^2 = 7.94, p < .01$ ). Humorous praise, however, was less likely to contain other positive emotions (80% vs. 93%;  $\chi^2 = 7.62, p < .01$ ) and more likely to convey negative emotion than non-humorous praise (22% vs. 8%;  $\chi^2 = 8.03, p < .01$ ). Complaints conveyed negative emotion regardless of whether or not they were humorous (86% vs. 86%;  $\chi^2 = .01, NS$ ). Similarly, humorous complaints seemed less negative than non-humorous complaints (3.07 vs. 3.65;  $F(1, 202) = 11.22, p < .001$ ). However, humorous praise seemed less positive than non-humorous praise (4.28 vs. 4.66;  $F(1, 202) = 12.00, p < .001$ ). Thus, the data are inconsistent with a halo perspective that humor makes all communications more positive. Consistent with a benign violation perspective, the presence of humor corresponded with more positivity in complaints but more negativity in praise.

Next, we explored whether being humorous helps people who want to entertain others by comparing the number of likes received by the humorous and non-humorous status updates. There were a small number of outliers that received a very high number of likes. To reduce concerns about these outliers (McClelland 2000), we excluded 5 status updates (4 complaints and 1 praise) that received more than 100 likes (1% of the sample). Humorous complaints attracted more likes on average than non-humorous complaints ( $M = 11.55$  vs.  $5.07$ ;  $F(1, 198) = 12.26, p < .001$ ). Humor, however, did not uniformly make status updates more entertaining, as humorous praise received directionally fewer likes than non-humorous praise ( $M = 7.88$  vs.  $10.60$ ;  $F(1, 201) = 2.09, NS$ ). The results were robust to different ways of treating outliers, such as recoding outliers as receiving the number of likes as the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile (40) and using a Mann Whitney-U test of median differences.

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Insert table 1 about here

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## Discussion

Studies 2a and 2b supported the hypothesis that humor is perceived more frequently in negative (i.e., complaints) rather than positive (i.e., praise) consumer-to-consumer communications. Additionally, although humor makes complaints seem more positive, it makes praise seem more negative. Both the result that humor is more common in response to negative communications and that it makes praise appear more negative diverge from a perspective that humor is strictly associated with positive things. The results, however, fit well with the perspective that humor requires the perception of something that is wrong yet okay.

The study also illustrates how consumers' propensity to attempt humor varies depending on their communication goal. Our respondents were equally likely to pursue humor in complaints involving impression management and coping goals. However, respondents' attempts to be humorous suggest that they intuitively believe that humor is a beneficial way to complain when they want to entertain others, but an ineffective way to complain if they want to prompt reparative action or warn others. The latter finding is intriguing in light of our hypothesis that humorous responses should help raise awareness of a problem. Our studies next examine if the complainers' intuitions about being humorous are correct.

## STUDY 3: HOW HUMOR HELPS COMPLAINERS

Study 3 examines whether being humorous benefits complainers who want to entertain, raise awareness, and cultivate a favorable impression. As study 2a illustrates, people typically do not anticipate that complaining humorously is a good way to increase awareness and manage their impression. Thus, demonstrating that being humorous benefits complainers who want to warn others and cultivate a favorable impression would offer a practical contribution.

We investigate differences between humorous and non-humorous complaints on a popular social network. However, whereas studies 2a and 2b measured whether or not complaints were intended to be humorous, the present study manipulates attempted humor by asking respondents to complain either humorously or seriously in a status update on Facebook. Respondents report the number of likes and comments received by each complaint. We also solicit a second sample of coders to assess the likelihood that the audience would accept a friend request from the complainer, share the complaint, and remember the complaint. If humorous complaints are more entertaining, then they should be liked more than non-humorous complaints. Similarly, if humorous complaints benefit impression management and a goal of raising awareness, then coders should be more likely to accept a friend request from the complainer, share the complaint, and remember the complaint when the complaint is humorous.

## Method

The study involved two phases. In the first phase, 75 undergraduate marketing students at a Bocconi University (in Milan, Italy) posted a complaint in a status update on their Facebook page as part of a class assignment. We randomly assigned participants to either a humorous complaint or a non-humorous complaint condition. Participants assigned to the humorous condition read:

“Complain about something, but complain in a humorous way. That is, describe something that went wrong or something bad that happened caused by nature, an institution, another person, or even yourself. The complaint can be about anything or anyone, just as long as it is written in a humorous manner (i.e., the complaint should be funny and make people reading it laugh).”

Participants assigned to the non-humorous condition read:

“Complain about something in a serious way. That is, describe something that went wrong or something bad that happened caused by nature, an institution, another person, or even yourself. The complaint can be about anything or anyone, just as long as it is written in a serious manner (i.e., the complaint should not be funny or make people reading it laugh).”

Topics of the status updates varied widely, as did the execution. For example, a student in the humorous condition, wrote, “Dear Italian men, Do you think cat-calling while riding on a vespa with another man will make you more likely to get some? Sincerely, Confused American.”

Twenty-four hours after posting, respondents recorded the number of their Facebook friends who “liked” the status update and the number of times friends commented on it. Finally, participants responded to individual difference measures, which we used as covariates in the analysis: number of Facebook friends, the number of times they visit Facebook in an average week, the number of status updates they post in an average week, the number of times they “like” or comment on someone else’s posting in an average week, and the approximate

percentage of their status updates that elicit a response (either likes or comments).

In the second phase, undergraduate students from The University of Colorado Boulder read 64 of the status updates created during the first phase (order randomized; we excluded 11 status updates from the first phase because they were not written in English). We asked participants to respond as if the update had been “posted by someone you know who sent you a friend request on Facebook.” Half of the respondents rated 1) the extent to which they disagreed or agreed on seven-point scales that the status update “is funny,” “amuses me,” and “makes me laugh” ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $n = 25$  raters), and 2) the extent to which the status update “is bad for the person posting it,” “is tragic,” and “is upsetting” ( $\alpha = .86$ ,  $n = 25$  raters). The other half of the respondents indicated on seven-point scales the likelihood that they would “like” the update, “share the update with others,” and “accept this person’s friend request” anchored by “very unlikely” and “very likely.”

Lastly, respondents in the second phase recalled as many updates as they could and typed each recalled status update into a text box. A research assistant, blind to condition and the purpose of the study, coded which status update most closely resembled the “recalled” update that the respondent entered into the text box. We calculated a “memorability” score for each status update by counting the number of times it was recalled. Using the score, we examine whether a complaint was recalled more frequently if it was humorous or non-humorous.

## Results

*Phase 1: Friends’ responses.* We omitted data from one participant for not following instructions and from one outlier whose complaint about an injured soccer star generated 64 comments (+six standard deviations). Consistent with our prediction that being humorous helps make a favorable impression, humorous complaints elicited more likes than non-humorous complaints ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 9.07$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 5.59$ ;  $F(1,71) = 5.67$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Humorous and non-humorous complaints elicited a similar number of comments ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 5.07$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 5.50$ ;  $F(1,71) = .11$ , NS); likes and comments were uncorrelated ( $r = .02$ ). To examine whether the effect of humor held when controlling for other variables, we entered the five individual difference variables reported by respondents (gender, number of friends, etc.) as covariates in a model predicting number of likes. The effect of the humor manipulation remained significant ( $F(1,61) = 4.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and of the covariates, only the number of friends predicted likes ( $b = .009$ ,  $F(1,61) = 23.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Phase 2: Observers’ responses.* Overall, the humor manipulation worked as intended. Status updates in the humorous complaining condition were perceived to be more humorous than the status updates in the non-humorous complaining condition ( $M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.47$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 3.39$ ;  $F(1,60) = 42.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We also checked for additional differences between the humorous and non-humorous complaints. The humorous and non-humorous complaints were similar in character length ( $M_{\text{Humor}} = 129.87$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 159.33$ ;  $F(1,60) = 1.42$ , NS) and equally likely to complain about a commercial business or service (42% vs. 46%;  $\chi^2 = .08$ , NS), as coded by a research assistant who was unaware of the hypotheses or experimental condition. Consistent with the results in study 2b, the sample of observers perceived the humorous complaints to be less negative than the non-humorous complaints ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 3.04$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 3.47$ ;  $F(1,60) = 13.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

We assessed whether the judged intention to like the status updates in the second phase

corresponded with the actual likelihood that people liked the status updates in the first phase. Consistent with the actual responses in phase 1 of the study, respondents in phase 2 indicated that they would be significantly more likely to “like” the humorous complaints than the non-humorous complaints ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 3.80$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 3.23$ ;  $F(1,60) = 11.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, likes (from phase 1) and intention to like (from phase 2) were significantly correlated ( $r = .35$ ). In sum, the responses in phase 2 also support the hypothesis that humorous complaints facilitate entertainment goals more than non-humorous complaints.

Next, we used the phase 2 responses to test our remaining predictions. Consistent with the prediction that complaining humorously helps cultivate a more favorable impression, respondents indicated that they would be more likely to accept a friend request from people who complained humorously ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 4.07$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 3.83$ ;  $F(1,60) = 4.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Moreover, consistent with the hypothesis that humor facilitates complainers who want to raise awareness, respondents indicated that they would be more likely to share the humorous complaints with others ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 2.63$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 2.42$ ;  $F(1,60) = 6.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ). We also tested whether humor helps complainers warn others by testing if humorous complaints were more memorable. Because the memory measure counted the number of times each complaint was recalled and was skewed (Kurtosis statistic = 1.79), we analyzed the memory data using a square-root transformation. Consistent with the hypothesis, respondents recalled humorous complaints more frequently than non-humorous complaints ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 2.00$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 1.54$ ;  $F(1,60) = 4.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ; table 2).

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Insert table 2 about here

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## Discussion

The study provided support for the prediction that humor benefits complainers who want to entertain and warn others while cultivating a favorable impression. Status updates featuring humorous complaints were liked more often by Facebook friends and rated as more likeable by outside observers. Observers were also more likely to indicate that they would accept friend requests from humorous complainers and share humorous complaints. Lastly, a recall task indicated that observers were more likely to remember humorous complaints. The finding that humor benefits people who complain in order to warn others contrasts with study 2a’s finding that people are less likely to complain humorously when they have a warning goal.

Study 3 documents benefits of humor for complainers with impression management, entertainment, and warning goals. In contrast, a benign violation perspective suggests that humor will not always benefit complainers. Specifically, we predict that humor may not help people who complain in order to obtain redress or sympathy.

## STUDY 4: HOW HUMOR HINDERS COMPLAINERS

Thus far, our studies have demonstrated benefits of complaining humorously: humorous complaints are more entertaining, humorous complaints are more likely to be shared and reach a larger audience, and humor helps mitigate the negative effects of complaining on impressions of the complainer. Despite the advantages, however, complainers may want to avoid humor in some situations. Because humor signals that a situation is playful or benign, we predict that firms will respond less promptly to humorous complaints. Consequently, humor may hinder consumers

who complain in attempt to motivate reparative action. We tested our prediction by creating a sample of complaints by asking people to complain about negative experiences at a restaurant. Then, we asked respondents to indicate how they would respond to a pair of complaints about a restaurant if they were the restaurant's manager. Prioritizing a response to a humorous complaint or a non-humorous complaint resembles choices that managers often face – confronting multiple complaints, often serious and occasionally humorous, and deciding which to address first.

## Method

The first phase of the study created a sample of humorous and non-humorous complaints. Sixty undergraduate business students at The University of Colorado Boulder read about two negative dining experiences: 1) a friend receiving an overcooked piece of steak and rude service at Zoe's Bistro, and 2) finding a hair in a pasta dinner at Claire's Kitchen (see appendix B for a description of the incidents). Respondents wrote two separate status updates complaining about the two experiences - one in a humorous way ("write a brief status update that readers are likely to laugh about and consider humorous") and the other in a non-humorous way ("write a brief status update that readers are unlikely to laugh about or consider humorous"). We counterbalanced whether respondents wrote the humorous update about the first or second restaurant.

A second phase identified complaint pairs in which the humorous and non-humorous complaints elicited different levels of perceived humor but similar levels of negativity. Respondents from mTurk ( $N = 81$ ) rated the humor perceived in each of the 60 complaints about one of the two restaurants using three agree/disagree scale items: "the status update is funny," "I am amused by the status update," and "the status update makes me laugh." Respondents also indicated the extent to which the complaints were negative on three agree-disagree scale items ("the status update says negative things about the restaurant," "the status update makes the restaurant sound bad," and "the person writing the status update has a negative opinion about the restaurant;" all items used seven-point scales). Based on the ratings from the mTurk respondents, we selected the two complaint pairs written by the undergraduate participants that differed the most in terms of perceived humor, but did not differ in negativity. Thus, each pair of humorous and non-humorous complaints came from the same undergraduate participant; moreover, the humorous and non-humorous complaints were perceived to differ in terms of humor but not in terms of negativity. One pair included a humorous complaint about the first restaurant and a non-humorous complaint about the second restaurant (P1 in table 3), whereas the other pair included a non-humorous complaint about the first restaurant and a humorous complaint about the second (P2 in table 3).

We used the two pairs (P1 & P2) of complaints as the stimuli in the focal study, which included a different sample of 105 workers from mTurk. Respondents from the mTurk sample represented different roles within the workforce, and many worked either in professional (executive, managerial, administrative, sales, etc.: 50%) or service positions (16%). Respondents read that they were completing a study on social media and were asked to take the perspective of a restaurant manager who is "checking the Internet to see what customers are saying about [the] restaurants on Facebook." Next respondents read two status updates (either P1 or P2) complaining about two of the restaurants that they ostensibly managed. One of the complaints was humorous and the other was non-humorous. Depending on randomly assigned condition, the humorous complaint either criticized Zoe's Bistro (P1) or Claire's Kitchen (P2). Thus, the study

used a 2 (complaint humor: humorous, serious) x 2 (complaint pair: P1, P2) mixed design with complaint humor as a within-subjects factor and complaint pair as a between-subjects factor. Complaint pair served as a replicate to increase our confidence that differences between responses to the humorous and non-humorous complaints would generalize beyond a specific pair of humorous and non-humorous complaints. The critical test investigated whether the mTurk workers playing the role of a restaurant manager would prioritize responding to the humorous or non-humorous complaint.

Respondents first indicated which of the two status updates they would prioritize on two comparative measures, “Which status update do you think is more important to respond to or address?” and “Which restaurant will you try to improve first?” ( $\alpha = .80$ ;  $r = .66$ ). Next, they indicated the importance of responding to the two complaints—first the complaint about Zoe’s Bistro, then the complaint about Claire’s Kitchen—on three agree-disagree measures: “I would try to reimburse the customer for his negative experience at the restaurant,” “I would do anything in my power to make it up to the consumer who posted the update,” and “I would make responding to this customer my top priority” (seven-point scales;  $\alpha_{\text{NonHumorous}} = .88$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Humorous}} = .90$ ).

## Results

We analyzed the data by comparing responses to the humorous complaint with responses to the non-humorous complaint. As hypothesized, the comparative measures revealed that respondents placed a lower priority on addressing the humorous complaint, as only 40% prioritized responding to the humorous complaint over the non-humorous complaint ( $t = -2.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ; critical value = 50%). The tendency to prioritize responding to the non-humorous complaint generalized across the two complaint pairs, as the effect of complaint pair was not significant ( $F(1,103) = 2.74$ , NS). A 2 (complaint humor: humorous, non-humorous) x 2 (complaint pair: P1, P2) repeated-measures ANOVA using the non-comparative measures of prioritization further confirmed that respondents in the role of manager placed a lower priority on addressing the humorous complaint than the non-humorous complaint ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 3.75$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 4.17$ ;  $F(1, 102) = 17.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Again, the tendency to prioritize the non-humorous complaint did not depend on which complaint pair the respondents viewed, as indicated by a non-significant interaction between complaint humor and complaint pair ( $F(1, 102) = .35$ , NS). The tendency to prioritize responding to non-humorous complaints occurred regardless of the respondents’ position in the workforce; respondents who work professional jobs responded similarly to respondents with non-professional jobs on both the comparative ( $F(1,103) = .46$ , NS) and non-comparative ( $F(1,102) = 1.90$ , NS) measures of prioritization.

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Insert table 3 about here

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## Discussion

The study shows a downside of complaining humorously. Humor hinders people who complain in order to receive redress or compensation. By signaling that the complaint is playful or non-serious, being humorous reduces the perceived need to offer the complainer redress. Next, we investigate whether being humorous also reduces the perceived need to offer sympathy.

## STUDY 5: WHY HUMOR HINDERS COMPLAINERS

Study 5 explores another potential downside of complaining humorously: the audience may be less inclined to sympathize with the complainer. A benign violation perspective suggests that humor requires the perception that a potentially threatening situation is playful, non-serious, acceptable, or otherwise benign. By signaling that a problem is somehow okay, humor may reduce the perceived need to worry about the complainer. Thus, we hypothesize that humorous complaints will be less likely to receive a sympathetic response than non-humorous complaints and the difference will be mediated by the perception that the humorous complaint is more benign than the non-humorous complaint.

### Method

Facebook users on mTurk ( $N = 1,214$ ; 39% female; mean age: 29, range: 18 to 73; all living in the USA) viewed and responded to a complaint posted in a status update. Respondents either viewed a humorous complaint or a non-humorous complaint ostensibly posted on Facebook by a close friend. To better control for the content of the complaint, we manipulated humor by adding either a laughter emoticon and “#lol” (humorous) or an anger emoticon and “#ugh” at the end of the complaint (non-humorous). That is, the humorous and non-humorous complaints contained the same content except for the emoticon and hashtag, which signaled whether the complaint was meant to be humorous or non-humorous (table 4).

In order to increase the generalizability of our results across stimuli (i.e., complaints) and respondents, we created a humorous and non-humorous version of 37 complaints originally written by the undergraduates in study 3. We edited the 37 complaints originally in the “humorous” condition by removing any direct signals of humor or negativity from the original complaint (e.g., “Ha!” 😄, etc.) and adding a laughter emoticon and #lol to create a humorous version of the complaint and an anger emoticon and #ugh to create the non-humorous complaint. Most of the complaints were moderately humorous (with a mean rating of 4.47 out of 7; table 2), and therefore could seem more or less humorous depending on the emoticon and hashtag.

We randomly assigned respondents to view one complaint using a 2 (humorous, non-humorous)  $\times$  37 (complaint replicates) between-subjects design. After completing two screening questions that confirmed that the respondents were active Facebook users and read the instructions, the survey asked respondents to “Imagine that you check your Facebook account and see a status update written by a close friend who is studying abroad in Italy.” Respondents then viewed the complaint and indicated how they would respond by answering the following yes/no questions: “Would you like the status update?” “Would you comment on the status update?” and “Would you send a personal message or email to make sure that [your friend] is okay?” If respondents said that they would comment on the update, they were asked the likelihood that their comment would sympathize with the complainer. Specifically, respondents indicated whether the comment would include any of the following: (a) a joke or lighthearted quip, (b) an expression of sympathy or concern, (c) a link to a video or website, and (d) any other type of response.

The study also measured the extent to which respondents perceived the status update to be humorous, benign, and containing a violation. We measured perceived humor using two items: “It is humorous” and “It makes me laugh” ( $\alpha = .89$ ;  $r = .80$ ). We measured benign appraisal using three items, of which the latter two we reverse scored: “It seems playful,” “It

seems serious,” and “It expresses concern” ( $\alpha = .76$ ). We measured violation appraisal using three items: “It expresses dissatisfaction,” “It communicates a problem,” and “It indicates that something went wrong” ( $\alpha = .85$ ). The items used five-point scales labeled “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Participants reported their age, gender, and native language.

## Results

The humor manipulation effectively varied the extent to which respondents perceived humor in the complaints. A 2 (humor) x 37 (complaint replicate) ANOVA treating humor as a fixed factor and complaint as a random factor revealed significant main effects of both humor ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 2.97$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 2.82$ ;  $F(1, 36) = 5.98$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and complaint ( $F(36, 36) = 3.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although some complaints were more humorous than others, a non-significant interaction between the humor manipulation and complaint ( $F(36, 1140) = 1.32$ , NS) indicated that the manipulation was similarly effective at increasing perceived humor across the different complaints. The small but significant difference in perceived humor between the humorous and non-humorous versions of the complaints is not surprising given that the complaint itself did not vary across the humorous and non-humorous conditions.

As in studies 2b and 3, humorous complaints were more entertaining than non-humorous complaints, as indicated by a higher proportion of respondents who said that they would like the humorous complaint (43% vs. 37%;  $\chi^2 = 5.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Despite facilitating entertainment goals, humorous complaints were less effective at attracting sympathy from respondents. Respondents were less likely to check up on the complainer with either a private message (12% vs. 16%;  $\chi^2 = 4.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ) or public comment (23% vs. 32%;  $\chi^2 = 13.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, comments responding to humorous complaints were half as likely to include an expression of sympathy or concern (4% vs. 9%;  $\chi^2 = 11.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but were equally likely to include other types of responses compared to comments responding to non-humorous complaints (table 4).

To examine whether the effect of humor on sympathy generalized across complaints, we created a sympathy score by averaging responses to the message, comment, and express sympathy measures ( $\alpha = .53$ ). We entered the aggregate sympathy score as the dependent variable in a 2 (humor) x 37 (complaint replicate) ANOVA with humor as a fixed factor and complaint as a random factor. The analysis revealed only independent main effects of both humor ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = .19$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = .13$ ;  $F(1, 36) = 31.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and complaint ( $F(36, 36) = 5.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although some complaints elicited more sympathy than others, the humorous complaints consistently prompted less sympathetic responses than the non-humorous complaints (interaction:  $F(36, 1140) = .60$ , NS).

Finally, we examined whether the reason that humorous complaints receive less sympathetic responses is because the problem communicated by the complaint seems benign. To do so, we used a regression procedure with 1000 bootstrapping samples (model 4 in Hayes 2013) with the aggregate sympathy score as the dependent variable, the humor manipulation as the independent variable, and the benign appraisal and violation appraisal measures as potential mediating variables. Because the effect of humor on sympathy was robust across the different complaints, we simplified the model by not including the complaint replicate factor. (Note: including dummy variables representing the main effect of complaint as covariates in the model yields qualitatively identical results.) The humor manipulation significantly influenced both the benign and violation appraisals. Respondents perceived humorous complaints as containing less severe violations ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 2.66$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 3.47$ ;  $t = -13.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and as being more

benign ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 3.96$ ,  $M_{\text{NonHumorous}} = 3.18$ ;  $t = 16.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than non-humorous complaints. Moreover, the appraisal that the problem was benign significantly reduced respondents' likelihood of extending sympathy to the complainer ( $b = -.05$ ,  $t = -5.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and mediated the effect of the humor manipulation on sympathy (indirect effect:  $-.021$ , 95% C. I. =  $-.029$  to  $-.013$ ). The perceived severity of the violation, on the other hand, neither significantly influenced the likelihood of extending sympathy ( $b = .01$ ,  $t = 1.58$ , NS) nor did it mediate the effect of the humor manipulation on sympathy (indirect effect:  $-.005$ , 95% C. I. =  $-.012$  to  $.001$ ). After accounting for the benign and violation appraisals, the direct effect of the humor manipulation on sympathy was no longer significant ( $b = -.01$ ,  $t = -.60$ , NS). In sum, our analyses suggest that the reason that humorous complaints elicit less sympathy is because the problem seems more benign when complained about in a humorous manner.

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Insert table 4 about here

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## Discussion

The study shows another downside of complaining humorously. Although humorous complaints were more entertaining, they were also less likely to elicit a sympathetic response than non-humorous complaints. By signaling that the problem in a complaint is benign, humor reduces the extent that the complainer seems to require sympathy (study 5) or redress (study 4).

## STUDY 6: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Our final study examines the effects of humor across five complaining goals: entertainment, raising awareness, impression management, obtaining redress, and attracting sympathy. Consistent with previous findings we expect that humorous complaints will benefit impressions, entertainment, and warning but have the opposite effect on redress and sympathy. Furthermore, we expected that perceptions of humor would predict the benefits of complaining humorously even when controlling for the benign and violation appraisals. However, in cases where being humorous hurts the complainer, we expected that the relationship between perceived humor and redress and sympathy would be less evident when controlling for the extent to which the situation seems benign.

We tested the relationship between perceptions of humor and the five goals across a sample of negative online reviews for Haribo's sugar free gummy bears, which, according to a warning label, can "cause stomach discomfort and/or a laxative effect." The Amazon page selling the product contains a large number of negative reviews containing dramatically different degrees of comedy. For example, a one-star review titled "Not your normal gummy" states, "it taste great but i have to tell you it will make you run to the bathroom in 20mins.. so far its only happens with the sugar free gummy.. i also tested this with another family member and same thing has happened! beware!" Another, more humorous one-star review titled, "Der Shitzkrieg!," states, "These little German Bombs destroyed my American Standard toilet...Germans 1 Americans 0. Never Never never again will I eat these!" (Note: Haribo is a German company.)

## Method

We asked a research assistant (who was unaware of our hypotheses) to curate all two, three, and four line one-star reviews on Amazon's Haribo sugarless gummy bear product page (Amazon.com, 2014). Reviews shorter than two lines and longer than four lines were not included in the sample. We limited the sample to reviews that addressed the many ways that the product caused consumers gastrointestinal distress. We removed two reviews that referenced a YouTube video resulting in a sample of 46 negative consumer reviews. Respondents from mTurk ( $N = 334$ ) evaluated each of the reviews (in random order) on one of the following randomly assigned measures: perceived humor ("How humorous is the review to you?"), impression of the complainer ("To what extent do you think you would like the person who wrote this review?"), entertainment ("How much did you enjoy reading this review?"), redress ("If you were a manager for the company, how likely would you be to respond by offering this person compensation?"), sympathy ("If you noticed that a friend or an acquaintance posted this review, how likely would you be to sympathize with or express concern for your friend?), benign appraisal ("To what extent did the review depict the situation in a non-serious way?"), or violation appraisal ("To what extent does this review depict a situation that falls short of what people should expect when they purchase or consume candy?"). Respondents indicated their agreement on a seven-point scale with endpoints labeled "not at all" and "extremely." We also assessed the extent that each complaint served as a warning to others by recording the number of people who rated it as being helpful on the Amazon website. Because the distribution was highly skewed, we transformed the measure using the natural log of the number of helpful ratings for each review.

## Results and Discussion

We analyzed the relationship between perceived humor, the benign and violation appraisals, and the complaint outcomes (entertainment, sympathy, etc.) by calculating a mean rating for each complaint and using the 46 complaints as the unit of analysis. First, we investigated the degree that perceived humor correlated with each of the measures (table 5). Consistent with the results in studies 2b and 3, Amazon users rated more humorous negative reviews as being more helpful ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ). Additionally, respondents rated more humorous reviews as being more enjoyable ( $r = .50, p < .001$ ) and conveying a more favorable impression of the complainer ( $r = .43, p < .01$ ) compared to less humorous reviews. However, consistent with studies 4 and 5, humor was negatively associated with respondents' willingness to extend redress ( $r = -.60, p < .001$ ) and sympathy ( $r = -.42, p < .01$ ) to the complainer. In line with a benign violation account, perceptions of humor were also *positively* correlated with both the appraisal that the situation is benign ( $r = .93, p < .001$ ) and that the situation contains a violation ( $r = .43, p < .01$ ).

Because humorous complaints seemed more benign and contained more severe violations, we regressed each of the complaint outcomes (entertainment, sympathy, etc.) on the extent to which the review seemed humorous, benign, and contained a violation. If the change in the complaint outcomes result from humor, per se, then the effect of perceived humor should remain significant when controlling for differences in the benign and violation appraisals. Conversely, if the benign or violation appraisals drive the outcome variable, then the effect of the appraisal should remain significant. Consistent with the perspective that perceived humor itself is beneficial, perceived humor was the strongest predictor of respondents' impression of the complainer ( $b = .71, t = 6.01, p < .001$ ), respondents' enjoyment of the complaint ( $b = .79, t =$

5.30,  $p < .001$ ), and the complaint's efficacy at warning others as measured by the transformed number of helpful judgments ( $b = .94$ ,  $t = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Conversely, controlling for the benign and violation appraisals associated with the complaint eliminated the relationship between perceived humor and respondents' likelihood of offering redress ( $b = -.02$ ,  $t = -.12$ , NS) and sympathy ( $b = .28$ ,  $t = 1.67$ , NS) to the complainer. The perception that the situation was benign, on the other hand, remained a significant predictor of offering redress ( $b = -.63$ ,  $t = -5.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and sympathy ( $b = -.57$ ,  $t = -4.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ; table 5).

Our final study provides further support for the hypothesized costs and benefits of complaining humorously. Although being humorous helps warn and entertain while maintaining a favorable impression, it also reduces the likelihood that the complainer receives redress or sympathy. Humorous complaints are less effective at prompting redress and sympathy because they portray a situation as playful and non-serious, thus reducing the need to address a problem.

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Insert table 5 about here

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## GENERAL DISCUSSION

People often complain about their negative experiences. Understanding the implications of complaining is increasingly important as social media and review sites empower people to publicly air their grievances. People's complaints – consumer or otherwise – are occasionally humorous. We draw on an emerging theory, which suggests that humor occurs when something seems wrong (i.e., a violation) yet also okay (i.e., benign; McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998), to build a better understanding of the role that humor plays in complaints. Our inquiry thus contributes to research that makes unique predictions drawn from the benign violation theory (McGraw et al. 2012; McGraw, Williams, and Warren 2014).

A benign violation account suggests that complaints and humor are often triggered by the same kinds of negative situations – boring presentations, delayed flights, or terrible meals. Indeed, an analysis of Yelp reviews revealed that negative consumer reviews were rated as being funny more frequently than positive reviews (study 1). Similarly, people were more likely to write humorous status updates when complaining than praising (study 2).

Additionally, and consistent with the idea that humor is preceded by something negative (a violation appraisal) yet playful (a benign appraisal), being humorous influences complaints and praise differently. Complaining humorously requires presenting the source of dissatisfaction (i.e., the violation) in a way that makes it seem okay (i.e., benign). In contrast, praising humorously requires introducing a violation into an otherwise positive or satisfactory experience. Consequently, humorous complaints are more likely to evoke positive feelings and seem less negative than non-humorous complaints, whereas humorous praise is more likely to evoke negative feelings and seems less positive than non-humorous praise (study 2b).

Importantly, our studies build on the benign violation perspective to investigate how, when, and why humor helps and hinders complainers. Being humorous facilitates complaining goals related to entertainment, impression management, and raising awareness. Humorous complainers are better liked than non-humorous complainers (studies 3 and 6). Humorous complaints are also liked (studies 2b, 3, 5, and 6), remembered (study 3), shared (study 3), and acknowledged (study 6) more than non-humorous complaints. The finding that being humorous helps raise awareness could empower dissatisfied consumers, who report that they don't

typically use humor when attempting to warn others (study 2a).

On the other hand, humor is less beneficial to people who complain in search of redress or sympathy. Because humor signals that something wrong (e.g., the source of dissatisfaction in a complaint) is also in some way okay or non-serious, humorous complaints are less likely to prompt reparative action (studies 4 and 6) or sympathy (studies 5 and 6) than non-humorous complaints. In support of the hypothesized process, the inhibiting effect of humor on redress and sympathy occurs because humorous complaints are seen as more playful and non-serious than non-humorous complaints (studies 5 and 6). The findings that humor can help or hinder the complainer moves beyond research focusing on humor's positive effects on communications.

### Implications and Future Directions

Given the potential benefits of humor, why don't people complain humorously more often? As our studies reveal, humor is less helpful at motivating someone to right a wrong, and complainers may not anticipate how humor helps warn others. Another reason people may not complain humorously is they are too dissatisfied to find a way to see the problem as okay. Finally, being funny is difficult. Comedians take years to hone their craft and comedy films typically bomb outside their demographic. People differ vastly in what they find humorous, which makes it difficult to be universally funny (Ruch 1998). Future research could identify ways to help people be more humorous in their complaints and other social interactions.

Although our results suggest that humor is unlikely to help complainers who seek sympathy as a means of interpersonal coping (Cohen and Wilson 1985; Martin 2001), humorous complaining could potentially help with intrapersonal coping by creating positive affect. Positive affect, including amusement can buffer stress and adversity (Fredrickson 1998; Martin 2001), and make it easier to reappraise the situation in a less negative light (Martin 2001; McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2014; Samson and Gross 2012). Historical records anecdotally support the potential for intrapersonal coping by documenting how people suffering great misfortune, such as holocaust victims and prisoners of war, use comedy to maintain mental health (Ford and Spaulding 1973; Frankl 1984; Henman 2001). Research similarly suggests that humor can be an effective way to deal with grief (Keltner and Bonnano 1997), pain (Cogan et al. 1987; Weaver and Zillman 1994; Weisberger, Tepper, and Schwarzwald 1995; Zillman et al. 1993), and anxiety (Ford et al. 2012). Future research could explore the degree to which humorous complaining facilitates coping or coping facilitates complaining humorously.

An implication of our inquiry is that managers should be on the lookout for humorous complaints. Firms typically prefer to directly field and resolve complaints, as complaint resolution can prevent customers from complaining further (Andreassen 1999; Blodgett and Anderson 2000; Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987; Gilly and Gelb 1982; Richins 1983; but see Dunn and Dahl 2012). Our studies hint that in the same way that firms are less responsive to positive consumer communications (Gulas and Larsen 2012), they may be less responsive to humorous than non-humorous complaints – at least until a complaint garners attention. As David Carroll's "United Breaks Guitars" complaint illustrates, the widespread attention generated by a humorous complaint may motivate an unresponsive firm to fix the problem (Deighton and Kornfeld 2010).

### Conclusion

Lorne Michaels quipped, "Comedy is complaining done with charm." Indeed, people are

capable of making jokes about many dissatisfying experiences, including cable employees who fall asleep on the job, hotels that fail to honor their reservations, and sugarless gummy bears that cause explosive diarrhea. We present the concept of humorous complaining and highlight how humor is a tool that can help consumers cut through a cluttered marketplace and warn others in an entertaining fashion. However, consistent with the perspective that humor arises from benign violations, humorous communication is not always beneficial. People who want others to right a wrong or simply offer social support would be better off complaining in a serious manner.

## Data Collection

Data for the first study were downloaded from Yelp in the autumn of 2012 and analyzed by the third author. Data for studies 2a and 2b were collected from mTurk in the winter of 2014. The second author analyzed the data. Data collection for phase 1 of study 3 was managed by the second author at Bocconi University in the fall of 2011 and data for phase 2 of the second study was collected by research assistants at the University of Colorado Boulder in spring 2012 under the supervision of the third author. The second author analyzed these data. Stimuli for Study 4 were collected from mTurk in the spring of 2011. Data for phase 1 of the fourth study were collected by research assistants at the University of Colorado Boulder in the spring of 2013 under the supervision of the third author. Data for phase 2 of the fourth study were collected from mTurk in the summer of 2013. The second author analyzed these data. Data for study 5 were collected from mTurk in the spring of 2014 and analyzed by the second author. Data for study 6 were collected from mTurk in the spring of 2014 by the third author and analyzed by the second and third author.

## APPENDIX A

### Descriptions of complaint motives in study 2a

Goal	Description
<b>Warning</b>	Any response that intends to let others know about the writer's experience for the others' benefit. Could reference spreading information, letting people know, trying to draw attention to the content of the post, or something similar.
<b>Action</b>	Any response that intends to get the audience (usually the responsible entity) to do something, such as fixing a problem, taking a stand, or searching for additional information. Could reference wanting an apology or reparations. For praise, this is more likely to take the form of encouraging others to honor or do something good for whoever or whatever is being praised.
<b>Connecting</b>	Any response related to connecting with others, relating to others, or garnering sympathy or support from others.
<b>Entertaining</b>	Any response that intends to be interesting or enjoyable in some way.
<b>Standards</b>	Any response that suggests that the experience met or failed to meet some (high) expectation of the writer or that the writer is expressing or publicizing his/her standards.
<b>Venting (complaints)</b>	Any response related to venting, letting off steam, or ranting.
<b>Rewarding (praise)</b>	Any response related to thanking, exonerating, or otherwise recognizing something or someone for something good.
<b>Other</b>	Any motive that doesn't fit into one of the aforementioned categories.

## APPENDIX B

Sixty undergraduate student respondents in study 4 wrote status updates complaining about the two ostensible restaurant experiences described below.

### **Zoe's Bistro**

You and a friend decide to try out Zoe's Bistro, a new restaurant recommended by a co-worker. When you arrive at the restaurant, you are seated at a quiet table near the window. The restaurant is attractive and has a nice décor. You are very excited for your meal.

You and your friend look at the menu for a short while and decide on your meals. After the waiter takes your order, you and your friend make small talk while you wait for your meal. Your food arrives and the steak that your friend ordered is completely overcooked. It is dark black and is so hard that your friend's fork bends when he tries to cut the meat.

When you tell the waiter that the steak has been overcooked, he tells you that the food has been prepared in an "al dente" style. He takes a quick look at the food and says, "Cooked to perfection! But if you want to be fussy about it, maybe I can bring you something else instead." You politely ask for food that hasn't been overcooked. Minutes later, the waiter returns with a large plate of raw vegetables.

### **Claire's Kitchen**

You decide to try eating dinner at Claire's Kitchen, a restaurant across town that has recently been getting very favorable reviews.

You arrive at the restaurant and after a short wait, you and your date are seated at a nice booth in the corner of the restaurant. The restaurant includes a large window where you can watch the cooks in the kitchen preparing the food. Your date orders chicken and you order a dish of pasta called "Claire's Angel Hair."

Your food arrives in a timely manner and it tastes pretty good. However, as you are eating your pasta, your date asks, "is that a piece of hair in your food?" You take a closer look and find a strand of dark curly hair mixed in with the pasta. Your date, who has been looking around the restaurant to try to identify the source of the hair looks at you and says, "strange, the cooks appear to have straight hair." You take another look at your plate and wonder how the hair ended up in your food.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Study 2 Results**

Study 2a (N = 202)				
	Complaints		Praise	
Perceived humor	41%***		22%	
Intended humor	<b>Humorous</b> (33%)	<b>Non-humorous</b> (67%)	<b>Humorous</b> (21%)	<b>Non-humorous</b> (79%)
Warn	6%***	27%	26%	30%
Prompt action	1%***	21%	2%	10%
Connect / Receive sympathy	31%	26%	16%	21%
Entertain	57%***	8%	37%***	4%
Manage impressions	18%	27%	16%	13%
Vent	51%	59%		
Reward / Thank			74%	81%
Other	3%	4%	0%	0%

Study 2b (N = 204)				
	Complaints		Praise	
Perceived humor	21%***		11%	
Intended humor	<b>Humorous</b> (28%)	<b>Non-humorous</b> (72%)	<b>Humorous</b> (31%)	<b>Non-humorous</b> (69%)
Commercial target	16%*	27%	27%	21%
Valence Extremity	3.07*** (SD = .88)	3.65 (SD = 1.18)	4.28*** (SD = .85)	4.66 (SD = .65)
Positive Emotion	32%***	14%	80%***	93%
Negative Emotion	86%	86%	22%***	8%
Likes <sup>1</sup>	11.55*** (SD = 15.69)	5.07 (SD = 6.51)	7.88 (SD = 7.64)	10.60 (SD = 14.19)
Comments <sup>2</sup>	4.54 (SD = 4.37)	4.81 (SD = 7.56)	3.77 (SD = 5.51)	3.90 (SD = 5.29)

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$

<sup>1</sup>Excludes updates with 100+ likes (1%)

<sup>2</sup>Excludes updates with 50+ comments (1%)

Results for studies 2a and 2b. The proportion or average ratings for Facebook status updates containing complaints (center columns) or praise (right columns) depending on whether or not the update was intended to be humorous. Asterisks indicate a significant difference between the humorous and non-humorous conditions.

**TABLE 2**  
**Study 3 Results**

	<b>Humorous Complaint</b>	<b>Non-humorous Complaint</b>
<b>Phase 1</b>		
Number of Facebook likes	9.07 (7.16)	5.59 (4.68)
Number of Facebook comments	5.07 (6.09)	5.50 (4.53) <sup>NS</sup>
<b>Phase 2</b>		
Humor rating (1 to 7)	4.47 (.58)	3.39 (.72)
Negativity rating (1 to 7)	3.04 (.48)	3.47 (.42)
Likelihood of clicking 'like' on Facebook (1 to 7)	3.80 (.62)	3.23 (.71)
Likelihood of accepting Friend request (1 to 7)	4.07 (.39)	3.83 (.46)
Likelihood of sharing (1 to 7)	2.63 (.31)	2.42 (.33)
Recall (square root)	2.00 (.82)	1.54 (.94)

Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for study 2. All mean differences and correlations are significant at the .05 level, except number of Facebook comments.

**TABLE 3**  
**Study 4 Results**

	Restaurant	Complaint	Perceived Humor	Negativity	Priority
P1	1 <sup>st</sup> : Zoe's (humorous)	Didn't know Gretzky's slapshots were landing on Zoe's steak grill. Hockey pucks for dinner #Zoe's	5.38 (1.50)	6.40 (1.06)	3.63 (1.00)
	2 <sup>nd</sup> : Claire's (non-humorous)	Found hair in my pasta at dinner tonight. Won't be back to #Claire's	1.31 (1.00)	6.56 (.94)	4.12 (1.01)
P2	1 <sup>st</sup> : Zoe's (non-humorous)	This past weekend I went to Zoe's with my friend Natalie. It was probably the worst dining experience I've had in years! The food was overcooked, and the staff were total jerks. Our waiter tried to compensate our \$20 overcooked steak with \$5 raw vegetables! Don't waste your time. #Zoe's	1.90 (1.46)	6.60 (.83)	4.22 (.92)
	2 <sup>nd</sup> : Claire's (humorous)	Went to Claire's Kitchen. Ironically my dish Claire's Angel hair actually had real hair in it (gross). Would have complained but didn't want to get myself into a "hairy situation". haha. #Claire's	4.97 (1.93)	6.26 (1.31)	3.85 (1.15)

*All measures on 7-point scales.*

The table shows the two complaint pairs (P1 & P2) created during the first phase of the study that were rated as being the most different in perceived humor by an independent sample in study 5. The fourth and fifth columns show the independent sample's mean ratings (standard deviations) of perceived humor and negativity, respectively. The sixth and final column shows the mean prioritization ratings (standard deviations) by an additional independent sample of mTurk participants.

**TABLE 4**  
**Study 5 Results**

		Humorous		Non-humorous		p-value	
		Like	Message	Comment	Content	Mean (SD)	p-value
<b>Example Complaints</b>	Like	43%	37%	.03			
	Message	12%	16%	.04			
	Comment	23%	32%	.001			
	Joke	19%	22%	.19			
	Concern	4%	9%	.001			
	Link	1%	0%	.71			
	Other	2%	4%	.07			
	Perceived Humor	2.97 (SD = 1.08)	2.82 (SD = 1.14)	.01			
	Violation Appraisal	2.66 (SD = 1.09)	3.47 (SD = .98)	.001			
	Benign Appraisal	3.96 (SD = .76)	3.18 (SD = .92)	.001			

Sample stimuli and selected results for study 5, including the percentage of respondents who would respond to the status update and the mean ratings (standard deviations) of the status update in the humorous and non-humorous conditions. The p-values indicate the significance of the contrast between the humorous and non-humorous conditions.

**TABLE 5**  
**Study 6 Results**

	Correlations	Regression coefficients		
	Perceived Humor	Perceived Humor (b)	Benign Appraisal (b)	Violation Appraisal (b)
Helpful (ln)	.46***	.94**	-.22	-.05
Enjoyment	.50***	.79***	-.44***	-.33***
Impression	.43***	.71***	-.49***	-.02
Redress	-.60***	-.02	-.63***	.11
Sympathy	-.42***	.28	-.57***	.70***
Benign Appraisal	.93***			
Violation Appraisal	.43***			

\*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$

The left column indicates the correlation between each outcome variable and perceived humor. The right columns indicate the beta coefficients (b) in regression equations predicting the outcome variable from perceived humor and the benign and violation appraisals. The equation predicting the number of helpful judgments controlled for the amount of time that the review had been posted on the website.

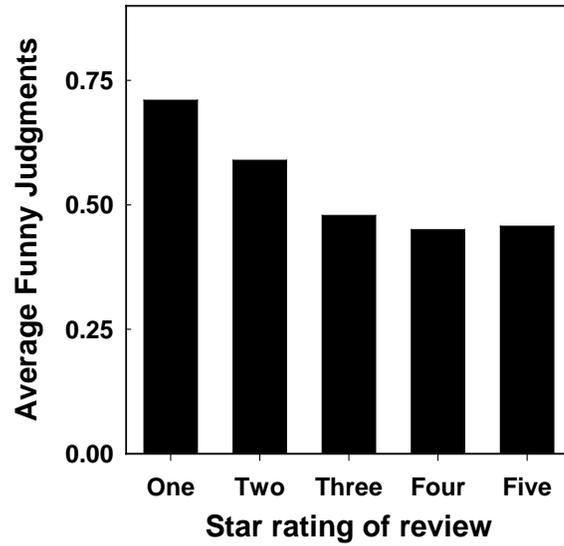
## FIGURE LEGEND

### FIGURE 1

Average Number of Funny Judgments by Star Rating for Yelp Reviews

**FIGURE 1**

Average Number of Funny Judgments by Star Rating for Yelp Reviews



## HEADINGS LIST

### **1) COMPLAINING**

#### **1) HUMOR**

#### **1) HUMOROUS COMPLAINING**

#### **1) HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

- 2) Complaints vs. Praise
- 2) Goals of the complainer
  - 3) *Entertaining Others*
  - 3) *Impression Management*
  - 3) *Warning Others*
  - 3) *Obtaining Redress*
  - 3) *Sympathy*

#### **1) OVERVIEW OF STUDIES**

#### **1) STUDY 1: COMPLAINING AND PRAISING ON YELP**

- 2) Method, Results, and Discussion

#### **1) STUDY 2: COMPLAINING AND PRAISING HUMOROUSLY ON FACEBOOK**

- 2) Method and Results
  - 3) *Sample*
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- 2) Method
- 2) Results
  - 3) *Phase 1: Friends' responses*
  - 3) *Phase 2: Observers' responses*
- 2) Discussion

#### **1) STUDY 4: HOW HUMOR HINDERS COMPLAINERS**

- 2) Method
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- 2) Discussion

#### **1) STUDY 5: WHY HUMOR HINDERS COMPLAINERS**

- 2) Method
- 2) Results
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#### **1) STUDY 6: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

- 2) Method
- 2) Results and Discussion
- 2) Discussion

#### **1) GENERAL DISCUSSION**

- 2) Implications and Future Directions
- 2) Conclusion