

# How Do Observers React to Companies' Humorous Responses to Online Public Complaints?

Mathieu Béal<sup>1</sup>  and Yany Grégoire<sup>2</sup> 

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## Abstract

The current research examines the way that observing consumers react when companies use humor to address online public complaints on social media. Drawing on, first, a field study using companies' humorous responses on social media and, second, on two main scenario-based experiments, we use benign violation theory to capture simultaneously the unfavorable effect (i.e., inferred negative motives) and the favorable effect (i.e., humor appreciation) of employing humor in a public complaining context. The results reveal that online observers respond more favorably (in terms of likes, retweets, and purchase intentions) when firms use affiliative humor (e.g., laughing *with* the complainer) rather than aggressive humor (e.g., laughing *at* the complainer). Also, affiliative humor and an accommodative recovery (e.g., apologies and compensation) provide equal results in terms of observers' purchase intentions. Because observers infer more negative motives of companies, affiliative humor compensates over an accommodative recovery by being funnier. Finally, our last study presents a reversal effect depending on brand personality; while sincere brands should always favor affiliative humor, aggressive humor elicits higher purchase intentions when performed by exciting brands. This research gives managerial insights about observers' reactions to humorous responses to online complaints and the importance for humor to fit with brand personality.

## Keywords

humor, service recovery, observers, brand personality, social media.

@ceophono: “Your food is trash.

@Wendys: No, your opinion is though.” (1,366 retweets, 4,197 likes)

@JayFeliipe: “Immediate turn off if a girl’s mobile network is Tesco mobile.

@tescomobile: Are you really in a position to be turning girls away?” (7,271 retweets, 5,214 likes)

Customers turn more to social media to express their dissatisfaction in the form of negative reviews, electronic word of mouth, and online public complaints (Grégoire et al. 2018; Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp 2015; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Ma, Sun, and Kekre 2015; Wang and Chaudhry 2018). In this context, companies need to respond in an appropriate manner because their post could be witnessed not only by the dissatisfied customer but also by (possibly) thousands of observing future customers (Hogreve, Bilstein, and Hoerner 2019; Johnen and Schnittka 2019). The service literature uniformly judges that providing an accommodative recovery (e.g., apologies and compensation) is the most effective recovery strategy to restore observers' positive attitudes (Javornik, Filieri, and Gumann 2020; Lee and Song 2010; Schaefer and Schamari 2016; Zhao, Jiang, and Su 2020). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that companies do not always use an accommodative strategy

and that they sometimes prefer using humor as an alternative response. Companies—like Tesco Mobile or Wendy’s—have become particularly popular on social media for their use of humor after online complaints. In 2013, Tesco Mobile launched the #NoJoke campaign in which they used humor to address some negative online reviews. One year after this campaign, in 2014, Tesco’s customer base had increased from 3.5 to 4 million individuals, and the number of Twitter followers had surged by 700% (Digiday 2014). Thus, it seems that humor can “pay off” as a recovery strategy as well as a tactic to gain observers' approval and attention.

The marketing literature has mainly investigated the consequences of humor in advertising (Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990; Eisend 2011, 2009), business-to-business relationships (Lussier, Grégoire, and Vachon 2017), services' interactions (Mathies, Chiew, and Kleinaltenkamp 2016), and after a major

<sup>1</sup> Grenoble Ecole de Management, France

<sup>2</sup> HEC Montreal, Canada

## Corresponding Author:

Mathieu Béal, Grenoble Ecole de Management, 12 rue Pierre Sémard, 38000 Grenoble, France.

Email: mathieu.beal@grenoble-em.com

public crisis (Xiao, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2018). However, there is limited research that specifically examines observers' reactions to humor in a recovery context, especially when this recovery occurs on social media. Investigating observers' reactions in an online setting is particularly important, as the anonymity associated with such an environment changes the way consumers react to humor compared to a traditional face-to-face setting. Although the use of humor has gained in popularity in service recovery, there are still few research-based insights to help managers understand when humor is appropriate from an online observer's perspective (Grégoire and Mattila in press). This issue is important because humor does not always produce positive effects, and its misuse can backfire (Eisend 2009; McGraw, Williams, and Warren 2014; Meyer 2000).

Here, benign violation theory explains that humor is successful when the norm violation it creates is perceived as benign—which means “being okay,” fun, and appropriate (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018; Warren and McGraw 2016). In the context of a public resolution, observers could view the use of humor as a form of norm violation because the company “makes jokes” rather than resolving the problem. However, this violation could also be viewed as appropriate and fun—or not at all—depending on the circumstances. On the one hand, the use of humor may turn into a “nice move” if observers judge this norm violation as benign, which would trigger fun and amusement (McGraw, Schiro, and Fernbach 2015). On the other hand, the use of humor could have detrimental effects if the observers infer that the firm was motivated by negative motives (Joireman et al. 2013). In the light of these two explanations, the general purpose of this research is to identify when humor is benign and successful (i.e., high humor appreciation) versus violating and detrimental (i.e., high inferred negative motives) from an online observer's perspective. Specifically, the current research examines the effects of two key variables (i.e., humor type and brand personality) on two core mediators (i.e., humor appreciation vs. negative motives) which capture the two previously explained processes. We test these effects and these two routes using a multimethods design (a field study, two main experiments, and one additional experiment presented in the Online Appendix).

As a first contribution, we investigate the effects of two forms of humor, namely affiliative humor (i.e., a nonhostile form of humor including gentle teasing and playful poking) and aggressive humor (i.e., a hostile and hurting form of humor including sarcasm and derision) (Martin et al. 2003). In general, we expect that affiliative humor, compared to aggressive humor, should lead to more positive behaviors (e.g., likes, retweets, or purchase intentions) from observing customers. Studies 1 and 2 test the general superiority of affiliative humor over aggressive humor. This superior effect should be obtained because affiliative humor (compared to aggressive humor) acts favorably on the two core mediators of this research. Compared to the aggressive form, affiliative humor should be more appreciated because of its nonthreatening nature. Observing customers should also perceive affiliative humor as less motivated by negative intent, thus attenuating the sense of norm violation.

As a second contribution, we compare the effects of affiliative humor with those of an accommodative recovery, which remains the golden rule after a service failure (Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Lee and Song 2010). Here, we argue that affiliative humor can be as effective as an accommodative recovery in the eyes of observing customers. Although affiliative humor should generate higher inferred negative motives than accommodative recovery does, a humorous tactic should compensate for this deficiency by generating more amusement. Overall, the combined effect of these two opposite forces should lead to equally favorable responses for affiliative humor and accommodative recovery (Study 2).

As a third contribution, we examine (in Study 3) the role of brand personality (Aaker 1997) and suggest that brands should adapt their humor according to the brand's personality in a recovery context. Building on Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004), we examine the interaction effects between humor type and two popular brand personalities: sincere (characterized by a family orientation, nurturance, warmth, and traditionalism) versus exciting (characterized by energy, youthfulness, and boldness). The psychology and management literatures consistently demonstrate that affiliative humor outperforms aggressive humor, and such an effect is also replicated in our Studies 1 and 2. However, in Study 3, we find a reversal effect of humor type depending on brand personality. When the brand is considered sincere, affiliative humor keeps its advantages. Affiliative humor is associated with agreeableness, security, and intimacy (Saroglou and Scariot 2002), and these characteristics represent a good fit with the values of a sincere brand (Aaker 1997; Sung and Kim 2010). Conversely, when the brand is exciting, observers develop higher purchase intentions if the brand responds with an aggressive rather than an affiliative form of humor. This is the only situation in this research where we find that aggressive humor is more effective than affiliative humor. In this particular case, the edgy and provocative nature of aggressive humor is consistent with the personality traits of an exciting brand (Führ 2002), and the fit “aggressive humor-exciting brand” is especially appreciated by online observers.

## Conceptual Framework

Customers regularly use social media to express their dissatisfaction with firms in the form of online reviews, electronic word of mouth, and online public complaints. Such varied expressions of dissatisfaction have been found to have serious negative effects on firms' reputation and prospering (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley 2013; Wang and Chaudhry 2018). While the issues of online public complaining, electronic word of mouth, and online reviews belong to different streams of research, all these literatures seem to examine a similar phenomenon—that is, consumers publicly expressing their dissatisfaction on social media. In this article, we build our framework by integrating the notions of three key literatures: electronic word of mouth (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004),

online complaining (e.g., Schaefer and Schamari 2016), and service recovery (e.g., Grégoire and Mattila in press; Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2019). By doing so, we answer the call of Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri (2020) who urge researchers to integrate the insights of different literatures studying the negative interactions between consumers and firms. Building on these literatures, we define “online public complaints” as all forms of consumers’ expression of dissatisfaction toward a company which are publicly voiced on social media or any other public media.

Online public complaints are clearly on the rise with the omnipresence of social media in all facets of consumers’ lives. Companies are warranted in providing appropriate responses to online public complaints because many other consumers—labeled “observers”—can witness firms’ responses, and then, these observers form their attitudes in accordance with firms’ actions (Hogreve, Bilstein, and Hoerner 2019; Javornik, Filieri, and Gumann 2020; Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Lee and Song 2010; Zhao, Jiang, and Su 2020). Such observers are more likely to engage in positive behaviors when firms address online complaints with an accommodative recovery by offering apologies and compensation (Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Lee and Song 2010). Alternatively, some companies use humor instead of accommodative recovery (see prior examples). However, when firms use humorous tactics, there are still few research-based insights documenting the effectiveness of this new practice.

We argue it is important to better understand online observers’ reactions to humorous online recoveries for two key reasons. First, humor is an important aspect of exchanges on social media (McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015), and managers need to adhere to this new norm in order to be successful in this environment (Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp 2015). Since the number of complaints on social media is on the rise, we should observe an increase in the use of humor in an online complaining context. Accordingly, firms and managers need to master the proper use of humor in this context so that they can take advantage of this “tactic” by avoiding its pitfalls. It is well established that humor is a double-edged sword and that failed humorous attempts can backfire (Eisend 2011, 2009). So, this research examines the aspects that make the use of humor successful in the context of a recovery on social media.

Second, although the field of service recovery is mature (see Kunz and Hogreve 2011; Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2019), there is still much to be learned about the responses of online observers rather than complainers. In this research, we focus exclusively on the observers, which is a perspective that has been recently identified as a promising research avenue in the service recovery field (Grégoire and Mattila in press). Surprisingly, the literatures on word of mouth and recovery focus almost exclusively on complainers, and the perspective of observers has been overlooked (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020). To address this gap, we pay special attention to observers’ reactions in a social media context. Examining observers’ responses in this context is important, as the anonymity

associated with an online setting changes the way observers react to service recoveries (e.g., Johnen and Schnittka 2019). In a social media context, it is clear that firms direct their recovery communications to *both* complainers and observers and that the use of humor could become a tactic to please observers. To summarize, the current research focuses on *observers’ responses in an online environment* because clever humoristic tactics can represent fantastic public relations opportunities, leading to the recruitment of new customers. Invoking these justifications, we now present our model (see Figure 1).

## Model and Hypotheses Development

### *The Basic Effects of Affiliative Humor Versus Aggressive Humor*

In broad terms, humor consists of any “amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization” (Romero and Cruthirds 2004, p. 59). Humor is typically associated with positive emotions, and it has received growing attention in an organizational context (Malone 1980; Romero and Cruthirds 2004) and in marketing (Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990; Eisend 2009). Importantly, humor has been qualified a double-edged sword. Successful humor has the potential to reinforce social connections, whereas a failed use of humor can disrupt them (Martin et al. 2003; Meyer 2000). Relatedly, Martin et al. (2003) provide a framework for different forms of humor and show that humor can achieve different goals depending on its affiliative or aggressive nature. On the one hand, humor can be playful, nonthreatening, and benevolent, and this form of *affiliative humor* can strengthen bonds with others without harming them (Cann and Matson 2014). Playfully poking fun and telling jokes are examples of affiliative humor. On the other hand, *aggressive humor* is a darker form that aims at ridiculing others, victimizing them, and putting them down (Keltner et al. 2001; Kowalski 2000; Martin et al. 2003). Sarcasm, derision, and disrespectful teasing are examples of aggressive humor.

Affiliative and aggressive humor have different effects on people (see Figure 1). Aggressive humor is associated with undesirable social behaviors (Cann and Matson 2014; Saroglou and Scariot 2002), which make the perpetrators look disagreeable (Kowalski 2000). It also motivates observers to avoid perpetrators of “bad jokes” (Pundt and Herrmann 2015; Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018). On the contrary, affiliative humor is a social lubricant that facilitates interpersonal connection (Romero and Cruthirds 2004). People tend to have a positive impression of persons who use affiliative humor (Kuiper and Leite 2010). From these insights, we generally expect observers to have better perceptions of companies that use affiliative rather than aggressive humor when answering online public complaints. These positive perceptions should be linked to the greater propensity of online observers to like a humoristic recovery post, to share it with friends (e.g., retweet), and to purchase from the company. Formally:

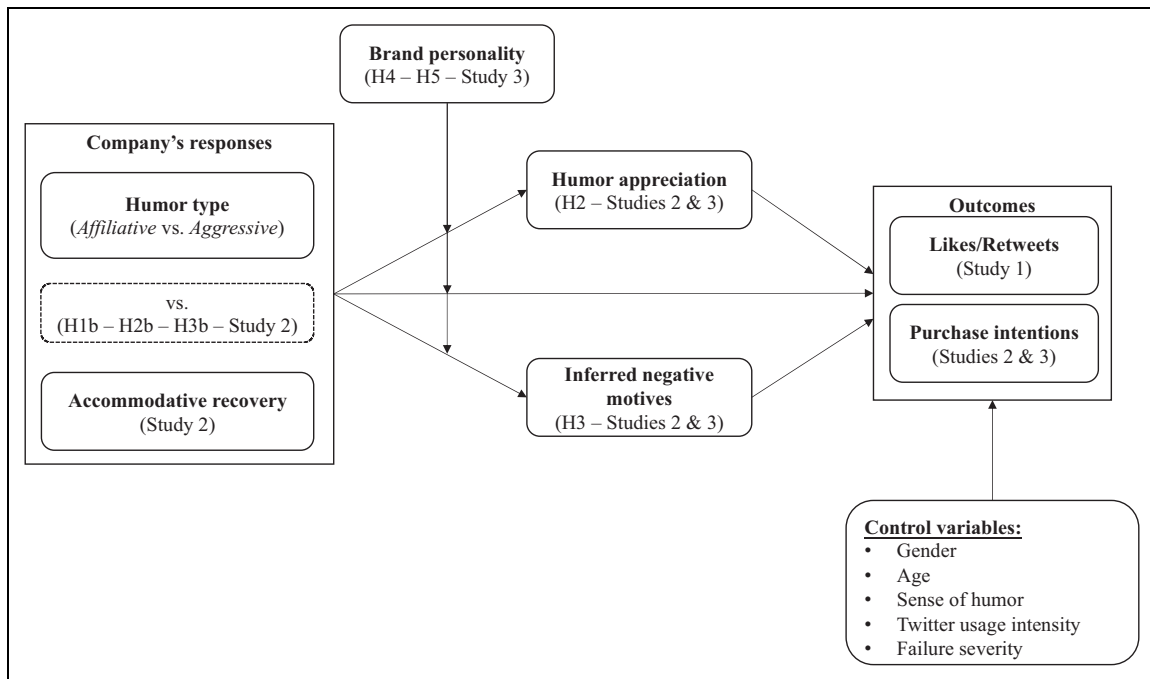


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Affiliative humor generates more positive outcomes on the part of observers—such as likes, retweets, and purchase intentions—compared to aggressive humor.

### Benign Violation Theory and the Favorable Mediation Through Humor Appreciation

As illustrated in Figure 1, we explain the differentiated effects of humor type by referring to two core mediators which disentangle the favorable effect (through humor appreciation) and the unfavorable effect (through inferred negative motives) of humor. To explain these effects, we refer to benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2020; Warren and McGraw 2016), which is especially helpful to capture the distinction between failed versus successful humor attempts.

Benign violation theory makes three interrelated predictions about the generation of a *successful humorous attempt* (McGraw, Schiro, and Fernbach 2015; McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015; McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018). First, humor triggers a form of norm violation. Second, this violation is perceived as benign. Third, the first two conditions occur simultaneously, triggering laughter and amusement. In our framework, this logic is captured by the mediator *humor appreciation*, which “denotes a psychological state characterized by amusement, the tendency to laugh, and the perception that something is funny” (Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018, p. 530). Even if humor violates a norm (e.g., addressing a complaint with a joke), it connects to an alternative norm that makes the initial violation look benign (e.g., the first violation is benign because the firm embraces the communicational norms on social media). This positive dynamic

naturally leads to appreciation of the humor and positive behaviors (see Figure 1).

On the basis of these explanations, we predict that affiliative humor, compared to aggressive humor, should generate more humor appreciation in observers, which in turn should lead to greater purchase intentions. We make this prediction because affiliative humor respects well the three previously enumerated steps. First, both types of humor create a norm violation. Second, the violation associated with affiliative humor is perceived as more benign than in the case of aggressive humor. Affiliative humor should be viewed as more socially desirable because it is respectful and benevolent, whereas aggressive humor should be seen as more harmful given its habit of mocking customers (Cann and Matson 2014). For Martin et al. (2003), the benign dimension is at the core of what distinguishes affiliative humor from the aggressive type. Third, the use of affiliative humor prompts a powerful communicational norm on social media (i.e., being clever, funny, and light), which is not as true for aggressive humor. Because observers derive more amusement in the affiliative condition, they should develop greater purchase intentions toward the firm. Formally:

**Hypothesis 2a:** Humor appreciation mediates the relationship between humor type and observers’ purchase intentions; affiliative humor, compared to aggressive humor, generates higher humor appreciation, which in turn leads to more purchase intentions.

### The Negative Mediation Through Inferred Negative Motives

Benign violation theory is also helpful to understand failed humorous attempts. Warren and McGraw (2016) demonstrate

that the stronger the norm violation caused by humor, the more negative are the customers' responses toward the company. Building on the recovery literature (e.g., Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010; Joireman et al. 2013), we argue that an inappropriate use of humor could violate a norm related to the expectations that firms will show good faith in the recovery process. Consumers expect that firms will be well-intentioned and helpful throughout the recovery process. Therefore, consumers respond especially negatively when they infer that a firm is motivated by negative intents (Joireman et al. 2013).

We use the mediator "inferred negative motives" to capture the norm-violating aspect of humor usage in our model (see Figure 1). Specifically, inferences of a firm's negative motives occur when customers believe that a company tried to maximize its own interests to the detriment of its customers (Campbell 1999; Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). We chose this mediator over other alternatives for three reasons (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020). First, inferred negative motives refer to a strong norm identified in the recovery literature—that is, a firm should address any complaint based on good faith by showing concern (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). Because of its normative nature, this mediator fits well benign violation theory. Second, inferred negative motive has been found to be the most influential judgment explaining customers' responses after a recovery (Joireman et al. 2013). Customers will react very differently, going from reconciliation to revenge, depending on their inferences of motive. Third, other cognitions (e.g., severity, responsiveness, and attributions) have been found to be predictors of an inference of motives, and their impacts on final behaviors tend to be indirect. Accordingly, negative motives appear to be the core mediator in the process that consumers follow after a service failure (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020).

When comparing the two forms of humor (from an online observer perspective), each type ought to differ on the basis of its ability to break the norm of a firm's "good faith" and, thus, to elicit different levels of inferred negative motives. On the one hand, aggressive humor is aversive, and it is perceived as an unsocial behavior (Cann and Matson 2014), which could easily lead to an inference of negative motives. Observers judge aggressive humor as an indication that the perpetrator devalues the relationship with the target and that the company disregards its relationships with its dissatisfied customers (Kowalski 2000). Here, such judgments should naturally elicit a sense of negative motives. On the other hand, a firm's use of affiliative manner would enhance observers' perceptions that the company tries to create a social connection with the complainer (Martin et al. 2003). The use of this type of humor could also contribute to reducing the tension and stress associated with a service recovery episode for the observers (McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015). Formally:

**Hypothesis 3a:** Inferred negative motives mediate the relationship between humor type and observers' purchase intentions; affiliative humor, compared to aggressive humor,

generates fewer negative motives, which in turn lead to higher purchase intentions.

### *A Comparison With an Accommodative Recovery, the Gold Standard*

Importantly, we compare the effects of the two types of humor with those of an accommodative recovery (i.e., a firm's efforts to resolve a current service failure by apologizing or offering compensation), which remains the gold standard in terms of online recovery (Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Lee and Song 2010; Zhao, Jiang, and Su 2020). As illustrated in Figure 1, the two processes of our framework (humor appreciation vs. negative motives) allow an understanding of why humor can be a reasonable recovery tactic from an observer's perspective, even when compared with an accommodative recovery. Because accommodative recovery and humor (especially the affiliative type) favor one given process over the other, both tactics can create equally positive responses by observers. Next, we elaborate on these counterbalancing effects.

On the one hand, an accommodative recovery, compared to humorous attempts, should lead to higher inferences of positive motives. An accommodative recovery specifically aims at solving the failure and redressing the equilibrium between a customer and a firm. Accordingly, an accommodative recovery should trigger the lowest level of inferred negative motives, which would be followed respectively by the score of affiliative humor (i.e., moderate negative motives) and aggressive humor (highest negative motives), as per Hypothesis 3a.

On the other hand, we expect an accommodative recovery to exert the lowest level of humor appreciation compared to the two other strategies. As stated by benign violation theory, a situation causes amusement if a norm-violating situation is simultaneously considered as benign (McGraw and Warren 2010). Consistent with this logic, an accommodative recovery is a purely benign situation that displays no norm threat, which would be a necessary condition to elicit amusement. An accommodative recovery should be even less amusing than aggressive humor because aggressive humor still meets the conditions of being norm violating and (slightly) benign. As a result, an accommodative recovery should elicit a lower level of humor appreciation compared to both humor attempts. As per Hypothesis 2a, we expect high or moderate levels of humor appreciation for affiliative humor and aggressive humor, respectively.

When we combine the effects of the three responses of interest on our core mediators, we conclude that aggressive humor is the least advantageous response in terms of creating observers' positive responses. In addition, from the exposed logic, it becomes difficult to predict a clear "winning" tactic between the affiliative humor and accommodative recoveries. Affiliative humor has a clear advantage (over accommodative recovery) in terms of humor appreciation but a clear disadvantage in terms of inferred motives. When these two effects are combined—and given their counterbalancing dynamics—we suggest that accommodative recovery and affiliative humor should lead to equally positive reactions by observers. Building

on these explanations, we incorporate the effect of accommodative recovery in our previous Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a. Formally:

**Hypothesis 1b:** Accommodative recovery and affiliative humor generate a similar level of observers' purchase intentions, and the levels generated by these two responses are higher than the level of aggressive humor.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Humor appreciation mediates the relationship between a firm's response and observers' purchase intentions; an accommodative recovery generates a lower level of humor appreciation compared to affiliative humor (high appreciation) and aggressive humor (moderate appreciation).

**Hypothesis 3b:** Inferred negative motives mediate the relationship between a firm's responses and observers' purchase intentions; an accommodative recovery generates a lower level of inferred negative motives compared to affiliative humor (moderate negative motives) and aggressive humor (high negative motives).

### *The Moderation Effects of Brand Personality*

Prior research emphasizes that observers' evaluation of humor depends largely on the perpetrator (e.g., Romero and Cruthirds 2004). Accordingly (see Figure 1), we investigate the effects of a boundary condition that seems especially important in the current context—that is, the personality of the brand using humor (Cann and Matson 2014; Kuiper and Leite 2010). The concept of personality has been applied to brands for more than 20 years. Indeed, Aaker (1997) proposed that personality dimensions form an inferential base that consumers use to represent brands as having a set of humanlike characteristics. Brand personality consists of five core dimensions (Aaker 1997) of which sincerity and excitement are considered the most fundamental (Sundar and Noseworthy 2016; Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia 2009). Briefly, sincere brands are viewed as being warm, authentic, and family-oriented, while exciting brands are associated with youth, uniqueness, fun, and boldness. The current research posits that humor type interacts with these two personalities to predict purchase intentions in different ways.

Brand personality influences how the actions of a brand—and its use of humor—are perceived by observers (Sundar and Noseworthy 2016). On the one hand, observers expect that sincere brands will use a type of humor that corresponds to their benevolent and authentic nature. In this context, affiliative humor is the tactic of choice, for it is associated with agreeableness, security, and intimacy (Saroglou and Scariot 2002)—that is, a set of attributes highly valued by sincere brands (Aaker 1997). Affiliative humor is consistent with sincere brands, and this association should result in observers' perception of a benign norm violation. In this case, the use of affiliative humor (compared to aggressive humor) preserves its fundamental virtues and should lead to greater purchase intentions.

On the other hand, we expect to find a reversal effect for exciting brands, which are associated with being edgy, “politically incorrect,” and fun. Here, we argue that the use of aggressive humor does not conflict with this last set of attributes. On the contrary, the use of aggressive humor should favor exciting brands, which are associated with youth and boldness (Führ 2002). Exciting brands are somewhat protected from norm violations (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004), and observers ought to see the use of aggressive humor as being more acceptable for such brands. Indeed, observers should view aggressive humor as especially fun and appealing for exciting brands, which should lead to greater purchase intentions (compared with affiliative humor). Formally:

**Hypothesis 4:** Brand personality interacts with humor type to predict purchase intentions: (a) When the brand is sincere, affiliative humor generates more purchase intentions than aggressive humor does and (b) when the brand is exciting, aggressive humor generates more purchase intentions than affiliative humor does.

We argue that the effects described in Hypothesis 4 are explained by different processes, depending on the type of personality. Given their emphasis on authenticity and integrity, sincere brands are expected to act responsibly by showing good faith. Sincere brands are valued by customers because of their ability to create confidence and trust (Sung and Kim 2010). Such brands are evaluated by observers not necessarily according to their ability to be entertaining but rather according to their ability to show concern for their customers (Sundar and Noseworthy 2016). In that regard, customers should react unfavorably toward sincere brands transgressing norms (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). For such brands, the nature of their intention seems more important than being funny. Accordingly, for sincere brands, the effect of humor type on purchase intentions should be explained mainly by the inferences made about a brand's motives.

In turn, for exciting brands, observers should pay special attention to their ability to be entertaining; for such brands, observers are probably less motivated to process the motives underlying the usage of humor. Consumers primarily expect exciting brands to be a bit provocative and frivolous; it is part of their personality. Consistent with this view, Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) explain that exciting brands are somewhat protected from norm transgression. The fact that exciting brands are slightly “politically incorrect” and “norm violating” should not concern observers too much. Rather, observers should be especially attentive to the entertaining aspect of exciting brands' use of humor. Accordingly, for exciting brands, the effects of humor type on purchase intentions should be explained primarily by their ability to be fun (i.e., humor appreciation). Formally:

**Hypothesis 5:** In terms of processes, (a) the mediator “humor appreciation” plays a more important role for exciting brands than for sincere brands, whereas (b) the mediator

“inferred negative motives” plays a more important role for sincere brands than for exciting brands.

## Overview of the Empirical Studies

To test our hypotheses, we use a multimethods design combining archival and experimental data in a variety of contexts (e.g., diversified contexts for Study 1 and internet provider for Studies 2 and 3). Specifically, we conducted a first study (Study 1) by collecting companies' humorous responses on Twitter and the associated retweets and likes (Hypothesis 1a). Study 2 is a scenario-based experiment that allows comparing the two forms of humor with each other (Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a). We also added the condition accommodative recovery to contrast its effects with those of the two humor types (Hypothesis 1b, 2b, and 3b). Finally, Study 3 is a scenario-based experiment in which we test the interaction effect of humor type with the two brand personalities of interest, as predicted in Hypotheses 4 and 5.

### Study 1: A Field Study Linking Humor Type to Likes and Retweets

#### Data Collection

We collected data from a French blog called CM Hall of Fame (<https://cmhalloffame.fr> [accessed December 3, 2020]), which is linked to a Twitter account. When someone identifies a humorous tweet posted by a community manager, they can tag the Twitter account of the blog. Then, the person responsible for the blog makes a screenshot to present the humorous post to all the followers. In December 2020, the Twitter account of the blog was followed by around 68,000 persons. The blog is not affiliated with any company and is fully independent; companies cannot deliberately put their tweets on this website. Here, we argue that selecting all the humorous posts from a neutral website minimizes researchers' selection bias. We did not collect tweets that we personally find humorous. Rather, we used tweets that are viewed as humorous by regular consumers who are not involved in the current research.

The blog contains 566 humorous messages posted by community managers. Of the 566 humorous messages, we considered only those messages in which a company used humor to respond to an online public complaint, resulting in 204 humorous responses. We did not retain humorous posts that were not associated with a complaint. Then, we tracked the original tweet in order to gain more information regarding the number of retweets and likes obtained by companies' responses. We were not able to collect such information for 62 of them, mostly because the original tweets were deleted. The final sample thus comprises 142 tweets (see Table 1 for examples).

Two independent individuals who were unaware of the purpose of this research coded the types of humor. The agreement level between coders was high (78.5%), and the differences were resolved through discussions. Of the 142 tweets, 79 are

considered aggressive humor (55.63%) and 63 affiliative humor (44.37%). Descriptive statistics (see Table 1) indicate a large variance for both likes ( $M = 581.04$ , standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 3,106.72) and retweets ( $M = 799.56$ ,  $SD = 2,994.17$ ), suggesting that this sample contains both successful (thousands of likes and retweets) and unsuccessful posts (none or only a few likes and retweets). Specifically, the post with the highest number of retweets counted 23,089 retweets (a very successful post), while a few posts did not have any retweet (failed posts). In our analysis, we controlled for the number of followers of a brand's page on Twitter to account for the potential visibility of a post (De Vries 2019). It should be noted that past research shows that humorous content in advertisements does not differ much across westernized countries (Laroche et al. 2014). Appealing to this last evidence, we argue that the current cultural context (France) does not affect the relevance of the humorous insights used in this study. Furthermore, the findings of Study 1 are replicated in Study 2 with an American sample.

### Results for Study 1

We conducted analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) with humor type as the independent variable, retweets and likes as the dependent variables, and the number of followers as a control variable. We found a significant difference in terms of likes between the two forms of humor, with affiliative humor generating more likes compared to aggressive humor,  $M_{\text{Affiliative}} = 1,299.19$ ,  $M_{\text{Aggressive}} = 93.76$ ,  $F(1, 139) = 4.69$ ,  $p < .05$ . Affiliative humor also generated more retweets compared to aggressive humor,  $M_{\text{Affiliative}} = 1,352.43$ ,  $M_{\text{Aggressive}} = 388.03$ ,  $F(1, 139) = 3.59$ ,  $p = .06$ . We also found that the number of followers did not affect the number of likes,  $F(1, 139) = .02$ ,  $p > .10$ , and retweets,  $F(1, 139) = .01$ ,  $p > .10$ . Overall, Hypothesis 1a is supported.

### Discussion of Study 1

In a social media context, observers are direct witnesses of companies' responses to other customers' complaints, and they can show their approval for these responses by liking and/or retweeting them. In Study 1, we collected archival data about the number of likes and retweets to capture observers' appreciation of companies' humorous responses to online public complaints on Twitter. Supporting Hypothesis 1a, our results show that affiliative humor is associated with superior outcomes in terms of observers' behavioral responses. In Study 1, we find initial evidence that observers are more likely to like and share affiliative humorous responses, compared with the aggressive type. In Study 2, we replicate these results in an experimental setting (Hypothesis 1a). Here, the objectives of Study 2 are twofold. On the one hand, it examines the differences between the two forms of humor in terms of purchase intentions. On the other hand, it examines the mediating variables that explain why affiliative humor is more effective than aggressive humor (i.e., Hypotheses 2a and 3a). We also compare the effects of humorous responses with those of an accommodative recovery (i.e., Hypotheses 1b, 2b, and 3b).

**Table 1.** Measures and Variable Statistics (Study 1).

Variable	Explanation	Examples	Mean or Frequency
Humor type	<i>Affiliative humor</i> : An essential nonhostile tolerant use of humor that is affirming of self and others and presumably enhances interpersonal cohesiveness and attraction (e.g., gently teasing, playfully poking, jokes).	Example 1 “[Customer:] Could you please move your butt to restore my network. It is not like if it is annoying but still . . . [Company:] Hi! I guarantee you that our technicians are moving their butts to fix that. It’s almost twerk”	44.37%
	<i>Aggressive humor</i> : A tendency to express humor without regard for its potential impact on others and that is likely to hurt or alienate others (e.g., cruel teasing, sarcasm, derision).	Example 2 “[Customer:] Come on bro’, do something with your Fries, they’re all dried @( <i>company name</i> ) [Company:] We work on it, bro!” Example 1 “[Customer:] I sent you an email but received no answer. Even answering ‘go f**k yourself’ would be fine to me. [Company:] Go f**k yourself.” Example 2 “[Customer:] All the buses’ drivers from ( <i>company name</i> ) are sons of b**ches. [Company:] Hello, we are sorry to tell you that the poetry contest is over for this year.”	55.63%
Number of followers of the brand page	Indicator of the number of potential observers of the post.	—	$M = 508,869.33$ $SD = 1,235,950.58$
Number of “retweets” of response	Proxy for electronic word of mouth made by observers about company’s response.	—	$M = 799.56$ $SD = 2,994.17$
Number of “likes” of the response	Proxy for observers’ positive attitude toward the company’s response.	—	$M = 581.04$ $SD = 3,106.72$

## Study 2: Comparing Humor Types and Accommodative Recovery

### Study Design and Sample

Study 2 is a single-factor (three recovery strategies: affiliative humor, aggressive humor, accommodative recovery), between-subjects experiment conducted in an internet service provider context. Participants were asked to imagine that they moved to another city, which required them to cancel their contract with their current internet service provider. Thus, they decided to search on the internet for different promotions and became interested in a fictional company called CyaNetwork. As they look at the Twitter page of the company, they find a message posted by a dissatisfied customer called Alex, who complains about being unable to watch the last episode of *Game of Thrones* because the internet network crashed. Although the complaint could appear to be emotionally charged at first, the participants perceived that the problem was of moderate

severity ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ , on a 7-point scale). Then, we manipulated the company’s response to the public complaint, depending on the company’s use of affiliative humor, aggressive humor, or an accommodative recovery (see Online Appendix 1 for the detailed scenario and manipulations). Following the recommendations of this literature (e.g., Kowalski 2000; Kuiper and Leite 2010; Martin et al. 2003), we manipulated the hashtags associated with each form of humor by including “#justkidding” in the affiliative condition and “#justteasing” in the aggressive condition.<sup>1</sup>

The manipulations and the questionnaire were pretested with 38 participants. All participants were recruited through the crowdsourcing platform Prolific. Several inclusion criteria were applied to the selection of the participants to control for the role of culture in their perception of humor (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993; Kalliny, Cruthirds, and Minor 2006). For instance, the participants needed to be born in the United States, to be American citizens, to declare English as their first language, and to consider themselves monocultural.<sup>2</sup> We removed nine participants because they failed the attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 156 participants (39.1%



female,  $M = 37.88$  years,  $SD = 11.60$ ). The participants were randomly assigned to the treatment groups.

## Manipulation Checks and Control Variables

After reading the scenario, the participants responded to the questions about the dependent variables, and they completed the manipulation checks. Most scales were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). As manipulation checks, we used the scales of affiliative humor (four items,  $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ,  $\alpha = .93$ ; Martin et al. 2003), aggressive humor (four items,  $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ; Martin et al. 2003), and accommodative recovery (four items,  $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 2.10$ ,  $\alpha = .97$ ; Johnen and Schnittka 2019). Our two mediators were inferred negative motives (four items,  $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ; Joireman et al. 2013) and humor appreciation (three items,  $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ,  $\alpha = .97$ ; McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015), and our key dependent variable was purchase intentions (three items,  $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ,  $\alpha = .97$ ; Grewal et al. 1998). Online Appendix 2 provides the detailed scales, and Online Appendix 3 provides the measurement model indices. Moreover, discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct with their correlations with the other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). All square roots of the AVE were substantially greater than all other correlations, which suggests discriminant validity.

The manipulation was successful. The participants in the affiliative humor condition reported that the firm used affiliative humor to a greater extent than the participants in the two other conditions,  $M_{\text{Affiliative}} = 4.48$ ,  $M_{\text{Aggressive}} = 3.16$ ,  $M_{\text{Accommodative}} = 1.63$ ,  $F(2, 153) = 59.92$ ,  $p < .01$ . Similarly, the participants in the aggressive humor condition reported that the firm used aggressive humor to a greater extent than participants in the two other conditions,  $M_{\text{Aggressive}} = 4.89$ ,  $M_{\text{Affiliative}} = 3.68$ ,  $M_{\text{Accommodative}} = 1.48$ ,  $F(2, 153) = 78.11$ ,  $p < .01$ . Then, the participants in the accommodative recovery condition perceived the company to be responding in a more accommodative manner compared to the two other conditions,  $M_{\text{Accommodative}} = 5.48$ ,  $M_{\text{Affiliative}} = 1.72$ ,  $M_{\text{Aggressive}} = 1.34$ ,  $F(2, 153) = 266.21$ ,  $p < .01$ . Of note, for our three core manipulations, the score they obtained on their intended check was greater than the neutral score of “4” (all  $ps < .05$ ). Finally, the participants perceived the scenario as realistic ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), and they understood that they were observers ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ ). The manipulations did not have any effect on the last two variables (all  $ps > .10$ ).

We also integrated different covariates in the model. We first controlled for sense of humor<sup>3</sup> by using a validated scale (three items,  $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ ; Svebak 1996), defined as the stable individual differences in the way people produce and consume comedy (Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018). Recently, Warren, Barsky, and McGraw (2018) have highlighted the importance of controlling for sense of humor because the appreciation of humor greatly varies from one

individual to another. Second, we controlled for twitter usage intensity (three items,  $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ,  $\alpha = .95$ ; Hübner Barcelos, Dantas, and Sénécal 2018). Third, we controlled for failure severity (three items,  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ; Maxham and Netemeyer 2002). Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri (2020, p. 526) insist on the importance of accounting for this “popular variable that is best considered as a control variable in today’s research.” Fourth, we also controlled for the effects of age and gender. Research suggests that men and women differ in their appreciation of humor, with men being more prone than women to appreciate aggressive humor (Keltner et al. 2001). Finally, we also added two attribution variables—blame attributions (two items,  $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ; Heidenreich et al. 2015) and stability attributions (one item,  $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ; Heidenreich et al. 2015)—which are regularly conceptualized as mediators (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020). We incorporated them to rule them out as rival explanations.

## Results of Study 2

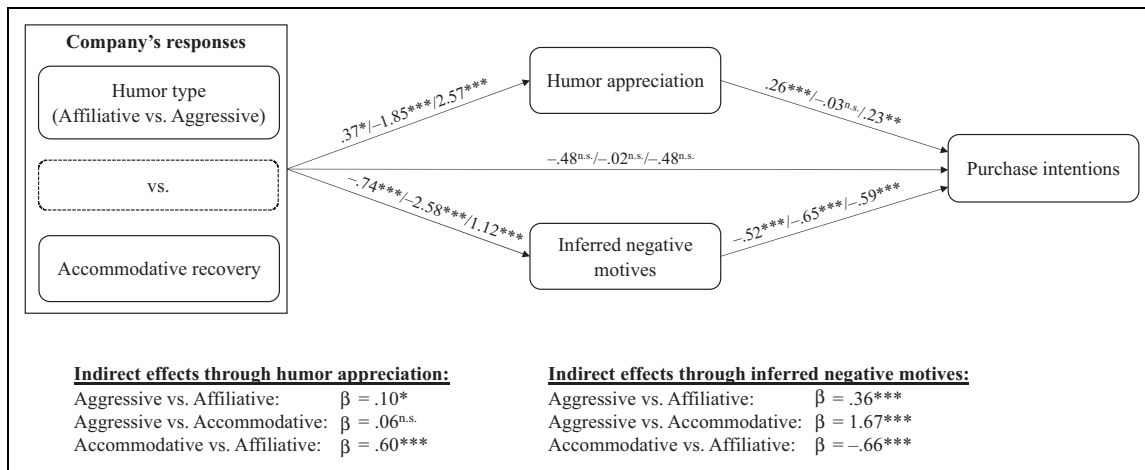
### Tests for Hypotheses 1a and 1b

First, the results of an ANCOVA indicate a significant effect of the company’s responses on purchase intentions,  $F(2, 146) = 18.98$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .21$ . Here, we find that failure severity,  $F(1, 146) = 12.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .08$ , and sense of humor,  $F(1, 146) = 3.63$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .02$ , have significant effects; all the other control variables (i.e., age, gender, and twitter usage) are not significant ( $ps > .10$ ). Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, purchase intentions<sup>4</sup> are significantly higher in the “affiliative humor” condition ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ) compared to the “aggressive humor” condition ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Consistent with Hypothesis 1b, an accommodative recovery ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) leads to higher purchase intentions than aggressive humor ( $p < .01$ ) and purchase intentions similar to those of affiliative humor ( $p = .32$ ). Overall, Hypotheses 1a and 1b are supported.

### Tests for Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 3a, and 3b

We find a significant main effect of our manipulations on humor appreciation,  $F(2, 146) = 27.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .27$ . Failure severity as a control variable has only a marginal effect on humor appreciation,  $F(1, 146) = 3.65$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .02$ . Here, simple tests reveal that the level of humor appreciation is significantly different in the three conditions. Affiliative humor generates the highest level of humor appreciation (Hypothesis 2a:  $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ), followed by aggressive humor (Hypothesis 2a:  $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ,  $p = .05$ ) and accommodative recovery (Hypothesis 2b:  $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These results are consistent with Hypotheses 2a (a difference between humor type) and 2b (the lowest score for accommodative recovery).

Consistent with Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we find a significant main effect of our manipulations on inferred negative motives,  $F(2, 146) = 45.72$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .39$ . For control variables, we find that severity,  $F(1, 146) = 20.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .12$ , has a



**Figure 2.** The mediating effects of humor appreciation and inferred negative motives on purchase intentions. *Note.* On each arrow, the first number presents the analyses in which we compare between aggressive humor (coded 0) and affiliative humor (coded 1), the second number presents the analyses in which we compare between aggressive humor (coded 0) and accommodative recovery (coded 1), and the third number presents the analysis in which we make a comparison between accommodative recovery (coded 0) and affiliative humor (coded 1). n.s. = not significant. \* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

significant influence on inferred negative motives; all others are not significant ( $ps > .10$ ). For negative motives, the three conditions present scores that are significantly different from each other (all  $ps < .01$ ). Simple tests reveal that negative motives are higher in the aggressive humor condition (Hypothesis 3a:  $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) compared to the affiliative humor condition (Hypothesis 3a:  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, accommodative recovery (Hypothesis 3b:  $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) is associated with the lowest score of negative motives across all conditions. Again, these results support Hypothesis 3a (a difference between humor type) and Hypothesis 3b (the lowest score on accommodative recovery).

We used PROCESS Models 4 (with 5,000 bootstraps; Hayes 2017) to test the mediating roles of humor appreciation (Hypotheses 2a and 2b) and negative motives (Hypotheses 3a and 3b) between a company's responses and purchase intentions. We employed three models in which we simultaneously incorporated our two mediators (see Figure 2). In all these models, the path between firm responses and purchase intentions becomes nonsignificant after the inclusion of the two mediators; the combination of these two mediators fully mediates the path between firm responses and purchase intentions.

First, we ran a model in which the two forms of humor were compared. In this model, the indirect effects going through humor appreciation (Hypothesis 2a:  $\beta = 0.10$ ; 95% CI [0.005, 0.231]) and negative motives (Hypothesis 3a:  $\beta = 0.36$ ; 95% CI [0.171, 0.627]) are both significant, which support Hypotheses 2a and 3a, respectively. Compared with aggressive humor, affiliative humor generates more humor appreciation, which increases purchase intentions (Hypothesis 2a). Compared with aggressive humor, affiliative humor generates fewer negative motives,<sup>5</sup> thus reducing purchase intentions (Hypothesis 3a). Both paths favor affiliative humor over aggressive humor.

Second, we ran a similar model in which we compared accommodative recovery with aggressive humor. In this case, only the indirect path going through negative motives is significant ( $\beta = 1.67$ ; 95% CI [1.133, 2.257]), and Hypothesis 3b is supported. Compared with aggressive humor, accommodative recovery generates fewer negative motives, thus reducing purchase intentions (support for Hypothesis 3b). The indirect path going through humor appreciation is not significant in this model ( $\beta = 0.06$ ; 95% CI [-0.292, 0.321]), and Hypothesis 2b is not supported. When aggressive humor and accommodative recovery are considered, the amusement generated by aggressive humor is not sufficient to influence observers' intentions.

Third, we compared accommodative recovery with affiliative humor. Both indirect paths are significant and in reversed directions. Compared with affiliative humor, accommodative recovery generates less humor appreciation, which increases purchase intentions ( $\beta = 0.60$ ; 95% CI [0.111, 1.159]). Supporting Hypothesis 2b, this sequence confers an advantage on affiliative humor over accommodative recovery. In turn, compared to affiliative humor, accommodative recovery generates fewer negative motives, thus reducing purchase intentions ( $\beta = -0.66$ ; 95% CI [-1.045, -0.319]). Consistent with Hypothesis 3b, this sequence favors accommodative recovery over affiliative humor. Overall, these two rival sequences nullify each other; that is why these two responses generate similar purchase intentions.

### Ruling Out Rival Mechanisms

We ran three additional models in which we added two mediators—stability and blame attributions—to the three models presented in Figure 2. The indirect paths going through these two attributions were never significant for any model. For all six possible paths, the confidence intervals always included

“0.” In addition, all the indirect effects described in the prior section retained similar significance and amplitude.

### Supplementary Study

To verify the robustness of our findings for our dependent variable (i.e., purchase intentions), we conducted a supplementary study (see Online Appendix 4 for details) with 177 U.S. participants (41.2% female,  $M = 38.56$  years,  $SD = 12.23$ ). Using the same design as in Study 2, we examined the mean differences across our three tactics: affiliative humor, aggressive humor, and accommodative recovery. Of note, this study did not measure our two mediators. The results of this study replicate Study 2’s conclusions. First, we find that aggressive humor elicits the lowest mean of purchase intentions, in comparison to affiliative humor and accommodative recovery. Second, we find that affiliative humor and accommodative recovery trigger a similar level of purchase intentions. Overall, our results are robust for our main dependent variable.

### Discussion of Study 2

Study 2’s objectives were two-fold. First, the study aimed to replicate Study 1 in a controlled setting by comparing the effects of humor type on observers’ purchase intentions. The results support the findings of Study 1. Overall, Study 2 confirms the general superiority of affiliative humor over aggressive humor in terms of observers’ reactions. Moreover, it compares the effectiveness of these two strategies with an accommodative recovery, which has been considered the most effective strategy to restore observers’ attitudes toward companies (Zhao, Jiang, and Su 2020). Interestingly, our results demonstrate that a tactic based on affiliative humor is as effective as an accommodative recovery to generate a reasonable level of purchase intentions.

Second, building on benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010), Study 2 investigates the mediation effects of both humor appreciation and inferred negative motives, and it confirms the key roles played by these two variables. Consistent with Hypotheses 2a and 3a, these two mediators help in understanding why affiliative humor generally outperforms aggressive humor at generating observers’ favorable reactions. Compared with aggressive humor, the affiliative type is perceived as more benign, and it generates more amusement (i.e., humor appreciation) from observers, which is consistent with Hypothesis 2a. Supporting Hypothesis 3a, affiliative humor is judged as a less severe norm violation, and observers infer fewer negative motives from its use, compared to aggressive humor. Related to Hypotheses 2b and 3b, the investigation of these two mediators also helps in understanding why affiliative humor and accommodative recovery do not differ in terms of observers’ favorable reactions. Even if observers infer higher negative motives to a company using affiliative humor, compared with an accommodative recovery (Hypothesis 2b), the former tactic compensates for its deficiency by creating more amusement and humor appreciation (Hypothesis 3b). Overall,

these two routes counterbalance each other to make affiliative humor and accommodative recovery equally effective in creating observers’ purchase intentions. Building on these mediation analyses, Study 3 now examines whether the evaluation of the two humor types depends on criteria related to the perpetrator and its brand personality.

## Study 3: The Moderating Role of Brand Personality

### Study Design and Sample

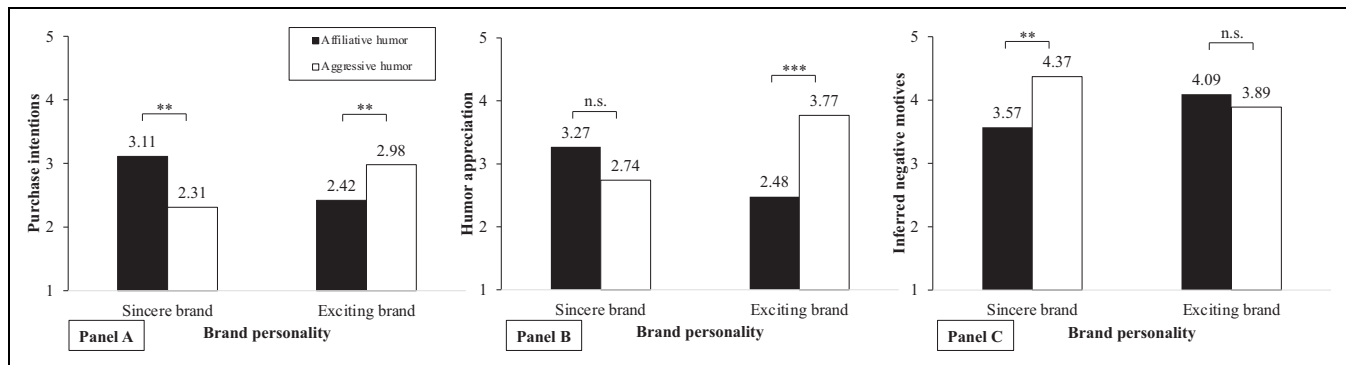
Study 3 is a 2 (humor: affiliative vs. aggressive)  $\times$  2 (brand personality: sincere vs. exciting) between-subjects experiment specifically designed to test Hypotheses 4 and 5. The context features the internet service provider sector. The two brand personalities were manipulated in three main ways (see Online Appendices 5–7) by following the procedure recommended by Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004). In this area, this seminal article represents the “blueprint” that hundreds of articles have followed to manipulate exciting and sincere brands.

First, brand personality was manipulated with overall tonality, as conveyed through vocabulary choice and phrasing (e.g., “Hello” for sincere brand vs. “Hey” for exciting brand). For instance, we carefully selected different hashtags to enhance the validity of each brand’s manipulation. Precisely, we used “#family” and “#wholesome” for sincere brands and “#unique” and “#young” for exciting brands because these terms are literally used in the two scales measuring brand personality (see Online Appendix 2).

Second, we manipulated the content, as contained in the brand logo and taglines. We changed the landscape image, as per Aaker and colleagues’ (2004) recommendations. In the sincere brand condition, the landscape represents a family, which aligns with the family-oriented aspect of sincere brands. For the exciting brand condition, the landscape represents jumping young people, which aligns with the excitement and youth of exciting brands (Sundar and Noseworthy 2016).

Third, we manipulated the website visuals, including colors and font (Comic Sans MS for sincere brand vs. Phosphate for exciting brand) in accordance with the recommendations of Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004). All other elements (e.g., location, contact information, number of posted tweets, likes, and retweets) remained the same. Overall, our stimuli strongly align with prior manipulations of brand personality (e.g., Sundar and Noseworthy 2016).

Then, we presented a public complaint to the participants and manipulated humor type in a way that is consistent with Study 2<sup>6</sup> (see Online Appendix 5 for details). We conducted two pretests (i.e., Pretest 1 with 42 U.S. respondents and Pretest 2 with 50 U.S. respondents) to check the validity of our manipulations. In both pretests, the manipulations were successful, in the same direction, and of similar amplitude. Importantly, we made sure that our brand manipulation was not confounded with closely related constructs. For instance, our brand



**Figure 3.** Visual representation of the interaction plot between humor type and brand personality on purchase intentions (Panel A), humor appreciation (Panel B), and inferred negative motives (Panel C). Note. n.s. = not significant. \* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

personality manipulation did not have any significant effect on brand attitude and service quality (all  $ps > .10$ ). For the main experiments, participants were recruited via Prolific using the usual selection criteria. We removed 18 participants because of failed attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 209 participants (43.5% women,  $M_{Age} = 39$  years,  $SD = 12.29$ ). The participants were randomly assigned to each condition.

### Manipulation Checks

We checked the manipulations by using established scales measuring sincere brand personality (four items,  $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004) and exciting brand personality (four items,  $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Otherwise, we used the same scales as in Study 2 (see Online Appendix 2). All square roots of the AVE are substantially greater than all other correlations, suggesting discriminant validity.

Participants reported the brand as being more sincere in the sincere brand condition than in the exciting brand condition,  $M_{Sincere} = 5.74 > M_{Exciting} = 4.23$ ,  $F(1, 207) = 104.60$ ,  $p < .01$ . Similarly, they reported the brand to be more exciting in the exciting brand condition than in the sincere brand condition,  $M_{Exciting} = 5.47 > M_{Sincere} = 4.19$ ,  $F(1, 207) = 55.28$ ,  $p < .01$ . We found no correlation between our sincere trait scale and our exciting trait scale ( $r = -.02$ ,  $p > .10$ ), suggesting that these two brand personalities are exclusive, discriminant, independent, and highly distinctive (e.g., Aaker 1997). The humor manipulation or the interaction between manipulations did not have a significant effect on the brand personality checks (all  $ps > .10$ ). As expected, participants reported that the firm uses affiliative humor to a greater extent in the affiliative condition than in the aggressive condition,  $M_{Affiliative} = 4.26 > M_{Aggressive} = 3.59$ ,  $F(1, 207) = 11.23$ ,  $p < .01$ . Similarly, they reported that the firm uses aggressive humor to a greater extent in the aggressive condition than in the affiliative condition,  $M_{Aggressive} = 4.56 > M_{Affiliative} = 3.61$ ,  $F(1, 207) = 16.72$ ,  $p < .01$ . The brand personality manipulation or the interaction between manipulations did not have a significant effect on the humor checks (all  $ps > .10$ ). The participants perceived the scenario as realistic ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD =$

1.45), and they understood that they were observers ( $M = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ). The manipulations and their interaction did not have any significant effects on the last two variables ( $ps > .10$ ). Overall, the manipulations were successful.

### Results for Study 3

#### Tests of Hypothesis 4

First, we conducted an ANCOVA with the manipulations and the control variables as independent variables and purchase intentions as the dependent variable.<sup>7</sup> The results indicate a nonsignificant effect of brand personality,  $F(1, 200) = .03$ ,  $p = .60$ , a nonsignificant effect of humor type,  $F(1, 200) = .01$ ,  $p = .99$ , and, importantly, a significant interaction effect of humor type and brand personality,  $F(1, 200) = 9.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .04$ . This interaction effect is displayed in Figure 3, Panel A. For control variables, we found only severity to have a significant effect,  $F(1, 200) = 37.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .16$ .

In the sincere brand condition, a simple analysis reveals that affiliative humor ( $M_{Affiliative} = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) elicits more purchase intentions than aggressive humor does ( $M_{Aggressive} = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This result is consistent with Hypothesis 4a. We find a reversal effect in the exciting brand condition, which is consistent with Hypothesis 4b. In this latter condition, aggressive humor ( $M_{Aggressive} = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) generates more purchase intentions than affiliative humor does ( $M_{Affiliative} = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Overall, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

#### Tests of Mediation and Hypothesis 5

For Hypothesis 5a, we replicated the same ANCOVA as in Hypothesis 4 by changing the dependent variable to humor appreciation. The results indicate a nonsignificant effect of brand personality,  $F(1, 200) = 1.24$ ,  $p > .10$ , a significant effect of humor type,  $F(1, 200) = 5.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .02$ , and a significant interaction effect of humor type and brand personality,  $F(1, 200) = 11.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .06$ . Sense of humor,  $F(1, 200) = 10.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .05$ , and failure severity,  $F(1, 200) = 24.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\omega_p^2 = .11$ , were the only significant

**Table 2.** Results for Study 3.

Variables	Humor Appreciation		Inferred Negative Motives		Purchase Intentions	
	Coefficient	t	Coefficient	t	Coefficient	t
X: Humor type (0 = affiliative; 1 = aggressive)	-1.821	-2.538**	1.355	2.223**	-0.560	-1.192 <sup>n.s.</sup>
W: Brand personality (0 = sincere; 1 = exciting)	-2.071	-2.879***	1.052	1.721*	-0.485	-1.029 <sup>n.s.</sup>
X × W	1.552	3.396***	-0.787	-2.025**	0.293	0.971 <sup>n.s.</sup>
Inferred negative motives					-0.416	-7.325***
Humor appreciation					0.384	7.948***
<i>Control variables</i>						
Gender	-0.101	-0.436 <sup>n.s.</sup>	-0.206	-1.044 <sup>n.s.</sup>	-0.032	-0.214 <sup>n.s.</sup>
Age	0.009	0.896 <sup>n.s.</sup>	-0.012	-1.498 <sup>n.s.</sup>	-0.006	-0.917 <sup>n.s.</sup>
Sense of humor	0.338	3.211**	-0.326	-3.644***	-0.140	-1.983**
Twitter intensity usage	0.009	0.151 <sup>n.s.</sup>	-0.045	-0.900 <sup>n.s.</sup>	0.026	0.686 <sup>n.s.</sup>
Failure severity	-0.373	-4.908***	0.332	5.140***	-0.126	-2.372**
R <sup>2</sup>	.219		.219		.585	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.045		.016		.002	
	ΔF(1, 200) = 11.532, p < .01		ΔF(1, 200) = 4.102, p < .05		ΔF(1, 198) = .797, p > .10	

Conditional effects of humor type at values of the moderator

Effect	95% Confidence interval	
	Lower Limit	Upper Limit
<i>Mediating variable: Humor appreciation</i>		
Sincere brand	-0.103	0.135
Exciting brand	0.492	0.814
Index of moderated mediation	0.595	1.066
<i>Mediating variable: Inferred negative motives</i>		
Sincere brand	-0.237	-0.016
Exciting brand	0.091	0.318
Index of moderated mediation	0.327	0.675

Note. n.s. = Not significant.  
\*p < .10. \*\*p < .05. \*\*\*p < .01.

control variables. The interaction is displayed in Figure 3, Panel B. In the sincere brand condition, the difference in terms of humor appreciation between the two types of humor was not significant ( $M_{Affiliative} = 3.27 \approx M_{Aggressive} = 2.74, p = .40$ ), although the means were in the expected direction. In the exciting brand condition, we found that aggressive humor generates more humor appreciation ( $M_{Aggressive} = 3.77, SD = 1.73$ ) than affiliative humor does ( $M_{Affiliative} = 2.48, SD = 1.36; p < .01$ ).

For Hypothesis 5b, we used the same ANCOVA with negative motives as the dependent variable. The results indicate nonsignificant effects of brand personality,  $F(1, 200) = .42, p = .74$ , and humor type,  $F(1, 200) = .83, p = .36$ , and a significant interaction effect of humor type and brand personality,  $F(1, 200) = 4.10, p < .05, \omega_p^2 = .02$ . This interaction effect is displayed in Figure 3, Panel C. The control variables “sense of humor,”  $F(1, 200) = 14.38, p < .01, \omega_p^2 = .07$ , and failure severity,  $F(1, 200) = 26.42, p < .10, \omega_p^2 = .12$ , are significant but the other control variables are not (all  $ps > .10$ ). In the sincere brand condition, affiliative humor ( $M_{Affiliative} = 3.57, SD = 1.56$ ) elicits fewer negative motives than aggressive humor does ( $M_{Aggressive} = 4.37, SD = 1.64, p < .05$ ). In the exciting brand condition, we did not find any significant

difference in terms of negative motives between the affiliative and aggressive conditions ( $M_{Affiliative} = 4.09 \approx M_{Aggressive} = 3.89, p = .43$ ), although the means were in the expected directions.

As a formal test of Hypothesis 5, we used PROCESS Model 8 (with 5,000 bootstraps) to test the significance of the moderated-mediation model involving humor type (dummy-coded) as the independent variable, humor appreciation, and negative motives as the mediators; purchase intentions as the dependent variable; and brand personality type (dummy-coded) as the moderator. The details of these mediation analyses are presented in Table 2.

For humor appreciation (Hypothesis 5a), the index of moderated mediation is significant ( $index = .595, 95\% CI [0.230, 1.066]$ ), which indicates that the indirect effect of “humor type—humor appreciation—purchase intentions” is different depending on the brand personality conditions (see Table 2). Specifically, this given sequence is significant for exciting brands ( $\beta = .492, 95\% CI [0.223, 0.814]$ ) but not significant for sincere brands ( $\beta = -.103, 95\% CI [-0.380, 0.135]$ ). Consistent with Hypothesis 5a, we find that humor appreciation plays a key mediation role for exciting brands.

For negative motives (Hypothesis 5b), the index of moderated mediation is also significant ( $index = .327, 95\% CI [0.017, 0.675]$ ). Consistent with Hypothesis 5b, the sequence “humor type—negative motives—purchase intentions” is significant for sincere brands ( $\beta = -.237, 95\% CI [-0.497, -0.016]$ ) but not for exciting brands ( $\beta = .091, 95\% CI [-0.131, 0.318]$ ). Consistent with Hypothesis 5b, we find that negative motives play a key mediation role for sincere brands.

## Discussion of Study 3

We find in Study 3 that affiliative or aggressive humor elicits different observers’ behavioral responses depending on whether it is used by a sincere brand or an exciting brand. Precisely, sincere brands should favor responses based on affiliative humor. For such brands, affiliative humor is consistent with their traits of agreeableness and intimacy, and as a result, this last type of humor generates more purchase intentions by observers than the aggressive type does (Hypothesis 4a). For exciting brands, we note a reversed effect when purchase intention is the dependent variable (Hypothesis 4b). The use of aggressive humor is especially appropriate for exciting brands, and it leads to more purchase intentions by observers than affiliative humor does. Overall, we find reversed effects for purchase intentions, depending on personality type.

As expected, we find that these reversed effects are explained by different processes, which are consistent with the personality of a brand. On the one hand, for sincere brands, the effects of humor type are mainly explained by the inferences that observers make about a brand’s intention (Hypothesis 5b is supported). Observers expect that sincere brands will act in good faith, and they have few expectations that these brands will be overly funny. This is why we believe that the perceived motives of sincere brands are especially diagnostic.

On the other hand, we find that humor appreciation is a significant mediator only for exciting brands, not for sincere brands (Hypothesis 5a). The attributes related to fun and edginess are highly valued for exciting brands, and this is why we believe that the mechanism going through humor appreciation is especially important for such brands.

## General Discussion

### Theoretical Implications

The investigation of online observers’ evaluation of companies’ responses to online negative reviews, electronic word of mouth, and online public complaints is still a recent topic of research (e.g., Hogueve, Bilstein, and Hoerner 2019; Ma, Sun, and Kekre 2015; Wang and Chaudhry 2018), and academic evidence suggests that firms should always favor an accommodative recovery (Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Zhao, Jiang, and Su 2020). However, some companies use humor as an alternative strategy, and we still have limited knowledge about observers’ perception of this tactic, especially in an online environment, uncovering which is the core purpose of this

research. Specifically, the current research makes three contributions to the literature.

First, we demonstrate that humor does not provide the same results, depending on its affiliative or aggressive nature. In the situation of online public complaints, we find that observers react better to companies’ responses that are based on affiliative humor than aggressive humor. Using benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010), we demonstrate that, in comparison to aggressive humor, observers infer fewer negative motives with the use of affiliative humor. Similarly, observers tend to be more amused by this type of humor because of its benign aspect (Martin et al. 2003).

As a second contribution, we find that affiliative humor provides similar effectiveness as an accommodative recovery does in terms of observers’ favorable responses. Even if an accommodative recovery outperforms affiliative humor as regard reducing inferred negative motives, this disadvantage is offset by the ability of affiliative humor to elicit observers’ laughter and amusement. The similar ability of affiliative humor and accommodative recovery to generate favorable intentions is particularly encouraging because accommodative recovery has been identified as the gold standard in the online service recovery literature (Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Lee and Song 2010; Zhao, Jiang, and Su 2020).

As a third contribution, we find a reversal effect of humor type on observers’ purchase intentions depending on brand personality. Prior research typically shows that consumers judge brands’ actions differently whether brands’ personality is perceived as sincere or exciting (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Sundar and Noseworthy 2016; Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia 2009). Our findings suggest that affiliative humor keeps its advantages over aggressive humor when brands are sincere. Conversely, exciting brands can expect better results in terms of purchase intentions if they favor aggressive humor. This last conclusion has strong implications, as prior research in psychology and management uniformly acknowledges that people react more favorably to affiliative humor compared to aggressive humor. In that regard, Studies 1 and 2 confirm such a prediction. Adding to this, we demonstrate that aggressive humor can elicit better responses, depending on the personality of the perpetrator.

Building on this reversal effect, we find that these differences are explained through different processes. For sincere brands, the supremacy of affiliative humor is explained by observers’ inferences about a brand’s intentions. Observers expect that sincere brands will act in good faith, and accordingly, they expect that such brands will cause only a small norm violation through the use of humor. On the contrary, observers evaluate exciting brands on the basis of their ability to be funny, edgy, and entertaining. It seems that exciting brands are somewhat protected from the norm transgression associated with aggressive humor (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Observers appreciate exciting brands’ use of aggressive humor because it is somewhat aligned with the youthfulness and boldness of exciting brands.

### Managerial Implications

Some companies (e.g., Wendy's, Tesco Mobile) have become particularly popular on social media for their use of humor to answer online public complaints. However, no research-based insights have been produced to guide managers about how they should use humor to address such complaints. This issue is important, as an inappropriate use of humor can backfire (Meyer 2000). This research provides two strategic insights to help managers.

*Which type of humor elicits the best reactions from online observers?* Observers react differently to humorous responses depending on whether the firm is using an affiliative (laughing with the customer) or an aggressive (laughing at the customer) type of humor. Our results conclude that in comparison to aggressive humor, affiliative humor generates more likes, more retweets, and higher purchase intentions from online observers. Firms should be aware that, all things being equal, observers judge aggressive humor as a stronger norm violation and infer more negative motives from this type of humor. Similarly, consistent with prior suggestions in psychology (Martin et al. 2003), we find that observers have a stronger appreciation of affiliative humor because of its benign dimension, which makes observers more appreciative of this type of humor. Interestingly, our findings demonstrate that affiliative humor performs just as well as an accommodative recovery.

*Should firms adapt their humor depending on their brand personality?* Managers should use a type of humor that fits well with the personality of their brand. On the one hand, sincere brands share traits associated with warmth, down-to-earthness, and boldness, which are related to the essence of affiliative humor. For such brands, we recommend that managers use affiliative humor. On the other hand, aggressive humor seems a better response strategy for exciting brands, which are associated with fun, edginess, and pushing the boundaries. For such brands, aggressive humor is perceived as more amusing than affiliative humor; the latter would be considered "boring" for exciting brands. In regard to the examples at the beginning of the introduction, we argue that Wendy's recourse to aggressive humor was appropriate (in terms of generating retweets and likes) because of the exciting personality of that brand.

### Limitations and Further Research

Some limitations of our research provide directions for future research. First, we focus solely on situations in which firms use humor to answer online public complaints. We focus on the effects of humor in online service recoveries because the benefits of humor in advertising (Eisend 2009) and positive interactions (Lussier, Grégoire, and Vachon 2017; Mathies, Chiew, and Kleinaltenkamp 2016) are well-documented. However, although complaint management is a mature service field (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020), we are not aware of any research that examines the role of humor in such situations.

Future research could replicate (and expand) our logic in other contexts, such as those in which firms use humor on social media to respond to other companies' failures. For instance, the fast-food chain Popeyes recently mocked its competitor Chick-fil-A when the latter apologized on social media to promote National Sandwich Day. Chick-fil-A did not realize this day fell on a Sunday, when the chain is closed. Popeyes capitalized on this mistake by quote-tweeting the post and added: "seriously . . . y'all good? @ChickfilA."

Second, the results from Study 2 demonstrate that affiliative humor and accommodative recoveries do not significantly differ in terms of purchase intentions. However, we compare the two strategies after an isolated and one-time complaint resolution episode. A repetitive use of humor could potentially backfire (Romero and Arendt 2011), and it could have a negative effect on observers' intentions. Subsequent research could study when observers judge that the company is abusing of its sense of humor. In the absence of such research, our findings indicate only that humor provides equal results with accommodative recoveries when it is used with parsimony. Many questions remain about the observers' perceptions of firms alternating between accommodative recoveries and humor. In other words, in a sequence of tweets, how do online observers react when the brand is sometimes funny and sometimes serious? Does a serious tweet make the brand seem like it has a dual personality? We believe that such questions could make for an interesting research project.

Third, we compare two forms of humor: affiliative humor and aggressive humor. We focus on these two types because both of them naturally arise when a conversation takes place, as is the case with an online complaint resolution. However, Martin et al. (2003) consider two other forms of humor that are more self-oriented: self-defeating and self-enhancing. Further research could study how observers react to these two other types of humor.

Fourth, for Study 1, we collected data from a blog that benefits from a relatively large audience (around 68,000 persons follow the website and its associated Facebook and Twitter). Hence, the number of likes and retweets received by the tweets in our database could be biased by the exposure of this particular blog. This is probably why the number of followers of a given brand does not exert a significant effect on the number of likes and retweets in this context. When the blog posts a new funny tweet, the blog's aficionados probably inflate the number of likes and retweets of the humorous tweets. It would be important for future researchers to replicate our study by directly collecting humorous tweets on Twitter rather than taking them from a specialized blog.

Finally, we consider solely purchase intentions as dependent variables. Subsequent research could question the effect of humor on other behavioral intentions. For instance, intention to complain could be another interesting response. In principle, companies should wish that most of their dissatisfied customers would complain rather than staying silent or defecting (Voorhees, Brady, and Horowitz 2006). However, a firm's use of humor could discourage customers from engaging in further

complaining if they feel that the firm is making fun of them rather than providing a solution to their problems.


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### ORCID iD

Mathieu Béal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4892-1063>

Yany Grégoire  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6939-4798>

### Notes

- To satisfy the request of a reviewer, we conducted a posttest by deleting the hashtags associated with the manipulations of humor. The rest of the manipulations remained unchanged. The results from the posttest ( $N = 100$  U.S. participants) show that the manipulations were successful, in the same direction, and of same amplitude as the original manipulations incorporating the hashtags.
- Monocultural is a filter proposed by Prolific. The study was administered only to participants who were monocultural, that is, who identified with only one national culture.
- As requested by a reviewer, in both Studies 2 and 3, we replicated all our analyses without the integration of sense of humor as a covariate. The results remained virtually the same with or without the incorporation of sense of humor. We elected to keep “sense of humor” as a control variable as it is a common practice in this area (see Cann and Matson 2014; Martin et al. 2003).
- It should be noted that relatively low means are regularly obtained in contexts in which observers are asked to form their purchase intentions on the basis of limited information (Lee and Song 2010; Schaefer and Schamari 2016; see Hogueve, Bilstein, and Hoerner 2019). Indeed, they only have access to a complaint and a basic firm response to form their intentions. However, although the mean for purchase intentions is below the midpoint ( $M = 3.24$ ), we still find an appropriate level of variance ( $SD = 1.72$ ) and a large distribution that includes a nonnegligible proportion of favorable responses (i.e., 28.2% of responses equal to or higher than 4). Importantly, when firms use the most effective tactics, the means and proportions of favorable responses are significantly higher (i.e., affiliative humor:  $M = 3.62$  and 46.3% of 4+; accommodative recovery:  $M = 3.94$  and 58% of 4+) compared to the use of aggressive humor ( $M = 2.16$  and 9.5% of 4+).
- Inferred negative motives are coded negatively, in a way that the higher (vs. lower) the score on motives, the more (vs. less) negative are the motives. In the mediation models involving inferred negative motives, the effect of a company’s response on negative motives is negative (IV  $\rightarrow$  mediator; Path A), as is the effect of negative motives on purchase intentions (mediator  $\rightarrow$  DV; Path B). Therefore, after multiplying these two negative effects, the indirect effect of a company’s responses on purchase intentions (IV  $\rightarrow$  DV;  $A \times B$ ) becomes positive.
- As requested by a reviewer, we conducted a posttest ( $N = 80$  U.S. participants) to assess the validity of our humor manipulations without including the hashtags. The results reveal that the manipulations of humor were of the same amplitude, direction, and significance with or without the hashtags.
- Similar results were found when including positive word of mouth as the dependent variable. For the sake of consistency, we report only the results for purchase intentions.

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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### Author Biographies

**Mathieu Béal** is an assistant professor in the Department of Marketing, Grenoble Ecole de Management (France). His research mainly focuses on services management, service recovery, and online public complaining. He published in *Journal of Business Research* and *Marketing Letters*.

**Yany Grégoire** is a full professor at HEC Montréal, and the Chairholder of the Omer DeSerres Chair of Retailing at the same institution. He has published extensively on the issues of customer revenge, online public complaining, and service failure in major journals including *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, and *Journal of Service Research*, among others. He is also interested in other managerial issues such as customer experience, B2B marketing, and sales. He sits on the editorial boards of several journals, including *Journal of Service Research* and *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*.