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Let's Laugh About It! Using Humor to Address Complainers' Online Incivility

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Abstract

This research investigates whether companies' use of humor is an effective strategy to address complainers' incivility on social media. Using three main experiments, the authors examine observers' evaluation of companies' humorous responses on social media in relation to the degree of incivility of the complaints. The authors find, first, that observers develop greater purchase intentions toward companies that use humor to respond to uncivil complaints. Drawing on benign violation theory, they explain that observers are less committed to uncivil complainers, which makes the use of humor more benign and thus more amusing. Second, they compare the effectiveness of humor with an accommodative recovery (e.g., apologies). When the complaint is civil, an accommodative recovery is a more effective strategy than affiliative humor. However, when the complaint is uncivil, affiliative humor is more interesting than an accommodative recovery because of greater engagement with the post (i.e., likes and shares) and similar purchase intentions. Theoretical and managerial implications of these results are then discussed.

Keywords

humor, service recovery, observers, customer incivility, social media

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Example A:
Twitter user: "Always f***ing up, f**k you and your stupid trains."
@Virgin_TrainsEC: "Oh I'm soooo sorry, no reaaaaallly I am – I forgot that we poured gallons and gallons of rain onto the tracks!"

Example B:
Twitter user: "When Virgin trains mess up and the older male train manager in the resulting conversation dismisses you with that hideously patronising word women shudder at in contexts such as these: 'honey'. @virgin TrainsEC."
@Virgin_TrainsEC: "Sorry for the mess up …, would you prefer 'pet' or 'love' next time?"

These two examples are responses from Virgin Trains to customers' complaints posted on social media. Although both responses adopted a humorous tone in an attempt to amuse people, observers' reactions to these replies were diametrically opposed. For Example A, Virgin Trains received large approval from observers, with thousands of likes and retweets. For Example B, the company was accused of being misogynistic, generating a "bad buzz" that ultimately led the company to delete the tweet and make public apologies. In the latter example, Virgin Trains' managers would probably have gained more observers' approval by responding in a more accommodative manner (e.g., apologizing, providing explanations) rather than trying to be funny. As illustrated by these two examples, the use of humor on social media can represent a real opportunity; its misuse, however, can turn into a costly public crisis. In this context, managers need to know when humor is appropriate as opposed to when an accommodative recovery represents a safer strategy.

Unfortunately, academic research does not provide many insights into knowing when humor is a beneficial tactic for observers (e.g., Béal and Grégoire 2022) or when humor should be rejected in favor of an accommodative recovery (e.g., Shin and Larson 2020). In this research, we argue that Example A is amusing because it uses humor to respond to an uncivil complaint. Complaint incivility refers to all forms of rude, disrespectful, condescending, or degrading complaints made by customers about a firm or an employee (Bacile et al. 2018; Henkel et al. 2017). The phenomenon of customer incivility is on the rise on social media because of the anonymity associated with such online environments (Fombelle et al. 2020). In a recent survey, 73% of observers reported having witnessed incivility on social media, and these individuals admitted to

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being affected by such actions (Duggan 2014). This phenomenon raises the critical question of how companies should manage incivility on social media, an issue that has been identified as an important research avenue in recent calls (Bacile 2020; Bacile et al. 2018; Fombelle et al. 2020). We address such calls and posit that humor is an appropriate and effective tactic to address complainers' incivility on social media.

A recent body of literature examines the effectiveness of humor on social media (Béal and Grégoire 2022; Liao, Li, and Filieri 2022; Shin and Larson 2020); however, we are not aware of any prior humor research incorporating the notion of complainers' incivility. To examine the effect of humor in the context of online incivility, we rely on benign violation theory, which constitutes an established framework to distinguish successful and failed attempts at humor (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018, 2020). Using humor to address online complaints represents a norm violation because the company "makes jokes" rather than resolving the problem (Béal and Grégoire 2022). However, if this intervention is perceived as benign, observers may be amused by this norm violation. Benign violation theory identifies some conditions that make a norm violation benign, including the level of commitment toward the target of the humor. On the one hand, observers tend to have a bad opinion of uncivil complainers and, as a result, feel less committed toward them (Henkel et al. 2017; Wolter, Bacile, and Xu 2022). Accordingly, for uncivil complaints, observers judge the company's humorous response as benign and amusing (e.g., Example A). Observers believe that these complainers "got what they deserved" given their prior incivility. On the other hand, in the case of civil complaints, observers would feel more committed to the complainers, and humor will be perceived as a malign violation, translating into little amusement and reduced purchase intentions or engagement (e.g., Example B). Building on this logic, the current research makes two core contributions by adopting an experimental approach based on four studies (three reported in this article and one reported in the Web Appendices), conducted in different service contexts (i.e., internet service provider, restaurant, and theme park).

First, the research contributes to the recent literature on customers' incivility (Fombelle et al. 2020; Henkel et al. 2017) in the social media context (Bacile et al. 2018; Batista et al. 2022; Wolter, Bacile, and Xu 2022). Specifically, our research identifies humor as a relevant strategy to address uncivil comments posted on social media. All three studies show that observers report greater purchase intentions when the companies use humor to address uncivil complaints rather than civil complaints. More precisely, both Study 1a and Study 2 compare the effectiveness of a humorous response with the effectiveness of an absence of response (considered a control condition here). When customers complain in a civil manner, a response based on humor does not provide any additional value in terms of observers' purchase intentions, compared with a situation in which the company remains silent. However, as complainers become uncivil, humor appears to be a more effective strategy for firms than not responding at all, in terms of purchase intentions. This increase in purchase intentions is explained by the larger gap of amusement generated by the humorous response in an uncivil context. In this situation, observers judge a humorous attempt funnier than they do in the civil complaint condition.

Second, Studies 1b and 2 compare the effectiveness of a humorous response with the effectiveness of an accommodative response. The online service recovery literature states that an accommodative response usually results in the highest positive attitudes and intentions of observers (e.g., Javornik, Filieri, and Gumann 2020; Schaefers and Schamari 2016). Recent research finds that a humorous response could be as effective as an accommodative response (Béal and Grégoire 2022), whereas others reconfirm the superiority of accommodative recovery over any humorous attempts (Shin and Larson 2020). Our research reconciles such discrepancies by referring to the incivility of the complaint. We argue that, when complainers are civil, observers should respond more favorably—in terms of engagement with the posts (i.e., likes and shares) and purchase intentions—to an accommodative recovery than to humor. In turn, when complainers are uncivil, humor is preferable to an accommodative recovery for at least two reasons. First, in a context of incivility, observers should engage more intensively with a humorous post, compared with a post presenting an accommodative recovery, by liking and sharing it to a greater extent. Second, in this context, humor is an inexpensive tactic that should generate similar purchase intentions to an accommodative recovery, which could involve a costly compensation.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Complainers' Incivility as a Context for the Use of Humor on Social Media

Figure 1 displays the conceptual model of this research. We follow the logic depicted in this figure to define our core concepts and to develop our hypotheses.

Customers increasingly turn to social media to directly express their dissatisfaction with companies (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), which, in turn, are expected to provide a public recovery (Hogreve, Bilstein, and Hoerner 2019). The service recovery literature often considers the complainers' reactions to service recovery, but recent research focuses on the reactions of other customers, known as observers (e.g., Javornik, Filieri, and Gumann 2020; Johnen and Schnittka 2019; López-López, Palazón, and Sánchez-Martínez 2021; Zhao, Jiang, and Su 2020). These observers consider companies' responses to form their attitudes and behaviors about the brand (e.g., Armstrong, Kulczynski, and Brennan 2021; Jeesha and Purani 2021; Proserpio and Zervas 2017; Weitzl and Hutzinger 2017).

Most research focuses on the benefits of adopting an accommodative recovery to restore observers' attitudes (see Table 1). Interestingly, a recent body of research considers humor as a possible alternative response to address online complaints (Béal and Grégoire 2022; Shin and Larson 2020). However,

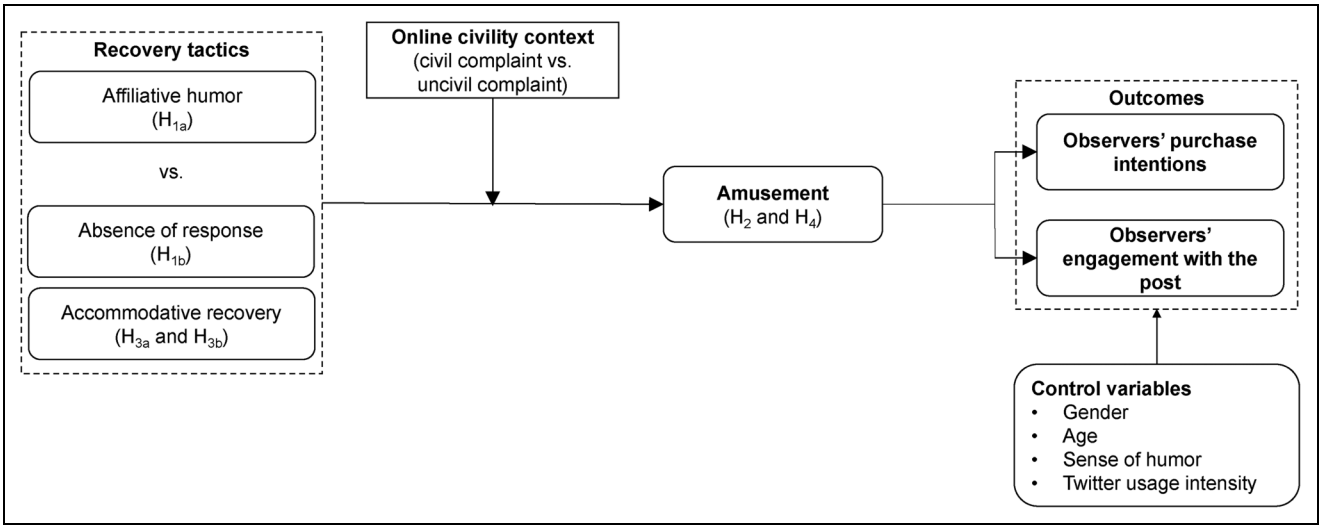

Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

the effectiveness of humor in this type of situation is still unclear. There is a need for more research to understand when humor is appropriate (i.e., generating amusement) and when it is not (i.e., failed humor turning into low amusement).

The marketing literature on humor (e.g., Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018), particularly in a social media context (e.g., Shin and Larson 2020), tends to differentiate between affiliative and aggressive humor. Briefly stated, affiliative humor represents a nonhostile form of humor in which the company laughs *with* the complainer, whereas aggressive humor represents a malign form of humor in which the company laughs *at* the complainer (Martin et al. 2003). In this research, we elected to focus on affiliative humor for three key reasons. First, abundant research in marketing (e.g., Bompar, Lunardo, and Saintives 2018; Lussier, Grégoire, and Vachon 2017) and meta-analyses in psychology (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, and Viswesvaran 2012; Plessen et al. 2020; Schneider, Voracek, and Tran 2018) find that affiliative humor is associated with more favorable outcomes (e.g., amusement, well-being, life satisfaction) than other forms of humor. Second, in a social media context, research shows that observers' responses are especially positive when companies use affiliative humor (Béal and Grégoire 2022; Shin and Larson 2020). Third, we conducted an experiment (Web Appendix A) and a short meta-analysis[1] (Web Appendix B) that both tend to support the superiority of affiliative humor over aggressive humor.

Here, we argue that complainers' incivility offers an appropriate context for the use of affiliative humor on social media. Incivility is a broad construct that embraces a large range of behaviors, including behaving rudely, being discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others, adopting a condescending tone, insulting others, and making verbal attacks (Cortina and Magley 2009; Skarlicki, Van Jaarsveld, and Walker 2008; Sliter, Sliter, and Jex 2012). On social media, uncivil posts are often characterized by aspersion, vulgarity, pejorative speech, and the use of capital letters (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014). In this research, we hypothesize that observers' perceptions of companies' use of humor on social media will depend on their judgment of whether complainers "deserve" such a response (Skarlicki and Kulik 2004).

Observers tend to disapprove of incivility, and they often become angry and develop a desire to retaliate against uncivil complainers (Henkel et al. 2017; Hershcovis and Bhatnagar 2017; Hershcovis et al. 2017; Wolter, Bacile, and Xu 2022). As a result, when customers' complaints are uncivil, observers consider that these complainers choose to disregard an established norm. Such complainers are deemed responsible for eliciting a norm-violating response from the other party (Skarlicki and Kulik 2004; Walker, Van Jaarsveld, and Skarlicki 2014), which means, in our context, a company using humor. In contrast, for civil complaints, observers should infer that a humorous response is inappropriate considering that complainers did not break any social rules. Accordingly, we expect observers to display greater purchase intentions when a company uses humor in response to uncivil rather than civil complaints:

> **H_{1a}:** A firm's use of affiliative humor leads to observers' greater purchase intentions when the online complaint is uncivil rather than civil.

To distinguish the effects of humor from those of incivility, we consider an "absence of response" condition as a control group. In the context of online incivility, we posit that responding with humor generates more positive observer reactions than an absence of response from the firm would generate. The use of incivility is so norm violating that observers expect firms to respond in some way to rebuke the complainers at fault (Wolter, Bacile, and Xu 2022). A firm's absence of response

[1] An additional objective of the meta-analysis is to show that affiliative humor generally provides favorable outcomes for firms and individuals regardless of the nature of the service failure (being defensible or indefensible).

Table 1. Previous Literature on Observers' Reactions to Online Service Recovery.

Source	Recovery Tactics		The Role of Complainers' Incivility	Method	Key Findings
	Humorous Recovery	Accommodative Recovery			
Lee and Song (2010)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	Accommodative recovery elicits higher levels of observers' intentions, compared with a defensive response.
Schaefers and Schamari (2016)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	The presence of observers affects complainers' reactions to successful and unsuccessful service recovery.
Proserpio and Zervas (2017)	No	No	No	Field data	Answering complaints influences observers' future complaints, with fewer but longer negative reviews.
Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	Brand advocates can help companies improve observers' responses to an accommodative recovery.
Bacile et al. (2018)	No	Yes	Yes	Netnography and scenario-based experiments	Online incivility negatively affects service recovery outcomes when a firm chooses to respond to it.
Hogreve, Bilstein, and Hoerner (2019)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	Companies must be transparent by resolving the problem publicly, regardless of their brand equity.
Johnen and Schnittka (2019)	No	Yes	No	Field data and scenario-based experiments	Observers prefer accommodative recoveries, although defensive responses are superior in the case of unreasonable complaints in hedonic contexts.
Javornik, Filieri, and Gumann (2020)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	Observers prefer firms using a response style that relies on a conversational human voice rather than a corporate style.
Shin and Larson (2020)	Yes	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	Humor is positively associated with trustworthiness and negatively associated with excitement. In contrast to affiliative humor, aggressive humor increases the negative impacts of humor. Finally, humor is less effective than an accommodative recovery to produce positive outcomes.
Zhao, Jiang, and Su (2020)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	Apology-based recovery works better when the service failure is unstable and when the service provider has a strong ability to change.
Armstrong, Kulczynski, and Brennan (2021)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	Observers' comments influence participants' likelihood to complain publicly rather than privately. This effect is increased by employees' intervention.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Source	Recovery Tactics		The Role of Complainers' Incivility	Method	Key Findings
	Humorous Recovery	Accommodative Recovery			
Jeesha and Purani (2021)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiments	Selective negative tactics are as effective as exhaustive webcare tactics (managerial responses to online reviews). Webcare tactics have limited effects when subsequent consumer reviews are positive.
López-López, Palazón, and Sánchez-Martínez (2021)	No	Yes	No	Scenario-based experiment	A personalized (vs. automatic) response is better perceived by observers when the complainer is a regular Twitter user versus an influencer.
Béal and Grégoire (2022)	Yes	Yes	No	Field data and scenario-based experiment	Affiliative humor elicits levels of observers' purchase intentions similar to those elicited by an accommodative recovery. Although affiliative humor is generally viewed as more appropriate than aggressive humor, aggressive humor is a better tactic for exciting brands.
Current research	Yes	Yes	Yes	Scenario-based experiment	Humor is more effective at generating favorable responses from observers when the complaint is uncivil rather than civil. When a complaint is uncivil, affiliative humor is more advantageous than an accommodative recovery; the former tactic generates higher levels of observers' engagement with the post for similar patronage intentions.

could be viewed by observers as being too passive and unassertive. Observers could perceive that the firm missed an opportunity to teach the uncivil complainer a lesson in decency. In turn, in the context of online civility, we expect that humor will generate an effect similar to that of an absence of response. Humor is poorly adapted to a civil context, and it has little advantage over an absence of response.

H_{1b}: When the online complaint is uncivil (vs. civil), affiliative humor elicits greater (vs. similar) purchase intentions compared with the absence of a firm's response.

Benign Violation Theory and the Mediating Role of Amusement

We consider that the ability of humor to increase observers' purchase intentions is mediated by the notion of amusement, which is defined as an emotional response to humorous stimuli that is characterized by positive valence and high arousal (Moran et al. 2014; Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2020). Humorous attempts do not always generate amusement (e.g., failed jokes), so we rely on benign violation theory to distinguish failed (i.e., not amusing) from successful (i.e., amusing) attempts at humor (McGraw and Warren 2010). Benign violation theory highlights three related appraisals to explain what makes things funny and amusing. First, something must be appraised as a norm violation. Generally, using humor to address an online complaint is a norm-violating situation because the company "makes jokes" rather than resolving the problem (Béal and Grégoire 2022). Second, something must be appraised as benign, meaning harmless. Third, the first two appraisals must be simultaneously juxtaposed (Warren and McGraw 2016).

We argue that one context in which humor is perceived as benign—and amusing as a result—is online incivility. According to benign violation theory, laughing at a customer's complaint could be perceived as benign if observers are not committed to the target of the joke (McGraw and Warren 2010). Since observers condemn the incivility of complainers

(Bacile 2020; Bacile et al. 2018; Wolter, Bacile, and Xu 2022), they should be less concerned about the treatment received by these individuals. Thus, in the context of incivility, observers tend to appraise the humorous response as benign because they connect poorly with complainers (McGraw and Warren 2010). In contrast, in the context of civility, observers feel more committed to the complainers. As a result, they have greater expectations about the responsiveness of a firm (Johnen and Schnittka 2019). In the context of civility, observers' commitment to the complainer makes them see a firm's humorous response as less benign and appropriate, generating less amusement. Thus, we hypothesize:

H_2: The positive indirect effect of affiliative humor (vs. absence of response) through amusement on observers' purchase intentions is larger in the online incivility condition than in the online civility condition.

The Comparison Between Affiliative Humor and Accommodative Recovery

Accommodative recovery is considered the most effective tactic to restore firms' reputation for observers (e.g., Hogreve, Bilstein, and Hoerner 2019; Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Lee and Song 2010; Weitzl and Hutzinger 2017). Relatedly, recent humor-based research compares the performance of accommodative recovery and humorous responses in the context of online public complaints (Béal and Grégoire 2022; Shin and Larson 2020), but these two studies differ in their main conclusions. One shows that humor is as effective as an accommodative recovery to generate purchase intentions (Béal and Grégoire 2022), whereas the other concludes that humor is less effective in generating the same outcome (Shin and Larson 2020). The current research reconciles these divergent views by examining the role of the incivility context. In this effort of reconciliation, we account for two outcomes: observers' purchase intentions and observers' engagement with the post (reflected in likes and shares). It is important to introduce this second outcome given its managerial value and association with profitability (Brettel et al. 2015).

In line with benign violation theory, when complainers are civil, observers are committed to them and the resolution of their problems (Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2020). In this context, observers value firms that are accommodative and provide proper solutions to complainers (Johnen and Schnittka 2019; Zhao, Jiang, and Su 2020). In the context of civil complaints, managers should gain more approval from observers if they adopt an accommodative recovery, whereas humor would be perceived as a malign violation, resulting in lower purchase intentions and engagement with the post. However, when complainers are uncivil, we assume that a humorous response represents a superior and more promising tactic than an accommodative recovery for two reasons. First, we expect a humorous response to generate a similar level of purchase intentions in comparison to an accommodative recovery. Building on the process suggested in H_2, we argue that a well-conceived humorous response creates a large differential of amusement compared with an accommodative recovery. Indeed, a humorous response is by nature funnier when it is used to answer an uncivil complaint, whereas an accommodative recovery does not represent a source of amusement for observers, no matter the tone of the complaint. Second, the high degree of amusement should drive observers' engagement with the post (e.g., Barry and Graça 2018). Formally:

H_{3a}: A company's recovery tactics interact with online civility contexts to predict observers' purchase intentions, such that in the civility (vs. incivility) condition, an accommodative recovery leads to observers' greater (vs. similar) purchase intentions, compared with affiliative humor.

H_{3b}: A company's recovery tactics interact with online civility contexts to predict observers' engagement with the post, such that in the civility (vs. incivility) condition, an accommodative recovery leads to observers' higher (vs. lower) levels of engagement with the post, compared with affiliative humor.

H_4: The indirect effects of recovery tactics on (a) observers' purchase intentions and (b) observers' engagement with the post are mediated by amusement.

Overview of the Empirical Studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted four scenario-based experiments (three main studies and one reported in the Web Appendices) in different service sectors (i.e., internet service provider, restaurant, and theme park). Study 1a is designed to test observers' responses—in terms of purchase intentions (H_{1a}, H_{1b}) and amusement (H_2)—to humorous responses, depending on the online civility context. It also integrates a control condition in which the company does not provide any response. In Study 1b, we compare the effectiveness of affiliative humor with an accommodative recovery to test H_3 and H_4. Finally, Study 2 considers the three recovery tactics (affiliative humor, accommodative recovery, and an absence of response) to test all the hypotheses. We also report a replication of Study 2 in the Web Appendices with the same experimental design but in a different service sector with different material and stimuli to alleviate concerns related to stimulus sampling (Wells and Windschitl 1999).

Study 1a

Study Design and Sample

Study 1a is a 2 (online civility context: civil complaint vs. uncivil complaint) × 2 (recovery tactics: affiliative humor vs. absence of response) study conducted in the setting of internet service. Participants were asked to imagine that they had just moved to another city, thus requiring them to cancel their contract with their current internet service provider and find a new

one. They start looking on the internet and become interested in a fictitious company called Access. As they look at the company's Twitter page, they find a complaint posted by a dissatisfied customer. We manipulate the degree of incivility by including insults and exclamation marks; in addition, the less civil tweet is written in capital letters. In the civil complaint condition, the customer stated, "Hello, could you please hurry up and fix my Internet network. It does not work anymore"; in the uncivil complaint condition, the complaint was "YOU SONS OF BITCHES!!! MOVE YOUR ASS AND FIX MY INTERNET NETWORK RIGHT NOW!!!! IT CRASHED OUT!!!" Then, we manipulate the company's recovery tactics. In the "affiliative humor" condition, the company replied: "Our technicians will work on it. We are moving our asses so much, it's almost twerk." In the "absence of response" condition, we simply notified participants that the company did not answer the customer's Twitter post. Web Appendix C provides the visuals for the used material.

All participants were recruited through the crowdsourcing platform Prolific (Peer et al. 2017). We applied several inclusion criteria for selecting participants to control for the role of culture in their perception of humor, an approach that aligns with previous research on humor (Béal and Grégoire 2022). Participants had to be born in the United States, be U.S. citizens, declare English as their first language, and consider themselves monocultural.[2] We included two attention checks in the questionnaire, asking participants to select "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree." Participants who did not answer correctly one or the other of these questions were automatically eliminated from the final sample, resulting in the exclusion of 43 participants. Thus, the final sample consisted of 241 U.S. respondents (49% female; $M_{age} = 32.67$ years, $SD = 11.04$). The participants were randomly assigned to the four conditions.

Manipulation Checks and Control Variables

After reading the scenario, the participants responded to the questions about the dependent variables, control variables, and manipulation checks. The manipulation checks were presented after the dependent variables to avoid any priming bias. All variables were measured using seven-point Likert scales (1 = "Strongly disagree," and 7 = "Strongly agree"). Web Appendix D provides details about the measures and their psychometric properties. We checked for blame attribution, failure stability, and failure severity (one item each) because of the influence of these variables in prior research (Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2014) and confirmed that they did not differ between conditions ($F_{blame}(1, 237) = .08$, $p > .10$; $F_{stability}(1, 237) = 2.08$, $p > .10$; $F_{severity}(1, 237) = .23$, $p > .10$). We checked our manipulation by measuring the complaint's degree of incivility (five items, $M = 4.36$, $SD = 2.05$, $\alpha = .96$; Sliter, Sliter, and Jex 2012) and affiliative humor (four items, $M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.86$, $\alpha = .93$; Béal and Grégoire 2022). Participants reported the complainer to be more uncivil in the uncivil condition than in the civil condition ($M_{uncivil} = 6.08$ vs. $M_{civil} = 2.65$; $F(1, 239) = 562.55$, $p < .01$). Then, participants reported that the firm used more affiliative humor in the affiliative humor condition than in the "absence of response" condition ($M_{affiliative} = 4.71$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 2.16$; $F(1, 239) = 213.86$, $p < .01$). We did not find any significant effect of the firm's response manipulation ($p > .10$) or the interaction between manipulations ($p > .05$) on the incivility check. Overall, our manipulations were successful.

Our key dependent variable was purchase intentions (three items, $M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.62$, $\alpha = .96$; Grewal et al. 1998), and our mediator was amusement (three items, $M = 3.27$, $SD = 2.03$, $\alpha = .98$; McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015). We also controlled for a variety of variables, such as sense of humor (three items, $M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.10$, $\alpha = .77$; Svebak 1996), Twitter usage intensity (three items, $M = 3.30$, $SD = 2.08$, $\alpha = .95$; Hübner Barcelos, Dantas, and Sénécal 2018), age, and gender. We measured sympathy toward the company as an alternative mediation (three items, $M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.59$, $\alpha = .96$; Allard, Dunn, and White 2020). The measurement model including seven factors (i.e., purchase intentions, amusement, complaint incivility, affiliative humor, sense of humor, Twitter usage intensity, and sympathy toward the company) with 28 items yielded a satisfactory fit (comparative fit index [CFI] = .97; Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = .96; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .07; standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = .06; $\chi^2 = 465.94$, d.f. = 228, $p < .01$). First, the loadings of the items on their corresponding constructs all exceeded .50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Second, the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct exceeded .50, suggesting adequate convergent validity. Third, discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the AVE from each construct with its correlations with the other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). All square roots of the AVE were substantially greater than all other correlations, suggesting discriminant validity. Finally, the participants perceived the scenario as realistic ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.35$), and they understood that they were observers of the situation ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 1.63$).

Results for Study 1a

Tests of H_{1a} and H_{1b}. First, we found a significant interaction between online civility context and recovery tactics on purchase intentions ($F(1, 233) = 5.36$, $p < .05$, $\omega_p^2 = .02$; see Figure 2, Panel A). For the control variables, we find sense of humor[3] ($F(1, 233) = 13.19$, $p < .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .05$) and Twitter usage intensity ($F(1, 233) = 4.12$, $p < .05$, $\omega_p^2 = .02$) to exert a significant

[2] 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.

[3] As requested by a reviewer, we conducted a post hoc analysis in which we tested a three-way interaction: online civility context by company's response by sense of humor. We tested the logic that a company's humorous response could be even more effective among observers with a good sense of humor. However, our results show that the three-way interaction is not significant ($p = .60$). In Study 1, the variable sense of humor only has a main effect on our core dependent variable.

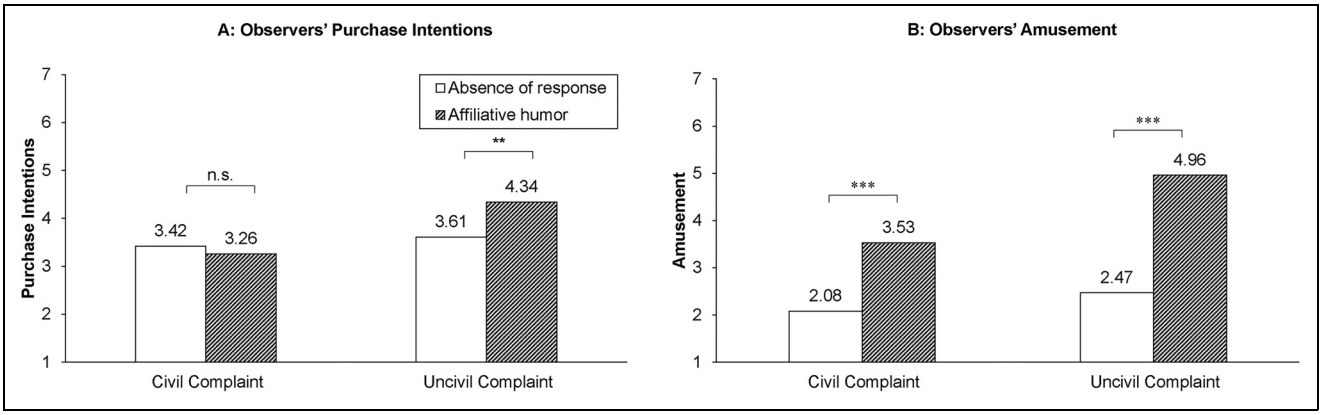

Figure 2. Visual Representation of the Interaction Between Recovery Tactics and Online Civility Context on Observers' Reactions in Study 1a. *$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$. n.s. = not significant.

effect; the other control variables[4] (i.e., age, gender) did not achieve significance ($p > .10$ in all cases).

When a firm uses an affiliative humorous response, observers' purchase intentions are greater in the incivility condition ($M = 4.34$) than in the civility condition ($M = 3.26$, $t = 4.04$, $p < .01$). This result supports H_{1a}. In turn, when the firm does not respond, there are no significant differences across the civility and incivility conditions ($M_{civil} = 3.42$ vs. $M_{uncivil} = 3.61$, $t = .67$, $p = .50$). Overall, we note that the interaction effect is driven by the "humorous response–uncivil complaint" condition, which is associated with the highest level of purchase intentions. Specifically, when a complaint is uncivil, a humorous response elicits greater purchase intentions than does an absence of response ($M_{affiliative} = 4.34$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 3.61$, $t = 2.15$, $p < .05$). In turn, when the online complaint is civil, there is no significant difference between a humorous response and an absence of response ($M_{affiliative} = 3.26$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 3.42$, $t = -1.11$, $p = .27$). These last results are supportive of H_{1b}. Overall, H_{1a} and H_{1b} are confirmed.

Tests of mediation through amusement (H_2). For H_2, we found a significant interaction effect between manipulations ($F(1, 233) = 6.84$, $p < .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .03$; see Figure 2, Panel B) to predict amusement. Here, sense of humor is the only significant control variable ($F(1, 233) = 13.98$, $p < .01$, $\omega = .06$). Simple tests reveal that affiliative humor generates more amusement than an absence of response in both the incivility condition ($M_{affiliative} = 4.96$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 2.47$, $t = 7.77$, $p < .01$) and the civility condition ($M_{affiliative} = 3.53$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 2.08$, $t = 4.13$, $p < .01$). Again, we note that the interaction effect is driven by the "affiliative humor–uncivil complaint" condition, which is associated with the highest level of amusement. Specifically, a humorous response generates more amusement in the incivility condition ($M = 4.96$) than in the civility condition ($M = 3.53$, $t = 4.78$, $p < .01$). To formally test the moderated mediation model stated by H_2, we used the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2017; Model 7; 5,000 resamples; see Table 2). Our results indicate that the index of moderated mediation is significant (coefficient = .61, 95% confidence interval [CI]: [.155, 1.092]); accordingly, we find that the indirect effect of recovery tactics through amusement on observers' purchase intentions is stronger when the online context is uncivil (coefficient = 1.29, 95% CI: [.938, 1.663]) compared with civil (coefficient = .68, 95% CI: [.342, 1.033]). Thus, H_2 is confirmed.

Ruling Out Alternative Explanations

We conducted two additional analyses to rule out alternative explanations related to the role of sympathy and the mere presence of a response. First, we tested whether an uncivil complaint could generate more sympathy for the company, independently of the company's response. Sympathy was considered a parallel mediator to amusement in our model. The results show that the index of moderated mediation for the indirect path going through sympathy is not significant (coefficient = .23, 95% CI: [−.014, .536]), whereas the indirect path through amusement remains significant (coefficient = .33, 95% CI: [.052, .629]). Overall, these findings help us rule out sympathy toward the company as a potential mediator, and they confirm that amusement is a core mediator explaining the process at play.

As a second alternative explanation, we examined whether purchase intentions are caused by the mere presence of a firm's response, regardless of its level of humor. To rule out this possibility, we divided the affiliative humor condition into two subgroups with a median split on amusement (median = 4.67): (1) participants who did not find the post amusing (amusement < 4.67) and (2) those who found it amusing (amusement > 4.67). We also incorporated the control group (i.e., an absence of response) in this analysis. The results of an analysis of variance show that these three subgroups led to different purchase intentions ($F(2, 238) = 66.85$, $p < .01$). Participants in the control group report greater purchase intentions than those in the low amusement condition

[4] Web Appendix E replicates the analyses without integrating any control variables. Our results remain virtually the same regardless of whether we include the control variables.

Table 2. Detailed Mediation Results (PROCESS Analysis) for Study 1a.

	Amusement		Purchase Intentions	
Variables	**Coeff.**	**t**	**Coeff.**	**t**
X: Recovery tactics (0 = Absence of response; 1 = Affiliative humor)	1.266	4.127***	−.991	−4.184***
W: Online civility context (0 = Civil complaint; 1 = Uncivil complaint)	.303	.968$^{n.s.}$	.031	.132$^{n.s.}$
X × W	1.137	2.616***	.313	.953$^{n.s.}$
Amusement			.536	10.971***
Control variables				
Gender	−.427	−1.956*	.147	.898$^{n.s.}$
Age	−.007	−.715$^{n.s.}$	−.007	−.997$^{n.s.}$
Sense of humor	.380	3.739***	.135	1.727*
Twitter usage intensity	.008	.153$^{n.s.}$	−.104	−2.605***
R^2	.346		.432	
ΔR^2	.019		.002	
	($\Delta F(1, 233) = 6.842$, $p < .01$)		($\Delta F(1, 232) = .908$, $p > .10$)	

Conditional Effects of Recovery Tactics at Values of the Moderator

		95% CI	
	Effect	**Lower Limit**	**Upper Limit**
Civil complaint	.678	.342	1.033
Uncivil complaint	1.287	.938	1.663
Coefficient of moderated mediation	.609	.155	1.092

*$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$. n.s. = not significant.

($M_{no_response} = 3.52$ vs. $M_{low_amusement} = 2.45$, 95% CI: [.582, 1.561]). This result rules out the possibility that an increase in purchase intentions is due to the mere presence of a response. Moreover, participants in the high amusement condition report the highest levels of purchase intentions of all conditions ($M = 5.13$, all $ps < .01$). Consistent with H_2, these results indicate that purchase intentions are driven mainly by the level of amusement of a response, and not by its mere presence.

Discussion of Study 1a

Study 1a was designed to test whether uncivil complaints represent an appropriate context for companies' use of humor on social media. Consistent with H_{1a}, our results show that observers develop greater (vs. lower) purchase intentions when companies use affiliative humor to answer an uncivil (vs. civil) complaint. Using benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010), we found amusement to play a key mediating role, in the sense that a humorous response is more amusing in the context of online incivility because observers feel less committed to uncivil complainers. In addition, in the incivility condition, we find that observers respond more favorably—in terms of purchase intensions and amusement—when the firm uses a humorous response, compared with the "absence of response" condition (i.e., the control group). For Study 1b, we use the same stimuli, although we replace the control condition with an accommodative recovery condition.

Study 1b

Study Design and Sample

Study 1b is a 2 (online civility context: civil complaint vs. uncivil complaint) × 2 (recovery tactics: affiliative humor vs. accommodative recovery) between-subjects experiment, which is specifically designed to test H_3 and H_4. The context features an internet service provider, and this study uses manipulations and stimuli that are similar to those in Study 1a, although we remove the "absence of response" condition. Instead, we include a condition where the company provides an accommodative recovery, replying: "Our technicians will work on it. We are sincerely sorry for the inconvenience." Web Appendix F provides the detailed materials. All participants were recruited through Prolific using the usual selection criteria. We automatically removed 13 participants because they failed our attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 217 U.S. participants (52.5% female; $M_{age} = 38.36$ years, SD = 13.08). The participants were randomly assigned to the four different conditions.

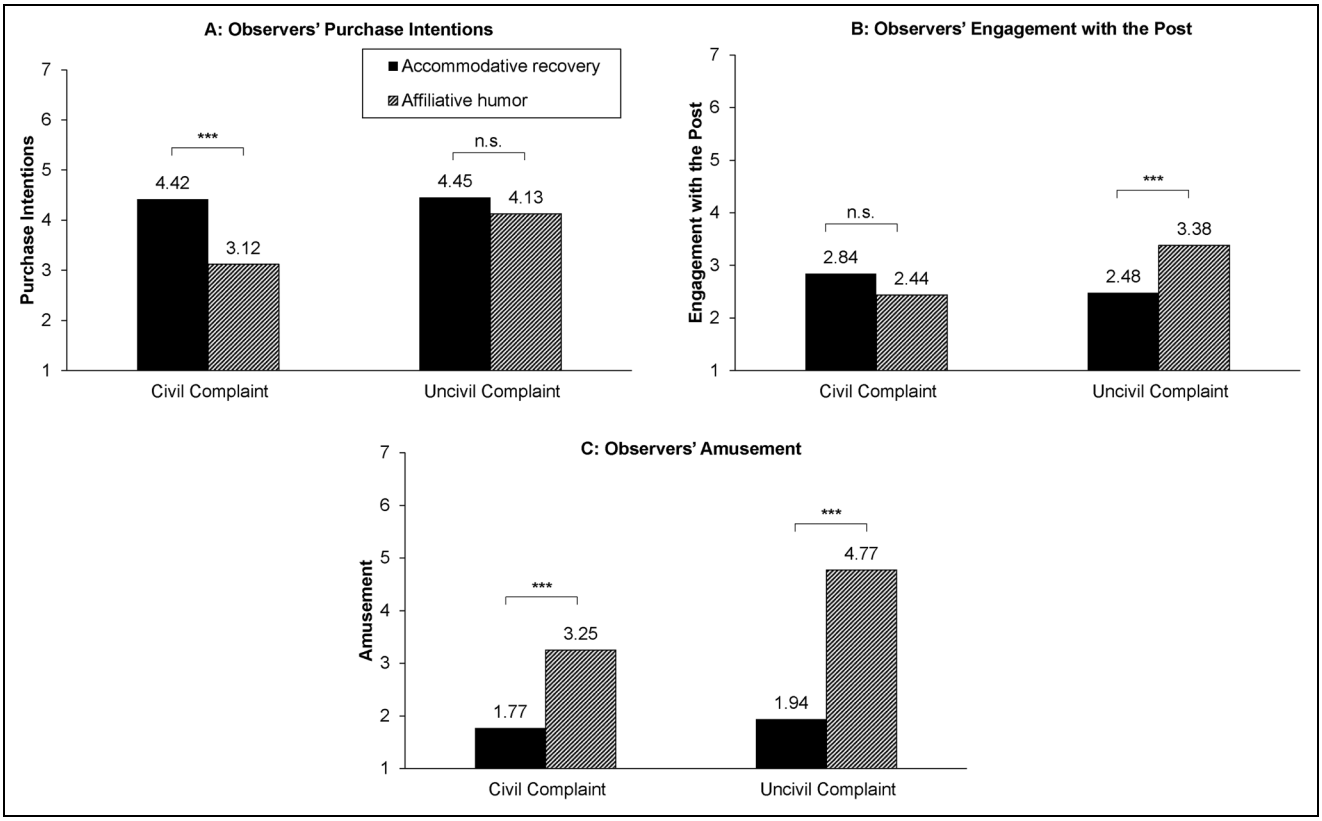

Figure 3. Visual Representation of the Interaction Between Recovery Tactics and Online Civility Context on Observers' Reactions in Study 1b. *$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$. n.s. = not significant.

Manipulation Checks and Control Variables

We used the same scales as those in Study 1a (see Web Appendix D), and we included additional scales to capture accommodative recovery (three items, $M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.73$, $\alpha = .80$; Johnen and Schnittka 2019) and engagement with the post (two items, $M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.71$, $\alpha = .83$). An eight-factor model (i.e., affiliative humor, accommodative recovery, complaint incivility, amusement, purchase intentions, engagement with the post, sense of humor, and Twitter usage intensity) with 26 items yields a satisfactory fit (CFI = .96; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .06; $\chi^2 = 499.43$, d.f. = 267, $p < .01$). The loadings of the items on their corresponding constructs all exceeded .50, and the AVE of each construct exceeded .50, suggesting adequate convergent validity. Finally, all square roots of the AVE were substantially greater than all other correlations, suggesting discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Participants reported the complainer to be more uncivil in the uncivil condition than in the civil condition ($M_{uncivil} = 6.34$ vs. $M_{civil} = 3.01$; $F(1, 217) = 398.34$, $p < .01$). Then, the participants reported that the firm used more affiliative humor in the affiliative condition than in the accommodative condition ($M_{affiliative} = 4.93$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 1.90$; $F(1, 217) = 328.77$, $p < .01$). Conversely, the participants reported that the firm was more accommodative in the accommodative recovery condition than in the affiliative humor condition ($M_{accommodative} = 5.54$ vs. $M_{affiliative} = 3.03$; $F(1, 217) = 241.32$, $p < .01$). Overall, the manipulations were successful. The participants also perceived the scenario as realistic ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.42$), and they understood that they were observers ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 1.05$). Finally, the participants did not differ between conditions in relation to blame, stability, and failure severity (all $ps > .10$).

Results for Study 1b

Tests of H_{3a}. Results of an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) indicate a significant interaction effect between recovery tactics and online civility contexts on observers' purchase intentions ($F(1, 209) = 5.90$, $p < .05$, $\omega_p^2 = .03$; see Figure 3, Panel A). We find only sense of humor to exert a significant effect ($p < .05$), all other control variables (i.e., age, gender, and Twitter usage intensity) being nonsignificant[5] ($ps > .05$). When the complaint is civil, accommodative recovery leads to a higher level of observers' purchase intentions than affiliative humor does ($M_{accommodative} = 4.42$ vs. $M_{affiliative} = 3.12$, $t = -4.93$, $p < .01$). However, when the complaint is uncivil, we note a similar level of purchase intentions for both recovery tactics

[5] Web Appendix G replicates the analyses without integrating any control variables; the results remain virtually the same with or without the control variables.

Table 3. Detailed Mediation Results (PROCESS Analysis) for Study 1b.

	Amusement		Purchase Intentions		Engagement with the Post	
Variables	**Coeff.**	**t**	**Coeff.**	**t**	**Coeff.**	**t**
X: Recovery tactics (0 = Accommodative recovery; 1 = Affiliative humor)	1.449	5.150***	−1.871	−7.318***	−1.228	−4.519***
W: Online civility context (0 = Civil complaint; 1 = Uncivil complaint)	.159	.572$^{n.s.}$	−.040	−.168$^{n.s.}$	−.455	−1.795*
X × W	1.290	3.248***	.402	1.152$^{n.s.}$	.399	1.077$^{n.s.}$
Amusement			.392	6.610***	.648	10.296***
Control variables						
Gender	−.340	−1.682*	.089	.508$^{n.s.}$	−.011	−.061$^{n.s.}$
Age	−.002	−.248$^{n.s.}$	−.004	−.631$^{n.s.}$	−.009	−1.297$^{n.s.}$
Sense of humor	.205	2.081**	.111	1.298$^{n.s.}$	−.045	−.498$^{n.s.}$
Twitter usage intensity	.066	1.259$^{n.s.}$	.060	1.350$^{n.s.}$	.156	3.282**
R^2	.430		.315		.417	
ΔR^2	.029		.004		.003	
	($\Delta F(1, 209) = 10.550$, $p < .01$)		($\Delta F(1, 208) = 1.326$, $p > .10$)		($\Delta F(1, 208) = 1.160$, $p > .10$)	

Conditional Effects of Recovery Tactics at Values of the Moderator

	Purchase Intentions			Engagement with the Post		
		95% CI			95% CI	
	Effect	**Lower Limit**	**Upper Limit**	**Effect**	**Lower Limit**	**Upper Limit**
Civil complaint	.567	.282	.900	.939	.555	1.365
Uncivil complaint	1.072	.683	1.519	1.775	1.305	2.273
Coefficient of moderated mediation	.505	.192	.860	.836	.320	1.378

*$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$. n.s. = not significant.

($M_{affiliative} = 4.45$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 4.13$, $t = -1.45$, $p > .10$). These results are consistent with H_{3a}.

Tests of H_{3b}. We replicated the same ANCOVA with engagement with the post as the dependent variable. Again, results show a significant interaction effect between recovery tactics and online civility context on observers' engagement with the post ($F(1, 209) = 7.77$, $p < .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .04$; see Figure 3, Panel B). Twitter usage intensity is the only significant control variable ($p < .01$). When the complaint is civil, we found no difference of engagement between the two recovery tactics ($M_{affiliative} = 2.44$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 2.84$, $t = -.92$, $p > .10$). Although the means are in the expected direction, this part of the interaction differs from H_{3b}, for which we predicted more engagement for an accommodative recovery compared with affiliative humor in the civility context. However, when the complaint is uncivil, we found that observers engage more intensively with the post when the company uses affiliative humor rather than an accommodative recovery ($M_{affiliative} = 3.38$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 2.48$, $t = 2.91$, $p < .01$); this result is consistent with H_{3b}.

Tests of mediation (H_4). We replicated the same ANCOVA with amusement as the dependent variable. The results indicate a significant interaction effect between recovery tactics and online civility context ($F(1, 209) = 10.55$, $p < .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .05$; see Figure 3, Panel C). Sense of humor ($p < .05$) was the only significant control variable. As for a general pattern, we find that affiliative humor elicits a higher level of amusement compared with an accommodative recovery in both the civil condition ($M_{affiliative} = 3.25$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 1.77$, $t = 5.15$, $p < .01$) and the uncivil condition ($M_{affiliative} = 4.77$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 1.94$, $t = 9.41$, $p < .01$). Importantly, the difference is especially pronounced in the incivility condition. Indeed, the interaction effect seems driven by the high level of amusement generated in the "affiliative humor–uncivil complaint" condition.

As a formal test of H_4, we used PROCESS (5,000 resamples). The details of the moderated mediation analyses are presented in Table 3. For purchase intentions (H_{4a}), the index of moderated mediation is significant (coefficient = .51, 95% CI: [.192, .860]), which indicates that the indirect effect of recovery

tactics through amusement on observers' purchase intentions differs depending on the online civility context. Regardless of the civility conditions, this sequence is always positive and characterized by a positive effect of affiliative humor (vs. accommodative recovery) on amusement, which in turn enhances observers' purchase intentions.[6] However, the indirect effect involving amusement becomes stronger in the incivility condition (coefficient = 1.07, 95% CI: [.683, 1.519]) than in the civility condition (coefficient = .57, 95% CI: [.282, .900]). Overall, H_{4a} is supported.

For H_{4b}, we replicate the same analysis with engagement with the post as the new dependent variable (see Table 3). Again, the index of moderated mediation is significant (coefficient = .84, 95% CI: [.320, 1.378]), which indicates that the indirect effect of recovery tactics through amusement on engagement differs depending on the online civility context. The indirect effect is always positive and significant, no matter whether the complaint is civil or uncivil. However, this effect is stronger in the uncivil condition (coefficient = 1.78, 95% CI: [1.305, 2.273]) than in the civil condition (coefficient = .94, 95% CI: [.555, 1.365]). Overall, H_{4b} is supported.

Discussion of Study 1b

Study 1b was designed to compare the effectiveness of affiliative humor with accommodative recovery because the latter is often considered the best tactic to protect a company's reputation after a public complaint (e.g., Johnen and Schnittka 2019). Here, previous research provides mixed conclusions about the relative effectiveness of a humorous response compared with an accommodative recovery. Study 1b reconciles these contrasting views by examining the moderating role of the online civility context. When the complaint is civil, we recommend that managers adopt an accommodative recovery (Shin and Larson 2020). In this context, an accommodative recovery generates a higher level of purchase intentions than affiliative humor generates; we note a similar engagement with the posts across tactics in this case. In turn, when the complaint is uncivil, we recommend that managers adopt affiliative humor (Béal and Grégoire 2022). In this context, a humorous response, compared with accommodative recovery, generates more engagement with the post and similar purchase intentions.

These findings are explained through two opposite effects. On the one hand, consistent with our previous findings (Study 1a), affiliative humor elicits greater amusement when a firm is responding to uncivil complaints (compared with civil ones). On the other hand, in the same incivility context, an accommodative recovery generates a particularly low level of amusement, compared with affiliative humor. Given these extreme responses in the incivility condition, the amusement gap between affiliative humor and accommodative recovery becomes especially wide. Therefore, in this context, the indirect effects of affiliative humor (vs. accommodative recovery) on purchase intentions and engagement are strong, matching the potential effects of an accommodative recovery. Otherwise, after a civil complaint, affiliative humor does not seem to generate sufficient amusement to compensate for the direct, favorable effect of an accommodative recovery.

Study 2

We developed Study 2 for two main reasons. First, it could replicate the findings of Studies 1a and 1b in a different service context, and it uses different materials to establish the core effects across a broader sample of stimuli. Second, it simultaneously manipulates the three tactics (affiliative humor, accommodative recovery, no response), whereas our previous studies manipulated only two of these tactics at a time.

Study 2 was preregistered with the Center for Open Science.[7] All the procedures and analyses similar to the previous studies were preregistered, including the experimental design, the data collection, the measures, and the analysis plan.

Study Design and Sample

Study 2 is a 2 (online civility context: civil complaint vs. uncivil complaint) × 3 (recovery tactics: affiliative humor, accommodative recovery, absence of response) between-subjects experiment, designed to test our set of four hypotheses. The context features a restaurant (a pizzeria). We asked participants to imagine that after a hard day at work, they plan to order a pizza for delivery. As they start searching on the internet for different pizzerias in their neighborhood, they find one called Luigi's. As they look at the Twitter page of the restaurant, they find a message posted by a dissatisfied customer. We then manipulate the complaint's civility. In the civil complaint condition, the customer posted the following complaint: "@PizzaLuigis It's been 1h since I have been waiting for my pizza to be delivered. Will it be much longer?" In the uncivil complaint condition, the customer posted the following complaint: "@PizzaLuigis F**K, IT'S BEEN 1H I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR MY GODDAMN PIZZA, YOU BASTARDS. WILL IT BE F**KING LONGER?" We then manipulate the company's recovery tactic, depending on whether the company uses an accommodative tone ("We'll do our best to deliver it asap. We are sincerely sorry for the inconvenience"), gives an affiliative humorous response ("No, it will be rounder"), or does not respond at all. For the last condition,

[6] In addition to this indirect effect, there is a direct, positive effect of accommodative recovery on observers' purchase intentions (see Table 3). In the incivility condition, the strong indirect effect of affiliative humor (going through amusement) reduces the direct effect of accommodative recovery on purchase intentions. This process explains why affiliative humor generates a similar level of purchase intentions as an accommodative recovery does *but only in the incivility condition*. In the civility condition, the amusement generated by affiliative humor is insufficient to compensate for the direct effect of accommodative recovery.

[7] Anonymized link to the preregistration: https://osf.io/7dgv9?view_only=3a41ba048bae44a89ce0f5f9715fa81a.

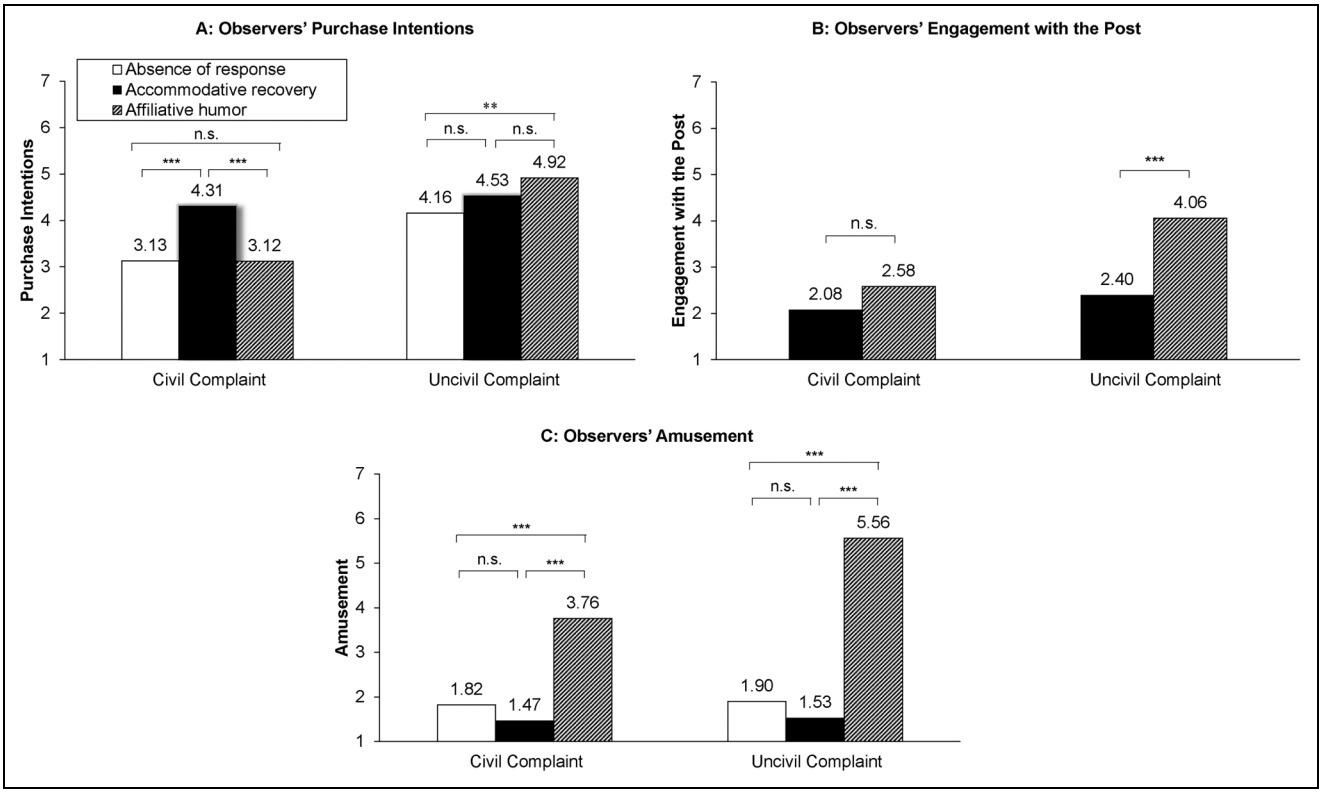

Figure 4. Visual Representation of the Interaction Between Recovery Tactics and Online Civility Context on Observers' Reactions in Study 2. *$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$. n.s. = not significant.

we informed participants that the company did not answer the customer's Twitter post. All the detailed stimuli are presented in Web Appendix H.

First, we pretested our scenario and stimuli with a sample of 108 participants (51.9% female; $M_{age} = 36.11$ years, SD = 11.81), and the effects of the experimental manipulations were all in the expected directions. For the main data collection, we recruited 376 participants through the Prolific platform using the usual selection criteria. We automatically removed 18 participants because they failed our attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 358 U.S. participants (50.3% female; $M_{age} = 38.43$ years, SD = 13.42). The participants were randomly assigned to the six different conditions.

Manipulation Checks and Control Variables

We used the same scales as those in previous studies (see Web Appendix D), and we included a measure of complaint–response fit for additional analyses (described subsequently). A measurement model based on nine factors (i.e., affiliative humor, accommodative recovery, complaint incivility, amusement, purchase intentions, engagement with the post, sense of humor, Twitter usage intensity, and complaint–response fit) with 29 items yielded a satisfactory fit (CFI = .97; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .06; $\chi^2 = 736.10$, d.f. = 340, $p < .01$). The loadings of the items on their corresponding constructs all exceeded .50, and the AVE of each construct exceeded .50, suggesting adequate convergent validity. Finally, all square roots of the AVE were substantially greater than any of the pairwise correlations between constructs, suggesting discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Participants reported the complainer to be more uncivil in the uncivil condition than in the civil condition ($M_{uncivil} = 6.39$ vs. $M_{civil} = 2.23$; $F(1, 356) = 1{,}819.79$, $p < .01$). Then, the participants reported that the firm uses more affiliative humor in the affiliative condition than in the other two conditions ($M_{affiliative} = 5.03$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 1.62$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 1.70$; $F(2, 355) = 387.30$, $p < .01$), as expected. Note that the accommodative recovery condition and the absence of response condition do not differ in regard to the score on affiliative humor ($p > .10$). Conversely, the participants reported that the firm was more accommodative in the accommodative recovery condition than in the other two conditions ($M_{accommodative} = 4.98$ vs. $M_{affiliative} = 1.51$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 1.74$; $F(2, 355) = 452.67$, $p < .01$), as expected. Again, we note no significant difference between affiliative humor and the absence of response conditions regarding the score on accommodative recovery ($p > .10$). Overall, the manipulations were successful. The participants also perceived the scenario as realistic (M = 5.49, SD = 1.22). Finally, the participants did not differ between conditions in relation to blame and failure severity (all $ps > .10$). However, we found stability to be affected by our manipulations ($p < .01$), so we included it as a covariate in the following analyses.

Results for Study 2

Tests of H_1 and H_3. We first investigate the interaction effect between a company's recovery tactics and online civility contexts on observers' purchase intentions. The results of an ANCOVA indicate a significant interaction effect between recovery tactics and online civility contexts on observers' purchase intentions ($F(2, 347) = 9.50$, $p < .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .05$; see Figure 4, Panel A). We find only sense of humor to exert a significant effect ($p < .01$), all other control variables (i.e., age, gender, Twitter usage, stability) being nonsignificant[8] ($ps > .05$).

Subsequent analyses reveal that when the company replies with affiliative humor, observers' purchase intentions are greater in the incivility condition than in the civility condition ($M_{civil} = 3.12$ vs. $M_{uncivil} = 4.92$, $t = 6.56$, $p < .01$), consistent with the logic exposed in H_{1a}. Then, in line with H_{1b}, we compare a response based on affiliative humor with an absence of response. When the complaint is civil, affiliative humor and an absence of response elicit similar levels of observers' purchase intentions ($M_{affiliative} = 3.12$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 3.13$, $t = .30$, $p > .10$). However, when the complaint is uncivil, we find observers' purchase intentions to be greater when the company uses affiliative humor than when it does not respond at all ($M_{affiliative} = 4.92$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 4.16$, $t = -2.38$, $p < .05$), consistent with H_{1b}.

In relation to H_{3a}, we also compare the effectiveness of affiliative humor with an accommodative recovery. The findings show that when the complaint is civil, accommodative recovery leads to a higher level of observers' purchase intentions than affiliative humor does ($M_{accommodative} = 4.31$ vs. $M_{affiliative} = 3.12$, $t = 4.94$, $p < .01$). However, when the complaint is uncivil, observers' purchase intentions do not differ between accommodative recovery and affiliative humor ($M_{affiliative} = 4.92$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 4.53$, $t = -.91$, $p > .10$), consistent with H_{3a}. We replicated the same ANCOVA with engagement with the post as the dependent variable (for H_{3b}).[9] Again, the results show a significant interaction effect between recovery tactics and online civility context on observers' engagement with the post ($F(1, 234) = 9.68$, $p < .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .04$; see Figure 4, Panel B). Twitter usage intensity is the only significant control variable ($p < .05$). When the complaint is civil, we found no difference of engagement between the two recovery tactics ($M_{affiliative} = 2.58$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 2.08$, $t = -1.69$, $p = .09$); this result differs from what was expected in H_{3b}. However, when the complaint is uncivil, we found that observers engage more intensively with the post when the company uses affiliative humor rather than an accommodative recovery ($M_{affiliative} = 4.06$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 2.40$, $t = -5.92$, $p < .01$); this result is consistent with H_{3b}.

Tests of mediation (H_2 and H_4). First, we replicated the same ANCOVA with amusement as the dependent variable. The results indicate a significant interaction effect between recovery tactics and online civility context ($F(2, 347) = 16.79$, $p < .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .09$; see Figure 4, Panel C). Sense of humor ($p < .05$) was the only significant control variable. As for a general pattern, when the complaint is civil, we find that affiliative humor elicits a higher level of amusement compared with both an accommodative recovery ($M_{affiliative} = 3.76$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 1.47$, $t = -16.33$, $p < .01$) and an absence of response condition ($M_{no_response} = 1.82$, $t = -14.30$, $p < .01$). The same conclusions apply to the online incivility context, although we notice that the difference between affiliative humor and the other two tactics is more pronounced ($M_{affiliative} = 5.56$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 1.53$ vs. $M_{no_response} = 1.90$, $p < .01$), compared with the online civility context.

Second, as formal tests of H_2 and H_4, we used PROCESS (Model 7; 5,000 resamples). Given that our independent variable employs three levels (affiliative humor, accommodative recovery, and an absence of response), we ran moderated mediation models by employing a multicategorical analysis for the independent variable. Affiliative humor is considered our "pivotal condition" (coded 0), and we analyzed two models: Model A compares affiliative humor with an absence of response (H_2), whereas Model B compares affiliative humor with an accommodative recovery (H_4). For Model A, the index of moderated mediation is significant (coefficient = −.72, 95% CI: [−1.124, −.350]). Specifically, we find that the indirect effect of recovery tactics through amusement on observers' purchase intentions differs depending on the online civility context. The sequence always favors affiliative humor and is characterized by a stronger effect of affiliative humor (vs. an absence of response) on amusement, with increased purchase intentions in turn. Moreover, such an indirect effect is larger when the complaint is uncivil (coefficient = −1.52, 95% CI: [−2.001, −1.067]) rather than civil (coefficient = −.80, 95% CI: [−1.123, −.520]). This finding confirms H_2.

For Model B, the index of moderated mediation is significant (coefficient = −.74, 95% CI: [−1.123, −.399]). Specifically, the indirect effect of recovery tactics through amusement on observers' purchase intentions differs depending on the online civility context. Regardless of the civility conditions, the given sequence always favors affiliative humor and is characterized by a positive effect of affiliative humor (vs. accommodative recovery) on amusement, which in turn enhances observers' purchase intentions. However, the indirect effect involving amusement is stronger in the incivility condition (coefficient = −1.68, 95% CI: [−2.167, −1.193]) than in the civility condition (coefficient = −.94, 95% CI: [−1.237, −.658]), as suggested by H_{4a}.

We replicated the analysis of Model B by considering engagement with the post as the dependent variable. Again, the index of moderated mediation is significant (coefficient = −.94, 95% CI: [−1.404, −.513]), meaning that the effect of recovery tactics through amusement on engagement with the post differs depending on the online civility context. Precisely, the sequence always favors affiliative humor (vs. accommodative recovery), but it is stronger in the incivility

[8] Web Appendix I replicates the analyses without integrating any control variables; the results remain virtually the same with or without the control variables.

[9] When analyzing this dependent variable, we do not consider the "absence of response" condition, as it was irrelevant to ask participants whether they would "like" or "retweet" a company's response that did not exist in their assigned scenario.

context (coefficient = −2.21, 95% CI: [−2.737, −1.723]) than in the civility context (coefficient = −1.23, 95% CI: [−1.615, −.890]), as suggested by H_{4b}.

Ruling Out the Alternative Roles of the Complaint–Response Fit and the Service Context

We checked the robustness of Study 2's conclusions in two different ways. First, we controlled for an alternative explanation for the benefits of affiliative humor whereby it could represent a better fit with the uncivil complaint, whereas an accommodative recovery could be interpreted as an incoherent and non sequitur response. We checked this logic by including a measure of complaint–response fit (adapted from Speed and Thompson [2000]; items reported in Web Appendix D). The results show that the interaction term between recovery tactics and online civility context is significant ($F(2, 348) = 13.67$, $p < .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .07$). Indeed, affiliative humor fits better with the uncivil complaint than with the civil one ($M_{uncivil} = 4.55$ vs. $M_{civil} = 3.02$, $t = 5.67$, $p < .01$). However, and more importantly, the participants always perceived that an accommodative recovery represents a better fit than affiliative humor, no matter whether the complaint is civil ($M_{affiliative} = 3.02$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 5.91$, $t = 12.58$, $p < .01$) or uncivil ($M_{affiliative} = 4.55$ vs. $M_{accommodative} = 5.72$, $t = 5.58$, $p < .01$). Consequently, the alternative logic that affiliative humor becomes more effective—because it represents a better fit with the uncivil complaint than an accommodative recovery does—is not established here.

Second, we checked the robustness of Study 2's conclusions by conducting a supplemental study (N = 540 U.S. participants; 61.1% female, $M_{age} = 35.68$ years, SD = 12.72) in which we adopted the same experimental design in a different service context (a theme park) and used different stimuli. Except for H_{1b}, the study yields support for all our hypotheses. The details of this supplemental study are reported in Web Appendix J.

Discussion of Study 2

Study 2 complements the results from Studies 1a and 1b in two different ways. First, the study simultaneously manipulates the three recovery tactics (affiliative humor, accommodative recovery, and an absence of response). Second, it replicates previous insights in a different service sector by using different stimuli. Study 2's results support all our hypotheses.

On the one hand, when the complaint is civil, we find that affiliative humor is as effective as an absence of response. However, in the same civility context, the former response generates lower approval from observers, compared with an accommodative recovery (lower purchase intentions and identical engagement with the post). On the other hand, when the complaint is uncivil, we find that affiliative humor arguably represents the best approach. First, this tactic is more effective than an absence of response in terms of observers' purchase intentions. Second, it is also more interesting than an accommodative recovery. Although purchase intentions do not differ between the two conditions, observers engage more intensively with the post (in terms of likes and shares) when the response is humorous rather than accommodative. Third, all these findings are explained by the mediating role of amusement and the demonstration that a humorous response is viewed as funnier in the context of an uncivil complaint.

General Discussion

Theoretical Implications

Customers' incivility is a growing phenomenon on social media (Fombelle et al. 2020; Wolter, Bacile, and Xu 2022), with 73% of observers reporting having witnessed incidents of incivility (Duggan 2014). Thus, there is a need for more research to understand how companies can handle customers' incivility on social media (Bacile et al. 2018; Batista et al. 2022). Moreover, the current research focuses on observers' reactions given their potential impact in terms of number and influence (Hogreve, Bilstein, and Hoerner 2019). The literature on service recovery generally focuses on complainers' reactions, and the perspective of observers is often ignored (Grégoire and Mattila 2021). In this research, we demonstrate that incivility represents a special context for the use of humor as a recovery tactic targeting observers. The benefits of humor in marketing are well documented (e.g., Bompar, Lunardo, and Saintives 2018; Lussier, Grégoire, and Vachon 2017), and the use of humor on social media has received growing attention (Batista et al. 2022; Liao, Li, and Filieri 2022), especially when firms respond to online complaints (Béal and Grégoire 2022; Shin and Larson 2020). Accordingly, the current research extends prior work on humor by examining its effects in the context of incivility on social media. By doing so, this research makes two core contributions.

First, we contribute to the literature on customers' incivility (Fombelle et al. 2020; Henkel et al. 2017), especially on social media (Bacile et al. 2018). Our results suggest that observers see incivility as a context in which companies are allowed to use humor as a recovery tactic. More precisely, we find that observers are more amused and develop greater purchase intentions when companies use humor after an uncivil complaint than when companies use humor after a civil complaint. We also find that, in the context of online incivility, observers respond more favorably to a humorous response than to an absence of response. Building on benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010), we explain that observers are less committed to uncivil complainers and their problems; this situation makes them see the violation caused by humor as more benign, which generates greater amusement. In contrast, observers tend to be more concerned about problems formulated by civil and polite customers. In this last context, humorous attempts are more likely to be interpreted as inappropriate, for

they can result in little amusement and reduced purchase intentions.

Second, we demonstrate that incivility represents a suitable context to favor affiliative humor over an accommodative recovery, the latter being generally considered the golden rule to restore a company's reputation in the eyes of observers (Javornik, Filieri, and Gumann 2020; Johnen and Schnittka 2019). By doing so, we reconcile recent mixed findings about the relative effectiveness of an accommodative recovery in comparison to affiliative humor (Béal and Grégoire 2022; Shin and Larson 2020). In the context of civil complaints, we reconfirm the superiority of an accommodative recovery, as observers have a greater appreciation for the use of this type of response. However, when the complaint is uncivil, affiliative humor is arguably more beneficial than an accommodative recovery because the latter is associated with observers' greater engagement with the post (i.e., likes and retweets) for similar levels of purchase intentions. Thus, using humor to answer uncivil complaints could be viewed as an opportunity to create a "positive buzz" around the brand on social media. This result is explained by the fact that, first, affiliative humor is more amusing for uncivil complaints and, second, an accommodative recovery is less effective in that situation.

Managerial Implications

Today's managers face increasing customer incivility on social media, and the academic literature examining tactics to address this phenomenon is still underdeveloped. Dealing with complainers' incivility on social media is of special importance for companies. Thousands of observers could read each complaint posted by dissatisfied customers, and research shows that these observers tend to be particularly affected by uncivil complaints (Bacile et al. 2018; Duggan 2014). Another body of research informs managers about the benefits and pitfalls of answering complaints on social media with humor. Humor is a double-edged sword that could either amuse observers (Béal and Grégoire 2022) or weaken their trust in a brand (Shin and Larson 2020). Thus, the current research provides important insights for managers to identify when humor is an appropriate tactic to address complaints on social media in regard to their degree of incivility.

On the one hand, this research demonstrates that incivility represents an appropriate context for the use of humor on social media. Humor is a matter of context, and its usage can be either beneficial or detrimental to a firm's reputation. Thus, managers must identify when using humor will help a company's reputation and when an abusive use of humor can have negative consequences. Here, our results suggest that managers should use humor to address uncivil complaints. This appropriate use of humor should help firms gather more support and engagement from their communities of observers.

On the other hand, the degree of incivility of a complaint helps clarify when managers can consider affiliative humor to be a clever tactic as opposed to when an accommodative recovery seems more suitable. After a civil complaint, the use of an accommodative recovery seems judicious, and the use of humor as a recovery tactic should be considered with great care. However, when the complaint is uncivil, managers can adopt a humorous tone with confidence. Indeed, affiliative humor elicits similar purchase intentions compared with an accommodative recovery, and, importantly, it strengthens observers' engagement with the post (i.e., likes and shares). Thus, using humor to address uncivil complaints represents a real opportunity for managers to turn negative events (i.e., rude complaints) into a positive buzz.

Limitations and Further Research

Several limitations of this research should drive continued research. The first limitation relates to our methodological choice, especially the use of lab experiments and the measure of behavioral intentions. Thus, even if intentions precede actual behaviors, they do not always perfectly capture them (Chandon, Morwitz, and Reinartz 2005). Accordingly, future research should replicate our model and extend our findings in more natural settings.

Second, all the studies feature only one interaction on social media. Thus, our implications are useful for companies that sporadically use humor. We do not examine observers' perceptions of a company's repetitive use of humor: Does the company gain more approval when it always uses humor to address uncivil complaints? In contrast, are there times when the company may be abusing its sense of humor? Such questions present an interesting agenda for future research.

Third, we focus solely on the affiliative dimension of humor because it is a prominent response on social media that tends to generate positive reactions from observers. However, future research could investigate how observers react to other forms of humor. For example, Béal and Grégoire (2022) show that, under certain circumstances, the use of aggressive humor represents a more suitable approach than the use of affiliative humor.

Fourth, effect sizes for all our studies are relatively small. Such effects could be explained by the fact that we asked participants to form their intentions toward the company on the basis of limited information—that is, a single response to one complaint episode on social media. Accordingly, it would be interesting to investigate the effects of humorous responses to online complaints by adopting a more holistic approach involving more information.

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