

Review

# Is laughter the best marketing? Why this is the wrong question

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## Abstract

Humor is often described as a miracle pill for marketers, yet the effects of humor on advertising, content marketing, service, and other marketing functions are wildly inconsistent. Before scholars can know whether a pun, prank, meme, or laugh will attract sales, clicks, or five-star reviews, they need to understand why the effects of humor appear to vary. Humor has different effects because scholars have treated humor as different constructs while studying how it influences different marketing outcomes with different types of stimuli in different of situations on different types of people. Only by recognizing these differences can scholars begin to understand when, why, and how humor can benefit marketers. To navigate this complexity, researchers need to develop a theory of humor that can help explain how different attempts to be humorous influence different consumers in different situations.

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Humor, Marketing, Advertising, Laughter, Consumer behavior.

## Introduction

In marketing, like in medicine, humor is sometimes described as an elixir that can cut through clutter, attract eyeballs, cultivate clicks, persuade, placate, sell, and satisfy. But is laughter the best marketing? Despite decades of research, the answer is not clear. Although some studies tout the benefits of humor [1,2], others reveal that humor can be ineffective or even harmful [3–5].

Before asking whether humor helps marketing, we argue that scholars must first answer a different question: why are the effects of humor inconsistent? We discuss four reasons: scholars have evoked different definitions,

measured different outcomes, employed different methods, and evoked different theories. To understand the effects of humor, scholars need to recognize, account for, and explore these differences rather than gloss over them with meaninglessly general questions like “does humor help marketing?”

## Humor is not consistently defined

One reason why the effects of humorous marketing appear to be inconsistent is because humor does not mean one thing. Scholars have conceptualized humor as three related yet distinct constructs [6]: a psychological response (e.g., a consumer is amused by an advertisement), a type of stimulus (e.g., a funny advertisement), or a trait variable (e.g., a consumer who is often amused by advertisements; see Refs. [7,8]). For clarity, we refer to a humorous response as *perceived humor*, a humorous stimulus as *comedy*, and a trait difference as *sense of humor* (see [Table 1](#)).

The “effect” of humorous marketing depends on how humor is conceptualized, especially because the advertisements used to manipulate humor (i.e., comedy) are not perceived to be equally funny [9]. Warren et al. [4] distinguish between the effects of comedy and perceived humor by asking participants to rate if they think an ad is humorous (perceived humor) and if they like the advertised brand (brand attitude) after viewing an ad previous research had used to manipulate humor (i.e., comedy). Although participants who rated the ad as funnier had a more favorable attitude towards the brand, there was no difference in attitudes between participants who viewed the humorous and non-humorous ads. That is, across a sample of 21 ads used in prior advertising research, perceived humor had a positive effect on brand attitudes, but comedy had no effect.

Because humor can mean different things, scholars need to specify how they conceptualize humor. Specifically, researchers should state whether they are studying the effects of humorous stimuli (comedy), responses to the stimuli (i.e., perceived humor), individual differences (sense of humor), or all the above.

## Humor has different effects on different marketing outcomes

Another reason for the variation is because researchers study different outcomes, and humor has different

<b>Humor has been conceptualized as a response, stimulus, or trait.</b>		
Concept	Definition	Example in Advertising Research
Response <i>Perceived Humor</i>	A psychological response characterized by the thought that something is funny, the feeling of amusement, and the tendency to laugh.	Participants rate the extent to which an ad is “funny” [40], “amusing” [10], or “humorous” [46]. The “effect of humor” is calculated (a) by splitting ads into those rated as more or less humorous and calculating the difference between them on the DV; or (b) by calculating the relationship between the perceived humor rating and the DV (e.g., attitude towards the ad, attitudes towards the brand, product awareness).
Stimulus <i>Comedy</i>	A stimulus that induces, or is intended to induce, laughter, amusement, and perceived funniness.	Participants respond to an ad intended to be funny or an ad not intended to be funny (e.g., Refs. [35,47]). Researchers classify ads as either being humorous or non-humorous (e.g., Ref. [48]). The “effect of humor” is calculated as the average difference between the humorous ad(s) and non-humorous ad(s) on the DV (e.g., attitude towards the ad, recall of the ad, purchase intention).
Trait <i>Sense of Humor</i>	An individual difference in the tendency for a person to perceive humor or produce comedy.	Customers complete agree-disagree scale items; e.g., “I like a good joke,” and “Other people tell me that I say funny things” [44]. An “effect of humor” is calculated as the relationship between measured sense of humor and the DV (e.g., satisfaction with a service interaction).

effects on different outcomes (see Table 2). For instance, humorous ads that rely on incongruity-resolution tend to improve impressions that a brand is competent but do not improve impressions that a brand

is warm [3]. Likewise, meta-analyses show that humor is more likely to improve attention and attitude towards an advertisement than it is to increase purchase behavior and thoughts about the brand [1,2,11], although the

<b>Humor has different effects on different marketing outcomes.</b>					
	Outcome	Example measure	Meta-analytic effect (r)		
			Eisend <sup>a</sup>	Hornik <sup>b</sup>	Walter <sup>c</sup>
Knowledge	Attention	Amount of time that participants view an ad.	.42*		.23*
	Ad Recall	% who remember seeing an ad before.	.12		
	Brand recall	% who remember seeing a brand advertised.	.07		
	Ad recognition	% shown an ad who say they saw it.	.22		
Responses	Brand recognition	% shown a brand who say they saw it advertised.	.16		
	Positive emotions	“The ad gives me positive feelings.”	.27*		
	Negative emotions	“The ad gives me negative feelings.”	-.28*		
	Positive thoughts	Participants report the thoughts they had while viewing an ad.	.12		
Persuasion	Negative thoughts	Researchers count the positive and negative thoughts.	-.05		
	Warmth	“The brand is warm”	Not reported in meta-analyses		
	Competence	“The brand is competent”	Not reported in meta-analyses		
	Ad attitudes	“I like this ad.”	.37*	.38*	.12*
	Brand attitudes	“I like this brand.”	.19*	.35*	
	Intentions	“I’m planning to purchase this brand.”	.19*		.09*
Satisfaction	Purchases/Sales	% of participants who purchased the brand.	.01		.04
	Word-of-mouth	“I’m likely to share this post.”	Not reported in meta-analyses		
	Service recovery	“I’m satisfied with this service.”	Not reported in meta-analyses		

*Note.* \* meta-analytic effect was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

<sup>a</sup> [1].

<sup>b</sup> [49].

<sup>c</sup> [19].

effects on the same outcome differ depending on how humor is defined (see the previous section) and operationalized (see the next section).

### Scholars do not operationalize humor consistently

A third reason why the effects of humor are inconsistent is because scholars have operationalized humor using different types of humor in different contexts with different people.

#### Comedy type

There are many ways to evoke laughter from tickles and teases to puns and farts, and the effects of humorous marketing depend on the type of comedy that marketers attempt. For instance, advertisements that produce humor through mild violations and clever humor (e.g., John Deere punning “Nothing runs like a Deere”) lead to more favorable brand attitudes than ads that produce humor through severe violations and non-clever humor (e.g., a lime peeing into a glass of Pepsi Twist) [5,12].

Scholars have discussed different schemes for categorizing comedy (see Table 3). Each is limited. The “humor mechanisms” were created to explain all humor [6] and the “humor styles” were created to explain individual differences in the way that people produce and

appreciate humor [13]—neither humor mechanisms nor styles were created for categorizing comedy. Violation severity [5], cleverness [12], and relatedness [14] were created to distinguish comedy types, but they each capture only one dimension along which humorous stimuli differ; they were not intended to account for every type of comedy. Thus, one important task for future researchers will be to develop theory and methods to better categorize humorous marketing stimuli.

Because the effects of humor depend on the type of comedy—and because there is not yet a reliable way to categorize comedy—scholars cannot make general conclusions about humor based on one or two humorous stimuli. Unfortunately, a common practice in marketing research is to test an “effect of humor” by comparing a single humorous stimulus (e.g., a funny ad) with a single non-humorous stimulus (e.g., an informative ad) [10]. The problem with studies that use a single pair of humorous and non-humorous stimuli is that it is impossible to know whether differences between conditions will generalize to other humorous and non-humorous stimuli [15]. Thus, until there is a more complete and rigorous taxonomy of comedy types, scholars should test the effects of comedy with samples of humorous and non-humorous marketing stimuli to ensure that the results generalize across both participants and stimuli [16].

**Table 3**

#### Scholars have different schemes for categorizing comedy.

	Type of Comedy	Definition
Humor mechanisms	Incongruity	Comedy that produces humor by introducing a discrepancy or unexpected element within a situation.
	Incongruity-resolution	Comedy that produces humor by explaining of making sense of a discrepancy or unexpected element within a situation.
	Relief/Arousal-safety	Comedy that produces humor by releasing physiological arousal caused by a discrepancy or unexpected element within a situation.
	Superiority/Disparagement	Comedy that produces humor by making fun of, insulting, or harming an individual or group.
Humor styles	Aggressive humor	Comedy that attempts to produce humor by making fun of, insulting, or harming other individuals or an out-group.
	Self-defeating humor	Comedy that attempts to produce humor by making fun of, insulting, or harming oneself or an in-group.
	Affiliative humor	Comedy that attempts to produce humor by improving social connections between individuals.
	Self-enhancing humor	Comedy that attempts to produce humor by making light of odd, unusual, or unpleasant situations.
Humorous violations	Mild violation	Less aversive comedy that produces humor by introducing a slight deviation from the norm without causing great discomfort or offense.
	Severe violation	More aversive comedy that produces humor by introducing a major deviation from the norm, causing great discomfort or offense.
Humor Cleverness	Clever humor	Comedy that requires a consumer to make a larger mental connection thereby prompting a sudden “aha” moment of understanding.
	Non-clever humor	Comedy that does requires less of a mental connection and that is less likely to prompt a sudden “aha” moment of understanding.
Humor Relatedness	Related to message	Comedy that is directly linked to the brand or the focal message.
	Unrelated to message	Comedy that is not directly linked to the brand or the focal message.

### Situation type

The effect of humor on marketing depends not only on the type of comedy but also on the context or situation in which it is used [2]. Humor can be used for different products and services, communicated through different media, and with different marketing functions (advertising, sales, service, product design, etc.). The effects of humor vary with each of these contextual differences. For instance, humorous advertising tends to be more effective for products that are less involved, like chewing gum rather than computers [17], more embarrassing, like tampons rather than toothpaste [18], and more hedonic, like a theme park rather than a dentist [2]. Likewise, humorous stimuli tend to be more persuasive in face-to-face and audio-visual communications than in print or audio communications [19]. We are not aware of research that directly compares the effects of humor across different marketing functions, but results across studies suggest that humor influences advertising [1] differently than product design [20], customer service [4,21], and sales [22].

### Audience type

The effect of even the same humorous marketing in the same situation varies depending on the audience. Perhaps the biggest challenge in both researching and implementing humorous marketing is that people rarely agree about whether a joke, word, cartoon, or video is humorous [23]. It is thus difficult, if not impossible, to find something that most consumers think is funny, because perceived humor depends more on individual differences (i.e., sense of humor) and the extent to which the comedic stimulus fits the idiosyncratic taste of the consumer than on the stimulus itself [23]. Perceptions of humor depend on a range of cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic conditions, including a consumer's moral values [24], personality [25], political beliefs [26,27], religion [28,29], nationality [30,31], gender [32], and age [33]. Even when they agree that something is funny, some consumers generally respond more favorably to humorous marketing than others [34]. For example, humorous advertisements have more favorable effects on consumers who have a high in need for levity [34] and a low need for cognition [35].

### Scholars lack an accepted theory of humor

A final reason why the effects of humor have been elusive is because scholars have not consistently relied on an established theory. Most studies develop hypotheses in an ad hoc manner without drawing on any general humor theory, and studies that developed theory-driven hypotheses have evoked different humor theories, including script-based semantic theory [36], the benign violation theory [10,37], relief/arousal-safety theory [21,38], superiority/disparagement theory [39], and variants of incongruity theory [40–42].

A lack of an accepted theory of humor makes the literature a collection of scattered effects that are difficult to reconcile [43]. Moreover, a lack of theory makes it difficult, if not impossible, to predict new effects of humorous marketing. Marketers, for instance, can now employ AI service bots to respond to consumers' questions and concerns. Should AI bots joke when interacting with consumers? Without theory, we cannot predict whether bots should attempt humor, which type of comedy the bots should use, which situations they should use it in, and which consumers they should use it with.

One theory that might help marketing scholars synthesize existing relationships and predict new ones is the benign violation theory [8,28]. The benign violation theory argues that a consumer perceives humor when something that threatens their subjective well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (i.e., a violation) simultaneously seems harmless, acceptable, or okay (i.e., benign). For example, tickles are attacks that don't hurt, just as puns (e.g., "becoming a vegetarian is one big, missed steak") contrast an incorrect use of language (e.g., misspelling "mistake") with a correct interpretation (e.g., vegetarians are going to "miss steak").

The benign violation theory can potentially help synthesize what appear to be scattered effects in humor literature. Consider the context of a service failure. Humor can either help or hurt service providers' attempts to recover [4,21,37,44]. Across studies, consumers respond more favorably when they are able to see the service provider's attempt to be funny as benign, either because the service failure was not that bad [21], the service provider uses nonhostile comedy [45], the consumer is generally more likely to experience violations as benign [44], or the complaining consumer seems like they deserve to be mocked [37].

Researchers need to develop a comprehensive theory that can reconcile the divergent findings across an otherwise fragmented literature. The benign violation theory offers one potential framework to do so, but marketing scholars will need to continue to improve this theory or find another one to help to order what appear to be a jumble of scattered effects.

### Conclusion

Humor does not have one effect on marketing. Its effect depends on the meaning of humor (e.g., an ad that tries to be funny vs. a consumer who feels amused), the outcome of interest (e.g., memory of an ad vs. sharing word-of-mouth about a service), the type of comedy (e.g., aggressive vs. affiliative humor), the type of situation (e.g., low vs. high involvement), and the type of consumer (e.g., high vs. low need-for-cognition). Asking "Is laughter the best marketing?" is a meaningless

question. Humor is not a simple cure but a constellation of treatments in search of a theory to help explain why, how, and when marketers can create and leverage humorous marketing.

### Author contributions

Both authors outlined, drafted, and revised the paper together.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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