Benign Violations: Humor As a Mixed Emotional Experience

A. Peter McGraw, University of Colorado, USA
Caleb Warren, University of Colorado, USA

Humor is frequently pursued by consumers and marketers but is not well understood by consumer researchers. We hypothesize that humor can be a mixed emotional experience. In five studies, we show that humor is aroused by benign violations and benign moral violations can elicit negative emotion as well as amusement.

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**SPECIAL SESSION**

**Layers of Feeling: Exploring The Complexity of Emotions**
Iris W. Hung, National University of Singapore, Singapore
Anirban Mukhopadhyay, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China

**EXTENDED ABSTRACTS**

“Differentiating Between Simple and Complex Emotions: It’s A Matter of Abstractness”
Lorraine Lau-Gesk, University of California, Irvine, USA
Joan Meyers-Levy, University of Minnesota, USA
Jesse R. Catlin, University of California, Irvine, USA

Three studies demonstrate that emotions can vary in their construal level, ranging from fairly high-level abstract emotions to low-level concrete ones, and uncover process insights. Relational- (vs. item-specific) processing appears to underlie abstract (vs. concrete) emotions and their association with higher (vs. lower) construal levels. These findings are discussed in light of recent work on complex emotions.

The present research explores the possibility that emotions vary in their construal level, ranging from fairly high-level abstract emotions to low-level concrete ones. Drawing on construal level theory, we propose that higher level abstract (lower level concrete) emotions may entail mentally engaging in farther (closer) psychological distances (Liberman, Trope, and Stephan 2007). That is, emotions arising from appraisals that involve comparisons vis a vis a distant alternative are likely to be more abstract than those that involve comparisons with a proximal alternative. We suggest that certain complex emotions (Johnson-Laird and Oatley 1989; Ortony and Turner 1990), such as hope, pride, and awe, are likely to be fairly abstract because experiencing them requires people compare their own situation to ones that are physically, socially, temporally, or hypothetically distant. For example, experiencing hope or pride involves a comparison with a distal expectation, ideal, or norm (Frijda, Kulpers and ter Schure 1990; MacInnis and de Mello 2005). By contrast, more concrete emotions include happiness, sadness, and fear since these arise from responses to more immediate situations and stimuli (i.e., close psychological distances; Liberman et al. 2007). Perhaps not surprisingly, these lower level, concrete emotions tend to be viewed as basic—feelings that are experienced universally from birth and in response to immediate needs (Ekman 1993; Plutchik 1981).

Study 1 explored whether emotions may indeed vary in their abstractness. We reasoned that people who experience more abstract versus concrete emotions should engage in a higher construal level and thereby should be more responsive to requests expressed at a higher versus lower construal level. Participants first wrote about an experience where they felt either proud or happy (i.e., abstract or concrete emotion). Subsequently they learned about a charity and were asked their willingness to make a donation—a request expressed at a high construal level, and to specify the precise amount they would donate—a request expressed at a low construal level. Participants also completed a BIF task, which directly assesses construal level (Vallacher and Wegner 1989). As expected, after participants had invoked the abstract emotion of pride versus the more concrete emotion of happiness, they were more willing to donate to the charity (a high level request) yet they committed a smaller dollar sum (a low level request). BIF results also showed after invoking pride versus happiness, participants construed data at a higher level.

Study 2 tests our theorizing more directly. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, where they experienced awe (abstract emotion) or happiness (concrete emotion) through a writing task, or engaged in a laddering exercise that prompted lower or higher level construal. Participants then read a blog reviewing a new brand of chocolate chips. One blog reader’s comments posted below the review described a recent experience at the target brand’s store where a clerk who prepared a customized box of chocolate shortchanged the consumer. The box was either severely or slightly underweight. If abstract (vs. concrete) emotions correspond with higher (vs. lower) construal levels, then participants in these conditions should be sensitive to the degree of unethical behavior displayed by the clerk. Indeed, Eyal, Liberman and Trope (2008) found that a higher (vs. lower) construal level led people to respond more favorably to moral virtues and less favorably to moral transgressions. Thus, we expected participants who had experienced awe (vs. happiness) or whose laddering task induced a higher (vs. lower) level construal would be harsher in their judgments of the chocolate company. Supporting our theorizing, in both conditions where construal level was expected to be high (but not where it was low), evaluations were less favorable when unethical behavior was more versus less severe.

Study 3 explored yet another abstract emotion and examined its influence on creativity. Prior evidence indicates that the use of relational (but not item-specific) processing can elevate creativity (Friedman and Forster 2001). Particularly pertinent, however, theorists also suggest that relational processing may partially underlie abstract thought because relational thinking facilitates identification of commonalities, which fosters the production of higher level abstractions (Hunt and Einstein 1981). Based on this logic, we expected that among individuals who experience either the abstract emotion, hopefulness, versus a concrete emotion, happiness, performance on a creativity task is likely to vary depending on whether individuals also receive a priming task that incites either no particular processing type (i.e., control condition), item-specific processing, or relational processing. Assuming that relational processing truly contributes to abstract thinking, several hypotheses follow. First, under control conditions, creativity should be higher among participants who experience hopefulness versus happiness. In addition, creativity among those who experience the abstract emotion of hopefulness should be higher if they receive a control prime versus an item-specific prime, but their creativity should be higher still if they receive a relational prime. On the other hand, people who experience the concrete emotion of happiness should exhibit equal and relatively low levels of creativity regardless of receiving a control or item-specific prime, but their creativity should be enhanced if they receive a relational prime. Study 3, which was designed to test these hypotheses, offered some support for each of these predictions. Implications of our findings are discussed in light of recent work in construal level theory and complex emotions.

“Benign Violations: Humor as a Mixed Emotional Experience”
A. Peter McGraw, University of Colorado, Boulder, USA
Caleb Warren, University of Colorado, Boulder, USA

Humor is frequently pursued by consumers and marketers but is not well understood by consumer researchers. We hypothesize that humor can be a mixed emotional experience. In five studies, we show that humor is aroused by benign violations and benign moral violations can elicit negative emotion as well as amusement.
Understanding humor is important for consumer research. Consumers seek humor in television, movies, and web content, while marketers attempt to deliver humor in feature entertainment (Martin 2007) and commercial interludes (Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004). Humor offers consumers hedonic benefits (Martin 2007) and helps attract attention and improve memory for marketing communications (Eisenst 2009; Krishnan and Chakravarti 2003).

Although humor is typically considered a positive emotional experience (Gervais and Wilson 2005; Martin 2007), several theories suggest that humor requires some sort of violation, such as a threat, a norm breach, or taboo content (Freud 1928; Gruner 1997; Veatch 1998). Building on ideas proposed by humor theorists (Koestler 1964; Rothbart 1973; Veatch 1998), we hypothesize that humor is aroused by violations that simultaneously seem benign. Because a violation is a necessary condition to elicit humor, we suspect that successful humor attempts may be accompanied by negative emotion. Indeed, situations that encourage multiple interpretations often elicit mixed emotions (Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo 2001; Larsen et al. 2004; Andrade and Cohen 2007). Using marketing and consumer behaviors considered wrong, we test whether benign violations similarly elicit mixed emotions. Because moral violations typically cause disgust (Chapman et al. 2009) benign moral violations may cause amusement and disgust.

Study 1 investigates consumers’ reactions to twelve morally questionable behaviors. For each scenario we constructed a control condition, describing a normal behavior, and a violation condition, describing a similar but potentially benign taboo behavior. In one scenario, for example, Jimmy Dean hires either a farmer (control) or a rabbi (violation) as a spokesperson for its pork products. Participants were more likely to respond to the violations with amusement (47% vs. 17%), disgust (58% vs. 10%), and mixed amusement and disgust (24% vs. 2%).

In Study 2 we observed behavioral responses rather than relying on self-report measures. An experimenter blind to condition was more likely to observe mixed emotional responses in participants’ exposed to a violation, a man snorting his dead father’s remains, than in participants exposed to a similar control behavior, a man burying his dead father’s ashes (19% vs. 3%).

The remaining studies examine ways a behavior can be appraised as both a violation and benign. Benign violations may occur when one norm suggests the behavior is wrong but another salient norm suggests it is acceptable. Consequently, behaviors that are wrong according to one moral norm but acceptable according to another should elicit mixed emotions. Conversely, behaviors forbidden by both norms should elicit only negative emotions. In study 3, participants read an adapted scenario about a man rubbing his genitals against his pet kitten (Schnall et al. 2008). The behavior violates a norm against bestiality. We manipulated whether the behavior also was acceptable according to another norm based on harm. In the harmless condition, the kitten “purs and seems to enjoy the contact.” In the harmful condition, the kitten “whines and does not seem to enjoy the contact.” Participants were equally disgusted by the two behaviors (94% vs. 94%). However, participants reported more amusement (61% vs. 28%) and mixed amusement and disgust (56% vs. 22%) in response to the harmless (vs. harmful) bestiality.

Consumers who are less committed to a moral norm have less at stake when that norm is violated. They may see the violation as benign and be both amused and disgusted. Conversely, consumers more committed to a moral norm should only be disgusted when that norm is violated. To test this hypothesis in Study 4, participants either read about a church (violation) or a credit union (control) that gives away a Hummer SUV as part of a promotion. Most consumers recognize that churches are sacred and should not be governed by the same market-pricing norms as credit unions, which are secular (McGrath, Schwartz, and Tetlock 2010). However, only churchgoers are likely to be committed to this norm. As predicted, most non-churchgoers were both amused and disgusted by a church giving away a Hummer (69%). Churchgoers were also disgusted, but less likely to be amused (35%). There were no differences in the control condition.

Psychological distance may reduce the threat posed by a violation thereby making the violation seem benign and thus amusing. Study 5 tests this hypothesis by priming either far or near distance before exposure to a violation or a control scenario. After plotting points far from or near one another on a Cartesian plane (Williams and Bargh 2008), participants read a scenario adapted from Haidt and colleagues (1993) in which a man either has sexual intercourse with (violation) or marinates (control) a chicken while eating it. Compared to participants who plotted points close together, participants who plotted points far apart were significantly more likely to respond to the violation with amusement (73% vs. 39%) and with mixed emotions of amusement and disgust (64% vs. 28%). No differences were present in the control condition.

“Choosing with Crying Smiles and Laughing Tears: The Dual Effects of Mixed Emotions on Variety Seeking”

Jiewen Hong, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China

Angela Y. Lee, Northwestern University, USA

This research examines the dual effects of mixed emotions on consumer variety seeking. Three experiments provide evidence that when people engage in affect regulation to reduce the conflicted feeling from mixed emotions, they seek less variety; however, people seek more variety when their focus is on the informational value of mixed emotions instead.

This research examines the influence of mixed emotions on decision making, and specifically, variety seeking. Following prior research (Ratner and Kahn 2002), variety seeking is conceptualized as the amount of variety chosen when selecting multiple items from a choice set on a single occasion. Building on the literature of affect regulation (e.g., Zillman 1988) and affect-as-information (e.g., Schwarz and Clore 1996), we argue that people’s motivation to regulate their affect may prompt those who experience mixed emotions to narrow their scope of consideration when they attempt to reduce the feeling of conflictedness, which would in turn steer them toward committing to fewer options and seeking less variety. However, mixed emotions may also signal to people that they have multiple goals, which would in turn broaden their scope of consideration and lead to their seeking more variety.

Experiment 1 tested the dual effects of mixed emotions on variety seeking by manipulating the extent to which people feel conflicted from mixed emotions. The rationale is that if people experience conflictedness from mixed emotions, they are more likely to engage in affect regulation, which would in turn lead to less variety seeking. However, when people do not feel conflicted from mixed emotions, they are more likely to rely on mixed emotions as informational input, leading to more variety seeking. To vary whether people feel conflicted from mixed emotions, we manipulated participants’ construal level: how abstractly or concretely they mentally represent information (Trope and Liberman 2003). We reason that mixed emotions would lead to less discomfort for those with high-level construals because they process information more inclusively and thus are better able to accommodate conflicts. Participants first completed a construal level manipulation in which they were asked to generate categories to which some objects belong (high-level construal induction), or exemplars of these ob-
The current research adds to the mixed emotions literature by proposing that the visual perspectives people employ in appraising a given self-control related situation can influence the relative intensities of the hedonic vs. self-conscious emotions they experience. Jones and Nisbett (1972) suggest that the salience of information about the internal states of actors and observers differ in that actors tend to focus on circumstances involved in a given situation, whereas observers tend to focus on the actor in the situation. We propose that this difference in salience of information can lead to differences in emotional appraisals of the same event as perceived by actors and observers. We conjecture that when making a choice of a vice over a virtue, actors might experience a stronger feeling of more immediate emotions such as happiness than observers whereas observers who see themselves choosing a vice over a virtue might experience relatively stronger self-conscious emotions such as guilt. Further, based on an ease of processing account (Schwarz 2004), we suggest that these hedonic and self-conscious emotions could facilitate/undermine the processing of emotional appeals in advertising.

Four experiments support these propositions. Participants took either an actor’s or an observer’s perspective to process a choice that led to mixed hedonic and self-conscious emotions, and reported the emotions they felt (experiments 1-2). Regardless of the choice, actors [observers] indicated more intense hedonic [self-conscious] emotions than observers [actors].

Experiments 2 to 4 demonstrated that (1) the use of visual perspectives could influence the impact of emotions in advertising, and (2) this effect was mediated by the ease of processing of the emotional appeals. Participants viewed appeals that described a choice in a self-control dilemma (either choosing a virtue over a vice or a vice over a virtue) and an emotion that one could experience about this choice. The emotion described was positive self-conscious (pride), negative self-conscious (guilt), positive hedonic (happiness), or negative hedonic (sadness). Participants took either an actor or an observer perspective to process the appeal. Across experiments, we operationalized visual perspectives and emotion appeals in different ways to rule out alternative explanations. Specifically, participants recalled a previous self-control situation using an actor vs. observer perspective and then saw an ad for an unrelated product (experiment 2), had their visual perspective induced and then saw an ad that cued a related product (experiment 3), or had
their visual perspective and emotion manipulated simultaneously by the same ad execution (experiment 4). Results consistently showed that the advertised product and the ad were evaluated more favorably when participants took an actor [observer] perspective than when they took an observer [actor] perspective to view a hedonic [self-conscious] emotion appeal. This effect was mediated by the ease of processing the emotional appeals, and was observed when the visual perspective was induced incidentally as well as integrally by the advertisement, and whether the advertisement was viewed subsequently or simultaneously.

Overall, results from these experiments shed new light on the role of situational factors (the nature of mixed emotions, and the use of visual perspectives to process events) in the experience and impact of mixed emotions on effectiveness of emotions appeals. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed in the session.