Humorous Complaining

Christina Kan, University of Colorado, USA
Caleb Warren, Bocconi University, Italy
A. Peter McGraw, University of Colorado, USA

We examine the audience, antecedents, and consequences of humorous complaining. Humorous complaints are more difficult than strict complaints for firms to control because humorous complaints are 1) more likely to be directed toward other consumers, 2) more enjoyable to consumers, and 3) more likely to go viral.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009295/volumes/v39/NA-39

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
When United Airlines was unresponsive to David Carroll’s complaint, he did what consumers are increasingly doing – he turned to the Internet. But rather than taking a strictly negative tone, the little-known musician and owner of a Taylor guitar broken during a United flight created a music video parody, “United Breaks Guitars.” His humorous complaint became an Internet sensation, spurring international media coverage and an immediate response from United (Deighton and Kornfeld 2010).

Humor refers to anything that threatens one’s belief about how things should be (Veatch 1998). Violations are seen as benign when the perceived threat also seems okay. Play fighting and tickling are prototypical examples of benign violations: both are physically threatening but harmless attacks (Gervais and Wilson 2005). In a similar manner, we suspect that unlike serious complaints, which only highlight a violation committed by a firm, humorous complaints also involve an element that makes the violation seem benign.

To derive our predictions, we draw on a theory that proposes that humor occurs when a violation is simultaneously perceived as benign (McGraw and Warren 2010). A violation refers to anything that threatens one’s belief about how things should be (Veatch 1998). Violations are seen as benign when the perceived threat also seems okay. Play fighting and tickling are prototypical examples of benign violations: both are physically threatening but harmless attacks (Gervais and Wilson 2005). In a similar manner, we suspect that unlike serious complaints, which only highlight a violation committed by a firm, humorous complaints also involve an element that makes the violation seem benign.

We present two studies that explore how the audience, antecedents, and consequences of humorous complaints differ from serious complaints.

1) **Audience.** Consistent with anecdotal evidence in the marketplace, we investigate whether consumers are more likely to complain humorously to other consumers rather than the offending firm or third party agencies. Consumers typically complain to firms and third party agencies in order to motivate reparative actions. Because humor softens criticism by suggesting the violation is benign (Keltner et al. 2001; McGraw and Warren 2010), humorous complaints may be less likely than serious complaints to prompt action. Thus, consumers should be more likely to direct humorous complaints to other consumers rather than firms or third-party agencies.

We randomly assigned members (N=83) of an online survey panel to imagine themselves in a hypothetical scenario depicting either an extreme or a mild customer service violation at a restaurant. In the extreme violation scenario, the patron receives the wrong order, the food is completely overcooked, and the waiter, who is very rude, does not rectify the mistake. In the mild violation scenario, the food is mildly overcooked, and the waiter eventually brings the correct order.

We asked participants how likely they would be to complain, both humorously and seriously (order counterbalanced), about their experience to the following audiences (1=Very Unlikely, 7 = Very Likely): 1) other consumers in person, 2) other consumers via the Internet, 3) the other consumers in person, 4) other consumers via the Internet, 5) the service provider, 6) a third-party agency, 7) not likely at all. Participants were asked to rate how likely they would be to complain, both humorously and seriously, about their experience to the following audiences (1=Very Unlikely, 7 = Very Likely): 1) other consumers in person, 2) other consumers via the Internet, 3) the service provider, 4) a third-party agency, 5) not likely at all.
firm, and 4) a third party agency. Although participants were likely to complain seriously directly to the firm ($M=3.9$), they were significantly more likely to complain humorously to other consumers, either in person ($M=4.2$) or via the Internet ($M=3.4$), than to a third party agency ($M=1.8$) or the firm ($M=1.6$).

**2) Antecedents.** In accordance with the benign violation theory, we expect that humor will be more prevalent in mildly negative than extremely negative experiences. Extremely negative experiences are less likely to be perceived as benign making it more difficult for consumers to complain about them in a humorous manner (McGraw et al. 2011).

We asked participants who read about the negative restaurant experience how easy or difficult it would be to recount their experiences in a humorous manner (1=Very Difficult, 7=Very Easy). Participants who read about a mildly negative experience reported that it would be easier to complain in a humorous manner than participants who read about an extremely negative experience ($M_{f/min}=4.83$, $M_{f/str}=3.91$).

**3) Consequences.** Because humor is attention getting, enjoyable, and memorable (Alden, Mukherjee and Hoyer 2000; Eisend 2009), we suspect that humorous complaints are more likely to go viral than serious complaints.

We asked 63 undergraduate students to read either a serious or humorous version of a letter complaining about a bank’s poor service. This letter was selected based on a search conducted by members of an online panel ($N=50$) asked to submit an example of the funniest consumer complaint that they could find on the Internet. Two research assistants blind to the study’s hypothesis ranked the written complaints based on their humor and selected the letter with the average highest ranking. One of the assistants then rewrote the complaint letter highlighting the same reasons but removing any humorous content.

Subjects read either the humorous or the serious version of the complaint. As expected, participants found the humorous version of the letter significantly more humorous than the serious version ($M_{4.9}$ humorous = $M_{n=3.2}$ non-humorous). Importantly, participants also enjoyed the humorous version significantly more ($M_{4.9}$ humorous = $M_{n=3.0}$ non-humorous) and, as a result, were more likely to share this version with other consumers ($M_{4.6}$ humorous = $M_{2.6}$ non-humorous). Our findings suggest that firms should be wary of consumers complaining humorously about their products and services. The spread of humorous complaints is more difficult for firms to control than the spread of serious complaints not only because the humorous complaints tend to be directed at other consumers, but also because their enjoyable nature makes them more likely to be circulated, thereby increasing the number of consumers exposed to negative information about the firm.

**REFERENCES**


**In the Aftermath of an Earthquake: The Interactive Role of Self-construal and Victim Group-Status in Charitable Behavior**

Rod Duclos, Hong Kong
The Hong Kong University of Science & Technology, Hong Kong
Alixandra Barasch, Wharton, University of Pennsylvania, USA

When a natural disaster strikes a community, consumers often face countless appeals to donate time or money to help the victims. Only a small percentage of people who view these advertisements, however, will investigate the cause further, and an even smaller percentage will end up offering resources to aid the rescue and rebuilding efforts. What factors influence whether individuals will help victims of natural disasters and other disadvantaged populations? The present research attempts to answer this question by investigating the interactive effects of self-construal and victim origin on prosocial behavior.

Fundamental to people’s emotional and cognitive responses, self-construal characterizes the extent to which one considers oneself separate from vs. connected with others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Hence, individuals vary on the self-construal continuum from interdependent to independent (Singelis 1994, Stapel and Koomen 2001). Because the interdependent self is more meaningful in the context of social relationships or as part of a larger social unit, one might expect interdependent (independent) individuals to be more (less) generous when faced with calls for help. Consistent with this view, several studies found positive correlations between interdependence and charitable behavior (Moorman and Blakely 2006; Eckstein 2001; Skarmeas and Shabbir 2011).