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Humorous Complaining

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Report Summary

Although nearly all marketing research on humor is related to advertising, the authors' inquiry highlights the importance of humor in a new context—consumer complaints. Understanding the effects of complaining is increasingly important as new media empowers consumers with greater reach. Peter McGraw, Caleb Warren, and Christina Kan bring together two previously unconnected topics, humor and complaining, to introduce the previously undocumented, yet not uncommon, phenomenon of humorous complaining.

Study 1 shows that humorous online reviews are more likely to express dissatisfaction than praise and that a substantial portion of negative reviews are perceived to be funny. The inquiry also examines people's differing reactions to humorous complaints and serious complaints.

Studies 2 – 5 reveal that humorous complaining is widely advantageous for the complaining consumer by increasing a complaint's reach while also overcoming negative attributions toward the complainer. Specifically, humor increases: (1) admiration for the complainer, (2) enjoyment of the complaint, (3) memory for the complaint, and (4) likelihood of sharing the complaint. However, because humor is typically associated with playful, non-threatening situations, it can blunt motivation to solve a problem. Studies 4 and 5 reveal that humorous complaining is a less effective way to obtain redress in customer service requests. People in customer service roles typically place lower priority on responding to humorous complains than serious complaints—despite their potential to reach a larger audience.

Indeed, when Dave Carroll famously took United Airlines to task with his humorous YouTube video, "United Breaks Guitars," his complaint attracted millions of views, thousands of tweets, and international media coverage. Facing a public relations disaster, United Airlines apologized to Carroll and offered him compensation in excess of his original claim. By understanding the threat of humorous complaints, managers may be able to identify the indirect threat and respond quickly to mitigate some of a humorous complaint's potential damage.

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“I should have flown with someone else or gone by car... ‘cause United breaks guitars.”

When United Airlines refused to compensate Dave Carroll for his damaged Taylor guitar, the musician did what many people are doing – he turned to the Internet to air his complaint. But rather than taking a strictly negative tone, his YouTube video, “United Breaks Guitars,” humorously parodied his negative experience with the company (Carroll 2009). The complaint attracted millions of views, thousands of tweets, and international media coverage. Facing a public relations disaster, United Airlines apologized to Carroll and offered him compensation in excess of his original claim (Ayres 2009; Deighton and Kornfeld 2010).

Although complaints express dissatisfaction, a deeper look reveals that they can also be humorous. We introduce the concept of *humorous complaining* and explore how it differs from its non-humorous (i.e., serious) counterpart. Drawing on interrelated streams of research, we suggest that humor and complaints are often elicited by the same situations. Further, we examine the effects of being humorous on the people exposed to the complaint and the implications for the complainer. When complaints are humorous, our studies show that other consumers are more likely to: 1) admire the complainer, 2) enjoy the complaint, 3) remember the complaint, and 4) share the complaint. Thus, humor helps the complaining consumer reach others in a manner perceived as witty instead of whiney. However, because humor is typically associated with fun settings and playful interactions, complaining humorously is less beneficial for consumers who want to motivate a party to right a wrong. Our studies examine how people in a customer service role place a lower priority on responding to humorous complaints than serious complaints. However, consistent with Dave Carroll’s story, we discuss when humorous complaining may indirectly help obtain redress by attracting a large audience.

Theoretical Background

Complaining

Whether due to bad weather, a rude salesperson, or an unmet brand promise, complaining is a common, important part of consumer experiences and social interactions (Alicke et al. 1992; Bearden and Teel 1983; Oliver 1980, 1987). Consistent with previous literature, we define a

complaint as a behavioral expression of dissatisfaction (Fornell and Westbrook 1979; Kowalski 1996; Landon 1980). People often complain to influence the perception and behavior of others. In consumption domains, people can garner sympathy, warn others, or exact revenge on a company by complaining to other consumers through word-of-mouth or social media (Day and Landon 1977; Richins 1983; Singh 1988; Ward and Ostrom 2006). Consumers can also hold others accountable for their actions or obtain redress by complaining directly to the responsible party or to a third party, such as the Better Business Bureau (Alberts 1988; Kowalski 1996). The potential benefits of complaining help explain why people sometimes complain even when they are satisfied (Kowalski 1996).

Complaining, however, is not always beneficial. People who complain frequently or about trivial matters are seen as grumpy and argumentative (Kaiser and Miller 2001; Kowalski 1996; Sperduto, Calhoun, and Ciminero 1978). Further, complaining may lead to conflict (when people disagree with the complainer) and social exclusion (for people who complain frequently or pointlessly; Forest and Wood 2012; Kowalski 1996). The potential costs of complaining help explain why people sometimes do not complain even when they are dissatisfied (Bearden and Oliver 1985; Day 1984; Day and Landon 1977; Richins 1983).

Humor

Humor, like complaining, is a common, important part of consumer experiences and social interactions (Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Martin 2007; Provine 2001). Consistent with prior literature, we define humor as a psychological response characterized by the positive emotion of amusement, the appraisal that something is funny, and the tendency to laugh (Gervais and Wilson 2005; Martin 2007; McGraw and Warren 2010). In this way, we describe humor operationally as an outcome rather than as an eliciting stimulus (i.e., a humor attempt; Warren and McGraw 2013a).

Although humor is a positive experience, the same negative, disappointing situations that trigger complaints also seem to be ripe sources of humor (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren and McGraw 2013b). Mark Twain observed, “The secret source of humor is not joy, it’s sorrow.” Greek philosophers believed that humor was associated with misfortune and vice (Morreall 1997; Plato 1975; Provine 2001). Historical causes of laughter include foolish behavior, mental illness, deformity, torture, and executions (Provine 2001), and insult, sarcasm,

and pain still elicit humor today (Keltner et al. 1998; Zillman 1983). Similarly, many humor theories suggest that humor arises, at least in part, from a negative antecedent (Warren and McGraw 2013b): another's failure (Gruner 1997), insult and suffering (Hobbes 1651; Zillman 1983), improper sexual and aggressive desires (Freud 1928), or threats to well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012; Veatch 1998).

Despite its potentially negative antecedents, humor offers many interpersonal benefits. Being humorous can help attract friendship and social support by easing critiques and entertaining others – especially during unpleasant situations (Dews, Kaplan, and Winner 1995; Fraley and Aron 2004). George Carlin observed, “Humor is a socially acceptable form of hostility and aggression.” A sense of humor is among the most desirable traits for friends, lovers, and strangers (Martin 2007; Sprecher and Regan 2002). Moreover, funny people are ascribed a vast range of positive characteristics: intelligence, friendliness, imagination, charm, and emotional stability (Cann and Calhoun 2001). Being humorous also offers instrumental benefits. People attend to, remember, and value humorous stimuli (Madden and Weinberger 1982; Schindler and Bickart 2012; Schmidt 1994, 2002). For example, people are inclined to attend social events that feature humorous invitations (Scott, Klein, and Bryant 1990). People are also more likely to share advertisements, videos, and news stories that elicit positive responses, especially humorous ones (Berger and Milkman 2012; Berger 2013). Humor even enhances the liking of ads, which people otherwise tend to find annoying (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000; Eisend 2009).

The aforementioned benefits notwithstanding, pursuing humor entails risks. Although generally a useful tactic to gain attention, improve memory, and increase liking, humorous content unrelated to a brand's central message can distract consumers and reduce their comprehension of the focal message (Duncan 1979; Eisend 2009; Krishnan and Chakravarti 2003). Moreover, failed attempts to be humorous can bore (e.g., a child's knock knock joke) or offend (e.g., a teen's dead baby joke; Beard 2005; McGraw and Warren 2010). Even successful humor attempts can evoke mixed emotional experiences (e.g., disgusting toilet humor; Hemenover and Schimmack 2007; McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren and McGraw 2013b), enforce a rigid or oppressive hierarchy (e.g., bullying; Keltner et al. 1998), or license discrimination and anti-social behavior (Ford et al. 2008).

Although humor appears to be triggered by negative situations, a review of humor research suggests that it is also closely associated with non-threatening, playful situations (e.g., tickling and play fighting; Eastman 1936; Gervais and Wilson 2005). Several theories highlight how humorous reactions are often associated with the appraisal that a situation is not threatening (Apter 1982; Martin 2007; Rothbart 1973), and describe laughter as a signal that a situation is safe or that an inappropriate act is not intended to be serious (Gervais and Wilson 2005; McGraw et al., 2012; Ramachandran 1998). Moreover, recent research highlights how humor may blunt motivation to respond to a problem. People are less likely to 1) comply with advice when it is delivered humorously (Bussiere 2009), 2) condemn immoral behavior after listening to humorous audio clips (Strohming, Lewis, and Myer 2011; Valdesolo and DeSteno 2006), and 3) judge a social issue as a problem after watching a humorous public service announcement (McGraw, Schiro, and Fernbach 2012).

Humorous Complaining

Moving beyond humor research in marketing that focuses predominantly on advertising (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Sternthal and Craig 1973), our inquiry highlights the influence of humor in another important marketing context – complaints. Although complaints express dissatisfaction, many highly publicized complaints are humorous. For example: When a Houston Double Tree hotel fails to honor a guaranteed reservation, two businessmen create a humorous PowerPoint presentation dubbed, “Yours is a Very Bad Hotel.” The document is widely spread by email and *The Wall Street Journal* and the *National Post* report the story.

While waiting on hold with Comcast, a cable repairman falls asleep in a customer’s home. The customer films the man sleeping, adds relaxing music to the scene, and posts it on YouTube (DoorFrame, 2006). The humorous video is viewed over 1.5 million times and the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* report the story.

On a Virgin Atlantic Airways flight, a passenger is disgusted by the food. He writes a public letter that humorously depicts his experience. The letter, which was widely spread by email, is published by *The Telegraph UK*, which dubbed it the “World’s best complaint letter” (see appendix A for evidence that all complaint on the list are humorous; The Telegraph 2009).

We define a humorous complaint as a behavioral expression of dissatisfaction that elicits a response characterized by the positive emotion of amusement, the appraisal that something is funny, and the tendency to laugh. Humorous complaining has likely existed since people first started complaining. Long before Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert were humorously complaining about politicians and the media, *Lysistrata*, the oldest documented satire, humorously criticized Greece's participation in the Peloponnesian War. Nowadays, Facebook and Twitter feeds are filled with witticisms and snarky comments about ill-behaved pop stars, poor cellular service, and drenching downpours. Consumers attempt to mobilize support and warn others by creating humorous revenge websites, such as *Untied.com*, which satirically refers to United Airlines as "an evil alliance member" (Ward and Ostrom 2006). Even marketers seek a competitive advantage by depicting humorous complaints about competitors (e.g., Wendy's famous "Where's the Beef?" campaign).

To develop an understanding of humorous complaining we examine its frequency in the marketplace and compare its effects relative to its non-humorous (i.e., serious) counterpart. Complaining has advantages and disadvantages, as does the pursuit of humor. We suspect that complaining humorously creates new advantages and disadvantages for the complaining consumer. Because humor facilitates memory and sharing behavior (e.g., Berger and Milkman 2012; Madden and Weinberger 1982), we propose that complaining humorously helps consumers extend the reach of their message. Specifically, we hypothesize that humorous complaints are more likely to be remembered and spread than serious complaints. Because being humorous is associated with positive feelings, good relationships, and entertainment (e.g., Martin 2007), humor may also help reduce people's tendency to react negatively to complainers. Therefore, we further hypothesize that perceiving humor in a complaint enhances consumers' evaluation of the complaint and of the complainer. Despite these advantages, humor may be less helpful in other ways. Because humor is associated with playfulness (suggesting a situation is safe or acceptable; Gervais and Wilson 2005; Martin 2007; McGraw and Warren 2010), humorous complaints may be a less effective means of obtaining redress directly. Consequently, we propose that humorous complaints will be less likely to prompt reparative action from an offending party than serious complaints.

Summary of Studies

Using online reviews, Facebook status updates, and complaint letters as stimuli, we compare humorous complaints to serious complaints. Study 1 shows that humorous online reviews from Yelp are not uncommon, particularly when a review expresses dissatisfaction (i.e., when it is a complaint). Studies 2 – 4 examine the effect of humor on consumers exposed to the complaint. Humorous complaining increases: 1) admiration for the complainer, 2) enjoyment of the complaint, 3) memory for the complaint, and 4) likelihood of sharing the complaint. Studies 4 – 5 examine how companies respond to humorous complaints about their product or service and find that consumer service agents place a lower priority on responding to humorous complaints than serious complaints.

Study 1: Yelp Reviews

Our initial examination of humorous complaints used a sample of online reviews to examine: 1) the relationship between negativity and humor and 2) the frequency of humorous complaints. Yelp, which hosts more than 42 million reviews (Yelp 2013), is like many online review sites that ask consumers to rate and write about their experience with businesses. The site is unique, however, because it allows readers to indicate whether a review is funny or not.

Method and results

Our first study analyzed a dataset that Yelp provides to academic researchers (Yelp 2012). The dataset contains 330,071 reviews written by 130,873 users for 13,490 businesses (e.g., restaurants, bars, spas) proximate to 30 US colleges and universities. We focus our analysis on two characteristics of individual reviews: 1) the star rating made by its writer (one through five), and 2) the number of times the review was judged funny by readers. (Reviews can also be judged as “cool” and “useful,” and thus our analysis controls for those variables.) If negative situations that trigger complaints are also good sources of humor, we should expect to find that reviews expressing greater dissatisfaction are more frequently judged to be funny.

Our initial analyses examined the relationship between star rating and humor after collapsing across businesses users, and reviews. As expected, negative reviews were more frequently judged as funny than positive reviews were (see Figure 1 following References). Consistent with our contention that humorous complaints are not rare, many negative Yelp

reviews were considered funny at least once. Of the 60,484 one or two stars reviews, 28% were rated as “funny” by at least one reader (compared to 20% of the 208,010 four or five star reviews in the dataset).

Tables and Figures follow References.

To provide a statistical test for the data, we fit a multilevel model with crossed random effects of users and businesses. We explored the effect of star rating on funny votes, controlling for the usefulness and coolness of a review. Reviews are treated as the unit of replication, with users and businesses partially crossed. We analyzed the following model for the number of funny votes for review i written by user j regarding business k .

$$\text{Funny Votes}_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{Star Rating}_{ijk} + \beta_2 * \text{Usefulness}_{ijk} + \beta_3 * \text{Coolness}_{ijk} + \mu_{0j} + \mu_{1j} \text{Star Rating}_{ijk} + \mu_{2j} \text{Usefulness}_{ijk} + \mu_{3j} \text{Coolness}_{ijk} + \mu_{0k} + \mu_{1k} \text{Star Rating}_{ijk} + \mu_{2k} \text{Usefulness}_{ijk} + \mu_{3k} \text{Coolness}_{ijk} + \varepsilon_{ijk}$$

Fixed effects are represented by β 's and the random effects are represented by the μ 's and ε . μ_{0j} represents the random deviation in intercept due to writer j , μ_{1j} represents the random deviation in star slopes due to writer j , μ_{2j} represents the random deviation in usefulness slopes due to writer j , and μ_{3j} represents the random deviation in coolness slopes due to writer j . The μ terms subscripted with k instead of j can be interpreted similarly, except that the random deviation is due to business k . ε_{ijk} represents the random error variation at the level of the individual review. The random intercept terms allow for non-independence in the data due to natural groupings of users and businesses by allowing the predicted values of the model to vary separately for each writer and business. The random slopes allow the effect of star rating, usefulness and coolness to vary by writer and business. To ease model estimation, random effects were treated as uncorrelated.

Reviews with lower star ratings received more funny votes, controlling for usefulness and coolness ($b = -.053$, Wald $Z = -51.05$, $p < .0001$, see Table 1, following References).

Finally, our own reading of the humorous complaints suggested that many appeared to be intentionally funny. To examine our observation more objectively, we collected the top 25 funniest one or two star reviews and asked two research assistants (blind to our hypotheses) to judge whether the complaint was intended to be humorous. The judges agreed that a majority (64%) of the reviews were intentionally humorous.

Discussion

Consumers were more likely to perceive reviews on Yelp as humorous when the review was negative (i.e., a complaint) rather than positive (i.e., praise). Moreover, the dataset revealed numerous instances of humorous complaints, many of which appeared to be intentionally funny. Although the data document the existence of humorous complaining, the dataset does not provide the information needed to examine differences between the influence of humorous and serious complaints on reach, liking, and responsiveness. Our remaining studies more directly examine the effects of complaining humorously on the people exposed to the complaint.

Study 2: Complaining on Facebook

We investigated differences between humorous complaints and serious complaints by asking students to complain either humorously or seriously in a status update on Facebook. The first phase of the study measured the number of likes and comments received by each complaint. The second phase of the study assessed the likelihood that observers would accept a friend request from the complainer, share the complaint, and remember the complaint.

Method

The study involved two phases. As part of a class assignment, we asked 75 undergraduate marketing students at a European university to post a complaint in a status update on their Facebook page. We randomly assigned participants to either a humorous complaint or a serious complaint condition. Participants assigned to the humorous condition read: “Complain about something, but complain in a humorous way. That is, describe something that went wrong or something bad that happened caused by nature, an institution, another person, or even yourself. The complaint can be about anything or

anyone, just as long as it is written in a humorous manner (i.e., the complaint should be funny and make people reading it laugh).”

Participants assigned to the serious condition read:

“Complain about something in a serious way. That is, describe something that went wrong or something bad that happened caused by nature, an institution, another person, or even yourself. The complaint can be about anything or anyone, just as long as it is written in a serious manner (i.e., the complaint should not be funny or make people reading it laugh).”

Topics of the status updates varied widely, as did the execution. For example, a student in the humorous condition, wrote, “Dear Italian men, Do you think cat-calling while riding on a vespa with another man will make you more likely to get some? Sincerely, Confused American.”

Twenty four hours after posting, participants recorded the number of their Facebook friends who “liked” the status update and the number of times friends commented on it. Finally, participants responded to individual difference measures, which we used as covariates in the analysis: number of Facebook friends, the number of times they visit Facebook in an average week, the number of status updates they post in an average week, the number of times they “like” or comment on someone else’s posting in an average week, and the approximate percentage of their status updates that elicit a response (either likes or comments).

In the second phase, undergraduate students from a US university read 64 of the status updates created during the first phase (order randomized; we excluded 11 status updates from the first phase because they were not written in English). We asked participants to respond as if the update had been “posted by someone you know who sent you a friend request on Facebook.” Half of the respondents rated 1) the extent to which they disagreed or agreed on seven-point scales that the status update “is funny,” “amuses me,” and “makes me laugh” ($\alpha = .92$, $n = 25$ raters), and 2) the extent to which the status update “is bad for the person posting it,” “is tragic,” and “is upsetting” ($\alpha = .86$, $n = 25$ raters). The other half of the respondents indicated on seven-point scales the likelihood that they would “like” the update, “share the update with others,” and “accept this person’s friend request” anchored by “very unlikely” and “very likely.”

Lastly, respondents in the second phase were asked to recall as many updates as they could and type each recalled status update into a text box. A research assistant blind to condition and the purpose of the study coded which status update most closely resembled the “recalled” update that the respondent entered into the text box. We calculated a “memorability” score for each status update by counting the number of times it was recalled.

Results

Phase 1: Friends’ responses. We omitted data from one participant for not following instructions and from one outlier whose complaint about an injured soccer star generated 64 comments (six standard deviations above the mean). Consistent with our prediction that humor helps make a favorable impression, humorous complaints elicited more likes than serious complaints ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 9.07$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 5.59$; $F(1,71) = 5.67$, $p < .05$; Cohen’s $d = .54$). Humorous and serious complaints elicited a similar number of comments ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 5.07$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 5.50$; $F(1,71) = .11$, NS; $d = .08$); likes and comments were uncorrelated ($r = .02$). To examine whether the effect of humor held when controlling for other variables, we entered the five individual difference variables reported by respondents (gender, number of friends, etc.) as covariates in a model predicting number of likes. The effect of the humor manipulation remained significant ($F(1,61) = 4.65$, $p < .05$), and of the covariates, only the number of friends predicted likes ($b = .009$, $F(1,61) = 23.84$, $p < .001$).

Phase 2: Observers’ Responses. Overall, the humor manipulation worked as intended. Status updates in the humorous complaining condition were perceived to be more humorous than the status updates in the serious complaining condition ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.47$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.39$; $F(1,60) = 42.08$, $p < .001$; $d = 1.31$). In addition to being perceived as more humorous, the humorous complaints were perceived to be less negative than the serious complaints ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.04$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.47$; $F(1,60) = 13.12$, $p < .001$; $d = .85$).

We assessed whether the judged intention to like the status updates in the second phase corresponded with the actual likelihood that people liked the status updates in the first phase. Consistent with the actual responses in phase 1 of the study, respondents in phase 2 indicated that they would be significantly more likely to “like” the humorous complaints than the serious complaints ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.80$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.23$; $F(1,60) = 11.20$, $p < .001$; $d = .81$). Moreover, likes (from phase 1) and intention to like (from phase 2) were significantly correlated ($r = .35$). In

sum, the responses in phase 2 also support the hypothesis that consumers enjoy humorous complaints more than serious complaints.

Next, we used the phase 2 responses to test our remaining predictions. Consistent with our prediction that complaining humorously helps cultivate a more favorable impression, respondents indicated that they would be more likely to accept a friend request from people who complained humorously rather than seriously ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.07$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.83$; $F(1,60) = 4.82$, $p < .05$; $d = .55$). Moreover, consistent with our hypothesis that humorous complaints are shared more frequently than serious complaints, respondents indicated that they would be more likely to share the humorous complaints ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 2.63$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 2.42$; $F(1,60) = 6.08$, $p < .05$; $d = .70$).

Finally, we examined whether humorous complaints were more memorable than serious complaints. Because the memory measure counted the number of times each complaint was recalled and was skewed (Kurtosis statistic = 1.79), we analyzed the memory data using a square-root transformation. Consistent with our hypothesis, respondents recalled humorous complaints more frequently than serious complaints ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 2.00$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 1.54$; $F(1,60) = 4.08$, $p < .05$; $d = .46$; see Table 2 following References for results).

Mediation. We defined humor as the response elicited in an observer rather than a property of the complaint itself, and within the humorous condition, some complaints were more humorous than others. Moreover, although our analyses revealed significant effects, the observed differences between humorous and serious complaints were not large. Therefore, we re-examined our findings testing whether perceived humor mediated the effect of the humor manipulation on the dependent measures. Perceived humor was significantly correlated with the number of times the complaint was actually liked ($r = .30$, $p < .05$) in phase 1 as well as the likelihood of liking the complaint ($r = .63$, $p < .001$), sharing the complaint ($r = .58$, $p < .001$), accepting the friend request from the complainer ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), and remembering the complaint ($r = .34$, $p < .01$) in phase 2. Moreover, bootstrapping tests (Preacher and Hayes 2008; Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010) using 1000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval indicated that perceived humor mediated the effect of the humor manipulation on the likelihood of liking the complaint (indirect effect = .58; 95% C.I. = .29 to 1.01), sharing the complaint (indirect effect = .28; 95% C.I. = .16 to .45), accepting the friend request (indirect effect = .26; 95% C.I. = .09 to .49), and remembering the complaint (indirect effect = .35; 95% C.I. = .00 to .79). In sum,

differences between humorous and serious complaints were largest when complaints attempting to be funny were actually perceived to be humorous.

Discussion

The study provided initial support for the prediction that being humorous provides benefits interpersonally (improving liking of the complainer) and instrumentally (increasing the reach of the complaint). Status updates featuring humorous complaints were liked more often by Facebook friends and rated as more likeable by outside observers. Observers were also more likely to indicate that they would share humorous complaints and accept friend requests from humorous complainers. Lastly, a recall task indicated that observers were more likely to remember humorous complaints.

Study 3: Reactions to Public Complaint Letters

To further explore people's enjoyment and sharing of humorous complaints, we examined responses to complaint letters posted on the internet. The study tested whether effects would replicate when consumers complain about disappointing products and services.

Method

Design and materials: We asked 165 undergraduate students (60% male) at a US university to respond to a letter that expressed dissatisfaction with a company. We randomly assigned participants to read one of four letters using a 2 (complaint: humorous, serious) x 2 (product replicate: feminine product, bank) between-subjects design. To avoid stimulus selection concerns, we asked people unaffiliated with the project to find and create the stimuli. A panel of workers on Amazon's mTurk (N = 50) sought humorous consumer complaints on the internet, then a research assistant blind to hypothesis screened the complaints, retaining only those that seemed intentionally humorous, were created by consumers, and involved a real product or service. The research assistant rated the remaining complaints using a five-point scale anchored by 1 = slightly humorous and 5 = extremely humorous. The most humorous complaint was a letter describing a marketing message on a feminine product wrapper. The second most

humorous complaint was a letter describing a bank customer who was dissatisfied with an overdraft charge and poor customer service. In order to create non-humorous versions of the two most humorous complaints, we asked another research assistant (also blind to hypotheses) to remove humorous elements from the complaints while keeping the length and content of the letter similar. Below, we present selected portions of the letters to illustrate how the humorous and serious executions differed (appendix B contains the complete letters):

Humorous Stimuli – Feminine Product

I have been a loyal user of your ‘Always’ maxi pads for over 20 years and I appreciate many of their features. Why, without the Leak Guard Core or Dri-Weave absorbency, I’d probably never go horseback riding or salsa dancing, and I’d certainly steer clear of running up and down the beach in tight, white shorts.

Serious Stimuli – Feminine product

I have been a loyal user of your ‘Always’ maxi pads for over 20 years and I appreciate many of their features. Because of the Leak Guard Core and Dri-Weave absorbency, I actually feel comfortable going dancing and jogging during my period, and when I work out at my neighborhood recreation center or do yoga, I don’t need to worry about leakage.

Humorous Stimuli – Bank

Please allow me to level the playing field even further. When you call me, you will now have a menu of options on my new voice mail system to choose from... 1. To make an appointment to see me. 2. To query a missing payment. 3. To transfer the call to my living room in case I am there. 4. To transfer the call to my bedroom in case I am sleeping. 5. To transfer the call to my toilet in case I am attending to nature...

Serious Stimuli – Bank

Please allow me to give you a summary of what a customer of yours must go through simply to talk to a customer service employee, to transfer money, or to simply do anything involving their own bank account. When I call your bank, I have a menu of options on the voice mail system to choose from... 1. To make an appointment to see a personal banker. 2. To query a

missing payment. 3. To transfer the call to a teller. 4. To transfer the call to customer service. 5. To transfer the call to a personal banker...

Procedure: We randomly assigned participants to read one of the four complaint letters. Participants then answered a series of questions on seven-point scales assessing their likelihood of sharing the complaint (“If you received this review in an email, how likely would you be to forward it along to someone else?” Extremely unlikely - Extremely likely), their attitude towards the complainer (“What is your attitude towards the person who wrote the review?” Negative-Positive, Unfavorable-Favorable; $r = .95$), and enjoyment of the complaint (“How much did you enjoy reading this review?” Not at all - Very Much). We also assessed perceptions of humor as a manipulation check (“How funny do you think this review is?” Not at all funny-Very Funny, Not at all humorous-Very Humorous; $r = .95$).

Results

Manipulation Check: The humor manipulation worked as intended. Participants considered the humorous versions of the complaint letter funnier than the serious versions ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.98$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.10$; $F(1,161) = 45.25$, $p < .001$; $d = 1.06$), and this was true both for the feminine product letter ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 5.02$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.36$; $F(1,161) = 17.89$, $p < .001$; $d = .95$) and the bank letter ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.93$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 2.86$; $F(1,161) = 27.94$, $p < .001$; $d = 1.17$). The interaction between the humor manipulation and product category was not significant ($F(1,161) = 0.53$, $p = .47$).

Dependent Variables: We tested our predictions by analyzing attitude towards the complaint, attitude towards the complainer, and likelihood of sharing the complaint as dependent variables in separate 2 (complaint: humorous, serious) x 2 (product: feminine product, bank) ANOVA models. In each case, we observed similar effects across the product replicates. Because the product replicate factor did not interact with the humor manipulation ($ps > .20$), we collapse across this factor in subsequent analyses (see Table 3 following References for complete descriptive statistics).

Consistent with our predictions about how humor will enhance liking, respondents reported higher enjoyment of the humorous complaints than the serious complaints ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.60$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.00$; $F(1,163) = 27.25$; $p < .01$; $d = .82$), and similarly reported a more positive

attitude towards a humorous complainer than a serious one ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.52$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.65$; $F(1,163) = 8.69$, $p < .01$; $d = .46$). Respondents also reported being more likely to share the humorous complaint than the serious complaint ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.65$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 2.87$; $F(1,163) = 5.66$, $p < .05$; $d = .37$; Table 3 following References)

Mediation. As in the previous study, we also examined the relationship between perceptions of humor and the dependent measures. Consistent with the idea that a humorous complaint is most effective when it is actually perceived to be humorous, perceived humor was significantly correlated with enjoyment of the complaint ($r = .64$, $p < .001$), attitude towards the complainer ($r = .32$, $p < .001$), and likelihood of sharing the complaint ($r = .27$, $p < .01$). Bootstrapping tests (Preacher and Hayes 2008; Zhao et al. 2010) also indicated that perceived humor mediated the effect of the humor manipulation on enjoyment of the complaint (indirect effect = 1.16; 95% C.I. = .79 to 1.62), attitude towards the complainer (indirect effect = .50; 95% C.I. = .18 to .91), and likelihood of sharing (indirect effect = .46; 95% C.I. = .12 to .87).

Discussion

The study provided additional evidence that complaining humorously is beneficial interpersonally (increasing liking) and instrumentally (increasing sharing). Moreover, the effects were most pronounced when the reader actually found the complaint humorous.

Study 4: Prioritizing Social Media Complaints

Thus far, our studies have demonstrated two benefits of complaining humorously: humorous complaints are more likely to be shared and reach a larger audience, and humor helps mitigate the negative effects of complaining on perceptions of the complainer. Despite the advantages, however, complaining consumers may want to avoid humor in some situations. Because humor signals that a situation is non-threatening, we predict that firms will respond less promptly to humorous complaints.

Consumers are increasingly likely to complain by microblogging on social media platforms. Therefore, we used status updates on a social networking platform as a context to

assess whether managers respond less promptly to complaints that are humorous rather than serious. We created a sample of complaints by asking people to complain about negative experiences at a restaurant. Then, we asked respondents with a range of work experience to indicate how they would respond to a pair of complaints about a restaurant if they were the restaurant's manager. Prioritizing a response to a humorous complaint or a serious complaint resembles choices that managers often face – confronting multiple complaints, often serious and occasionally humorous, and deciding which to address first.

Method

The first phase of the study created a sample of humorous and serious complaints. Sixty undergraduate business students (97% who report using Facebook) read about two negative dining experiences: 1) a friend receiving an overcooked piece of steak and rude service at Zoe's Bistro, and 2) finding a hair in a pasta dinner at Claire's Kitchen (see appendix C for a description of the incidents). Participants wrote two separate status updates complaining about the two experiences - one in a humorous way ("write a brief status update that readers are likely to laugh about and consider humorous") and the other in a serious way ("write a brief status update that readers are unlikely to laugh about or consider humorous"). We counterbalanced whether respondents wrote the humorous update about the first or second restaurant.

A second phase identified complaint pairs in which the humorous and serious complaints elicited different levels of perceived humor but similar levels of negativity. Respondents from Amazon's mTurk (N = 81) rated the humor perceived in each of the 60 complaints about one of the two restaurants using three agree/disagree scale items: "the status update is funny," "I am amused by the status update," and "the status update makes me laugh." Respondents also indicated the extent to which the complaints were negative on three agree-disagree scale items ("the status update says negative things about the restaurant," "the status update makes the restaurant sound bad," and "the person writing the status update has a negative opinion about the restaurant;" all items used seven-point scales). Based on the ratings from the mTurk respondents, we selected the two complaint pairs written by the undergraduate participants that differed the most in terms of perceived humor, but did not differ in negativity. Thus, each pair of humorous and serious complaints came from the same undergraduate participant; moreover, the humorous and serious complaints were perceived to differ in terms of humor but not in terms of negativity.

One pair included a humorous complaint about the first restaurant and a serious complaint about the second restaurant (P1 in Table 4 following References), whereas the other pair included a serious complaint about the first restaurant and a humorous complaint about the second (P2 in Table 4 following References).

We used the two pairs (P1 & P2) of complaints as the stimuli in the focal study, which included a different sample of 105 workers from Amazon's mTurk. Participants from the mTurk sample represented different roles within the workforce, and many worked either in professional (executive, managerial, administrative, sales, etc.: 50%) or service positions (16%). Participants read that they were completing a study on social media and were asked to take the perspective of a restaurant manager who is "checking the Internet to see what customers are saying about [the] restaurants on Facebook." Next participants read two status updates (either P1 or P2) complaining about two of the restaurants that they ostensibly managed. One of the complaints was humorous and one of the complaints was serious. Depending on randomly assigned condition, the humorous complaint either criticized Zoe's Bistro (P1) or Claire's Kitchen (P2). Thus, the study used a 2 (complaint humor: humorous, serious) x 2 (complaint pair: P1, P2) mixed design with complaint humor as a within-subjects factor and complaint pair as a between-subjects factor. Complaint pair served as a replicate to increase our confidence that differences between responses to the humorous and serious complaints would generalize beyond a specific pair of humorous and serious complaints. The critical test investigated whether the mTurk workers playing the role of a restaurant manager would prioritize responding to the humorous complaint or to the serious complaint.

Respondents first indicated which of the two status updates they would prioritize on two comparative measures, "Which status update do you think is more important to respond to or address?" and "Which restaurant will you try to improve first?" ($\alpha = .80$; $r = .66$). Next, they indicated the importance of responding to the two complaints – first the complaint about Zoe's Bistro, then the complaint about Claire's Kitchen – on three agree-disagree measures: "I would try to reimburse the customer for his negative experience at the restaurant," "I would do anything in my power to make it up to the consumer who posted the update," and "I would make responding to this customer my top priority" (seven-point scales; $\alpha_{\text{Serious}} = .88$, $\alpha_{\text{Humorous}} = .90$).

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We analyzed the data by comparing responses to the humorous complaint with responses to the serious complaint. As hypothesized, the comparative measures revealed that participants placed a lower priority on addressing the humorous complaint than the serious complaint, as only 40% prioritized responding to the humorous complaint over the serious complaint ($t = -2.40, p < .05$; critical value = 50%). The tendency to prioritize addressing the serious complaint generalized across the two complaint pairs, as the effect of complaint pair was not significant ($F(1,103) = 2.74, NS$). A 2 (complaint humor: humorous, serious) x 2 (complaint pair: P1, P2) repeated-measures ANOVA using the non-comparative measures of prioritization further confirmed that participants in the role of manager placed a lower priority on addressing the humorous complaint than the serious complaint ($M_{\text{Humorous}} = 3.75, M_{\text{Serious}} = 4.17; F(1, 102) = 17.00, p < .001$). Again, the tendency to prioritize the serious complaint did not depend on which complaint pair the respondents viewed, as indicated by a non-significant interaction between complaint humor and complaint pair ($F(1, 102) = .35, NS$). The tendency to prioritize responding to serious complaints over humorous complaints occurred regardless of the participants' position in the workforce; participants who work professional jobs responded similarly to participants with non-professional jobs on both the comparative ($F(1,103) = .46, NS$) and non-comparative ($F(1,102) = 1.90, NS$) measures of prioritization.

Discussion

Study 4 provides initial evidence that humorous complaints prompt less reparative action than serious complaints, as people in a management role prioritized addressing a serious complaint over a humorous complaint.

Study 5: Revisiting Complaint Letters

Our final study provides another test of whether humor reduces the tendency to respond to a complaint. Because study 4 employed a joint evaluation of humorous and serious complaints, which may have sensitized respondents to differences, we used a separate evaluation in which respondents saw only a humorous or a serious complaint (Hsee and Leclerc 1998). We

asked business students to act as a manager and prioritize a humorous or serious complaint letter. The study also manipulated whether the complaint letter was private (sent directly to the firm) or public (posted online) as an exploratory factor that examines sensitivity to the public relations implications of humorous complaints. If marketers perceive humorous complaints to be more playful and less severe, we would expect them to prioritize serious complaints over humorous ones, in general. However, if marketers recognize that humorous complaints are more likely to be shared with others, we would expect attenuated differences in reactions to humorous versus serious complaints when the audience is public.

Method

We randomly assigned 118 undergraduate business students (70% male) to one of four conditions in a 2 (complaint: humorous, serious) x 2 (audience: public, private) between-subjects design. Participants read that the study would be investigating how managers make decisions regarding consumer complaints. We asked participants to take the role of a customer relations manager at a bank who needed to decide how to prioritize a number of tasks, including responding to a consumer complaint letter that had either been emailed directly to the company (private condition) or posted on a website (public condition). Specifically, participants read: “Imagine that you are currently employed in the communications division of a large US bank. You head up a small 3-person team specializing in managing customer relations. Your responsibilities include overseeing your fellow team members, spearheading new customer relations initiatives, managing public opinion, and essentially, overseeing the customer relations efforts for your company. Imagine that you get in to work one morning, and find yourself confronted with a long list of tasks to take care of, all of which need to be done today. This list includes:

- Writing up a report for your boss on your most recent initiative
- Planning a meeting with your team members to discuss responsibilities for the next phase of your new project
- Researching the most recent social media programs and figuring out how to take advantage of them
- Submitting end of month expense reports to accounting

In addition, one of the employees you supervise brings the following issue to your attention. A disgruntled customer has recently [posted the following 'open letter' on a consumer reviews website / emailed the following letter to the bank].

Participants read the complaint letter, which was either the humorous or serious complaint about the bank described in study 3. Next, we measured participants' rating of task priority by asking them, "How important do you think it is that you respond to this letter before you break for lunch today?" (Least important—Most important), and "How would you prioritize responding to the letter relative to the other tasks you need to accomplish?" (Lowest priority – Highest priority; seven-point scales; $r = .81$). Subsequently, we measured participants' personal reactions to the complaint letter, including the extent to which they considered the letter memorable ("How memorable is the letter?"), enjoyable ("How enjoyable was it for you to read the letter?"), and humorous ("How funny did you find this letter?"). We also measured their likelihood of sharing the complaint ("How likely would you be to tell your co-workers about the letter, just for fun?") as well as their intuitions about the eventual reach of the complaint letter ("How likely will other customers find out about the letter?"). The measures used seven-point scales anchored by "not at all" and "very." Question order was random. We removed seven participants who failed to follow instructions. The effective sample was 111 participants.

Results

The manipulation check confirmed that participants found the humorous version of the letter funnier than the serious version ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.81$, $M_{\text{Serious}} = 2.88$; $F(1,107) = 31.75$, $p < .001$; $d = 1.08$). Perceptions of humor did not depend on whether the complaint was private or public ($M_{\text{Private}} = 3.5$, $M_{\text{Public}} = 4.12$; $F(1,107) = 2.34$, $p = .13$; $d = .31$) and the audience by humor interaction was not significant ($F(1,107) = 1.51$, $p = .22$).

In order to examine how the business students would prioritize responding to a humorous complaint relative to a serious complaint, we entered priority as the dependent variable in a 2 (complaint: humorous, serious) x 2 (audience: private, public) ANOVA. Not surprisingly, there was a significant main effect of audience, such that participants placed a higher priority on responding to the complaint when it was public rather than private ($M_{\text{Public}} = 4.61$; $M_{\text{Private}} = 3.94$;

$F(1,107) = 4.65, p < .05; d = .38$). Interestingly, the analysis also revealed a significant main effect of humor. Consistent with the idea that humor signals that a situation is not threatening, participants placed a lower priority on responding to the humorous complaint than the serious complaint (main effect: $M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.87, M_{\text{Serious}} = 4.67; F(1,107) = 6.39, p < .05; d = .47$) both when the complaint letter was posted on a public website ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.07, M_{\text{Serious}} = 5.16; F(1,107) = 5.83, p < .05; d = .62$) and when the letter was addressed directly to the company, although the latter difference was not statistically significant ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.64, M_{\text{Serious}} = 4.19; F(1,107) = 1.39, p = .24; d = .34$; complaint x audience interaction $F(1,107) = .70, p = .41$). In sum, even when a complaint letter was publicly visible, customer service agents were less likely to respond to the complaint when it was humorous rather than serious.

Next, we examined participants' personal reactions to the complaint letter. Replicating our previous studies, participants enjoyed reading the humorous complaint more than the serious complaint ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.93, M_{\text{Serious}} = 2.63; F(1,107) = 9.18, p < .01; d = .71$). They also reported that the humorous complaint would be more memorable ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 5.39, M_{\text{Serious}} = 4.75; F(1,107) = 4.32, p < .05; d = .41$) and reported a higher likelihood of sharing the humorous complaint than the serious complaint ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 4.76, M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.70, F(1,107) = 9.18, p < .01; d = .59$). These differences held irrespective of whether the complaint letter was public or private (complaint x audience interactions: $F(1,107) < 1, \text{NS}$).

Finally, we assessed participants' intuition about the eventual reach of the complaint letter. Despite finding the humorous complaint more memorable and reporting a higher likelihood of personally sharing the complaint, participants did not believe that the humorous complaint would reach more consumers ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.33, M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.47; F(1,107) = .28, p = .60; d = .09$). Participants recognized that more customers would see the complaint letter when it was public than private ($M_{\text{Private}} = 3.13, M_{\text{Public}} = 3.67; F(1,107) = 3.18, p = .08; d = .34$) but did not foresee the complaint letter reaching more customers when it used humor regardless of whether it was posted on a public website ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.52, M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.82, F(1,107) = 0.52, p = .47; d = .19$) or sent in a private email ($M_{\text{Humor}} = 3.12, M_{\text{Serious}} = 3.14, F(1,107) = .002, p = .97; d = .01$; see Table 5 following References for results). In sum, when asked to play the role of a customer service agent, business students did not see the potential danger of a humorous complaint and responded to it less urgently than a similar serious complaint.

Discussion

Business students taking the role of a customer service professional found humorous complaints more enjoyable, memorable, and worthy of sharing than serious complaints. Nonetheless, these same students placed a lower priority on responding to humorous complaints than serious complaints. The recognition that humorous complaints are more enjoyable and more memorable may not necessarily translate into higher awareness for the public relations implications of humorous complaints. Ignoring negative word-of-mouth is dangerous for firms because of its influence on consumer behavior (Haywood 1989).

Studies 4 and 5 collectively show that humorous complaints are less likely to elicit apologies, refunds, and other reparative actions irrespective of whether the complaints are expressed in brief status updates or lengthy letters, whether the complaints are evaluated jointly or separately and whether the participants work in professional or non-professional positions or are obtaining a degree in business and management.

General Discussion

Complaints express dissatisfaction, but sometimes they create a bit of levity. Humor and complaining are natural compliments because they often arise from the same kinds of situations – boring presentations, delayed flights, or terrible meals. Great thinkers in scholarship and entertainment – Plato, Socrates, Hobbes, Twain, Freud – have noted humor’s negative antecedents. The results from study 1 point to a similar conclusion; an analysis of Yelp reviews revealed that negative consumer reviews were rated funnier than positive reviews.

Understanding the implications of complaining is increasingly important as new media empowers consumers with greater reach and influence in the marketplace (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009). However, to be successful consumers must find a way to stand out in the cluttered world of social media. We illustrate one way to obtain reach and influence: be humorous. Specifically, we find that consumers are more likely to remember humorous complaints (study 2) and share them with others (studies 2, 3, and 5). Complaining humorously

also decreases the risk of making a bad impression on others. Consumers hold a more favorable view of complainers (studies 2 and 3) and are more likely to express liking for status updates (study 2) and letters (studies 3 and 5) that complain humorously rather than seriously.

Firms typically prefer to directly field and resolve complaints, as complaint resolution can prevent customers from defecting or spreading negative word-of-mouth (Andreassen 1999; Blodgett and Anderson 2000; Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987; Gilly and Gelb 1982; Richins 1983; but see Dunn and Dahl 2012). Yet, despite their potential to reach a larger audience, humorous complaints are less likely to motivate a response from a firm than non-humorous complaints. Workers in an online labor market acting as restaurant managers were less likely to respond to status updates that complained humorously rather than seriously (study 4), and business students acting as bank managers placed a lower priority on responding to a complaint letter when the complaint was humorous rather than serious (study 5).

Although our studies show that humorous complaining inhibits a direct response from the offending party, we suspect that in other circumstances complaining humorously may be indirectly helpful. In situations when a consumer is interacting in conversation with a customer service agent, humorous complaining could facilitate liking and thus facilitate cooperation with a request. Also, humor may indirectly motivate a firm to address the problem by increasing the reach of the complaint. As David Carroll's "United Breaks Guitars" complaint illustrates, the attention – especially from the media – generated by a humorous complaint can motivate even the most unresponsive firms to right a wrong (Deighton and Kornfeld 2010).

Implications and Future Direction

Despite an extensive history of inquiry, philosophers, scientists, and entertainers continue to debate the antecedents of humor (Martin 2007). The marketing literature draws predominantly on incongruity-resolution theory, which suggests that humor occurs when one makes sense of or resolves something that initially seems unexpected (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993; Alden et al. 2000; Woltman Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004). Incongruity-resolution account effectively explains humor when there is a set up followed by a punchline, as is common in jokes and advertisements. However, the theory has more difficulty explaining why satire, irony, and sarcasm present in complaints will elicit humorous reactions (Martin 2007; Ritchie 2004).

A benign violation account of humor, recently introduced in the psychology literature (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012; Rozin et al. 2013), readily explains humor across a broad range of ways that people complain humorously. The account holds that humor occurs when something perceived to threaten a person's well-being, identity, or normative belief structure (i.e., a violation) simultaneously seems okay or acceptable (i.e., benign; McGraw and Warren 2010; Veatch 1998). Play fighting and tickling are prototypical examples of benign violations because both are physically threatening but harmless attacks (Gervais and Wilson 2005). Sarcasm – saying one thing but meaning the opposite – also fits the account by breaking a common conversational norm (violation), but communicating the intended meaning through other cues, such as an exaggerated tone (benign). From a benign violation perspective, a humorous complaint occurs when the complainer transforms something that is wrong (and thus dissatisfying) into something okay. Accordingly, humor can be associated with negative antecedents *and* non-serious situations – thus explaining why humorous complaints cause liking but also blunt motivation to solve a problem.

Reappraising a source of dissatisfaction (i.e., a violation) as benign helps explain the oft observed connection between humor and coping (Martin 2001; 2002). Historical records indicate that people suffering great misfortune, such as holocaust victims and prisoners of war, use humor as a way to maintain mental health (Ford and Spaulding 1973; Frankl 1984; Henman 2001). Clinical research similarly suggests that humor can be an effective way to deal with grief (Keltner and Bonnano 1997) and pain (Cogan et al. 1987; Weaver and Zillman 1994; Weisberger, Tepper, and Schwarzwald 1995; Zillman et al. 1993). Connecting humor and coping is of particular interest because people complain with the intention of feeling better (Alicke et al. 1992). Complaining helps people cope with negative experiences by alleviating the detrimental effects of suppressing negative thoughts and feelings (Alicke et al. 1992; Engell, Blackwell, and Miniard 1993; Gross and Levenson 1997; Gross 1998; Kowalski 1996; Nyer 1999; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster 1998). We suspect that complaining humorously may be an especially helpful means to cope by 1) creating positive affect, which helps buffer against pain, stress, and adversity (Fredrickson 1998; Martin 2002), 2) facilitating reappraisals of the situation into something less negative (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012; Samson and Gross 2012), and 3) increasing social support by entertaining people and not pushing them away (Cohen and Wilson 1985; see Martin 2002).

Given the potential benefits of complaining humorously, why don't people don't do it more often? One reason is that being funny is difficult. Comedians take years to hone their craft. Sitcoms are regularly cancelled. Hit comedy films often bomb outside their narrow demographic. Indeed, people differ vastly in what they find humorous, which makes it difficult to be a universally funny person (Ruch 1998). Another reason consumers may fail to be humorous is they are so highly dissatisfied that they cannot see the problem as okay or they don't think that humor is appropriate for the situation. An opportunity for future research would be to identify ways to help consumers better use humor in their complaints and other social interactions.

Another opportunity for future research would be to explore how humorous complaints influence consumers' attitudes towards the brand or firm targeted in the complaint. One possibility is that because humor makes the complaint seem playful and less serious, humorous complaints may have a less harmful influence on brand attitude than serious complaints. However, the influence of humor on attitude and persuasion is complicated; studies in other domains have reported inconsistent effects and many moderating factors (Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Martin 2007; Sternthal and Craig 1973; Warren and McGraw 2013b). Therefore, it seems unlikely that humor would consistently benefit or damage consumers' impression of a brand. Recent research on the effects of humorous marketing on brand attitude suggests that the effect of a humorous complaint (relative to a serious complaint) on brand attitude may depend on the specific way that the complaint evokes humor and on whether the humorous complaint seems more or less negative than the serious complaint (Warren and McGraw 2013b).

Conclusion

United breaks guitars. Comcast employees sleep on the job. The Double Tree Hotel won't hold your reservation. In response, disgruntled consumers are cutting through a cluttered marketplace by humorously expressing their dissatisfaction in a way that entertains others. Our inquiry serves as an initial step to viewing humorous complaints as a tool that empowers consumers to call unresponsive brands to the attention of other consumers and the media.

Appendix 1:

Empirical analysis of humorous responses to the Telegraph's top 5 complaint letters

We asked participants whether they found the 'Top 5 best complaint letters' letters published by the Telegraph to be humorous.

Design and Procedure. One-hundred and twenty-one participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mTurk) participated. Respondents were randomly assigned to read one of three letters and judged the degree they found the letter to be humorous (Is this letter: Not funny, Somewhat funny, Very funny) and the degree it made them laugh (Did this letter make you laugh? Not at all, A little, A lot).

Materials. The Telegraph's Top 5 Best Complaint Letters consisted of 1) a consumer complaint letter directed to Chrysler, 2) a consumer complaint letter directed to Continental Airlines, 3) a consumer complaint letter directed to NTL Cable, 4) a letter written by an Inland Revenue customer service agent to a customer and 5) a letter written by a citizen to the government. Because our inquiry focuses on complaint letters written by consumers, we limited our test to the first three letters.

Table 1.

Is this letter:

Letter	Not funny	Somewhat funny	Very funny
Chrysler	7%	68%	24%
Continental Airlines	21%	51%	28%
NTL	22%	43%	35%
Grand Total	17%	55%	29%

Table 2.

Did this letter make you laugh?

Letter	Not at all	A little	A lot
Chrysler	22%	51%	27%
Continental Airlines	23%	56%	21%
NTL	30%	43%	27%
Grand Total	25%	50%	25%

Appendix 2:

Stimuli for the Four Conditions Presented in study 3.

Humorous condition – Feminine Product

Dear Mr. Thatcher,

I have been a loyal user of your ‘Always’ maxi pads for over 20 years and I appreciate many of their features. Why, without the Leak Guard Core or Dri-Weave absorbency, I’d probably never go horseback riding or salsa dancing, and I’d certainly steer clear of running up and down the beach in tight, white shorts.

But my favorite feature has to be your revolutionary Flexi-Wings. Kudos on being the only company smart enough to realize how crucial it is that maxi pads be aerodynamic. I can’t tell you how safe and secure I feel each month knowing there’s a little F-16 in my pants.

Have you ever had a menstrual period, Mr. Thatcher? Ever suffered from ‘the curse’? I’m guessing you haven’t. Well, my time of the month is starting right now. As I type, I can already feel hormonal forces violently surging through my body.

Just a few minutes from now, my body will adjust and I’ll be transformed into what my husband likes to call ‘an inbred hillbilly with knife skills.’ Isn’t the human body amazing?

As Brand Manager in the Feminine-Hygiene Division, you’ve no doubt seen quite a bit of research on what exactly happens during your customers monthly visits from ‘Aunt Flo’. Therefore, you must know about the bloating, puffiness, and cramping we endure, and about our intense mood swings, crying, jags, and out-of-control behavior. You surely realize it’s a tough time for most women. In fact, only last week, my friend Jennifer fought the violent urge to shove her boyfriend’s testicles into a George Foreman Grill just because he told her he thought Grey’s Anatomy was written by drunken chimps. Crazy!

The point is, sir, you of all people must realize that America is just crawling with homicidal

maniacs in Capri pants... Which brings me to the reason for my letter.

Last month, while in the throes of cramping so painful I wanted to reach inside my body and yank out my uterus, I opened an Always maxi-pad, and there, printed on the adhesive backing, were these words: 'Have a Happy Period.'

Are you ----- kidding me? What I mean is, does any part of your tiny middle-manager brain really think happiness - actual smiling, laughing happiness, is possible during a menstrual period? Did anything mentioned above sound the least bit pleasurable? Well, did it, James?

FYI, unless you're some kind of sick S&M freak girl, there will never be anything 'happy' about a day in which you have to jack yourself up on Motrin and Kahlua and lock yourself in your house just so you don't march down to the local Walgreen's armed with a hunting rifle and a sketchy plan to end your life in a blaze of glory.

For the love of God, pull your head out, man! If you just have to slap a moronic message on a maxi pad, wouldn't it make more sense to say something that's actually pertinent, like 'Put down the Hammer' or 'Vehicular Manslaughter is Wrong', or are you just picking on us?

Sir, please inform your Accounting Department that, effective immediately, there will be an \$8 drop in monthly profits, for I have chosen to take my maxi-pad business elsewhere. And though I will certainly miss your Flex-Wings, I will not for one minute miss your brand of condescending bull sh*t.

And that's a promise I will keep. Always!

Best,

Humorous condition – Bank

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to thank you for bouncing my check with which I endeavored to pay my plumber last month. By my calculations, three nanoseconds must have elapsed between his depositing the check and the arrival in my account of the funds needed to honor it. I refer, of course, to the automatic monthly transfer of funds from my modest savings account, an arrangement which, I admit, has been in place for only thirty-one years. You are to be commended for seizing that brief window of opportunity, and also for debiting my account \$30 by way of penalty for the inconvenience caused to your bank.

My thankfulness springs from the manner in which this incident has caused me to rethink my errant financial ways. I noticed that whereas I personally attend to your telephone calls and letters, when I try to contact you, I am confronted by the impersonal, overcharging, pre-recorded, faceless entity which your bank has recently become. From now on, I, like you, choose only to deal with a flesh-and-blood person. My mortgage and loan repayments will therefore and hereafter no longer be automatic, but will arrive at your bank, by check, addressed personally and confidentially to an employee at your bank whom you must nominate. Be aware that it is an offense under the Postal Act for any other person to open such an envelope.

Please find attached an Application Contact Status form which I require your chosen employee to complete. I am sorry it runs to eight pages, but in order that I know as much about him or her as your bank knows about me, there is no alternative. Please note that all copies of his or her medical history must be countersigned by a Notary Public, and the mandatory details of his/her financial situation (income, debts, assets and liabilities) must be accompanied by documented proof. In due course, I will issue your employee with a PIN number which he/she must quote in dealings with me. I regret that it cannot be shorter than 28 digits but, again, I have modeled it on the number of button presses required of me to access my account balance on your phone bank service. As they say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

Please allow me to level the playing field even further. When you call me, you will now have a menu of options on my new voice mail system to choose from.

Please press the buttons as follows:

1. To make an appointment to see me.
2. To query a missing payment.
3. To transfer the call to my living room in case I am there.
4. To transfer the call to my bedroom in case I am sleeping.
5. To transfer the call to my toilet in case I am attending to nature.
6. To transfer the call to my mobile phone if I am not at home.
7. To leave a message on my computer, a password to access my computer is required. Password will be communicated to you at a later date to the Authorized Contact.
8. To return to the main menu and to listen to options 1 through 7.
9. To make a general complaint or inquiry. The contact will then be put on hold, pending the attention of my automated answering service. While this may, on occasion, involve a lengthy wait, uplifting music will play for the duration of the call.

Regrettably, but again following your example, I must also levy an establishment fee of \$50 to cover the setting up of this new arrangement. Please credit my account after each occasion.

May I wish you a happy, if ever so slightly less prosperous, New Year.

Your Humble Client,

Serious condition – Feminine product

Dear Mr. Thatcher,

I have been a loyal user of your ‘Always’ maxi pads for over 20 years and I appreciate many of their features. Because of the Leak Guard Core and Dri-Weave absorbency, I actually feel comfortable going dancing and jogging during my period, and when I work out at my neighborhood recreation center or do yoga, I don’t need to worry about leakage.

Personally, I find the most valuable feature of your maxi pads to be the Flexi-Wings. It is great that your company realizes just how crucial it is that maxi pads be well-designed. I certainly appreciate the security of knowing that I have protection against leaks.

However, recent behavior on the part of your company has indicated a lack of understanding regarding what it is like to have a period. From first hand experience, I can explain what this is like. Every time I have my period, my body aches, cramps and is generally in pain. In addition to these physical discomforts, I experience severe mood swings, and am often bad-tempered and unhappy.

As Brand Manager in the Feminine-Hygiene Division, you've no doubt seen quite a bit of research on what exactly happens during your customers' monthly menstrual cycle. I would expect that the bloating, puffiness, cramping and general discomfort that women experience during menstruation would be well understood. Menstruation is a challenging time for almost all women. For example, I have a female friend who, when faced with the aching and cramping that accompanies her monthly cycle, becomes irritable and even angry about concerns that would otherwise be considered trivial.

The point I am trying to make here is that your company must have the statistics on the women who purchase your product in this country. I therefore found it frustrating when the following incident occurred.

Last month, while I was experiencing extremely painful cramping, I opened an Always maxi-pad, and printed on the adhesive backing were the words: 'Have a Happy Period.'

I have to sincerely admit that this struck me as condescending. Menstruating is at the very least uncomfortable and unpleasant, and as the head of your division, due diligence and market research must have made that apparent. Therefore, I feel that to wish one a 'happy period' demonstrates a profound insensitivity for the hassles that women endure and that I have described above.

There is nothing pleasurable or happy about the pain that women experience during their time of the month and to suggest otherwise belittles our suffering. When it is that time of the month for me, the aches and pains I go through are so severe that I am unable to even leave the

house. Instead, I am bedridden with cramps and must rely on Motrin and other drugs to ease the pain. On the occasions in which I am forced to leave the house, I am short-tempered, grouchy and likely a source of irritation for all of those around me.

In short, I feel that your decision to place this message on a maxi pad was poorly made. The circumstances surrounding a women's period are never pleasurable and it feels like your company is mocking both myself and all women who experience this.

I have spoken with all of my female friends about this issue, and we have decided to boycott the Always brand of maxi pads. I hope others choose to do so as well. And though I will certainly miss your Flex-Wings, I will not put up with this form of condescension.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Best,

Serious condition - Bank

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to you in regards to your company bouncing my check with which I endeavored to pay my plumber last month. Only a couple of minutes could have possibly elapsed between his depositing the check and the arrival in my account of the funds needed to honor it. I'm referring to the automatic monthly transfer of funds from my savings account, an arrangement which has been in place for thirty-one years. You should be ashamed for using that brief window of opportunity, and also for debiting my account \$30 by way of penalty for not having the appropriate funds in place a couple minutes too late.

My dissatisfaction springs from the manner in which this incident has occurred and has caused me to rethink my financial ways. I noticed that whereas I personally attend to your telephone

calls and letters, when I try to contact you, I am confronted by the impersonal, overcharging, pre-recorded, faceless entity which your bank has recently become. I remember when I was able to interact with a flesh-and-blood person whenever I needed help from your customer service representatives, tellers, or personal bankers. If I had queries regarding my mortgage and loan repayments, I was able to call an actual person without having to navigate through endless phone menus and being put on hold for long amounts of time. Additionally, I dislike the fact that I was issued a customer PIN number that I have to quote when calling your bank. It is so long that I cannot remember it and have to keep it written down next to the phone at home. However, if I'm out and about and don't have that slip of paper with me, I'm not able to access my own account if I need to! I feel as though I no longer know my own bank.

Please allow me to give you a summary of what a customer of yours must go through simply to talk to a customer service employee, to transfer money, or to simply do anything involving their own bank account. When I call your bank, I have a menu of options on the voice mail system to choose from. The options are as follows:

1. To make an appointment to see a personal banker.
2. To query a missing payment.
3. To transfer the call to a teller.
4. To transfer the call to customer service.
5. To transfer the call to a personal banker.
6. To hear a recorded message of the bank's location and hours of operation.
7. To leave a message on the branch's voicemail, in which I have to cite my long customer PIN number in order to have my call returned.
8. To return to the main menu and to listen to options 1 through 7.
9. To make a general complaint or inquiry. I have chosen this option many times and find that I am only put on hold, pending the attention of the automated answering service that finally picks up after nearly 40 minutes. Furthermore, the music played when being put on hold is extremely distasteful and should be changed.

The most dissatisfying part of this whole ordeal is that I am also charged an 'establishment fee'

to, presumably, cover the costs of this phone service and other expenses. I find this to be unfair and not good business practice.

I would very much appreciate if you would rectify these problems.

Sincerely,

Appendix 3

Sixty undergraduate student participants in study 4 wrote status updates complaining about the two ostensible restaurant experiences described below.

Zoe's Bistro

You and a friend decide to try out Zoe's Bistro, a new restaurant recommended by a co-worker. When you arrive at the restaurant, you are seated at a quiet table near the window. The restaurant is attractive and has a nice décor. You are very excited for your meal.

You and your friend look at the menu for a short while and decide on your meals. After the waiter takes your order, you and your friend make small talk while you wait for your meal. Your food arrives and the steak that your friend ordered is completely overcooked. It is dark black and is so hard that your friend's fork bends when he tries to cut the meat.

When you tell the waiter that the steak has been overcooked, he tells you that the food has been prepared in an "al dente" style. He takes a quick look at the food and says, "Cooked to perfection! But if you want to be fussy about it, maybe I can bring you something else instead." You politely ask for food that hasn't been overcooked. Minutes later, the waiter returns with a large plate of raw vegetables.

Claire's Kitchen

You decide to try eating dinner at Claire's Kitchen, a restaurant across town that has recently been getting very favorable reviews.

You arrive at the restaurant and after a short wait, you and your date are seated at a nice booth in the corner of the restaurant. The restaurant includes a large window where you can watch the

cooks in the kitchen preparing the food. Your date orders chicken and you order a dish of pasta called "Claire's Angel Hair."

Your food arrives in a timely manner and it tastes pretty good. However, as you are eating your pasta, your date asks, "is that a piece of hair in your food?" You take a closer look and find a strand of dark curly hair mixed in with the pasta. Your date, who has been looking around the restaurant to try to identify the source of the hair looks at you and says, "strange, the cooks appear to have straight hair." You take another look at your plate and wonder how the hair ended up in your food.

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Table 1
Study 1 Results

Fixed Effects	Coefficient	Standard Error	Wald Z	p-value
<i>Intercept, β_0</i>	0.2582	0.0042	62.09	< .0001
<i>Star Rating_{ijk}, β_1</i>	-.0534	.0010	-51.05	< .0001
<i>Usefulness_{ijk}, β_2</i>	.1199	.0031	38.95	< .0001
<i>Coolness_{ijk}, β_3</i>	.3668	.0062	59.60	< .0001
Random Effects				Standard Deviation
Grouping: User (writer) j				
<i>Intercept, μ_{0j}</i>				0.0000
<i>Star Rating_{ijk}, μ_{1j}</i>				0.0000
<i>Usefulness_{ijk}, μ_{2j}</i>				0.2263
<i>Coolness_{ijk}, μ_{3j}</i>				0.4307
Grouping: Business k				
<i>Intercept, μ_{0k}</i>				0.0430
<i>Star Rating_{ijk}, μ_{1k}</i>				0.0000
<i>Usefulness_{ijk}, μ_{2k}</i>				0.1582
<i>Coolness_{ijk}, μ_{3k}</i>				0.3873
ε_{ijk}				0.6366

Estimates of the fixed and random effects for the multilevel model fit to the Yelp reviews data in study 1.

Table 2
Study 2 Results

	Humorous Complaint	Serious Complaint	Correlation with Perceived Humor
Phase 1			
Number of Facebook Likes	9.07 (7.16)	5.59 (4.68)	.30
Number of Facebook Comments	5.07 (6.09)	5.50 (4.53) ^{NS}	-.27 ^{NS}
Phase 2			
Humor rating (1 to 7)	4.47 (.58)	3.39 (.72)	--
Negativity rating (1 to 7)	3.04 (.48)	3.47 (.42)	-.36
Likelihood of clicking 'like' on Facebook (1 to 7)	3.80 (.62)	3.23 (.71)	.63
Likelihood of accepting Friend request (1 to 7)	4.07 (.39)	3.83 (.46)	.45
Likelihood of sharing (1 to 7)	2.63 (.31)	2.42 (.33)	.58
Recall (square root)	2.00 (.82)	1.54 (.94)	.34

Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for study 2. All mean differences and correlations are significant at the .05 level, except number of Facebook Comments and the correlation between the number of comments and perceived humor.

Table 3
Study 3 Results

	Bank		Feminine Product		Collapsed	
	Humorous	Serious	Humorous	Serious	Humorous	Serious
Perceived humor	4.93 (1.91)	2.86 (1.68)	5.02 (1.65)	3.36 (1.88)	4.98 (1.77)	3.10 (1.78)
Enjoyment	4.80 (2.26)	3.19 (1.87)	4.40 (1.95)	2.80 (1.77)	4.60 (2.10)	3.00 (1.82)
Attitude toward complainer	4.74 (2.10)	4.21 (1.75)	4.31 (1.95)	3.04 (1.61)	4.52 (2.03)	3.65 (1.77)
Likelihood of sharing	3.70 (2.21)	3.30 (2.05)	3.60 (2.15)	2.40 (1.92)	3.65 (2.17)	2.87 (2.03)

All measures on 7-point scales

Mean values (top number) and standard deviations (bottom number) for ratings of humor, enjoyment, attitude toward the complainer, likelihood of sharing and attitude towards the firm in study 3. The first four columns on the left show values for each separate product, and the two columns on the right show values collapsed across product.

Table 4
Study 4 Results

	Restaurant	Complaint	Perceived Humor	Negativity	Priority
P1	1 st : Zoe's (humorous)	Didn't know Gretzky's slapshots were landing on Zoe's steak grill. Hockey pucks for dinner #Zoe's	5.38 (1.50)	6.40 (1.06)	3.63 (1.00)
	2 nd : Claire's (serious)	Found hair in my pasta at dinner tonight. Won't be back to #Claire's	1.31 (1.00)	6.56 (.94)	4.12 (1.01)
P2	1 st : Zoe's (serious)	This past weekend I went to Zoe's with my friend Natalie. It was probably the worst dining experience I've had in years! The food was overcooked, and the staff were total jerks. Our waiter tried to compensate our \$20 overcooked steak with \$5 raw vegetables! Don't waste your time. #Zoe's	1.90 (1.46)	6.60 (.83)	4.22 (.92)
	2 nd : Claire's (humorous)	Went to Claire's Kitchen. Ironically my dish Claire's Angel hair actually had real hair in it (gross). Would have complained but didn't want to get myself into a "hairy situation". haha. #Claire's	4.97 (1.93)	6.26 (1.31)	3.85 (1.15)

All measures on 7-point scales.

The table shows the two complaint pairs (P1 & P2) created during the first phase of the study that were rated as being the most different in perceived humor by an independent sample in study 5. The fourth and fifth columns show the independent sample's mean ratings (standard deviations) of perceived humor and negativity, respectively. The sixth and final column shows the mean prioritization ratings (standard deviations) by an additional independent sample of mTurk participants.

Table 5
Study 5 Results

	Private		Public		Both	
	Humorous	Serious	Humorous	Serious	Humorous	Serious
Perceived Humor	4.76 (1.79)	2.41 (1.62)	4.86 (1.94)	3.36 (1.83)	4.81 (1.85)	2.88 (1.77)
Prioritization	3.64 (1.76)	4.19 (1.48)	4.07 (2.02)	5.16 (1.50)	3.87 (1.90)	4.67 (1.56)
Enjoyment	3.52 (2.00)	2.31 (1.42)	4.28 (2.12)	2.96 (1.75)	3.93 (2.08)	2.63 (1.61)
Memory	5.36 (1.25)	4.55 (1.90)	5.41 (1.59)	4.96 (1.50)	5.39 (1.43)	4.75 (1.71)
Likelihood of Sharing	4.80 (1.76)	3.59 (1.74)	4.72 (2.02)	3.82 (1.81)	4.76 (1.88)	3.70 (1.76)
Expectation of W.O.M.	3.12 (1.54)	3.14 ^{NS} (1.58)	3.52 (1.64)	3.82 ^{NS} (1.61)	3.33 (1.59)	3.47 ^{NS} (1.62)

All measures on 7-point scales

The first four columns on the left show the means (top number) and standard deviations (bottom number) for the public and private conditions separately. The two columns on the right show the means (top number) and standard deviations (bottom number) collapsed across the public and private conditions. All mean differences are significant at the .05 level except the expectation of word-of-mouth.

Figure 1

Average Number of Funny Judgments by Star Rating for Yelp Reviews

