



## Turn the Other Cheek or an Eye for an Eye: Exploring Brand-to-Brand Dialogue on Social Media

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### ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of brands making sarcastic and sometimes rude comments regarding their competitors via social media is a relatively novel and unexplored behavior, and research in this area is scarce. How consumers perceive the use of humor in brand-to-brand dialogue may have meaningful managerial implications for companies and important theoretical implications for existing theory. Thus, to understand the dyadic relationship between two brands who engage with each other on social media, we explore two different types of humorous comments (low aggression and high aggression) and how the type of humor employed affects consumers' perceptions of both the brand initiating the dialogue and the brand that responds. Interestingly, we find that the safest strategy for brands that elect to interact with other brands on social media is to refrain from either type of humor, thus avoiding perceptions of manipulative intent. However, for brands that elect to respond to other brands, the type of humor employed can vary based on the tone of the initiating brand's comment.

Wendy's, the fast-food restaurant, is known for its social media presence and often interacts online with both consumers and other businesses. Sometimes the banter is lighthearted and playful. For example, Walansky (2018) reports that Burger King recently asked Wendy's (via Twitter) to the prom, which prompted Wendy's to respond (in case you are wondering, Wendy's said yes!). The seemingly wholesome burger chain—known for its iconic founder, Dave Thomas, and the cute logo of a freckled-faced girl with pigtails—often serves up sarcasm in addition to burgers. For example, a consumer asked Wendy's (via Twitter) where to find the closest McDonald's; Wendy's responded with an image of a garbage can (Collie 2017). Wendy's also trolled McDonald's when McDonald's announced that its Quarter Pounders would be made with fresh rather than frozen beef; Wendy's response to the news: "So you'll still use frozen beef in MOST of your burgers in ALL of your restaurants? Asking for a friend" (Jargon 2017). As brands begin to interact directly with one another using social media, the question arises: How do such

brand-to-brand interactions impact consumers' perceptions of the businesses involved?

To date, research has largely explored how social media communications occur between brands and consumers (e.g., Colliander, Dahlén, and Modig 2015; Simon and Tossan 2018), failing to consider the exchanges that arise when brands interact with one another and the resulting impact on consumers' perceptions. Exploring this gap is important, as past research in related streams on brand interactions, such as comparative advertising, reveals that when a brand references another brand it affects consumers' perceptions of the brand and its advertising, as well as behavioral intentions (Grewal et al. 1997; Sorescu and Gelb 2000). Instead of investigating paid advertisements, whereby one brand makes comparisons to (or otherwise references) another brand, we discuss dialogue that takes place between competing brands on social media where both brands participate. Because humorous exchanges are desired by social media users (Sprout Social 2017) and are acknowledged as the goal of some brand-to-brand interactions (Jargon 2017),

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we explore the use of humor in brand-to-brand exchanges. Specifically, we investigate two types of humor (low aggression and high aggression) that brands might use in their interactions with their competition. Both are forms of disparaging humor, but they vary in their degree of negativity. Importantly, the subject of the joke (i.e., the compared-to brand) is implicitly or explicitly referenced in each, making this type of humor, as opposed to other types, especially relevant in the context of social media dialogue. Thus, this research compares variations in consumers' interest toward a brand who initiates a dialogue on social media using either low-aggression or high-aggression humor *and* consumers' interest toward the responding brand based on its use of either low-aggression or high-aggression humor.

This research makes important contributions to the literature. Brand references to other brands are examined within the context of social media, as opposed to the more often researched realm of paid advertising. Within the paid advertising context, brands often make reference to other brands in one of two ways. In comparative advertising one brand either implicitly or explicitly compares itself to another on specific attributes (Grewal et al. 1997), and in parodic advertisements one brand creates "commercial messages that mimic other advertising" (Roehm and Roehm 2014). Typically, the compared-to brand does not have a method to respond directly. As the dynamic nature of social media readily facilitates real-time brand dialogue (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010), a feature unique to this medium, it opens up the possibility of immediate and direct response. This research explores the interactive effect of brand dialogue as opposed to focusing on a single advertisement where a brand references another brand, allowing for an examination of consumers' perceptions of both brands engaging in such dialogue. Moreover, this work extends literature on humor, manipulative intent, and communication accommodation theory into a social media context.

This article proceeds as follows. We first review the literature on humor in advertising, focusing on research examining low-aggression and high-aggression humor. Both of these types require that a specific target be referenced, thus setting the stage for brand-to-brand dialogue to occur. Communication accommodation theory is then reviewed to provide explanatory support for how the entire exchange between the brands might be interpreted by consumers and, ultimately, influence consumers' interests toward each brand (operationalized via engagement intentions and attitudes) on social media. We also discuss the underlying mechanism

facilitating these results: perceptions of manipulative intent. The results of our research suggest important differences in the type of humor that brands should use based on whether they are initiating the dialogue or responding to other brands, providing meaningful managerial implications. Thus, this work extends theoretical understanding of the use of humorous exchange in a social media context.

## Humor in Advertising

The use of humor in advertising is prevalent in the United States as well as in other countries (Laroche et al. 2011), with many beneficial outcomes ascribed to this tactic. For example, a recent meta-analysis finds that humor frequently has a significant positive effect on attitude toward the advertisement, attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions, positive affect, and attention (Eisend 2009). Research also suggests that the successful use of humor signals confidence and competence, which in turn increases the joke teller's status (Bitterly, Brooks, and Schweitzer 2017) and results in more positive perceptions regarding the appropriateness of the advertising tactic (Koenigstorfer and Uhrich 2017).

In addition to its use in more conventional advertising media, humor also plays a significant role in brands' social media presence. In a study of the recast of brand-sponsored commercials on YouTube, Barry and Graça (2018) find that humorous videos represent more than half of the content with 50,000 or more views. Further, Berger and Milkman (2012) find that emotionally arousing content (e.g., humor appeal) is more viral, while Petrescu, Korgaonkar, and Girona (2015) show that humorous viral advertisements (in comparison to sex appeals or informational appeals) result in more positive attitudes toward the advertisement and brand as well as intentions to forward the advertisement and purchase the brand. Finally, in a recent survey by Sprout Social (2017), 75% of participants indicated that they appreciated a brand's use of humor on social media. Thus, past research finds that humor positively affects consumers' perceptions of brands on social media.

The effectiveness of humor in advertising is often attributed to one of three mechanisms that may work alone or in concert to influence consumers (Beard 2008; Spotts, Weinberger, and Parsons 1997). Specifically, these mechanisms are arousal-safety, incongruity resolution, and humorous disparagement (Beard 2008). Humor stemming from the arousal-safety mechanism occurs when an individual

experiences a heightened emotional state of arousal, followed by a sense relief (Beard 2008; Speck 1991). The incongruity mechanism is a result of consumers finding something amusing due to its unanticipated nature. With disparagement, humor is derived from attacking another (Speck 1991).

We examine two types of humor, low-aggression and high-aggression humor, both of which stem from incongruity and disparagement mechanisms (Beard 2008; Beard and Tarpenning 2004; Speck 1991). As such, they can be thought of along a continuum (LaMarre et al. 2014) with both displaying elements of humor and aggression (Holbert et al. 2011). However, the attack or disparagement component is less severe (or more light-hearted) for low-aggression humor (Speck 1991), and in many instances it takes the form of satire, which is defined as “the disparaging portrayal of another and the resulting tension is a mixture of enjoyment tinged with anxiety or guilt over enjoyment of the disparagement” (Beard 2008, p. 4). Thus, low-aggression humor is akin to Horatian satire and can be described as light and witty (Holbert et al. 2011). Conversely, high-aggression humor relies on an overly disparaging portrayal of another and is defined as “negative comedy designed to improve personal well-being by disparaging another person or group” (Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018, p. 6) or, in this case, a brand. Thus, high-aggression humor is akin to Juvenalian satire, representing the darker end of the spectrum, and is therefore more acidic in tone and meant to wound rather than just amuse (Holbert et al. 2011).

These two types of humor were singled out for scrutiny as they are both popular (LaMarre et al. 2014) and deviate from each other in terms of how they try to persuade (Holbert et al. 2011). Importantly, the subject of the joke (i.e., the compared-to brand) is implicitly or explicitly referenced in each. As such, we answer the call of both Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) and Holbert et al. (2011) to look more closely at the types of humor a marketer might use to persuade an audience, rather than just the presence or absence of humor.

The variations in these two types of humor may have important implications for brands that employ such humorous strategies. When disparagement is taken to an extreme, as is the case of high-aggression humor, it may be viewed as excessive to the point of hostility (Martin et al. 2003). As such, consumers may prefer and find other forms of humor less offensive (Speck 1991). Thus, high-aggression humor may attenuate the oft-observed positive effects of humor. Indeed, research supports that humor can cross a line

(McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012; Warren, Carter, and McGraw 2019; Weinberger et al. 2017). The benign-violation hypothesis suggests that moral violations (McGraw and Warren 2010) and threatening situations (McGraw et al. 2012) can be perceived as funny as long as they are also perceived as benign. When humor is perceived not as benign but as overly negative, as with high-aggression humor, reactions to the brand may suffer. Supporting this assertion, recent research finds that humorous advertisements that prompt a negative emotional reaction also negatively affect brand attitudes (Warren et al. 2019) and can lead to complaints from the public (Beard 2008). Further, Holbert et al. (2011) show the potential divergent effects of Horatian (low-aggression) and Juvenalian (high-aggression) humor on persuasion in a political campaign context. Thus, high-aggression humor may be perceived negatively as it relies heavily on disparagement to induce humor and such negativity may no longer be perceived as benign, adversely affecting perceptions of brands using this humor tactic and reducing interest toward the brand.

Research on comparative advertising comes to similar conclusions and suggests that consumers report reduced evaluations of the advertisement and increased perceptions of unfairness when a company engages in strongly negative comparisons to another brand (Grewal et al. 1997; Sorescu and Gelb 2000). Further, research on parodic advertising finds that such advertisements can negatively affect recall and may result in lower attitudes toward the sponsoring brand compared to controls (Roehm and Roehm 2014).

As a whole, research suggests that brands which use low-aggression humor to engage in dialogue with another brand should be viewed more positively, resulting in more positive consumer behavioral intentions, than brands which use high-aggression humor. In the context of social media and brand-to-brand exchanges, this should be true regardless of whether the brand is initiating the exchange or responding to another brand's comment. Thus, we propose that consumers will report weaker interest toward a brand, whether that brand is initiating or responding to another brand, when high-aggression humor is employed as opposed to low-aggression humor. Formally, we offer these hypotheses:

**H1:** When a brand engages in dialogue with another brand using low-aggression (high-aggression) humor, consumers will report higher (lower) interest toward the initiating brand.

**H2:** When a brand responds to another brand using low-aggression (high-aggression) humor, consumers will report higher (lower) interest toward the responding brand.

## Communication Accommodation Theory

Within the social media context, the use of humor by a responding brand does not exist in a vacuum; consumers are able to view the initial comment to which the brand is responding. Thus, attitudes toward the responding brand may be influenced not only by the type of humor employed in the response; rather, consumers may take a holistic approach, weighing the appropriateness of the response in comparison to the initiating brand's opening comments. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) is useful in determining how dialogue between two brands will be interpreted. Initially formed to explain shifts in people's speech styles during social encounters, CAT has evolved into a multifunctional theory useful in predicting and understanding intergroup interactions (Gallois, Ogay, and Giles 2005). The tenets of CAT apply to the context of this study in that the encounters between brands on social media follow a pattern of exchange similar to what might be expected of individuals. Research also supports consumers' personification of brands (Aaker 1997), as well as the application of interpersonal relationship theories to brand research (Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal and Law 2005; Thomas and Jewell 2019).

There are two competing response strategies one might use in a conversational exchange. In accommodation, individuals adapt their communication styles in such a way as to become more similar to their dialogue partners; conversely, nonaccommodation leads to an accentuation of differences between self and other (Gallois, Ogay, and Giles 2005). Research finds that accommodation is enacted strategically when one wishes to be perceived favorably by another individual or integrated within a group; while nonaccommodation occurs when one wishes to either maintain one's own identity or disassociate from another individual or group (Toma 2014). Further, communication accommodation patterns influence others' judgments regarding the participants of these exchanges (Liao, Bazarova, and Yuan 2018). Therefore, the humor tactics used in brand-to-brand dialogue may potentially influence consumers' perceptions of brands that employ them. So, responding to low-aggression humor with low-aggression humor might be a useful strategy when the responding brand wants to convey similarity to the initiating brand. Responding to an aggressive initial comment with a more benign comment could also be a good strategy, signaling that the responding brand is different and perhaps more likeable. But what happens when a brand responds in

kind to a highly aggressive initial comment? Will consumers penalize both brands for being too aggressive?

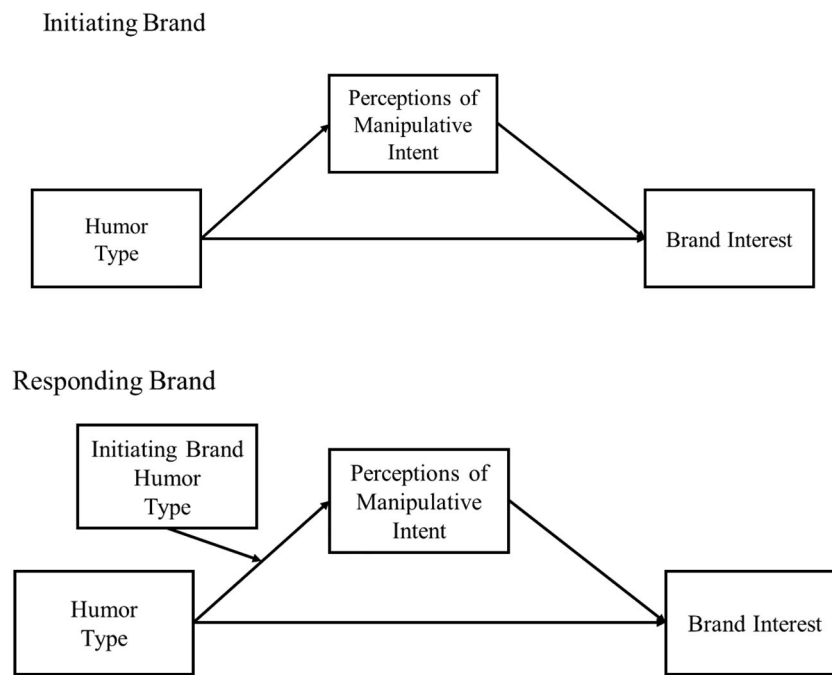
Particularly germane to this question is the finding that the intent of the dialogue partners is taken into consideration when conversations are evaluated (Gasiorek and Giles 2012). So, although the use of highly aggressive humor typically leads to reduced perceptions of the responding brand, if the initiating brand originally used highly aggressive humor as a means to start the dialogue, the negative effect on interest toward the responding brand should be attenuated. Essentially, the penalty that comes with responding negatively will be mitigated under circumstances where consumers feel the responding brand was justified given the perceived intent of the initiating brand. We offer a third hypothesis:

**H3:** When the responding brand uses high-aggression humor, the negative effect on interest toward the responding brand will be weakened (remain unchanged) if the initiating brand used high-aggression (low-aggression) humor.

## Manipulative Intent

We propose that the effect of humor on interest toward both the initiating and responding brand will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of manipulative intent. The persuasion knowledge model suggests that consumers attempt to infer the intentions that underlie a marketer's actions (Friestad and Wright 1994). When brands behave in a manner that is non-normative or unpredicted, consumers are more likely to question the brand's motives, perceiving such actions as manipulative (Friestad and Wright 1994). These resulting inferences of manipulative intent are defined as "consumer inferences that the advertiser is attempting to persuade by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means" (Campbell 1995, p. 228) and can arise in social media contexts (Kim and Song 2018). Overall, humor tends to reduce perceptions of an advertisement's intrusiveness (Goodrich, Schiller, and Galletta 2015) and results in more positive perceptions regarding the appropriateness of the advertising tactic (Koenigstorfer and Uhrich 2017). However, the use of overly negative humor when directly engaging with another brand may increase perceptions of manipulative intent, activating persuasion knowledge and triggering reactance (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle 2018; Campbell and Kirmani 2000). When overly negative, humor can be perceived as inappropriate (Beard 2008; Speck 1991) and lead to increased skepticism (Sabri 2018), and comparative advertising that lacks direct





**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.

attribute comparisons triggers negative cognitive and emotional reactions (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle 2018). Thus, consistent with the benign-violation hypothesis, which suggests that humor can cross a line, no longer being perceived as benign (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012), and the persuasion knowledge model which suggests that nonnormative actions can trigger an evaluation of the brand's motives (Friestad and Wright 1994), overly aggressive humor may trigger inferences of manipulative intent. Specifically, when a brand (whether initiating or responding) engages with another brand using high-aggression humor, participants will view the brand as acting in a more manipulative manner than if the brand uses low-aggression humor. However, for the responding brand, this effect will also be moderated by the nature of the initiating brand's comment. If the initiating brand originally used high-aggression humor as a means to start the dialogue, the negative effect on perceptions of manipulative intent toward the responding brand should be attenuated. Ultimately, increases in perceptions of manipulative intent will decrease interest, as past research finds that manipulative intent negatively impacts consumers' attitudes toward advertising (Campbell 1995; Cotte, Coulter, and Moore 2005), the brand (Campbell 1995; Lunardo and Mbengue 2013), the advertiser (Cotte, Coulter, and Moore 2005), and the retail environment

(Lunardo and Mbengue 2013). Formally (see Figure 1 for conceptual models), we propose:

**H4:** When a brand engages in dialogue with another brand, the effect of humor type on interest toward the initiating brand will be mediated by perceptions of manipulative intent.

**H5:** The interactive effect of humor type used by the initiating brand and humor type used by the responding brand on interest toward the responding brand will be mediated by perceptions of manipulative intent.

## Study 1

Study 1 employs a 3 (initial tweet: control, low aggression, high aggression)  $\times$  3 (response tweet: control, low aggression, high aggression) between-subjects design to test all five hypotheses. Specifically, we examine the effect of an initial tweet on consumers' interest toward the initiating brand, the response tweet on consumers' interest toward the responding brand, and the interaction between the humor used in these two communications on interest toward both brands. In this study, interest is operationalized via positive social media engagement intentions.

Jin and Phua (2014) succinctly describe Twitter as "a microblogging site allowing users to post short text (maximum 140 characters) updates called tweets to a

network of people called followers” (p. 182). Twitter was selected as the context for these communications due to its popularity and primary use as a means to engage in discussion with users (Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012). As of 2018, Twitter had 326 million monthly active users with 500 million tweets sent per day (Aslam 2019). Further, 85% of small and medium businesses use Twitter as one means to provide customer service (Aslam 2019) and 75% of business-to-business firms and 65% of business-to-consumer firms use Twitter for marketing (Cooper 2019).

Prior to running the study and testing the hypotheses, a pretest was conducted to ensure that the brands’ tweets are correctly operationalized as low-aggression or high-aggression forms of humor. That is, it is desired that both conditions are perceived similar in terms of humor yet significantly different in regard to negativity.

### Pretest

The goal of the pretest was to determine two initial tweets ( $T_I$ ) that varied in terms of perceptions of negativity but not humor, as well as two response tweets ( $T_R$ ) that also varied in terms of perceptions of negativity but not humor. In addition, the pretest was used to determine a control condition for both the initial tweet and response tweet that was benign (low in humor and aggression). Using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), 97 individuals (average age 37; 67% male) were recruited and compensated (two participants were screened out for failing attention checks). A survey was administered through Qualtrics. Upon opening the link and providing consent, participants were asked to imagine there were two rival bakeries in the same town. Further, they were asked to imagine that a consumer posted the following tweet: “New to town and need a birthday cake for a party. How do @TopFrost and @TastyBakes compare?” They were then randomly assigned to read an initial tweet from one of the bakeries (between subjects) and then read several potential response tweets from another bakery (within subjects). Participants provided their perceptions of negativity for each tweet by rating the extent to which it was mean-spirited, negative, and ridiculing (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) adapted from Pinkleton, Um, and Austin (2002). Consistent with past research (Cline, Altsech, and Kellaris 2003) and the literature on disparaging humor (Speck 1991), a three-item measure composed of the items humorous, teasing, and sarcastic, rated on a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7

(*Strongly agree*) scale, was used to capture perceptions of humor.

For the initial tweet, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that three tweets (“@TopFrost is our top choice!”; “They don’t”; “@TastyBakes is more like NastyBakes. Select @TopFrost”) significantly differed in perceptions of negativity,  $F(2, 94) = 44.20, p < .01$ . Post hoc analysis shows that “@TopFrost is our top choice!” ( $M = 1.89, SD = 1.01$ ) was significantly less negative than both “They don’t” ( $M = 3.92, SD = 1.75; p < .01$ ) and “@TastyBakes is more like NastyBakes. Select @TopFrost” ( $M = 5.23, SD = 1.41; p < .01$ ). Further, the initial tweet “They don’t” was perceived as less negative than “@TastyBakes is more like NastyBakes. Select @TopFrost” ( $p < .01$ ). A one-way ANOVA also shows significant differences in perceptions of humor,  $F(2, 94) = 5.74, p < .01$ . The response “@TopFrost is our top choice!” was significantly less humorous ( $M = 3.18, SD = 1.40$ ) than “They don’t” ( $M = 4.37, SD = 1.38; p < .01$ ) and “@TastyBakes is more like NastyBakes. Select @TopFrost” ( $M = 3.87, SD = 1.44; p = .05$ ). No significant differences arose between these latter two tweets ( $p = .15$ ). Therefore, “@TopFrost is our top choice!” was selected as the control condition, “They don’t” as the low-aggression condition, and “@TastyBakes is more like NastyBakes. Select @TopFrost” as the high-aggression condition.

For the response tweet, the following tweets were selected: “@TastyBakes is better”; “If you want frost (in your tweets or your cakes) go with @TopFrost, if you want tasty treats go with @TastyBakes”; and “@TastyBakes, always Tasty, never Frosty. Avoid @TopFrost.” A paired samples  $t$  test shows that the response tweet “@TastyBakes is better” ( $M = 2.74, SD = 1.52$ ) was perceived as significantly less negative than “If you want frost (in your tweets or your cakes) go with @TopFrost, if you want tasty treats go with @TastyBakes” ( $M = 3.19, SD = 1.55; t(96) = -2.41, p < .05$ ) and the response “@TastyBakes, always Tasty, never Frosty. Avoid @TopFrost” ( $M = 4.28, SD = 1.66; t(96) = -9.75, p < .01$ ). Further, the tweet, “If you want frost (in your tweets or your cakes) go with @TopFrost, if you want tasty treats go with @TastyBakes” was perceived as significantly less negative than “@TastyBakes, always Tasty, never Frosty. Avoid @TopFrost” ( $t(96) = -5.90, p < .01$ ). These same analyses were conducted for perceptions of humor. A paired samples  $t$  test shows that the response tweet “@TastyBakes is better” ( $M = 2.59, SD = 1.31$ ) was perceived as significantly less funny than “If you want frost (in your tweets or your cakes)

**Table 1.** Manipulations for brand dialogue.

Study 1—Dialogue prompt: New to town and need a birthday cake for a party. How do @TopFrost and @TastyBakes compare?

Initial tweet (T <sub>I</sub> )	
Control	@TopFrost is our top choice!
Low aggression	They don't.
High aggression	@TastyBakes is more like NastyBakes. Select @TopFrost.
Response tweet (T <sub>R</sub> )	
Control	@TastyBakes is better.
Low aggression	If you want frost (in your tweets or your cakes) go with @TopFrost, if you want tasty treats go with @TastyBakes.
High aggression	@TastyBakes, always Tasty, never Frosty. Avoid @TopFrost.

Study 2—Dialogue prompt: Who would win in a battle between @FieldMuseum and @shedd\_aquarium, what exhibits/items would bring home the victory? #askacurator

Initial tweet (T <sub>I</sub> )	
Low aggression	Fun fact: T-Rex are scavengers by nature. They eat every fish they find. We have a T-Rex and are coming for your fish @shedd_aquarium
High aggression	Fish are so cool, said no one ever. Bring it @shedd_aquarium
Response tweet (T <sub>R</sub> )	
Low aggression	We're out of your reach. @FieldMuseum—Take your tiny armed T-Rex and stay out of this fight
High aggression	Dinosaurs are a thing of the past, just like your collection @FieldMuseum. We are here for the win

go with @TopFrost, if you want tasty treats go with @TastyBakes" ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ;  $t(96) = -9.12$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and "@TastyBakes, always Tasty, never Frosty. Avoid @TopFrost" ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ;  $t(96) = -7.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Further, no significant differences arose in perceptions of humor for these latter tweets ( $p = .23$ ). Therefore, "@TastyBakes is better" was selected for the control condition, "If you want frost (in your tweets or your cakes) go with @TopFrost, if you want tasty treats go with @TastyBakes" as the low-aggression condition, and "@TastyBakes, always Tasty, never Frosty. Avoid @TopFrost" as the high-aggression condition.

### Procedure

Using MTurk, 345 individuals (average age 38; 53% male) were recruited and compensated (10 participants were screened out for failing to correctly answer an attention-check question). After electing to participate, they opened a link to an online survey that was administered through Qualtrics. The survey was available for a three-day period, but when a participant started the survey it had to be completed in one session.

After opening the survey and consenting to participate, participants read the scenario used in the pretest where they were asked to imagine that a consumer posted the following tweet: "New to town and need a birthday cake for a party. How do @TopFrost and @TastyBakes compare?" Participants were then

randomly assigned to both an initial tweet (control, low-aggression, or high-aggression) and response tweet (control, low-aggression, or high-aggression) condition. For ease, throughout the document, the initiating brand is referenced as B<sub>I</sub> and the responding brand is referenced as B<sub>R</sub>. Table 1 provides the manipulations, as determined by the pretest, for all initial tweet and response tweet conditions.

After viewing the stimuli, participants then completed the survey. Participants rated their social media engagement intentions for both brands (B<sub>I</sub>:  $r = .81$ ; B<sub>R</sub>:  $r = .86$ ) using the items "I would follow this brand" and "I would like this brand's posts" measured on a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) scale (Pentina, Guilloux, and Micu 2018). Participants then rated their perceptions of manipulative intent (Kirmani and Zhu 2007) in regard to both brands' actions (B<sub>I</sub>:  $r = .75$ ; B<sub>R</sub>:  $r = .77$ ) using the items "This tweet was inappropriate" and "This tweet was manipulative" on a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) scale. Demographic information was collected.

## Results

### Initiating Brand

#### Social Media Engagement Intentions

While only a main effect for the initial tweet on social media engagement intentions toward the initiating brand was predicted, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to rule out any unpredicted relationships between the valence of the response tweet and social

**Table 2.** Means and standard deviations: *M* (*SD*).*Study 1: Social media engagement intentions toward initiating and responding brands*

	T <sub>I</sub> Control			T <sub>I</sub> Low Aggression			T <sub>I</sub> High Aggression		
	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>
	Control	Low	High	Control	Low	High	Control	Low	High
B <sub>I</sub> Intentions	3.76 (1.57)	4.13 (1.80)	3.84 (1.85)	3.16 (1.46)	3.32 (1.71)	3.43 (1.63)	2.56 (1.96)	2.56 (1.68)	2.63 (1.66)
B <sub>R</sub> Intentions	3.17 (1.77)	3.43 (2.04)	2.58 (1.61)	3.15 (1.47)	4.87 (1.42)	3.12 (1.49)	3.89 (1.89)	4.20 (1.83)	3.82 (1.74)

*Study 1: Attitudes toward initiating and responding brands*

	T <sub>I</sub> Control			T <sub>I</sub> Low Aggression			T <sub>I</sub> High Aggression		
	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>	T <sub>R</sub>
	Control	Low	High	Control	Low	High	Control	Low	High
B <sub>I</sub> Attitudes	4.95 (1.07)	5.37 (1.25)	5.26 (1.19)	3.91 (1.36)	3.88 (1.66)	3.98 (1.47)	2.66 (1.93)	3.11 (2.14)	2.86 (1.72)
B <sub>R</sub> Attitudes	4.29 (1.43)	4.26 (1.84)	3.14 (1.84)	4.21 (1.07)	5.39 (1.26)	3.56 (1.50)	5.07 (1.32)	5.13 (1.58)	4.55 (1.60)

*Study 2: Attitudes toward initiating and responding brands*

	T <sub>I</sub> Low Aggression		T <sub>I</sub> High Aggression	
	T <sub>R</sub> Low	T <sub>R</sub> High	T <sub>R</sub> Low	T <sub>R</sub> High
B <sub>I</sub> Attitudes	5.92 (1.43)	5.47 (1.47)	4.85 (1.63)	5.45 (1.36)
B <sub>R</sub> Attitudes	5.64 (1.31)	4.93 (1.56)	5.19 (1.39)	5.51 (1.43)

media engagement intentions toward the initiating brand (means and standard deviations for all analyses are reported in Table 2). No effects occurred for the response tweet ( $p = .72$ ) or the interaction between the initial tweet and response tweet ( $p = .93$ ). A main effect of the initial tweet on intentions toward the initiating brand did emerge,  $F(2, 336) = 16.91$ ,  $p < .01$ ; see Figure 2. Post hoc analysis shows that participants in the initial tweet control condition reported significantly higher intentions toward the initiating brand ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) than those in either the initial tweet low-aggression ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ;  $p < .01$ ) or high-aggression condition ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Further, participants in the initial tweet low-aggression condition reported significantly higher intentions toward the initiating brand than those in the initial tweet high-aggression condition ( $p < .01$ ). These results support hypothesis 1: Participants reported higher intentions toward a brand initiating dialogue when low aggression, as opposed to high aggression, humor was employed. Interestingly, these results also demonstrate that the control condition, a neutral tweet, resulted in higher social media engagement intentions than either humor condition.

**Mediation Analysis**

Next, data were analyzed using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes 2013) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples assessing perceptions of manipulative intent as a mediator,

affecting the relationship between the initial tweet and social media engagement intentions. As the initial tweet condition is a multicategorical variable, this model was run twice using indicator coding (Hayes and Preacher 2014) to compare the relationship for all three conditions. First, the model was run with two dummy-coded independent variables where X1: T<sub>I</sub> low-aggression condition = 1 and X2: T<sub>I</sub> high-aggression condition = 1 (T<sub>I</sub> control condition is point of comparison). Second, the model was run where the T<sub>I</sub> low-aggression condition was the point of comparison (X1: T<sub>I</sub> control condition = 1 and X2: T<sub>I</sub> high-aggression condition = 1), allowing for the low-aggression and high-aggression conditions to be compared. Results support mediation for the comparison between the initial tweet control condition and the initial tweet low-aggression condition (relative indirect effect:  $b = -.20$ , 95% CI =  $[-.3927, -.0609]$ ), the initial tweet control condition and the initial tweet high-aggression condition (relative indirect effect:  $b = -.56$ , 95% CI =  $[-.9521, -.2164]$ ), and the initial tweet low-aggression condition and initial tweet high-aggression condition (relative indirect effect:  $b = -.36$ , 95% CI =  $[-.6160, -.1387]$ ). These results support hypothesis 4, suggesting that the reduction in social media engagement intentions toward the initiating brand when high-aggression humor is employed (as compared to low-aggression humor) is due to an increase in perceptions of manipulative intent.



**Discussion**

Taken together, these results support hypothesis 1, suggesting that when a brand engages in dialogue with another brand on social media, the use of low-aggression humor results in higher consumer intentions to engage with the brand on social media than high-aggression humor. Interestingly, these findings suggest that a neutral comment (control condition) results in more favorable intentions than either of the humor strategies. Neither the main effect of the response tweet nor the interaction between initial tweet and response tweet was significant; this suggests that consumers' perceptions of the initiating brand are driven primarily by the nature of the brand's own comments (as opposed to the nature of the responding brand's comments). Further, the negative effect of high-aggression humor on intentions is mediated by increased perceptions of manipulative intent, providing support for hypothesis 4. Both low-aggression and high-aggression humor led to higher perceptions of manipulative intent than the control condition. Thus, while low-aggression humor is preferable to high-

aggression humor, for brands initiating dialogue on social media a more neutral tone may be preferable.

**Responding Brand**

**Social Media Engagement Intentions**

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of both the initial and response tweet conditions on consumers' intentions toward the responding brand (Figure 3). Results show a main effect of both the initial tweet and response tweet on intentions toward the responding brand,  $F(2, 336) = 8.74, p < .01$ ;  $F(2, 336) = 10.93, p < .01$ , respectively. Post hoc analysis for the initial tweet condition shows that participants reported significantly lower intentions toward the responding brand in the control condition ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.84$ ), as compared to conditions in which the initial tweet used either low-aggression ( $M = 3.81, SD = 1.67; p < .01$ ) or high-aggression humor ( $M = 3.96, SD = 1.81; p < .01$ ). No significant difference arose between the initial tweet low-aggression and high-aggression conditions for intentions toward the responding brand ( $p = 1.00$ ). Supporting hypothesis 2, post hoc analysis for the response tweet condition shows that participants reported significantly higher intentions toward the responding brand when the response tweet used low-aggression humor ( $M = 4.17, SD = 1.86$ ) as opposed to high-aggression humor ( $M = 3.17, SD = 1.69; p < .01$ ). The low-aggression response also garnered higher intentions toward the responding brand than the control condition ( $M = 3.38, SD = 1.73; p < .01$ ), while no significant differences arose between the response tweet control and high-aggression conditions ( $p = 1.0$ ).

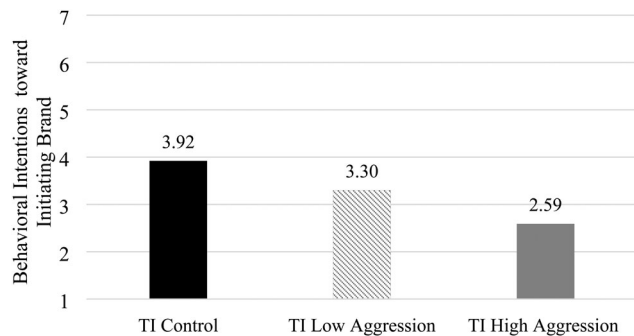


Figure 2. Social media engagement intentions toward the initiating brand.

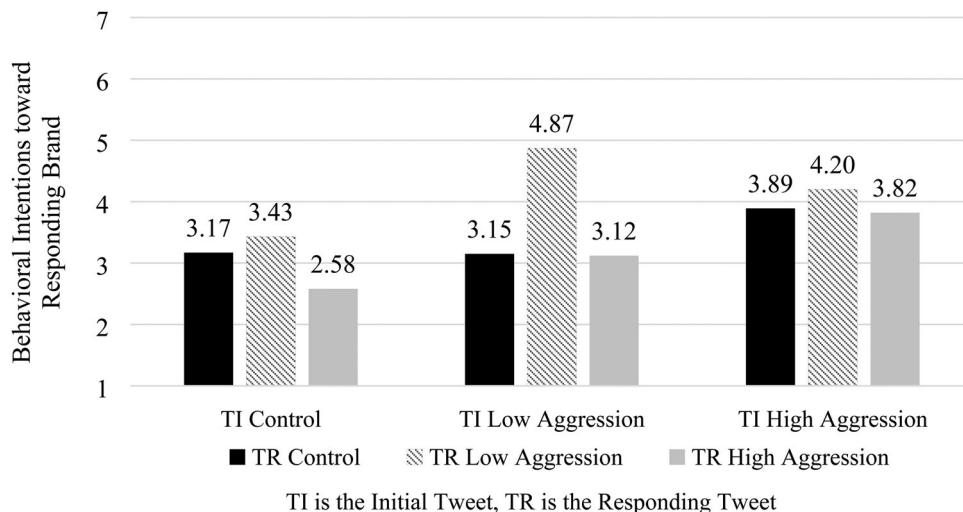


Figure 3. Social media engagement intentions toward the responding brand.

These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between the initial and response tweet conditions,  $F(4, 336) = 2.92, p < .05$ . Probing within each initial tweet condition, simple effects analysis shows that no effect of the response tweet emerged within the initial tweet control or high-aggression conditions ( $p = .09; p = .63$ , respectively). However, in the initial tweet low-aggression condition, the response tweet had a significant effect on intentions toward the responding brand,  $F(2, 115) = 19.99, p < .01$ . Post hoc analyses suggest that when the initial tweet used low-aggression humor, participants in the response tweet low-aggression condition reported significantly higher intentions toward the responding brand ( $M = 4.87, SD = 1.42$ ) than participants in the response tweet control ( $M = 3.15, SD = 1.47; p < .01$ ) or high-aggression condition ( $M = 3.12, SD = 1.49; p < .01$ ). No significant differences arose between the response tweet control and high-aggression conditions ( $p = 1.00$ ). These results support hypothesis 3, demonstrating that when an initial tweet uses high-aggression humor, responding with a high-aggression tweet does not result in significantly different intentions compared to a low-aggression response.

Although not hypothesized, for completeness additional analyses were conducted by probing within the response tweet condition. These analyses show that the initial tweet had no significant effect on intentions toward the responding brand within the response tweet control condition ( $p = .12$ ) but did have a significant effect when the response used either low-aggression or high-aggression humor,  $F(2, 120) = 7.48, p < .01; F(2, 110) = 5.85, p < .01$ , respectively. To understand the nature of these effects, post hoc analyses were conducted. When the response tweet used low-aggression humor, participants had significantly higher intentions toward the responding brand than when the initial tweet used low-aggression humor ( $M = 4.87, SD = 1.42; p < .01$ ) compared to the control condition ( $M = 3.43, SD = 2.04$ ). No significant differences arose between participants in the initial tweet high-aggression condition compared to the low-aggression ( $p = .32$ ) and control ( $p = .19$ ) conditions. When the response tweet used high-aggression humor, participants had significantly higher intentions toward the responding brand ( $M = 3.82, SD = 1.74; p < .01$ ) than when the initial tweet was the control condition ( $M = 2.58, SD = 1.61$ ). Results show no significant differences between participants in the initial tweet low-aggression condition compared to either the initial tweet control ( $p = .46$ ) or initial tweet high-aggression condition ( $p = .20$ ).

### Mediation Analysis

Adhering to procedures outlined in past research examining moderated mediation with multicategory variables (Hayes and Preacher 2014), data were analyzed with PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes 2013) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples assessing manipulative intent as a mediator, affecting the relationship between the initial and response tweets on social media engagement intentions. The indirect effects in the initial tweet neutral (control) condition suggest that a high-aggression response reduced social media intentions through perceptions of manipulative intent compared to both the control (indirect effects:  $b = -.28, 95\% CI = [-.5420, -.0849]$ ) and low-aggression response conditions (indirect effects:  $b = -.17, 95\% CI = [-.3804, -.0009]$ ). As the confidence interval did not contain zero, the results suggest that when the initial tweet was neutral (control), perceptions of manipulative intent do not significantly mediate the relationship between a low-aggression response tweet (compared to control) and social media intentions. This suggests that when a brand responds to an initial tweet that is neutral using high-aggression humor, consumers perceive the responding brand as having higher manipulative intent as compared to a neutral or low-aggression response.

When the initial tweet used low-aggression humor, a high-aggression response reduced social media intentions through perceptions of manipulative intent compared to the low-aggression condition (indirect effects:  $b = -.21, 95\% CI = [-.4479, -.0420]$ ). Perceptions of manipulative intent did not significantly mediate the moderating relationship of any of the other initial tweet and response tweet conditions on social media intentions, as none of the confidence intervals contained zero. This suggests that when a company instigates a discussion on social media with a low-aggression tweet, a high-aggression response reduces intentions compared to a low-aggression response due to increased perceptions of manipulative intent.

Finally, when the initial tweet was high in aggression, the indirect effects suggest that a low-aggression response (as compared to the control) and a high-aggression response (as compared to the control) affected social media intentions through perceptions of manipulative intent (low-aggression indirect effects:  $b = -.35, 95\% CI = [-.6186, -.1339]$ ; high-aggression indirect effects  $b = -.40, 95\% CI = [-.6964, -.1515]$ ). However, the indirect effects contained zero when comparing low-aggression and high-aggression responses. This suggests that when a brand starts a

dialogue on social media using high-aggression humor, responding with either low- or high-aggression humor (as compared to a neutral response) reduces intentions due to perceptions of manipulative intent. Importantly, though, if a brand initiates dialogues using highly aggressive humor, responding with high-aggression humor is not significantly different from a low-aggression humor response.

### Discussion

As anticipated, a responding brand is perceived more positively when low-aggression humor is employed as opposed to high-aggression humor, supporting hypothesis 2. Importantly, though, when consumers formulate their perceptions of the responding brand, the nature of the comments from the initiating brand is taken into consideration, supporting hypothesis 3. While high-aggression humor is typically perceived more negatively, results show that if the initiating brand used high-aggression humor, there is no significant difference in intentions toward the responding brand based on the valence of their response. Consistent with communication accommodation theory, this suggests that matching a high-aggression comment can be perceived as permissible, offsetting the typically negative effects of high-aggression humor.

In an effort to achieve parsimony and avoid redundancy, these same analyses were conducted with attitudes toward the initiating brand and attitudes toward the responding brand as the dependent variables (measured using the items *Good/Bad*, *Like/Dislike*, and *Favorable/Unfavorable*;  $B_I: \alpha = .98$ ;  $B_R: \alpha = .97$ ) but not reported. The results with attitudes as the dependent variables paralleled the findings for intentions (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). Moreover, research suggests that comparative advertising (Chang 2007) and comedic aggression (Weinberger et al. 2017) can lead to reduced brand perceptions among women. Recognizing that brand-to-brand dialogue and humor type may also be susceptible to gender effects, all analyses were rerun with gender as a covariate. Including gender as a covariate did not substantially change any of the aforementioned results or conclusions.

### Study 2

To enhance the generalizability of the findings from Study 1, a second study was conducted using real brands known for their humorous Twitter accounts and focusing only on the conditions of interest (low

aggression, high aggression). As the goal was to determine which type of humor (low aggression or high aggression) was preferable, not whether humor was preferred over nonhumor, the control condition was eliminated. The Field Museum and Shedd Aquarium, both located in Chicago, Illinois, were selected. As of June 15, 2020, the Field Museum had 96,400 followers and the Shedd Aquarium had 156,900 followers, and both brands have had popular press mentions for their fun and humorous Twitter accounts featuring “Sue the T-Rex” at the Field Museum and the penguins at the Shedd Aquarium (e.g., Lee 2020). The design of Study 2 is a 2 (initial tweet: low aggression, high aggression)  $\times$  2 (response tweet: low aggression, high aggression) between-subjects design. The dependent variable, interest, was operationalized via attitudes toward the initiating and responding brands.

### Pretest

Similar to Study 1, a pretest was conducted to select initial tweets and response tweets. Participants ( $n = 68$ : average age 37; 47% male), recruited through MTurk, consented to and completed a survey administered through Qualtrics. Participants were first provided background information on the Field Museum and the Shedd Aquarium and read the following tweet: “Who would win in a battle between @FieldMuseum and @shedd\_aquarium, what exhibits/items would bring home the victory? #askacurator.” They were then randomly assigned to view follow-up tweets by either the Field Museum or the Shedd Aquarium. To enhance realism for Study 2, the tweets that were pretested and ultimately selected were based on real tweets but slightly modified for the context of the study. Participants evaluated each tweet, providing both perceptions of negativity (mean-spirited, negative, and petty; Pinkleton, Um, and Austin 2002) and humor (humorous, amusing, and sarcastic; Speck 1991) on a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) scale.

As the goal was to select a low-aggression and high-aggression tweet for each brand, the following tweets for the Field Museum were selected (selected tweets also appear in Table 1): “Fun fact: T-Rex are scavengers by nature. They eat every fish they find. We have a T-Rex and are coming for your fish @shedd\_aquarium” and “Fish are so cool, said no one ever. Bring it @shedd\_aquarium.” The first tweet was selected to represent the low-aggression condition and the latter the high-aggression condition. This decision was made as two paired-samples *t* tests show that

both tweets were perceived as similar in terms of humor ( $p = .29$ ), but the second tweet was perceived as significantly more negative ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ;  $t(32) = 2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than the first ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ).

As for the response tweet from Shedd Aquarium, the following tweets were selected: “We’re out of your reach. @FieldMuseum—Take your tiny armed T-Rex and stay out of this fight” and “Dinosaurs are a thing of the past, just like your collection @FieldMuseum. We are here for the win.” Again, the first tweet was selected to represent the low-aggression condition and the latter the high-aggression condition. This decision was made as two paired-samples  $t$  tests show that both tweets were perceived as similar in terms of humor ( $p = .60$ ), but the second tweet was perceived as significantly more negative ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ;  $t(34) = -2.45$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than the first ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ).

### Procedure

Participants ( $n = 152$ : average age 37; 59% male), recruited through MTurk, consented to and completed a survey administered through Qualtrics (five participants were screened out for inattention). Participants read the introduction tweet (as described in the pre-test) and then were randomly assigned to view an initial tweet condition (low aggression, high aggression) or response tweet (low aggression, high aggression). To enhance realism, tweets were provided in a visual format consistent with Twitter (see the [appendix](#)). After reading the Twitter exchange, participants completed items to assess their attitudes toward both brands and their perceptions of manipulative intent. Attitudes toward both the initiating brand ( $\alpha = .96$ ) and responding brand ( $\alpha = .95$ ) were assessed using the same three items from Study 1. Similar to Study 1, manipulative intent for both brands was assessed by having participants rate the extent to which they perceived the tweet as inappropriate, unfair, and manipulative (Kirmani and Zhu 2007). These items were measured on a 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Extremely*) scale ( $B_I$ :  $\alpha = .95$ ;  $B_R$ :  $\alpha = .95$ ). Further, as real brands were employed, data were collected on education and frequency of visitation to cultural attractions similar to those featured in the survey (e.g., zoos, aquariums, and museums). The visitation question was open-ended, and participants were asked to indicate the number of times that they visited any of these attractions within the past two years and were told that they should count each visit, not unique locations.

Education and visitations were collected and used as covariates, as past research (Hansen 2018; Todd and Lawson 2001) indicates that education levels and prior visits significantly influence attendance at museums and cultural destinations. Demographic information (age and gender) along with Twitter use (*Yes, No*) was also collected.

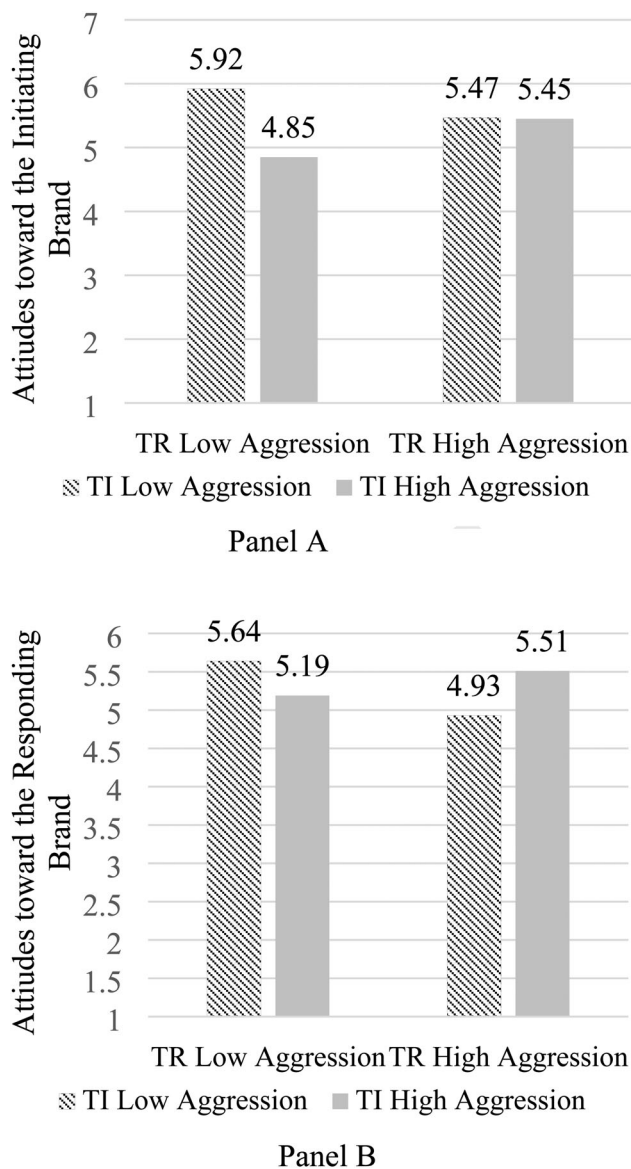
## Results

### Initiating Brand

#### Attitudes

A two-way ANOVA was conducted with the initial tweet and response tweet conditions as the independent variables, education and visits as the covariates, and attitudes toward the initiating brand as the dependent variable. No main effect occurred for the response tweet ( $p = .67$ ), but a main effect occurred for the initial tweet,  $F(1, 144) = 4.30$ ,  $p < .05$ . Participants who viewed a low-aggression initial tweet had more positive attitudes toward the initiating brand ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) than those who viewed a high-aggression tweet ( $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ). This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between the initial and response tweet conditions,  $F(1, 144) = 5.87$ ,  $p < .05$  (Figure 4, panel A). Probing within the initial tweet condition, simple effects analysis shows that when the initial tweet was low in aggression, the nature of the response tweet did not have a significant effect on attitudes toward the initiating brand ( $p = .13$ ). However, when the initial tweet was high in aggression, the response tweet had a significant effect on attitudes toward the initiating brand,  $F(1, 75) = 4.08$ ,  $p < .05$ , such that when the responding brand responded in a low-aggression manner, attitudes toward the initiating brand were significantly lower ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than when the responding brand used a high-aggression tweet ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ). Probing within the response tweet condition, results show that when the response tweet used low-aggression humor, attitudes toward the initiating brand were significantly lower when an initial high-aggression tweet was used ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) as compared to an initial low-aggression tweet ( $M = 5.92$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ;  $F(1, 71) = 9.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). No significant differences arose between the initial tweet conditions (low aggression versus high aggression) when the response tweet used high aggression ( $p = .85$ ). These results support hypothesis 1, suggesting that the initial tweet has a direct effect on consumers’ attitude toward the initiating brand. The observed interaction was not hypothesized but suggests that





**Figure 4.** Attitudes toward the initiating brand (Panel A) and attitudes toward the responding brand (Panel B).

participants also considered the nature of the response tweet when rating their attitudes toward the initiating brand. Participants had more positive attitudes toward the initiating brand when their tweet was low aggression or if their high-aggression tweet was also matched by the responding brand with a high-aggression tweet. Attitudes toward the initiating brand were lower when the initiating brand employed a high-aggression tweet and the responding brand used a low-aggression tweet.

#### Mediation Analysis

Next, data were analyzed using PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes 2013) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples assessing perceptions of manipulative intent as the mechanism mediating the relationship between the initial and

response tweets on attitudes toward the initiating brand (visits and education included as covariates). The index of moderated mediation supports moderated mediation ( $b = .53$ , 95% CI = [.0943, 1.041]). The interaction between the initial tweet (low aggression = 0, high aggression = 1) and the response tweet (low aggression = 0, high aggression = 1) had a significant effect on manipulative intent ( $b = -1.35$ ,  $t = -2.38$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which significantly affected attitudes toward the initiating brand ( $b = -.39$ ,  $t = -5.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As evidence of full mediation, the direct effect of the independent variable (initial tweet) on attitudes is no longer significant when perceptions of manipulative intent are included in the model ( $p = .09$ ). Moreover, the same holds true for the moderator, response tweet ( $p = .39$ ), and interaction ( $p = .14$ ).

To understand the nature of the moderated mediation, indirect effects were examined. The indirect effect was significant for participants who viewed a response tweet that was low aggression ( $b = -.54$ , 95% CI = [-.9519, -.2023]), but not for those who read a response tweet that was high aggression ( $b = -.02$ , 95% CI = [-.3491, .2798]), suggesting that mediation occurred in the response tweet low-aggression condition but not the response tweet high-aggression condition. This suggests that manipulative intent affected the relationship between the nature of initial tweet and attitudes toward the initiating brand only in the low-aggression response condition. Taken together, this suggests that when the response tweet used low-aggression humor, perceptions of manipulative increase when the initial tweet was high in aggression, negatively affecting attitudes toward the initiating brand.

#### Discussion

These results suggest a slightly different story than hypothesized by hypotheses 1 and 4 and found in Study 1. Whereas Study 1 finds that attitudes and engagement intentions toward the initiating brand were solely driven by the nature of the initiating brand's tweet, the findings from Study 2 suggest that participants considered the entire dialogue (both the nature of the initiating brand's tweets and those of the responding brand) when forming their attitudes toward the initiating brand.

There are a few potential explanations for these discrepant findings. First, the consumer tweet used to initiate the brand dialogue sets up expectations for brand interactions and even an element of competition between the two brands. As such, participants

may have been more primed to consider the totality of the interactions, thus resulting in the application of some of the tenets outlined in communication accommodation theory; whereas in Study 1 participants may have been more likely to perceive that the initiating brand elected to engage with the responding brand due to the brand's own volition rather than as an expected response to an external prompt (i.e., the consumer tweet). Another possible explanation is the use of real, known brands as opposed to fictitious brands. Eisend (2009) finds that when fictitious advertisements are employed in research, the effects of humor are reduced as compared to real ads. Study 1 employed fictitious brands and fictitious tweets, while Study 2 used real brands and real tweets. As such, the effects of humor may have been dampened in Study 1 with participants failing to fully comprehend the brand's positioning or taking into account the exchange of dialogue for the initiating brand.

While the findings related to the initiating brand from Study 2 might be slightly different than those of Study 1, the recommendation remains the same, brands using humor to initiate a dialogue with another brand on social media should avoid being overly aggressive. Although the results from Study 2 suggest that this approach can be viewed as acceptable by consumers when the responding brand also engages using a similarly valenced response (high-aggression humor), the initiating brand is unable to control the responding brand. Thus, to avoid a situation where the responding brand fails to mirror the initiating brand's tone, it is best for the initiating brand to use low-aggression humor.

## Responding Brand

### Attitudes

A two-way ANOVA was conducted with the initial tweet and response tweet conditions as the independent variables, education and visits as the covariates, and attitudes toward the responding brand as the dependent variable. No main effects occurred for the initial tweet ( $p = .63$ ) or the response tweet ( $p = .33$ ). However, a significant interaction occurred between the initial and response tweet conditions,  $F(1, 144) = 5.87, p < .05$  (Figure 4, panel B). Probing within the initial tweet condition, simple effects analysis shows that the nature of the response tweet did not have a significant effect on attitudes toward the responding brand when the initial tweet was high in aggression ( $p = .21$ ). However, when the initial tweet used low aggression, a high-aggression response tweet resulted in significantly lower attitudes toward the responding

brand ( $M = 4.93, SD = 1.56$ ) than a low-aggression response tweet ( $M = 5.64, SD = 1.31; F(1, 67) = 4.23, p < .05$ ). Probing within the response tweet condition, results show that when the response tweet used low aggression, attitudes toward the responding brand are not significantly different ( $p = .16$ ). However, when the response tweet used high aggression, attitudes toward the responding brand are significantly lower if the initial tweet was low aggression ( $M = 4.93, SD = 1.56$ ) as opposed to high aggression ( $M = 5.51, SD = 1.43; F(1, 71) = 3.70, p = .05$ ). While the main effect predicted by hypothesis 2 is not supported, these results are consistent with hypothesis 3 and the findings from Study 1. As proposed in hypothesis 3, these results demonstrate that when the responding brand uses high-aggression humor to respond to an initial high-aggression tweet, attitudes are higher than if the responding brand uses high-aggression humor to respond to an initial low-aggression tweet.

### Mediation Analysis

Next, data were analyzed using PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes 2013) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples assessing perceptions of manipulative intent as the mechanism mediating the relationship between the initial and response tweets on attitudes toward the responding brand (visits and education included as covariates). The index of moderated mediation supports this model ( $b = .60, 95\% CI = [.1813, 1.117]$ ). The interaction between the initial tweet (low aggression = 0, high aggression = 1) and the response tweet (low aggression = 0, high aggression = 1) had a significant effect on manipulative intent ( $b = -1.60, t = -2.80, p < .01$ ), which significantly affected attitudes toward the responding brand ( $b = -.38, t = -6.04, p < .001$ ). As evidence of full mediation, the direct effect of the independent variable (response tweet) on attitudes is no longer significant when perceptions of manipulative intent are included in the model ( $p = .39$ ). Moreover, the same holds true for the moderator, initial tweet ( $p = .99$ ), and interaction ( $p = .21$ ).

To understand the nature of the moderated mediation, the indirect effects were examined. The indirect effect was significant for participants who viewed an initial tweet that used low aggression ( $b = -.53, 95\% CI = [-.9087, -.2054]$ ), but not for those who read an initial tweet that used high aggression ( $b = .07, 95\% CI = [-.2157, .3802]$ ), suggesting that mediation occurred in the initial tweet low-aggression condition but not the initial tweet high-aggression condition. This suggests that manipulative intent affected the relationship between the response tweet and attitudes

toward the responding brand only when the initial tweet used low-aggression humor. That is, when the initial tweet employed low-aggression humor, a high-aggression response increased perceptions of manipulative intent negatively affecting attitudes toward the responding brand.

### Discussion

Consistent with Study 1, the results of Study 2 show that when consumers formulate their attitudes toward the responding brand, the nature of the comments from the initiating brand is taken into consideration. While high-aggression humor is typically perceived more negatively, results show that if the initiating brand used high-aggression humor, there is no significant difference in interest toward the responding brand based on the valence of their response. Finally, the analyses for the both the initiating brand and responding brand were redone to include the use of Twitter as a covariate. Inclusion of Twitter use as a covariate did not substantially change any of the aforementioned results or conclusions.

### Discussion

The results of this research provide important managerial and theoretical implications. While the results from Study 1 and Study 2 vary slightly, the conclusions align. Brands that elect to initiate a humorous dialogue with another brand on social media are viewed most favorably when they elect to employ either neutral messaging or engage in low-aggression humor. While Study 2 suggests that an initiating brand can employ high-aggression humor without penalty, this is only when the responding brand replies with a similarly valenced message (i.e., high-aggression humor). As the initiating brand is unable to control the nature of the response, it would be wise to initiate dialogue with other brands using more lighthearted humor. This strategy is relatively straightforward. However, selecting an appropriate humorous response strategy is complicated, as the responding brand has more options that are perceived as acceptable by consumers depending on the nature of the initial tweet. Rather than turn the other cheek and respond in a neutral or low-aggression manner when the initiating brand uses high-aggression humor, responding in kind (i.e., “an eye for an eye”) is also acceptable. Thus, responding brands should avoid high-aggression humor, but if the initiating brand used high-aggression humor the responding brand could elect to respond in a more lighthearted or more

aggressive fashion and either option is deemed acceptable by consumers.

This research contributes to past literature that suggests marketers no longer completely control the stories of their brands (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013; Peters et al. 2013) and answers calls for additional research on brand communication in social media (Voorveld 2019). Just as social media has enabled consumers to contribute to a brand’s story (Gensler et al. 2013; Ilhan, Kübler, and Pauwels 2018), brands can also more readily play an influential role in shaping consumers’ perceptions of other, potentially competing, brands. By extending communication accommodation theory into a social media and branding context, this research demonstrates that brand-to-brand dialogue shapes consumers’ attitudes toward both brands as well as their intentions to engage on social media, identifying a previously unexplored antecedent of brand attitudes and social media engagement. Moreover, past research typically examines brand-to-brand interaction in traditional advertising mediums, examining dependent variables such as attitudes and purchase intentions. This research works toward filling that gap, exploring brand interactions on social media and the resulting influence on consumers’ intentions to engage with the brand on social media (as well as attitudes). Further, the specific context of this study is humorous exchange, helping to fill a gap noted by Beard (2008) on the paucity of research related to disparaging humor and, more specifically, low-aggression (i.e., satirical) humor, as noted by Holbert et al. (2011).

This research also examines manipulative intent as the underlying mechanism influencing the relationship between humor type and social media engagement. To date, tactics found to contribute to consumers’ inferences of manipulative intent are numerous and include fit of appeal type (Campbell 1995), comparative advertising (Chang 2007), biased sources (Kirmani and Zhu 2007), product placement (Cowley and Barron 2008), disclosures (Thomas, Fowler, and Grimm 2013), and arousal eliciting elements (Lunardo and Mbengue 2013). This research contributes to the existing literature by identifying the role of humor and brand-to-brand dialogue in triggering perceptions of brand manipulation.

This research also contributes to the literature on interfirm brand rivalries, as social media exchanges among companies or between consumers and companies can be part of a larger interfirm brand rivalry (Berendt, Uhrich, and Thompson 2018; Ilhan, Kübler, and Pauwels 2018). When faced with unflattering

portrayals of their brands, some rivals choose to respond publicly. The resulting back-and-forth is called an advertising war and occurs when “one advertiser responds to a direct or implied attack by another” (Beard 2010). Motivation to participate in an advertising war may be fueled at least in part by human nature to respond in kind when attacked; however, many companies often regret the actions afterward as the hostilities escalate and damage is done to the entire product category (Beard 2010).

While this research bolsters previous findings on advertising wars that suggest engaging in such competitive actions via social media can negatively affect consumers’ intentions, this research also qualifies such previous work by finding that consumers give brands some leeway depending on context. Indeed, the finding that actions which would normally be perceived as nonnormative become permissible when the initiating brand is portrayed as an aggressor is consistent with past research exploring moral justification (Bandura 2001) and comedic violence (Brown, Bhadury, and Pope 2010). Similarly, these findings contribute to the benign-violation hypothesis (McGraw and Warren 2010; McGraw et al. 2012) by suggesting that nonnormative, aggressive behaviors may be perceived as acceptable when employed as retaliatory tactics. Further, it contributes to research that suggests media can perpetuate and glamorize uncivil behavior (Bandura 2001; Mustonen and Pulkkinen 1997) and that comedic violence can result in favorable advertising outcomes (Brown, Bhadury, and Pope 2010).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The scope of our research is limited in that we explore only two types of humor that vary in terms of negativity. Exploring humor with elements of negativity was an intentional choice, as these two types of humor are frequently employed in social media and commonly featured in popular press headlines (e.g., Cheng 2018; Morris 2019), suggesting that consumers are regularly exposed to this type of dialogue. Further, the subject of the joke (i.e., the compared-to brand) is implicitly or explicitly referenced in each of these humor types (which is not the case for all types of humor). Thus, these forms of humor are highly relevant to the exploration of brand dialogue. However, there are many existing types of humor (e.g., Barry and Graça 2018; Speck 1991), and our work should serve as a starting point for others’ continued exploration of how various types of humor affect perceptions of brands engaging in dialogue. For example,

Barry and Graça (2018) elaborate on Speck’s (1991) initial taxonomy, identifying a multitude of humor types (termed devices) which stem from the incongruence, arousal-safety, and disparagement mechanisms. These humor devices suggest greater extremes in aggression than examined in this research, with higher ends of aggression resulting in humor related to social deviancy. Moreover, devices such as deserved repercussions, malicious joy, and put-downs are all suggestive of aggressive humor that engage (directly or indirectly) with another and, thus, could prove useful for identifying the acceptability of other types of aggressive humor in the context of brand-to-brand dialogue.

Additional research comparing aggressive humor to nonaggressive humor in brand-to-brand dialogue is also warranted. As Weinberger and colleagues (2017) suggest, advertisers must weigh the stopping power of aggressive humor against the tactic’s potential to offend important audiences, thus harming brands. Sorescu and Gelb (2000) further caution that it is difficult to calibrate the level of negativity in a comparative advertisement. Therefore, future research may want to explore conditions where aggressive humor in brand-to-brand dialogue, rather than potentially safer nonaggressive humor, would be advantageous.

An additional limitation is that the intensity of the humor used in the advertisement was not controlled. Past research suggests that moderate humor may have more brand benefits, such as increased attitudes toward the brand and purchase intentions, while more intense humor results in higher attitudes toward the advertisement (De Pelsmacker and Geuens 1999). Thus, future research may want to examine if intensity moderates the effect of humor type on the results reported in this research. Another avenue that might be worthy of pursuit is to examine if intensely aggressive humor can spark retaliatory behavior from consumers who wish to protect the brand under attack.

Further, past research suggests that the effectiveness of comparative advertising may be qualified by age (Beard 2015), gender (Chang 2007), and culture (Schwaiger et al. 2007), and that responses to humor may vary by gender (De Pelsmacker and Geuens 1999) and age (Mak and Carpenter 2007). Thus, demographic differences may influence our observed effects. Rerunning the analyses with gender and age as covariates did not substantially change the significance of our results or the proceeding conclusions. However, based on the aforementioned research, and as the exploration of demographic factors was not central to our hypotheses, future research should



examine if these results hold across different demographics. In addition, individual differences such as the need for humor (Cline, Altsech, and Kellaris 2003) and tolerance of negativity (Muehling, Vijayalakshmi, and Laczniak 2018), as well as consumers' usage of either the brand or the compared-to brand (Vijayalakshmi, Muehling, and Laczniak 2015) or schema familiarity (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000), have been found as moderators in the humor and comparative advertising literature and should also be considered.

As brand-to-brand dialogue has not been extensively explored in the academic literature, there are many avenues for future research. For example, future research could examine how brands might prompt consumers to consider the entire dialogue instead of just one brand's comment. In Study 1 consumers considered the initiating brand's comment independently from the responding brand; in Study 2 we found that consumers used the entire dialogue to form impressions of the initiating brand. It would, therefore, be important to determine what tactics the marketer could take to either encourage or discourage this practice, given the marketer's goal for the interaction.

Another avenue worthy of consideration might be whether it is acceptable to not respond when faced with a brand's attempt to engage on social media. It is unclear how consumers would perceive a brand that was attacked and elected not to respond. For example, would consumers perceive the brand as being "the bigger person"? Or would they be more likely to reward a brand for sticking up for itself? Moreover, if the initiating brand attempts to engage in a polite manner, is a lack of response viewed as rude? These questions, along with an examination of aggressive provocation and perceptions of when such aggression is justifiable, are fruitful areas for future research.

Finally, our research was conducted under the guise of a Twitter exchange. It is unknown whether social norms, and more specifically communal norms, might differ between the various social media platforms, potentially impacting the results reported here. However, Yoon (2016) finds that normative beliefs about violence in advertising have a significant effect on perceptions of humor and advertising effectiveness, indicating that normative beliefs may affect the results observed in this research. Thus, future research should consider both other social media platforms and the impact of the various social norms therein.

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## Appendix: Study 2 Stimuli

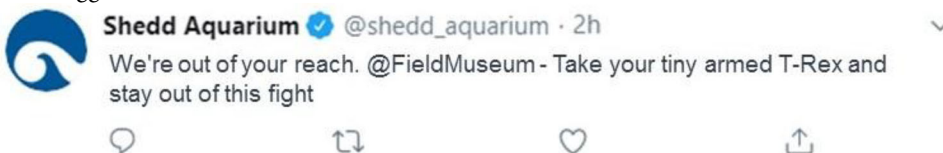
Initial tweet low-aggression condition:



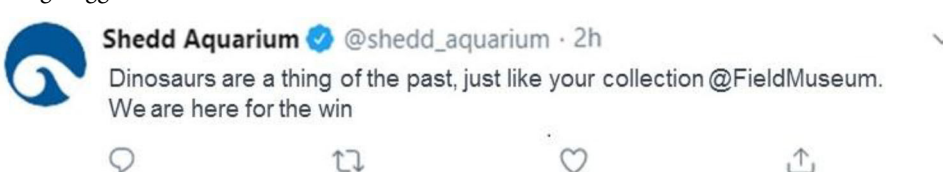
Initial tweet high-aggression condition:



Response tweet low-aggression condition:



Response tweet high-aggression condition:





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