Laughing at the Customer or the Brand? The Effectiveness of Self- and Customer-Disparaging Humour in Short Video Advertising

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Short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have become central to brand communication, increasing the need for effective strategies that stimulate audience engagement. Disparagement humour, whether directed at the brand or at customers, has become increasingly popular. However, little research has directly compared different forms of disparagement humour in short video advertising or examined the mechanisms underlying their effects. This study investigates the effects of humour strategy (self-disparaging vs customer-disparaging vs no humour) on engagement intentions in an online between-subjects experiment (N = 179, mean age 18-29). Both humour strategies generated significantly higher engagement intentions than the non-humorous ad. The effects were fully mediated by attitude toward the ad. No significant differences were found between self-disparaging and customer-disparaging humour. These findings suggest that disparagement humour enhances engagement intentions in short video advertising primarily by improving affective responses to the ad, regardless of the targets.

Keywords: short video advertising; engagement intentions; attitude towards the ad; self-disparagement humour; customer-disparaging humour

Introduction

With the rise of short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, social media advertising increasingly relies on emotional appeal and audience interaction (Montag 2021; Meng et al. 2024). It is more important than ever for advertisers to develop effective strategies to capture consumers' attention in cluttered social media feeds. Humour can be an effective advertising tool because it attracts attention, enhances message liking, and reduces resistance to persuasion (Weinberger and Gulas 2019). As social media platforms encourage more authentic, entertainment-driven brand communication, humour plays an important role in stimulating engagement (Berger and Milkman 2012; Romell and Segedi 2022).

Disparagement humour, which involves mocking or belittling a specific target, such as the brand itself or its customers, has emerged as a popular yet controversial strategy (Ferguson and Ford 2008). Brands employ both self-disparaging humour, in which they make fun of their own shortcomings (Sabri and El Hana 2021), and customer-disparaging humour, in which they mock their audience (Iveson and Harris 2025). For example, Ryanair's TikTok posts mock passengers' complaints, while Duolingo's mascot is portrayed as annoying when reminding users to maintain their language-learning streaks (Akavickaitė and May Ross 2022; Wiswall 2024).

Despite its popularity, disparagement humour remains a risky advertising strategy. Research suggests that aggressive or hostile humour can evoke negative affect, damage brand perceptions, and alienate audiences when perceived as offensive (Beard 2008; McGraw and Warren 2016). In contrast, self-disparaging humour may signal humility and authenticity, thereby increasing trust and positive evaluations (Sabri and El Hana 2021). Although both forms of disparagement humour have been studied independently, their relative effectiveness has not been directly compared within a single study. Moreover, prior research has focused on traditional advertisements or text-based social media posts (e.g., posts on platform X). Less is known about how different humour strategies function in short video advertising, which has become influential among Gen Z audiences due to its reliance on rapid storytelling, dynamic visuals, and emotional appeal, where humour often plays a central role (Fatimah and Nasir 2025).

Attitude toward the ad is a key construct in advertising research and frequently serves as a mediator between cognitive responses to an advertisement and behavioural outcomes (MacKenzie et al. 1986; Mitchell and Olson 1981). Humour has been shown to enhance attitudes toward the ad, which in turn influence brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Eisend 2008; Kim and Hunter 1993). However, the mediating role of attitude

toward the ad in explaining the relationship between disparagement humour and engagement intentions in short video advertising has not yet been examined.

Therefore, we propose the following research question: *To what extent does humour strategy (self-disparaging vs customer-disparaging vs no humour) influence engagement intentions toward short video ads, and is this relationship mediated by attitude toward the ad?*

Theoretical framework

Humorous advertising enhances attention and message liking by eliciting positive affect and reducing counter-arguing (Sternthal and Craig 1973; Madden and Weinberger 1984). As a result, humorous advertisements are generally perceived as more compelling than non-humorous ones. On social media, humorous posts frequently outperform non-humorous content in terms of engagement, as reflected in higher levels of likes and shares (Sewak et al. 2025). Playful and entertaining advertisements also facilitate interpersonal interaction by encouraging consumers to converse about and share content with others (Campo et al. 2013).

Given these effects, humour in short video advertising is expected to increase viewers' willingness to interact with the ad. Therefore, it is hypothesized that *Ads using disparagement humour (self-disparaging or customer-disparaging) generate higher engagement intentions than non-humorous ads (H1a).*

The effectiveness of disparagement humour can be explained through benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010), which proposes that humour arises when a norm violation is perceived as benign rather than threatening. Mocking or teasing becomes humorous only when it is interpreted as playful rather than hostile (Li and Wang 2022). If the violation is perceived as overly aggressive or offensive, the humour may backfire and evoke negative responses (Martin et al. 2003).

Customer-disparaging humour may be more likely to be perceived as aggressive because it targets the audience. Aggressive humour can generate negative affect, weaken brand evaluations, and harm behavioural responses when perceived as mean or hostile (Beard 2008; McGraw and Warren 2016; Hatzithomas et al. 2021). In contrast, self-disparaging humour positions the brand itself as the target of the joke. By highlighting minor flaws or stereotypes, brands may signal humility and authenticity, thereby enhancing trust and positive evaluations (Sabri and El Hana 2021; Kale and Sayin 2024). Lower perceived aggressiveness in humorous advertising is associated with more favourable engagement outcomes (Ning et al. 2022). Accordingly, self-disparaging humour may be more effective than customer-disparaging humour in stimulating engagement intentions. Thus, *Self-disparaging humour generates higher engagement intentions than customer-disparaging humour (H1b).*

Attitude toward the ad is a central construct in advertising research and often mediates the relationship between ad characteristics and behavioural outcomes (MacKenzie et al. 1986; Mitchell and Olson 1981). Humour has consistently been shown to enhance attitudes toward the ad (Belch and Belch 1984; Gelb and Pickett 1983; Chung and Zhao 2003). However, overly aggressive humour may undermine attitudes when perceived as offensive (Beard 2008; McGraw and Warren 2016).

Positive attitudes toward the ad are associated with stronger behavioural intentions (Kim and Hunter 1993). In social media contexts, favourable attitudes increase the likelihood that consumers will like, comment on, or share the advertisement (Chung 2018). Humorous ads may therefore increase engagement intentions indirectly by improving affective evaluations of the ad (Eisend 2008; Sewak et al. 2025).

Because self-disparaging humour is generally perceived as less aggressive than customer-disparaging humour, it may produce more positive attitudes toward the ad

and, consequently, stronger engagement intentions (Beard 2008; Ning et al. 2022). Therefore, we expect that *the effect of humour strategy on engagement intentions is mediated by attitude toward the ad (H2).* More specifically: *Disparagement humour (self-disparaging or customer-disparaging) leads to more positive attitudes toward the ad than no humour (H2a); Self-disparaging humour leads to more positive attitudes toward the ad than customer-disparaging humour (H2b); More positive attitudes toward the ad are associated with higher engagement intentions (H2c). (See Figure 1).*

Method

Design and participants

An online experiment with a three-group between-subjects design was conducted with 179 participants aged 18-29 years, recruited via a convenience sample (75 men, 102 women, and 2 identifying as another gender). Regarding educational level, 44% held a Bachelor's degree, 23% held a Master's degree, and 25% were enrolled at a university. Most participants reported frequent use of short-form video platforms.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Randomization checks showed no significant differences across conditions in gender, $\chi^2(4) = 9.04$, $p = .060$; educational level, $\chi^2(10) = 5.86$, $p = .83$; or frequency of short-video platform use, $\chi^2(8) = 8.68$, $p = .37$, indicating successful random assignment.

Stimulus material

The stimuli consisted of three 15-second video advertisements promoting the same budget airline on TikTok. To avoid copyright issues, brand logos were blurred. The no-humour condition depicted an airplane taking off with the on-screen text: "*Fly across Europe for just €16.99!*" (Figure 2). The customer-disparaging humour condition

featured a customer with an oversized backpack asking, "*Do I look suspicious?"* The airplane responded, "*No, just ridiculous!",* followed by a fee appearing on screen, mocking attempts to avoid baggage fees (Figure 3). The self-disparaging humour condition displayed the on-screen text: "*Us anytime someone mentions we can't charge for the toilet*," accompanied by an anthropomorphized airplane (with eyes and a mouth). The video mocked the brand's reputation for excessive fees (Figure 4).

Measures

Attitude toward the ad was measured using an adapted 7-point semantic differential scale based on MacKenzie and Lutz (1986). The scale consisted of four bipolar items: *bad–good, unpleasant–pleasant, unfavourable–favourable, and unlikeable–likeable*. The scale demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

Engagement intentions were measured using the scale developed by Alhabash et al. (2015). Participants indicated their likelihood of liking, commenting on, and sharing the video on a 7-point Likert scale. The scale showed high reliability ($\alpha = .93$).

As manipulation check, perceived humour was assessed using Zhang's (1996) SD scale, consisting of five bipolar items: *not humorous–humorous, not funny–funny, not playful–playful, not amusing–amusing, and dull–not dull*. The scale demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$). Participants were also asked to indicate who was being made fun of in the advertisement (the brand, the consumer, or no one) to verify correct identification of the humour target.

Procedure

Data collection took place in 2025 via Qualtrics, following ethical approval from ASCoR. Participants first provided informed consent, confirming that they were at least 16 years old, resided in the EU and agreed to data processing. After demographic

questions, they were then randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. After viewing the video, they completed measures of attitude toward the ad, engagement intentions, and manipulation checks. The study concluded with a debriefing.

Results

Manipulation check

The majority of participants (90.0%) correctly identified the experimental condition. A one-way ANOVA examined perceived humour across the experimental conditions. The effect of condition on perceived humour was significant, $F(2, 178) = 211.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$. Participants in the self-disparagement humour condition ($M = 7.29$, $SD = 1.37$) and in the customer-disparagement humour condition ($M = 7.19$, $SD = 1.47$) reported higher perceived humour than participants in the control condition ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.61$, $p < .001$). The two humour conditions did not significantly differ from each other. Thus, the manipulation functioned as intended.

Main analysis

To examine the direct and indirect effects of humour strategy on engagement intentions via attitude toward the ad, mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals. Humour strategy was specified as a multicategorical independent variable. Two indicator variables were created: X1 compared humour (self- and customer-disparaging combined) to no humour and X2 compared self- versus customer-disparaging humour.

The model predicting attitude toward the ad was significant, $R^2 = .50$, $F(2, 178) = 92.92$, $p < .001$. Compared to no-humour, disparagement humour significantly increased attitude toward the ad, $b = 2.98$, $SE = 0.25$, $t = 12.10$, $p < .001$, 95% *CI* [2.49,

3.46]. The contrast between self-disparaging and customer-disparaging humour was not significant, $b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.25$, $t = -0.74$, $p = .460$, 95% CI [−0.67, 0.31]. Thus, H2a was supported, whereas H2b was not supported.

The model predicting engagement intentions was significant, $R^2 = .68$, $F(3, 177) = 132.09$, $p < .001$. Attitude toward the ad positively predicted engagement intentions, $b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 13.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.42, 0.56], supporting H2c. Humour (vs no humour) significantly increased engagement intentions, $b = 1.62$, $SE = 0.17$, $t = 9.37$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.28, 1.96]. The contrast between self-disparaging and customer-disparaging humour was not significant, $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.17$, $t = -0.38$, $p = .708$, 95% CI [−0.41, 0.28]. Thus, H1a was supported, whereas H1b was not supported.

The direct effects of humour on engagement intentions were not significant: X1: $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = .343$; X2: $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .843$. Indirect effect of humour (vs no humour) on engagement intentions through attitude toward the ad was significant, $b = 1.46$, Boot $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI [1.15, 1.81]. The indirect effect comparing self- and customer-disparaging humour was not significant, $b = -0.09$, Boot $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [−0.34, 0.16]. Thus, the effect of disparagement humour (vs no humour) on engagement intentions was fully mediated by attitude toward the ad. No significant differences were found between self- and customer-disparaging humour. See Table 1 for statistical details and Figure 5 for the summary of results.

Discussion

Drawing on benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010), this study examined how different forms of disparagement humour function in short video advertising. The findings indicate that disparagement humour, whether self- or customer-disparaging, increases engagement intentions compared to non-humorous advertising. This effect operated indirectly by generating more positive attitudes towards the ad.

Prior research has suggested that humour targeting consumers may be perceived as more aggressive and therefore riskier than humour targeting the brand itself (Beard 2008; Ning et al. 2022). However, our findings show no significant differences between the two humour strategies in terms of attitudes toward the ad or engagement intentions. Both forms of disparagement humour were equally effective relative to a non-humorous condition. These findings suggest that in the context of short-form social media advertising both humour strategies can enhance affective responses to the ad, stimulating engagement intentions. Thus, the effectiveness of disparagement humour seems to depend less on its target and more on positive attitude to ad.

The mediation results further reaffirm the central role of attitude toward the ad as a mechanism linking creative strategy to behavioural outcomes. Consistent with prior studies (MacKenzie et al. 1986; Mitchell and Olson 1981), humour influenced engagement intentions indirectly through affective responses.

Practical implications

Our findings suggest that brands operating on short-video platforms can use disparagement humour to stimulate engagement intentions, provided that the humour is perceived as playful rather than hostile. Both self- and customer-disparaging humour can increase positive attitude to ad and engagement intentions. The absence of significant differences between the two humour types provides brands with more flexibility. Rather than being constrained to self-mockery as a "safer" option, brands may select the humour style that aligns with their brand personality, tone of voice, and audience expectations. In fast-moving social media environments, this flexibility enables experimentation with humour formats without necessarily risking lower engagement intentions.

Limitations and further research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported engagement intentions rather than observed behavioural engagement. Although intentions are widely used in advertising research, they do not always translate directly into actual behaviour. Future research should examine whether the observed effects replicate when measuring real engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares.

Second, the experimental setting limits external validity. The findings may not generalize equally across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, or YouTube Shorts, where algorithms, user norms, and content expectations differ. Future studies could complement experimental designs with field studies or content analyses of real brand posts to assess actual engagement behaviour across platforms.

Third, perceived aggressiveness of humour was not measured. Given the theoretical importance of benign violation theory, future research should assess perceived aggressiveness to better understand when customer-disparaging humour is interpreted as benign rather than hostile. Including such measures would allow for more precise testing of the psychological mechanisms underlying humour effects.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that disparagement humour in short video advertising increases engagement intentions compared to non-humorous ads. Both self- and customer-disparaging humour improved attitudes toward the ad, which in turn enhanced engagement intentions. No significant differences were found between the two humour strategies. The findings suggest that disparagement humour can serve as an effective strategy for stimulating engagement in short-form social media advertising, regardless of whether the target of the joke is the brand or the consumer.

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Table 1. Summary of the Mediation Model (PROCESS Model 4)

Outcome variable: Attitude towards the Ad					
	Coefficient (SE)	*t*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*	*p*
Constant	2.32 (0.17)	13.50	1.98	2.66	< .001
X1: Humour v no humour	2.98 (0.25)	12.10	2.49	3.46	< .001
X2: Brand vs customer-disparagement humour	-0.18 (0.25)	-.074	-0.67	0.30	.306
Outcome variable: Consumer Engagement					
Constant	0.29 (0.12)	2.41	0.05	0.53	.017
X1: Humour vs no humour	0.16 (0.17)	0.95	-0.17	0.49	.343
X2: Brand vs customer-disparagement humour	0.29 (0.13)	0.20	-0.22	0.27	.843
Attitude towards the Ad	0.49 (0.03)	13.23	0.42	0.56	< .001
Total effects of humour on consumer engagement					
X2: Humour vs no humour	1.62 (0.17)	11.87	1.28	1.96	<.001
X2: Brand vs customer-disparagement humour	-0.07 (0.17)	-0.38	-0.41	0.28	.708
Direct effects of humour on consumer engagement					
X1: Humour vs no humour	0.16 (0.17)	0.95	-0.17	0.49	.343
X2: Brand vs customer-disparagement humour	0.29 (0.13)	0.20	-0.22	0.27	.843
Indirect effects of humour on consumer engagement					
X1: Humour vs no humour	1.46 (0.17)		1.15	1.81	sign.
X2: Brand vs customer-disparagement humour	-0.09 (0.13)		-0.34	0.16	n/s

Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

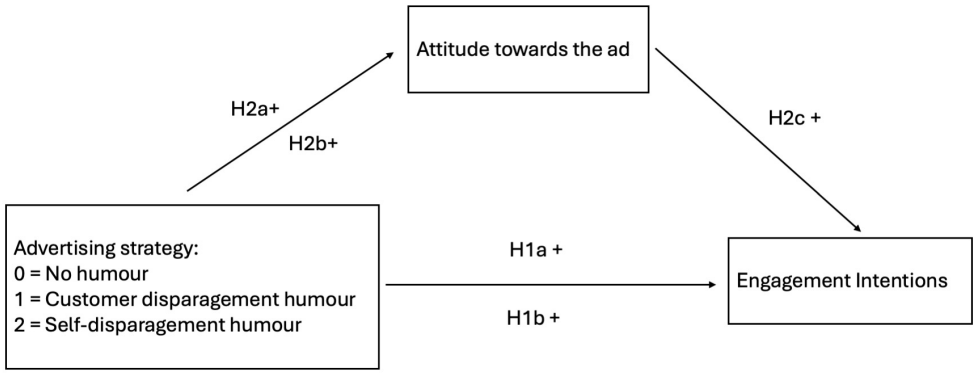


Figure 2. No-humour condition



Figure 3. Customer disparagement humour condition

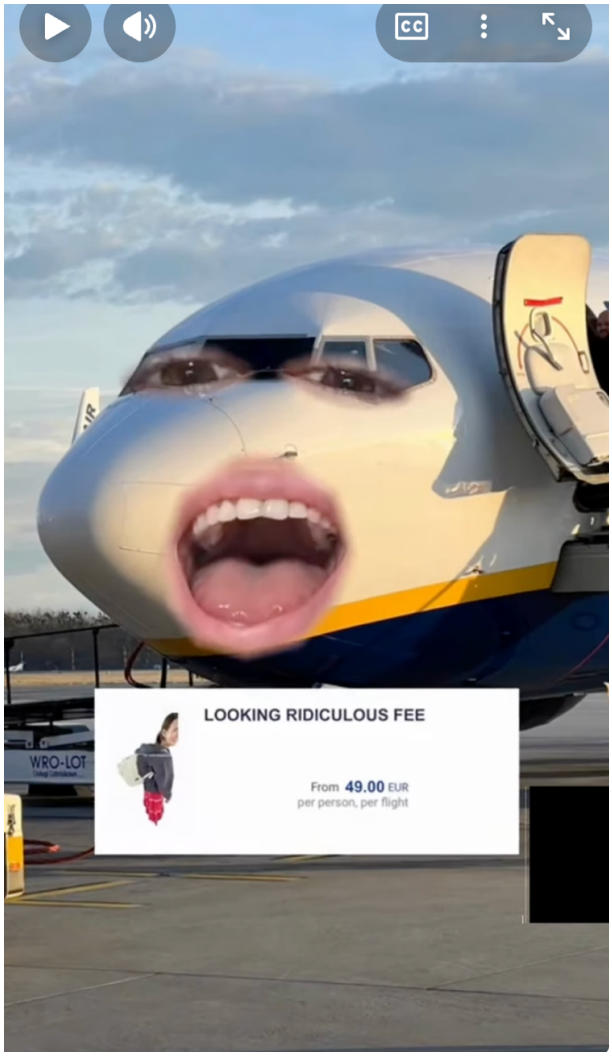
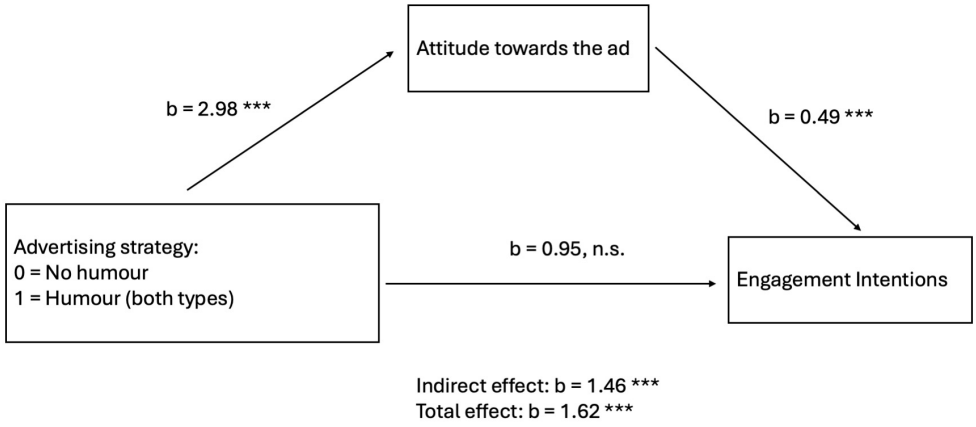


Figure 4. Brand self-disparagement humour condition



Figure 5. Summary of the results

A) Effect of humour vs no humour advertising strategies on engagement intentions mediated by attitudes towards the ad



B) Effects of self- vs customer-disparagement humour on engagement intentions mediated by attitude towards the ad

