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# How morality judgments influence humor perceptions of prankvertising

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## ABSTRACT

Prankvertising, an innovative form of branded entertainment, has not attracted much research attention yet. This article proposes a morality-centered theoretical framework to explain how and when prankvertising triggers humor and evokes positive brand attitudes. By integrating benign violation theory and morality literature, this study presents a mediated moderation model to explain humor perceptions of prankvertising. A defining aspect of prankvertising—shocking unsuspecting people—represents a transgression of social norms that can activate viewers' moral censoring. The proposed model builds on the proposition that victims' expressions of surprise indicate the degree of this transgression, which can induce humor perceptions and result in positive brand attitude changes among viewers if it is morally justified. In the proposed model, the mediating effect of victims' surprise on brand attitudes, through morality judgments and humor perceptions, varies with two main cues: victims' expressions of fear and the meaningfulness of the pranks. Four studies test and confirm the proposed mediated moderation model.

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benign violation theory; branded entertainment; branded videos; humor perceptions; humor appreciation; morality; prankvertising; viral ads

## Introduction

According to a Pew Survey (Purcell 2013), 72% of adult Internet users watch videos on video-sharing sites like YouTube or Vimeo, and more than half of them (58%) watch comedy and humorous videos, whereas only 15% watch advertising. Because consumers browse online more for entertainment than for advertising, marketers strive to blur this line, engendering the practice of branded entertainment, often manifested as branded videos. Investments in branded videos continue to increase (Litsa 2016), as do the number of creative tactics advertisers use to lead consumers to believe that their advertising is entertainment, such as prankvertising (Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński 2014; Luckerson 2014), short film ads (Chen 2015), or insightful approaches

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(e.g., Dove's Real Beauty sketches). When advertisers combine brand information with entertainment and create such new genres, they often can attract consumers' attention and generate buzz via sharing (Luckerson 2014).

In particular, *prankvertising*, a digital-age marketing innovation, involves advertisers playing pranks on seemingly unsuspecting consumers to deliver information about the product, the brand, the campaign, and the brand's image or positioning. Its first notable instances appeared in 2012, prompting substantial views and sharing (Dobrevá 2014), as well as ongoing popularity on video-sharing sites (Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński 2014; Luckerson 2014). Anecdotal evidence highlights the vast spread of such videos: LG Reality earned 700,000 views on the first day it released a prankvertising video (Ratcliff 2013), and the Telekinetic Coffee Shop Surprise prankvertising video, first posted on YouTube on October 7, 2013, had amassed 71,586,339 views as of October 2019. In 2019, a quick search on YouTube for "pranks + advertising" identifies 485 recently posted videos, some of which are tied in to holiday themes, such as the spookiness of Halloween or the silliness of April Fools' Day.

Brands use such prankvertising to induce viral sharing of their brand messages. Most of their videos present the prank as it unfolds, with careful editing that adds playful cues. After sharing the branded videos to sites such as YouTube, consumers can watch and share the content easily and virally. However, this novel marketing tactic also can create controversies (Dobrevá 2014), such as when advertisers seemingly overstep the boundaries of what is funny or clever and actually damage their brands by pulling a prank that seems harmful or cruel (Tsikolis 2014). As Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński (2018) demonstrate, exposure to harmful prankvertising ultimately triggers negative brand affect. It seems counterintuitive that any advertisers would purposefully evoke consumers' discomfort, yet the widespread use and virality of prankvertising implies that even some harmful forms have been effective. Therefore, this article seeks to determine how and when prankvertising may be effective or not, as well as what features determine whether it benefits or harms consumers' brand attitudes.

To establish these insights, this article proposes an integrated model that builds on benign violation theory (BVT), which predicts that "humor results from consumers simultaneously holding two specific appraisals: (1) there is a violation, and (2) the violation is benign" (Warren and McGraw 2016a, 42). According to BVT, when violations feature playful cues and inconsequential threats, viewers find them humorous. The case of prankvertising seems more complex though. Surprising people on the street represents a violation and has the potential to induce humor, as BVT suggests. Yet the videos also start by depicting the set-up or preparation process, and they are full of playful cues. Therefore, viewers know right away that the pranks are staged, meant to be funny and not harmful. According to BVT, all consumers then should find prankvertising humorous—an assertion that does not appear to hold in practice (e.g., Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński), suggesting the need to expand BVT to understand the effects of this unique advertising tactic. Accordingly, this article uses BVT as a foundational model, then integrates morality literature to offer a nuanced explanation of the humor perception process associated with prankvertising. Morality literature suggests that when observing others doing harm to innocent people, people's

morality censoring gets automatically activated, and they seek cues or make inferences to aid their reasoning (Haidt and Joseph 2008). To the degree that people believe aggressive acts can be justified, they are more likely to find them morally acceptable (Fujihara et al. 1999; Lagerspetz and Westman 1980). In particular, in their moral reasoning, people are sensitive to both the victims (Raney 2003) and the motives of the aggressors (Reeder et al. 2002).

In the case of prankvertising, when viewers observe surprise in victims, they sense a violation, so they engage in moral reasoning and seek cues from the victims, such as the degree of fear they express. In this reasoning process, viewers also take note of the aggressors' (i.e., advertisers') motives (e.g., trying to present product messages in a creatively meaningful way, trying to gain attention for their brands). If the viewers believe that surprising innocent victims is justified and does not represent a violation of their moral expectations, those consumers should be more likely to perceive humor in the prankvertising, which may generate more positive brand attitudes. The theoretical framework that reflects this reasoning therefore seeks to explain when prankvertising is likely to be effective versus harmful for a sponsoring brand.

## Prankvertising

A prank is “a playful act held to amuse, tease or even mock the victim, and to entertain the audience” (Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński 2014, 31). It involves an agent, an object, and an audience. According to Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński (2014), branded pranks are those that advertising agencies stage for brands (i.e., agents), involving well-planned scenarios and complex executions. Seemingly unaware consumers (i.e., objects) are caught up in the playful deceit, and their genuine reactions—which might range from surprise to fear to relief—are recorded and shared online. Viewers (i.e., audience) enjoy experiencing the suspense simultaneously or observing the dramatic emotional shifts experienced by the objects. These videos constitute prankvertising, which is intended to go viral through social media or blogs and to generate word of mouth (Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński 2014).

Prankvertising may serve several other important functions too, including maximizing reach, increasing brand visibility, and strengthening core product benefits (Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński 2014). It is common for advertisers to use prankvertising to communicate a brand's positioning, perhaps with a surprising but relevant deceit (e.g., a hungry bear loose in New York City to signal the naturalness of Chobani yogurt), or to bolster campaign themes, such as when a playful setting illustrates a campaign theme (e.g., Heineken's Carol Karaoke, Open Your World).

Unlike other marketing communication forms, prankvertising purposefully contains surprises to encourage viral sharing of the content. Similar to humor, which can be mean-spirited or good-natured (Samson and Gross 2012), the staged surprises in prankvertising often feature two distinct styles: pleasant or fearful. In the pleasant scenarios, advertisers trick unaware people with hilarious hoaxes that involve pleasure and fun, such as the loo maze prank for Yovis Viaggio (Tsikolis 2014). In unpleasant or fearful scenarios, advertisers instead stage pranks to mock, ridicule, or scare unaware consumers, which represent threats to the innocent victims. For example, a prank to

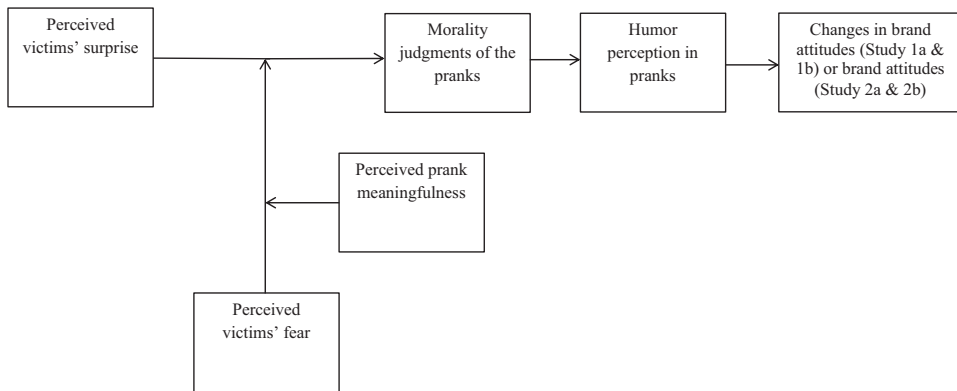
promote the horror film *Chucky* featured an actor dressed like the Chucky doll, who emerged out of a lighted billboard at a bus stop at night, screaming and running after unsuspecting commuters with a knife. Such a prank may be entertaining to watch, but it puts innocent bystanders in horrifying, perplexing situations. Because both forms are common, an integrated model is needed to account for the effects of distinct types of prankvertising.

Likely because prankvertising is such a new form of branded entertainment, relevant research is scarce. An exception is Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modliński (2018), who compare consumers' brand affect before and after their exposure to videos. They find that harmful prankvertising has a boomerang effect, such that it generates significantly negative shifts in brand affect, while positive prankvertising has no parallel, positive influence. Harmful prankvertising also generates significantly more negative brand affect than positive prankvertising. Yet harmful pranks are frequent and widely shared in practice, which implies that they must be effective in certain conditions. In parallel, research in other domains acknowledges that negative (e.g., disgusting, violent, threatening) humor can be effective for certain consumers (Yoon and Kim 2016; Yoon and Mayer 2014; Yoon and Tinkham 2013). These contributions again suggest the need for an integrated theoretical framework to predict specific conditions in which prankvertising may be effective, even when it seems harmful.

### **Humor as benign violation**

In proposing BVT, McGraw and Warren (2010, 1) suggest that "laughter and amusement result from violations that are simultaneously seen as benign." The violations are stimuli that seem threatening and wrong because they deviate from perceptions of how things should be (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren and McGraw 2016b). Furthermore, BVT identifies three conditions that allow humor to emerge from violation (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren and McGraw 2016b). First, the violations must impose some physical or psychological threats. Second, the violations must occur in contexts that are perceived as safe and playful, which makes them benign and acceptable. Third, an interpretative process should help reconcile the contradiction between the violation and the sense of safety (i.e., wrong but okay). Several tests of this theory demonstrate that benign behaviors are more humorous when they involve a violation than when they do not, and that violations are more humorous when they are perceived as benign (McGraw and Warren 2010).

Accordingly, BVT offers a useful, generic model for humor perception but remains insufficient for explaining the effects of prankvertising, which is edited specifically to highlight playful cues and the preparation stages, such that they clearly reveal the benign nature of the prank. According to BVT, viewers would always recognize that the victims are in a safe, benign context and enjoy the humor, but real-world evidence to the contrary strongly suggests the need to extend BVT to establish a clearer sense of when and why prankvertising works. That is, people assess violations and the extent to which they seem benign to determine their responses to humor, as predicted by BVT, but in the unique case of prankvertising, they also assess whether the



**Figure 1.** Proposed model.

pranks are morally acceptable. Humor perceptions in prankvertising thus depend on more than solely perceptions of benignity.

### Theoretical framework

In the proposed theoretical framework in [Figure 1](#), which aims to specify when people find humor in prankvertising, moral scrutiny informs the cognitive element of humor perceptions. When advertisers stage surprises to startle unsuspecting victims, the unexpected behaviors violate social norms and have the potential to induce humor, according to BVT. Yet such violations also must pass viewers' moral scrutiny before they can indulge in a perception of the humor. In other words, observing victims being surprised by advertisers' aggressive behaviors can be morally acceptable and induce humor only if the surprise appears morally justified. This study therefore predicts a surprise→morality→humor mediation process.

Moral reasoning is innate and can be easily triggered by violations (Haidt 2001), such as observing victims being shocked. In the dynamic process of moral reasoning, people assess whether aggressive behaviors are justified (Bandura 2001; Raney 2003), according to the context (Fujihara et al. 1999; Lagerspetz and Westman 1979). Two important factors thus may moderate the surprise→morality→humor mediation process: the degree of fear that victims express, which likely inhibits the positive mediation effect, and the degree to which the pranks appear meaningful, which could mitigate this inhibiting influence, even if victims express great fear. In this model, across various interpretation processes, if viewers resolve their moral judgment and come to perceive humor, the prankvertising can be effective and generate more positive brand attitude changes or more favorable brand attitudes.

### *Seeing people being surprised triggers humor perception*

Shocking innocent victims is a violation in BVT, and those victims' expressions of surprise serve as signals of this violation. Therefore, this article focuses on such expressions, depicted in the prankvertising video, rather than on viewers' own surprise. Prior studies of humor perception already have established that people's feelings of surprise

contribute to their perceptions of humor (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000; Woltman Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004). However, prankvertising viewers are unlikely to feel such surprise; the videos highlight the preparation for the prank, so viewers know that something is coming, even if the victims do not. In this unique case, the viewers' humor perception processes likely focus on their perceptions of the victims' surprise, not their own surprise. Viewers can readily observe this feeling; surprise is one of the basic emotions that people universally express and recognize (Ekman and Friesen 1971; Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth 2013).

Seeing others experience surprise may be amusing. Playing pranks on innocent people remains an unexpected, norm-violating act, with the potential to trigger a sense of humor. Disparagement humor theories also postulate that this type of fun requires exhibitions of others' misfortune or surprise (Zillmann 1983). Seeing victims in shocked states thus may be essential to perceiving the humor of prankvertising.

### ***Morality judgment and humor***

However, prankvertising also activates people's moral intuition (i.e., do not harm others) (Haidt and Joseph 2008). According to BVT, people need to judge a violation as benign before they can enjoy its humor (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren and McGraw 2016b), but assessing a violation as benign does not necessarily mean that it appears morally acceptable. The proposed framework predicts that morality judgments, or the degree to which people believe that an act is morally adequate, are pivotal for humor perceptions in prankvertising settings. The same act, depicted in prankvertising, may appear more or less morally justifiable, depending on how people make moral sense of such acts or perceive victims' level of fear (Raney 2003; Wicker, Barron, and Willis 1980).

Prior humor research does not explicitly examine perceived morality or morality judgments as psychological mechanisms that lead to humor perception, though such topics have been explored extensively in entertainment contexts. For example, leveraging moral foundation theory, Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel (2012) demonstrate that of five innate moral intuitions (harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, authority/respect, in-group/loyalty, purity/sanctity), harm/care is the most salient. When they select media entertainment, people are reluctant to choose options that violate this salient moral intuition. When they watch dramas, moral violations by characters decrease viewers' enjoyment (Eden, Daalmans, and Johnson 2017). Tamborini et al. (2013) similarly document how perceptions of "character immorality" lessen enjoyment.

Morality judgments also may be salient for advertising contexts and humor perceptions, though extant advertising research does not directly examine this notion. Rather, Swani, Weinberger, and Gulas (2013) test perceived violations of social norms, which represent a related construct; they find that, compared with less violent humor, violent humor in advertising evokes greater violations of social norms and results in more negative attitudes toward the ad. They do not explore the relationship between this violation and perceived humor. Yoon (2016) compares reactions by people with strong versus weak beliefs about whether violence in humorous advertising is normative, noting that people with weaker such beliefs are less likely to find advertising that contains violent humor funny. Although these prior studies do not directly tap

people's morality judgments, they imply that consumers assess violence in advertising using moral judgments, in their process of responding to humor in violent, funny ads. Therefore, this article puts morality judgments in a central position in the proposed framework: To the degree that people do not find norm-violating prankvertising immoral, they should be better able to enjoy its humor. Formally,

H1: To the degree that viewers perceive pranks in prankvertising as morally acceptable, they find the prankvertising video more humorous.

### ***Perceived fear evoked in the victims as cues for morality judgments***

Moral judgments often are automatic in response to media or entertainment (Tamborini 2011). As noted, among innate moral intuitions, care for or not doing harm to others is the most salient (Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel 2012); shocking others represents a moral violation that may be subject to moral censoring. Surprise frustrates the need for predictability and interrupts ongoing activities, so when observing others being surprised, people's initial emotional responses tend to be negative (Noordewier and Breugelmans 2013). Thus, seeing others being shocked should raise people's emotional sensitivity and direct their attention to signs of the victims' responses (e.g., fear), so they can decide whether such surprises violate their moral standards.

Research into negative humor suggests that victims' characteristics also can affect people's humor perceptions. For example, viewers are less likely to enjoy humor evoked by surprise when they like, rather than dislike, the victims (Wicker, Barron, and Willis 1980), such as when the victims are friends rather than strangers (McGraw et al. 2012). Because people tend to pay attention to victims and have innate tendencies to care for others (Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel 2012), viewers likely consider victims' expressions of fear when they undertake a process of moral reasoning to assess prankvertising.

These expressions of fear offer salient cues for morality judgments, because fear is another universal human emotion (Ekman and Friesen 1971; Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth 2013). Characteristic fear expressions are obvious; observers can use cues such as a raised upper lip, nostril dilation, raised inner brow, and widened eyes to perceive fear in others (Kohler et al. 2004). When prankvertising viewers spontaneously observe victims' expressions of fear, they likely use them as information to determine whether the prank is immoral. A prank that induces substantial fear among innocent victims may make viewers question its morality.

With this reasoning, the current research focuses on the degree of fear that viewers perceive that victims experience when being pranked, not the degree of fear that viewers might experience themselves. Humorous content elicits different feelings from the observer's versus the target's perspective (Hemenover and Schimmack 2007). The fear that viewers experience may hinder the effects of humorous advertising (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000), but victims' fear offers better input for morality assessments than viewers' fear. That is, the fear that *viewers* experience can be mitigated easily by playful cues, whereas the degree of fear that *victims* exhibit is vivid and cannot be altered by such playful cues. The audience then may not feel frightened while watching the videos, which have been edited to be maximally entertaining, but the victims may experience true fear due to the prank. The surprise, imposed on



unsuspecting consumers, could transgress the viewers' morality judgments if they observe that it arouses substantial fear in those victims. In turn, these viewers are unlikely to enjoy the humor intended by the prankvertising.

When viewers watch surprises being performed, they may have difficulty interpreting the outcomes too, so to achieve a sense of humor, they need more information, which they can use to develop their interpretation of the surprise. As noted, victims' expressions of fear provide ready cues for such interpretations. To the degree that they perceive that the victim experiences extreme fear, viewers should interpret the surprise negatively, such that the positive effects of surprise on humor, through morality judgments, become muted.

H2: The degree of fear that consumers perceive that the victims experience moderates the mediating effect of morality judgments on the link between perceived surprise in victims and prankvertising humor perceptions; when perceived fear in victims is low, but not when it is high, the mediating effect is positive.

### ***Perceived prank meaningfulness as cues for morality judgments***

To make morality judgments, people often take note of the intention or motives for an act (Lillard 1998) and attempt to infer reasons for inappropriate behaviors (Reeder et al. 2002). For example, when they observe aggression, people seek to understand the aggressors' intentions, and these inferences affect their judgments about the morality of the behaviors. To the degree that they infer the aggression is instrumental, committed solely to protect the aggressors' self-interests, they find it more immoral (Reeder et al. 2002). For the current research, pranks constitute a form of aggression toward innocent victims, which cause them to experience surprise or even fear, so they likely motivate viewers to elaborate on the potential reasons for these acts. Viewers might infer that advertisers intend solely to draw consumers' attention to their brands, or they could discern that the advertisers are trying to be creative and fun in delivering relevant brand messages. Through such inference processes, creative links between the pranks and the brand messages should help consumers interpret and justify advertisers' actions meaningfully and thus guide their morality judgments.

A highly creative prank, staged with care, makes the motivation for the prank manifest and better justified. When Nivea launched its new Stress Protect Deodorant for example, it developed a campaign, The Stress Test for Nivea, that induced fright among travelers at airports. The link was thus clear: By imposing psychological threats on innocent travelers, it could demonstrate that when people are stressed and perspire, Nivea deodorant offers a solution. In contrast, some prankvertising seemingly frightens consumers simply to draw attention, without a clear justification. In the Rough Day for Coggins Beer campaign, advertisers invaded people's homes at night and kidnapped the residents while they slept. The plot had no clear link to the theme of the campaign, nor did it demonstrate any key benefits of drinking Coggins Beer.

Creativity comprises three main dimensions: novelty, meaningfulness, and connectedness (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007). According to Ang, Lee, and Leong (2007), an advertisement is meaningful if its elements are presented and executed in a coherent way, so that consumers can derive information about the product or brand.

Meaningfully developed prankvertising plots should reveal close connections with campaign themes, product features, or brand positioning to facilitate observers' understanding of the motives for staging the pranks. Such understanding then can lead them to relax their moral scrutiny. Formally, a prank's *meaningfulness* refers to the degree to which it is presented and executed in a coherent, novel way so that viewers can derive information about the product, the brand, the campaign, and the brand's image or positioning.

To the extent that prank-triggered immorality judgments can be reconciled or attenuated through such inference processes, the justification for advertisers' prank-playing behaviors might be clearer. In other words, staged pranks with novel plots that connect meaningfully to campaign themes, the product, or the brand positioning should help viewers make inferences about the advertisers' motives (i.e., to be creative) and interpret the intended humor. The meaning behind the creative pranks provides an appropriate justification to lower their moral censoring.

Morality reconciliation is especially sought after when the pranks arouse fear. In such a context, if the staged pranks fail to establish a meaningful connection, consumers cannot find a justifiable motive, and they likely regard the shock as a transgression of morality norms. In these specific conditions, victims' surprise will not be perceived as morally justified or humorous. That is, in addition to anticipating that perceptions of victims' greater fear attenuate the positive effects of surprise on humor perceptions, through morality judgments (as predicted in H2), this research predicts that the attenuating effect triggered by victims' great fear should be more likely to emerge in less meaningful conditions than in more meaningful conditions. In combination, these arguments suggest that victims' expressions of surprise influence viewers' humor perceptions, moderated by perceptions of the victims' fear and the perceived meaningfulness of the prank, as well as mediated by morality judgments. Formally,

H3: The meaningfulness of the prank moderates the interaction effect between perceptions of surprise and perceptions of fear in victims, such that when meaningfulness is low, but not high, high perceived fear in victims mutes the positive mediation effect of victims' surprise on humor perceptions through morality judgments.

### ***Humor perception and Brand attitudes***

A meta-analysis of humor advertising research reveals that humorous advertising generates significantly more favorable brand attitudes than non-humorous advertising (Eisend 2009). Perceived humor in advertising thus should account for significant variance in brand attitudes. This morality-based model also implies that prankvertising should benefit a brand only if consumers perceive humor in it, following from their morality judgments. If the focal variables (perceptions of victim surprise, victim fear, and prank meaningfulness) interact to affect morality judgments and humor perceptions in prankvertising, they also should influence brand attitudes. Formally,

H4: The greater the humor perception, the more favorable consumers' brand attitudes are.

## Overview

With a pilot study, this article reports on a content analysis, reflecting real-world applications of prankvertising. Four studies then test the proposed model. Modeling after Warren, Carter, and McGraw (2019), we used two methods and provided findings gathered from two data sets for each method. Studies 1a and 1b leverage existing prankvertising videos that induce different levels of surprise and fear among victims and exhibit varying levels of meaningfulness. The pre–post design of these two studies means that the degree to which participants’ brand attitudes shift represents an effect indicator. Then Studies 2a and 2b each expose participants to a single video, manipulated to inform viewers about the level of victims’ surprise and fear and the meaningfulness of the pranks. By using the same video across different manipulated conditions, these studies each include brand attitudes as effect indicators and avoid the potential issues associated with measuring viewers’ attitudes twice in a short time. The measures across studies consistently use 5-point scales, and the analyses rely on Hayes’s (2018) Process macro 3.4. That is, the tests of H1 and H4, which involve the links in the full model, rely on the outputs obtained from a customized model. The test of H2, which predicts a mediated moderating effect on humor perception, with one moderator and one mediator, utilizes Hayes’s Model 7, and the test of H3, which predicts a mediated moderation effect with two moderators and one mediator, uses Hayes’s Model 11.

## Pilot study

### Sample

On September 1, 2017, a research assistant searched for “prankvertising” on YouTube, the most widely used video-sharing site in the United States, with “video” and “views” selected as filtering criteria. The same assistant also searched “prankvertising” and “pranks” on Ads of the World, rated as the most influential advertising blog (<https://acart.com/2252-2/>). These searches identified 439 videos. After removing replications and videos in languages other than English that lacked English subtitles, the sample consisted of 216 videos.

### Coding

Two coders, without knowledge of the study purpose, then applied the previously cited definition to determine whether each video constituted prankvertising (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = 1.00$ ). Excluding videos that do not fit the definition produced a final sample of 107 videos. The two coders also identified the advertised brand (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = 1.00$ ); the product categories according to Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra (1999) typology (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = 1.00$ ); and whether the pranks aroused mainly negative feelings (fear, disgust, or anger) or positive feelings (fun, amusement, or delight) among the victims (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = .81$ ).

## Results

The results of this coding process indicated that prankvertising aroused more negative feelings in victims (56.07%) than positive feelings (43.93%). In terms of product categories, entertainment (e.g., movies and music; 24.30%) emerged as more likely to use prankvertising, followed by food nondurables (23.36%), consumer services (17.76%), high-tech consumer durables (16.82%), policies or ideas (6.54%), low-tech consumer durables (5.61%), personal nondurables (2.80%), and household nondurables (2.80%). Brands that used prankvertising most frequently included LG, Pepsi, Cheetos, Carlsberg, Chobani, Coco-Cola, Kia, Renault, and Heineken.

## Discussions

Despite some evident trends, this pilot study affirms that prankvertising is not limited to certain product categories. Among the advertisers, many of the most frequent producers of prankvertising are globally marketed brands. Both positive and negative forms exist, so exploring their effects with a coherent model is well justified.

## Study 1

To ensure a realistic setting, **Studies 1a and 1b** each feature existing prankvertising videos, selected randomly from a content analysis, similar to Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson (2017) method of sampling real commercials that aired in the United States during a specific time period and on a particular station. With these realistic stimuli, Study 1a measures participants' perceptions of victims' surprise, victims' fear, and prank meaningfulness as three independent variables. Study 1a also includes a check to determine whether the degree of fear that viewers perceive in victims offers a better cue of their morality judgments than the degree of fear that the viewers themselves experience. Study 1b replicates Study 1a with a different sample of videos.

### Stimuli selection

The stimuli selection followed three steps, slightly different for each study. First, for Study 1a, the selection process removed prankvertising for entertainment products (which may not be available at the time of the data collection), services (which may not be accessible at locations where participants live), and policies or ideas (which do not have sponsoring brands). After this step, 55 videos remained. Second, removing brands marketed outside the United States left 49 videos. Third, a random selection of 20% of the videos established the 10 videos that served as stimuli for Study 1a (see the [Appendix](#)). For Study 1b, the stimuli selection also comprised three but distinct steps, detailed in the [online appendix](#). First, five brands (LG, Pepsi Max, Cheetos, Carlsberg, and Chobani) that use the most prankvertising videos were identified. Second, a review of online distribution channels gathered as many prankvertising videos by these brands as possible. Third, random selection identified one video per brand.

## **Participants and procedures**

Participants in Study 1a/1b were randomly assigned to 10/5 video conditions. Because the videos feature different brands, it is appropriate to measure existing brand- and product-level differences. With regard to brand-level differences, prior research shows that advertising effects vary for products that differ in their familiarity (Campbell and Keller 2003), usage frequency (Chang 2012), and brand loyalty (Agrawal 1996). For product-level differences, prior research shows that advertising effects differ for people with different product category involvement (Dens and De Pelsmacker 2010). Therefore, Study 1 includes these variables as covariates. Participants first rated their attitudes toward the brand, product involvement, product familiarity, purchase frequency, and brand loyalty. After viewing the video, they rated the degree to which the video aroused their fear. Then they completed the measures of their brand attitudes, humor perception, morality judgments of the pranks, perceptions of the meaningfulness of the pranks, and perceptions of the victims' surprise and fear.

The recruitment process for Study 1a solicited 403 U.S. participants of Amazon's MTurk (average age: 40.25 years, 59.80% women, 76.67% Caucasians, and 53.60% with at least a bachelor's degree), and that for Study 1b gathered 203 U.S. participants of Amazon's MTurk (average age: 35.22 years, 42.86% women, 66.50% Caucasians, and 66.50% with at least a bachelor's degree). In both cases, all the participants earned acceptance rates higher than 97%, and they received US\$1 for their participation.

## **Measures**

This section summarizes the measures for Studies 1a and 1b but only presents the detailed reliability and validity results for Study 1a. The relevant data for Study 1b, including evidence that all the Cronbach's alpha values range from .80 to .94, are in [Table A1 in the online appendix](#).

### **Covariates**

The one-item *brand familiarity* measure came from Martin and Stewart (2001): "I am familiar with the brand." *Product use frequency* also was rated with one item (Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003): "I am a frequent user of the brand." The *brand loyalty* assessment used Brady et al. (2005) three-item measure: "I would classify myself as a loyal customer of the brand," "If asked, I would say good things about the brand," and "I would recommend the brand to a friend" (Cronbach's alpha = .88). Chandrasekaran's (2004) three-item scale provides the measure of *product involvement*: "I am particularly interested in the brand," "Given my personal interests, this product is very relevant to me," and "Overall, I am quite involved in the purchase of the brand for personal use" (Cronbach's alpha = .93).

### **Perceived surprise in victims**

Participants rated the degree to which they agreed that the prank caused the innocent victims' surprise, with three items: "The victims are surprised/startled/shocked" (Cronbach's alpha = .81).

### ***Perceived fear in victims***

Participants rated the degree to which they agreed that the prank caused the innocent victims to experience fear, with four items from Duhachek (2005): worried, fearful, anxious, and threatened (Cronbach's alpha = .88). To confirm the prediction that it is perceptions of the victims' fear, not the viewers' own fear, that plays a determinant role, the survey also asked participants to indicate the degree of fear they experienced themselves (Cronbach's alpha = .93).

### ***Meaningfulness of the pranks***

Participants rated the degree to which they agreed that the prank was meaningful, using the two-item meaningfulness subscale from Ang, Lee, and Leong (2007): "The prank helps deliver the product benefits" and "The prank relates to the main message." Because it is a subdimension of creativity, the delivery should be original too, so this study included one more pertinent item: "The prank is designed in a creative way so that I can understand the meaning behind it." The reliability of the three-item scale was satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha = .91). Removing the new item from the scale reduces its reliability. Therefore, averaged responses to the three items provide the indicators of morality judgments.

### ***Morality judgments***

The perceived morality scale, created for this study, contains five items: "The prank was not ethical/evil/not justified/ill-willed/not moral" (Cronbach's alpha = .93). Prior research has used single items, such as moral (Reeder et al. 2002) and good/evil (Shafer and Raney 2012), or two items, such as moral and ethical (Tamborini et al. 2013). In addition to compiling these items (ethical, evil, and moral), this study includes two items that pertain to assessments of behaviors, such as pranking others (ill-willed and not justified). Removing any item from the scale reduces its reliability. Therefore, averaged responses to the five items provide the indicators of morality judgments.

### ***Perceived humor in pranks as an indicator of humor perception***

A perceived humor scale, adopted from Zhang (1996), contains five items: "The pranks are humorous/funny/playful/amusing/dull (R)" (Cronbach's alpha = .92).

### ***Brand attitudes***

Participants rated their attitudes toward the advertised brand using Miniard et al. (1991) three-item scale: "I like the brand," "My attitudes toward the brand are favorable," and "I feel positive toward the brand," both before (Cronbach's alpha = .95) and after (Cronbach's alpha = .97) their exposure to the prank video.

## ***Results***

### ***Convergent and discriminant validity***

Several items for different measures (surprise, meaningfulness, morality) were developed expressly for this study, so the analysis begins by checking the convergent and

discriminant validity of all the measures. The factor loadings of all items exceed .80 on the intended factor, indicating good convergent validity. The square roots of the average variances extracted (AVE) for all items in these measures are greater than .82, higher than the correlations between these constructs and all other constructs, so the analysis also suggests good discriminant validity.

### *Hypothesis tests*

As noted previously, Hayes's (2018) Process Model 3.4 was customized to test the full model (Figure 1). The results pertaining to the links from morality to humor perception affirm that morality judgments determine humor perceptions in both studies (Study 1a coefficient = .54, SE = .03,  $t(402) = 20.87$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.4749, .5736]; Study 1b coefficient = .26, SE = .05,  $t(202) = 4.89$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.1582, .3716]), as predicted by **H1**.

The test of H2, with Process Model 7 (Hayes 2018), reveals significant indexes of mediated moderation (Study 1a 95% CI: [-.1639, -.0108], and Study 1b 95% CI: [-.0884, -.0083]), such that the indirect, positive influence of perceived surprise on humor perception, through morality judgments, is positive and significant only when perceived fear is one standard deviation below the mean ([.0812, .2411] and [.0225, .1677]), not when it is one standard deviation above the mean ([-.1137, .1264] and [-.0603, .0560]), in support of **H2**. The two-way interaction between surprise and fear also has a significant effect on morality (see Figure A1 in the online appendix) in both Studies 1a and 1b.

Process Model 11 (Hayes 2018), applied to test **H3**, generates a significant index of mediated moderation (Study 1a 95% CI: [.0041, .1277] and Study 1b 95% CI: [.0006, .0889]). When meaningfulness is low ([-.2665, -.0497] and [-.1707, -.0022]), the mediated moderation effect between surprise and humor perception, through morality as a function of fear, is significant. When meaningfulness is high ([-.1055, .0787] and [-.0496, .0367]), it is not significant. As expected, when fear is low, the mediation process (surprise→morality→humor) is positive and significant ([.0814, .2453] and [.0354, .1838]). When fear is high, the mediation effect reduces as meaningfulness shifts from 1 standard deviation above the mean ([-.0443, .2801] and [.0303, .1852]) to 1 standard deviation below the mean ([-.1949, .0387] and -.1865, .0190).

Finally, humor perceptions might account for variance in brand attitudes. The customized Process model reports on the test of the links from humor perceptions to brand attitude changes (Study 1a coefficient = .36, SE = .03,  $t(402) = 10.33$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.1288, .4239]; Study 1b coefficient = .42, SE = .06,  $t(202) = 7.36$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.3095, .5374]). In both studies, the results support **H4**.

### *The full model*

In the customized model (the full model) (Table A2) to predict brand attitude changes, the index of mediated moderation is significant in both Study 1a (.0229, 95% confidence interval [CI]: [.0012, .0498] and Study 1b (.0229, 95% CI: [.0017, .0435]; see Table A2 in the online appendix). The results further specify that when meaningfulness is low ([-.1026, -.0181] and [-.0839, -.0035]), the mediated moderation effect between surprise and brand attitude changes, through morality and humor as a function of

**Table 1.** Main and interaction effects of victims' surprise, victims' fear, and prank meaningfulness on morality judgments.

	Coeff	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
<b>Study 1a</b>						
Victims' surprise (S)	.2304	.0712	3.2371	.0013	.0905	.3703
Victims' fear (F)	-.4469	.0482	-9.2717	.0000	-.5417	-.3522
Meaningfulness (M)	.3451	.0379	9.1055	.0000	.2706	.4195
S x F	<b>-.1541</b>	<b>.0690</b>	<b>-2.2338</b>	<b>.0260</b>	<b>-.2896</b>	<b>-.0185</b>
S x M	.0301	.0638	.4727	.6367	-.0952	.1555
F x M	.0854	.0409	2.0874	.0374	.0050	.1659
S x F x M	<b>.1226</b>	<b>.0598</b>	<b>2.0505</b>	<b>.0409</b>	<b>.0051</b>	<b>.2402</b>
<b>Study 1b</b>						
Victims' surprise (S)	1.5231	.8374	1.8189	.0705	-.1285	3.1747
Victims' fear (F)	1.8680	.8495	2.1989	.0291	.1925	3.5435
Meaningfulness (M)	.7568	.8172	.9262	.3555	-.8549	2.3686
S x F	<b>-.6407</b>	<b>.2212</b>	<b>-2.8962</b>	<b>.0042</b>	<b>-1.0770</b>	<b>-.2044</b>
S x M	-.2197	.2101	-1.0457	.2970	-.6340	.1946
F x M	-.4546	.2212	-2.0550	.0412	-.8910	-.0183
S x F x M	<b>.1500</b>	<b>.0579</b>	<b>2.5878</b>	<b>.0104</b>	<b>.0357</b>	<b>.2642</b>
<b>Study 2a</b>						
Victims' surprise (S)	-.2489	.1315	-1.8934	.0595	-.5079	.0101
Victims' fear (F)	-.0418	.1293	-.3234	.7467	-.2966	.2130
Meaningfulness (M)	-.0003	.1292	-.0024	.9981	-.2549	.2543
S x F	-.2073	.2586	-.8015	.4237	-.7167	.3022
S x M	-.2826	.2580	-1.0955	.2744	-.7909	.2256
F x M	.3570	.2597	1.3748	.1705	-.1546	.8686
S x F x M	<b>1.3745</b>	<b>.5170</b>	<b>2.6589</b>	<b>.0084</b>	<b>.3561</b>	<b>2.3930</b>
<b>Study 2b</b>						
Victims' surprise (S)	.6108	.2918	2.0932	.0374	.0359	1.1857
Victims' fear (F)	-.0088	.2864	-.0308	.9755	-.5731	.5554
Meaningfulness (M)	.7645	.2890	2.6448	.0087	.1950	1.3339
S x F	<b>-.9310</b>	<b>.4134</b>	<b>-2.2519</b>	<b>.0252</b>	<b>-1.7454</b>	<b>-.1165</b>
S x M	-.5357	.4136	-1.2950	.1966	-1.3505	.2792
F x M	-.3071	.4069	-.7547	.4512	-1.1087	.4945
S x F x M	<b>1.5475</b>	<b>.5863</b>	<b>2.6395</b>	<b>.0089</b>	<b>.3925</b>	<b>2.7026</b>

Notes. Numbers in bold indicate results that are consistent with the predictions. SE = standard error, LLCI = lower level confidence interval, ULCI = upper level confidence interval.

fear, is significant and negative. When meaningfulness is high, this mediated moderation effect is not significant ([-.0384, .0313] and [-.0240, .0175]). As expected, when fear is low, the mediation process (surprise → morality → humor → brand attitude changes) is positive and significant ([.0172, .0742] and [.0034, .1293]). When fear is high, the mediation effect reduced as meaningfulness shifts from 1 standard deviation above the mean ([-.0144, .1153] and [.0163, .0915]) to 1 standard deviation below the mean ([-.0688, .0387] and [-.0869, .0036]).

The findings also confirm a significant, three-way interaction effect among surprise, fear, and meaningfulness on morality (Study 1a coefficient = .12, SE = .06,  $t(402) = 2.05$ ,  $p = .04$ , 95% CI: [.0051, .2402]; Study 1b coefficient = .15, SE = .06,  $t(202) = 2.59$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.0357, .2642]) (see Table 1). As Figure A2 in the online appendix shows, when pranks are not meaningful, victims' greater surprise is less likely to be perceived to be moral as victims' fear increases.

### Exposure effects

The distribution of brand attitude changes indicates that, in Study 1a (1b), even though 57.07% (58.12%) of the participants or 230 (118) of them, did not change



their brand attitudes after exposure, 22.58% (23.65%), or 91 (48) of them, shifted their attitudes in positive directions, and 20.35% (18.23%), equivalent to 82 (37) changed them in negative directions. According to analyses of variance (ANOVA), in both studies, the three groups differ significantly in their morality judgments (Study 1a  $F(2, 400) = 25.17, p < .01, \eta^2 = .11$ ;  $M_{\text{pos}} = 4.07, SD = .84$ ;  $M_{\text{no}} = 3.78, SD = .93$ ;  $M_{\text{neg}} = 3.06, SD = 1.19$ ; Study 1b  $F(2, 199) = 4.78, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$ ;  $M_{\text{pos}} = 3.71, SD = .98$ ;  $M_{\text{no}} = 3.80, SD = 1.04$ ;  $M_{\text{neg}} = 3.21, SD = .98$ ) and humor perceptions (Study 1a  $F(2, 400) = 32.77, p < .01, \eta^2 = .14$ ;  $M_{\text{pos}} = 3.76, SD = .48$ ;  $M_{\text{no}} = 3.45, SD = .67$ ;  $M_{\text{neg}} = 2.89, SD = 1.00$ ; Study 1b  $F(2, 199) = 10.18, p < .01, \eta^2 = .07$ ;  $M_{\text{pos}} = 3.92, SD = .76$ ;  $M_{\text{no}} = 3.79, SD = .94$ ;  $M_{\text{neg}} = 3.06, SD = 1.16$ ). In Study 1a, the positive change group had higher ratings than the no change group, which offered higher ratings than the negative change group. In Study 1b, the positive and no change groups both generate higher ratings than the negative group but do not differ significantly from each other. Therefore, prankvertising can encourage positive brand attitude changes—as long as it appears morally justified and induces humor.

#### **Alternative tests: viewers' fear**

As a novel proposition, this article predicts that perceptions of victims' fear are more important for determining humor perception in prankvertising than viewers' own fear. Additional analyses in each study confirm whether the viewers' own fear might affect their morality judgments and humor perception, by replacing victims' fear with viewers' fear in additional tests of the hypotheses. Except for the test of H2 in Study 1a ([-.1583, -.0070], the test for H2 in Study 1b [-.0635, .0182]) and the test for H3 (Study 1a [-.0182, .1151] and Study 1b [-.0345, .0548]) generated insignificant indexes of mediated moderation.

#### **Discussion**

In two iterations, Study 1 confirms the proposed mediated moderation model, suggesting victims' surprise can be morally justified and lead to humor perceptions and positive brand attitude changes, depending on perceptions of the victims' fear and prank meaningfulness. As expected (H2), when victims do not express much fear, the positive mediation effect is significant. Moreover, greater fear expressed by victims is more likely to reduce the positive mediation effects if the pranks are less meaningful.

Exploring participants' brand attitude changes after their exposure to prankvertising offered by well-known brands constitutes a conservative test of the framework, because people's attitudes toward these brands are less likely to be affected by advertising (Machleit, Allen, and Madden 1993). However, by testing the hypotheses using existing videos, Studies 1a and 1b create some concerns, because prankvertising videos naturally vary on multiple characteristics, and these unique characteristics may introduce unnecessary confounds. Therefore, Studies 2a and 2b manipulate the independent variables, each with a single video.

## Study 2

### *Design, stimuli, procedure, and participants*

**Study 2a** features a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects design to manipulate the degrees of perceived surprise among victims (high vs. low), perceived fear induced in victims (high vs. low), and meaningfulness of the pranks (high vs. low). Participants received different primes before they watched a prankvertising video, titled “Nivea Stress Test, Girl at Airport Prank,” which featured the Nivea brand. Specifically, all participants read that they would watch a video in which the advertiser plays pranks on unsuspecting consumers to deliver information about the product, brand, campaign, or brand image or positioning. In the high/low meaningfulness condition, they then read that “The branded video is rated by ad professionals as one of the 10 most [least] creative branded videos, because the featured pranks deliver [fail to deliver] the product message in a meaningful way.” For the high/low fear conditions, the prompts indicated, “After being pranked, those victims, some of whom were still trembling [seem totally amused], were asked to rate the degree of fear they experienced in the process, and their ratings reveal that they experienced a great amount of fear [did not experience much fear].” Finally, for the high/low surprise condition, the stimuli presented (fictitious) interviews with the victims, who either expressed that they had been taken by surprise or knew all along that they were being subjected to a prank. **Study 2b** features the same design and procedure, but it uses a different video, for Carlsberg Beer, titled “Carlsberg puts friends to the test.”

Participants read that the study involves two sections, one pertaining to their personalities and consumption behaviors and the other pertaining to a video. They first rated their sense of humor and empathy, along with some filler questions about other personal traits, then indicated their level of involvement with deodorant/beer (i.e., the product featured in the video). After reading the priming materials and viewing the video, they rated the degree to which it aroused their fear. Finally, they completed measures of their brand attitudes and humor perceptions, as well as their perceptions of the morality and meaningfulness of the pranks and of victims’ surprise and fear.

The recruitment process solicited 245 U.S. participants in Study 2a (average age: 43.71 years, 50.20% women, 77.55% Caucasians, and 59.18% with at least a bachelor’s degree), as well as 245 U.S. participants in Study 2b (average age: 42.60 years, 49.80% women, 80.00% Caucasians, and 53.06% with at least a bachelor’s degree), all from Amazon’s MTurk and with acceptance rates higher than 97%. They were paid US\$1 for their participation.

### *Measures*

#### *Covariates*

Study 2a/2b features a single video about a deodorant/beer brand. Therefore, only product-level differences (product category involvement), not brand-level variations, are included as covariates. *Product category involvement* was rated with the scale from Studies 1a and 1b (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .87$ ). Prior advertising research also identifies the importance of individual differences in humor appraisals, so participants

completed Cline, Kellaris, and Machleit (2011) external humor scale to tap their *humor appreciation*. Whereas internal humor refers to “the need to experience humor internally—to generate humor,” Cline, Kellaris, and Machleit (2011) define external humor as “the need to experience humor from external sources” (p. 17). To investigate individual differences in people’s responses to prankvertising, the external humor scale provides a better proxy of humor appreciation; the scale includes three items: “I like situations where people can express their sense of humor,” “I like to be around people who have a sense of humor,” and “I enjoy hearing someone tell a joke” (Cronbach’s alpha = .90). Furthermore, considering the research focus on perceptions of victims’ feelings, *empathy* tendencies may affect participants’ responses. Therefore, the two studies include Davis’s (1983) empathy scale, with 7 items, such as “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them” and “Other people’s misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal” (R) (Cronbach’s alpha = .90).

### *Independent and dependent variables*

The independent and dependent variables are the same as in Studies 1a and 1b and offer satisfactory reliabilities, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from .80 to .97 for Study 2a and from .80 to .96 for Study 2b (Table A1).

## **Results**

### *Manipulation checks*

As expected, in both Studies 2a and 2b, participants assigned to the high surprise condition ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = .73$ ;  $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = .58$ , respectively) perceived that the victims expressed more surprise than those in the low surprise condition ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ;  $F(1, 243) = 91.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .27$ ;  $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = .64$ ;  $F(1, 243) = 5.09$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ ). Those assigned to the high fear condition also perceived that the victims experienced greater fear ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = .62$ ;  $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = .59$ ) than those in the low fear condition ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = .66$ ;  $F(1, 243) = 7.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ;  $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = .59$ ;  $F(1, 243) = 7.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ). In the high meaningfulness condition, participants rated the pranks as more meaningful ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ;  $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than those in the low prank meaningfulness condition ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ;  $F(1, 243) = 9.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ;  $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ;  $F(1, 243) = 17.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ ). None of the two- or three-way interactions across manipulation check measures was significant, indicating all the manipulations were successful.

### *Hypothesis tests*

The customized model provides and confirms the test of the link from morality to humor perceptions (Study 2a coefficient = .99,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(244) = 28.97$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.9315, 1.0674]; Study 2b coefficient = .64,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(244) = 15.99$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.5633, .7216]), as predicted in **H1**.

For the test of **H2**, using Process Model 7, the index of mediated moderation is not significant in Study 2a or 2b (95% CI: [-.6788, .3106] and [-.5074, .2021]) (Figure A1).

For the test of **H3**, using Process Model 11, the index of mediated moderation is significant in both studies (95% CI: [.1885, 2.2174] and [.1909, 1.6339]). When

meaningfulness is low ([-1.4929, -.1107] and [-1.0560, -.0526]), but not when it is high ([-.3197, 1.1335] and [-.1304, .8616]), the mediated moderation effect between surprise and humor perception through morality, as a function of fear, is significant. In particular, when fear is high, the positive mediation effect reduces as meaningfulness shifts from high ([-.6611, .3763] and [.0129, .7606]) to low ([-.1949, .0387] and [-1.0623, -.0292]).

In line with **H4**, humor perception accounts for variance in brand attitudes. The output of the customized Process model reveals links from humor perception to brand attitude changes (Study 1a coefficient = .47, SE = .04,  $t(244) = 11.56$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.3908, .5513]; Study 2b coefficient = .5977, SE = .05,  $t(244) = 12.94$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI: [.5067, .6889]).

### *The full model*

The customized Process model generates a significant index of mediated moderation (Study 2a .6471, 95% CI: [1.1589, 1.1608]; Study 2b .5942, 95% CI: [1.1326, 1.1431]; see Table A2). In the customized model (the full model) (Table A2) to predict brand attitudes, the results specify that when meaningfulness is low ([-.7775, -.0777] and [-.7254, -.0402]), but not when it is high ([-.1270, .5827] and [-.0710, .5906]), the mediated moderation effect between victims' surprise and brand attitude changes through morality and humor, as a function of fear, is significant. In particular, when fear is high, the positive mediation effect reduced as meaningfulness shifts from high ([-.3307, .1729] and [.0223, .5505]) to low ([-.5237, .0098] and -.1725, .2274).

The data also indicate a significant three-way interaction effect among surprise, fear, and meaningfulness on morality (Study 2a coefficient = 1.37, SE = .52,  $t(244) = 2.66$ ,  $p = .01$ , 95% CI: [1.3561, 2.3930]; Study 2b coefficient = 1.55, SE = .57,  $t(244) = 2.64$ ,  $p = .01$ , 95% CI: [1.3925, 2.7026]) (see Table 1). As Figure A2 shows, when pranks are not meaningful, victims' greater surprise is less likely to be perceived as moral as fear rises among the victims.

### *Alternative test: viewers' fear*

In the follow-up test with viewers' sense of fear instead of their perceptions of victims' fear, the indexes of mediated moderation are not significant in either study (H2 [-.0027, .3743] and [-.3522, .0220]; H3 [-.1030, .6857] and [-.3196, .4102]).

## *Discussion*

Study 2a, which includes individual differences as covariates and manipulates perceptions of victims' fear and surprise and prank meaningfulness, confirms the proposed mediated moderation model. Similar to the findings in Studies 1a and 1b, morality judgments determine humor perceptions, which significantly affect brand attitudes. However, the perception that victims feel fear does not moderate the influence of victims' surprise on humor perceptions through morality judgments. It appears that the manipulations of the three factors might have made all these elements salient, which may have encouraged the participants to take all of them into consideration. To test this explanation, Study 2b uses a different prankvertising video and again reveals that

only the mediated moderation model involving two moderators (perceived fear in victims and prank meaningfulness) is significant; the mediated moderation model involving only one moderator (perceived fear in victims) is not. Therefore, the manipulation appears to have made all three perceptions salient, affecting the participants' judgments.

Across all four studies, when meaningfulness is low, the positive mediation effect decreases with victims' fear, such that it disappears (Study 1a, 1b, and 2c) or even becomes negative (Study 2a) if victims express high levels of fear.

## General discussion

### *Findings and contributions*

The construct of morality judgments largely has been ignored in prior advertising literature, despite its importance, particularly in a digital era in which branded brand videos, designed to go viral, frequently contain provocative content. Viral advertising is defined as "unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the Internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others" (Porter and Golan 2006, 33). As an exemplary form, prankvertising is created to go viral (Luckerson 2014) and often contains such provocative content. A content analysis, as reported in the Pilot Study, demonstrates that most prankvertising arouses negative feelings (e.g., fear, disgust, anger; 56.07%), more so than positive feelings (e.g., fun, amusement, delight; 43.93%). Similarly, humorous advertising can contain provocative elements, including violence (Scharrer et al. 2006), deception (Shabbir and Thwaites 2007), or threats (Yoon and Mayer 2014). Therefore, understanding how people make moral judgments to determine their appreciation of provocative advertising in general or prankvertising in particular is crucial. As prior research shows, media entertainment activates people's moral intuition (Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel 2012), so morality judgments are likely automatic and critical to evaluations of viral advertising and prankvertising.

The findings across four studies further support the proposed mediated moderation model, as well as the idea that people engage in moral judgments when they are exposed to prankvertising. Studies 1a and 1b expose viewers to different prankvertising videos with known brands that vary in the perceived level of surprise and fear they arouse in victims and the meaningfulness of their execution. Studies 2a and 2b manipulate these perceptions, using a single prankvertising video each. The results consistently confirm that morality judgments determine humor perception in prankvertising settings. Observations of victims' surprises prompt morality judgments; in the process, viewers also account for the victims' apparent fear and the meaningfulness of the pranks to make these judgments and determine their humor perceptions. Finally, humor perceptions determine the direction and degree of brand attitude changes (Studies 1a and 1b) and brand attitudes in general (Studies 2a and 2b).

The findings indicate both positive and negative mediation effects. In terms of positive effects, Studies 1a and 1b confirm that when prankvertising does not arouse much fear among victims, victims' surprise is judged as morally appropriate and induces humor perceptions. But muted and negative effects arise when pranks are not

perceived as meaningful, in which case perceptions of victims' fear attenuates any positive mediation effect, muting it (Studies 1a, 1b, and 2b) or reversing the effects to become negative (Study 2a).

These insights advance advertising research in several notable ways. First, this article proposes an integrated theoretical framework to explain different patterns of effects triggered by prankvertising. Second, it builds on BVT and morality literature to establish a coherent, theoretical framework for how prankvertising works and when it can be most effective. Third, this article includes morality judgments as focal mechanisms; prior research predicts their likely influences on humor perceptions but has not explicitly tested this link (e.g., McGraw and Warren 2010). By measuring morality judgments directly, in terms of their influences on consumers' humor perceptions, this article confirms the assumption behind extant advertising studies of comedic violence that moral reasoning informs humor perceptions (Swani, Weinberger, and Gulas 2013; Weinberger et al. 2017). Fourth, it demonstrates that morality-based humor perception is dynamic, hinging on viewers' perceptions of both victims' expressions and advertisers' motives. Fifth, adding to fear-based advertising research, this article reveals that the degree of fear that viewers perceive in others (i.e., victims of the prank), rather than the degree of fear they experience themselves, provides an important cue for their morality judgments. Prankvertising is edited content, with playful cues purposefully embedded, and it often depicts the preparation for the pranks. Evidence of this staging appears essential for prank perception and also may lessen viewers' fear. Therefore, the extent of fear that viewers believe the pranks arouse in *others* is more pivotal than viewers' own sense of fear.

### **Further research directions**

The four studies measure consumers' morality judgments, which depend on various factors, beyond those addressed herein. For example, pranks that trick victims into revealing their private self-identities or weaknesses (e.g., make them appear cowardly) are subject to stricter moral censuring. Videos that feature follow-up interviews with victims who express their enjoyment of the pranks instead might relieve viewers of distress and reduce their immorality judgments. Additional research could identify which factors trigger immorality judgments most powerfully.

On YouTube, users view branded videos in conjunction with other viewers' comments and reactions, which may alter their attitudes. For example, if others enjoy a prank, even if it induces strong perceptions of victims' fear, viewers may limit their moral censuring, regardless of the perceived meaningfulness of the prank. If others already are criticizing the prank though, viewers may increase their moral sanctions, even if the prank does not induce much fear or appears meaningful. That is, viewers' sense of violated social norms may depend on other viewers' posts.

This article does not explore intentions to share the prank videos, which often is the intended goal of advertisers. Sharing videos on social network sites serves important self-presentation functions and may come under social scrutiny. In such conditions, people may raise their moral standards. Even if viewers like a prank video, they may be reluctant to share it on social networks, because they worry about their public

image and do not want to be perceived as immoral or lacking in empathy. The effects on sharing behaviors thus might exhibit different patterns from the effects on attitudinal responses. Further research should explore this possibility.

The evidence provided herein not only supports the idea that perceived morality depends on the context but also demonstrates how certain factors can make prankvertising seem more justifiable. Extant research also suggests that people enjoy depictions of aggression more if the aggressive behaviors appear better justified (Bandura 2001; Raney 2003). Mustonen and Pulkkinen (1997) argue that violence on television is more attractive if it can be justified. Thus, in media entertainment contexts broadly, people seem ready to indulge in humor or entertainment if the violations they present are morally justified. The same idea may apply to advertising that contains any provocative content, regardless of whether it is humorous or not.

Finally, there are no national borders for viral videos, which makes it critical to determine whether people in different cultures react differently to prankvertising. Prior research suggests that people with higher vertical individualism and lower horizontal and vertical collectivism scores tend to use more aggressive humor (e.g., sarcasm, teasing, ridicule; Kazarian and Martin 2006). Prankvertising thus may be subject to stricter moral censoring in collectivistic cultures, such as those in East Asia, than in individualistic cultures, such as the United States.

### ***Implications for practitioners***

In the proposed, supported model, the effects of prankvertising on brand attitude changes and brand attitudes vary as a function of perceptions of victims' fear and prank meaningfulness. In determining how to execute prankvertising effectively then, advertisers should recognize that if they aim to startle innocent victims and induce their surprise, they should try not to arouse much fear in those victims. If they have concerns about doing so, they should take particular care to ensure the pranks are meaningfully connected to their brand messages.

Additional analyses, conducted for each of three distinct groups of the Study 1a and 1b participants, defined by the direction of their brand attitude changes (i.e., positive, no, negative), also confirmed the findings. Participants in the positive change group rated the pranks as more moral and humorous. Therefore, advertisers that execute staged pranks in a morally justified way are more likely to attain benefits for their brands.

### ***Limitations***

The findings must be interpreted in view of several limitations. In Studies 1a and 1b, the stimuli rely on existing videos; it was not possible to develop professional-quality, fictional videos that precisely reflect the different conditions. Therefore, the study included brand attitude changes as the outcome variable. The pre-post study design is appropriate for testing attitude changes, but it also could trigger an interaction effect between the pretest and treatment, which would threaten the external validity of the findings (Dimitrov and Rumrill 2003). Moreover, the videos in each condition

could vary on other important characteristics that might have introduced confounding influences. Studies 2a and 2b sought to address this concern by manipulating viewers' perceptions of different, single videos. These videos depict victims' fear, but the manipulations sought to get participants to believe that the victims either did or did not experience the degree of fear they expressed. The vivid portrayals by victims meant that the manipulation could not eliminate fear perceptions altogether; that is, the two conditions in each study varied in the relative degree of perceived fear in victims, as higher and lower. It also would be helpful for further research to develop dedicated videos.

Despite some methodological limitations, the findings broaden knowledge of how and when prankvertising can be an effective means of marketing communication. They also contribute to extant literature pertaining to humor in advertising, by demonstrating the importance of moral judgments for determining humor perceptions.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

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