

# **A superiority-inferiority hypothesis on disparagement humor: the role of disposition toward ridicule**

**Proposed short title: A superiority-inferiority hypothesis on disparagement humor**

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## **Conflicts of Interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

## **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## **Abstract**

The present paper adopts and substantiates a superiority-inferiority hypothesis on disparagement humor generation and appreciation. Two between-subjects (identification with a character acting as victimizer or victim) experiments address disparaging humorous advertising effectiveness, providing a novel perspective on very old questions. Perceived superiority and inferiority autonomously mediate the relationship between a disparaging advertisement and perceived humorousness. Individuals with high superiority motivation (i.e., high-katagelasticians) experience increased humorousness and an improved attitude toward the brand when they identify with a character acting as victimizer in the disparaging ad. People with a motivation to avoid inferiority (i.e., high-gelotophobes) experience reduced humorousness and lower positive attitudes toward the brand when they identify with a character who is victimized in the disparaging ad. Gelotophiles are not driven by feelings of superiority or inferiority and experience increased humorousness as well as more positive brand attitudes irrespective of the ad's victimization focus.

Keywords: disparagement humor, character identification, katagelasticism, gelotophobia, gelotophilia, superiority, inferiority

## 1. INTRODUCTION

---A woman enjoys a Reese's Take 5 bar. Being asked by one of her colleagues, she describes the product, but to her amazement he has never heard of it. The woman scornfully asks him "have you been under a rock?" which proves to be true. As all her colleagues seem to be unaware of the well-known snack, the woman sarcastically confronts them with expressions like "were you raised by wolves?", or "you have your head stuck in the sand?" implying that the only way to not know Reese's Take 5 bar, is if these phrases are literally true. At the closing scene, an awkward looking discomfited colleague asks in resentment "none of us has heard Reese's 5, so who looks stupid now?" ending up to literally strengthen her claim.---

Aired in 2020, Hershey's Super Bowl commercial for Reese's Take 5, is addressing people's low awareness of the brand. Adopting a superior stance, the key character verbally abuses her colleagues for their stupid, unnatural ignorance. The creative element in the ad is disparagement humor "that disparages, belittles, debases, demeans, humiliates, or otherwise victimizes" (Zillmann, 1983, p. 85). Being often described as "idiosyncratic" humor (Weinberger et al., 2017), it holds the capacity to instigate extreme positive and negative emotions (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992) and a feeling of superiority (Newton et al., 2016). Over the past two decades, longitudinal analyses of Super Bowl humorous commercials have underlined a significant rise in the use of disparagement (Gulas et al., 2010) and aggressive humor (Timamopoulou et al., 2020).

Theories adopting the superiority approach have been extensively used in the discussion of disparagement humor and its impact on the perception and appreciation of humorous advertising (Grougiou et al., 2018). The superiority theory, that implies a triadic relationship between victimizer, victim, and audience, proclaims a stronger appreciation of disparagement humor when the audience has high identification with

(or a positive disposition toward) the victimizer and at the same time low identification with (or a negative disposition toward) the victim of the joke, as this increases their sense of superiority (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). Recent studies, however, highlight certain discrepancies with respect to this notion. For instance, masculine individuals seem to appreciate more an aggressive humorous ad when they are emotionally attached to the victim rather than the victimizer (Weinberger et al., 2017), and men enjoy disparaging jokes irrespectively of the victim's gender (Manyiwa & Jin, 2020). Thus, disparaging humorous advertising is a popular but also risky execution strategy (Warren & McGraw, 2016) that may result in unexpected communication outcomes (Meyer, 2000).

Based on two experiments, the present study extends the superiority theory and applies it in the advertising context. First, the study tests and replicates the superiority hypothesis indicating that identification with a character acting as victimizer (victim) in a disparaging ad increases (decreases) feeling of superiority and perceived humorousness. Moreover, the study extends prior research by revealing that identification with a character acting as victim (victimizer) of a disparaging ad increases (decreases) feeling of inferiority and in turn decreases (increases) perceived humorousness. Originating from Plato's and Aristotle's writings, the superiority hypothesis received widespread acceptance by Thomas Hobbes and many other prominent, contemporary researchers (e.g., Charles Gruner, John Morreall, Dolf Zillmann). The present study contributes to this stream of research, designating that humor stems not only from a desire to achieve superiority but also from a motivation to avoid inferiority and hence underlines novel avenues to understand the triggering mechanisms of disparagement humor.

Second, the study introduces the three dispositions toward ridicule and being laughed at, namely katagelasticism (the joy of laughing at others), gelotophobia (the fear of being laughed at), and gelotophilia (the joy of being laughed at) (Ruch & Proyer, 2009) in the discussion of disparaging humorous advertising and attempts to explain the generating mechanisms of humor with respect to the induced feelings of superiority or inferiority. The present study indicates that consumers with a high superiority motivation (i.e., katagelasticists) experience higher perceived superiority, humorousness, and more positive attitude toward the advertised brand when they identify with a character acting as victimizer of the disparaging ad. On the other hand, consumers with a motivation to avoid inferiority (i.e., gelotophobes), experience lower perceived inferiority, increased humorousness, and a more positive attitude toward the brand, when they identify with a character acting as victimizer of the disparaging ad. Gelotophiles, who aren't usually driven by feelings of superiority or inferiority, seem to appreciate humor and the advertised brand regardless of the ad's victimization focus. Both gelotophobes and gelotophiles cannot experience perceived humorousness through heightened feelings of superiority, as suggested by the superiority theory. This is the first study to test the superiority and inferiority hypotheses based on consumers' dispositions toward ridicule. This novel approach to disparagement humor facilitates a greater understanding of how (through superiority or inferiority) and when (the viewers are katagelasticists or gelotophobes) disparagement leads to perceived humorousness. Moreover, it indicates that the superiority theory cannot adequately explain how gelotophobes and gelotophiles, experience humor, thus highlighting a significant limitation of the theory and providing an explanation for the disagreements of prior studies in the field.

The findings of this study can provide guidance for the design of disparaging humorous advertisements specifically tailored to target audience characteristics (motives to increase superiority or avoid inferiority). They may also help advertisers determine the reasons behind a disparaging humorous campaign's failure. Given that gelotophilia is a relatively common population trait (Ruch & Proyer, 2009), the present study can explain the growing use and popularity of disparagement humor in advertising.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND & RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

The proposed conceptual framework is outlined in a sequence of eleven hypotheses. The first three hypotheses refer to the role of identification with a character acting as victimizer or victim on perceived humorousness and in turn on attitude toward the brand, taking into consideration the mediating role of perceived superiority. These hypotheses derive from, and are consistent with several studies and theoretical developments in both psychology (La Fave et al., 1976; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; McGhee & Lloyd, 1981; McGhee & Duffey, 1983; Ruch, 2008) and advertising (Newton et al., 2016; Weinberger et al., 2017). Thus, they do not aim to provide novel theoretical and practical insights on the appreciation of disparagement humor. Yet, in combination with hypotheses 4-11 that significantly extend prior literature uncovering the role of perceived inferiority and that of the three dispositions toward ridicule, contribute to the development of a conceptual model that addresses a plethora of consumer behaviors and highlights new managerial implications.

### **2.1 Disparagement humor and perceived humorousness**

Originally described by Plato, superiority is probably the earliest and the most conventional theory addressing disparagement humor (Spotts et al., 1997). Hobbes (1996 [1651]) stresses that people are amused when observing the infirmities or misfortunes of others (i.e., victims) since they experience a sudden feeling of superiority or triumph about themselves through a downward social comparison with the victims (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). This sudden “glory” enhances their self-esteem and amusement. The victims’ infirmities or misfortunes can be a product of their own mistakes (e.g., they are stumbling on a rock) but in most cases, there is a victimizer who acts unjustly against the victims.

Prior studies on the superiority theory focus on the “victimizer–victim–audience” scenario and examine how a victimizer’s verbal or physical attack on a victim affects the audience’s perceived amusement and mirth (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). La Fave et al. (1976) support that the more positive an individual's attitude toward an identification group A and the more negative toward an identification group B, the greater the magnitude of amusement experienced for a joke that applauds A and disparages B (La Fave et al., 1976, p. 67). In a critique of these findings, Zillmann and Cantor (1976) denote that it is not just the attitude toward a group but rather the disposition toward the disparaged target (e.g., a person, animal, or object), that causes mirth and promotes laughter. Hence, a positive disposition toward (i.e., high identification with) the victimizer and a simultaneous negative disposition toward (i.e., low identification with) the victim is fundamental for the appreciation of disparagement humor and the experience of mirth. Disposition and identification have been used interchangeably in prior research to express the psychological proximity with the characters represented in a joke (McGhee & Lloyd, 1981; McGhee & Duffey, 1983; Ruch, 2008).



Research in advertising (Torres & Briggs, 2007) has repeatedly underlined the importance of identification to accomplish advertising objectives. “When identifying with a character, a person imagines him or herself to be that character, a process that involves feeling empathy and affinity towards that character (affective empathy component) and adopting the character’s goals and point of view within the narrative (cognitive empathy component)” (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010, p. 404). Identification with either a person or a group originates from an individual’s sociocultural (e.g., age, gender, native language, culture, occupation, religious beliefs), or status/state identity and ranges between empathy (i.e., feeling emotional interest or even the same emotions with the character), cognitive approach (i.e., understanding what the character feels), motivational (i.e., understanding the drivers of their behavior), and absorption (i.e., complete identification with the character) (Cohen, 2001).

Prior studies and theories (Hobbes, 1996 [1651]; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972; La Fave et al., 1976) agree that people enjoy witnessing an individual being victimized, humiliated, or disparaged by another person when they highly identify with the latter rather than the former. People laugh since they experience a sudden feeling of self-enhancement and superiority in relation to the victim of the joke. On the contrary, strong identification with a disparaged person reduces or even eliminates humor. Based on the above analysis it can be assumed that the advertising audience experiences higher perceived humorousness when they identify with an advertising character acting as victimizer rather than as victim of the joke. Thus, the following hypothesis is advanced:

**H1:** Identification with a character acting as victimizer rather than as victim of a disparaging ad leads to a higher perceived humorousness.

## **2.2 Superiority, inferiority and perceived humorousness mediate the relationship between disparagement humor and attitude toward the brand**

Prior studies (Unger, 1995; Zhang, 1996b) show that perceived humor exerts a positive direct effect on both attitude toward the ad and the brand. Perceived humor also has a mediating role in the relationship between attempted humor and consumers' attitudes (Flaherty et al., 2004). Attempted humor in advertisements aims to amuse the audience but it is not always funny. However, in order to create a positive attitude toward the ad and the brand, it must be funny. In the same vein, only when aggression and violence are perceived as humorous can lead to a positive attitude toward the ad and brand (Swani et al., 2013). Elaborating in these relationships, Weinberger et al. (2017), support that emotional interest (emotional identification) for the victims of an aggressive ad leads to lower perceived humorousness, less positive attitude toward highly aggressive humorous advertisements, and eventually less positive attitude toward the brand. Projecting from the above, it is assumed that identification with an advertising character acting as victimizer rather than as victim can increase perceived humorousness (i.e., mediator) and in turn, attitude toward the brand:

**H2:** Perceived humorousness mediates the relationship between the disparaging ad (identification with a character acting as victimizer rather than as victim) and attitude toward the brand.

The conceptual framework of the present study is largely based on the concepts of superiority and inferiority. Superiority and inferiority are not two opposite ends of the same bipolar construct. Individuals with a sense (complex) of superiority need to

prove that they are more superior/important/capable than they truly are, while individuals with a sense of inferiority are in vain striving to find a domain/ability/skill in which they excel compared to their peers (Adler, 2013a). There are individuals primarily motivated by superiority and others driven by a sense of inferiority (Adler, 2013b). However, feelings of superiority and inferiority can be experienced even simultaneously by anyone in various situations and domains. For instance, gifted people tend to feel superior to normal people but at the same time are denounced resulting in social alienation and perceived inferiority (Striley, 2014). Thus, it is expected that superiority and inferiority will exert an autonomous effect on the dependent variables. It should also be noted that this study does not examine the actual superiority (e.g., a highly talented person) or inferiority (e.g., poverty, inadequacy) of the advertising audience but their perceived feelings of superiority or inferiority, which can strongly influence their attitudes.

Thomas Hobbes (1996 [1651]) first pointed out that laughing at a person's misfortune is a triumphant expression of a suddenly perceived superiority defined as "a reinforcement or happiness increment" and "a heightened self-esteem" (La Fave et al., 1976, p. 86). The audience's identification with either the victimizer or the victim is a dividing line between supporters and opponents of the joke teller and can generate feelings of superiority. If the audience identifies with the victimizer, due to shared similarities (e.g., gender, age, race, etc.), they will experience self-affirmation at the expense of the victim, a boost in self-esteem, and will perceive the joke as humorous (Meyer, 2000). If the audience identifies with the victim, they will not feel superior and may consider the joke offensive and insulting (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976). The spontaneous mirth is first experienced through perceived superiority and may then be manifested through laughter (Meyer, 2000). In other words, perceived superiority

mediates the relationship between the disparaging ad and perceived humorousness. Indeed, Newton, Wong, and Newton (2016) demonstrate that feelings of superiority mediate the relationship between disparaging humor and the perceived humorousness of an advertisement, when the advertising audience has high power motivation. Hence, it is expected that when consumers identify with a character acting as victimizer rather than as victim in a disparaging advertisement, they will experience feelings of superiority, and perceive the ad as humorous:

**H3:** Perceived superiority mediates the relationship between the disparaging ad (identification with a character acting as victimizer rather than victim) and perceived humorousness.

**H4:** Perceived superiority and perceived humorousness serially mediate the relationship between the disparaging ad and attitude toward the brand.

Despite the extensive focus on superiority and its role on disparagement humor appreciation, the role of inferiority remains undetected (Solomon, 2002). Inferiority is defined as “sadness or distress over one’s shortcoming or over subservience to an envied person; anxiety over one’s status; despair of over obtaining what the envied person has” (Salovey, 1991, p. 13). The invidious comparisons with other people enhance the sense of inferiority and are often linked to depressive symptoms (Rutherford, 1994). Perceived inferiority increases subjective injustice beliefs (Salovey, 1991), that can trigger hostility and aggressive behavior (Smith et al., 1994). Bullies for instance, often experience envy, insecurity, inadequacy, and inferiority that result in self-loathing and bullying behavior as an attempt to mitigate these feelings (Vartia, 1996; Piotrowski & Hoot, 2008).

Similarly, insulting, humiliating, offensive, and in general disparaging humor can be used by individuals with low self-esteem (Ruch & Proyer, 2009) to compensate for their inferiority feelings. Even as bystanders they tend to appreciate humorous disparagement of their envied persons. As widely accepted by psychotherapists, humor can be used to reduce feelings of inferiority (Rutherford, 1994) and liberate people from a sense of inadequacy (Foot & McCreddie, 2006). It can help people with greater self-ascribed loneliness, lower perceived attractiveness, and lower self-acceptance to improve their well-being (Führ et al., 2015). However, when insecure people prone to inferiority and mediocrity are the victims of a disparaging joke, they experience extreme shame-bound anxiety, intense perceived inferiority, and decreased perceived humorousness (Titze, 2009).

It is only the disparagement of an envied person, and not the self-disparagement, that can instantly decrease perceived inferiority and create fitting conditions for the appreciation of humor. For instance, in German cabarets, artists bring socially powerful people (such as politicians or celebrities) into a downward position that enables the audience to experience malicious joy (i.e., *schadenfreude*) (Titze, 2016). Sometimes people tend to experience malicious joy when they read embarrassing news about a CEO or politician, especially if the politician is from an opposing political party and not from their own political party (Crysel & Webster, 2018).

In line with the above reasoning, it can be assumed that when consumers identify with a character acting as victimizer rather than as victim in a disparaging advertisement, they will experience decreased feelings of inferiority, and perceive the ad as humorous:

**H5:** Perceived inferiority mediates the relationship between the disparaging ad (identification with a character acting as victimizer rather than victim) and perceived humorousness.

**H6:** Perceived inferiority and perceived humorousness serially mediate the relationship between a disparaging ad and attitude toward the brand.

### **2.3 Individual differences and disparagement humor**

According to Kazdin (2000, VI: 100), “personality refers to individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving”. Prior studies have addressed several individual differences affecting humor appreciation (Martin et al., 2003). The advertising literature extensively refers to individuals’ “need for levity” and “need for humor” (Cline et al., 2003). Introduced by Cline and Kellaris (1999), the “need for levity” represents individuals’ craving for humor (i.e., “need for humor”) and whimsy (i.e., need for whimsy). The advertising literature suggests that humorous advertisements create a more positive attitude toward the ad (Cline et al., 2003) and higher recall (Cline & Kellaris, 2007) among individuals with a high “need for humor”. High “need for levity” has also been associated with a more positive attitude toward the advertisement (Cline et al., 2011).

Taking a novel approach, recent research (Karpinska-Krakowiak, 2020) has underlined the role of katagelasticism (love of laughing at others), gelotophobia (fear of being laughed at), and gelotophilia (love of being laughed at), originally introduced by Ruch and Proyer (2009), on understanding consumers’ reactions to comedic violence advertising. However, to date, there are no available studies demonstrating the role of the three concepts on understanding how feelings of superiority and

inferiority affect perceived humorousness of a disparaging humorous ad and in turn consumers' attitudes.

Addressing individuals' disposition toward ridicule and being laughed at (Đurka & Ruch, 2015), the three concepts have gained widespread acceptance in psychology and humor research (Hofmann et al., 2017). A study of gelotophobia in 73 countries (e.g., China, USA, England) and 42 different languages has established gelotophobia as a universal personality trait defined by and subject to people's cultural context (Proyer et al., 2009). Katagelasticians along with gelotophobes and gelotophiles represent a considerable proportion of the population (Nosenko & Opykhailo, 2014). Gelotophobia and gelotophilia are distinct individual differences (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). Both gelotophobia and gelotophilia have a positive correlation with katagelasticism but they are not interchangeable.

Although the three dispositions toward ridicule share few similarities with "need for levity" they have distinctive differences. In line with the "need for levity", katagelasticism and gelotophilia describe an individual's tendency to generate and seek out humor. Opposing "need for levity" though, the three dispositions toward ridicule focus on aggressive, disparaging, and self-deprecating humor rather than on positive functions of humor such as levity (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). On one hand, "need for levity" is a construct broader than the sense of humor (Cline et al., 2003), while on the other hand, katagelasticism, gelotophobia, and gelotophilia focus on understanding individuals' reactions to disparagement humor emphasizing the "victimizer-victim-audience" scenario (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). As Samson and Meyer (2010) have indicated katagelasticians enjoy, whereas gelotophobes dislike aggressive humor. Katagelasticians and gelotophiles are more favorable to brands advertised through realistic, comedically violent advertisements (Karpinska-

Krakowiak, 2020). Hence, katagelasticism, gelotophobia, and gelotophilia are deemed more applicable than “need for levity” to the analysis of disparagement humor.

### ***2.3.1 Gelotophilia and the mediating role of perceived humorousness***

Gelotophiles are extrovert, spontaneous, self-confident, and complex-free people (Proyer & Ruch, 2010b) who love being laughed at (Ruch & Proyer, 2009) and are known for their sense of humor (Proyer et al., 2014). Gelotophiles are not ashamed of embarrassing situations, they are rather creative in making the best out of an awkward situation and enjoy making others laugh at them. They do not interpret laughter as a sign of inferiority but rather as a token of appreciation and admiration (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). Gelotophiles enjoy watching the embarrassment of other people, since they prefer to laugh at with maladaptive behaviors (i.e., bullying) rather than positive ones (Proyer et al., 2013). Thus, it is expected that gelotophiles would enjoy a disparaging ad, experience high perceived humorousness, and positive attitude toward the brand regardless of the ad’s victimization focus. The following hypothesis is advanced:

**H7:** Perceived humorousness mediates the relationship between gelotophilia and attitude toward the brand.

### ***2.3.2 Katagelasticism as a moderator of perceived humorousness***

Katagelasticism describes people’s predisposition to ridicule others (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). Katagelasticists consider laughing at others to be normal and occasionally, crossing the line they become unkind and rude for the sake of a joke. They may engage in bullying behavior at a very young age (Proyer et al., 2012b) and



keep the bully-role as adolescents and adults (Proyer et al., 2013). However, they may also recall being subjected to punishment or victimization during their childhood (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). Research on both children (6 to 9 years old) and adolescents (13 to 15 years old) has demonstrated that katagelasticians prefer to be in the role of bully-victimizer rather than the victim (Proyer et al., 2012b; 2013). High-katagelasticians compared to low-katagelasticians derive greater pleasure from witnessing the disparagement of others, while no differences are observed when they are personally subjected to embarrassing situations. It is expected that high-katagelasticians would experience higher perceived humorousness than low-katagelasticians when they identify with a character acting as victimizer in a disparaging advertisement. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- H8:** (a) When they identify with an advertising character acting as victimizer in a disparaging ad, high-katagelasticians compared to low-katagelasticians experience higher perceived humorousness.
- (b) When they identify with an advertising character acting as victim in a disparaging ad, high-katagelasticians and low-katagelasticians experience similar levels of perceived humorousness.

Katagelasticians often claim to have been laughed at by peers during their childhood (Ruch & Proyer, 2009), to have had low social support in adolescence (Weibel & Proyer, 2012), and to have had siblings who also enjoyed laughing at others (Proyer et al., 2012a). Hence, katagelasticism may be a personal adaptive strategy to avoid ridicule by others and regain self-esteem (Proyer et al., 2012a; Blasco-Belled et al., 2019). Hobbes (1996 [1651]) suggests that humans constantly

struggle for power and laughter is their reward for this victory. For instance, majority ethnic groups express their social power motivation through racial disparagement humor (Johnson et al., 2012a). Consumers with high-power motivation seem to have more positive attitudes toward brands advertised through disparaging humorous advertisements that enhance their superiority (Newton et al., 2016). In a similar vein, katagelasticians laugh at people's misfortunes stressing their ability to cope better, being more powerful and competitive (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). High-katagelasticians are expected to experience higher perceived superiority than low-katagelasticians when they identify with a character acting as victimizer in a disparaging advertisement. Hence the following hypothesis is advanced:

- H9:** (a) When they identify with an advertising character acting as victimizer in a disparaging ad, high-katagelasticians compared to low-katagelasticians experience higher perceived superiority.
- (b) When they identify with an advertising character acting as victim in a disparaging ad, high-katagelasticians and low-katagelasticians experience similar levels of perceived superiority.

### ***2.3.3 Gelotophobia as a moderator of perceived humorousness***

According to Titze (1996), gelotophobia is the pathological fear of being ridiculed in front of others and hence gelotophobes avoid disparagement humor in their everyday life (Hofmann et al., 2017). They are vigilant for circumstances in which they may be ridiculed by others and tend to misinterpret pranks and jokes due to a pathological fear of being laughed at (Platt & Ruch, 2010). When gelotophobes identify with the victim of a joke, their emotional response corresponds to that of

individuals subjected to mockery or bullying, indicating an inability to appreciate any type of disparagement humor be it benevolent or malicious (Ruch & Proyer, 2008), sexual and aggressive (Ruch et al., 2009). Thus, gelotophobes dislike being the victims of a joke (Proyer et al., 2013; Weiss et al., 2012) and consider laughter as an offensive mechanism rather than a pleasurable experience (Ruch & Proyer, 2008). In some special cases gelotophobes, acting as victimizers, enjoy laughing at other's humiliation, victimization or disparagement (Proyer & Ruch, 2010b). However, according to Proyer et al. (2013), greater gelotophobia is negatively related to laughing when individuals are personally subjected to a humiliating situation. It is not associated with laughing if a third person is being humiliated. It is expected that high-gelotophobes would experience lower perceived humorousness than low-gelotophobes when they identify with a character acting as victim in a disparaging advertisement. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- H10:** (a) When they identify with an advertising character acting as victimizer in a disparaging ad, high-gelotophobes and low-gelotophobes experience similar levels of perceived humorousness.
- (b) When they identify with an advertising character acting as victim in a disparaging ad, low-gelotophobes compared to high-gelotophobes experience higher perceived humorousness.

Titze (2014) affirms that feelings of inferiority are an antecedent of gelotophobia. Gelotophobes, in their childhood often experience low emotional warmth, increased control and discipline from their parents (Proyer et al., 2012a) and low support from teachers, peers and their parents (Weibel & Proyer, 2012). They are also more likely

to have experienced bullying as children (Proyer et al., 2012a), adolescents (Führ, 2010), or adults (Platt et al., 2009). As a result, they feel not only unconnected but also inferior to others (Titze, 2009). Adler (1964, p. 40) in his work on social interest, states “to be a human being means the possession of a feeling of inferiority that is constantly pressing on towards its own conquest”. However, when humans believe they are unable to overcome their feelings of inferiority (i.e., in the case of inferiority complex), they may try to completely or partially avoid a problem of life, narrowing their path of advance (Adler, 1964). Gelotophobes have an intense and irrational fear of being the involuntary object of ridicule and tend to avoid situations that make them feel inferior or the butt of the joke (Titze & Kühn, 2014). Comparison with others is the primary source of inferiority feelings (Kretschmer, 1922, p. 136): a comparison to a person better off increases their perceived inferiority and leads to more negative feelings (Titze, 2014). It can be assumed that high-gelotophobes experience higher perceived inferiority than low-gelotophobes, when they identify with a character acting as victim in a disparaging advertisement. Hence the following hypothesis is advanced:

- H11:** (a) When they identify with an advertising character acting as victimizer in a disparaging ad, high-gelotophobes and low-gelotophobes experience similar levels of perceived inferiority.
- (b) When they identify with an advertising character acting as victim in a disparaging ad, high-gelotophobes compared to low-gelotophobes experience higher perceived inferiority.

The conceptual model summarizing all hypotheses is shown in Figure 1.

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### 3. STUDY 1

#### 3.1 Method

##### *3.1.1 Participants and design*

Study 1 tests H1, H2, H7, H8<sub>a,b</sub>, and H10<sub>a,b</sub> (Figure 1). A *a priori power analysis* was conducted using G\*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the required sample size (two-tailed test, medium ( $f^2 = .15$ ) to small ( $f^2 = .02$ ) effect size, and alpha = .05). A total sample of 85 to 602 participants in two equal groups was set to determine medium to small effects for a .80 power. In addition, according to Fritz and MacKinnon (2007), to achieve a power of 0.80 (Cohen, 1988), the required sample size for small to medium effect sizes for mediation analysis ranges between 71 and 462. A group of 547 undergraduate students (274 men), from a Large Greek University, Department of Economics, between 18 and 30 years of age ( $M = 22.06$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ), participated in a between-subjects single factor (two versions of a disparaging ad: identification with a character acting as victimizer versus victim) online experiment (Table 1). Young students fit to the purposes of this research as younger people are more open to disparagement humor and are mainly targeted by disparaging humorous advertisements (Swani et al., 2013). Participants were randomly divided into two treatment groups and were exposed to one of two print disparaging ad versions (i.e., identification with a character acting as victimizer/victim). They all responded to the same questionnaire. Nine participants

were excluded from the analysis based on attention check measures resulting in 538 valid responses.

PLEASE PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### ***3.1.2 Measures***

All measures used in the study were adopted from existing scales to suit the research context and translated in Greek with the “back translation and monolingual test” method (Maneesriwongul & Dixon, 2004, p. 178). Participants stated their (a) attitude toward the advertised brand (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 1998; four-items, e.g., I like the brand;  $\alpha = .84$ ), (b) perceived humorousness (Zhang, 1996a; four-items, e.g., This ad is funny;  $\alpha = .95$ ), (c) perceived character disparagement (four-items, e.g., The character seems disparaged;  $\alpha_{\text{student}} = .94$ ) and (d) character identification (Cohen, 2001; seven-items, e.g., I feel his emotions;  $\alpha = .97$ ). All above items were logged on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree”. Measures of katagelasticism ( $\alpha = .79$ ), gelotophobia ( $\alpha = .77$ ), and gelotophilia ( $\alpha = .78$ ) were recorded in a four-point scale from (1) “strongly disagree” to (4) “strongly agree” based on PhoPhiKat (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). Internal validity for all multi-item scales satisfied Nunnally's criterion (1978).

### ***3.1.3 Stimuli and pretest***

Two cartoon versions (adopted from Zillmann & Cantor, 1972; Figure 2) of a disparaging ad for a fictitious tutoring agency were designed for the experiment. Both versions depict a graduation ceremony with a professor awarding a diploma to a student. In the first version, the student throws a cake to the professor's face (i.e., the

student is the victimizer and the professor the victim), whereas in the second ad, the professor throws the cake to the student's face (i.e., the professor is the victimizer and the student the victim).

PLEASE PLACE FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

A pretest with 21 students established that they identified with the student on both ads regardless of his role (victimizer or victim) ( $t_{\text{ident}}(19) = -.69, p = .5$ ;  $M_{\text{student\_victimizer}} = 3.29, SD = .39$ ;  $M_{\text{student\_victim}} = 3.17, SD = .33$ ). Participants also clearly distinguished the disparaged/victimized character for both the professor ( $t_{\text{disparagement}}(11.62) = -6.63, p < .001, M_{\text{professor\_victimizer}} = 1.17, SD = .18, M_{\text{professor\_victim}} = 3.52, SD = 1.21$ ), and the student ( $t_{\text{disparagement}}(10.11) = 7.15, p < .001, M_{\text{student\_victimizer}} = 1.33, SD = .33, M_{\text{student\_victim}} = 3.31, SD = .78$ ).

## 3.2 Results

### 3.2.1 Manipulation Checks

Manipulation checks indicate that the identification with the student was constantly high and similar in both versions of the ad ( $t(519.07) = -1.02, p = .31$ ;  $M_{\text{student\_victimizer}} = 3.16, SD = 1.25$ ;  $M_{\text{student\_victim}} = 3.05, SD = 1.08$ ). The disparagement of both characters, the professor ( $t_{\text{disparagement}}(521.3) = -11.5, p < .001, M_{\text{professor\_victimizer}} = 1.93, SD = 1, M_{\text{professor\_victim}} = 3, SD = 1.15$ ), and the student ( $t_{\text{disparagement}}(461.15) = 11.79, p < .001, M_{\text{student\_victimizer}} = 1.78, SD = .91, M_{\text{student\_victim}} = 3, SD = 1.45$ ) was clearly identified by participants. Thus, the manipulation was successful.

### 3.2.2 Hypotheses Testing

In line with H1, there was a statistically significant higher perceived humorousness ( $t(522.82) = -2.5, p = .01$ ) when participants identified with the student acting as victimizer ( $M_{\text{student\_victimizer}} = 3.2, SD = 1.08$ ) rather than victim ( $M_{\text{student\_victim}} = 2.94, SD = 1.32$ ). Thus, hypothesis H1 was supported.

For H2 and H7, two mediation analyses with PROCESS macro (model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2013) were used to test the indirect effects of the disparaging ad (identification with a character acting as victimizer versus victim) and gelotophilia on attitude toward the brand through perceived humorousness. For hypotheses H8<sub>a,b</sub>, and H10<sub>a,b</sub> two moderation analyses with PROCESS macro (model 1; 10,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2013) were used to test the moderating effect of katagelasticism, and gelotophobia on the relationship between the disparaging ad and perceived humorousness. Age was used as a covariate in the analysis since it was associated with attitude toward the brand.

The disparaging ad's effect on attitude toward the brand was mediated by perceived humorousness ( $\beta = .046, SE = .02, 95\% CI = [.01, .08]$ ). Perceived humorousness also mediated the positive relationship between gelotophilia and attitude toward the brand ( $\beta = .059, SE = .02, 95\% CI = [.03, .10]$ ). In addition, there was a statistically significant positive direct effect of disparaging ad ( $\beta = .078, p = .013$ ) and gelotophilia ( $\beta = .262, p < .001$ ) on attitude toward the brand. In both mediations the total effect was also statistically significant (Table 2). Thus, H2 and H7 were supported.

PLEASE PLACE TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE



Katagelasticism and the disparaging ad had an interaction effect on perceived humorousness ( $\beta = .18, p = .001$ ; Table 3). A statistically significant interaction was also recorded between the disparaging ad and gelotophobia on perceived humorousness ( $\beta = .15, p = .01$ ). *Post hoc power* analyses through Linear multiple regression (*F* tests) – (Fixed model,  $R^2$  deviation from zero; Type I error or  $\alpha = .05$ ; Faul et al., 2007) also supported the proposed model. The interactions of disparaging ad with katagelasticism ( $f^2 = .07; 1 - \beta = .999$ ), and disparaging ad with gelotophobia ( $f^2 = .057; 1 - \beta = .997$ ) predict the perceived humorousness.

Spotlight analyses and simple slop analyses were used for the interaction effects via PROCESS macro, with low levels of katagelasticism/gelotophobia (“mean minus one standard deviation of the continuous moderator variable”) and high levels of katagelasticism/gelotophobia (“mean plus one standard deviation of the continuous moderator variable”) (Krishna, 2016, p. 6), to determine variations in perceived ad humorousness among the low and high katagelasticism/gelotophobia. The spotlight analyses indicated that in the *identification with the student acting as victimizer* scenario, high-katagelasticists experienced higher perceived humorousness than low-katagelasticists ( $\beta = .27, p < .001; d = 1.26$ ; H8a was supported), while high- and low-gelotophobes experienced similar perceived humorousness ( $\beta = .05, p = .52; d = .25$ ; H10a was supported) (Figure 3). In the *identification with the student acting as victim* scenario the high- and low-katagelasticists experienced similar perceived humorousness ( $\beta = -.09, p = .3; d = .1$ ; H8b was supported), whereas high-gelotophobes experienced lower perceived humorousness than low-gelotophobes ( $\beta = -.25, p = .001; d = .61$ ; H10b was supported).

PLEASE PLACE TABLE 3 AND FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Two moderated mediation analyses with PROCESS macro (model 7; 10,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2013) were used to replicate the full model. The disparaging ad was the independent variable of the model, perceived humorousness the mediator, katagelasticism and gelotophobia the moderators, and attitude toward the brand was the dependent variable. Age was used as covariate. The total index at 95% CI of the moderated mediation analysis for gelotophobia ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $SE = .02$ , [.01, .07]) and katagelasticism ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $SE = .02$ , [.02, .08]) excluded zero, indicating a statistically significant moderated mediation effect of the disparaging ad on attitude toward the brand (Table 3). The direct effect of the disparaging ad on attitude toward the brand was statistically significant ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $t = 4.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the indirect effect of the disparaging ad on attitude toward the brand through perceived humorousness was statistically significant only for high-katagelasticists ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95%  $CI = [.04, .12]$ ) and high-gelotophobes ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95%  $CI = [.04, .12]$ ).

### **3.3 Discussion**

Study 1 elaborates on the indirect effect of a disparaging ad on attitude toward the brand through perceived humorousness at different levels of katagelasticism and gelotophobia when the audience identifies with the advertising character acting as either the victimizer or the victim in the ad. When high-katagelasticists identify with the advertising character acting as victimizer of a disparaging ad, they experience higher levels of perceived humorousness than low-katagelasticists which lead to a more favorable attitude toward the brand. When high-gelotophobes identify with the advertising character acting as victim, they experience lower perceived humorousness

than low-gelotophobes and develop a less favorable attitude toward the brand. High-gelotophiles appear to appreciate humor and have positive attitude toward the brand regardless of the focus of victimization.

## **4. STUDY 2**

### **4.1 Method**

Study 2 examines hypotheses H3-H6, H9<sub>a,b</sub> and H11<sub>a,b</sub> (Figure 1). As in Study 1, a between-subjects single factor online experiment with Qualtrics was used. A *priori power analysis* was also conducted with the required sample size for medium to small effects for a .80 power ranging between 109 and 759, while according to Fritz and MacKinnon (2007), the range for mediation analysis ranges between 71 and 462. Thus, 324 undergraduate students from a large public university in Greece (Department of Economics) were recruited for the experiment in exchange for extra course credit. Seventeen respondents were excluded from further analysis based on the attention check measures resulting in 307 valid responses for further analysis (40% females; aged between 21 and 37 years of age [ $M = 22.88$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ ]) (Table 1).

Two cartoon disparaging ads (Figure 4) for a fictitious Greek beach bar were designed by a professional graphic designer. Both versions feature a scene at a sunny beach during the coronavirus period with the imposed mobility restrictions and social distancing measures. In the first (second) version, a policeman (young man) is tied up to an umbrella while a young man (policeman) relaxes on a sunbed, enjoying a drink and the sun. The advertisement implies that the policeman (who tries to impose safety regulations) is being humiliated by the young man and vice versa. The policeman character was used as they are not very popular to most people (Zillmann, 1983).

PLEASE PLACE FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Apart from the measures used in the first study, the second study incorporated a four-item scale for perceived superiority (Newton et al., 2016; e.g., This ad makes me feel superior –  $\alpha = .86$ ) and a five-item scale for perceived inferiority (e.g., This ad makes me feel inferior –  $\alpha = .91$ ). Perceived ethicality (Grougiou et al., 2018; four bipolar items, e.g., This ad is morally right/not morally right;  $\alpha = .83$ ), mood (Peterson & Sauber, 1983; four-items, e.g., As I answer these questions, I feel cheerful;  $\alpha = .77$ ), ad comprehension, intention to seek a beach for holidays, prior attitude toward the beach, and intention to visit the specific beach were also measured as potential covariates.

Reliability analysis indicated that all measures satisfied Nunnally's (1978) criterion. A pretest with 66 students indicated that participants identified with the young man in both ads, regardless of his role (victimizer or victim) in the ad ( $t_{\text{ident}}(64) = 0, p = 1, M_{\text{young\_man\_victimizer}} = 3.08, SD = .97; M_{\text{young\_man\_victim}} = 3.08, SD = .93$ ). There was no identification with the policeman ( $t_{\text{ident}}(54) = -1.22, p = .23, M_{\text{policeman\_victimizer}} = 2.02, SD = .79, M_{\text{policeman\_victim}} = 2.22, SD = .5$ ). Participants also clearly distinguished when the policeman ( $t_{\text{disparagement}}(50.48) = -4.22, p < .001, M_{\text{policeman\_victimizer}} = 2.23, SD = .63, M_{\text{policeman\_victim}} = 3.17, SD = 1.11$ ), or the young man were disparaged/victimized ( $t_{\text{disparagement}}(56.99) = 4.79, p < .001, M_{\text{young\_man\_victimizer}} = 1.72, SD = .9, M_{\text{young\_man\_victim}} = 3.04, SD = 1.3$ ).

## 4.2 Results

#### **4.2.1 Manipulation Checks**

Manipulation checks indicate that identification with the young man was high and similar in both ads ( $t(305) = 1.3, p = .193; M_{\text{young\_man\_victimizer}} = 3.19, SD = .67; M_{\text{young\_man\_victim}} = 3.3, SD = .77$ ). Participants also clearly identified the disparagement of the policeman ( $t_{\text{disparagement}}(305) = -12.11, p < .001, M_{\text{policeman\_victimizer}} = 2.1, SD = 1.09, M_{\text{policeman\_victim}} = 3.63, SD = 1.13$ ), and the young man ( $t_{\text{disparagement}}(291.5) = 14.32, p < .001, M_{\text{young\_man\_victimizer}} = 1.68, SD = .92, M_{\text{young\_man\_victim}} = 3.33, SD = 1.09$ ), indicating a successful manipulation.

#### **4.2.2 Hypotheses Testing**

H1 was supported, as perceived humorousness was higher when respondents identified with the young man acting as victimizer rather than victim ( $t(305) = -4.33, p < .001$ ). To test H3 and H5, two mediation analyses with PROCESS macro (model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2013) were used, with the disparaging ad (identification with a character acting as victimizer/victim) as the independent variable, perceived humorousness as the dependent variable, and superiority/inferiority as mediators. Hypotheses H3 and H5 were supported as both perceived superiority ( $\beta = .06, SE = .02, 95\% CI = [.02, .1]$ ) and inferiority ( $\beta = .04, SE = .02, 95\% CI = [.01, .07]$ ) mediate the relationship between the disparaging ad and perceived humorousness. To test the serial mediation of superiority/inferiority and perceived humorousness on the relationship between disparaging ad and attitude toward the brand, a serial mediation analysis (model 6; 10,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2013) was also used. Perceived superiority and perceived humorousness ( $\beta = .01, SE = .004, 95\% CI = [.003, .02]$ ) as well as perceived inferiority and perceived humorousness ( $\beta = .01, SE = .003, 95\% CI = [.001, .014]$ ) serially mediate the

relationship between the disparaging ad and attitude toward the brand. Hence, H4 and H6 were supported.

For H9<sub>a,b</sub> and H11<sub>a,b</sub> four moderation analyses with PROCESS macro (model 1; 10,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2013) were used to determine the moderating effect of katagelasticism and gelotophobia (moderators) on the relationships between disparaging ad and perceived superiority/inferiority respectively. The interaction of the disparaging ad with katagelasticism (Table 4) has a statistically significant effect on perceived superiority ( $\beta = .15, p = .003$ ) but not on perceived inferiority ( $\beta = .04, p = .44$ ). The interaction of the disparaging ad with gelotophobia has a statistically significant effect on perceived inferiority ( $\beta = -.22, p < .001$ ) but not on perceived superiority ( $\beta = -.01, p = .92$ ). *Post hoc power* analyses through Linear multiple regression (*F* tests) – (Fixed model,  $R^2$  deviation from zero; Type I error or  $\alpha = .05$ ; Faul et al., 2007) also supported the proposed model. The interaction of the disparaging ad with katagelasticism ( $f^2 = .397; 1 - \beta = 1$ ) predicts superiority whereas the interaction of the disparaging ad with gelotophobia ( $f^2 = .445; 1 - \beta = 1$ ) predicts inferiority.

The spotlight analyses indicated that in the *identification with the young man acting as victimizer* scenario, high-katagelasticists experience higher perceived superiority than low-katagelasticists ( $\beta = .37, p < .001; d = 2.18$ ; H9a was supported), while high-gelotophobes experience similar perceived inferiority with low-gelotophobes ( $\beta = -.13, p = .07; d = .54$ ; H11a was supported). In the *identification with the young man acting as victim* scenario, high-katagelasticists experience similar perceived superiority with low-katagelasticists ( $\beta = .07, p = .36; d = .85$ ; H9b was supported), while high-gelotophobes experience greater perceived inferiority than low-gelotophobes ( $\beta = .3, p < .001; d = 1.62$ ; H11b was supported) (Figure 5).

PLEASE PLACE TABLE 4 AND FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Two moderated mediation analyses with PROCESS macro (model 8; 10,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2013) were used to replicate the full model and determine the indirect effect of the disparaging ad (independent variable) on attitude toward the brand (dependent variable) through perceived superiority/inferiority and perceived humorousness (mediators). The moderating effect of katagelasticism and gelotophobia (moderators) on the relationships between the disparaging ad and perceived superiority/inferiority respectively were also included in the model. Perceived ethicality, gender, mood, and ad comprehension were used as covariates due to their correlation with perceived humorousness. A moderated mediation effect of the disparaging ad on perceived humorousness through perceived superiority was statistically significant for high-katagelasticists ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95%  $CI = [.04, .14]$ ). The same effect through perceived inferiority, was statistically significant for high-gelotophobes ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95%  $CI = [.02, .12]$ ).

### **4.3 Discussion**

Study 2 elaborates on the indirect effect of a disparaging ad on perceived humorousness and sequentially on attitude toward the brand through perceived superiority/inferiority at different levels of katagelasticism and gelotophobia when the audience identifies with the advertising character acting as victimizer/victim in the ad. High-katagelasticists experience higher perceived superiority than low-katagelasticists only when they identify with the advertising character acting as victimizer. In turn, they experience higher perceived humorousness and a more favorable attitude toward

the brand. Instead, high-gelotophobes experience higher perceived inferiority than low-gelotophobes only when they identify with the advertising character acting as victim. As a result, they experience lower perceived humorousness and develop a less favorable attitude toward the brand.

## **5. GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The study examines the mediating effect of perceived superiority and inferiority on the relationship between disparaging ad and perceived humorousness and their effect on attitude toward the brand, under the prism of people's disposition to ridicule. The findings indicate that high-katagelasticians experience greater superiority and in turn increased perceived humorousness and attitude toward the brand than low-katagelasticians, when they identify with an advertising character acting as victimizer. High-gelotophobes experience greater inferiority and eventually lower perceived humorousness and attitude toward the brand than low-gelotophobes, when they identify with an advertising character acting as victim in the ad. Gelotophiles enjoy humor and form a positive attitude toward the brand irrespective of the ad's victimization focus. These findings broaden our understanding of humor and its driving force in advertising strategy in several ways:

They extend current understanding of the mechanisms that trigger disparagement humor. To date, the superiority theory holds sway among the various theories on humor as the oldest and one of the three most cited (i.e., superiority, incongruity, and relief theory) (Martin & Ford, 2018). For centuries, from Plato to the present date, researchers adopt different perspectives to describe an almost standard process for the disparagement humor elicitation and appreciation; that is, the indirect effect of



disparagement on perceived humorousness through perceived superiority. The present study suggests that in addition to the known path of increased superiority, disparagement humor can also influence perceived humorousness through decreased inferiority. In this sense, the superiority theory appears to be one of the two dimensions of the broader superiority-inferiority theory of humor. People with high superiority motivation (i.e., high-katagelasticians) tend to experience strong superiority and individuals with a motive to avoid inferiority (i.e., high-gelotophobes) tend to experience lower inferiority when they identify with an advertising character acting as victimizer rather than the victim of a joke. Hence, it is either increased perceived superiority or decreased perceived inferiority that can trigger higher perceived humorousness and lead to improved attitude toward the brand.

Interestingly, counter to the superiority hypothesis, people with a desire to reduce inferiority (i.e., high-gelotophobes) cannot experience perceived humorousness through heightened feelings of superiority. They strive to avoid inadequacy, submissiveness, shame-bound anxiety, and victimization (Titze, 2009) and tend to appreciate humor only when it meets their motives to reduce inferiority. Identification with an advertising character acting as victimizer in a disparaging humorous ad does not help gelotophobes feel superior to the victim; it rather allows them to experience relief as they are not the butt of the joke. This finding addresses and supports the consensus among psychotherapists that humor is a coping mechanism to reduce perceived inferiority (Rutherford, 1994). Prior studies also relate anxiety and depression (i.e., two distinct characteristics of gelotophobes) with the desire to avoid inferiority and subordination and not with the longing for superiority (Johnson et al., 2012b).

The study also underlines that neither perceived superiority nor inferiority affect gelotophiles in their perception of a disparaging advertisement as humorous. Indeed, prior research on gelotophilia (Proyer et al., 2013) supports that people who enjoy being laughed at appreciate both disparaging and self-deprecating humor. This is yet another limitation of the superiority theory, as evidently individuals with neither a desire for superiority over another person nor a motivation to avoid inferiority can appreciate disparaging humor and form positive attitude toward the advertised brand irrespective of the victimization focus. This finding can, also, provide an alternative reading to prior studies indicating that men enjoy more than women, comedic violence (Manyiwa & Jin, 2020) and sexual (Herzog, 1999) humorous advertisements irrespective of the victim's gender. These results for men appear to be consistent with typical gelotophiles' behavior. Indeed, men and especially young men are mainly gelotophiles (Proyer & Ruch, 2010b) who derive great amusement from not only witnessing other people's humiliation but also personally experiencing embarrassing situations.

Our study also extends motivational theories of humor; namely superiority, relief, and Freud's psychoanalytic theory (Martin & Ford, 2018). While the relief and Freud's psychoanalytic theory uncover the role of intrapersonal motives, suggesting that the relief of tension (as physiological arousal or forbidden sexual/aggressive impulse) is central to all humor experiences, the superiority approach emphasizes interpersonal motives of self-enhancement (i.e., superiority). Our findings offer important insights for understanding the motivational mechanisms of humor elicitation and appreciation, by revealing the role of perceived inferiority. This is a step forward to the development of a more comprehensive theory of humor.

This study also extends the literature (Proyer et al., 2009; Proyer & Ruch, 2010a) on the three dispositions toward ridicule and their role on humor appreciation. There is only one study of the three dispositions to ridicule and their effect on consumers' attitudes toward a comedic violence advertisement, indicating that only katagelasticians and gelotophiles react positively to comedic violence when there is high perceived realism (Karpinska-Krakowiak, 2020). Although, the interaction effect between katagelasticism/gelotophilia, comedic violence and perceived realism is intriguing, it does not take into consideration the motives behind katagelasticians, gelotophobes, and gelotophiles' attitudes or their association with the advertising characters. Research in psychology (Proyer et al., 2009; Proyer & Ruch, 2010a; Proyer & Ruch, 2010b) has mainly focused on the interpretation of gelotophobes, katagelasticians and gelotophiles' behavior, examining their inner drivers (such as the need for superiority and avoidance of inferiority) and their attitudes toward something embarrassing that happens either to them or to other people. Therefore, the present study is better suited to bring together the two disciplines, psychology and advertising, both in order to improve our understanding of the three dispositions to ridicule and in order to infuse into the advertising practice new knowledge about these individual differences.

Moreover, this study builds upon previous research on the moderating role of individual differences in disparaging humorous advertising effectiveness (Grougiou et al., 2018; Newton et al., 2016). In addition to Newton et al.'s (2016) study, that underlined the role of superiority on perceived humorousness and brand attitude, we introduce the influence of inferiority, thus directing new avenues for research in humor and advertising. Elaborating on recent findings (Grougiou et al., 2018), we

advocate that the proposed conceptual model holds, notwithstanding the level of the disparaging ad's perceived ethicality.

## **6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Our findings put forward significant managerial implications for advertisers with respect to the design of effective disparaging humorous advertisements to improve brand attitudes. Advertisers should consider the audience's identification with the character acting as victimizer or victim in the disparaging advertisement. High identification with the advertising character acting as victimizer and low identification with the advertising character acting as victim of the disparaging ad can improve brand attitude regardless of the individual characteristics of the target group (i.e., katagelasticism, gelotophobia or gelotophilia). Instead, high identification with the advertising character acting as the victim of a disparaging ad can lead to negative brand attitudes among gelotophobes. People with a motivation to avoid inferiority (i.e., gelotophobes), who do not want to associate with the victims of a disparagement, experience increased perceived inferiority and decreased humorousness, resulting in low preference for the advertised brand.

Advertisers can enhance the perceived superiority of katagelasticists by victimizing characters who share no similarities (i.e., age, gender, race etc.) with the audience (e.g., stock characters, see Stern, 1996). This increases amusement for katagelasticists and limits the possibilities of identification with the character acting as victim. The present study also highlights a novel path (i.e., the inferiority path) for advertisers to generate humor and reduce the shame-bound anxiety that stems from personal-beliefs of inferiority. The victimization of people with power can help

individuals who strive to avoid feelings of inferiority. Watching the disparaging advertisement, such feelings are compensated for when the audience realizes that the hitherto superior people or groups often come off worst. According to Titze (2016, p. 5), “in this instance, the proverbial joyous feeling of obtaining ultimate justice will prevail, which ensures social equality and the immediate compensation of prior inferiority feelings”.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of victimizer and victim in a disparaging humorous advertisement can help the audience to experience increased superiority (or decreased inferiority) and in turn high perceived humorousness and positive attitude toward the brand. This creative execution explicitly states the downward/upward comparison between the two advertising characters and helps the audience identify with the character who shares some similarities or perspectives. On the contrary, many well-known actual advertisements present only the victim and not the victimizer (e.g., see [careerbuilder.com](http://careerbuilder.com) – “Maybe it’s time to move on” campaign). All pretests and main experiments reported in this study, strongly suggest that the juxtaposition of the two characters helped the participants easily understand the disparagement.

Both experiments in the present study also showed the pivotal role of perceived humorousness in predicting attitude toward the brand. Advertisers should seriously consider the selection of the advertising characters and consumers’ disposition toward ridicule, as they can significantly influence perceived humorousness through the superiority/inferiority path. Furthermore, they need to measure perceived humorousness of their advertisements before launching their campaign, since attempted humor (e.g., the use of a victimizer and a victim) is not always funny.

Advertisers should consider the personality characteristics of the target audience and use the three dispositions to ridicule and being laughed at as a segmentation tool.

We can draw upon insights from the psychology and media consumption literature to identify the demographics, and media preferences of katagelasticists, gelotophobes, and gelotophiles. For instance, katagelasticists and gelotophiles have been identified as mainly young men (Proyer & Ruch, 2010b), who favor disparaging humorous TV programs (e.g., slapstick series or movies, super bowl advertising breaks). Katagelasticists display a preference in more masculine TV programs (e.g., sports and political shows) and microblogs (i.e., twitter), whereas gelotophiles enjoy more light-hearted TV programs (e.g., sitcoms and adult animation) and media sharing (e.g., YouTube) (Voutsas et al., 2019). Katagelasticists and especially gelotophiles are an ideal audience for disparaging humorous advertising.

Gelotophobes enjoy more carefree TV programs, (e.g., soap operas, reality competitions), and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Messenger, Instagram) (Voutsas et al., 2019). Gelotophobia prevails “in cultures where shame is used as a form of social control and in strongly hierarchical societies” (Proyer et al., 2009, p. 277). Thus, when advertising campaigns try to launch a brand in country with hierarchical culture, advertisers should be more cautious with disparaging humorous advertisements.

## **7. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH**

Addressing the study’s limitations, we highlight new avenues for future research. While examining the moderating role of the three dispositions toward ridicule on perceived humorousness of a disparaging advertisement via perceived superiority and inferiority, we did not consider other personality characteristics. Future research should examine the interaction between advertising character identification and other

personality traits associated with feelings of superiority or inferiority (e.g., neuroticism, psychosis) and determine how their interaction influences disparaging advertising effectiveness.

Furthermore, our findings are culture specific. Culture is one of the factors affecting humor appreciation (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006) and cross-cultural studies (Hatzithomas et al., 2011) have substantiated that. Even though the average scores of katagelasticism, gelotophobia, and gelotophilia in our study exceed previous ones (Proyer & Ruch, 2010a), the replication of our findings in a different cultural setting could provide solid, dispersed evidence on the moderating effect of katagelasticism, gelotophobia, and gelotophilia on perceived humorousness.

Our findings are also product specific. The stimulus material in both experiments referred to service agencies. Most studies use low-involvement products (e.g., Swani et al., 2013), even though humor can be also used to promote high-involvement goods (Stewart et al., 2019). Future research endeavors could focus on diverse product categories and media.

The print advertisements in our studies were manipulated to ascertain participants' unfamiliarity to the ad and the brand. Moderate disparagement and humor were used as modest humor facilitates encoding (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003) and average disparagement does not induce high ad irritation (Swani et al., 2013). Future research could address highly disparaging humorous advertising.

Our stimuli contain characters with obvious power differences (i.e., student versus professor and policeman versus citizen), an approach also adopted by previous studies (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972; La Fave et al., 1976; Abrams et al., 2015) to manipulate upward and downward comparisons. According to the superiority theory, comparisons between a protagonist and antagonist lead to the elicitation and

appreciation of disparagement humor; it is the depicted transitory dominance of empathetic protagonists over less empathetic antagonists that amuses. Future research could test the proposed model's efficacy with advertisements depicting disparagement among "equals" (e.g., colleagues, same-age peers).

To end with, our sample consists of 18 to 37-year-old undergraduate students. Despite expressed concerns about the external validity of student samples (Lynch, 1982) they are deemed appropriate in consumer psychology studies (Kardes, 1996). Younger people are the most appropriate age group for disparaging humorous advertisements (Swani et al., 2013). Yet, it would be of interest to substantiate our results for older and more diverse age groups (Thompson & Thompson, 2009).



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