

# Impressive Insults: How do consumers perceive self-deprecating advertisements?

**Vaishnavi Kale**

IE Business School, IE University, Madrid

**Eda Sayin**

IE Business School

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# **Impressive Insults: How do consumers perceive self-deprecating advertisements?**

## **Abstract**

In this research, we intend to understand how consumers perceive self-deprecating advertisements shared on different social media platforms (utilitarian vs. hedonic) and for various product types (utilitarian vs. hedonic). We posit that self-deprecating (vs. self-enhancing) advertisements will result in more positive consumer reactions (1) when shared on a utilitarian platform (i.e., LinkedIn) rather than a hedonic platform (i.e., Instagram), and (2) for more hedonic (vs. utilitarian) product types. Using deviance regulation theory (Blanton & Christie, 2003), we suggest that self-deprecating ads on utilitarian platforms are perceived as a socially attractive deviation from the norms, leading consumers to make positive brand inferences. However, this effect only persists for hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products, as consumers may consider self-deprecating ads for utilitarian products as a socially unattractive deviation from the norms.

*Keywords: Self-deprecation, Social media, Social attractiveness*

*Track: Consumer Behavior*

Considering consumers are exposed to thousands of advertisements daily, brands must use innovative techniques to impress them (Marshall, 2015). In this research, we focus on one technique – self-deprecating advertising – and intend to understand consumers’ reactions to it. Self-deprecation is a way of communication using self-criticism and involves putting oneself down lightheartedly (Crichter, O’Donnell, and Jung, 2018). Some studies have shown that self-deprecating advertisements evince positive consumer reactions by positioning the brand as honest and credible (Ein-Gar, Shiv, and Tormala, 2012; Mookerjee, Cornil, and Hoegg, 2021). Others, however, found that consumers perceive self-deprecation as distracting, leading to lower attitudes (Eisend, 2022). We infer that consumers’ contradictory reactions to self-deprecation may be context-dependent. Our research intends to understand how different types of product categories and social media platforms affect consumers’ evaluation of self-deprecating advertisements.

Social media platforms like Instagram are used for emotional experiences and are considered hedonic. Contrarily, LinkedIn is used for practical experiences and is considered utilitarian (Reich & Pittman, 2020). Consumers may assign a different meaning to the self-deprecating advertisement based on the fit between the ad and their associations with a social media platform. We argue that self-deprecating advertisements will be perceived as more deviating from advertising norms on LinkedIn when compared to Instagram. From deviance regulation theory (Blanton & Christie, 2003), we know that nonconformity is only awarded when it is considered socially attractive by the perceivers. Thus, the use of self-deprecating ads on utilitarian platforms such as LinkedIn may lead consumers to confer more social attractiveness to the brand. They may appreciate the social cost incurred by the brand by using a self-deprecating ad, especially within a more utilitarian context, and hence make more positive inferences about the brand. Our suggestion aligns with the finding by Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan (2014) that nonconformity can lead to positive consumer reactions in certain contexts.

Furthermore, we suggest that consumer reactions may depend on the three-way interaction between the product type, advertisement, and social media platform. When consumers evaluate ads for utilitarian products, self-deprecating ads may be distracting (Eisend, 2022). Consumers need a brand that sells utilitarian products to take itself seriously and may penalize self-deprecating advertisements (Chen, Thomas, and Kohli, 2016). Consumers may focus on the functional characteristics of utilitarian products and may judge a self-deprecating ad harshly, regardless of the social media platform on which it is shared. Further, Yeung and Wyer (2004) found that consumers' positive affect spills over to hedonic

but not utilitarian products. Consumers prefer affective ads for hedonic products (Drolet & Aaker, 2002). Since self-deprecating ads are perceived as humorous, and humor elicits affective reactions (Drolet, Williams, and Lau-Gesk, 2007), consumers may be more impressed by self-deprecating ads for hedonic (versus utilitarian) products, as positive effects of humor will not spillover to consumers' evaluations of utilitarian products (Yeung & Wyer, 2004).

Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1: Self-deprecating (versus self-enhancing) advertisements for hedonic (versus utilitarian) products will result in more positive consumer inferences – namely, (i) product attitudes and (ii) purchase intention on utilitarian (versus hedonic) social media platforms.

H2: Within utilitarian platforms, self-deprecating (versus self-enhancing) advertisements will lead to more positive consumer inferences for hedonic (versus utilitarian) products through greater social attractiveness attributed to the brand.

We conducted three pre-registered studies – first with a utilitarian product, second with a hedonic product, and third with a neutral product where we measured the hedonic versus utilitarian product attributes. A pretest revealed that participants ( $N = 60$ ) perceived small city cars ( $M = 6.76$ ) as significantly more utilitarian than beer ( $M = 4.62$ ) ( $F(2, 59) = 21.564, p < .001$ ). In study 1, participants ( $N = 319, 206$  females) were asked to evaluate an advertisement for a small city car. We employed a 2 (ad type: self-deprecating vs. self-enhancing) x 2 (social media platform: hedonic-Instagram vs. utilitarian-LinkedIn) between-subjects design. Advertisement type was manipulated by changing the tagline, and the social media platform was manipulated by varying the advertisement design [See Table 1]. Participants were explicitly asked to imagine that they saw the ad on Instagram (LinkedIn). We found that self-deprecating (vs. self-enhancing) ads resulted in a marginally significant main effect on product attitude ( $F(1, 318) = 3.409, p = .066$ ) [See Table 2 for the means]. However, the effect of self-deprecating ads was not significant on purchase intention. Combining a utilitarian product and a hedonic, self-deprecating advertisement did not lead to significantly positive consumer reactions, supporting hypothesis 1. We measured participants' response time as a proxy for attention and their involvement with small-size city cars and found that neither of the two are significantly affected by ad type or social media platform type. Hence, increased attention and product involvement do not explain the effect of self-deprecation on consumers' attitudes. Our

results suggest that consumers may focus on the functional attributes of a utilitarian product and may penalize a brand for using a hedonic, self-deprecating ad. Hence, we used a pre-tested, hedonic product category (beer) in Study 2.

Table 1: Stimuli for Study 1

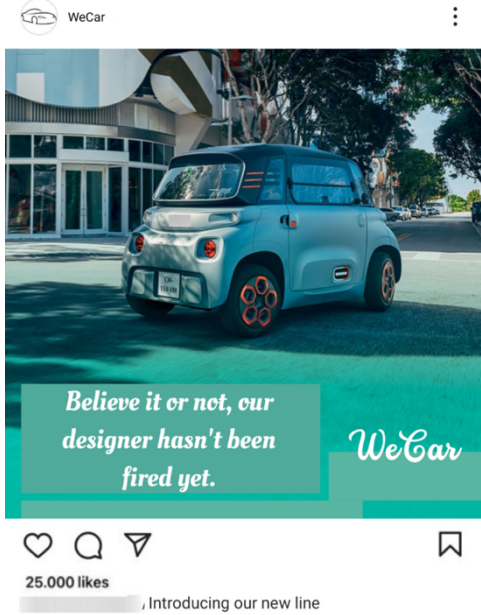
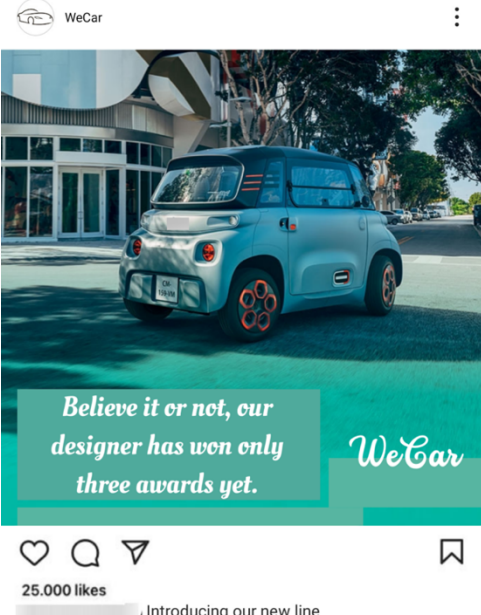


Instagram/Self-deprecating	Instagram/Self-enhancing
 <p>Instagram post for WeCar. The image shows a light blue compact car parked in front of a modern building. The text overlay reads: "Believe it or not, our designer hasn't been fired yet." The WeCar logo is in the bottom right. The post has 25,000 likes and the caption says "Introducing our new line".</p>	 <p>Instagram post for WeCar. The image shows a light blue compact car parked in front of a modern building. The text overlay reads: "Believe it or not, our designer has won only three awards yet." The WeCar logo is in the bottom right. The post has 25,000 likes and the caption says "Introducing our new line".</p>
LinkedIn/Self-deprecating	LinkedIn/Self-enhancing
 <p>LinkedIn post for WeCar. The image shows a light blue compact car parked in front of a modern building. The text overlay reads: "Believe it or not, our designer hasn't been fired yet." The WeCar logo is in the bottom right. The post has 25,000 likes and the caption says "Introducing our new line".</p>	 <p>LinkedIn post for WeCar. The image shows a light blue compact car parked in front of a modern building. The text overlay reads: "Believe it or not, our designer has won only three awards yet." The WeCar logo is in the bottom right. The post has 25,000 likes and the caption says "Introducing our new line".</p>

Table 2: Results

Study #	Main Effects – Means and Standard deviations						
		Hedonic (Instagram)		Utilitarian (LinkedIn)		Ad Type – Total	
	Variable	Self-deprecating	Self-enhancing	Self-deprecating	Self-enhancing	Self-deprecating	Self-enhancing
Study 1	Product attitude	5.84 <sup>a</sup> (2.4)	5.09 <sup>a</sup> (2.21)	5.32 <sup>a</sup> (2.4)	5.23 <sup>a</sup> (2.01)	5.59 <sup>a</sup> (2.41)	5.16 <sup>a</sup> (2.1)
	Purchase intention	3.8 <sup>a</sup> (2.48)	3.72 <sup>a</sup> (2.47)	3.89 <sup>a</sup> (2.48)	3.44 <sup>a</sup> (2.31)	3.84 <sup>a</sup> (2.47)	3.58 <sup>a</sup> (2.4)
Study 2	Product attitude	6.31 <sup>a</sup> (1.73)	5.69 <sup>a</sup> (1.94)	6.03 <sup>a</sup> (1.98)	5.21 <sup>b</sup> (1.94)	6.18 <sup>a</sup> (1.84)	5.48 <sup>b</sup> (1.95)
	Purchase intention	3.99 <sup>a</sup> (2.29)	3.5 <sup>a</sup> (2.32)	3.65 <sup>a</sup> (2.39)	2.82 <sup>a</sup> (2.25)	3.84 <sup>a</sup> (2.33)	3.21 <sup>b</sup> (2.3)

Note – Numbers in parentheses denote standard deviations. Cell means with different superscripts are significantly different from each other.

Study 2 explored consumer reactions to self-deprecating ads for a hedonic product. We used the same design as Study 1 and asked participants ( $N = 198$ , 94 females) to evaluate an ad for beer. Advertisement type and social media platform type were manipulated in the same manner as in Study 1 [See Table 3]. To make the manipulation more salient, participants repeatedly read that they encountered the ad on Instagram (LinkedIn). In the stimuli, we used an actual self-deprecating advertisement for the beer brand Carlsberg to maintain external validity. The logo was blurred, and only 10 participants could guess the brand name. We conducted the analyses with and without those participants, and the results remained unchanged. We found that the main effect of advertisement type (self-deprecating vs. self-enhancing) was significant on product attitude ( $F(1, 196) = 6.89, p = .009$ ) and purchase intention ( $F(1, 196) = 3.98, p < .05$ ) [See Table 2 for the means]. Moreover, simple contrasts revealed that participants in the LinkedIn condition had greater product attitude ( $F(1, 196) = 4.01, p < .05$ ) when evaluating a self-deprecating (versus self-enhancing) ad. However, this effect was not significant within Instagram ( $p = .10$ ). Combining a hedonic product and a self-deprecating advertisement leads to more positive inferences within LinkedIn, a utilitarian platform, lending support to hypothesis 1. Combining the results from the previous studies, we can infer that the positive effect of self-deprecation on consumers' attitudes is stronger for hedonic (utilitarian) products, supporting hypothesis 2.

However, neither study 1 nor study 2 directly tests the effect of product type on consumer reactions. To overcome this limitation, we used a neutral product type in Study 3 and measured the extent to which the participants perceived it as hedonic and utilitarian.

Table 3: Stimuli for Study 2

Instagram/Self-deprecating	Instagram/Self-enhancing
 <p>This mockup shows an Instagram post with a green background. On the left is a tall glass of beer with a thick head of foam. To its right, the text reads "Probably the best beer in the world" in white, with the word "NOT" in green above the word "A". Below the image are icons for heart, comment, share, and bookmark. The text "25.000 likes" is displayed, followed by a grey progress bar and the text "Add some fizz to your life."</p>	 <p>This mockup is identical to the self-deprecating version, but the text to the right of the beer glass reads "Probably the best beer in the world" in white. Below the image are icons for heart, comment, share, and bookmark. The text "25.000 likes" is displayed, followed by a grey progress bar and the text "Add some fizz to your life."</p>
LinkedIn/Self-deprecating	LinkedIn/Self-enhancing
 <p>This mockup shows a LinkedIn post with a white header. The header contains a profile picture icon, the word "Promoted", and the text "Add some fizz to your life." Below the header is a green background with a tall glass of beer on the left and the text "Probably the best beer in the world" in white, with "NOT" in green above "A". At the bottom, there are icons for share, heart, and comment, followed by "25,000". Below that are "Like" and "Comment" buttons.</p>	 <p>This mockup is identical to the self-deprecating version, but the text to the right of the beer glass reads "Probably the best beer in the world" in white. At the bottom, there are icons for share, heart, and comment, followed by "25,000". Below that are "Like" and "Comment" buttons.</p>

According to Voss, Spangenberg, and Grohmann (2003), consumers believe that sneakers possess equally high hedonic and utilitarian attributes. Thus, in Study 3, we used sneakers as the focal product for our stimuli and measured whether participants ( $N = 199$ , 102 females) perceived them as more hedonic or utilitarian. Advertisement type and social media platform were manipulated similarly as in the previous studies [See Table 4]. The dependent variable was the participants' likelihood to engage with the advertisement, i.e. click on the like button, follow the brand online, and share/repost the ad (Reich & Pittman, 2020). We chose this dependent variable to study a consumer reaction more behaviorally relevant to social media platforms. One of the main objectives of this study was to demonstrate the mediating role of social attractiveness. Thus, we measured the social attractiveness of the brand using a scale adapted from Aggarwal (2004). To assess the three-way interaction, we conducted spotlight analyses on one standard deviation above and below the mean of the perceived hedonic score. We found that the effect of ad type (self-deprecating vs. self-enhancing)  $\times$  social media (Instagram vs. LinkedIn)  $\times$  product type (hedonic vs. utilitarian) on engagement with the ad was marginally significant ( $b = -.482$ ,  $se = .271$ ,  $p = .075$ ,  $95\%CI [-1.015, .051]$ ) for high hedonic scores. We employed the multiplicative moderation method with the SPSS Process Macro Model 11 (Hayes, 2018) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples to test the mediation effect. We found evidence of a conditional moderated mediation effect on engagement with the ad. Analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of social attractiveness ( $b = -.293$ ,  $se = .137$ ,  $95\%CI [-.563, -.018]$ ) for LinkedIn but not for Instagram, supporting hypothesis 2. Although scholarship considers sneakers to be a neutral product category, we found that participants rated sneakers to be significantly more utilitarian ( $M = 6.39$ ) than hedonic ( $M = 5.18$ ),  $t(198) = 11.03$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, when participants considered sneakers to be more hedonic, they preferred self-deprecating ads on LinkedIn over self-enhancing ads. and this process was explained by increased social attractiveness conferred to brands.

In this study, we also measured the perceived competence, status, and trustworthiness of the brand and found that neither of them is significantly affected by ad type. Thus, we ruled them out as alternative explanations for consumers' positive reactions to self-deprecating ads. In the subsequent studies, we plan to manipulate the consumption context to be more hedonic (versus utilitarian) along with manipulating the advertisement and social media platforms.



Table 4: Stimuli for Study 3

Instagram/Self-deprecating	Instagram/Self-enhancing
<p>woodsworth_sneakers Sponsored</p> <p><b>ANOTHER BLOODY SNEAKER!</b></p> <p>WOODSWORTH SNEAKERS</p> <p>Shop Now</p> <p>25.000 likes</p> <p>woodsworth_sneakers We will take you there...</p>	<p>woodsworth_sneakers Sponsored</p> <p><b>ANOTHER AWESOME SNEAKER!</b></p> <p>WOODSWORTH SNEAKERS</p> <p>Shop Now</p> <p>25.000 likes</p> <p>woodsworth_sneakers We will take you there...</p>
LinkedIn/Self-deprecating	LinkedIn/Self-enhancing
<p>Woodsworth Sneakers Promoted</p> <p>We will take you there...</p> <p><b>ANOTHER BLOODY SNEAKER!</b></p> <p>WOODSWORTH SNEAKERS</p> <p>25,000</p> <p>Like Comment Share Send</p>	<p>Woodsworth Sneakers Promoted</p> <p>We will take you there...</p> <p><b>ANOTHER AWESOME SNEAKER!</b></p> <p>WOODSWORTH SNEAKERS</p> <p>25,000</p> <p>Like Comment Share Send</p>

Our research contributes to the literature on social media advertising and the perception of self-deprecation in consumer behavior. Our results reveal that consumer reactions to self-deprecation are context-dependent. Self-deprecating ads are preferred over self-enhancing ads when the product is more hedonic (versus utilitarian). Further, they evoke more positive consumer reactions in utilitarian platforms than self-enhancing ads. Our findings directly impact marketers, as the same ad campaign may evince different reactions based on the social media platform. Considering social media advertising is a critical investment for brands and the most effective method to reach consumers, our research elucidates when consumers may reward self-deprecation, which may assist marketers (Doty, 2022).

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