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Sarcastic or Assertive: How Should Brands Reply to Consumers' Uncivil Comments on Social Media in the Context of Brand Activism?

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Abstract

Brands are increasingly embracing social activism and adopting positions on controversial issues, prompting some consumers to react by making uncivil comments on social media. How should brands reply to such incivility while maintaining their positions and protecting their reputations? Two common types of reply include either a sarcastic or an assertive tone, but the effects of these types of communication on consumers' attitudes toward brands remain largely unexplored. Results from a series of five studies exploring different causes (LGBT+ phobia, sexism, and racial equity) show that consumers evaluate brands that reply using an assertive tone more favorably than those using a sarcastic tone, which can be partially explained by the perceived aggressiveness of sarcasm. Additionally, support for a brand's stance acts as a boundary condition on the effect the type of reply adopted by the brand has on consumer attitudes toward the brand. So, the more someone supports a brand's stance, the less their perception of aggressiveness will negatively influence their attitude to that brand. We discuss the implications of these findings for marketing theory and practice.

Keywords

sarcasm, assertiveness, brand activism, incivility, social media, attitude toward brands

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Introduction

Companies are increasingly taking a stance on controversial, contested, or polarizing societal issues (Vredenburg et al. 2020), primarily determined by political ideology, religion, and other beliefs such as environmentalism, human rights, and LGBT+, and gender equality. For example, Starbucks announced a plan to hire more than 2,500 refugees across its European locations by 2022 (Thomson 2017); Adidas used a same-sex couple in its Valentine's Day ad (Huffpost 2016); one of Diesel's ad messages proclaimed, "Make Love, Not Walls" (Forbes 2017); and Gillette launched an advertising campaign confronting toxic masculinity, sparking a wave of controversy among consumers (Knowledge@Wharton 2019). More recently, Ben & Jerry's has shown its support for the anti-racism movement Black Lives Matter (Independent 2020). This phenomenon is referred to as brand activism, defined as the alignment of a brand's explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging (Vredenburg et al. 2020) to promote or impede changes in society (Sarkar and Kotler 2018). It takes place when brands show their support for a cause that has no direct association with their core business (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020).

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Support for causes related to their core business has long been part of companies' social responsibility strategies and is generally accepted by consumers and society (Vredenburg et al. 2020). In the context of brand activism, however, causes are often regarded as controversial in the institutional environment (Eilert and Cherup 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). Such causes can be progressive (a stance favoring reform over tradition) or conservative (a stance seeking to maintain the status quo), but progressive stances tend to prevail. Based on an analysis of 1.5 million consumer conversations in the US in 2019–20, Kantar (2021) concluded that consumers are likely to act on their opinions on matters of social justice and human rights, which are progressive in nature. Taking up progressive and controversial causes may be risky for a brand's image, so communicating it properly is crucial for marketing success as well as for eliciting positive social change (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

As the number of people using social media is projected to increase from 3.6 billion in 2021 to 4.41 billion in 2025 (Statista 2021), brands are increasingly using these platforms to communicate with their customers on different matters, including their activism. However, brand activism on social media fosters conditions for incivility, since differences of opinion may encourage individuals to use aggressive language to express their viewpoints rather than engaging in civil discourse (Petit, Li, and Ali 2020; Ziegele and Jost 2020). Incivility may include hostile or offensive comments made by dissatisfied or offended consumers directed toward a brand's position on a cause, toward the brand itself, and toward other consumers who interact with the brand, all in the plain sight of other Internet users observing the interaction. This interface poses an immense challenge for brands, calling on them to consider what tone to take in their communication in addressing this new type of criticism without backing down on their positions.

Brands have several options to choose from when it comes to responding to uncivil consumers. They may opt for an informational or an emotional approach, use humor/sarcasm, or be more assertive, respond by using symbols (e.g., hashtags, emojis) or text in a range of lengths, or choose not to respond at all. We focus our research on two common types of response: one that has a humorous and aggressive tone (sarcasm), and one that has a more serious and straightforward tone (assertiveness).

Many brands use a sarcastic tone to reply to uncivil comments on their activist posts on social media. For example, when Adidas posted a picture on Instagram suggesting a kiss between two women, one of its followers commented, "*Shame on you, Adidas. I'm going to Nike now*," to which the brand replied with two emojis: a kiss and a goodbye wave (Huffpost 2016). Other brands have adopted a more assertive tone, such as when Avon posted a message against LGBT+ phobia and received an uncivil comment from a follower; the company responded: *"Hi [Internet User]. Being conniving means to conspire with some activity that is wrong, and homosexuality isn't an activity, let alone wrong. I believe love is never wrong, whatever form it takes. I hope to have helped you, and also given the matter some thought."*

There is no consensus yet on whether a sarcastic or assertive response is more effective for enhancing a brand's reputation, and the literature on sarcasm offers disputable evidence in this respect (e.g., Iles and Nan 2017; Ziegele and Jost 2020). Moreover, since courting controversy elicits both positive and negative consumer reactions depending on their support (or lack thereof) for the brand's stance (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), it is unclear whether brands' sarcastic or assertive responses to uncivil comments have different impacts on consumers with opposing points of view.

Our goal is to understand which communication tone (assertive or sarcastic) leads to a more favorable attitude toward a brand when the company replies to an uncivil consumer dissatisfied with its activism. In a series of five experiments considering several progressive and controversial causes (LGBT+ phobia, sexism, and racial equity), we investigate the effects of the two types of replies on attitude toward the brand. We also examine the mechanism that underlies this effect, considering the role of consumers' support for a cause as a boundary condition. Our findings demonstrate that consumers perceive sarcastic replies to be more aggressive and hence that assertive replies lead to a more favorable attitude toward the brand. However, this effect varies depending on consumers' level of support for the brand's stance, so that even when they perceive a sarcastic response as aggressive, consumers who support the brand's stance will still have a positive attitude toward the brand.

This paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, while there have been some attempts to detect and understand how consumers use sarcasm (Bouazizi and Ohtsuki 2015; Haripriya and Patil 2019; Muresan et al. 2016) or the effect of sarcasm in mass-media advertising (Iles and Nan 2017; Lagerwerf 2007), we move away from advertising-related studies to brands using sarcasm in consumer interactions, specifically when interacting directly with uncivil responses by consumers. Second, the humor literature examines situations in which humor helps brands (Eisend 2018; Gulas and Weinberger 2006) and others in which it hurts them (Warren and McGraw 2016; Warren, Carter, and McGraw 2019). We shed light on the incongruity of these findings by examining whether consumer support for a brand's activist stance affects their perception of the brand when it employs humorous sarcasm in its communication with consumers. Third, the communication literature presents contradictory findings on how individuals who support a cause react to the aggressiveness or hostility of the communication of those who defend a different point of view (Becker and Barreto 2014; Martinez et al. 2017). We address this contradiction by examining how consumers' support for a cause moderates the effect of aggressiveness on a brand's reply to uncivil comments has on their attitude toward the brand. Fourth, we add to the marketing literature on how brands respond to online incivility and how such responses affect them. Marketing investigations of incivility are few and limit their focus to customer-to-customer online incivility. Previous research has provided evidence of the effects of online incivility on perceived justice (Bacile et al.

2018), service climate evaluations (Bacile 2020), and experiential value (Bacile et al. 2020) by exploring how brands respond to such incivility. We investigate customer-to-brand online incivility by analyzing the effect different tones (sarcastic vs. assertive) used by a brand to confront online incivility have on customers' attitude toward the brand.

Finally, we offer practical implications for marketers and public relations managers for managing consumer–brand the tone of communication on social media platforms in the context of brand activism and consumer incivility. For example, our findings provide insights that brands can use customers' online incivility to their benefit, depending on the communication tone they use in their interaction with customers and how much the customers support their cause.

Brand Activism and Uncivil Reactions on Social Media

Under the umbrella of corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing, many firms have embraced a variety of initiatives in areas such as environmentalism, human rights, and education, often connecting these efforts to their brand image (Zdravkovic, Magnusson, and Stanley 2010). Until recently, companies focused primarily on social projects that either were related to their core business (e.g., a gas company investing in an environmental program) or were universally favored (e.g., childhood education). However, things have changed, and now brands are increasingly adopting stances on controversial topics not necessarily related to their core businesses. While cause-related marketing involves some monetary advantage for consumers (e.g., sales of a specific product linked to a social program or institution), brand activism is associated with broad social topics that are controversial in nature, such as politics, immigration, gender roles, and same-sex marriage (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vahdati and Voss 2019).

Controversial issues are ones that are subject to different points of view and opinions. When consumers do not agree with a brand's standpoint on such issues, they will sometimes express their views on social media platforms. Unlike traditional complaint channels such as telephone and e-mail, social media platforms are public spheres where a wider audience can accompany the conversation between the dissenter and the brand, making it an ideal space for consumers to vent their anger against organizations (Clark 2013).

Consumers may be aggressive when using social media platforms (Rösner, Winter, and Krämer 2016), expressing their disagreement in an uncivil manner, especially on more controversial social issues. Existing research recognizes the perils surrounding online incivility, defined as a discussion style that conveys "an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics" (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014, 660). Incivility can affect not only those who are targeted but also those who observe, for example by increasing polarization around the issue or undermining interpersonal trust (Anderson et al. 2014; Mutz and Reeves 2005).

Research on how brands deal with online incivility has evolved over the past decade. For example, Bacile et al. (2018) observed that when consumers direct online incivility toward complainants during virtual service encounters, the targets and observers of such incivility are impacted, influencing the evaluation of service recovery through perceptions of justice. But this effect can be offset by a prompt response on the part of the firm to customer online incivility. Bacile et al. (2020) noticed that the presence of other customers can negatively influence a focal complainant's perceptions of justice and subsequent experiential value, with this effect also depending on the brand's promptness in responding and on the complainant's personal characteristics. When other customers interject in the complainant–service provider exchange on social media, Bacile (2020) concluded that online incivility that is perceived to be unfair diminishes customer perceptions of the service climate, especially when the service provider fails to address the incivility. There is also evidence that leaving uncivil comments unanswered has a detrimental effect on brand evaluation (Bacile et al. 2018; Van Noort and Willemsen 2012). Brands thus need to find proper communication tones to confront incivility; however, it is still unclear what the proper tone in such cases might be.

Confronting Incivility: Assertive vs. Sarcastic Tone

Assertiveness has been defined as a communication style that expresses thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a direct, respectful, and appropriate way (Bate 1976; Graham and Rees 2003; Vagos and Pereira 2010). Extant research shows that assertiveness plays a fundamental role in conflict situations, as it allows individuals to defend their point of view firmly, without offending or disrespecting the others involved (Gilbert and Alan 1994). It is distinct from aggressiveness: while the former encompasses respect for others, the latter involves harmful behavior to maintain one's viewpoint (Gilbert and Allan 1994; Richins and Verhage 1987). Being assertive is considered an elegant and polite way to state personal feelings and beliefs (Oana and Ona 2019; Pipas and Jaradat 2010).

Assertiveness has been taught as a positive social skill to be applied in several situations, including standing for one's own rights (Vagos and Pereira 2010). In this context, research on prejudice confrontation has highlighted the benefits of an assertive response when confronting an inappropriate comment. For Hyers (2010), an assertive response carries an educational tone, turning the situation into a "teachable moment," especially in social situations. In the same vein, several studies have found that assertive responses often produce desirable outcomes (e.g., Hyers 2007; Kubany et al. 1992), such as positive feelings (Czopp, Monteith, and Mark 2006), positive evaluations (Terlutter, Diehl, and Mueller 2010), perceptions of greater competence and likability (Kern and Paquette 1992), and

positive behavioral inclinations. This effect is especially true when comparing assertive and accusatory responses (Kubany et al. 1992). Therefore, it is plausible that when a brand chooses an assertive reply to uncivil comments about its position on a cause, it will elicit positive attitudes toward it.

However, when some consumers express themselves in a very rude and aggressive manner, some brands opt to respond in a sarcastic tone, which has a component of aggressiveness. Sarcasm has been defined as a subtype of irony (Dews, Kaplan, and Winner 1995), in which the agent says something that is different from or even opposite to what they actually aim to express, intending to chastise (Long and Graesser 1988) and with a clear purpose in mind (Attardo 2000; Filik et al. 2019). Sarcasm has also been regarded as a type of aggressive humor (DiCioccio 2012), which employs irony to show a degree of negative attitude toward a particular person (Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989). Although some characteristics of sarcasm overlap with those of public incivility (Anderson and Huntington 2017), sarcasm is more of a subtle mockery than an explicit attack (Papacharissi 2004) and is often paired with impoliteness rather than harsher negative orientations such as incivility (Papacharissi 2004; Rowe 2015).

According to the literature on humorous sarcasm, sarcasm may lead to either positive or negative effects, depending on the situation. When it provokes positive reactions, individuals perceive sarcastic insults as being funnier (Dews, Kaplan, and Winner 1995), more unexpected (Lagerwerf 2007), and more memorable (Gibbs 1986) than other types of communication. Sarcasm also attracts greater attention (Huang, Gino, and Galinsky 2015) and influences audiences more deeply than other types of negative responses (Peng et al. 2019).

However, sarcasm often provokes negative reactions (Anderson and Huntington 2017). Individuals may interpret sarcasm as an offensive way of criticizing others (Toplak and Katz 2000). A sarcastic remark enhances condemnation of the target, expressing harsher feelings than a literal criticism does (Colston 1997; Toplak and Katz 2000). Sarcastic messages elicit more negative feelings (Lagerwerf 2007) and greater disapproval (Warren and McGraw 2016) and are perceived as representing weaker arguments (Iles and Nan 2017) than non-humorous statements. Moreover, evidence shows that discussions online that mix incivility and sarcasm are detrimental to joint participation (Anderson and Huntington 2017; Ziegele and Jost 2020).

Contentious topics are ones that remain poorly settled in a given society (Levinson 2006), which means that opinions both in favor of and against a certain topic are still appropriate to the discussion. Therefore, aggressiveness displayed against any side might be perceived as offensive, impolite, or even uncivil (Kuipers 2005), and confronters are often viewed unfavorably, including being regarded as overreactors (Czopp, Monteith, and Mark 2006), complainers (Kaiser and Miller 2001, 2004), impolite, and aggressive (Hyers 2007; Swim and Hyers 1999), irrespective of their tone. It is thus expected that using an aggressive tone (e.g., sarcasm) will diminish the sense that continued discussion is appropriate, and hence sarcastic replies to uncivil comments may erode observers' perceptions of the brand's interest in fostering an atmosphere of learning and productive discourse. It may also weaken the brand's argument in support of the cause and intensify incivility toward the brand. Applying these findings into the context of brand activism and controversial issues, we hypothesize:

> **H_1**: An assertive (sarcastic) reply to an uncivil comment leads to a more (less) favorable attitude toward the brand.

Communication through aggressive humor, as in the case of sarcasm, may be perceived positively among individuals who enjoy this type of humor. For instance, people often like aggressive jokes when they dislike the target of the mockery (Wicker, Barron, and Willis 1980). Also, when targeted at out-group members, aggressive humor can foster and strengthen in-group bonds (i.e., of the social group with which a person psychologically identifies) (Thomae and Pina 2015). Conversely, when it is targeted at in-group members, it can be a tool for sending a corrective message to those who violate group norms (Alexander 1986). However, in the majority of situations, aggressiveness in humor produces negative outcomes such as hurting a brand's social desirability (Cann, Cann, and Jordan 2016) and harming customer satisfaction (Crowe et al. 2019) and wellbeing (Sirigatti et al. 2014). For example, individuals generally disapprove of aggressive humor when it is targeted at a specific person or group, as opposed to people in general (Warren and McGraw 2016). We posit that the element of aggressiveness in sarcasm is an underlying mechanism explaining the negative effect of sarcastic replies on attitude toward brands, such that:

> **H_2**: The perceived aggressiveness of the reply mediates the relationship between the type of reply (assertive vs. sarcastic) and the attitude toward the brand, such that the more aggressive the reply is perceived to be, the less favorable the resulting attitude toward the brand.

Consumer Support for a Brand's Stance

Because brand activism tackles controversial issues, its effect on attitudes and behaviors depends on whether consumers are supportive of the brand's stance. Consumers who support the controversial point of view will see the brand as compatible with their beliefs, while consumers who are against it will see the brand as violating moral values (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020).

Although debates involving controversial topics are generally open to different points of view, there are always those who support a specific side, potentially leading to a polarized environment. Extant research suggests that people's appreciation of aggressive or disparaging humor depends on their reference group, which does not necessarily require membership but an attitude or disposition (Ferguson and Ford 2008; LaFave 1972). In this sense, we can expect that an individual who

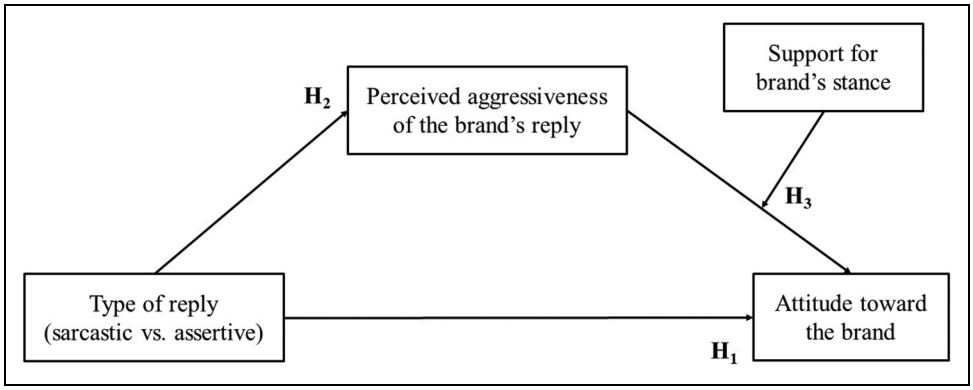

Figure 1. Conceptual model of moderated mediation.

strongly supports the LGBT+ cause will feel affiliated to the group. When targeted to a social outgroup, aggressive humor tends to enhance self-esteem among the social ingroup and a sense of superiority toward outgroup members (Ferguson and Ford 2008; LaFave 1972).

The fact that consumers perceive a brand as being consistent with their beliefs should influence the strength of the effect of the brand's reply to uncivil comments on their attitude toward the brand. More specifically, we propose that the consumer's support for the brand's stance will influence the mediation effect that the perceived aggressiveness of the reply has on the relationship between the type of reply (assertive vs. sarcastic) and the resulting attitude toward the brand, such that:

> **H_3**: The indirect effect of the type of reply on attitude toward the brand through aggressiveness is moderated by the consumer's support for the brand's stance, such that the greater the consumer's support, the lesser the indirect effect.

The assumption in H_3 is that respondents will find a sarcastic response aggressive but that the perceived aggressiveness will not impair the brand attitude of those consumers who support the brand´s cause. In other words, those who support the cause may underplay the aggressive component of the sarcasm when evaluating the brand. Figure 1 presents our proposed model alongside the hypotheses. Below, we present our method for testing these hypotheses with respect to different causes in the context of brand activism.

Overview of Studies

In the context of brand activism on social media platforms, we conducted five experiments to test the effect of type of reply (sarcastic vs. assertive) on attitude toward the brand, invoking distinct progressive causes. Study 1A tested the main effect (H_1) by manipulating the type of brand reply (sarcastic vs. assertive) to an Internet user's uncivil comments on the topic of LGBT+ phobia, while also investigating the process through which the perceived aggressiveness of the reply mediated the relationship between the type of reply and attitude toward the brand (H_2). Study 1B replicated Study 1A while using sexism as the controversial cause. In Study 2, we added robustness to test H_2 by manipulating the mediator variable (the level of aggressiveness of the brand's reply), also in a context of LGBT+ phobia. Study 3 tested H_3 by examining the moderating role of consumer support for the brand's stance in the indirect effect of reply type on attitude toward the brand through the aggressiveness of the reply, using LGBT+ phobia as the controversial issue. Study 4 replicated and confirmed the results of Study 3 by using a different controversial cause: racial equity in the workplace. We note that the use of real brands may have added realism to the empirical studies but would also generate a condition in which prior knowledge could bias the respondents' evaluations, so we decided to use fictitious (Study 1A) or anonymous (other studies) brands.

Study 1A

Study 1A tested H_1 (the effect of type of reply on attitude toward a brand) and H_2 (whether this effect is mediated by the perceived aggressiveness of the reply) through an online experiment by manipulating the type of reply by the brand to an Internet user's uncivil comment regarding its stance on a controversial issue.

Participantsand Design. One hundred fifty-six participants (60.1% female; $M_{age} = 36.05$, $SD = 11.24$) were recruited via a Facebook ad and randomly assigned (between-subjects design) to one of two conditions: reply type sarcastic vs. assertive. They were told they would take part in a study on how brands interact with consumers on social media platforms.

Procedures. Participants were shown the Facebook feed of a fictitious brand (Beauty Co.), suggesting that the company belonged to the beauty industry, with a post against LGBT+ phobia, followed by a comment written by a customer, identified only as "Internet User," which read*: "I must not be compelled to collude with this homosexualism idiocy and that's*

what must be respected. I hope you have a son like that." The brand's post and the customer's comment were identical for all the participants. The manipulation came next: the participants were shown either a sarcastic reply by the brand ("*Sweety, nobody should be compelled to do anything. LOL Beauty Co. already has several LGBT children, so your wish has come true. Next.*") or an assertive reply ("*We take the liberty of clarifying a few points, ok? First, it's homosexuality, the 'ism' in the end of the word means an illness, and homosexuals aren't ill. Second, to collude means to conspire in some activity that is wrong, but homosexuality isn't an activity, let alone wrong. Finally, being against homophobia is to understand that love isn't wrong, whatever form it takes. We hope to have helped in that question and to bring you new food for thought.*") (see the Web Appendix for the manipulations). All the stimuli were originally written in Portuguese (manipulations in the original language can be found in the Web Appendix).

Measures. After viewing the scenario, the participants indicated their attitude toward the brand (*"The way the brand replied to the user made me see the brand in a positive light*") and responded to the manipulation checks (assertive tone: "*Beauty Co.'s reply was explanatory*;"[1] sarcastic tone: "*Beauty Co.'s reply was ironic*").[2] The aggressiveness of the reply was measured by the item "*The brand's reply was aggressive*." All the statements were displayed in a random order and were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and all the participants were asked to respond to the demographic questions.

Results

Manipulation Check. A t-test showed that the participants perceived the sarcastic reply to be more ironic ($M_{sarcastic} = 6.36$, $SD = 1.19$; $M_{assertive} = 2.92$, $SD = 1.89$; $t(1, 154) = 13.39$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.18$) and less explanatory ($M_{sarcastic} = 3.37$, $SD = 1.99$; $M_{assertive} = 5.87$, $SD = 1.34$; $t(1, 156) = -9.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.47$) than the assertive reply. Moreover, the t-test results revealed that the participants exposed to the sarcastic reply had a significantly higher perception of aggressiveness in the reply than the participants exposed to the assertive reply ($M_{sarcastic} = 4.32$, $SD = 1.75$; $M_{assertive} = 2.51$, $SD = 1.78$; $t(1, 155) = 6.38$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$).

Attitude toward the Brand. A one-factor ANOVA revealed that the participants saw the brand in a more positive light when they were exposed to the assertive response than when they were exposed to the sarcastic response ($M_{assertive} = 5.73$, $SD = 1.57$; $M_{sarcastic} = 3.86$, $SD = 2.16$; $F(1, 155) = 39.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$). The results remain significant after controlling for the participants' age and gender ($F(3, 153) = 14.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$).

Mediation Analysis. The bootstrapping procedure (Hayes 2013, Model 4: confidence interval of 95% with 5,000 resamples) confirmed that perceived aggressiveness partially mediated the effect of each reply on the participants' attitude toward the brand (direct effect = .560, 95% CI [.071, 1.04], $p = .025$; indirect effect = 1.27, 95% CI [.830, 1.76]). This mediation effect suggests that the attitude toward the brand could be explained at least in part by the perceived aggressiveness of the reply.

Discussion

This study provided initial evidence of our main effect that an assertive reply leads to a more favorable consumer attitude toward a brand than a sarcastic reply, supporting H_1. It also supports the rationale that this effect results, at least in part, from the perceived aggressiveness of the brand's reply mediating the main effect, as hypothesized in H_2. While previous studies have often compared sarcasm with other forms of insults, our preliminary results suggest that it is beneficial for a brand to choose a non-aggressive form of communication.

One limitation of Study 1A is that the lengths of the replies are different. It is possible that the participants simply preferred longer replies. Although both replies varied in aggressiveness and this aggressiveness was at least partially responsible for driving the effect, we have to rule out this alternative explanation. To overcome this shortcoming, we conducted Study 1B, in which the brand's reply was of the same length in both conditions, although this time in a different brand activism context (sexism).

Study 1B

In Study 1B, H_1 and H_2 were tested by replicating Study 1A in a different brand activism context (sexism) using an anonymous brand and offering replies of approximately the same length for both stimuli.

Participants and Design. Two hundred twenty-nine Brazilian adults (49.3% male; $M_{age} = 32.69$, $SD = 10.34$) were recruited via an online consumer panel (Toluna) and randomly assigned (between-subjects design) to one of two conditions: reply type sarcastic vs. assertive.

Procedures. As in Study 1A, the participants were told they would take part in a study on how brands interact with consumers on social media platforms. They were shown the Facebook feed of an anonymous brand with a post supporting the national women's soccer team (in Brazil, soccer is a male-dominated sport, so the brand's message could be regarded as activist), followed by a comment written by a person identified only as "Internet User" which read: "*Shame! They should be in the kitchen cooking for their husbands, and not doing a man's*

[1] We used the word "explanatory" because it is easier for a lay person to understand its meaning in the Portuguese language without invoking the concept of assertiveness.

[2] In Study 1A, we used the word "ironic" as a lay synonym for "sarcastic." The other studies confirm that the participants understood both words as having the same meaning.

thing." The brand's post and the customer's comment were identical for all the participants. The participants were then shown either a sarcastic reply by the brand ("*Sorry, but it seems your comment comes in the wrong century. Husbands should cook for themselves. Can you, guys?*") or an assertive reply ("*We disagree with you. This is neither a man nor woman's thing. They can do whatever they want to. We hope we have brought food for thought to the issue*") (all stimuli were originally written in Portuguese; see the Web Appendix for details).

Measures. After viewing the scenario, the participants indicated their attitude toward the brand (same as in Study 1A) and responded to the manipulation checks: assertive tone (one item: "*The brand's reply was explanatory*") and sarcastic tone (three items: "*The brand's reply was sarcastic*," "*The brand's reply was ironic*," and "*The brand's reply was mocking*"; $\alpha = .886$; adapted from Dews, Kaplan, and Winner 1995; Papacharissi 2004). Aggressiveness of the reply was measured as in Study 1A.

Results

Manipulation Check. A t-test showed that the participants perceived the sarcastic reply to be more sarcastic than the assertive reply ($M_{sarcastic} = 4.48$, $SD = 1.71$; $M_{assertive} = 2.65$, $SD = 1.68$; $t(1, 227) = 8.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.08$). Although they perceived the assertive reply to be slightly more explanatory than the sarcastic reply, this difference was not statistically significant ($M_{sarcastic} = 5.39$, $SD = 1.69$; $M_{assertive} = 5.72$, $SD = 1.57$; $t(1, 227) = -1.51$, $p = .130$, $d = .20$). A t-test also revealed that the participants perceived the sarcastic reply to be more aggressive than the assertive reply ($M_{sarcastic} = 2.80$, $SD = 1.93$; $M_{assertive} = 2.11$, $SD = 1.63$; $t(1, 227) = 2.89$, $p = .004$, $d = .38$).

Attitude toward the Brand. Consistent with the previous study, one-factor ANOVA results revealed that the participants saw the brand in a more positive light when they were exposed to the assertive reply than when they were exposed to the sarcastic reply ($M_{assertive} = 6.15$, $SD = 1.21$; $M_{sarcastic} = 5.65$, $SD = 1.67$; $F(1, 227) = 6.62$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .028$). Again, the results remain significant after controlling for participants' age and gender ($F(1, 225) = 2.54$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .028$).

Mediation Analysis. As in Study 1A, the bootstrapping procedure (Hayes 2013, Model 4) confirmed the perceived aggressiveness as fully mediating the effect of each reply on the participants' attitude toward the brand (direct effect = .269, 95% CI [-.085, .632], $p = .13$; indirect effect = .227, 95% CI [.077, .433]). This full mediation effect suggests that the perceived aggressiveness of the reply is indeed the causal mechanism of the effect of the brand's reply on attitude toward the brand.

Discussion

Study 1B provided further evidence that an assertive reply leads to a more favorable consumer attitude toward a brand than a sarcastic reply (supporting H_1). These results also support the rationale that this effect emerges from perceived aggressiveness (supporting H_2). The results of Studies 1A and 1B are consistent, despite the differences in the manipulation, participant samples, and type of progressive cause.

Together, Studies 1A and 1B provide evidence that a non-aggressive assertive tone is more appropriate when replying to uncivil comments than more aggressive sarcasm. However, does sarcasm always evokes a negative reaction? If aggression is indeed the causal mechanism for the preference for an assertive reply, then if the sarcastic reply is less aggressive, it may be as appropriate as the assertive reply. Study 2 tackles this point.

Study 2

Study 2 investigated whether the level of aggressiveness is the causal mechanism for why sarcastic replies elicit less favorable attitude toward the brand than assertive replies, adding robustness to the test of H_2 by manipulating the mediator (aggressiveness of the brand's reply: high vs. low). Since assertive replies are not aggressive by nature, we expect an assertive reply to produces the same results regardless and a sarcastic reply to elicit more favorable attitudes toward the brand the less aggressive it is.

Participants and Design. Three hundred ninety-four Brazilian adults (52.8% female; $M_{age} = 33.61$, $SD = 10.16$) were recruited from a consumer panel (Toluna) and randomly assigned to one of four conditions of a 2 (response type: sarcastic vs. assertive) $\times$ 2 (aggressiveness of the reply: high vs. low) between-subjects design experiment (see the Web Appendix for details).

Procedures. The procedures were similar to those employed in the previous studies. The participants were exposed to a scenario in which an anonymous brand replied to an uncivil comment on one of its posts on Facebook. They were shown the Facebook feed of an anonymous company with a post against LGBT+ phobia, followed by a comment written by a customer identified only as "Internet User", which read: "*I must not be compelled to collude with this homosexualism idiocy and that's what must be respected. I hope you have a son like that*." The brand's post and the customer's comment were identical for all the participants. The manipulation came next: the participants were shown one of four conditions: a highly aggressive sarcastic reply ("*Sweety, nobody should be compelled to do anything. LOL I already have several LGBT children, so your wish has come true*"), a low-aggression sarcastic reply ("*Dear, I already have several LGBT children and I'm very proud of them the way they are*"), a highly aggressive assertive reply ("*[Internet User], you are being homophobic, disrespectful, and inconvenient. So, I'm going to explain. First, it's homosexuality, the 'ism' in the end of the word means an illness, and homosexuals aren't ill. Second, to collude means to conspire with some activity that is wrong, but homosexuality isn't an activity, let alone wrong. Finally, being against homophobia is to understand that love isn't wrong, whatever form it takes*"), or a low-aggression assertive

reply ("*[Internet User], we took the freedom to explain some points, ok? First, it's homosexuality, the 'ism' in the end of the word means an illness, and homosexuals aren't ill. Second, to collude means to conspire with some activity that is wrong, but homosexuality isn't an activity, let alone wrong. Finally, being against homophobia is to understand that love isn't wrong, whatever form it takes. We hope to have helped and given you some food for thought*" (see the Web Appendix for details).

Measures. After viewing the scenario, the participants indicated their attitude toward the brand (as measured in Studies 1A and 1B) and responded to the manipulation checks: assertive tone (one item: "*The brand's reply was explanatory*") and sarcastic tone (four items: "*The brand's reply was sarcastic*," "*The brand's reply was ironic*," "*The brand's reply was mocking*," and "The brand's reply was funny"; $\alpha = .827$) (adapted from Dews, Kaplan, and Winner 1995; Papacharissi 2004). Aggressiveness of the reply was measured by the item "*The brand's reply was aggressive*."

Results

Manipulation Check. A one-way ANOVA revealed that the participants perceived the sarcastic reply to be more sarcastic than the assertive reply ($M_{sarcastic} = 4.37$, $SD = 1.47$; $M_{assertive} = 3.16$, $SD = 1.58$; $F(1, 393) = 63.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .139$) and that they perceived the assertive reply to be more assertive than the sarcastic reply ($M_{sarcastic} = 4.62$, $SD = 1.91$; $M_{assertive} = 5.57$, $SD = 1.65$; $F(1, 393) = 28.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$). The participants perceived the highly aggressive replies to be more aggressive than the low-aggression replies ($M_{highly-aggressive} = 3.40$, $SD = 2.09$; $M_{low-aggressive} = 2.82$, $SD = 1.84$; $F(1, 393) = 8.56$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Neither the main effect of type of reply nor the type of reply vs. level of aggressiveness interaction was significant for the aggressiveness variable. Thus, both manipulations were successful (see Web Appendix for more details on how the manipulation was verified).

Attitude toward the Brand. A two-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of type of reply, meaning that the participants' attitude toward the brand was more favorable when they were exposed to the assertive replies than when they were exposed to the sarcastic replies ($M_{assertive} = 5.27$, $SD = 1.79$; $M_{sarcastic} = 4.87$, $SD = 2.05$; $F(1, 390) = 4.22$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .01$). However, we were unable to find a main effect of aggressiveness ($M_{high-aggressive} = 4.93$, $SD = 1.98$; $M_{low-aggressive} = 5.21$, $SD = 1.88$; $F(1, 390) = 2.22$, $p = .137$, $\eta^2 = .006$). More interestingly, we found a significant interaction between the type of message and the level of aggressiveness ($F(1, 390) = 4.32$, $p = .038$, $\eta^2 = .011$). While the less aggressive sarcastic replies led to a more positive attitude ($M_{high-aggressive} = 4.53$, $SD = 2.15$; $M_{low-aggressive} = 5.21$, $SD = 1.89$; $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$), no differences emerged between the assertive replies ($M_{high-aggressive} = 5.32$, $SD = 1.71$; $M_{low-aggressive} = 5.21$, $SD = 1.89$; $p = .68$, $\eta^2 = .00$) (see Figure 2).

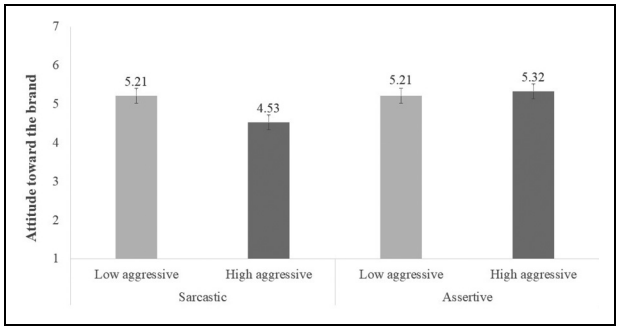

Figure 2. Study 2: The effect of response type and aggressiveness on brand attitudes.

Discussion

Since an assertive reply cannot be highly aggressive by its very nature (Bate 1976; Graham and Rees 2003; Vagos and Pereira 2010), we expected and found that only the aggressive sarcastic reply impaired the participants' attitude toward the brand. This finding is interesting, since it shows that aggressiveness is indeed the causal mechanism that makes consumers respond more favorably to an assertive reply. Moreover, this result implies that brands can build consumers' attitudes toward it by using sarcasm as long as it is only slightly aggressive. Indeed, a slightly aggressive sarcastic reply could be as good for a brand's reputation as an assertive one.

Together, studies 1A, 1B, and 2 provide evidence that, in general, assertive replies produce more favorable attitudes toward the brand than sarcastic ones due to perceived aggressiveness (H_1 and H_2). However, is this effect true for all consumers?

Study 3

Study 3 tests whether the indirect effect of type of reply (sarcastic vs. assertive) on consumers' attitude toward the brand depends on how much they support the controversial position defended by the brand (H_3). Moreover, in previous studies, we measured our main independent variable and the manipulation checks using single-item measures for simplicity. However, we recognize this choice as a limitation. Study 3 overcomes it by adding multi-item scales to measure attitude toward the brand and to check manipulations (sarcasm and assertive replies). Finally, in Study 1A and 2, the sarcastic and assertive replies differed in length. Study 3 overcomes this limitation.

Participants and Design. Five hundred and seventy-three Brazilian adults (60.9% female; $M_{age} = 34.34$, $SD = 10.85$) were recruited via an online consumer panel (Toluna) and were randomly assigned (between-subject design) to one of two conditions (response type: sarcastic vs. assertive).

Procedures. The procedures were similar to the previous studies: the participants were shown a Facebook feed from an anonymous company with a post against LGBT+ phobia, followed

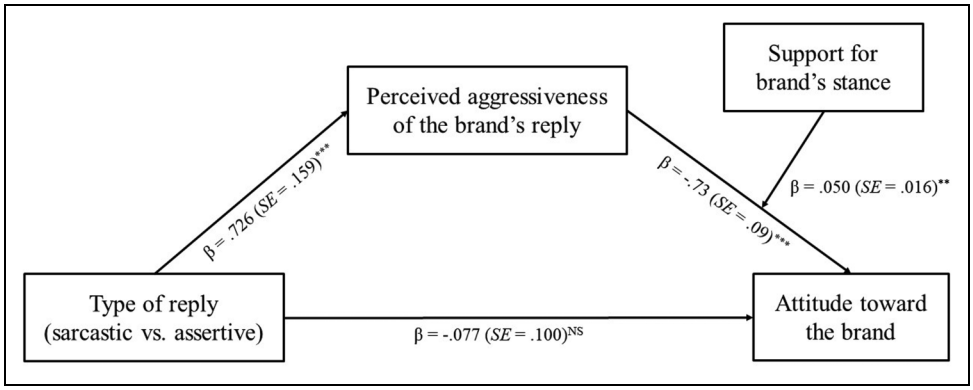

Figure 3. Study 3: The moderation effect of support for a brand's stance on the mediation effect of perceived aggressiveness of a brand's communication on the main effect of response type on attitude toward the brand (*Note*: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; ^{NS} = Non-significant).

by a comment written by a customer identified only as "Internet User": "*I must not be compelled to collude with this homosexualism idiocy and that's what must be respected. I hope you have a son like that*" (see Web Appendix for detailed manipulations).

Measures. After being exposed to the stimuli (sarcastic or assertive reply), participants were instructed to assess their attitude toward the brand, their perception of aggressiveness in the reply, and their support for the brand's stance, and to answer the manipulation checks. We added items in some measurements used in the previous studies to provide robustness in our analysis. We used four items to measure consumer's attitude toward the brand: "*The way the brand replied to the Internet user made me see the brand in a positive light*" (7-point Likert scale) and three items on a 7-point semantic differential scale: *positive/negative*, *good/bad*, and *favorable/unfavorable* (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995; $\alpha = .965$). The aggressiveness of the reply was measured by one item: "*The brand's response was aggressive.*" The participants' support for the brand's stance was measured by three items using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (so much): "*How much are you in favor of LGBT+ causes?*," "*How sympathetic are you to LGBT+ causes?*," and "*How relevant are LGBT+ causes to you?*" ($\alpha = .934$). Four items were used to check the manipulations on assertiveness: "*The brand's reply was explanatory*," "*The brand's reply was assertive*," "*The brand's reply was instructive*," and "*The brand's reply was enlightening*" (Hyers 2010; $\alpha = .903$); and four items were used to check the manipulations on sarcasm: "*The brand's reply was sarcastic*," "*The brand's reply was ironic*," "*The brand's reply was funny*," and "*The brand's reply was mocking*" ($\alpha = .866$).

Results

Manipulation Check. A t-test showed that the participants perceived the sarcastic response to be more sarcastic ($M_{sarcastic} = 4.06$, $SD = 1.63$; $M_{assertive} = 2.87$, $SD = 1.56$; $t(1, 571) = -8.88$, $p < .001$, $d = .74$) and less assertive ($M_{sarcastic} = 5.25$, $SD = 1.53$; $M_{assertive} = 5.77$, $SD = 1.31$; $t(1, 571) = 4.35$, $p < .001$, $d = .36$) than the assertive response, so the manipulation was successful. Moreover, the participants exposed to the sarcastic response perceived it to be more aggressive than the participants exposed to the assertive response ($M_{sarcastic} = 3.10$, $SD = 2.04$; $M_{assertive} = 2.37$, $SD = 1.75$; $t(1, 571) = -4.57$, $p < .001$, $d = .38$).

Attitude toward the Brand. A one-way ANOVA on consumer's attitude toward the brand as a function of the type of reply revealed that the participants exposed to the assertive reply had a more favorable attitude toward the brand than the participants exposed to the sarcastic reply ($M_{assertive} = 6.01$, $SD = 1.51$; $M_{sarcastic} = 5.55$, $SD = 1.78$; $F(1, 572) = 10.66$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .018$), supporting H_1. The results remain significant after controlling for the participants' age and gender ($F(1, 572) = 10.06$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .017$).

Mediation Analysis. As in the previous studies, the bootstrapping procedure (Hayes 2013, Model 4) supported H_2 (direct effect = −.068, 95% CI [−.287, .152], $p = .545$; indirect effect = −.383, 95% CI [−.575, −.211]), indicating that the effect of the response type on customers' attitude toward a brand is fully mediated by the perceived aggressiveness of the brand's reply; i.e., the more aggressive the reply is perceived to be, the less favorable the customer's attitude toward the brand.

Moderated Mediation Analysis. A moderated mediation analysis using bootstrapping with the repeated extraction of 5,000 samples (Hayes 2013, Model 14) with response type as the independent variable (0 = assertive, 1 = sarcastic), support for the brand's stance as the moderator, perceived aggressiveness as the mediator, and attitude toward the brand as the dependent variable indicated that the negative indirect effect of response type on attitude toward the brand, through perceived aggressiveness, was stronger when support for the brand's stance was at the minimum (β = −.397; SE = .097; 95% CI [−.603, −.229]) than when it was at the mean (β = −.337; SE = .083; 95% CI [−.511, −.185]) and one standard deviation above the mean (β = −.278; SE = .080; 95% CI [−.468, −.145]. Figure 3 shows the results from the direct and indirect effects of the

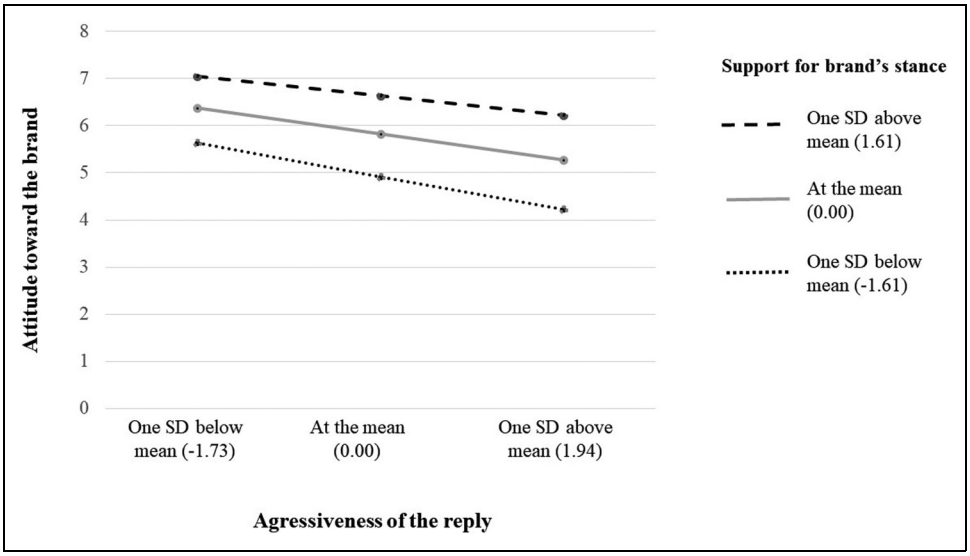

Figure 4. Study 3: attitude toward the brand for three levels of perceived aggressiveness combined with three levels of consumer support for the brand's stance.

type of reply on attitude toward the brand through the interaction (moderated mediation) between perceived aggressiveness and support for brand's stance (also see Figure 4 with a simple slopes plot of the conditional effect of this interaction).

Discussion

Study 3 shows that the effect of response type (assertive vs. sarcastic) on consumer attitudes toward the brand depends on how much they support the brand's stance, supporting H_3. Consumers in general saw the sarcastic response as more aggressive than the assertive response, but the negative effect of the perceived aggressiveness on the customer attitudes toward the brand was mitigated among those who supported the brand's stance. These consumers probably believe that aggression in this context is appropriate.

Study 4

Study 4 replicates our previous results using a different brand activism context: promoting racial equity in the workplace. It also overcomes Studies 1A, 1B, and 2 limitations by using multi-item scales to measure attitude toward the brand, check manipulations (sarcasm and assertive replies), and it uses same length replies.

Participants and Design. Six hundred twenty-three Brazilian adults (65% female; $M_{age} = 35.17$, $SD = 11.65$) were recruited via an online consumer panel (Toluna) and were randomly assigned (between-subjects design) to one of two conditions (response type: sarcastic vs. assertive).

Procedures. The participants were first shown a Facebook feed from an anonymous company announcing that their recruitment process for the internship program was exclusively for black people: "*We announce that our next selection process for the internship program will be exclusively for black people. #DiversityNow*," followed by a comment written by a customer identified only as "Internet User": "*What is that now? Are you in the fad that black people are better? That is idiocy! I hope that your company closes the doors! #BoycottNow*." The brand's post and the customer's comment were identical for all participants. Next, the participants were shown either a sarcastic reply ("*Whoever invented the theory that the customer is always right did not know you!"*) or an assertive reply ("*In Brazil, less than 5% of executives are black. We need more inclusive initiatives*"). The same measures as in Study 3 were employed: attitude toward the brand ($\alpha = .966$), perceived aggressiveness of the reply (one item), support for the brand's stance ($\alpha = .946$), and manipulation checks for sarcasm ($\alpha = .873$) and assertiveness ($\alpha = .925$) (see the Web Appendix for details).

Results

Manipulation Check. A t-test showed that the participants perceived the sarcastic reply to be more sarcastic ($M_{sarcastic} = 4.46$, $SD = 1.54$; $M_{assertive} = 2.48$, $SD = 1.50$; $t(1, 621) = -16.21$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.30$) and less assertive ($M_{sarcastic} = 4.65$, $SD = 1.74$; $M_{assertive} = 5.81$, $SD = 1.32$; $t(1, 621) = 9.31$, $p < .001$, $d = .75$) than the assertive reply, confirming that the manipulation was successful. A t-test revealed that the participants exposed to the sarcastic reply perceived it to be more aggressive than the participants exposed to the assertive reply ($M_{sarcastic} = 3.50$, $SD = 1.99$; $M_{assertive} = 2.43$, $SD = 1.83$; $t(1, 621) = -6.97$, $p < .001$, $d = .55$).

Attitude toward the Brand. As in Study 3, a one-way ANOVA on consumers' attitudes toward the brand as a function of the type of reply revealed that the participants exposed to the assertive reply had a more favorable attitude toward the brand than

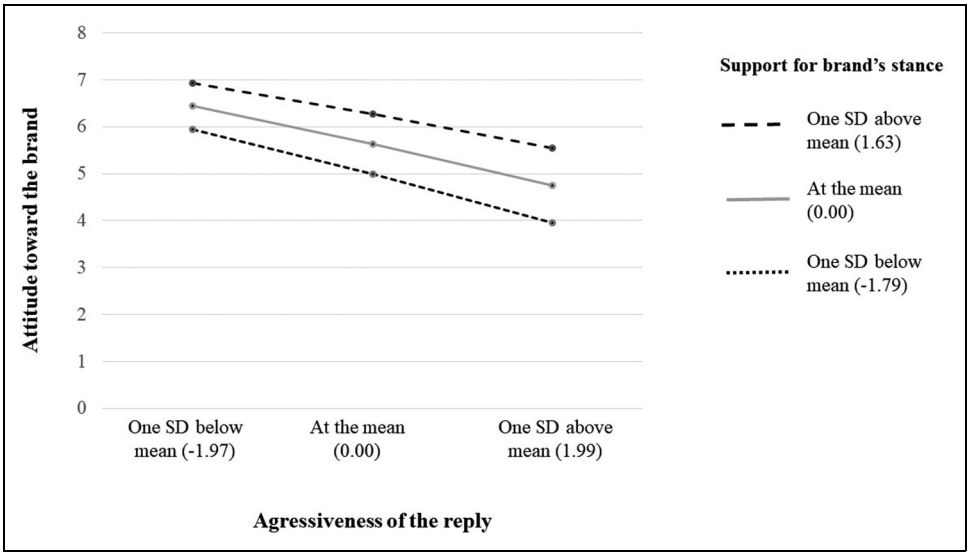

Figure 5. Study 4: attitude toward the brand for three levels of perceived aggressiveness combined with three levels of consumer support for the brand's stance.

the participants exposed to the sarcastic reply ($M_{assertive} = 5.92$, $SD = 1.52$; $M_{sarcastic} = 5.28$, $SD = 1.86$; $F(1, 622) = 22.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .035$), supporting H_1. Again, the results remain significant after controlling for participants' age and gender ($F(1, 622) = 20.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .033$).

Mediation Analysis. As in previous studies, the bootstrapping procedure (Hayes 2013, Model 4) supported H_2 (direct effect $= -.176$, 95% CI [−.419, .066], $p = .154$; indirect effect $= -.469$, 95% CI [−.645, −.311]), indicating that the effect of response type on attitude toward a brand is fully mediated by the perceived aggressiveness of the brand's reply, i.e., the more aggressive the reply is perceived to be, the less favorable the customer's attitude toward the brand.

Moderated Mediation Analysis. As in Study 3, a moderated mediation analysis using bootstrapping with repeated extraction of 5,000 samples (Hayes 2013, Model 14) with response type as the independent variable (0 = assertive, 1 = sarcastic), support for the brand's stance as the moderator, perceived aggressiveness as the mediator, and attitude toward the brand as the dependent variable indicated that the negative indirect effect of response type on attitude toward the brand, through perceived aggressiveness, was stronger when support for the brand's stance was at the minimum ($\beta = -.429$; $SE = .086$; 95% CI [−.621, −.275]) than when it was at the mean ($\beta = -.345$; $SE = .066$; 95% CI [−.489, −.232]) and one standard deviation above the mean ($\beta = -.268$; $SE = .064$; 95% CI [−.414, −.163]). Figure 5 illustrates the conditional effect of the interaction between perceived aggressiveness and support for the brand's stance on consumers' attitudes toward the brand.

Discussion

Study 4 replicated our theoretical model, expanding our findings to a different cause. It thus provided further evidence that the indirect effect of type of reply on attitudes toward a brand through perceived aggressiveness depends on how much consumers support the brand's stance, supporting H_3. The more someone supports the brand's stance, the less strong will be the negative effect of perceive aggressiveness of the reply on the attitude toward the brand. Again, perceived aggressiveness probably had less of a negative impact on the brand attitude of those consumers who supported the brand's cause because they might believe that aggressiveness was appropriate in the context.

The consistency of the results in Studies 3 and 4, despite the differences in the causes in question, the manipulations, and the participants in the samples provides strong evidence to support H_2 and H_3.

General Discussion

With brands increasingly adopting a public stance on controversial, contested, or polarizing causes and communicating them on social media platforms, some consumers may feel dissatisfied with or even offended by such positions and may occasionally react by making uncivil comments. Using an appropriate communication tone to address such incivility is important because what and how brands communicate is seen not only by the consumers interacting directly with the brand but also by all the Internet users observing the interaction. Online conversations between a brand and consumers are instrumental in shaping consumers' attitudes toward the brand, its reputation, and even its credibility in defending the cause.

Our research explored one impact of brand activism by investigating which communication tone, assertive or sarcastic, adopted by a company in response to consumer incivility leads to a more favorable consumer attitude toward its brand. We also examined whether the perceived aggressiveness of the reply is

the mechanism that underlies this effect, and the role of consumers' support for the cause in question as a boundary condition. We developed five studies to test three hypotheses, and validated the results among various samples and progressive causes: LGBT+ phobia, sexism, and racial equity.

Our findings provide evidence that when brands reply to uncivil comments (made by dissatisfied consumers) using an assertive tone, this leads to a more favorable attitude toward the brand on the part of consumers than when they use a sarcastic tone (H_1). Although previous studies confirm that sarcasm may prompt positive reactions because it is humorous (Dews, Kaplan, and Winner 1995), unexpected (Lagerwerf 2007), memorable (Gibbs 1986), and attracts attention (Huang, Gino, and Galinsky 2015), assertiveness carries an educational tone (Hyers 2010), which fosters an atmosphere of learning and fruitful conversation, which can be positive when the cause being supported by the brand is still subject to debate in wider society. An assertive tone may also help brands to strengthen their argument in support of the controversial cause and promote an environment of civility among Internet users interacting with the brand. Sarcasm is often paired with impoliteness (Papacharissi 2004; Rowe 2015), while assertiveness is associated with politeness in communication (Pipas and Jaradat 2010; Oana and Ona 2019), which signals respect for others, a crucial point when two parties (brands and consumers) debate different points of view.

The present research examined whether the perceived aggressiveness of a brand's reply to consumer incivility is a mechanism underlying the negative effect of sarcastic replies on consumer attitudes toward the brand, such that the more aggressive the reply is perceived to be, the less favorable consumer attitudes toward the brand become (H_2). Although sarcasm is related more to subtle mockery than to outright attacks (Papacharissi 2004), it has a component of aggressiveness and is considered a type of aggressive humor (DiCioccio 2012). Our studies indicate that when a reply is sarcastic, consumers will respond better to a less aggressive form of sarcasm on the part of the brand. Meanwhile, an assertive reply seems to prompt more favorable responses than a sarcastic one, which can be explained by the absence of aggressiveness when an assertive tone is employed. However, the findings of our study demonstrate that consumers' support for the brand's stance acts as a boundary condition for the relationship between the aggressiveness of the reply and their attitude toward the brand (H_3), meaning that the negative impact on consumers' attitudes to a brand when it employs a highly aggressive sarcasm in response to an uncivil third-party comment will be mitigated if they support the brand's cause or stance. When individuals support the brand's cause or share its point of view on an issue, they perceive themselves as belonging to an in-group alongside the brand. This in-group effect may be magnified by the tendency for in-group favoritism or empathy for group members (Pliskin et al. 2018). The in-group effect may explain why those who support the brand's stance will tolerate aggressiveness they perceive in its replies to out-group members (those who do not support the cause and react in an uncivil manner). This is consistent with the concept of intergroup conflict (Böhm, Rusch, and Baron 2018), wherein different people react to in-group- and out-group-related content in often diverging ways. This finding provides insights into how brands could use customers' online incivility to their benefit when their online followers on social media share their point of view on an issue, i.e., when consumers perceive themselves as belonging to an in-group alongside the brand.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

Theoretical Implications

These findings make three important contributions to the literature. First, although there are numerous studies on the use of sarcasm in social media in different fields (e.g., Sarsam et al. 2020; Anderson and Huntington 2017), on how consumers use sarcasm to express their sentiments on brands and products (Haripriya and Patil 2019), on how to detect and identify consumer sarcasm (Bouazizi and Ohtsuki 2015; Muresan et al. 2016), on the use of sarcasm in online brand-to-brand interaction (Thomas and Fowler 2021), and on the effect of sarcasm in mass-media advertising (Iles and Nan 2017; Lagerwerf 2007), our paper adds to the knowledge of sarcasm in the context of online consumer-brand interaction when brands use sarcasm as a communication tone to respond to uncivil comments. Specifically, we add to the body of knowledge of online consumer-brand interaction by showing that the component of aggressiveness in sarcasm negatively affects attitude toward the brand. This effect is especially true when sarcasm is compared to assertive communication and when different levels of aggressiveness in sarcasm are compared.

Second, our study contributes to the marketing domain with knowledge related to online incivility. Most of the existing research in this area features customer-to-customer online incivility (Bacile 2020; Bacile et al. 2020). Previous research in service recovery and brand response has investigated how brands should respond to consumer complaints on social media (e.g., in an accommodative or defensive way), considering the role of observers of the communication between dissenters and brands (Johnen and Schnittka 2019). However, no research has empirically investigated how brands engaged in online activism should respond to consumer incivility. Given the intensification of aggressiveness and incivility in online discussions in an increasingly polarized society (Anderson et al. 2014; Petit, Li, and Ali 2020), our work originally examines customer-to-brand online incivility and how brands reply to it in terms of their communication tone. We add to the understanding of how brands can take a stand on controversial causes that may trigger uncivil comments without inducing any impairment to customers' willingness to engage in constructive online debate or to the brand's reputation. In our research, we evaluated only the output variable of attitude, but substantial empirical research indicates that attitude toward brands influences overall customer evaluations of brands, including reputation (Aaker and Keller 1990).

Third, our study contributes to the literature on humor in communication. Previous research has focused on comparing either humorous with non-humorous appeals (e.g., Eisend 2009; McGraw, Shiro, and Fernbach 2015; Warren, Carter, and McGraw 2019) or different forms of humor (i.e., affiliative or self-enhancing versus self-defeating or aggressive) (e.g., Béal and Grégoire 2021; Miczo and Welter 2006; Warren and McGraw 2016). We add to this body of knowledge by investigating the role of perceived aggressiveness as a mechanism that drives the negative effect of a specific form of negative humor (sarcasm) on attitude toward the brand when compared with one particular non-humorous tone (assertive).

Finally, we clarify the contradictory findings in the literature on how individuals supportive of a cause react to aggressiveness toward those (in our case, brands) promoting a stance on that cause (Becker and Barreto 2014; Martinez et al. 2017). For example, evidence that individuals in a bystander situation that are highly involved with an issue (e.g., victims of prejudice or their allies) tend to favor non-hostile assertive responses (Hyers 2010; Martinez et al. 2017) contradicts the findings that individuals exposed to negative online comments disparaging their point of view tend to favor aggressive words (Petit, Li, and Ali 2020). Our results show the conditional effect of the interaction between perceived aggressiveness and support for a brand's stance (moderated mediation effect) on consumer attitudes toward the brand, meaning that for those customers who support the brand's stance, the negative effect of aggressiveness in the sarcastic reply (compared to the assertive reply) on the attitude toward the brand is mitigated. So, for those customers who share the brand's support for the cause, when the brand replies to uncivil comments online, such customers may overlook the negative characteristics of aggression in that reply.

Managerial Implications

Brands can interact with consumers in such a way that, even while maintaining their stance on a controversial cause, they can maximize their marketing success and their positive social impact while seeking to mitigate negativity and incivility among consumers and observers. From a managerial perspective, we contribute to the debate on which communication tone should prevail when brands address online incivility over their stance on progressive causes. First, as a general recommendation, it is safe to say that in the context of brand activism, if a brand can choose between an assertive or a sarcastic tone when replying to incivility, assertiveness is preferable, since the aggressive component of sarcasm can have a negative effect on customer evaluations of brands. Suppose they do decide to adopt a sarcastic tone in their online interaction with uncivil customers. In that case, they are more likely to be successful if the level of aggressiveness in the communication is mild.

Second, we found that the aggressive component of sarcasm does not harm a brand when the audience is composed of individuals who support its stance. Indeed, brands may use customers' online incivility to their benefit, depending on the communication tone they use to reply to incivility and the extent to which the customers support the brand's cause. When replying to uncivil comments in the context of brand activism, the responding brand should avoid high-aggression humor and give preference to use an assertive communication tone. However, in situations where the customers support the brand stance, brands can use sarcasm or assertiveness, since either option will be deemed acceptable by these consumers, who will overlook the aggressive component of the sarcasm because of their shared stance. The way brands communicate with their audience on social media platforms has been evolving to an informal style, sometimes emulating a conversation between acquaintances. Our study offers additional guidance to marketers willing to push harder on this strategy, showing that brands can even take an aggressive tone when dealing with incivility in circumstances where customers support the brand's stance on the cause. Nevertheless, we still recommend that brand managers be cautious when using an aggressive tone in brand communication, given that the observers of consumer–brand interactions on social media are many and varied. It is better for brands to be alert to the tone they use in communicating about causes that have a strong component of controversy among social media users, taking into consideration not only consumers' support for the cause, but also the brand's identity and overall communication strategy. Because social media communication is not fully controlled by brands, they should constantly seek to minimize the negative effects of what consumers say and how they reply to the brand's posts.

Third, research has shown that people are using more subtle forms of incivility, aggressiveness, and "attack discourse" in online discussions (Anderson and Huntington 2017; Rowe 2015). Hostile consumer-to-consumer interactions on social media lead to conflicts that are likely to cause emotional distress to those actively involved as well as those who merely observe it (Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017). We recommend that brands not be drawn into the communication tone being used by others on social media, but develop a communication strategy that clearly dictates the tone of replies to attacks on their position on causes they believe and support.

As a final comment, we should note that except for Study 1A, all studies demonstrate a favorable attitude toward the brand for both sarcastic and assertive replies. It means that, in general, replying to an uncivil comment using sarcasm is not inherently harmful: consumers still accept aggressiveness in this kind of communication. Instead, an assertive tone produces more positive outcomes than a sarcastic one.

Limitations and Future Research

This article advances our knowledge of how brands should reply to uncivil comments made by consumers on social media in the context of brand activism. However, it has some limitations that may be addressed through future research. First, we used hypothetical online posts and replies rather than real examples of brand communication. We used only one post and one reply, but in the real world consumers are exposed to multiple posts and uncivil comments on firms' social media, which may produce stronger effects (Bacile 2020) than those found in this

study. This limitation could be overcome by examining the frequency and sequence of interactions producing uncivil comments that affect brand attitudes and reputation.

Second, by using fictitious or anonymous brands, we avoided inducing bias in the respondents' evaluation based on prior knowledge of the brand. The use of real brands could add realism by introducing real-world determinants, such as a brand's identity. For example, if the type of reply aligns with the brand's identity (e.g., Wendy's often uses sarcastic replies on social media; Dynel 2020), people may expect and favorably evaluate this type of reply and the negative effects the of sarcastic responses and the component of aggressiveness may be attenuated. Future research could consider whether/how a brand's identity operates as a moderating mechanism in a model fashioned after ours, with brand identity potentially attenuating the effect of sarcastic replies on perceived aggressiveness and/or the effect of perceived aggressiveness on attitudes toward the brand. Other brand characteristics could also be examined, such as brand personality and brand image that are more compatible with a sarcastic tone.

Third, the consumers who made the uncivil comment's identities were also anonymous. However, some of their characteristics might affect how a brand's response is perceived (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, brand loyalty, being a "troublemaker," etc.). Future research could investigate how these personal characteristics interact with the reply tones on attitude toward the brand.

Fourth, we limited our investigation to uncivil replies to progressive social causes, since the majority of corporate activism is progressive (Crane 2020). Our results cannot be extended to cases where uncivil comments are made on non-social issues, such as a brand service failure, or more conservative social causes, such as industrial deregulation. Communication tactics on social media on causes related to the core business, such as companies' social responsibility (e.g., Gallaugher and Ransbotham 2010; Goh, Heng, and Lin 2013; Okazaki et al. 2020), and the relationship between consumer complaint, online incivility, and service recovery (e.g., Bacile et al. 2018; Bacile et al. 2020; Bacile 2020) have been intensively examined. Future research might thus consider investigating the effect of uncivil comments regarding non-social issues or more conservative social causes, and how brands should respond to such comments. Consumers might also be more accepting of the use of sarcasm when society holds a more unanimous opinion on a topic, and where negative comments persist as outliers. Future research could thus compare the impacts of sarcasm on brand–customer communication in controversial versus settled contexts.

Fifth, although some authors argue that there is no difference in the predictive validity and effect sizes of multiple-item and single-item measures for concrete constructs such as attitude toward the brand (Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007; Ang and Eisend 2018), there may be concerns about the use of single-item measures in Studies 1A, 1B, and 2. Although we used multiple-item measures on studies 3 and 4 to measure attitudes toward the brand, sarcasm, and assertiveness in order to improve content validity and internal-consistency reliability, we acknowledge this limitation.

Finally, although we conducted our studies using diverse samples, it is possible that certain consumer groups do enjoy sarcasm and might comprise a niche whose preferred form of communication is sarcasm. Culture is a primary area in which decoders of sarcasm (those who are able to recognize a situation in which sarcasm is used) may differ. Individuals from different cultures do not express sarcasm in the same way or with the same frequency (Rockwell and Theriot 2001). For example, Haiman (1998) reports that some groups (e.g., Hua, a group of New Guinea Highlanders) do not use sarcasm at all. In all our studies, we collected data from Brazilian respondents, but we did not verify whether the Brazilian culture might have impacted our results, since we did not compare them with data from other cultures. Caution should therefore be employed when generalizing the findings obtained here to other cultural contexts. We would propose that future research investigate how customer reactions to the use of a sarcastic tone by brands in responding to customer incivility differs across cultures. Individual characteristics might also be further examined in this context. Different personality traits, moods, and temperaments may make individuals react differently to the different communications tones and humor styles (e.g., aggressive humor, self-deprecating humor) used by brands when they interact with customers. We did not control for those variables in our studies, and individuals may not necessarily express them consciously (Mendiburo–Seguel, Paez, and Martínez–Sánchez 2015). These variables could be considered in further studies, measuring them by implicit techniques, which would add value to this new, important, and intriguing avenue of research on communication in the context of brand activism.

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