

# Psychology of Popular Media

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Online First Publication, May 25, 2023. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000476>

### CITATION

Quinlan, J. A., Dunk, R. J., & Mar, R. A. (2023, May 25). Weird Reactions to Weird Twitter: How Expectation and Intention Relate to Appreciation for Absurd Humor. *Psychology of Popular Media*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000476>

# Weird Reactions to Weird Twitter: How Expectation and Intention Relate to Appreciation for Absurd Humor

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Violations to our sense of meaning have traditionally been thought of as a source of anxiety and threat. However, meaning violations can also be a source of humor, as is evidenced by their abundant use within comedy in the form of absurd humor. This has recently been exemplified by Weird Twitter, a popular subculture organized around aggressively absurd comedic tweets. The present study investigated this apparent paradox by examining the effects of expecting absurdity and perceiving an intention to be funny on humor ratings of absurd jokes taken from Weird Twitter. Based on the Benign Violation Theory of Humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010), we predicted that experimentally manipulating the expectation of absurdity and an intention to be funny would increase humor ratings for these jokes, by rendering them “benign.” We found that expecting absurd jokes had a small positive effect on ratings of humor, whereas intentionality had no effect after accounting for expectations. In addition, individual differences in Openness to Experience and Need for Cognition did not seem to play a role in the appreciation of absurd humor.

## Public Policy Relevance Statement


In this study, we examine the apparent paradox of absurd humor: how can meaning violations, traditionally thought of as threatening, be found funny? We investigate this in the context of Weird Twitter, a popular community of Twitter users devoted to absurdist and nonsensical humor. We find that expecting absurdity helps to make absurd humor funnier, which helps to explain why Twitter users enjoy absurd tweets so much.


**Keywords:** humor, absurdity, meaning violations, benign violation theory, Twitter

**Supplemental materials:** <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000476.supp>

i used to date a guy who hated my twitter with a burning passion because it was “unintelligent humor.” one time he had a meltdown and nearly broke up with me because i tweeted “egg” and it got 200 likes (Hannah Jo, 2022)


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Kai DeMaeyer provided invaluable assistance in producing an early version of this manuscript.

Joshua A. Quinlan served as the lead for conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, visualization, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing. Rebecca J. Dunk served in a supporting role for conceptualization. Raymond A. Mar served as the lead for supervision and served in a supporting role for conceptualization, methodology. Rebecca J. Dunk and Raymond A. Mar contributed equally to writing—review and editing.

 The experimental materials are available at <https://osf.io/rdk4p/>

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Twitter is one of the most popular forms of social media with over 238 million daily active users in 2022 (Twitter Inc., 2022). One of the main ways that people use Twitter is as a source of humor and one of the most popular forms of humor on Twitter is distinctly absurd. That is, seemingly bereft of meaning or context yet eliciting mirth: such as tweeting a single word, “egg.” However, absurdity violates our expectations of how we expect the world to work and these norm violations have historically been viewed as threatening rather than entertaining (Bruner & Postman, 1949; Heine et al., 2006). What determines whether an absurd tweet is perceived as funny or threatening? We propose that expecting the absurdity and recognizing an intention to be funny are both likely to increase the likelihood of an absurd tweet eliciting mirth. A tightly controlled experiment manipulating both these factors was conducted to test these ideas.

## Absurdity and Weird Twitter

Twitter hosts millions of users who visit the app to discuss news, entertainment, research, and daily life. In many ways, it acts as a global watercooler or town square. There are, however, some Twitter subcultures with no clear analog in the everyday world. One such subculture, “Weird Twitter,” is comprised of different

accounts that all exist to produce increasingly absurd examples of humor. Users who are part of Weird Twitter create tweets with sloppy grammar and pseudo-poetic structure to deliver jokes that are almost exclusively absurd and end in nonsequiturs (Douglas, 2012). It is here that one finds users tweeting things like, “a wise old man told me the things that matter the most are the things that matter the least, later we found out he was just a pile of hair” (Wolf Pupy, 2014a). Despite its seemingly inaccessible tendencies, Weird Twitter has developed into a major influence on popular culture, now described as “one of the biggest influences on comedy today” (Herman & Notopoulos, 2013). In fact, absurdity is one of the central forms of humor employed by teenagers on social media, used to both communicate and bond with peers (van der Wal et al., 2020). Weird Twitter is also a direct result of the structure of social media. As one media reporter put it:

Not only is there no time for narrative online, there is rarely room for the traditional set-up/punchline structure either. Instead, things are funny because they are wilfully jarring and strange. (Aroesti, 2019)

With Weird Twitter evolving into a major cultural force and a major phenomenon rooted in a popular social media platform, better understanding its popularity is an important goal for the psychology of popular media.

### Why Is Weird Twitter Funny and Not Simply Disconcerting?

The popularity of such absurd humor may seem surprising, but it is nonetheless gaining attention in both mainstream and academic circles (Aroesti, 2019; Bruenig, 2017; Lau et al., 2022; Wu & Chen, 2019). Absurd jokes flout traditional norms of meaning and represent a clear violation to expectations of sensible communication (Grice, 2002). Meaning violations of this nature have long been thought of as threatening, more likely to elicit a negative or defensive response than mirth, as argued by both early philosophers (Camus, 1942; Kierkegaard, 1843/1985) and current psychologists (e.g., Heine et al., 2006). In other words, by violating norms and expectations, absurd humor presents a threat to our ability to understand how the world works. This makes it unique from some other forms of traditional humor, such as physical humor (e.g., pratfalls) and wordplay (e.g., puns). It is also different from traditional jokes, which have historically been explained as introducing an incongruity and then resolving this incongruity with the punch line (Suls, 1972, 1983). With absurd humor, the incongruity remains unresolved at the end of the joke. The inability of traditional theories to explain absurd humor motivated a great deal of research and theoretical development.

### Meaning Violations and Expectations

Research on absurdity as a unique form of humor is long-established, with “nonsense humor” forming one of the three distinct categories of humor defined by a major review (Ruch, 1992). This category of humor is associated with specific tropes: illogical situations, inexplicable events, and non sequiturs. One of the reasons why it is so fascinating and has remained a fruitful area of research is that despite its potential to be threatening, it has been popular throughout history (e.g., Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, Monty Python, Tim, and Eric; for further examples visit

<https://osf.io/rdk4p/>). This apparent paradox of absurdity’s dual nature—both threatening and potentially humorous—has helped to motivate a new theory for explaining humor: the Benign Violation Theory of Humor.

The Benign Violation Theory of Humor suggests that threat is a crucial element of all humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010): something is funny when it is simultaneously perceived as both threatening and benign. Because absurdity acts as a threatening violation of our expectations and sense of meaning, the Benign Violation Theory predicts it will only be seen as funny if it is also perceived as benign. Some research has supported this idea. For example, norm violations are perceived as funnier when they are seen as both a violation and benign, rather than strictly one or the other (McGraw & Warren, 2010). In another study, a confederate posing as a participant either passed candy or threw candy at participants, explaining the behavior either beforehand or afterward (Warren & McGraw, 2016). Participants found the experience funnier when the candy was thrown rather than passed and also funnier when the behavior was explained beforehand rather than afterward. This illustrates how a violation (i.e., having candy thrown at you) can be perceived as funny when it is rendered benign by establishing an expectation. Additional research has also confirmed that expectation reduces the perceived threat of absurdity (Mitchell et al., 2010), by reducing the sense of norm violation: with the correct expectations, audiences know not to expect the norm (Heine et al., 2006; Warren & McGraw, 2016). Expectations about absurdity should also reduce the sense of unpredictability, an additional source of threat (Hirsh et al., 2012). Put succinctly, expected norm violations are more likely to be seen as humorous, whereas unexpected norm violations are more likely to be threatening. Importantly, we often expect absurd humor when it is encountered in an entertainment context, like when scrolling through Weird Twitter. Crucially, if expectation can reduce the threat to the point where this absurdity is perceived as benign, then this absurdity should be perceived as funny.<sup>1</sup>

Although there is little direct research on how expectation influences perceptions of absurd humor, one study indirectly examined this topic in the pursuit of another goal. Proulx et al. (2010) presented participants with an absurd and humorous short story, manipulating participants’ expectation of absurdity, in a study on meaning violations. Most surprisingly, no differences in ratings of humor were found based on expectation; those who expected the piece to be absurd found it just as funny as those who did not. However, it is difficult to interpret this result because the story did not employ absurd humor alone. It also included drug use, homoerotic sexual innuendo, and slapstick, all forms of humor distinct from absurdity. As a result, the effect of these humorous elements cannot be disentangled from those tied to the absurdity of the story. Importantly, the expectation may not affect these more common forms of humor in the same way as it affects absurdity, due to the distinct structure of absurd humor (Ruch, 1992).

The Benign Violation Theory of Humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010), and some preliminary research, supports the idea that expectation should be an important component of what makes absurd humor funny. By extension, the expectation could help us to better

<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that expecting absurdity does not necessarily eliminate all surprise from absurd humor. The content of an absurd joke may still be surprising, even if the presence of absurdity is not.

understand the phenomenon of Weird Twitter. This results in our first hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* When absurdity is expected, absurd tweets will be rated as funnier.

### **Meaning Violations and Intentions**

Another situation in which a meaning violation could seem more benign is when an audience knows that there is an intention to be funny. If we know in advance that something is merely a joke, it is intrinsically less threatening to our sense of meaning when someone says or does something nonsensical. Without knowing that there is an intention to be funny, attempts at absurd humor appear to be flagrant violations of social norms (e.g., Gricean communication norms; Grice, 2002). Because things that are meant to be funny are seen as inconsequential (i.e., “just a joke”), they should be perceived as less threatening, more benign, and therefore more funny.

Intention is also separate from expectation in that we might expect something to be absurd, but not necessarily know that it is intended to be funny. A person can act oddly with no intention to entertain, for example. Similarly, we might perceive that something is intended to be funny, but not necessarily expect it to be absurd. We could easily be told to expect a joke and anticipate a more traditional form of humor. Past work has found that expecting a moderate level of humor makes traditional jokes seem more funny, compared to when no expectations are created (or when they are expected to be very funny; Wimer & Beins, 2008). This illustrates how a perceived intention to be funny helps foster humor for a joke (especially when paired with appropriate expectations for the level of humor).

The prediction that a perceived intention to be funny would make absurdity more funny follows directly from the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), but it has not previously been empirically investigated. Intentions therefore undergird our second hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* When an intention to be funny is known, absurd tweets will be rated as funnier.

### **Interactions Between Expectations and Intentions**

In this experiment, we examine how both expectations of absurdity and perceived intentions to be funny could make absurd humor seem funnier, using tweets from Weird Twitter. In doing so, we employ ecologically valid stimuli allowing us to directly research the psychology behind a predominant real-world cultural phenomenon rooted in popular media. Twitter itself likely encourages both expectations and perceived intentions. Users curate their own feeds, choosing who to follow and therefore what sort of content they are likely to encounter. Members of Weird Twitter literally opt-in for these meaning violations, so this audience both expects to encounter absurdity and understands it is intended to be funny. These two factors may help to encourage appreciation for absurd humor by rendering it benign. By studying both, we are also able to study their interaction.

It is not yet clear how intentions to be funny affect perceptions of absurdity in tandem with an expectation of absurdity: how the two potentially interact. When no other expectations of absurdity are explicitly provided, having information regarding an intention to be funny may create an expectation of traditional, nonabsurd,

humor. In this case, the shock of encountering absurdity may increase the threat rather than reduce it, rendering it malign and not funny. In this way, the intention to be funny may interact with expectations of absurdity, making absurdity funnier when these expectations are present and less funny than when these expectations are absent. This forms our third hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3:* Perceived intention to be funny and expectation of absurdity will interact to produce a divergent effect. When absurdity is expected, perceived intention to be funny will lead to absurd tweets being rated as funnier (as predicted in H2). When absurdity is unexpected, perceived intention to be funny will lead to absurd tweets being rated as less funny. This is due to the violation of an expectation of traditional humor created by knowledge of an intention to be funny.

### **The Role of Individual Differences**

People vary in the degree to which uncertainty or violations of meaning are troubling, with several well-studied traits ascribed to these differences. A tendency to appreciate novelty and ambiguity, encapsulated by trait Openness, should predict less perceived threat for meaning violations (DeYoung et al., 2007; John & Srivastava, 1999). Need for Cognition, a related trait that describes an appreciation for effortful thought, may show the same effect, as individuals high in Need for Cognition may be more likely to enjoy the search for meaning in an absurd tweet (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Those who appreciate novelty and are not inherently bothered by unexpected complexity should find absurdity less threatening and more humorous. Consistent with this idea, traits related to Openness and Need for Cognition predict appreciation for nonsense humor (Ruch, 1988). It is also possible that individual differences moderate the effects of expectation and intention on perceived funniness. It may be that some individuals possess enough tolerance to norm violations that they find almost all absurdity benign, regardless of expectations or intention to be funny. This results in our fourth and final hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4:* Those higher in Openness and Need for Cognition will rate absurd tweets as funnier.

## **Current Study**

Our goal is to examine how the expectation of absurdity and perceived intention to be funny affect the perception of absurd humor, in an attempt to better understand the phenomenon of Weird Twitter. Participants were presented with tweets from Weird Twitter and their expectations of absurdity and knowledge of intention were experimentally manipulated, with the interaction between the two also examined. Lastly, we explored the influence of two traits, Openness and Need for Cognition.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

We recruited participants with at least 10 years of English fluency because the stimuli employ nuanced language. A total of 649 undergraduates from Toronto, Canada completed the study and were compensated with partial course credit. We did not

conduct an a priori power analysis, but instead endeavored to collect as much data as possible in the time we had available, to maximize statistical power. No interim analyses were conducted during sampling, with all analyses performed after data cleaning. This study was approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University (ORE # 2015-225).

The final sample consisted of 132 participants in the Control condition, 108 in the Expectation condition, 116 in the Intention condition, and 76 in the Expectation/Intention condition. (The latter had the most difficult manipulation check, leading to more exclusions.) A post hoc sensitivity analysis indicated that with a minimum of 76 participants per group, the four-group ANOVA analysis has 80% power to detect effects equal to  $f = 0.19$  or larger (equivalent to a Cohen's  $d$  of 0.38; sensitivity calculated using the {pwr} package in R; Champely, 2020).

### Data Cleaning

All data cleaning was completed prior to the statistical analyses. Participants were excluded for failing to consent ( $n = 5$ , 1%), failing attention checks ( $n = 13$ , 2%), reporting they were dishonest when responding ( $n = 12$ , 2%), inaccurately summarizing instructions ( $n = 151$ , 24%), or incorrectly recalling instructions during the manipulation check ( $n = 36$ , 6%). The final sample consisted of 432 participants (124 men, 306 women, and two who declined to report their gender,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.84$ ,  $SD = 3.98$ ).

### Stimuli

Ten absurd tweets were taken from Weird Twitter and all exemplify this style of humor by being irrational, illogical, or strange. Participants were presented with randomly selected tweets from this set of 10.<sup>2</sup> All tweets are provided in the Appendix and all materials appear on OSF (<https://osf.io/rdk4p/>).

### Target Ratings

Participants made four ratings for each joke, each on a 7-point scale. The first rating was the main dependent variable: "How funny was the passage you just read?" (1 = *not at all funny*, 4 = *moderately funny*, 7 = *very funny*). Second, participants rated their familiarity with the joke: "How familiar are you with this passage (or a close variation of it)?" (1 = *not at all familiar*, 4 = *somewhat familiar*, 7 = *very familiar*). This allowed us to ensure that these tweets were not already highly familiar to participants. Third, participants made a filler rating to obscure our true intentions in this study: "How grammatical was the passage you just read?" (1 = *not at all grammatically correct*, 4 = *moderately grammatically correct*, 7 = *fully grammatically correct*). Finally, as a means of measuring a behavior associated with finding the tweet funny, participants were asked how likely they would be to share the text with friends: "How likely would you be to share this with your friends?" (1 = *not at all likely*, 4 = *moderately likely*, 7 = *very likely*).

### Individual Difference Measures

#### Trait Personality

The Big Five personality traits were measured using the Big Five Aspect Scale (BFAS; DeYoung et al., 2007). Participants read 100

short descriptive phrases, each associated with an aspect of personality (e.g., "I love to reflect on things," for Openness) and rated how well each phrase described them (from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). This measure has been shown to have good psychometric properties, with alpha reliability ranging from 0.72 to 0.89 (DeYoung et al., 2007). In the analyses discussed, we focus on the trait Openness, measured via its two aspects, with 10 items from the Openness to Experience subscale and 10 items from the Intellect subscale. We found that the scale for trait Openness had good internal reliability (combining these two aspects), with an alpha of 0.80.

#### Need for Cognition

Need for Cognition was measured using the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo et al., 1984). Participants read 18 statements (e.g., "I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles I must solve") and rated to what degree each statement is characteristic of them (from 1 = *extremely uncharacteristic of me*, 3 = *somewhat characteristic of me*, 5 = *extremely characteristic of me*). The measure has good psychometric properties, with an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.90 (Cacioppo et al., 1984). We also found that it had good internal reliability based on our own sample, with an alpha of 0.83.

#### Procedure

Data were collected using Qualtrics survey software ([www.Qualtrics.com](http://www.Qualtrics.com)). In Session 1, participants were randomly assigned to receive one of the following sets of instructions. (NB. the Expectation condition refers to an expectation of absurdity and the Intention condition refers to knowledge of an intention to be funny.) In the Control condition, participants were merely told to "Please read the following passages and respond to the questions that follow." In the Expectation condition, they were also told that "The passages you are about to read are absurd (i.e., strange, illogical)." For the Intention condition, this information was instead "The passages you are about to read were written to be funny (i.e., humorous, make people laugh)." Lastly, for the combined Expectation/Intention condition, participants were also informed that "The passages you are about to read are absurd (i.e., strange, illogical) and were written to be funny (i.e., humorous, make people laugh)."

Participants were then randomly assigned to read and rate one of the 10 possible absurd tweets. Afterward, as a manipulation check, participants were asked to recognize their instructions from a list: (a) Nothing (Control), (b) That the passages would be absurd (Expectation Condition), (c) That the passages would be funny (Intention Condition), (d) That the passages would be absurd and funny (Expectation/Intention Condition), and (e) Don't know/don't remember. After completing a demographics questionnaire, participants were debriefed. A few days after the Session 1 experiment, participants were invited to complete Session 2. During Session 2, participants completed the individual difference measures

<sup>2</sup> Participants were presented with three jokes but only the ratings of the first joke are presented in this paper, as subsequent ratings were likely influenced by the first in relevant ways (e.g., inferring an intention to be funny, expecting further absurdity). Analyses based on all three combined ratings are publicly available: <https://osf.io/rdk4p/>

**Table 1**  
*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Confidence Intervals*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Funniness	2.50	1.60	—			
2. Familiarity	1.44	0.91	0.27** [0.18, 0.35]	—		
3. Grammaticality	4.05	1.76	0.10* [0.01, 0.19]	0.04 [−0.05, 0.14]	—	
4. Sharing	1.81	1.41	0.58** [0.51, 0.64]	0.29** [0.21, 0.38]	0.11* [0.01, 0.20]	—

*Note.* Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

in a randomized order and were debriefed.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the break between sessions was to avoid participant fatigue and reduce the influence of experimental manipulations on the individual difference measures. Embedded within these measures were three items designed to identify inattentive responders.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Correlations between ratings, collapsing across conditions, are presented in Table 1. These associations were as expected: funniness, familiarity, and likelihood of sharing were all positively correlated. The filler rating (i.e., Grammatical) exhibited only weak relations with our key ratings of interest. In addition, participants were not very familiar with these tweets. Based on a 5-point scale, the mean familiarity was 1.44, with a median of 1. Thus, familiarity with our stimuli does not appear to be an issue of concern.

Mean funniness ratings are presented by condition in Table 2, along with differences between conditions. The overall mean funniness ratings were below the midpoint of the 7-point scale across conditions ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) and within each condition. Therefore, participants generally did not find the tweets very funny, regardless of condition.

**Analysis of Variance**

A 2 (presence/absence of Expectation)  $\times$  2 (presence/absence of Intention) factorial ANOVA was conducted to assess the effects of expectation of absurdity, perceived intention to be funny, and their interaction, on mean funniness ratings of the absurd jokes. The main effect of Expectation was statistically significant but small in magnitude,  $F_{\text{Expectation}}(1, 428) = 4.45$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , 90% CI [ $<.01$ ,  $.03$ ]. Both the Intention main effect and the interaction term remained small and statistically nonsignificant,  $F_{\text{Intention}}(1, 428) = 0.154$ ,  $p = .70$ ,  $\eta^2 = .0004$ , 90% CI [ $.00$ ,  $.01$ ];  $F_{E \times I}(1, 428) = 1.19$ ,  $p = .28$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.003$ , 90% CI [ $.00$ ,  $.02$ ]. Although there is some evidence for an interaction based on the condition means, this was not statistically significant due to the large standard errors. Condition differences are presented in Figure 1.<sup>4</sup>

**The Role of Individual Differences**

We next investigated whether the effect of expectation was moderated by two traits related to an appreciation of novelty: Openness ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) and Need for Cognition ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ). Each model regressed ratings of humor on Expectation and Intention, with an individual difference measure and all possible

two-way interaction terms included in the model. Because these regressions required that participants complete both sessions, the total sample size for these analyses was 222.

Each regression was bootstrapped with 1,999 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals for regression coefficients were calculated. All results are presented in Table 3. Broadly speaking, we found no strong evidence for any main effect of an individual difference, nor any interaction with our manipulations. Nearly every regression coefficient had confidence intervals that were wide and included zero. Those that did not still had wide confidence intervals that neared zero (e.g., in the model that includes Openness as a predictor, the main effect of Intention has 95% CI [ $-5.78$ ,  $-0.44$ ]). One result that did emerge is the interaction between Intention and Openness, whose CIs do not include zero. As can be seen in Figure 2, Openness has a positive effect on funniness when the tweet is intended to be funny, but its effect is weak and negative when there is no intention information. This may be because absurd jokes are still too threatening, even for people high in Openness, without knowing that they are intended to be funny. That said, the confidence intervals are extremely wide and have considerable overlap, and this interaction should be interpreted cautiously.

**Discussion**

In this study, we examined the conditions under which tweets taken from Weird Twitter are found to be the funniest. One unique strength of our study is the fact that we employed a tightly controlled experimental design, actually manipulating the expectation of absurdity and intention to be funny to observe their causal effects on humor. In addition, we employed ecologically valid stimuli in the form of actual tweets by popular accounts. One of our main predictions, that expecting absurdity would promote humor, was supported by our data: those in the conditions in which absurdity was expected

<sup>3</sup> Participants completed other individual difference measures in addition to those discussed here, namely Intolerance of Uncertainty, Ambiguity Tolerance, and Need for Closure. Analyses with these measures yielded results very similar to those for Openness and Need for Cognition and are therefore not reported. All measures and materials are available in our OSF project and data will be immediately shared upon request.

<sup>4</sup> We also examined willingness to share the tweet as an outcome in a separate factorial ANOVA using the same factors. Although condition differences in willingness to share show the same direction and pattern of effects as does funniness, these mean differences are smaller, which renders the main effects and interactions statistically nonsignificant. These analyses are presented in the supplemental materials, which are available on the OSF page (<https://osf.io/rdk4p/>).

**Table 2**  
*Condition Means and Mean Differences in Funniness Rating*

Condition	<i>M</i>	Expected	Intended	Expected/Intended
Control	2.40 (1.61)	-0.18 (-0.11)*	0.08 (0.05)	-0.44 (-0.29)*
Expected	2.58 (1.65)	—	0.26 (0.16)*	-0.26 (-0.16)
Intended	2.32 (1.61)	—	—	-0.52 (-0.34)*
Expected/Intended	2.84 (1.47)	—	—	—

*Note.* Mean funniness ratings are presented with standard deviations in parentheses. Condition differences in funniness ratings are presented with Cohen's *d* in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ , as determined by the ANOVA.

found the tweets to be the funniest (i.e., the Expectation and Expectation/Intention conditions) and there was a main effect of Expectation. This result provides additional support for the Benign Violation Theory of Humor appreciation (McGraw & Warren, 2010; Warren & McGraw, 2016). We also predicted that perceiving an intention to be funny would make the tweets funnier. However, we did not find evidence for this or any interaction with Expectation.

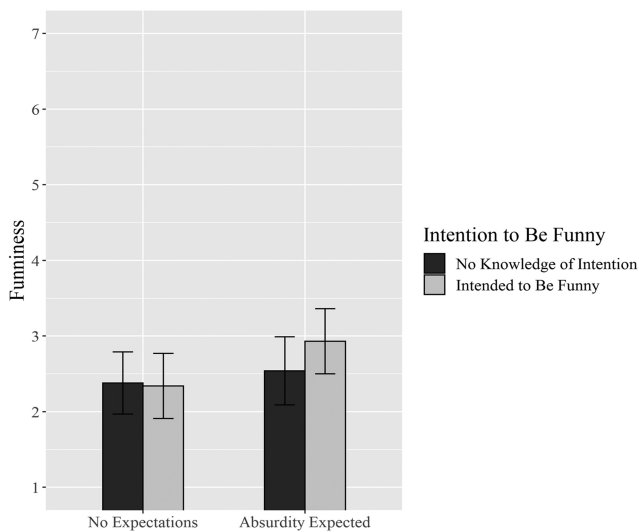
We also anticipated that those with a greater appreciation for novelty and complexity would find these absurd tweets funnier. However, our data did not support this hypothesis. In fact, after controlling for our two manipulated variables, no individual difference showed a consistent effect on funniness. This may be because the effect of personality on humor appreciation is weak in the context of a lab experiment where variables are manipulated and stimuli are chosen by experimenters. Instead, personality may have more to do with one's decisions of who to follow on Twitter. Those who belong to the Weird Twitter community may be higher on Openness and Need for Cognition compared to other Twitter users, which is a promising question for future research.

Overall, these data inform how we understand social media platforms such as Twitter, in addition to how users leverage these platforms for entertainment. For one, Weird Twitter has grown from a

niche aspect of this platform to a major force both on Twitter and in mainstream culture. In fact, one of the accounts from which we drew our stimuli, a user named *dril* (2012), was recently the subject of a *New Yorker* profile (Marshall, 2022). Thus, this study of Weird Twitter is also an examination of a central aspect of Twitter and of absurd humor on social media more broadly. Moreover, the manipulations of this study map onto how social media is employed for the purposes of humor and entertainment. People rarely encounter content randomly but rather engage with a feed of content made up primarily of accounts to which they have subscribed. To this end, Twitter users generally have clear expectations regarding what will appear in their feed and, more specifically, what sort of content is associated with each account. Your typical Twitter user who is exposed to Weird Twitter actively "signs up" to receive this content, presumably based on some prior exposure and a preference for this type of content. To that end, our data demonstrating that expectations increase the appreciation of content from Weird Twitter illustrates that studying absurd humor in an ecologically valid fashion requires the incorporation of expectations.

In terms of the intentions behind a tweet, these are likely easily inferred based on the context: other tweets from this account, reactions to the tweet, and so forth. Based on our results, however, it may be that intention to be funny is a poor fit for understanding social media humor and plays more of a role during the spontaneous conversation. Although we predicted that the perceived intention to be funny would make absurd tweets funnier, we actually find that it has a small effect in the opposite direction. We theorized that perceived intentions would help to render absurd tweets benign when absurdity is expected, thereby making them funnier. But when absurdity is unexpected, intentions would make these tweets less funny. Our reasoning was that a perceived intention to be funny creates the expectation of traditional humor, which makes encountering absurdity all the more jarring (i.e., threatening). To a certain degree, this is what we observed. The condition with the lowest funniness rating was the one in which participants perceived an intention to be funny but did not expect absurdity. The condition in which participants perceived an intention to be funny and expected absurdity also had the highest mean funniness ratings. Although the Expectation  $\times$  Intention interaction failed to achieve statistical significance, the condition means (and the interaction plots in Figures 1 and 2) indicate that intention has a positive effect when absurdity is expected and a negative or null effect when absurdity is not expected. Given that this is a single study, it would be imprudent to make strong conclusions about the effect of intentions based on these results. Future research should examine this question using a larger sample size to estimate these marginal effects with greater precision.

**Figure 1**  
*Mean Ratings of Funniness by Condition*



*Note.* Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

**Table 3**

*Regressions Showing Prediction of Mean Funniness Rating Using Expectation, Intention, and Individual Differences*

Measure	Expectation	Intention	ID	E × I	E × ID	I × ID
Openness	-0.38 [-3.06, 2.70]	-3.21 <sup>a</sup> [-5.78, -0.44]	-0.29 [-0.87, 0.32]	0.49 [-0.23, 1.24]	0.15 [-0.73, 0.92]	0.89 <sup>a</sup> [0.12, 1.61]
Need for Cognition	1.75 [-1.33, 4.78]	-1.71 [-4.47, 1.22]	0.13 [-0.50, 0.76]	0.46 [-0.29, 1.19]	-0.51 [-1.47, 0.47]	0.53 [-0.38, 1.38]

*Note.*  $N = 222$ . Values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.  $E \times I$  = Expectation–Intention interaction term; ID = listed individual difference measure;  $E \times ID$  = Expectation–Individual Difference interaction term;  $I \times ID$  = Intention–Individual Difference interaction term; CIs = confidence intervals. <sup>a</sup>CIs not including 0.

It is important to emphasize that our results may pertain only to the context that we studied: absurd humor on Twitter. Using Twitter or other social media platforms for eudaimonic or informational purposes likely entails different relevant factors, as does absurd humor in other contexts (e.g., in real life) and on other platforms.

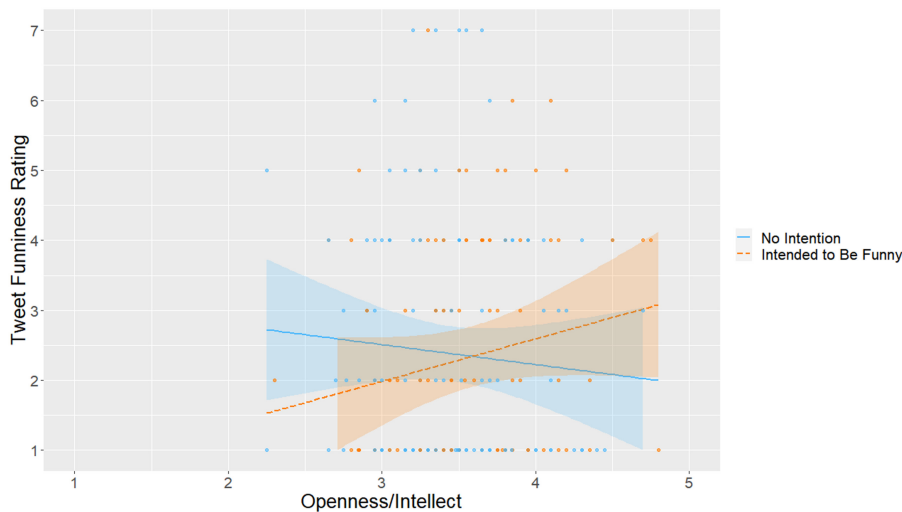
Beyond Weird Twitter, absurd humor is an increasingly popular form of comedy across various media (e.g., TikTok *@jercho1*, HBO’s *The Rehearsal*) and a growing part of mainstream culture (Aroesti, 2019; Bruenig, 2017). However, our data were collected in 2015, which reflects a markedly different time on the Internet, a place where norms, customs, and trends are constantly changing. Jokes in 2015 appear to have been relatively more concrete and less absurd than they are today (Madison, 2015; Reinstein & Dahir, 2022). One possible explanation for this shift in humor, particularly on social media, is that people are using absurdity to cope with the increasingly disturbing events of their reality. In the last few years alone, people have witnessed a global pandemic, climate disasters, nuclear threats, and the outbreak of war. A kind of dark absurdity has emerged in young social media users, often called “Gen Z humor,” which takes its cues from niche millennial subcultures and pushes them into the mainstream (Ehrlich, 2020). Another explanation is that reality is becoming not only more disturbing but also more surreal and absurd in itself. A reality TV star becomes president, a woman records an aerobics video in front of a military

couple in Myanmar, and everyone on Twitter debates whether the threat of “30–50 feral hogs” is a valid argument for owning an assault rifle. As reality becomes increasingly absurd, so too does our sense of humor, it seems. Weird Twitter appears to have been ahead of the curve, providing meaninglessness as entertainment years before it became a mainstream coping mechanism. Going forward, research on absurd humor and social media should consider the potential role that absurdity plays in providing a reprieve from reality. Future work could measure expectations of absurdity in daily life and examine its association with the appreciation of absurd humor.

**Limitations**

One limitation of our study is the many participants who had to be excluded, resulting in a reduced sample size. A majority of our exclusions were the result of participants being unable to either (a) accurately describe the manipulation in their own words, or (b) recognize the manipulation in a multiple-choice question. Those who remained were successful in both manipulation checks, which indicates that the sample we analyzed correctly processed the manipulation, increasing the likely validity of our results. Still, the fact that a large number of participants did not pass the manipulation checks suggests that our manipulation may have been weak. Future work should endeavor to reinforce these key manipulations, perhaps by

**Figure 2**  
*The Interaction Between Intention and Openness, Collapsing Across Expectation Conditions*



*Note.* Error ribbons represent 95% confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

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having participants write out a summary of the instructions at the time they are delivered.

Another limitation is that our stimuli may have been too threatening to be perceived as funny for many participants, even when absurdity was expected. This would be consistent with the results of Proulx et al. (2010), who found no influence of expectation and intention combined. Our stimuli are highly popular Tweets from the relatively large community on Weird Twitter. Some of the accounts responsible for the Tweets we employed have over a million followers. That said, this type of humor is still subjectively experienced and people will vary in their appreciation. It may be that the meaning violations we presented were perceived as malign by many in our sample, even when it was expected. This possibility is consistent with the data as the overall mean funniness rating was 2.57, below the scale's midpoint of 4 (*moderately funny*) with 61 participants (14%) rating the funniness of all targets as a 1 (*not at all funny*). Future studies should use stimuli with less severe meaning violations allowing for a greater variability in responses and related sensitivity to detect associations.

### Conclusion

This study of Weird Twitter raises questions for future research and contributes to our broader understanding of absurd humor. Expecting absurdity increases the funniness ratings of an absurd joke, likely by reducing the threat of norm violation (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Future work should measure threats directly to test this hypothesis. Our findings also help explain the growing popularity of absurd media, with audiences selecting this content with a pre-existing expectation of absurdity. Just like any other media, users of Twitter have their preferred genres. There is no shortage of accounts dedicated to traditional forms of humor like puns, pranks, or political satire. But for those who like to expect the unexpected, Weird Twitter delivers: “a crispy, flaky crust. A moist and delicious filling. That’s the way my closest friends and colleagues describe me” (Ringworm, 2021).

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(Appendix follows)

## Appendix

### Absurd Jokes Taken From Weird Twitter

- For sale: car. Does not stop. You will have to jump in as I jump out. I have been driving this car for three years. Please help me (Ristolable, 2014).
- Putting cool gothic steeples everywhere was my trademark as an architect and I'll be damned if I change that now that I'm a plastic surgeon (Bandit, 2011).
- The chief put my gun and badge in the paper shredder but it just broke the paper shredder (Wolf Pupy, 2014b).
- Forgot my iPod so I'm just beatboxing on the bus. Driver is breakdancing in the aisle. Bus is going crazy right now. We haven't moved in 2 hr (Famous Crab 2020, 2011).
- If your grave doesn't say "rest in peace" on it you are automatically drafted into the skeleton war (dril, 2013).
- Hour 7 of refusing to say "when" as Mom spoons more and more mashed potatoes onto my plate. Grandma crying, uncles yelling, I will not yield (\$8 dunce cap, 2012).
- One hundred percent of survey respondents said: help us get out of this tall tree. We didn't know this survey involved being stuck in a tree (Ringworm, 2014a).
- I'd be extra scared if a break-in occurred while I was in the shower and the burglar saw me in there, fully clothed and eating my soup (Tara Shoe, 2014).
- It's reductive to describe my new website, hoogle, as "just google for horses" (Ringworm, 2014b).
- A wise old man told me the things that matter the most are the things that matter the least, later we found out he was just a pile of hair (Wolf Pupy, 2014a).

Received November 29, 2021

Revision received February 27, 2023

Accepted March 30, 2023 ■