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**‘Bunch of jerks’: Research shows how brands can benefit from reclaiming insults**

Written by Helaine Hickson,UW-Milwaukee

When the Carolina Hurricanes were called “a bunch of jerks” for their on-ice celebrations, the hockey team didn’t take offense. They printed the phrase on T-shirts and embraced the insult — and saw a surge in support. The phrase became the team’s rallying cry, and the shirt became the bestselling merch in the franchise’s history.

That moment sparked the curiosity of Katherine Du, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Lubar College of Business.

“What really fascinated me was how the insult, which was meant to shame, ended up fueling pride and even loyalty among fans,” Du says. “That led me to wonder — can reappropriating insults actually help brands?”

Her answer? Yes — sometimes.

In [new research published in the Journal of Consumer Psychology](https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.70001), Du and co-authors Lingrui Zhou (University of Hong Kong) and Keisha Cutright (Duke University) found that when done thoughtfully, brands that reclaim insults can actually strengthen their image, increase customer engagement, and even boost brand choice.

**‘Satanic activity’**

For example, Hillary Clinton’s supporters famously reclaimed the term “nasty woman” as a badge of feminist pride. LeBron James responded to being told to “shut up and dribble” by trademarking the phrase and using it to spotlight athletes’ voices beyond sports. A small restaurant in North Carolina even embraced a bizarre online review that claimed “satanic activity” was happening there by putting the insult on a T-shirt — turning mockery into viral merchandise.

Du’s study shows that these examples aren’t just quirky PR stunts. While reappropriating an insult is not the usual response — most often, brands ignore or rebut criticism, or even apologize in some cases — it may actually reflect deeper psychological dynamics.

“When a brand reclaims a negative label, it signals confidence and humor, which sparks interest in and connection with the brand,” Du says. “A brand that is willing to apply an insult to itself is presumed to be light-hearted and assured in what they have to offer consumers. But it has to be done in the right context and in the right way.”

The research involved multiple experiments with thousands of participants. The findings show that reappropriating insults can work particularly well when the insult is somewhat absurd but not deeply problematic (think “jerks” or “weirdos”).

**Context matters**

But she also cautions that reappropriation can backfire when it is insensitive or ignores real issues, like when a brand legitimately fails consumers or engages in morally questionable actions.

“Context really matters,” she says. “The risk is real, but so is the reward. Surprisingly, we have studies showing that reappropriation can work in several business contexts and for many types of businesses.”

Du’s work offers a valuable playbook for marketers looking to stand out in a crowded media landscape. It also provides insights for consumers curious about why some branding moves resonate more than others.

“In today’s world, we’re constantly navigating labels and judgments,” says Du. “This research shows that sometimes, owning an insult and turning it into something positive can be a powerful way to connect with people.”