

HACKERS OR HELPERS? SUBVERTING CORPORATE INTERESTS THROUGH SATIRICAL SOCIAL MEDIA

Abstract

This study examined the motivations behind a satirical Facebook page called Hope that Helps (HTH). HTH creators impersonated companies, public institutions, and public figures to subvert the interests of large organizations. HTH creators, Ben Palmer and Nick Price, were motivated by the desire to entertain, dissatisfaction with corporate greed, anger over entitled consumers, and the desire to empower marginalized customer service workers. When the motivations were explored, paradoxes between humor, control, and resistance emerged from the findings. The first paradox was the amount of control that HTH followers had over content on the page. Another paradox was that Ben and Nick thought they empowered customer representatives through the page, but as external stakeholders they did not know how their work impacted employees. It is possible that, while funny, HTH posts created work challenges for the employees that Ben and Nick wanted to help. Implications and future directions for studying satirist motivations in online environments are discussed.

Introduction

Humor is a part of the human experience, yet this form of communication serves multiple goals and is contextually and culturally based. Recently humor on social media has become an emergent field in communication research (Pennington & Hall, 2014). Satirical social media outlets have proved to be heavily influential in entertaining followers and advancing political agendas (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016; Schrank, 2016). But despite the growing influence of satirists online, it is hard to decipher the motivations behind satirical content. Lynch (2009) explained that communication research dealing with humor or comedic messages needs to detail humorist motivations. This study explored the motivations behind the satirical Facebook page called Hope that Helps (HTH) through interviews and field observation with the page creators. HTH regularly engaged in resistance acts including corporate impersonation, critique of government institutions, and ridicule of American consumers. By studying the motivations behind HTH, this project illuminated the goals of Facebook satirists and the intersection between comedy and resistance online.

Literature Review

Communication researchers have explored social functions of humor in a variety of contexts (Meyer, 2000; Sayers & Fachira, 2015; Lynch, 2002). Meyer (2000) explained that humor serves four key social functions: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. While identification and clarification are the social functions that unite individuals, the enforcement and differentiation functions are divisive. Meyer's (2000) claims about the social functions of humor brings understanding to the ways humor online can solidify identity for in-groups and exclude out-group members.

Regardless of which type of humor a researcher is describing or which medium the humor operates in, humor is paradoxical in nature. Ultimately the paradox of control and resistance in humor is a continuum as a “joke may be neither wholly control nor wholly resistance, but rather interpreted through the degrees of control and resistance present in the expression” (Lynch, 2002, p. 439). Lynch proposed that to take a holistic approach to studying the paradoxes of humor, a researcher must first explore the motivations of the humorist. Humorist motivations are vital to understanding the context of the message being communicated, this context is necessary for exploring humor’s paradoxes.

Humor has been connected to organizational dissent expression in communication research. Sayers and Fachira (2015) examined a group of hairstylists that used social media to cope with difficult customers. Often the messages (or gripes) about difficult customers were humorous in nature and were cited as informal resistance acts. Sayers and Fachira (2015) urged other researchers to continue exploring the relationship between social media humor and organizational resistance to test the transferability of their findings.

Garner, Chandler, and Wallace (2015) also explored the relationships between humor and dissent by surveying student interns at three American universities. These researchers found that students used humor to express hidden messages of dissent, suggest alternatives, accomplish some type of individual or organizational change, cope emotionally with stress, make others laugh, and avoid workplace punishment (Garner et al., 2015). Garner et al. explained that their use of quantitative methodology was an expedient way to study a large sample size, but urged that qualitative research be used to confirm their research findings. The authors argued that since humor is such a complex communication phenomenon that it is best to conduct emergent qualitative research including the opportunity to observe humor in action.

In addition to humor dissent, humor in social media has become an emergent field. Pennington and Hall (2014) researched humor in Facebook profiles and how an individual's use of humor affected approval from their Facebook friends. Pennington and Hall urged researchers to continue exploring the ways in which humor interacts with individuals through Facebook, as there are many nuances between the use of humor and the construction of identity in social media environments.

When studying humor in social media environments, satirical sources are arguably the biggest outlet for comedic messages. We live in an age of authentic satire, where satirical news articles or advertisements can seem like legitimate sources to the untrained eye (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016). One of the leading satirical media outlets is *The Onion* which started as a print satirical news source in 1988 (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016). Now *The Onion* is an exclusively online media outlet that reaches 10 million followers via social media channels: social media accounts for forty percent of its traffic and an increasing amount of page views each day (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016). Winkler (2015) explained that social media is a forum where an everyday person can offer up an image, a video, or a status and see that content be shared with hundreds of thousands of people, a quantity of people previously unreachable unless an influencer was a celebrity or politician. Considering the extraordinary influence that a satirical outlet, such as *The Onion* or an individual with enough followers can have, researchers have questioned the degree to which satirists respond to opinion leaders versus how many have become opinion leaders.

Crittenden, Hopkins, and Simmons (2011) asserted that throughout history satire had been used to raise awareness and critique society, but now satire is its own highly influential genre. These researchers presented four types of satirical opinion leaders which include: the

traditionalist, the creator, the rookie, and technologist (Crittenden et al., 2011). Crittenden et al., established excellent descriptive categories for different types of satirists, but urged researchers to explore how these satirists can use social media as opinion leaders and to examine the impact their satire has with the public.

Satirists can advance political agendas because of their influence as opinion leaders. Alt-Right is a white supremacist political group that used humorous memes on social media to influence large groups of people and advance larger political agendas (Schrank, 2016). Alt-right is known for coining terms such as “cuckservatives” to describe Republicans who embrace racial equality and “libtards” for anyone who identifies as a Democrat or a Liberal (Schrank, 2016). The group has hidden codes for its followers, such as using three parentheses to distinguish a public figure as Jewish, but overall tries to manufacture content that appeals to millennials at large (Schrank, 2016). This humorous content has a simple goal: if Alt-Right can get millennials laughing at overt racism then racist ideology can be used as an acceptable form of discourse. Humor’s framing in social media is a way for competing groups to gain influence, but there has been little communication research evaluating the motivations behind these influences.

In addition to satire being a tool to advance political agendas, researchers have also evaluated satire as an act of resistance. Zoller (2014) explained that from a broad perspective, acts of resistance can be categorized as either overt or covert. Ashforth and Mael (1998) defined resistance as, “intentional acts of commission or omission that defy the wishes of others” (p. 90). With this framework, counter-institutional resistance can be understood as intentional acts of commission or omission that defy the wishes of larger institutions or corporations. Ashforth and Mael also explained that an act of resistance has a symbolic value that transcends the tangible

impact of the act. Regardless of the tangible impact of resistance acts, the symbolic value is still significant.

Lynch (2009) identified humor as an act of resistance where “workers can safely use resistance humor to express grievance, resist, and challenge unfair and/or burdensome managerial restraints” (p. 459). Humor has also been cited as a form of political resistance against government bodies, Sorenson (2008) explained how humor was used in the Serbian Otpor resistance movement. Sorenson argued that there is a difference between serious and humorous messages, but humor can reframe serious messages in powerful ways. As a researcher, Sorenson explained that humor is significantly under-researched in relation to resistance, especially as a nonviolent way to change public attitudes and peacefully fight oppression.

Counter-institutional resistance and humor have also been studied with external stakeholders online. Mikkonen, Moisander, and Firat (2011) studied sarcasm in anti-Christmas forums and blogs as an act of resistance. Gossett and Kilker (2006) examined the counter-institutional website, radioshacksucks.com, and found that a variety of stakeholders voiced their concerns and frustrations with Radio Shack using sarcasm and jokes. These researchers categorized the online posts as a form of dissent because the website gave voice to criticisms directed at Radio Shack leadership (Gossett & Kilker, 2006). 68). Both Mikkonen, et al. (2011) and Gossett and Kilker (2006) encouraged communication researchers to keep exploring the relationship between humor and resistance, especially from external stakeholders in online environments.

Past research has confirmed the intersection of humor and resistance as well as the incredible influence that satirical social media has in the digital age. While online humor and resistance messages have been heavily researched, rarely have the motivations of content

creators been examined. This study filled research gaps surrounding the motivations of Facebook satirists and the perceived impact of their content. This study also filled research gaps dealing with the paradoxes of humor, control, and resistance found in online environments.

Setting

This case study explored the motivations of Ben Palmer and Nick Price who started the HTH satirical Facebook page. On the HTH page, Ben and Nick impersonated customer service representatives from a variety of companies and responded to comments or complaints that were posted on a company's page. Ben and Nick have impersonated a wide variety of companies representing different industries, well known celebrities and public figures, and entire cities (some examples include their work with fake City of Atlanta and City of Los Angeles Facebook pages). When creating content for the page, Ben and Nick did not follow a specific method as their work was personally inspired or done as a reaction to current events.

Ben and Nick treated social media as a new frontier, a place where powerful institutions could be mocked or manipulated. Ultimately Ben and Nick revealed the vulnerabilities that large companies have when using social media to connect with their customers. HTH illuminated how social media was a space where organizations and individuals compete for influence. The competition for space and voice in a social media environment was unique in that individuals, like Ben and Nick, could have large spheres of influence that were previously unattainable in older media forms.

This case study examined the motivations of the HTH creators as the page required a significant investment of time and resources without any clear incentive. The following research questions are answered:

RQ1: What goals do the HTH creators aim to accomplish by impersonating corporations through satirical social media channels?

RQ2: How does HTH showcase the resistance and control continuum within humor's paradoxes?

Methods and Data Analysis

Using Lynch's (2002) prescription to explore humorist motivations, I conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and field observation to answer the research questions (Whyte, 1982; Lindlof & Taylor 2011). To conduct these interviews, I used purposeful sampling because this type of sampling could provide rich information, especially because the studied phenomenon was not commonly experienced (Creswell, 1998). It is rare to find people who would devote their lives to satirical social media and counter-institutional resistance, so I deliberately sought out my participants.

In addition to semi-structured interviews with Ben and Nick, I completed several hours of field observation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). During field observation Ben and Nick showed me how they created content for HTH and how they navigated around Facebook algorithms to create satirical pages that resulted in convincing corporate impersonations. Along with observation of how Ben and Nick created content, I observed one of Ben Palmer's comedy shows where he presented HTH material in front of a live audience and gave humorous commentary. The field observation helped me contextualize the interview findings.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, coded with axial and in vivo coding, then analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I went through three rounds of axial coding in which I organized and reorganized the data to identify the emergent themes. During field observation, I took field notes and recorded analytic memos to assist with

data analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). After I analyzed the findings I used detailed coding description and triangulation to verify the findings. To have a better understanding of the participants' experience and establish the most prominent themes I engaged in microanalysis including open, axial and in vivo coding (Creswell, 1998). Triangulation was achieved by supplementing data from interviews with field observation of HTH's working methods and public presentations. The field observation confirmed the transferability of the findings on humorist motivations and the paradoxes of humor, control, and resistance.

Consent for the study was approved by the University's Internal Review Board (IRB) and informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews started (Creswell, 1998). Due to the unique public nature of the HTH Facebook page I received direct permission from Ben and Nick to use their real names in the study. Ben and Nick did not receive compensation for their participation and were subjected to no possible risk or harm through the interview or field observation process.

Findings

Humor quality assurance. Ben and Nick explained that while HTH could accomplish other goals, their main concern was that the page remained genuinely funny. Nick explained, "The primary goal is to just gonna be to get people to laugh. And to do it in a way that's not at anyone's expense unless they deserve it" (Nick: 23). Nick and Ben explained that there were many people on social media who were just outright rude and spent their time "trolling." These creators wanted to distinguish themselves from these "trolls" by having higher level creative humor and not taking "cheap shots". If a joke was to be at anyone's expense Nick explained that it had to be well deserved and done in good taste.

Another aspect that made Ben and Nick's comedic strategies unique was that they looked to their fans to keep them accountable. Ben described this when he stated:

Our fans keep us accountable. They'll tell us when they (targets of HTH ridicule) didn't deserve it or if it's not funny...it makes you better to have that criticism. It's a competitive advantage, they're just people who are giving us notes on our product. (Ben: 27)

If the creators did something in bad taste, or simply posted something unfunny Ben and Nick found that their fans were quick to respond. Ben said that he had a hard time taking criticism at first, but over time he saw this type of feedback as something that gave their page a competitive advantage over other satirists who used social media. In this way, Nick and Ben considered their fans an integral part of their success. It was clear to that to Ben and Nick, comedic strategies were no laughing matter.

Antecedents to Resistance

Nick and Ben cited a variety of factors that inspired them to start the HTH page. Nick and Ben were in part inspired by growing cultural problems including corporate neglect, personal issues in customer service jobs, and the growing entitlement of American consumers. In addition to problems, Nick and Ben also shared a vision for how HTH could advance society and remedy the cultural problems they perceived.

Big companies are not doing their jobs. The first emergent theme surrounding the inspiration behind HTH was that corporations were not doing their due diligence in handling customer complaints. In the age of social media, where a company can capitalize on the social media presence it has with customers, it was surprising that big corporations often ignored customer complaints via social media channels. Ben was first inspired to start impersonating

customer service staff when he discovered a multitude of complaints concerning a popular app based transportation network company. This company charged extra fees for customers to request rides during peak hours or holidays, Ben looked at their Facebook page on New Year's Eve and found many customers complaining about the extra fees they were billed. Despite this company's reputation for innovative social media marketing campaigns, Ben found that these customer complaints were widely ignored. For Ben, this represented a problem with large companies that used social media for self-promotion but rarely addressed the complaints of its paying customers. Ben felt that if he could afford the time to respond to customer complaints, even for the sake of satire, that corporations could afford to acknowledge their customers as well.

Nick also expressed a similar viewpoint about company neglect via social media channels, adding that sometimes companies responded to customer complaints in ways that ignored the issue. Nick called these "boiler plate" responses where companies gave the appearance of responding to customers but did not resolve the issue or pay close attention to the customer's complaint. Nick explained this view point:

These corporations that have been around doing something a certain way forever- some post on Facebook won't change their mind. I guess to that point that's why they're still pasting those boiler plate responses to their customers, because they don't really care about what people post on Facebook. Whether it is the customers or whether it's us.

(Nick: 34)

Nick explained that customers use social media as a voice to make their concerns heard, but that companies were rarely engaged with that feedback. Nick often found that companies were also not inclined to respond to HTH comments on their page, often opting to delete the comments rather than respond to HTH criticism.

But corporate neglect was not the only issue with these Facebook wall posts, Nick and Ben found that customer complaints were often exaggerated or unreasonable. Ben explained this when he stated, “First I was mad at [transportation network company] for not responding and then I started reading the complaints and the complaints started making me mad” (Ben: 2). During a time when Ben did not have a car and had limited transportation options, he found it hard to empathize with people who could afford the convenience of transportation-for-hire. It became clear that companies were not the only issue, customer entitlement was also something HTH critiqued.

We turn our blessings into curses. Like Ben, Nick also saw the difference between legitimate social media complaints and unreasonable whining. Nick stated, “Over time things changed. When I first started out, the posts I would make were highlighting how big these companies are and how little they care about people. Over time, I started to notice the more entitled customers” (Nick: 3). Nick and Ben thought that American consumers had grown spoiled and these privileges caused problems in their lives.

Ben was vocal about the problems he saw with the growing entitlement of American consumers. Ben explained, “In America and other countries that have it as nice as we do, we let our blessings cause stress. We let good things become problems when they shouldn’t be there” (Ben: 31). Ben explained that luxuries made it hard for American consumers to distinguish wants from needs, and that was a root cause of stress and anxiety. Ben gave an example of this phenomenon:

“If you get a new car-before you had a piece of shit car and if someone were to scratch it you wouldn’t give two fucks. But you have this brand-new car and you’re so happy about it and then someone comes by and gives it a little ding and now your whole day is ruined.

Why are you letting this new thing ruin your day? It's supposed to be good but now you become a slave to it" (Ben: 31).

Ben explained that entitled and materialistic people take their blessings for granted and let their possessions control them. Ben went on to give several more examples including when people take for granted that they can regularly afford to spend \$5.00 on coffee and overreact to a coffee barista who messes up their drink. Ben thought large groups of middle-to-upper class consumers had a growing entitlement that ruined their personal satisfaction.

A shared vision for advancing society. Nick and Ben also shared a common vision for how HTH could improve society. Ben explained, "Satire is supposed to advance society, it's to critique to improve society" (Ben: 7). Ben thought that the HTH satire could draw attention to cultural problems and bring about social change. In this way, satire was used as device to critique dominant ideology or behavior- a way to draw attention to something people might not usually question.

Nick described that in addition to advancing society through satire, HTH could help individuals engage in perspective taking. Nick elaborated, "I think at the end of the day it can illuminate different perspectives and help people see things from the other side of the fence as it were" (Nick: 36). Nick explained that this perspective taking could occur between companies, customers, and general groups of people on an interpersonal level. Nick saw perspective taking as a remedy to larger social problems including lack of gun control or discrimination against the transgender community.

Uncommon motivators. Nick and Ben had shared motivations for starting HTH and a common vision for how their page could improve society. Nick and Ben also had motivations they were not shared, these included: possible comedic fame, HTH as a way to hold people

accountable, and personal motivations because of poor experiences in the customer service industry.

The first motivation that Nick and Ben did not share was comedic fame. Ben had a vision that HTH would bring about significant financial gain or possibly a professional comedy career. When asked about why he spent so much time on this endeavor, Ben explained,

I would be looking at it and working at it as a full-time job. Cause at that time I sensed money, or I sensed an escape. I was like ‘Okay, I can get out of this, I can make this a job, a full-time job.’ And not have to work and do these jobs anymore. So, I really put a lot of energy into it” (Ben: 14).

Ben explained that to him, HTH either was a means of gaining money or a way to escape jobs that he did not enjoy. This was partly why Ben found connections between his work with HTH and the standup comedy he did. Ben was convinced that this type of work could give him enough momentum to be a professional stand-up comic.

While financial gain and a professional comedy career have not come to fruition for Ben, he was still interested in increasing the HTH fan base. Ben described his goals when he stated, “Once you start getting the following that you wanted, then we had goals. I want to get 10 million followers- I still say that” (Ben: 7). To Ben, gaining influence and increasing followers of HTH was a way for his larger comedic aspirations to materialize.

The second motivation that Nick and Ben differed on was that HTH could be a way to hold people accountable. This idea was dependent on the movement getting much more popular such that it would be a household name. Ben described a future where HTH was so well known that people refrained from lashing out at customer service reps so that they avoid getting spotlighted on the page. Ben stated:

Just if you're ordering pizza and the pizza doesn't come out for an hour and you're about to go off. And you're about to go bitch to that 16-year-old working the cash register. And then in the back of your mind you think, 'Wait a second- Hope that Helps' (Ben: 7)

Ben described the ways that HTH could be a medium for satire on a larger scale similar to popular shows like "South Park." Ben had a grandiose vision for what HTH could be and the ways in which their increased influence could improve the way customer service representatives were treated in a variety of industries.

The final motivation that Ben and Nick did not share was being fired from customer service jobs. Ben described multiple customer service jobs that he disliked and was fired from. The worst job he discussed was a job in the Midwest where he was a point of contact for vehicle emissions issues. In the county he lived in there was an emissions law that charged people up to \$300 if their vehicle did not pass an emissions test. Ben described this experience:

Basically, it [the job] was on the phone all day talking to pissed off people. And the energy just transfers into me and I'm just mad. I ended up getting fired because I slammed the phone down and swore. And then my supervisor sent me home and then I just appealed the suspension and I was like you guys need to hire more people cause this shit sucks. I don't want to answer the phone all the time talk to these pissed off people.

(Ben, 15-16).

Like most people, Ben had not always had the jobs he enjoyed. Due to the forceful language when describing the dissatisfaction in his former customer service roles and his experience getting fired, it was clear that these experiences shaped his work with HTH. This finding also illustrated the type of jobs that Ben wanted an escape from, hoping that this page could spark professional success.

Hackers or helpers. Before HTH, Nick experienced his fair share of corporate conflict. Nick explained a time when he ran into “legal trouble” with a large US based telecommunications company because he was part of a group that hacked the company’s firewalls and found a technological vulnerability. Nick described the situation:

Long story short some friends and I discovered a security vulnerability in their website a few years back. And it got disclosed to [US based telecommunications company]. And then [the company] instead of saying, ‘Thank you for letting us know’ they got the FBI involved. Then people went to jail for years and people got thrown into solitary confinement. It was a bad situation. (Nick: 4)

Nick and Ben described how companies often blame hackers to distract from their own corporate failures. To Nick, finding the security vulnerability and reporting it was an act of goodwill, a way to do the right thing. While Ben and Nick believed that the company would have grown stronger by offering these individuals programming positions, the company pursued legal action instead.

Ben and Nick described times when their work disrupted the corporations they critiqued. Nick cited a specific example when HTH was able to shut down the entire Facebook page of a Canadian telecommunications company. Nick explained that he had commented on customer posts when this company sent Nick a message asking him not to post on their page anymore. It was then that Nick realized that customer representatives were formatting their company profiles in a way that broke Facebook’s naming policy. Nick reported the page to Facebook and urged HTH fans to report the page as well. Nick explained that Facebook shut down the entire company’s social media presence. Nick described that this was a turning point for him as a HTH

contributor, “The movement in itself actually started to coalesce” (Nick: 8). For Nick and Ben, this was the first time that their page had thwarted a corporate agenda, this sparked other projects within their social media movement.

During field observation, Ben and Nick showed me a hoax they were working on. They had copied code from a popular app-based transportation network company’s website and were trying to launch an event under the company’s brand. Essentially this transportation network app company made money by hiring drivers who worked as contractors and took a percentage of the driver’s profits. Nick and Ben’s hoax would make the public think that for one day out of the year the travel network company would not take profits from drivers, this would drastically increase driver wages. Nick and Ben explained that if this hoax could gain enough traction it would put the company in a bind- either they would deny the hoax and get negative media coverage or they would be forced to perform this act of generosity towards its employees. In this way, Ben and Nick saw HTH as a way to subvert corporate agendas and force companies into acts of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Empowering the “little guy.” To Nick and Ben, the people who worked in customer service were often characterized as working in a lose-lose situation because they were never empowered to help customers. Nick explained the life of a customer service representative, “They’re stuck listening to angry people for a big heartless corporation and they’re not empowered to do anything either way” (Nick: 34). Nick explained that the plight of the modern customer representative was fraught with opposition on both sides- they had to put up with a large bureaucracy that does not have lower level employee’s best interests in mind while putting up with angry customers. Ben described HTH’s potential to defend customer service representatives, “these people who are like a small percentage or like the little guy- that’s where

we can be very strong, you know” (Ben: 20). Ben and Nick thought their ability to help customer service representatives was a strength of the page.

Ben and Nick explained that their page was a way to empower customer service reps from a wide variety of industries. An example of this empowerment was when Ben and Nick were doing many posts specifically featuring a popular build-your-own burrito fast food chain. They found that after they had been doing a series of posts, the company’s employees started breaking away from scripted responses and had more open dialogue with their customers. Nick explained:

Through seeing how this could resonate it’s kind of empowered them [these employees] and given their managers a little idea of giving the customer service people some leeway in how to deal with customers, it could be a good thing. (Nick: 18)

Ben and Nick explained customer service representatives found HTH material funny, and they felt as if they were defending these employees. In rare cases, as Nick described in the burrito fast food chain, they found that they paved the way and made it easier for customer representatives to have more direct interactions with customers.

Lastly, on the surface it might seem that Nick and Ben were making the customer service representatives’ jobs more difficult when they irritated customers on Facebook. Neither Ben nor Nick felt that their work had negative effects on customer service representatives. To these creators, customer service representatives were simply bystanders to work that they did against giant corporations and entitled customers. When describing these customer service representatives Ben stated:

They [customer service workers] have to do their job, protect their job. So in a way they're just innocent people. They're just trying to stay alive and make their money. If we were to attack anybody it would be the giant corporate machine. (Ben: 19)

Ben explained that he did not take it personal when employees had to report his posts or block him from a company's Facebook page, to him these employees were just innocent bystanders of the larger HTH acts of corporate resistance. Both Nick and Ben felt that their content empathized with these workers and gave voice to a marginalized group of hardworking people.

Satire without borders. Both Nick and Ben explained how their movement had spread into an international context. Nick explained this international phenomenon when he stated:

What we've also seen throughout this, is that especially in the beginning, when it started to gain some real traction there were pages in the Netherlands and like all over the place in different languages that started doing the same thing. And now there's so many, if you just look up customer service on Facebook and there's just hundreds and hundreds of pages of people who said 'Hey we like this, we can do this too. We don't need this under this banner.' And they can go off and do their own thing. (Nick: 12-13)

Neither Ben nor Nick sought to control this type of counter-institutional expression. Both creators sought to control the posts under their own page to protect their brand, but they did not audit other pages that sought to do the same thing, regardless of the country they resided in. Ben stated, "We tapped into something" (Ben: 13). To Ben and Nick, HTH sparked a global movement, where counter-institutional resistance was happening in social media channels across the world.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivations behind the popular satirical Facebook page, Hope that Helps (HTH), and the possible paradoxes within the humor featured on the page. The research illuminated goals that HTH creators, Ben Palmer and Nick Price, had for the page and the impact they believed HTH made in society. Findings that addressed the paradoxes of control and resistance in HTH satire also emerged. Online satire and computer mediated acts of counter-institutional resistance have rarely explored the motivations behind the acts themselves. These findings have implications for the study of humor and counter-institutional messages online.

HTH Motivations

The first research question asked: what goals do HTH creators aim to accomplish by impersonating corporations through satirical social media channels? The data showcased several intentional goals that Ben and Nick had including: comedic fame, broader influence, empowering underrepresented employees, and encouraging gratitude in American consumers. The data also revealed that Ben and Nick thought their page had a global impact because their page was imitated by foreign groups across the world.

It was clear from the interviews that Ben wanted comedic fame from the HTH page. Nick agreed that humor should be the focus of the page, but did not see any type of career in professional comedy. Unlike Nick, Ben had convinced himself that recognition from the page could lead to a career in professional comedy. This finding augments what we know about the extraordinary influence an individual can have through social media. We live in an age where one Instagram model can have a platform to reach half a million viewers (Winkler, 2015). This finding also connected with the popularity of major satirical news outlets because of social media

followers (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016). It seemed counterintuitive that an individual who critiqued wealthy corporate executives and petty consumers would have his own uniquely American dream for fame and fortune. The possibility that fame motivations can play a major role in online content should be explored by communication scholars who study humor or satire in a computer mediated environment.

Along with broader influence, the findings indicated that the creators thought there was potential for HTH to hold the public accountable. Pennington and Hall (2014) have examined how humor affects a person's personal sphere of influence but there has not been research on social media's ability to lead individuals toward self-censorship. Ben's idea that the page would become so popular for ridiculing rude customers that some customers would censor themselves brings a fresh perspective to how online satirists view their role in society. Communication researchers should be more cognizant of the broader social goals that online satirists have when posting content.

The final personal goal that HTH creators had when creating the page was negative experiences in past customer service jobs. Ben detailed the negative experiences from a few jobs that he had been fired from. This finding furthers research done in Gossett and Kilker's (2006) piece on radioshacksucks.com where they discovered that the anonymous online forums could be used by disgruntled employees who were terminated from the Radio Shack company. While Ben and Nick did not use the page for personal revenge against past employers, their negative customer service experiences influenced their opinions of large corporations and the plight of customer service employees. Unlike the forum that Gossett and Kilker studied which had a relatively small sphere of influence, Ben and Nick's work illuminated possibilities for almost any disgruntled employee to tarnish the reputation of their employer through social media.

Organizational communication researchers, particularly those interested in dissent, should keep exploring the ways that employees can critique their companies on social media whether those messages are humorous or not.

Ben and Nick's poor customer service experiences shaped how they viewed employees in the service industry. To Ben and Nick, customer service representatives were in a difficult position because they had to deal with demanding customers but were not empowered to help them. The companies that were too big to care simply had representatives to console entitled customers, but did empower the representatives to help customers. The findings indicated that Ben and Nick thought the HTH page empowered customer service representatives and served as emotional catharsis by critiquing the difficult customers. This finding confirms past research on how humor can be used for emotional catharsis or a tool of dissent (Garner et al., 2015; Sayers & Fachira 2015). Gossett and Kilker (2006) explored how online forums can serve as emotional catharsis or a space for dissent expression. Sayers and Fachira (2015) explored the ways that hairstylists used humor online to vent about the difficult customers they serviced. The main differentiation between the findings from past research was that Ben and Nick were stakeholders who neither had employment or consumer ties to the companies they impersonated. It was a new finding for unaffiliated stakeholders to gripe about companies and customers they have no relation to. Social media allows a wide variety of stakeholders to critique companies and consumers, communication researchers should explore the large number of people who comment or post on corporate pages but have no affiliation with the company they dialogue with.

In addition to making an impact in the lives of customer service representatives, Ben and Nick also wanted to make an impact with consumers. Ben and Nick considered American consumers to be entitled, over demanding, and spoiled. The findings indicated that Ben and Nick

wanted HTH to make American consumers grateful for their quality of life and identify with the customer service representatives they interacted with. By helping American consumers identify with customer service representatives, Ben and Nick thought that the consumers would be more empathic when interacting with these workers. These findings connected with humor theories related to identification both in small groups and larger resistance movements (Meyer, 2000; Sorenson, 2008). Communication scholars should keep exploring the connection between humor and identity, especially in its ability to help in-group members empathize and identify with out-group members.

The last set of findings in response to the first research question detailed an unintended global impact HTH had. Ben and Nick explained that after starting the HTH page that other people started copycat pages around the world. Schrank (2016) explained situations where the White supremacist Alt-Right group copied popular memes and twisted the memes for their own agenda, but there has not been a study on how social media can spark copycat counter-institutional movements. Communication researchers should continue to study trends that are copied in social media environments, especially when a movement transcends a specific cultural context.

HTH Paradoxes

The second research question asked: how does HTH showcase the resistance and control continuum within humor's paradoxes? The findings that addressed the second question included: the accountability of HTH followers, a HTH agenda that forces companies to act socially responsible, and hacking that allows Ben and Nick to subvert company agendas.

The first paradox of control and resistance was found in the relationship that Ben and Nick had with HTH fans. While followers of the page would approve of Nick and Ben deceiving

or insulting a customer, sometimes the followers felt that the jokes were mean or too extreme. Ben and Nick explained that their fans kept them accountable to having a higher quality humor and picking the right type of people to insult on the page. Lynch (2002) explained that humor is paradoxical in nature and often leads to counterintuitive relationships between control and resistance. This finding confirmed the complicated relationship that humor can create, where Ben and Nick could gain either approval or disapproval from their fans from the same type of satire. This finding also displayed the complexity of counter-institutional resistance for people who create content for public consumption, the type of resistance messages Ben and Nick crafted were controlled by the followers who held them accountable. Communication researchers should continue examining the complicated relationship between counter-institutional resistance and stakeholder accountability in social media environments.

The findings also showcased the paradox of control and resistance that Ben and Nick had with the companies they critiqued. On one hand, Ben and Nick used satire to resist companies who prioritized fiscal agendas over the well-being of its customers and employees. But in addition to sending out resistance messages, Ben and Nick had a clear vision of corporate social responsibility and wanted to force companies into socially responsible acts. The examples of hacking into company code or creating hoaxes demonstrated that HTH had the potential to control larger corporations. The forced corporate social responsibility attempts showed that Ben and Nick were not content with critiquing companies or subverting corporate agendas, they wanted to control how companies interacted with employees and customers. Ashforth and Mael (1998) explained that resistance acts have a symbolic value independent of tangible outcomes. Whether Ben and Nick could successfully perpetuate a hoax did not affect the symbolic value of control as a tool of resistance in social media environments where misinformation is

commonplace. Communication researchers should keep exploring instances where control and resistance paradoxes are present in online movements.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study was one of the first attempts to explore motivations of online satirists, there were limitations in working with one set of satirists. It is possible that other creators of online satirical media have completely different goals for their messaging and how their content can impact society. In the modern digital age, it can be difficult to identify the creators of satirical content as many Instagram accounts, Facebook pages, and YouTube accounts are operated by anonymous authors. Communication researchers should continue exploring satirist motivations to test the transferability of the findings featured in this study.

Conclusion

Social media allows individuals to have a wider sphere of influence than ever before, especially when showcasing satirical content (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016; Winkler, 2015). Unless a satirist chooses to share their personal views, motivations, or authorial intent it is hard to decipher the reasons why they create satirical content. Investigating the motivations behind the satirical Facebook page, Hope that Helps, illuminated grandiose visions for the page and ways that the content could be used to subvert corporate agendas. Since humor is complex and paradoxical in nature, this study also revealed the paradoxes of control and resistance in HTH satirical content. My hope is that this study can illustrate the importance of investigating motivations of satirists and humorists when researching humorous messages.

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