

# “Yo mama so fat we had to run TWO studies”: Appreciation of mother jokes as a function of masculine honour beliefs and joke characteristics

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## Abstract

*Two studies examine factors associated with reactions to the popular mother joke format (i.e., jokes denigrating or disrespecting the audience’s mother), both in general (Study 1, n = 167 undergraduates, predominantly White) and for specific jokes (Study 2, n = 215 undergraduates, predominantly White). Study 1, a correlational design, found higher endorsement of masculine honour beliefs was associated with greater willingness to share and perceived funniness of mother jokes in general; all but one honour subscale (family) shared these relationships. Content analysis of participants’ qualitative responses indicate that participants primarily think about mother jokes in terms of their content and performance, and participant-provided examples of mother jokes typically fit a scalar format and primarily target four domains (weight, intelligence, appearance, sexuality). Study 2, an experimental design, examined the relationships between masculine honour beliefs and responses to specific jokes from each of these four domains, using a between-groups experimental design to further examine the effects of joke type (ugly, fat, stupid, sexual) and the relationship of the joke teller (friend, stranger). Results also showed participants perceived mother jokes more negatively when they were told by a stranger than a friend, and that fat mother jokes and sexual mother jokes were perceived more negatively than ugly mother jokes and stupid mother jokes. Overall masculine honour beliefs were unrelated with perceptions of specific mother jokes, but two subscales (virtue, family) showed opposing relationships with these evaluations. The diverging relationships of masculine honour subscales and mother joke perceptions between these two studies are discussed.*

*Keywords: humour appreciation, benign-violation theory, masculine honour beliefs, joke content, disparagement humour.*

## 1. Introduction

The mother joke (also known as a “your mom” or “yo mama [momma]” joke) has been a staple of insult humour for generations. The typical format as we know it today gained popularity in the 1990’s when they were heavily featured on the television show *In Living Color* as part of a recurring sketch in which contestants on a game show exchanged such jokes (e.g., “Yo mama’s so stupid, she asked for a price check at the 99-cent store.”; Wayans et al., 1993), but jokes insulting or disrespecting one’s mother date further back. The first film to feature a mother joke was 1975’s *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (“Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries!”; Gilliam & Jones, 1975), and William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1594) is considered the first published mother joke (“Villain, what hast thou done?” “That which thou canst not undo.” “Thou hast undone our mother.” “Villain, I have done thy mother.”; Vincent, 2014). Indeed, archaeologists identified a Babylonian tablet dating back to 3500 BCE that appears to feature one of these jokes, though the exact translation is lost to time (“...of your mother is by the one who has intercourse with her. What or who is it?”; Rao, 2012). Mother jokes still pervade contemporary society, appearing in dedicated joke books (e.g., Laughing, 2015; Remark, 2022), movies (e.g., *White Men Can’t Jump*, Shelton, 1992; *Meet the Spartans*, Friedberg & Seltzer, 2008), and television shows (e.g., *South Park*, Parker & Stone, 2011; *Saturday Night Live*, Sublette et al., 2023). Mother jokes are also a common response to hecklers (Conway, 1995); in fact, U.S. President Donald Trump even attempted a mother joke against a protester at a political rally in 2016: “Your mother is voting for Trump” (Sullivan, 2016). Given the historical and modern relevance of this popular joke format, we sought to examine factors that may influence appreciation of these widely-used but under-studied jokes.

### 1.1. “Your Mom” is a joke format

In their analyses of these jokes, Stanzak (2012) notes that modern mother jokes typically follow the standardised format of a *scalar joke*, or one that employs exaggeration and absurdity to emphasise the incongruous relationship between two concepts; in other words, it follows the blueprint “X is so Y that Z” (Bergen & Binsted, 2003). Stanzak (2012) splits this blueprint for mother jokes into four components. First is the *introductory formula* that conveys the upcoming statement is indeed a mother joke, most commonly taking the form “Yo Momma so” (i.e., the “X is so” in the blueprint). Second is the *modifying element*, that defines the type of relationship or comparison at the centre of the joke (i.e., the “Y” in the blueprint); virtually any descriptor can fill this role (e.g., “ugly”, “old”). The third and fourth components work in tandem to complete the joke (i.e., the “Z” in the blueprint). A *causal component* is effectively another stage of setup; by itself it is not humorous and typically describes a normal/neutral scenario. It pairs with a *consequential component* that employs various rhetorical devices to produce the funny mental image of just how Y (fat, ugly, old, etc.) the mother must be given the information presented by the causal and consequential components. We see each of these components in the *In Living Color* example provided at the start of this paper. After the introductory frame of “Yo mama’s so”, they choose the modifying element of “stupid”, establishing the type of insult aimed at the mother. Completing the joke, they present the causal component “she asked for a price check” (a relatively normal behaviour) with the consequential component “at the 99-cent store” (a context that renders the price check absurd to ask for in the first place).

The scalar structure of mother joke gained popularity from *In Living Color* (itself based on the ritual insult game “The Dozens”; Randolph & Lewis, 2023), but not all mother jokes fit this

format. The Twitter/X account @CNNyourmom posts real news headlines with a word or phrase swapped out for “your mom” (e.g., “Your Mom Threatens Sea Levels”, “Your Mom Available to Everyone for \$1500”; Peters, 2014). Mother jokes can also take the form of sexual humour that may or may not follow the scalar structure. Conway (1995) notes comedians often respond to hecklers by insinuating they’ve personally had sex with the heckler’s mother (e.g., “I went to [an ice cream shop] and the flavour of the month was your mother. I had two scoops.”), mirroring the sexual form used in the *Titus Andronicus* example mentioned above. Furthermore, based on the 1,000+ definitions provided by users of *Urban Dictionary* (“Your Mom,” 2024) and the contributors to *TV Tropes* (“Your Mom,” 2009) over the past two decades, even just the phrase “your mom” can be used as a low-effort humorous response to virtually any prompt, either by itself (e.g., “What are you doing today?” “Your mom.”) or in the same word replacement approach of the @CNNyourmom Twitter account (e.g., replying to “This pizza tastes weird,” with “Your mom tastes weird.”). Regardless of the format specifics, there generally appears to be an enduring appreciation of mother jokes.

## 1.2. “Your Mom” is funny: benign violation theory

To understand why people can perceive mother jokes as funny, we turn to Benign Violation Theory (BVT; McGraw & Warren, 2010; Warren et al., 2021). According to BVT, for something to be perceived as funny, two things must happen. First, it must be viewed as a *violation* or “wrong”; for example, it may appear threatening to one’s safety or identity, and/or violate established norms (e.g., social, cultural, communication, morality, logic). Second, it must be viewed as *benign* or “acceptable”; for example, it may appear unimportant, harmless, and/or otherwise inconsequential. Importantly, humour comes from the *simultaneous* appraisals of the stimuli as both a violation *and* benign. For example, McGraw et al. (2014) examined responses to humour about a major hurricane, as mediated by threat perceptions. The participants responding within the first two weeks of landfall reported low funniness, because, in terms of BVT, the humour could not be readily seen as benign with the severe violations made salient from the storm and subsequent news coverage (e.g., lives lost, damage dealt); the violation appraisal outweighed the benign appraisal. In contrast, participants viewing the posts 3-5 weeks after landfall reported higher funniness, because the humour appears more benign (e.g., recovery efforts are underway, news coverage refocuses to other topics); the violation appraisal no longer outweighed the benign appraisal.

Through defining humour as the juxtaposition of a violation appraisal and a benign appraisal, BVT helps explain the influence of not just characteristics of the stimuli (i.e., content, structure) and context in which it occurs, but also characteristics of the appraiser (i.e., personal sensitivities and standards). For example, Buie et al. (2022) found that liberals appreciated a joke about immigrants less than conservatives did, and that this was mediated by liberals perceiving a personal moral violation (as immigration issues align more with traditionally-liberal moral values than traditionally-conservative ones); similar results were found for conservatives in response to jokes mocking religion. People also differ in their appreciation of humour mocking their ingroup based on individual differences in the general tendency to believe a joke is “just a joke” rather than a serious affront (Prusaczyk & Hodson, 2020). In terms of BVT, individual differences like these can explain how readily one views violations as simultaneously benign (and thus funny). The present study investigates one individual difference that may impact the extent to which one views mother jokes in this “sweet spot” of benign violation: masculine honour beliefs.

### 1.3. “Your Mom” is a violation: masculine honour beliefs

Masculine honour beliefs (MHB) encompasses a set of beliefs justifying aggressive responses to insults against themselves, their spouse, or their families (Saucier & McManus, 2013; Saucier et al., 2016). Measurement of MHB is comprised of several dimensions, some of which could correspond to insults about one’s mother: *protection* (defending others from threat, especially the women in one’s family), *provocation* (defending one’s self from insult, be it against him or his family), and *family and community bonds* (firm connection to family/community). Given that the target of mother jokes is inherently the receiver’s mother (i.e., the “X” in Bergen & Binsted’s [2003] blueprint), greater endorsement of MHB, and especially these three dimensions, may predict a more negative reaction to mother jokes.

Research examining the relationship between MHB and responses to humour is scant. Kryszewski et al. (2017) compared responses to non-humorous insults (e.g., an acquaintance “abusively” referring to your mother as a prostitute in the presence of your friends), and found that people from honour cultures are less likely to respond to insults with humour/amusement compared to people from dignity and face cultures, instead preferring a more physically aggressive response. Another recent study examined MHB in the context of the 2022 Academy Awards, in which actor Will Smith slapped comedian-and-host Chris Rock over a joke targeted at Smith’s then-partner Jada Pinkett-Smith (Olah & Saucier, 2025). Specifically, they found that greater endorsement of MHB, specifically the pride (asserting one’s masculinity) and virtue (holding masculine honour as a core moral value) dimensions predicted more positive perceptions of Smith’s aggressive response to Rock’s joke, and greater endorsement of the protection and family dimensions specifically corresponded to more negative perceptions of Rock for making the joke. Interestingly, the same study also showed that MHB shares a positive correlation with the belief that a joke is “just a joke” and not to be taken seriously, but of all the MHB subscales, the protection and family dimensions were largely unrelated to that belief. Collectively, this seems to suggest that, in terms of BVT, those higher in MHB (especially protection and family beliefs) may be prone to viewing jokes about their loved ones as less benign and more violating.

### 1.4. “Your Mom” is the present study

To understand appreciation of this time-honoured joke format, we conducted two studies to test the hypothesis that greater endorsement of MHB corresponds with decreased appreciation of mother jokes. The first examines the relationship between MHB and people’s *general* appreciation of and tendency to share mother jokes, and explores how people generally define the rules and content of mother jokes. The second seeks to replicate the relationship between MHB using a broader array of appreciation variables in response to *specific* jokes, and also explores the role of two situational factors in the appreciation of mother jokes: the joke teller’s relationship to the participant, and the type of insult conveyed by the joke’s content.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

We recruited 167 students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a university in the United States Midwest (52.5% female, 73.7% White,  $M_{Age} = 20.09$  [ $SD = 4.16$ ]) in exchange for course credit. No participants were excluded.

### 2.1.2. Measures

*Masculine honour beliefs.* We assessed MHB using Saucier et al.'s (2016) 35-item measure. Per standards provided by George & Mallery (2003), the internal reliability of the overall measure was excellent, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ . The measure includes seven five-item subscales, each of which also showed acceptable-to-excellent reliability: *masculine courage* (e.g., "It is important for a man to be able to take pain";  $\alpha = .88$ ), *pride in manhood* (e.g., "If a man does not defend himself, he is not a very strong man";  $\alpha = .83$ ), *socialization* (e.g., "As a child, you were taught that boys should defend girls";  $\alpha = .76$ ), *virtue* (e.g., "Physical aggression is the most honourable way to defend yourself";  $\alpha = .89$ ), *protection* (e.g., "A man should stand up for a female who is in his family or is a close friend";  $\alpha = .80$ ), *provocation* (e.g., "If a man's mother is insulted, his manhood is insulted";  $\alpha = .93$ ), and *family and community bonds* (e.g., "It is important for a man to be loyal to his family";  $\alpha = .73$ ).

### 2.1.3. Procedure

After granting informed consent, participants responded to two items: one assessing their general tendency to share mother jokes ("Do you tell mother jokes?" [*Yes, No*]), the other their general appreciation of mother jokes ("Please rate the extent to which you find mother jokes funny."; 1: *Not funny at all*, 9: *Very funny*). Next, participants were prompted with two open-ended questions to solicit guidelines and examples for mother jokes. Specifically, we asked "What are some rules you think should be followed when telling mother jokes?" (with four open-ended textboxes), and "What are the top 5 mother jokes that you know of? (Please do not censor yourself)" (with five open-ended textboxes). Participants then reported their MHB and demographics, and were debriefed.

### 2.1.4. Analysis

Study 1 employed Pearson's  $r$  correlations as the quantitative data analysis method to examine the relationship between participants' MHB and their mother joke sharing and appreciation. We also employed content analysis as the qualitative data analysis method to identify common elements within mother jokes.

## 2.2. Results

### 2.2.1. Quantitative Results

Of the 167 participants surveyed, 39 (23.4%) reported telling mother jokes. Of the 39 who tell mother jokes, 33 were male and 6 were female; a chi-square analysis confirmed that men are more likely to tell mother jokes than women,  $\chi^2(1, 163) = 27.77, p < .001$ .

On average, mother jokes were rated somewhat low in funniness ( $M = 4.46, SD = 2.02$ ). Unsurprisingly, funniness ratings were much higher for those who do tell mother jokes ( $M = 6.11, SD = 1.49$ ) than those who do not tell mother jokes ( $M = 3.97, SD = 1.89$ ),  $t(155) = 6.31, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.81$ . Funniness ratings were also much higher for male participants ( $M = 5.19, SD = 2.01$ ) than for female participants ( $M = 3.82, SD = 1.83$ ),  $t(155) = 4.47, p < .001, d = 1.91$ .

Overall endorsement of MHB was associated with both likelihood of telling mother jokes and with funniness ratings, though not in the expected direction (see Table 1). Specifically, higher overall MHB was associated with a greater likelihood of sharing mother jokes,  $r = .29, p < .001$ ; this trend held true for each subscale except for virtue and family, both of which were not significantly correlated with the likelihood of sharing mother jokes. Overall MHB was also

positively correlated with funniness ratings of mother jokes,  $r = .34, p < .001$ ; this trend held true for each subscale except for family, which was not significantly correlated with funniness ratings.

Table 1. Correlations for masculine honour beliefs and mother joke sharing and funniness ratings.

	1.	2.
1. Tell mother jokes (0: No, 1: Yes)	--	.45**
2. Funniness of mother jokes	.45**	--
3. MHB (Overall)	.29**	.34**
4. MHB (Courage)	.29**	.30**
5. MHB (Pride)	.23**	.34**
6. MHB (Socialization)	.31**	.21**
7. MHB (Virtue)	.10	.27**
8. MHB (Protection)	.20*	.17*
9. MHB (Provocation)	.24**	.28**
10. MHB (Family)	.08	.03

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

### 2.2.2. Content Analysis

Two coders were trained by the first author to categorise the open-ended responses to the rules and joke questions according to two separate coding schemes. Cohen’s kappa ( $\kappa$ ) was computed for each category and definitions were refined if kappas were below .75; afterwards, all remaining disagreements (i.e.,  $\kappa < 1.00$ ) were resolved through discussion and mutual consensus among the coders and first author.

For rules, we received 413 distinct responses from participants. The first authors established three codes based on existing humour appreciation literature (e.g., Heintz, 2020; Norrick, 2004; Rosenbusch et al., 2022; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976[1996]) to understand what aspect of mother jokes people are most attuned to: (1) *content*, i.e., the words, topics, and/or themes included in the joke itself (e.g., “No joking about death”; “If something is actually true then you stop”); (2) *structure*, i.e., the mechanism(s) that allow the joke/punchline to work (i.e., to be funny) from the text alone (e.g., “Keep it short”; “Don’t make it too complicated”); and (3) *performance*, i.e., the factors affecting the success of the joke when telling it to others (e.g., “Do not joke if other person’s mom is dead”; “They should be so overdramatic that it will be obvious that the joke-teller is kidding”). Responses were allowed to have multiple codes if warranted (e.g., “You need to clarify at one point that you are joking” and “Tell them ironically, and only among close friends/family” were each coded as both “structure” and “performance”; “Keep in mind who you tell fat jokes to” and “No crossing personal boundaries” were each coded as both “content” and “performance”). Any entry that did not fit into these three codes was assigned a *miscellaneous* code (e.g., “I don’t think they should be told”; “There are no rules, roast on”).

Of the 413 responses analysed, the vast majority were coded as referring to *content* (59.1%,  $\kappa = .84$ ) and *performance* (37.3%,  $\kappa = .82$ ), with far fewer rules referencing *structure* (5.6%,  $\kappa = .80$ ). Only 4.4% ( $\kappa = .92$ ) were assigned a *miscellaneous* code, many of which simply advised not telling mother jokes in the first place. Overall, when consciously thinking about the rules for mother jokes, people primarily dwell on the content/topic of the joke and the performance aspects.

For the example jokes solicited from participants, we received 386 responses, including not just full jokes, but also partial jokes or vague topics for jokes (e.g., “Your mama so ugly (fill in blank)”); “Your mama so hot...”). Of these, 53 were identified by coders as explicitly not being jokes (e.g., “I can’t think of any”; “None”; “Most of the jokes from celebrity jeopardy on *Saturday Night Live*”) and therefore excluded from analysis. The remaining 333 responses were then coded for two things. First, coders determined whether or not each joke followed Stanzak’s (2012) “X so Y that Z” format (a binary yes/no decision;  $\kappa = .96$ ). Second, coders identified the modifying element (the “Y”) or equivalent implicit theme of the joke. For this, coders initially provided a single word description based on their interpretation of the joke (typically the “Y” itself in the joke); through discussion and mutual agreement with the first author, these codes were condensed by collapsing across synonyms (e.g., “stupid” and “dumb” are coded simply as “stupid”). The full context of the joke was considered in these decisions; for example, jokes calling a mother “big” were coded as “fat” in some cases (e.g., “Your mom’s so big, things orbit around her”; “Yo mama so big that her picture heavy”), but remained a “big” code when the context did not definitively imply a “fat” code was equivalent (e.g., “Almost as big as your mom is”; “Your momma is so big she doesn’t fit in the door of her house”). There were 4 responses coded as having two modifying elements (e.g., “Your mother saw a bus and thought it was a Twinkie” was coded as both “fat” and “stupid”; “Your mother looks like a sack of laundry” was coded as both “fat” and “ugly”); all remaining responses were coded as having just one modifying element. Cohen’s  $\kappa$  was then computed for each category presented in the final list of modifying elements (all  $\kappa > .75$ ), again resolving any further disagreements through discussion and mutual agreement.

Table 2 provides all final codes for the modifying elements (with examples). Of the 333 responses analysed, 252 (75.7%) followed Stanzak’s (2012) scalar mother joke format ( $\kappa = .96$ ). We also identified 17 distinct modifying elements across the 333 responses; Table 2 provides a full breakdown with examples. By far, *fat* mother jokes were the most common, comprising 48.3% of responses. *Stupid* mother jokes (15.9%) were the next most common, followed by *ugly* mother jokes (9.6%), *sexual* mother jokes (7.5%), and *old* mother jokes (5.1%). The remaining 13 types of mother jokes each comprised less than 3% of responses, 8 of which captured only 1-2 responses. In sum, while participants provided a wide range of examples of mother jokes, their mother jokes generally fit the scalar format, and over three-quarters of them highlight the mother as either fat, stupid, ugly, or sexual.

Table 2. Modifying elements of example jokes.

Modifying Element	Number of Responses (%)	Example Response
<i>Fat</i>	161 (48.3%)	“Your mother’s so fat, I took a picture of her last Christmas and it’s still printing.”
<i>Stupid</i>	53 (15.9%)	“Your mom’s so dumb, she stared at the orange juice carton for an hour because it said ‘concentrate’.”
<i>Ugly</i>	32 (9.6%)	“Your mother is so ugly she was herself for Halloween.”
<i>Sexual</i>	25 (7.5%)	“What’s the difference between you and a mallard with a cold? One’s a sick duck and forgot the rest of the joke, but your mother’s a whore.”
<i>Old</i>	17 (5.1%)	“Your mama is so old, she sat next to Jesus in high school.”
<i>Hairy</i>	9 (2.7%)	“Yo mama is so hairy, she speaks Wookiee.”
<i>Poor</i>	6 (1.8%)	“Your momma is so poor I saw her kicking around a can, so I asked what she was doing and she said ‘moving’.”
<i>Racial</i>	5 (1.5%)	“Yo momma so Black that her lotion is WD-40.”
<i>Big</i>	4 (1.2%)	“Almost as big as your mom is.”
<i>Stank / Stanky</i>	2 (0.6%)	“You momma so stanky everytime she walks past the bathroom the toilet flushes.”
<i>Scary</i>	1 (0.3%)	“Your mama is so scary, she could trick-or-treat over the telephone.”
<i>Greasy</i>	1 (0.3%)	“Yo mama so greasy, Texaco buys oil from her.”
<i>Lazy</i>	1 (0.3%)	“Your momma’s so lazy...”
<i>Short</i>	1 (0.3%)	“Yo momma so short, you can see her feet on her driver’s license.”
<i>Ghetto</i>	1 (0.3%)	“Yo mama so ghetto, when she breastfeeds, Kool-Aid comes out.”
<i>Bitch</i>	1 (0.3%)	“Your mom is a bitch.”
<i>Cheap</i>	1 (0.3%)	“Your mom is so cheap she shops at Goodwill.”
Modifying element unclear	4 (1.2%)	“Yo mama look like a baby marsupial.”
No modifying element	12 (3.6%)	“Your mom. (as a response in general)”

Note. Percentages based on 333 example jokes provided by participants. For each category, Cohen’s  $\kappa > .90$ .

### 2.3. Discussion

The results of Study 1 refined our understanding of mother jokes and their prevalence. Approximately one-fifth of participants in our undergraduate sample reported telling mother jokes, and men were especially likely to share and appreciate mother jokes. When asked to identify rules and examples of mother jokes, content analysis revealed participants' rules largely focus on content and performance considerations (rather than structure considerations); the jokes they provided largely fit Stanzak's (2012) scalar format, and predominantly targeted four domains (weight, intelligence, appearance, and sexuality). Contrary to hypotheses, however, overall MHB was *positively* associated with a general tendency to share and appreciate mother jokes; all but two MHB subscales (virtue, family) were associated with sharing mother jokes, and all but one subscale (family) related to their funniness.

### 3. Study 2

Study 1 suggests there is a relationship between MHB and perceptions of mother jokes. Importantly, however, Study 1 only assessed *general* perceptions of mother jokes as a whole; apart from the examples they provided themselves, participants did not actually see or rate any mother jokes. Therefore, we crafted Study 2 to examine how MHB relates to perceptions of *specific* mother jokes. Study 2 also expands on our perceptions measure; in addition to assessing funniness as in Study 1, Study 2 includes measures of negative perceptions (i.e., offensiveness) and perceived motivations of the joke teller (to insult, to compliment). The relevance of these four outcomes can be understood through BVT: funniness reflects the extent a joke is seen as simultaneously benign and violating, negative perceptions reflect the extent a joke is viewed as a violation, and insult and compliment motivations reflect two context factors (as perceived by the participant) that respectively enhance and lessen the perceived violation. Lastly, in light of participants' evident attentiveness to content and performance factors when identifying the rules of mother jokes, Study 2 also includes two manipulated situational variables: the aspect of the mother targeted by the joke (reflecting content considerations) and the relationship between the joke teller and audience (reflecting performance considerations).

Previous research demonstrates that people respond differently to different joke contents. Herzog & Bush (1994) examined responses to different categories of "sick" jokes (i.e., humour targeting dark/uncomfortable themes such as death and disease), finding people had different preferences among "dead baby" jokes, jokes about death more generally, and jokes about physical handicaps. More recently, Koszalkowska & Wróbel (2019) found differences in amusement from homophobic jokes, racist jokes, sexist jokes, religion-disparaging jokes, and neutral/nonaggressive jokes. Given that over 75% of the jokes provided by our Study 1 participants referred to mothers as fat, ugly, or stupid, or made a sexual innuendo about the mother, Study 2 explores how MHB relates to perceptions of *specific* mother jokes that fit these evidently popular content categories.

Furthermore, evaluations of humour are known to come not just from the content of the joke, but also from situational factors outside of the joke, including characteristics of the person telling the joke (e.g., Kant & Norman, 2019). For example, we tend to smile and laugh more in response to humour when it is shared by a friend than when it is shared by a stranger (Zaalberg et al., 2004). Vignette research further demonstrates that, when targeted by corrective humour, participants report higher liking for the joke teller when the joke is told by a good friend than when it comes from an acquaintance, and that this relationship is explained at least in part by benign perceptions of the joke teller's motivations for making the joke (Cao et al., 2023). Outside the realm of humour, racial slurs are considered less offensive when made between friends than between strangers (O'Dea et al., 2015). Therefore, Study 2 also examines how the

joke teller's relationship with the participant affects ratings of mother jokes, as well as the perceived intentions of the joke teller.

### 3.1. Method

#### 3.1.1. Participants

We recruited 215 students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a university in the United States Midwest in exchange for course credit. After excluding 11 participants with incomplete data, the final sample included 204 participants (58.3% female, 79.4% White,  $M_{Age} = 19.65$  [ $SD = 1.90$ ]).

#### 3.1.2. Measures and materials

*Vignettes.* Participants read one of eight vignettes, in which the participant imagines someone (stranger or friend) makes a mother joke to the participant targeting one of four aspects (ugly, fat, stupid, sexual), fitting a 2 (relationship)  $\times$  4 (joke type) between-groups design. The vignette read:

It's family weekend and your parents have decided to come visit you at your dorm. You show them around campus and then you walk down to Aggieville to meet up with some friends and their parents for dinner. When you get back to your dorm, you introduce your parents to your roommate, and your roommate introduces their friend named Kevin who you have never met before. You talk with them about biology and their majors for a bit but then your parents decide to head home before it gets too late. You show them out, hug them goodbye, and head back to your room. When you walk in the door, Kevin is alone. You say, "Hey, what's up?". Kevin laughs and says "Hey, thanks for introducing me to your mom. You know, I was thinking, [INSERT JOKE]."

This was the text presented for the Stranger level of the Relationship variable; the Friend level was virtually identical, except the text "who you have never met before" was replaced with "who is also your friend". The vignette ended with one of four jokes defined by their topic: "Your mama's so ugly, that when she tried to enter an ugly contest, they said 'Sorry, no professionals!'" (*ugly*), "Your mama's so fat her blood type is gravy!" (*fat*), "Your mama's so dumb she tripped over a cordless phone!" (*stupid*), or "Your mama's like a vacuum; she sucks, she blows, and then gets put in the closet!" (*sexual*). Each of these jokes were adapted from jokes submitted by participants in Study 1 to bolster the external validity of our stimuli. Per the between-groups design of this study, each participant read a single vignette, which included only a single mother joke, told either by a friend or a stranger.

*Masculine honour beliefs.* We again used Saucier et al.'s (2016) measure to assess MHB. Reliability for the overall measure and subscales were virtually identical as those reported in Study 1.

*Funniness.* Participants rated six descriptions of Kevin's statement (*Hilarious, Amusing, Funny, Silly, Appropriate, Clever*) from 1 (*Not at all*) to 9 (*Very much*). Responses were averaged into a composite score reflecting funniness, with excellent reliability,  $\alpha = .86$ .

*Negative Perceptions.* Participants rated nine descriptions of Kevin's statement (*Offensive, Hateful, Hostile, Disturbing, Threatening, Mean, Terrible, Inappropriate, Harmless*) from 1 (*Not at all*) to 9 (*Very much*). Responses were averaged into a composite score reflecting negative perceptions of Kevin's statement, with excellent reliability,  $\alpha = .92$ .

*Motivations.* Participants responded to four items about the joke teller's motivation for making the mother joke, on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) and each demonstrated excellent reliability. Two items assessed insult motives ("To insult you", "To insult your mom";  $r = .69, p < .001$ ), and two items assessed compliment motives ("To compliment you", "To compliment your mom";  $r = .81, p < .001$ ).

### 3.1.3. Procedure

After granting informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to read one of the eight vignettes described above. Participants then rated Kevin's remark in terms of funniness and negative perceptions, and the extent to which Kevin intended his remark as an insult or compliment. Participants responded to the same MHB measure described in Study 1, reported demographics, and were debriefed.

### 3.1.4. Analysis

Study 2 employed Pearson's  $r$  correlations and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) as the quantitative data analysis methods to examine the relationships between MHB, joke type, joke teller relationship, and the four outcome variables while controlling for gender.

## 3.2. Results

We first examined Pearson's  $r$  correlations between MHB, the relationship of the joke teller, and each outcome variable both overall and split by joke type. Collapsed across joke type (Table 3), participants perceived a joke slightly more negatively when it came from a stranger than when it came from a friend ( $r = .17, p = .016$ ); joke teller relationship was not significantly related to funniness or perceived motivations of the joke teller, and it was not significantly related to any of these four outcome variables within any of the joke type conditions.

Collapsed across joke type, overall MHB was not significantly related to any of the four outcome variables; this remained mostly true when looking within the joke type conditions, the only exception being that overall MHB was positively correlated with perceiving an insult motivation when the joke teller told a fat mother joke ( $r = .29, p = .045$ ). Two MHB subscales in particular appear to relate to the outcomes in opposing ways; the virtue subscale is positively related with funniness ratings ( $r = .30, p < .001$ ) and perceiving a compliment motivation ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ), whereas the family subscale is negatively correlated with funniness ( $r = -.16, p = .025$ ) and compliment motivation ( $r = -.19, p = .006$ ); neither was significantly related to negative perceptions or insult motivations. This pattern generally remains when looking within the joke type conditions (see Table 4), with all correlations at least trending in the same directions as the corresponding relationships in Table 3, suggesting that the subscales may be more informative than the overall MHB score when it comes to responses to mother jokes.

For each of our four outcome variables, we conducted a 2 (*relationship*: friend, stranger)  $\times$  4 (*joke type*: ugly, fat, stupid, sexual) ANCOVA<sup>1</sup>, with four of the MHB subscales included as continuous covariates: virtue, protection, provocation, and family. The latter three subscales were selected for their at-face relevance to mother jokes (i.e., one or more items in their measures refer or could be interpreted as a reference to one's mother; see example items

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<sup>1</sup> Because we had no a priori reason for anticipating a Relationship  $\times$  Joke Type interaction, we excluded the interaction term from the model. The results are largely unchanged if the interaction is included; the analyses with the interaction term included are available in OSF: [https://osf.io/c3nx2/?view\\_only=dfccaab7089e4ab68ce05a56ea3e56b4](https://osf.io/c3nx2/?view_only=dfccaab7089e4ab68ce05a56ea3e56b4).

provided in Study 1 above), while the virtue subscale was selected in light of its apparent opposition to the family subscale in the correlations discussed in the previous paragraph. We also included gender as a categorical covariate, as Study 1 showed women tended to appreciate and share mother jokes less than men. VIFs for this model were all below 2.5, indicating minimal multicollinearity concerns.

*Funniness.* There was no main effect of relationship,  $F(1, 192) = 0.51, p = .477, \eta_p^2 = .003$ , nor was there a main effect of joke type,  $F(3, 192) = 0.11, p = .956, \eta_p^2 = .002$ . We did find a significant main effect of gender,  $F(2, 192) = 9.44, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .090$ , a medium effect size; higher funniness was reported by men ( $M = 2.79, SD = 1.66$ ) than by women ( $M = 1.81, SD = 1.17$ ). Protection ( $F[1, 192] = 0.44, p = .506, \eta_p^2 = .002$ ) and family ( $F[1, 192] = 0.15, p = .699, \eta_p^2 = .001$ ) were not significantly associated with funniness in this model. However, virtue ( $F[1, 192] = 18.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .088$ ) and provocation ( $F[1, 192] = 5.29, p = .023, \eta_p^2 = .027$ ) did significantly relate to funniness, such that higher virtue beliefs and higher provocation beliefs each corresponded with higher funniness ratings.

*Negative Perceptions.* We found a small main effect of relationship on negative perceptions,  $F(1, 192) = 5.30, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = .027$ . Mother jokes were perceived more negatively when told by a stranger ( $M = 6.30, SD = 1.86$ ) than when told by a friend ( $M = 5.64, SD = 1.99$ ). We also found a medium-sized main effect of joke type,  $F(3, 192) = 4.86, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .071$ . Pairwise comparisons (Table 5) indicated that fat jokes ( $M = 6.44, SD = 1.56$ ) and sexual jokes ( $M = 6.38, SD = 1.86$ ) were perceived more negatively than ugly jokes ( $M = 5.63, SD = 2.26$ ) and stupid jokes ( $M = 5.40, SD = 1.86$ ). Further, gender showed a medium-sized effect,  $F(2, 192) = 10.61, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .010$ ; women ( $M = 6.40, SD = 1.76$ ) reported more negative perceptions of mother jokes than did men ( $M = 5.31, SD = 2.05$ ).

None of the four MHB subscales significantly showed significant relationships with negative perceptions of the mother jokes: virtue ( $F[1, 192] = 0.02, p = .897, \eta_p^2 = .000$ ), protection ( $F[1, 192] = 0.09, p = .763, \eta_p^2 = .000$ ), provocation ( $F[1, 192] = 1.87, p = .173, \eta_p^2 = .010$ ), family ( $F[1, 192] = 0.90, p = .344, \eta_p^2 = .005$ ).

*Insult Motivation.* There was no main effect of relationship on perceived insult motivation,  $F(1, 192) = 2.12, p = .147, \eta_p^2 = .011$ , nor was there an effect of gender,  $F(2, 192) = 0.27, p = .767, \eta_p^2 = .003$ ; however, there was a main effect of joke type,  $F(3, 192) = 4.59, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .067$ , a medium-sized effect. The joke teller's perceived insult motivations were higher for the fat joke ( $M = 4.54, SD = 1.49$ ) and sexual joke ( $M = 4.13, SD = 1.67$ ) than for the ugly joke ( $M = 3.42, SD = 1.71$ ) and stupid joke ( $M = 3.61, SD = 1.60$ ).

None of the four MHB subscales significantly showed significant relationships with insult motivations: virtue ( $F[1, 192] = 0.04, p = .851, \eta_p^2 = .000$ ), protection ( $F[1, 192] = 2.38, p = .124, \eta_p^2 = .012$ ), provocation ( $F[1, 192] = 2.29, p = .132, \eta_p^2 = .012$ ), family ( $F[1, 192] = 3.24, p = .074, \eta_p^2 = .017$ ).

*Compliment Motivation.* There was no main effect of relationship,  $F(1, 192) = 0.00, p = .968, \eta_p^2 = .000$ , nor was there a main effect of joke type,  $F(3, 192) = 0.22, p = .885, \eta_p^2 = .003$ , nor was there an effect of gender,  $F(2, 192) = 1.49, p = .229, \eta_p^2 = .015$ . Protection ( $F[1, 192] = 1.23, p = .269, \eta_p^2 = .006$ ) and provocation ( $F[1, 192] = 3.59, p = .060, \eta_p^2 = .018$ ) were also not significantly associated with perceived compliment motivations in this model. However, virtue was significantly related to compliment motivations,  $F(1, 192) = 13.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .064$ , a medium effect size; higher virtue beliefs were associated with more perceived compliment motivations. Family's relationship was also significant,  $F(1, 192) = 5.61, p = .019, \eta_p^2 = .028$ , a small effect size; higher family beliefs corresponded with lower compliment perceptions.

Table 3. Correlations between MHB and mother joke perceptions (collapsed across joke type conditions).

	Funniness	Negative Perceptions	Insult Motivations	Compliment Motivations
Relationship	-.06	.17*	.10	-.03
MHB (Overall)	.13	.08	.05	.11
MHB – Courage	.22**	-.02	-.06	.11
MHB – Pride	.18*	.05	.05	.11
MHB – Socialization	-.05	.14*	.05	.10
MHB – Virtue	.30**	.03	.05	.29**
MHB – Protection	-.03	.06	-.02	.004
MHB – Provocation	.08	.08	.11	.09
MHB – Family	-.16*	.12	.06	-.19**

Note. n = 204. Relationship is a dummy-coded variable (0 = *Friend*, 1 = *Stranger*). \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 4. Correlations between MHB and mother joke perceptions (split by joke type).

	Funniness	Negative Perceptions	Insult Motivations	Compliment Motivations
Relationship				
Ugly	-.08	.23	.27	.16
Fat	.09	.03	.15	-.03
Stupid	-.23	.22	.11	-.14
Sexual	-.07	.17	-.12	-.11
MHB (Overall)				
Ugly	.15	.18	.04	.08
Fat	.21	-.02	.29*	.20
Stupid	-.19	.07	.004	-.03
Sexual	.22	.03	-.07	.14
MHB – Courage				
Ugly	.23	.09	-.04	.08
Fat	.30*	-.16	.16	.24
Stupid	.07	.01	-.20	-.07

	Sexual	.24	-.05	-.11	.15
MHB – Pride					
	Ugly	.17	.23	.05	.10
	Fat	.29*	-.06	.22	.18
	Stupid	.02	-.12	-.12	.11
	Sexual	.18	-.02	.07	.03
MHB – Socialization					
	Ugly	-.03	.14	.02	-.07
	Fat	.03	.09	.24	.25
	Stupid	-.38**	.12	.14	-.12
	Sexual	.07	.15	-.17	.28*
MHB – Virtue					
	Ugly	.25	.21	.004	.28*
	Fat	.34*	-.15	.25	.40**
	Stupid	.32**	-.004	-.01	.30*
	Sexual	.29*	-.12	-.04	.20
MHB – Protection					
	Ugly	.02	.21	.15	-.03
	Fat	-.002	.09	.19	.10
	Stupid	-.38**	.05	-.05	-.17
	Sexual	.15	-.01	-.19	.07
MHB – Provocation					
	Ugly	.09	.02	.02	.09
	Fat	.13	.02	.20	.14
	Stupid	-.17	.13	.18	.10
	Sexual	.18	.10	.04	.02
MHB – Family					
	Ugly	-.10	.14	.06	-.15
	Fat	-.10	.14	.30*	-.29*
	Stupid	-.41**	.17	.08	-.33*
	Sexual	-.06	.16	-.04	-.02

Note.  $n_{\text{Ugly}} = 53$ ;  $n_{\text{Fat}} = 50$ ;  $n_{\text{Stupid}} = 49$ ;  $n_{\text{Sexual}} = 52$ . Relationship is a dummy-coded variable (0 = Friend, 1 = Stranger). \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 5. Descriptive statistics by joke type

	Ugly	Fat	Stupid	Sexual
Funniness	2.21 (1.49) <sub>a</sub>	2.29 (1.57) <sub>a</sub>	2.04 (1.15) <sub>a</sub>	2.29 (1.60) <sub>a</sub>
Negative Perceptions	5.63 (2.26) <sub>ac</sub>	6.44 (1.56) <sub>b</sub>	5.40 (1.89) <sub>c</sub>	6.38 (1.86) <sub>ab</sub>
Insult Motivations	3.42 (1.71) <sub>a</sub>	4.54 (1.49) <sub>b</sub>	3.61 (1.60) <sub>a</sub>	4.13 (1.67) <sub>ab</sub>
Compliment Motivations	1.77 (1.03) <sub>a</sub>	1.74 (1.15) <sub>a</sub>	1.73 (0.95) <sub>a</sub>	1.89 (1.27) <sub>a</sub>

Note. Means are significantly different  $p < .05$  if they do not share any subscripts in the same row. Two comparisons were marginally significant: negative perceptions between ugly vs. sexual ( $p = .059$ ), and insult motivations between ugly vs. sexual ( $p = .051$ ).

### 3.3. Discussion

Study 2 examined the relationship between MHB and perceptions of specific mother jokes, while also accounting for the effects of gender, the joke teller’s relationship to the participant, and the modifying element of the mother joke. Men generally appreciated mother jokes more than did women (i.e., higher funniness and lower negative perceptions), but gender was unrelated to perceived motivations of the joke teller. The relationship of the joke teller was largely unrelated to perceptions of the mother joke, with the only exception being that people perceived mother jokes more negatively when told by a stranger than by a friend. Although largely irrelevant for funniness ratings and perceptions of a compliment motivation, joke type did influence perceptions; specifically, fat jokes and sexual jokes were perceived more negatively and their joke teller perceived as having more insult motivations compared to ugly jokes and stupid jokes. Overall MHB was generally unrelated to perceptions of these specific mother jokes in this context, but two of its subscales had opposing relationships with funniness ratings and perceptions of the joke teller’s compliment motivations when controlling for relationship and joke type. Specifically, higher virtue beliefs corresponded to higher funniness ratings and more perception of a compliment motivation, whereas higher family beliefs corresponded to lower funniness and perceived compliment motivations.

## 4. General discussion

We presented two studies exploring the relationship between MHB and perceptions of mother jokes. Notably, Study 1 found that higher MHB (both overall as well as five of its seven subscales) positively correlated with funniness perceptions of mother jokes as a general class of jokes. But when examining funniness of *specific* mother jokes in Study 2, the relationship observed in Study 1 was quite different; overall MHB and most subscales were not significantly related to funniness, but virtue and family beliefs had significant but opposing relationships with funniness, which were the only two subscales to not show significant relationships with funniness in Study 1. This divergence could be due to the differences in measurement between the two studies (Study 1 used a single funniness item, whereas Study 2 measured funniness with a six-item composite measure), though the face validity of these two measures remain similar. If this difference is not due to measurement differences, then this discrepancy suggests that individual difference variables (like MHB) relate differently to general views of jokes compared to specific jokes. Prior research on cavalier humour beliefs (i.e., the belief that a joke is “just a joke” and not to be taken seriously; Hodson et al., 2010) supports this idea. For example, Hodson

et al. (2010) found that higher social dominance orientation predicts more endorsement of cavalier humour beliefs in general, but does not have a direct relationship with amusement and offensiveness ratings of specific disparaging jokes. Similarly, O’Dea et al. (2015) found that warmth towards Black people and endorsement of negative stereotypes of Black people were both significant predictors of cavalier beliefs around racial humour specifically, but were both unrelated to the perceived offensiveness of specific racial slurs presented in a vignette. Incidentally for both of those studies, MHB is positively correlated with social dominance orientation (Martens et al., 2018) and prejudice against Black people (Olah & Saucier, 2025), further supporting the diverging results we found between Study 1 and Study 2. Future research might go beyond the cavalier humour belief construct to more explicitly assess differences between general perceptions of established joke classes (like the mother joke) and perceptions of specific instances of those jokes, possibly assessing both in the same sample to better understand their relationship with each other as well.

The majority of humour appreciation theories were designed to explain reactions to specific instances of humour (for a review of these theories, see Warren et al., 2021), with no theories to our knowledge dedicated to explaining general appreciation of broad classes of humour/joke types. However, the discrepancy of our studies’ results *can* be explained through BVT, which posits that humour appreciation comes from evaluating stimuli as simultaneously benign and violating, and that these evaluations are influenced by characteristics of the stimuli, context, and appraiser. Crucially, when evaluating a *specific* joke or other instance of humour, the characteristics of that stimulus (e.g., themes, literary/rhetorical devices) interact with the characteristics of the context in which the humour is shared (e.g., relationship with the joke teller, presence of others) and with characteristics of the appraiser (e.g., personal sensitivities/standards, life experiences) to predict appreciation of that joke. But with a general joke *class*, the influence of stimuli and context on appreciation are severely dampened; people evaluate a joke class without context, and with only the stimuli characteristics universal to the joke class (in the case of mother jokes, [ostensibly] nonserious degradation or objectification of one’s mother). This leaves a far heavier role of appraiser characteristics to predict appreciation. This is exemplified well in the present studies; MHB’s relationship with appreciation of mother jokes in general (Study 1) was overall stronger than its relationship with appreciation of specific mother jokes (Study 2). In Study 1, the influence of participants’ MHB was not diluted by factors such as whether a friend or a stranger was telling the joke, whether the joke was in a formal or informal environment, or how clever the text of the joke was at a lexical level. Future research may use BVT to examine the extent individual differences have a strengthened relationship with appreciation of other joke classes (e.g., dumb blonde, knock-knock, Chuck Norris) or even meme formats (e.g., disloyal man, Philosoraptor, condescending Wonka) compared to specific instances of such humour, as well as determine other influences on appreciation of joke/meme classes beyond individual differences in the absence of specific stimuli and context, such as cultural differences in humour appreciation and gender norms.

The observed relationships of virtue and family in Study 2 are to be expected based on their definitions (Saucier & McManus, 2013; Saucier et al., 2016). Virtue captures the more anti-social “toxic” side of masculinity that may foster appreciation of the degradation of others in general, humorous or otherwise. Conversely, the family subscale captures a more pro-social aspect of masculinity akin to loyalty that may inhibit appreciation of mother jokes specifically because they target one’s family; the more someone endorses these family beliefs, the more they may perceive mother jokes as a betrayal/transgression. It is interesting that responses to specific mother jokes in Study 2 were largely unrelated to the protection and provocation dimensions of MHB. What’s more, both of these subscales corresponded to *positive* evaluations of mother jokes in general in Study 1; given protection and provocation centre on defending others and oneself from insult, it would seem more intuitive that higher endorsement of these values would

be associated with more negative views of mother jokes. Yet, only one of thirty-two relevant correlations in Table 4 supported this prediction ( $r = -.38$  between protection and funniness perceptions of Stupid mother jokes), while all other correlations for these dimensions were not significant or even always in a negative direction. It may be that people are simply not perceiving mother jokes as a threat in the first place; previous research shows both subscales are positively correlated with cavalier humour beliefs (though protection only modestly so), suggesting low perceived threat from humour in general (Olah & Saucier, 2025). That low threat may inhibit the perception of a genuine provocation, and therefore preclude any need to protect.

Study 2 further built on Study 1 by examining the roles of the relationship between the joke teller and participant, and the content of the joke. The influence of the joke teller's relationship was largely uncorrelated with perceptions of mother jokes, with the only exception being that a joke was perceived more negatively when it came from a stranger compared to from a friend. This finding is consistent with previous research (e.g., O'Dea et al., 2015), and extends it by highlighting the joke teller's relationship only influences negative perceptions of the joke; it appears to be unrelated to funniness perceptions and perceived intentions. Additionally, joke content (ugly, fat, stupid, sexual) influenced perceptions of mother jokes; while there was no difference in funniness ratings across these joke types, fat and sexual jokes were viewed as more offensive and more malicious in intent than ugly and stupid jokes. These results complement previous research demonstrating differences in perceptions of different joke types/content (e.g., Koszalkowska & Wróbel, 2019), specifically focusing on mother jokes with evidently common themes (based on content analysis of jokes provided by Study 1 participants).

#### **4.1. Limitations and future directions**

Our samples for these studies were restricted to Midwestern U.S. college students who completed self-report measures, and while this is great for internal validity and examining differences due to the manipulation of our variables within this population, these results may vary in light of different norms around honour. For example, pulling from Kryszewski et al.'s (2017) study of responses to non-humorous insults discussed in our introduction above, MHB may be an especially strong predictor in populations from honour cultures but less so in dignity and face cultures. This sampling limitation is particularly important to note when looking at the influence of joke type. Study 2 examined four distinct topics of mother jokes, derived from jokes generated by participants in Study 1: ugly, fat, stupid, and sexual. Just these four categories comprised over 75% of jokes submitted by Study 1 participants, and fat by itself comprised nearly 50% of the submitted jokes. The evident centrality of these specific types of jokes found in our study may not generalise to other populations. Sexual mother jokes appear to be fairly timeless and universal, given that they've appeared not just in modern-day U.S., but also 16th-century England and even ancient Babylon; however, there may be cultural factors influencing the apparent dominance of the fat mother joke. For instance, the U.S. overall faces an obesity problem, and it is especially prevalent in the state our sample comes from, where over 35% of adults are affected (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). People, especially women (an inherent target of mother jokes), are often concerned about their weight (Lemon et al., 2009; Statista Search Department, 2024), so mocking the mother's weight may feel like an especially strong/effective "punch" to use in a joke. In addition, there is widespread belief that people are inherently responsible for their obesity and being overweight stems from a lack of willpower/responsibility (e.g., Crandall et al., 2001). Early research on anti-fat attitudes shows cultural differences in these beliefs, with individualistic cultures endorsing willpower beliefs and negative attitudes toward these people more than collectivist cultures (Crandall et al., 2001). In reality, the causes of obesity are more than just a matter of willpower (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024), but these widely-held beliefs may help people feel it is more

acceptable to mock someone for their weight. Supporting this, Burmeister and Carels (2014) found people perceived weight-related humour as less offensive the more they endorsed these willpower beliefs, and So et al. (2016) found tweets about obesity (often in the form of derogatory jokes) centred more on individual-level controllable causes than more social-level causes beyond the individual's control (e.g., cost of healthy food options). Future research might examine how socio-cultural values influence evaluations of mother jokes differently for different topics/modifying elements.

Another limitation is that, in the absence of a non-mother joke control group, we cannot know how much of the pattern of MHB relationships we observed are specific to mother jokes, or if they generalise to insult jokes or even non-insult jokes in general. The relationship with the virtue subscale may generalise to insult humour more generally. In the only study to our knowledge to examine the MHB subscales' relationships with responses to humour, Olah & Saucier (2025) found that higher virtue beliefs predicted more endorsement of physical retaliation over a joke made at his wife's expense, and higher family beliefs predicted decreased approval of that joke; this suggests our findings could generalise to jokes that target one's wife, but it is unclear if it goes beyond jokes targeting female family members. Interestingly, however, that same study found a moderate-sized positive correlation between MHB and cavalier humour beliefs, suggesting that MHB may predict higher humour appreciation across domains. Our study's purpose was solely to examine variables that affect perceptions of mother jokes, not to establish that these variables are uniquely associated with such perceptions; future research may pursue such answers by comparing perceptions of mother jokes, other forms of insult humour, and non-insult humour to clarify MHB's unique contributions in predicting these perceptions.

There are many other individual differences that potentially predict perceptions of mother jokes and/or the influence of MHB on these perceptions that we did not assess in these studies. Disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976[1996]) suggests our evaluations of mother jokes should depend at least partly on our attitudes toward / closeness with our mother (the target of the joke). Related, given our sample contains primarily younger college students, it is unlikely we recruited many actual *mothers* into the sample, a population that may react differently to these jokes. BVT also suggests a role for whether someone even has a mother and the circumstances around that; for instance, people who instead have two fathers may not view mother jokes as enough of a violation to be funny, whereas people whose mothers have died may view them as *too much* of a violation to be funny.

This study focused solely on appreciation of mother jokes, contributing to humour research on honour-based aggressive responses (e.g., Olah & Saucier, 2025; Saucier et al., 2015; Saucier et al., 2025) and evaluations of gendered humour (e.g., Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Greenwood & Gautam, 2020), but future research could also examine their social consequences. For example, prejudiced norm theory (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Ford & Olah, 2021) states that jokes disparaging socially-protected populations (e.g., gender and racial non-majorities) can act as permission to discriminate against those groups. Mother jokes inherently target women, and consequently might activate sexist norms in that context; if it is a fat mother joke (like the vast majority our participants provided), it may also activate norms of prejudice against overweight/obese people as well. While no empirical work seems to have addressed this aspect of mother jokes specifically, some have published opinion pieces expressing concern about sexism inherent in these jokes (e.g., Blocker, 2016; Kibbe, 2021). Kibbe (2021) argues “the butt of a ‘Your Mom’ joke isn’t really the anonymous, maybe even symbolic, mother in question, but the offspring of this ugly/fat/promiscuous/stupid<sup>2</sup> woman.” Per this argument, mothers (i.e., women) are expected to be “models of idealized femininity [i.e.,

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, the descriptors Kibbe highlights here are perfectly in line with the primary descriptors participants provided in Study 1.

beautiful/thin/chaste/intelligent]”, and failing to uphold these standards risks bringing shame upon the recipient’s family. In this way, mother jokes reinforce these gendered societal expectations. In one interview, female comedian Lolly Adefope shares this idea that the mother isn’t even the actual target of the jokes, and in fact the mother is largely ignored in the joke: “The intrinsic nature of ignoring the woman herself, it’s a bit sexist...Like, ‘it’s not even about the woman – the woman can shut up, it’s not about her; it’s about me and this other guy.’” (Blocker, 2016). That is, the joke is not on the mother, but rather the person the person being told the joke (i.e., the “you” in “your mother”); the mother is viewed as the “property” of the true target of the joke. These ideas that mother jokes reinforce sexist standards put forth by society (and possibly body shaming in the case of fat/ugly jokes) are in line with prejudiced norm theory, and future research might consider testing these claims empirically. Such research should be deliberate in its sampling decisions, as cultural differences in honour (e.g., Krys et al., 2017) and humour appreciation (e.g., Kant & Norman, 2019) are likely to influence results.

## 4.2. Conclusion

We found evidence for several factors that relate to perceptions of mother jokes, namely MHB, the joke teller’s relationship to the audience, and content/subject of the mother joke. But many questions remain. Contrary to expectations, higher MHB corresponded with more *positive* perceptions of mother jokes in general; for specific mother jokes, only the family subscale predicted the hypothesised lower appreciation of specific mother jokes, other subscales were either unrelated or in the opposite direction. We found content and performance factors affect perceptions of mother jokes, but the *why* is unclear. For a joke format that’s over 5,000 years old, we know surprisingly little about it, and (despite their limitations) the present studies offer a springboard for future research.

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