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Transcending Embarrassment: On the Reputational Benefits of Laughing at Yourself

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How do people judge those who commit faux pas? Across six preregistered studies ($N = 3{,}204$), we find that the answer depends on how a faux pas is presented to others and the extent to which it harms others. For faux pas that cause minimal or no harm to others, those who display amusement (by laughing at their error) are seen as warmer, more competent, and more authentic (though not significantly more or less moral) than those who display embarrassment. While both amusement and embarrassment displays serve an appeasement function (which reflects positively on actors), observers view those displaying embarrassment as being excessively self-conscious (which limits positive character judgments). In contrast, amusement displays are deemed more emotionally calibrated, since they signal that an actor recognizes the faux pas is benign and therefore not serious enough to warrant negative self-conscious emotions. In other words, observers do not believe actors ought to feel particularly embarrassed upon committing common benign faux pas. However, when a faux pas harms others, those who display amusement are seen as experiencing a deficient level of self-consciousness, since, in this case, amusement indicates a disregard for the welfare of others. As a result, as harm to others increases, the benefits of displaying amusement become either attenuated or reversed relative to displaying embarrassment. Together, these findings provide a simple framework for understanding when amusement and embarrassment displays reflect well on individuals who commit faux pas.

Statement of Limitations

We examined how displays of amusement and embarrassment influence an actor's reputation after committing a faux pas. While we investigated these reputational consequences on warmth, competence, morality, and authenticity, they might be broader and more nuanced across dimensions we have not evaluated. Moreover, while the studies assessed character judgments, we did not assess any behavioral measures related to reputation. We also studied this question using hypothetical scenarios with Prolific samples; the strength of our effects may differ in real-life situations. Additionally, we investigated one-shot interactions; thus, it remains unclear how reputation changes over repeated interactions. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude that the strategy suggested by our findings will eventually lead to more favorable treatment of an individual in the long run. Moreover, while we establish these effects using verbal descriptions of a person's reaction and by presenting participants with photographs across separate studies, our results depend on further variation in how an individual may exactly present their emotions in live social interactions. Finally, we conducted our studies among U.S. samples. However, the sensitivity of the faux pas we studied varies across cultures, and there may be limits on the replicability of our experiments among populations of different backgrounds.

Keywords: embarrassment, amusement, impression management, humor, norm violations

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All studies were preregistered on https://aspredicted.org, and the data files and preregistrations can be accessed on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/jwdq6/. This work has been granted ethics approval by the London Business School ethics committee. The authors do not have any conflicts of interest. London Business School and Cornell University provided funding for this research. The authors thank the seminar participants at London Business School and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam for their feedback.

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Faux pas, personal blunders, and social gaffes—such as tripping and falling in public, knocking over a product in a store, or misremembering someone's name—are minor violations of social norms that disrupt interactions due to their awkward or inappropriate nature (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1963; Modigliani, 1968). These actions often evoke embarrassment, although reactions can vary: While one person might feel acutely embarrassed after a public fall, another might respond with indifference, anger, or even amusement (Feinberg et al., 2012; Keltner & Buswell, 1997). The present research examines faux pas from an impression-management perspective. Specifically, we investigate which emotional responses most effectively enhance an actor's reputation upon either revealing a past faux pas or being observed committing one.

Existing research finds that upon committing or communicating a faux pas, individuals can save face by expressing embarrassment via verbal or nonverbal cues (e.g., by blushing; Dijk et al., 2011; Keltner & Anderson, 2000; Keltner et al., 1997). This serves an appeasement function: By displaying their embarrassment, actors acknowledge their commitment to communal norms and indicate that their intentions were not sinister (de Jong, 1999; Feinberg et al., 2012; Keltner, 1995). However, we find that from an impression-management perspective, actors often make a better impression not by displaying embarrassment in response to their faux pas (e.g., via blushing or averting one's gaze) but by signaling that they are amused by it (e.g., by laughing at themselves; Beermann & Ruch, 2011).

Signaling amusement in response to a faux pas is reputationally advantageous for two reasons. First displays of amusement serve an appeasement function similar to displays of embarrassment. Both signal that one's behavior is unintentional and that one understands and respects communal norms (cf. Feinberg et al., 2012; Keltner et al., 1997; Miller, 2007). Second, signaling amusement indicates that one recognizes that the norm violation is benign (Modigliani, 1971; Tangney et al., 1996; Tangney & Fischer, 1995) and does not necessitate negative self-conscious feelings. Therefore, displaying amusement (vs. embarrassment) is perceived to be a more emotionally calibrated response to many common faux pas.

Importantly, we find that the reputational advantages of amusement displays are either reduced or turned into disadvantages when faux pas cause considerable harm to third parties. In those cases, actors are expected to express negative self-conscious emotions, such as embarrassment (Anderson et al., 2021; Wahlers et al., 2024). In contrast, signaling amusement reflects a lack of regard for the welfare of others, indicative of having an antisocial disposition (Ames & Johar, 2009). Thus, when faux pas harm third parties, displaying embarrassment (vs. amusement) is perceived to be a more emotionally calibrated response.

Together, we make the following contributions. First, we contribute to literature on emotional expression and reputation management (e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Feinberg et al., 2012; Gross et al., 2006). Theories of affective deviance argue that reputation is diminished when the valence of one's emotional expression mismatches the valence of their actions (Ames & Johar, 2009; Anderson et al., 2021; Szczurek et al., 2012). We find that affective deviance can also occur when the valence of an expression matches the valence of an action. Specifically, actors are often deemed emotionally miscalibrated when they signal embarrassment (a negative emotion) following the commission of a faux pas (a negatively valenced action), but better emotionally calibrated when they display amusement (a positive emotion). Thus, our findings highlight a unique case in which people can maximize reputation by displaying a positive emotion following a negative action.

Second, we offer a simple framework for understanding how different emotional reactions shape reputation after committing a faux pas. Prior work has highlighted the reputational benefits of displaying embarrassment (Dijk et al., 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012; Keltner & Buswell, 1997) but has largely overlooked the benefits of displaying amusement. We show that amusement displays are often more reputationally beneficial than embarrassment displays. Moreover, we highlight a key determining factor in identifying which display is more beneficial: whether the faux pas harms third parties. Our framework offers clear predictions about when different displays of emotion confer reputational advantages in response to norm violations.

Impression-Management Strategies in the Face of Embarrassment

Embarrassment is a self-conscious, aversive emotion that commonly arises in response to committing a faux pas or personal blunder (Edelmann, 1985; Krishna et al., 2019). It is often accompanied by a heightened sensitivity to social evaluation, which increases concerns about negative evaluation (Modigliani, 1968). Individuals who are more prone to embarrassment tend to closely monitor cues that signal how others judge them in interpersonal situations (Edelmann, 1985; Miller, 1995; Pickett et al., 2004).

Fear of negative judgment often inhibits individuals from disclosing faux pas to others (Baum & Critcher, 2020; Goffman, 1955; Modigliani, 1971). However, self-disclosure serves an important relationship-building function. Those who disclose personal information (including negative information, such as faux pas) are not only liked more by others but others also form stronger connections with them (Collins & Miller, 1994; Sprecher et al., 2013; Worthy et al., 1969). Hence, sharing embarrassing information may be beneficial in interpersonal interactions.

Given the potential of faux pas to strengthen relationships, we distinguish between two displays that individuals commonly show in response to a faux pas or personal blunder. First, people often have verbal and nonverbal reactions, such as blushing, stuttering, or averting their gaze (Keltner, 1995; Keltner & Buswell, 1997). We refer to these reactions as "embarrassment displays" to indicate that an actor is experiencing elevated levels of self-consciousness. We contrast this with "amusement displays," in which an actor laughs at themselves, indicating they acknowledge the humor in the situation (Keltner et al., 1997; Leary & Meadows, 1991; Miller & Tangney, 1994).

Research on embarrassment displays has mainly highlighted its reputational benefits, arguing it acts as a nonverbal apology and appeasement gesture (Goffman, 1963; Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Miller & Leary, 1992), with the intensity of such displays signaling greater regret over an action (Thorstenson et al., 2020). However, laughter also signals nonthreat in undesirable social situations (A. Wood & Niedenthal, 2018). It indicates the actor's harmless intentions (Mehu & Dunbar, 2008; Owren & Bachorowski, 2003) and alleviates negative consequences by softening tensions and

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displaying affiliation (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; Martin & Kuiper, 1999; Shaw et al., 2013). In sum, both embarrassment and amusement displays serve appeasement functions.[1]

Faux Pas From the Perspective of the Self and Others

While faux pas that evoke embarrassment are norm violations, they are typically characterized as benign—common, incidental, and unintentional social errors (Miller & Tangney, 1994; Modigliani, 1971; Tangney & Fischer, 1995). Unlike shameful incidents, which tend to be more serious, faux pas themselves do not necessarily reflect poorly on one's moral character (Keltner & Buswell, 1997).

Theories of humor argue that benign norm violations—those considered simultaneously wrong and acceptable—trigger laughter (McGraw & Warren, 2010; Warren & McGraw, 2016). Consistent with this, observers view faux pas and personal blunders—violations that are not serious enough to warrant shame—as being funny (Billig, 2001; Fink & Walker, 1977; Tangney et al., 1996). Whereas shameful transgressions are associated with negative reactions, including disgust and anger, embarrassing blunders are associated with positive ones, including smiles and humor (Miller & Tangney, 1994; Weisfeld & Weisfeld, 2014).

While third parties typically view actors' faux pas as benign and humorous, actors often overestimate the extent to which others will judge them harshly (Gilovich et al., 2000; Savitsky et al., 2001). Observers tend to perceive others' faux pas or blunders as less anxiety provoking than the actors themselves do (Epley et al., 2002; Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999; Van Boven et al., 2013). In other words, actors and observers often differ in the degree to which they deem social gaffes to be embarrassing, with actors finding such situations to be more intensely negative than observers do (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003).

Building from the above, we argue that third-party observers think that embarrassment displays are often excessive responses to faux pas because they communicate that a situation is serious enough to warrant negative self-consciousness (de Jong, 1999). Instead, displaying amusement by laughing it off signals that one correctly recognizes the benign nature of a faux pas as being worthy of humor (Billig, 2001; Fink & Walker, 1977; Warren & McGraw, 2015). Thus, relative to embarrassment displays, we expect amusement displays to be perceived as better *emotionally calibrated* to the situation.

Importantly, this does not mean it is problematic for individuals to signal a sense of self-consciousness. A deficiency in self-conscious emotions is associated with a lack of understanding of social norm violations (Heerey et al., 2003). Observers view neutral expressions in response to embarrassing situations negatively compared to displays of embarrassment (Keltner et al., 1997). We similarly argue that neutral displays will be viewed negatively and instead predict that displaying amusement will lead to a better reputation than displaying embarrassment.

Reputational Consequences of Amusement Displays

We have argued that in response to benign faux pas, displaying amusement is a superior impression-management strategy than displaying embarrassment. To test our predictions, we assess four central person-perception constructs that have received considerable attention in the person-perception literature: warmth, competence, morality, and authenticity (Fiske et al., 2007; Goodwin, 2015; A. M. Wood et al., 2008).

Warmth and Competence

Warmth and competence are two fundamental drivers of person perception (Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2007). We expect that, for several reasons, observers will reach greater warmth and competence judgments of an actor who displays amusement (vs. embarrassment) in response to a benign faux pas or blunder.

First, humor eases social interactions by decreasing the social distance between interaction partners (Kant & Norman, 2019). Individuals with a good sense of humor are perceived to be open to social interactions (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997; Martin, 2007; Yam & Ye, 2024). In contrast, embarrassment signals a heightened self-consciousness, which is associated with social withdrawal (Tracy & Robins, 2007) and can indicate a lack of desire or skills for social interactions (Crozier, 2000). Thus, displaying amusement (vs. embarrassment) is likely to signal an openness for more sociable and hence warmer interactions.

A good sense of humor is also associated with a range of positive characteristics related to competence, including intelligence, creativity, and effectiveness (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; Feingold & Mazzella, 1991; Greengross & Miller, 2011). Successful use of humor signals confidence and increases one's perceived status and power (Bitterly et al., 2017; Lyttle, 2001). In contrast, displaying negative self-conscious emotions (such as embarrassment) might be seen as an acknowledgment of one's lack of self-esteem or weakness (Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Modigliani, 1968). This suggests that as long as the context is deemed appropriate (i.e., when a faux pas is benign), embracing the humorous nature of a faux pas can boost one's competence.

Morality

Moral character is a particularly influential driver of impression formation. Although moral character is associated with judgments of warmth, these constructs are separable (Goodwin, 2015). Past research highlights that embarrassment displays are effective signals of prosocial intention, which is associated with care for the welfare of others (Feinberg et al., 2012), thereby likely reflecting well on one's moral character.

What about amusement displays? On the one hand, the use of humor can pose a risk for one's perceived moral standards (Yam & Ye, 2024). Individuals with strong self-reported moral identities are less likely to engage in humor and are perceived as less humorous (Thomas et al., 2016; Yam et al., 2019). On the other hand, to the extent that being amused by a faux pas is seen as emotionally appropriate, actors who do so may signal their social and emotional competence, both of which are intimately tied to moral ability (Stellar & Willer, 2018). Thus, amusement displays could boost or reduce moral character relative to embarrassment displays in

[1] In research that supports the similar functions of these two signals, Keltner et al. (1997) assessed how observers perceived a variety of displays an actor might show after an embarrassing faux pas. The authors found that observers evaluated those who showed either amusement or embarrassment displays more favorably than those who displayed no emotions. However, this study did not report a significant difference between displays of amusement and embarrassment, likely due to its small sample size ($N = 17$).

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response to benign faux pas. We therefore do not have strong predictions regarding the impact of displaying amusement versus embarrassment on morality judgments for benign faux pas.

Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the extent to which an individual acts in accordance with their "true self" and expresses their genuine feelings and opinions (Bailey & Levy, 2022; Ryan & Ryan, 2019; A. M. Wood et al., 2008). Authentic individuals acknowledge who they really are and accept both their desirable and undesirable aspects in an unbiased manner (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

When it comes to responding to benign faux pas, amusement (vs. embarrassment) displays likely signal that an individual endorses their "true self" in several ways. First, engaging in acts of self-presentation is associated with disguising one's true self from others (Gershon & Smith, 2020; Gosnell et al., 2011; Sedikides et al., 2017) and may signal presentation of a regulated version of oneself to others (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991; Scheier & Carver, 1985). In contrast, using humor about one's own shortcomings is associated with self-acceptance, including the acceptance of one's weaknesses (Barnett & Deutsch, 2016; Kuiper & Martin, 1998). Thus, in embarrassing situations, amusement displays likely signal that one endorses a strong and stable self-concept (Kraus et al., 2010), enhancing authenticity judgments.

Harm to Others Moderates the Appropriateness of Amusement Displays

Our theorization leads us to argue that signaling amusement is more socially appropriate than signaling embarrassment in benign situations. What about when a social violation is no longer benign, resulting in harm to others?

While people often experience positive emotions in nonserious and unthreatening situations (Fredrickson, 1998), displaying amusement in response to a serious violation is likely to be deemed unfunny (Warren & McGraw, 2016). When an actor harms others, even if done unintentionally, observers expect the actor to display negative, self-conscious emotions (Anderson et al., 2021; Wahlers et al., 2024). In these cases, displaying embarrassment signals that the actor feels bad about their actions, experiences remorse, and accepts responsibility for the current situation (de Jong et al., 2003). In contrast, displaying a positive emotion likely indicates endorsement of the harm and may be perceived as an antisocial response by others (Ames & Johar, 2009).

Therefore, we predict that in nonbenign situations—specifically, faux pas that cause harm to others—humor is likely to be perceived as inappropriate (Bitterly et al., 2017; Ong et al., 2022). As a result, the more harm is caused to others, the more people will penalize those who display amusement. Thus, we expect that as harm to others increases, the reputational benefits of amusement (vs. embarrassment) displays will diminish and may ultimately reverse.

Overview of Studies

Across six studies (N = 3,204), we examine reputational consequences of displaying embarrassment versus amusement in response to faux pas. Studies 1, 2, and 3 focus on self-disclosures of faux pas that happened in the past, while Study 4 investigates faux pas as they occur in the present. Study 5 examines how different displays influence perceived appeasement and emotional calibration. Study 6 explores the extent to which the benefits of amusement display prevail when such faux pas lead to harm to others. It also tests emotional calibration as a mechanism of our findings and reconciles our results with previous literature.

In all studies, our sample size was determined in advance, and no conditions were dropped. In Studies 1 and 4, we additionally measure perceptions of resilience and social competence. For these measures, we find significant effects consistent with our central predictions, and we report these analyses in the Supplemental Materials. Across all studies, except Study 5, we additionally manipulate the gender of the actor. We only found one significant interaction of gender with our focal manipulations on one of the dependent variables (DVs) in Study 4, which is disclosed in the Supplemental Materials. Consistent with our preregistration plans, we collapse across the actor gender across studies. The Supplemental Materials include a full description of our stimuli and measures. This research was granted ethical approval by the London Business School ethics committee.

Transparency and Openness

All studies were preregistered on aspredicted.org. The data files, preregistrations, and study files, including the stimuli, can be accessed at https://osf.io/jwdq6/ (Goksel et al., 2026).

Study 1

Study 1 investigated how displaying embarrassment or amusement upon retelling a story of a faux pas affects how warm, competent, and authentic an actor is perceived to be.

Method

We preregistered the design, sample size, and analysis plan for this study (https://aspredicted.org/35xt-xqqp.pdf). We recruited 600 participants via Prolific in exchange for payment. We excluded eight participants who failed the attention check, which left 592 participants (48.7% male, 49.3% female, 1.2% nonbinary, 0.8% did not disclose; $M_{age} = 41.6$, $SD = 13.6$). This sample afforded 80% power to detect a minimal effect size of $d = 0.23$.

We employed a 2 Display (embarrassment vs. amusement) × 12 Scenario between-subjects design. We asked participants to imagine attending a dinner party at a friend's house and chatting with a cousin of their friend whom they had never met before. Participants then imagined that the cousin shared a story describing one of 12 situations, adapted from Feinberg et al. (2012; see the Appendix). All the stories described an everyday faux pas, such as walking into a glass door or tripping and falling on the street (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

Next, we manipulated how the storyteller revealed the story by describing their reaction, consistent with past research on embarrassment and amusement displays (Dijk et al., 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012; Keltner et al., 1997). Participants in the embarrassment-display condition read, "As he[she] is telling you the story, he[she] tends to look away and avoids eye contact with you. He[she] also starts touching his[her] face and you realize it is turning red." Participants in the amusement-display condition read, "As he[she] is

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telling you the story, he/she smiles and laughs at himself[herself] about what happened. He[she] also makes fun of himself[herself], and you realize that he[she] finds the situation funny."

As dependent measures, we had participants complete a four-item measure of warmth (i.e., warm, sincere, friendly, kind; $\alpha = .86$), a four-item measure of competence (i.e., competent, intelligent, skillful, capable; $\alpha = .91$; Cuddy et al., 2007), and a 12-item measure of authenticity (e.g., "[Storyteller's name] is true to him/herself in most situations"; $\alpha = .92$; A. M. Wood et al., 2008). The warmth and competence items were presented within a single matrix in random order. The authenticity items were presented in a single matrix on a separate page in random order. The presentation order of the two pages was counterbalanced (see Table A4 in the Appendix for correlations). All items were rated on 5-point scales (−2 = *strongly disagree*, 0 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 2 = *strongly agree*). Last, participants reported how embarrassed they thought their interaction partner was on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).[2]

Results

Per our preregistered analysis, we first collapsed across the 12 scenarios presented to participants and ran a set of independent-sample *t* tests. This revealed that the actor who displayed amusement was perceived to be warmer, $t(590) = 2.44$, $p = .015$, $d = 0.20$, 95% CI_d [0.04, 0.36]; more competent, $t(590) = 2.55$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.21$, 95% CI_d [0.05, 0.37]; and more authentic,[3] $t(590) = 11.56$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.94$, 95% CI_d [0.77, 1.11], than the actor who displayed embarrassment. Table 1 summarizes the results.

We additionally ran a set of non-preregistered analyses to examine robustness. First, we ran a set of linear mixed-effects regression models on each of our main DVs, with display condition as the fixed factor (*embarrassment display* = 0, *amusement display* = 1) and scenario as a random factor. This confirmed that the effect of display was robust across all DVs when including random effects for scenario—warmth: $B = 0.13$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI_B [0.01, 0.25], $t(585) = 2.09$, $p = .037$; competence: $B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI_B [0.01, 0.29], $t(590) = 2.34$, $p = .019$; authenticity: $B = 0.59$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI_B [0.49, 0.69], $t(587) = 11.45$, $p < .001$. The *t* tests for this and all subsequent mixed-effects models are reported using Satterthwaite's approximation for degrees of freedom.

Next, we investigated whether the effect of display on our DVs varied across scenarios. To do so, we used the Stimulus package in R to perform a bootstrapped nonparametric analysis of heterogeneity in response to the display manipulation across stimuli (Simonsohn et al., 2025). This showed that, across the scenarios, the variation in the effect of display was larger than would be expected by chance for each of our main DVs ($p_{Warmth} < .001$; $p_{Competence} = .007$; $p_{Authenticity} < .001$). Figure 1 visualizes this variation.

Our theorizing proposes that one key source of variability in how observers respond to different displays depends on the extent to which a faux pas results in harm to a third party. While some of the scenarios in this study involve limited harm to third parties (e.g., fall: tripping and falling in public), others may be considered more harmful (e.g., pregnant: congratulating a woman on her pregnancy despite her not being pregnant). Therefore, we next investigated whether the effect of display was moderated by the level of perceived harm in each scenario.[4]

To do so, we ran a posttest in which 100 Prolific participants evaluated each of the 12 scenarios on the extent to which the actor's actions caused harm to a third party (on 7-point scales; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*). We averaged responses from all participants to create a continuous measure of perceived harm to others for each scenario, separately. Ratings ranged from 1.50 to 4.87 (see the Appendix). We inserted these ratings as a new independent variable, perceived harm, into our main data set.

We then fit a linear mixed-effects model for each DV. The model included fixed effects for display (0 = *embarrassment display*, 1 = *amusement display*), perceived harm (continuous), and their interaction, as well as random intercepts for scenario. Results show a significant Display × Perceived Harm interaction across warmth ($B = -.22$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI_B [−0.34, −0.10]), $t(581) = -3.59$, $p < .001$; competence ($B = -.23$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI_B [−0.35, −0.11]), $t(586) = -3.45$, $p < .001$; and authenticity ($B = -.14$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI_B [−0.24, −0.04]), $t(581) = -2.69$, $p = .007$, judgments.

For each DV, there was a negative association between perceived harm and amusement: When an actor displayed amusement, the more harm was caused to others, the less favorably they were rated—$B_{Warmth} = -.25$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI_B [−0.39, −0.11], $t(15) = -3.40$, $p = .004$; $B_{Competence} = -.20$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI_B [−0.30, −0.10], $t(30) = -3.90$, $p < .001$; $B_{Authenticity} = -.12$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI_B [−0.22, −0.02], $t(17) = -2.21$, $p = .04$. In contrast, there was no significant relationship between perceived harm and character judgments when the actor displayed embarrassment—$B_{Warmth} = -.02$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI_B [−0.16, 0.12], $t(15) = -0.32$, $p = .75$; $B_{Competence} = 0.03$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI_B [−0.07, 0.13], $t(26) = 0.55$, $p = .59$; $B_{Authenticity} = 0.02$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI_B [−0.08, 0.12], $t(16) = 0.30$, $p = .77$.[5]

Next, we conducted a floodlight analysis using the Johnson–Neyman technique (Spiller et al., 2013) to identify the ranges of perceived harm for which the effect of display was statistically significant. The results revealed that displaying amusement (vs. embarrassment) significantly increased perceptions of warmth, competence, and authenticity when perceived harm was below 3.16, 3.24, and 5.53, respectively. Conversely, embarrassment was rated significantly more positively than amusement at high levels of perceived harm—above 4.76 for warmth and 6.70 for competence. For authenticity, there was no range of perceived harm where embarrassment was rated significantly more positively than amusement. Note that even though the perceived harm was measured on a 7-point scale, our data

[2] We did not measure perceived amusement in this study or in Studies 3, 4, and 6. Nonetheless, a posttest confirms that those who display amusement were perceived as more amused than those who displayed embarrassment. See the Supplemental Materials.

[3] The measure of authenticity had three subdimensions, including authentic living, acceptance of external influence, and self-alienation (A. M. Wood et al., 2008). See the Supplemental Materials for detailed results on each subdimension for all studies.

[4] We thank the review team for suggesting we investigate scenario variability in this study.

[5] Following the recommendations of Barr et al. (2013), we additionally fit maximal models for this analysis, which included random slopes for display, allowing the effect of display to vary across scenarios. Model comparisons indicated that the maximal model provided a significantly better fit for warmth ($p = .03$) but not for competence ($p = .86$). The maximal model failed to converge for authenticity. Importantly, our key findings remained substantively unchanged in the maximal model for warmth (see the Supplemental Materials). In all subsequent studies, we additionally fit maximal models for analyses that include random intercept for scenario. In none of these analyses did the maximal model improve model fit, and thus, we do not report these models.

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Table 1
Study 1: Means and Standard Deviations

Dependent variable	Embarrassment display (N = 294)	Amusement display (N = 298)
Warmth	0.97 (0.72)	1.13 (0.87)
Competence	0.54 (0.75)	0.71 (0.85)
Authenticity	0.22 (0.60)	0.82 (0.68)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

were bounded within [1.50, 4.87]. Thus, inferences outside this range (e.g., above 4.87) are based on extrapolations and should be treated with caution. Figure 2 presents these results.

Finally, we conducted an exploratory analysis examining how embarrassed observers perceived the actor to be, dependent on their reaction. Participants perceived their interaction partner to be less embarrassed when they displayed amusement (M = 3.14, SD = 1.51) relative to when they displayed embarrassment (M = 5.95, SD = 1.11), $t(590) = 25.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.12$, 95% CI_d [1.92, 2.32].

Discussion

Study 1 found that amusement (vs. embarrassment) displays lead to more positive perceptions of warmth, competence, and authenticity when relaying a faux pas. This was particularly true when the faux pas caused low levels of harm to others, whereas this was either attenuated or reversed for high levels of harm. In the next two studies, we focus on examining scenarios in which harm to others is minimal to assess the robustness of the effect in these contexts.

Study 2

Study 2 presented participants with photos of an individual who shows a physical expression of either amusement or embarrassment. In addition, it assessed perceptions of moral character along with warmth, competence, and authenticity.

Method

We preregistered the design, sample size, and analysis plan for this study (https://aspredicted.org/v4sb-f96t.pdf). We aimed to recruit 400 participants via Prolific in exchange for payment and ended up with 399 participants. We excluded 10 participants who failed the attention check, leaving 389 participants (48.6% male, 49.6% female, 0.5% nonbinary, 0.5% self-described, and 0.8% did not disclose; M_{age} = 39.5, SD = 12.5). This sample afforded 80% power to detect a minimal effect size of $d = 0.28$.

We employed a 2 Display (embarrassment vs. amusement) × 4 Scenario (hiking, theater, party, yoga) between-subjects design. Participants imagined attending a dinner party and chatting with a cousin of a friend, whom they had never met before. They then imagined asking the cousin about their weekend. The cousin replied with one of the following four stories: walking into a glass door at a housewarming party (Party), passing gas during a session at a yoga retreat (Yoga), falling into a pile of horse feces while hiking (Hiking), or waving at the wrong person while attending the theater (Theater). These scenarios were written to depict common faux pas in everyday interactions that cause little or no harm to others (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

For each scenario, we manipulated how this person reacted when sharing their faux pas by presenting participants with photos of an actor displaying different facial expressions (see Figure 3). These photos were generated using OpenArt, an online platform for generating and editing digital art through artificial intelligence. We first prompted the artificial intelligence to generate photos of an "average" male and female in their 30s with a neutral expression. When editing these photos, we referred to previous literature (e.g., Keltner, 1995; Keltner et al., 1997) that suggests embarrassment is characterized by gazing downward, turning the head away from center, and trying to control one's smile. In contrast, amusement is characterized by having a so-called Duchenne smile: a mouth open in laughter with the head tilted backward. We altered the facial expression by adjusting the position of the head, mouth, and eyes accordingly (see the Supplemental Materials). Participants were randomly presented with the photo of either the male or the female actor displaying amusement or embarrassment.

Participants rated this person on four measures, including a four-item measure of warmth (warm, extraverted, friendly, sociable; α = .86), a four-item measure of competence (competence, intelligent, skillful, capable; α = .91), a four-item measure of morality (sincere, trustworthy, moral, honest; α = .91; Goodwin et al., 2014), and the 12-item measure of authenticity used in Study 1 (α = .86). The warmth, competence, and morality items were presented within a single matrix in random order. The authenticity items were presented in a single matrix on a separate page in random order. The presentation order of the two pages was counterbalanced. All items were rated on 5-point scales (−2 = *strongly disagree*, 0 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 2 = *strongly agree*). Finally, participants rated how embarrassed and how amused they thought this person was on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*).

Results

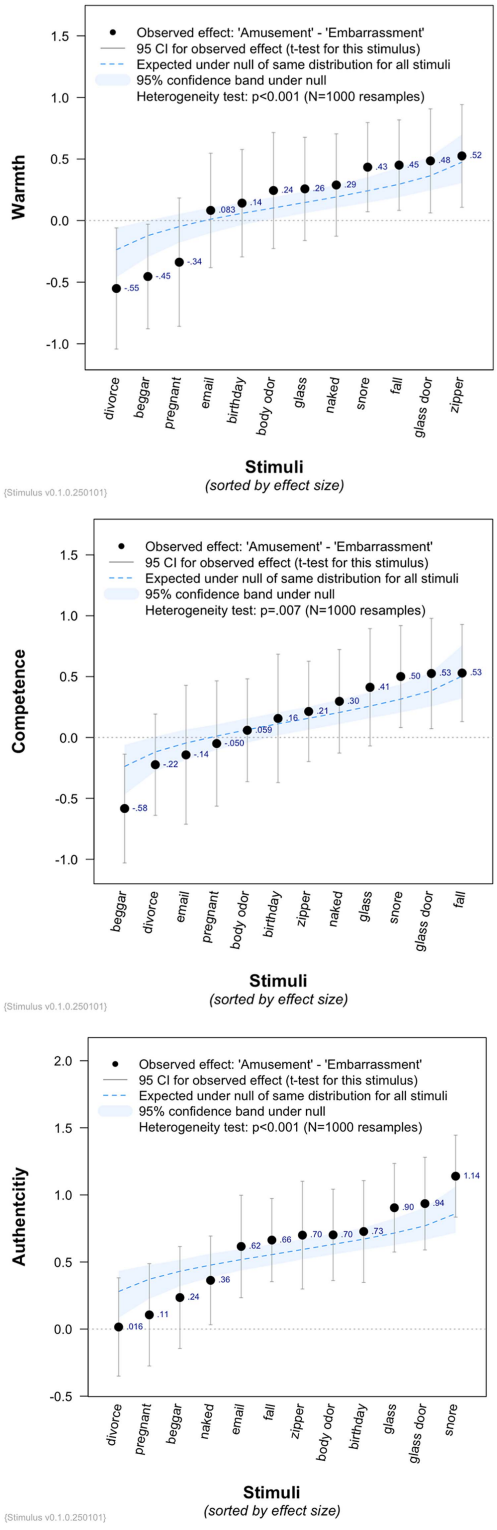
A manipulation check assessed perceived embarrassment and perceived amusement of the actor dependent on their facial expressions. Consistent with the intent of the photos, participants perceived their interaction partner to be more amused in the amusement-display condition (M = 6.06, SD = 1.08) than in the embarrassment-display condition (M = 3.30, SD = 1.90), $t(387) = 17.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.79$, 95% CI_d [1.55, 2.02], and more embarrassed in the embarrassment-display condition (M = 5.78, SD = 1.43) than in the amusement-display condition (M = 3.33, SD = 1.69), $t(387) = 15.42$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.57$, 95% CI_d [1.34, 1.79]. A follow-up analysis showed that the two effect sizes were not significantly different, $F(1, 387) = 0.89$, $p = .35$, $\eta^2 = .002$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0, 0.02] (see the Supplemental Materials).

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Figure 1

Stimulus Plots for Each of Our Main Dependent Variables



Note. The expected line and its 95% CI are obtained via resampling by recomputing the average difference of means for each stimulus after shuffling the stimulus label across rows repeatedly (Simonsohn et al., 2025). CI = confidence interval. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Next, as per our preregistered analysis, we collapsed across four scenarios and ran a set of independent-sample *t* tests. They revealed that participants perceived their partner to be warmer, $t(387) = 8.44$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.86$, 95% CI_d [0.65, 1.06]; more competent, $t(387) = 2.81$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.28$, 95% CI_d [0.08, 0.48]; and more authentic, $t(387) = 8.01$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$, 95% CI_d [0.59, 1.01], when they displayed amusement versus embarrassment. Those who displayed embarrassment did not differ significantly on the morality measure, $t(387) = 0.89$, $p = .37$, $d = 0.10$, 95% CI_d [−0.10, 0.30]. Table 2 summarizes the results.

Finally, as in Study 1, we conducted a set of non-preregistered follow-up analyses. First, we ran a set of linear mixed-effects regression models, with display condition as the fixed factor (0 = *embarrassment display*, 1 = *amusement display*) and scenario as a random factor on each DV. These replicated our main findings—warmth: $B = 0.55$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI_B [0.41, 0.69], $t(387) = 8.04$, $p < .001$; competence: $B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI_B [0.07, 0.35], $t(387) = 2.93$, $p = .004$; authenticity: $B = 0.59$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI_B [0.45, 0.73], $t(387) = 8.14$, $p < .001$; morality: $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI_B [−0.05, 0.23], $t(386) = 1.29$, $p = .20$. Second, we ran a heterogeneity analysis, which revealed that the variation in the effect of display was not significant across the scenarios for either of our main DVs (warmth: $p = .82$; competence: $p = .80$; authenticity: $p = .42$; morality: $p = .61$; Simonsohn et al., 2025).

Discussion

Study 2 replicated our result that those who display amusement when relaying a benign faux pas are seen as warmer, more competent, and more authentic than those who display embarrassment. The effects of display on perceived morality remained nonsignificant.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 found an impact of emotional display on warmth but not on morality. In Study 3, we aim to make a clearer empirical distinction between social warmth and morality (Goodwin, 2015). In addition, to probe the benefits of sharing compared to not sharing, this study includes a control condition in which an actor does not share a faux pas at all.

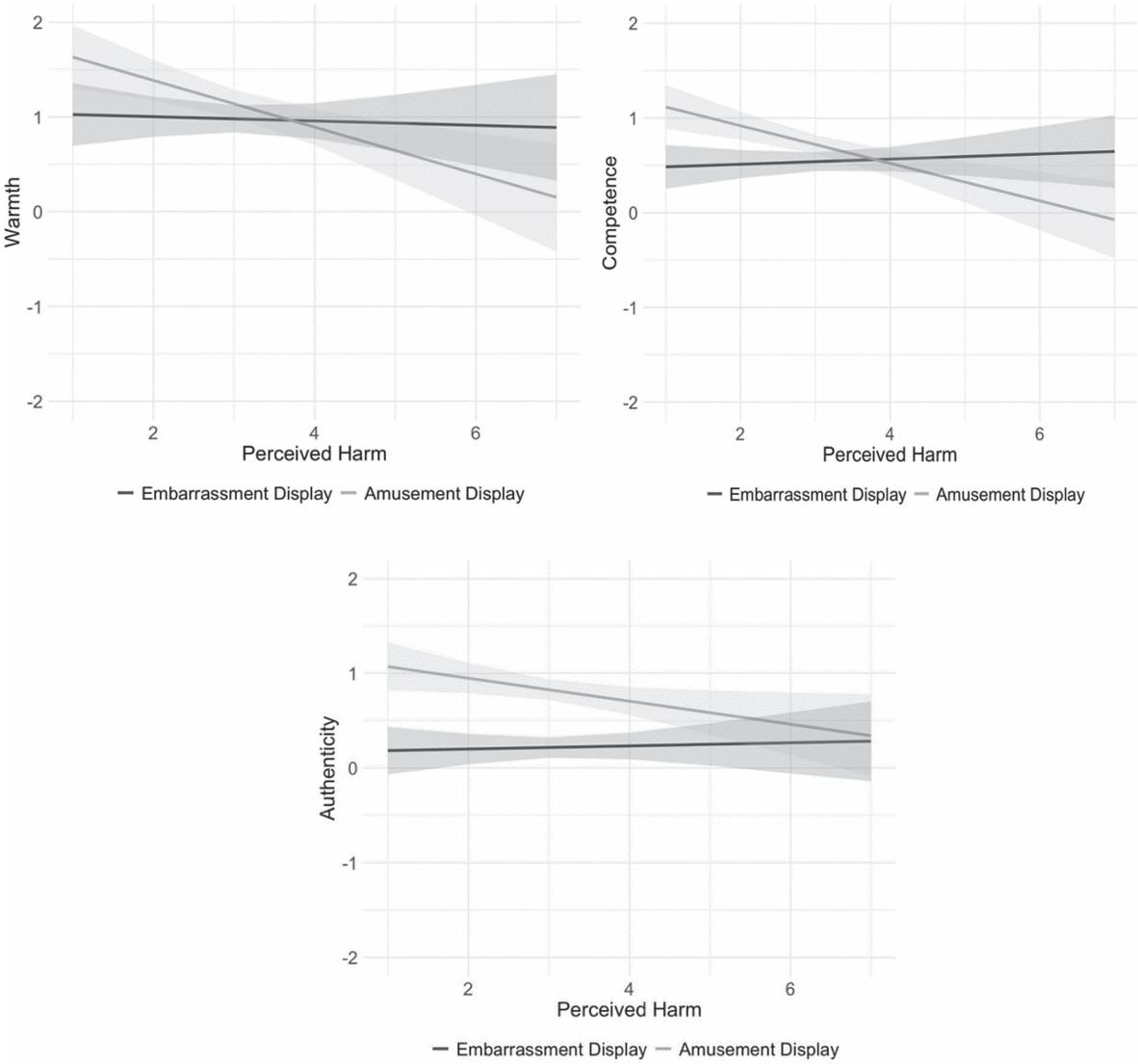
Method

We preregistered the design, sample size, and analysis plan for this study (https://aspredicted.org/rn37-2xhn.pdf). We aimed to recruit 600 participants via Prolific in exchange for payment and ended up with 602 participants. We excluded 27 participants who failed the attention check, leaving 577 participants (49.2% male, 48.5% female, 1.7% nonbinary, and 0.5% did not disclose; M_{age} = 41.9, SD = 13.8). This sample afforded 80% power to detect a minimal effect size of $\eta^2 = .016$.

We employed a 3 Display (no disclosure, embarrassment, amusement) × 4 Scenario (hiking, theater, party, yoga) between-subjects design. As in Study 2, participants imagined chatting with a cousin of a friend and asking the cousin about their weekend. In the no-disclosure condition, participants only read that this person took part in a focal activity (involving either hiking, going to the theater, attending a party, or attending a yoga class), and no faux pas was mentioned. In both the amusement- and embarrassment-display

Figure 2

Character Judgments as a Function of Display (Amusement vs. Embarrassment) and Perceived Harm to Third Parties



Note. Shaded regions represent the 95% confidence intervals.

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conditions, the cousin additionally mentioned committing a faux pas, as in Study 2. We manipulated how the person sharing the story reacted by verbally describing their reaction, as in Study 1.

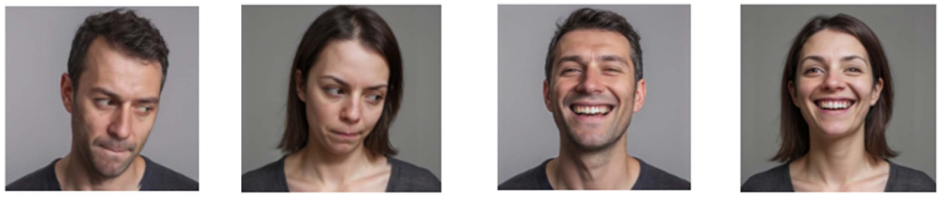
Participants rated this person on three measures related to morality and social warmth, based on Goodwin et al. (2014). This included an eight-item measure of morality (courageous, fair, principled, responsible, just, honest, trustworthy, and loyal; $\alpha = .95$), an eight-item measure of social warmth (warm, sociable, happy, agreeable, enthusiastic, easygoing, funny, and playful; $\alpha = .94$), and an eight-item composite measure of morality and social warmth (humble, kind, forgiving, giving, helpful, grateful, empathetic, and cooperative; $\alpha = .95$). Each measure was presented on a separate page, and the presentation order of the pages was counterbalanced. On each page, the items of the corresponding measure were presented on a matrix in random order. Each item was assessed on 9-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *moderately*, 9 = *extremely*).

Results

Per our preregistration plan, we collapsed across four scenarios and ran three separate one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) using display as the independent variable on each of our main DVs. These revealed a significant main effect of display on morality, $F(2, 574) = 5.05$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .02$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.003, 0.037]; social warmth, $F(2, 574) = 91.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.19, 0.29]; and the morality–social warmth composite measure, $F(2, 574) = 11.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.02, 0.07].

A planned contrast analysis revealed that individuals were rated higher on social warmth, $t(574) = 13.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.35$, 95% CI_d [1.13, 1.58], and the morality–social warmth composite measure, $t(574) = 3.24$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.34$, 95% CI_d [0.13, 0.54], when they displayed amusement compared to when they displayed embarrassment while sharing a faux pas, although this difference

Figure 3
Photos Presented to Participants in Study 2



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

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was not significant for the morality measure, $t(574) = 1.94$, $p = .053$, $d = 0.20$, 95% CI_d [−0.004, 0.40]. They were also rated higher across all dimensions among those who displayed amusement relative to those who did not disclose a faux pas at all—$t_{\text{Social Warmth}}(574) = 8.22$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.92$, 95% CI_d [0.70, 1.13]; $t_{\text{Morality}}(574) = 3.15$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.32$, 95% CI_d [0.12, 0.53]; $t_{\text{Composite}}(574) = 4.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.48$, 95% CI_d [0.27, 0.68].

Finally, those who displayed embarrassment were judged as less socially warm, $t(574) = 5.20$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.50$, 95% CI_d [0.30, 0.71], than those who did not disclose their faux pas. Those who displayed embarrassment did not significantly differ on either the morality measure, $t(574) = 1.22$, $p = .22$, $d = 0.13$, 95% CI_d [−0.07, 0.33], or the morality–social warmth composite measure, $t(574) = 1.43$, $p = .15$, $d = 0.14$, 95% CI_d [−0.06, 0.34], from those who did not relay their story. Table 3 summarizes the results.

Next, as in the previous studies, we ran a set of non-preregistered analyses to assess robustness. First, we ran a set of linear mixed-effects regression models, with display condition as the fixed factor (dummy coded, rotating the reference category across conditions) and scenario as a random factor on each DV. These qualitatively replicated the above analysis on character judgments for all contrasts: amusement display (referent) versus embarrassment display—social warmth: $B = -1.49$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI_B [−1.73, −1.25], $t(574) = -12.46$, $p < .001$; morality: $B = -0.26$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.51, −0.01], $t(573) = -1.96$, $p = .05$; composite: $B = -0.44$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.69, −0.19], $t(574) = -3.34$, $p < .001$; amusement display (referent) versus no disclosure—social warmth: $B = -0.89$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI_B [−1.13, −0.65], $t(574) = -7.35$, $p < .001$; morality: $B = -0.43$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.68, −0.18], $t(573) = -3.19$, $p = .002$; composite: $B = -0.65$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.90, −0.40], $t(574) = -4.92$, $p < .001$; and embarrassment display (referent) versus no disclosure—social warmth: $B = 0.61$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI_B [0.37, 0.85], $t(574) = 5.07$, $p < .001$; morality: $B = -0.17$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.42, 0.08], $t(573) = -1.24$, $p = .22$; composite: $B = -0.21$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.46, 0.04], $t(574) = -1.63$, $p = .11$.

Second, as in Study 2, we ran a series of tests for heterogeneity across all possible pairs of conditions for each DV using the Stimulus package in R (Simonsohn et al., 2025). This did not reveal significant heterogeneity in responses to the display manipulation across scenarios (warmth: ps > .49; morality: ps > .58; composite: ps > .32).

Discussion

Study 3 replicated our previous findings that displaying amusement boosts perceived social warmth (relative to displaying embarrassment). We again did not find a significant effect on morality. We additionally found that sharing one's own faux pas, and laughing it off, increased one's reputation beyond not sharing a faux pas in the first place. In contrast, disclosing a faux pas while displaying embarrassment reduced perceived warmth compared to not disclosing, though it had no detectable effect on morality. In other words, while previous research highlights the benefits of self-disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994; Sprecher et al., 2013; Worthy et al., 1969), this study showed that the emotions people convey when self-disclosing matter.

Study 4

Our previous studies examined perceptions of individuals relaying past faux pas. Thus, it may be that the benefits of amusement hold only when actors have had time to process the faux pas, as time can facilitate humor (McGraw et al., 2012; McGraw & Warren, 2010). Additionally, observers may evaluate someone who voluntarily shares a story that makes them feel embarrassed as

Table 2
Study 2: Means and Standard Deviations

Dependent variable	Embarrassment display (N = 194)	Amusement display (N = 195)
Warmth	0.90 (0.73)	1.45 (0.54)
Competence	0.50 (0.69)	0.69 (0.65)
Morality	0.96 (0.60)	1.02 (0.65)
Authenticity	0.37 (0.67)	0.88 (0.60)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

Table 3
Study 3: Means and Standard Deviations

Dependent variable	No disclosure (N = 191)	Embarrassment display (N = 194)	Amusement display (N = 192)
Social warmth	6.94 (1.09)	6.34 (1.29)	7.88 (.96)
Morality	6.36 (1.25)	6.52 (1.27)	6.77 (1.28)
Composite	6.46 (1.29)	6.65 (1.28)	7.06 (1.22)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

socially inept, which could reflect negatively on their character. To address these possibilities, this study examined reactions to faux pas at the moment of their occurrence. It also investigated how observers judge actors who show no emotion upon committing a faux pas.

Method

We preregistered the design, sample size, and analysis plan for this study (https://aspredicted.org/8k27-p4yv.pdf). We aimed to recruit 300 participants via Prolific in exchange for payment and ended up with a final sample of 303 participants. We excluded 14 participants who failed the attention check, which left 289 participants (48.8% male, 47.4% female, 3.1% nonbinary, 0.4% other, and 0.4% did not disclose; M_{age} = 42.7, SD = 14.2). This sample afforded 80% power to detect a minimal effect size of η^2 = .03.

We employed a 3 Display (embarrassment, amusement, neutral) × 6 Scenario between-subjects design. Participants were presented with a scenario describing one of six scenarios adapted from Feinberg et al. (2012; see Table A1 in the Appendix). We selected a subset of scenarios because they were particularly adaptable to the perspective of a third-party observer.

All participants imagined seeing the faux pas and, immediately thereafter, catching the eye of the actor who committed it. Participants in the embarrassment-display condition read that the actor avoids eye contact and their face turns red. Participants in the amusement-display condition read that the actor smiles and laughs about what happened. Finally, those in neutral-display condition read that the actor does not show any reaction.

Participants then evaluated their interaction partner on four dimensions—warmth (α = .86), competence (α = .91), morality (α = .91), and authenticity (α = .86)—using the same measures and procedures as in Study 2. All items were rated on 5-point scales (−2 = *strongly disagree*, 0 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 2 = *strongly agree*). Finally, as in Study 1, participants completed a single-item measure of perceived embarrassment of the actor, rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Results

Per our preregistration plan, we ran four separate one-way ANOVAs using display as the independent variable. These revealed a significant main effect of display on warmth, $F(2, 286) = 53.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.20, 34]; competence, $F(2, 286) = 3.11$, $p = .045$, $\eta^2 = .02$, 95% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.0002, 0.05]; morality, $F(2, 286) = 13.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.04, 0.14]; and authenticity, $F(2, 286) = 23.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.08, 0.20].

A planned contrast analysis showed that participants evaluated those who displayed amusement as being warmer, $t(286) = 7.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.12$, 95% CI_d [0.82, 1.43], and more authentic, $t(286) = 6.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.99$, 95% CI_d [0.70, 1.29], than those who displayed embarrassment. There was no significant difference in competence, $t(286) = 1.80$, $p = .073$, $d = 0.26$, 95% CI_d [−0.02, 0.54], and morality judgments, $t(286) = 0.25$, $p = .80$, $d = 0.04$, 95% CI_d [−0.24, 0.32], across the amusement-display and embarrassment-display conditions.

Comparing the amusement-display and neutral-display conditions, we found that those who displayed amusement were also perceived as warmer, $t(286) = 9.79$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.42$, 95% CI_d [1.11, 1.74]; more competent, $t(286) = 2.40$, $p = .017$, $d = 0.34$, 95% CI_d [0.06, 0.63]; more moral, $t(286) = 4.63$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.65$, 95% CI_d [0.36, 0.94]; and more authentic, $t(286) = 4.02$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.55$, 95% CI_d [0.26, 0.84], than those who displayed a neutral reaction.

Finally, comparing the embarrassment-display and neutral-display conditions, we found that those who displayed a neutral reaction were perceived as less warm, $t(286) = 2.05$, $p = .041$, $d = 0.30$, 95% CI_d [0.01, 0.58], and less moral, $t(286) = 4.38$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.65$, 95% CI_d [0.36, 0.94], than those who displayed embarrassment. There were no significant differences in perceived competence, $t(286) = 0.61$, $p = .55$, $d = 0.08$, 95% CI_d [−0.2, 0.37], across the embarrassment-display and neutral-display conditions. Interestingly, those who displayed a neutral reaction were perceived as more authentic than those who displayed embarrassment, $t(286) = 2.79$, $p = .006$, $d = 0.42$, 95% CI_d [0.14, 0.71]. Table 4 summarizes the results.

Next, as in the previous studies, we ran a set of non-preregistered analyses to assess robustness. First, we ran a set of linear mixed-effects regression models, with display condition as the fixed factor (dummy coded, rotating the reference category across conditions) and scenario as a random factor on each DV. We qualitatively replicated the above analysis on character judgments for all contrasts: amusement display (referent) versus embarrassment display—warmth: $B = -0.88$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI_B [−1.10, −0.66], $t(283) = -8.32$, $p < .001$; competence: $B = -0.19$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI_B [−0.39, 0.01], $t(283) = -1.80$, $p = .08$; authenticity: $B = -0.55$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI_B [−0.71, −0.39], $t(284) = -6.88$, $p < .001$; morality: $B = -0.06$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI_B [−0.28, 0.16], $t(283) = -0.51$, $p = .61$; amusement display (referent) versus neutral display—warmth: $B = -1.10$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI_B [−1.32, −0.88], $t(283) = -10.25$, $p < .001$; competence: $B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI_B [−0.43, −0.03], $t(284) = -2.25$, $p = .025$; authenticity: $B = -0.32$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI_B [−0.48, −0.16], $t(285) = -3.97$, $p < .001$; morality: $B = -0.54$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI_B [−0.76, −0.32], $t(283) = -4.89$, $p < .001$; and embarrassment display (referent) versus neutral display—warmth: $B = -0.21$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI_B [−0.43, −0.01], $t(281) = -2.01$, $p = .045$; competence: $B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI_B [−0.25, 0.15], $t(281) =$

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Table 4
Study 4: Means and Standard Deviations

Dependent variable	Neutral display ($N = 95$)	Embarrassment display ($N = 97$)	Amusement display ($N = 97$)
Warmth	−0.02 (0.77)	0.21 (0.77)	1.06 (0.76)
Competence	0.37 (0.76)	0.43 (0.70)	0.62 (0.75)
Morality	0.18 (0.77)	0.68 (0.73)	0.70 (0.84)
Authenticity	0.41 (0.59)	0.18 (0.49)	0.73 (0.61)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

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−0.47, $p = .63$; authenticity: $B = 0.23$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI_B [0.07, 0.39], $t(282) = 2.88$, $p = .004$; morality: $B = -0.48$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI_B [−0.70, −0.26], $t(281) = -4.43$, $p < .001$.

Second, we ran a heterogeneity analysis across each possible pair of display conditions (Simonsohn et al., 2025). This revealed significant heterogeneity in the effect of display for warmth (embarrassment vs. amusement: $p = .002$; amusement vs. neutral: $p = .004$; embarrassment vs. neutral: $p = .001$) and morality judgments (embarrassment vs. amusement: $p = .33$; amusement vs. neutral: $p = .001$; embarrassment vs. neutral: $p < .001$), but not for competence ($ps > .24$) or authenticity ($ps > .079$) judgments. See the Supplemental Materials for stimulus plots.

To assess the nature of this heterogeneity on warmth and morality, we conducted an analysis that included perceived harm as an additional variable. As in Study 1, for each of these DVs, we fit a set of linear mixed-effects models that included fixed effects for display (dummy coded, rotating the reference category across conditions), perceived harm (continuous), and their interaction, as well as random intercepts for scenario. These revealed a significant Display × Perceived Harm interaction only for warmth, as depicted in Figure 4—amusement [referent] versus embarrassment: $B = 0.38$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [0.13, 0.63], $t(280) = 3.02$, $p = .003$; amusement [referent] versus neutral: $B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [0.05, 0.55], $t(280) = 2.37$, $p = .02$; embarrassment [referent] versus neutral: $B = -.08$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.33, 0.17], $t(279) = -0.66$, $p = .51$. The Display × Perceived Harm interaction was not significant for morality—amusement [referent] versus embarrassment: $B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.05, 0.46], $t(280) = 1.59$, $p = .11$; amusement [referent] versus neutral: $B = -.04$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.29, 0.21], $t(280) = -0.31$, $p = .76$; embarrassment [referent] versus neutral: $B = -.25$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI_B [−0.50, 0.005], $t(279) = -1.92$, $p = .056$.[6]

A floodlight analysis using the Johnson–Neyman technique (Spiller et al., 2013) examined ranges of perceived harm for which the effect of display on warmth was statistically significant. This revealed that displaying amusement led to higher ratings of warmth relative to displaying embarrassment for all values below 3.8, and it also led to higher ratings of warmth relative to displaying a neutral reaction for all values below 4.4. There was no region for which displaying amusement led to lower ratings of warmth relative to either displaying embarrassment or a neutral reaction. Perceived warmth when displaying embarrassment and a neutral reaction never significantly differed from each other across the entire region of perceived harm.

Finally, an exploratory analysis examined how embarrassed observers perceived the actor to be. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of display, $F(2, 286) = 85.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .38$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.30, 0.44], such that the actor was perceived as feeling less embarrassed when displaying amusement ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.64$) compared to both displaying embarrassment ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 0.94$), $t(286) = 12.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.02$, 95% CI_d [1.67, 2.37], and displaying a neutral reaction ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(286) = 3.20$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.41$, 95% CI_d [0.12, 0.69]. Displaying embarrassment led to greater perceived embarrassment than displaying a neutral reaction, $t(286) = 9.35$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.42$, 95% CI_d [1.11, 1.74].

Discussion

Replicating our previous findings, the results of Study 4 showed that when individuals are directly observed while committing a faux pas, displaying amusement (vs. embarrassment) increases their perceived warmth, competence, and authenticity. Moreover, the results did not reveal any significant differences in perceived morality.[7] Thus, the benefits of displaying amusement were also prevalent when individuals do not feel embarrassed immediately upon committing a faux pas in front of others.

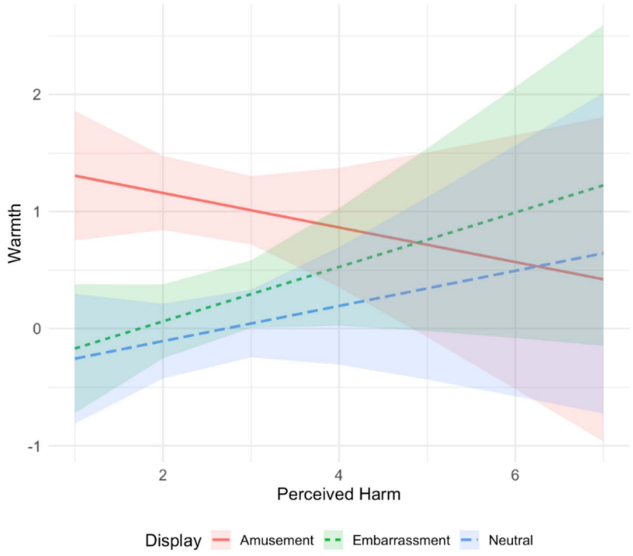
Study 5

Study 5 examined two mechanisms that potentially explain why displaying amusement in response to a faux pas is an effective impression-management strategy. First, it investigated whether amusement displays serve an appeasement function similar to embarrassment displays. Second, it examined whether amusement displays are perceived to be more emotionally calibrated compared to embarrassment displays.

[6] Although no heterogeneity was detected on competence and authenticity, we nonetheless checked whether there is a significant Display × Perceived Harm interaction by repeating the same analysis. Unlike in Study 1, the interactions were nonsignificant. Note that this study used only six of the 12 scenarios from Study 1, which potentially limited the variation across the stimuli.

[7] In sum, across Studies 2–4, we found no benefits of displaying amusement over embarrassment on perceptions of morality. To probe this further, we conducted an additional preregistered study ($N = 287$; Supplemental Study S1; https://aspredicted.org/pnvz-ymf6.pdf) that solely assessed traits related to prosociality across three display conditions (amusement, embarrassment, no emotion). The results show no significant difference in perceptions of prosociality among those who displayed embarrassment ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.07$) compared to amusement ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(284) = 1.35$, $p = .18$. However, both embarrassment and amusement displays were a stronger signal of prosociality than displaying no emotion ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.24$; $ps < .001$).

Figure 4
Warmth as a Function of Display and Perceived Harm



Note. Since our stimuli only include perceived harm ratings between 1.50 and 4.87, results outside this range should be treated with caution. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Method

We preregistered the design, sample size, and analysis plan for this study (https://aspredicted.org/ysx6-7s3r.pdf). We recruited 600 participants via Prolific in exchange for payment. We excluded 13 participants who failed the attention check, leaving 587 participants (47.4% male, 49.2% female, 2.7% nonbinary, 0.3% self-described, and 0.3% did not disclose; M_{age} = 36.8, SD = 11.8). This sample afforded 80% power to detect a minimal effect size of η^2 = .016.

We employed a 3 Display (embarrassment, amusement, neutral) × 4 Story (hiking, theater, party, yoga) between-subjects design. Participants imagined meeting someone new who told them one of the four embarrassing stories described in Study 2. They then saw a photo of an individual who displays different facial expressions. These photos were established as showing typical displays of embarrassment, amusement, or a neutral reaction in previous literature (Keltner et al., 1997; see Figure 5).

All participants completed two measures assessing perceptions of appeasement and emotional calibration on separate pages in a random order. Although past research proposed appeasement as a key feature of embarrassment displays, it has not directly measured it (Feinberg et al., 2012; Goffman, 1963; Keltner et al., 1997; Miller, 2007). We therefore created a three-item measure of appeasement (α = .70) by assessing the extent to which the actor's reaction "reduces tension," "implies the action was accidental," and "indicates a peaceful intention" on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*), drawing on previous literature.

Next, participants rated the extent to which this person "actually feels" embarrassed (i.e., *perceived* embarrassment) and, separately, the extent to which this person "should feel" embarrassed (i.e., *appropriate* embarrassment). Each measure was assessed on a three-item measure (embarrassed, ashamed, and self-conscious; αs > .86) rated on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*). The order of the presentation of each measure was randomized.

We preregistered that we would analyze these measures by subtracting the appropriate embarrassment from perceived embarrassment.[8] However, upon reflection, we recognized that we could use these ratings in two ways to test our predictions on emotional calibration more precisely. First, to test our hypothesis that individuals displaying embarrassment would be perceived as feeling more excessively embarrassed compared to those displaying amusement, we directly compared perceived and appropriate embarrassment across conditions. This allows us to capture the direction of a potential deviation, indicating either an excess or deficient level of embarrassment. Second, to test our hypothesis that individuals displaying amusement would be perceived as more emotionally calibrated than those displaying embarrassment, we took the absolute value of the difference between perceived and appropriate embarrassment, thereby capturing the magnitude of an actor's perceived deviation from what observers deem to be an appropriate reaction. We refer to this as *perceived emotional miscalibration*.

Results

Appeasement

Per our preregistration plan, we first collapsed across the four scenarios and ran a one-way ANOVA on perceived appeasement. This revealed a main effect of display, $F(2, 584) = 68.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.14, 0.23]. A planned contrast analysis showed that as compared to a neutral display ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.39$), both displaying amusement ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.28$), $t(584) = 9.43$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.91$, 95% CI_d [0.70, 1.11], and displaying embarrassment ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(584) = 10.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.09$, 95% CI_d [0.88, 1.30], signaled greater appeasement. The perceptions of appeasement did not significantly differ between amusement and embarrassment displays, $t(584) = 1.22$, $p = .22$, $d = 0.13$, 95% CI_d [−0.06, 0.33].

Emotional Calibration

First, we tested our hypothesis that individuals displaying embarrassment would be perceived as more feeling excessively embarrassed than those displaying amusement. In other words, we compared the extent to which an actor actually feels embarrassed (i.e., *perceived* embarrassment) and the extent to which they should feel embarrassed (i.e., *appropriate* embarrassment) across conditions. To do so, using these two ratings, we constructed a measure of embarrassment that reflects either perceived or appropriate embarrassment.

We then ran a two-way mixed-design ANOVA on embarrassment with display (embarrassment, amusement, neutral) as a between-subjects factor and embarrassment type (perceived, appropriate) as a repeated-measures factor. This revealed a significant Display × Embarrassment Type interaction, $F(2, 584) = 13.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$, 95% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.02, 0.07]. Perceived embarrassment of the actor was significantly greater than the appropriate embarrassment across all conditions—embarrassment display: $M_{Diff} = 1.23$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(584) = 8.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.78$, 95% CI_d [0.58, 0.99]; amusement display: $M_{Diff} = 0.38$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(584) = 2.68$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.23$, 95% CI_d [0.03, 0.43]; neutral display: $M_{Diff} = 1.30$, $SE = 0.14$,

[8] In the preregistration, we refer to this as the embarrassment gap.

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Figure 5
Photos Presented to Participants in Study 5



Note. From "Appeasement in Human Emotion, Social Practice, and Personality," by D. Keltner, R. C. Young, and B. N. Buswell, 1997, *Aggressive Behavior*, *23*(5), p. 363 (https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1098-2337(1997)23:5<359::AID-AB5>3.0.CO;2-D). Copyright 1997 by the John Wiley & Sons. Reprinted with permission.

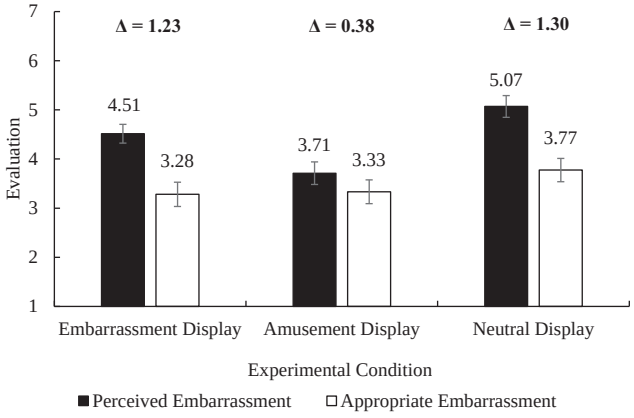
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$t(584) = 9.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.79$, 95% CI_d [0.59, 1.00]. Moreover, this difference was significantly smaller in the amusement-display condition than in both the embarrassment-display, $t(584) = 4.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.46$, 95% CI_d [0.26, 0.67], and the neutral-display, $t(584) = 4.49$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.45$, 95% CI_d [0.25, 0.65], conditions. That is, those displaying embarrassment or a neutral reaction were perceived as feeling more excessively embarrassed than those displaying amusement. There was no significant difference in the size of this difference between the embarrassment- and neutral-display conditions, $t(584) = 0.30$, $p = .77$, $d = 0.03$, 95% CI_d [−0.17, 0.23]. Figure 6 presents these results.

Next, we investigated which display was deemed more emotionally calibrated to the context. To assess the magnitude of the deviation, we ran a one-way ANOVA using the measure of *perceived emotional miscalibration* as the DV (i.e., higher numbers indicate greater miscalibration). This revealed a main effect of display, $F(2, 584) = 7.46$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.007, 0.05]. Perceived emotional miscalibration was smaller when individuals displayed amusement ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.25$) compared to both when they displayed embarrassment ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(584) = 2.20$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.24$, 95% CI_d [0.04, 0.44], and a neutral reaction ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.65$), $t(584) = 3.85$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.39$, 95% CI_d [0.19, 0.59]. Perceived emotional miscalibration did not differ between the embarrassment display and the neutral reaction, $t(584) = 1.66$, $p = .10$, $d = 0.16$, 95% CI_d [−0.08, 0.39]. Thus, amusement displays are deemed more emotionally calibrated relative to embarrassment and neutral displays.

Finally, we conducted the same robustness checks as in the previous studies for both appeasement and emotional miscalibration. Across all measures, our results did not change when we included scenario as a random factor in a mixed-effects model. Additionally, we did not detect any significant heterogeneity across stimuli. See the Supplemental Materials for details.

Figure 6
Perceived Embarrassment and Appropriate Embarrassment Based on Emotional Display in Study 5



Note. Deltas indicate the size of the difference between perceived embarrassment and appropriate embarrassment. Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

Study 5 found that amusement displays, like embarrassment displays, serve an appeasement function in response to a benign faux pas. Moreover, the results showed that while those who display embarrassment upon committing a faux pas are deemed to feel excessively embarrassed, those who display amusement are seen as more emotionally calibrated to the context.

Study 6

Study 1 found initial evidence that the reputational advantages of amusement displays hold primarily when a faux pas causes minimal harm to others. The present study tests the impact of harm directly by holding a faux pas constant and manipulating if harm is accidentally caused to the self or others. In addition, this study assesses whether perceptions of emotional miscalibration mediate the relationship between display and character judgments.

Method

We preregistered the design, sample size, and analysis plan for this study (https://aspredicted.org/xw8b-bjnb.pdf). We aimed to recruit 800 participants via Prolific in exchange for payment and ended up with a final sample of 802 participants. We excluded 11 participants

who failed the attention check, leaving 791 participants (49.4% male, 49.1% female, 1% nonbinary, 0.1% self-described, 0.4% did not disclose; $M_{age} = 41.5$, $SD = 13.3$). This sample afforded 80% power to detect a minimal effect size of $\eta^2 = .01$ for an interaction.

We employed a 2 Display (amusement vs. embarrassment) × 2 Harm (self vs. other) between-subjects design. As in the previous studies, participants imagined chatting with a person they had never met before who shared a faux pas they committed before a meeting at work that day. Those in the self-harm condition read that the person "tripped and fell" in the conference room, accidentally breaking their own arm, while those in the other-harm condition read that the person "tripped and knocked over a colleague," accidentally breaking the colleague's arm (see Table A3 in the Appendix).

As in Studies 1, 3, and 4, we manipulated whether this person displayed amusement or embarrassment while relaying their faux pas by describing their reaction. Participants then reported the perceived warmth ($\alpha = .91$), competence ($\alpha = .79$), morality ($\alpha = .90$), and authenticity ($\alpha = .90$) of the actor using the same measures and procedures as in Studies 2 and 4. All items were rated on 5-point scales (−2 = *strongly disagree*, 0 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 2 = *strongly agree*).

Next, participants rated the extent to which this person "actually feels" embarrassed (i.e., perceived embarrassment) and the extent to which this person "should feel" embarrassed (i.e., appropriate embarrassment) on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*) in random order. As in Study 5, we used these measures in two ways.[9] First, to assess whether one expression signals more excessive embarrassment, we directly compared perceived and appropriate embarrassment. Second, to assess which expression is considered to be more emotionally calibrated to the situation, we calculated *perceived emotional miscalibration* by taking the absolute value of the difference between perceived and appropriate embarrassment.

Results

Character Judgments

Per our preregistration plan, we ran three separate two-way ANOVAs on each of our main DVs using display and harm as independent variables. These revealed a significant Display × Harm interaction on warmth, $F(1, 787) = 111.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.09, 0.16]; competence, $F(1, 787) = 60.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.05, 0.10]; morality, $F(1, 787) = 165.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.14, 0.21]; and authenticity, $F(1, 787) = 44.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.03, 0.08].

A planned contrast analysis revealed that actors who harmed themselves (self-harm condition) were perceived as warmer, $t(787) = 14.98$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.66$, 95% CI_d [1.43, 1.88]; more competent, $t(787) = 4.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$, 95% CI_d [0.33, 0.73]; and more moral, $t(787) = 5.75$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.60$, 95% CI_d [0.40, 0.80], when they displayed amusement compared to embarrassment, replicating our previous findings. However, when the faux pas inflicted harm on a third party (other-harm condition), those who displayed amusement were not perceived as more or less warm, $t(787) = 0.02$, $p = .99$, $d = 0.003$, 95% CI_d [−0.19, 0.20], than those who displayed embarrassment, but they were perceived as *less* competent, $t(787) = 6.09$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$, 95% CI_d [0.36, 0.77], and *less* moral, $t(787) = 12.42$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.18$, 95% CI_d [0.96, 1.40]. Finally, those who displayed amusement were perceived as more authentic than those who displayed embarrassment across both harm conditions, though the amusement advantage was smaller when this person harmed others, $t(787) = 3.47$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.37$, 95% CI_d [0.17, 0.57], compared to when they harmed themselves, $t(787) = 12.97$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.27$, 95% CI_d [1.05, 1.48]. Table 5 summarizes the results.

Emotional Calibration

First, we tested our hypothesis that individuals displaying embarrassment would be perceived as feeling more excessively embarrassed compared to those displaying amusement. In other words, we compared the extent to which the actor actually feels embarrassed (i.e., *perceived* embarrassment) and the extent to which the actor should feel embarrassed (i.e., *appropriate* embarrassment). To do so, we constructed a measure of embarrassment that reflects either perceived or appropriate embarrassment, as in Study 5.

Next, we ran a three-way mixed-design ANOVA on this measure, with display (embarrassment vs. amusement) and harm (self vs. other) as between-subjects factors and embarrassment type (perceived vs. appropriate) as a repeated-measures factor. This revealed a significant three-way Display × Harm × Embarrassment Type interaction, $F(1, 787) = 33.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.02, 0.06].

Planned contrast analysis revealed that in the self-harm condition, perceived embarrassment was greater than the appropriate embarrassment across both display conditions—amusement display: $M_{Diff} = 0.92$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(787) = 6.27$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.56$, 95% CI_d [0.37, 0.76]; embarrassment display: $M_{Diff} = 2.83$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(787) = 18.27$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.92$, 95% CI_d [1.68, 2.16]—but this difference was significantly smaller in the amusement-display condition than in the embarrassment-display condition, $t(787) = 8.97$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.98$, 95% CI_d [0.77, 1.18], replicating Study 5. That is, displaying embarrassment was perceived as more excessive than displaying amusement relative to the appropriate level of embarrassment.

The patterns of results changed in the other-harm condition. In the embarrassment-display condition, the perceived embarrassment of the actor remained greater than the appropriate embarrassment, $M_{Diff} = 1.83$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(787) = 12.26$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.22$, 95% CI_d [1.01, 1.43]. However, in the amusement-display condition, perceived embarrassment was *lower* than the appropriate embarrassment, $M_{Diff} = -1.85$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(787) = 11.85$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.13$, 95% CI_d [0.91, 1.34], and this difference was significantly smaller than in the embarrassment-display condition, $t(787) = 17.05$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.59$, 95% CI_d [1.36, 1.82]. That is, while displaying embarrassment was perceived as excessive, displaying amusement was perceived as deficient relative to the appropriate level of embarrassment. Figure 7 presents these results.

Next, we investigated which display was deemed more emotionally calibrated to the situation. To do this, we ran a two-way

[9] As in Study 5, we preregistered to analyze these measures by constructing a measure of the embarrassment gap. We instead follow the same analysis as in the previous study for consistency.

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Table 5
Study 6: Means and Standard Deviations

	Self-harm condition		Other-harm condition	
Dependent variable	Embarrassment display (N = 195)	Amusement display (N = 190)	Embarrassment display (N = 193)	Amusement display (N = 192)
Warmth	0.38 (0.73)	1.43 (0.52)	0.47 (0.70)	0.47 (0.83)
Competence	0.42 (0.75)	0.80 (0.68)	0.46 (0.80)	−0.02 (0.89)
Morality	0.67 (0.87)	1.12 (0.61)	1.00 (0.74)	−0.01 (0.94)
Authenticity	−0.03 (0.59)	0.79 (0.70)	0.17 (0.60)	0.40 (0.60)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

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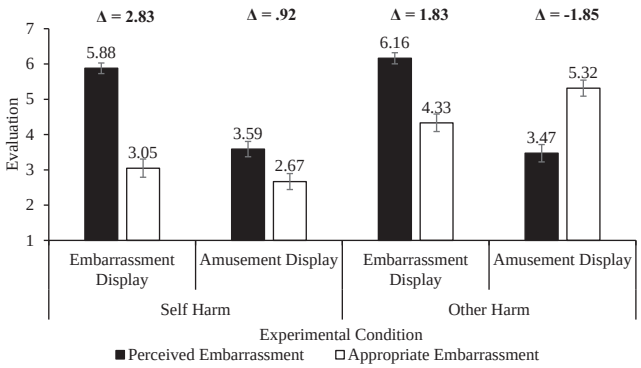
ANOVA using *perceived emotional miscalibration* as the DV to assess the magnitude of the deviation between perceived and appropriate embarrassment. This revealed a main effect of display, $F(1, 787) = 14.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.006, 0.04], and a Display × Harm interaction, $F(1, 787) = 61.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0.05, 0.10]. The main effect of harm was not significant, $F(1, 787) = 0.71$, $p = .40$, $\eta^2 = .001$, 90% $CI_{\eta 2}$ [0, 0.01].

A planned contrast analysis revealed that, in the self-harm condition, perceived emotional miscalibration was smaller when individuals displayed amusement ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 1.32$) compared to when they displayed embarrassment ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.90$), $t(787) = 8.33$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.86$, 95% CI_d [0.66, 1.07], replicating Study 5. In contrast, in the other-harm condition, perceived emotional miscalibration was smaller when the actor displayed embarrassment ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.73$) compared to amusement ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.80$), $t(787) = 2.81$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.27$, 95% CI_d [0.07, 0.47]. That is, while displaying amusement was a better calibrated reaction when the faux pas did not involve harm to a third party, displaying embarrassment was a better calibrated reaction when it did.

Moderated Mediation Model

Next, we conducted an exploratory analysis to assess the extent to which perceived emotional miscalibration explains our findings and how this reconciles with the previous literature. While prior research suggests that greater displays of embarrassment lead to more favorable character judgments (Dijk et al., 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012; Keltner et al., 1997), we hypothesize that it is not the intensity of embarrassment alone, but rather the degree to which actors are perceived as emotionally calibrated, that drives positive evaluations.

Figure 7
Ratings of Perceived Embarrassment and Appropriate Embarrassment Based on Emotional Display and Harm Conditions in Study 6



Note. Deltas indicate the size of the difference between perceived embarrassment and appropriate embarrassment. Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

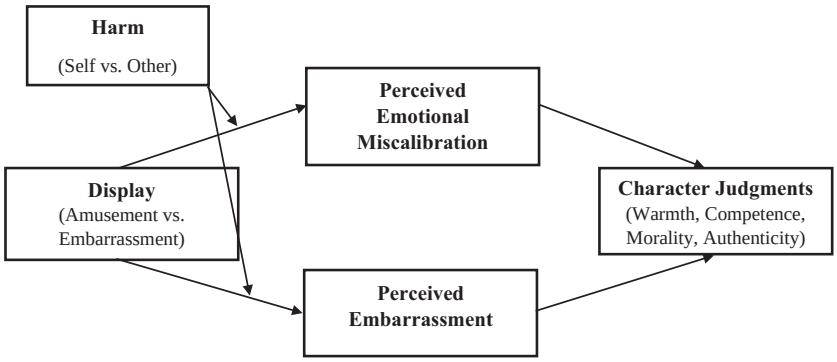
We ran a moderated mediation analysis (SPSS Macro PROCESS Model 7; Hayes, 2017; 5,000 samples) to assess whether perceived emotional miscalibration and perceived embarrassment simultaneously mediate the effect of display on character judgments and if the pattern of mediation depends on whether the faux pas causes harm to the self or others. Specifically, we ran four separate analyses, each using each character judgment (warmth, morality, competence, and authenticity) as the DV, display (1 = *amusement*, 0 = *embarrassment*) as the independent variable, the perceived emotional miscalibration and perceived embarrassment of the actor as the two (continuous) mediators, and harm (1 = *other*, 0 = *self*) as the moderator.[10] Figure 8 depicts this model.

Note that our theoretical model assumes that observers first process the actor's emotional display and then form inferences about (a) what that display signals about the actor's underlying feelings (i.e., perceived embarrassment) and (b) how well those feelings fit the situation (i.e., perceived emotional miscalibration). Observers subsequently use these inferences to judge the actor's character. This ordering follows appraisal-based models of emotion perception, which posit that evaluations of character judgments are based on context-sensitive emotional inferences (Hareli & Hess, 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2015; Van Kleef, 2009). Thus, while our data on the relationship between the mediators and character judgments are correlational (Bullock et al., 2010; Fiedler et al., 2011), this ordering is temporally and theoretically consistent with how observers interpret emotional displays.

Results show that, consistent with our moderated mediation hypothesis, we found a significant index of moderated mediation both for perceived emotional miscalibration (warmth = −.15, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [−0.23, −0.07]; competence = −.09, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [−0.18, −0.02]; morality = −.13, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [−0.22,

[10] Although the emotional miscalibration variable is derived partly from the perceived embarrassment, the correlation between these two variables is low ($r = .12$, $p = .001$), decreasing the risk of interpretation of these results (Hayes, 2017). Nevertheless, we ran two separate sets of moderated mediation analyses, which include either the perceived emotional calibration or the perceived embarrassment as the only mediator in the model. We find consistent results and report these in the Supplemental Materials for details.

Figure 8
The Moderated Mediation Model in Study 6



−0.05]) and for perceived embarrassment (warmth = −.03, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [−0.07, −0.001]; competence = −.03, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [−0.07, −0.0003]; morality = −.05, *SE* = 0.03, 95% CI [−0.12, −0.002]) on warmth, competence, and morality measures. This was decomposed in two ways.

Consistent with our mediation hypotheses, when the faux pas only involved harm to the self (self-harm condition), perceived emotional miscalibration mediated the impact of emotional display on warmth, competence, and morality. That is, displaying amusement (vs. embarrassment) decreased emotional miscalibration, and lower emotional miscalibration was associated with higher character judgments. In contrast, when the faux pas involved harm to a third party (other-harm condition), perceived emotional miscalibration mediated the impact of display in the opposite direction on warmth, competence, and morality. In this case, displaying amusement (vs. embarrassment) *increased* emotional miscalibration, and higher emotional miscalibration was associated with lower character judgments.

We also find significant mediation through perceived embarrassment both in the self-harm condition and in the other-harm condition for warmth, competence, and morality. That is, displaying amusement (vs. embarrassment) decreased perceived embarrassment both in the self-harm and in the other-harm conditions, and the more embarrassed the actor was viewed to be, the more positively they were judged by others for each character dimension, consistent with previous literature. See Table 6 for details.

The results for authenticity judgments showed a different pattern. In this case, there was no significant moderation by harm for either emotional miscalibration (authenticity = −.02, *SE* = 0.03, 95% CI [−0.07, 0.03]) or perceived embarrassment (authenticity = .02, *SE* = 0.01, 95% CI [−0.001, 0.05]) mediators. Specifically, we do not find evidence that emotional miscalibration mediated authenticity judgments across either the self-harm or the other-harm conditions. However, perceived embarrassment mediated the effect of display on authenticity judgments across both harm conditions. Across both conditions, displaying embarrassment (vs. amusement) led to greater perceived embarrassment, which was associated with *lower* authenticity judgments. See Table 6 for details.

Finally, the direct effect of display was significant for warmth (*B* = 0.68, *SE* = 0.07, 95% CI [0.54, 0.82]) and authenticity (*B* = 0.40, *SE* = 0.06, 95% CI [0.28, 0.52]), but not for competence (*B* = 0.12, *SE* = 0.08, 95% CI [−0.04, 0.27]) and morality (*B* = 0.04, *SE* = 0.08, 95% CI [−0.13, 0.20]).

Discussion

Study 6 showed that the reputational benefits of displaying amusement in benign situations weakened when a faux pas causes harm to others—diminishing for authenticity, disappearing for warmth, and reversing for competence and morality. This study also reconciled our findings with past research. We found that for warmth, competence, and morality, both perceived emotional calibration and perceived embarrassment mediated the effect of display on judgments, such that both signaling better emotional calibration and greater embarrassment were associated with superior character judgments. Interestingly, while perceptions of emotional miscalibration did not significantly impact authenticity, perceived embarrassment was associated with *lower* authenticity judgments, even when a faux pas harmed others.

General Discussion

We present a simple framework for how different emotional displays affect reputation upon the commission of a faux pas. When a faux pas causes minimal or no harm to others, actors maximize reputation by displaying amusement (vs. embarrassment), but when a faux pas harms others, amusement becomes inappropriate, decreasing its reputational benefits.

Our studies outline an incident and then describe or display the reaction of the actor responsible for the incident. However, in the real world, witnesses may obtain differing levels of information about the incident or the actor itself. For those with less information, the emotion an actor displays upon committing or communicating a faux pas may therefore influence how harmful (i.e., severe) the action was perceived to be in the first place (cf. McGraw et al., 2015). Those displaying amusement likely signal that the act was more benign than those displaying embarrassment.

Different emotional expressions of actors are also likely to directly affect the experience of third parties (Goffman, 1963). When facing faux pas, calibrating one's emotional reactions is difficult not only for the actor but also for the observer. Whereas observing an embarrassing faux pas can engender laughter (Billig, 2001; Fink & Walker, 1977), laughing at someone can be perceived as an act of humiliation (Yip & Martin, 2006; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2013). An actor who laughs at their own faux pas may be perceived as giving observers permission to laugh "with" rather than "at" the

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Table 6
Study 6: Moderated Mediation Results

Harm condition	Indirect effect	*SE*	95% CI	*a* pathway			*b* pathway		
				B	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*
Mediator 1: Emotional Miscalibration									
Warmth									
Self-harm	0.11	0.03	[0.06, 0.16]	−1.41	0.17	<.001	−0.08	0.02	<.001
Other harm	−0.04	0.02	[−0.08, −0.01]	0.48	0.17	.005			
Competence									
Self-harm	0.07	0.03	[0.02, 0.13]	−1.41	0.17	<.001	−0.05	0.02	<.001
Other harm	−0.02	0.02	[−0.06, −0.002]	0.48	0.17	.005			
Morality									
Self-harm	0.09	0.03	[0.04, 0.16]	−1.41	0.17	<.001	−0.07	0.02	<.001
Other harm	−0.03	0.02	[−0.07, −0.01]	0.48	0.17	.005			
Authenticity									
Self-harm	0.01	0.02	[−0.02, 0.05]	−1.41	0.17	<.001	−0.01	0.01	.50
Other harm	−0.004	0.008	[−0.02, 0.01]	0.48	0.17	.005			
Mediator 2: Perceived Embarrassment									
Warmth									
Self-harm	−0.16	0.05	[−0.25, −0.06]	−2.29	0.14	<.001	0.07	0.02	<.001
Other harm	−0.18	0.06	[−0.30, −0.07]	−2.69	0.14	<.001			
Competence									
Self-harm	−0.15	0.05	[−0.26, −0.05]	−2.29	0.14	<.001	0.07	0.02	.001
Other harm	−0.18	0.07	[−0.32, −0.06]	−2.69	0.14	<.001			
Morality									
Self-harm	−0.29	0.06	[−0.40, −0.17]	−2.29	0.14	<.001	0.13	0.02	<.001
Other harm	−0.34	0.08	[−0.49, −0.19]	−2.69	0.14	<.001			
Authenticity									
Self-harm	0.11	0.05	[0.03, 0.20]	−2.29	0.14	<.001	−0.05	0.02	.003
Other harm	0.13	0.05	[0.03, 0.23]	−2.69	0.14	<.001			

Note. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

actor. This is likely to be appreciated by third parties who can share in the humor of the situation.

While our studies put participants in the shoes of a third party, one might wonder how those who find themselves the target of the faux pas (e.g., a second party who is called by the wrong name) will react to different displays by an actor. Our results suggest that the second party's view will depend on whether they feel harmed or offended by the faux pas, although additional empirical investigation is needed. There may be significant heterogeneity in whether second parties take offense to innocent blunders in the first place, as responses may depend on the personality of the second party and the relationship between the two parties, such as their social closeness (Clark & Finkel, 2005; Clark & Reis, 1988) or status differences (Steckler & Tracy, 2014). In these cases, one might consider displays of embarrassment to be a safer impression-management strategy, as it reduces the likelihood that a second party is being "laughed at," especially when it is unclear the extent to which the second party feels harmed by the offense.

It is worth noting that we focused on perceptions of actors who are giving off ostensibly real expressions of their feelings. It remains unclear how actors are perceived if they are seen as suppressing or faking emotions. For instance, someone who laughs at themselves in a failed attempt to hide feelings of embarrassment may be seen as "putting on a brave face" (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006). This might reflect positively on them by signaling resilience but may also be seen as hiding their true feelings, which could reflect a lack of authenticity.

Our studies show that amusement displays reflect positively on actors both immediately upon the commission of a benign faux pas as well as after time has passed. Future research can investigate how observers judge the emotional processes individuals may go through to overcome feelings of embarrassment (i.e., the process of "transcending" embarrassment). For instance, it remains unclear to what extent an initial embarrassment display matters to character judgments if an actor eventually reconstrues their faux pas in a more humorous light.

Across all studies, we find that individuals who signal their embarrassment upon committing a faux pas are perceived as less authentic even when the faux pas involves moderate harm to others. Yet, authenticity was the only measure that was not mediated by emotional calibration in Study 6, suggesting that perhaps the relationship between authenticity, embarrassment, and amusement is unique relative to the other DVs we assessed. It is possible that because embarrassment is a negative self-conscious emotion—reflecting a disconnect between internal and external standards of behavior—it will be seen as a somewhat inauthentic emotion. Consistent with this notion, in Study 6, perceived embarrassment was negatively associated with authenticity. Further research could explore the relationship between negative self-conscious emotions and authenticity judgments more broadly.

Our findings point to the significance of emotional calibration in reputation management. Yet, the mediation results in Study 6 are correlational, as we did not experimentally manipulate perceived emotional calibration to assess its effect on character

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Table 7
Table of Limitations

Limitation	Description
Generalizability to field settings (I): Studies employ hypothetical scenarios and internet-based samples.	Our studies rely on hypothetical scenarios that are assessed using U.S.-based Prolific samples. As a result, a degree of artifice may inhibit the external validity of our findings. In real life, the vividness of a faux pas or the corresponding reaction may affect how observers react to actors (Van Boven et al., 2010, 2013). Moreover, the results presented are limited to text and electronic interactions.
Generalizability to field settings (II): Dependent variables lack behavioral measures.	We do not assess behavioral measures of how individuals are treated by others based on their emotional reaction to committing faux pas. It is possible that a person who laughs at themselves might be perceived favorably but might not be chosen as an optimal interaction partner (e.g., if they are seen as flippant), which warrants further investigation.
Theoretical limitation (I): Results may be context sensitive.	Behavioral responses of interaction partners may also depend on the social context (e.g., work, dating, friendship) and purpose of the interaction. Future research can investigate downstream consequences of amusement and embarrassment displays for impressions across different settings.
Theoretical limitation (II): Identified mechanisms may not be exhaustive.	Our theorization on emotional calibration and harm to others may not represent the totality of mechanisms at play. Other mechanisms may be present that have not been investigated.
Theoretical limitation (III): Voluntary disclosure of faux pas may influence inferences about intentionality.	Our empirical package (except for Study 4) primarily focuses on the consequences of different emotional displays upon voluntary disclosure of past faux pas. While Study 4 removed this concern by focusing on direct observation of faux pas, the impact of intentionally revealing a faux pas (vs. not intentionally doing so) is not directly investigated in this article.
Generalizability to population pool: Participants are primarily Western/WEIRD.	Our experiments were conducted among a Western participant pool. Reactions to faux pas may be perceived differently in other cultures. For example, interdependent cultures are more prone to feelings of embarrassment and are more sensitive to others' evaluations (Miller & Leary, 1992; Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). Thus, such cultures may find traditional displays of embarrassment (e.g., blushing) more appeasing than amusement (Keltner & Haidt, 1999), a possibility that warrants further empirical investigation. Moreover, perceptions of amusement or embarrassment displays may vary based on factors that affect sensitivity to such social norms, such as age group, generation, or historical period.

judgments (Bullock et al., 2010; Fiedler et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2005). Future work could manipulate perceived calibration directly to isolate its causal role. This could help to develop a broader theory of how it influences character judgments and whether there are any additional inferences that underlie it (e.g., actor intentionality). Moreover, future research could assess whether emotional calibration is more consequential for some emotions than others (e.g., social vs. nonsocial, positive vs. negative) and varies with the moral or consequential gravity of the situation.

Finally, our results are not without limitations. We present these in Table 7.

Conclusion

Contrary to the common inclination to strongly signal embarrassment upon committing a faux pas, this research proposes that signaling amusement offers a more effective impression-management strategy. The findings of this research provide a richer understanding of faux pas in interpersonal contexts, offering insights for individuals struggling to communicate potentially embarrassing faux pas with composure. We hope these insights will help those who risk experiencing negative self-judgments from faux pas by teaching them the value of transcending their embarrassment and encouraging them to take their faux pas more lightheartedly.

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(*Appendix follows*)

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Appendix

Additional Details on Methods

Table A1
Scenarios in Studies 1 and 4

Scenario	Stimuli	Harm
Fall	I was walking on a crowded public street yesterday. Suddenly, my foot caught on the sidewalk, and I awkwardly flung my body forward barely preventing myself from falling over. Many people saw me trip.	1.50
Glass door	I was at a friend's house for a party yesterday. The party was outside on the patio. My friend asked me to grab something from inside. I didn't notice that the sliding glass door was closed, and I walked right into it causing it to make a very loud rumbling noise. Everyone at the party looked over and saw what I've done.	1.96
Zipper	I gave a presentation in front of a large audience yesterday. Everything went well, but at the end, I looked down and noticed that my zipper had been down the whole time.	2.10
Divorce[a]	I ran into a friend in a store who I haven't seen for years yesterday. I asked her how her husband is doing. She informed me that she actually divorced him a year ago.	2.79
Body odor[a]	I went to the gym yesterday afternoon for a particularly intense workout. Afterward, I talked to a few people before leaving. As I left the gym, I noticed that I forgot to use deodorant and smelled terribly as a result. I realized that the people I spoke with must have noticed.	2.87
Glass	I was in a restaurant eating dinner yesterday and I reached to grab some bread, but I accidentally knocked over the water glass causing it to break on the floor with a crash.	2.88
Naked[a]	I had just gotten out of the shower and was drying myself off in my room yesterday. I then realized that my window shades were open and my neighbors, who were walking by, could see me naked.	2.91
Snore	I was sitting in a crowded theater yesterday and accidentally fell asleep. Before I realized it, I snored loudly, which caused me to wake myself up, and I noticed many people looking at me.	3.04
Birthday[a]	I gave my mom a call to wish her a happy birthday yesterday. When she answered, I enthusiastically wished her a happy birthday. She thanked me and informed me that, actually, her birthday was the day before. I was a day late.	3.71
Beggar	I saw a person sitting on a bench in a park yesterday. He looked shabby and was holding out a cup. I walked up to him and put some coins in his cup, but it turned out he was not begging, but just a man sitting on the bench drinking coffee.	4.11
Email[a]	A coworker sent out a request for ideas for a new project yesterday. I wrote an email back to my coworker referring to an inside joke between the two of us that others would find very inappropriate. I realized after I sent it that I actually pressed reply all.	4.64
Pregnant[a]	My friend introduced me to a woman who had a protruding stomach yesterday. I assumed she was pregnant and asked her when she is due. She informed me that she was not pregnant.	4.87

Note. Scenarios used in Study 4 were slightly modified to reflect someone observing a faux pas at the present time (see the Supplemental Materials). The "Harm" column represents the mean perceived harm from the posttest for Study 1.
[a] Scenarios that are only used in Study 1.

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Table A2
Scenarios in Studies 2, 3, and 5

Scenario	Stimuli
Hiking	[name] tells you that [he/she] went hiking with [his/her] sister and a large group of [his/her] sister's friends yesterday. In the middle of the trail, there was a zip line to cross to the other side of the valley. As [name] was getting off the zip line, [he/she] fell into a pile of horse poop in front of everyone. [He/She] had to walk around looking like that until the end of the trail.
Theater	[name] tells you that [he/she] went to see a famous show at a large theater yesterday. Before the show began, [he/she] saw an old friend among the crowd on the other side of the theater. [name] waved enthusiastically to catch [his/her] friend's attention for a few minutes. At the end, [he/she] realized that [he/she] was waving at the wrong person and half of the theater was now staring at [him/her].
Party	[name] tells you that [he/she] went to a colleague's housewarming party yesterday. The party was outside on the patio. In the middle of the party, [he/she] wanted to go grab something from inside. [He/She] did not notice that the sliding glass door is closed, and [he/she] walked right into it causing it to make a very loud rumbling noise. Everyone at the party looked over and saw what [he/she] has done.
Yoga	[name] tells you that [he/she] went to a 1-day yoga retreat yesterday. During lunch break, [he/she] met a group of people, and they joined the workshop together in the afternoon. In the middle of their yoga session, [name] accidentally let out a very long and loud fart. The room was so silent that everyone could hear [him/her] farting and turned around and stared at [him/her].

Table A3
Scenarios in Study 6

Harm condition	Stimuli
Self-harm	I had to attend an important meeting at work today. As I walked into the conference room, I tripped and fell. When I fell, my arm struck one of the desks really hard. A bunch of people in the room ran to help me and realized what I had done. They had to take me to the hospital to get my arm checked. The doctor told me that my arm was broken and that I would need to wear a cast for the next 3–4 weeks for it to heal.
Other harm	I had to attend an important meeting at work today. As I walked into the conference room, I tripped and knocked over a colleague, [colleague], who fell as a result. When [colleague] fell, [his/her] arm struck one of the desks really hard. A bunch of people in the room ran to help [colleague] and realized what I had done. We had to take [colleague] to the hospital to get [his/her] arm checked. The doctor told [colleague] that [his/her] arm was broken and that [he/she] would need to wear a cast for the next 3–4 weeks for it to heal.

(*Appendix continues*)

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Table A4
Correlations Between Dependent Variables

Study 1	1	2	3	
1. Warmth	—			
2. Competence	.69	—		
3. Authenticity	.53	.48	—	
Study 2	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
1. Warmth	—			
2. Competence	.43	—		
3. Morality	.50	.59	—	
4. Authenticity	.59	.39	.43	—
Study 3	**1**	**2**	**3**	
1. Social warmth	—			
2. Morality	.65	—		
3. Composite	.67	.85	—	
Study 4	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
1. Warmth	—			
2. Competence	.55	—		
3. Morality	.71	.67	—	
4. Authenticity	.42	.39	.36	—
Study 6	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
1. Warmth	—			
2. Competence	.58	—		
3. Morality	.57	.71	—	
4. Authenticity	.49	.42	.39	—

Note. This table presents the correlation coefficient between our main dependent variables across all studies. All correlations are significant at the $p < .01$ level.

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