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Profanity and Humor: Is that @!&#% funny?

A THESIS

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James Hultman

Edmond, Oklahoma

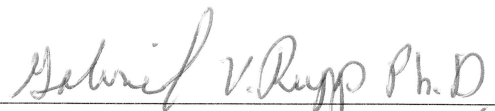
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Gabriel Rupp, Ph.D.
Chair



Robert Mather, Ph.D.
Committee Member



Brett Sharp, Ph.D.
Committee Member

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Abstract

Profanity and Humor are two complex human behaviors; both have been understudied by mainstream academics. There has even less research examining the interaction between these two topics. Three previous studies examined profanity (or some connotative synonym) and how it interacts with humor. This study revisits Sewell's (1984) research examining the appreciation of profanity in captioned cartoons. The present study is examining what, if any, changes have transpired from 1984 to 2011. Another expectation was that despite the possible changes, the research would find results similar to Sewell's (1984) experiment. Three questionnaires were used to see if there were any similar characteristics between the participants. The findings of the present study were different than those in Sewell's (1984) experiment, with there no longer being a significant difference between mild or strong profanity. The study also found there no significant difference in the appreciation of profanity in cartoons with captions. The results also yielded no similar characteristics between participant scores on their questionnaires and how they rated the cartoon.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iv
List of Tables.....	v
Chapters	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature Review.....	5
2.1 Humor Review.....	5
2.2 Profanity Review.....	12
3. Methods.....	19
4. Results.....	21
5. Discussion.....	22
List of References.....	27
Appendices.....	33
Appendix A: Indirect Aggression Scale.....	33
Appendix B: Humor Styles Questionnaire.....	36
Appendix C: Buss-Perry Aggression Scale.....	38
Appendix D: Cartoons.....	39

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – ANOVA Test of Between-Subjects Effects.....	40
Table 2 – Pairwise Comparison using LSD.....	40
Table 3 – Correlation between Indirect Aggression Questionnaire and cartoon rating.....	41
Table 4 – Correlation between Humor Styles Questionnaire and cartoon rating.....	42
Table 5 – Correlation between Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire and cartoon rating...	43

Chapter I

Introduction

“I know it when I see it”

Justice Potter Stewart

The infamous quote above from Justice Potter Stewart sums up the subjectivity that surrounds profanity and humor - two topics that are addressed in this research. Profanity and humor are interesting topics with some interesting similarities. With profanity one of the first things that must be addressed is terminology. Words such as *shit*, *damn*, *fuck* may be called a variety of things including, bad words, curse words, swearing, or obscenity. More detail will be given to each of these later, but for this thesis that type of language will be collectively referred to as profanity. Neither topic would probably fall into mainstream research, yet both occur in most social settings (Martin, 2007; Jay, 2000). Despite both being a behavior and happening with a degree of regularity in most social interactions, neither seems to garner as much attention as they deserve. The research on profanity appears sporadically over many decades and throughout a variety of fields such as anthropology, sociology, and communications (Gibbons, 1990). The research on humor appears to be similar to research on profanity in that it, too, is conducted in a variety of fields, using an array of methods ranging from anthropology, health science, and zoology/ethology (Roedelein, 2002).

This diversity of fields and methods, however, does suggest that both topics are viable research topics. According to *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography*, a 2001 search showed that proportionately psychology is conducting most of the

research pertaining to humor compared to other fields. While humor research has been conducted it has been overlooked by much of mainstream academic research, over the years the research has produced a considerable number of articles as mentioned early (Roeckelein, 2002). In contrast, profanity has been largely overlooked by both language and psychological researchers. Timothy Jay, in *Why We Curse*, brings this neglect to light. In this book, he notes that over the countless years of research, and despite all of the progress that has been made, profanity has yet to be included in most scholarly theories.

Obviously, what is deemed as offensive is largely determined by society, and as society changes, so, too, do people's perception of offensiveness. For example, analyzing television's shifting mores concerning offensive language from a semi historical perspective sheds light on how language has change generationally. Broadcast television seems to be the final barrier for any given topic; once the topic is on television, that topic becomes almost common place as opposed to taboo. A great example of this is Carl Reiner's roast of Joan Rivers on Comedy Central. In that venue, he spent his time not roasting Joan Rivers, but talking about the things he could not say during his time with *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. One example he offered was how he could not say "pregnant" on the show. Currently, not only do television shows allow actors to say "pregnant," they also allow the use words that during the early 1960s no one would have dreamed of using on a sitcom (Comedy Central Roast, 2009). Shows, such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and others of its time, were constrained by the mores and social norms of the 1950s and 1960's. Considering that the first toilet shown on a television show was in 1957, and even then it only showed the tank of the toilet not the seat (Toilet Museum), one can imagine the type of language that was permitted to be aired during this period of television history. In an early study that used strong language, Aronson and Mills (1959), while studying cognitive dissonance

developed the embarrassment test. In that test, groups of people went through one of three initiations: no initiation, mild initiation, and severe initiation. In the no initiation condition they did nothing to get in the group, in the mild initiation condition they read material that would not be considered embarrassing to get in the group, and the severe initiation condition they were exposed to material that would be considered embarrassing to get in the group. The severe group's words consisted of words such as, "fuck," "cock," and "screw." Along with two descriptions of sexual activity, these words would have been very taboo during the late 1950's. Findings indicated that those who went through the severe initiation condition liked the group more than those who went through either no initiation or mild.

However, things were about to change with shows such as *All in the Family* and *Maude*. These shows addressed taboos head on, with both Cousin Maude and Archie Bunker ending up on the cover of *Time Magazine* with the title *The New TV Season: Toppling Old Taboos*. TV Guide ran a "Close up" entitled "A Lighthearted Look at Prejudice" (p.138). Those who tuned in to watch the first *All in the Family* saw a disclaimer about the show. The disclaimer stated that *All in the Family* wanted to look at the frailties, prejudices, and concerns of society in a humorous way. They wanted to laugh at these topics, showing the world how absurd these topics are (Neuwirth, 2006,). These shows addressed taboos such as miscarriage, breast cancer, infidelity and, on an episode of *Maude*, abortion, which had just become legal in the state of New York (Maslon & Kantor, 2008). Norman Lear said that "it was difficult to get those words on television in the first place..." (p.282). Lear spearheaded a lawsuit against "Family Viewing Hour," (p.282) set from eight to nine pm eastern standard time, where viewing was to be devoid of any controversy, bad language, or bad behavior. He later won the lawsuit with the courts ruling the restriction unconstitutional (Maslon & Kantor, 2008). Since then, there has been quite

a change in the language that has been aired. For example, in 1972, George Carlin performed a stand-up routine which he went over the “*Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television.*” At the time the words, on Carlin’s list, were not considered appropriate to be aired (Pinker, 2007). However, Steven Pinker who cites a great example of change in his book, *The Stuff of Thought: Language As a Window Into Human Nature*. In the text, he states how the power of these words has changed throughout history. In the past, if a person would say “Go to hell” people actually felt that the person had the power to send their soul to hell. Today, if someone said “Go to hell,” a person would hardly flinch, let alone feel that he/she was doomed to hell. To get a similar reaction today, a person would have to use much more graphic language (Pinker, 2007). This example is quite telling; those words no longer have the same impact that they once did, and have been replaced by new more powerful language.

While entities such as the FCC will always be there, society ultimately will both adapt to and change the regulations, finding ways to get the message across. The uses of euphemisms are a prime example of this process of adaptation and change. A euphemism is “the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive word for a word that may offend or suggest something unpleasant” (Euphemism, Merriam-Webster). While words like *fuck*, *shit*, and *damn* may be prohibited, words like *fudge*, *crap*, and *darn* are not. In other words, euphemisms allow writers to code offensive words in non offensive ways. Another way to code offensive words is to use the first letter of the word. For example, “fuck” can be expressed without the use of euphemisms because very few people would be confused when told that someone used the *f-word* or *f-bomb*. These expressions convey similar meaning and at the same time are not subject to penalty by the FCC.

This thesis revisits Sewell’s experiment (1984) that examined cartoons that contained profanity in their captions. This thesis uses these cartoons to see what, if any, changes have

transpired in students from 1984 to 2011 with respect to profanity in cartoon captions. It is the expectation of this work to find similar results to Sewell's research, with men finding the strong profanity funnier than women. Also, mild profanity to be found the funniest of the three cartoons, by both men and women. This study used three questionnaires to determine whether those who had more aggressive characteristics/traits find the strong profanity funnier than those with less aggressive characteristics/traits. In hopes that the participants will share some commonalities and they will serve as a predictor to humor preference. Greater detail will be given in the methodology section as to how the experiment was conducted and additions made to the original experiment.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Humor Review

Despite the years of research on the topic there is no formal definition of humor (Guinsler, 2008). Additionally, how humor came to mean exactly what it does today is quite detailed. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, for example, a simple search of the word "humor" brings up a list of humor as a "noun," a "verb," sense of humor, ill humor, aqueous humor, and more it shows that definition one and two both refer to humor as fluids (Humor, Merriam-Webster). Similarly, there are just about as many theories dealing with humor as there are definitions. Topical theories include Psychoanalytic (Freud, 1960), Superiority (Gruner, 1997), Arousal (Berlyne, 1972), Incongruity (Suls, 1972), and Benign Violation Theory (McGraw and Warren, 2010).

Freud (1960), wrote *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, where he lays out his

ideas on humor. His view was that laughter was a release of excess energy. Much like his mainstream theory, much of his ideas about humor revolved around sex and aggression. He does however mention a form of cognitive humor; he addresses this as “wit” or “joke work.” He maintains that people who are witty have the mental faculties that are separate from other mental faculties (e.g., IQ, memory). He mentions that not everyone is capable of this form of “joke work.” Freud refers to two forms of humor as “tendentious” (sex and aggression) and “non-tendentious” (joke work). Non-tendentious jokes were also referred to as innocent jokes, and the reason that jokes produce enjoyment is the release of the sexual or aggressive energy (Freud, 1960).

Superiority theory (Gruner, 1997) is a theory that says humor is generally based on the misfortunes of others. While early philosophers did not use the term superiority theory when dealing with humor or laughter, early thinkers, such as Plato and Aristotle, spoke of this type of theory when dealing with such things as laughter or humor. Plato’s take on humor/laughter was that our amusement came from seeing those who were powerless, and this amusement resulted in malice towards those people. Plato warned that those who find this amusement should be vigilant, because he thought this amusement, an emotion, could cause the loss of rational control (Morreall, 1987). Aristotle, much like Plato, believed that laughter was brought on by being amused by perceiving someone who was believed to be inferior in some way (Morreall, 1987). It is the work of these early philosophers that laid the ground work to become superiority theory. Gruner (1997) simply defines superiority theory as where there is a winner and loser in each humorous situation. However, he states that finding the winner and loser of the situation can be very difficult.

Berlyne (1972), developed Arousal theory basing his ideas on the concept of an inverted

U. He states that humor and pleasure are closely associated, and he described the “collective variables,” including a degree of novelty, surprisingness, complexity, rate of change, ambiguity, and incompatibility. He maintained that humorous material could possess any degree of those factors driving it towards the apex of the inverted U, to reach its max potential. If it surpassed that apex, it would in turn have a negative impact and would no longer be humorous. In an early experiment examining arousal theory, Schachter and Wheeler (1962) had three groups: the epinephrine group, the chlorpromazine group, and the saline solution group. The researchers used epinephrine to increase arousal, chlorpromazine to decrease arousal, and saline solution as the control. Participants were then exposed to a clip of slapstick from the movie *The Good Humor Man*. Results indicated that those who were injected with the epinephrine showed more amusement (smiling and/or laughter) than those who were injected with chlorpromazine or saline. This theory played an important role in the understanding of the psychophysical and emotional aspects of how humor is processed. This research follows the line of the two-factor theory of emotion research done by Schachter and Singer (1962). The two-factor theory might look something like this when applied to humor: While watching something funny, heart starts beating quickly, the heart beat is caused by arousal, and in the end laughter to release the arousal.

As the cognitive psychology took foothold in mainstream psychology, it was also taking hold in humor. The major cognitive theory pertaining to humor is incongruity theory. While there are several early theorists dealing with the idea of incongruity, Jerry Suls (1972) two-stage theory, is probably the most commonly cited and views humor as a problem solving activity. Sul’s theory, based on incongruity and resolution, views humor as a problem, and resolution comes when the listener has solved the problem. Once the listener has solved the problem, he/she will experience either laughter or puzzlement. His theory gives four factors that contribute to the

appreciation of humor one incongruity of the joke ending. Factor one is Incongruity; this refers to how much the ending of the joke violates the listener/audience expectations. Factor two is Complexity of Stage -2 problem solving, which refers to how much thought is need to solve the problem. Factor three is Time taken to solve the incongruity, saying that if it requires too much thought and time to figure out, it will affect how much one can appreciate it. Finally, the fourth factor deals with the salience of the joke content. This factor involves how obvious the content is within the joke, because too obvious content equals not funny, and if not obvious, then it will impact the length of time that it takes to figure the joke out causing more confusion than anything else. This theory, more than most theories, is reliant upon the listener or audience to understand the joke; otherwise it is likely the joke will simply fall flat. Most people are familiar with a comedian saying “tough crowd.” This theory might say “dumb crowd” because the humor/jokes may simply be too difficult for the audience to grasp. Comedians who are able to sustain a long career may human understand nature, as it pertains to humor, better than most.

Benign Violation Theory (McGraw and Warren, 2010) is based on a combination of other humor theories key elements. The author states that when humor theories are taken down to their base, one gets three common elements for humor. The first element is a violation, and this violation can be viewed as a threat, a violation of norms, or a taboo. The second element is humor within the contexts of a safe situation. The third element is the ability to reconcile either of the first two elements. Benign Violation Theory examines humor when it possesses all three of the elements at the same time. This theory hinges on the ability for the listener/audience to hold a situation as safe and the violation to be benign simultaneously. Those who can process a situation as such will likely be more amused than those who lack this ability. This theory, like incongruity, relies heavily on the listener/audience ability to process information. With

incongruity, the information processing is dependent on time with benign violation requiring the information to be processed simultaneously (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

Clearly, the variety of definitions and theories allows a researcher to approach the study of humor using an array of methods. For those within the field of psychology or other methodologically-driven fields, the inability to give that true operational definition proves to be an issue. Methodologically-driven fields need this definition for consistency because it provides future researchers with the definition of what, and how, humor is being measured. This is why there is a need for more methodologically-driven studies that will allow those interested in humor to arrive at an operational definition. Achieving a better definition of what humor is and how to best measure it will only help the field of humor as a whole continue to grow, both with better studies and better theories. Previous methodological studies used limited forms of measurements when addressing how funny the stimuli were to the participants. An early annotated bibliography shows 122 experimental studies from 1950 to 1971, with the two most common dependent variables rating scale and laughter/smiling (Goldstien & McGhee, 1972). While there is usually a positive correlation between the two measurements, this correlation is typically weak (Gavanski, 1986). Laughter is thought to go hand-in-hand with humor, but it is important to realize that this not always the case. There are situations in which laughter is not accompanied with humor (e.g., social, embarrassed, or nervous laughter) and humor which doesn't result in laughter. In these situations, laughter may be found without humor (McGhee, 1979). Gavanski (1986) argues that researchers should include both the funniness scale and, as he puts it, "behavioral mirth responses." He argues this because laughing and smiling are more closely associated with the appreciation of humor, and that the rating of humor is more closely associated with the ability to comprehend humor.

This thesis uses captioned cartoons as the independent variable. These cartoons were taken from Sewell's (1984) experiment where the goal was to determine what, if any, impact profanity had on captioned cartoons. This study was the first to use captioned cartoons to explore the interaction of profanity in humor appreciation. Little has been examined since the original study was done. The study left questions that remain unanswered by either humor or profanity research. This thesis looks to examine some of those unanswered questions, by revisiting the original work and adding questionnaires to address those unanswered questions. Herzog and Larwin (1988) maintain that humor theories have two common themes: either sex and aggression or incongruity. These two themes involved two major theories: psychodynamic and incongruity. The following research examines profanity's interaction with humor as it pertains to aggression. Both humor and profanity have aggression in common and by using three questionnaires to determine whether the cartoon is found funny because of the aggression or other factors. With the other possibility being that the cartoon could be humorous because of incongruity and not aggression.

The thought is that those who preferred the humor with profanity would score higher on aggression sections of the each questionnaire. Further that these aggressive commonalities would serve as predictors of humor preference. Previous studies have shown that aggressive people are more likely to enjoy aggressive humor (Bryne, 1956; Ullmann and Lim, 1962), but neither used profanity in their humor. The questionnaires used in this study serve to examine whether those who express aggressive behavior in other forms also use humor as an outlet for their aggression. In an early study examining aggressive behavior on humor preferences, researchers found that the experimental aggression affected humor ratings but noted that the extent of this affect was dependent on the subject and the cartoon. They also found both sexual and aggressive cartoons

were rated higher by the high aggressive group than the low aggressive group (Hetherington & Wray, 1966). Another study that examined aggression and cartoon funniness showed that more aggressive cartoons were funnier. Researchers found a positive correlation between humor and aggression, with the results of Non-Americans ratings mirroring that of Americans. They had similar results when children were presented with children's cartoons. They found no significant difference when examining the impact of socioeconomic status (McCauley, Woods, Coolidge, & Kulick, 1983).

A follow up study examined pain versus aggression and how they correlate with funniness ratings. They found that the perceived pain of the victim correlated higher with funniness than did aggression. They also looked to determine whether or not the inverted U relationship could explain their findings. The study revealed that the inverted U did not fit, because despite the severity, there was no effect on funniness regardless of pain rating. This probably best fits with Aristotle's view and superiority theory: joy/amusement is found in the suffering of those around us (Deckers & Carr, 1986).

Kuhlman (1985), when examining the importance of salience with joke content, found that taboo related topics (e.g. sex, profanity, death, etc.) were consistently rated higher, regardless of the group (during lecture, before a test, or post test). This was an unexpected finding, and the author had no explanation for the finding because many factors such as incongruity were controlled. The author brought up the possibility for Freud's drive theory, but outside of that, there was no reason given for his surprising findings. Herzog and Bush (1994) cites that despite the recent surge in humor research, there has been very little surrounding that of "sick humor." Sick humor, was humor that dealt with death, disease, the persons with disabilities. Any of these could be classified as taboo, depending on the culture. Clearly, there is

some evidence that indicates the correlation between aggressive people and humor preference (Bryne, 1956; Ullmann and Lim, 1962; Hetherington & Wray, 1966), how conclusive the evidence is debatable. These few studies, especially Kuhlman (1985), indicated the need to understand jokes that contain taboo material.

2.2 Profanity Review

While many may struggle when asked to define what is profane, most people would likely indicate they would know it if they saw it. Profanity has a specific definition, but one might associate the same word with a multitude of names such as “swearing,” “cursing,” and “obscenities,” among others (Jay, 1992).

Where profanity and humor are probably most separate is in their degree of acceptance in society. If asked, most might see humor as a positive thing, whereas they might see profanity as a social taboo breaking some sacred oath never to use such language. Research has examined the impact of profanity and how it reflects on the individual. A study examining the use of profanity on listeners attitude found the similar results, that again the use of profanity had an impact on the listener’s attitude. Listener’s rated those who used profanity lower on Socio-Intellectual Status and Aesthetic Quality (Mulac, 1976).

Children acquire the words from a variety of sources, including parents, television, and general socialization like school. While at home, parents may attempt to discourage the use of profanity directed towards others, but from an early age, children use derogatory terms such as “four eyes,” “geek,” “dork,” or other names that help set them apart from others (Jay, 2000). Obviously, these are not the words that an adult would use to set them apart from one another, but the only difference is in the actual words deployed. Regardless, the word used still makes

others the object of the joke as though they have been belittled by the person telling the joke (e.g. teasing superior or solidarity). Research shows that in homes, both parents cursed at some point, with mothers cursing in 66% of homes and fathers in 51%. While it showed that both parents used profanity in the home most of the homes, 66% had rules against using profanity. The same research looked at the participant's memories of the punishment he/she received for using profanity. Verbal reprimands were more common than physical forms of punishment. Mothers used more physical forms like washing the mouth out with either soap or sometimes Tabasco sauce, and occasionally other forms like spanking or hitting (Jay, King, & Duncan, 2006). Those "adult words" that children use early lack the emotional component that is there when adults use the exact same language. Despite parents attempt to rid their children of these words with the punishments that were mentioned earlier, children continue to use them, and parent's punishment have little effect on usage as adults (Jay, 2009).

It is obvious that profanity can serve a variety of purposes and people can be familiar with profanity but chose not to use it. This phenomenon leaves us with the question: What motivates people use to profanity? People's motivation for using profanity is dependent on what they are trying to accomplish. Profanity can serve as an attention getter for the speaker; by simply using a profane word during the conversation, profanity can get the attention of the listener, letting them in on the seriousness of the conversation. The role that profanity plays in communication has been a question researchers have been trying to answer in a variety of experiments to find out what motivates people to use profanity. Motivation to use profanity is like motivation underlying human behavior: it varies from person to person. If the speaker is trying to achieve something positive from profanity, he/she may use it in jokes, humor, in-group slang, or other ways to promote group cohesion. Sometimes people use profanity just to use it.

For example, “This CD is fucking great” does not show any clear purpose for its use (Jay, 2009). A big reason for the versatility of profanity is its ability to have different connotative and denotative meanings. Jay (2009) points out that the totality of profanity is like the horn of a car; it provides an outlet for emotional expression. This research shows both the complexity of profanity and the emotional outlet that it provides a way to express the severity of the situation with words. When someone uses words such as *damn* or *fuck*, the listener knows that something may be wrong or that the speaker is angry. Within the context of a conversation, the speaker of profanity can express a multitude of emotions, such as surprise, frustration, or happiness (Jay, 2000). As the emotional association develops, profanity can then be used in a variety of situations to express emotions. At some point in history, society gave these words their power, and profanity’s emotional component seems communicate its strength. How we obtain the connection between these specific words and emotion is learned over time. Because of the emotional component that profanity has, one of the psychological factors greatly implicated is the expression of anger. Both men and women agree that profanity can serve as an expression of anger or to emphasize feelings (Fine & Johnson, 1984).

Research on aggression show men tend to be more aggressive than women, while the research on profanity shows men tend to use more profanity than women. Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992) examined the types of aggression development (eg. Physical, Verbal, and Indirect). They defined indirect aggression as “Social Manipulation,” where the target was unaware of the intentions of the person. They found a decrease in physical aggression in boys with an increase in both verbal and indirect aggression during adolescence. During the same time there was an increase in indirect aggression with girls. They stated that the developmental change could be attributed to maturation and/or social intelligence. Recent

research by Smith and Waterman (2005) examined the way men and women process different type of aggressive words. Using the Emotional Stroop task and aggressive words, they had participants say the color while ignoring the word. As they had predicted, males demonstrated a greater bias towards words pertaining to direct aggression, taking longer to name the color and females demonstrated greater bias towards words pertaining to indirect aggression, taking longer to name the color. A similar line of research using the Taboo Stroop task showed that it took longer for participants to name the color of taboo words versus the color of neutral words. That study revealed that the participants were also familiar with the taboo words used. A familiarity mean of 4.9 out of 5 revealed that, despite the familiarity of the word, processing the color of the word still took longer (Mckay, Shafto, Taylor, Marian, Abrams, & Dyer, 2004). These studies show that both aggressive words and tobaoos words take longer to process than neutral words. With words having a greater emotional meaning this paints a clearer picture as to how the words affect the sexes. As mentioned previously, there are venues in which profanity is present; it would benefit to see which words typically have the most impact. Since early exposure to profanity is not uncommon, it would benefit everyone's understanding of both the positive and negative impact profanity has on both those who use profanity and those who are subjected to it.

One of the problems that come with the studying of profanity, or other types of dirty words, is categorizing these words. Much of this problem comes from the interpretation of these words by the general public; many of them may not be able to give the standard or connotative definition that is found in the dictionary or classify a given word to the correct category. Jay (1992) categories and defines where certain offensive language falls.

Cursing

Curse (vt): to call upon divine or supernatural power to send injury upon.

Curse (n): a prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come to one.

Profanity

Profane (vt): to treat (something sacred) with abuse, irreverence, or contempt.

Profane (adj): not concerned with religion or religious purpose: secular: not holy because unconsecrated, impure, or defiled: unsanctified.

Blasphemy

Blasphemy (n): the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God: the act of claiming the attributes of deity: irreverence towards something considered sacred or inviolable.

Taboo

Taboo (adj): set apart as charged with a dangerous supernatural power and forbidden to profane use or contact.

Taboo (n): a prohibition instituted for the protection of a cultural group against supernatural reprisal.

Taboo (vt): to exclude from profane use or contact as sacrosanct esp. by marking with a ritualistic symbol.

Obscenity

Obscene (adj): disgusting to the senses: repulsive: abhorrent to morality or virtue: designed to incite lust or depravity.

Vulgarity

Vulgar (adj): generally used, applied, or accepted: having an understanding in the ordinary sense: of or relating to common people: lacking in cultivation, perception, or taste: coarse: morally crude, underdeveloped, or unregenerate: gross.

Slang

Slang (n): language peculiar to a particular group: an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrary changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech

Epithets

Epithets (n): a characterizing word or phrase accompanying or occurring in place of the name of a person or thing: a disparaging or abusive word or phrase

Insults and Slurs

Insults (vb): to treat with insolence, indignity, or contempt: to make little of.

Slur (vt): to cast aspersions upon: disparage

Scatology

Scatological (adj): of or relating to excrement or scatology

Scatology (n): the study of excrement: interest in or treatment of obscene matters

(p.2-8)

Many words fall into multiple categories, but the classification provides researchers the ability to operationally define the words. Again, the ability for many of the words to fall into multiple categories shows the versatility of these words. The different meanings (connotative vs. denotative) are additionally complicated when combined with the emotional and contextual component. Differentiating the words by connotative and denotative allow a variety of research in which participants place meaning on the individual words. This procedure allows the participants to place meaning and emotion on the word, therefore controlling for possible confounds. Researchers have taken sets of words and had participants rate these words on different aspects, ranging from the word's aggressiveness (Driscoll, 1981), to their tabooeness, and to their offensiveness, while keeping track of the frequency of use (Jay, 1992). One would expect aggressiveness, tabooeness, and offensiveness would have some impact on the usage due to the fact that both men and women perceive the use of profanity less favorably and less professional (Paradise, Cohl, & Zweig, 1980).

However, there is little research done using these words in humor research. For example, in *The Psychology of Humor* (Martin, 2007), there is no mention of profanity within the subject index, nor is it mentioned in *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography* (Roedkelein, 2002). This observation brings up the question: Why is there such little research being done? Is it as simple as it doesn't require the attention, because there is no need to examine the interaction? Is it as simple as profanity plays no role in the perception of a joke or cartoons funniness? Or, is it too uncomfortable for researchers to deal with?

Fortunately, there are three important works that examine the interaction of profanity,

swearing, or the general taboo language play in the funniness of humorous material. The first study looked at sex differences in response to what the author called “bawdy humor.” Using stories with obscenities, participants rated the text for censorship, and humor judgments. Females were stricter in censoring than males, with males rating significantly higher on humor than females (Wilson, 1975). In an unpublished work, Jay and Abbott (1978) looked at *Why Dirty Words Make Dirty Jokes Funny*, using jokes and varying the words used within the joke. In one experiment, the jokes consisted of a technical term such as “testicles,” and then used the same joke with a taboo term such as “balls” and in the control group the word was replaced with a “nonsense” word. Afterwards they had participants rate the joke on a scale from 1-9. Another study examined the appreciation of cartoon humor used strong profanity, mild profanity, and no profanity within the individual captions (Sewell, 1984). Sewell, similar to Jay and Abbott, looked at profanity’s impact humor. He found that there was a sex difference in the appreciation of these cartoons, with women finding the cartoons with mild profanity more humorous than those cartoons with either no profanity or strong profanity. Men, like women, found mild profanity to be the most humorous, but overall men found strong profanity to be significantly more humorous than women (Sewell, 1984).

Building on previous research the current study examined how profanity had an impact on humor. The current study used similar methodology used in research employed by Jay and Abbott as well as Sewell. This study used cartoons from Sewell (1984), containing one of three options no profanity, mild profanity, or strong profanity. Additionally, along with cartoons, there were three questionnaires used in the study to address the humor style of the participants as well as aggression. As in, Sewell (1984), this study expected there to be a significant difference between each group, with mild profanity being more humorous than either no profanity or strong

profanity. This study expected to find that, as in previous studies, there is a difference between, gender with males and females finding each cartoon equally as funny, and with males finding the strong profanity to be more humorous than females. Unlike other studies, this study used three questionnaires to determine whether people who had higher aggressive characteristics rated the cartoon with strong profanity higher than those who had less aggressive characteristics. This addition to the study was to determine whether there is a commonality between participant's aggressive characteristics and how he/she rated the captioned cartoons. These commonalities could serve as predictors to the participant's humor preference.

Chapter 3

Method

3.1 Participants

A convenient sample of one hundred fifty one undergraduate students enrolled in an undergraduate introductory to psychology course completed the experiment for course credit. It consisted of 57 men, and 94 women, whose age ranged from 18 to 41 years ($M = 20.25$; $SD = 3.55$).

3.2 Materials

Measuring Indirect Aggression – Aggressor (IAS-A) (Appendix A)

This study used a 34 question scale that is made up of four factors, Social Exclusion, Malicious humor, and Guilt induction. Participants rated the degree which each statement describes them on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being “Never,” 2 “Once or twice,” 3 “Sometimes,”

4 “Often,” and 5 being “Regularly.” No psychometric properties were provided for this scale (Forrest, Eatough, & Shelvin, 2005).

Humor Styles Questionnaire (Appendix B)

The *Humor Styles Questionnaire* is a 32 question scale, each with a self-descriptive statement about particular uses of humor. Respondents rate the degree to which each statement describes them on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). There are four subscales consisting of the following: “Affiliative,” which the author describes “as use of humor to amuse and facilitate relationships.” “Self-enhancing,” was described “as the use of humor to cope with stress and maintain a positive outlook on tough times.” “Aggressive” was described as “the use of sarcasm, put-downs, manipulative, or disparaging humor.” “Self-defeating” was described by the author as “the use of excessive self-disparaging remarks, ingratiation, or defensive denial.” The scale demonstrates solid psychometric properties, with internal consistency of .77 to .81, test-retest of .80 to .85 (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

Buss-Perry Aggression Scale (Appendix C)

Is a 29 question scale where participants rate how characteristic each question is of them on a scale of 1 (extremely uncharacteristic of me) to 7 (extremely characteristic of me). Internal consistency for the scale ranged from .72 to .85 on the individual scales and .89 for the total of each scale. The test-retest reliability for the questionnaire ranged from .72 to .80 with .80 for the total of each scale (Buss & Perry, 1992).

Procedures

The assigning of group was done using Sona (Sona Systems Ltd), which is the software

used by the university for all experiments. The participant was able to log in and select one of the three groups available, Humor Language “N” where the participant would be exposed to the no profanity cartoon, Humor Language “M” where the participant would be exposed to the mild profanity cartoon, and finally Humor Language “S” where the participant would be exposed to the strong profanity. The letters indicated the condition to the experiment, but participants were blind to the condition. When the participants entered the room, they were given consent forms to sign and date. Once consent was given they were given one of the three packets that consisted of three questionnaires and a cartoon. Each packet consisted of the same three questionnaires first: *Measuring Indirect Aggression*, *Humor Styles Questionnaire* and *Buss-Perry Aggression Scale*. The only difference between the conditions was cartoon that the participant would rate. The participant was given instructions on how to rate a cartoon on the level of “funniness” on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not funny and 10 being very funny.

Results

A 2 x 3 ANOVA (Table 1) with sex (male, female) and group (no, mild, strong profanity) as a between subject revealed no significant main effect for sex $F(1,145) = 2.53, p = .114 \eta_p^2 = .017$. It also indicated no significant interaction between sex and group $F(2,145) = .471, p = .63 \eta_p^2 = .006$. The only significant difference was found for the group main effect $F(2,145) = 14.72, p = .000 \eta_p^2 = .169$. A pairwise comparison using Least Significant Difference (Table 2) was conducted on the three groups, indicating a significant difference between no profanity and mild profanity. There was also a significant difference between no profanity and strong profanity. The comparison did not show a significant difference between mild profanity and strong profanity.

A correlation analysis was conducted on cartoon rating and each of the three scales as a

whole and for each of their subscales. The analysis was conducted to determine whether or not there were any characteristics common among the participants. None of the individual scales or totals revealed any significant commonality on the *Indirect Aggression Questionnaire* (Table 3) or *Humor Styles Questionnaire* (Table 4). The *Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire* (Table 5) was the only questionnaire to reveal any significant correlation. The two-tailed test did reveal three of four subscales and total to be significant. Physical aggression had a small positive correlated with cartoon rating Pearson's $r(151) = .180, p < .027$. Verbal aggression was not significant, Pearson's $r(151) = .156, p < .055$. Anger was positively correlated with cartoon rating Pearson's $r(151) = .220, p < .007$. Hostility also positively correlated with cartoon rating Pearson's $r(151) = .226, p < .005$. When all four subscale were combined, it revealed a small correlation with cartoon rating Pearson's $r(151) = .257, p < .001$.

Discussion

The expectation of this work was to find similar results to previous studies (Sewell, 1984; Jay, 1978) despite the changes in on air language; however, this was not the case. Strong profanity was found to be equally as funny as the mild profanity, unlike, Sewell's (1984) findings, where mild profanity was found to be the funniest of the three groups. The most significant finding was a lack of significance in gender; the analysis revealed that there is no longer a difference between men and women in rating cartoons with profanity in their captions. These results indicate that strong profanity has gained ground on mild profanity as it pertains to humor. These results also showed that aggressive people/traits did not serve to be a predictor for humor preference as only one questionnaire provided a positive correlation and that correlation was weak. These results go against some previous studies that found aggressive people prefer more aggressive humor (Bryne, 1956; Ullmann and Lim, 1962). Additionally, the findings

indicate that cartoons were not aggressive and the humor was found in the form of incongruity. The incongruity could come from an interaction between the text of the joke and the cartoon, with the use of profanity violating a norm that people hold. Most would not expect a student, let alone a child, to speak to his teacher in the manner shown in the cartoon. This factor, or some combination of these factors, could have contributed the rating and nothing to do with aggression.

While the results did not support the hypothesis, it is important to understand the potential implications for this work. The results did not yield any pertinent data that could directly impact humor, outside of the fact that participants rated the cartoon with mild/stronger profanity funnier than the cartoon without profanity. These results are clouded because of the study's limitations, and the best interpretation of the data is that the difference between this study and Sewell's are societal changes. The changes in appreciation of profanity in captioned cartoons from 1984 to 2011 show the generational changes. One important factor was the lack of significance difference between men and women: there is no longer a gap between genders in the appreciation of profanity in captioned cartoons like there once was. Clearly, the college students of today are neither those of the Cleaver's in the late 50's, or the early 60's, or even the Brady's of the late 60's early 70's. The results even indicate that college students of today are different than those of the early 80's. This change can have an impact in a variety of ways, and as it pertains to this thesis, most notable the standards and practices of the FCC. While some FCC changes have already been made, more changes will likely be made in the future. These changes will be made simply because the culture will become more and more accepting of, what was once taboo language. Although it is unlikely for the government to completely remove the language restrictions from modern day television, it will be interesting to see what changes will

be made for future television watchers.

Limitations for the present study consist of finding a better way to control for possible incongruity in the cartoon picture. The humor found in the cartoon could be caused by a form of incongruity, and while profanity is seen as a form of aggression it may not increase the perceived aggressiveness of a cartoon or joke. Another limitation of this study was not asking the participant to rate the cartoon on its perceived aggressiveness. This perceived aggression rating could have provided information against which to compare the funniness rating. This additional measure would provide opportunity to analyze whether the increase in aggression rating also reflected an increase in funniness rating. Another limitation is only having one cartoon; having other cartoons would have provided an opportunity to either compare incongruence versus arousal theory or at least eliminate the role that incongruity may have played in the perceived funniness of the cartoon. Not including a text only joke is a limitation including a text only joke would have provided another avenue of analysis. The cartoon in this study could be a limitation, not the cartoon itself but the joke. Younger students may not understand why “Dick and Jane” would be funny, because “Dick and Jane” is not used as a modern reading material in the classroom. Making a more modern cartoon to examine any difference would be helpful.

Future research should involve both building on the previous studies (Sewell, 1984; Jay, 1978) and then expanding present research. Much of what was mentioned within the limitation section is a good place to start. First researchers need to use multiple cartoons either comparing incongruity against arousal theory or eliminating any role that incongruity could play in why the cartoon was rated as funny as it was. Secondly, researchers could examine the interaction between profanity and humor by having the participants rate the joke with profanity by itself, the cartoon by itself, and finally the combination of the in text joke and the cartoon. This design

would provide a better view of exactly how profanity impacts the participants rating. The aggression rating of the cartoon from the participants would allow the researcher to examine exactly how the participants view the stimuli in terms of perceived aggressive content. Examining the role of profanity in other forms of humor, such as, irony and sarcasm will provide a better sampling of humor with profanity. This sampling will give a more exhaustive picture of the interaction between humor and profanity.

Future research for both humor and profanity seems limitless, but the lack of mainstream academics researching humor is the biggest hurdle. The reason for this lack of systematic investigation could result from the dearth of funding for humor studies. In other words, getting grant money might be more difficult resulting in people studying other areas that bring in more grant monies for their university. For humor, research trying to determine what proves to be the most consistent predictors when it comes to humor preferences. Another area for investigation is to determine personality characteristics differences using more twins' studies to examine what separates something being funny for one person and not funny for another. Also researchers should examine the neurological underpinnings of humor by using more modern method, like Event Related Potential (ERP), fMRI, to study the brain during the processing of humorous material. For those interested in humor, the only limit seems to be that of your imagination, because the variety of fields provides almost anyone with the option to study this complex and nuanced. Whether one's specialty is in, communications, psychology, anthropology, English, literature, linguistics, or education and one is interested in humor one can study it.

Profanity could provide a wealth of information about what some might consider the "darker" side of language. Just because profanity is considered taboo by some doesn't mean that it isn't worth studying. As this paper has shown, profanity happens and probably more often than

anyone would like to acknowledge. By understanding the emotional component that plays into the usage of profanity, future researchers studying profanity using ERP or fMRI will show active parts of the brain during the use of profanity. These physiologic studies would provide solid data showing the neurological impacts people who use profanity, or may be more importantly those who don't use profanity. Such studies would indicate which words impact people on the highest physiologic levels. It might also be beneficial to renorm a list of these words and compare the results of the renormed list to the results of physiologically studies. Profanity, like humor, it may occur more spontaneously and because of this spontaneity, studies involving a variety of environments could yield interesting results. In general though, continuing to study profanity using more refined methods is a must.

In summary, this research produced a mixed bag of results. It did show that changes have taken hold in the perception of profanity, for both men and women. It also showed that the stronger profanity has closed the gap between the other levels. For humor, the limitations prevent any true conclusive statement regarding the results of the study other than, as of now; humor should be examined at more levels. The more research done examining the two will provide a clearer picture and it will be easier to determine what, if any, the role that profanity plays in humor or any in other area. Researchers need to take a more detailed look at these two areas of human behavior that appear to be extremely complex. There appears to be no clear cut reason for the use of profanity or exactly why we find something funny. Better understanding of these areas will not remove the mystery behind them, ruining them for everyone, but allow a better understanding of a cross – cultural and pervasive human behavior that involves many complex processes.

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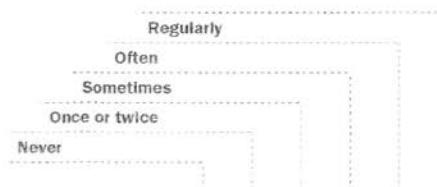
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Appendix A - Indirect Aggression Scale

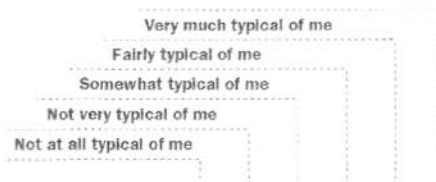
Participant # _____

Please rate each of the following items in terms of how often YOU have done any of the listed behaviors towards SOMEONE within the last year. Use the following scale for answering these items.



- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Imitated them in front of others | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Made negative comments about their physical appearance | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Gave them 'dirty' looks | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Tried to influence them by making them feel guilty | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Used emotional blackmail on them | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Made them feel inferior to me by my behavior/words | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. Criticized them in public | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Called them names | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Snubbed them in public | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Been 'bitchy' towards them | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Used my relationship with them to try and get them to change a decision | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Made them feel that they don't fit in | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Done something to try and make them look stupid | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. Made other people not talk to them | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. Played a nasty practical joke on them | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. Belittled them | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Participant # _____



17. Gained their confidence and then disclosed their secrets	1	2	3	4	5
18. Put undue pressure on them	1	2	3	4	5
19. Talked about them behind their back	1	2	3	4	5
20. Used private in-jokes to exclude them	1	2	3	4	5
21. Purposefully left them out of activities	1	2	3	4	5
22. Pretended to be hurt and/or angry with them to make them feel bad about him/her-self	1	2	3	4	5
23. Used sarcasm to insult them	1	2	3	4	5
24. Stopped talking to them	1	2	3	4	5
25. Omitted them from conversations on purpose	1	2	3	4	5
26. Used their feelings to coerce them	1	2	3	4	5
27. Intentionally embarrassed them in public	1	2	3	4	5
28. Accused them of something whilst making it appear to be said in fun	1	2	3	4	5
29. Excluded them from a group	1	2	3	4	5
30. Intentionally ignored another person/people	1	2	3	4	5

Participant # _____

31. Spread rumors about them	1	2	3	4	5
32. Made fun of them in public	1	2	3	4	5
33. Turned other people against them	1	2	3	4	5
34. Took or damaged something that belonged to them	1	2	3	4	5
35. Withheld information from them that the rest of the group is let in on	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix B – Humor Styles Questionnaire

Humor Styles Questionnaire

People experience and express humor in many different ways. Below is a list of statements describing different ways in which humor might be experienced. Please read each statement carefully, and indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with it. Please respond as honestly and objectively as you can. Use the following scale:

Totally Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Totally Agree	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1.	I usually don't laugh or joke around much with other people.					6	7
2.	If I am feeling depressed, I can usually cheer myself up with humor.					6	7
3.	If someone makes a mistake, I will often tease them about it.					6	7
4.	I let people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should.					6	7
5.	I don't have to work very hard at making other people laugh -- I seem to be a naturally humorous person.					6	7
6.	Even when I'm by myself, I'm often amused by the absurdities of life.					6	7
7.	People are never offended or hurt by my sense of humor.					6	7
8.	I will often get carried away in putting myself down if it makes my family or friends laugh.					6	7
9.	I rarely make other people laugh by telling funny stories about myself.					6	7
10.	If I am feeling upset or unhappy I usually try to think of something funny about the situation to make myself feel better.					6	7
11.	When telling jokes or saying funny things, I am usually not very concerned about how other people are taking it.					6	7
12.	I often try to make people like or accept me more by saying something funny about my own weaknesses, blunders, or faults.					6	7
13.	I laugh and joke a lot with my friends.					6	7
14.	My humorous outlook on life keeps me from getting overly upset or depressed about things.					6	7
15.	I do not like it when people use humor as a way of criticizing or putting someone down.					6	7
16.	I don't often say funny things to put myself down.					6	7
17.	I usually don't like to tell jokes or amuse people.					6	7

Appendix C – Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire

Buss-Perry Scale

Please rate each of the following items in terms of how characteristic they are of you. Use the following scale for answering these items.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
extremely uncharacteristic of me						extremely characteristic of me	

- 1) Once in a while I can't control the urge to strike another person.
- 2) Given enough provocation, I may hit another person.
- 3) If somebody hits me, I hit back.
- 4) I get into fights a little more than the average person.
- 5) If I have to resort to violence to protect my rights, I will.
- 6) There are people who pushed me so far that we came to blows.
- 7) I can think of no good reason for ever hitting a person.
- 8) I have threatened people I know.
- 9) I have become so mad that I have broken things.
- 10) I tell my friends openly when I disagree with them.
- 11) I often find myself disagreeing with people.
- 12) When people annoy me, I may tell them what I think of them.
- 13) I can't help getting into arguments when people disagree with me.
- 14) My friends say that I'm somewhat argumentative.
- 15) I flare up quickly but get over it quickly.
- 16) When frustrated, I let my irritation show.
- 17) I sometimes feel like a powder keg ready to explode.
- 18) I am an even-tempered person.
- 19) Some of my friends think I'm a hothead.
- 20) Sometimes I fly off the handle for no good reason.
- 21) I have trouble controlling my temper.
- 22) I am sometimes eaten up with jealousy.
- 23) At times I feel I have gotten a raw deal out of life.
- 24) Other people always seem to get the breaks.
- 25) I wonder why sometimes I feel so bitter about things.
- 26) I know that "friends" talk about me behind my back.
- 27) I am suspicious of overly friendly strangers.
- 28) I sometimes feel that people are laughing at me behind me back.
- 29) When people are especially nice, I wonder what they want.

Appendix D – Cartoons used



No Profanity



Mild Profanity



Strong Profanity

Tables

Table 1 – ANOVA Table

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable:Cartoon

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power ^b
Corrected Model	156.597 ^a	5	31.319	6.432	.000	.182	.997
Intercept	2294.999	1	2294.999	471.300	.000	.765	1.000
Sex	12.308	1	12.308	2.528	.114	.017	.352
Group	143.370	2	71.685	14.721	.000	.169	.999
Sex * Group	4.589	2	2.295	.471	.625	.006	.126
Error	706.079	145	4.870				
Total	3223.000	151					
Corrected Total	862.675	150					

a. R Squared = .182 (Adjusted R Squared = .153)

b. Computed using alpha = .05

Table 2 – Pairwise Comparison

Pairwise Comparisons

Dependent Variable:Cartoon

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. ^a
No Profanity	Mild Profanity	-1.918*	.455	.000
	Strong Profanity	-2.297*	.453	.000
Mild Profanity	No Profanity	1.918*	.455	.000
	Strong Profanity	-.380	.453	.404
Strong Profanity	No Profanity	2.297*	.453	.000
	Mild Profanity	.380	.453	.404

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

a. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Table 3 – Indirect Aggression Questionnaire Correlation with Cartoon Rating

Correlations		Cartoon
Cartoon	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	151
Malicious Humor	Pearson Correlation	.115
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.159
	N	151
Social Exclusion	Pearson Correlation	.126
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.124
	N	151
Guilt Induction	Pearson Correlation	.123
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.133
	N	151
Total	Pearson Correlation	.141
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.085
	N	151

Table 4 – Humor Styles Questionnaire Correlation with Cartoon Rating

Correlations		Cartoon
Cartoon	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	151
Affiliative	Pearson Correlation	-.004
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.961
	N	151
Self-enhancing	Pearson Correlation	-.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.923
	N	151
Aggressive	Pearson Correlation	.025
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.761
	N	151
Self-defeating	Pearson Correlation	-.065
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.430
	N	151
Total	Pearson Correlation	-.023
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.780
	N	151

Table 5 – Buss Perry Questionnaire Correlation with Cartoon Rating

Correlations		Cartoon
Cartoon	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	151
Physical Aggression	Pearson Correlation	.180*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.027
	N	151
Verbal Aggression	Pearson Correlation	.156
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.055
	N	151
Anger	Pearson Correlation	.220**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007
	N	151
Hostility	Pearson Correlation	.226**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005
	N	151
Total	Pearson Correlation	.257**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
	N	151

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).