

Tools of Persuasion: A Comparison of Satirical and Serious Treatments of Sexual Harassment

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Honors Thesis

Oklahoma State University

2019

### Abstract

Satire is often used to send persuasive messages. Humor in general increases engagement with and enjoyment of media, which can make said media more persuasive. However, satire is a subtle type of humor that may be subject to misinterpretation. This study investigates the effects that satirical media have on people's opinions about sexual harassment. Participants in different conditions were shown satirical clips from popular TV shows which dealt with the topic of sexual harassment or serious clips about the same issue. A control condition with clips that were funny but not persuasive was also included. No significant differences between the three conditions were found.

### Tools of Persuasion: A Comparison of Satirical and Serious Treatments of Sexual Harassment

In recent years, there has been increasing debate in politics and around the internet about the appropriateness of using satire to make statements about political issues. On one side of this debate, people argue that satire does not send a clear enough message, or that it may trivialize important topics. On the other side, people argue that satire may be more approachable than other ways of discussing these topics. If this is true, then satire might be especially effective for convincing people who are resistant to the message being conveyed. Despite the public interest in this issue, there has been no research to date which compared the persuasive impact of satire to non-satirical or non-humorous alternatives.

The first category of research that informed this project was research on the use of humor for persuasion. A set of experiments looking at the effectiveness of humor in advertising found two distinct benefits of incorporating humor into persuasive media: First, humor makes people happy, which tends to lead to positive appraisal of whatever the funny thing is. Second, humor causes distraction, which derails viewers' attempts to not be persuaded by a piece of media (Strick, Holland, van Baaren, & van Knippenberg). These two effects of humor might not apply to political or social justice media in the same way they do to advertisements. Clearly, the positivity effect is a good thing in advertising. After all, Wendy's does not care why people buy their food. If the thing that convinces you to go there instead of McDonalds is your funny memories of the Wendy's twitter account, that is fine by them. They still get your money. However, it is difficult to predict how this effect might operate with more political subject matter. It is possible that with more complex issues, the positive associations from humor could attach to something other than your intended message. If I make a comedy sketch that satirizes

racist people, I do not want my audience to walk away with the idea that racism is funny. The distracting effect might be more useful, especially when media is aimed at people who do not already hold the opinion it is promoting. Another study in this category compared humorous and serious versions of both one-sided and more complex two-sided PSA posters about agricultural practices. The study found that the two-sided PSA inspired more resistance to persuasion. This resistance interacted with humor in an interesting way. When humor was not incorporated into the two-sided PSA, it was significantly less persuasive than the control, but when humor was incorporated, it was significantly more persuasive (Vande Veld, Hudders, Cauberghe, & Claerebout, 2018). This suggests that humor may be a good persuasive tool in contexts other than advertising, especially when it is part of a relatively complex message. However, the humor used in this study was simple silly art that gave no opportunity to misinterpret anything. It might not be appropriate to generalize these findings to satire.

The second major category of research that helped guide this project focused on the potential ambiguity of political satire. When presented with satire that is never explained or put into context, people tend to assume that the views being expressed in the satire are similar to their own. This effect was demonstrated in a study which showed participants a segment from *The Colbert Report* and then asked them to guess the political views of host Stephen Colbert. People who were themselves politically conservative judged Colbert to also be conservative, while liberals judged him to be liberal. This is not caused by people “not getting the joke,” as both conservatives and liberals found the segment equally funny. However, conservatives thought that Colbert’s humor was essentially literal, or that he was being doubly ironic. (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). It is possible for people to clearly understand that ambiguous humor is funny without understanding who or what is being made fun of, but other

research has suggested that there are differences in the degree to which people find ambiguous humor funny at all. Since satire is ambiguous and cognitively taxing compared to other forms of humor, it would logically follow that people with a high tolerance for ambiguity and a preference for cognitive work would like satire more than people without those traits. As it happens, both of the traits mentioned are correlated with liberalism. Liberals have been found to have a higher appreciation for satire, as well as other types of humor (Young, Bagozzi, Goldring, Poulson, & Drouin, 2017). These two studies conflict with each other somewhat, since LaMarre, Landreville and Beam found no difference in appreciation between liberals and conservatives.

General theories about the purpose and/or mechanism of humor can help explain how humor might function as a persuasive tool. One way that humor has been conceptualized is as a sort of emergency shutoff to prevent people from acting according to unworkable schemas. According to this view, people laugh when they become aware of a schema that is not compatible with the real world. While someone is laughing, they cannot think very clearly or get much done, so they are prevented from basing their actions on the incompatible schema. You cannot perform detrimental actions based on a misunderstanding of how the world works if you cannot perform any actions at all. This incompatibility with the real world, which could also be called absurdity, is the basis of humor (Chafe, 1987). There is some empirical support for this concept of humor, as media messages that violate viewer's expectations have been found to be funnier (Walther-Martin, 2015). The idea that humor is based on incongruity ties into another theory involved in this area of study. It is a defense of political humor. Although using humor to discuss serious issues seems like it could have the effect of trivializing those issues and marking them as something not to be taken seriously, it could be that humor, with its focus on incongruity, is the perfect tool to point out hypocrisies or miscalculations in the area of politics.

Jokes may be an engaging and efficient way of showing people that something does not make sense (Lenette, 2018). Satire in particular is well suited to pointing out hypocrisy (Purcell, Heitmeier, & Van Wyhe, 2017).

One rather unique study looked at humor not as a means of persuasion, but as a means of revenge. This study examined the role of negative humor in both platonic and romantic relationships and found that people were more likely to make jokes about their partner's flaws when they felt that the partner had slighted them. The authors theorized that aggressive humor could be a way to "get even," because unlike other forms of retaliation, jokes are socially acceptable. Humor may give people a way to express frustration with or lower the status of an offending partner without escalating the conflict (Vallade, Booth-Butterfield, & Vela, 2013). This could be relevant to the study of political and social justice comedy. If such comedy is made primarily by people who see themselves as victims of societal injustices, the humor could very well be intended to help those people get even instead of to get others on their side. Then again, Vallade, Booth-Butterfield, & Vela do suggest in their study that revenge humor is meant to lower the status of those it is directed against. In light of this, humor may need to be persuasive and get people on the side of the joke maker in order to be a satisfying means of revenge. The presence of a revenge motive does not negate the presence of a persuasive motive; it may even necessitate one.

The present study was designed to elucidate the effects of satire with a political message on opinions about the phenomenon being satirized. In particular, I wanted to know how satire influenced opinions compared to a more serious presentation of the same topic. In light of the research which suggests that humor alone can persuade people by creating positive mood, I also included a control condition with media that was humorous without being political. I chose the

issue of sexual harassment to focus on because it is a common topic for satirical comedy. It is also something that most college students already have an opinion about. I wanted to focus on persuasion rather than education, so this was another thing that made it a good topic for my stimulus materials. Based on the research I reviewed, I came up with two hypotheses to test:

H 1. The presence of humor affect will increase level of expressed concern about sexual harassment.

H 2. The presence of a persuasive message about sexual harassment will increase level of expressed concern about sexual harassment.

I also used the following three research questions to give some structure to the more exploratory parts of my study:

RQ 1. Is satire related to sexual harassment more or less persuasive than a serious treatment of the issue?

RQ 2. Is the effectiveness of satire relative to serious videos dependent on political stance?

RQ 3. Do persuasive videos about sexual harassment influence expressed opinions about racism, a separate political issue?

## **Methods**

### **Participants:**

30 participants registered to take part in this study. Of these, 26 produced useable responses. These 26 people made up the final sample. All participants were undergraduate students at Oklahoma State University. They were predominately female (22 female & 4 male). They were recruited via an online research participation program, and were given no monetary compensation. They received course credit for participating in this study.

**Materials:**

Clips taken from Youtube videos and television shows were used as stimulus materials for this study. The clips were relatively similar in length, ranging from 36 seconds to 1 minute and 42 seconds. For the two comedy conditions, I used matched sets of clips from popular sitcoms, with one satirical and one nonpolitical clip taken from each show. The serious clips were taken from YouTube videos designed to educate and/or raise awareness about sexual harassment. Because the serious videos were sourced from YouTube instead of from television shows, there was a bit more variety in style, tone and production value within the serious category than there was in the two comedy categories. This is an unfortunate consequence of the complete lack of major television shows which educate viewers about touchy topics without making any attempt to be funny.

The Concern About Sexual Harrassment (CASH) scale was my primary responding variable. It was developed by me for the purpose of this study. This scale was intended to measure the degree to which participants believed that sexual harassment is a relevant issue deserving of attention. I thought it necessary to develop my own scale for this because most of the existing scales on the subject are either too general (i.e. measuring things like the belief that men should be more proactive than women during dating or the belief that women should focus on caring for children instead of advancing their careers in addition to acceptance of sexual harassment). The scales that do focus on specifically sexual harassment are a bit extreme, and tend to measure the difference between thinking sexual harassment is bad and thinking it is totally okay. I thought that might not line up with the range of opinions I was likely to find in a college sample, and I wanted something that was more attuned to the distinction between thinking sexual harassment is an issue that deserves more attention and thinking it is not as much

of a problem as it is made out to be. The Cronbach's Alpha for the CASH scale was found to be 0.7 in a pilot test. I also included a racism scale with the same questions in order to test whether any effects of the different video conditions on attitude were limited to subjects covered in the videos or applied to social justice topics in general. The CASH scale and the racism variation on it are included in the appendix.

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, abbreviated as PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to judge whether participants had an emotional reaction to the videos which might affect how they answered later questions, and to give a more complete picture of how people responded to the different types of video content. The version of PANAS that I used included 20 different emotion words such as "afraid," "proud," and "jittery." Each word functioned as a question which participants answered by indicating how strongly they felt that emotion at that moment on a scale from 1 to 5, with one meaning little to no feelings of the emotion in question and five meaning intense feelings of that emotion.

The policy-based conservatism scale was also included in the study in case it was necessary to control for political orientation during statistical analysis. This scale was used by Young and colleagues (Young, Bagozzi, Goldring, Poulson, & Drouin, 2017) and includes 8 policy issues on which the two political parties tend to have opposing stances. Some examples of issues included on the scale are "legalization of marijuana" and "increasing access to birth control." Participants indicate their level of support for the suggested policies on a 5-point scale which ranges from "strongly support" to "strongly oppose." This scale was used instead of a simple political affiliation question because other research has found that many people do not express identification with either of the two major American political parties (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). I thought that using an issue scale like this one instead would

measure political affiliation more directly, instead of potentially being influenced by negative feelings toward political parties.

Procedure:

The study itself consisted of a Qualtrics survey and several video clips. After consenting, participants were directed to a video on a separate online site. What video they saw was randomly chosen from one of three conditions: Comedy that dealt with the topic of sexism or sexual harassment in a satirical or sarcastic way, serious informative content that dealt with the same topics but did not include any satire, and comedy that did not involve sexism or sexual harassment to any significant degree. I used three clips for each condition. Since I was not able to embed the video clips into Qualtrics directly, I stitched all the clips from each category into one video. This was done so that participants would only have to use one external link instead of three.

After watching whichever set of clips they were assigned to, participants returned to Qualtrics to complete the rest of the survey. The first scale presented to participants was PANAS. Since PANAS measures transient mood, I thought it would be most valid if it was done immediately after the video. The next items on the survey were the CASH scale and a variation of it which had questions about racism instead of sexual harassment. Following these was the policy-based conservatism scale and a few standard demographic questions. Since no part of the study required any kind of researcher intervention, it was conducted entirely online.

## **Results**

Responses from a total of 26 participants were analyzed. A summary of the descriptive statistics by condition is displayed in Table 1.

The mean CASH scale response overall was (4.64), which is somewhat high for a scale that only goes up to 5. Broken down by condition, the mean CASH scores were as follows: the mean control condition response was 4.45, the mean satire condition response was 4.77, and the mean serious condition response was 4.80. As mentioned

in the previous section, higher response score indicates higher concern about sexual harassment. The mean scores for each condition are shown in Figure 1. A single factor ANOVA was performed between these three groups ( $df=2, 25$ ), which found no significant difference between the groups' responses to the CASH scale ( $p=0.118$ ).

Several t-tests were performed, as some of the conditions had common factors between them that the other did not share; for instance, two conditions were comedic, while the other was not. A t-test comparing the two comedic conditions ( $N=21$ ) with the serious political condition ( $N=5$ ) was performed to test H 1. This test found no significant difference in response to the CASH scale ( $p=0.095$ ). Since there was no difference between the serious and satirical conditions (RQ 1), I elected not to do a follow up test to control for political stance (RQ 2). The purpose of including political stance as a variable was to see whether it explained any unique effects of satire. Since there were no unique effects of satire, this test would not have made much sense. In order to test H 2, I did a t-test comparing the two conditions referencing sexual harassment (satire & serious) ( $N=15$ ) with the condition containing no politically charged content (control) ( $N=11$ ). T-tests found no significant difference in response to the CASH scale between these two groups ( $p=0.067$ ); however, this effect was notably close to being significant. In order to find out whether the effect of politically charged content was limited to the subject of the content or could carry over to other political topics (RQ 3), another t-test was performed

between these groups comparing their responses to the racism variant of the CASH scale. Responses here were less consistent than they were on the original CASH scale ( $p=0.095$ ), but they followed the same general trend. The results of the two tests of political vs. nonpolitical content are shown in Figure 2.

## **Discussion**

Although this study had no significant findings, there were a few things that were quite close to significance. Since this study had an extremely small sample size ( $N=26$ ), I think it is reasonably likely that if this experiment were repeated with a larger sample, some of these differences would become statistically significant. The most notable of these is the effect of political content, which was just barely below the significance threshold at  $p=0.067$ . This provides very limited evidence that the presence of a persuasive message about sexual harassment increases the level of expressed concern about sexual harassment (H 2).

While it may appear that there is also a near-significant effect of comedy ( $p=0.095$ ), this is probably only due to the fact that the nonpolitical control condition is included in the comedy category. When only the satire and serious conditions (which differed on the presence of humor but both contained political messages) were compared, their mean CASH scores were nearly identical ( $p=0.766$ ). Since they were so similar, it seems most likely that there is no meaningful difference between the persuasive power of serious and satirical media (RQ 1). Another reason why the possible difference due to comedy is most likely misleading is the fact that the correlation between comedy and CASH score was negative in my data. According to the existing literature, comedy should have a positive persuasive effect if there is any effect at all. Based on this study, it appears that humor that is not attached to a persuasive message does not persuade people of anything. This is not surprising. After all, what could a random joke persuade people

of? Based on this, I do not think I have any basis for claiming that the presence of humor affects opinions about sexual harassment (H 1).

I would have liked to analyze the differences in PANAS scores between the conditions in order to see if the presence of comedy contributed to more positive mood, but unfortunately my PANAS data was rather spotty. For some reason, only 11 of the 26 participants filled it out completely. The rest of the survey had almost no missing data, but the participants really did not feel like answering the PANAS questions for some reason. Since less than half of the sample did not finish that section, I decided not to include it in my data analysis.

A number of limitations apply to this study. The most obvious problem with it is its small sample size. I hope to revisit this project in the future and try to get more participants so that I can see if any of the insignificant effects I saw in my data would be significant in a more powerful study. Another issue is that my sample was 85% female. This is not representative of the college population that I sampled from, let alone the general population. The topic of sexual harassment has a lot to do with sex and gender, and men and women are likely to have different attitudes about it. I think it is very likely that the lack of male participants impacted my results. I do not think the results of this study should be generalized to other populations unless other studies with better gender distribution can produce similar findings.

There may also be problems with the validity of my main responding variable. The responses to the CASH scale did not have much variation. I tried to design the questions in such a way that low value responses (i.e. answering “strongly disagree” in response to the question “sexual harassment is an important social issue today”) would not seem shockingly sexist or socially unacceptable. Apparently, I still missed the mark a bit, because responses were clustered around the top of the scale even in the control condition. This could be because most of my

participants were female, although the average male response (4.67) was technically higher than the average female response (4.64). It is also possible that the high scores were caused by participants trying to choose the most socially desirable answer. Two of the three conditions contained videos that brought up the topic of sexual harassment, which might have primed them to respond to questions about sexual harassment in a socially desirable way. Participants may have thought that I was studying different strategies for raising awareness about sexual harassment and responded in the way that they thought was most likely to give me significant results. Future research in this area should attempt to reduce the problem of social desirability, perhaps by including manipulation check questions or by simply designing experiments that are less transparent and obvious than mine was.

Although this study was small, exploratory in nature, and did not find any statistically significant results, I think it is an important first step towards answering the question of how best to talk about polarizing or sensitive issues. This is a question that has become important in recent years with the rise of the modern social justice movement. Although it is being discussed, the present conversation around this issue involves a lot of assumptions and hypotheticals. It would be helpful to have sound research to shed some light on the debate. This study has been my effort to do that, but I think I generated more questions than answers. Based on these results alone, satire appears to be as effective as serious informational content in changing people's minds, but not more effective. Still, these results are not much to base assumptions on. It remains to be seen whether the same pattern would appear in a larger, more representative study. In addition, I only tested attitude shortly after showing participants the persuasive videos. Although it would be a more involved experiment, it might be worthwhile to ask follow up question a few hours, days or weeks after participants watched videos to see whether there is any lasting effect. Another option

for studying this topic would be to simply ask participants what kind of media they watched in their own time and see if people who watched lots of satire expressed the same amount of concern as people who did not. A study like that would have the problems associated with self-report measures, but it would have the advantage of not being limited to measuring the impact of a few isolated video clips. In the real world, people form their opinions over time based on a variety of sources. A self-report study might capture a more typical picture of how persuasive media works to change and form opinions.

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**Table 1**

	CASH Scale	Racism Scale	PANAS	Political Stance
Serious	4.80 (.14)	4.53 (.36)	3.36 (.98)	4.08 (.41)
Satire	4.77 (.29)	4.40 (.51)	2.35 (1.10)	3.54 (.90)
Control	4.45 (.49)	3.95 (.82)	2.21 (1.02)	3.64 (.72)

Table 1: Descriptive statistics by scale and experimental condition.  
Means are given first; then standard deviations in parentheses.

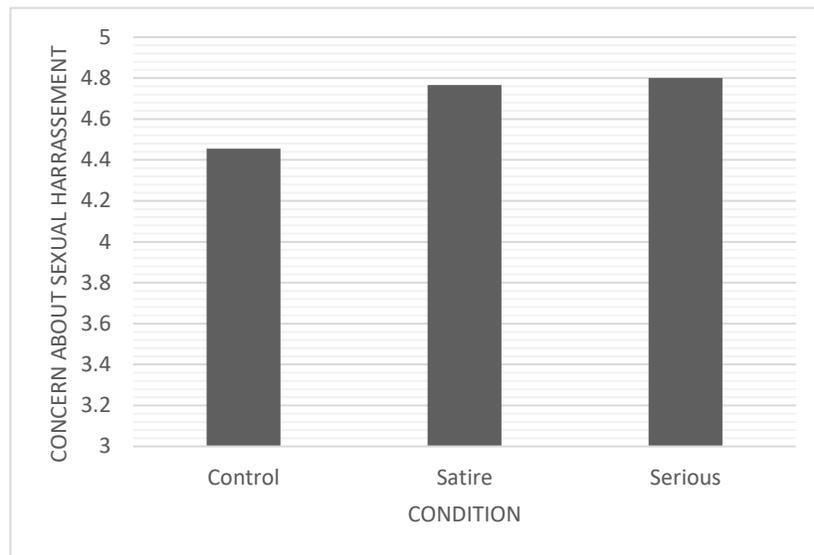
**Figure 1**

Figure 1: Average scores on the Concern About Sexual Harassment scale for each of the three conditions.

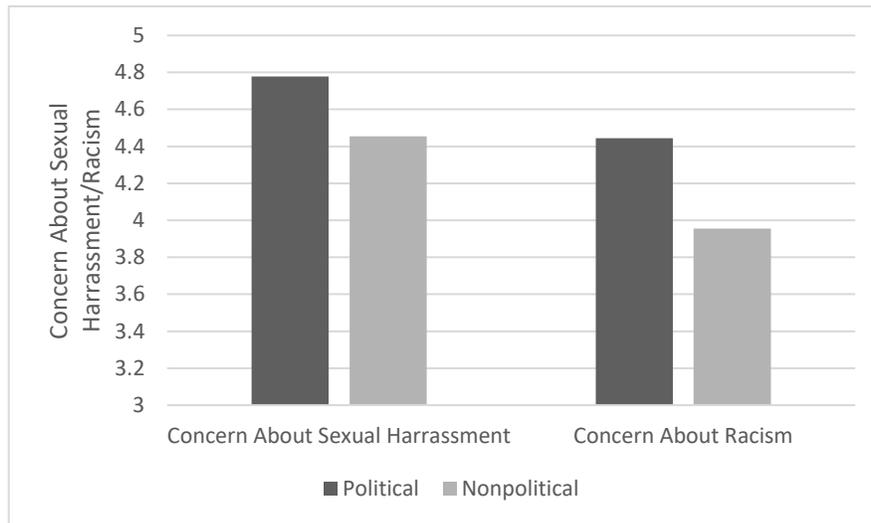
**Figure 2**

Figure 2: Average scores on scales for concern about sexual harassment and concern about racism, comparing participants who were shown political content (satire & serious conditions) to those who were shown nonpolitical content (control).

### Appendix

#### Concern About Sexual Harrassment Scale (Original)

1. It bothers me when my friends make sexually threatening remarks.
2. Sexual harassment is an important social issue today.
3. Sexual harassment is a problem of the past (reverse scored)
4. I am not particularly concerned about sexual harassment. (reverse scored)
5. It is easy to sympathize with women who complain about sexual harassment.
6. It is important to have honest conversations about sexual harassment.

#### Racism Variant

1. It bothers me when my friends make racist remarks.
2. Racism is an important social issue today.
3. Racism is a problem of the past (reverse scored)
4. I am not particularly concerned about racism. (reverse scored)
5. It is easy to sympathize with people of color who complain about racism.
6. It is important to have honest conversations about racism.