

EVALUATION OF SENDERS OF  
CAUSTIC WIT MESSAGES (AN  
EXPERIMENTAL STUDY)

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## PREFACE

This research project examines the influence of ethnicity, gender, relationship and topic on the general evaluation of senders of caustic wit messages. A 2 X 2 X 2 X 2, ANOVA factorial design was used (ethnicity: African American/European American X gender: male/female X relationship: friend/stranger X topic: serious/non-serious). The research procedure invited participants (undergraduate university students) to listen to caustic wit messages and then to complete the General Evaluation Inventory (GEI). The GEI was used to record the research participants' general evaluations of the sender of a caustic wit message.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

## General Preview

The evaluation of the sender of a message in a communication encounter is influenced by a variety of factors. Whenever caustic wit is added to the message, evaluation is even more difficult due to increased contributing factors. Some of the contributors to the evaluation process are: (a) ethnic/cultural perspectives, regarding the acceptability of humor within a given domestic sub-culture; (b) gender perspectives, regarding male/female reactions to disparaging humor; (c) the relationship between the person delivering the disparaging humor and the person receiving the message; and, (d) the serious or non-serious topic choice. These four factors and their influence on the evaluation of the person delivering the caustic wit message provides the framework for this study.

As a consequence of our increasingly pluralistic world, there is growing intercultural/interethnic contact. To reduce existing and potential ethnic and cultural conflict, we must develop means to facilitate effective communication among members of varying cultures and ethnic groups. This need for effective communication is not limited to international domains, but includes diverse domestic cultures. To have more effective interethnic communication, an understanding of the similarities and differences of



humor appreciation from varying cultural perspectives is imperative. Smith (1973) found that:

Communicating with another person is a multifaceted event involving psychological, physiological, and physical processes. How persons send and receive messages from other persons who do not share similar histories, heritages, or cultures is of critical importance to our understanding of contemporary society.

(p. v)

Due to increased gender integration in all aspects of our society, to research the issues of varying communication styles and differing humor appreciation between men and women is also imperative. Within our society, many theorists feel professional, political and social situations offer evidence of greater gender integration. Clearly, the workplace is becoming a less segregated environment with the stereotypical divisions of male boss and female secretary, male principal and female teacher, and so forth. This liberating integration (where power is more equally shared by men and women) is further realized within the political arena as more women enter into this previously male-dominated area. Socially, male and female roles are changing as submissive and dominate role patterns develop into equal partnerships. Therefore, developing understanding about varying gender perspectives, concerning humor appreciation, will facilitate clearer

communication between the sexes in professional, political and social environments.

Varying types of relationships may have a strong impact upon perspective development. The concept of idiosyncratic credits (Hollander, 1958) establishes that one builds up a basis of good-standing with prior acceptable behaviors and then foregoes negative interpretation of an act based upon that established good standing. This concept asserts that one is more willing to forego negative judgments of disparaging humor when communicating with a friend, rather than a stranger. This concept reveals the importance of identifying relationship type prior to communicating caustic forms of humor. Caustic wit for the purpose of this study is defined as a spontaneous verbal witticism with a disparaging element. Topic choice also has a potentially strong impact on perspective development. Whether a person labels a topic as serious or non-serious influences one's judgment about proper protocol when dealing with potentially sensitive issues. Educated judgments must be made to discern appropriate topic choices within varying situations.

Adding humor to the factors of ethnic and gender perspective, and the situational influences of relationship and topic, magnifies the complexity of the evaluation process. The concluding statements in the work of Baxter (1992), suggest:

The fact that the respondents... displayed substantial commonality in their perceptions of

the forms and functions of play suggest that intimate play is a meaningful communication event in the discourse code of the broader speech community. However, at the level of idiosyncratic enactment, relationship parties may differ in their interpretations. (p. 361)

This difference of interpretation between parties was the catalyst for this research project on caustic wit. Caustic wit is a spontaneous verbal witticism involving a disparagement component directed toward the receiver of the message. Varying evaluations of caustic wit messages influence the communication process. This premise was illustrated by a communication episode within a university classroom. As I sat in class at Oklahoma State University during my graduate study I was listening to the lecture of a professor. As I was sitting there I heard an attention getting comment delivered by the instructor. It was a caustic wit comment, with a strong disparagement element, which was directed at the students of the class. After class was dismissed the students left the room. A congregation gathered in the hall. The congregation was divided into two factions. One faction was revealing how offended they were by the professor's remark. They greeted the remark with anger and a negative evaluation of the professor. The other faction revealed how humorous they thought the remark was and they were laughing at what they considered a clever witticism. They had a positive evaluation

of the professor. These apparent polarized reactions which were elicited by an identical stimuli (the caustic wit message) prompted me to be very questioning of what variables would contribute to these very different evaluations of the sender of a caustic wit message. This suggested the need to locate objective determinants which brought about the varying evaluations.

The first step in analyzing varying perceptions (evaluations) of caustic wit humor is to determine the overall essence of humor. As shown in Figure 1, Berger (1991) has identified the "basic techniques of humor":

Table 1. Basic techniques of humor.

Language	Logic	Identity	Action
Allusion	Absurdity	Before/After	Chase Scenes
Bombast	Accident	Burlesque	Slapstick
Definition	Analogy	Caricature	Speed
Exaggeration	Catalogue	Embarrassment	
Facetiousness	Coincidence	Eccentricity	
Insults	Comparison	Exposure	
Infantilism	Disappointment	Grotesque	
Irony	Ignorance	Imitation	
Misunderstanding	Mistakes	Impersonation	
Over-Literalness	Repetition	Minicry	
Puns and Wordplay	Reversal	Parody	
Repartee	Rigidity	Scale	
Ridicule	Theme &	Stereotype	
Sarcasm	Variation	Unmasking	
Satire			

Note: From Signs in Contemporary Culture: An Introduction to Semiotics (p. 72) by A. Berger, 1991, Salem: Sheffield.

Berger considers language humor a sub-division of humor. An element of language humor is caustic wit--an integration of several types of language humor, such as "bombast," "facetiousness," "insults," "puns," "wordplay," "ridicule," and "sarcasm."

As in the classroom episode, caustic wit can elicit polarized interpretations. Goldstein (1972) insightfully questioned, "Is humor a gift handed down from the gods or a

scourge delivered up from the devils?" (p. 25). Caustic wit may be perceived either as a verbally aggressive/hostile communication exchange (postulated by Freud as "masked aggression" (Berger, 1991, p. 72) or paradoxically, it may be perceived as a non-aggressive/humorous verbal exchange. Therefore, that caustic wit is a complex, multi-dimensional form of communication is clear. A paradoxical nature of evaluation has been illustrated in the work of Jones and Yarbrough (1985), who defines playful affection as being reciprocal in nature, and playful aggression as being directed by one participant toward the other. Jones and Yarbrough's research focused upon touch behavior. When these principles are applied to a form of verbal play, such as caustic wit, the behavior may be perceived as either a playful, affectionate interaction or as a verbally aggressive behavior directed toward one of the participants. Participant evaluation of a caustic wit message has the potential of being perceived as aggressive behavior or playful behavior. Glenn and Knapp (1987) stated:

Play represents an interactional frame, created by metacommunicative signals through which participants interpret and attach meaning to their behaviors. Thus, the frame notion of play suggest a phenomenological interest in how the persons engaging in behaviors perceive those behaviors.

(p. 56)

This raises the issue of what individual determinants and situational factors contribute to the evaluation process. The following problem statement summarizes the emphasis of this research.

#### Research Problem Statement

Do ethnicity, gender, topic and relationship affect the receiver's evaluation of a sender delivering a caustic wit message?

#### Research Purpose

Understanding evaluative patterns enhances positive communication processes. By determining generalized patterns of evaluation, individuals increase their ability to effectively adapt communication strategies. These strategies allow individuals to have greater control over desired communication outcomes. To determine evaluative patterns, communication scholars must focus upon sub-groups within society and the criteria that these sub-groups use to evaluate messages. Researchers must then establish generalized patterns of evaluation. From these generalities, senders of caustic wit messages may determine probable individual evaluations. These evaluations contribute to effective communication adaptation. Determining general patterns of the evaluative process (in the areas of ethnicity and gender, in reference to topic and relationship) provides the bases for establishing evaluative patterns. These patterns, when applied to the evaluation of caustic wit, enable the sender of the message to detect the

probable evaluative process of the receiver, and to adjust the communication strategy accordingly. This project seeks to determine methods by which the sender of a caustic wit message is able to predict the respondent's evaluation with greater accuracy. This process involves impression accuracy. Insko and Schopler (1972) set forth criteria regarding research on impression formation:

To study the process requires finding how impressions are systematically affected by changes in information or circumstances of judgment; to study accuracy required finding verifiable indices of the content of the impressions. Accuracy is defined by the extent to which the content of impressions matches the actual occurrence of what has been predicted. It is for this reason that this line of research has been very sensitive to the existence of objective indices which are psychologically relevant. (p. 223)

This project has sought to determine objective indices which affected the receiver's evaluation of the sender of a caustic wit message. The four indices chosen for exploration in this project are: (a) ethnicity (African American/European American), (b) gender (male/female), (c) topic (serious/non-serious), and (d) relationship (friend/stranger).



### Research Hypotheses

H<sub>1</sub>: Ethnicity affects receivers' evaluations of communicators who send messages with caustic wit content. African Americans will evaluate senders of caustic wit messages more favorably than will European Americans.

H<sub>2</sub>: Gender affects receivers' evaluations of communicators who send messages with caustic wit content. Males will evaluate senders of caustic wit messages more favorably than will females.

H<sub>3</sub>: Relationship affects receivers' evaluations of communicators who send messages with caustic wit content. Caustic wit messages exchanged between friends will be evaluated more favorably than messages exchanged between strangers.

H<sub>4</sub>: Topic affects receivers' evaluations of communicators who send messages with caustic wit content. Caustic wit messages employing serious topics will be evaluated less favorably than messages dealing with non-serious topics.

## CHAPTER TWO

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are several elements that merit attention in the study of caustic wit. First, semantic space sets forth the dimension of evaluation (the necessary element in developing an objective measurement for the study). Second, humor theory which will establish a background of understanding for caustic wit humor. Third, ethnic influence which is one of the attribute variables within the study. Fourth, gender influence which is another attribute variable within the study. Fifth, relationship influence which is a situational variable within the study. And finally topic influence which is another situational variable within the study. The elements of semantic space, humor theory, ethnicity, gender, relationship and topic offer insight into the exploration of caustic wit messages.

## Semantic Space (Evaluation)

Semantic space is a theory set forth by Osgood (1989). Littlejohn (1989) defines semantic space as:

One's meaning for any sign is said to be located in a metaphorical space of three major dimensions: evaluation, activity, and potency. A given sign, perhaps a word or concept, elicits a reaction in the person consisting of a sense of evaluation (good or bad), activity (active or inactive), and potency or strength. The person's connotative

meaning will lie somewhere in the hypothetical space....(p. 73)

This study of caustic wit measured the dimension of evaluation. The General Evaluation Inventory (GEI), as set forth by Cronkhite (1977), was used to determine the receiver's evaluation of senders delivering caustic wit messages.

#### Humor Theories

"In the study of humor, four macrotheories of humor have been set forward: (1) incongruity, (2) relief, (3) ambivalence, and (4) superiority" (Koller, 1988, p. 7). Incongruity theory refers to "conceptualizations that do not seem to fit together, but, ... are compared and contrasted" (Koller, p. 7). The comparisons and contrasts are the resolutions to the incongruity. Relief theory refers to "humor as a release from restraints or controls whether they are physiological, psychological, or social restrictions" (Koller, p. 8). Political humor is an example of this theory. Ambivalence theory refers to "a struggle between opposing emotions or feeling-states, a type of love-hate, attraction-repulsion commingling" (Koller, p. 8). Superiority theory refers to the concept that "by degrading others, one can elevate one's own status" (Koller, p. 9). Disparagement theory of humor is derived from superiority theory (Koller, p. 9). Disparagement humor refers to put-down humor.

The consolidation of two previously detailed humor theories constitutes the basis for the concept of caustic wit. These two theories are incongruity-resolution theory and disparagement humor theory. In reference to incongruity-resolution humor theory, the receivers must "first detect an incongruity..., then resolve it by utilizing other information which makes the incongruous elements meaningful 'fit' in some unexpected way" (Kuper, 1985, p. 371). Disparagement humor involves put-down humor. These two types of humor, when synthesized, constitute caustic wit. These two forms of humor will be explored within the following analysis.

The foundation of incongruity-resolution theory indicates that an incongruity occurs between expectation and occurrence. Problem solving transpires to alleviate the discrepancy. The disparity between what was anticipated and what occurred is the resulting humor (Suls, 1972). In support of incongruity theory, Nerhardt (1970) conducted empirical research by having participants pick up weights, the last weight being incongruent within the series. The results indicated that the greater the discrepancies (from the participants' expectations), the greater the subjects' humorous responses. The participants' humorous responses were determined by laughter level and amusement level. The discrepancy factor is present (in caustic wit messages) when the sender delivers a message that is in contrast to the

receiver's expectations. This concept is illustrated in the following table:

**Table 2**

Sample Caustic Wit Scenario

---

Store Clerk: May I help you?

Shopper: I like this dress. Maybe I will buy it for the party next week. But I have gained weight. Maybe it's too revealing. Do you think I'm too heavy for this dress?

Store Clerk: Well miss, have you thought about shopping in the awning section?

---

The element of discrepancy is the initial component; the second element is resolution. Resolution involves the shopper determining a solution to the discrepancy.

Empirical research by Shultz and Horibe (1974) provided further insight into incongruity and resolution as they pertain to humor. It was determined that to be considered humorous from the age of eight and beyond, both elements (incongruity and resolution) must be present within a joke. Shultz and Horibe developed jokes that lacked either the element of incongruity or the element of resolve; jokes that possessed both elements were also included. The jokes were then presented to students. Students were asked to rank the jokes while an observer watched their reactions. The results of this research support the contention that both

incongruity and resolution elements must be present for a joke to be considered humorous.

Incongruity-resolution theory, as applied to humor, offers understanding about those elements that are necessary for a joke to be considered humorous. First, an incongruity must be communicated. Second, problem solving/resolution must be determined by the receiver. Additionally, the environment must be non-threatening for the factors of incongruity and resolution to produce humorous results. The non-threatening condition, within the concept of humor, was determined by Nerhardt (1970). Nerhardt contended that for incongruity to be perceived as humorous, it must occur in an environment that presents no threat. Within caustic wit messages, the antithesis of this principle can occur. Therefore, caustic wit messages may be perceived as verbal aggressions rather than humorous attempts.

The basis of disparagement humor theory is revealed by Wicker, Barron, and Willis (1980): "[D]isparagement theorists tend to emphasize humorous material in which one protagonist disparages or aggresses against another one" (p. 701). The disparagement component is a major factor of caustic wit messages. Caustic wit possesses a cutting edge which was illustrated in the preceding scenario of the store clerk and shopper. This element of disparagement is subject to the receiver's perception of the sender's intent. "Freud (1960) divided wit into two categories--tendency wit (which

ridiculed someone) and harmless wit (which was funny due to form alone)..." (Smith & Powell, 1988, p. 279).

Suls (1977) consolidates incongruity-resolution and disparagement humor theory:

At first thought the incongruity-resolution model and the disparagement model appear quite different since they focus on different variables and processes. The first theory seems linked to cognitive processes, the second to affective reaction toward social groups or individuals. It is contended, however, that a closer examination reveals some important commonalities which may lead to a possible synthesis. (p. 42)

This caustic wit study contends that synthesis does occur within caustic wit messages. The connection between the two factions (intellectual and emotional), as suggested by Suls, develops the basis for caustic wit messages. The previously examined scenario illustrates the cognitive and affective nature of caustic wit messages. The cognitive element is presented in the incongruity-resolution stage. The affective element is presented within the disparagement level of the exchange.

In review, incongruity-resolution and disparagement theories, in conjunction with cognitive and affective elements of humor, constitute the complex multi-dimensional caustic wit message. The synthesis of these humor theories, incongruity-resolution and disparagement, form the

foundation for caustic wit messages. The additional components (cognitive and affective) provide the intellectual and emotional elements of the message. The variables that might affect this complex communication process, and thus, the evaluation of senders of caustic wit messages are--ethnicity, gender, topic choice and relationship type as detailed in the following sections.

### Ethnic Influence

Ethnicity, in this study refers to "extended kinship groups; that is, membership in an ethnic group is based on common ancestry" (Pitchford, 1992, p. 1615). Within African American and European American cultures varying verbal oral customs have developed. "Playing the dozens" is an oral custom manifested in segments of the African American population. Playing the dozens refers to verbal exchanges, which exhibit strong disparagement levels, which are generally toward female relatives. Other terms describing this verbal activity are revealed in the work of Labov (1972). These terms include "sounding", "woofing", "screaming", "cutting, capping, or chopping" (p. 307). More specifically, sounding includes personal insults, while "playing the dozens refers to any ritualized insult directed against a relative" (p. 307). The cultural comparison of this verbal gaming, between European American and African American cultures, was examined by Berdie (1947):

While working with black and white prisoners in a Navy Disciplinary Barracks, Berdie (1947) asked



over 100 whites and 100 Negroes whether they had ever heard of playing the dozens or knew its meaning. None of the whites expressed any knowledge of the dozens while more than 90 percent of the blacks had heard of the term and could give some inkling of its meaning. (Foster, 1974, p. 213)

Playing the dozens is a "part of the black's oral tradition" (Foster, 1974, p. 215). The old saying "your Mama wears army boots" could be considered an example of playing the dozens. It is directed toward the female relative of the receiver of the message and has a disparaging element. The message is also an example of caustic wit. It has the element of incongruity (army boots are not traditionally worn by mothers) and resolution (army boots are a traditional symbol of masculinity). Also, within the army boot message there is a disparagement or put down element exhibited (that your mother is masculine). A more current study of this phenomenon was conducted within inner city schools. Foster revealed that within inner city black culture there is a predominant element of verbal gamesmanship involving a disparagement element. Based upon the verbal background found within African American culture (namely evidence of disparagement) it can be predicted that African Americans will perceive caustic wit messages as more acceptable than will the European American population.

The next consideration is that of gender. Gender is another attribute variable within this caustic wit study and is detailed in the following section.

#### Gender Influence

Gender, in this study, "directs attention to the social meaning assigned to the categories of male and female" (Deaux, 1992, p. 1749). Developing societal understanding of varying gender perspectives concerning humor appreciation will facilitate clearer communication between the genders. Foster (1974) illustrates gender perspective on disparagement humor as follows:

On the streetcorner, verbal ability is rated as highly as is physical strength. Most often, when men gather, a boasting or teasing encounter takes place. Verbal contest participation is an important part of peer relationships. Starting a verbal attack is "mounting" or getting above an opponent. To lose a verbal battle is to become feminized. Strength and masculinity are shown by boasting or "putting down" an adversary or a group of adversaries.... Furthermore, the ritual battle of words is accepted and rated as a means of masculine release from anxiety. (p. 182)

As alluded to in the preceding quotation, the receiver's gender influences the interpretation of a caustic wit message. Hess, Bridgwater, Bornstein, and Sweeney (1980) determined that the gender of the receiver affects the

interpretation process. In their study, taped messages which contained both positive and negative assertions, were rated by participants according to their perceptions of the actors. It was concluded that "female as opposed to male observers perceived actors in all tape conditions as more assertive, aggressive, and masculine in their response style" (Hess, Bridgewater, Bornstein, Sweeney, p. 56). Therefore, it is anticipated that when these findings are adapted to the interpretation of caustic wit, females as opposed to their male counterparts, will perceive caustic wit to be more aggressive. The research of Van Wagner and Swanson (1979) revealed that:

Sexual identity influences people's perceptions of appropriate ways to express power-related behavior. Women perceive building up internal strength and concern for others to be acceptable expressions of their power needs. Men, on the other hand, think that acting aggressively or assertively is an appropriate expression of these needs. (p. 69)

Consequently, this line of reasoning would support the notion that men, as opposed to women, find caustic wit messages a more socially acceptable behavior.

The next consideration is that of relationship influence. Relationship is a situational variable within this caustic wit study and is detailed in the following section.

## Relationship Influence

Relationship type may have a strong impact upon perspective development. The concept of idiosyncratic credits (Hollander, 1958) suggests that one builds up a basis of goodstanding due to one's prior acceptable behaviors; consequently, a negative behavior may be overlooked by the offended party because of the established goodstanding. Based on this concept, when communicating with a friend, as opposed to a stranger, one would be more willing to forego negative judgments of disparaging humor. This concept reveals the importance of identifying relationship type prior to introducing caustic forms of humor. Research by Smith and Powell (1988) concluded that "appreciation of disparaging humor depends upon the target of the humor and the target's relationship to the respondent" (p. 288). Lewis and Gallois (1984) work has provided insight into perceptions involving "negatively assertive messages" that were descriptive of certain types of caustic wit. The findings of their 1984 study involved perceptions of friends and strangers:

Friends were rated as significantly more likable than strangers on each type of assertive message. Friends who disagreed also received significantly higher ratings than strangers on social appropriateness, social skill, and respect, and they were rated as significantly less aggressive.  
(p. 360)

These findings can be adapted to the interpretive process of caustic wit; the author contends that friends using messages of caustic wit will elicit a positive evaluation from the receiver. This positive evaluation is predicted because friendship involves an intimacy between the participants within the communication encounter. The term "intimate," according to Sillars and Scott (1983), is a "relationship in which there is repeated interaction, high self-disclosure, high interdependence (i.e., mutual influence), and high emotional involvement" (p. 154).

Research by Bell and Healey (1992) considered the relational element within "teasing insult idioms;" it was determined that the "teasing insult idioms were...more likely to be evaluated as negative" (p. 328). However, they suggest:

Confrontation idioms, though often seen as negative, nonetheless correlated positively with solidarity. Such idioms probably begin to emerge in friends vocabularies only after they have achieved a strong sense of solidarity and feel comfortable tackling sources of conflict -- hence the positive relationship of solidarity to confrontation idioms, despite the tension these idioms cause. (p. 330)

These elements, when applied to caustic wit, contend that friends are more prone than strangers to interpret caustic wit messages as humorous.

The next consideration is that of topic influence. Topic is a situational variable within this caustic unit study and is detailed in the following section.

#### Topic Influence

Topic choice may have a strong impact on perspective development. Whether persons determine a topic serious or non-serious, influences their judgments about proper protocol in dealing with potentially sensitive issues. According to Fine (1983), "joking is a strategic activity. By that I mean that not everyone can joke about all topics in all situations" (p. 166). Topic type can affect the outcome of evaluation within a dyadic communication encounter. Serious or non-serious topics can influence the evaluation process positively or negatively:

Humor, like all interpersonal behavior, is socially situated. That is, it is embedded in a particular social environment. For humor to work--that is, to be funny--it must be responsive to the immediate situation and to be appropriate to the normative properties of the more general social circumstances. (Fine, 1983, p. 164)

Topic choice is an integral aspect of social circumstance. Consequently, it is a distinctive element in evaluation of caustic wit messages. It is predicted that non-serious topics will be evaluated more favorably than serious topics when delivered within a caustic wit message.

### Summary

Based upon the preceding information concerning semantic space, cognitive and affective elements, disparagement and incongruity-resolution factors, and their relationships to ethnicity, gender, relationship, and topic, it has been determined that evaluative processes are complicated within caustic wit messages. Caustic wit represents a form of verbal play. In regard to the evaluation of play, Glenn and Knapp (1987) have maintained that "the notion of unsuccessful play actions should be carefully scrutinized. By studying instances in which play is not successfully negotiated, we may discover more about how, in other instances, it is successfully negotiated" (p. 64). The following methodology explores the positive and negative evaluations of verbal play, as caustic wit.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

There are several elements that must be considered within the methodology section. First, the respondents and research sites are detailed. Second, the independent variables of ethnicity, gender, relationship and topic are explained, along with the dependent/measurable variable of evaluation (which is measured by the General Evaluation Inventory). Third, the scenarios that were developed for use within this caustic wit study. Fourth, the dialect verification used within the audio tapes of the scenarios. Fifth, the experimental design used within the study. And finally the statistical analysis used within the study. These elements provide the basic framework for this caustic wit research.

#### Respondents and Research Sites

Participants in the study were 113 undergraduate university students. There were 33 African American females, 29 European American females, 26 African American males, and 25 European American males. The mean age was 23.2 years. Each participant was randomly assigned to a treatment cell. The research sites were three central Oklahoma institutions - Langston University, a predominantly African American university, Oklahoma State University (Oklahoma City) and Rose State College, predominantly European American universities.



### Variables

The research design was a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 factorial Analysis of Variance (ethnicity: African American/European American X gender: male/female X relationship: stranger/friend X topic: serious/non-serious). The dependent/measurable variable was the receiver's evaluation of the sender who delivered a caustic wit message. The receiver's evaluation of the sender of the caustic wit message was determined by the General Evaluation Inventory (GEI) (Appendix A). The GEI measured the evaluation of the sender of the message, not the message itself. The GEI, which was developed by Cronkhite (1977), consists of 22 items. Cronkhite argues that the scale is valid by describing the three groups of items that make up the scale. The items on the first group "always loaded at least .60 on that factor regardless of concept, raters, or concept rater combination" (Cronkhite, p. 68). The items and their ratings within the first scale are as follows:

Table 3

First Scale Factor Loadings


---

 Factors
 

---

	Loadings
foolish - wise	.82
stupid - smart	.81
honest - dishonest	.79
responsible - irresponsible	.79
friendly - unfriendly	.76
painful - pleasurable	.71

---

Note. From "Scales measuring general evaluation with minimal distortion" by G. Cronkhite, 1977, The Public Opinion Quarterly, 41, p. 68.

The items within the second group "which loaded at least .50" (Cronkhite, 1977, p. 69) are as follows:

Table 4

Second Scale Factor Loadings


---

Factor	Loadings
right - wrong	.80
pleasant - unpleasant	.80
kind - unkind	.77
grateful - ungrateful	.76
false - true	.75
unbelieving - believing	.73
uncooperative - cooperative	.73
intelligent - stupid	.71
clean - dirty	.70

---

Note. From "Scales measuring general evaluation with minimal distortion" by G. Cronkhite, 1977, The Public Opinion Quarterly, 41, p. 69.

The items within the third group "failed to load to the .50 criterion only once in 19 analyses" (Cronkhite, 1977, p. 69). The items and their ratings in the third scale are as follows:

Table 5

Third Scale Factor Loadings


---

Factors	Loadings
dislike - like	.80
bad - good	.79
unfavorable - favorable	.78
careful - careless	.75
worthless - valuable	.74
annoying - pleasing	.71
mature - immature	.67

---

Note. From "Scales measuring general evaluation with minimal distortion" by G. Cronkhite, 1977, The Public Opinion Quarterly, 41, p. 69.

Reliability tests were conducted by the present investigator on each scale using participant responses from this caustic wit study. Cronbach's Alpha on the first scale was .7498 (N = 113,  $p < .01$ ). The second scale was computed at .8145 (N = 113,  $p < .01$ ). The third scale computed at .8546 (N = 113,  $p < .011$ ). The reliability for the entire 22 items was .9252 (N = 113,  $p < .01$ ).

#### Independent Variables

Four independent variables were considered within this caustic wit study: the attribute variables of gender and

ethnicity, and also, the active, situational variables of relationship and topic. These four variables are detailed as follows: (a) the ethnicity of the research participants, African American or European American, was considered. Ethnicity within this study refers to "extended kinship groups; that is, membership in an ethnic group is based on common ancestry" (Pitchford, 1992, p. 1615); (b) the gender of the participants, male or female, was considered. Gender within this study "directs attention to the social meaning assigned to the categories of male and female" (Deaux, 1992, p. 1749); (c) the relationship of the actors within the scenario, friend or acquaintance, was considered; and (d) the topic displayed by the actors within the scenario, serious or non-serious was also considered.

#### Scenarios

Four scenarios were developed to represent each level of the two situational variables. The first scenario represented caustic wit being delivered in a friend relationship/serious topic situation. The second scenario represented caustic wit being delivered in a stranger relationship/serious topic situation. The third scenario represented caustic wit being delivered in a friend relationship/non-serious topic situation. The fourth scenario represented caustic wit being delivered in a stranger relationship/non-serious topic situation. Each of the four scenarios were presented in a non-threatening

environment. There was no threat of physical violence or physical intimidation presented within the scenarios.

The process of developing these scenarios began prior to the pilot study. Eight caustic wit scenarios were written; these scenarios were viewed by a panel of judges (master's degree candidates at the Oklahoma State University's Speech Communication Department). These judges were trained on definition of terms and how to complete the evaluation form. This training session was conducted prior to the validation. The purpose of the validation was to determine the strength of the scenarios in five categories: disparagement level, incongruity level, resolution level, relationship (friend/acquaintance), and topic (serious/non-serious). After viewing each scenario, the judges completed a validation form (Appendix B). The mean was determined for each category scenario. Scenarios with the highest overall ratings were used in the pilot study. The scenarios, after validation by the judges, were considered flawed. Each treatment group received the one scenario that received the best rating.

It was determined that additional scenarios must be constructed to have greater validity within the scenarios and treatment cells. Therefore, 20 scenarios were constructed and subjected to validation by undergraduate university students (Appendix C). The 50 students listened to the scenarios and completed the scenario validation form (Appendix D). The validation form included five categories:

ascertaining the strengths of the disparagement level within the scenarios, the incongruity level, the resolution level, the relationship, and the topic. The mean was determined and scenarios with the highest overall ratings were used within the study. (Appendices E & F.)

#### Dialect Verification

Two actresses delivered the caustic wit scenarios on audio tape. It was deemed necessary to determine whether the presenters' dialects were perceived as either African American or European American. This was done by the development and implementation of a dialect verification form. This determination was used to avoid skewing the participants' evaluations, since they might have ethnic identifications with the actresses. Therefore, 40 subjects (undergraduate university students) were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the scenario actresses' ethnicities by listening to voice recordings of the scenarios. Ten African American men, 10 African American women, 10 European American men, and 10 European American women were given the following survey to complete after listening to a sample scenario:

Table 6

Dialect Verification Form


---

After listening to the sample scenario, would you determine Ruth and Sara to be:

(check one)

- \_\_\_\_\_ African American with 100% certainty
- \_\_\_\_\_ European American with 100% certainty
- \_\_\_\_\_ Could be either African American or  
European American
- 

Table 7

Dialect Verification Survey Results


---

	African American Dialect	European American Dialect	Either
African American Women	1	3	6
European American Women	0	2	8
African American Men	0	4	6
European American Men	1	4	5

---

The majority of the sample population perceived the dialect as either African American or European American. Dialect verification was necessary in order to avoid skewing the participants' evaluations, since they might have ethnic



identification with the actresses, if the dialects seemed to be either African American or European American.

#### Experimental Design

A factorial Analysis of Variance (2 x 2 x 2 x 2) was the structure of this experimental research project. The independent variables included ethnicity, gender, topic, and relationship. The dependent variable was the receiver's evaluation of the sender of a caustic wit message, which was measured by Cronkhite's General Evaluation Inventory. The research participants were randomly assigned to treatment cells as detailed below:

Table 8

#### Dispersion of Research Participants

---

Friend Relationship/Serious Topic:

African American Male (5)  
 African American Female (9)  
 European American Male (6)  
 European American Female (8)

Stranger Relationship/Non-Serious Topic:

African American Male (5)  
 African American Female (9)  
 European American Male (7)  
 European American Female (7)

Friend Relationship/Non-Serious Topic:

African American Male (9)  
 African American Female (6)

European American Male (5)

European American Female (8)

Stranger Relationship/Serious Topic:

African American Male (7)

African American Female (9)

European American Male (7)

European American Female (6)

Experimental Procedures

---

The randomly assigned subjects listened to the corresponding scenarios on audio tape. The participants were randomly assigned by using poker chips which they each selected from a container. The container had black, red, white and blue chips. The color of the chips corresponded to the scenarios to which they would listen. Once in their corresponding scenario group they were asked to take on the role of the person receiving the caustic wit message. As stated in the directions, "Based upon the scenario you just heard, imagine yourself in Ruth's place. If you had been Ruth, how would you have perceived Sara?" After listening to the scenario, participants recorded their evaluations of the person who delivered the caustic wit message using the GEI. The Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research granted exempt status with provisions for this study by mail and a cleared exempt status by telephone; IRB#: ED-93-057.

### Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed on a mainframe computer. The four independent variables were coded and entered. The GEI items were coded and entered. The data were analyzed with the SPSS-X statistical program. Results are reported in the following section.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of two attribute variables and two situational variables on a receiver's evaluation of a sender of a caustic wit message. The attribute variables were ethnicity (African American/European American) and gender (male/female). The situational variables were relationship (friend/stranger) and topic (serious/non-serious). Cronkhite's General Evaluation Inventory (GEI) measured the research participants' evaluation of the person delivering the caustic wit message. Based upon the 113 research participants' response patterns, the overall reliability was determined by Cronbach's alpha to be .9252. The four hypotheses were analyzed using an ANOVA. The rejection level for testing was .05.

## Effects of Ethnicity

Hypothesis 1 predicted that ethnicity influences a receiver's evaluation of communicators who send messages with caustic wit content. Hypothesis 1 states that African Americans will evaluate senders of caustic wit messages more favorably than will European Americans. The ethnicity hypothesis was confirmed. The GEI results yielded African American  $\bar{x} = 89.32$  and European American  $\bar{x} = 102.39$ ,  $F(1,97) = 12.91$ ,  $p < .001$ . Pursuant to these findings, it was determined that African Americans evaluated senders of

caustic wit messages more favorably than did European Americans.

#### Effects of Gender

Hypothesis 2, predicted that gender influences a receiver's evaluation of communicators who send messages with caustic wit content. Hypothesis 2 states that males will evaluate senders of caustic wit messages more favorably than will females. The gender hypothesis was not confirmed. The GEI yielded females  $\bar{x} = 97.55$  and males  $\bar{x} = 93.16$ ,  $F(1,97) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .172$ .

#### Effects of Relationship

Hypothesis 3 predicted that relationship influences a receiver's evaluation of communicators who send messages with caustic wit content. Hypothesis 3 states that caustic wit messages exchanged between friends will be evaluated more favorably than messages exchanged between strangers. The relationship hypothesis was not confirmed. The GEI results yielded stranger  $\bar{x} = 98.88$  and friend  $\bar{x} = 92.20$ ,  $F(1,97) = 3.61$ ,  $p = .060$ .

#### Effects of Topic

Hypothesis 4 predicted that topic influences a receiver's evaluation of communicators who send messages with caustic wit content. Hypothesis 4 states that caustic wit messages dealing with serious topics will be evaluated less favorably than messages dealing with non-serious topics. The topic hypothesis was confirmed but in the

opposite direction. The GEI results yielded serious topic  $\bar{x} = 89.88$  and non-serious topic  $\bar{x} = 101.36$ ,  $F(1,197) = 10.00$ ,  $p < .002$ . Pursuant to these findings, it was determined that topic choice did affect the receiver's evaluation of the sender of a caustic wit message; however, the results confirmed the opposite from what was predicted in the hypothesis. It was found that serious topics were viewed more favorably than non-serious topics.

In summary, the influence of ethnicity was confirmed. The influence of gender was not confirmed. The influence of relationship was not confirmed. The influence of topic was confirmed but in the opposite direction of what was predicted. There were no statistically significant interactive effects. These findings prompted the concerns and insights which are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## DISCUSSION

## Summary of Findings

We seek causal relationships in part because they help us understand behavior. We also search for causes because they aid our efforts at prediction and control. The ability to predict is quite different from the ability to understand.

(Schneider, 1988, p. 34)

The purpose of this study was to better predict recipient response to caustic wit messages. This predictive element has the potential of producing greater control over the sender's desired outcome in this complex communication process. The response patterns of research participants within this study support the hypothesis that African Americans evaluate senders of caustic wit messages more favorably than will European Americans.

The results do not support the prediction that males will evaluate senders of caustic wit more favorably than will females. This finding is attributed to both gender's appreciation of humor becoming more homogenous as equality in social and workplace interactions increases. A current theorist, Crawford (1994), takes issue with gender differences in communication patterns. She contends, that gender is not the primary factor in communication patterns; rather, the variables of role and status are of greater influence.

The results do not statistically support the hypothesis that senders of caustic wit messages among friends will be evaluated more favorably than between strangers. This finding could be attributed to content being more prominent in the decoding process of caustic wit messages rather than the relationship of the participants.

And finally, the prediction that messages with serious topic focus will be evaluated less favorably than those with non-serious topic focus is not confirmed. Interestingly, in regard to topic effect, the opposite of what was predicted was set forth. Serious topics were regarded more favorably than non-serious topics within caustic wit messages. This difference between prediction and occurrence could be attributed to tension release through laughter or as a defense mechanism to insult.

The confirmation and non-confirmation of the hypotheses set forth within this study raise interesting issues in research design and unforeseen study limitations. The study limitations and implications for continued research are detailed in the following sections.

#### Study Limitations

The study limitations identified through the course of this research project included: (a) response patterns which did not take into account individual differences, (b) stratified sampling, (c) limited sample size, (d) diffused participant responses, (e) limited scope on gender issues, (f) instrument development, and (g) scenario development.



First, it is cautioned that this study produced generalized response patterns to caustic wit messages and did not take into consideration individual difference such as; temperament, religious upbringing, intelligence levels, and so forth. Second, this was a stratified sample and only measured response patterns of participants within a higher education setting. It did not measure response patterns within potentially volatile environments or with participants of varying educational levels. Third, due to limited access to student participants the sampling was not as large as preferred. Fourth, the audio tapes had the potential to diffuse the research participants' agitation toward the episode because they were merely listening to the episode rather than personally experiencing the caustic wit message. Fifth, the interactions on the audio tapes (the stimuli within the study) were limited to women's voices. Sixth, the General Evaluation Inventory was not developed specifically for the evaluation of the sender's of caustic wit messages. Seventh, the scenarios were developed by a European American female and limited the ethnic and gender flavor of the scenarios. Based upon the aforementioned study limitations, there are many research options which might be developed from these considerations. The research possibilities are detailed below in the Implications for Continued Research section.

### Implications for Further Research

This study prompted several implications for continued research. The areas meriting additional research are: (a) response patterns which consider individual differences, (b) more diverse sampling, (c) increased sample size, (d) direct participant involvement, (e) male and/or mixed gender dyads being used on the stimulus audio tapes, (f) an instrument specifically developed to measure humor appreciation, and (g) scenarios developed by a panel comprised of varying ethnic and gender participants. First, determining individual differences such as; temperament, religious upbringing, intelligence level and so forth would provide a view of individual differences and their relationship to humor appreciation. Second, the concept of sampling varying environments and varying educational levels of participants would provide a more realistic view of the study of humor and response patterns. Third, a sample comprised of other ethnic groups, in addition to African American and European American, would provide a broader understanding of cultural comparisons. Fourth, direct involvement (for example, role play) rather than voyeuristic involvement in the caustic wit communication encounter would provide a more accurate real-life response rather than a displaced response. Fifth, in their study of assertive behavior Kelly and Kern (1980) determined that "both male and female subjects devalue the assertive behavior of a female stimulus model (relative to the same objective behavior of a male)..." (p. 680).

Pursuant to this finding, a duplicate caustic wit study that includes males and females delivering the same caustic wit messages might provide further insight into the humor field of research. Sixth, an instrument specifically developed to determine humor appreciation would provide a more concise and insightful measurement. Seventh, scenarios developed by a panel comprised of varying ethnic and gender participants would provide a more well-rounded representation of humor across cultures. The aforementioned implications for continued research offer future directions in the development of research designs within the study of humor.

#### Concluding Comments

Due to increasing interactions of varying subcultures within our society, to discover methods that reduce existing and potential conflicts is imperative. This task involves commitment to developing probable response patterns to varying communication episodes. These patterns are necessary to aid in the development of communication competence. When interjecting humor to this already complex computation, academicians are faced with an added challenge of unraveling human interactions and responses as they pertain to humor appreciation.

Humor appreciation is often considered a subjective judgment; this lack of objectivity makes scientific investigation more difficult. Therefore, developing investigative and objective methods of study is necessary to better understand how humor is coded and decoded within the

communication processes. An example of the coding and decoding process is described in the introduction to this project. Within that communication episode, I observed students who were given identical stimuli (a caustic wit message in a classroom situation) to which they exhibited polarized reactions. On one extreme were students who reacted to the message with laughter, and on the other extreme were students who reacted to the message with anger. As previously stated, these polarized reactions provided the inspiration for undertaking this project involving humor appreciation. Some of the questions proposed in the research statement were answered but based upon the research process many additional questions were raised. These new questions provide interesting possibilities for continued humor research.

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APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## General Evaluation Inventory

Based upon the scenario you just heard, imagine yourself in Ruth's place. If you had been Ruth, how would you have perceived Sara?

Listed below are a number of personality descriptions. Each description consists of two extremes and a number of points between them. For example:

Happy    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    Unhappy

If you thought this person was happy, you would circle the "1". If you thought she was unhappy, you would circle the "7". If you thought she was happy (but not extremely so), you might circle the "2". A "4" always represents the midpoint between the two extremes. Circle a "4" only when the person falls exactly between the two extremes.

Please read each set of descriptions carefully. Be sure to note that in some cases the more positive response is on the left, and in other cases, it is on the right end of the range. Then, for each item, circle the number (1 to 7) which most closely represents your impression of the person. Please do not skip any.

We realize there may be times when you may feel you don't have enough information to be able to answer the question, but please answer it anyway according to your best "hunch" about what this person is like.

Foolish	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Wise
Right	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Wrong
Dislike	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Like
Stupid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Smart
Pleasant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unpleasant
Bad	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Good
Honest	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Dishonest
Kind	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unkind
Unfavorable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Favorable
Responsible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Irresponsible
Grateful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Ungrateful
Careful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Careless
Friendly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unfriendly
False	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	True
Painful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Pleasurable
Unbelieving	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Believing
Worthless	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Valuable
Uncooperative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Cooperative
Annoying	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Pleasing
Mature	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Immature
Intelligent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Stupid
Clean	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Dirty

ETHNICITY: African/American \_\_\_\_\_

European/American \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

GENDER: Male \_\_\_\_\_

Female \_\_\_\_\_

AGE: \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON THESE MATERIALS.

Note: The first portion of this survey (the instruction segment) was adapted from Kelly's (et/al.) Interpersonal Evaluation Inventory.

## APPENDIX B

Panel of Experts Scenario Validation Form

Rate the scenario you just viewed using the following factors: (The scale ranges from extremely low level (1) to extremely high level (5)).

Incongruity level	1	2	3	4	5
Resolution level	1	2	3	4	5
Disparagement level	1	2	3	4	5
Overall presentation	1	2	3	4	5

Circle the number which most closely corresponds to your perception of the following areas:

## THE TOPIC WAS:

Serious	1	2	3	4	5	Non-serious
---------	---	---	---	---	---	-------------

## THE RELATIONSHIP WAS:

Friend	1	2	3	4	5	Stranger
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## APPENDIX C

Student Validation Instructions

You will listen to a caustic wit message. After listening to the scene, you will fill out the corresponding evaluation sheet. Rate the scenarios on the following scale. (The scale has two extremes and increments between the two extremes). If you perceive the episode as having an extremely low level of (for example disparagement), circle 1. If you perceive the episode as having a low level, circle 2. If you perceive a medium level, circle 3. If you perceive a high level of disparagement, circle 4. If you perceive an extremely high level of disparagement, circle 5.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Extremely low

Extremely high

In addition, the TOPIC will be judged based on the following scale: (It will range between serious topic and non-serious topic.)

Serious      1      2      3      4      5      Non-serious

The RELATIONSHIP will be judged based on the following scale: (It will range between friend and stranger.)

Friend      1      2      3      4      5      Stranger

Definitions:

Incongruity refers to the "I can't believe she said that."

It is the difference between what is expected to be said and what is actually said.

Resolution refers to the "Aha, I get it."

Disparagement refers to the "putdown."

## APPENDIX D

Student Scenario Validation Form

# \_\_\_\_\_

Rate the scenario you just heard using the following factors: The scale ranges from extremely low level (1) to extremely high level (5).

Incongruity level            1        2        3        4        5

Resolution level            1        2        3        4        5

Disparagement level        1        2        3        4        5

Circle the number which most closely corresponds to your perception of the following areas:

## THE TOPIC WAS:

Serious            1        2        3        4        5                    Non-serious

## THE RELATIONSHIP WAS:

Friend            1        2        3        4        5                    Stranger

## APPENDIX E

Scenario Validation Results

	Incongruity level	Resolution level	Disparagement level	Topic choice <sup>a</sup>	Relation type <sup>b</sup>
1	3.38	2.84	3.52	3.56 N	4.3 S
2	3.64	2.68	4.08	3.62 N	1.9 F
3	3.42	2.96	3.98	3.6 N	1.58 S
4	*3.52	3.04	3.5	2.2 S	4.98 S
5	3.66	3.44	4.16	2.42 S	3.72 S
6	3.54	2.84	3.8	2.42 S	1.28 F
7	3.98	2.88	4.2	4.1 N	1.82 F
8	3.46	3.0	3.92	2.12 S	4.46 S
9	4.08	2.74	4.5	2.1 S	4.6 S
10	*3.22	3.18	3.1	2.44 S	1.34 F
11	4.36	3.1	4.5	3.38 N	1.46 F
12	3.68	3.58	3.78	2.44 S	4.66 S
13	*4.44	3.3	4.66	3.18 N	4.86 S
14	*3.78	3.08	4.26	3.8 N	1.52 F
15	3.34	3.08	3.42	3.08 N	1.34 F
16	4.2	3.12	4.12	3.3 N	4.78 S
17	4.16	3.02	4.5	2.88 S	4.44 S
18	3.78	2.84	4.22	3.84 N	1.52 F
19	3.26	2.54	2.84	2.16 S	1.06 F
20	3.44	2.92	3.46	3.06 N	4.9 S

Note: Asterisks indicate the most valid scenarios within each section: friend/non-serious topic, stranger/non-serious topic, friend/serious topic, and stranger/serious topic. These designated scenarios were used within the study. a Topic Choice S = Serious; N = Non-serious.  
b Relationship Type S= Stranger, F = Friend.

APPENDIX F  
SCENARIOS



## SCENE ONE

Sara and Ruth are in a dress boutique. Sara is the sales clerk. Ruth is the customer.

Ruth: Pardon me, miss. I'm shopping for a party dress, could you help me? I want the dress to be youthful and vivacious!

Sara: I would be delighted to help you. Do you like this red dress? It would be great on a beautiful young girl.

Ruth: It's gorgeous, I love it. It's a pretty color and nice fabric.

Sara: It's great. A black jacket, black shoes and a dainty purse would be perfect with it, don't you think?

Ruth: Yes. I think I'll buy the dress. It would be perfect for the party Thursday night.

Sara: Your daughter will look great!

## SCENE TWO

Ruth and Sara are visiting during their coffee break at work.

Ruth: My husband and I went driving through the country this weekend and came to a rickety, old wooden bridge. I told him I wanted to turn around and go back instead of crossing, but he was determined to go across that deathtrap. A sign was posted that the maximum weight was 2000 pounds.

Sara: I assume you got out and walked to meet that minimum standard.

## SCENE THREE

Ruth and Sara are having lunch at a restaurant. They have been seated.

Ruth: I am so glad you suggested we come here for lunch. This restaurant has the best food in town. (Pause) Hey, see that guy over there? He's cute. I'm going over to ask to borrow the salt from his table.

Sara: Ruth we have salt at our table.

Ruth: Sara, you're missing the point. I want to start a conversation. Does my makeup and hair look okay?

Sara: Ruth, wait for the dinner hour (pause) the lighting will be dimmer.

## SCENE FOUR

Ruth enters an office for an interview. She is greeted by the interviewer, Sara.

Ruth: I am here to interview for the management position at your company.

Sara: Thank you for coming in for the interview. Please sit down.

Ruth: Thank you. Here is my resume. Please note that I have a strong management background. (Yawn) Pardon me. I stayed up last night studying.

Sara: At first glance, this resume is quite impressive. You seem to be dragging a bit here at the end of the day though. Would you like a cup of coffee?

Ruth: No, thank you, coffee makes me hyperactive.

Sara: In that case, perhaps you should have two cups with extra sugar!

## SCENE FIVE

Ruth and Sara are sitting in a library.

Ruth: Pardon me. I don't know if you recognize me but I'm in your class at law school. You seem to know all the answers in class! Could you explain this case to me? I am so confused!

Sara: Of course, look at this point and this point. Do you see the correlation?

Ruth: No, I don't have a clue. (Pause) Do you think I have a chance of passing?

Sara: Let me put it this way. Are you capable of saying, "How deep do you want this ditch dug?"

## SCENE SIX

Sara and Ruth are talking over coffee in the kitchen.

Ruth: Sara, I have a job interview. This job could be my dream career. I want to do everything I can to improve my chances. I updated my resume and had it typeset. I got my hair cut and styled. I want to wear just the right outfit. Do you think this dress is a good choice? (Pause) I want to make a good impression.

Sara: Well, let me put it this way. If the interviewer has any taste at all, be sure to take cookies.

## SCENE SEVEN

Ruth and Sara are in a department store sampling perfume at the cosmetic counter.

Ruth: I love shopping for perfume. There are so many wonderful fragrances on the market.

Sara: They do have some nice fragrances. Do you like this one?

Ruth: Yes, it smells great. Let me spray this one on my wrist. How do you think this reacts to my body chemistry?

Sara: Listen Ruth. Did you hear that?

Ruth: I don't hear anything.

Sara: I heard someone scream soo-eee!!

## SCENE EIGHT

Ruth and Sara are in an office setting.

Sara: Pardon me, is your name Ruth?

Ruth: Yes.

Sara: Are you the one auditing the Anderson account?

Ruth: That's right.

Sara: Do you think it's going to balance?

Ruth: I'll look over the figures and get back to you.

Sara: Just give me an idea of the direction you think it will go.

Ruth: I'll have to think about it.

Sara: Well, don't hurt yourself Ruth!



## SCENE NINE

Ruth goes to the bank to check on her account. Sara is the bank employee with whom she is conferring.

Ruth: You know, I keep getting overdrawn on my checking account. I am horrible with math, I just can't keep my checkbook balanced correctly.

Sara: Perhaps you should take a course to improve your math concepts.

Ruth: That's a great idea. Where would you suggest going for the course?

Sara: Well, with your math background, I would suggest preschool.

## SCENE TEN

Sara and Ruth are visiting in the kitchen.

Ruth: Sara, I'm getting married. Stan asked me last night.

Sara: Congratulations. I know you are excited.

Ruth: Yes, but I am a bit concerned. There will be so many demands on me once we are married. I'll be a career woman, a wife and eventually a mother. Do you think I'm multi-faceted enough to fulfill all of those responsibilities?

Sara: Only if you have a multiple-personality disorder of which I am not aware.

## SCENE ELEVEN

Ruth and Sara are in the kitchen, sitting at the table.

Ruth: Sara, this guy I met several years ago is coming into town this weekend. He called and asked me to meet him for dinner. He is so attractive. I can't believe he asked me out.

Sara: Is he bringing his dog or just the cane?

## SCENE TWELVE

Ruth and Sara are in an office setting.

Ruth: Hi, my name is Ruth and you must be the new member of our staff. It's nice to meet you.

Sara: It's nice to meet you. I am so excited about the new job. It is so difficult to get hired by this company. I am really appreciative of this opportunity.

Ruth: By the way, how did you get hired? Are you the boss's niece? (Pause) Everyone has to get their foot in the door someday.

Sara: Right now the door is not where I want my foot positioned!

## SCENE THIRTEEN

Sara and Ruth are in a department store. Sara is the sales clerk. Ruth is the customer.

Sara: May I help you?

Ruth: Yes, I need some advice. I like this dress but I have gained weight. Maybe it's too revealing. Do you think I'm too heavy for this dress?

Sara: Let me put it this way. Have you thought about shopping in the awnings section?

## SCENE FOURTEEN

Sara and Ruth are browsing in a bookstore.

Ruth: Sara, see that guy over there. He's looking this way. I think he just winked at me.

Sara: Where is he? I don't see him.

Ruth: Over by the bookshelves. The horror section.

(Pause) Do you think he is flirting with me?

Sara: All I can say is that his taste in reading and women must be parallel!!

## SCENE FIFTEEN

Ruth and Sara are in the kitchen.

Ruth: Sara, I am so depressed! My mother-in-law is coming over tonight. In her opinion, there must be an immaculate house and gourmet meal whenever she walks in the door.

Sara: Who's doing the cooking and cleaning?

## SCENE SIXTEEN

Sara and Ruth are in a department store. Sara is a sales clerk. Ruth is a customer.

Ruth: Pardon me, miss. I'm going skiing next month and I need to buy a ski suit, hat, mittens, and, well...just about everything.

Sara: Let me show you some really nice items.

Ruth: Could you show me items on sale? I need to save money for the trip.

Sara: Well, at least you will save on one expense of the trip.

Ruth: What's that? I need to cut expenses anyway I can.

Sara: Obviously, just by glancing downward, I can tell you won't have to rent skis.



## SCENE SEVENTEEN

Ruth and Sara are shopping at a department store. Ruth is looking at a rack of size three clothes.

Ruth: Pardon me, miss. Please tell me you live a life of misery to be a size three. It would make my envy more bearable.

Sara: Sorry to disappoint you, but I found a diet book that makes dieting easy. I am never hungry.

Ruth: Perhaps I should buy that book.

Sara: Perhaps you should buy two!

## SCENE EIGHTEEN

Ruth and Sara are watching television.

Ruth: I love this show. The actresses wear such beautiful clothes.

Sara: I love that red dress she is wearing. It's very flattering.

Ruth: Oh my gosh! That actress who just came in has gained so much weight since she first started with the series.

Sara, I'm not that heavy, am I?

Sara: Well, Ruth, let me put it this way. If you were an actress on this show, we would now be sitting before a wide screen TV.

## SCENE NINETEEN

Sara and Ruth are drinking coffee at the kitchen table.

Ruth: Sara, you know Don and I have been dating for three years. You know him very well and you are my best friend. So tell the truth, do you think Don and I will ever get married?

Sara: Ruth, you are a sweet, lovely girl and Don is a great guy. I really do believe, with all my heart, you two will get married. (Pause) But not to each other.

## SCENE TWENTY

Sara and Ruth are in a bookstore. Sara is the sales clerk.  
Ruth is the customer.

Ruth: Excuse me, miss. Could you direct me to the language section?

Sara: Please follow me to the back area of the store. This entire shelf is devoted to language studies.

Ruth: Oh yeah? What language do you think I should study?

Sara: How about English?

Vita

Jane Haggard

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Dissertation: EVALUATION OF SENDERS OF CAUSTIC WIT MESSAGES  
(AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY)

Major Field: Higher Education

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Education: Graduated from Central State University, December 20th, 1978, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Education. Graduated from Southwestern Oklahoma State University, December 23, 1988, with a Master of Education degree. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree with a major in Higher Education at Oklahoma State University in December 1994.

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Pages in Study: 77

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Scope and Method of Study: This research project examined the influences of ethnicity, gender, relationship, and topic on the general evaluation of senders of caustic wit messages. Caustic wit is defined as a spontaneous verbal witticism involving a disparagement component directed toward the receiver of the message. The ANOVA factorial design used was a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 (ethnicity: African American/European American X gender: male/female X relationship: friend/stranger X topic: serious/non-serious). The research procedure invited participants (113 undergraduate university students) to listen to caustic wit messages and then complete the General Evaluation Inventory (GEI). The GEI recorded the research participants' general evaluations of the sender of a caustic wit message.

Findings and Conclusions: The analysis of response patterns indicates that ethnicity affects the evaluation process of caustic wit messages. Gender does not affect the evaluation process. Relationship does not significantly affect the evaluation process. Finally, topic choice is found to affect the evaluation process, but in the opposite direction from what was predicted. This study reveals the impact of various factors contributing to the evaluation of caustic wit and the possibilities for future research designs.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: \_\_\_\_\_

*Jane O. Haggard*