

WHY DISPARAGEMENT HUMOR IS FUNNY: THE ROLE OF PUNCH POTENTIAL

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By

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ABSTRACT

WHY DISPARAGEMENT HUMOR IS FUNNY: THE ROLE OF PUNCH POTENTIAL

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This research investigated the multifaceted dynamics of disparagement humor through the lens of Benign Violation Theory by incorporating the variables of psychological distance as well as the novel variable of punch potential. Drawing on the foundational work of Zillmann and Cantor (1976) and subsequent humor theories, this study explores the interplay between one's attitudes towards the target of disparagement humor, the punch potential or punch potential of the joke, and the resulting appraisal of humor. The interaction between punch potential and attitudes towards the target was posited to moderate the appraisal of disparagement humor, affecting the levels of amusement or offensiveness, resulting in two hypotheses: increasing the punch potential of disparagement humor would enhance amusement among individuals with a negative disposition towards the target while reducing amusement among those with a positive disposition towards the target and vice-versa. To test these hypotheses, I utilized a between-subjects factorial design, manipulating both the punch potential (low vs. high) and the target of the disparaging humor (e.g., President Joe Biden or Floridians). Participants evaluated the funniness, aversiveness, and personal enjoyment associated with these jokes while also disclosing their political affiliations and attitudes towards Joe Biden. The results revealed that attitudes towards Joe Biden significantly influenced humor appraisal: participants with negative attitudes towards Biden found the disparaging memes

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more amusing, whereas those with positive attitudes found them more offensive. Contrary to expectations, the punch potential of the jokes did not significantly affect perceived amusement or offensiveness. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of humor theories by highlighting the role of individual attitudes in humor appraisal and suggesting that social context manipulations may require more nuanced approaches to detect their influence. The study's limitations include the operationalization of punch potential and the nature of the stimuli, which may have affected the robustness of the findings. Future research should explore varied manipulations of punch potential, a broader range of humor types, and additional individual difference variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying humor appreciation.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

What's the most progressive thing about Joe Biden?
His dementia.

Consider the joke above. Do you find the joke funny? Offensive? Are you indifferent? Whether you appreciate the joke, that is, interpret it as benign amusement, or consider it offensive should depend, in part, on your attitude toward the disparaged target, Joe Biden. Indeed, a robust empirical finding in the humor literature is that people appreciate disparagement humor to the extent they dislike the disparaged target (e.g., Cantor & Zillmann, 1923; La Fave, McCarthy, & Haddad, 1973; McGhee & Duffey, 1983; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976).

In the present study, I introduce the possibility that a second variable associated with disparagement humor, its "punch potential," also influences our reactions to it. Punch potential refers to the degree to which humor can influence or affect the attitudes, perceptions, and emotions of others. To illustrate, consider two hypothetical scenarios. In the first, a friend sent you the joke in a text message, whereas in the second a professor told the joke to a large audience of impressionable college freshmen. In the first scenario the joke would have *low* punch potential: it is not likely to affect anyone's perceptions of Joe Biden. The second scenario is a different story; the joke would have *high* punch potential as it reaches a large number of people who are likely to be impressionable.

I propose that one's attitudes towards the target of disparagement humor and punch potential interact to affect appraisals of amusement and offensiveness. Increasing the punch potential of disparagement humor should increase amusement (and decrease offensiveness) if one holds a *negative* disposition toward the target; it should decrease amusement (and increase offensiveness) if one has a *positive* disposition. For instance, those who do not like Joe Biden

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should enjoy the joke presented above more than those who do. Further, their enjoyment should be compounded if they thought others would also witness and possibly be affected by the mockery.

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CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

What Makes Something Funny? The Role of Incongruity

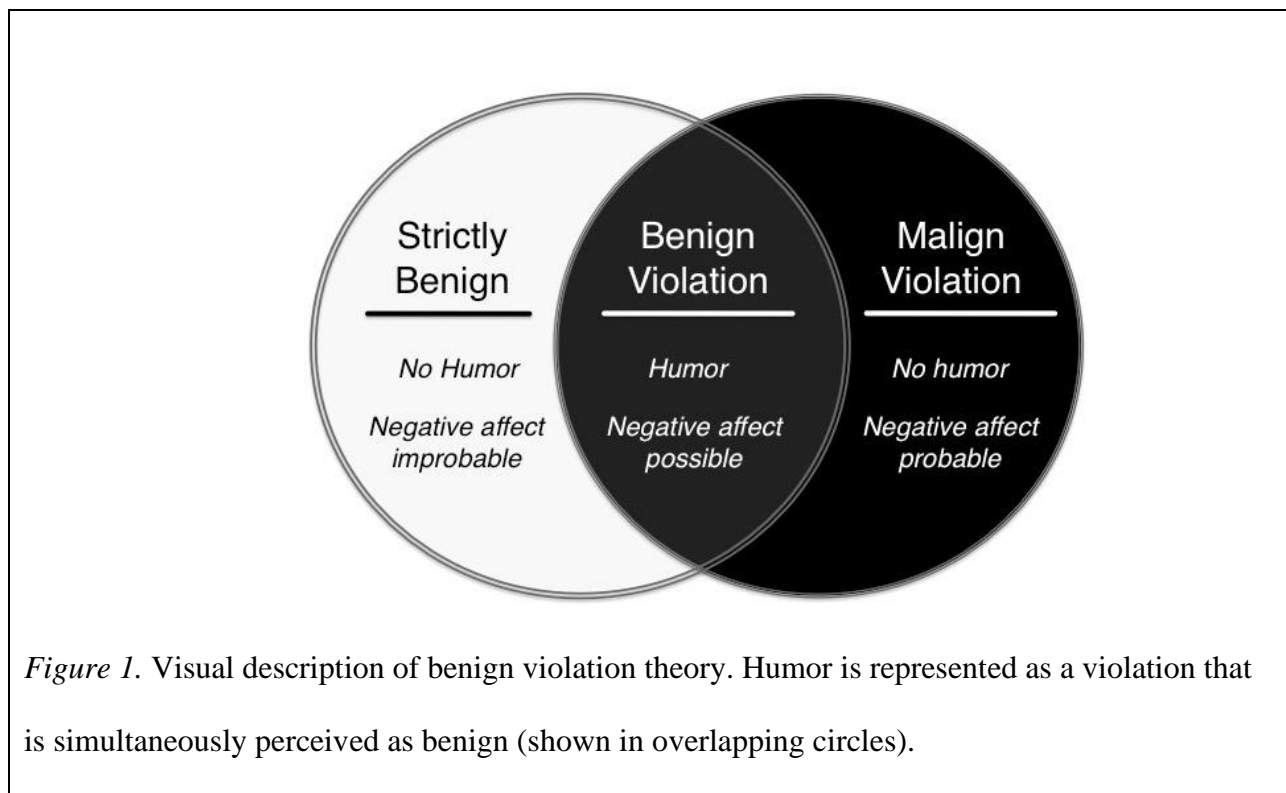
With the emergence of the “cognitive revolution” in psychology in the 1950s and early 1960s, psychological theories of humor began to locate the critical ingredients for humor—what makes something funny—in cognitive and perceptual processes, namely in the perception of incongruity. Incongruity involves holding two opposing ideas or interpretations of an event or stimulus at the same time (Suls, 1972). We experience mirth and laughter when we perceive or think about something that clashes with expectations or the mental representations we use to organize and understand our experiences (Morreall, 2011; 2020). The greater the disparity between the expected and the incongruous elements, the more likely it is for the individual to perceive an event as humorous (Martin & Ford, 2018). Numerous humor theorists have built upon this basic idea describing the fundamental experience of incongruity in nuanced ways (e.g., Apter, 1982, 2013; Koestler, 1964; McGraw & Warren, 2010; Suls, 1972; Wyer & Collins, 1992).

What Makes Something Funny? The Role of Benign Violation Theory

The central hypothesis of benign violation theory is that to find something funny we must perceive it as a violation (wrong, threatening) and as benign (not wrong, not threatening) at the same time (see Figure 1). The simultaneous interpretation of something as a violation and as benign (wrong and not wrong) constitutes the conditions that are both necessary and sufficient to produce humor. Thus, all humor events from jokes and puns to slapstick to spontaneous conversational humor reflect the same cognitive experience, a benign violation.

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When a situation is strictly a violation, it can elicit discomfort or offense. Conversely, when a situation is entirely benign, it might lack the surprise or cognitive shift required for humor to occur (McGraw & Warren, 2010). A common example of a benign violation is the behavior of tickling. Encroaching on the personal space of another person is a violation of a social norm that causes laughter. Being too aggressive (too malign) or stopping the tickling (too benign) results in the cessation of laughter. Figure 1 is a visual representation of each of these three possibilities.



The theory's framework suggests that the humor potential of a situation increases when the perceived balance between violation and benignity is optimal. Situations that strike this balance are likely to evoke amusement, as the violation creates a cognitive disruption that is defused by the recognition of benignity, resulting in a pleasurable experience (Aknin et al., 2013).

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Finding the Sweet Spot: The Role of Psychological Distance

Liberman and Trope (2008) proposed that psychological distance is a construct that represents how individuals perceive events (such as humor events) as distant or close based on variables such as physical closeness, temporal distance, social connection, and hypothetical chance of the event occurring. Increasing psychological distance from an aversive event renders it less threatening (Williams & Bargh, 2008). In the context of humor events, priming a person to perceive a humor event as psychologically distant leads to them appraising immoral jokes as more amusing (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

Reducing the threat of an aversive humor event (such as disparagement humor) does not mean it will always elicit amusement. Per BVT, an event requires a degree of violation in order to be humorous. Reducing the threat of a humor event entirely will render it wholly benign and unamusing. McGraw and Colleagues (2014) evidence this with their study of reactions to jokes about Hurricane Sandy. Participants in their study rated jokes about the tragedy over a period of 100 days, and their ratings suggested that jokes about the destruction became funnier as time passed since the hurricane hit, reached an apex, then sloped downward into being unfunny again (McGraw et al., 2014). Psychological distance should therefore moderate the humor appraisals of other aversive humor events, such as disparagement humor, and that moderation can either increase or decrease the amusement elicited by the disparagement humor.

Attitudes Toward the Target of Disparagement Humor

Previous research has shown that people's reactions to disparagement humor depend on their attitude toward the target. People are amused by disparagement humor insofar as they have a negative attitude towards the target (Zillmann, 1976). In their original work, Zillmann and Cantor (1976) assessed the pre-existing attitudes of college age men towards feminists, then

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presented either a neutral joke or a joke disparaging feminists to the men, measuring the participants enjoyment of the humor afterward (Zillmann, 1976). They found that participants who held negative attitudes towards feminists enjoyed the disparaging humor significantly more than those with neutral or positive attitudes towards feminists. Further, participants with neutral or positive attitudes towards feminists were offended by the jokes disparaging them (Zillmann, 1976).

Furthermore, in the context of sexist humor, Greenwood and Isbell (2002) found that men and women high in hostile sexism—that is, antagonism toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996)—were more amused by and less offended by “dumb blonde” jokes than were men and women low in hostile sexism. In similar fashion, Thomas and Esses (2004) found that men reported more enjoyment of female-disparaging jokes and a greater likelihood of telling those jokes insofar as they were high in hostile sexism. In short, the more one holds a negative attitude towards a target of disparagement, the more amusement they should derive from jokes disparaging the target.

Viewed through the lens of BVT, people who dislike Joe Biden will likely appraise the joke at the beginning of this paper as a *benign* violation: they would approve of or excuse the underlying disparagement. It would not bother them. The joke is funny because it is both a violation and benign at the same time. In contrast, people who like Joe Biden would likely appraise the joke as a *malign* (rather than benign) violation: they would not approve of or excuse the underlying disparagement. It would bother them. For such people the joke misses the “sweet spot”; it would not present a violation that is also benign.

Punch Potential

I propose that another vital component of humor appreciation is the effect of punch potential, or punch potential. Punch potential, or degree to which a joke has the potential to

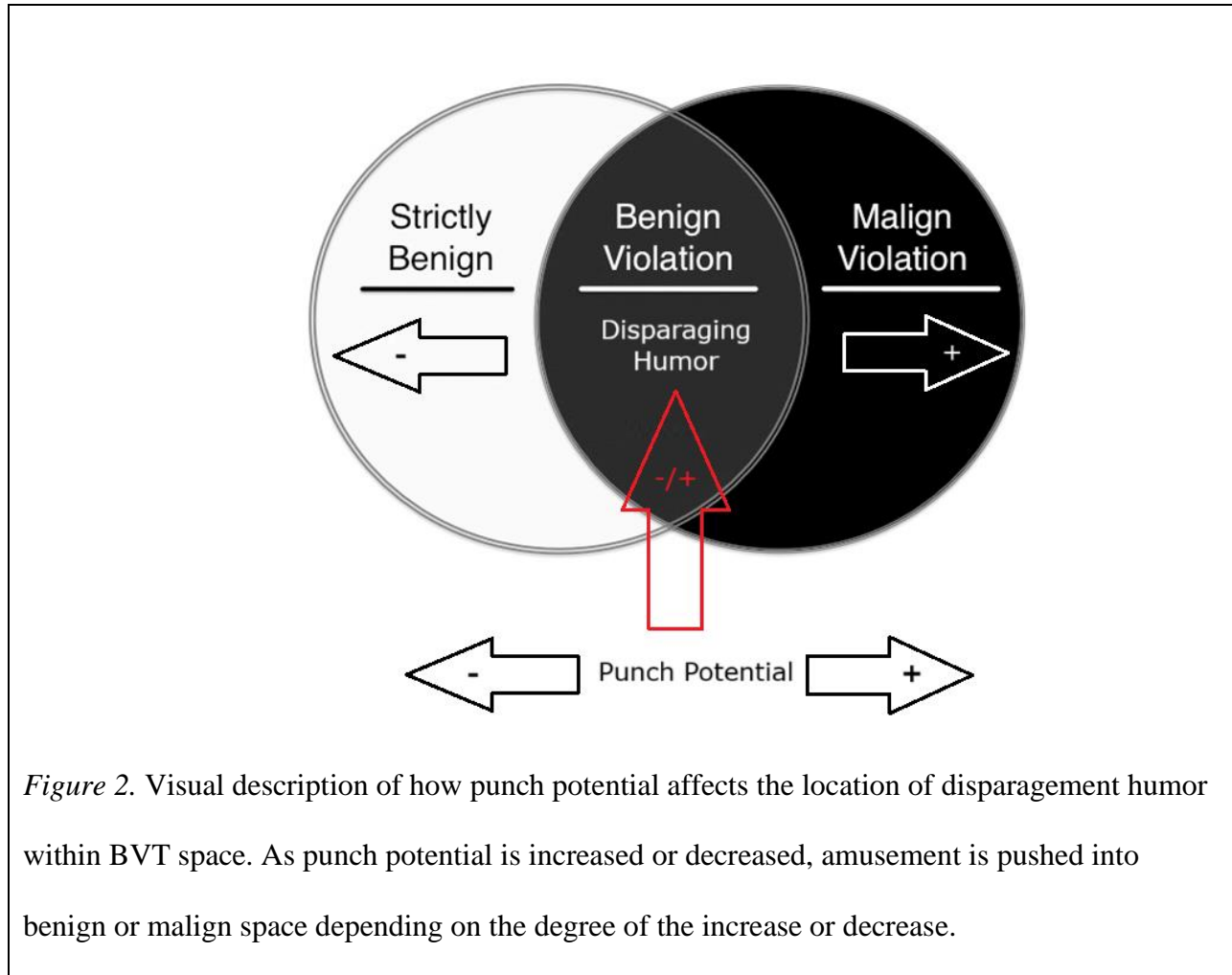
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affect the people either hearing or being targeted by the joke, can be modified based on the number of people present, the composition of that audience, and the potential to change people's thoughts about the target of the joke. For instance, if the joke is determined to affect an unaffiliated or affiliated group negatively or positively or amuse or offend those groups, the joke's location in the BVT space will move in either a positive or negative direction. Humor has the potential to positively affect people's thoughts about an affiliated group, improving ingroup cohesion, as well as negatively affect unaffiliated groups, polarizing the ingroup from the outgroup. Humor also has the potential to negatively affect people's thoughts about an affiliated group, worsening ingroup cohesion and positively shifting thoughts about an outgroup.

If the joke has lower punch potential and is directed towards a target a person has positive attitudes towards, the joke will appear malign and disagreeable, but ultimately inconsequential and not amusing. Similarly, if a joke with low punch potential is directed towards a target a person has negative attitudes toward, they will appraise it as benign, trivial, and likely unamusing.

If the punch potential is increased, then the likelihood of entering the BVT sweet spot or exiting it entirely is increased. When a high punch potential joke is told targeting someone held in positive regard, it will be perceived as a malign violation, warranting greater levels of offense and disapproval. Figure 2 presents a visual representation of this idea of disparagement humor "moving" within the BVT space as a result of punch potential. If the same potential joke is told with a negatively perceived target, the inverse will be true, and the joke will be a consequential violation that warrants amusement.

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The Present Research

Consistent with Zillmann and Cantor's (1976) findings, I first hypothesize that people's attitudes toward the target of disparagement humor and amusement are inversely related: people are more amused and less offended by disparagement humor to the extent they dislike the target. I further propose that punch potential moderates the effect of attitudes on humor appreciation. Specifically, I hypothesize that increasing the punch potential of disparagement humor will increase amusement for those who have a more *negative* attitude toward the target. I further hypothesize the inverse, that increasing the punch potential of disparagement humor will decrease amusement for those who have a more *positive* attitude toward the target

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To test my hypotheses, I presented participants with a scenario asking them to role play as a freshman student taking a seminar class. I then asked participants to observe the professor of this seminar class sharing memes with the students of the class and provide their impressions of the interaction afterward. Specifically, I asked them to evaluate the funniness and offensiveness associated with a disparaging meme about either Joe Biden or Floridians (a previously established neutral humor target) that was either shared with the participant in an office-hours context (wherein they are with the professor and one other student) or presented to everyone in class during a lecture. I will also ask that participants disclose their political identities and level of cavalier humor beliefs (see Hodson et al., 2010 for a review) to control for these variables as well as their attitudes towards Joe Biden. I expected to find a positive relationship between enjoyment of the Joe Biden meme and political affiliation as well as the negative relationship between offensiveness of the Biden meme and political affiliation will both be moderated by the punch potential manipulation. Each relationship should be stronger in the high punch potential condition than in the low punch potential condition.

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CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Power Analysis

I conducted an *a priori* power analysis using G*Power software (Erdfelder et al., 2007; Erdfelder et al., 2009) for correlation and regression analyses to determine the minimum sample size required for obtaining a significant medium effect size, given $\alpha = 0.05$, and a statistical power of 0.80. Results of the power analysis indicated that I needed a minimum of 208 participants.

Pilot Testing/ Stimulus Sampling

I pilot tested stimuli to ensure that the disparaging humor jokes and memes were consistently funny and disparaging across conditions. I tested several possible stimuli by creating a survey using Qualtrics software that was distributed to undergraduate students taking an introductory psychology course taught at Western Carolina University in exchange for course credit. The survey began as follows:

You will be asked to read sixteen jokes/memes, and to give your reactions to them on a few different dimensions. Importantly, all of your responses are anonymous. Your name will not be associated with any of your responses to the jokes and memes. Please respond honestly and candidly. Thank You!

Next, I presented all participants six jokes and two memes that disparage Joe Biden and three jokes and five memes that disparage Floridians (See Appendices A and B). Participants responded to four items for each joke and meme (“*I found the joke/meme funny,*” “*I found the joke/meme offensive,*” “*I found the joke/meme disrespectful of its target (Joe Biden or Floridians)*”) using a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). I also

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asked participants to indicate their age as well as to indicate their political affiliation on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Conservative*) to 7 (*Strongly Liberal*). A total of 32 students from Western Carolina University participated in this pilot test aged between 18 and 48 ($M = 21.35$, $SD = 6.73$). Participants overall indicated neutral political identities ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.43$), with nine participants indicating that they were strongly to slightly conservative and twelve indicating that they were strongly to slightly liberal.

I computed mean funniness ratings for the jokes and memes disparaging Joe Biden and Floridians. I selected memes with mean funniness ratings near the middle of the scale to avoid floor and ceiling effects. I chose to do this to reflect the impact of punch potential on a joke's funniness within the BVT space; if a joke begins in the neutral space, the effect punch potential has on its amusement should be more apparent. Ultimately, none of the jokes pretested yielded ratings that perfectly met inclusion criteria. I selected memes so that those for the Joe Biden condition and the Floridian condition had comparable mean funniness ratings ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.10$, and $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.43$ respectively), $t(31) = 1.31$, $p = 0.19$.

In addition, I selected jokes and memes for the Joe Biden condition that were given mean offensiveness ratings near the middle of the scale. The mean offensiveness rating was 2.55 ($SD = 1.39$) for the Joe Biden memes and 1.25 ($SD = 0.47$) for the Floridian memes, $t(31) = 5.01$, $p < .01$. As expected, participants rated the Floridian memes as less offensive compared to the Joe Biden memes. The funniness and offensiveness ratings for the jokes and memes I selected for each condition of my study are depicted in Figure 3.

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Floridian Meme 1

M_f : 3.45
 M_o : 1.21



Floridian Meme 2

M_f : 3.35
 M_o : 1.28



Combined

M_f : 3.40
 M_o : 1.25

Joe Biden Meme 1

M_f : 3.87
 M_o : 2.41



Joe Biden Meme 2

M_f : 2.97
 M_o : 2.69



Combined

M_f : 3.42
 M_o : 2.55

Figure 3. Four memes selected after comparing mean funniness and offensiveness (Mean funniness and offensiveness included above each image). M_f = Mean funniness, M_o = Mean offensiveness. Combined means are displayed in the rightmost column.

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Participants and Design

I recruited participants (ages 18+) from Prolific, an online platform used by researchers to post studies and gather participants. Prolific differs from other online participant recruitment platforms by ensuring a high-quality participant pool by screening for bots, banning suspicious participants, and requiring the upload of a form of identification from all participants to verify authenticity (Prolific, 2023). Prolific also ensures participants are ethically treated by requiring minimum-wage compensations for participation in research studies (Prolific, 2023). I opted to restrict my sample's geographical location to the United States given my use of the president of the United States being the target of disparagement humor. I collected data from 224 people in the United States, however one withdrew from the study prior to completion. Additionally, one participant's response times were greater than three standard deviations above the mean. After standardizing the completion time measure once the outlier was removed, an additional nine participants were found to be three standard deviations above the mean and were also removed. Twenty-one participants indicated that they had provided poor data when asked the data quality question at the end of the survey and were subsequently removed. In total, I removed thirty participants from the sample, resulting in a final sample of 194 people from the United States.

The final sample consisted of 106 (54.6%) women, 81 (41.8%) men, four transgender men, one transgender woman, and one agender person. One participant declined to indicate their gender. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 76 years old ($M = 37.21$, $SD = 11.77$). Regarding race/ethnicity, there were 122 (62.9%) White, 25 (12.9%) Asian, 19 (9.8%) Black or African American, 13 (6.7%) Hispanic, twelve who indicated Multiethnic, two as "other," and one Native American. I randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions in a 2 (Meme: Joe Biden, Floridian) x 2 (Punch potential: Low, High) between-subjects factorial design.

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Procedure

First, participants were provided with the informed consent form for the study and notified of how they would be compensated for participation. Participants were able to decline consent, ending their response to the study immediately. Participants who provided consent were then taken to the next screen of the survey.

Next, participants read the following instructions asking them to participate in a roleplay exercise:

We have found that students' first impressions of their professors and of the class strongly impact their engagement in class throughout the semester.

In this study, we're interested in studying students' first impressions of their instructors in different classroom settings (online versus face-to-face). You were randomly assigned to be in the online classroom condition.

You will be presented with the professor's opening remarks in a recorded excerpt from the first day of class last semester. You will then be asked to give your impressions of the professor and the class.

We then introduced the punch potential manipulation with the following instructions:

High Punch Potential Condition: Now, please imagine you are a freshman taking this seminar, and it is the first day of class. This is a required course for all freshmen, with over 100 students in class. It is being taught by Assistant Professor Richard Michaels via Zoom. Please click the button below to join the class.

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Low Punch Potential Condition: Now, please imagine you are a freshman taking this seminar. You missed the first lecture and have signed up for a 1:1 office hour appointment to review the material from the first class. Assistant Professor Richard Michaels, the professor teaching the class, has sent you a Zoom invite link. Please click the link below to join your office hours appointment.

I then presented participants with one of four videos depicting Professor Michaels in each of the four experimental conditions (see Appendix C). The scripts are nearly identical for each meme condition, with the differences between conditions being in which meme is shown (either Joe Biden disparaging or Floridian disparaging) and contextual word-changes for consistency. The scripts also differ slightly between the high and low impact conditions to make sense in their respective contexts but are as close as possible qualitatively to ensure consistency between conditions. The script for the high impact condition videos is as follows, with labels denoting the meme conditions:

Professor: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to your freshman seminar. My name is Professor Richard Michaels. Now, I see folks are joining the Zoom call - I will wait a few minutes before we get started.

Joe Biden Condition. So, while we're waiting for folks to join, there's some great Biden memes I found earlier today. Take a look: [DISPLAY JOE BIDEN MEME 1 & 2]

Floridian Condition. So, while we're waiting for folks to join, there's some great Florida Man memes I found earlier today. It goes like this: [DISPLAY FLORIDIAN MEME 1 & 2].

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Here is the syllabus for class. I'm going to review it in detail and then we can answer any questions you may have. Please note, while this class is being offered virtually, the expectations are equal to those of students taking the class in-person.

The script for the low impact condition videos is as follows, also with labels denoting meme conditions:

Professor: Good morning, I'm Professor Richard Michaels. Yesterday, we reviewed the syllabus in class. Let me find that document so we can review it together.

Joe Biden Condition. [DISPLAY FOLDER WITH SYLLABUS AND MEMES]. Oh, here's some great Biden memes I saw earlier, check them out! [DISPLAY JOE BIDEN MEME 1 & 2).

Alright, here is the syllabus for class. Let's take a look. Please note, while this class is being offered virtually, the expectations are equal to those of students taking the class in-person.

Floridian Condition. [DISPLAY FOLDER WITH SYLLABUS AND MEMES]. Oh, here's some great Florida Man memes I saw earlier, check them out! [DISPLAY FLORIDIAN MEME 1 & 2).

Alright, here is the syllabus for class. Let's take a look. Please note, while this class is being offered virtually, the expectations are equal to those of students taking the class in-person.

After viewing the stimuli, participants responded to two scales to measure subjective amusement and offensiveness to the memes presented. Participants responded to three

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amusement-related questions (“*How funny did you find the professor’s memes?*”, “*How amusing did you find the professor’s memes?*”, “*How entertaining did you find the professor’s memes?*”) and three offensiveness related questions (“*How offensive did you find the professor’s memes?*”, “*How negatively did you feel towards the professor’s memes?*”, “*How bothersome did you find the professor’s memes?*”) each rated on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very Much*). Both the amusement scale and the offensiveness scale exhibited good internal consistency, $\alpha = .92$ and $\alpha = .89$, respectively. Next, participants responded to a measure of their attitudes towards Joe Biden which was made of four questions (“*How much do you like Joe Biden?*”, “*How positively do you feel about Joe Biden?*”, “*How much do you agree with Joe Biden?*”, “*How likely are you to vote for Joe Biden?*”) each rated on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very Much*). Reliability analyses indicate that this scale also exhibited excellent internal consistency, $\alpha = .95$. Participants then indicated their political identity on a scale from 1 (*Extremely Liberal*) to 7 (*Extremely Conservative*).

Participants also completed the cavalier humor beliefs scale (Hodson et al., 2010) and indicated their level of awareness about other people in the class/office hours appointment with them to measure the effectiveness of the punch potential variable. This response was scored on a seven-point scale from 1 (*Extremely Unaware*) to 7 (*Extremely Aware*). Reliability analysis for the cavalier humor beliefs scale indicated good internal consistency, $\alpha = .78$. Participants were then asked to respond to statements about how they felt about the class and the professor to support the initial description of the study (“*How much do you think you would enjoy this class?*”, “*How much would you enjoy having this professor?*”, “*What do you think your engagement in this class will be?*”, “*How excited are you about attending this class in the future?*”) each rated on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very Much*). Reliability analysis for this

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scale indicated excellent internal consistency, $\alpha = .93$. Participants then completed a brief demographic questionnaire, indicating their age, ethnicity, and gender. Finally, I administered a data quality question to the participants, phrased:

Thank you for being involved in our research! Sometimes, people complete surveys out of interest in science or the topic. Other times, people enter bogus answers, maybe to get course credit or gain some incentive, or out of boredom. If you have given any bogus answers in this survey, that's OK, we trust that you have your reasons. However, this is not good for data quality! Please indicate if you answered the questions honestly and to the best of your abilities.

Lastly, I provided participants with a URL to follow to be compensated for completing the survey, per Prolific protocol (Prolific, 2023). I then took the responses from Qualtrics and placed them into SPSS for analysis, following data-cleaning procedures. Data cleaning included recoding the responses into interpretable variables, as well as identifying responses that indicate they are not genuine. As previously mentioned, I excluded twenty-one participants from the analyses due to indication of poor data, and nine were omitted due to being three standard deviations above the mean for completion time of the survey.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the measures of (a) attitudes towards Joe Biden, (b) cavalier humor beliefs (CHB), (c) attitudes towards the class (class attitudes), (d) amusement, and (e) offensiveness as a function of the meme manipulation and the punch potential manipulation.

These descriptive statistics reveal several noteworthy findings about the four conditions. First, participants reported a slightly liberal political identification ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.70$). Importantly, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants' political identification did not differ significantly across experimental conditions indicating that liberals and conservatives were distributed roughly evenly across the three conditions, $F(3,190) = 2.27$, $p = .08$. Similarly, participants' level of cavalier humor beliefs did not differ significantly across conditions, $F(3,190) = 1.08$, $p = .35$. Interestingly, participants' attitudes towards Biden and their level of cavalier humor beliefs were significantly and negatively correlated, $r = -.21$, $p = .004$, indicating that as participants reported more positive attitudes towards Biden, they reported a lower level of cavalier humor beliefs. Participants were generally more averse to memes disparaging Joe Biden ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 2.11$) compared to memes disparaging Floridians ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.71$).

Participants indicated being more aware of punch potential in the high impact conditions ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.92$) compared to the low punch potential conditions ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 2.01$). I conducted a one-way analysis of variance to determine if the effect of the punch potential manipulation was significant. The effect differed significantly across conditions, $F(3, 190) =$

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26.416, $p < .001$, suggesting the manipulation was indeed effective. In other words, participants reported being more aware of other people being in the class with them in the high impact conditions, indicating greater potential for punch potential from the professor's memes.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics for each dependent measure as a function of the meme manipulation and punch potential condition.

Measure	<u>Condition</u>									
	<u>Total Sample</u>		<u>HB</u>		<u>HFL</u>		<u>LB</u>		<u>LFL</u>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Attitude to Biden	2.69	1.31	2.62	1.37	2.70	1.30	2.60	1.27	2.87	1.31
2. CHB	5.90	1.33	5.60	1.43	6.00	1.23	5.96	1.37	6.02	1.27
3. Class Attitudes	3.09	1.11	3.08	1.20	3.03	1.08	3.26	1.13	2.99	1.06
4. Amusement	3.59	2.12	3.72	2.23	3.51	2.20	4.03	1.96	3.11	1.99
5. Offensiveness	2.81	2.01	3.44	2.18	2.00	1.61	3.44	2.05	2.38	1.81
	N = 194		n = 48		n = 48		n = 48		n = 50	

Note. Conditions are as follows: High punch potential, Biden disparaging (HB), high punch potential, Floridian disparaging (HFL), low punch potential, Biden disparaging (LB), and low punch potential, Floridian disparaging (LFL).

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Table 2 presents correlations among (a) attitudes towards Joe Biden, (b) cavalier humor beliefs (CHB), (c) attitudes towards the class (class attitudes), (d) amusement, and (e) offensiveness as a function of the meme manipulation and the punch potential manipulation. An examination of correlations revealed several significant relationships among the variables studied. Notably, offensiveness ratings were significantly and negatively correlated with amusement ($r = -.208, p < .01$), political identity ($r = -.221, p < .01$), and attitudes towards the classroom ($r = -.187, p < .01$). In other words, more conservative participants found the memes in the Joe Biden Floridian conditions less offensive than more liberal participants. Furthermore, participants reported enjoying the class more to the extent they found the memes inoffensive. Conversely, offensiveness ratings were positively correlated with attitude towards Joe Biden ($r = .286, p < .01$) and CHB ($r = .376, p < .01$), suggesting that as participants were more offended by the memes, they rated themselves as holding more positive attitudes towards Joe Biden and having higher levels of cavalier humor beliefs.

Amusement was positively correlated with political identity ($r = .195, p < .01$), CHB ($r = .304, p < .01$), and attitudes towards the classroom ($r = .482, p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of amusement are associated with higher conservatism, more positive attitudes towards class, and total CHB scores. Additionally, a significant negative correlation existed between attitude towards Joe Biden and political identity ($r = -.566, p < .01$), and a positive correlation between political identity and CHB ($r = .471, p < .01$). These correlations suggest participants who were more conservative held more negative attitudes toward Joe Biden and that more conservative participants expressed greater levels of CHB.

Participants generally reported having neutral to slightly negative attitudes towards Joe Biden ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.31$), which also did not significantly differ across conditions, $F(3, 190)$

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= .432, $p = .73$. Participant political identity significantly correlated negatively and moderately with attitudes towards Biden, $r = -.56$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that participants who were more liberal reported more positive attitudes towards Joe Biden, whereas participants who were more conservative reported more negative attitudes towards Joe Biden.

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Table 2

Correlations for each dependent measure.

	<u>Offensiveness</u>	<u>Amusement</u>	<u>Political ID</u>	<u>Attitude to Biden</u>	<u>CHB</u>	<u>Punch Potential</u>	<u>Attitude to Class</u>
<u>Offensiveness</u>	1						
<u>Amusement</u>	-.208**	1					
<u>Political ID</u>	-.221**	.195**	1				
<u>Attitude to Biden</u>	.286**	-.107	-.566**	1			
<u>CHB</u>	-.376**	.304**	.471**	-.209**	1		
<u>Punch Potential</u>	-.044	.014	-.016	-.031	-.072	1	
<u>Attitude to Class</u>	-.187**	.482**	.130	-.038	.320**	-.029	1

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

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Hypothesis Tests

Based on Zillmann and Cantor's (1976) findings, I expected to find a *positive* relationship between enjoyment of the Biden meme and political affiliation; participants should enjoy the meme less to the extent they identify themselves as liberal and more to the extent they are conservative. I also expected to find a *negative* relationship between offensiveness of the Biden meme and political affiliation; participants should be offended by the meme more to the extent they identify themselves as liberal and less to the extent they are conservative.

Recall that I predicted that the positive relationship between enjoyment of the Joe Biden meme and political affiliation as well as the negative relationship between offensiveness of the Biden meme and political affiliation will both be moderated by the punch potential manipulation. Each relationship should be stronger in the high punch potential condition than in the low punch potential condition. Finally, I did not expect to find a significant relationship between amusement or offensiveness of the Floridian meme and attitude toward Joe Biden.

I tested my hypotheses by conducting regression analyses separately on the amusement ratings and the offensiveness ratings of the memes in the two experimental conditions. First, I standardized the measure of attitude toward Joe Biden. Then, I followed Jaccard et al.'s (1990) recommendations and contrast code the Floridian conditions as “-1” and the Joe Biden conditions as “1”. Similarly, I coded the low impact condition as -1 and the high impact condition as 1. I computed interaction terms involving attitude toward Joe Biden by multiplying each effect-coded variable by the standardized attitude score.

Next, I regressed the dependent measures (amusement, offensiveness) onto the standardized attitudes toward Joe Biden measure, the two contrast coded variables along with the

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following interaction terms: Attitude toward Joe Biden x Punch Potential, Attitude toward Joe Biden x Meme Condition, Punch Potential x Meme Condition, and finally Attitude toward Joe Biden x Punch Potential x Meme Condition.

Amusement

For amusement, I found a significant regression, $F(7,186) = 2.47, p < .02$, suggesting that the combination of predictors significantly contributes to the variance in amusement. The model summary indicates that the R^2 was .08, meaning that the attitudes towards Joe Biden, punch potential, and meme condition explained 8% of the variance in the model. The adjusted R^2 , which accounts for the number of predictors in the model, is slightly lower at .05, or 5% of the variance. The only interaction term that showed a significant relationship was the interaction effect for Attitude toward Biden x Meme Condition, $\beta = -.22, t = -3.14, p < .01$, indicating that the more participants reported positive attitudes towards Joe Biden the less amused they were by the memes disparaging him. Attitudes toward Joe Biden did not moderate amusement with the Floridian memes.

The remaining predictors (Meme Condition, Punch Potential, Attitudes towards Joe Biden, Attitudes towards Joe Biden x Punch Potential, Punch Potential x Meme Condition, and Attitude towards Joe Biden x Punch Potential x Meme Condition) did not show significant effects (see Table 2 for the amusement predictor coefficients). This indicates that in this sample, attitudes towards Joe Biden did not predict amusement with Floridian disparagement jokes as well as they did Joe Biden disparaging jokes. Contrary to my hypotheses, there was no change in amusement between each impact condition, meaning the punch potential of the joke did not affect the perceived amusement.

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Next, I completed a simple effects analysis of the significant effect found to better understand what could explain the relationship observed. I did this by regressing the measure of attitudes towards Biden onto the separate meme conditions (disparaging Biden or disparaging Floridians). For the Biden meme condition, the model summary indicates that the R^2 explained about 10% of the variance. The regression was significant $F(7,94) = 10.81, p < .001$ with the predictor coefficients being negative, $\beta = -.32, t = -3.28, p < .001$, meaning that participants who saw memes about Joe Biden and held more positive attitudes towards him rated the memes as less amusing than those with more negative attitudes. The model for the Florida meme condition was insignificant, explaining about 1% of the variance with an insignificant model, which fits the theoretical model insofar as attitudes towards the target of disparagement humor affecting appraisals of amusement.

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Table 3

Coefficients for the amusement regression model.

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Significance
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	3.57	.15		24.10	<.001
Meme Condition	0.27	.15	.13	1.79	.075
Punch Potential	0.03	.15	.01	0.21	.833
Attitude towards Joe Biden	-0.20	.15	-.09	-1.31	.190
Interaction 1	0.02	.15	.01	0.13	.899
Interaction 2	-0.47	.15	-.22	-3.13	.002*
Interaction 3	-0.18	.15	-.09	-1.22	.225
Interaction 4	-0.09	.15	-.04	-1.62	.535

Note. Interaction effects are as follows: Interaction 1 is Attitude towards Joe Biden x Punch Potential. Interaction 2 is Attitude towards Joe Biden x Meme Condition. Interaction 3 is Punch Potential x Meme Condition. Interaction 4 is Attitude towards Joe Biden x Punch Potential x Meme Condition. Significant predictors are denoted with an asterisk.

Table 4

Coefficients for the offensiveness regression model.

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Significance
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	2.84	.13		21.61	<.001
Meme Condition	0.66	.13	.33	5.05	<.001*
Punch Potential	-0.08	.13	-.04	-0.60	.553
Attitude towards Joe Biden	0.61	.13	.30	4.62	<.001*
Interaction 1	0.13	.13	.06	0.99	.321
Interaction 2	0.23	.13	-.11	1.71	.089
Interaction 3	0.09	.13	.04	0.65	.515
Interaction 4	0.08	.13	.04	0.62	.538

Note. Interaction effects are as follows: Interaction 1 is Attitudes towards Joe Biden x Punch Potential. Interaction 2 is Attitude towards Joe Biden x Meme Condition. Interaction 3 is Punch Potential x Meme Condition. Interaction 4 is Attitude towards Joe Biden x Punch Potential x Meme Condition. Significant predictors are denoted with an asterisk.

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Offensiveness

For offensiveness, I found that the predictors explain 21% of the variance in the model, with an adjusted R^2 of .18, suggesting that the model has a moderate fit. The regression model is significant, $F(7, 186) = 7.177, p < .001$, indicating that the combination of predictors significantly contributes to the variance in offensiveness. The only two significant predictor variables in the model were the meme condition variable, $\beta = .33, t = 5.05, p < .01$ and the Attitude towards Joe Biden variable, $\beta = .30, t = 4.62, p < .01$. This suggests a predictor effect of the meme condition on offensiveness to the jokes, meaning that participants were generally more offended by the Joe Biden meme condition over the Floridian meme condition and that participants who reported more positive attitudes towards Joe Biden reported being more offended by jokes in general. Akin to the amusement regression analyses, the remaining variables and interaction terms (Punch Potential, Attitude towards Joe Biden x Punch Potential, Attitude towards Joe Biden x Meme Condition, Punch Potential x Meme Condition, and Attitude towards Joe Biden x Punch Potential x Meme Condition) were all insignificant (see Table 3 for the offensiveness predictor coefficients).

I conducted additional simple effects analyses by regressing the Attitude towards Joe Biden variable onto the offensiveness variable for both meme conditions. For the Joe Biden meme condition, the model explained about 16% of the variance. The regression was significant $F(1,94) = 18.48, p < .001$, with the predictor coefficient being positive, $\beta = .41, t = 4.30, p < .001$. The model for the Floridian meme condition was also significant, explaining about 4% of the variance significantly, $F(1, 96) = 5.25, p = .024$. The predictor coefficient was positive, $\beta = .23, t = 2.29, p = .024$. While the interaction effects for the broader model were not found to be

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significant and while this only explains four percent of the variance, this means that regardless of meme condition, participants who reported positive attitudes towards Biden were more offended by jokes as a whole. This is sensible given the earlier finding that as participants reported more positive attitudes towards Biden, they also reported a lower level of cavalier humor beliefs.

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CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to explore the dynamics of disparagement humor through the lens of Benign Violation Theory (BVT), focusing on the variables of attitude toward the disparaged target and punch potential. The hypotheses proposed that increasing the punch potential of disparagement humor would enhance amusement among individuals with negative dispositions toward the target and reduce amusement among those with positive dispositions toward the target.

The regression analysis for amusement indicated that the combination of predictors, including attitudes towards Joe Biden, punch potential, and meme condition, explained 8% of the variance. However, the only significant predictor was the interaction effect between Attitude towards Joe Biden and meme condition. Participants with positive attitudes towards Joe Biden were less amused by the memes disparaging him, while those with negative attitudes were more amused. Contrary to expectations, the punch potential of the joke did not significantly affect perceived amusement. For offensiveness, the predictors explained 21% of the variance, with the meme condition and Attitude towards Joe Biden being significant predictors. Participants were generally more offended by the Joe Biden meme condition compared to the Floridian meme condition. Additionally, participants with positive attitudes towards Joe Biden reported higher offensiveness to the jokes, regardless of the meme condition. The punch potential variable did not significantly influence offensiveness.

The findings support the notion that attitudes towards the target of disparagement humor play a crucial role in humor appraisal. Participants with negative attitudes towards Biden found the disparaging memes more amusing, aligning with BVT's premise that humor arises from

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benign violations. Conversely, positive attitudes towards Joe Biden correlated with increased offensiveness, suggesting that these participants perceived the jokes as malign violations.

The lack of significant effects for the punch potential variable on amusement and offensiveness suggests that the context in which the humor was presented (high vs. low punch potential) did not alter participants' humor appraisals in this study. This finding contrasts with previous research suggesting that social context can modulate humor responses. Further investigation is needed to understand the conditions under which punch potential influences humor perception.

Implications for Humor Theory

The results contribute to the broader understanding of humor theories by highlighting the interplay between individual attitudes and humor appraisal, adding to the robust literature supporting BVT as a lens for explaining why things are or are not funny. The significant interaction between attitudes towards Biden and meme condition underscores the importance of considering individual differences in humor research.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. One potential limitation lies in the operationalization of the punch potential variable. The study used high and low punch potential conditions based on classroom settings and the presence of other students. This manipulation may not have been strong enough to capture the nuanced ways in which social context can influence humor perception. Future research should consider more varied and intense manipulations of punch potential, such as different audience compositions or explicit feedback from others, to better assess its role in humor appraisal. Further, the contrived nature of an imagined role-play may

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have impacted the genuine experience of punch potential – while participants indicated being aware of other students, it may be more beneficial to replicate this study using a live classroom setting or a live one-on-one setting to truly capture punch potential.

Another limitation lies with the memes used in the study. The memes used in the study, while pilot-tested for funniness and disparagement, might not have been sufficiently potent to elicit strong reactions that would reveal the effects of punch potential. This is not to suggest that the memes are impervious to the effects of punch potential, but rather that the impact of punch potential may be moderated by the types of humor it is used with. The relatively neutral nature of the Floridian memes compared to the more politically charged Joe Biden memes could have diluted the overall impact of the stimuli. Future studies should utilize a broader range of humor types and targets, including more polarizing content, to test the robustness of the findings. Participants may also have experienced desensitization due to repeated exposure to similar types of humor during the experiment, potentially leading to reduced sensitivity to the manipulations given that the year this data was collected in was an election year. Future studies should consider using a wider variety of humorous stimuli and reducing repetition to maintain participant engagement and responsiveness.

Humor appreciation is a complex and multifaceted process that may not be fully captured by the variables examined in this study. Factors such as individual differences in humor styles, cultural background, and the immediate mood of participants could all play significant roles in how humor is perceived. Future research should incorporate these additional variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying humor appreciation.

Conclusion

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The present study advances the understanding of disparagement humor by elucidating the role of individual attitudes and the limited impact of social context. The findings reinforce the relevance of BVT in humor research and highlight the need for further exploration of the factors that modulate humor appraisal. By integrating these insights, future research can develop more comprehensive models of humor appreciation and its social effects.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Joke Pretest Items

Jokes disparaging Joe Biden

What is Joe Biden's favorite video game? *Space Invaders.*

Why is Joe Biden afraid of getting COVID? *He's afraid he will lose his sense of smell.*

Why does Joe Biden call women muffins? *Because muffins backwards is sniffum'.*

In honor of President Biden... *I forgot the punchline.*

Joe Biden's campaign message: *"I'm Joe Biden and I forgot this message."*

Jokes disparaging Floridians

Everything in Florida is in the 80's. The temperature, the humidity, *the average age, and the IQ.*

Why did Florida man bring a ladder to the bar? *He heard drinks were on the house.*

What is Florida man's favorite cologne? *Bug spray.*

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APPENDIX B: Meme Pretest Items

Figure B1

Memes disparaging Joe Biden that were selected for use in the study.



Figure B2

Meme disparaging Joe Biden that was not selected for use in the study



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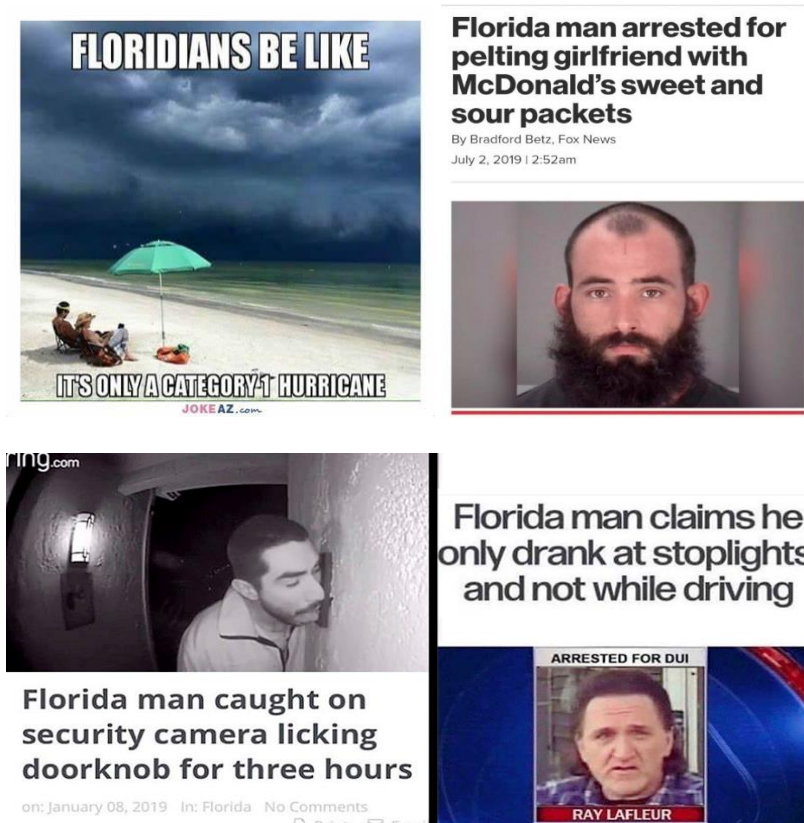
Figure B3

Mememes disparaging Floridians that were selected for use in the study.



Figure B4

Mememes disparaging Floridians that were not selected for use in the study.



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APPENDIX C: Links to Stimuli Videos

High punch potential / Joe Biden meme condition: https://youtu.be/sXH_v9ZYaFo

High punch potential / Floridian meme condition: <https://youtu.be/hB1irEnTwbg>

Low punch potential / Joe Biden meme condition: <https://youtu.be/09B6uBKqNdc>

Low punch potential / Floridian meme condition: <https://youtu.be/oXTnGoXfGEE>