

HUMOR AND PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology.

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ABSTRACT

HUMOR AND PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

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Political conservatives and liberals appreciate different kinds of humor, as dictated by differing moral values. The amount of value they place on certain morals determines what is and is not okay to joke about. People draw inferences about a person's traits based on what behaviors they see them doing, and from those inferences make assumptions about other traits that person may possess. The use of humor is one such behavior, and accordingly I discuss relationships between morality, humor, political identities, humor appreciation, and impression formation. The present research consists of a single experiment that investigated participants' ratings of the likeability and presumed political identity of a person based on the humor they used over social media (via posting a meme) as well as the participants' own reported political identities. Results partially supported the first hypothesis, showing that people do identify a person as either liberal or conservative based on the type of humor they employ (specifically, what moral they violate with their humor). Furthermore, results supported the second and third hypotheses, revealing that liberals like a person more (and conservatives less) when they observed them mocking a less-prioritized moral foundation *because* they perceive them as a fellow liberal and that conservatives like a person more (and liberals less) when they observed them mocking a less-prioritized moral foundation *because* they perceive them as a fellow conservative.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Envision a depiction of Jesus Christ brandishing a can of beer and a lit cigarette, paired with a caption stating, “Jesus got hammered for his sins, you can too.” The feelings elicited from this may be positive, if seen as just a joke, or negative, if seen as an affront to Christianity. This was the case in 2019, when a pub in Australia made this exact social media post. The post received a significant amount of criticism from the public, indicating disgust and outrage over the depiction. On the contrary, there were also several people who found the post to be quite humorous. The pub eventually took the post down, claiming they did not mean to offend anyone with their joke.

People differ in their views of what is funny. Similarly, people differ in their views on what is offensive. These differences are rooted in the fundamental sources of morality, which separate political liberals from conservatives (Buie, Ford, Olah, Argüello, & Mendiburo-Seguel, 2021). Buie and colleagues provide evidence for this; their study showed that conservatives rated the pub’s post as more offensive and less funny than did liberals *because* the post violated their personal moral convictions to a greater degree. Conservatives and liberals differentially construct their moral worldviews on foundational concerns affronted by the post.

People’s strong comments of condemnation or defense of the pub owners in response to this news story suggests that they believe the pub owners did not post the meme with merely the playful intention to amuse others. Rather, it appears people inferred from the meme something about the pub owners’ attitudes, character, intentions, etc., which identify them as a “friend or foe”, an “ally or enemy.” Indeed, research has shown that people readily make trait inferences about others from their humor (e.g., Cann & Matson, 2014; Kuiper, Kirsh & Leite, 2010; Olah, 2019). Conservatives commenting on this post on social media, for instance, seem to have

inferred that the pub owners were liberal and held antagonistic attitudes toward, not only Christianity, but also conservatives, and that they posted the meme with malicious intentions under the protective ruse of “it was just a joke.”

The proposed research explores the possibility that people readily infer another person’s political affiliation from the jokes they tell, specifically from the moral foundations their jokes violate. Furthermore, we propose that people use that initial categorization to form an overall impression and evaluation of the person.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Morality and Political Identity

Moral foundations theory (MFT; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) asserts that morality, our basic concepts of right and wrong, are founded on five foundation sets of concerns and beliefs or “intuitions” (Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009). The *Harm/care* foundation is made of constructs relating to caring for others (e.g., It is right to help others in need.). The moral imperatives of the Harm/care foundation underlie the concept of altruism or doing good for the sake of good as opposed to other motivational factors. The *Fairness/reciprocity* foundation is at the heart of concerns for equitable treatment and social equality (e.g., It is right to treat people with dignity and respect.). This is best exemplified by philosophy behind the social justice movement, which aims to bring equality to underprivileged populations. The *Ingroup/loyalty* foundation underlies beliefs and virtues that unite people by roles and mutual duties irrespective of one’s own personal desires (e.g., It is right to serve and honor one’s country; Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva & Ditto, 2011). The *Authority/respect* foundation is made of values concerning tradition and social order as defined by authoritative figures (e.g., It is right to respect and defer to legitimate authorities.). The *Purity/sanctity* foundation is made of spiritual values such as discipline, self-control, and devotion to divinity. This is exemplified by religious communities that construct their morality based on religious ideals, which guide the individuals in identifying what is pure and what isn’t (e.g., It is right to recognize and honor transcendent truth claims.).

These foundations can be grouped into two categories, named individualizing and binding foundations (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). The individualizing foundations are Harm/care and

Fairness/reciprocity, named such for their focus on internal sources of moral regulation. Specifically, these foundations are oriented towards the individual, having the individual determine what is morally right or wrong. The Ingroup/loyalty, Authority/respect, and the Purity/sanctity foundations are referred to as the binding foundations because they do not place the individual as the primary focal point of morality. Rather, they collectively emphasize virtues that unite people through roles, duties and mutual obligations (Graham et al., 2011).

Research on MFT indicates that liberals and conservatives differentially emphasize these five moral foundations in constructing their moral worldviews. Individuals who lean conservative allocate a more equal importance across all five foundations, whereas individuals who lean liberal place a disproportionate emphasis on the individualizing foundations (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt et al., 2009). Haidt and colleagues directly assessed self-reported importance of the five moral foundations as well as the political leanings of an international sample (Haidt et al., 2009). Additionally, they extended beyond direct self-report by having participants make moral judgments tied to each of the five moral foundations. The results across both studies suggested that liberals were more likely to report valuing the individualizing foundations as well as making moral judgments in accordance with them (Haidt et al., 2009). In contrast, conservatives more equally reported valuing each of the five foundations and making moral judgments in-line with valuing all five (Haidt et al., 2009). This evidences a key difference between liberals and conservatives; while they consider all foundations important, conservatives view the individualizing foundations as *comparatively* less important than liberals, whereas liberals view the binding foundations as less important than conservatives (Graham et al., 2009).

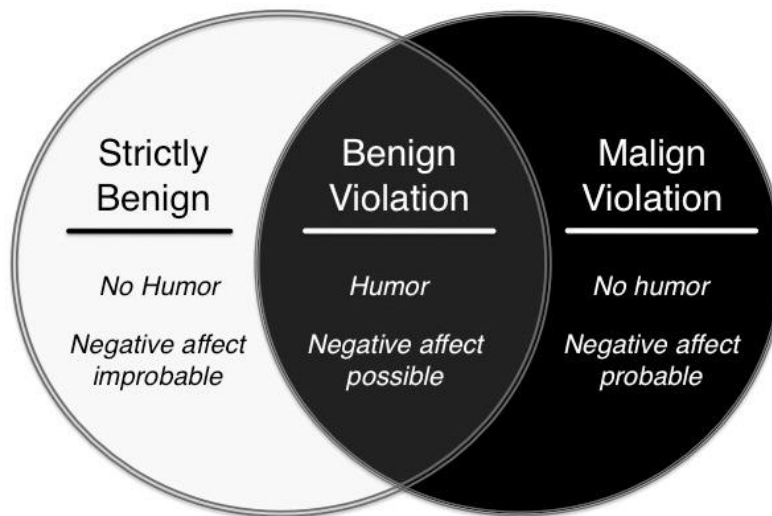
Morality and Humor Appreciation

Benign violation theory proposes that humor begins with the perception of a violation. The theory posits a violation must occur before a situation is perceived as humorous (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Warren and McGraw explain a violation as something that goes against social norms, appears threatening, or seems amoral (Warren & McGraw, 2015). In order to be perceived as funny, an event must be perceived simultaneously as a violation and as benign. Benignity, as explained by McGraw and Warren, is when a situation is okay or acceptable. If the circumstance is amoral or threatening, but it turns out not to be harmful or seems acceptable, it becomes a *benign violation* (visually represented by Figure 1).

Benign violations give rise to perceptions of an event being humorous as opposed to offensive. Particularly relevant to the present research, McGraw and Warren (2010) proposed that people perceive social norm violations as benign (and thus funny) insofar as they do not care about the norm. For instance, McGraw and Warren (2010, Exp 4) presented churchgoing and non-churchgoing participants with a description of a church giving away a luxury SUV in a raffle in order to attract new people. They found that both churchgoers and non-churchgoers found the church's behavior to be disgusting. However, non-churchgoers rated the situation as funnier than churchgoers, due in part to the fact that they valued religious ideas less than churchgoers, resulting in the violation being appraised as benign. In short, whether we find a joke to be funny or offensive depends, in part, on how much we value or care about the moral foundations the joke violates (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

Figure 1

Visual description of benign violation theory.



Note. Humor is represented as a violation that is simultaneously perceived as benign (shown in overlapping circles).

Kruschke and Vollmer (2014) expanded on this by linking benign violations to MFT. After having participants complete a questionnaire measuring their degree of endorsement for each moral foundation, they then had them rate jokes that disparaged one. When participants rated a foundation as very important to them, they found jokes that disparaged it to be less of a benign violation, and thus more offensive and less funny (Kruschke & Vollmer, 2014).

Koszalkowska and Wrobel (2019) classified disparagement humor according to which moral foundations it violated. Jokes that disparage disadvantaged populations (LGBT+, racial minorities, etc.) violate the individualizing foundations. Koszalkowska and Wrobel found that

people rated such jokes as more offensive and less funny to the extent they value the individualizing moral foundations. Similarly, participants rated jokes that disparaged the binding foundations (i.e., by mocking religion or patriotism) as more offensive and less funny to the extent they value the binding moral foundations (Kruschke & Vollmer, 2014).

Buie et al. (2021) expanded on this connection between humor and morality showing that liberals and conservatives differentially perceive humor that violates the individualizing and binding moral foundations. They created three humor conditions using memes and jokes that violated either the individualizing foundations (i.e., immigrant-disparaging), the binding foundations (i.e., religion-disparaging) or none of the moral foundations (i.e., Floridian-disparaging). They found that liberals rated immigrant-disparaging memes/joke as less humorous and more offensive than the religion-disparaging memes/jokes; conservatives rated the religion-disparaging memes/jokes as less humorous and more offensive than the immigrant-disparaging memes/jokes.

Impression Formation: Implicit Personality Theories

Social psychologists have long proposed that people form impressions of others through an interaction of “bottom-up or data driven” processes and “top-down or theory driven” processes (see Fiske & Taylor, 2019 for a review). A person’s behavior represents the “data” of impression formation. We make inferences about a person’s dispositional qualities (e.g., personalities, attitudes, values, etc.) in a bottom-up fashion based on observations of their behavior and the context in which the behavior was performed (e.g., Heider, 1959; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967).

Furthermore, our initial trait inferences can activate an implicit personality theory: a set of general beliefs and assumptions—a theory—about the relations among personality traits and

behaviors (Ashmore, 1981; Schneider, 1973). Thus, once we make a trait inference about a person from their behavior, we might also assume, in a top-down fashion, that the person also possesses several other qualities we associate with the inferred trait. For instance, if you infer from a new co-worker's talkative behavior that they are extraverted, you might assume they are also happy (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Wilt & Revelle, 2009), bold and assertive (Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009) and prefer upbeat music (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). This implicit personality theory of extraverts could then provide a general organizational framework for understanding and interacting with your talkative new co-worker.

Humor and Impression Formation

Research has shown that people make trait inferences about other people based on *how* those people use humor (e.g., Bitterly, 2018; Cann & Matson, 2014; Kuiper, Kirsh & Leite, 2010; Kuiper & Leite, 2010; Olah, 2019; Zeigler-Hill, Besser, & Jett, 2013). Cann and Matson (2014), for instance, found that people form negative impressions of people who use humor to put-down, mock, or ridicule another person. Similarly, Kuiper and Leite (2010) found that people perceive others who use put-down humor as “cold,” and “mean.”

The way people use humor affects not only our perceptions of them, but our perceptions of how they feel about us. Specifically, when people respond to us with put-down humor, we feel rejected or socially excluded. In contrast, when people respond to us with “affiliative,” forms of humor, we feel socially accepted (Kuiper, Kirsh, & Leite, 2010). Kuiper and colleagues asked participants to rate the degree to which they would want to continue interacting with a friend who was depicted as using different types of humor (Kuiper et al., 2010). Their findings evidenced that when people observe others using an affiliative humor style, they experience an increased desire to continue interacting with the observed person, thus driving future social

interaction (Kuiper et al., 2010). Collectively, previous research reveals people's use *humor* behavior as the "data" of impression formation. These impressions carry important social consequence, determining our sense of social belongingness.

Present Research: Hypotheses and Overview

The present research integrates and extends the literature on humor and morality as well as the literature on humor and impression formation. I hypothesize that people use implicit theories of what liberals and conservatives are like to make trait inferences about a person's political identity (liberal or conservative) based on whether that person's humor mocks individualizing or binding moral foundations. Specifically, I propose the following hypothesis:

H₁: Regardless of one's own political identification, people infer that a person who mocks the binding foundations leans liberal and that a person who mocks the individualizing foundations leans conservative.

Furthermore, I propose that liberals and conservatives differentially like a person who makes jokes that mock the binding moral foundations (Hypothesis Two) and the individuating foundations (Hypothesis Three) because of that person's presumed political identification:

H₂: Liberals like someone *more* and conservatives *less* after they mock the binding moral foundations *because* they perceive that person as liberal.

H₃: liberals like a person *less* and conservatives *more* after they mock the individuating moral foundations because they perceive that person as conservative.

To test my hypotheses, participants viewed a Facebook page allegedly belonging to a young man named John Miller. On his timeline, John posted a funny meme, either one that disparaged either (a) immigrants, thus violating the individuating moral foundation, (b) religion (specifically, Jesus), thereby violating the binding moral foundations, or (c) Floridians. The

Floridian-disparaging meme served as a control condition as it did not violate any of the moral foundations. Then, participants indicated how much they anticipated liking John. Based on Hypothesis One, I predicted that both liberal and conservative participants would infer that John leans liberal when he posted the religion-disparaging meme and conservative when he posted the immigrant-disparaging meme. Further, according to Hypothesis Two, I predicted liberal participants would like John more and conservative participants would like him less when he posted the religion-disparaging meme *because* they perceived him as liberal. In contrast, following Hypothesis Three, I predicted conservative participants would like John more and liberal participants would like him less when he posted the immigrant-disparaging meme *because* they perceived him as conservative.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Participants and Design

I recruited participants over the age of 18 from an introductory psychology course taught at Western Carolina University in exchange for course credit. To estimate minimum sample size, I conducted an a priori power analysis using the joint significance test via the `pwr2ppl` package for R (Aberson, 2019). This test was conducted for conditional process model 15 of Hayes's PROCESS for SPSS (Hayes, 2017). The test indicated that 80% power to detect moderated-mediated association would require 165 participants, assuming small-medium associations.

I collected data from 218 students, however 15 submitted incomplete responses. Additionally, one student's response times were greater than three standard deviations above the mean. Thus, my final sample included 202 students at Western Carolina University (136, 67.3% women). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 60 years old ($M = 22.26$, $SD = 7.60$). Participants self-identified as 169 (83.3%) White, 14 (6.9%) Black or African American, 7 Latinx (3.4%), and 3 Asian (2%). Nine participants (4.4%) declined to indicate their racial identity. I randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions the meme manipulation (immigrant-disparaging, religion disparaging, or neutral) serving as a between-subjects variable.

Procedure

I provided participants with the following instructions asking them to participate in a role-play exercise:

In this study, we're interested in how people form impressions of others based different amounts of information. You've been randomly assigned to the condition where you'll be given very little information to form your impression. Imagine: You're browsing

Facebook when you notice you have a new friend request. You decide to look into this person and open their profile.

Next, I presented participants in all conditions with a screenshot of a generic-appearing, racially ambiguous young man named John Miller, who appears to be in his early twenties (see Appendix A). The screenshot was followed by a prompt asking the participant to evaluate a meme on John's profile (see Appendix B).

The profile contained one of the three memes from Buie et al.'s (2021) study. In the *immigrant-disparaging meme* condition, the profile contained a meme depicting Rodney Dangerfield and the caption, "What's the difference between E.T. and an illegal alien?" "E.T. learned English and wanted to go home." In the *religion-disparaging meme* condition, the profile contained a meme depicting Jesus Christ holding a beer and a cigarette with the caption "I got hammered for ur sins, u can too." In the neutral *Floridian-disparaging meme* condition, the profile contained an image of people at a beach in very stormy weather and the caption, "Floridians be like, it's only a category 1 hurricane."

After viewing the profile, participants then read a series of questions to respond to. The first one asked what their impression of the screenshot's political identity was:

"Something we hear a lot these days about political orientation is that it ranges from liberal to conservative or left to right. Where do you think John falls on a continuum of political identity from liberal to conservative?"

Participants then responded to this question using a scale ranging from 1 (*Extremely Liberal*) to 7 (*Extremely Conservative*).

Participants then answered four questions to assess their other impressions of John Miller (“*How much do you think you would like John?*”, “*To what extent does John seem like the kind of guy would want to hang out with?*”, “*To what extent do you think you would get along with John?*”, “*How much do you think you would want to be friends with John outside of Facebook?*”). Participants answered each question using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*). I averaged responses to all four items to form an aggregate measure of liking for John ($\alpha = .93$).

Participants then completed a brief demographic questionnaire, indicating their age, ethnicity, and their political affiliation indicated on a seven-point scale. This response was scored identically to the political appraisal of the stimulus, from 1 (*Extremely Liberal*) to 7 (*Extremely Conservative*). Once the demographic section was complete, I then asked participants to respond to a suspicion check (“*Please write one sentence describing your reactions to this study.*”). 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.

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, of which there were none. As previously mentioned, I excluded fifteen participants from the

analyses due to incomplete responses, and one was omitted due to being two standard deviations above the mean for completion time of the survey.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Below, I first present descriptive statistics for each of the dependent measures as a function of experimental condition. Then, I present tests of my Hypotheses in a series of bootstrapping analyses using Haye's (2017) Process Models for SPSS. The bootstrap method computes bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for 5,000 samples with replacement and determines if an effect is different from zero by providing a 95% confidence interval for the population value for that effect. If zero is not in the 95% confidence interval, the effect is significant at $p < 0.05$. Finally, preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects involving participant gender, thus we collapsed all analyses across gender.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the measures of (a) liking for John, (b) John's presumed political identification (PI), and (c) participants' political identification (PI) as a function of the three meme conditions. These descriptive statistics reveal three noteworthy findings about the participants. First, participants reported a slightly liberal political identification ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.59$). Importantly, participants' political identification did not differ significantly across experimental conditions indicating that liberals and conservatives were distributed roughly evenly across the three conditions, $F(2,200) = 1.84$, $p = .161$. Second, participants' appraisal of John's political identification was significantly correlated with their own reported political identification, $r = .21$, $p = .002$. Overall, participants tended to see John's political identification as similar to their own. Finally, across the experimental conditions, participants' appraisal of John's political identification was significantly and negatively

correlated with their reported liking for John, $r = -.33$, $p < .001$, indicating that participants liked John less insofar as they perceived him to be conservative.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for each dependent measure as a function of the meme manipulation.

Measure	<u>Meme Condition</u>								<u>Correlations</u>		
	<u>Overall</u>		<u>Immigrant</u>		<u>Religion</u>		<u>Floridian</u>		1.	2.	3.
	<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. Liking for John	2.66	0.97	2.14	0.92	2.74	0.95	3.09	0.80	-		
2. John's PI	4.48	1.60	5.90	1.06	3.32	1.56	4.14	0.85	-0.33	-	
3. Participant PI	3.66	1.59	3.61	1.70	3.95	1.56	3.43	1.50	0.21	-0.06	-
	N = 203		n = 69		n = 65		n = 69				

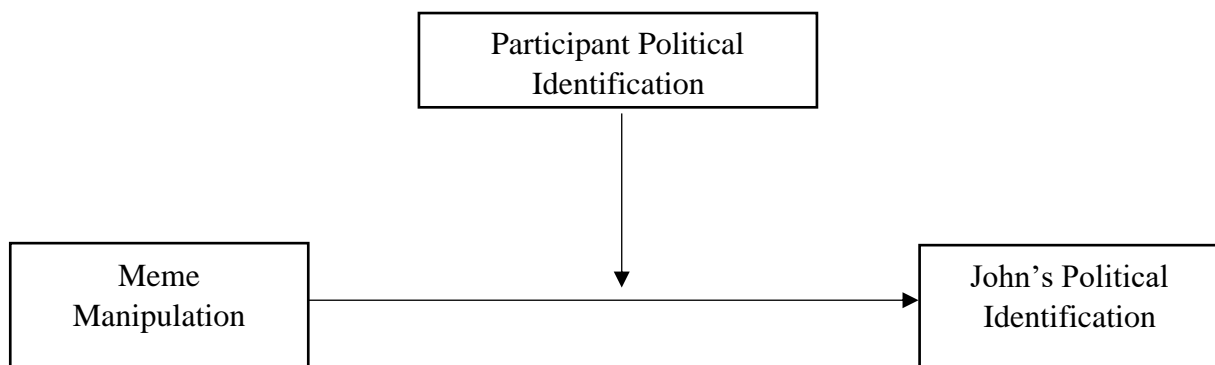
Hypothesis One: Model 1

I expected that participants, regardless of their own political identification, would perceive John as more liberal when he posted the religion-disparaging meme versus the Floridian-disparaging meme. In contrast, they should see him as more conservative in the immigrant-disparaging versus the Floridian-disparaging control condition.

To test Hypothesis One, I subjected perceptions of John’s political identification to two separate bootstrapping analyses using Hayes’ (2017) PROCESS v3.0 bootstrapping macro (model 1) for SPSS with the meme manipulation serving as the predictor variable and participants’ political identification as the moderator variable (see Figure 2). In the first analysis, I contrast-coded the religion-disparaging meme condition as “1” and the Floridian-disparaging meme condition as “-1.” For the second I coded the immigrant-disparaging meme condition as “1” and the Floridian-disparaging meme condition as “-1.”

Figure 2

Moderation model reflecting Hypothesis One.



In the first analysis, the main effect of the meme manipulation was significant, $b = .374$, $SE = .136$, $t(199) = -2.75$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [-.64, -.11]. Importantly, there was not a significant meme condition x participant PI interaction effect, $b = -.151$, $t(199) = -1.71$, $p = .08$, 95% CI [-.33, .02]. Thus, regardless of participants' political identification, they perceived John as more liberal when he posted the religion-disparaging meme ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.56$) than when he posted the Floridan-disparaging meme ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.85$).

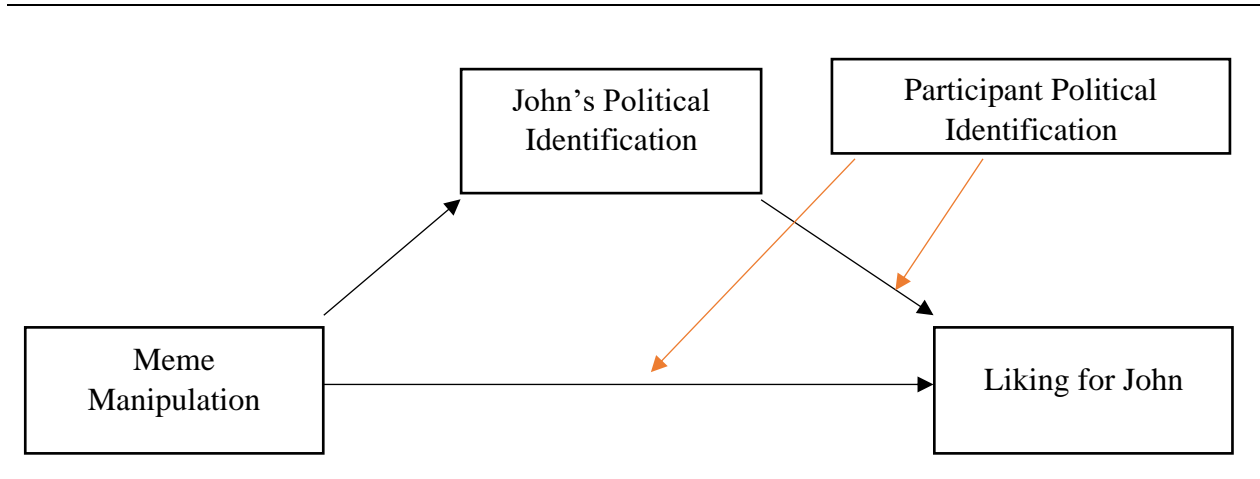
Similarly, in the second analysis the main effect of the meme manipulation was significant, $b = .871$, $SE = .121$, $t(199) = 7.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.63, 1.11], and the interaction effect was not, $b = .091$, $t(199) = -1.19$, $p = .24$, 95% CI [-.24, .06]. Participants, regardless of their political identification, perceived John as more conservative when he posted the immigrant-disparaging meme ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.06$) versus the Floridian-disparaging meme ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.80$). Collectively, these results support Hypothesis One. Liberals and conservatives perceived John as more liberal when he posted a religion-disparaging meme and more conservative when he posted an immigrant-disparaging meme.

Hypotheses Two and Three: Model 15

To test Hypotheses Two and Three, I subjected the measure of liking for John to separate moderated mediation analyses using Hayes' (2017) PROCESS v3.0 bootstrapping macro (model 15) for SPSS. The meme manipulation served as the predictor variable in the model, John's political identification served as the mediator variable and the participants' political identification served as the moderator variable (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Moderated mediation model reflecting Hypotheses Two and Three.



Hypothesis Two. To test Hypotheses Two, I compared the effect of the religion-disparaging meme (coded as “1”) versus to the Floridan-disparaging meme (coded as “-1”). The immigrant-disparaging meme condition was excluded from the analysis. Supporting Hypothesis Two, the index of moderated mediation was significant (-0.057 , $SE = 0.021$, $CI_{95} = [-0.10, -0.19]$) indicating that liberals and conservatives differentially liked John when he posted the religion-disparaging meme versus the Floridan-disparaging meme *because* of his political identification.

I further analyzed this significant moderated mediation effect with tests of indirect effects for liberal participants and conservative participants (those 1 SD below and above the mean score on the political identification measure, respectively). As predicted, liberals perceived John as more liberal and thus liked him more when he posted the religion-disparaging meme than when he posted the Floridan-disparaging meme, $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.06$, $CI_{95} = [0.065, 0.303]$. In contrast, for conservatives, perceptions of John’s political identification did *not* significantly

mediate the effect of the meme manipulation on liking for John, $b = -0.002$, $SE = 0.02$, $CI_{95} = [-0.052, 0.041]$. Interestingly, the *direct* effect of the meme manipulation on liking for John, for conservatives, was however significant, $b = -0.341$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -3.40$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95} = [-0.539, -0.143]$ indicating that conservatives liked John less when he posted the religion-disparaging meme compared to the Floridian-disparaging meme, however, not *because* they perceived him as liberal.

Hypothesis Three. To test Hypotheses Three, I compared the effect of the immigrant-disparaging meme (coded as “1”) versus to the Floridian-disparaging meme (coded as “-1”). The religion-disparaging meme condition was excluded from the analysis. Supporting Hypothesis Three, the index of moderated mediation was significant (0.135 , $SE = 0.024$, $CI_{95} = [0.090, 0.186]$) indicating that liberals and conservatives differentially liked John when he posted the immigrant-disparaging meme versus the Floridian-disparaging meme *because* of his political identification.

I further analyzed this significant moderated mediation effect with tests of indirect effects for liberal participants and conservative participants (those 1 SD below and above the mean score on the political identification measure, respectively). As predicted, liberals perceived John as more conservative and thus liked him less when he posted the immigrant-disparaging meme than when he posted the Floridian-disparaging meme, $b = -0.33$, $SE = 0.05$, $CI_{95} = [-0.438, -0.225]$. Conservatives too perceived John as more conservative but liked him more as a result, when he posted the immigrant-disparaging meme compared to the Floridian-disparaging meme, $b = 0.106$, $SE = 0.05$, $CI_{95} = [0.014, 0.202]$.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The present research sought to test three hypotheses, the first of which being that regardless of one's own political identification, people will infer that a person who mocks the binding moral foundations leans liberal and that a person who mocks the individualizing foundations leans conservative. I found significant evidence to support this hypothesis, indicating that the participants of this study used humor as a type of data when forming impressions of others. Specifically, the participants were able to ascribe a political identity to an otherwise complete stranger based entirely on the moral foundations he chose to mock with his humor. Participants identified John as a conservative when he used humor that mocked the individualizing foundations and identified him as a liberal when he used humor that mocked the binding foundations. Worth noting is that participants did this independently of their own political leaning, and without an explicit declaration of the moral preferences of the stranger.

I also hypothesized that liberals and conservatives differentially like a person who makes jokes that mock the binding moral foundations (Hypothesis Two) and the individuating foundations (Hypothesis Three) because of that person's presumed political identification. Supporting Hypothesis Two, I found that liberals liked John more and conservatives less when he posted a religion-disparaging meme, which mocked the binding moral foundations, compared to the morally neutral Floridian-disparaging meme. Further, mediation analyses revealed that liberals liked John more in the religion-disparaging meme condition *because* they thought he was liberal. Conservatives, in contrast, liked John less when he posted the religion-disparaging meme versus the Floridian-disparaging meme. Although conservatives perceived John as more liberal in the religion-disparaging meme condition, mediation analyses suggest that this perception of

John was not the reason they liked him less when he posted the religion-disparaging meme. It appears that the irreverent mockery (violation of the sanctity foundation), was itself, offensiveness enough to affect liking for John, independent of their perceptions of him as liberal.

The results also supported Hypothesis Three. I found that liberals liked John less and conservatives more when he posted an immigrant-disparaging meme, which mocked the individualizing moral foundations, compared to the morally neutral Floridian-disparaging meme. Similarly, mediation analyses revealed that liberals liked John less in the immigrant-disparaging meme condition *because* they thought he was conservative. Generally speaking, the more conservative John appeared to be, the less liked he was for the sample as a whole. This is likely reflective of the leftward skew observed in the data. Overall, conservative participants did not alter their ratings of liking John based on the level of conservatism they ascribed to him. I also noted that as participants described themselves as more conservative, they tended to dislike John across all conditions.

Implications and Extensions

These findings reinforce the existing literature on MFT. As initially observed by Haidt and colleagues, conservatives view the individualizing foundations as *comparatively* less important than liberals but tend to equally appreciate all five moral foundations (Haidt et al., 2009). Similarly, the conservative participants in this study were prone to dislike John any time he violated a moral foundation. Per BVT, it is likely that the meme conditions presented to the participants may have been perceived as too offensive to be funny by the conservative participants (Kruschke & Vollmer, 2014). On the other end of the political spectrum, the liberal participants significantly based their liking of John on the type of humor he was using. In line

with Haidt's research, liberal participants valued the individualizing foundations more than the binding foundations.

These findings also extend the literature on impression formation. Using minimal data about John, participants were able to make trait inferences about him and label him in a manner that enabled them to make moral judgments of him. These moral judgments then guided the level of social desirability John appeared to possess. Even when John was observed using aggressive, mocking humor, liberal participants still indicated that they would socially engage with him and appraised him as likeable, so long as they identified him as having a common political affiliation. This is in contrast to previous research on humor styles, which typically described affiliative humor as the ideal style for building social connectivity (Kuiper et al., 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although my findings make important contributions, they do have limitations that should be addressed by future research. Following the design used by Buie and colleagues (in press), the memes used in this study violated the individualizing and binding foundations upon which liberals and conservatives have been shown to build their personal moralities according to MFT (Graham et al., 2009). I did not ask participants to identify the degree to which the memes or jokes presented violated the individualizing or binding foundations per their perception. Thus, I did not examine whether the severity of perceived violation of individualizing versus binding foundations predict one's response to a joke. Rather, the present research demonstrated that jokes violating either individualizing or binding foundations are differentially judged as "wrong," by liberals and conservatives. Furthermore, the level of "wrong," or offensiveness of the memes may have been too elevated, given the observed results for the conservative participants. A replication using milder disparaging memes may resolve this concern.

My research took place using a simulated social media encounter as the independent variable. Therefore, the generalizability of this data is limited to social media; future research could address people's reactions to similar mocking humor in real social interactions and examine if the ratings of John replicate. While attention was given to control as many variables as possible, it is possible that John's likeability ratings could have been influenced positively by confounding factors such as attractiveness (Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015). The likeability ratings could have also been affected negatively by the nature of the social media roleplay. In the roleplay, participants were informed that they received a friend request from John with no prior connection to him, which may have been alienating and off-putting for some participants.

Conclusion

This research has successfully integrated and extended the literature on humor and morality as well as the literature on humor and impression formation. My research has identified that people are able to make top-down inferences about a stranger's political orientation based on what type of moral foundation they are observed mocking through humor, and that people use that trait inference to form an overall evaluative impression of the person. Given the abundance of political humor on the internet and the importance of impression formation for constructing social groups, my research addresses a topic of critical social relevance and theoretical importance for social psychology.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Profile header for the target stranger.

Figure A1

Screenshot of the fabricated Facebook profile for the target stranger.



APPENDIX B: Memes

Figure B1

Meme for the individualizing-disparaging condition.



Figure B2

Meme for the binding-disparaging condition.



Figure B3

Meme for the neutral condition.



APPENDIX C: Survey items

Rating Scales

How much do you think you would like John?

To what extent does John seem like the kind of guy you'd want to hang out with?

To what extent do you think you would get along with John?

How much do you think you would want to be friends with John outside of Facebook?

Demographics

Please indicate your gender identity.

What is your age?

What is your ethnicity?

Please indicate your political identity on a continuum from liberal to conservative.