

# THE EFFECT OF SEXIST HUMOR ON WOMEN'S SOCIAL INFLUENCE

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.

By

Kyle Richardson

Director: Dr. Thomas Ford  
Associate Professor of Psychology  
Psychology Department

Committee Members: Dr. Winford A. Gordon, Psychology  
Dr. Erin Myers, Psychology

April 2015

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## ABSTRACT

### THE EFFECT OF SEXIST HUMOR ON WOMEN'S SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Kyle Richardson, B.S.

Western Carolina University (April 2015)

Director: Dr. Thomas E. Ford

For people high in sexism, humor that disparages women diminishes women and trivializes discrimination against them (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008). The present study builds on the existing findings by examining how sexist humor affects the degree to which women can exert social influence in a virtual Asch line-judgment paradigm. Latane (1981) demonstrated that a person's status affects the degree to which he or she can influence others; higher status people can exert greater social influence. The participants' level of conformity was measured by the number of times they conformed to incorrect line-judgments given by female confederates following exposure to either sexist or neutral humor. I hypothesized that by trivializing and diminishing women, sexist humor has status-lowering effects and weakens women's ability to exert social influence, resulting in less conformity from men high in hostile sexism. My hypothesis was not supported. The results revealed no significant main or interaction effects of hostile sexism, type of humor, or sex of the confederate on conformity.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Discrimination is made up of *tiny acts* that position women as less than human. It is not about men with cigars meeting to decide ‘Hmmm, we hate women, how can we keep them down today?’”

Anonymous (2011)

Recent events have highlighted the prevalence and controversy of sexist humor in public comedy routines. For instance, comedian Seth MacFarlane, host of the 2013 Academy Awards, received scathing reviews for his sexist comedy bits that included rape jokes punctuated by a song-and-dance number called, "We Saw Your Boobs" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTKEDXNQAcc>). Similarly, in 2013, comedian Daniel Tosh was criticized and subsequently apologized for directing a rape joke at a female audience member at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles. Also in 2013, Filipino comedian, Vice Ganda, apologized for making weight jokes and rape jokes about a local female newscaster to a large arena audience.

In a recent interview with CNN, Journalist Lindy West responded to the use of sexist humor—humor that denigrates women—by saying, “It’s not just a joke. It does not just exist on your twitter and go away. Things have real life consequences.” Empirical research validates Lindy West’s and the general public’s suspicion that sexist jokes can be more than “just a joke.” By making light of rape, discrimination of women, and sexual objectification of women, sexist humor functions as one of those “tiny acts” that diminishes women and thus has important social consequences. In fact, sexist men (those who have some antagonism against women) exposed to

sexist jokes or comedy skits versus other stimuli (e.g., sexist statements, neutral jokes, neutral comedy skits) reported greater: (a) acceptance of rape myths (Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998), (b) tolerance of sexist events (Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001), (c) rape proclivity (Romero-Sanchez, Durán, Carretero-Dios, Megías, & Moya, 2010; Thomae & Viki, 2013), (d) willingness to discriminate against women (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008), and (e) greater acceptance of societal sexism (Ford, Woodzicka, Triplett, & Kochersberger, 2013).

The present study builds on the existing findings by examining how sexist humor affects the degree to which women can exert social influence. Latane (1981) demonstrated that a person's status affects the degree to which he or she can influence others; higher status people can exert greater social influence. I hypothesize that by trivializing and diminishing women, sexist humor reduces their status and thus their ability to exert social influence.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The Effect of Disparagement Humor**

**Stereotypes and prejudice.** Prejudice involves an evaluative prejudgment, usually negative, of a person or group of people based on their membership in a certain social category (Allport, 1954; Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002). Stereotypes are mental associations between a social category and various attributes that represent one's beliefs about members of that group (Devine, 1989). One way that a person may express his or her prejudice is through the use of disparagement humor.

Disparagement humor is humor that denigrates and belittles members of certain social groups (Janes & Olson, 2000; Zillmann, 1983). Humor theorists have traditionally argued that exposure to disparagement humor creates and reinforces negative stereotypes and prejudice toward the targeted group (e.g., Berger, 1993; Freud, 1905/1960; La Fave & Mannell, 1976; Meyer, 2001; Ruscher, 2001; Stephenson, 1951; Zenner, 1970). In fact, Freud (1905/1960) believed that humor was a tool for one to express his or her aggressive feelings in socially acceptable ways. Similarly, Stephenson (1951, p. 570) described the function of humor to "express common group sentiments, develop and perpetuate stereotypes...and express collective, *sub rosa* approbation of action not explicitly approved." Accordingly, empirical research on the detrimental consequences of exposure to disparagement humor focused initially on how it affects stereotypes and attitudes toward disparaged targets. Empirical studies revealed complex and surprising findings.

Weston and Thomsen (1993), for instance, found that participants made more stereotypical evaluations of men and women after watching sexist comedy skits than after

watching neutral comedy skits. In a similar vein, Ford (1997) found that when White participants were exposed to negative stereotypical portrayals of African-Americans, they were more likely to make negative evaluations of an African-American person. Ford (1997) subjected participants to five comedy skits from a popular television show that either contained negative stereotypical portrayals of African-Americans or contained no stereotypical content. After watching the comedy skits, participants read a vignette describing a college student who was accused of assaulting another student. The name “Tyrone” was given to the defendant in one condition to make him appear African-American while the name “Todd” was used in the other condition to elicit the image of a White defendant. Participants rated the African-American defendant significantly guiltier after watching comedy skits that employed negative stereotypes of African-Americans (i.e., poor, uneducated, and prone to violence) than after watching neutral comedy skits. Together, the studies by Weston and Thomsen (1993) and Ford (1997) suggest that negative group stereotypes are activated by viewing stereotypical comedy skits, and those stereotypes can affect social perceptions.

The designs of these studies, however, did not allow one to make conclusions about the unique effects of humor beyond any other form of negative disparagement. In fact, the findings on the effect of disparagement humor were interpreted as negative priming effects. Olson, Maio, and Hobden (1999) designed three experiments to address these limitations and further examine whether disparagement humor changes stereotypes and/or increases stereotype accessibility.

In Experiment 1, female subjects read either disparaging or nondisparaging cartoons based on stereotypes of men. Of the 15 cartoons in the “disparaging” condition, five employed the “domestic laziness” and “domestic incompetence” stereotypes while two other cartoons were disparaging toward men without using stereotypes. The other eight were nondisparaging

cartoons. In the nondisparaging condition, all 15 cartoons used nondisparaging humor involving domestic topics like dishwashing and care-taking.

After reading the cartoons, participants read a paragraph describing ambiguous behaviors conducted by a male character “Larry”. The paragraph described behaviors that were potentially interpretable as lazy and even hostile in some situations. Participants evaluated Larry’s behavior on 16 trait dimensions. Then, participants were asked to confirm or deny the accuracy of personality traits directed at men and women. A computer program measured their response latency; shorter response latency meant that the stereotypes were more accessible to the participant. Finally, participants answered how strongly they felt those traits described men and women.

Olson et al. (1999) found no significant effects of disparagement humor on participants’ ratings of Larry’s behaviors. Specifically, participants did not interpret his behaviors as any more stereotypical than participants who read nondisparaging cartoons. Also, Olson et al. (1999) found that disparaging cartoons did not make male stereotypes more accessible to female subjects, nor did they view male stereotypes more extremely than subjects in the nondisparaging condition.

The second experiment expanded upon Experiment 1 and added new dimensions to be measured. There were four conditions instead of two, and the original disparaging and nondisparaging conditions were altered to show either only disparaging cartoons or nondisparaging cartoons instead of a mix. In the two new conditions, participants received either no cartoons, or they read plain, disparaging statements toward men.

Immediately afterwards, participants again rated the ambiguous behavior of the men they read about. Four sentences referenced male stereotypes from the cartoons, four mentioned male

stereotypes not in the cartoons, and four sentences were fillers. Each rating was given through a computer program that recorded their responses and response latencies. Then, attitude extremity and accessibility was measured by participants' answers on semantic differential scales assessing how "unfavorable/favorable", "negative/positive", etc. they felt towards the targeted group. Again, shorter response latencies meant greater stereotype accessibility.

Olson et al. (1999) found no evidence that exposure to disparaging cartoons elicited more stereotypical responses from female participants. They also concluded that male stereotypes were no more severe or accessible to the subject after reading disparaging cartoons. The only significant finding was that female participants who read disparaging cartoons expressed less favorable attitudes toward men. Despite a stronger manipulation of disparagement humor, Experiment 2 only yielded one significant interaction effect.

In Experiment 3, Olson et al. (1999) targeted lawyers in disparaging cartoons rather than men. They posited that occupational stereotypes may produce better results than gender stereotypes due to less familiarity with the profession. The procedure, measures, and analyses followed the previous experiment. Unlike Experiment 2, however, participants did not express more negative attitudes toward the targeted group (lawyers) following disparagement humor. There were also no significant differences in stereotype or attitude accessibility.

In summary, these experiments did not support the idea that exposure to disparagement humor can affect one's stereotypes and attitudes toward a social group. However, Olson et al. (1999) only targeted groups who have traditionally held high social status (men and lawyers). They discussed the idea that targeting disadvantaged groups, such as women, may yield a stronger effect of disparagement humor. Another limitation of Olson et al.'s (1999) experiments

is that each participant's level of prejudice was not measured. It could be that those high in prejudice are more susceptible to the effects disparagement humor may have on a person.

Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion (2001) designed an experiment to address these limitations and more fully investigate the effect disparagement humor may have on one's stereotypes and attitudes toward a social group. Specifically, they found that even men high in "hostile sexism" – antagonism against women (Glick & Fiske, 1996) – did not report more negative stereotypes of women following exposure to sexist humor versus neutral humor or non-humorous sexist statements. Together, Olsen et al. (1999) and Ford et al. (2001) provide no evidence that exposure to disparagement humor creates or reinforces negative stereotypes and prejudice toward the targeted group

### **Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: Prejudiced Norm Theory**

Although exposure to disparagement humor does not appear to affect internal sources of self-regulation (i.e., attitudes and stereotypes), Ford and Ferguson (2004) proposed that disparagement humor does, indeed, have negative social consequences. Ford and Ferguson (2004) provided a "prejudiced norm theory" which hypothesizes that, for people high in prejudice, disparagement humor creates a norm tolerant of discrimination and allows one to release his/her prejudice more freely.

The theory is comprised of four propositions that explain how humor is a unique medium through which a group can be denigrated without the fear of reprisal. First, it proposes that humor triggers a "conversational rule of levity" (Ford & Ferguson, 2004) by which people adopt a non-critical "humor" mindset to interpret a given message rather than the usual serious, literal mindset. Mulkay (1988) suggested that when in the humor mindset, people abandon the rules of logic and expectations of common sense. Consequently, people do not process a joke as they

would serious communication. Zillmann and Cantor (1976/1996), for instance, asserted that the “club over the head” is funny when the protagonists are clowns in cartoons but not when they are police officers responding to a riot (p. 105). Likewise, Berlyne (1972) stated that,

Humor is accompanied by discriminative cues, which indicate that what is happening, or it going to happen, should be taken as a joke. The ways in which we might react to the same events in the absence of these cues become inappropriate and must be withheld (p. 56).

Disparagement of a social group through humor, then, communicates an implicit message that in this context the underlying expression of prejudice should be interpreted in a playful, non-serious manner (Gollob & Levine, 1967; Mutuma, La Fave, Mannell, & Guilmette, 1977). In contrast, non-humorous disparagement does not activate a playful humor mindset. Consequently, people will react to serious expressions of prejudice in a usual, critical manner. Bill and Naus (1992) found that men viewed incidents of sex discrimination as harmless and acceptable when they were considered to be humorous.

Second, if a person accepts the disparagement humor and switches to a non-critical, humor mindset to interpret it, he or she assents to a social norm implied by the humor that it is acceptable in this particular context to make light of discrimination (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Ford, Woodzicka, Triplett, Kochersberger, & Holden, 2014). Emerson (1969), for instance, suggested that using jokes to communicate socially unacceptable sentiments is a way for those involved to suspend the typical, serious norms attached to such attitudes. However, the recipient may think it inappropriate to make light of the expression of prejudice (Apte, 1987; Barker, 1994; Mannell, 1977; Sev'er & Ungar, 1997), and therefore reject the normative standard implied by the humor (Attardo, 1993; Francis, 1988). If the recipient does reject the

disparagement humor and refuses a non-critical humor mindset, he or she should be less likely to perceive a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). In keeping with this hypothesis, Ford (2000, Exp. 2) found that only when jokes are read in a non-critical mindset does the tolerance of sexism increase. Before participants read a vignette containing either humorous or non-humorous sexist or neutral content, some were instructed to focus on the underlying messages of the jokes. Ford (2000, Exp. 2) found that the instructions caused participants (even those high in hostile sexism) to reject the levity of the sexist jokes and maintain intolerant responses to the sexist vignettes. It was concluded that an increased tolerance of sexism only occurs when humor is allowed to create a non-critical atmosphere.

The third proposition of Prejudice Norm Theory maintains that one will interpret disparagement humor in a non-critical mindset to the extent that he or she holds prejudice toward the disparaged group. Highly prejudiced people have less internalized non-prejudice convictions and are more externally motivated (e.g., through social norms) to respond in a non-prejudice manner (e.g., Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002; Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Monteith, Devine, & Zuwerink, 1993; Plant & Devine, 1998). Prejudiced Norm Theory predicts that weakly internalized non-prejudice convictions make one less likely to reject disparagement humor and therefore more likely to adopt a non-critical mindset when evaluating discrimination. In support of this proposition, Greenwood and Isbell (2002) revealed that sexist participants found sexist jokes more amusing and less offensive than non-sexist participants. Similarly, Ford (2000, Exp. 3) found that when participants were not instructed to read sexist vignettes in a critical mindset, highly prejudiced participants viewed sexist humor as no more offensive than neutral humor, and were less offended by sexist jokes than non-sexist participants.

Lastly, Prejudice Norm Theory posits that a prejudiced individual is more likely to perceive and assent to a new prejudiced norm implied by sexist humor in the immediate context, and use that norm as a basis for how they respond toward the targeted group (Ford et al., 2008; Ford et al., 2001; Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Thomae & Viki, 2013). Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) provided early evidence that people perceive disparagement humor differently depending on their level of prejudice. They discovered that non-prejudiced participants interpreted the bigoted humor of *All in the Family's* Archie Bunker as lampooning Archie while prejudiced participants interpreted the humor as lampooning the target of Archie's disparagement humor.

Recent research has more directly studied the connection between prejudice and the interpretation and consequences of disparagement humor. Ford and Ferguson (2004), for instance, demonstrated that people interpreted sexist humor in a non-critical humor mindset to the extent that they held sexist attitudes toward women. In a study by Thomae and Vicki (2013), the negative effect of sexist humor was limited to men high in hostile sexism. They showed that only men high in hostile sexism reported greater rape proclivity upon exposure to sexist versus neutral humor (Exp. 2). Also, Ford et al. (2008) found that men higher in hostile sexism discriminated against a women's organization upon exposure to sexist but not neutral humor. Specifically, hostile sexist men allocated greater budget cuts to a woman's student organization upon exposure to sexist versus neutral comedy skits. Furthermore, this effect was mediated by a perceived local norm of tolerance of discrimination against women. Upon exposure to sexist humor, hostile sexist participants used the emergent "prejudiced norm" in the immediate context to guide their own discriminatory behavior.

**Summary statement.** While disparagement humor does not appear to create prejudice against the targeted group, it does have negative social consequences. By making light of prejudice, disparagement humor creates an environment of unspoken approval or tolerance of discrimination against a targeted group. Highly prejudiced people who are exposed to disparagement humor are more likely to accept the denigrating humor, perceive a norm that is tolerant of prejudice, and use that norm to guide their own responses toward the targeted group.

### **Social Influence and Conformity**

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) defined two types of social influence that a group exerts upon an individual: informational influence and normative influence. A group has informational influence when an individual is unsure of how to respond in a given situation and relies on the group for information or guidance. Not surprisingly, a group's informational influence is strongest in novel settings in which the appropriate or "right" response is highly ambiguous or unclear, and when the individual perceives the group as credible (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2007). Informational influence induces private acceptance conformity—a change in an individual's public behavior *and* privately held personal beliefs in accordance with a group norm. The individual truly believes that the group norm provides the best response in an uncertain situation.

Sherif (1935) took advantage of the auto-kinetic effect (an optical illusion where a steady beam of light shown on a wall of a dark room appears to move) in his seminal study to demonstrate how informational influence and private acceptance conformity can occur. It is noteworthy that judgments of how far the spot of light moves are highly ambiguous because there is no reference point from which to judge the distance. Sherif conducted the experiment in three phases. First, three individuals were placed in separate dark rooms and were asked to judge

how far a beam of light appeared to move on a series of trials. Participants developed their own standards of how far the light typically moved. In phase two, the three participants were brought into the same room and were asked to make the judgments as part of a group. After a few trials, the individuals converged on a group norm they used to estimate how far the light moved. In phase three, the group was separated again and the individuals were asked to give their judgments independently. The individuals' judgments still conformed to the group norm in private, demonstrating private acceptance conformity. The individuals adopted the group norm as their own.

Normative influence is defined as “an influence to conform with the positive expectations of another” (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In other words, people conform to fit in, be approved, and not be an outcast. The strength of a group's normative influence is not derived from the ambiguity of a novel setting. Rather, a group's normative influence is strongest when an individual desires approval from the group (Aronson et al., 2007). Normative influence induces public compliance conformity—a change in an individual's public behavior in accordance with a group, but not a change in privately held personal beliefs. The individual merely acts in accordance with a group norm to avoid social rejection (Janes & Olson, 2000).

The most famous experiments investigating normative influence and public compliance conformity were conducted by Solomon Asch (1951; 1956). In one variation of his experiment, the participant arrived at his lab and sat among seven confederates. The experimenter explained to them that they would be completing a test of visual perception, and displayed a picture of a “target” line. Then, he presented three comparison lines and asked the participants to estimate which comparison line was the same length as the target line. For the first couple trials, the participant and confederates correctly chose the line that matched the target. However, on the

third trial, all confederates unanimously gave the wrong answer prior to the participant's judgment. The group was no longer in agreement with the participant, who was feeling marked distress about opposing the group's influence. Although participants believed their own judgments were correct, they conformed to the group's incorrect answer 33% of the time. One participant even stated in a post-experiment interview, "I felt I was definitely right...[but] they might think I was peculiar" (Asch, 1956). From the participant's responses, it was clear that normative influence could have significant effects on one's behavior. Even if a person does not agree with a group's behavior, he or she may still be publicly compliant in order to maintain the group's approval.

**Social impact theory.** Latane (1981) developed the social impact theory (SIT) to specify the principles that moderate a group's ability to exert normative influence and induce public compliance conformity. The three principles discussed in his theory are immediacy, number, and strength. Immediacy is defined by how close in space and time the group is to the target. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) demonstrated that conformity to a group norm dropped when the experimenters added partitions to create space between participants and confederates. The second component, number, refers to the size of the influencing group. Asch's (1951) study on conformity showed that the number of group members necessary to exert normative influence on an individual is three. Having fewer than three people in the group caused public compliance conformity to dwindle, and adding more than three members did not increase conformity.

Latane (1981) defined strength as "the salience, power, importance, or intensity of a given source to the target – usually this would be determined by such things as the source's status, age, socioeconomic status, and prior relationship with, or future power over, the target." The more strength a group has, the more normative influence it can exert. For instance, Latane

and Harkins (1976) manipulated the strength of a group by varying the age of its members. They found that audiences in their late thirties exerted more normative influence than audiences in their teens, and therefore created more tension in participants who visualized giving a speech to one of the two age groups.

Relevant for my research, an important implication of Latane's (1981) theory is that a group's strength to exert normative influence can be weakened when the group is demeaned or trivialized. Sexist humor demeans women as a group and therefore should reduce their strength to exert normative influence in the immediate context. Furthermore, men high in hostile sexism are most likely to accept the diminishment of women implied by sexist humor. It follows that men higher in hostile sexism are more likely to perceive women as less able to exert normative influence following exposure to sexist humor. In an Asch line-judgment task using female confederates, then, exposure to sexist humor reduces women's ability to induce public compliance conformity among hostile sexist men.

### **The Proposed Research**

The present research tested the hypothesis that men higher in hostile sexism would conform less to a group of women after exposure to sexist versus neutral humor. This effect should be attenuated for a group of men. Men should not differentially conform to a group of men after exposure to either sexist or neutral humor as a function of hostile sexism. I tested this hypothesis by asking male participants to complete two separate studies. In the first, they watched either sexist or neutral comedy skits. In the second study, I conducted a conceptual replication of Asch's (1951) line-judgment study within a virtual world using an application known as Second Life (Rayburn-Reeves, Wu, Wilson, Kraemer, & Kraemer (2013). Specifically, participants chose an avatar to represent themselves, and to interact with three

alleged female participants, each represented by a different female avatar. The participants completed ten trials of the Asch line-judgment task. Using their avatars, the alleged female participants unanimously gave the wrong answer on four trials. I measured the number of critical trials on which participants conformed to the group by giving the same wrong answer. I predicted that there would be a negative relationship between participants' level of hostile sexism and their percentage of conforming judgments in the sexist humor condition, but not the neutral humor condition, when the confederates were female. I did not expect to find any relationship between hostile sexism and conformity in either the sexist or neutral humor conditions when the virtual confederates were males.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

### **Participants and Design**

Eighty-one male students over 18 from Western Carolina University were recruited using the WCU participant pool. Each participant received course credit for his participation. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 30 with a median of 19 and a mean of 19.19 (SD = 1.94). There were 66 Whites, eight African Americans, four Hispanics, and two people of "other" descent. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (type of humor: sexist, neutral) x 2 (sex of confederates: male, female) factorial design. To estimate minimum sample size, I conducted power analyses using G\*Power 3 software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). I assumed an  $\alpha$  of .05, power of .80 and a medium effect size (Cohen's  $f^2 = .15$ ). The power analysis suggested that I needed a minimum of 77 participants distributed across four conditions.

### **Confederate Participants**

Participants were told that they would be working with three other students from Western Carolina University, each located in different rooms. The alleged "three other students" were actually virtual avatars controlled by the experimenter. The experimenter used the confederate avatars to provide line-judgment responses for each trial. The confederate avatars represented female participants in the female confederate conditions, and male participants in the male confederate conditions.

### **Materials and Measures**

**Hostile sexism.** Each participant's level of hostile sexism was measured through Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI). See Appendix A for a complete copy of

the ASI. The questionnaire was administered as a “Social Attitudes Survey” to supposedly assess attitudes about certain social issues. The ASI is composed of 22 statements to which participants indicate their agreement on a 6-point scale (ranging from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Eleven of the statements measure hostile sexism – antagonism toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). One such statement reads, “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.”

**Humor manipulation.** Participants were asked to rate the funniness of a set of videos involving either sexist or neutral (non-sexist) humor, depending on the condition they are assigned to. In each condition, the comedy videos were comprised of four separate comedy clips, and the total time of each video is approximately 4:20. Participants rated each clip on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all funny*) to 7 (*very funny*).

In the neutral humor condition there were no disparaging content in the video. The neutral comedy video featured an E\*Trade baby commercial, a home video of a baby laughing and making funny faces at sounds made by its mother, a humorous *Snickers* commercial featuring Betty White participating (poorly) in a game of back-yard football, and lastly, a skit in which a recently hired male supervisor introduces himself to his employees. He tells them of his phobia of spoons and asks the employees to refrain from using spoons or even saying the word, spoon, in his presence. Suddenly, an unknowing employee walks into the room raising a spoon from his coffee cup. A yell is heard, and when the camera pans back to the new boss, there is only an open window. His spoon phobia had caused him to jump out the window and he fell to his death. See Appendix B for a link to the neutral comedy videos.

In the sexist humor condition, the first comedy segment consisted of the non-disparaging "spoon phobia" skit described above (included to reduce suspicion of the purpose of the study);

the remaining three clips portrayed women as inferior to men and as sex objects that are judged on shallow criteria like their physical appearance. One of the sexist comedy skits featured comedian Daniel Tosh stating “that women can do anything that men can do except” and then reciting a long list of things such as “math,” “making money,” “being tall” and “being funny...on purpose.” The second sexist skit humorously portrayed women in “wife school” where they learn how to “keep quiet,” “stop spending (his) money” and “put their husbands’ needs first.” In the skit, the women are transformed from “normal wives” who were devaluated by their husbands into very thin, sexually provocative young women desired by their husbands. There are also humorous testimonials from the husbands and wives explaining how great “wife school” was for their marriage. Finally, the last sexist comedy skit featured a man and a woman conversing at a party. The man obviously pays little attention to the woman who is describing her job, and finally interrupts by saying, “I’m not at all interested in what you have to say, but you’re a very attractive young lady and it’s nice to have you here for decorative purposes...”. The man continues his rant by stating, “You’re not very important so I cannot be bothered to talk to you, unless of course your father or husband is important, in which case I would be prepared to patronize you for a few minutes for the sake of your important connections.” When the woman responds that she is not married and her father is unemployed, the man quips, “Well, there you are then. You are a very attractive waste of time! Oh, unless of course you want to sleep with me.” See Appendix B for a link to the sexist comedy videos.

The comedy videos from both conditions were pre-tested by Ford et al. (2014) on the following dimensions: (a) funniness, (b) the degree to which it disparaged (made fun of) women, (c) the degree to which it depicted women as sex objects, and (d) the degree to which it depicted sexist stereotypes. Participants provided their answers on scales ranging from 1 (*not at*

*all*) to 7 (*extremely*). The sexist clips were rated as more sexist, than the neutral clips, and the four neutral clips were rated as funnier than the three sexist clips (Ford et al., 2014).

**Asch line-judgment task in a virtual environment.** The Asch line-judgment was disguised as a test of visual perception. I utilized a virtual world application known as Second Life to create virtual environments and avatars that represented the participants' physical presence.

A virtual room was created that resembled Asch's (1951) conformity study. There were four chairs in the center of a room with a large white screen in front of it where the line judgments were be presented (see Figure 1). Directly below the screen, there were three gray blocks engraved with the letters "A," "B," and "C" (see Figure 2). The letters corresponded to three comparison lines that participants compared to a target line. Participants and confederates specified which of the three comparison lines matched the length of the target line by walking their avatar to the appropriate block. They completed two practice trials with the confederates to practice moving their avatar with the keyboard arrow keys. After the practice trials there were six "control" trials on which each confederate gave the correct answer, and four "critical" trials on which each confederate gave the same wrong answer. The confederates always provided their answer before the participant. Conformity was operationally defined by the number of times participants conformed to the confederates' incorrect responses on the critical trials.



Figure 1. The seating arrangement for avatars in the virtual lab.



Figure 2. The virtual view of an Asch line-judgment trial.

**Support for virtual environment use.** The use of virtual environments in scientific research has been increasingly promoted and examined during recent decades (e.g., Biocca & Levy, 2013). Blascovich, Loomis, Beall, Swinth, Hoyt, and Bailenson (2002) even argued that social psychologists have been creating virtual environments for over 50 years by developing props, using confederates, and creating illusions. In the current electronic age, social scientists have begun using computers and the internet as new means to create virtual environments. Numerous virtual, online environments (e.g., Second Life, Cyberball) have been shown to reliably produce social psychological phenomena such as conformity, ostracism, social exclusion, and rejection, validating the use of virtual environments in psychological research (Biocca & Levy, 2013).

### **Procedure**

My experiment closely followed the procedures of Rayburn-Reeves et al. (2013). At the start of the experiment, the participant met the experimenter in a room on WCU's campus. First, under the guise of a separate, unrelated experiment, each participant completed Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory to measure their level of hostile sexism. Second, the participant was asked rate the funniness of a few videos for a future pilot study. The videos were viewed on a lab computer and involved either sexist comedy skits or neutral comedy skits. Next, the second part of the study was described as a visual perception test. The experimenter guided the participant to log into Second Life and join a virtual room. The participant selected an avatar that closely resembled their own personal appearance. Then, in the female confederate condition, they met three female avatars controlled by the experimenter who the participant was told were real students from Western Carolina University. In the male confederate condition, participants met three male avatars. In the virtual room, the participant used the keyboard arrow

keys to direct his avatar to sit in a virtual chair beside the three confederates. Directly in front of the avatars there was a virtual display screen where the line judgments were shown. Following Rayburn-Reeves et al. (2013), the experimenter then provided the following instructions for the participant:

You will be shown an image in which there will be a target line on the left side and three comparison lines of different length on the right side, labeled A, B, and C. Your task is to locate the comparison line that matches the target line in length. Once the test image has appeared for a brief period, it will disappear, and another image will appear with the letters A, B, and C directly above stone blocks labeled A, B, and C. When told to do so by the experimenter, please move your avatar to the stone block representing your stimulus choice (p. 5).

When an avatar indicated his/her answer, he or she remained standing on that block until all other avatars answered too. The avatars then returned to their chairs to view the next trial.

The participant completed two practice trials followed by 10 total trials (six control trials and four critical trials).

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### **Preliminary Analyses**

Thirty participants indicated suspicion of the true purpose of the study. To determine if “suspicious” participants responded differently on the dependent measure from non-suspicious participants, I conducted a 2 (sex of confederate: male, female) x 2 (type of humor: sexist, neutral) x 2 (suspicion: suspicious, not suspicious) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the measure of conformity. There was a significant main effect of suspicion,  $F(1, 73) = 16.28, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .18$ , showing that the suspicious participants conformed to fewer trials ( $M = .33, SD = 0.54$ ) than non-suspicious participants ( $M = 1.37, SD = 1.24$ ). Furthermore, the suspicious participants were disproportionately distributed across the sexist humor condition ( $n = 19$ ) and neutral humor condition ( $n = 11$ ). On the basis of these findings, I excluded the suspicious participants from all subsequent analyses.

### **Hostile Sexism**

I constructed an overall measure of hostile sexism for each participant by averaging their scores on the Hostile Sexism Scale in Glick and Fiske’s (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. Cronbach’s alpha was .85 exceeding Nunnally’s (1978) criteria of acceptable reliability of .70. The overall mean score was  $M = 2.48 (SD = .67)$ . Mean hostile sexism scores were  $M = 2.43 (SD = .59)$  in the sexist humor condition and  $M = 2.52 (SD = .73)$  in the neutral humor condition. A 2 (type of humor: sexist, neutral) x 2 (sex of confederates: male, female) ANOVA on the hostile sexism scores revealed no effect of experimental condition, all  $F$ ’s,  $p > .10$ .

## **Conformity**

I predicted that, in the female confederate condition, hostile sexism would significantly predict the amount of conformity in the sexist humor, but not neutral humor condition. In the male confederate condition, I expected that hostile sexism would not be significantly related to conformity in either the sexist or neutral humor conditions. See Figures 3 and 4.

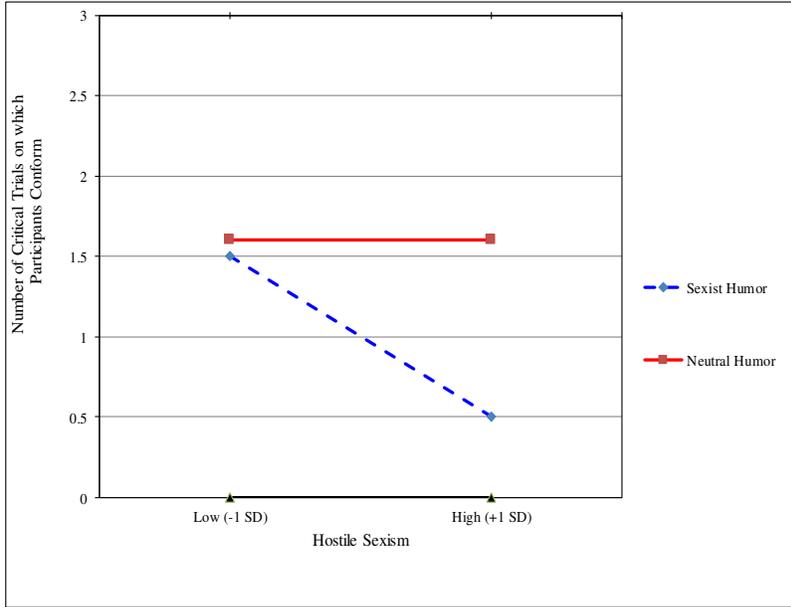


Figure 3. Predicted change in conformity to female confederates.

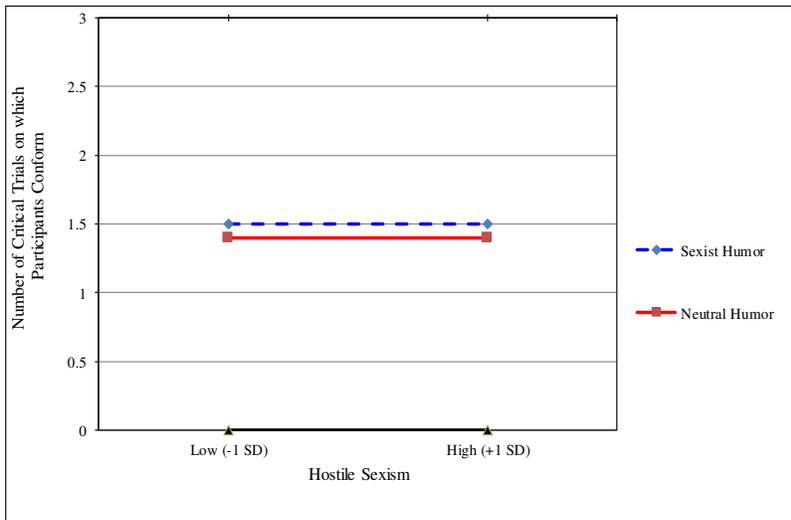


Figure 4. Predicted change in conformity to male confederates.

To test my hypothesis, I first dummy coded the humor variable (sexist humor = 1, neutral humor = 0) and the sex of confederates variable (male = 1, female = 0). Next, I computed interaction terms by multiplying the standardized hostile sexism score by each dummy coded variable. Finally, I regressed the measure of conformity (the number of critical trials on which participants conformed to the wrong group judgment) onto the standardized hostile sexism score, type of humor manipulation, sex of confederate manipulation, all the two-way interactions and the hostile sexism x type of humor x sex of confederates interaction effect. In keeping with my hypothesis, I expected to find a significant 3-way interaction effect.

As can be seen in Table 1, the regression analyses revealed no significant main or interaction effects. Importantly, the predicted three-way interaction effect was not significant  $\beta = -.245$ ,  $SE = .851$ ,  $t = -.866$ ,  $p = .391$ . Figures 5 and 6 depict the regression lines for the number of critical trials on which participants conformed to the confederates' incorrect line judgments as a function of type of humor and standardized hostile sexism scores.

Table 1

*Summary of the regression analysis on the measure of conformity.*

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.193	.265		.730	.469
Confederate (A)	.516	.424	.240	1.216	.231
Humor (B)	.147	.436	.069	.337	.737
HS (C)	-.183	.280	-.142	-.653	.517
1 AxB	-.732	.657	-.282	-1.114	.271
AxC	.794	.482	.396	1.649	.107
BxC	.288	.595	.131	.485	.630
AxBxC	-.737	.851	-.245	-.866	.391

a. Dependent Variable: Conformity

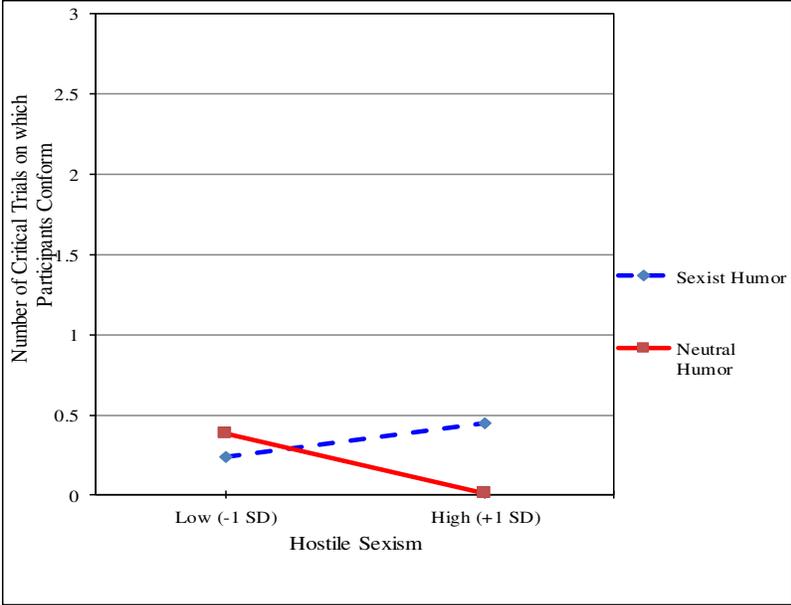


Figure 5. Observed change in conformity to female confederates.

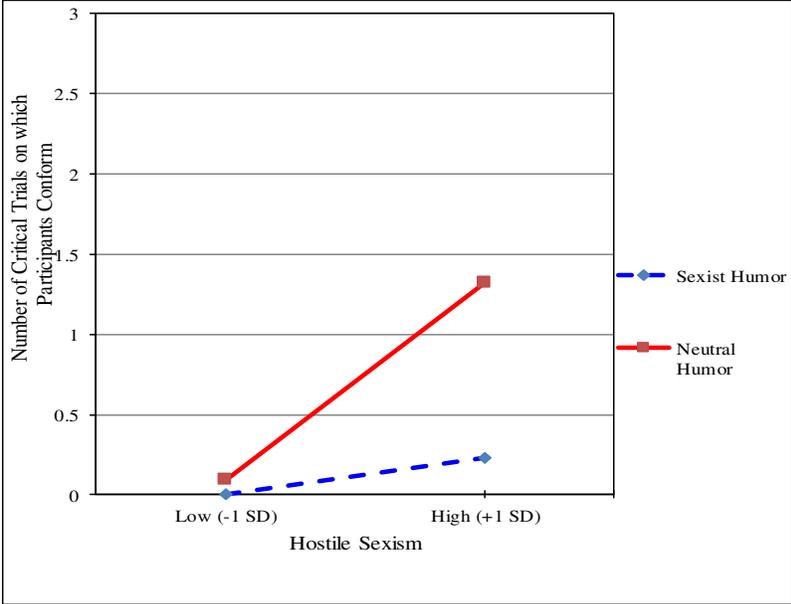


Figure 6. Observed change in conformity to male confederates

To further test my hypotheses, I examined the relationship between hostile sexism and conformity to the male and female confederates' judgments in each of the two humor conditions on the first critical trial. According to my hypothesis I predicted that there would be a significant negative relationship between hostile sexism and conformity to the female confederates' incorrect line judgments in the sexist humor condition, but not the neutral humor condition. Contrary to my prediction, there was no relationship between hostile sexism and conformity to the female confederates' incorrect line judgments in the sexist humor condition or the neutral humor condition, (point-biserial  $r = .051$ ,  $p = .874$ , point-biserial  $r = -.199$ ,  $p = .445$ , respectively).

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This experiment tested the hypothesis that men higher in hostile sexism would conform less to a group of women after exposure to sexist versus neutral humor. Furthermore, I hypothesized that men would not differentially conform to a group of men after exposure to either sexist or neutral humor as a function of hostile sexism.

The results did not support my hypotheses. Regressing the measure of conformity onto the standardized hostile sexism score, type of humor manipulation, sex of confederate manipulation, all the two-way interactions and the hostile sexism x type of humor x sex of confederates interaction effect revealed no significant main or interaction effects. Participants' level of hostile sexism did not predict their conformity to male or female confederates' incorrect line judgments as a function of humor.

Had my hypotheses been supported, this research would have contributed new knowledge about the social consequences of sexist humor. Specifically, a growing body of research has shown that sexist humor fosters discrimination against women among men who normally suppress their sexism. My study tested the possibility that sexist humor has additional detrimental consequences for women. By diminishing women, I reasoned that sexist humor reduces women's ability to exert social influence. The present research would have provided further insight into these effects by showing that exposure to disparagement humor can also result in less conformity to a group.

Significant results would have contributed to the social influence literature by identifying a new variable that can reduce a person's or a group's strength to exert normative social influence. As stated in Latane's (1981) social impact theory, immediacy, number, and strength

are essential to a group's social influence. A group's ability to exert influence is greatly reduced when one of those elements is weakened. Support for my hypotheses would have shown how a targeted group's strength becomes diminished through disparagement humor, resulting in devaluation of the group's influence.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

There are some important limitations to this experiment. First, it is not clear that the sexist comedy skits in my study actually diminished women in the eyes of the male participants. Including a manipulation check would have revealed if the humor manipulation did indeed diminish women. I predicted that diminishment would mediate the relationship between sexist humor and the weakening of women's social influence, so failing to confirm that effect limits the interpretation of the present results.

Second, the research paradigm used allowed for a high number of suspicious participants. Analyses revealed a significant main effect of suspicion, showing that the suspicious participants conformed to fewer trials than non-suspicious participants. It is also possible that this data was further compromised by suspicious participants who failed to express their suspicion. The Asch line-judgment experiment is very well-known and taught in every introductory psychology class at WCU. Unfortunately, all participants in the present research were recruited from those classes. Perhaps using a task other than line judgments (e.g., counting the number of shapes inside geometric figures) would have obscured the familiarity of the paradigm.

I believe it would be valuable for future research to continue examining the effect of disparagement humor on targeted groups' social influence. As stated above, instead of using line judgments, a potential future study could simply replace the testing stimuli in an Asch line-judgment paradigm with another task such as counting the number of shapes within a geometric

figure. A less familiar task may reduce suspicion and allow for better examination of the effect of sexist humor on a group's social influence.

Also, future research could examine the effect of sexist humor on women's ability to exert informational influence. A group's ability to exert informational influence depends on its credibility. The less credible one perceives a group the less likely he or she is to rely on the group for guidance (Deutch & Gerard, 1955). If sexist humor diminishes women, then men should perceive a group of women as less credible sources of information upon exposure to sexist humor. Consequently, men should be less likely to exhibit private acceptance of information provided by women upon exposure to sexist versus neutral humor.

An experiment could test this hypothesis by presenting male participants with a judgmental task for which the accurate or appropriate response is unclear. For instance, participants could be asked to answer a number of extremely difficult trivia questions to which they do not know the answers. Furthermore, participants could be given the opportunity to rely on a group's input (information) or ignore the group's input. We predict that insofar as the men are sexist, exposure to sexist humor will cause them to ignore information from a female group more often compared to a male group.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The present study set out to contribute to the existing literature on the social consequences of sexist humor by investigating the possibility that sexist humor diminishes women's social influence. Unfortunately, the results of the study were inconclusive, failing to provide supportive evidence for my hypotheses. Future research that addresses the limitations of the current study may indeed contribute knowledge of great social relevance.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

### Consent Form

Here are some questions you might have about this study.

#### **What is the purpose of this research and what will be asked of me?**

You will be taking two separate and independent studies that will be used for our social psychology lab. You will first watch a video and rate how funny you believe it is. Then, you and a few other participants will be asked to participate in a visual perception test administered through a virtual computer application called "Second Life." Last, you will complete a questionnaire and a short demographic survey.

#### **How long will the research take?**

The study in total should take 45 minutes or less.

#### **Will my answers be anonymous?**

Yes.

#### **Can I withdraw from the study if I decide to?**

Absolutely, and you will still be given credit.

#### **Is there any harm that I might experience from taking part in the study?**

There is no potential harm from participating in this research.

#### **How will I benefit from taking part in the research?**

You will satisfy your research requirement *or* receive extra credit in your PSY 150 course, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing you've participated in research that we hope will contribute to the body of knowledge in social psychology. Your input will also help us to design future studies.

#### **Who should I contact if I have questions or concerns about the research?**

If you have any questions, you may contact Professor Thomas E. Ford, [tford@wcu.edu](mailto:tford@wcu.edu). Also, if you have any concerns about how you were treated during the experiment, you may contact the office of the IRB, a committee that oversees the ethical aspects of the research process. The IRB office can be contacted at 828-227-7212. This research project has been approved by the IRB.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Your completion of the study indicates your consent to participate.**

Psy 150 Instructor: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Ambivalent Sexism Inventory

Below is a series of statements concerning men and women and their relationships in contemporary society. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale:

0	1	2	3	4	5
disagree strongly	disagree somewhat	disagree slightly	agree slightly	agree somewhat	agree strongly

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for “equality.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. In a disaster, women ought not necessarily be rescued before men.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts being sexist.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Women are too easily offended.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the opposite sex.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Women should be cherished and protected by men.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Men are complete without women.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Women exaggerate problems they have at work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. Women, as compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.

## Appendix C: YouTube Video Links

Videos for the Sexist Humor Condition.

Betty White Snickers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkAnLtqWDhc>

Danel Tosh: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fomOtKxGkr8> (up to 28 seconds).

The Man Show Wife School: <http://www.yourdailymedia.com/post/the-man-show-wife-school/>

Harry Enfield: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNmBauXYzgc>

Videos for the Neutral Humor Condition.

Betty White Snickers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkAnLtqWDhc>

E\*Trade Baby Commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErPr99rOcec>

Laughing Baby: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9oxmRT2YWw>

Spoon Phobia: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaAZXP1v0u4>