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Gender and the Appreciation of Physically Aggressive “Slapstick” Humor

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ABSTRACT *This study investigated gender differences in the appreciation of slapstick humor. Participants included 28 male and 29 female undergraduates at Brigham Young University. Participants rated three humorous video clips (slapstick, wordplay, and non-sequitur) using a five question, seven point Likert-type rating scale. The results of the study supported our hypothesis that men would rate slapstick humor as funnier than women would. This suggests that gender differences in physical aggression influence perception of humor.*

There are significant gender differences in physical aggression. In 2004, men were almost ten times more likely than women to commit murder (U.S. Department of Justice). Moreover, men consistently report more physical aggression on questionnaires and measurement scales (Burton, Hafetz, & Henninger, 2007). In addition to being more overtly aggressive, men are more likely to participate in activities with physically aggressive undertones. For example, men play more contact sports such as lacrosse, football, ice hockey, and wrestling (Connell, 2000). Men are also more likely to be soldiers or police officers (Connell, 2000).

Gender differences in physical aggression may affect entertainment preferences (Fenigstein, 1979). Entertainment preferences, especially more violent preferences for males, appear early in life. By age two, some boys already demonstrate a preference for masculine toys such as tanks, planes, toy guns, and male action figures (Singer & Singer, as cited in Goldstein, 1998, pp. 62-63). Boys typically prefer violent video games like Grand Theft Auto, Counter Strike, and Call of Duty, over less aggressive games (Lemmens, 2006). Boys are also more likely than girls to enjoy a game's aggressive elements (Cantor, as cited in Goldstein, 1998). Gender differences continue into adolescence as young men prefer more

violent music videos and television shows than do young women (Shayovits, 2006).

Another form of entertainment in which gender differences appear is in physically aggressive humor. When asked to rate the perceived pain and funniness of aggressive cartoons, men and women rated the perceived pain similarly, but women rated the most painful cartoons as less funny than did men (Barrick, Hutchinson, & Deckers, 1990). Similarly, women have shown an inverse relationship between joke cruelty and joke appreciation (Herzog, Harris, & Kropscott, 2006). Other studies have failed to find significant gender differences (Henkin & Fish, 1986; McCauley, Woods, Coolidge, & Kulick, 1983).

Although previous studies have explored gender differences in appreciation of cruel and painful humor, no studies specifically deal with gender differences in appreciation of slapstick humor. Slapstick humor is physical, “pie in the face” humor. It is characterized by an exaggerated display of violence that is not accompanied by realistic consequences (Tibbetts, 1973). An understanding of slapstick humor is important because exposure to aggressive humor may increase overt aggression (Baron, 1978; Baron, 1974). In this study, we examined whether men or women would find slapstick humor funnier. Instead of having participants rate cartoons, as several past studies have done, we had them rate a short video clip. A video clip, as opposed to cartoons, can more accurately display the exaggerated violence that characterizes slapstick humor. Based on previous studies of gender differences in physical aggression, entertainment preferences, and specifically humor appreciation, we hypothesized that men would rate a slapstick video clip as funnier than women would.

Method

Participants

Participants were 28 men and 29 women undergraduates attending Brigham Young University, between the ages of 18-25. Most were recruited from psychology courses and received extra credit for their participation. All participants signed an informed consent. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Materials

The instruments were three video clips and a rating scale for each clip. The first clip depicted a violent scene from *Happy Gilmore* in which actors Bob Barker and Adam Sandler engage in a brawl on a golf course. The fighting that occurs in this clip is extended, exaggerated, and neither party seems to suffer any consequences such as fatigue or the presence of blood. Also, while fighting, the pair begins to tumble down the golf course hill. This tumble is intended to be humorous. The aforementioned characteristics of the clip were intended to represent slapstick humor.

The second clip illustrated wordplay humor, which the researchers define as quick wit and a play on words. It involved a scene from the television show *Scrubs*, in which the doctor gives his old Spanish dictionary to the nurse because he claims he already mastered the language. The nurse thanks him in Spanish and he replies, "You're welcome-o." By the doctor's vocabulary, it shows that he did not, in fact, know Spanish. This dialogue represented a play on words. The final clip was from the movie *Zoolander*. This particular clip shows Ben Stiller watching a video intended to brainwash him. The delusions that follow are random images and ideas whose haphazard connectedness displays non sequitur humor. The nonsensical content was intended to represent non sequitur humor. The wordplay and non sequitur humor clips were used as controls because neither clip had a physically aggressive element. A physically aggressive element is a central tenant of slapstick humor.

We constructed a Likert-type rating scale of five items to accompany each clip. Participants rated how funny, clever, physically aggressive, entertaining, and offensive each clip was on a seven-point scale; one being low and seven being high. The researchers only analyzed the funniness and physical aggression ratings. The other questions

were instituted in order to disguise the real intent of our study. The clip types and the participants' gender were independent variables, while the mean ratings of each clip were the dependent variables.

Procedure

Each participant sat in front of a computer that had the three clips downloaded onto the desktop. After signing the informed consent, each received a packet with instructions informing them of the order they were to watch the clips. This order was determined by an online random number generator. After reading the instructions on the first page, participants circled whether they were male or female. This packet also included the rating scales, which participants filled out immediately after viewing each clip. Participants were excused once their packet had been collected. Though there was no formal debriefing, participants who inquired were explained the details of the study.

Results

Ratings of funniness and aggression were analyzed using a repeated measures ANOVA with the following independent variables: Humor type (slapstick, wordplay, non sequitur) and gender (males, females). Our alpha level was set at 0.05.

There was no Gender main effect for the funniness ratings of the clips [$F(1, 55) = 1.381$; $p = 0.245$] indicating that the overall averages of the funniness ratings of the three clips did not differ by the participants' gender. This analysis was performed to make certain that there were not any significant differences in overall funniness ratings of the clips between the genders.

There was a Clip main effect for the funniness ratings of the clips [$F(2, 110) = 6.945$; $p = 0.001$]. The funniness ratings of the individual clips were different depending upon the clip type: the slapstick clip rated as the funniest, the word play clip rated the second funniest, and the non sequitur clip rated as the least funny. Thus the clips differed in how funny the participants found them.

There was a Clip x Gender interaction for the funniness ratings [$F(2, 110) = 3.186$; $p = 0.045$] (see figure 1). There was a significant difference between how men and women rated the individual clips. This difference was

Figure 1

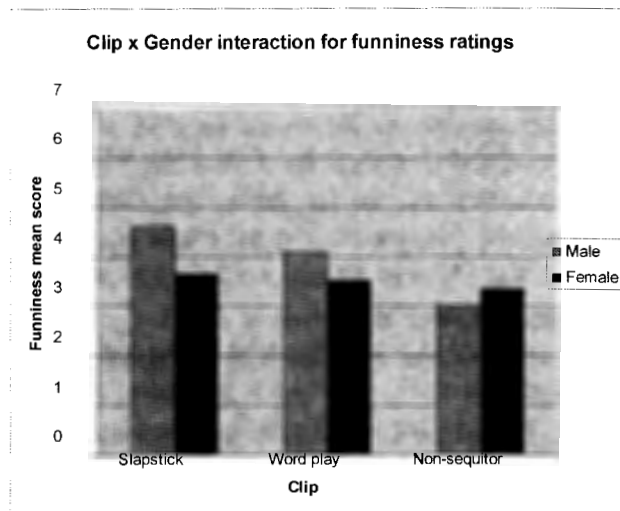
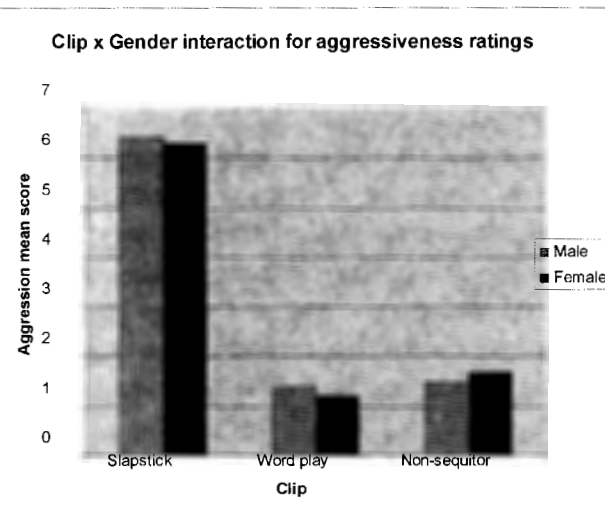


Figure 2



found looking at the linear component. This differs from the finding of no Gender main effect in that the Clip x Gender interaction analyzed the individual clips' funniness rather than the overall funniness.

There was a significant linear component for the funniness ratings of the clip [$F(1,55) = 16.411$; $p = 0.000$] with a nonsignificant quadratic component [$F(1,55) = .350$; $p = 0.557$]. The Clip funniness ratings x Gender linear component [$F(1,55) = 7.370$; $p = 0.009$] was significant and the quadratic component which was not significant [$F(1, 55) = 0.270$; $p = 0.605$], show that the significant difference lies in the slapstick clip.

The standard deviation of the funniness ratings among women for each clip was higher than the standard deviation for the men. The difference was highest for the slapstick clip ($SD_{women}=2.09$; $SD_{men}=1.73$). Particularly, the funniness ratings of the slapstick clip differed more between women. Their ratings were more inconsistent while men's ratings tended to be more similar.

There was a Clip main effect for the aggressiveness ratings [$F(2, 110) = 655.589$; $p = 0.000$]. The mean rating for the slapstick clip was higher than the other two clips (slapstick $M=6.3684$, wordplay $M=1.2982$, non sequitur $M=1.5965$) indicating that this clip is the most physically aggressive of the three.

The Clip x Gender interaction for the aggressiveness ratings was non-significant [$F(2,110) = 0.811$; $p=0.447$] (see figure 2). Thus, the relative ratings of the three clips did not differ between genders. Both men and women rated the physical aggressiveness of each clip similarly.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether men and women would rate the funniness of slapstick humor differently. Specifically, we hypothesized that men would rate the slapstick clip funnier than women would. Two other clips were used to control for funniness ratings. This was to ensure that the men did not rate all three humor types significantly funnier than the women. The findings are consistent with our hypothesis and support the research of Barrick et al. (1990), which found that men were not influenced by the amount of pain suffered by a character while women showed an inverted-U relationship between the pain and the funniness of cartoons. Moreover, the results expand previous research by extending the media form from cartoon images to video clips of human actors.

From our results, we cannot specifically determine why men rated slapstick humor funnier than women rated it. However, by connecting previous research to our findings, we can seek probable cause for the difference. Previous research found that men are more aggressive in behavior and prefer more violent entertainment (Burton et al, 2007; Fenigstein 1979). One of the predominant factors that distinguish slapstick comedy from wordplay and non sequitur humor is physical aggression. Not only did the men rate the slapstick clip as funnier than the other two clips, but they also rated it as funnier than the women rated it. This implies that the high level of physical aggression was a major factor in determining who

rated the slapstick clip as funnier.

Implications

Because the men rated slapstick humor as more comical than the women rated it, this may help to explain why the media markets more violent forms of entertainment towards the male demographic. Additionally, entertainment is becoming more violent overtime (McCauley et al., 1983). The increasingly violent media may possibly be due to two factors: desensitization and the finding that the more aggressive a cartoon is, the funnier men rate it (McCauley et al., 1983).

Confounds & Limitations

There are at least three potential alternative explanations for the differences observed. First, having the participants circle whether they are male or female prior to viewing the clips may have primed them to conform to gender stereotypes. For example, some female participants might have rated the slapstick clip as less funny because they may believe that most women do not find this type of humor funny. We could have controlled for this by recording a participant's gender after they completed the experiment.

A second limitation was the unequal duration of the clips. The slapstick clip was 85 seconds, the non sequitur clip was 70 seconds, and the word play clip was 20 seconds. It is possible that the length of the slapstick clip affected how the women rated its funniness. In the study conducted by Barrick et al. (1990), female participants initially rated violent cartoons as very funny, but as the cartoons grew progressively more violent, female participants began to rate them as less funny. Barrick et al.'s study suggests that the intensity and the duration of aggressive humor may affect female humor appreciation. In our experiment, the women may have initially enjoyed the slapstick clip but over time found it less humorous. Thus, future research should systematically study the influence of intensity and duration of aggressive humor regarding gender differences in funniness ratings.

Finally, the clips selected may have biased our results. Despite attempts to be objective, the influence of personal preference regarding what is amusing was inevitable. For example, the male authors of this study liked the word-play clip enough to persuade the females, who were initially opposed to the clip, that it should be included in the

study. Moreover, many of the participants may have been familiar with the sources of the clips. This familiarity may have caused them to rate the funniness of the clip's source and not the clip itself. For example, participants may have rated the slapstick clip as funnier than the non sequitur clip based on their holistic opinions of the films *Happy Gilmore* and *Zoolander*. Experimenters wishing to control for these variables should hold the source constant or select less familiar video clips.

There are also a few limitations to the study. By using a convenience sample we may not be able to generalize the findings to an entire population because our sample came from Brigham Young University undergraduate students and was limited to the ages 18-25. This population is mostly a conservative and more traditional group of people compared to other colleges and this may affect how the participants viewed the violence in the slapstick clip. In addition, men were the principal actors in the three clips. This may have had an influence on how the participants rated the clips. For instance, McGhee and Duffey (1983) found that both genders rated jokes as funnier when women, as opposed to men, were the brunt of the joke.

Further Research

We suggest that future studies investigate how, and if there is an interaction between gender personality characteristics and appreciation of physically aggressive humor. Previous research has shown that people that rate themselves as aggressive were more appreciative of aggressive jokes (Prerost, 1975). This would be worth examining to pinpoint what other characteristics elicit a higher funniness rating of aggressive behavior or jokes. This could have further implications as to what personality types are more susceptible to aggressive tendencies.

It would also be beneficial to see if sampling in a more diverse population would render different results. Because Brigham Young University is a conservative school, a more liberal school may produce different results between men and women. Because the majority of our participants were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, coming from a more conservative and traditional background, another study may use a sample from different religious backgrounds. Religious affiliation and beliefs tend to trickle into other parts of a person's life, so there is a reasonable cause to investigate how this

might affect a person's evaluation of physically aggressive humor. According to Latter-day Saint doctrine, viewing certain types of media such as physically aggressive humor should be avoided. "Consuming violent media makes it more difficult to keep ourselves 'unspotted from the world.'" (Bushman, 2003). Since the Bible is a part of the Latter-day Saints' standard works, they believe that being "unspotted from the world" means to keep one's self pure, including what is visually perceived (James 1:27). Thus, it is possible that the results presented here would be stronger in other samples.

It would be valuable to determine whether age plays a role in the perception of slapstick humor. The older a person gets, the more conservative they become (Truett, 1993). From this finding, the assumption could be made that older persons might rate a slapstick clip as less funny than would younger persons. Future researchers could evaluate if age does in fact affect humor appreciation and whether or not it changes over time (Shammi, 2003). This investigation could be done by comparing the ratings of clips from different age groups. Results may also affect how the media caters to age groups, and how a violent clip may not be as effective if viewed by an older generation.

Another way to expand the research would be to obtain a sample of males from different countries and compare their ratings of a slapstick humor clip. Research has shown that American males score higher on the masculinity scale than do males from Great Britain (Eysenck, 1995). Another contribution that could be made is to find if there is a correlation with scores on the masculinity scale and the ratings of physically aggressive humor.

In conclusion, though we cannot specifically attribute what caused the difference in ratings between genders, there are certain personality differences in men and women which may have led them to rate slapstick humor differently one from another. For example, men score higher on aggressive personality inventories (Burton et al., 2007). Thus, personality differences may lead men to enjoy watching slapstick humor more than women.

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