Spoofing Presidential Hopefuls:
The Roles of Affective Disposition and Positive Emotions
in Prompting the Social Transmission of Debate Parody

JASON T. PEIFER[1]
Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

KRISTEN D. LANDREVILLE
University of Wyoming, USA

Exploring factors that contribute to the social transmission of debate parody, this study employs the conceptual lenses of affective disposition and discrete emotions. An online experiment was conducted within days of *Saturday Night Live*'s original airing of its parody of the first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Participants (*N* = 472) were randomly assigned to view either the parody of the debate or a non-politics-related parody sketch. The debate parody was significantly more mirth and hope inducing when participants had an unfavorable disposition toward Trump; there was no difference in mirth and hope between the exposure conditions among those who had a more favorable disposition toward Trump. Furthermore, mirth and hope were demonstrated to predict willingness to share the humor. Both positive emotions served as significant mediating mechanisms for debate parody's relationship with willingness to share, as amplified by one's negative affective disposition for Trump.

Keywords: emotion, political parody, political humor, affective disposition theory, mirth, presidential debates, Saturday Night Live, sharing

Impersonation-based parodies of presidential hopefuls have become a widely and eagerly anticipated part of presidential election campaign seasons (Jones, 2015). In particular, spoofs of presidential debates—most notably, as produced by *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*)—have become a traditional component of election cycles, serving as one prism through which citizens can make sense of political candidates (Jones, 2015). Televised presidential debates serve as one of the more consequential media events of a campaign season (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003)—"that crucial moment when many Americans start paying attention to politics once again" (Jones, 2015, p. 88). Similarly, parody sketches of these debates are

Jason T. Peifer: jpeifer@iu.edu
Kristen D. Landreville: klandrev@uwyo.edu
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popular media events, drawing large audiences (Nielsen, 2016). Citizens can have strong reactions to such comedy, especially amid a divisive election season, as was the case in 2016 (Pew Research Center, 2016).

One factor that gives television-based political parodies particular resonance in today's media environment is citizens' ability to comment on and transmit the humorous content, whether via social media, email, texting, or other forms of personal interaction. To better understand the mechanisms of what can propel the diffusion of a comedic representation of a debate event, this study is designed to consider the roles of several social-psychological factors in fostering political humor-sharing behavior. First, the role of *affective disposition* is examined relative to sharing political parody content. Based on the theoretical premise that one's enjoyment of a humor message is often greatly influenced by one's feelings of favorability (or lack thereof) for the humor message's principal target (e.g., Becker, 2014; Priest, 1966), the affective disposition concept is important for understanding responses to disparaging political humor. Second, given that discrete emotions have innate action tendencies (Nabi, 2010) and that intense emotions can prompt information-sharing behavior (Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy, & Okdie, 2013; Hasell & Weeks, 2016), emotional responses to a political parody message are also explored. In particular, hope and mirth are here posited to play a crucial mediating role in fostering debate humor-sharing behavior.

An online experiment was conducted within days of *SNL*'s original airing of its parody of the first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Participants ($N = 472$) were exposed to edited versions of either an *SNL* parody of the first general election debate or a non-politics-related *SNL* sketch from the same episode. Subjects were subsequently instructed to report both cognitive and affective responses to the comedy they viewed. Results indicate that both mirth and hope serve as mediating mechanisms for debate parody exposure's relationship with a willingness to share (WTS), and this mediated relationship is amplified (i.e., moderated) by one's negative affective disposition for the principal target of the debate humor message. That is, the more one dislikes Trump, the greater the mirth and hope upon exposure to the debate parody, which in turn strengthens a willingness to share the humor. Of note, the process of influence modeled by the study is also significant among those with more neutral dispositions toward Trump. Study implications and limitations are discussed in conclusion.

Saturday Night Live and Debate Parodies

Comedic treatments of political matters can be easy to dismiss as trivial and innocuous, but political entertainment scholarship suggests that humor can play meaningful roles in shaping society's political sphere. One political humor mainstay in the mainstream media landscape is *SNL*. Debuting in 1975, *SNL* is the longest running source of television-based satire (Jones, 2015). One staple of *SNL*'s comedy is parodies of prominent political figures. Parody can be broadly defined as a comedic imitation and inversion of a cultural text, intended to offer some form of commentary about that which is being imitated (Dentith, 2000; Hutcheon, 1985). While many of *SNL*'s caricatures of political figures could be characterized as politically toothless (Jones, 2009), *SNL*'s parody humor—particularly during election seasons—serves as a popular reference point for citizens in seeking to make sense of the political landscape.

Amid the flurry of spin and commentary that both precedes and follows a given presidential debate, *SNL*'s spoofs of debates contribute to society's commentary about the debate event (Peifer & Holbert, 2013),

often drawing large audiences. For instance, *SNL*'s 2016 season debut, which parodied the first debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, drew an estimated 8.3 million viewers (Pallotta, 2016a). *SNL* is savvy about capitalizing on political events such as a presidential debate to increase the circulation of its content, ensuring that the show's reach extends beyond live programming. By repackaging and redistributing debate parody—in addition to the live broadcast—the humor can become more deeply embedded in America's collective memory. Research suggests that *SNL* parodies can influence audience attitudes and cognitive schemas about political candidates (Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012; Esralew & Young, 2012; Peifer, 2016). They may also impact how journalists cover the politicians being parodied (Abel & Barthel, 2013; Wild, 2015), influence campaign strategies (Smith & Voth, 2002), and be useful in the service of campaign rhetoric (Becker, 2018; Compton, 2016).

Discrete Emotions Framework

Young, Holbert, and Jamieson (2014) identify several categories of effects as underexplored in political humor research, including the affective dimension of political satire effects, sharing behaviors, and the common cultural experience afforded by such media content. With regard to the underexplored affective facets of political humor effects, it is important to closely examine the role of emotion in the processing of humor like that of an *SNL* debate parody—considering that one of the defining features of a humor message is that it bears the potential to elicit emotion (namely, mirth).

Emotions can be defined as temporally bound mental states, with varying levels of intensity, that represent valenced reactions to some event, agent, or object (Nabi, 1999; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). A discrete view of emotions conceptualizes emotions as associated with particular thought patterns (i.e., appraisals; see Lazarus, 1991). For instance, hope is associated with thought patterns about the possibility of amelioration and success relative to uncertainty in the environment at hand (Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Importantly, appraisal theory stipulates that each discrete emotion has an innate action tendency (Frijda, 1987). Though there are strengths to leverage via other conceptual models of emotions, one benefit of taking a discrete emotion perspective is the affordance of making strong predictions, given that the discrete approach identifies specific action tendencies (Myrick, 2015; Nabi, 2010).

Mirth

In light of the humorous nature of debate parody content, it is sensible to first explore the role of appreciating a humor message as an influence on the social transmission of presidential spoofs. Remarkably, there is not yet a strong scholarly consensus on how to understand—and label, for that matter—the emotion evoked by funny stimuli. Martin (2007) argues that the concept of "mirth" is fitting. Defining it as "the distinctive emotion that is elicited by the perception of humor" (p. 8), Martin (2007) explains that mirth is accompanied by subjective feelings of pleasure, amusement, and cheerfulness, and that like other emotions, it can occur with varying degrees of intensity, ranging from mild feelings of amusement to high levels of hilarity. Mirth involves a cognitive appraisal of an event/situation as playful, amusing, or somehow incongruous (Martin, 2014), which in turn elicits an emotional response. As a positive emotion, mirth bears strong similarity to the emotions of joy and happiness. Some identified action tendencies of happiness are to share positive outcomes with others, a willingness to engage with the situation at hand, and an enhanced

motivation for social cohesiveness (Martin, 2014; Myrick, 2015). Of note, Berger (2011) demonstrated that emotions characterized by high arousal (e.g., amusement or anxiety) boost a willingness to share, compared with low arousal emotions (e.g., sadness; see also Berger & Milkman, 2012). This line of thinking suggests that finding political comedy funny will increase the likelihood of sharing and talking about it.

Hope

Hope represents a belief in and yearning for a positive outcome, despite circumstances that might portend otherwise (Lazarus, 1991). It can be characterized as an emotional reaction to an anticipated event (Ortony et al., 1988). Understanding humor's capacity to serve as a "weapon" in the competitive sphere of politics (Meyer, 1990), it can be expected that political humor can also spark hope of one's favored political candidate gaining the upper hand. This line of reasoning aligns with the classic superiority theory of humor, which posits that humor's appeal lies in its ability to make one feel superior (Gruner, 1997). Humor that is proattitudinal may serve to enhance one's ego/self-esteem (La Fave, Haddad, & Maesen, 1976) not only because of disparaging what one opposes, but also because the object that one supports (e.g., a political candidate) can be implicitly or explicitly represented as victorious in a humor message. In this sense, humor content can—in some cases—engender the hopeful feeling of a person's team winning (Gruner, 1997) in politics. Hope, as induced by humor, may also be the product of experiencing a sense of enthusiasm and reassurance that is due to agreement with the humor message and a realization that oneself may not be quite so alone in thinking or feeling a certain way about a political matter. In some cases, hope could be induced by the prospect of others coming to a stronger understanding of the given political dysfunction or folly featured in the humor message. Notably, feelings of hope are often linked to a behavioral intention to approach the object/agent/event at hand, seeking to work toward achieving one's goals (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990; Roseman, 2011). Accordingly, if one feels hope upon exposure to a disparagement-based parody, the humor is likely being perceived as an endorsement of that which the message recipient supports—providing an incentive to share and amplify the humor message.

Affective Disposition Theory and Political Humor

Importantly, humor messages do not universally evoke the same emotional responses. Humor research suggests that one factor in particular is important to consider: one's feelings of favorability for the target of a given humor message. That is, affective disposition is a key determinant for shaping responses to humor. Specifically, the dispositional theory of humor argues that one's response to a humor message is dependent on one's feelings of favorability toward and affinity for the humor target (Zillmann & Cantor, 1996). Given that we have positive dispositions for liked groups and negative dispositions for disliked groups, the combative nature of politics renders political humor research a fertile area to apply the dispositional theory of humor. For example, Becker's (2014) application of disposition theory to political parody videos found that those who liked Barack Obama were more likely to appreciate Republican-directed humor and, at the same time, were less likely to appreciate Democratic-directed humor targeting Obama. Notably, this phenomenon bears relevance to the concept of *affective polarization*—that is, "the degree to which partisans view the opposing [political] party more negatively than their own" (Banda & Cluverius, 2018, p. 90).

In view of how the affective disposition factor (along with dynamics of affective polarization) can help predict the extent to which humor appreciation/mirth is experienced, and given the theoretical basis for anticipating that one's feelings toward the key target of a humor message can influence the extent to which that humor is hope-inducing, it is predicted that affective disposition will interact with parody exposure to influence emotion-based responses. That is, affective disposition should serve to illuminate when mirth and hope are most strongly induced.

H1:   *Debate parody exposure will interact with one's affective disposition toward the political figure chiefly disparaged by the parody representation to induce greater (a) mirth and (b) hope, as compared with exposure to a non-politics-related parody.*

Social Transmission of Political Humor Content

In seeking to better understand the social transmission of debate parody humor, it is useful to consider the concept of sharing. Of course, sharing behavior predates digital culture. Humans have long disseminated and dialogued about information, ideas, knowledge, and emotions (Shifman, 2016). Yet the emergence of digital culture—wherein digital technology and online activities are now positioned at the center of daily life—has greatly expanded notions of what it means to "share" (John, 2012; Wittel, 2011). Whether in the form of uploading, posting, liking, or commenting, sharing serves as a form of self-presentation and facilitates the construction and maintenance of social ties—often without physically inhabiting the same space with others. One can also find social validation through sharing messages in a social network (Guadagno et al., 2013; Ho & Dempsey, 2010). It is noteworthy that sharing something online with friends, family, and acquaintances also involves "sharing it with companies such as Facebook, who in turn, share it with commercial parties" (Shifman, 2016, p. 584).

As a form of communication (two-way or multiple-way) and distribution (John, 2012), sharing in the digital context can pertain to both user-generated content (e.g., original content; remaking, remixing, or imitating an existing text) and unaltered professionally produced content (e.g., an *SNL* sketch). Whether the content is user generated or otherwise, scholarship identifies several common antecedents to sharing content online. In one overview of the factors that enhance the virality of online sharing, Shifman (2014) highlights positivity/humor and high-arousal emotions as key features of highly shared content (along with several other factors, including the complexity of the message and the prestige of the content's source). Put another way, individuals are inclined to share that which makes them feel good and that which elicits strong emotions. Echoing this understanding, numerous research efforts focused on the social transmission of media messages highlight emotion as a key antecedent to both online sharing (e.g., Guadagno et al., 2013; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Nelson-Field et al., 2013) and offline sharing (e.g., Landreville & LaMarre, 2011; Lee & Jang, 2017).

An insight to underscore is that when experiencing an emotion elicited by a given media message, individuals are commonly motivated to spread that emotion to others. Sharing a media message can be a way to pass along an emotion, in anticipation that others will experience a similar emotion via the message content. This is consistent with theorizing about *emotional contagion*, wherein experiencing a given emotion(s) can elicit a desire and tendency to express and spread that emotion to others both offline and online (Hatfield & Cacioppo, 1994; Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014; Rimé, 2009). Hence, during an intense presidential

election season—and amid an atmosphere of heightened affective polarization—the desire to share political humor content can be understood as reflecting a desire to share a strong emotional experience with others.

In the general scope of political humor messages, people can experience a range of emotions. But considering the question of what can motivate the sharing of debate parody humor in particular, it is sensible to focus on experiences of positive emotions—given that strong, positive emotions have been identified as key factors in motivating online sharing (Shifman, 2014).[2] Therefore, a second hypothesis is offered:

H2:   *Upon exposure to a debate parody sketch, the elicitation of (a) mirth and (b) hope will positively influence a willingness to share the parody humor message.*

Conditional Direct and Indirect Effects of Debate Parody Humor

Taken together, the preceding discussion and predictions suggest a process of influence wherein the interaction of parody exposure and affective dispositions toward the principal target of a debate parody leads to distinct emotional responses, which in turn influence a willingness to share the humor with others (see Figure 1 for an overview of this conceptual model). While not designed to represent all the elements that may motivate humor-sharing behavior, this model offers an illuminating lens for simultaneously investigating the how and why of debate parody's social transmission/diffusion.

H3:   *Debate parody exposure will exhibit an indirect effect on willingness to share parody humor. The indirect effect of debate parody exposure on willingness to share (as mediated by [a] mirth and [b] hope) will be amplified by one's negative affective disposition for the disparaged candidate.*

Though hope and mirth are here theorized to play key roles in motivating political humor-sharing behavior, it is quite plausible that other debate parody-related factors interact with affective disposition to influence an impulse to share the content. Accordingly, it is worth also exploring the general influence of the Debate Parody Exposure × Affective Disposition interaction, independent of the mediating influence of hope and mirth. This effectively investigates the conditional direct effect of debate parody exposure on sharing behavior (see Figure 1). Given the exploratory nature of this inquiry, a research question is posed.

RQ1:   *Will debate parody exposure exhibit a conditional direct effect on willingness to share (independent of mirth and hope), such that debate parody exposure interacts with affective disposition to directly affect willingness to share, as compared with exposure to a generic SNL parody sketch?*

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[2] While an unflattering parody of one's preferred candidate might elicit a strong emotion such as anger, it is doubtful that people would be consistently motivated to promote/amplify that representation by sharing it with others.

Method

To test these hypotheses, an online experiment was conducted in October 2016 using MTurk participants. MTurk is an online labor market increasingly used by social scientific researchers as a subject pool for Web-based surveys and experiments (Mason & Suri, 2012). Though MTurk convenience samples are not representative of the national population (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014), they can be useful for experimental research focusing on cause-and-effect relationships (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013). The study questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics survey software. A total of 508 people completed the study in its entirety; each participant was paid $0.61. Those who spent less than one minute[3] on either of the two videos presented were dropped from the analyses ($n = 36$), resulting in a final N of 472 participants.
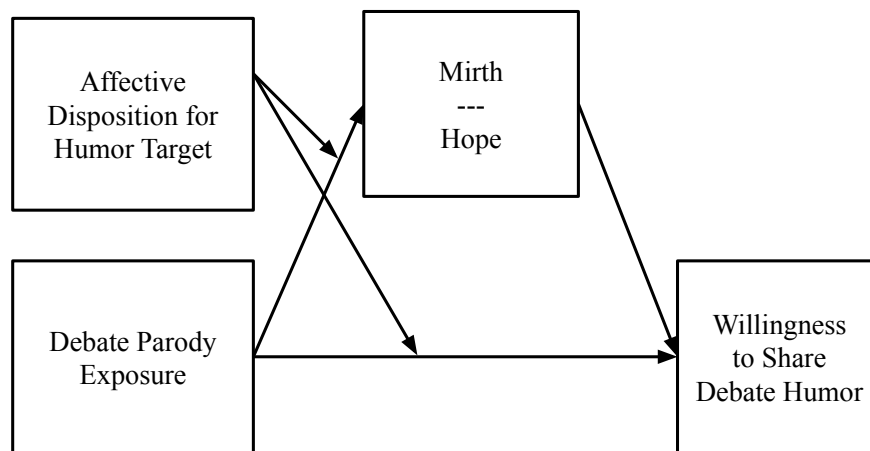

Figure 1. Conceptual overview of moderated-mediation model predicting willingness to share debate parody humor, as mediated by the positive emotions of mirth and hope.

After providing consent, participants first answered a variety of questions, including political interest, attention to news coverage, and feelings of favorability for the major candidates in the 2016 presidential election (i.e., Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, Gary Johnson, and Jill Stein). Next, as part of a 2 × 2 experimental design extending beyond the scope of this study, participants were randomly exposed to edited segments of the real September 26, 2016, presidential debate between Clinton and Trump or, alternatively, a *PBS News Hour* segment (October 7, 2014, episode) about women directors in the film industry. Each of these videos was edited to be about 3.5 minutes in length. After exposure to the real debate footage or a *PBS News Hour* segment, all subjects answered a series of questions

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[3] Reasoning that most participants would be able to fairly quickly determine (a) how they felt about the sketch and (b) whether they would share it, it seemed reasonable to include those who viewed only a short portion (at least one minute) of the stimuli. When running the study's key analyses with only those who viewed at least 4 minutes of a parody sketch, the study findings were virtually the same.

about their reactions to the video presented, including questions about the extent to which they were exposed to the September 26 debate. Participants were next randomly exposed to either an *SNL* parody (October 1 episode) of the first presidential debate[4] *or* an *SNL* sketch (from the same episode) that parodied a film festival actress roundtable discussion about women in Hollywood. Each *SNL* video was edited to be about 5 minutes. A fuller description of the debate sketch featured in the study can be found in the online supplemental material (see www.jasontpeifer.com/onlinesupplemental), but it is worth briefly noting here that the key thrust of this particular *SNL* sketch was that of strong criticism of Trump—implicitly and explicitly pertaining to questions of Trump's perceived crudeness, racism, sexism, dishonesty, and incompetence. Rather than sympathetic or lighthearted mockery, it represented a biting attack on Trump.

Following exposure to *SNL* content, subjects answered a set of questions about their emotional responses to the presented stimulus and hypothetical willingness to share and discuss the content. The questionnaire concluded with a variety of other questions, including items about basic demographics and political orientations. As noted previously, the first manipulation of the experiment (i.e., exposure to the real presidential debate or a PBS news segment) is beyond the scope of this study. The significance of assignment to the real debate stimuli or the PBS segment was examined relative to all the study analyses; importantly, no significant effect on the variables of interest in this article emerged as a result of this manipulation.

Sample

The sample (*N* = 472) was majority female (57.0%). Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 78 years (*M* = 38.44, *SD* = 12.28). Self-reported political orientations were measured on 7-point scales (range 1 to 7), from *strong Democrat* to *strong Republican* (*M* = 3.48, *SD* = 1.94) and *extremely liberal* to *extremely conservative* (*M* = 3.53, *SD* = 1.78). A strong majority of the sample identified as White/Caucasian (79.9%), while 8.5% identified as African American/Black, 6.1% as Asian, and 5.9% as Hispanic/Latino(a). (Participants could select all options they felt applied.) In terms of total household income in 2015, 5.5% of the sample earned less than $10K; 49.3% earned between $10K and $50K; 23.5% earned between $50K and $75K; and 21.6% earned more than $75K. For educational background, 8.5% had a high school diploma/GED or less; 34.7% reported "some college"; 35.6% had a bachelor's degree; and 21.2% had a graduate degree or "some graduate school."

Measures

Measures of affective disposition were based on favorability ratings for presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton on a scale from 0 to 10. Feelings of favorability were indicated by a

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[4] To guard against respondent fatigue, the *SNL* parody stimuli was edited down to about 5 minutes. To help ensure that the parody effects revealed by this research were not an artifact of the video-editing choices, two versions of the *SNL* parody of debate were created. The *SNL* sketch was essentially cut in half, with half of the respondents randomly exposed to mostly the first half of the originally 9-minute sketch, and the other half randomly exposed to mainly the second portion of the original sketch.

high score on the scale. Subjects were told, "If you feel absolutely neutral towards the person, you can give the person a 5." While the mean favorability rating of both candidates resided below the scale's neutral point (5), the sample reported feeling more favorable toward Clinton ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 3.79$) than Trump ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 3.70$), $t(471) = 4.57$, $p < .001$. (See online supplemental material to view histograms of these measures' distributions.)

Affective responses to the stimuli were measured in terms of mirth and hope. The mirth measure was based on 1–7 scale evaluations in terms of the given stimulus being "funny," "amusing," "entertaining," and "humorous" ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 2.06$, Cronbach's α = .99). Hope was based on feeling "hopeful" and "enthusiastic" in response to the question, "Thinking about the *SNL* video clip you just viewed, to what extent did it make you feel . . ." (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.82$, $r = .74$).

A willingness to share (WTS) index (adapted from Myrick & Oliver, 2015) was calculated ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.99$, Cronbach's α = .89) based on three questions. Participants were asked how likely they would be to "share the video with others via email," "talk about the video with another person in a face-to-face, phone, instant messenger, or text-message conversation," and "share the video with others by posting it to my social media feeds." The item scales ranged from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*).

Numerous additional measures were separately tested relative to this study's statistical modeling to ensure that other factors could not provide alternative explanations for the processes of influence under investigation here—including prior exposure to the *SNL* debate parody, basic demographics, political affiliation and ideology, and political interest. These analyses did not reveal substantially different findings. For the sake of parsimony, these covariates are not included in reported findings. More details on these procedures can be found in the online supplemental material.

Post Hoc Manipulation Check

As noted in the description of the *SNL* debate parody presented earlier, a key premise of this study is that the debate parody content in question chiefly disparages Donald Trump. Of course, political humor is subject to varied interpretations (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). While it is arguably self-evident that the *SNL* parody of the first Trump/Clinton debate portrayed Trump more unfavorably than Clinton (e.g., Kate McKinnon-as-Hillary Clinton stated within the sketch, "I think I'm going to be president"; see Pallotta, 2016b), it is worthwhile to empirically establish that the debate parody employed in this study did, in fact, more aggressively attack Trump than Clinton. A post hoc manipulation check experiment was conducted from December 2017 through March 2018 to confirm that the stimuli clearly portrayed one candidate more unfavorably (i.e., as the main victim) than the other. A paired-samples *t* test analysis compared an index of perceived negative portrayals (see online supplemental material for details on measures and procedures), indicating that participants clearly rated *SNL's* portrayal of Trump ($M = 5.23$, $SD = .83$) as more unfavorable than the portrayal of Clinton ($M = 3.58$, $SD = .95$), $t(142) = 15.19$, $p < .001$.

Statistical Analyses

The main study hypotheses and research question were tested with ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. A multiple regression approach (as opposed to an analysis of variance) is ideal for examining the outcome of a continuous moderator variable (i.e., affective disposition), rather than converting it into a high–low categorical variable (Hayes, 2018). Interaction terms comprising (a) affective disposition for Donald Trump and (b) the experimental debate exposure conditions were incorporated via the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018) to test the effects on mirth and hope. The Model 1 PROCESS macro was used to probe the interaction via the Johnson–Neyman technique—a procedure that highlights where in the distribution of a moderator (e.g., affective disposition) the independent variable (X) has an effect on the dependent variable (Y) that is different from zero. By specifying the point(s) of transition of the effect of X on Y relative to the distribution of the moderator, the Johnson–Neyman technique highlights regions of statistical significance. In addition, the Model 8 PROCESS macro was used to estimate and test the effect size of the moderated mediation processes of influence relative to WTS, as based on 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (Hayes, 2018).

Findings

The first hypothesis, that debate parody exposure—as compared with exposure to a non-politics-related parody sketch—will interact with one's affective disposition for Trump to induce greater (a) mirth and (b) hope, found support. As indicated in the regression model reported in Table 1, $F(3,468)$ = 23.12, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .13$, the data demonstrate a significant interaction relative to mirth as the dependent variable ($b = -.17$, $p < .001$). A similar interactive effect is present ($b = -.12$, $p < .01$) when modeling hope as the outcome, $F(3,468) = 3.60$, $p = .01$, $R^2 = .02$. These interaction terms are significant in models with and without the battery of controls noted in the measures section. Probing these interactions via the Johnson–Neyman technique, it is evident that debate parody exposure's positive relationship with mirth is most pronounced when one's affective disposition for Trump is at the lowest point (0). As illustrated in Figure 2, the difference in mirth between the exposure conditions remains statistically significant until point of transition at 6.61 in the affective disposition scale. Debate parody exposure's relationship with mirth is not significantly different from the comparison group (i.e., the non-politics-related parody exposure group) above 6.61 on the Trump disposition scale. Similarly, as illustrated in Figure 2, the difference in hope between the exposure conditions remains significant until the point of transition at 3.07 in the disposition scale—indicating that the debate parody did elicit hope among those with an unfavorable disposition toward Trump. There was no difference in elicited hope between the parody exposure conditions when one's affective disposition for Trump was relatively neutral or positive (above 3.07 on the disposition scale). In sum, in terms of both mirth and hope, there is no significant difference between the exposure groups when one's disposition toward Trump is relatively positive, yet there is a clear difference when having a negative disposition.

Dependent Variable: **Mirth**
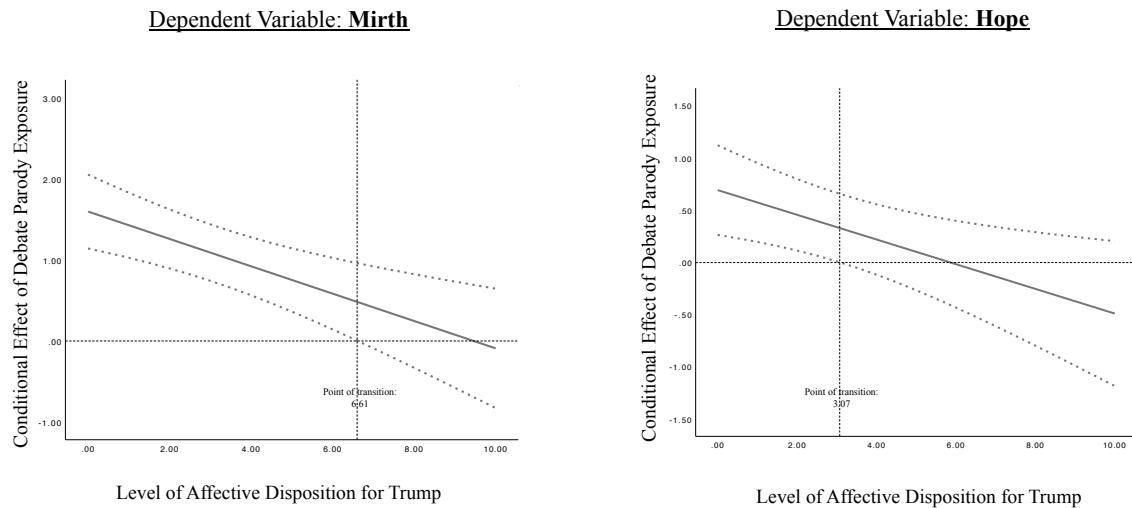
Dependent Variable: **Hope**

Figure 2. Conditional effects of debate parody exposure on mirth and hope, as moderated by affective disposition. The solid lines of the figures represent interactive effects of debate parody exposure (compared with non-political parody exposure) and affective disposition (the moderator), relative to the dependent variables of (a) mirth and (b) hope. The curved dashed lines represent the 95% confidence interval (CI) of the conditional effects. When both the upper-level and lower-level dashed lines of the CI are above or below zero on the y-axis, the figure represents a statistically significant indirect effect. The vertical dotted line represents the point of transition (i.e., for statistical significance) within the scale of the moderator. The perpendicular dotted lines demarcate regions of significance (in the top left quadrants).

The second hypothesis states that the elicitation of mirth and hope will positively influence one's willingness to share parody humor. This prediction also finds support. As indicated in the OLS regression model reported in Table 1, $F(5,466) = 76.02$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .45$, the data confirm that finding debate parody funny fosters a strong WTS ($b = .40$, $p < .001$). Experiencing hope is also demonstrated to predict WTS ($b = .32$, $p < .001$). Together, these findings confirm that positive emotions can function as a meaningful impetus for sharing debate parody content.

***Table 1. OLS Regression Models Predicting Mirth, Hope, and Willingness to Share Upon
Parody Exposure (Model 1) and as Moderated by Affective Disposition for Trump (Model 2).***

DV: **Mirth**	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	5.08 (.15)***	4.80 (.16)***
Experimental Debate Parody Exposure (0,1)	1.07 (.18)***	1.60 (.23)***
Trump Affective Disposition	−0.11 (.02)***	−0.02 (.04)
Trump Affective Disp. × Parody Exposure	—	−0.17 (.05)***
R^2	0.11	0.13
DV: **Hope**	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	2.86 (.14)***	2.67 (.15)***
Experimental Debate Parody Exposure (0,1)	0.32 (.17)#	0.67 (.22)**
Trump Affective Disposition	0.01 (.02)	0.07 (.03)*
Trump Affective Disp. × Parody Exposure	—	−0.12 (.05)**
R^2	.01	.02
DV: **Willingness to Share (WTS)**	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	−0.10 (.21)	−0.11 (.21)
Experimental Debate Parody Exposure (0,1)	0.59 (.14)***	0.67 (.19)***
Trump Affective Disposition	0.10 (.02)	0.02 (.03)
Trump Affective Disp. × Parody Exposure	—	−0.02 (.04)
Mirth	0.40 (.04)***	0.40 (.04)***
Hope	0.32 (.04)***	0.32 (.04)***
R^2	.45	.45

Note. Unstandardized coefficients reported with standard error in parentheses. DV = dependent variable.
#$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p <. 001$.

The third hypothesis tests the indirect influence of debate parody exposure to hypothetical sharing behavior—as mediated by mirth and hope—as dependent upon one's disposition toward Trump. Table 2 reports an index of moderated mediation relative to each conditional indirect effect. An index of moderated mediation represents a test of whether an indirect effect depends on a given moderator (Hayes, 2015)—in this case, one's affective disposition for Trump. Furthermore, Table 2 reports the probing of where in the range of the affective disposition scale the respective indirect effects are significant, probing three different points: the affective disposition mean (3.14), one standard deviation above the mean (6.84), and 0. (Zero is the lowest point of the scale.)

Notably, when conducting tests of moderated mediation via the Model 8 PROCESS macro, both mirth and hope are demonstrated to carry the influence of debate parody exposure as a function of affective disposition. This is evidenced by significant indices of moderated mediation. The bootstrapped confidence interval of the index estimate for mirth does not include zero (point estimate = −0.07; 95% CI [−.114, −.026])—indicating that the estimate is statistically different from zero. Similarly, the confidence interval for the index of moderated mediation for hope does not include zero (point estimate = −0.04; 95% CI [−.076, −.008]). Probing the conditional indirect effects through mirth and hope, the relationships are shown to be significant at the mean value of affective disposition and 0 (the lowest point of the disposition

scale), but not at +1 *SD* (see Table 2). This demonstrates that the mediating roles of mirth and hope are most meaningful when one's disposition for Trump is low or average. Moreover, the more unfavorable one's affective disposition, the more pronounced the indirect effects become.

Table 2. Model for Parody Exposure's Conditional Indirect Effect on Willingness to Share, as Mediated by Mirth and Hope and Moderated by Affective Disposition.

Mediators	Levels of Affective Disposition for Trump			Index of Moderated Mediation
	0 (minimum)	3.14 (*M*)	6.84 (+1 *SD*)	
Mirth	0.64 (.10)	0.43 (.08)	0.18 (.12)	−0.07 (.02)
	CI [.462, .853]	**CI [.283, .593]**	CI [-.053, .422]	**CI [−.114, −.026]**
Hope	0.22 (.08)	0.10 (.06)	−0.04 (.09)	−0.04 (.02)
	CI [.091, .394]	**CI [.001, .222]**	CI [−.209, .130]	**CI [−.076, −.008]**

Note. The independent variable of the model is debate parody exposure, and the dependent variable is willingness to share (WTS). Point estimates of indirect effects are reported with bootstrap standard errors in parentheses; 95% bootstrap confidence intervals (CI) are reported directly beneath the estimates in brackets. All CIs reported in bold are significant at a 95% CI. The index of moderated mediation (see Hayes, 2015) reported in the right-side column represents the slope of the line relative to the size of debate parody exposure's conditional indirect effect, via the respective mediators; the CI serves as an inference as to whether the index is statistically different from zero.

Finally, analyses investigated the question (RQ1) of whether debate parody exposure exhibited a conditional direct effect on sharing, such that debate parody exposure interacts with affective disposition to influence WTS independent of hope and mirth. As reported in Table 1, the data do not offer evidence of a conditional direct effect on WTS; the interaction term for parody exposure and affective disposition is not significant (*b* = −.02, *p* = .55). This finding underscores the key roles of mirth and hope for illuminating how parody exposure can prompt sharing behavior.

Discussion

This study helps to sharpen an understanding of the roles of emotional reactions in contributing to the social transmission of political parody representations—whether via word of mouth or computer mediated—by way of drawing from two conceptual domains: discrete emotions and affective disposition. In overview, the study confirms the capacity of emotion to motivate sharing behavior—in particular, the discrete emotions of mirth and hope. Furthermore, the analyses illuminate how affective experiences involving mirth and hope are meaningfully amplified by one's affective disposition for the primary target of the parody humor. In highlighting the affective elements of mirth and hope as key mechanisms of influence, this research more precisely spotlights how experiences with political humor like that of *SNL* debate parody can motivate intentions to share/discuss political humor with others. Of note, both mirth and hope are positive emotions that evoke pleasure and are associated with a desire to share the respective emotion (Guadagno et al., 2013). Moreover, this research strengthens theoretical insight by showcasing how affective disposition theory is an important lens for understanding the subtleties of engaging with debate parody humor, confirming that when an impersonation-based parody text targets a polarizing political figure, it is likely to spark strong and consequential emotions. Addressing an underdeveloped research domain, this study offers an empirical foundation for building political entertainment scholarship.

By comparing the influence of exposure to debate parody humor with the influence of exposure to a non-politics-related parody sketch, this research is able to more precisely parse the moderating influence of affective disposition relative to a political figure—beyond the scope of the hope and mirth that a given parody text might induce simply by virtue of being comedic. Importantly, the contrasts in hope and mirth between the two exposure conditions were not significantly different when one had relatively favorable feelings for the principal target of the debate parody sketch (i.e., Trump). This indicates that this study does not provide evidence of the debate parody being less funny or less hope inducing (among those who had favorable feelings for Trump) because of the nature of the humor message's targeting. Instead, the debate parody was demonstrated to be more funny and hope inducing (compared with a relatively average *SNL* parody sketch) when viewers were predisposed to have unfavorable feelings for Trump.

A key insight highlighted by this article is the central role of disliking Trump in motivating sharing behavior. While this is not especially surprising—it is consistent with the tenets of affective disposition theory—it nonetheless underscores the powerful role of negative dispositions. While it is well evident that conservative opinion media (e.g., talk radio or cable news programs like *Hannity*) commonly features "outrage" rhetoric toward all things liberal (Young, 2020), there is a case to be made that disdain among those on the political left for elements of conservatism serves to motivate, in part at least, harsh political comedy and a desire for audiences to share such content (Morris, 2018). It will be important for political entertainment scholars to forge a deeper understanding of the extent to which popular political comedy is distinct (or not) from the conservative "outrage" industry and what this portends for contemporary political discourse (see Young, 2020).

This research is also valuable for comprehensively examining a broad process of influence relative to the social transmission of comedic political representations. By conducting tests of linear moderated mediation, which integrates investigations of mediation and moderation, the work illuminates "the when of the how" (Hayes, 2015, p. 1) of debate parody exposure's behavioral influence. That is, the analyses simultaneously address the question of how debate parody exposure can prompt sharing behavior (i.e., by way of experiencing mirth and hope), as well as when these mediating dynamics are most pronounced (i.e., especially when having a strong dislike for the parody's primary target). The significant indices of moderated mediation indicate significant differences between contrasting levels of affective dispositions (for Trump) in terms of amplifying the mediating roles of mirth and hope. Importantly, this approach enables research to step beyond questions of simple direct, cause–effect relationships, which often do not do justice to the complexity of politically oriented media's influence.

While the effects highlighted by this study are most robust for those who strongly dislike Trump, the findings of this research nonetheless bear relevance to a relatively wide spectrum of citizens. Study analyses indicate that a significant process of influence is relevant not just to individuals who have strongly unfavorable feelings toward Donald Trump. The moderated mediation model is applicable to those with more ambivalent or neutral feelings toward Trump. As illustrated in Figure 1, even those in the middle region of the 0–10 affective disposition scale (i.e., 5 and 6) found the debate parody to be more mirth inducing, and as the moderated mediation analyses demonstrate, this mirth significantly motivates sharing behavior. Therefore, while those with a strongly favorable disposition toward Trump are unsurprisingly disinclined to find the parody representations featured in this study to be (a) funny/hopeful and (b) worthy of sharing, it

seems evident that individuals with less extreme feelings toward Trump are susceptible to a parody exposure effect in this regard.

In considering the significance of the WTS outcome—designed to help illuminate the diffusion of comedy-based representations of politics—it should be recognized that political media's influence extends beyond matters of attitude change and persuasion. Attitude reinforcement and identity formation/expression also represent meaningful effects of political media (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). In positioning WTS as an outcome variable, this study helps to illuminate mechanisms of attitude reinforcement (e.g., further solidifying negative perceptions about Trump) and the dynamics that contribute to sparking political discussion—an important democratic outcome in itself.

It is notable that the study was conducted within the context of the closing weeks of a hotly contested election—shortly after the first presidential debate. In this respect, the stimuli and timing of the study contribute to the study's ecological validity. While this work focuses on a singular case, and it is recognized that political figures are not always quite as polarizing as Trump and Clinton, it is expected that the mechanisms of influence showcased here are relevant to other disparagement-heavy political humor messages within and beyond the United States context. Certainly, future research should further probe the boundary conditions of these findings. It is also important to acknowledge that while the current study revealed positive emotions to be meaningful antecedents that motivate a willingness to share, not all parody/satire may inspire hope in the same way that mirth is consistently elicited. While hope/enthusiasm are here posited to commonly be elicited by political humor that depicts a clear loser and winner, the role of hope should be carefully contextualized in research of this nature. On a similar note, it should be recognized that the conceptual model featured in this study does not (nor is it intended to) fully capture the range and nature of the factors that can propel sharing behavior.

As with any research effort, there are limitations to consider. First, while more ideal than a fairly homogenous student sample, an MTurk sample—in which respondents select the surveys to take—is not a representative or random sample of Americans. Of note, the MTurk sample was liberal leaning, which is not an anomaly for MTurk (Clifford, Jewel, & Waggoner, 2015), and a bit more interested in politics—which again, is not an anomaly for politically oriented surveys (Groves, Presser, & Dipko, 2004). Even so, Clifford et al. (2015) argue that MTurk research on political ideology is not so different than representative sampling. It is also important to contextualize this study's focus on individual-level psychological processes; it does not address the meaningful role of algorithms and other facets of social media's infrastructure in shaping the spread of debate humor. In addition, the dependent variable of this study—WTS—was based on hypothetical, self-reported behavioral intentions. While behavioral intentions tend to strongly predict actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991), hypothetical intent and behavior are nonetheless distinct. Future work in this area would benefit by examining actual behavior, whether as simulated in a lab or in a field setting. Finally, another limitation of the WTS measure is that it does not directly represent how humor sharing can be motivated by a desire for connection with others—an underlying rationale articulated in this article. Notably, however, the measure does positively correlate ($r = .37$, $p < .001$) with the social cohesion dimension of the Affinity for Political Humor scale (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011), suggesting that the WTS measure is indeed relevant to social connection-based motivations.

There is little doubt that political and social polarization represents an ongoing challenge in many regions of the world (World Economic Forum, 2017). As this research highlights, patterns of polarization are also evident relative to political humor. It is evident that debate humor is most commonly circulated by those who have unfavorable feelings toward the main target of the humor. While *SNL*'s political parody—and political humor of a similar ilk—may at times encourage healthy skepticism and rational debate (Jones, 2015), as one of the most visible political parody venues during U.S. election seasons, *SNL* may also contribute to political polarization. Given the challenges presented by political divisions, the ubiquity of political parody representations, and the room for more understanding of how the diffusion of political humor contributes to the health of democracies, future political entertainment research should continue to integrate diverse theoretical approaches and investigate the conditions under which political information-sharing behaviors both flounder and flourish.

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