

“That Show Really Spoke to Me!”: The Effects of Compatible Psychological Needs and Talk Show Host Style on Audience Activity

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One recent change in the U.S. media landscape is the shift toward specialized audiences consuming specialized news content. With this trend as a backdrop, this study argues that viewers of a news talk show are more involved with the show’s content when the style of the show is compatible with their psychological needs. This proposition is tested across two instances of compatibility: a host promoting critical debate and viewers with a high need for cognition, and a host promoting humorous commentary and viewers with a high need for humor. Results from an experimental design support the compatibility argument. When compatibility occurred, respondents perceived the program as more relevant, which in turn increased cognitive and behavioral activity regarding the program’s content.

Keywords: news audiences, uses and gratifications, experiment, need for cognition, need for humor

The U.S. news landscape has undergone remarkable changes in the past 15 years. Chief among them is the availability of a wide variety of news options. Television viewers, for example, now choose from competing sources like network news, public broadcasting, cable news, and even entertainment sources featuring information on current events. This shift toward increased news choice poses significant challenges to notions of a mass news audience and powerful news effects. Words like “niche,” “fragmented,” and “polarized” describe news audiences (Stroud, 2010; Webster, 2014), and effects are described as “minimal” and “differential” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Xenos & Moy, 2007). The linchpin

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connecting these conceptual shifts is the increased role of individual differences in driving media exposure and effects. It is not that all television news viewers watch Fox News, or that all who watch are prone to the same effects (Edgerly, 2015a), but rather that exposure and effects are explained by myriad factors at the level of both the individual (e.g., age, partisanship, media preferences, personality traits) and content (e.g., degree of incivility, negativity, close-up camera shots), as well as the interaction of the two. This study positions itself at the heart of this changing news landscape by developing a framework highlighting the role of one type of individual difference—the psychological needs of viewers—to reveal the effects of different styles of talk shows.

News talk shows form a compelling backdrop for investigation, as they increasingly populate the media environment with various styles. Although the format is not novel—news talk shows have been part of the television landscape since the 1950s—the types of talk shows containing public affairs information have expanded to include diverse styles of talk show hosts (Baym, 2013; Hoffman, 2013). Early talk shows featured a journalist–host appearing with a panel of experts and news figures to discuss politics. This model is still visible on many Sunday morning news programs (e.g., *Meet The Press*, *Washington Week*), but increased media competition have driven producers to experiment with new talk show models, both on television and online. One model gaining popularity infuses humor with current events information (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*). These shows' hosts are largely not journalists by trade (most are comedians or actors), yet they are vital sources of news and political information for many people ("Cable Leads the Pack," 2012) and illustrate the widening space where politically relevant information can be found.

In building an analytic framework for news talk shows, we took inspiration from uses and gratifications (U&G), a foundational framework of media exposure. U&G is a fitting perspective for explaining the nature of news effects in the high-choice media age because it emphasizes how audiences approach news and how this approach colors news effects (Ruggiero, 2000). We drew on this framework to establish a link between different styles of talk shows and the psychological needs that influence their effects. We combined this U&G approach with more recent political entertainment media research indicating mixed findings as to whether humor in news contexts produces democratically positive effects. In what follows, we argue that in the high-choice news landscape, individuals are able to consume news programming that is compatible with their orientations. While recent research has largely focused on the compatibility between political predispositions and news viewing (Stroud, 2010), we adopt a complementary approach by examining the compatibility between two psychological needs (i.e., need for cognition and need for humor) and corresponding talk show host styles (i.e., correspondent host and comic host). In doing so, we propose a "compatibility argument": when psychological needs and host style are compatible, audiences will increase activity with the talk show program in the form of greater information recognition and willingness to take action.

Literature Review

The Post-Broadcast News Landscape

Emerging styles. In the high-choice environment, media organizations compete to capture and maintain a substantial audience. One way to accomplish this is to create products “designed with a particular audience in mind, based on politics, religion, lifestyle, cultural preference, or some other principle” (McQuail, 1997, p. 56). For producers, this specialization makes media products competitive in an increasingly noisy environment. For audiences, it enables the selection of media products that better suit particular needs.

The development of distinct news brands is evidence of media specialization. The news brand of Fox News, for example, is perceived to possess “toughness,” whereas the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is seen as “sincere” (Baek, Kim, & Martin, 2010). Along these lines, news anchors and talk show hosts play important roles in reinforcing and implementing brand positions (Baym, 2013; Hoffman, 2013). Bill O’Reilly’s hosting style conveys the toughness of Fox News; similarly, Gwen Ifill’s hosting style reflects PBS’s sincerity. A more recent stylistic addition to the news landscape involves current events information infused with a more playful, humorous approach (Baym, 2010). Programs such as *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* have found ratings success by cultivating their own distinct brand of humorous news (“Cable Leads the Pack,” 2012). From a media market standpoint, the use of humor in news programs is a result of producers experimenting with innovative ways to attract new audience segments in an increasingly crowded media environment. From the audience reception standpoint, humor in news programming has mixed effects.

Effects on audiences. On one hand, combining humor with current events information can produce negative or null effects. In terms of cognitive processing of information, humor in news programming can act as a distractor, reducing effortful processing of information and lowering the level of argument scrutiny (Young, 2008). Audiences can perceive humor as a “discounting cue” indicating that deep elaboration of information is not needed (LaMarre, Landreville, Young, & Gilkerson, 2014; Nabi, Moyer-Guse, & Byrne, 2007). Evidence of limited and superficial learning from humor in news talk shows supports these possibilities (Baek & Wojcieszak, 2009). There is also reason to question whether humorous news programming can spur democratic action. Baumgartner and Morris (2010) found that among young adults, traditional news exposure was positively related to voting, whereas exposure to humorous talk shows was unrelated. Other studies, however, paint a less bleak picture, finding that a talk show format infused with humor can help audiences learn about public affairs (Hardy, Gottfried, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2014; Parkin, 2010). The anticipation of humor can motivate audiences to pay closer attention—they want the payoff of understanding the humor—resulting in higher information retention and recall (Young, 2008; Becker, 2013). Exposure to humorous news programming has also been positively related to various forms of online participation (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010).

What drives these inconsistent findings? One answer concerns the particular *content* of talk shows. Learning effects occur because information mixed with humor resonates with audiences (resulting in increased learning), or fails to occur because humorous content indicates there is no need to pay

attention (resulting in decreased learning). The array of findings, however, suggests a more complicated process is at work: The effects of these programs could depend on *individual* characteristics. Past work has found that politically uninterested or less educated individuals are more affected by the use of humor in news programming (Baek & Wojcieszak, 2009; Feldman, 2013). We believe it is a combination of these explanations that warrants closer attention. First, we argue that psychological trait differences should cause some individuals to be more affected by traditional or humorous talk shows than others. Second, we outline how specific individuals respond to specific styles of news. That is, we aim to understand the democratic implications of different styles of news talk shows by exploring the active role audiences play in processing media content.

Considering Psychological Traits

In examining the role of psychological traits in guiding media effects, U&G is a natural starting point. A wealth of scholarly research over the past 60 years has adopted a U&G framework to explain media exposure patterns and effects (Ruggiero, 2000). This framework emphasizes the antecedents of media exposure, suggesting that the motivations for media use and resulting exposure patterns contribute to individual differences in effects.

A hallmark of U&G research is the link between individuals' psychological needs and media selection (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). In an early attempt to understand the relationship between individual needs and specific uses of media, Katz, Haas, and Gurevitch (1973) identified categories of media-related needs (cognitive, affective, integrative, contact, and escape) and their relationship to media selection. Although Katz and colleagues based their list of needs on the functions of the mass media, they noted that "media-related needs are not, by and large, generated by the media. Most predate the emergence of the media and, properly, ought to be viewed within the wider range of human needs" (Katz et al., 1973, p. 180). Scholars have taken heed and operationalized media needs in terms of personality traits and lifestyle types (Ruggiero, 2000).

While much U&G research focuses on the relationship between individual needs and media selection, contemporary studies have expanded to consider the consequences of media use (David, 2009; Feldman, 2013). As Oliver (2002) explained, "because many individual difference measures can be conceptualized as 'needs' or 'affinities,' it follows that stimuli that address or fulfill needs should be more frequently sought after and enjoyed" (p. 508). Perse (1992) demonstrated that need for cognition (NFC)—a relatively stable psychological trait described as the "tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking" (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982, p. 116)—was related to increased attentiveness to news. For individuals with an affinity for complex thinking, news programs (c. the late 1980s) provided information in a manner that satisfied this need and resulted in increased attention. Two decades later, Liu and Eveland (2005) found that effects of newspaper exposure on knowledge depended on a person's NFC level. Interestingly, they found no relationships among *general* television news exposure, NFC, and knowledge. The authors suggested that in the post-broadcast-media environment, the relationship between NFC and news was weakened because not all sources of television news were mentally stimulating enough for individuals with high NFC. This implies that NFC does not increase news exposure and attention generally; rather, it increases selective exposure and attention to specific news formats or styles that appeal to a proclivity for

complex thinking. Lee (2013) recently made this point, criticizing some U&G studies for treating news as “a universal product without taking different genres (e.g., ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ news) into consideration” (p. 302). As such, the changed volume of variety and choice in news sources necessitates looking beyond NFC to understand the effects of different types of news content.

The emergence and popularity of humor in news talk shows highlights the need to consider a wider range of dispositional traits, such as the need for humor (NFH; Cline, Altsech, & Kellaris, 2003). Similar to NFC, NFH captures the extent to which a person engages in and enjoys humor in daily life. In the field of advertising, differences in NFH have been shown to influence processing. For example, people with low NFH demonstrated lower levels of information recall after exposure to a humorous advertisement than did people with high NFH (Kellaris & Cline, 2007). Given the current news environment and the recent trend of news specialization, we expect styles of programming to appeal to different audience motivations and gratify distinct psychological needs. We position our argument about the contingent nature of news effects within the space where audiences are exposed to specifically styled news programming that matches their needs.

The Compatibility Argument

We propose a “compatibility argument” for understanding news talk show effects. In the broadcast era, news was generally presented in a uniform manner (Baym, 2010). Viewers had few alternatives if this presentation was incompatible with their preferences. In the current media environment, producers increasingly target narrow audiences with more diverse and specialized programming (McQuail, 1997). For news viewers, this translates into more opportunity for exposure to information presented in a style compatible with their preferences. As such, we expected the effects of two different news talk show host styles to be contingent on their compatibility with audience needs. We expected a traditional “correspondent” host style to be compatible with NFC and the “comic” host style to be compatible with NFH. In terms of observing and understanding effects, the U&G framework suggests that when host–need compatibility exist, a talk show’s content will be seen as more relevant to audience goals, prompting viewers to attend to the program more readily and actively than they would without this compatibility.

To formally model this process, we built on Levy and Windahl’s (1984) typology of audience activity. Defined broadly within audience research, activity is the work audiences do in selecting and responding to media experiences (Napoli, 2010). To explicate the concept, Levy and Windahl proposed two orthogonal dimensions of audience activity. The first outlines three orientations audiences can display toward media—selectivity, cognitive involvement, and behavioral utility. Whereas many studies adopting a U&G approach have focused on the first form of activity (e.g., selective exposure patterns), we point to the latter two’s importance in developing rigorous models of audience behavior. As such, we address Napoli’s (2010) call for research to move beyond the limited “watching as working” definition of activity. The second typology dimension considers when activity can occur—before, during, or after exposure. In the current study, we tested the compatibility argument on two types of activity: compatibility’s influence on cognitive involvement during and immediately after exposure, and its influence on behavioral utility after exposure (Figure 1).

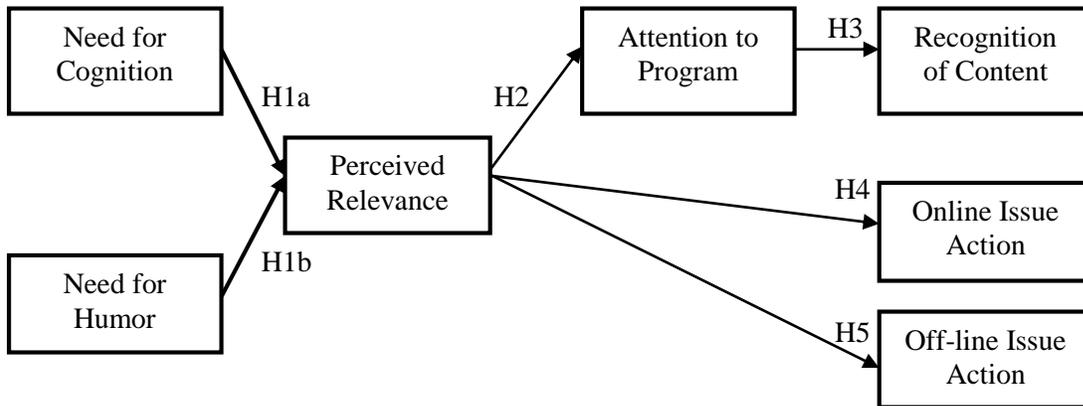


Figure 1. Theorized Path Model Relating Psychological Needs to Audience Activity.

Note. H1a is hypothesized in the correspondent host style condition, and H1b is hypothesized in the comic host style condition. The model is tested simultaneously across both hosting conditions.

We began by hypothesizing that individuals viewing a host style that is compatible with their needs would see the program as more relevant to them. This prediction was based on U&G research arguing that information matching people's predispositions better fulfills their goals for media use, making this match an important precondition for relevance (Cooper, Burgoon, & Roter, 2001; Katz et al., 1973; Levy & Windahl, 1984). As such, this relationship is central to the compatibility argument. For all hypotheses testing the compatibility argument, we expected a significant relationship only between the compatible need and the outcome of interest (e.g., perceived relevance of content).

H1: When the host adopts a correspondent style, need for cognition (NFC) will relate to greater perceived relevance (a), whereas when the host adopts a comic style, need for humor (NFH) will relate to greater perceived relevance (b).

We expected this important step—compatibility between host style and audience needs relating to greater perceived relevance of the program content—to lay the foreground of our model. That is, we expected perceived relevance to increase cognitive involvement in the program in turn. Levy and Windahl (1984) defined involvement as a "mental or psychological process" (p. 55) where audiences engage in information processing and meaning construction (see Rubin & Perse, 1987 for a similar definition). The authors distinguished between involvement taking place during exposure and after. *During-exposure* involvement encompasses how much attention audiences pay to the media content; *after-exposure* involvement relates to retention and reflection on media content. Our model establishes the relationship between both forms. These predictions were based on past work illustrating perceived relevance as a precursor to message scrutiny and attention (Batra & Ray, 1986; Petty & Wegener, 1998), and message attention as a precursor to information storage and retrieval (Gantz, 1978; Rubin & Perse, 1987).

H2: Perceived relevance will relate to greater attention to the program.

H3: Attention to the program will relate to greater recognition of the program content.

Additionally, we moved beyond cognitive involvement to examine the compatibility argument in the context of *after-exposure* behavioral utility. Levy and Windahl (1984) defined the audience activity of "utility" as the extent to which a communicated message infiltrates some aspect of an individual's social or political life (see Rubin & Perse, 1987 for a similar definition of behavioral involvement). For example, after-exposure activity could entail talking with friends about the topic of a media message or deciding to further one's knowledge and engagement with the topic. The key feature of this type of activity is the intention of future action. To modernize the operationalization of behavioral utility, we included two contexts where audiences have the opportunity to take action: online and off-line. Recent research in the area of political participation has found that although these concepts are related, they are distinct areas for action and should be measured separately (gil de Zuñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010). In building a test of the compatibility argument, we again predicted that perceived relevance would act as a precursor to audience activity. We based this prediction on past research demonstrating the importance of relevance in spurring action (Price, David, Goldthorpe, Roth, & Cappella, 2006). For example, Spielmann and Richard (2013) found that the perceived relevance of an advertising message directly influenced behavioral intentions, but other variables related to exposure, like attention and reflection, did not. The next sets of hypotheses predict a direct relationship between perceived relevance and after-exposure activity.

H4: Perceived relevance will relate to greater willingness to take action online.

H5: Perceived relevance will relate to greater willingness to take action off-line.

The direct paths provide the foundation for testing the *indirect* relationships between psychological needs and audience activity outcomes across the two host styles. Regarding cognitive involvement, Batra and Ray (1986) found that involvement occurs only after media messages are deemed relevant. As such, the first prediction is the indirect paths leading, by way of perceived relevance, to increased attention to the program. The second is the indirect paths, by way of perceived relevance and increased attention, to increased recognition of program content.

H6: When the host adopts a correspondent style, need for cognition (NFC) will indirectly relate to greater attention through perceived relevance (a), whereas when the host adopts a comic style, need for humor (NFH) will indirectly relate to greater attention through perceived relevance (b).

H7: When the host adopts a correspondent style, need for cognition (NFC) will indirectly relate to greater recognition through both perceived relevance and attention (a), whereas when the host adopts a comic style, need for humor (NFH) will indirectly relate to greater recognition through both perceived relevance and attention (b).

Regarding behavioral utility, we drew on the above line of reasoning to predict that utility would

also occur only after media messages were deemed relevant. Thus, the first prediction is the indirect paths, by way of perceived relevance, to online issue action. The second is the indirect paths, by way of perceived relevance, to off-line issue action.

H8: When the host adopts a correspondent style, need for cognition (NFC) will indirectly relate to greater online issue action through perceived relevance (a), whereas when the host adopts a comic style, need for humor (NFH) will indirectly relate to greater online issue action through perceived relevance (b).

H9: When the host adopts a correspondent style, need for cognition (NFC) will indirectly relate to greater off-line issue action through perceived relevance (a), whereas when the host adopts a comic style, need for humor (NFH) will indirectly lead to greater off-line issue action through perceived relevance (b).

Method

Participants

The data in this study were collected online over a one-week period during December 2013 using an experimental design. Respondents were recruited from the crowdsourcing website Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which enabled the use of an adult sample that was not exclusively college undergraduates.² Recruitment was restricted to individuals living in the United States. A total of 500 respondents participated in this experiment; however, we report on only a subset of these ($n = 339$).³ After elimination of an additional 13 participants who failed quality control measures,⁴ the final sample included 326 respondents.

Respondents in the final sample were between 18 and 74 years old ($M = 35.58$, $SD = 12.67$). Males made up 51%, 82% were White, the median education was "some college," and the median annual income was "\$30,000 to under \$40,000." On a 7-point scale from "strong Democrat" to "strong Republican," half identified at least to some degree as Democrats, while 29% identified as Independents and 21% identified as Republicans.

Procedure

² For more information about the reliability of using MTurk for social science experiments, see Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling (2011).

³ This study drew from a larger three-cell experimental design. The third condition featured an aggressive hosting style, however, it failed its manipulation check, which ruled out examining it in a compatibility context. The larger study proceeded, focusing on the two experiences of compatibility developed and tested in this article.

⁴ Immediately following the video stimulus, respondents were asked if they could see and hear the video; those who indicated they were unable to do either were removed from the sample ($n = 8$). Also removed were respondents who failed both questionnaire attention checks ($n = 5$): a pretest item asked respondents to identify the current U.S. president (99.4% answered correctly), and a post-test item instructed respondents to mark a specific answer to show they were paying attention to the questionnaire (93% correctly answered).

After completing the pretest questionnaire, respondents were randomly assigned to watch a video showing one of the host-style manipulations (either the correspondent or comic). Consistent across both video conditions, respondents viewed a simulated news talk show in which a host questioned two pundits about their positions on government strategies intended to address climate change. Respondents were told the YouTube video was from a local public-access talk show. Following exposure to the manipulation, respondents completed the post-test questionnaire, and upon completion of the study were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Manipulation

The video scripts were designed to mirror the format of many current talk show programs. In both conditions, the same host began with a short introduction of the topic and each guest, questioned the guests on their opinions, moderated the discussion in an ideologically neutral manner, and closed the segment with a transition to a commercial break. Efforts made to construct a realistic talk show included hiring professional actors to play the roles of the host and two guests, the use of a television studio and green screen technology, and the help of an experienced director and video editor.

Host style in the simulated talk show was manipulated by altering the manner in which the host interacted with the guests.⁵ In the "correspondent" condition, the host asked questions conducive to a high-quality exchange, in a style similar to someone like PBS's Gwen Ifill. For example, the correspondent host probed for additional information and offered clarification of the guests' positions (e.g., "So I think you're saying corporations can be a key part of the solution"). Additionally, the correspondent host kept a consistent, calm vocal tone throughout the talk show segment. Conversely, in the "comic" condition, the same actor used humor in his questioning of the guests. For example, he offered quips about the guests' arguments in self-referential asides similar to the style of Jon Stewart (e.g., "So the folks that got us into this mess are supposed to get us out of it? Okay . . . like that could fail. . ."). In this condition, the host altered his vocal inflection and displayed animated facial expressions while making jokes. It is important to note that all facts remained constant across conditions and the run time was roughly equivalent, ranging from 227 seconds for the correspondent host condition to 241 seconds for the comic host condition. The use of tightly controlled stimuli enabled the isolation of the distinct host styles, while other factors that may have conditioned observed effects, such as context or prior expectations of the host, were kept constant (Parkin, 2010).

Manipulation checks confirmed that respondents perceived the correspondent and comic host styles in the intended way. The correspondent host was seen as significantly more professional ($M = 5.93$, $SD = 1.06$) than the comic host ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.59$); $t(323) = 16.42$, $p \leq .001$, while the comic host was seen as significantly more humorous ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 1.31$) than the correspondent host ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.49$); $t(323) = 20.77$, $p \leq .001$.

Measures

⁵ Transcripts and videos of host manipulations are available at the website <https://www.sites.google.com/site/sedgerly/research/compatibility>

Descriptive statistics, scale reliability estimates, and zero order correlations among all variables are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Scale Reliability Estimates, and Correlations Among Modeled Variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>a</i>	Zero Order Correlations						
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 NFC	4.76	1.29	0.84	--	0.31 ***	0.33 ***	0.32 ***	0.30 ***	0.12	0.21 **
2 NFH	5.83	0.95	0.86	0.22 **	--	0.22 **	0.30 ***	0.23 **	0.07	0.23 **
3 Perceived relevance	5.14	1.70	--	0.10	0.21 **	--	0.28 ***	0.15 †	0.38 ***	0.55 ***
4 Attention	4.22	0.75	--	0.20 *	-0.01	0.31 ***	--	0.18 *	0.14 †	0.19 *
5 Recognition	3.69	1.69	0.65	0.13	0.18 *	0.09	0.09	--	-0.14 †	-0.03
6 Online issue action	3.72	1.69	0.91	0.17 *	-0.02	0.27 **	0.14 †	-0.00	--	0.70 ***
7 Off-line issue action	4.51	1.26	0.87	0.30 ***	0.09	0.33 ***	0.25 **	0.14 †	0.54 ***	--

† $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. Coefficients above the diagonal represent correlations among variables for participants in the correspondent host condition; coefficients below the diagonal represent correlations among variables for participants in the comic host condition.

Psychological needs. Five pretest items were used to measure NFC (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Respondents rated their agreement with five statements: "I prefer complex to simple problems," "I prefer to do something that challenges my thinking abilities rather than something that requires little thought," "Thinking long and for a long time about something gives me little satisfaction" (reverse-coded), "I don't like to have to do a lot of thinking" (reverse-coded), and "I try to avoid situations that require a lot of in-depth thinking about something" (reverse-coded). Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Four items measured NFH. These items were adapted from multiple scales (Cline et al., 2003; Thorson & Powell, 1993). Respondents were asked how much they agreed with the following statements: "I appreciate those who generate humor," "I like a good joke," "Things go better with humor," and "I don't like to be around people who tell jokes or funny stories" (reverse-coded). Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Perceived video relevance. Respondents indicated the relevance of the video content on a scale ranging from 1 (*irrelevant*) to 7 (*relevant*).

Cognitive involvement. Two types of cognitive involvement with the video content were measured. First, during-exposure attention was measured according to participants' responses to the

question, "How much did you concentrate on the video?" This item was adapted from Saloman and Leigh's (1984) concept of the amount of invested effort. Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*a great deal*) (also see Feldman, 2013).

A second measure of cognitive involvement was respondents' after-exposure ability to correctly identify the source of a provided statement from the video. Respondents were given six statements taken from content in the stimulus that was consistent across conditions and asked to indicate the source of each. For example, respondents were asked to attribute the statement "Consumers are demanding fuel-efficient cars" to its speaker. Answer options included: "The host," "Paul," "Allen," and "No one." To aid respondents, visual stills appeared next to the names of the three talk show participants. Correct answers received a score of 1; incorrect answers received a score of 0. Scores from the six statements were summed to create an overall source identification score.

Behavioral utility. We examined two behavioral utility outcomes of online and off-line issue action. Online issue action was measured by asking respondents how likely they were to engage in the following four activities on social media websites: share their opinion about climate change, post a link to information about climate change, comment or like a post about climate change, and join or follow a group to see more posts about climate change. Off-line issue action was measured by asking respondents how likely they were to engage in the following seven activities: talk about climate change with those who agree, talk about it with those who disagree, seek out more information about climate change, ask others where they stand on climate change, pay attention to news about climate change, contact a public official about climate change, and try to persuade others about climate change. Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). Exploratory factor analysis using promax (an oblique rotation method to allow the factors to correlate) confirmed the presence of two factors with eigenvalues over 1.00 corresponding to online and off-line issue action.⁶

Results

Multigroup structural equation modeling using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors was conducted in Mplus to test the hypotheses derived from our compatibility argument. The paths from NFC and NFH to perceived relevance were free to vary across the correspondent and comic host conditions. In this way, it was possible to examine how significance of the direct (H1) and indirect paths (H6–H9) differed across the two conditions. All other paths were constrained to be equal across the

⁶ Confirmatory factor analysis also provided support for a two-factor solution; however, modification indices revealed the presence of two cross-loading items at greater than 0.30. We respecified the model to exclude the highest cross-loading item ("likelihood of contacting a public official about climate change"), which did not reveal any other cross loaders. This two-factor model ($\chi^2 = 117.750$, $df = 34$, $p < .05$; $\chi^2/df = 3.463$; RMSEA = 0.087, 90% CI [0.070, 0.104]; CFI = 0.938) was then compared to a model in which all issue action items were collapsed into a single factor ($\chi^2 = 342.353$, $df = 35$, $p < .05$; $\chi^2/df = 9.782$; RMSEA = 0.164, 90% CI [0.149, 0.180]; CFI = 0.772). Results of the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test provided support for the more complex two-factor model of behavioral utility, $\Delta\chi^2 = 85.136$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$.

two conditions since we had no reason to expect that the relationships among perceived relevance, attention, and recognition, or those among perceived relevance and online and off-line issue action, would differ according to host style. Table 2 reports the direct paths in the measurement and structural parts of the model as well as R^2 for all endogenous variables, and Table 3 reports the indirect paths across the correspondent and comic host conditions.

Results of Direct Paths

As expected, the path from NFC to perceived relevance of the program content was significant in the correspondent host condition but not in comic host condition, whereas the path from NFH to perceived relevance was significant in the comic host condition but not in the correspondent host condition (see Table 2). These results provide support for H1a and b. Moreover, the results of a Wald test showed that the path from NFC to perceived relevance was significantly stronger in the correspondent host condition than in the comic host condition (Wald $\chi^2 = 4.21$, $p \leq .05$). This is evidence of a significant interaction between NFC and host style. However, this was not the case for the path from NFH to perceived relevance (Wald $\chi^2 = 0.19$, ns).

As for the hypothesized relationships among endogenous variables, as expected, the paths from perceived relevance to attention to the program, and from attention to source recognition were significant, providing support for H2 and H3. Additionally, the paths from perceived relevance to online and off-line issue action were significant, supporting H4 and H5.

Table 2. Maximum Likelihood Estimates for the Model Relating Psychological Needs to Audience Activity.

	Correspondent Host		Comic Host	
	Est. (SE)	Std. Est.	Est. (SE)	Std. Est.
Measurement model				
NFC by:				
Cognition 1	1.00 (0.00)	0.67 ***	1.00 (0.00)	0.72 ***
Cognition 2	0.98 (0.06)	0.67 ***	0.98 (0.06)	0.83 ***
Cognition 3	0.74 (0.12)	0.45 ***	0.74 (0.12)	0.55 ***
Cognition 4	1.22 (0.15)	0.82 ***	1.22 (0.15)	0.90 ***
Cognition 5	1.11 (0.15)	0.72 ***	1.11 (0.15)	0.86 ***
NFH by:				
Humor 1	1.00 (0.00)	0.81 ***	1.00 (0.00)	0.85 ***
Humor 2	1.01 (0.08)	0.65 ***	1.01 (0.08)	0.80 ***
Humor 3	0.97 (0.08)	0.72 ***	0.97 (0.08)	0.82 ***
Humor 4	1.13 (0.11)	0.66 ***	1.13 (0.11)	0.78 ***
Online issue action by:				
Online 1	1.00 (0.00)	0.89 ***	1.00 (0.00)	0.83 ***
Online 2	0.97 (0.05)	0.85 ***	0.97 (0.05)	0.77 ***
Online 3	0.95 (0.05)	0.81 ***	0.95 (0.05)	0.83 ***

Online 4	1.11 (0.04)	0.95 ***	1.11 (0.04)	0.90 ***
Off-line issue action by:				
Off-line 1	1.00 (0.00)	0.78 ***	1.00 (0.00)	0.78 ***
Off-line 2	1.03 (0.07)	0.76 ***	1.03 (0.07)	0.77 ***
Off-line 3	1.02 (0.09)	0.72 ***	1.02 (0.09)	0.67 ***
Off-line 4	0.98 (0.10)	0.63 ***	0.98 (0.10)	0.73 ***
Off-line 5	0.85 (0.08)	0.69 ***	0.85 (0.08)	0.68 ***
Off-line 6	0.99 (0.09)	0.68 ***	0.99 (0.09)	0.69 ***
Structural model				
Perceived relevance on:				
NFC	0.47 (0.15)	0.31 **	0.06 (0.13)	0.05
NFH	0.23 (0.19)	0.12	0.34 (0.17)	0.19 *
Attention on:				
Perceived relevance	0.13 (0.03)	0.30 ***	0.13 (0.03)	0.28 ***
Recognition on:				
Attention	0.31 (0.11)	0.14 **	0.31 (0.11)	0.15 **
Online issue action on:				
Perceived relevance	0.33 (0.05)	0.33 ***	0.33 (0.05)	0.36 ***
Off-line issue action on:				
Perceived relevance	0.34 (0.05)	0.49 ***	0.34 (0.05)	0.47 ***
NFC with:				
NFH	0.36 (0.11)	0.38 ***	0.37 (0.12)	0.29 ***
Recognition with:				
Online issue action	-0.57 (0.21)	-0.22 **	-0.03 (0.21)	-0.01
Off-line issue action	-0.18 (0.14)	-0.11	0.20 (0.17)	0.11
Online issue behavior with:				
Off-line issue behavior	1.04 (0.18)	0.67 ***	0.93 (0.17)	0.58 ***
R²				
Perceived relevance	0.14 (0.07) *		0.05 (0.03)	
Attention	0.09 (0.03) **		0.08 (0.03) *	
Recognition	0.02 (0.01)		0.02 (0.02)	
Online issue action	0.11 (0.04) **		0.13 (0.04) **	
Off-line issue action	0.24 (0.06) ***		0.22 (0.05) ***	

† $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. Only the paths from the two psychological needs to perceived relevance were free to vary across the two host conditions. All other paths were constrained to be equal across conditions. Model parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors. Model fit: Satorra-Bentler scaled $\chi^2 = 774.543$, $df = 438$, $p < .05$; RMSEA = 0.069, 90% CI [0.061, 0.077]; CFI = 0.884.

Results of Indirect Paths

Turning to Table 3, as expected, the indirect path from NFC to attention to the program through perceived relevance of program content was significant in the correspondent host condition but not in the comic host condition. In contrast, the indirect path from NFH to attention through perceived relevance was significant in the comic host condition but not in the correspondent host condition. These results provide support for H6a and b. Also, the indirect path from NFC to source recognition through perceived relevance and attention was marginally significant in the correspondent host condition but not in the comic host condition. In contrast, the indirect path from NFH to recognition through perceived relevance and attention was marginally significant in the comic host condition but not in the correspondent host condition. These results support H7a and b; although these paths only crossed the $p \leq .1$ threshold.

Also as expected, the indirect paths from NFC to both online and off-line issue action through perceived relevance were significant in the correspondent host condition but not in the comic host condition. In contrast, the indirect paths from NFH to both online and off-line issue action through perceived relevance were significant in the comic host condition but not in the correspondent host condition. These results support H8a and b and H9a and b.

Table 3. Indirect Paths for the Model Relating Psychological Needs to Audience Activity.

	Correspondent Host			Comic Host		
	<i>Est. (SE)</i>	<i>Std. Est.</i>		<i>Est. (SE)</i>	<i>Std. Est.</i>	
NFC to attention:						
Perceived relevance	0.06 (0.03)	0.09	*	0.01 (0.02)	0.01	
NFC to recognition:						
Perceived relevance, attention	0.02 (0.01)	0.01	†	0.00 (0.01)	0.00	
NFC to online issue action:						
Perceived relevance	0.15 (0.05)	0.10	**	0.02 (0.04)	0.02	
NFC to off-line issue action:						
Perceived relevance	0.16 (0.06)	0.16	**	0.02 (0.05)	0.02	
NFH to attention:						
Perceived relevance	0.03 (0.03)	0.03		0.05 (0.02)	0.06	*
NFH to recognition:						
Perceived relevance, attention	0.01 (0.01)	0.01		0.01 (0.01)	0.01	†
NFH to online issue action:						
Perceived relevance	0.07 (0.06)	0.04		0.11 (0.06)	0.07	*
NFH to off-line issue action:						
Perceived relevance	0.08 (0.06)	0.06		0.12 (0.06)	0.09	*

† $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. Model parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors.

Discussion

The media landscape has undergone remarkable change over the past decade. News audiences have increased autonomy to choose from an array of diverse media content mixing public affairs and current events information in various ways. This study aimed to develop a model of news talk show effects that better reflects recent shifts in the news landscape by considering the role of individual differences in predicting media effects. In doing so, it showed that compatibility between audience needs and host style promotes increased audience activity during and after exposure to the program. These results have significant implications for future research and theory building.

First, as the line between news and entertainment blurs (Chadwick, 2013; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), the ways of presenting current events information increase. The growing field of political entertainment research attests to this shift (Baym, 2013; Becker, 2013; Feldman, 2013). Scholars interested in the media's influence on democratic outcomes such as political knowledge and participation are now looking beyond traditional news content toward a diversity of fictional, reality, and talk show programming (Hardy et al., 2014; Lee, 2013; Parkin, 2010). The current study extended this research to examine how different host styles in talk shows, each conveying the same tightly controlled pieces of information, impacted audience activity depending on their match with audience needs. As clear content distinctions between "news" and "entertainment" no longer prevail in the contemporary media environment (Edgerly, 2015b; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), we believe a more useful distinction resides in stylistic differences in the ways media combine news and entertainment content.

Second, given these shifts in how media content and audiences are conceptualized, this study investigated the conditions and processes through which audiences demonstrate activity. Results indicated strong, consistent support for the compatibility argument and the role of perceived relevance in channeling audience activity. In other words, when audiences encountered media offerings compatible with their psychological needs, they perceived them as more relevant. This was true of both high-NFC individuals in the correspondent talk show host condition and high-NFH individuals in the comic talk show host condition. Perceptions of program relevance facilitated greater attention to the program and in turn moderately greater recognition of its content, as well as greater willingness to take action online and off-line.

Third, in today's high-choice media environment, audience activity is an increasingly important and multidimensional concept for understanding media uses and effects. Broadly speaking, activity is the "work" audiences do in selecting and responding to media experiences. We followed Napoli's (2008) call to move beyond the limited "watching as working" conception of audience activity to examine audience activity during and after exposure to a simulated talk show, demonstrating compatibility effects for two types of activity—cognitive (involvement) and behavioral (utility). For the former, we gauged activity through attention to the program and recognition of content. For the latter, we gauged activity through traditional off-line issue action as well as the new ways audiences take action digitally online, including but not limited to the ability to create and share content on social media websites and to engage with others online. Research should continue to explore how the technical affordances of media (Webster, 2014) and the audiences who navigate these environments are reshaping the concept of audience activity.

Lastly, support for the compatibility argument suggests a potential pathway for engaging different audiences. Rather than promoting a knowledge and participation gap between those who prefer entertainment over news and those who favor news over entertainment (Prior, 2007), increased media choice may actually build bridges by providing individuals with current events information in a manner that more directly satisfies their psychological needs. Admittedly, we must be cautious in making such a statement based solely on the results from this study. Although results demonstrated the compatibility argument in the significance (or nonsignificance) of the paths from compatible (or incompatible) psychological needs through perceived relevance of the program content, results of the Wald tests revealed a significant interaction only between NFC and talk show host style. This need was related to significantly greater perceived relevance in the correspondent host condition compared to the comic host condition. The same could not be said for NFH.

We can offer several explanations for this. Perhaps the comic host manipulation needed to go further in its degree of compatibility with NFH. Because we manipulated only one aspect of the talk show, host style, several elements of the program remained constant between the two conditions. Altering the visual cues of the talk show (e.g., changing the actors' wardrobe or replacing the studio setting with a couch or table), using a laugh track, and increasing the humorous content would make the program even more compatible with NFH. We also note that humor itself is a multifaceted construct encompassing a range of approaches, including simple jokes, satire or irony, and self-deprecation (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; LaMarre et al., 2014). Therefore, the general NFH measured here may not have perfectly matched our comic host style manipulation. Also worth exploring are the similarities and differences among individuals with high scores for NFC and NFH. Are individuals with high NFH less politically interested, or more cynical about news media? NFC and its relationship to news have been investigated for decades, but we are only just beginning to understand the relationships between other psychological needs, such as NFH, and emerging forms of media containing current events information. Future work should expand this line of research to consider how other psychological needs, personality traits, or aspects of the self-concept condition media effects when compatibility is achieved.

In light of these findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, our respondents had no prior experience with the talk show program they viewed. Effects generated by a popular talk show host with a known distinct hosting style may differ from those reflected in a single-exposure study with an unknown talk show program and unfamiliar host. Future studies should disentangle talk show *content* from audience *expectations* about the talk show content to assess their roles in driving effects. Moreover, this single-exposure experimental design also likely contributed to the relative smallness of effects observed in our model. Even the small effects observed here would be consequential if they accumulated over long-term exposure to a program. Second, the during- and after-exposure audience activity variables were measured at the same time. Although we relied on past theoretical and empirical work to establish the causal ordering of these variables, this was something our design did not allow us to test directly. Third, our model fit indices suggest that we produced only adequate—and in some cases substandard—model fit. We encourage future research that expands on this initial model, in terms of more refined measures, to explore the effects of compatibility with talk show programming. Lastly, this study used MTurk to recruit a nonprobability sample of adults that was not nationally representative, though it was more diverse than the college samples typically used in experimental studies (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

Ultimately, as opportunities for audience agency increase in the new digital media environment, scholars will continue to observe how audience choices—driven by differences in preferences, needs, and goals—contribute to the potential for media effects. These effects are not necessarily minimal, and are enhanced when audiences select content that is compatible with personal predispositions. Thus, a media environment that gives audiences more options to select compatible content offers both opportunities and challenges to scholars studying its effects.

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