

Live From New York, It's Trump on Twitter! The Effect of Engaging With *Saturday Night Live* on Perceptions of Authenticity and the Salience of Trait Ratings

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The research explores what happens when Donald Trump responds critically to *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) via Twitter. Analyzing data from a December 2016 controlled experiment ($N = 325$), the results suggest that being exposed to Trump's social media engagement with SNL enhances perceptions of Trump's celebrity authenticity and encourages viewers to see Trump as more experienced and well informed. The effect of exposure to Trump's social media response on perceptions is significant even after controlling for prior disposition toward Trump. In effect, the research suggests that viewing Trump's social media response encourages viewers to discount the critical satire in the original SNL content, offering viewers an alternative narrative or counterargument. The implications of this disruptive engagement with political comedy are discussed.

Keywords: comedy, authenticity, Twitter, Trump, trait salience

An integral part of the political comedy landscape since the 1970s, *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) has been parodying presidents and major politicians since the Ford administration (Marx, Sienkiewicz, & Becker, 2013; Michaud Wild, 2015). Although media accounts suggest that the comedians impersonating these politicians focus primarily on perfecting the imitation (e.g., mimicking speech patterns and cadence, physical gestures and appearance), it is hard to deny that each in-character presentation also includes some carefully crafted political satire, or a critical take on the target's performance and character (Jones, 2009; Nir, 2016; Smith & Voth, 2002). Recognizing the electoral value of being in on the joke, a diverse array of politicians has publicly embraced their SNL caricatures—from former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to former candidates Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton (Compton, 2016).

Without question, the 2016 election disrupted traditional patterns of political comedy engagement (Garber, 2017). Rather than embrace the attention SNL was showering on him via Alec Baldwin's impersonations, Donald Trump repeatedly took to Twitter in Fall 2016 to protest the comedy portrayal, suggesting that SNL was "unwatchable" and engaging in a "hit job," that Baldwin was "not funny," and that the show itself was "biased" (Politi, 2016). Baldwin continued to appear on SNL during the course of 2017; again, Donald Trump reacted critically via Twitter (Wilstein, 2017).

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For scholars of political communication—and comedy and entertainment in particular—Trump’s Twitter response to *SNL* presents a case that runs counter to prior patterns of engagement with political humor. Before 2016, candidates tried to appear alongside their *SNL* counterparts to celebrate and engage with their fake personas (Parkin, 2014; Poniewozik, 2016). In contrast, as he has now done with so many opponents, Trump chose to condemn and attack Baldwin’s portrayal via social media.

At this critical inflection point in our public political culture, it is important that research consider how audience members have responded to this reactionary, nontraditional engagement with political comedy. Broadly speaking, it is valuable to probe whether Trump’s practice of engaging with rather than embracing comic portrayals has disrupted traditional patterns of political comedy engagement or if this is simply the new normal in the age of Twitter and hybrid media (Chadwick, 2017). More narrowly, was Trump’s Twitter reaction seen as an expression of his inability to be in on the joke or just an authentic display of his combative political character? Did Trump’s social media reaction to *SNL* shift the conversation from a one-sided comic attack to a two-sided 140-character argument? Did Trump’s hostile reaction to *SNL* effectively encourage viewers to discount the critical message present in *SNL*’s satire, offering them an alternative narrative or counterargument?

Drawing on prior research on political comedy exposure and processing and social media engagement, this study attempts to gauge the effect of Trump’s Twitter engagement with *SNL* on perceptions of celebrity authenticity and the salience of key character traits including being honest, experienced, and well informed. Specifically, by analyzing data from a controlled experiment conducted in December 2016 ($N = 325$), the research is able to pinpoint the effect of engaging with *SNL* on Twitter on evaluations of Trump above and beyond exposure to just *SNL* alone, highlighting the disruptive effect that Trump’s social media response has on attitudes and perceptions. The discussion begins with a detailed review of the Trump/*SNL* case before turning to an exploration of celebrity authenticity and the effects of exposure to political comedy on the salience of key character traits.

Trump’s Twitter War With *SNL* and Alec Baldwin

The 2016 election cycle was not the first time that *SNL* relied on a friend of the show to appear as a guest and mimic a major national candidate, and it likely will not be the last (Peifer, 2013). Tina Fey’s caricature of Sarah Palin in 2008 was so impactful that scholars even documented evidence of a “Fey effect,” specifically that exposure to Fey’s parodies of Palin caused voters to express a lower likelihood of voting for the Republican ticket, question McCain’s candidacy, and think more negatively of Palin overall (Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012). Related work found that exposure to Fey’s *SNL* portrayals encouraged viewers to describe Palin as rural (Esralew & Young, 2012), and to misattribute fake statements made during a comedy sketch by Fey to real media commentary offered by Palin (Cacciatore et al., 2014).

During Fall 2016—starting October 1—Baldwin appeared in character as Donald Trump on eight *SNL* broadcasts (NBC Universal, 2016). Trump’s first Twitter response came on October 16 after Baldwin’s third appearance in a skit mocking the presidential debate. Trump’s next Twitter response was on November 20, after a skit mocking the president-elect’s lack of preparation for the job of chief executive.

Finally, on December 4, just 45 minutes into the December 3 *SNL* broadcast, Trump again reacted to yet another Baldwin impersonation via Twitter: "Just tried watching Saturday Night Live— unwatchable! Totally biased, not funny and the Baldwin impersonation just can't get any worse. Sad." (Politi, 2016). With this third Trump tweet, Baldwin responded directly, remarking, "Release your tax returns and I'll stop. Ha" (Politi, 2016).

It is clear from his social media responses that Trump was not a fan of the Baldwin impersonations; however, viewers flocked to the show, rewarding *SNL* with its highest ratings in over two decades (Berg, 2016). Critics and industry insiders showed renewed interest in the variety show, bestowing the program with nine Emmy awards in 2017, including an award for Baldwin for Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series (Otterson, 2017). In interviews, Baldwin talked not only about the process of becoming Trump and getting into character, but also his desire to hold Trump accountable for his actions. Importantly, Baldwin also publicly acknowledged the possibility that his impersonations were actually helping Trump, making him appear more likeable in the eyes of voters (Barbaro, 2016).

Social Media Engagement, Donald Trump, and Celebrity Authenticity (Not Apprentice)

Donald Trump can best be described as a businessman and reality TV star turned politician. Trump's outsider status was appealing to many across the political spectrum, with his character and behavior as a candidate being evaluated and compared against his very public, celebrity persona. In today's political arena, celebrities campaign for and endorse candidates, champion controversial issues, and even in some cases, run for political office (West & Orman, 2003; Wheeler, 2013). Increasingly, social media serves as the primary channel through which celebrity political involvement is communicated to citizens (Ekman & Widholm, 2014; Marshall & Redmond, 2015). Social media and platforms such as Twitter in particular enable celebrities and politicians to form online, imagined communities through which they can connect with potential supporters in a more personalized, familiar fashion (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011). As recent international scholarship has shown, for young people in particular, successful celebrity communication about politics via social media needs to be participatory, personalized, credible, and most important, authentic (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2015).

In fact, in recent years, it seems that the concept of authenticity has become central to American political life as more celebrities insert themselves into the political arena and as we increasingly treat our politicians like celebrities (Desta, 2016; Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016). An often complicated construct thanks to the interference of the media and other competing narratives, celebrity authenticity is best described as "the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self" (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015, p. 175). With respect to social media, authentic celebrity political communication is self-generated; it is not (or at least does not appear to be) put forth by a communications team or public relations professional (Loader et al., 2015). Furthermore, as campaign professionals noted in interviews after the 2016 election, candidate social media behavior needs to align with perceptions of the candidate's ease and comfort with social media engagement (Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2017). To be successful from a strategic vantage point, what candidates share needs to feel like natural, authentic behavior.

In both the 2012 and 2016 campaigns, Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton suffered from authenticity perception problems (Brewer, Hoffman, Harrington, Jones, & Lambe, 2014; Parry-Giles, 2014). Donald Trump, however, was quickly lauded for his “authentic” if unconventional political style. According to December 2015 polling data, a “huge majority of GOP primary voters, 76 percent, believe Trump ‘says what he believes,’ rather than saying ‘what people want to hear’” (Sargent, 2015, para. 5). Furthermore, according to *New York Times* journalist Jennifer Szalai (2016), Trump represented a new model for political authenticity: “The kind of authenticity that’s prized in the 2016 election looks different. Frustration with the establishment is so pronounced that affability seems less a factor than a candidate’s anti-establishment bona fides and a penchant for blunt, even brutal, statements” (para. 12).

At present writing, it is clear that Donald Trump continues to rely on Twitter to attack his opponents, and that for his key supporters in particular, this combative communication is yet another “authentic” example of his tough character and demeanor (Chira, 2017). Not surprisingly, the mainstream media continue to report on Trump’s Twitter activity; for example, according to an October 2017 report by the Pew Research Center, 16% of news stories published online in November and December 2016 featured a direct quote of one of President Trump’s tweets (Mitchell, Gottfried, Stocking, Matsa, & Grieco, 2017).

Given an understanding then of Trump’s combative political character and his now well-established patterns of social media behavior (Francia, 2017), it should not be at all surprising that he would respond via Twitter to *SNL*’s humor rather than embrace Baldwin’s caricature. In fact, it is possible that given Trump’s personality style, he is actually unable to engage in self-deprecating humor in the same way that traditional politicians can shift gears to be in on the joke in response to *SNL* (Stewart, 2011). Returning to the case study, it seems clear that viewing Trump’s direct Twitter reaction to *SNL* in addition to the original *SNL* skit should result in more positive evaluations of Trump’s authenticity than simply watching the original *SNL* content alone. Moreover, subjects who are exposed to a larger dose of Trump’s Twitter responses—or his history of engagement with *SNL* via mediated news coverage—should find Trump to be more authentic than those who simply view an isolated tweet in addition to the *SNL* parody. Put more formally,

H1: Viewing Trump’s Twitter reaction to SNL results in higher ratings of celebrity authenticity than simply viewing SNL alone.

H1a: Exposure to Trump’s history of engagement with SNL is positively related to ratings of celebrity authenticity.

Political Comedy, Trait Salience, and Potential Discounting and Counterarguing Effects

Traditionally, humor targeting politicians tends to focus on character traits and all things personal rather than on policy (Lichter, Baumgartner, & Morris, 2014; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003). Previous research has shown that political comedy can prime viewers to evaluate candidates based on the traits emphasized in comic routines; this dynamic is especially true for politically inattentive viewers (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006; Young, 2004, 2006). In other words, when a comedy routine focuses on a candidate’s lack of experience or bumbling speech patterns, these traits become more accessible or salient

for viewers. Research has offered evidence of a political comedy salience effect across elections and candidates (Baumgartner, 2007; Baumgartner et al., 2012; Esralew & Young, 2012; Young, 2004). In sum, when a comedian suggests that a politician is inexperienced or unintelligent, viewers incorporate these traits into their subsequent evaluations.

Given the wealth of prior research on political comedy and trait salience, it therefore seems logical to suggest that the traits emphasized in the *SNL* skit will be more top-of-mind for viewers when subsequently rating Trump across a set list of character attributes. More specifically, viewing comedy mocking Trump's Twitter behavior and his inability to focus during a national security briefing should naturally prime viewers to evaluate Trump as lacking in experience and support the notion that he is not well informed.

At the same time, viewing the *SNL* skit in conjunction with Trump's Twitter response should undermine the perceived salience of these traits as these viewers are now presented with two sides of the argument rather than just the one-sided satirical message put forth by *SNL* (Warner, Hawthorne, & Hawthorne, 2015). By providing a response to the *SNL* skit with his Twitter activity, Trump is actively encouraging viewers to further discount the message in the *SNL* satire, subsequently classifying the content as trivial humor that is not to be taken seriously or actively scrutinized (Nabi, Moyer-Guse, & Byrne, 2007). In effect, Trump's Twitter response suggests that the *SNL* humor is not something that should have a critical impact on attitudes toward the president-elect (Becker, 2017); the real thing worthy of attention is Trump and his serious social media critique of Baldwin (Nabi et al., 2007). By responding via Twitter, Trump actively disrupts viewers' processing of the original *SNL* content, encouraging less absorption of the original comedy message (Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & de Vreese, 2015; Young, 2008).

More specifically, Trump's Twitter response actively engages the *SNL* humor in two ways. First, given its nontraditional nature and the reality that all prior politicians have worked to embrace rather than attack *SNL*, Trump's social media response presents a new, overt threat to *SNL*'s persuasive messaging (Compton, 2013). As a result, Trump's engagement with the comedy disrupts the traditional relationship between exposure to critical political comedy content and trait salience (Young, 2008). More specifically, by claiming that *SNL* is offering a biased presentation, Trump could be effectively distracting viewers from the comedy's core message about Trump's qualifications for the office of the presidency (Boukes et al., 2015). Second, Trump's social media response provides a counterargument to *SNL*. By effectively suggesting that *SNL* is engaging in a biased attack against the then-president-elect, Trump gives viewers an alternative narrative to consider and ultimately find persuasive (Becker, 2017). Therefore, via the mechanisms of discounting and reduced argument scrutiny, exposure to this nontraditional two-sided argument (*SNL* paired with Trump's social media response) rather than just the one-sided *SNL* satire should effectively make viewers less likely to rate Trump as lacking in experience and uninformed, encouraging viewers to evaluate Trump in a more positive light. Put more formally,

H2: Viewers of Trump's Twitter reaction to SNL will be less likely to rate Trump as inexperienced.

H3: Viewers of Trump's Twitter reaction to SNL will be less likely to rate Trump as being uninformed.

Given the nature of Trump's Twitter response and his nontraditional political character, it also seems valuable to explore the differential effect of exposure to just *SNL* versus *SNL* and Trump's Twitter response on the character trait of honesty. As discussed briefly above, Trump is well known for his combative political style. Rather than engage with opponents in a more diplomatic fashion, he tells it like it is, airing his unfiltered complaints via social media. It therefore seems valid to assume that those exposed to Trump's Twitter response in addition to the *SNL* skit should be more likely to rate Trump as being honest. Put more formally,

H4: Exposure to Trump's Twitter response to SNL is positively related to perceptions of Trump's honesty.

The Polarized Electorate and the Role of Disposition

Before proceeding with the analysis of the experimental data, it is also important to point out the potential moderating role of disposition toward Trump on perceptions of celebrity authenticity and candidate trait ratings. The U.S. political climate is more partisan and divided than ever before; the evidence of this polarization was on full display during the 2016 presidential election (Doherty, Kiley, & Jameson, 2016). As many have noted, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were the least-liked presidential candidates in modern American history (Enten, 2016).

Research on political comedy effects has consistently considered the moderating role of partisanship (and more recently, disposition) on the effects of exposure to political satire. Research on the intervening role of partisanship presents a mixed pattern of effects (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009; Xenos, Moy, & Becker, 2011), and recent scholarship on political comedy and prior disposition shows that orientations toward both the victim and the villain of the joke have a moderating effect on humor appreciation and perceived funniness, as well as attitudes toward politicians (Becker, 2014; Boukes et al., 2015).

Generally, the more viewers dislike the target of a joke, the more likely they are to appreciate humor that goes on the offensive to engage in attack, especially given a highly charged political context (Zillmann, Bryant, & Cantor, 1974). Given the Trump/*SNL* case, it should therefore follow that those who like Trump will be more likely to perceive him as authentic and rate him as experienced, well informed, and honest, whereas those who dislike Trump should be less likely to evaluate him as being authentic, experienced, well informed, and honest. Moreover, disposition toward Trump may moderate the impact of exposure to *SNL* versus *SNL* and Trump's Twitter response on these key outcome variables of interest. Specifically, exposure to the critical *SNL* parody should be less impactful for those who like Trump, but should have a greater impact among those who dislike him. In addition, viewing Trump's Twitter response should reinforce perceptions of authenticity and enhance ratings of Trump's experience, honesty, and being well informed for those who are positively disposed toward Trump, yet we should see the opposite effect for those who are already negatively disposed toward Trump. Put more formally,

H5: Prior disposition toward Trump should moderate the effect of exposure to SNL and Trump's Twitter response on perceptions of authenticity, level of experience, being well informed, and honesty.

Data and Method

Procedures and Stimuli

A four-group experiment (three conditions; one control) was created using Qualtrics. Subjects ($N = 329$) were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk Human Intelligence Tasks (mTurk) platform between December 13 and 18, 2016, and were offered between \$0.75 and \$1.50 for completing the 15-minute online experiment. The study was approved as exempt by the university institutional review board.

Consistent with established best practices (Peer, Vosgerau, & Acquisti, 2014), mTurk respondents had a 95% or higher approval rating and had completed more than 500 human intelligence tasks. The survey included five attention check measures; those with one or more incorrect responses ($n = 4$) were removed from the data set.

After a pretest questionnaire measuring political interest, disposition toward politicians, and social media habits, subjects were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions or the control. Subjects in the first condition ($n = 79$) viewed a 5-minute clip of the cold open from the December 3 *SNL* broadcast.¹ In the clip, Alec Baldwin impersonates President-Elect Donald Trump and Kate McKinnon portrays strategist Kellyanne Conway. In the skit, Alec Baldwin's Trump repeatedly interrupts his national security briefing to retweet the thoughts of random individuals including a high school student named Seth. Subjects in the second condition ($n = 81$) viewed the *SNL* clip and then were directed to view a screenshot of Donald Trump's immediate response to the skit that was posted on Twitter at 12:13 a.m. on Sunday, December 4 (see Figure 1). Subjects in the third condition ($n = 80$) viewed the 5-minute *SNL* skit and then were directed to read an article (Politi, 2016) that chronicled Trump's repeated Twitter reactions to the Baldwin impersonations (October 16, November 20, December 4) and Alec Baldwin's own response to Trump on December 4 (see Figure 2). The article was taken from *Slate* (Politi, 2016), but the masthead and other information identifying the publication were removed so that subjects would simply see a basic report on Trump's Twitter activity that was not tied to a particular media source. Subjects in the control group ($n = 85$) viewed a 5.5-minute clip of *Lava*, a short Pixar film.

¹ Clip from the December 3 *SNL* broadcast, <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/classroom-cold-open/3435356?snl=1>

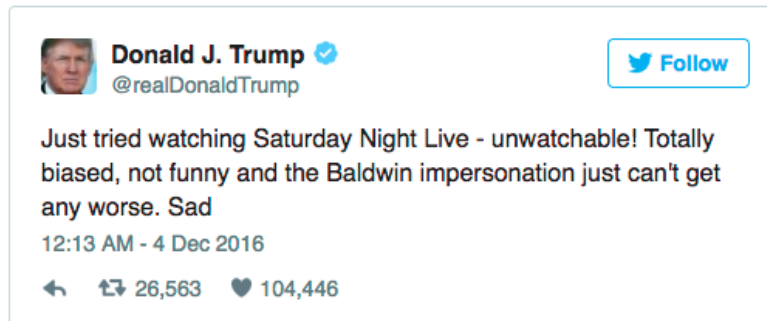


Figure 1. Screenshot of Donald Trump's Twitter response to the December 3, 2016, Saturday Night Live broadcast.

All of the videos were captured via YouTube and edited to remove ads, related video suggestions, and comments. A validation mechanism ensured that subjects could not scroll ahead through portions of the videos and had to remain on the screen for at least 300 seconds before advancing the experiment. Validation mechanisms were also set so that subjects spent an appropriate amount of time viewing and reading either the direct Twitter response or the *Slate* article detailing Trump's pattern of engagement with *SNL* via Twitter. Manipulation checks followed immediately after the videos in each condition, and a posttest questionnaire tapped key variables including favorability toward politicians, perceptions of celebrity authenticity, candidate traits, and demographics.²

The final Amazon mTurk sample ($N = 325$) was fairly well balanced in terms of gender (54.8% male vs. 45.2% female). The sample was 78.8% White, 8.3% African American, 8.0% Asian American, 3.7% Hispanic/Latino, 0.6% Native American, and 0.6% More than one race; 43.7% identified as Democrats compared with 20.6% of the sample who identified as Republican, 31.7% as Independent, and 4.0% as something else. Although this partisan distribution may seem a bit unbalanced, research on the external validity of mTurk samples confirms that these samples are comparable demographically with subject pools obtained by other online survey data-gathering platforms (Huff & Tingley, 2015). Moreover, a randomization check confirmed that there were no significant differences in distribution across condition for partisan identification, gender, or other demographic variables. The key measures used in the analysis are outlined below.

² Immediately after viewing the videos, subjects were asked to evaluate the content across a series of attributes using 7-point scales (e.g., 1 = *not at all entertaining* to 7 = *entertaining*; 1 = *not at all serious* to 7 = *serious*). A review of the data showed that viewers appropriately classified the *SNL* skit as entertaining ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.91$), funny ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 2.01$), amusing ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.96$), humorous ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 2.00$), and negative ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.80$); they correctly noted that the *SNL* clip was not serious ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.49$).



Figure 2. Donald Trump's Twitter engagement with Saturday Night Live (Politi, 2016).

Key Measures

Dependent Variables

The celebrity authenticity scale (Ilicic & Webster, 2016) was based on subjects' mean level of agreement with four related statements ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.87$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*): (1) "Donald Trump tries to act in a manner that is consistent with his held values, even if others criticize or reject him for doing so"; (2) "Donald Trump cares about openness and honesty in close relationships with others"; (3) "In general, Donald Trump places a good deal of importance on others understanding who he truly is"; and (4) "People can count on Donald Trump being who he is regardless of the situation."

Subjects were also asked to rate Donald Trump across a battery of standard political traits, including the traits emphasized in the *SNL* skit, specifically, whether they found Trump to be (1) experienced ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.96$; 1 = *describes President-Elect Donald Trump not well at all* to 4 = *describes . . . extremely well*), (2) well informed ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.99$), and (3) honest ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.03$).

Independent Variables

Experimental condition. Assignment to condition was included as an independent variable in the analysis. Dummy variables were created for those who were assigned to view *SNL* plus Twitter ($n = 81$), *SNL* plus the article ($n = 80$), or the control ($n = 85$). Those who viewed the *SNL* video only ($n = 79$) were treated as the default and were not specified in the model.

Political predispositions. These were measured by three items from the pretest questionnaire: (1) general political interest ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.9$; "Would you say that you follow what's going on in politics and government?" 0 = *never*, 1 = *hardly at all*, 2 = *only now and then*, 3 = *some of the time*, and 4 = *most of the time*); (2) disposition toward Trump ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 2.18$; 1 = *dislike* to 7 = *like*); and (3) disposition toward Clinton ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 2.09$; 1 = *dislike* to 7 = *like*).

Demographics. Controls for gender (female, = 1, 45.2%), age ($M = 33.93$ years, $SD = 11.78$; range = 22–79 years) and education (1 = *some high school* to 7 = *graduate degree*, $Mdn =$ some college 30.2%) were also included in the models.

Analytical Plan

Hierarchical ordinary least squares regression was used for the analysis. Hierarchical regression enters blocks of variables based on their presumed causal order, allowing researchers to assess the relative contribution of each new variable block in explaining the variance in the dependent variable over and above previously entered blocks. For this case study, hierarchical regression was ideal given the ability to isolate the differential effect of exposure to the varied stimuli after controlling for other antecedent variables such as demographics and disposition toward Trump.

Demographic variables were entered first, followed by political predispositions. The experimental conditions were included as Block 3, with dummy variables for viewing *SNL* plus Twitter, *SNL* plus the article, and the control. A fourth and final block was added to test for any potential interaction effects between disposition toward Trump and assignment to the conditions with a Twitter response, given the expectation (H5) that the evaluation of the *SNL* skit and Trump's social media response may depend on prior disposition or how much one likes or dislikes Donald Trump. The interaction terms were created by multiplying the standardized values of the key main effect variables to prevent possible problems of multicollinearity (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

Results

The results of the analysis of celebrity authenticity are displayed in Table 1. As the data in Table 1 show, demographics explained a small portion of the variance in perceptions of celebrity authenticity (incremental $R^2 = 4.3\%$). Disposition toward Trump was the largest predictor of celebrity authenticity ($\beta = .78, p < .001$; Block 2, incremental $R^2 = 58.3\%$), with those who like Trump significantly more likely to describe him as authentic. Those assigned to view the *SNL* skit plus the article detailing Trump's continued Twitter engagement were also significantly more likely to describe Trump as authentic ($\beta = .09, p < .05$; Block 3, incremental $R^2 = 0.6\%$; H1 supported), even after controlling for disposition. Although exposure to the *SNL* skit plus Trump's single tweet was not significant in the model, it is clear that being exposed to Trump's continued Twitter engagement encouraged viewers to see him as more authentic, especially when compared against those who viewed the *SNL* skit alone or the *SNL* skit plus a single tweet (H1a supported). The interactions between disposition and assignment to condition in Block 4 were not significant, suggesting that at least with respect to celebrity authenticity, the effect of exposure to the varied stimuli was direct and not dependent on prior orientations toward Trump.

Table 1. Hierarchical Ordinary Least Squares Regression Predicting Authenticity.

Variable	Zero-order correlations	On entry	Final β
Block 1: Demographics			
Female	-.06	-.11*	-.01
Age	.17**	.19***	.06
Education	.08	.07	.04
Incremental R^2		4.3%	
Block 2: Political predispositions			
Political interest	.05	-.03	-.03
Disposition toward Trump	.79***	.77***	.78***
Disposition toward Clinton	-.46***	-.02	-.00
Incremental R^2		58.3%	
Block 3: Experimental conditions			
<i>SNL</i> + Twitter	-.02	-.00	-.00
<i>SNL</i> + article	.09	.09*	.09*
Control	-.01	.03	.03
Incremental R^2		0.6%	

Block 4: Interactions	
DispTrump × Article	-.04
DispTrump × Tweet	-.00
Incremental R^2	0.2%
Final R^2	63.4%

Note. $N = 321$.

$p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The results for the analysis of key character traits emphasized in the *SNL* clip (experienced, well informed, honest) are displayed in Table 2. As the data in Table 2 show, women were significantly less likely to rate Trump as experienced ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .05$; Block 1, incremental $R^2 = 3.7%$); those who liked Trump were significantly more likely to rate him as experienced ($\beta = .73$, $p < .001$; Block 2, incremental $R^2 = 51.9%$). Furthermore, viewing Trump's Twitter response in addition to the *SNL* skit was also a significant positive predictor of perceived experience (*SNL* plus Twitter, $\beta = .15$, $p < .001$; *SNL* plus article, $\beta = .09$, $p < .05$; Block 3, incremental $R^2 = 2.3%$; H2 supported). Of note, the interaction between disposition toward Trump and being assigned to view the *SNL* skit and Trump's tweet was significant ($\beta = .08$, $p < .05$; partial support for H5).

Table 2. Hierarchical Ordinary Least Squares Regression Predicting Key Traits (Well Informed, Experienced, Honest).

Variable	Experienced	Well informed	Honest
Block 1: Demographics			
Female	-.10*	-.04	-.01
Age	-.03	.01	-.00
Education	.01	-.02	-.03
Incremental R^2	3.7%	3.2%	2.1%
Block 2: Political predispositions			
Political interest	-.01	-.06#	-.10**
Disposition toward Trump	.73***	.81***	.82***
Disposition toward Clinton	-.01	-.02	-.02
Incremental R^2	51.9%	64.5%	66.5%
Block 3: Experimental conditions			
<i>SNL</i> + Twitter	.15***	.03	-.08*
<i>SNL</i> + article	.09*	.08*	-.07#
Control	.00	.02	-.05
Incremental R^2	2.3%	0.5%	0.5%
Block 4: Interactions			
DispTrump × Article	-.03	-.01	.02
DispTrump × Tweet	.08*	.01	-.00
Incremental R^2	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Final R^2	58.6%	68.2%	69.1%
N	321	320	319

Note. Cell entries for all models are final standardized regression coefficients.

$p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Displayed graphically in Figure 3, being exposed to the *SNL* parody and Trump's tweet was most impactful for those who were moderately disposed toward or liked Trump. Specifically, Trump earned higher experienced ratings ($M = 2.73$) among this group than among those who liked Trump but did not see the Twitter response ($M = 2.38$). For those who disliked Trump, viewing his Twitter response had little to no effect on perceptions of experience.

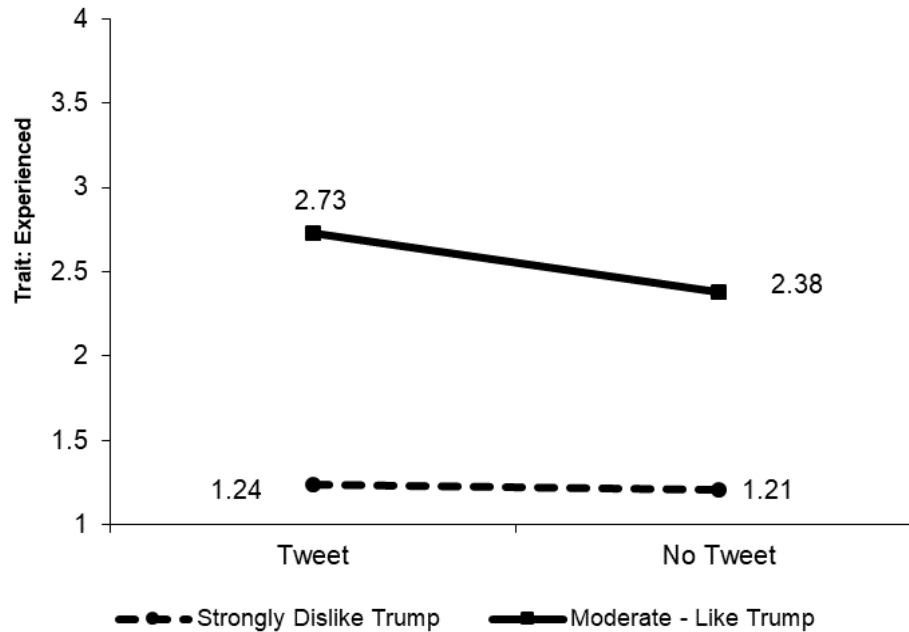


Figure 3. Tweet condition, disposition toward Trump, and perceptions of experience.

Not surprisingly, disposition toward Trump was also the largest predictor for ratings of being well informed ($\beta = .81, p < .001$; Block 2, incremental $R^2 = 64.5\%$) and honest ($\beta = .82, p < .001$; Block 2 incremental $R^2 = 66.5\%$). Those assigned to view *SNL* and the article were significantly more likely to rate Trump as well informed ($\beta = .08, p < .05$; Block 3, incremental $R^2 = 0.5\%$; H3 supported); yet, contrary to expectations, those assigned to view *SNL* and a tweet or *SNL* and the article detailing Trump's continued Twitter engagement were significantly less likely to evaluate Trump as being honest ($\beta = -.08, p < .05$ for *SNL* plus Twitter; $\beta = -.07, p < .10$ for *SNL* plus article; Block 3, incremental $R^2 = 0.5\%$). Hypothesis 4 was therefore not supported by the research. The interactions between disposition toward Trump and assignment to condition were not significant in these last two regression models.

Overall, the results of both analyses point toward significant yet small effects for conditions featuring a Trump Twitter response. Notably, the effect of exposure to the *SNL* skit along with Trump's

social media response was still significant relative to just viewing *SNL* alone even after controlling for prior disposition or how much one liked or disliked Trump.

Discussion

Alec Baldwin appears on *SNL* to impersonate Donald Trump and rather than embrace the humor, Trump fires back on Twitter. What is the net effect of engaging with rather than celebrating *SNL*? Is Trump seen as someone who cannot take a joke, or as Baldwin mused in recent interviews (Barbaro, 2016), does the caricature and subsequent social media response help rather than hurt Trump?

As the research findings presented here show, viewing Donald Trump's history of engagement with Twitter in addition to the original *SNL* skit encouraged viewers to rate Trump as more authentic, experienced, and well informed than if they had just watched the comedy skit alone. Simply viewing a single tweet from Trump in addition to the *SNL* skit was less impactful overall; yet, these subjects also rated Trump as more experienced. Contrary to expectations, viewing Trump's social media response led to lower trait ratings for honesty.

Overall then, it seems that responding to *SNL* via Twitter helps rather than hurts Trump. Those assigned to view Trump's Twitter response in addition to the *SNL* skit rated him as more authentic. Moreover, those who viewed Trump's Twitter activity in addition to the *SNL* skit were more—not less—likely to rate Trump as experienced and well informed. At least in this instance it seems that Trump's engagement with *SNL* on Twitter disrupted the traditional pattern of political comedy exposure effects as the traits emphasized in the comedy skit became less—not more—salient for viewers after they also viewed Trump's social media response.

Ultimately, Trump's social media response to *SNL* allows him to present another side of the story. It is a side of the story that sticks with viewers irrespective of their prior disposition toward Trump. By using Twitter to respond to *SNL*, Trump encourages viewers to further discount the message present in *SNL*'s humor. By going against the grain to attack rather than embrace *SNL*, Trump disrupts viewer processing of the original *SNL* skit, offering a clear counterargument to Baldwin's impersonation. Trump's short tweets ultimately present a real threat to *SNL*'s ability to persuade. It is a threat that, as Baldwin himself mused in a *New York Times* interview, could be helping rather than hurting Trump over the long haul (Barbaro, 2016). Future research should consider a potential sleeper effect associated with Trump's continued engagement with Baldwin and *SNL* (Nabi et al., 2007).

It is of course noteworthy that the effects of exposure to the varied stimuli were significant even after controlling for prior disposition toward Trump. Furthermore, only one of the tested interactions between disposition toward Trump and varied stimuli exposure was significant, suggesting that the overall effect of viewing Trump's social media response on evaluations of the politician is direct rather than filtered through a partisan or dispositional lens. Ultimately, Trump's hostile Twitter response to *SNL* is seen as an authentic expression of his political character and enhances ratings of his perceived experience and the belief that he is well informed. In the end, Trump's social media response seems more like proactive two-sided messaging rather than a combative off-the-cuff reaction to *SNL* (Becker, 2017).

More broadly, the present investigation speaks to the reality that we can no longer consider the effects of exposure to political comedy in a vacuum. To date, research on the effects of exposure to critical political comedy content seems to fail to account for our dynamic and ever-changing media environment, one that is increasingly driven by social media response and engagement. Although it is clear that Donald Trump's behavior is not typical of the average target of political humor and that he responds in a hostile way that is counter to the embrace of *SNL* that has been put forth by previous politicians, his example does suggest that we need to broaden our study of the ways in which political comedy can come to impact political attitudes.

Moving forward, it is clear that for political comedy effects research to remain relevant, it must, as Bode and Vraga (2017) suggest, "extend [their] research outside of a single platform, to consider the context and affordances of multiple platforms, and to focus on a more ecological approach to the modern media environment" (p. 1). The case study presented here suggests that to measure the true effect of political comedy exposure on attitudes and the salience of key character traits, we need to consider not only the original comedy content, but also the circulating response across social media platforms (Waisanen & Becker, 2015). We need to move forward with a more ecological approach toward studying the effects of political comedy exposure. Only then will we understand the full reach and potential of satire and parody.

Before concluding, it is important to point out some of the study's limitations. Although Amazon's mTurk is becoming more commonplace in experimental research, the study still relied on a convenience sample of individuals who may be more attentive and in tune with what is happening politically than a random sample of the population (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016). At the same time, an Amazon mTurk sample is certainly more representative and diverse than a college student sample, which is traditionally used in research on political comedy effects (Levay, Freese, & Druckman, 2016).

In addition, Baldwin's *SNL* impersonations had a viral reach; not only were the skits widely shared, but Trump's individual Twitter responses and news coverage of the various incidents were as well. To account for this, subjects were asked to indicate whether they had seen the *SNL* skit immediately after exposure in the posttest questionnaire. A review of the data confirmed that only a small percentage had seen the skit before and that there were no notable differences in the dependent variables of interest for those who had already seen versus had not previously seen the *SNL* video stimuli.

It is also possible that Trump's response to *SNL* is resonating with viewers because they agree with his evaluation of the impersonations: Perhaps they also do not find Baldwin funny, or more likely, perceive *SNL* as biased in favor of a liberal point of view. Similarly, the recency of the election might have influenced evaluations of the comedy content. It is possible that viewers were simply too fatigued from what seemed like a never-ending campaign to react fully to the critical comedy and resulting social media content (McGraw, Williams, & Warren, 2014; Pierce, Rogers, & Snyder, 2016). Last, the analysis considered only three character traits emphasized in the *SNL* content (being well informed, experienced, and honest). Although these traits are certainly important characteristics voters use to evaluate politicians and collectively speak to Trump's perceived credibility, they represent the ranking of only three individual items (Bartels, 2002).

Despite these limitations, the research findings are significant and ultimately suggest that Donald Trump's engagement with *SNL* is seen as yet another authentic representation of his combative political character. To embrace *SNL* and refrain from responding in a critical manner, as has been the practice of prior presidents and political candidates, would be uniquely inauthentic or out of character for Donald Trump. Of course, given the case of another politician such as Hillary Clinton, for example, a critical response to *SNL* would likely hurt perceptions of authenticity and related trait ratings. It seems that responding to *SNL* works for Trump because it aligns with his general patterns of social media behavior and practice of engaging in reactionary character attacks online (Hess, 2016).

On the whole, the research underscores the importance of *SNL* as a force in the growing world of political comedy and satire. Newer offerings from Samantha Bee and John Oliver abound on cable, and network late-night comedians such as Seth Meyers and Jimmy Kimmel are increasingly jumping into the political fray (Garber, 2017). *SNL* has been parodying presidents and major politicians for more than 40 years and viewers have come to expect that each broadcast's cold open, or opening sequence, will present a spoof of the latest political debate or major national address (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009).

Future research on political comedy effects should proceed with a renewed focus on *SNL* and the show's impact on politicians and the viewing public, but must be careful not to treat *SNL* and other comedy content in a vacuum. In today's media environment, measuring the impact of political comedy also means taking the critical response to the content on social media into account. As this study has shown, there is more than one way for politicians to engage with and respond to political comedy. Rather than privilege traditional patterns of political comedy effects, it is time for research to recognize and embrace our new period of disruption, considering the impact not just of comedy alone, but also the potential response to comedy across multiple media platforms.

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