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### At odds: laughing and thinking? The appreciation, processing, and persuasiveness of political satire

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It's Fun! But is it Effective?:

The Appreciation, Processing, and Persuasiveness of Political Satire

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Abstract

This study constructs and experimentally tests an integrated framework of how political attitudes are affected by political satire. On the one hand, we show that political satire affects the attitude toward the satirized subject positively via perceived funniness. This was particularly strong among those who did not perceive the satire as potentially threatening, which follows disposition theory. On the other hand, young adults were found to be more absorbed into the satirical items, which decreased counterarguing, such that the attitude toward the satirized object was affected negatively. This is consistent with entertainment-education literature and theory about people's life stages. Investigating underlying and conditional processes thereby proved to be a valuable approach to detecting the mechanisms by which satire influences attitudes.

*Keywords:* political satire, disposition theory, background knowledge, absorption, emerging adulthood

Incongruity between what is expected and what is presented is an inherent element of humor (Eisend, 2009; Meyer, 2000). Political satire, by means of incongruity, thus allows for new ways of looking at political matters and can make the “taken-for-granted” less self-explanatory and influence attitude formation (Colletta, 2009). Political satire thereby makes a potentially significant democratic contribution by offering perspectives that differ from those in the traditional media (Holbert, 2013).

Many studies on political satire, however, have shown persuasive effects that are small and often insignificant (Holbert, 2013) most likely because the genre evokes opposing underlying processes (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007), which may play out stronger or weaker depending on several viewer characteristics and satire features. Regrettably, previous studies hitherto considered none or only one such nuance. As such, an integrated framework for whether and how political satire causes attitude change remains lacking (Young, Holbert, & Jamieson, 2013).

We aim to strengthen the understanding of how satire may affect citizens’ attitudes. To that end, three potentially moderating factors (political preference, age, and the availability of background knowledge) and two mediating processes (perceiving satire as funny, and being absorbed into the satire) are incorporated, so essential underlying and conditional processes by which political satire may affect political attitudes are incorporated. In an experiment, we employed professionally created stimuli crafted for this study and looked into the complementary influence of exposure to regular news about the same topic. Moreover, it speaks to the need (see Baym & Jones, 2012) to go beyond the late-night comedy genre and US borders because this study has been conducted in the Dutch context with a different type of satire.

### **The Effects of Political Satire**

Most studies on political satire have focused on direct persuasive effects without considering the underlying processes. However, due to a diversity of findings, questions arise as to *how* humor affects individuals in a political context. Nabi et al. (2007) found that perceiving political messages as funny sets in motion two crucial processes that, respectively evoke and inhibit counterarguing: on the one hand, the information of funny messages is frequently discounted (Nabi et al., 2007), whereas on the other hand humorous messages enhance in-depth processing, so-called “absorption” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 179).<sup>1</sup> LaMarre et al. (2014) shed light on similar processes regarding specific types of satire and their attitudinal effects, by looking into the effects on message discounting, resource allocation, and argument scrutiny.

By applying the theoretical insights from these studies (LaMarre et al., 2014; Nabi et al., 2007), we substantially add to the understanding of political satire’s persuasive process in the following ways: We investigate (1) how perceived funniness and absorption are impacted by political satire relative to regular news content, (2) whether these effects are conditional on viewers’ characteristics, and (3) how perceived funniness and absorption eventually affect people’s attitudes due to their indirect effects via counterarguing. Figure 1 gives an overview of our theoretical framework and the specific hypotheses, which we elaborate on step-by-step in the following sections.

[Figure 1 about here]

### **When is Political Satire Perceived as Funny and When is it Not?**

Incongruity between what people expect and what is actually presented to them is the key ingredient of humor (Eisend, 2009; Holbert et al., 2013; Meyer, 2000). The consumption of political satire is a participatory act in which people individually deconstruct the joke, use their existing knowledge, and reconstruct the message to come to an understanding of what

they see (Holbert & Young, 2013). Keeping this in mind helps explain why some do and others do not recognize the intended meaning of satire (Colletta, 2009), and do or do not think it is funny as a consequence.

Whereas fully understanding a joke does not even seem to be necessary (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013), people laugh at what surprises them, what is odd, or at what is unexpected but *only* when the satire is *not* perceived as threatening to one's self-image (Meyer, 2000). Disposition theory posits that appreciating a joke depends on the favorableness of one's disposition toward the *targeted* subject (Becker, 2014, p. 3; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). Thus, because people interpret jokes in the framework of their own experiences and values (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972), laughter is only evoked when the humor does not threaten one's self-image too much (Nabi et al., 2007).

However, the presumption that people do not laugh at satire that targets themselves has been rejected more than once (Colletta, 2009). Unprejudiced viewers of the popular 1970's sitcom *All in the Family* liked that the assertively prejudiced blue-collar worker Archie Bunker was being satirized. Prejudiced viewers, conversely, loved seeing someone expressing their feelings and, thus, found the sitcom funny by misinterpreting the satire (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). Similarly, conservatives and liberals differ in their reasons for laughing at *The Colbert Report*, a television show that satirizes conservative political pundit programs (Colletta, 2009; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009).

Indications of both selective processing and disposition theory have thus been found in the context of political satire. Podlas (2013) showed how circumstances may predict when one or the other occurred. When a satirical message was overly clear, people interpreted it in the intended way. Most often, satire's meaning is however only implicitly present (Young et al., 2013). In that case, when the intended meaning of satire was not completely obvious to

viewers, interpretations were largely guided by existing beliefs, and selective processing occurred; so, people saw reflections of their own preferences (Podlas, 2013).

Satire's clarity depends not only on message characteristics but also on viewers' ability to understand the message by having the required background knowledge (see, e.g., Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, & Morey, 2011). However, not much is known yet about how satire functions when it is part of a media diet that also consists of traditional news (Holbert & Young, 2013), which typically *provides* citizens with the background information to understand political matters. Knowledge regarding how satire functions in conjunction with regular news is also of great importance in terms of external validity because those who tune into political satire generally do this supplementary to the consumption of traditional news and not in a news vacuum (Young & Tisinger, 2006).

People who are not provided with such background knowledge, will most likely not be able to fully understand the intended meaning, and, consequently, will not give meaning to the satire in a threatening way. The understanding of those without the required background knowledge will most likely be guided by their existing beliefs, and they will likely engage in selective processing to still find the satire funny even if its intended message was counter-attitudinal (see Holbert et al., 2011). Following this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

H<sub>1a</sub>: Viewers without topic-specific background information find the satirical message funny, irrespective of their political preferences.

People who are provided with background knowledge about the targeted subject, by contrast, are presumably better able to interpret the satire in the intended manner. Hence, they will elaborate more on its content (LaMarre & Walther, 2013), and congruency with one's

political preferences will determine perceived funniness: Those with political preferences *congruent* with the satire will perceive the satire to be *funnier* than those with political preferences *incongruent* with the satirical message. Being able to understand the satire will provide viewers with the means to decide whether they believe the satirized subject was worthy of being attacked according to their preferences (Holbert et al., 2011). Thus, we hypothesize as follows:

H<sub>1b</sub>: Viewers provided with topic-specific background information find the satirical message funnier when its intended meaning is congruent with one's political preferences than when it is incongruent with such preferences.

### **The Consequence of Perceiving Political Satire as Funny**

Perceiving a message as funny has been shown to set in motion a discounting mechanism (Nabi et al., 2007). In general, humorous messages are perceived to be less credible and less informational than those of non-humorous formats (Eisend, 2009; LaMarre & Walther, 2013). Due to its silliness or ridiculous display, the delivery of humorous messages suggests that the information contained in them is not serious and should not be used to form political attitudes (Nabi et al., 2007).

As a consequence, perceiving political messages as funny increases counterarguing due to this discounting process (Nabi et al., 2007). Evoking relatively more negative thoughts about the idea that satire intends to convey, subsequently, negatively affects attitude-agreement with the satirist. That is, compared with similar content without humoristic discounting cues, the attitude toward the *targeted* subject may be influenced relatively less negatively in the event that people find a message funny. Exposure to parody, for example, generally causes negative evaluations of a parodied politician, but a positive indirect effect

via perceived funniness of the parody simultaneously counterbalanced this negative effect somewhat (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013).

Similarly, satirical content has been shown to evoke more positive thoughts toward the targeted subject than critical news content (LaMarre & Walther, 2013). Thus, rather than scrutinizing the message's *target*, people seem to have scrutinized the *message* itself because it provides cues to not be taken seriously. More evidence for this discounting mechanism has been found in the processing of different types of satire (LaMarre et al., 2014), such as with horatian and juvenalian satire, which differ in the conduct of aggression and laughter but also on the degree of judgment implicitness (Holbert, 2014). Lighter forms of humor, such as horatian satire, were perceived as *funnier* and less serious than bitter approaches to humor, such as juvenalian satire (LaMarre et al., 2014). Horatian satire, therefore, caused more message discounting and more message scrutinizing than juvenalian satire, which eventually led to relatively less agreement with the satirist's horation message. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

H<sub>2</sub>: The funnier a political message is perceived to be, (a) the more it induces counterarguing and, therefore, (b) the more it indirectly affects the political attitude regarding the satirized subject in a manner that is *incongruent* with the message's argument.

### **Absorption in Political Satire**

Past research has also established that humorous messages have a persuasive influence because perceiving messages as funny causes a deeper level of processing: absorption in the message. When people are absorbed, they are "primarily engaged in the storyline, rather than in one's immediate environment" (Moyer-Gusé, 2008, p. 409). Entertainment in general, and humorous content in particular, have been shown to absorb



viewers into their content (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Studies of advertising, for example, have shown that even humorous messages draw more attention than non-humorous messages (Eisend, 2009). This evoked absorption relates to the motivation for processing information.

As soon as people realize that a message is funny, they will be motivated to process the content because they eventually may be rewarded with a laugh (Nabi et al., 2007). Moreover, research has shown that humor comprehension involves high cognitive loads (for an overview, see Young, 2008): Comprehending a joke typically involves more than language comprehension and also requires strategically recruiting background knowledge. As a result of this highly demanding cognitive load, people allocate more cognitive resources and process humorous messages more closely to be able to understand the jokes. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H<sub>3</sub>: The perceived funniness of a political message positively affects people's absorption into this message.

How much individuals are absorbed in entertainment content depends on how well it serves their needs and goals (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Satire seemingly serves the needs and goals of younger audiences better than traditional news formats as it particularly attracts this audience segment (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006), which at the same time tuned out from traditional news (Mindich, 2005). The period of emerging adulthood, between 18 years of age and the late 20s, is typically identified as a time of being self-focused, exploring one's identity, and feeling "in-between", which translates into certain usage and gratification patterns in one's media selection (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013) and arguably in a preference for watching satire over traditional news (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008; Young, 2013).

As emerging adulthood is the period in life in which people are particularly self-focused (Coyne et al., 2013), it is not surprising that emerging adults have little interest in news that mainly covers public affairs. Young people perceive a greater isolation from the political process and therefore are not inclined to politically inform themselves through the traditional news (Mindich, 2005). By contrast, older generations often grew up in times of limited media choice, were more likely to see news when they were young, and have developed an interest in and a habit of following news (Mindich, 2005). Many young people did not develop this interest in watching news, but humor has the ability to make coverage of politics and current affairs relevant to them and holds their interest and attention (Rottinghaus et al., 2008).

In terms of identity exploration, emerging adults have a psychological and social need to develop world views (Coyne et al., 2013). Rather than being informed, their priority is to know what opinions they should hold (Barnhurst, 1998), because their political preferences are still developing and partisan attachments have not crystalized yet (see Jennings & Markus, 1984). Compared with traditional news, political satire provides interpretations and demonstrates which ideas prevail in a critical discussion and, thus, helps such emerging adults develop political attitudes (Feldman, 2007; Marchi, 2012). By contrast, they do not like the balance and superficial political detachment of regular news coverage because this type of information is not particularly helpful in developing opinions (Mindich, 2005).

Lastly, as emerging adulthood has been described as a period of feeling in-between childhood and adulthood, young people may begin feeling a responsibility to become engaged with politics; however, they may find the traditional news media not entertaining enough (Feldman, 2007) and too didactical (Mindich, 2005) to do so. Emerging adults may thus consider political satire an enjoyable alternative because it offers them a comic relief to the serious and sad situations prevalent in the news (Rottinghaus et al., 2008; Young, 2013)

and allows them to learn and laugh simultaneously (Lee, 2013; Young, 2013). Rather than traditional news' rational discourse that posits politics as something to learn, satire also encourages its audience to play with politics (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009), which most likely will be appealing to the group emerging adults. Because political satire fulfills the needs of emerging adults better than those of older audiences, we expect younger adults to watch this genre more carefully than they watch regular news compared with older adults:

H<sub>4</sub>: Younger viewers are more absorbed in political satire compared with traditional news than older viewers.

### **The Consequence of Absorption in Political Satire**

Absorption has been shown to enhance the persuasive impact of formats that primarily intend to entertain (Slater & Rouner, 2002). For this reason, the elaboration likelihood model has been extended into the E-ELM (Slater & Rouner, 2002), which predicts that people will be less resistant, produce fewer counterarguments, and be more accepting of what they see as they are more absorbed in an entertaining message (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). The reason is that entertainment is typically not directly linked to one's own life, and therefore does not induce a need for scrutinizing because it does not threaten to directly impinge on one's self-interest. Unconstrained by the need to be critical, messages used for entertainment purposes may absorb so much of viewers' attention and cognitive capacity that it becomes difficult to critically evaluate and counterargue its information (Nabi et al., 2007).

The attempts to comprehend satire put such a high cognitive load on viewers (LaMarre & Walther, 2013; Nabi et al., 2007) that insufficient available resources remain to scrutinize the validity of information that accompanies the satire (LaMarre et al., 2014; Young, 2008). Furthermore, and evidencing this theory, when satire is more complex and

requires more cognitive effort, fewer resources will be available for counterarguing (LaMarre et al., 2014). In addition to capabilities, viewer motivation also obstructs scrutinizing satire. It seems that absorption and counterarguing “are fundamentally incompatible” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 180). After all, message scrutiny will undermine the reward component of comprehending a joke because it minimizes laughter (Young, 2008). Thus, enhanced absorption increases susceptibility in the following manner:

H<sub>5</sub>: Absorption in a political message (a) reduces counterarguing, and therefore (b) indirectly affects the political attitude regarding the satirized subject in a manner that is *congruent* with the message’s argument.

### **Satire’s Nature of Attack**

Political satire comes in many forms, which might influence the effects it may have. Over forty different humor techniques have been identified, including irony, slapstick, parody, and sarcasm (Berger, 1976). Political satirists are not bound to one of these techniques but serve a “mixed dish” of humor techniques in which elements of aggression, play, laughter and judgment implicitness are combined to *attack* a political subject (Holbert, 2014, p. 4). Examples of this diversity include horatian and juvenalian satire, which diverge on these characteristics and, therefore, will almost always provide different information when attacking the same subject, which complicates experimental investigations to their differential effects with stimuli directly taken from the “real world”.

However, within one specific mixture of humor techniques, jokes may still differ in their *nature of attack* by varying only the degrees of aggression and play (Holbert, 2014). A joke, while employing the same techniques, may be subtle – relatively more play – in how it attacks its target or may attack in a harsher manner by showing more aggression (Holbert,

2014). Previous studies have suggested that different types of satire may have different effects; however, because they relied on existing stimuli that also provided different information, the internal validity of these findings might be questioned. To shed further light on this matter, we attempt to answer the following question in an exploratory manner because there is not enough theory to build on:

RQ: How do the effects hypothesized above ( $H_1$  to  $H_5$ ) differ for satire with a subtle nature of attack relative to satire with a harsh nature of attack?

### **Method**

An online experiment was conducted on April 3 and 4, 2014. A 2 (nature of attack: subtle vs. harsh) by 2 (background information provision: yes vs. no) with an appended control condition (a non-humorous news item with no provision of background information) design was used to test the effects of political satire. After providing informed consent and answering pre-test questions, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the following five conditions: a non-humorous news item ( $n = 53$ ), a subtle satire item ( $n = 52$ ), a harsh satire item ( $n = 58$ ), a provision of background information and the subtle satire item ( $n = 56$ ), or a provision of background information and the harsh satire item ( $n = 49$ ).<sup>2</sup>

### **Stimulus Materials**

All videos addressed the same topic, which was the plan of the Dutch government to reduce funding for the public broadcasting organization. The government suggested that these budget cuts could be compensated for by scheduling more or longer advertising breaks between programs. The choice of this policy topic was made because recent content analyses showed that political humor often is issue-oriented and informative (e.g., Haigh & Heresco,

2010). In the European context, a larger share of jokes has even been found that was substantive rather than person oriented (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013).

The satire items were purposefully made for this experiment by the producer of *LuckyTV*, Sander van de Pavert. *LuckyTV* is broadcast on weekdays as a one-minute satirical closure of the popular prime-time infotainment talk show *De Wereld Draait Door*. *LuckyTV* always uses video materials that have been previously broadcast and that often originate from news broadcasts of *NOS Journaal*, which is the news program with the highest ratings in the Netherlands and is known for its objective news coverage. *LuckyTV* puts a humorous twist on these materials by re-editing them, combining them with visuals and audio from other sources, and/or by manipulating the voice-over.<sup>3</sup>

An original news item was used as the treatment in the non-humorous condition, whereas this same item was manipulated into *LuckyTV* items for the satire conditions. Our stimuli were thus improved in terms of internal validity compared with previous studies. Except for the presence or type of humor, stimuli from previous studies also varied on visuals, sounds, actors, and voice-overs because they relied on existing materials. Our stimuli largely showed the same visuals, with the same actors, and with exactly the same topic.<sup>4</sup> The humorous stimuli were, however, consciously made identifiable as *LuckyTV* items by its introduction and logo, whereas the news item was identifiable as *NOS Journaal* item because people's expectations about what is to come likely influences how they process information.<sup>5</sup> Making satire unrecognizable as such would have been artificial and inconsistent with reality.

Acknowledging that political humor comes in a variety of forms, we manipulated an inherent characteristic of political satire, which is the nature of attack (see Holbert, 2014). Creating a subtle item and a harsh satire item required relatively small differences in stimuli, while keeping the same intended meaning. As is common with political satire (Young et al., 2013), the intended meaning of the satire items was not made overly clear. Thus, the

participants had to use their knowledge of the topic to understand the joke. If they succeeded, they would have discovered that, according to the satirist, it was a bad plan because the public broadcaster would be inundated with commercials or violence to attract audience share if the government persevered in its plans to cut the budget.

**Non-humorous condition.** In the non-humorous news condition, the participants were exposed to an existing item that had been broadcasted by *NOS Journaal* on October 10, 2013. The news item introduced the plan of the Dutch government to cut the budget for the public broadcasting organization and suggests that more or longer commercial breaks will be scheduled and that prize of distribution will be renegotiated with operators. Part of the item is a short interview with State Secretary Sander Dekker in which he explained that public broadcasters can fill up their deficit by broadcasting one or two more minutes of commercials per hour.

**Subtle satire conditions.** In two of the conditions, the participants were exposed to a satiric *LuckyTV* item with a subtle nature of attack. The item started with exactly the same introduction as the *NOS Journaal* item stating that the Dutch government planned to cut the budget of public broadcasters and suggested broadcasting more commercials. However, after the State Secretary repeated that the public broadcaster should consider scheduling one or two more minutes of commercials, this time a tedious and ridiculous one-minute commercial for a senior toilet began with epic movie music in the background. At the commercial's end, we see a news host waiting for the commercial to finally finish before he can continue presenting the headlines.

Half of the participants who saw this subtle humorous item were in the condition that only saw this video. The other half additionally had read an article from the *NOS* news website that reported on the planned budget cuts for public broadcasting *before* they saw the

*LuckyTV* item. This news article provided background information that was also presented in the non-humorous *NOS* item, although with a few more details.

**Harsh humor conditions.** The participants in the last two conditions were exposed to a *LuckyTV* item that addressed the same topic in a harsh satirical way. This time, the item also began with the introduction of the *NOS Journaal* item that the Dutch government planned to cut the budget of public broadcasters. However, instead of filling up their deficits by broadcasting more commercials, this item suggested (by manipulating the voice-over) that more revenues could be derived by broadcasting violent series and movies. Furthermore, the interviewer's question to the State Secretary whether more commercials should be broadcast was replaced by a question concerning whether more violence should be broadcast. As in the original, the State Secretary confirmed this expectation. Visuals from inside Parliament were replaced by violent scenes from movies. In addition, whereas the *NOS Journaal* item showed citizens watching sports on TV, in the *LuckyTV* item the sports video was replaced by a video of a gun fight. Again, about half of the participants who saw this item had read the background information article from the *NOS* website *before* they saw the video, while the other half only saw the video.

The harsh satire item was perceived as being 0.86 points (on a 10-point scale) more inappropriate than the subtle item,  $p = .052$ , and 1.17 points more offending,  $p = .016$ , than the subtle satire item. As intended, the harsh item and the subtle item did not differ on how complicated they were to be understood,  $p = .662$ , nor in terms of clarity,  $p = .169$ , which shows that it was the nature of the attack that was manipulated and not, for example, the explicitness of the argument.

## Participants



Participants were recruited from the database of a market research agency, PanelClix. Quotas were set on age, gender and political preference to ensure variation in the sample and to make it representative for Dutch society at least on these characteristics. With a 57.1% completion rate, 268 participants successfully finished the experiment. They showed to have done so attentively by correctly responding to an instructional manipulation check (see Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009).

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 72 ( $M = 40.62$ ,  $SD = 14.06$ , skewness = 0.04, kurtosis = -1.16), and 54.5% were female. The median educational level was elementary general secondary education, and 40.7% had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. In our sample, 34% of the participants identified themselves with a left-wing political preference, 30.2% with no political preference, and 35.8% indicated to have a right-wing political preference. Participants took an average of 32 minutes ( $SD = 17.37$ ) to complete the experiment.

## Measures

**Moderators: *Political preference.*** In the pre-test, the participants were asked on a scale from -5 to 5 whether cultural facilities should be maintained or whether the government should cut the budget for these expenses ( $M = -0.91$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ , skewness = 0.30, kurtosis = -0.60). This question was used to identify people's opinions regarding the various budget cuts that the government proposed during the period in which this study was conducted.

**Mediators: *Perceived funniness.*** How funny participants perceived the video to be to which they were exposed was measured with the response to one question that ranged from not funny to funny on an 11-point scale from 0 to 10. The average score was 3.53 ( $SD = 3.03$ ), which was not very high because it included the non-humorous news item condition.

**Absorption.** How much people were absorbed in the item was measured with a latent scale of two items both assessed on 11-point scales ( $M = 9.93$ ,  $SD = 3.80$ ): first, whether people felt distracted or if they concentrated while watching the video and second, whether people remained conscious of their surroundings or whether they were completely focused on the video. Both items were also part of the larger scale used by Nabi et al. (2007) and were used as indicators of the latent construct “absorption” in the structural equation model and had standardized factor loadings of 0.65 and 0.62, respectively.

**Counterarguing.** Immediately after stimulus exposure, the participants were asked to write down all of the things they were thinking of during and directly after watching the video. They were given a minimum of at least one minute to accomplish this task and were provided with six text entry boxes to help structure their minds and stimulate responses. On average, the participants provided 2.18 thoughts ( $SD = 1.34$ ), of which 1.18 ( $SD = 1.22$ ) related specifically to the topic of budget cuts for the public broadcaster.

The valence of these thoughts was coded by the author to capture whether participants actively agreed or disagreed with the message of the satirist that the plans of the government were not good. The coding scheme followed Young (2008), and distinguished among negative message-relevant thoughts (disagreeing with the satire items, i.e., stating that the budget cuts were fine) and positive message-relevant thoughts (agreeing with the satire items, i.e., stating that the budget cuts were problematic). Twenty percent of the thoughts were randomly selected to be coded by someone not involved in this study for the purpose of intercoder reliability assessment. The number of positive message-relevant thoughts were subtracted from the number of negative message-relevant thoughts ( $M = -0.52$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ; Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .87$ ), such that higher scores indicated more counterarguing with the stimuli.

**Dependent variable: *Attitude*.** To determine how much people supported the plan of the government to cut the budget of the public broadcasting organization, three responses to the following statements on 11-point scales from -5 to 5 were combined in a latent variable ( $M = -2.82$ ,  $SD = 8.80$ ): whether people thought the plans were (1) a bad or good idea, (2) unacceptable or acceptable, and (3) foolish or sensible. The three items were used as indicators of the latent construct “attitude” and had standardized effect coefficients of 0.97, 0.90, and 0.94, respectively.

### **Analysis**

Dealing with a multicategorical independent variable (i.e., allocation to one of five experimental conditions), being interested in more comparisons than only to a reference condition, and having a model with multiple mediators and moderators, a sophisticated analytical design was developed that allowed all of the hypotheses to be analyzed at once. Following Hayes and Preacher (2013), forward difference contrast coding was applied (see Table 1), which resulted in  $k - 1$  variables (i.e., four in this case) (Serlin & Levin, 1985).

[Table 1 about here]

Thereby, we could analyze most of the differences between experimental conditions that were of interest. The contrast-coded variables allowed for the following comparisons of conditions: Subtle satire with background information versus subtle satire; subtle satire versus news item; news item versus harsh satire; and, harsh satire versus harsh satire with background information. The effect coefficients of contrast-coded variables replicated post hoc differences between conditions as in an ANOVA.

The contrast-coded variables were used in a partially latent structural equation model with attitude and absorption included as latent constructs (see Figure 2). The hypothesized moderated relationships were included as interaction effects with age and existing political

preference. The analyses were conducted in *AMOS 21* using maximum likelihood estimation. The model fit the data well,  $\chi^2(90) = 110.36$ ,  $p = .071$ , the comparative fit index was (CFI)  $>.99$ , standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.04, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .03, 90% confidence interval [.00, .05].

[Figure 2 about here]

## Results

Table 2 shows the estimates of the effects yielded with the structural equation model. Findings are discussed in the order of the hypotheses, and we conclude by comparing the effects of the subtle and harsh satire items.

[Table 2 about here]

### Effects of Political Satire via Perceived Funniness

The significant parameter estimates in the structural equation model for the contrasts with the news item showed that the two satire items were perceived as funnier than the news item. Generally, no differences in perceived funniness were found between those who read the news article before they saw a satire item and those who were not provided with this background information before exposure.

However, whether people were provided with background information did matter for the way the satire was processed. When the subtle and harsh satire conditions without background information were compared to the news item, no significant interaction effects were found with people's existing political preference. Therefore, these effects were restrained to zero (i.e., there were no effects) in the structural equation model, which indicates that political preferences did not moderate how funny the satire was perceived among those who were *not* provided with background information.

The interaction effects with political preferences were, however, significant for the contrast-coded variables that compared the satire conditions *without* background information with the satire conditions that *were provided* with background information for both the subtle and the harsh items. Thus, it was really the background information provision that allowed political preferences to moderate the effect of satire on perceived funniness. When the news item condition was compared with the two satire conditions in which people were first provided with background information, the interaction effects were also significant. Johnson-Neyman significance regions (see Hayes, 2013) below 0.72 and -0.86, respectively, showed that people who were provided with background information and disagreed with the satire's viewpoint did not significantly perceive the satire items as funnier than the news item.

Figure 3 plotted these interaction effects and shows how funny people with different political preferences thought the videos were. The differences between the people who were against budget cuts on cultural facilities and those who favored these cuts were minor in most conditions except for the satire conditions in which they first had read the news article. In those conditions, joke appreciation was highest among those who generally were against budget cuts and most likely agreed with the satirist's message.

[Figure 3 about here]

Background information, therefore, seemed essential to evoke laughter only when the satire was consistent with the participant's existing disposition, which supports Hypothesis 1. Confirming the foundation underlying this hypothesis, an ANOVA showed that participants in the conditions provided with background information indicated that they found it less difficult to understand the satire than participants not provided with background information,  $F(1,213) = 5.02$ ,  $p = .026$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , which could decrease the tendency to selectively process in ways that reflect one's preferences (see Podlas, 2013).

As formulated in Hypothesis 2, how funny an item was perceived to be has been expected to affect the attitude toward the satirized subject in a manner that is incongruent with its meaning due to message discounting. This expectation was confirmed. Perceived funniness had a significant positive effect on counterarguing. Counterarguing, subsequently, positively affected the attitude in a manner such that people agreed more with the government's plan and thus less with the satirist. The 95% bias-corrected 10,000 bootstraps interval of the indirect effect of perceived funniness on the attitude via counterarguing did not negatively exceed zero, implying a significant positive indirect effect,  $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95% CI [0.00, 0.06],  $p = .016$ .

### **Effects of Political Satire via Absorption**

How funny an item was perceived to be also increased processing depth. As Hypothesis 3 predicted, a positive effect of perceived funniness on absorption was found. As predicted in Hypothesis 4, the experiment also confirmed that young adults were more absorbed in satire than in regular news compared with older people. The two interaction effects of age with the contrast-coded variables that compared exposure to the news item relative to seeing one of the two satire items were both significant.

Figure 4 shows how the effect on absorption of being assigned to a satire condition relative to the news condition changes with age: absorption was significantly stronger among younger participants who saw the satire, whereas older participants were significantly less absorbed in it (i.e., they were more absorbed in the news item). Johnson-Neyman significance regions (see Hayes, 2013) showed that absorption was significantly stronger among participants under 28 for the subtle satire video, whereas for the harsh satire the same occurred among people younger than 35. This closely resembles the boundary of 30 years that has been described as the end of emerging adulthood (Coyne et al., 2013)

[Figure 4 about here]

Absorption was expected to negatively affect the attitude toward the government's plan due to a lack of resources and motivation to scrutinize the arguments of the items. Hence, we investigated whether absorption had a negative indirect effect on the attitude via decreased counterarguing. First, a negative effect was found for absorption on counterarguing, which indicates that as participants were more absorbed in the message, relatively fewer critical thoughts raised about its intended meaning. Second (as previously described), because the item was counterargued less, the attitude toward the government's plan was affected more negatively: Not disagreeing with the items increased support for the satirist's perspective. The indirect effect of absorption on attitude via counterarguing was significant as the bounds of its 95% bias-corrected 10,000 bootstraps interval did not positively exceed zero,  $b = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI  $[-0.17, -0.01]$ ,  $p = .020$ , which implies a significant negative indirect effect.<sup>6</sup> This finding supports Hypothesis 5.

Following these results, and because joint significance of direct effects very well indicates the significance of indirect effects (Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008), the conclusion can be drawn that exposure to satire has a negative indirect effect via absorption and decreased counterarguing on the attitude toward the subject being attacked in the satire. However, this negative indirect effect will only occur for emerging adults because older people were not absorbed more into the satire than into the regular news.

### **The Consequences of Satire's Nature of Attack**

The contrast-coded variables that were used to investigate the hypotheses did not allow for a direct comparison of the subtle and harsh satire conditions. Using user-defined estimates in *AMOS* with bootstrapping, the effects of both could nevertheless be compared. The difference estimates of the effects of the subtle satire and the harsh satire item, however,

never reached statistical significance. Neither the effect on absorption nor the effect on perceived funniness were significantly different for the subtle satire item relative to the harsh satire item. Additionally, when the two satire conditions in which people first read the news article were compared, the differences were not significant. Lastly, the interaction effects with age and political preference did not function significantly different for the subtle and harsh satire items. The nature of attack in satire, therefore, seems not to have had an impact in this experiment.

### **Discussion**

This study has shown that political satire influences political attitudes via two underlying processes, perceived funniness and absorption, that evoke and inhibit counterarguing, respectively, with the ideas the satire aims to convey. Because these two mediators have opposite effects on attitude, no overall effect of watching satire has been found. In addition to adding another result in the mixed row of preceding studies, this study moves beyond the extant research by explaining *why* effects can be positive or negative, but frequently are insignificant, through an investigation of these underlying processes. Focusing on the insignificant overall effect may, however, lead to a distorted picture; due to the conditionality of indirect effects, certain people will remain susceptible to the influence of satire.

In our theoretical framework and empirical findings, we show that emerging adults tend to be more absorbed into satire than into regular news. When people are absorbed into the content, satirists are most likely to achieve their intended effects because absorbed people are unlikely to counterargue due to a lack of resources and motivation (LaMarre et al., 2014; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Those intended effects are, however, counterbalanced via the indirect effect of perceived funniness (Nabi et al., 2007). As a message is perceived funnier,



it is more likely to be counterargued. Due to such scrutinizing, positive thoughts toward the *message target* are evoked, which goes against the intentions of the satirist and blocks the overall effect of absorption.

To be effective, satirists should thus not provide too many discounting cues. Rather, satirists must make clear that, although they bring their message in the form of a joke, they are serious about its content. Lighter forms of humor, such as horatian satire, thus appear to be less effective not only because of the fewer resources they require (this is the argument of LaMarre et al., 2014) but also because they evoke more laughter compared with more definitive and bitter approaches – as in juvenalian satire. The nature of attack, whether subtle or harsh, while providing similar discounting cues and equally complex information as in this study, did not seem to have influenced the persuasiveness. Future studies may want to manipulate this factor less tenuously.

The current study has shown that whether background information was provided affected the processing of satire. People who did not read the news article found the satire equally funny; this is indicative of selective processing. For those who were provided with background information, however, moderation by existing political preference was found. This is consistent with disposition theory. Those who agreed with the satire still found it funny, whereas those who had preferences incongruent with the satire could not laugh about it and perceived the satire to be about as funny as the news item. The study, thereby, provides evidence for both selective processing mechanisms (LaMarre et al., 2009; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974) and disposition theory (Becker, 2014; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972) within the context of political satire, and concludes that, for the latter to occur, viewers require background information to realize when a satire might threaten their self-image.

A question open for future research is whether the tendency to be more absorbed in satire than in news among emerging adults is a cohort or a life cycle effect. There are

indications for the former perspective because studies have shown that young adults currently are not developing a news habit at all because of the ever-expanding media environment. Therefore, they remain more interested in entertainment formats and are likely to remain relatively indifferent to the news for the rest of their lives (Mindich, 2005).

With two satire conditions in our design (subtle and harsh), this allowed for a comparison of two types of satire that differed in their nature of attack but also for *two* comparisons of satire with non-humorous content. Because the effects of both the subtle and the harsh satire items on the mediating variables were similar (also their interaction effects), this actually replicated these findings and gives great confidence to the reliability of our results.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated two indirect ways through which satire affects political attitudes. However, whereas the process via absorption negatively affected the attitude, the process via perceived funniness did so in a positive manner. Therefore, no overall effects of satire could occur. As long as satirists primarily try to be funny and provide enough cues to be understood as jokesters rather than as a sincere source of information, it seems unrealistic to have concerns that are too great, or that have too much hope, regarding the power of political satire to bring down societal power structures (Colletta, 2009).

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Alternative terms with the same meaning are “transportation” and “narrative engagement” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 179). We use the term “absorption” as we believe this most clearly describes what happens.

<sup>2</sup> The current study was part of a larger experiment with a total of 12 conditions of which only these five were relevant to this manuscript.

<sup>3</sup> *LuckyTV* sometimes produces items in English, which may be helpful to understand its format. Two manipulated State of the Union addresses exemplify the humorous techniques used by its producer and can be found at <http://www.luckymedia.nl/luckytv/2007/01/state-of-the-union/> and <http://www.luckymedia.nl/luckytv/2012/01/up-down2/>

<sup>4</sup> As intended, the news item and the two satire items did not differ on how much it prompted people to think,  $F(2,160) = 0.93, p < .395$ , nor on perceived ideological bias,  $F(2,160) = 0.32, p < .728$ .

<sup>5</sup> Anticipation of a joke, which was strongest in the satire conditions, positively predicts how much people were absorbed in the item and how funny participants assessed the video. This variable was not included as an extra mediator to avoid making the model needlessly complicated.

<sup>6</sup> Considering that perceived funniness also has an indirect effect on the attitude via absorption, its overall indirect effect remains significant,  $b = 0.02, SE = 0.01, 95\% CI [0.00, 0.04], p = .016$ .

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Figures and tables in text

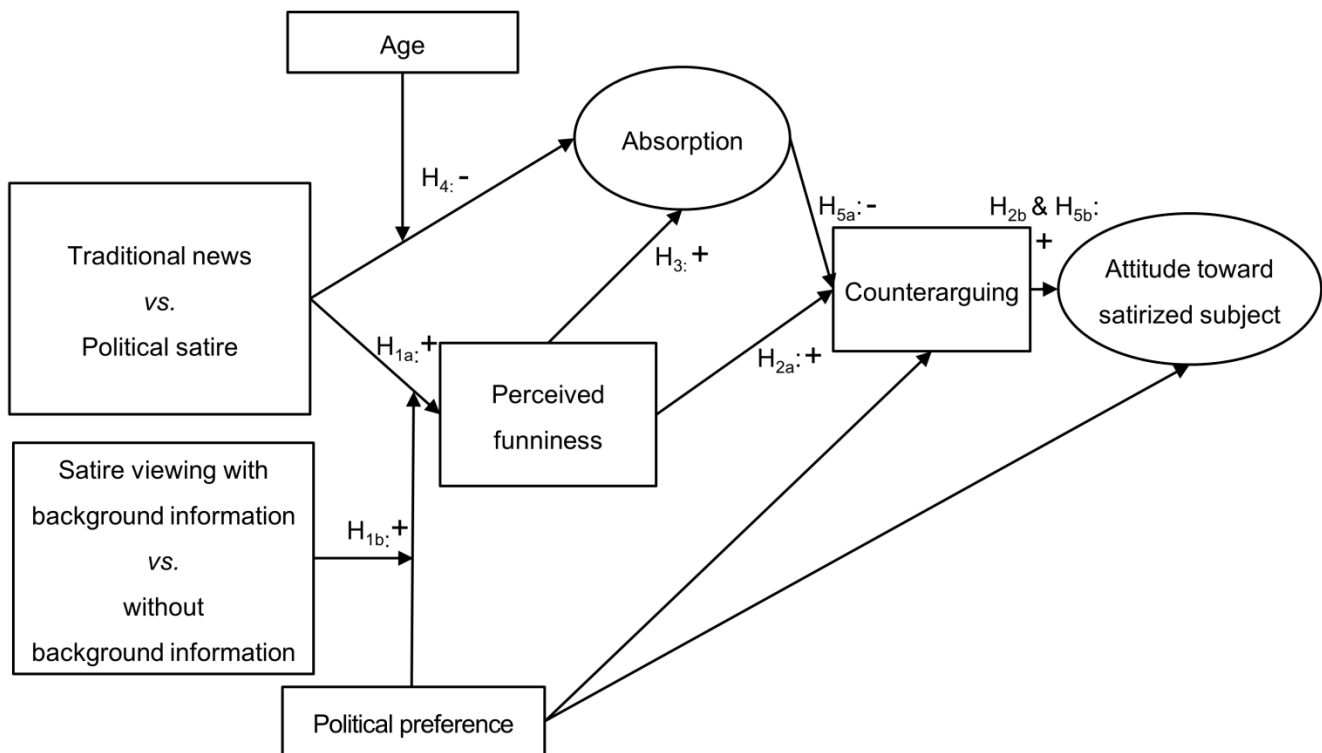


Figure 1. The theoretical model of satire's influence on political attitudes.

Table 1. *The contrast coding scheme applied to analyze the data. Values in the columns show the weight given per condition in one of the four contrast-coded variables.*

<i>Experimental condition:</i>	<b>Contrast-coded variables</b>			
	Subtle with background info vs. Subtle satire	Subtle satire vs. News item	News item vs. Harsh satire	Harsh satire vs. Harsh with background info
Subtle with background info	0.8	0.6	0.4	0.2
Subtle satire item	-0.2	0.6	0.4	0.2
News item	-0.2	-0.4	0.4	0.2
Harsh satire item	-0.2	-0.4	-0.6	0.2
Harsh with background info	-0.2	-0.4	-0.6	-0.8

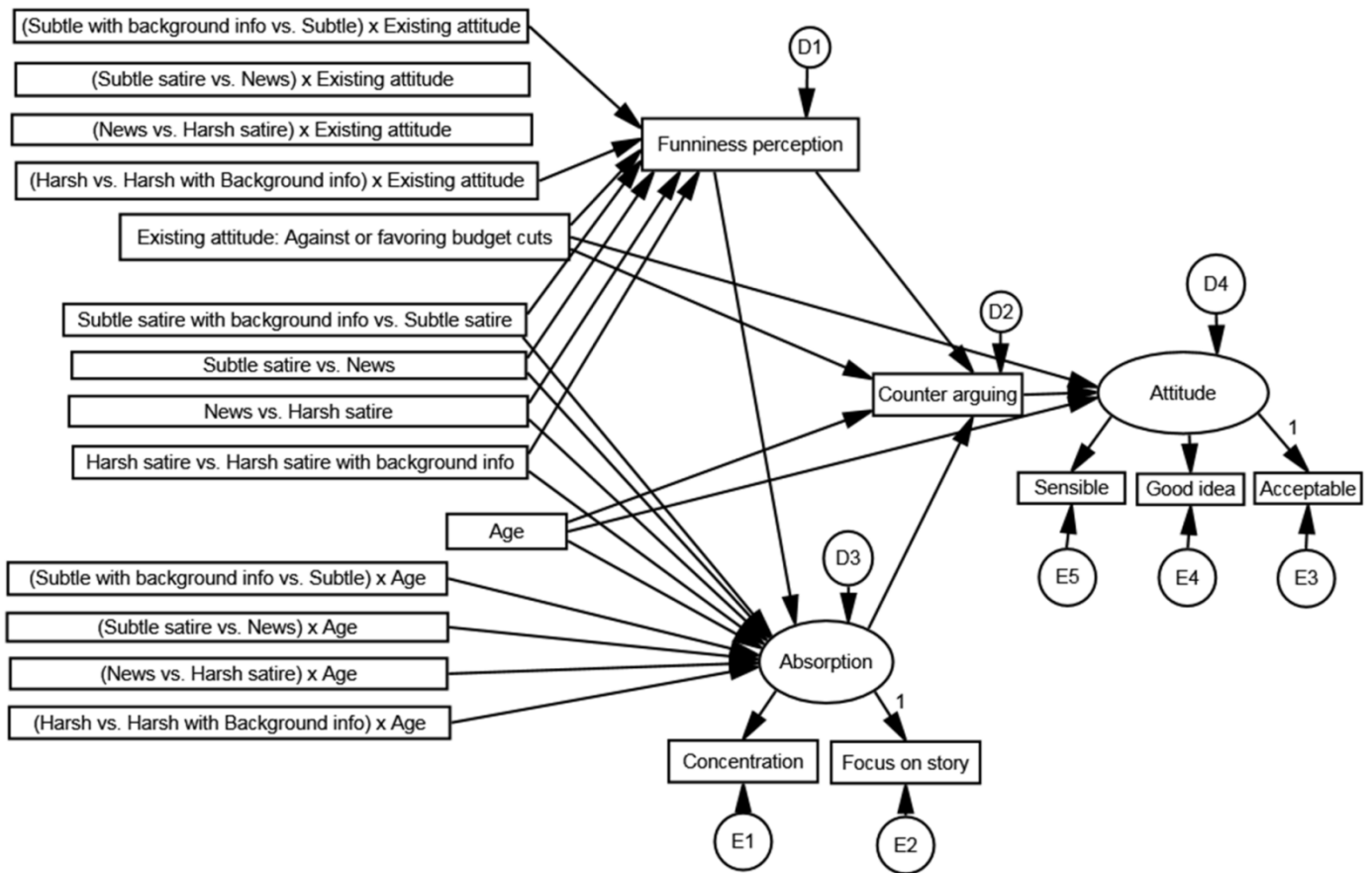
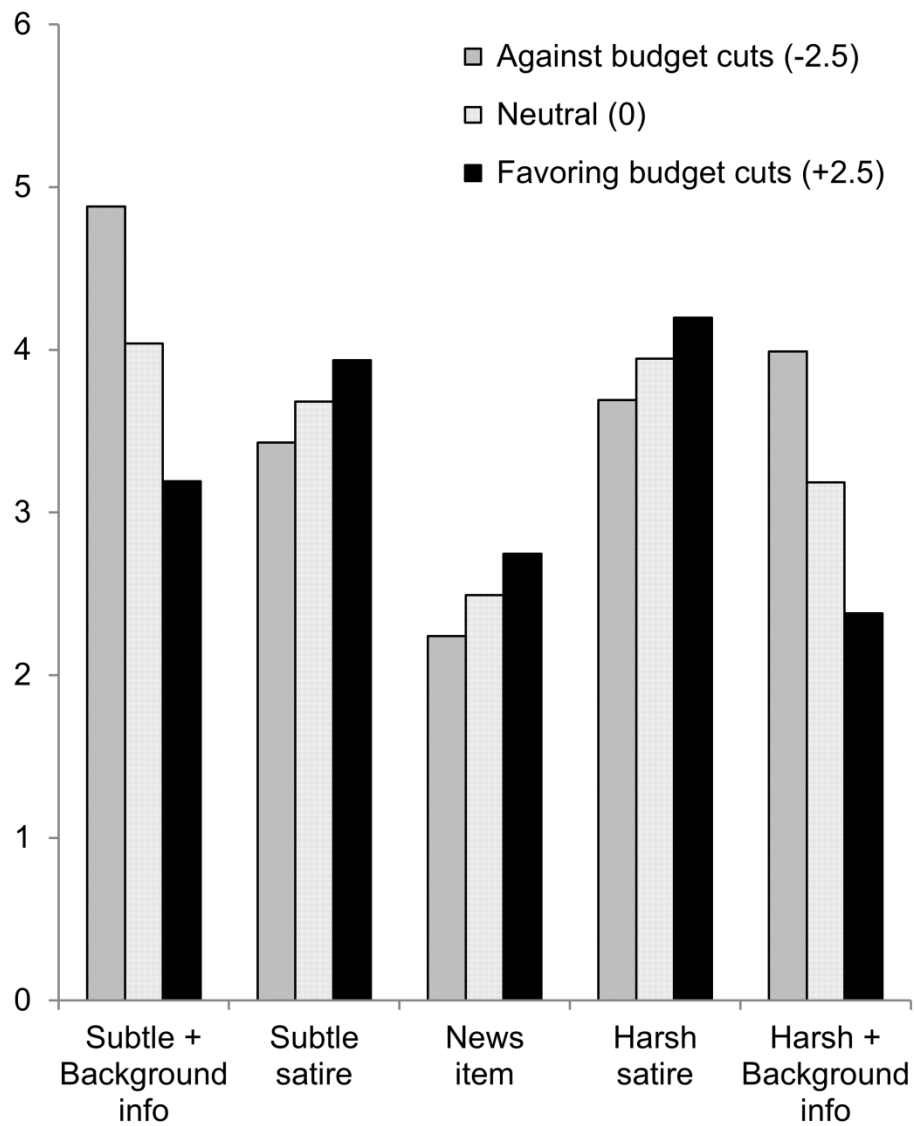


Figure 2. The partially latent structural equation model testing the underlying processes of satire’s effect on political attitudes. *Note:* For reasons of clarity, we did not visualize the specified covariances between the exogenous variables, although they were included in the model.

Table 2. *Parameter estimates for the partially latent structural regression model predicting attitudes toward budget cuts on public broadcasting by the government.*

Hyp.	Independent variable	Dependent variable	B	(SE)	p
1	Subtle with background info vs. Subtle humor	Perceived funniness	0.36	0.58	.543
1	Subtle humor vs. News item	Perceived funniness	1.19	0.57	.037
1	News item vs. Harsh humor	Perceived funniness	-1.45	0.56	.009
1	Harsh humor vs. Harsh with background info	Perceived funniness	0.76	0.60	.207
1	Existing preference (against vs. favoring budget cuts)	Perceived funniness	-0.07	0.07	.342
1	(Subtle with background info vs. Subtle humor) x Preference	Perceived funniness	-0.44	0.20	.028
1	(Subtle humor vs. News item) x Preference	Perceived funniness	0	- restricted -	
1	(News item vs. Harsh humor) x Preference	Perceived funniness	0	- restricted -	
1	(Harsh humor vs. Harsh with background info) x Preference	Perceived funniness	0.42	0.18	.020
3	Perceived funniness	Absorption	0.12	0.05	.008
4	Subtle with background info vs. Subtle humor	Absorption	1.02	1.26	.418
4	Subtle humor vs. News item	Absorption	3.98	1.39	.004
4	News item vs. Harsh humor	Absorption	-5.81	1.44	.000
4	Harsh humor vs. Harsh with background info	Absorption	3.30	1.25	.008
4	Age	Absorption	0.02	0.01	.013
4	(Subtle with background info vs. Subtle humor) x Age	Absorption	-0.03	0.03	.362
4	(Subtle humor vs. News item) x Age	Absorption	-0.11	0.03	.000
4	(News item vs. Harsh humor) x Age	Absorption	0.14	0.03	.000
4	(Harsh humor vs. Harsh with background info) x Age	Absorption	-0.09	0.03	.005
2 <sub>a</sub>	Perceived funniness	Counterarguing	0.07	0.02	.000
5 <sub>a</sub>	Absorption	Counterarguing	-0.16	0.05	.001
	Age	Counterarguing	-0.05	0.04	.262
	Existing preference	Counterarguing	0.09	0.02	.000
2 <sub>b</sub> & 5 <sub>b</sub>	Counterarguing	Attitude	0.34	0.15	.025
	Existing preference	Attitude	0.39	0.06	.000
	Age	Attitude	-0.03	0.01	.004
		Absorption		$R^2 = .24$	
		Perceived funniness		$R^2 = .07$	
	Variance accounted for:	Counterarguing		$R^2 = .15$	
		Attitude		$R^2 = .21$	

*Note.* Cells contain unstandardized (*B*) coefficients with standard errors (*SE*) in parentheses, and probabilities (*p*).



*Figure 3.* Display of the interaction effect on perceived funniness between experimental condition and existing political preference.

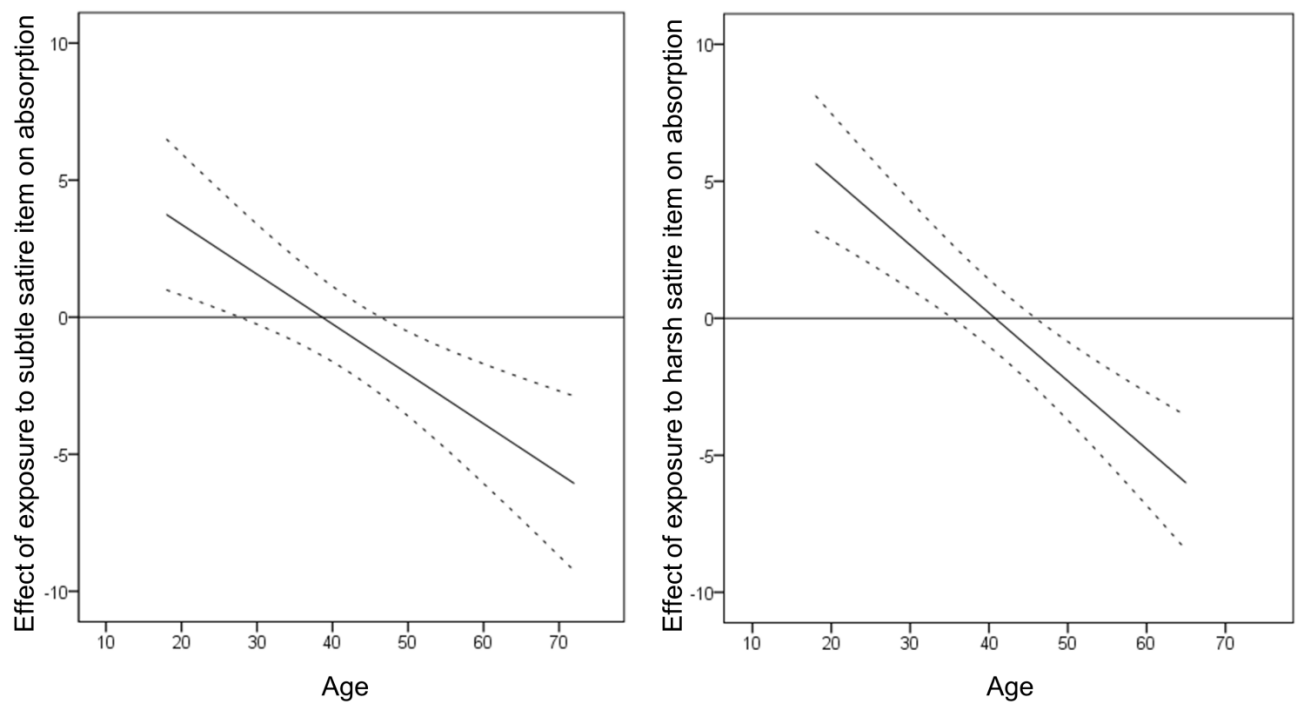


Figure 4. The visualized interaction effect and its 95% confidence interval of being exposed to a humorous item (subtle or harsh) relative to exposure to the news item on absorption for different ages.