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Individual Differences in Perceptions of Intersectional Racial Humor Memes

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Intersectionality and Humor

"The way we imagine discrimination or disempowerment often is more complicated for people who are subjected to multiple forms of exclusion. The good news is that intersectionality provides us a way to see it."

Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (2017)

Kimberle Crenshaw, professor of civil rights studies, constitutional law, and author of Critical Race Theory researches intersectional identities and how they factor into understanding discrimination and disempowerment in society. An intersectional identity is defined as the combination of multiple interlocking social identities (e.g., gender, race) based on intersectional systems (e.g., power, privilege, oppression, and inequality) (Ronald & Wong, 2017). In our studies, we specifically examined how people perceive gender and race-based humor that punches up and punches down at intersectional identities. Essentially, this type of humor is an often political tool that can challenge, reflect and reproduce asymmetrical power relations in society (Boskinds 1977; Weave 2011). This preservation of asymmetrical power relations may lead people to perceive that humor targeting those lower on the social hierarchy (e.g., Black people) is different from humor targeting those on top (e.g., White men). These concepts can be referred to as punching up (i.e., disparaging someone who is higher than you on the social hierarchy) and punching down (i.e., disparaging someone who is below you on the social hierarchy). This is why some individuals may find it acceptable for LGBTQ comedians to denigrate straight people, or for women to make fun of men. Punching up at someone who has more privilege than you may allow someone to subvert the existing status hierarchy and temporarily level the social playing field.

Disparaging humor can be used as a sword to belittle and denigrate an individual or a group (e.g., Black people) (Jane & Olsen, 2000). When this occurs, privileged groups can be placed above marginalized groups if the target is of a historically oppressed identity (e.g., Black people, women). Previous literature shows that those who use said humor may use it intentionally in an attempt to not only reinforce their superiority, but also to reinforce racism and privilege (Cruthids, Wang, Romero, 2013). As a result, stereotypes about traditionally stigmatized groups (e.g., Black people, women) can be reinforced through the normative nature of disparaging humor (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). What is unknown is how humor targeting intersectional identities (e.g., Black woman, Black man, White woman, White man) is perceived by the targeted groups and third parties. To our knowledge there is no literature that examines how people perceive humor that disparages an intersectional groups.

In Study 1, participants responded to relatively non-threatening starter packs targeting four intersectional identities (i.e., Black men, Black women, White men, White women) and were asked to rate how funny and offensive they were. In Study 2, participants responded to four more overtly disparaging starter packs of these same groups. These starter packs addressed target groups based on race and gender using stereotypical humor that belittles their groups (e.g., stereotypes related to crime). They were then asked to rate how much they themselves were represented by, humored by, and offended by the starter packs. We hypothesized that humor that targets less privileged groups (i.e., women, Black people) would be seen as more offensive and less funny than humor targeting a more privileged group (i.e., White men).

METHOD

Study 1:

In total, 153 undergraduates from a large Midwestern university participated in this research study in exchange for a mandatory research credit. The sample was 52% men and consisted of predominantly Caucasian participants (81%).

Study 2:

Participants (n= 203) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and were compensated \$0.25 for their participation.

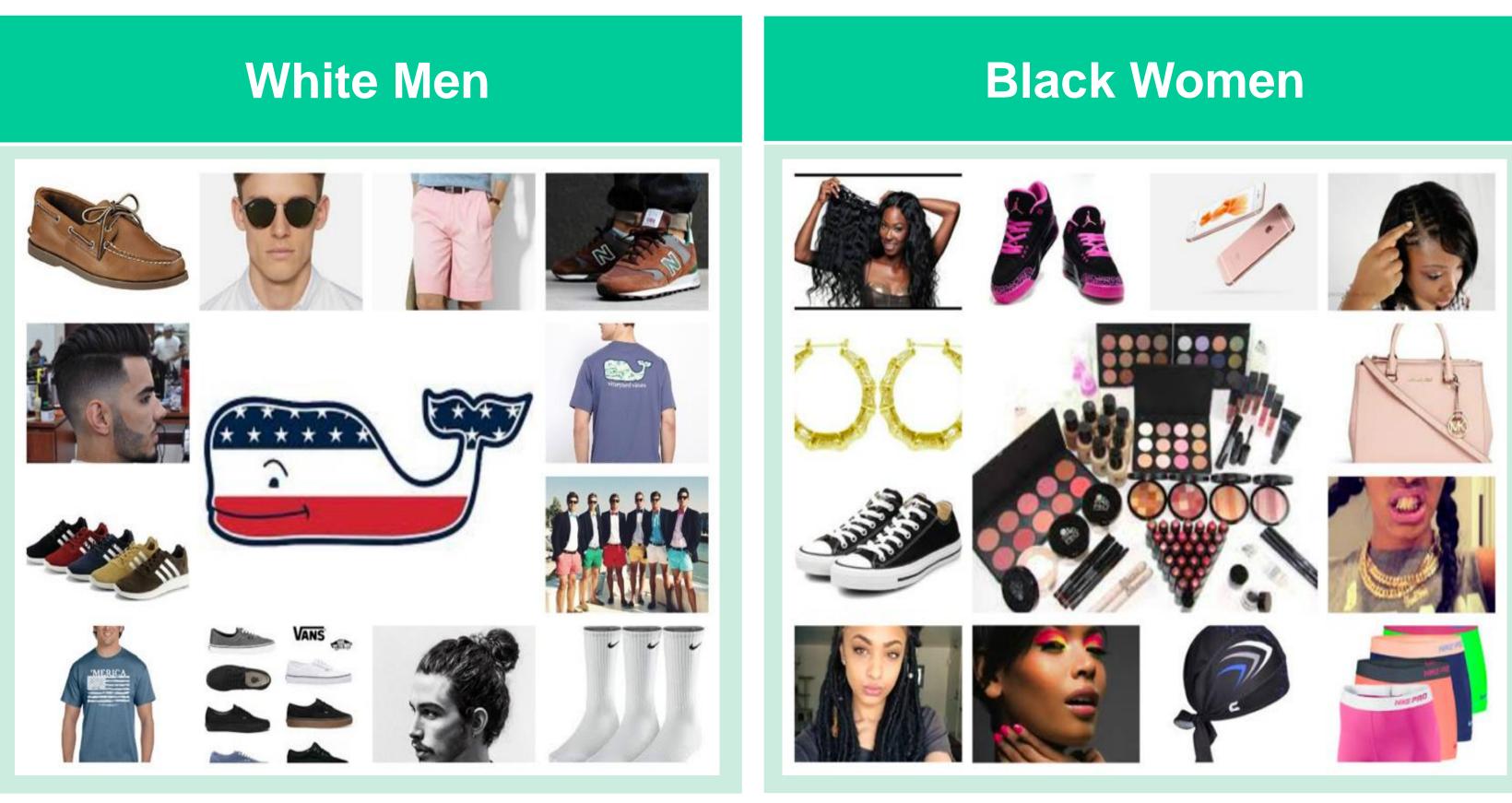
Procedure

We began by defining a 'starter pack' for the participants as "a collection of images representing objects, characteristics, and features that stereotypically describe a member of a specific gender and race." Participants then viewed and responded to four relatively non-threatening starter packs that targeted a specific intersection of gender and race, (i.e. Black women, Black men, White women, White men). Participants assessed the degree to which they were represented by, were humored by, and were offended by each starter pack using a 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much) scale. They also rated how humored and offended they would be if a Black person, White person, woman, or man showed them the starter pack on the same 1 to 9 scale. All participants responded to the same eleven items for all four starter packs in a randomized order.

2.3 Materials

Participants were presented with four starter packs (i.e., Black woman, Black man, White woman, White man) and were asked to rate them on levels of funniness, offensiveness, and degree to which the starter pack represented the group portrayed.

Examples of Starter Packs



RESULTS

Study 1:

Between-groups analyses of variance were conducted to examine participant gender and participant race as predictors of perceptions of starter packs as offensive and funny. There were no significant main effects on perceptions of the Black man and White man starter packs. There were also no significant main effects on perceptions of the Black woman and White woman starter packs as offensive. However, there was a significant main effect of participant gender such that women found the White woman starter pack funnier than did men (F(1, 146) = 18.09, p < .001). Additionally, there was a significant main effect of race such that people of color found the Black woman starter pack funnier than did White people (F(1, 146) = 9.94, p = .002). There were no significant interactions.

Table 1Summary of Significant Differences in Perceived Humor and Offensiveness based on Target and Presenter

Target	Presenter	Funny			Offensive		
	-	M(SD)	t	p	M (SD)	t	p
Black Men	Black 3.88 (2.54)))	2.10 (1.96)	1		
	White	3.15 (2.18)	}4.98	}<.001	2.10 (1.96) 3.20 (2.60)	}-5.26	}<.001
	Man	3.39 (2.38)	1	1	2.16 (1.95)	1	1
	Woman	3.27 (2.25)	} 0.94	}.350	2.16 (1.95)2.35 (2.11)	}-2.70	800.
Black Woman	Black	3.18 (2.32)	}4.85		1.67 (1.42)		}<.001
	White	2.53 (1.92)					
	Man	2.78 (2.08)	l 0 10	}.846	2.11 (1.96) 1.83 (1.59)	1224	}.001
	Woman	2.76 (2.10)	} 0.19				,
White Men	Black	4.21 (2.68)	1024	014	1.59 (1.19) 1.50 (1.04)	} 0.70	100
	White	4.31 (2.69)					
	Man	4.52 (2.59)	} 0.27	} 788	1.46 (1.09) 1.49 (1.16)	}0.23	} 816
	Woman	4.44 (2.60)					
White Woman	White Woman Black 4.06 (2.60) White 4.21 (2.61) }-2.28	1 2 20	1 024	1.58 (1.22) 1.52 (1.10)	1 74	}.083	
	White	4.21 (2.61)	5-2.28	J .U24	1.52 (1.10)	J 1./4	J .U83
	Man	4.23 (2.55)	1	1	1.98 (1.76) 1.67 (1.41))	1
	Woman	4.22 (2.62)	} 0.13	} .900	1.67 (1.41)	} 3.56	} .001

Table 2Summary of Examples of Relevant Differences in levels of Perceived Humor and Offensiveness based on Presenter

Target	Presenter	Funny			Offensive			
		M(SD)	t	p	M (SD)	t	p	
Black Men	Black Man	2.07 (2.54)	}0.33	}.745	4.93 (1.96)	} 3.48	}<.001	
	White Man	2.07 (2.54) 2.10 (2.18)			4.93 (1.96) 5.42 (2.60)			
Black Woman	ack Woman Black Woman 2.86 (2.32)	1	1	4.95(1.42)	1	1		
	White Woman	2.86 (1.92)	} 0.04	} .971	5.67 (2.02)	} 4.55	}<.001	

Study 2:

Between-groups analyses of variance were conducted to examine participant gender and race as predictors of perceptions of starter packs as offensive and funny. Generally, women (M = 1.63, SD = 1.38) were less amused by the starter packs than were men (M = 2.72, SD = 2.41, t = -3.64, p < .001). There were no significant effects of participant race or gender on perceived offensiveness of the the starter packs, possibly because of combined ceiling and floor effects leading to a binomial distribution of the offensiveness criterion variables.

DISCUSSION

Across two studies, we found that, generally, humor targeting historically oppressed groups was perceived to be more offensive than humor targeting historically dominant groups. We incorporated the intersection of racial and gender-based humor through starter packs. In some aspects, people in some groups being targeted perceived the humor as more funny (e.g., women found the White woman starter pack funnier than did men). However, it is possible this is because they were more comfortable reporting so. This may also be because the starter packs are not openly disparaging, therefore inviting groups to laugh at stereotypes of themselves that may not be inherently threatening. However, generally, participants said they would find the humor more offensive and less funny if it was presented by a privileged group that was not the target (e.g., a White person presenting the Black woman starter pack). These results show that it may be more socially acceptable to target humor within one's social group or at privileged groups such as White men, but it is socially unacceptable to target a group with less social privilege (i.e. White people targeting Black people, men targeting women).

One limitation of our studies is the way in which we chose the stereotypes for each of the groups. There is no literature that explicitly states that these stereotypes are associated with these intersectional identities, and they were based on our perceptions of common stereotypes of the groups. Additionally, unfortunately, our sample was rather racially homogenous, so we had to combine all non-White ethnicities into one category in order to make racially-based comparisons. It is possible that a sample of all Black people would have reacted very differently than did the combination of many various People of Color. In the future, we would like to conduct a clipboard study in which we might have a more racially balanced sample. Future work should also compare perceptions of subversive humor in relation to gender and intersectionality instead of only using ambiguous and disparaging humor as we did. From our preliminary results, racial and gendered humor, used as a sword, appears to be viewed as less socially acceptable when used against historically oppressed groups than when used against historically privileged groups, and therefore should, deservedly, be socially suppressed. However, it is possible that subversive humor would be perceived differently.

Our findings suggest that people perceive jokes disparaging historically oppressed groups to be less funny and more offensive, and therefore potentially less acceptable. This is true in general, but is especially true when the humor is presented by groups that are traditionally higher on the social hierarchy than the target of the humor. Individuals may perceive jokes "punching down" at historically lower-status groups, such as women or Black people, as less socially acceptable than jokes "punching up" at historically higher-status groups, such as men or White people.

For More Information

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