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To Laugh or Cry: Examining Intergroup Attitudes through Humor

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences

To Laugh or Cry: Examining Intergroup
Attitudes through Humor
by
Katlin Bentley

A thesis presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Off-color humor targeting racial differences is understudied in the context of intergroup relations. This type of humor is considered a socially acceptable outlet for aggression and societal criticism (Cann, Cann, & Jordan, 2016; Ziv, 2010), but it is unclear how it affects emotion and attitudes towards outgroups. The sparse literature on this topic yields mixed results. There is some evidence that off-color racial humor may be beneficial to intergroup relations by dismantling prejudiced beliefs in a positive, inclusive way (Rappoport, 2005). However, in other studies, this type of humor seemed to encourage and reinforce negative stereotypes (Husband, 1977; Maio, Olson, & Bush, 1997). The following project examines off-color racial humor in the context of stand-up comedy to develop our understanding of how it affects emotions as well as attitudes towards and affiliation with racial outgroups.

1.1 Increasing Outgroup Familiarity through Intergroup Contact

Interracial conflict and misunderstandings often stem from decreased exposure to people of other races (Allport, 1954). This idea makes sense; it is easier to maintain prejudiced or ignorant beliefs about racial outgroups if you rarely encounter them during your daily routine and the ingroup members around you advocate similar stereotypes. This erroneous mindset can foster socially acceptable aggression towards outgroups, limit participation in intergroup forgiveness, and encourage justification of the ingroup's past misdeeds (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Cortes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Leyens, 2005). Exposure to and interactions with racial outgroups (i.e., intergroup contact) can be highly beneficial in dismantling misguided beliefs about outgroups. Intergroup contact increases familiarity with outgroup norms, decreases anxiety related to intergroup interactions, and increases people's ability to empathize with outgroups (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Why does this effect

occur? Encounters with other races allow people to reshape the way they perceive racial outgroups, drawing from specific knowledge gained from these interactions rather than solely relying on stereotypes (Pettigrew, 1998). As the ingroup develops a more accurate representation of outgroup characteristics, they may feel less threat and anxiety in response to outgroups, and commonalities between the groups may become more apparent. Recognition of these shared traits can help groups create a common ingroup identity that supersedes previously established group boundaries, leading people to recategorize outgroup members as another type of ingroup member (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996).

While intergroup contact generally tends to be beneficial for intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), it is important to note that direct (i.e., in-person) interactions with outgroups are not always as successful. People may feel stressed or anxious in anticipation of or during interactions with outgroup members (Hyers & Swim, 1998; Littleford et al., 2005; Shelton, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 1989; Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000). Actually engaging in these interactions can lead to increased biases toward and avoidance of outgroups (Paolini, Hewstone, Voci, Harwood, & Cairns, 2006; Shelton, Dovidio, Hebl, & Richeson, 2009; Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009), concerns about being perceived as a confirmation of group stereotypes (Shelton, Richeson, & Vorauer, 2006), and activation of stress-related physiological responses (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Mendes, Blascovich, Lickel, & Hunter, 2002; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008). These outcomes are likely amplified in the context in which the interactions occur. Participants who are unfamiliar with outgroups or actively avoid them may feel very uncomfortable interacting with outgroups in a lab setting, particularly one in which they have little control over the situation, leading to increased negative outcomes (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015). Even if interactions

occur under optimal conditions, there is also a concern that interacting and improving relations with specific outgroups will not lead to similar attitude changes for other outgroups (Amir, 1976; Forbes, 1997).

In addition to having ambiguous outcomes, direct interactions are not always feasible to implement. Issues such as physical proximity, language barriers, differences in education, and cultural beliefs about outgroups can limit opportunities for intergroup interactions (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011). Groups may not want to interact directly, particularly if they are highly suspicious and distrusting of one another (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002), making it unlikely that initial or impromptu interactions will help reduce tension between groups. Indirect contact is a practical solution to this issue. Such forms of contact can include having an ingroup friend who is close to an outgroup member (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007), observing an ingroup stranger interact with outgroups (Mazziotta, Mummendey, & Wright, 2011; Weisbuch, Pauker, & Ambady, 2009), or imagining oneself interacting with an outgroup member (Husnu & Crisp, 2010; Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007). These experiences may be just as effective as direct contact at improving outgroup attitudes and reducing anxiety relating to intergroup interactions; vicariously experiencing intergroup contact can trigger affective and cognitive processes similar to those activated by direct contact (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011).

Indirect contact may be more influential on intergroup relations today than in prior generations due to the rapid advancement and accessibility of mass media in modern society (Enos, 2016; Kellner, 2011). Our brains process media experiences in a way that is very similar to tangible experiences, leading people to categorize and respond to fictional and televised characters as they would real people (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Kanazawa, 2002; Schiappa,

Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Given the flexibility of media, intergroup encounters can be presented in such a way as to cater to a wide audience of viewers, regardless of proximity, language, education, and culture. Frequent exposure to media portrayals of outgroups can be highly effective at inducing the effects of indirect contact. Viewing intergroup interactions and relationships through film and television allows people to become familiar with a broad array of outgroups, even if they do not have the opportunity to directly interact with them on a day to day basis (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). However, there is a concern that these portrayals may reinforce harmful, negative stereotypes, particularly if outgroup characters are consistently assigned to low status roles or if prejudiced ingroup characters are seen in a positive light (Mutz & Goldman, 2010).

1.2 Humor in an Intergroup Context

Regardless how people are exposed to outgroups, humor can be a highly effective tool for facilitating memorable, positive intergroup relations. Humor has several functions relating to interpersonal communication. It can increase group cohesion, foster intimacy, and reshape group norms in a variety of contexts (Khoury, 1985; Ziv, 2010). Incidental humor (i.e., awkward or comedic elements of everyday situations) during extended, face-to-face interracial interactions is highly effective at restoring and maintaining a positive, inclusive atmosphere when dialogue has broken down (Reid, 2015; Rocke, 2015). Humor can also facilitate the communication of topics that deviate from social norms. Teasing capitalizes on this idea by intentionally provoking someone in an affiliative way (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). The messages conveyed through teasing are derogatory to the target; however, they are paired with verbal and nonverbal signals to express jovial intent and reduce the aggressiveness of the message (Alberts, 1992; Drew, 1987; Eisenberg, 1986). These cues, referred to as “off-record” markers, are

decisive to interpreting the speaker's true intentions and if they are meant to be taken seriously (Brown & Levinson, 1999). Teasing that contains many off-record markers is seen as more playful and evokes positive emotion, while teasing with few markers comes across as hostile and offensive (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998; Wyer & Collins, 1992). Thus aggressive (i.e., off-color) humor is interpreted more favorably when paired with multiple cues that downplay the seriousness of the message and emphasize affiliative intent.

Humor directly targeting outgroups, often falling into the category of off-color humor, is a popular topic for today's comedians and audiences. Much like teasing, this type of humor allows people to bypass societal taboos against openly expressing prejudiced or ignorant beliefs about outgroups that are normally repressed (Apte, 1983; De Souza, 1987; Van Dijk, 1992). The comedian's intent can be a key factor in interpreting the meaning behind off-color jokes. The way the jokes are presented (e.g., tone, wording) can focus on and exaggerate the silliness of stereotypical beliefs. Thus, people may find disparaging racial humor funny, even if the material does not align with their personal views (Fisher & Fisher, 1981). Off-color comedy can be a subtle means toward promoting social equality: It can de-stigmatize racial jokes, encouraging people to reconsider what beliefs about outgroups ought to be ridiculed and which should be affirmed (Avila-Saavedra, 2011; Rappoport, 2005).

Of course, this type of humor can be a double-edged sword, particularly when people are laughing at outgroups rather than with them. There are notable differences in what people find funny on an individual- and a group-level, and these differences are often used to delineate social groups (Fine, 1983; Speier, 1998). Humor that makes light of negative stereotypes about outgroups may perpetuate discrimination against them and reinforce social cohesion among the ingroup (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Husband, 1977; Maio, Olson, & Bush, 1997). Without

providing counterarguments to the message, this type of comedy may downplay the inappropriateness of the stereotype and persuade people to incorporate it into their outgroup-related schemas (Maio, Olson, & Bush, 1997). Additionally, it could be an outlet for hidden prejudiced beliefs; people tend to enjoy this type of humor more when they dislike the group being targeted (LaFace, Haddad, & Marshall, 1974; Wicker, Baron, & Willis, 1980; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Thus off-color racial humor may encourage people to develop or maintain intolerant views of outgroups.

1.3 Do Responses to Off-Color Humor Differ by Race?

There is some evidence that audiences evaluate off-color racial humor differently depending on their race. White viewers tend to place more emphasis on tone, intention, and the race of the comedian when assessing the offensiveness of racial comedy; for instance, White comedians who target other races are often rated as highly inappropriate by White audiences (Green & Linders, 2016; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). In contrast, minority groups, such as Black viewers, tend to be more supportive of White comedians despite being the target of the jokes; for these groups, the race of the comedian does not predict enjoyment of the material (Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). Why? Green and Linders (2016) suggest that White people may be highly influenced by political correctness; as members of a high-status racial group in the United States, they may think it is almost impossible for a White comedian to not be offensive when joking about a lower status racial group. Being unfamiliar with and uncomfortable around other races may cause White viewers to have heightened sensitivity to what might be considered socially inappropriate, leading them to judge White comedians targeting a racial minority as more offensive more frequently (Banjo, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Green & Linders, 2016). Minorities may see this situation in a completely different light. White comedians who

successfully deliver racial jokes could be demonstrating that they are actually familiar with the outgroups being targeted; if racial minorities agree that the routine conveys an authentic view of minority experiences, they tend to remain receptive to this type of humor regardless of the comedians' demographics (Green & Linders, 2016).

1.4 The Present Study

It remains unclear if there is a socially corrective nature to off-color racial humor. This type of comedy may be an effective way to shed light on ingroup assumptions. Alternatively, it may provide justification for disparaging beliefs and encourage people to be less tolerant of racial outgroups. There may also be other factors, such as viewer race, that differentiate when exposure to off-color racial humor results in one outcome over the other. This project addresses this issue by examining emotion experience, emotion expression, attitudes towards outgroups, and affiliation with outgroups in response to off-color racial comedy. This form of humor may not be beneficial for intergroup relations for all audiences. By understanding how people emotionally respond to racial comedy and whether this exposure affects outgroup attitudes and affiliative preferences, we can begin exploring ways to maximize the usefulness of humor in race-related interventions.

To test these questions, we assigned participants to view a stand-up comedy clip that targeted Black Americans or featured a non-racial topic. The race of the comedian was manipulated to compare how routine content along with the comedian's group membership affected emotion experience, emotion expression, racial outgroup attitudes, and racial outgroup affiliation. It should be noted that using this type of stimuli requires compromising between rigorous experimental control and ecological validity. Viewing stand-up performances provides a richer, more realistic experience compared to stimuli used in prior studies. Pairing

experimentally manipulated descriptions of comedians with written jokes and audio clips is not quite as engaging as seeing and hearing a comedian's presentation. We used video clips in order to evoke strong emotional and attitude-related responses among participants. Additionally, this project is one of the first to use both subjective and objective measures of emotion in the context of off-color racial humor. This comparison can help identify patterns where participants may report feeling certain emotions after viewing but display notable different emotions while watching the comedy clip. It is relatively easy to withhold reporting true emotion experiences, particularly if one feels that these emotions are inappropriate to feel or disclose, but it is much more difficult to convincingly control one's emotions expressions.

We had several predictions. After viewing a White comedian whose routine targeted Black Americans, participants would 1) feel and express greater levels of negative emotion and less positive emotion, 2) be more tolerant attitudes towards racial outgroups, and 3) report a stronger desire to affiliate with outgroups compared to participants viewing a Black comedian targeting Black Americans. We reasoned that participants would judge a clip featuring a member of a high-status racial group (i.e., the White comedian) targeting a low-status racial group (i.e., Black Americans) to be socially inappropriate and unfunny, making people feel uncomfortable. Participants would subsequently endorse more tolerant attitudes and affiliative preferences towards racial outgroups as a way to counteract these negative emotions and reaffirm socially desirable beliefs. In contrast, participants would consider a clip featuring a Black comedian targeting Black Americans to be more acceptable and humorous. As a result, they would be less motivated to endorse extremely tolerant and affiliative beliefs compared to those assigned to view the White comedian. We did not have any specific predictions regarding the viewer's race, so we conducted exploratory analyses to test participant race as a moderator of conditional

effects. In addition to looking at condition's effects on attitudes, we also examined attitudes' effects on emotional responses to the clip. Individual differences in attitudes could impact people's reactions to this type of humor, so we conducted exploratory analyses to test for main effects of attitudes and whether attitudes moderated condition's effects.

Chapter 2: Methods

2.1 Sample

Undergraduate students ($N = 161$) were recruited from Washington University's Psychology Subject Pool. The sample was 68.9% female and 31.1% male. Age ranged from 18 to 23 years old ($M = 19.47$, $SD = 1.21$). The majority of participants identified as White or European American (47.2%), followed by Asian or Asian American (27.3%), Black or African American (12.4%), multiracial (7.5%), and Hispanic or Latinx (5.6%). Eighty-seven percent were born in the U.S., while 13.0% were internationally born. Participants tended to come from relatively high-income households: 54.7% identified as upper middle income, 16.8% upper, 16.1% middle, 10.6% lower middle, and 1.9% lower. Most participants considered themselves to be liberal (52.2%) or moderate (25.5%), followed by very liberal (17.4%), conservative (4.3%), and very conservative (.6%).

2.2 Procedure

Upon arriving in the lab, participants rated their current emotion experience. Next, they were randomly assigned to view one of four stand-up comedy clips that featured either a Black or White comedian whose material targeted Black Americans or discussed non-racial (control) topic. Participants were filmed while viewing the clip to allow for behavioral coding. Afterward, they rated how funny and offensive the clip was, their emotions, attitudes towards racial outgroups, desire to affiliate with racial outgroups, and attitudes towards Black Americans. Upon completion, participants were debriefed on the study's purpose and received one course credit as compensation.

2.3 Condition Assignment

The racial clips were Dave Chappelle's "3:00 AM in the Ghetto" (Black racial clip; $n = 42$) and Bill Burr's "Steroids, Sports, Race, and Hitler" (White racial clip; $n = 39$). The non-racial clips were Kevin Hart's "My First Time Cursing" (Black control clip; $n = 40$) and George Carlin's "Every Child is Not Special" (White control clip; $n = 40$). Each clip was approximately 7.5 minutes. They showed the comedians performing in front of a live audience and were uncensored. All clips featured American, male comedians. These clips were selected to have comparable levels of humor and offensiveness on a scale of 1 (*not funny/offensive at all*) to 5 (*very funny/offensive*). Pilot testing indicated that the clips were moderately funny (Black racial clip: $M = 3.14$, $SD = .95$; White racial clip: $M = 3.36$, $SD = .93$; Black control clip: $M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.14$; White control clip: $M = 3.13$, $SD = .99$) and moderately offensive (Black racial clip: $M = 3.21$, $SD = .89$; White racial clip: $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.27$; Black control clip: $M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.17$; White control clip: $M = 3.00$, $SD = .93$). This testing was completed by members of the research team and volunteer participants ($N = 15$; 60.0% female, 40.0% male; 40.0% White or European American, 26.7% Asian or Asian American, 20.0% Black or African American, and 13.3% Hispanic or Latinx).

2.4 Measures

2.4.1 Clip funniness and offensiveness

Participants rated how funny their assigned clip was on a scale of 1 (*not funny at all*) to 5 (*very funny*). They also rated offensiveness, from 1 (*not offensive at all*) to 5 (*very offensive*).

2.4.2 Emotion

2.4.2.1 Subjective experience. Participants reported the extent they were feeling 16 possible emotions on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*). This measure includes a variety of positive and negative emotions from low to high arousal levels. We created two categories for analyses: positive and negative emotion. Positive emotion included the average of happy, calm, excited, amused, curious, enthusiastic, astonished, and proud ($\alpha = .64$). Negative emotion included the average of disgusted, anxious, sad, guilty, shame, angry, bored, and embarrassed ($\alpha = .74$). Change in self-reported emotion was calculated by subtracting pre-viewing from post-viewing emotion. Positive values indicate an increase in emotion after watching the comedy clip, while negative values indicate a decrease in emotion.

2.4.2.2 Behavioral expression. In addition to collecting self-rated emotions, we used behavioral coding to measure outward expression while participants viewed the comedy clips. The Facial Action Coding System (FACS; Ekman, Friesen, & Hager, 2002) tracks observable facial movements, allowing researchers to objectively measure prototypical emotion expressions. We focused on the duration (in seconds) of two expression codes: positive and negative emotion. Positive emotion was coded whenever AU 12 (lip corner puller) was present to capture smiling. Negative emotion was coded when AUs 4 (brow lowerer), 9 (nose wrinkle), 10 (upper lip raiser), 14 (dimpler), 15 (lip corner depressor), 20 (lip stretcher), 23 (lip tightener), or 24 (lip pressor) were present. These negative AUs were selected to capture facial movements that represent prototypical expressions of negative emotions (e.g., anger, disgust) and smile controls (i.e., movements that disrupt smile formation) as indicators of mixed or uncomfortable emotions (e.g., embarrassment) (Ekman & Rosenberg, 2005; Keltner, 1995). Positive and negative emotion were not mutually exclusive (i.e., both items were coded if the participant expressed AU 12 along with one of the negative AUs). Seven participants requested not to be filmed while watching the comedy clip, leaving 154 videos for behavioral analyses. One FACS-certified coder completed the entire dataset and a second certified coder reviewed 20% of the videos for reliability (positive emotion: $\alpha = .76$; negative emotion: $\alpha = .72$).

2.4.3 Attitudes towards Racial Outgroups

The Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000; $\alpha = .89$) measures attitudes towards racial outgroups in the U.S. This questionnaire captures three constructs, beliefs about racial privilege (e.g. “Race is very important in determining who is successful and who is not”), institutional discrimination (e.g. “Due to racial discrimination, programs such as affirmative action are necessary to help create equality”), and blatant racial

issues (e.g. “Talking about racial issues causes unnecessary tension”), on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate stronger beliefs about the existence of racial differences in the U.S. and less favorable attitudes towards racial outgroups.

2.4.4 Affiliation with Racial Outgroups

The Miville-Guzman Universality Diversity Scale – Short Form (Fuertes, Miville, Mohr, Sedlacek, & Gretchen, 2000; $\alpha = .78$) captures people’s desire to affiliate with racial and ethnic outgroups. This measure asks 15 questions about three constructs, desire for diversity of contact (e.g. “I attend events where I might get to know people from different racial backgrounds”), relativistic appreciation of other races and ethnicities (e.g. “People of different races and ethnicities can teach me things I could not learn elsewhere”), and comfort with racial and ethnic differences (e.g. “Getting to know someone of another race is generally an uncomfortable experience for me”), on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate a greater desire to affiliate with racial and ethnic outgroups.

2.4.5 Attitudes towards Black Americans

The Modern and Old Fashioned Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986; $\alpha = .71$) examines attitudes towards Black Americans. This measure includes two main subcategories of questions, old-fashioned racism (e.g., “It is a bad idea for Black and White people to marry one another”) and modern racism (e.g., “Discrimination against Black people is no longer a problem in the U.S.”), on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate less tolerant attitudes towards Black Americans.

Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Analysis overview

We analyzed our dependent variables separately. While there were small to moderate sized correlations between ratings of clip funniness and offensiveness, emotion experience, and behavioral expression, the correlations among the attitudes and affiliation measures were mostly negligible. Table 1 provides the inter-item correlation matrix for all dependent variables.

For each outcome, we conducted hierarchical linear regression to test for conditional effects and to see if participant race moderated these results. Condition was split into two variables: comedian race (0 = White, 1 = Black) and routine topic (0 = control, 1 = race-related). Given the racial composition of the sample, participant race was coded as 0 = White and 1 = non-White. We examined each dependent variable across three models. Model 1 examines comedian race, routine topic, and the interaction between these variables. Model 2 tests whether participant race moderates the effects of condition; this model include comedian race, routine topic, participant race, and the interactions between each of these predictors. In Model 3, we control for clip funniness and offensiveness; this model includes those covariates as well as the variables and interactions from Model 2. We also examined gender as a potential moderator; however, there were no significant effects or interactions for any of the dependent variables, so the results presented here are collapsed across gender.

Regression results for emotion-related outcomes, as well as clip funniness and offensiveness, are in Table 2, while results related to attitudes and affiliation are in Table 3. Table 4 contains exploratory regression analyses testing attitudes' effects on emotion-related outcomes and whether attitudes moderated the effects of condition. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show mean-level differences across conditions for subjective experience, behavioral expression,

attitudes towards racial outgroups, and affiliation with racial outgroups. Figure 4 describes mean-level differences in clip funniness predicted by condition and racial outgroup attitudes. Figure 5 shows mean-level differences in clip offensiveness predicted by condition and attitudes towards Black Americans.

3.2 How funny or offensive were the clips?

In Model 1, there was a main effect of comedian race on clip funniness, $\beta = .54, p < .001$. However, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction between comedian race and routine topic, $\beta = -.59, p < .001$. The Black control clip ($M = 3.73, SD = .82$) was considered more funny than all other clips (Black racial clip: $M = 2.57, SD = .89, p < .001$; White racial clip: $M = 2.85, SD = .90, p < .001$; White control clip: $M = 2.60, SD = 1.15, p < .001$). The Black racial clip had similar ratings compared to the clips featuring White comedians, and the ratings for the White racial and control clips were not statistically different from one another.

In Model 2, there was a main effect of participant race on funniness ratings, $\beta = -.38, p = .007$, and significant interactions between comedian race and participant race, $\beta = .55, p = .002$, and routine topic and participant race, $\beta = .37, p = .047$. However, there was also a significant three-way interaction for comedian race, routine topic, and participant race, $\beta = -.51, p = .014$. White participants rated the Black control clip ($M = 3.50, SD = .80$) as more funny than the Black racial clip ($M = 2.65, SD = .70, p = .025$) but just as funny as the clips featuring White comedians (racial clip: $M = 2.82, SD = .95$; control clip: $M = 3.00, SD = 1.12$). Those viewing the Black racial clip rated it similarly to the White racial and control clips, and there was no significant difference in ratings for the clips featuring White comedians. Non-White participants rated the Black control clip ($M = 4.00, SD = .77$) as more funny than all other clips (Black racial clip: $M = 2.52, SD = 1.01, p < .001$; White racial clip: $M = 2.86, SD = .89, p = .002$; White

control clip: $M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.06$, $p < .001$). Responses to the Black racial clip were similar to those for the clips featuring White comedians, and there were no significant differences in ratings across the White racial and control clips.

In Model 1, routine topic predicted offensiveness ratings, $\beta = .31$, $p = .004$. Racial clips ($M = 2.69$, $SD = .90$) were considered more offensive than the control clips ($M = 2.15$, $SD = .93$). There was no effect of comedian race on offensiveness ratings. In Model 2, neither comedian race nor routine topic predicted offensiveness ratings. Participant race did not moderate this outcome.

3.3 Does off-color humor affect emotion?

3.3.1 Subjective experience

In Model 1, there was a main effect of comedian race for self-reported positive emotion, $\beta = .25$, $p = .023$. However, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction between comedian race and routine topic, $\beta = -.31$, $p = .024$. Participants assigned to the Black control clip ($M = .27$, $SD = .59$) felt more positive emotion compared to participants viewing the Black racial clip ($M = -.33$, $SD = .90$; $p = .004$) but were not statistically different from participants viewing White comedians (racial clip: $M = -.17$, $SD = .91$; control clip: $M = -.13$, $SD = .66$). Those viewing the Black racial clip reported similar changes in positive emotion compared to participants assigned to White comedians. There was no difference in positive emotion experience for participants viewing the White racial and control clips.

In Models 2 and 3, these conditional effects were no longer significant. When accounting for participant race, clip funniness, and clip offensiveness, neither comedian race nor routine topic predicted positive emotion experience. In Model 3, clip funniness, $\beta = .54$, $p < .001$, and offensiveness, $\beta = -.16$, $p = .025$, alone predicted felt positive emotion. Regardless of condition

assignment, people who rated their clip as more funny felt more positive emotion, while those who rated their clip as more offensive felt less positive emotion.

In Models 1, 2, and 3, comedian race and routine topic did not predict self-reported negative emotion. Participant race did not moderate this outcome. In Model 3, ratings of clip funniness, $\beta = -.36, p < .001$, and offensiveness, $\beta = .43, p < .001$, predicted felt negative emotion. Regardless of condition assignment, participants who rated their clip as more funny felt less negative emotion, while those who rated their clip as more offensive felt more negative emotion.

3.3.2 Behavioral expression

In Models 1, 2, and 3, there was a main effect of comedian race for expressions of positive emotion (Model 1: $\beta = .64, p < .001$, Model 2: $\beta = .70, p < .001$, Model 3: $\beta = .58, p < .001$). However, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction between comedian race and routine topic for expressions of positive emotion, $\beta = -.56, p < .001$. Participants viewing the Black control clip ($M = 333.19, SD = 98.33$) showed the most positive emotion compared to all other clips (Black racial clip: $M = 196.35, SD = 113.12, p < .001$; White racial clip: $M = 217.81, SD = 120.17, p < .001$; White control clip: $M = 195.59, SD = 103.76, p < .001$). Those assigned to the Black racial clip showed similar amounts of positive emotion compared to participants viewing White comedians. There was no statistical difference in behavior for participants assigned to the White racial and control clips. In Model 2, $\beta = -.53, p = .006$, and Model 3, $\beta = -.43, p = .015$, this interaction remained significant. Participant race was not a significant moderator in any of the models. In Model 3, clip funniness also predicted positive emotion displays, $\beta = .40, p < .001$. As expected, participants who rated their assigned clip as more funny showed positive emotion expressions. Clip offensiveness had no effect on this behavior.

In Models 1, 2, and 3, comedian race and routine topic did not predict negative emotion expression. Participants displayed similar amounts of negative emotion across all conditions. Participant race did not moderate this outcome. In Model 3, there were no main effects of clip funniness or offensiveness on negative emotion expression.

3.4 Does off-color humor affect attitudes towards racial outgroups?

Across Models 1, 2, and 3, comedian race and routine topic did not predict attitudes towards racial outgroups. Regardless of their assigned clip, participants reported similar attitudes following viewing. Participant race did not moderate this outcome, and in Model 3, there were no main effects of clip funniness or offensiveness.

3.5 Does off-color humor affect affiliation towards racial outgroups?

Across Models 1, 2, and 3, comedian race and routine topic did not predict affiliation towards racial outgroups. Participants reported similar affiliation preferences across all conditions. Participant race did not moderate this outcome, and in Model 3, there were no main effects of clip funniness or offensiveness.

3.6 Does off-color humor affect attitudes towards Black Americans?

Across Models 1, 2, and 3, comedian race and routine topic did not predict attitudes towards Black Americans. Regardless of their assigned clip, participants reported similar attitudes following viewing. Participant race did not moderate this outcome, and in Model 3, there were no main effects of clip funniness or offensiveness.

3.7 Do racial outgroup attitudes and affiliation predict emotion-related outcomes?

3.7.1 Racial outgroup attitudes

There were significant interactions for comedian race and attitudes towards racial outgroups, $\beta = -.35$, $p = .004$, and comedian race, routine topic, and racial outgroup attitudes, $\beta =$

.34, $p = .008$, for clip funniness. Participants with less tolerant attitudes towards racial outgroups tended to rate the Black racial clip ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .96$) as more funny than the other clips (White racial clip: $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.00$; Black control clip: $M = 3.00$, $SD = .76$; White control clip: $M = 2.88$, $SD = .99$); however these differences were not significant. Participants with more tolerant attitudes tended to rate the Black control clip ($M = 4.25$, $SD = .50$) as more funny than the Black racial ($M = 2.29$, $SD = .76$, $p = .030$) and White control clips ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.21$, $p = .042$) but just as funny as the White racial clip ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.53$). They considered the Black racial clip to be just as funny as the clips featuring White comedians, and there was no difference in funniness ratings between the White racial and control clips.

There was a main effect of racial outgroup attitudes on self-reported negative emotion, $\beta = -.26$, $p = .050$. Participants with less tolerant attitudes towards racial outgroups felt less negative emotion post-viewing ($M = .12$, $SD = .71$), while those with more tolerant attitudes felt more negative emotion ($M = .24$, $SD = .78$) regardless of clip assignment. Attitudes towards racial outgroups did not moderate condition.

3.7.2 Racial outgroup affiliation

Racial outgroup affiliation had no influence on emotion-related outcomes, nor did it moderate condition's effects.

3.7.3 Attitudes towards Black Americans

There was an interaction between comedian race, routine topic, and Black Americans attitudes for clip offensiveness, $\beta = .45$, $p = .012$. Participants with less tolerant attitudes towards Black Americans rated the Black racial clip ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .89$) as more offensive than the other clips (White racial clip: $M = 2.20$, $SD = .84$; Black control clip: $M = 2.00$, $SD = .82$; White control clip: $M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.14$); however these differences were not significant. Participants

who were more tolerant of Black Americans rated the White racial clip ($M = 3.50, SD = .58$) as more offensive than the other clips (Black racial clip: $M = 2.22, SD = .97$; Black control clip: $M = 2.30, SD = .95$; White control clip: $M = 2.50, SD = 1.38$); however these differences were not significant.

There was an interaction between comedian race, routine topic, and Black Americans attitudes, $\beta = .43, p = .019$. Participants who were less tolerant of Black Americans felt more negative emotion after viewing the White control clip ($M = .58, SD = 1.11$) and less negative emotion after viewing the White racial clip ($M = -.13, SD = .40$) compared to those assigned to clips featuring Black comedians (racial clip: $M = .28, SD = .83$; control clip: $M = .00, SD = .44$); however, these differences were not significant. More tolerant participants felt more negative emotion in response to the White racial clip ($M = 1.31, SD = .79$) compared to those viewing clips featuring Black comedians (racial clip: $M = -.07, SD = .50, p = .005$; control clip: $M = .06, SD = .33, p = .011$) but reported similar experiences compared to participants assigned to the White control clip ($M = .67, SD = .96$). These participants felt similar amounts of negative emotion in response to the Black racial clip compared to the control clips, and there were no significant differences in self-reported experience for those assigned to the control clips.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Prior research has yielded mixed results on the effects of off-color racial humor. This type of comedy may be a beneficial tool for introducing sensitive topics in a positive manner, or it could be an outlet for promoting normally inhibited intolerance. In the present study, we examined the effects of stand-up comedy targeting Black Americans, manipulating the race of the comedian to see how participants' emotions and attitudes towards and affiliation with racial outgroups were impacted. Our findings indicate that this type of humor alters emotion-related responses but had no effect on attitudes towards or affiliation with racial outgroups.

Participants generally preferred the clips that were unrelated to race; these clips tended to be rated as more funny and less offensive, and participants felt and displayed more positive emotion in response to viewing them. There could be several reasons participants did not enjoy viewing the racial clips. Participants may have been sensitive to the social implications of the clip, particularly those viewing a high-status race (White comedian) joking about stereotypes of a low-status group (Black Americans). Seeing a person in a position of power (i.e., a celebrity comedian reaching a large audience through a televised comedy special) promoting untrue stereotypes may have reminded them of the inappropriateness of the routine's content.

Attitudes towards racial outgroups and Black Americans appeared to moderate some of condition's effects on emotion-related outcomes. Those who were less tolerant towards racial outgroups tended to find the Black racial clip more humorous and generally felt less negative emotion in response to off-color humor, regardless of routine topic. These participants may consider off-color humor to be less offensive overall, and endorse comedy that happens to align with their biases towards outgroups. Comedy featuring minority comedians targeting their own race could be particularly enjoyable for this demographic, possibly because this form of

entertainment reaffirms their personal biases in a humorous way using groups involved in said biases. Interestingly enough, people who were less tolerant towards Black Americans rated the Black racial clip as more offensive, but felt less negative emotion after viewing the White racial clip. These participants may be more sensitive to the social inappropriateness of racial comedy if a Black comedian is discussing Black Americans stereotypes. Exposure to the Black racial clip may trigger processes that cause less tolerant viewers to be more vocal in disapproving of this type of humor, perhaps as a way to avoid appearing racist or due to feelings of guilt or shame. These processes may not occur when viewing a White comedian discussing racial jokes. Altogether, these findings indicate that certain viewers may have more readily available stereotypes regarding racial outgroups that can alter emotions in response to exposure to off-color racial humor.

Attitudes towards and affiliation with racial outgroups were unaffected by condition. There are several potential reasons behind these findings. A single exposure to a stand-up clip may not be enough to influence attitudes and affiliative preferences. Participants likely have extensive experience with outgroups prior to the study session, and they may draw from this familiarity with outgroups to shape their opinions. Regardless of the clip's content, their attitudes and affiliation responses might not be affected at all by brief exposure to racial humor. Another similar explanation may be that participants have no reason to base judgments on the material. Stand-up comedy is a common source of entertainment, and our sample has likely encountered similar routines many times prior to this study. They may have been aware that stand-up comedy is typically presented in an exaggerated way to emphasize that it is not meant to be taken seriously. It is unlikely that they would be motivated to reconsider their beliefs about outgroups, especially if the presented content is not deemed surprising or informative. Alternatively, the

measures we used may not be ideal for our research questions. The questionnaires capturing attitudes and affiliation are primarily trait-based. Repeating the study with more state-like measures could yield different results; plus it would be beneficial to have pre- and post-viewing ratings to compare, rather than solely relying on a post-viewing measure. Additionally, these measures have noticeably blunt wording. They assess tolerance in an obvious manner, and it is improbable that participants would willingly endorse some of the more extreme statements. For example, the Modern and Old Fashioned Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986) includes the following item: “It was wrong for the United States Supreme Court to outlaw segregation in its 1954 decision.” Thus floor and ceiling effects are a concern, particularly if participants are motivated to appear as tolerant or affiliative as possible regardless of condition. A more subtle measure assessing implicit or explicit attitudes would be beneficial to this type of research, particularly if exposure to off-color racial humor does not cause drastic shifts in outgroup beliefs.

Other limitations include our study sample. The participants were predominantly White, female, from a mid- to high-SES household, and moderate to liberal. It is difficult to generalize the findings beyond this participant demographic. It may be the precise population that is typically unaffected by off-color racial humor. Additionally, there was a lot of variability in the responses of non-White participants that may not have been adequately examined in the present analyses. Follow-up studies should recruit more evenly across non-White racial groups to increase power for comparisons across White, Black, and non-Black minority participants. Another limitation is that the stimuli used in this study may not have been appropriate for our research questions. While using clips of televised stand-up routines increases the realism of the situation and participants’ responses, confounds remain between comedian race and routine topic. Comedians often have a certain way of delivering their jokes that influences audience’s

assessments of enjoyment and appropriateness beyond the content of their performance. Some may be better at providing linguistic cues that differentiate what statements should be interpreted in a literal manner and which have more ambiguous meanings (Brown & Levinson, 1999). Additionally, routine topics differed across clips, and there may have been nuances in topic severity regardless of the comedian's race. For example, the material from the Black racial clip focused on Black stereotypes related to poor, inner-city neighborhoods, while the White racial clip discussed Black stereotypes related to sports and slavery. It may be beneficial to consider using more artificial stimuli, such as audio clips or written jokes where the comedians' demographics are manipulated separately from the material, to address these issues. Finally, the comedians selected for the present study varied in popularity, and participants may already be familiar with the routines we selected. Using less known comedians or designing our own stimuli from scratch could be helpful if we were to repeat this study.

In terms of future directions, we are interested in testing this paradigm in the context of other racial groups. For example, how might results change if we used clips of White comedians targeting other racial minorities or minority comedians targeting White Americans? There may be specific combinations that may be more influential in inducing changes in attitudes or affiliative preferences. Additionally, we could conduct a similar study in a social setting. If participants view the clip with an outgroup member, particularly one who is targeted by the jokes, how would they respond? There may be important implications for audience effects when viewing this kind of humor. This idea also brings up more complex predictions regarding the races of the participant, viewing partner, and comedian relative to the racial group being targeted. Additionally, we should explore other potential moderators. There may be other factors, such as beliefs about social dominance across racial groups, support for cavalier humor (i.e., the

idea that a “joke is just a joke” regardless of the intention), and racial proficiency (i.e., familiarity with the experiences and characteristics of other races) that are strong predictors of emotion experience and attitudes following exposure to off-color racial humor (Banjo, 2011; Hodson, Rush, & MacInnis, 2010).

The present study was designed to examine the effects of off-color racial humor on emotions, attitudes, and affiliative preferences in the context of intergroup relations. Our findings indicate that viewing race-related routines may not be as enjoyable as non-racial comedy, but it does not appear to have any effect on short-term attitudes or affiliation regarding racial outgroups. Given the inconclusive results of past studies, more research is needed to confirm if these outcomes will be consistent across other populations and contexts.

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Tables

Table 1

Inter-item correlation matrix for outcome variables.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Clip funniness	2.93 (1.05)	--								
2. Clip offensiveness	2.42 (.95)	-.37 *	--							
3. Positive emotion (experience)	-.10 (.80)	.58 *	-.36 *	--						
4. Negative emotion (experience)	.19 (.67)	-.47 *	.55 *	-.37 *	--					
5. Positive emotion (expression)	239.30 (122.78)	.51 *	-.12	.31 *	-.25 *	--				
6. Negative emotion (expression)	89.15 (68.79)	.01	.02	-.07	.03	.07	--			
7. Racial outgroup attitudes	3.54 (.25)	.02	-.10	.04	-.09	.07	-.06	--		
8. Racial outgroup affiliation	4.74 (.49)	.02	.00	.00	.04	-.08	.19 *	-.14 †	--	
9. Black Americans attitudes	1.55 (.37)	-.04	-.08	-.07	-.04	-.07	-.04	.11	-.31 *	--

Note. Means and standard deviations were calculated using the entire sample, regardless of condition assignment. Clip funniness was rated from 1 (*not funny at all*) to 5 (*very funny*). Clip offensiveness was rated from 1 (*not offensive at all*) to 5 (*very offensive*). Subjective experience was rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*) pre- and post-viewing. The values presented here represent the change in felt positive and negative emotion from baseline. Duration of behavioral expression was coded in seconds. Racial outgroup attitudes and affiliation were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Attitudes towards Black Americans were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$.

Table 2

Hierarchical regression analyses for the effects of condition and participant race on emotion-related outcomes.

	Clip Funniness	Clip Offensiveness	Positive Emotion (Experience)	Negative Emotion (Experience)	Positive Emotion (Expression)	Negative Emotion (Expression)
Model 1						
Race _C	.54 *	-.08	.25 *	-.17	.64 *	.16
Topic	.12	.31 *	-.02	.10	.11	.13
Race _C * Topic	-.59 *	-.05	-.31 *	.11	-.56 *	.01
Model 2						
Race _C	.24 †	-.01	.17	-.14	.70 *	.10
Topic	-.08	.29 †	-.03	.05	.04	.04
Race _P	-.38 *	.08	-.03	.01	.04	-.03
Race _C * Topic	.28	-.05	-.29	.16	-.53 *	.31
Race _C * Race _P	.55 *	-.13	.15	-.07	-.13	.12
Topic * Race _P	.37 *	.03	.01	.08	.11	.16
Race _C * Topic * Race _P	-.51 *	.02	-.06	-.06	-.03	-.46 †
Model 3						
Race _C	--	--	.04	-.05	.58 *	.11
Topic	--	--	.07	-.11	.06	.04
Race _P	--	--	.19	-.16	.17	-.03
Clip Funniness	--	--	.54 *	-.36 *	.40 *	-.01
Clip Offensiveness	--	--	-.16 *	.43 *	.08	-.02
Race _C * Topic	--	--	-.14	.08	-.43 *	.30
Race _C * Race _P	--	--	-.17	.18	-.32 †	.12
Topic * Race _P	--	--	-.19	.20	-.02	.17
Race _C * Topic * Race _P	--	--	.22	-.25	.14	-.46 †

Note. Regression values represent standardized beta coefficients. Race_C is the race of the comedian (0 = White, 1 = Black). Topic is the target of the comedy routine (0 = control, 1 = racial). Race_P represents the race of the participant (0 = White, 1 = Non-White). Gender was tested as a moderator; however, there were no significant interactions. Reported results are collapsed across gender. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$.

Table 3

Hierarchical regression analyses for the effects of condition and participant race on attitude- and affiliation-related outcomes.

	Racial Outgroup Attitudes	Racial Outgroup Affiliation	Black Americans Attitudes
Model 1			
Race _C	.06	-.05	-.08
Topic	-.02	.01	.01
Race _C * Topic	-.08	.05	.08
Model 2			
Race _C	.11	.05	-.03
Topic	-.11	.09	.00
Race _P	-.10	.23	.07
Race _C * Topic	-.11	-.06	.11
Race _C * Race _P	-.11	-.17	-.08
Topic * Race _P	.16	-.16	.00
Race _C * Topic * Race _P	.08	.16	-.04
Model 3			
Race _C	.12	.03	-.02
Topic	-.08	.10	.04
Race _P	-.11	.26	.06
Clip Funniness	-.05	.08	-.06
Clip Offensiveness	-.12	.00	-.13
Race _C * Topic	-.13	-.03	.09
Race _C * Race _P	-.10	-.21	-.06
Topic * Race _P	.18	-.19	.02
Race _C * Topic * Race _P	.05	.20	-.06

Note. Regression values represent standardized beta coefficients. Race_C is the race of the comedian (0 = White, 1 = Black). Topic is the target of the comedy routine (0 = control, 1 = racial). Race_P represents the race of the participant (0 = White, 1 = Non-White). Gender was tested as a moderator; however, there were no significant interactions. Reported results are collapsed across gender. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$.

Table 4

Linear regression analyses for the effects of condition and racial outgroup attitudes and affiliation on emotion-related outcomes.

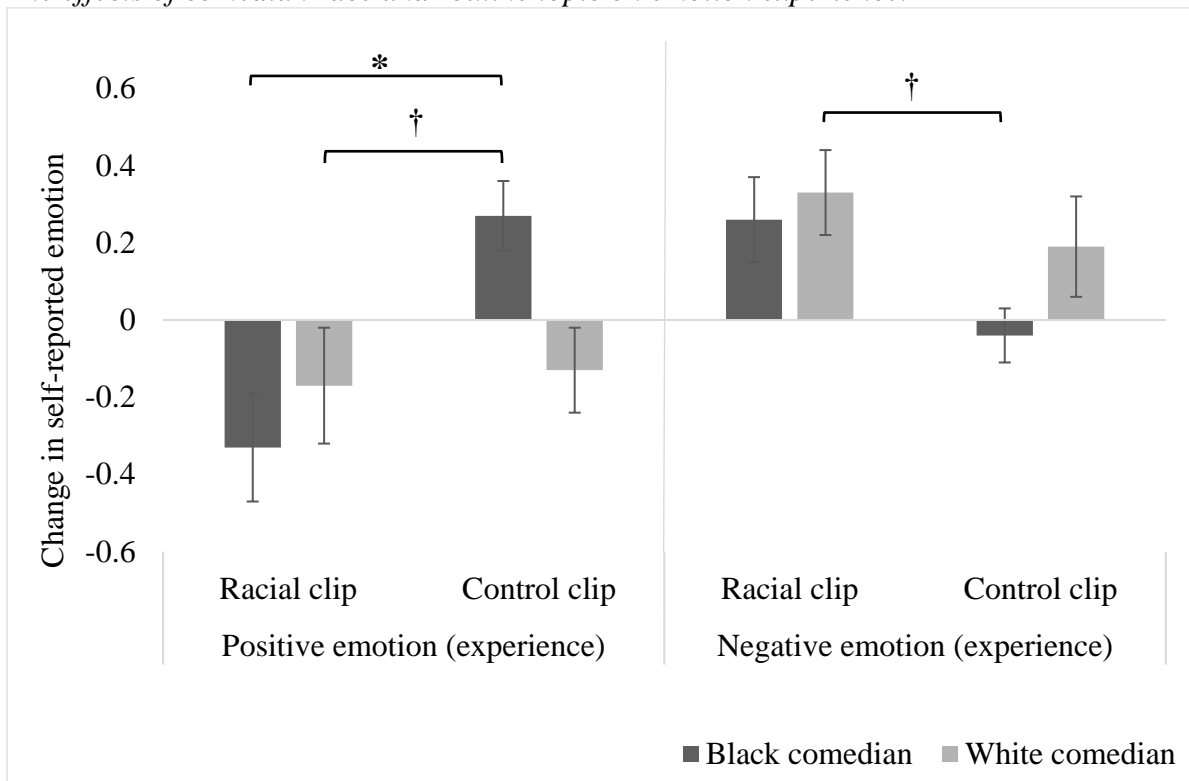
	Clip Funniness	Clip Offensiveness	Positive Emotion (Experience)	Negative Emotion (Experience)	Positive Emotion (Expression)	Negative Emotion (Expression)
Racial outgroup attitudes						
Race _C	.56 *	-.08	.26 *	-.18	.63 *	.16
Topic	.12	.31 *	-.02	.10	.11	.13
RO Attitudes	.15	-.25 †	.11	-.26 *	.07	-.11
Race _C * Topic	-.60 *	-.04	-.31 *	.11	-.57 *	.01
Race _C * RO Attitudes	-.35 *	.21	-.20	.26 †	-.07	.05
Topic * RO Attitudes	-.11	.07	-.09	.18	.03	.01
Race _C * Topic * RO Attitudes	.34 *	-.06	.20	-.23	-.07	-.01
Racial outgroup affiliation						
Race _C	.54 *	-.07	.25 *	-.18	.64 *	.16
Topic	.12	.32 *	-.02	.10	.09	.11
RO Affiliation	-.11	-.04	.03	.09	-.03	.13
Race _C * Topic	-.59 *	-.05	-.31 *	.11	-.54 *	.02
Race _C * RO Affiliation	.17	.11	.04	-.15	.02	.10
Topic * RO Affiliation	.18	-.06	-.02	-.02	.22	.18
Race _C * Topic * RO Affiliation	-.19	-.01	-.05	.12	-.28 †	-.22
Black Americans attitudes						
Race _C	.54 *	-.10	.25 *	-.18 †	.63 *	.16
Topic	.12	.32 *	-.03	.11	.11	.13
BA Attitudes	-.06	.02	.05	-.04	.04	-.07
Race _C * Topic	-.58 *	-.03	-.30 *	.11	-.55 *	.02
Race _C * BA Attitudes	.04	-.27 †	.02	-.07	-.07	.06
Topic * BA Attitudes	.12	-.23	.07	-.29 †	-.01	.08
Race _C * Topic * BA Attitudes	-.12	.45 *	-.27	.43 *	-.01	-.14

Note. Regression values represent standardized beta coefficients. Race_C is the race of the comedian (0 = White, 1 = Black). Topic is the target of the comedy routine (0 = control, 1 = racial). “RO Attitudes” refers to racial outgroup attitudes, “RO Affiliation” to racial outgroup affiliation, and “BA Attitudes” to Black Americans attitudes. Attitudes and affiliation items have been z-scored. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$.

Figures

Figure 1

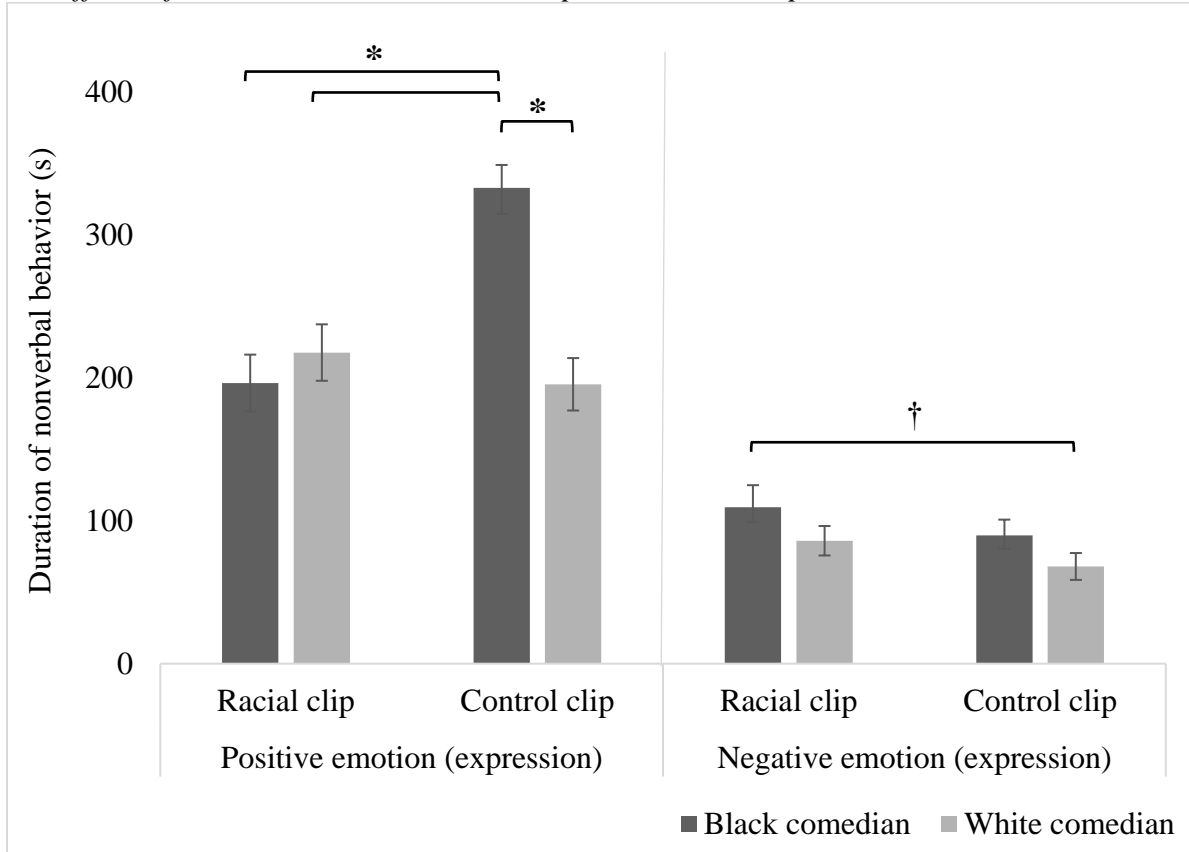
The effects of comedian race and routine topic on emotion experience.



Note. Positive values indicate an increase and negative values indicate a decrease in emotion experience after viewing the assigned clip. Error bars in the graphs represent ± 1 SE. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$

Figure 2

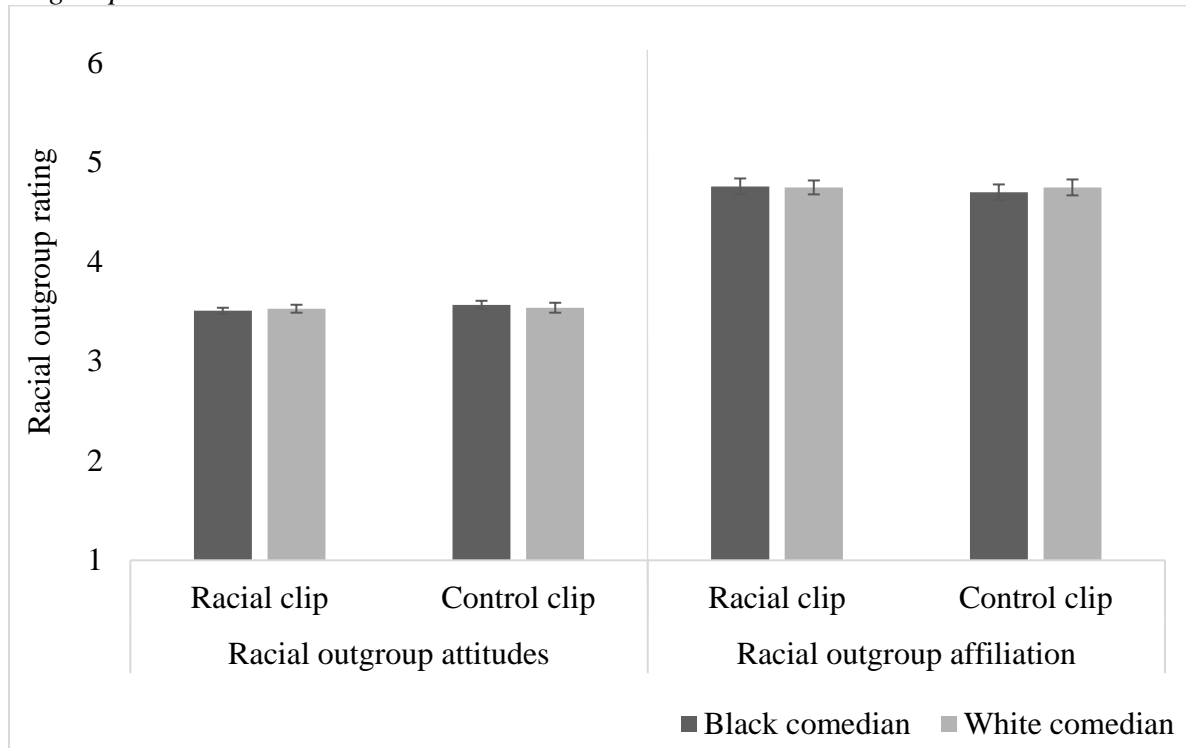
The effects of comedian race and routine topic on emotion expression.



Note. Error bars in the graphs represent ± 1 SE. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$

Figure 3

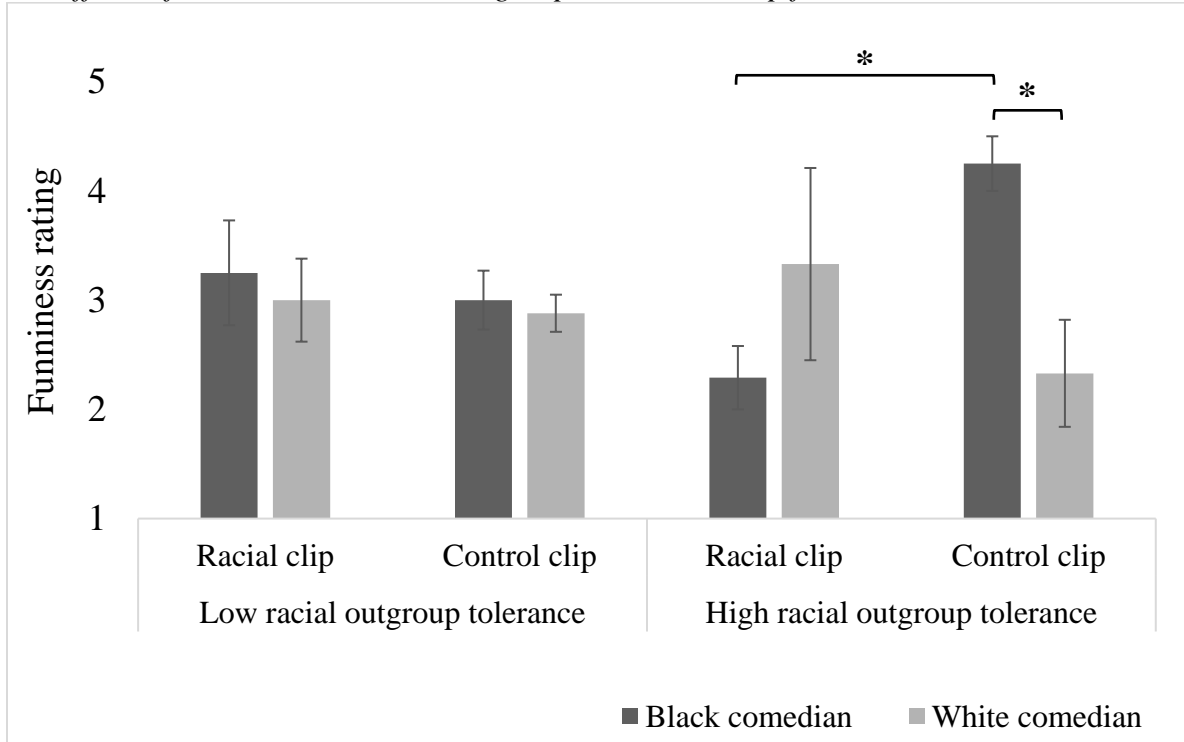
The effects of comedian race and routine topic on attitudes towards and affiliation with racial outgroups.



Note. Higher scores for racial outgroup attitudes indicate stronger beliefs about the existence of racial differences in the U.S. and less favorable attitudes towards racial outgroups. Higher scores for racial outgroup affiliation indicate a greater desire to affiliate with racial and ethnic outgroups. Error bars in the graphs represent ± 1 SE. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$

Figure 4

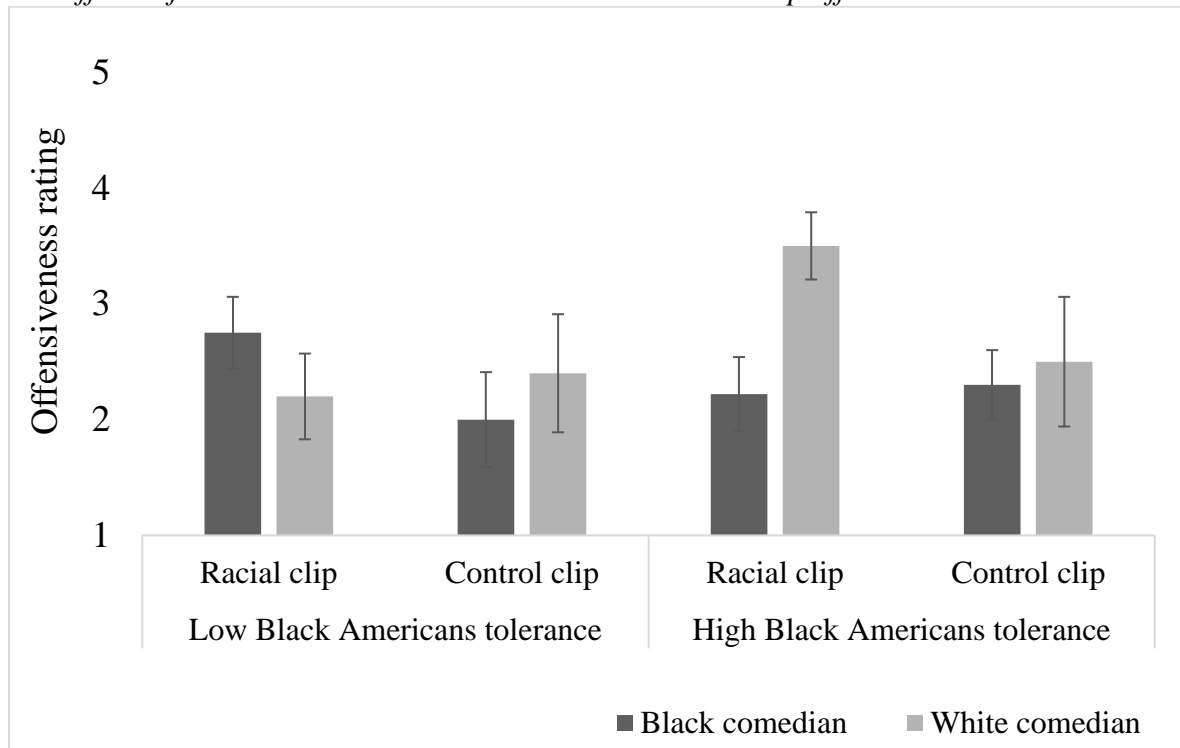
The effects of condition and racial outgroup attitudes on clip funniness.



Note. Higher scores for racial outgroup attitudes indicate stronger beliefs about the existence of racial differences in the U.S. and less favorable attitudes towards racial outgroups. Values for racial outgroup attitudes have been z-scored. Low racial outgroup tolerance includes participants whose attitude ratings were 1 SD above the mean, while the high racial outgroup tolerance includes those whose ratings were 1 SD below the mean. Error bars in the graphs represent ± 1 SE. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$

Figure 5

The effects of condition and Black Americans attitudes on clip offensiveness.



Note. Higher scores for Black Americans attitudes indicate less favorable attitudes towards Black Americans. Values for Black Americans attitudes have been z-scored. Low Black Americans tolerance includes participants whose attitude ratings were 1 SD above the mean, while the high Black Americans tolerance includes those whose ratings were 1 SD below the mean. Error bars in the graphs represent ± 1 SE. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$