Journal of Experimental Psychology: General

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Online First Publication, February 13, 2025. https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xge0001729

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Journal of Experimental Psychology: General

ISSN: 0096-3445

https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001729

Softening the Blow or Sharpening the Blade: Examining the Reputational Effects of Satire

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Criticism is foundational to the fabric of society and can directly impact people's reputations. Although criticism takes many forms, one prevalent form of criticism is satire—the coupling of criticism with humor. While the lighthearted and playful nature of satire has been argued to render it innocuous, the present research suggests that satire can in some cases be more incendiary than direct criticism. First, a naturalistic study examines nonpolitical satirical versus critical YouTube videos. Participants (N = 1,311) evaluated a criticized individual more negatively following satire compared to direct criticism. Moreover, when conducting automated text analysis of the actual comments left by viewers on YouTube (N = 104,555), people used more dehumanizing language in response to satirical versus critical videos. In six subsequent lab experiments (N = 2,040) using memes and videos, causal evidence is provided that nonpolitical satire can cause greater damage to a target's reputation than direct criticism. Evidence that satire renders targets as less human, and thus more prone to more reputational damage is explored via both mediation and moderation.

Public Significance Statement

On a daily basis, people are exposed to satire—memes on social media, television shows, comedy channels on YouTube, and videos on TikTok. Satire has become an increasingly common source of communicating information, including reputational information. Despite the prevalence of satire in daily life, academic endeavors to understand satire in the psychological sciences are surprisingly sparse. This article demonstrates that despite its humorous nature, satire can in some cases do more harm than criticism alone to one people's most prized psychological and social assets: one's reputation. When people are reduced to caricatures for entertainment purposes, as in the case when they are the object of satire, they are seen as having fewer human qualities. Yet, this can be mitigated with a brief imagined positive contact manipulation. This research has broad relevance to those in the psychological sciences, communications, public relations, and importantly, the public at large, who consume satirical content on a regular basis.

Keywords: reputation, satire, humor, criticism, dehumanization

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001729.supp

Criticism is the expression of disapproval of someone or something, and the proffering of opinions about their faults or negative qualities (e.g., Brewster, 2022). From the arts to the sciences, criticism abounds. In many ways, criticism is a foundational thread in the tapestry of society—individuals, groups, and organizations use criticism to communicate information, advance ideas, and influence behavior (e.g., Eagleton, 1984; Hohendahl, 1982). Criticism can facilitate important social functions such as aiding in problem-solving, providing accountability, and promoting growth and improvement (e.g., Carroll, 2009; Fengler, 2012; Gibson & Mumford, 2013). Yet, criticism, regardless of its validity, can also be harmful—generating negative emotions for the target and

Paul A. O'Keefe served as action editor.

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Some of the data appearing in this article were shared at the Kellogg School of Management Human Ecology Lab meetings at Northwestern University. None of the data appearing in this article were previously disseminated at any conferences, listservs, or websites.

The authors thank Loran Nordgren for his invaluable contributions to this research idea and article development, as well as assistance from Matias Wissinger, Amy Guo, Andres Tompson, Hillary Tumbali, and feedback from members of the Kellogg School of Management Human Ecology Lab.

Hooria Jazaieri played a lead role in data curation, formal analysis, investigation, project administration, visualization, and writing–original draft and an equal role in conceptualization, methodology, and writing–review and editing. Derek D. Rucker played a lead role in supervision and an equal role in conceptualization, methodology, and writing–review and editing.

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audience and damaging interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baron, 1988; Chambless & Blake, 2009; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Moreover, criticism can threaten a particularly prized and valued psychological and social asset: one's reputation.

Although criticism can take various forms, one prevalent form of criticism is satire. Satire is the coupling of criticism with humor and is even referred to as "humorous criticism" (e.g., Condren, 2012; Dadlez, 2011; Holmes, 1998). For example, Highet (1962) suggested that the "attacks" levied upon the target of satire reflect a blend of both amusement and contempt. Like criticism itself, satire has been argued to have a social function of allowing people to attack perceived wrongs in society (see Caufield, 2008). Others have suggested that satire, by ensconcing a critical message in humor, essentially allows criticism while evading the potential social ostracizing that might occur with direct criticism (E. Johnson, 1945).

As with direct criticism, satire may have implications for a target's reputation, and the present article investigates this relationship. At first blush, two competing hypotheses on the relationship between satire and reputation surfaced. On the one hand, a first hypothesis is that the playful nature of satire provides cues that it should not be taken seriously; therefore, satire might be less damaging to one's reputation than direct criticism. This hypothesis holds that satire "softens the blow" relative to direct criticism. On the other hand, an alternative hypothesis is that when individuals are viewed as a source of entertainment or pleasure, such as the punchline of a joke, they are more likely to be dehumanized; if dehumanization occurs, satire might be more damaging to one's reputation than direct criticism. This hypothesis holds that satirical humor "sharpens the blade" relative to direct criticism. The present work tests these competing hypotheses and finds evidence for the latter—despite its playful nature, satire sharpens the blade and leads to more reputational damage than direct criticism.

In what follows, we provide a brief review of the humor literature, which has informed the extant literature on satire, consider the effects of criticism more generally, and then present our formal hypotheses.

The Science of Humor

Humor has been defined as "intentional verbal and nonverbal messages which elicit laughter, chuckling, and other forms of spontaneous behavior taken to mean pleasure, delight, and or surprise in the targeted receiver" (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991, p. 205). "Successful" humor has been represented as making people laugh, while "failed" humor does not (e.g., Williams & Emich, 2014). Humor is considered to be a basic and fundamental part of humankind's nature that spans societies (e.g., Ford et al., 2016; Martineau, 1972). Despite the prevalence of humor, scholars have observed it to be relatively "underexplored as a valuable tool for understanding human behavior" (Robert & Yan, 2007, p. 206).

Similar to criticism, humor serves important social functions at the individual, group, organizational, and societal level (e.g., Cooper, 2005; Martin & Ford, 2018; O'Neill & Jazaieri, 2024; Warren et al., 2021). For example, research has found that humor can alleviate ennui and frustration (e.g., Bieg et al., 2017; Duncan, 1982). Humor can also help people cope with difficult situations, communicate their feelings, and even construct their personal identities (Kahn, 1989). Of course, humor is not always a "laughing matter" and can have unintended consequences (e.g., Meyer, 2000). For example, when examining brands, humorous marketing can, in some cases, hurt consumer attitudes about the brand (Warren & McGraw, 2016). While some scholars suggest the function of humor can be largely boiled down to conflict and control (Stephenson, 1951), humor has also been argued to convey social norms and values (e.g., Bergson, 1911; Martineau, 1972; Meyer, 2000; Ziv, 2010).

Humor has been discussed as running along a spectrum from a benevolent virtue to an aggressive and hostile vice (e.g., Beermann & Ruch, 2009; Heintz & Ruch, 2019). According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), humor has different forms related to direct derogation and sarcasm to parody and practical jokes (see also Billig, 2005). Stephenson (1951) observed that some forms of humor might be particularly damaging by allowing individuals to behave aggressively without fear of social repercussions. However, other forms of humor might have positive functions such communicating a reprimanding message in a more palatable manner (Martineau, 1972; Meyer, 1997). Some suggest that humor is a "benign violation," that arises at the intersection of something viewed as threatening and something being viewed as harmless (e.g., A. P. McGraw & Warren, 2010; Warren & McGraw, 2015, 2016). Thus, across the various forms of humor, there appears to be a general understanding that humor might have both harmful and prosocial elements (see also Gruner, 1997; Malone, 1980; Meyer, 2000). In the present research, we explore a particular form of mildly aggressive humor: satire.

Satire in the Modern World

In today's world, satire is a popular means to convey criticism about public figures with the media menu of satire ever expanding to include a wider range of formats (e.g., Feldman & Borum Chattoo, 2019). For example, satire of public figures is found on websites (e.g., *The Onion*), television shows (e.g., *NBC's Saturday Night Live [SNL]*), images (e.g., memes and cartoons), and user-generated content (e.g., *TikTok, YouTube*). These satirical outlets, once exclusively seen as sources of entertainment, are now relied upon by some as sources for news (Kohut, 2004). In fact, people have been turning to satirical news as an alternative to traditional news outlets (see Brewer & McKnight, 2017). For example, nearly 30% of Americans reported learning something about politics from satirical programs (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). In addition, social media outlets appear overflowing with satirical content—leading some to recognize satire as the "genre of the masses" (Crittenden et al., 2011, p. 174).

Despite the growing use of satire as an entertaining means to convey criticism, academic endeavors to understand satire and its effects, particularly in the psychological sciences, are surprisingly scant. To the extent a literature on satire exists, its roots reside in the fields of political science, communications, and philosophy (e.g., Abel & Barthel, 2013; Branham, 2009). However, the findings in these literatures are mixed and leave open questions surrounding the underlying psychology of satire. On the one hand, some research suggests that satire is nothing but harmless entertainment without detrimental effects. For example, LaMarre and Walther (2013) found that viewers of late-night political comedy directed at the U.S. Congress had more positive and less negative thoughts about Congress compared to those who watched traditional political news coverage. Relatedly, prior research suggests that information embedded in humorous messages are perceived as less credible, uncompelling, and are frequently discounted (e.g., Eisend, 2009;

LaMarre et al., 2014; LaMarre & Walther, 2013; Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008). As such, the sting of criticism may be reduced by the addition of humor (i.e., satire).

On the other hand, results from both experimental and survey methods suggest satire may sometimes harbor negative consequences (e.g., Baumgartner, 2008; Baumgartner et al., 2018; Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Boukes et al., 2015; Morris, 2009; Moy et al., 2006; Young, 2006). For example, in some cases, political satire appears to make key negative attributes and flaws more salient or central to the audiences' inferences. Consider Tina Fey's 2008 *Saturday Night Live* impersonation of then vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Although the performance was wrought with satire, it created what was deemed the "Fey Effect." Those who saw Fey's impersonation of Palin reported declines in their approval for Palin and likelihood of voting for her compared to those who saw other, nonsatirical media coverage of Palin (Baumgartner et al., 2012). Elsewhere, user-generated political satire has been linked to reduced favorability and credibility of political candidates (e.g., Rill & Cardiel, 2013). While some scholars refer to political satire as "fake news" because of its perceived realism (Balmas, 2014), satire can influence the audience's cynicism toward political candidates. Thus, when satire is directed at an individual, instead of simply reiterating a person's shortcomings, as is the case via criticism, satire may exacerbate them (see Griffin, 1994).

Criticism Versus Satire: Dehumanization and Reputation

Satire can be viewed as a form of mildly aggressive humor where criticism is encased by humor. As such, the literature on criticism offers a starting point for insight into satire. In particular, research on criticism at the individual level of analysis suggests that criticism can have negative effects on the target's reputation (see Craik, 2008). For example, those who are gossiped about in a critical manner are seen as having less admirable reputations, regardless of whether the content of the gossip has been confirmed to be true or not (e.g., Jazaieri et al., 2019). Relatedly, innuendos in the form of newspaper headlines (e.g., "Is Bob Talbert Linked with Mafia?") can lead to more negative inferences regarding the target (Wegner et al., 1981).

One reason criticism may damage a target's reputation is that criticism involves expressing disapproval or making negative comments about the person's personality or character (see Karantzas et al., 2022). Karantzas et al. (2022) argue that some forms of criticism are dehumanizing, that is, criticism makes people seem less than human. In simple form, dehumanization involves perceiving someone, implicitly or explicitly, as having fewer human qualities such as feelings, self-regulation, thought, cognitive flexibly, intelligence, agency, and social refinement (e.g., Costello & Hodson, 2010; Haslam et al., 2013; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016; Kozak et al., 2006). Such appraisals of others can result in harsher inferences and punishment of the dehumanized person (e.g., Bandura et al., 1975; Bastian et al., 2013; Hodson & Costello, 2007; Waytz & Epley, 2012). For example, Bastian et al. (2013) found that people assign more severe punishment decisions for offenders viewed as less human.

Compared to more direct forms of criticism, one might argue that the humorous nature of satire makes it playful and less threatening. Although possible, we suggest that the very act of coupling criticism with humor may make such remarks all the more dehumanizing, and therefore, all the more likely to damage one's reputation. Consistent with such a perspective, research suggests that satire involves exerting a sense of superiority over a target, which could lead a target to be perceived as inferior or less human (see Martin, 2019; Martin et al., 2003; Simpson, 2003; Ziv, 1988). Indeed, not only does satire create a potential caricature of its target, research suggests that satire can enhance the salience of the individual's caricaturized traits (e.g., Young, 2006), which may facilitate dehumanization of the person. Some might argue that the whole point of satire is indeed to dehumanize the target—as comedian and host of *The Daily Show* Jon Stewart described: "The key to [late night political comedy] is reducing these guys to monosyllabic stereotypes," (Levin, 2000; Niven et al., 2003, p. 130). Reducing people to "monosyllabic stereotypes" is by definition dehumanization, as it is de-emphasizing the uniquely human characteristics of the person—whether such behavior is consequential for an individual's reputation remains unclear.

If satire increases dehumanization, rather than being harmless, it may lead to greater reputational damage than direct criticism. Far from softening the blow, satire may sharpen the blade. Formally, the above discussion leads to the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Satire will be more prone to damage a target's reputation compared to direct criticism.

Hypothesis 2: The damaging effects of satire on a target's reputation will be mediated by the target being dehumanized (i.e., perceived as less human).

Overview of Studies

We explore the effects of satire on reputation through a series of studies—both naturalistic and experimental. Study 1 examines people's response to YouTube videos that reflect either satire or direct criticism. We code both the comments left by users as well as examine a separate group of participants' ratings of the reputation of the target of the video. Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c experimentally test the causal relationship between satire and reputational harm through memes. Study 3 tests whether the damaging effects of satire on reputation is mediated via a propensity to dehumanize the target. Study 4 examines a theory-driven boundary condition related to preventing dehumanization, namely an imagined positive contact manipulation. Finally, Study 5 tests moderated mediation with the imagined positive contact manipulation and dehumanization.

Transparency and Openness

All studies received research ethics committee approval. In the experimental studies, participants were adults (18 years old and older), located in the United States, recruited via CloudResearch's (formerly TurkPrime) Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) toolkit. In line with established practices (Litman & Robinson, 2020; Peer et al., 2014), we included "CloudResearch Approved Participants"[1] with approval ratings of 98% or greater, Human Intelligence

[1] CloudResearch approved participants have been previously vetted by CloudResearch to be individuals who have passed CloudResearch's attention and engagement measures. Data from these participants have been shown to improve MTurk research data quality (Litman, 2020).

Task or "HIT" completions between 500 and 10,000, and compensated at an average rate of $0.16 per minute. To avoid repeat participation across our studies, we excluded any MTurk workers who participated in any of our prior studies.

In our initial set of Studies (1, 2a, 2b, 3, and 4), we did not conduct a priori sample size calculations. However, given the relatively small effect sizes typically found in psychological research (e.g., Richard et al., 2003), in our initial studies we aimed for approximately 100 participants per experimental cell, consistent with other research where a priori sample size calculations were not conducted (e.g., Park & Klein, 2024). This approach resulted in having 80% power to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.4$. However, in our subsequent Studies (2c and 5), which were run later in the research stream, we based our sample sizes on a priori power analyses using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009).[2]

Following recommended practices for MTurk studies (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2021; Casler et al., 2013), our studies included a minimum of two attention checks in each study to assess participants who "have not taken the task seriously or who had insufficient skills to complete it correctly" (Casler et al., 2013, p. 2159). Per recommendation (Aguinis et al., 2021), these attention checks included both qualitative and quantitative questions. For example, the qualitative question asked participants to describe, in a few sentences, what the task was about; nonsensical responses were excluded. The quantitative question directed participants to select a specific response from a 7-point Likert scale; participants that select any response besides the ones they were told to were excluded. Per the study's IRB, all participants were paid for their responses, irrespective of passing the attention checks. Given that the process we are studying requires viewing and engaging with the content (i.e., being able to elaborate on it), results reported in the article reflect only participants who passed all attention checks. However, at the request of the review team, for the non-pre-registered studies, the results of key analyses with participants who missed attention check(s) are included in the Supplemental Materials.

For each study, we report the number and overall percentage of participants dropped due to one or more missed attention checks. Across the seven studies in this article, 219 of 3,571 participants or 6.1% of the sample were dropped due to failed attention checks. The percentage of participants missing attention checks in our studies was well below the MTurk average of 20%–30% of participants (e.g., Moss et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2019). We believe this lower rate of failure may follow from our decision to restrict participation to "CloudResearch Approved Participants" and the stringent inclusion criteria described above (e.g., approval rating).

Data, analysis code, and research materials for the experimental studies are available (https://osf.io/8zncu/). Data were analyzed using SPSS Versions 28 and 29. We preregistered the Study 1 experiment (Video Viewer Perceptions of Reputation; https://aspredicted.org/jtd4-7zpt.pdf), Study 2c (https://aspredicted.org/ktx4-mqds.pdf), and Study 5 (https://aspredicted.org/ph9g-bswz.pdf).

Reporting of Demographic Information

At the very end of each experiment, participants were asked to indicate their gender (selecting from a dropdown list: man, woman, other [text box]), age (selecting numerical number from a dropdown list), and their race/ethnicity (selecting from a dropdown list: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White or Caucasian, More than one, Other [textbox entry]). Participants could decline to respond to any of the demographic questions. Detailed demographic information for all participants in each study can be found in Table 1.

Study 1: Satire Versus Criticism in YouTube Videos

Method

We began in a naturalistic context that has both satire and direct criticism: YouTube videos. In an effort to enhance generalizability and ecological validity of the phenomenon, we intentionally searched for a range of targets, topics/domains, and video lengths. We selected videos for which both satirical and direct criticism videos were present for the same target and the same issue or situation. For example, Tom Brady's "deflategate" scandal had both satirical videos (i.e., Saturday Night Live) and criticism videos (e.g., Brady's press conference addressing the scandal). Three independent coders categorized the videos as either satirical or direct criticism. Next, with both satirical and direct criticism videos identified, we used two distinct methodological approaches to test how the videos affected people's responses. First, we conducted an experiment where we tested whether satirical YouTube clips were more reputationally damaging for the target by exposing participants to a video that featured either satire or criticism toward a target and had them evaluate the target. Second, we used text analysis and coded the actual comments users left on the YouTube videos and examined whether comments posted online were more or less dehumanizing in response to satirical versus direct criticism videos.

Design and Procedure

Identification of Videos as Satirical or Direct Criticism. We identified 20 targets for which videos appeared on YouTube that could be classified as either satirical or direct criticism. Targets included athletes, musicians, TV personalities, and business figures (see Study 1 Supplemental Methods for Stimuli Selection). To avoid any potential target-related gender differences, we only included targets who were men. For each target and topic, we identified a video that was satirical and a video that was nonsatirical, which led to 40 total videos. For each set of videos (i.e., one satirical and one direct criticism per target), we aimed to keep the subject matter of the criticism constant. As an example of a satirical video, we used an *SNL* skit depicting Meta (formerly Facebook) CEO Mark Zuckerberg (played by Alex Moffat), where he was criticized by *SNL's* Colin Jost for the Cambridge Analytica scandal. As an example of a corresponding criticism video, we used Mark Zuckerberg's *CNN* interview, where he was criticized by *CNN's* Laurie Segall for the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

To ensure that the videos selected for each target differed with regard to satire versus direct criticism, three coders who were

[2] These sample sizes were based on an a priori sample size calculation with 80% power to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.3$ ($f = 0.15$, $\eta^2 = .022$). Based on our prior studies, we estimated that approximately 6% of our sample would miss one or more attention checks, and their data would not be retained. Thus, in our preregistration, we added 6% to each of the a priori sample size calculations to ensure an adequate sample would be retained.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Experimental Studies

Characteristic	Study 1	Study 2a	Study 2b	Study 2c	Study 3	Study 4	Study 5
Sample size	1,311	299	307	347	185	477	425
Age, *M* (*SD*)	38.90 (13.38)	36.26 (12.08)	38.46 (12.78)	42.18 (12.87)	37.43 (10.96)	40.28 (12.30)	41.02 (12.53)
Gender (*N*, %)							
Women	692, 52.8	170, 56.9	204, 66.4	174, 50.1	115, 62.2	259, 54.3	246, 57.9
Men	605, 46.1	128, 42.8	100, 32.6	167, 48.1	70, 37.8	210, 44	175, 41.2
Different identity	10, 0.8	0, 0	3, 1.0	5, 1.4	0, 0	1, 0.2	4, 0.9
Decline to state	4, 0.3	1, 0.3	0, 0	1, 0.3	0, 0	6, 1.3	0, 0
Race/ethnicity (*N*, %)							
American Indian or Alaska native	10, 0.8	1, 0.3	1, 0.3	4, 1.2	1, 0.5	0, 0	2, 0.5
Asian	110, 8.4	24, 8	19, 6.2	12, 3.7	9, 4.9	45, 9.4	24, 5.6
Black or African American	99, 7.6	30, 10	31, 10.1	30, 8.6	10, 5.4	41, 8.6	33, 7.8
Hispanic or Latino	73, 5.6	20, 6.7	22, 7.2	20, 5.8	12, 6.5	17, 3.6	26, 6.1
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1, 0.1	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	1, 0.2
White or Caucasian	978, 74.6	212, 70.9	224, 73.0	265, 76.4	149, 80.5	351, 73.6	321, 75.5
More than one	29, 2.2	10, 3.3	9, 2.9	13, 3.7	2, 1.1	17, 3.6	12, 2.8
Other	4, 0.3	1, 0.3	1, 0.3	2, 0.6	2, 1.1	3, 0.6	5, 1.2
Decline to state	0, 0	1, 0.3	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	3, 0.6	1, 0.2

Note. *N* = number of participants; % = percent of sample.

unaware of the nature of the present research coded each video. Specifically, coders rated: (a) how funny they perceived each video to be, and (b) how critical they perceived the video to be. On average, the satire videos were as critical of the target ($M_{\text{satirical}}$ = 5.35, SD = 1.05) as the direct criticism videos ($M_{\text{direct criticism}}$ = 5.17, SD = 0.98); $t(118) = 0.99$, $p = .325$, 95% CI [−0.18, 0.55], $d = 0.18$. However, the satirical videos were rated as more humorous ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 5.22$, $SD = 0.92$) than the direct criticism videos ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 1.40$, $SD = 0.62$); $t(118) = 26.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.53, 4.10], $d = 4.87$.

Video Viewer Perceptions of Reputation. Within a set of videos identified, we examined people's perceptions of the target's reputation. Specifically, MTurk participants (N = 1,380) were randomly assigned to view a video that we had identified as satirical or direct criticism. In this experiment, random assignment was successful such that the conditions did not differ by gender ($p = .789$), thus we do not use gender as a covariate or discuss it further. We assigned each participant to view a single video to avoid participant fatigue and order effects. Lower than we anticipated in our preregistration, 69 participants (5% of the sample) failed an attention check, leaving a final sample of 1,311 participants. A post hoc sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample size provided 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.15$.

Procedurally, participants first read a brief overview of the experiment. Participants were told they would be given one video to watch about a specific target. Next, given the importance of audience knowledge in satire (e.g., Caufield, 2008) and following recommendations of others (e.g., Skalicky & Crossley, 2019), participants were asked to indicate their familiarity with the target and the situation surrounding the criticism (see Supplemental Study 1 for details). In addition, following others (e.g., Boukes et al., 2015), we gave all participants a brief background description of the target and the situation surrounding the criticism of the target (see Supplemental Study 1 for details). Participants were then exposed to either the satirical or direct criticism video for that target. After the video finished, participants completed a manipulation check for the content of the video (satirical vs. direct criticism). Specifically, participants were asked to describe in a text box the content of the video and asked to rate the degree to which they found the video to be "funny" and "critical" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Following others (e.g., Helm & Klode, 2011; Jazaieri et al., 2019; D. E. Johnson et al., 2002), all participants rated the target's reputation using a single measure of reputation: "How would you rate [target's name]'s reputation?" (1 = *one of the worst* to 7 = *one of the best*).

Natural Text Analysis of Comments to YouTube Videos. Separate from the experiment, we performed a natural text content analysis on the public comments posted by users in the comment section of the YouTube videos. Across the 40 videos, there were a total of 104,555 comments written in English. To test the idea that satire may facilitate dehumanization, we used a validated text analysis tool of dehumanization, the Mind Perception Dictionary (MPD; Schweitzer & Waytz, 2021) for Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2015). The MPD reliably captures the overall presence of humanizing words or words that suggest the presence of a mental state (i.e., words that contain more human qualities) in text entries. As with all LIWC analyses, to account for differing lengths of text entries, LIWC relies on the percentage of words used (as opposed to a total). For example, an MPD score of 3.33 indicates that 3.33% of the words in the text used humanizing words.

Results and Discussion

Video Viewer Perceptions of Reputation

Independent samples t tests indicated that viewers randomized to the satirical condition found the videos to be more humorous ($M_{\text{satirical}}$ = 4.85, SD = 2.04) than those randomized to the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}}$ = 2.32, SD = 1.68); $t(1309) = -24.47$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.33, 2.73], $d = 1.35$. Consistent with our coders' ratings, participants between conditions did not differ in how critical they perceived the stimuli to be ($M_{\text{satirical}}$ = 4.39, SD = 1.70, $M_{\text{direct criticism}}$ = 4.38, SD = 1.60); $t(1309) = 0.16$,

$p = .871$, 95% CI [−0.16, 0.19], $d = 0.009$, suggesting both were equally critical.

However, when it came to the target's reputation, the two conditions differed significantly (see Figure 1). Those randomized to the satirical YouTube video perceived the target's reputation to be less positive ($M_{satirical} = 3.81$, $SD = 1.55$) compared to those in the direct criticism YouTube video condition ($M_{direct\ criticism} = 4.13$, $SD = 1.54$); $t(1309) = -3.70$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.48, −0.15], $d = 0.21$. Of note, this difference in reputation arose, despite the fact the videos were seen as equally critical of the target. This finding is consistent with *H1* and the notion that satire may "sharpen the blade" of criticism, resulting in reputational harm.

Natural Text Analysis of Comments to YouTube Videos

Satirical videos had more views on YouTube ($M_{satirical} = 2858953.35$; $SD = 4{,}419{,}543.88$) compared to the criticism videos ($M_{direct\ criticism} = 766{,}499.20$; $SD = 1094292.66$); $t(38) = 2.06$, $p = .047$, 95% CI [31,453.63, 4,153,454.67], $d = 0.65$ but had an equivalent number of public comments posted to the videos ($M_{satirical} = 2{,}544.60$, $SD = 5{,}498.72$; $M_{direct\ criticism} = 2{,}684.05$, $SD = 4{,}634.79$); $t(38) = -0.09$, $p = .931$, 95% CI [−3,394.80, 3,115.90], $d = 0.03$.

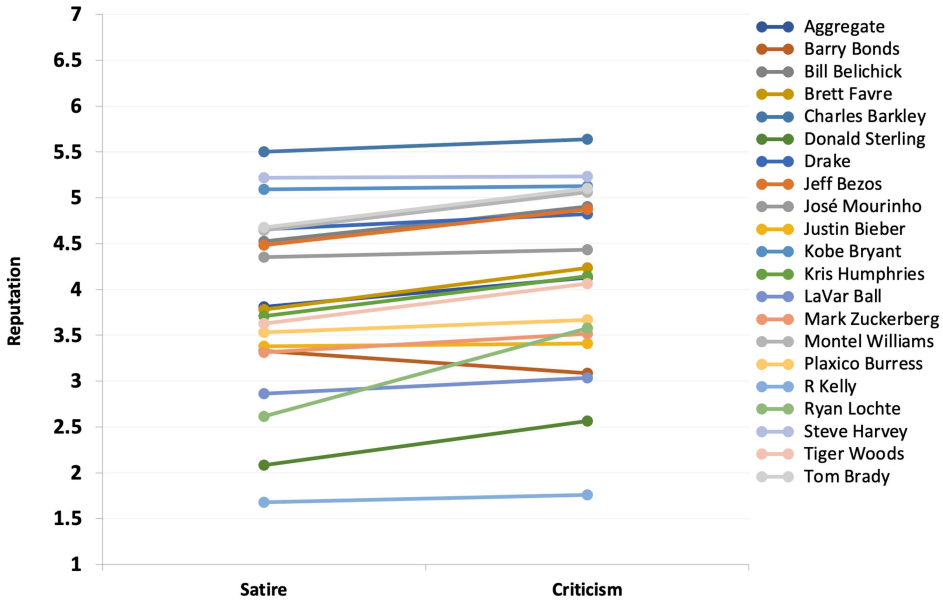
Relevant to our hypotheses, for satirical videos, posted comments by users contained fewer humanizing words (MPD: $M_{satirical} = 1.67$, $SD = 5.36$) compared to the direct criticism videos (MPD: $M_{direct\ criticism} = 2.41$, $SD = 5.96$), $t(104{,}553) = -21.13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.81, −0.67], $d = 0.13$. As an example of content differing in humanization, in a direct criticism video about Jeff Bezos, viewers wrote comments such as: "What is with these insane early comments suggesting Amazon take their business to other countries? Bezos is the second wealthiest man in the world and you're encouraging him to leave America, think about it, idiot trolls." (MPD: 2.70), while in satire condition viewers wrote comments about Bezos such as: "Except Bezos is a bit more like Satan, than Mr. Rogers, but great job SNL!" (MPD: 0.00; see Study 1 Supplemental Results for additional examples). In summary, consistent with our hypothesis, the overall percentage of words contained fewer humanizing words, when commenting on videos that were satirical in nature as opposed to videos that were critical. This result is consistent with the possibility that the greater negative effect of satire on reputation reported by participants asked to watch the videos could potentially be due to their dehumanization of the target. Of course, given the differences in our experiment and the naturalistic data, caution is warranted regarding causal claims about such a relationship.

Study 2a: Examining the Effect of Satire on Reputation With a Public Figure

Study 2a sought to replicate the negative effects on satire using a different paradigm with the inclusion of a no criticism baseline condition. On the former point, while YouTube videos are a very rich set of real-world stimuli, they could vary in ways beyond satire. To address this issue, Study 2a utilized experimental methods, wherein participants were exposed to a static picture that varied only by the tagline of the text that accompanied it. On the latter point, perhaps satire does not "sharpen the blade" but direct criticism somehow dulls it. To address this matter, we included a no criticism baseline condition.

Figure 1

Aggregate and Individual Target Reputation Ratings From Study 1



Note. Reputation ratings are on the *y*-axis. Satire and criticism ratings are on the *x*-axis. Targets from the videos are listed on the righthand side in a key. Error bars are omitted for visual ease. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Method

Participants and Design

In this study, participants ($N = 330$) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: satire, direct criticism, and no criticism control. In this experimental design, random assignment was successful such that the conditions did not differ by gender ($p = .416$), thus findings are reported without gender as a covariate. Thirty-one participants (9.4% of the sample) failed an attention check, leaving a final sample of 299 participants.[3] A post hoc sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample size provided 80% power to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.36$, $\eta^2 = .031$.

Procedure

Once again, given the importance of knowledge and familiarity with regard to satire (e.g., Caufield, 2008; Skalicky & Crossley, 2019), participants were first shown a picture of the target, soccer manager José Mourinho, and were asked if they recognized him. Participants were also asked to write who they thought the person was. Next, following others (e.g., Boukes et al., 2015), participants were given a brief description of the target's employment history including that he was released from a recent job (see Supplemental Study 2a for details). Participants were asked to rate their familiarity with the target and the situation surrounding his firing (see Supplemental Study 2a for details). Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions.

Participants randomized to the satire condition saw the same initial photo of the target except with an existing satirical headline circulating on the Internet regarding his employment woes, in a meme format. Participants in the direct criticism condition saw the same initial photo of the target except with a direct criticism headline regarding his employment woes, again in a meme format. Finally, those in the no criticism control condition saw the same initial photo of the target without any headline.

As a manipulation check for the satire and direct criticism stimuli, participants rated whether they found the meme "funny" and "critical." Reputation was measured with the single-item "How would you rate [target's name]'s reputation?" (1 = *one of the worst* to 7 = *one of the best*).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Independent samples *t* tests on the manipulations checks indicated that the manipulation was successful—those in the satire condition ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 4.20$, $SD = 1.99$) found the stimuli to be more humorous than those in the criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 2.98$, $SD = 1.70$); $t(192) = 4.59$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.69, 1.74], $d = 0.66$. The two conditions did not differ in how critical they perceived the stimuli to be ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 5.11$, $SD = 1.61$, $M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 5.17$, $SD = 1.68$); $t(192) = -0.25$, $p = .804$, 95% CI [−0.53, 0.41], $d = 0.04$.[4]

Reputation

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a statistically significant difference between the three groups on reputation, $F(2, 296) = 22.41$, $p < .001$, eta squared (η^2) = .13. Participants in the satire condition viewed the target's reputation as less positive ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 3.02$, $SD = 1.20$) compared to those in the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 3.35$, $SD = 0.93$); $t(192) = -2.12$, $p = .035$, 95% CI [−0.63, −0.02], $d = 0.31$, and the control condition($M_{\text{control}} = 4.06$, $SD = 1.22$); $t(199) = -6.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.37, −0.70], $d = 0.86$. In addition, the difference between the criticism and control conditions was significant, $t(201) = -4.63$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.01, −0.41], $d = 0.65$. Of note, while both satire and direct criticism damaged the target's reputation relative to the control condition, the bite of satire was sharper.

Study 2b: Examining the Effect of Satire on Reputation With a Fictional Target

Whereas Study 2a used a real public figure, it is possible that the effects might somehow be limited to people having deep knowledge of the target of satire. To address this possibility, Study 2b used a fictional target ("Steve Randall"). In addition to the explicit reputation measure used in Study 2a, we also added additional measures of reputational harm in the form of inferences related to the target's job performance.

Method

Participants and Design

Using procedures similar to Study 2a, participants ($N = 330$) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: satire, direct criticism, and no criticism. In this experiment, random assignment was successful such that the conditions did not differ by gender ($p = .654$), thus findings are reported without gender as a covariate. Twenty-three participants (7.0% of the sample) failed an attention check, leaving 307 participants. A post hoc sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample size provided 80% power to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.40$, $\eta^2 = .039$.

Procedure

Similar to Study 2a, participants read a brief background description of the target's employment history (see Supplemental Study 2b for details) and were exposed to similar stimuli as in Study 2a (here, the photo was of a fictitious person "Steve Randall" rather than José Mourinho but with the same satire and criticism headlines as Study 2a), and were asked to provide the same ratings of the stimuli and target. Given that we were examining the effect with a fictitious person, in this study, we also administered two additional measures of reputational harm in the form of inferences related to the fictious target's job performance: "How many times do you think Steve Randall has been fired?"

[3] For any study not preregistered, we included analyses with exclusions in our Supplemental Materials.

[4] When pretesting the stimuli, participants ($n = 111$) randomized to the control condition were also asked to rate how funny and critical the control stimuli were. Results indicated that the control condition did not find the image of Mourinho to be funny ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.26$) or critical ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.98$). Given that the control stimuli were not perceived to be funny or critical, in this study, we did not ask participants in the control condition to rate how funny or critical the image was. We address this limitation in Study 2c.

ranging from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*more than five times*) and "How long do you think Steve Randall has been at his current job?" (in number of years).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Independent samples *t* tests indicated that the manipulation checks were successful—those randomized to the satire condition ($M_{satirical} = 3.13$, $SD = 2.10$) found the stimuli to be more humorous than those randomized to the criticism condition ($M_{direct\ criticism} = 2.22$, $SD = 1.50$); $t(203) = 3.60$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.41, 1.14], $d = 0.50$. The two conditions did not differ in how critical they perceived the stimuli to be($M_{satirical} = 5.38$, $SD = 1.45$, $M_{direct\ criticism} = 5.12$, $SD = 1.64$); $t(203) = 1.20$, $p = .23$, 95% CI [−0.17, 0.69], $d = 0.17$.

Reputation

Replicating Study 2a, a one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between the three groups on reputation, $F(2, 304) = 8.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Participants randomized to the satire condition viewed the target's reputation as less positive ($M_{satirical} = 3.40$, $SD = 1.18$) compared to those in the criticism ($M_{direct\ criticism} = 3.81$, $SD = 1.19$); $t(203) = -2.44$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [−0.73, −0.08], $d = 0.34$, or the no criticism control condition ($M_{control} = 4.08$, $SD = 1.15$); $t(197) = -4.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.00, −0.35], $d = 0.58$. Although not statistically significant, participants also tended to be more negative toward the target's reputation in the direct criticism compared to the control condition, $t(208) = -1.69$, $p = .092$, 95% CI [−0.59, 0.05], $d = 0.23$.

Extending Study 2a by examining the additional inferences related to reputation, a one-way ANOVA demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the three groups on participants' inferences regarding how frequently the target had been fired, $F(2, 304) = 27.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$. Those randomized to the satire condition inferred that the target had been fired more frequently ($M_{satirical} = 3.51$, $SD = 1.73$) compared to those in the direct criticism ($M_{direct\ criticism} = 2.27$, $SD = 1.68$); $t(203) = 5.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.78, 1.72], $d = 0.73$, or control conditions ($M_{control} = 1.93$, $SD = 1.26$); $t(197) = 7.40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.16, 2.01], $d = 1.05$. The difference between the criticism and control conditions was nonsignificant, $t(208) = 1.64$, $p = .103$, 95% CI [−0.07, 0.74], $d = 0.23$.

We also observed a statistically significant difference between the three groups on participants' inferences regarding how long the target had been with his current organization, as determined by a one-way ANOVA, $F(2, 304) = 33.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$. Specifically, those randomized to the satire condition inferred that the target had a shorter tenure at his current organization ($M_{satirical} = 1.69$, $SD = 1.34$) compared to those in the direct criticism ($M_{direct\ criticism} = 2.21$, $SD = 1.10$); $t(203) = -3.07$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [−0.86, −0.19], $d = 0.43$, or control conditions ($M_{control} = 3.05$, $SD = 1.13$); $t(197) = -7.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.70, −1.01], $d = 1.10$. The difference between the criticism and control conditions was also significant, $t(208) = -5.45$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.14, −0.53], $d = 0.75$.

Taken together, the data from this study suggest that even for a target who is a nonpublic figure, exposure to satire results in more negative appraisals of the target and has consequences for additional inferences related to reputation.

Study 2c: Examining the Effect of Satire on Reputation and Behavior

Study 2c sought to examine effects on not only reputation but also behavior. Specifically, we examine the effects of satire of a well-known public figure, actress Gwyneth Paltrow, and hypothesized that compared to direct criticism and control, exposure to satire would result in: (a) viewing the target's reputation more negatively, (b) an increased willingness to engage with the image in various forms (e.g., liking, sharing), and (c) written replies to the image that contain fewer humanizing words. Finally, while single-item, face-valid reputation measures are widely used and are considered valid indicators of reputation (e.g., Helm & Klode, 2011; Jazaieri et al., 2019; D. E. Johnson et al., 2002) in this study, we assessed reputation with a multi-item indicator.

Method

Participants and Design

We used nearly identical procedures as Studies 2a and 2b with the primary differences being in the target and the dependent measures collected. Using a preregistered a priori sample size calculation (80% power to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.30$, $f = 0.15$, $\eta^2 = .022$), participants ($N = 373$) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: satire, direct criticism, and no criticism. In this experiment, random assignment was successful such that the conditions did not differ by gender ($p = .324$), thus findings are reported without gender as a covariate. In line with our preregistration, 26 participants (7.0% of the sample) failed an attention check, leaving 347 participants.

Procedure

Participants were asked to rate their familiarity with the target (i.e., Gwyneth Paltrow) and the situation surrounding her criticism. The issue involved a recent lawsuit and court trial about a skiing accident (see Supplemental Study 2c for details). Using an image from her court trial, participants were randomized to either a satirical, direct criticism, or control meme. To examine a behavioral response to the images, we asked participants to write a comment. This comment allowed us to code the spontaneous language participants used. Specifically, we gave participants the following prompt: "Imagine that you were going to write a comment about this image on social media. What would you write (in 280 characters or less)?" Utilizing the same text analysis method from Study 1 (MPD; Schweitzer & Waytz, 2021, for LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2015), we examined the degree to which participants wrote replies that contained humanizing words. We also asked participants about their intention to engage with the image and whether they would "like it," "comment on it," and "share it with friends" (1 = *extremely unlikely* to 7 = *extremely likely*). These items comprised our "intention to engage" composite, which had good reliability (overall: $\alpha = .86$, satire: $\alpha = .83$, control: $\alpha = .90$, criticism: $\alpha = .87$). We measured reputation with a multi-item measure adapted from Hochwarter et al. (2007) that included items: The individual

is: "highly regarded by others," "has a good reputation," and "is seen as a person of high integrity" (all items used a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*). These items comprised our "reputation" composite, which had very good reliability (overall: $\alpha = .92$, satire: $\alpha = .89$, control: $\alpha = .92$, criticism: $\alpha = .94$). Finally, as a manipulation check for the satire, direct criticism, and control stimuli, participants rated whether they found the meme "funny" and "critical."

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between the three groups on how humorous they found the stimuli to be, $F(2, 344) = 20.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Follow-up independent samples t tests indicated that those randomized to the satire condition ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 3.28$, $SD = 2.01$) found the stimuli to be more humorous than those randomized to the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 1.96$, $SD = 1.32$); $t(231) = 5.93$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.88, 1.77], $d = 0.77$, and control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 2.30$, $SD = 1.49$); $t(229) = 4.18$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.52, 1.43], $d = 0.55$. The difference between the direct criticism and control condition was nonsignificant, $t(228) = 1.88$, $p = .061$, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.72], $d = 0.25$.

A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between the three groups on how critical they found the stimuli to be, $F(2, 344) = 7.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Follow-up independent samples t tests indicated that those randomized to the satire condition ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 4.13$, $SD = 1.73$) found the stimuli to be equally critical as those randomized to the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 3.81$, $SD = 1.75$); $t(231) = 1.40$, $p = .164$, 95% CI [−0.13, 0.77], $d = 0.77$. However, participants in the satire condition found the stimuli to be more critical compared to those in the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 3.26$, $SD = 1.66$); $t(229) = 3.87$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.43, 1.30], $d = 0.51$. In addition, participants in the direct criticism condition found the stimuli to be more critical compared to participants in the control condition, $t(228) = -2.43$, $p < .02$, 95% CI [−0.99, −0.10], $d = 0.32$.

Reputation

A one-way ANOVA revealed a difference between the three groups on reputation, $F(2, 344) = 14.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Participants in the satire condition viewed the target's reputation as less positive ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 3.81$, $SD = 1.23$) compared to those in the direct criticism ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 4.58$, $SD = 1.35$); $t(231) = -4.53$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.10, −0.43], $d = 0.59$, or the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.58$, $SD = 1.24$); $t(229) = -4.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.09, −0.45], $d = 0.62$. We found no differences in reputation for participants in the direct criticism and control conditions, $t(228) = 0.03$, $p = .980$, 95% CI [−0.33, 0.34], $d = 0.003$. One explanation for the lack of a difference here is that all participants received the same information about the lawsuit in the target's background information (see Supplemental Study 2c). As such, perhaps the nature of this information was sufficient to lead to similar assessments of her reputation. Nonetheless, the addition of satire led to more negative assessments of reputation.

Intention to Engage

Contrary to our prediction, we did not observe a significant difference between the three groups on the intention to engage composite, as determined by a one-way ANOVA, $F(2, 344) = 0.23$, $p = .792$, $\eta^2 = .001$. One explanation for the lack of differences was a floor effect. Namely, participants appeared to intend to abstain from engagement whether they were in the satire ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 1.91$, $SD = 1.30$), direct criticism ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 2.03$, $SD = 1.43$); $t(231) = -0.69$, $p = .493$, 95% CI [−0.47, 0.23], $d = 0.09$, or control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 1.98$, $SD = 1.39$); $t(229) = -0.37$, $p = .714$, 95% CI [−0.41, 0.28], $d = 0.05$. One reason for the low levels of intent to engage could be that participants were uninterested in sharing this information (i.e., consistent with the notion that social media users have a preference to "lurk"; see Nonnecke et al., 2006) or had impression management concerns (i.e., not wanting to answer in a way that would make them seem like gossiping).

Humanizing Replies

When examining the descriptive statistics of the word count of the responses written (limited to 280 characters or less), participants wrote on average $M_{\text{entire sample}} = 14.52$ words ($SD = 11.84$), $M_{\text{satirical}} = 13.68$ words ($SD = 11.85$), $M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 13.56$ words ($SD = 10.27$), and $M_{\text{control}} = 16.35$ words ($SD = 13.15$). During the review process, we were asked to test for normality and adjust our analyses accordingly. A Shapiro–Wilk test of normality revealed that the distribution was not normal for the entire sample ($p < .001$), as well as for each group individually (all ps $< .001$). Thus, in subsequent analyses we utilized Kruskal–Wallis H test rather than ANOVA and Mann–Whitney U tests rather than t tests as originally proposed in our preregistration. For interested readers, we also share the preregistered analyses using t tests in the Study 2c Supplemental Results.

The Kruskal–Wallis H test indicated no differences between the three conditions on word count ($H = 2.699$, $p = .259$). Specifically, results indicated that the number of words participants wrote did not differ between the satire and criticism conditions ($U = 6546.00$, $p = .641$, $\eta^2 = .00$),[5] between the satire and control condition ($U = 5883.50$, $p = .122$, $\eta^2 = .01$), or between the criticism and control conditions ($U = 6006.50$, $p = .230$, $\eta^2 = .00$).

We examined descriptive statistics of the percentage of humanizing words in replies by each group ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 1.95$, $SD = 5.91$; $M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 4.70$, $SD = 7.95$; $M_{\text{control}} = 6.46$, $SD = 9.14$). Similar to word count, when examining normality, a Shapiro–Wilk test of normality revealed that the distribution was not normal for the whole sample ($p < .001$), as well as for each group individually (all ps $< .001$). Thus, we utilized Kruskal–Wallis H test rather than ANOVA and Mann–Whitney U tests rather than t tests.

The Kruskal–Wallis H test indicated significant differences between the three conditions on the percentage of humanizing words used in the replies ($H = 31.28$, $p < .001$). Specifically, results indicated those randomized to the satire condition used fewer humanizing words in their replies compared to the direct criticism condition ($U = 5324.50$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$), and control condition

[5] To calculate an effect size for the Mann–Whitney U tests, we used the Z statistics provided and calculated η^2 using the formula: $\eta^2 = ([Z^2]/[N-1])$.

($U = 4147.50$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$). Compared to the direct criticism condition, the control condition used more humanizing language ($U = 5634.50$, $p = .037$, $\eta^2 = .02$). As illustrative examples, in the control condition a participant wrote: "She looks sad. She doesn't look very good in this photo." (MPD: 9.09). In the direct criticism condition, a participant wrote: "Gwenyth [sic] Paltrow is being dragged on social media because of this collision trial. I do not think she deserves this." (MPD: 5.00). In the satire condition a participant wrote:

> She looks like she's on trial for a murder trial or something. I wouldn't wanna see her or run into her on any kind of vacation because she looks too scary and I wouldn't wanna be a meme like that. Also her outfit to trial looks very ski resort vibes and I think that is so funny. (MPD: 1.75; see Study 2c Supplemental Results for additional examples).

Thus, consistent with Study 1, these findings suggest that when prompted to generate their own response to the images, those in the satire condition, when examining the overall percentage of words used, spontaneously used fewer humanizing words compared to those in the criticism or control conditions.

Study 3: The Mediating Role of Dehumanization on Satire and Reputation

As noted in Hypothesis 2 (H2), we propose that satire may "sharpen the blow," because it dehumanizes the target. While Studies 2a and 2b did not examine dehumanization, Study 2c is consistent with this perspective in terms of the replies written by participants. However, our measures of dehumanization reflected outputs related to dehumanization (i.e., language use) as opposed to participants' own assessment of dehumanization. In this study, we directly measured participants' dehumanization of the target and explored whether this mediated any observed effect on reputation.

Method

Participants and Design

This experiment utilized a two-cell (satire vs. direct criticism), between-subjects design. Participants ($N = 200$) were randomly assigned to either the satire or direct criticism conditions from Study 2. In this experiment, random assignment was successful such that the conditions did not differ by gender ($p = .751$), thus findings are reported without gender as a covariate. Fifteen participants (7.5% of the sample) failed an attention check, leaving 185 participants. A post hoc sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample size provided 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.41$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

Procedure

In this study, participants were randomly assigned to either a satire or direct criticism of José Mourinho (see Supplemental Study 3 Methods). Unique to this study, participants completed a measure to assess whether satire led to more dehumanization of the target. Specifically, we administered the 10-item Mind Attribution Scale (MAS; Kozak et al., 2006), a validated measure of the degree to which participants believe the target (José Mourinho) is capable of acting with intention, engaging in higher order thought, and experiencing emotions. Attributes were rated using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all capable* to 7 = *extremely capable*), whereby lower scores indicate that the target has fewer human qualities. Following Kozak et al. (2006), we report the overall MAS composite ($\alpha = .94$); however, in order to provide more nuance, throughout we also provide supplemental analyses using each of the three subscales of the MAS (emotion: $\alpha = .93$; intention: $\alpha = .79$, and cognition: $\alpha = .85$). Similar to the prior studies, as a manipulation check for the satire and direct criticism stimuli, participants rated whether they found the meme "funny" and "critical." The single-item measure of reputation (described in Study 1) was our dependent variable of interest.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Independent samples *t* tests indicate that the manipulation checks were successful—those randomized to the satire condition found the stimuli to be more humorous ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 4.16$, $SD = 1.86$) than those randomized to the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 3.08$, $SD = 1.75$); $t(183) = 4.04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.55, 1.59], $d = 0.59$. The two conditions did not differ in how critical they perceived the stimuli to be ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 5.36$, $SD = 1.39$, $M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 5.17$, $SD = 1.62$); $t(183) = 0.84$, $p = .401$, 95% CI [−0.25, 0.63], $d = 0.12$.

Reputation, Dehumanization, and Mediation

Once again, the two conditions differed on reputation—those randomized to the satire condition viewed the target's reputation more harshly ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 3.09$, $SD = 1.12$) compared to those in the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 3.46$, $SD = 1.09$); $t(183) = -2.31$, $p = .022$, 95% CI [−0.69, −0.05], $d = 0.34$. Additional analyses indicated that the two conditions differed on how they viewed the target's human qualities. Compared to the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 5.83$, $SD = 1.01$), those in the satire condition ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 5.37$, $SD = 1.15$) viewed the target as having relatively fewer human qualities—surmising that the target was *less* capable of acting with intention, engaging in higher order thought, and experiencing emotion, $F(1, 183) = 8.42$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .04$. When looking at the dehumanization subscales, the pattern remained the same—emotion subscale: $F(1, 183) = 7.47$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .04$; intention subscale: $F(1, 183) = 5.31$, $p = .022$, $\eta^2 = .03$; and cognition subscale: $F(1, 183) = 8.41$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

When examining the correlation between reputation and dehumanization, there was a significant positive relationship, $r(185) = .183$, $p = .013$. When looking at the correlations with reputation and the dehumanization subscales, there was no relationship with the emotion subscale, $r(185) = .072$, $p = .328$, and a positive relationship with the intention subscale, $r(185) = .30$, $p < .001$, and the cognition subscale, $r(185) = .172$, $p = .019$.

We tested for mediation using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018; Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrapping samples with condition (1 = satire or 0 = criticism) as the independent variable (X), reputation as the dependent variable (Y), and dehumanization (as assessed via the Mind Attribution Scale) as the mediator (M). We

found a significant effect of condition on dehumanization, $B = -0.46$, $SE = .16$, $t(183) = -2.90$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [−0.77, −0.15], and dehumanization significantly predicted reputation, $B = 0.16$, $SE = .07$, $t(182) = 2.09$, $p = .038$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.30]. When we controlled for dehumanization, condition no longer predicted reputation ($p = .068$). Of critical importance, the indirect effect of condition on reputation through dehumanization was significant, as indicated by the 95% CI that did not include 0 ($B = -0.07$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [−0.184, −0.002]), which suggests that the effect of condition on reputation was mediated by dehumanization (see Figure 2).

In subsequent exploratory analyses looking at the dehumanization subscales, the indirect effect of condition on reputation through the *emotion* subscale was nonsignificant, as indicated by the 95% CI including 0 ($B = -0.02$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [−0.10, 0.05]); the indirect effect of condition on reputation through the *intention* subscale was significant, as indicated by the 95% CI not including 0 ($B = -0.10$, $SE = .056$, 95% CI [−0.23, −0.01]); and the indirect effect of condition on reputation through the *cognition* subscale was nonsignificant, as indicated by the 95% CI including 0 ($B = -0.07$, $SE = .045$, 95% CI [−0.17, 0.00]). This supplementary analysis suggests that the cognition subscale might best capture the nature of the dehumanization leading to negative assessments of the target's reputation.

While the existing literature on criticism, humor, and satire provided some hints at the role of dehumanization, and the findings from Study 1 suggested that dehumanization was playing a unique role, when viewers were watching satirical YouTube videos in the context of this tightly controlled experimental study, we see direct evidence of the role of dehumanization in the relationship between satire and reputation.

Study 4: The Moderating Role of Positive Contact

Given the prior findings, Study 4 explored a potential boundary condition based on a psychological process related to dehumanization. Specifically, if seeing the target as having fewer human qualities is responsible for the additional damage of satire to one's reputation (Study 3), then the reputational harm could potentially be mitigated if people imagine positive contact with the target (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Imagining having a positive interaction between oneself and the target should aid in ascribing greater mind to the other and thus to recognize them as a humanized entity (e.g., Crisp & Turner, 2009), which, in turn, should reduce reputational damage. Formally, we introduce Hypothesis 3 as follows:

> *Hypothesis 3:* Imagined positive contact will reduce the negative effects of satire on reputational harm.

To test this hypothesis, in Study 4, we examined moderation via considering positive imagined contact with the target.

Method

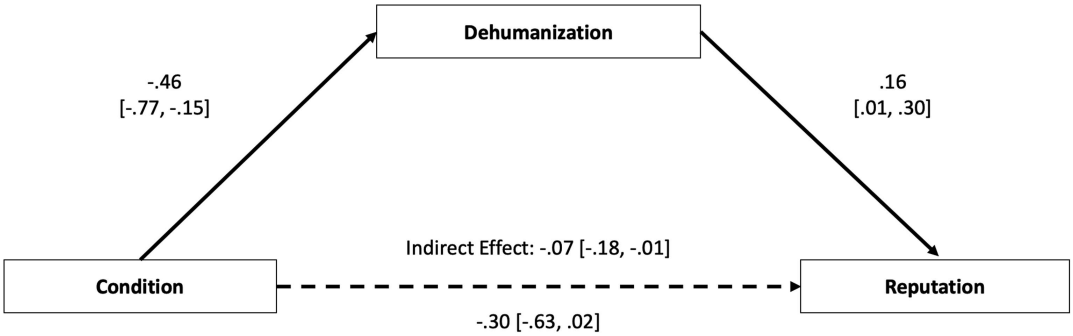
Participants and Design

In this 2 × 2 between-subjects design, participants ($N = 500$) were randomized to either the satire or direct criticism video clip of former Juul CEO Kevin Burns and either a "positive contact" or a "nature" manipulation. These videos were pretested with regard to both humor and degree of criticalness prior to administration in this study (see Study 4 Supplemental Results for details). In this experiment, random assignment was successful such that the conditions did not differ by gender ($p = .728$), thus findings are reported without gender as a covariate. Twenty-three participants (4.6% of the sample) failed one or more attention checks (i.e., failing to describe the contents of the video clip in a textbox and/or the contents of their respective imagined scenario), leaving 477 participants. A post hoc sensitivity analysis revealed that this sample size provided 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.26$.

Procedure

Procedures in this study were similar to those reported in Study 3 (see Supplemental Study 4 for details). Participants were randomized to either the satire or direct criticism condition. However, unlike the prior studies, after exposure to the satire or direct criticism video, participants were then randomized to either a positive contact manipulation or a nature manipulation (Crisp & Turner, 2009). Participants randomized to the positive contact manipulation were asked to imagine having a "positive, relaxed, and comfortable interaction" with the target (e.g., Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Crisp & Turner, 2009; Turner & West, 2012). Participants randomized to

Figure 2
Mediation Model From Study 3



Note. Condition (1 = satire or 0 = criticism) as the independent variable, dehumanization as the mediator, and reputation as the dependent variable. Used Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro (Model 4 with 5,000 resamples).

the nature condition were asked to imagine an outdoor scene (e.g., Crisp & Turner, 2009; Turner et al., 2007). In both conditions, participants were given exactly 1 min to complete the task. Following others, to reinforce the instructions, participants were then asked to spend 1 min describing the scenario they imagined (e.g., Husnu & Crisp, 2010). The single-item measure of reputation (described in Study 1) remained our dependent variable of interest. Participants also completed the same manipulation check for the satire and direct criticism stimuli.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Those randomized to the satire condition found the video stimuli to be more humorous ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 5.38$, $SD = 1.73$) than those randomized to the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 1.39$, $SD = 0.85$); $t(475) = 32.03$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.75, 4.24], $d = 2.93$. The two conditions did not differ in how critical they perceived the video stimuli to be ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 5.12$, $SD = 1.65$, $M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 5.33$, $SD = 1.36$); $t(475) = -1.59$, $p = .113$, 95% CI [−0.49, 0.05], $d = 0.15$.

Contact and Reputation

A 2 (satirical, direct criticism) × 2 (positive contact, nature) ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of satire versus direct criticism, $F(3, 473) = 13.71$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .028$, a significant main effect of positive contact versus nature, $F(3, 473) = 25.28$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .051$, as well as a significant interaction, $F(3, 473) = 4.22$, $p = .041$, partial $\eta^2 = .009$. As depicted in Figure 3, when comparing the nature manipulation between the satire ($M_{\text{satirical, nature}} = 2.48$, $SD = 0.98$) and direct criticism ($M_{\text{direct criticism, nature}} = 3.05$, $SD = 1.19$) conditions, the two groups differed, $t(238) = -4.01$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.84, −0.29], $d = 0.52$. However, when participants were assigned to the positive contact manipulation, no differences were observed between satire ($M_{\text{satirical, contact}} = 3.18$, $SD = 0.99$) and direct criticism conditions ($M_{\text{direct criticism, contact}} = 3.34$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(235) = -1.19$, $p = .237$, 95% CI [−0.43, 0.11], $d = 0.15$.

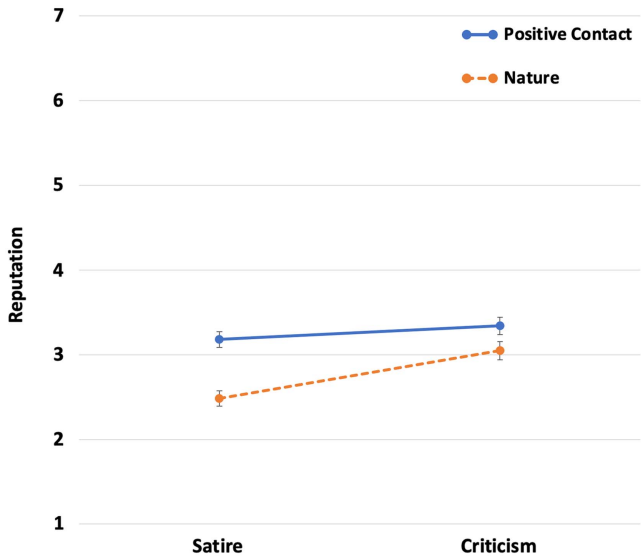
From another perspective, participants randomized to the satire condition viewed the target's reputation as less positive in the nature manipulation compared to those in the positive contact with the target condition, $t(233) = -5.41$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.95, −0.44], $d = 0.71$. Those randomized to the direct criticism condition also viewed the target's reputation more harshly in the nature manipulation compared to the positive contact with the target, $t(240) = -1.97$, $p = .050$, 95% CI [−0.58, −0.0006], $d = 0.25$. The findings from this study show that for both satire and criticism (to differing degrees), pausing for even1 min and considering a pleasant interaction with the target can humanize them in a way that provides a buffer preventing negative appraisals of the target's reputation.

Study 5: Moderated Mediation

Study 5 was designed to build upon Study 4 by measuring our proposed mediator, dehumanization, and examining whether it mediated any observed differences in reputation due to positive contact.

Figure 3

Effect of Satire Versus Criticism and Positive Contact Versus Nature Manipulation on Reputation in Study 4



Note. Reputation is on the *y*-axis. Satire and criticism conditions are on the *x*-axis. Positive contact condition is depicted with the solid line. Nature condition is depicted with the dashed line. Error bars show standard errors. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Method

Participants and Design

In this preregistered, 2 × 2 between-subjects design, participants ($N = 458$, based on an a priori sample size calculation with 80% power to detect an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.3$, $f = 0.15$, $\eta^2 = .022$) were randomized to either the satire or direct criticism video clip of chef, author, and TV personality, Paula Deen. In this experiment, random assignment was successful such that the conditions did not differ by gender ($p = .066$), thus findings are reported without gender as a covariate. The satire and direct criticism videos were pretested, with regard to both humor and degree of criticalness prior to administration in this study (see Study 5 Supplemental Results for details). Subsequently, participants received either a "positive contact" or a "neutral control" manipulation. In line with our preregistration, 32 participants (7% of the sample) failed one or more attention checks (i.e., failing to select a specific response or describe the contents of the video clip in a textbox). Additionally, one participant was removed, because they had issues with the video clip (reporting not being able to play it). The final sample for this study consisted of 425 participants.

Procedure

Procedures in this study were similar to those reported in Studies 3 and 4 (see Supplemental Study 5 for details). Participants were randomized to either the satire or direct criticism condition video. Next, participants were randomly assigned to receive either the positive imagined contact (e.g., Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Crisp & Turner, 2009; Turner & West, 2012) or the neutral control

manipulation (e.g., Auger & Amiot, 2019). To assess dehumanization, participants completed the 10-item Mind Attribution Scale (MAS; Kozak et al., 2006), described in detail in Study 3. As in Study 3, following Kozak et al. (2006), we report the overall MAS composite ($\alpha = .90$). In order to provide more nuance, we also provide supplemental analyses using each of the three subscales of the MAS (emotion: $\alpha = .89$; intention: $\alpha = .64$, and cognition: $\alpha = .71$). Additionally, similar to Study 2c, we utilized a multi-item measure of reputation (Hochwarter et al., 2007). Reliability of this reputation measure in the present sample was very good ($\alpha = .90$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Those randomized to the satire condition found the video stimuli to be more humorous ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 4.50$, $SD = 1.71$) than those randomized to the direct criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 1.73$, $SD = 1.31$); $t(423) = 18.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.48, 3.06], $d = 1.82$. The two conditions did not differ in how critical they perceived the video stimuli to be ($M_{\text{satirical}} = 4.86$, $SD = 1.39$, $M_{\text{direct criticism}} = 5.07$, $SD = 1.45$); $t(423) = -1.54$, $p = .125$, 95% CI [−0.48, 0.06], $d = 0.15$.

Contact and Reputation

A 2 (Satirical, direct criticism) × 2 (positive contact, neutral control) ANOVA indicated a nonsignificant main effect of satire versus direct criticism, $F(3, 421) = 1.39$, $p = .239$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$, a significant main effect of positive contact versus control, $F(3, 421) = 13.25$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, and a significant interaction, $F(3, 421) = 4.72$, $p = .030$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Specifically, as depicted in Figure 4, when comparing reputation within the neutral control manipulation, the satire condition led to more negative reputation ($M_{\text{satirical, neutral control}} = 3.05$, $SD = 1.09$) than the criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism, neutral control}} = 3.44$, $SD = 1.34$); $t(216) = -2.36$, $p = .019$, 95% CI [−0.72, −0.07], $d = 0.32$. When comparing reputation within the positive contact manipulation, the satire condition was not different ($M_{\text{satirical, positive contact}} = 3.73$, $SD = 1.21$) from the criticism condition ($M_{\text{direct criticism, positive contact}} = 3.61$, $SD = 1.15$); $t(205) = 0.71$, $p = .481$, 95% CI [−0.21, 0.44], $d = 0.10$.

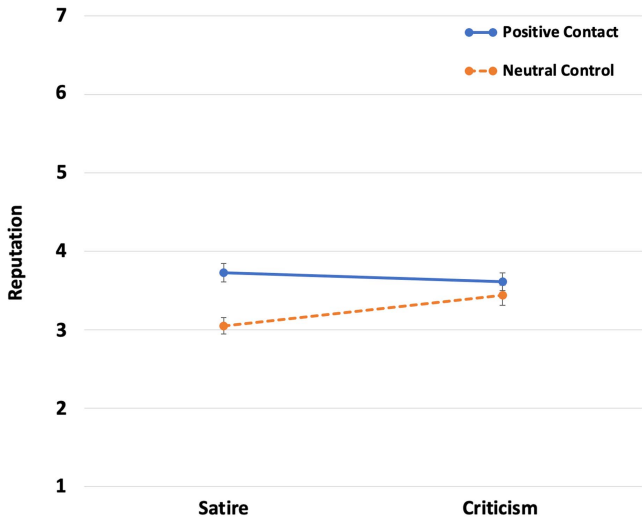
From another perspective, within the satire condition, participants assigned to receive the positive contact treatment viewed the reputation of the target more favorably compared to participants in the neutral condition, $t(211) = -4.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.99, −0.37], $d = 0.59$. Within the criticism condition, participants viewed the reputation of the target similarly regardless of whether they received the neutral control manipulation or the positive contact condition, $t(210) = -1.00$, $p = .320$, 95% CI [−0.51, 0.17], $d = 0.14$.

Contact and Dehumanization

The descriptive statistics of the satire conditions on dehumanization are as follows: $M_{\text{satirical, neutral control}} = 5.60$, $SD = 0.90$ and $M_{\text{satirical, positive contact}} = 6.12$, $SD = 0.70$. The descriptive statistics of the direct criticism conditions on dehumanization are as follows: $M_{\text{direct criticism, neutral control}} = 5.99$, $SD = 0.74$ and $M_{\text{direct criticism, positive contact}} = 6.01$, $SD = 0.76$. When examining normality at the request of our review team, a Shapiro–Wilk test of normality revealed that the distribution was not normal for the entire sample ($p < .001$), as well as for each group individually (all $ps \leq .002$). Thus, deviating from our preregistration due to the appropriateness of the test, we utilized Kruskal–Wallis H test rather than ANOVA and Mann–Whitney U tests rather than t tests. For interested readers, the preregistered analyses using ANOVA and t tests are reported in the Study 5 Supplemental Results.

Figure 4

Effect of Satire Versus Criticism and Positive Contact Versus Neutral Control Manipulation on Reputation in Study 5



Note. Reputation is on the y-axis. Satire and criticism conditions are on the x-axis. Positive contact condition is depicted with the solid line. Neutral control condition is depicted with the dashed line. Error bars show standard errors. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

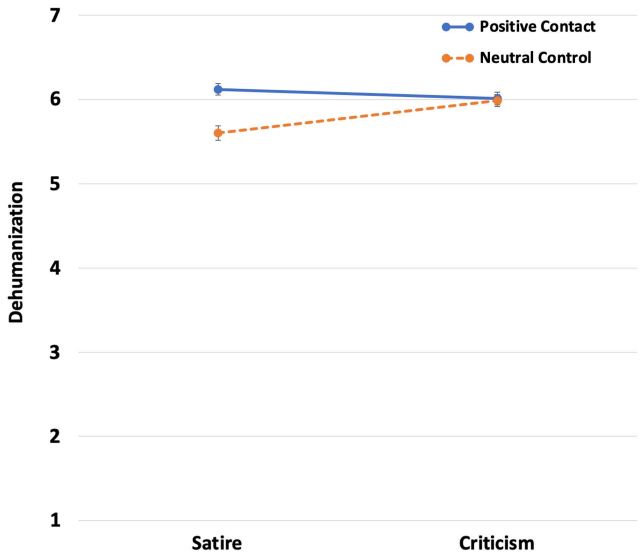
The Kruskal–Wallis H test indicated significant differences between the four conditions on dehumanization ($H = 21.161$, $p < .001$). Specifically, as depicted in Figure 5, when comparing dehumanization within the neutral control manipulation, the satire condition viewed the target as having relatively fewer human qualities—surmising that the target was *less* capable of acting with intention, engaging in higher order thought, and experiencing emotion than the criticism condition ($U = 4461.50$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$). However, the two groups did not differ under the positive contact manipulation ($U = 4915.00$, $p = .305$, $\eta^2 = .005$).

Participants randomized to the satire condition viewed the target as more human in the positive contact manipulation condition compared to those in neutral control manipulation condition ($U = 3{,}733.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$). Finally, those randomized to the criticism condition viewed the target's humanness equivalently in the positive contact manipulation condition and the neutral control manipulation condition ($U = -0.23$, $p = .817$, $\eta^2 = .000$).

Dehumanization Subscales. Per our preregistration, to provide more nuance to the findings, we also conducted exploratory analyses on the three MAS subscales (emotion, intention, and cognition). Again, when examining normality at the request of our review team, a Shapiro–Wilk test of normality revealed that the distribution was not normal for the entire sample on all three subscales (all $ps < .001$), as well as for each group individually (satire neutral control: all $ps \leq .007$, satire positive contact: all $ps < .001$, criticism neutral control:

Figure 5

Effect of Satire Versus Criticism and Positive Contact Versus Neutral Control Manipulation on Dehumanization in Study 5



Note. Dehumanization is on the *y*-axis. Satire and criticism conditions are on the *x*-axis. Positive contact condition is depicted with the solid line. Neutral control condition is depicted with the dashed line. Error bars show standard errors. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

all *p*s < .001, and criticism positive contact: all *p*s < .001). Thus, we again utilized Kruskal–Wallis *H* test rather than ANOVA and Mann–Whitney *U* tests rather than *t* tests.

Emotion Subscale. The Kruskal–Wallis *H* test indicated significant differences between the four conditions on the MAS *emotion* subscale ($H = 9.071$, $p = .028$). Specifically, within the neutral control manipulation, the satire condition and the criticism condition did not differ on their interpretations of the target's emotional capacity ($U = 5{,}238.00$, $p = .123$, $\eta^2 = .01$). The two groups also did not differ in the positive contact manipulation ($U = 4{,}928.50$, $p = .301$, $\eta^2 = .005$). When looking within the satire condition, there were significant differences between those in the positive contact manipulation condition compared to those in the neutral control manipulation condition ($U = 4{,}432.00$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .038$). Finally, those randomized to the criticism condition viewed the target's emotional capacity equivalently in the positive contact manipulation condition and the neutral control manipulation condition ($U = 5{,}386.00$, $p = .600$, $\eta^2 = .001$).

Intention Subscale. The Kruskal–Wallis *H* test indicated significant differences between the four conditions on the MAS *intention* subscale ($H = 27.976$, $p < .001$). Specifically, within the neutral control manipulation, the satire condition and the criticism condition did significantly differ in their evaluations of the target's ability to act with intention ($U = 4{,}104.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$). However, the two groups did not differ in the positive contact manipulation ($U = 5{,}354.00$, $p = .996$, $\eta^2 = .000$). When looking within the satire condition, there were significant differences between those in the positive contact manipulation condition compared to those in the neutral control manipulation condition ($U = 3{,}659.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .095$). Finally, those randomized to the criticism condition viewed the target's ability to act with intention equivalently in the positive contact manipulation condition and the neutral control manipulation condition ($U = 5{,}396.00$, $p = .623$, $\eta^2 = .001$).

Cognition Subscale. The Kruskal–Wallis *H* test indicated significant differences between the four conditions on the MAS *cognition* subscale ($H = 21.618$, $p < .001$). Specifically, within the neutral control manipulation, the satire condition and the criticism condition did significantly differ regarding assessments about the target's cognitive capacities ($U = 4{,}420.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$). However, the two groups did not differ in the positive contact manipulation ($U = 4{,}827.50$, $p = .215$, $\eta^2 = .007$). When looking within the satire condition, there were significant differences between those in the positive contact manipulation condition compared to those in the neutral control manipulation condition ($U = 3{,}723.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$). Finally, those randomized to the criticism condition viewed the target's cognitive capacities equivalently in the positive contact manipulation condition and the neutral control manipulation condition ($U = 5{,}603.50$, $p = .982$, $\eta^2 = .000$). Taken together, these findings suggest that all three MAS subscales had relevance in this study.

Moderated Mediation

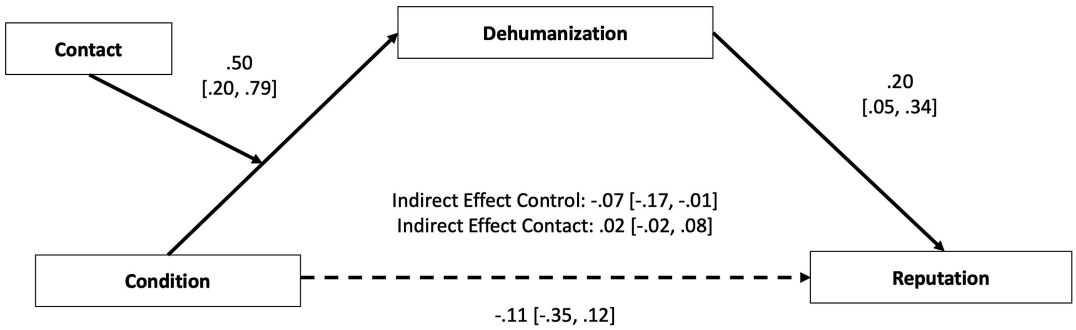
When examining the correlation between reputation and dehumanization, there was a significant positive relationship, $r(425) = 0.13$, $p = .006$. For more nuance, we also looked at the correlations with reputation and the three dehumanization subscales: emotion, $r(425) = 0.08$, $p = .087$; intention, $r(425) = 0.20$, $p < .001$; and cognition, $r(425) = 0.07$, $p = .133$. Based on these correlations, only the intention subscale correlated significantly with reputation.

We tested for moderated mediation using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018; Model 7) with 5,000 bootstrapping samples with condition (1 = satire or 0 = criticism) as the independent variable (*X*), contact manipulation (1 = positive contact or 0 = neutral control) as the moderator (*W*), dehumanization as the mediator (*M*), and reputation as the dependent variable (*Y*; see Figure 6). The index of moderated mediation was significant (index = .10, *SE* = .05, 95% CI [0.02, 0.22]), indicating that the difference between the conditional indirect effects was significant. Specifically, the indirect effect for the neutral control manipulation was significant ($B = -0.08$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [−0.17, −0.01]), and the indirect effect for the positive imagined contact manipulation was nonsignificant ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.08]). Furthermore, the direct effect of condition on reputation was nonsignificant ($B = -0.11$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI [−0.35, 0.12]). Taken together, these findings suggest that the positive contact moderation we observed is explained by dehumanization.

General Discussion

Satire, a form of humorous criticism, is an increasingly prevalent method of conveying information in the 21st century (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Kohut, 2004). It has been suggested that satire is harmless and "just joking" (e.g., Treiger, 1989); yet, our research finds satire can produce negative reputational effects for the target. Across a naturalistic study and six experiments, which varied in context, satire sharpened, rather than dulled, the blade of criticism. Moreover, as an explanation for this effect, when compared to direct criticism, satire led to greater dehumanization, which led people to

Figure 6
Moderated Mediation From Study 5



Note. Condition (1 = satire or 0 = criticism) as the independent variable, contact manipulation (1 = positive or 0 = neutral control) as the moderator, dehumanization as the mediator, and reputation as the dependent variable. Used Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro (Model 7 with 5,000 resamples).

evaluate the target's reputation more negatively. In our final two experiments, we found that a brief positive imagined contact manipulation seems to humanize the target, preventing the harsh reputational appraisals.

The present research also augments a growing literature in political science and communications demonstrating the potential negative effects of satire (e.g., Baumgartner, 2008; Baumgartner et al., 2012, 2018; Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, 2011; Boukes et al., 2015; Morris, 2009; Moy et al., 2006; Rill & Cardiel, 2013; Young, 2006). While research on political satire often examines the effect of exposure to dynamic stimuli (e.g., a video clip) on audience perceptions and preferences, the present research demonstrated effects of satire for both static (e.g., memes) and dynamic stimuli (e.g., video clips) as well as nonpolitical figures who were relatively known (e.g., Gwyneth Paltrow; Study 2c) and unknown (e.g., Steve Randall; Study 2b). Additionally, while some literature cited above has found negative effects of satire, less is known about the psychological underpinnings of these effects and how to curtail them. The present research presents, and finds evidence for, a dehumanization account. Moreover, based on this mechanism, the current work demonstrates that a positive imagined contact manipulation can curb the negative reputational effects of satire. Finally, rather than examining the effect of satire on preferences for a future political leader, our research examines the effect of satire on one of the most prized psychological and social assets, reputation.

Implications

The present work has theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the present research provides one possible mechanism, dehumanization, that explains why satire can damage an individual's reputation. In addition, while focused on satire, the present research also contributes to our understanding of humor more generally and its unintended negative consequences (e.g., Hodson et al., 2010; Hodson & MacInnis, 2016; Hodson & Prusaczyk, 2021). For instance, prior research has shown humor can have negative consequences by disparaging others and keeping them in disadvantaged positions (for a review see Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). The present research suggests, while some might view satire as fun and games, satire can tarnish a person's reputation more than direct criticism.

Second, this work has implications for researchers interested in person perception. In particular, given the value of one's reputation, immense value lies in understanding factors that affect that reputation. The present findings inform this literature by demonstrating, irrespective of the intentions behind the satirical content, even seemingly lighthearted or off-the-cuff satire about a target can harm the target's reputation when compared to direct criticism about the target. Given that reputation is defined as a person's agreed-upon character that is given to them by others (e.g., Bromley, 1993; Craik, 2008; Emler, 1990), we find that satirical content seems to indeed shape and influence inferences of the target's reputation.

Relatedly, this work has implications for the research on the communication of reputational information. Much of the research on person perception suggests that people's reputations are often communicated and updated verbally via gossip (e.g., Craik, 2008; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Emler, 1990, 1994; Feinberg et al., 2014; Jazaieri et al., 2019). This work introduces another method to the psychological literature through which reputations can be communicated and evaluated—satire. Interestingly, satire, due to its humorous nature, may be an effective means of transmitting reputational information without incurring the typical costs associated with other reputation communication methods such as gossip, which is often seen as "malicious, destructive, and largely reprehensible" (Dunbar, 2004; p. 100). Additionally, unlike gossip, satire might not result in the same type of retaliation if the target learns of the critical content, and thus may be a more effective way of communicating critical information. As pointed out by one of our reviewers, this may create an ethical issue—satire could be preferred to damage someone's reputation in order to avoid retaliation, potentially giving the target of satire less of a chance to defend themselves.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present studies are not without limitation. First, while our research was theory-driven, the majority of our studies involved an experimental context, and we cannot definitely rule out that other factors—such as impression management—might operate elsewhere. As such, while we did capture people's spontaneous written

comments (see Study 2c), this does not mean they aptly capture how they always behave in the wild. Thus, readers should be careful of attempting to generalize the present research to more naturalistic settings. That said, we do see in Study 1, specifically the coding of people's YouTube comments for dehumanization, as evidence that the present effects may also take hold in naturalistic settings. We hope the present research spurs additional work into understanding how satire affects perception and behavior in other naturalistic settings.

In this article, the majority of our studies focused on celebrities, as they are often the source of both ridicule and satire. This raises the question of whether satire might be particularly damaging, or perhaps even viewed as acceptable, in the case of celebrities. For example, are people less likely to jump to conclusions when encountering a noncelebrity? Study 2b alone speaks to this matter by showing that satire damaged the reputation of an unknown individual. However, in that study, the effect of criticism was not significant relative to the control condition ($p = .092$). Thus, perhaps people do withhold some judgment for noncelebrities, but interestingly satire still breaks through to harm them and produce more damaging effects than criticism. We suggest that future research could more deeply explore how properties of the target, such as whether they are known or unknown, are affected by both satire and criticism.

The present research tested our hypotheses with visual stimuli that involved images (e.g., memes) and videos (e.g., SNL clips). However, satire can also be delivered through other forms such as via text-only (e.g., The Onion) or audio-only (e.g., stand-up comedy recordings). Do these different modalities have different consequences? For example, might people pay more attention to visual stimuli, which makes the sting of satire more prevalent or prominent? Or does satire sharpen the blow even in contexts devoid of visual imagery? Future research could explore this issue. Based on a dehumanization process, we suspect that satire can still be damaging in nonvisual stimuli, since words can be powerful vehicles to convey someone as more or less human. Nonetheless, the visual imagery may make the effect more pronounced, which makes this a ripe question for future research.

Future research could explore whether satire can ever *dull* the blade of criticism. For example, it is possible that prior-liking or affiliation with the satirized target might reduce the likelihood of engaging in dehumanization—either making the satire not humorous, or perhaps making it endearing. To test this, future research could examine satire directed at well-liked musicians (e.g., Taylor Swift) among those who are fans of the artist (e.g., Swifties) versus detractors (e.g., Swift-critical Reddit communities), or those uncommitted. Perhaps satire would harm the reputation further for detraction or uncommitted audiences, but not for avid fans of the artist. Given the research on humor and psychological distance (e.g., A. P. McGraw et al., 2012, 2014), future research should examine whether the observers' prior life experiences and psychological distance influence their appraisals of the target of satire's reputation.

Another limitation of the present research is that we did not inform participants how the target of the satire felt about the satire. If the audience knew that the target of the satire found the satirical content to be humorous (i.e., the ability to laugh at oneself or self-defeating humor; Martin et al., 2003), perhaps exposure to satire could provide a reputational boost for the target by humanizing them by reducing social distance and making them seem more approachable (e.g., Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Consistent with such a possibility, prior research on political satire has found self-deprecating humor can lead to more favorable inferences of a target (see Baumgartner et al., 2018; Becker, 2012). In contrast, if an audience is aware that the target of satire does not find the satirical content to be humorous (e.g., Taylor Swift, 2024: "Is it a wonder I broke? Let's hear one more joke. Then we could all just laugh until I cry".), this might elicit empathy and compassion for the target and mitigate reputational harm. Thus, exploring knowledge of the target's reaction is both a limitation and a promising direction for future research.

This research only examined reputational impressions immediately after exposure to the satirical or direct criticism rather than repeatedly in a longitudinal manner. Given that reputations are dynamic rather than static, in the age of social media, public perceptions of the target can rapidly change. Future research could examine how reputational impressions change overtime (i.e., stable or become more, or less, favorable). For instance, research by Nabi et al. (2007) examining political satire suggests that there is a "sleeper effect" such that the messages communicated through comedy became more memorable and persuasive over time (1-week delay), suggesting that the effects may be persistent. Additionally, more information can become available which shifts public perception (e.g., Gwyneth Paltrow countersuing Sanderson following the skiing accident and winning), and celebrities can engage in reputational repair attempts and if successful, perception of their reputations can shift (e.g., Tom Brady winning three more Super Bowls following the deflategate scandal). On a related note, when celebrities die (e.g., Matthew Perry), perceptions of them also tend to change, creating a "posthumous rise in popularity" (e.g., Allison & Eylon, 2005). One opportunity for future research would be to use naturalistic studies to examine the trajectories of a celebrity's reputation (based on comments made about them) and how this may change overtime based on events.

Finally, in this research, we do not consider whether the harm to the target's reputation is justified, or whether the harm incurred is unwarranted—we simply observe that in the present context, satire harms individuals more than criticism. We recuse ourselves from the debate of whether satire is "sacred work" or "propaganda" (e.g., Smith, 2019). Of course, in terms of outcomes, one can generate both positive and negative outcomes as a result of the sharpened blade of satire. In terms of positive outcomes, mild forms of satire may be effective at targeting a person who has violated a social norm in a manner to correct the behavior (e.g., Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). In terms of negative outcomes, if satire is directed at a target unfairly (i.e., target is innocent of the negative critique), it could, as in the present studies, damage their reputation unfairly.

Conclusion

Despite the prevalence of satire on social media and in popular culture, the scientific study of it is lacking, particularly with respect to the psychological sciences. The current research suggests that satire can lead to more dehumanization of a target and thus damage a target's reputation more than direct criticism alone. As satire continues to serve an important social function in society, a means of social commentary, constructive criticism, and reputational communication, the nature of this construct both invites and requires further empirical exploration.

Constraints on Generality

Regarding constraints on generality (Simons et al., 2017), given the research on humor and culture (e.g., Lu, 2023; P. McGraw & Warner, 2014) and that the present research only sampled English-speaking adults from the United States, we do not assume that these findings generalize to people around the globe. It is important to consider that nationality and culture may play a role in the effects of satire and criticism on reputation. We also do not assume that these findings generalize to those under the age of 18, who may hold different perspectives about what is considered funny or critical.

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Received January 25, 2023
Revision received December 14, 2024
Accepted December 16, 2024 ■