

Squid or Chalkie? The Role of Self-identity and Selective Perception in Processing Tendentious “Hillbilly” Humor

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The current study used selective perception as a conceptual framework to examine how one’s socio-cultural identification (“Hillbilly” or “Yuppie”) guides interpretations and enjoyment of tendentious comedy. Two episodes of Squidbillies were screened- selected based on existing narrative analysis (Bowman & Groskopf, 2010) coupled with show writer interviews suggesting the target episodes to offer targeted-yet-humorous critiques on the “banality and absurdity of the [Yuppie] status quo.” A theoretically causal model connecting viewer identification, character identification, character liking, perceived humorous intent, and enjoyment demonstrate that as one’s “Yuppie” identification increases, enjoyment suffers due to the fact that they perceive the humor as more tendentious towards their own peer group. Results suggest that audiences might not be as open to humorous self-critique as assumed by past research.

Keywords: Identification, selective perception, Hillbillies, Yuppies, Squidbillies, tendentious humor

In 1974, Vidmar and Rokeach offered empirical evidence of the Archie Bunker effect – the notion that one’s own worldview could influence one’s selective perception of tendentious humor. In examining Norman Lear’s critically acclaimed sitcom *All in the Family*, the researchers found that viewers’ own bigotries had a significant impact regarding identification with the lead character Archie (the lovable bigot), or with supporting character Mike (the idealistic youth; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). While both high prejudice and low prejudice people reported high levels of enjoyment when watching *All in the Family*, their reasons for enjoying the show differed drastically. While respondents who identified as less bigoted enjoyed the show’s constant portrayal of Archie as a boor, respondents identified as more bigoted enjoyed the show’s portrayal of Archie ‘telling it like it is.’ As Vidmar and Rokeach explained:

People who disliked Archie indicated that he is a bigot, domineering, rigid, loud, and that he mistreats his wife. Persons who liked Archie reported that he is down-to-earth, honest, hard-working, predictable, and kind enough to allow his son-in-law and daughter to live with him (1974, pp. 43-44).

These differential paths to enjoyment of the show – also supported by the show’s five straight years on top of the Nielsen television ratings from 1971 to 1983 (Museum of Broadcast Communications, 2011) – led the researchers to conclude that audience members’ selective perception of the characters was what allowed both groups of people to enjoy the program. The selective perception hypothesis (cf. Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) explains that when viewing an event, audiences’ own cognitive biases cause them to perceive the situation according to their own beliefs. In the case of *All in the Family*, it is explained simply that high prejudice viewers did not see the ironic prejudice in Archie’s demeanor as Lear likely intended, but rather they saw Archie as ‘telling it like it is.’ Likewise, those low prejudice viewers were more likely to enjoy the program because it made Archie – like many of their own contemporaries – look foolish for his bigoted and blundered views on the civil rights movement.

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Our research expands on this selective perception explanation for the enormous popularity of otherwise divisive programming by focusing on another widely stereotyped group: the (pejorative) Hillbilly. Selective perception is a useful theoretical perspective that offers background on audience perceptions of social groups and the subsequent effects of those biases.

Selective Perception

The selective perception hypothesis (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) explains how audiences differentially process invariant media messages, explaining simply that an individual's own cognitive and affective biases color how one processes and responds to a given media portrayal. Selective perception effects have been studied extensively in relation to news media, including research on the hostile media bias (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) – that audiences' prejudices of various social issues (cognitive and affective biases) predict their perceptions of media messages that make mention of those issues; even an innocuous message can be perceived as biased, even hostile towards one's personal views. These effects can be particularly intense when audiences have no control over the messages provided (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012).

While a number of selective perception studies tend to focus on news media (see Feldman, 2014 for an overview), the basic tenets of the perspective have also been applied to entertainment programming. For example, research on news satire – programs such as *The Colbert Report* use the premise of a faux conservative news commentator in order to ridicule conservative politics – find that while conservatives and liberals both appreciate the show's humor, the former group perceives Colbert as having much stronger conservative values than the latter. In essence, conservatives view Colbert as merely teasing them, while liberals view Colbert as offering serious social commentary in a humorous format (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009).

Many of the mechanics of Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) have been applied to entertainment programs with social commentaries purposefully embedded in their humor. For example, the early 1990s program *In Living Color* was created by African-American comedian Keenen Ivory Wayans and was described as a program on "black themes, in a Saturday Night Live-ish format" (Bunce, 1990, p. 14). As outlined by Cooks and Orme (1993), these themes portrayed extreme negative stereotypes of Black characters as an act of satire - with skits such as "The Home Boy Shopping Channel" (a place for petty criminals to sell their loot on television; a satire of Black crime), "Anton Jackson" (a drunken vagabond who shares his views on urban life; a satire of Black poverty), and "Homey D. Clown" (an ex-convict turned clown for hire who interlaces his performances with rants about social racism; a satire of Black pride). In their research, Cooks and Orme (1993) found that only the African-American respondents reported having any sense of identification with the show's characters (40% of the sample, compared to less than 1% of the non-Black respondents), which hindered the ability of non-Black audiences to understand the satirical nature of the show's stereotypes.

Hillbillies in the Media

Hillbilly stereotypes – the Appalachian-native country bumpkin often found "sitting on his front porch, barefoot, unkempt, unemployed, and unencumbered by the trappings of the modern world" (Bowman & Groskopf, 2010, para 2; also see Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Frierson, 1998) – have been popular subjects of entertainment media for most of its modern history. Early silent films, comic strips, radio serials, television sitcoms, and cartoons have prominently featured the image of the Hillbilly as a target of tendentious humor, usually designed to show the ineptitude of the backcountry folk and/or the superiority of 'city living.' Specific examples of this include the television shows *Beverly Hillbillies* and *Kentucky Feud*, the comic strip "L'il Abner," and various Hillbilly portrayals in 1930s through 1950s Warner Bros. animated shorts (cf. Frierson, 1998). One is hard-pressed to find portrayals of Hillbilly characters as anything but the butt of social commentary. Although Magoc (1991) does offer that these portrayals could be construed as subversive critiques, for example juxtaposing the Hillbilly's appreciation for the environment with urbanization and socio-technological progress as an inherently virtuous development (an important note for the current study). Indeed, appropriation of the Hillbilly pejorative has seeped into environments beyond entertainment media – when it became known that then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld commonly referred to members of U.S. Congress as hillbillies, Georgia Senator Zell Miller, born and raised in the Georgia Appalachian region, wrote to express that such terminology from a man in Rumsfeld's authoritative position "disturbs me greatly" (as cited by Shipp, 2001).

Squids v. Chalkies. The recent portrayal of Hillbilly humor in *Squidbillies* is the focus of the current study, as it both represents the classic appropriation of the Hillbilly stereotypes outlined above (also see Whitaker, 2015), as well as the use of these same stereotypes as a way to critique modern culture. *Squidbillies* is an animated serial that is part of the regular line-up on The Cartoon Network; specifically their Adult Swim brand of cartoons. Adult Swim is a major brand for The Cartoon Network, regularly drawing in high ratings in late night timeslots, and consistently earning some of the largest cable television audience numbers for adults 18-34, 18-24, and men 18-34 and 18-24 (Seidman, 2010), with *Squidbillies* itself ranking as one of the 10 most popular telecasts for each of these audience segments (Gorman, 2009). The show follows the lives of the Cuyler family, a group of endangered land squids that inhabit the Appalachian region of northern Georgia. According to creators Jim Fortier and Dave Willis, squidbillies are “rednecks...they huff and they scratch lottery tickets; they’re Hillbilly squids” whose diet consists largely of “mud pies and turpentine” (Fortier & Willis, 2008; Willis, 2010).

While the majority of episodes focus almost exclusively on the Cuyler family dynamic as it unfolds in the Appalachia region of north Georgia, two episodes in particular – “Reunited, and it Feels No Good” (Episode 49; Fortier, Willis, & Kelly, 2009) and “Not Without My Cash Cow!” (Episode 50; Fortier & Willis, 2009) – provide an opportunity to examine the selective perception hypothesis because they call attention to two distinct groups of people: Squids (Hillbillies) and Chalkies (Yuppies). Because of the salience of these two groups relative to each other in these episodes, viewers may find themselves self-identifying with one or the other group. That identification encourages viewers to understand the episodes and events therein through the lens of that identification, and to perceive the humor as either funny at best or offensive at worst.

In the aforementioned episodes, family patriarch Early is reunited with his cousin Durwood, a fellow land squid who has since married a suburban white woman and moved to the Atlanta metropolitan area. Early is the stereotypical “country bumpkin” (Bowman & Groskopf, 2010, para. 2) relegated to a life of dirt pies, alcoholism, and broken grammar. In contrast, Durwood is presented by the show’s writers to be the representation of Yuppie culture, with his Bluetooth earpiece, cargo shorts, polo shirt, large SUV, and bottled water (Bowman & Groskopf, 2010). What makes these specific episodes unique is the manner in which the Hillbilly v. Yuppie comedy showoff develops. While Episode 49 is largely an exercise in Hillbilly derision (Fortier et al., 2009), Episode 50 shifts its tendentious focus to chiding the Yuppies for their inherent banality (Fortier & Willis, 2009; also see Bowman & Groskopf, 2010, for a more detailed recap of both episodes). In the context of selective perception based on self-identification, these particular episodes allow us to look both at how those identifying as Hillbillies might interpret the “Chalkie scourge” invading the mountains as the city encroaches on the simple life of the country, as well as how those identifying as Yuppies might enjoy the oft-ridiculous actions of the Squidbillies as the hilarious antics of backwoods mountain folk.

Middle-brow hillbilly humor. The program *Squidbillies* relies on a specific stereotype of the hillbilly within the context of a “middle-brow” comedy program to elicit audience response. The nature of a “middle-brow” context may also influence audience reactions to media content, as Gans (1977) explained that audience taste cultures influence different aesthetics to different audiences. Gans explored the notion of taste cultures to attempt to distinguish mass media audiences in terms of their content preference, with “low-brow” audiences preferring more basic and simple media fare (such as Hollywood action movies) and “high-brow” audiences preferring the aesthetics of high culture (such as literary classics and opera). For Gans, this audience preference distinction was rooted in more systematic socio-cultural differences between “low-brow” and “high-brow” audiences, suggesting that both audiences likely see great entertainment value in culturally proximal programming but very little value in culturally distal programming. Essentially, each audience segment is quick to write off the others’ content as comparatively worthless.

In this low-brow/high-brow dichotomy, Gans (1977) also highlights the emergence of “middle-brow” content: content that contains many of the aesthetic devices of low-brow programming but includes the socio-cultural lessons of high-brow content. A contemporary example of this can be found in the Disney animated film *Wall-E* (2008), in which Disney essentially packages a larger critique of consumerism and environmentalism into a critically and commercially successful film widely marketed as a comparatively basic narrative about robots aimed at children and families (Murray & Heumann, 2009). As “middle-brow” content, the writers of *Wall-E* were able to successfully introduce larger cultural critiques in an unexpected fashion by wrapping the critical messages in a more “low-brow” animated fare. Similarly, we argue that the two focal episodes of *Squidbillies* for this study are

well-poised to offer social commentary along the same lines of *All in the Family* in that both can be considered as accessible-yet-innovative middle-brow content. In particular, these two episodes contain lewd jokes, violence, and a variety of other markers of (here, Hillbilly) disparagement typical low-brow comedy (Gans, 1977), yet they also introduce an unexpected juxtaposition of this group with the Yuppie audience assumed to comprise the viewing audience of the show - as explained by Fortier (personal communication, January 7, 2010), “the only difference between Durwood [the Yuppie character] and Early [the Hillbilly character] is that Durwood wears a suit and tie.”

Dispositions and stereotype. As alluded to in the work of both Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) and Cooks and Orme (1993), one mechanism behind the so-called Archie Bunker effect is that audiences develop dispositions towards the on-screen characters, often relying on their own set of attitudes and beliefs to form opinions of each character: in the case of Archie Bunker, an individual with a more conservative mind-set would be most likely to view the bigoted Archie as the show’s protagonist; in the case of a character such as Homey D. Clown, an African-American audience member might feel a greater sense of identification with the character and thus, report increased liking. These predispositions are likely to impact the reactions that audiences have towards the consequences befalling these characters, as explained by disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Put simply, audiences who have a strong positive disposition towards a media character are most likely to enjoy programs in which those characters are rewarded or celebrated, and least likely to enjoy programs in which those characters are punished or maligned. Likewise, audiences should celebrate the punishment of hated characters, and loathe it when hated characters are reward. Although beyond the scope of the current manuscript the basic tenets of disposition theory are well-supported in extant literature (see Raney, 2004, for an overview). In the context of the Archie Bunker, enjoyment of a program might be contingent on the extent to which an audience member can identify with the caricatured on-screen identity – for example, Cooks and Orme (1993) found that as African-American audiences were more likely to identify with on-screen characters in *In Living Color*, they also were able to interpret the humor as satirical (rather than disparaging) and as such, enjoy the programming more. By contrast, non-Black audiences tended to find humor (and by proxy, enjoyment) from the disparaging African-American stereotypes in the program.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

As Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) were most interested in how one’s own views affected the selective perception process, the central question to our study is whether or not individuals perceive themselves as being particularly Hillbilly or Yuppie. Assuming these identifications can be recognized, the selective perception process (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) can then be applied to make predictions regarding how both populations will interpret the show’s humor. First, we expect self-identification to drive identification with either of the episode’s two character sets. Related to this, we expect that identification with a character will drive favorable opinions of that character and his group. To the extent that one can self-identify as a Hillbilly or Yuppie, this self-perception should bias perceptions of in-group members (in the form of one of the show’s two main characters) as being more similar and more attractive, and out-group members (in the form of the second of the show’s two main characters) as being less similar and less attractive.

H1: Individuals who self-identify more with a particular social group (e.g., Hillbilly or Yuppie) should identify more strongly with the relevant character from that social group than the relevant character from the other social group.

H2: Individuals who identify with a character from one social group (e.g. Hillbilly or Yuppie) should have more favorable opinions of that character than the character from the other social group.

Then, we wonder how this identification will influence selective perception of the humor, and therefore enjoyment of the program. From their Burkeian analysis of the episodes’ narratives combined with interviews with the show’s writers, Bowman & Groskopf (2010) concluded that while on its surface *Squidbillies* seems to be “yet another satire about hillbillies and rednecks” (para. 1), further investigation shows that the show – or at least, these two episodes – is in fact directed at “[challenging] the superiority of the upper-middle class lifestyle” (para. 34). In other words, just as Lear intended *All in the Family* to be a commentary on the absurdity of racism in the civil rights era, Fortier and Willis intended *Squidbillies* to be a commentary on the absurdity of the hegemonic assertion that yuppies are

inherently better than hillbillies – a commentary notably initiated in similar programs (which often used hillbillies as an oppositional force to modernization; cf. Magoc, 1991). Thus, simple logic from disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976) would lead us to believe that individuals self-identifying as Hillbillies should enjoy the show more so than those self-identifying as Yuppies, as the target of the show’s tendentious humor is the Yuppies. Disposition theory explains enjoyment as a function of our feelings about a show’s characters and the events that befall those characters; to the extent that identification with characters positively influences disposition towards them (as evidenced most clearly in research on sports fandom, e.g. Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976), we expect Hillbillies to enjoy the show significantly more than Yuppies.

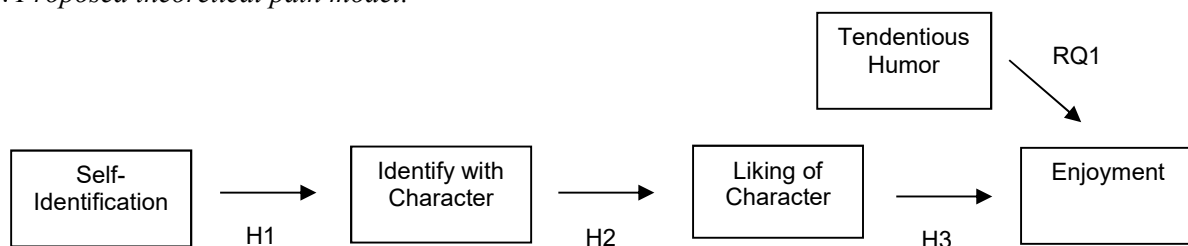
H3: Individuals who report favorable opinions of Hillbilly characters should enjoy the show more so than those with favorable opinions of Yuppie characters.

At the same time, Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) did not find significant differences in enjoyment of *All in the Family* between individuals self-identified as low-prejudice or high-prejudice. In fact, their intent was not to identify differential reactions to the program, as anecdotal and industry data consistently showed the program to be among the most popular of the 1970s. Rather, their focus was to identify the mechanisms as to how these disparate populations came to enjoy the show; that is, what elements of the show were these populations selectively attending to in order to arrive at enjoyment? In terms of selective perception, it was argued that both audiences enjoyed the show because they chose to perceive it as being in line with their own world view – bigots saw Archie Bunker as “telling it like it is” and liberals saw his son-in-law Mike as a voice of reason. However, and in line with our own understanding of disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), it makes sense that one’s subjective interpretation of the show’s humor as tendentious or not would play a role in enjoyment outcomes, as suggested by Zillmann and Bryant (1980). Recall that disposition theory predicts enjoyment to be highest when liked characters are rewarded and disliked characters are punished; in the case of humor, enjoyment should be highest when tendentious humor is directed at characters with whom one least identifies with. More specifically, one’s interpretation of the show’s humor as well as the show’s characters should moderate the relationship between self-identification and enjoyment.

RQ1: Will an individual’s interpretation of the tendentious nature of the show’s humor moderate the relationship between favorable opinions of show characters and enjoyment?

Our hypotheses and research questions are presented in a path model specified below (Figure 1):

Figure 1. *Proposed theoretical path model.*



Method

Participants

Participants were $N = 80$ student respondents from a small, private Southeastern college in the southern Appalachians. Sixty-six percent ($n = 53$ were female) and 34 percent ($n = 27$) were male, with an average age of 20.7, $SD = 1.52$. Average hours spent watching television (both traditional and Internet or mobile television) was $M = 15.4$ hours, $SD = 21.3$; the modal response for viewing was 4.00, and more than 75 percent of the sample watched television at or under the sample average. Reality television (17.5 percent), sitcoms (17.5 percent), and

police dramas (15 percent) were listed as the favorite genres of study respondents, with westerns (28.8 percent) and soap operas (18.8) listed as the least favorite.

Procedure

Participants were invited to a screening of “a popular animated series” in exchange for class credit or a raffle for a \$10 gift card to their college bookstore. Screenings were held in a typical lecture-style classroom with a maximum seating capacity of about 100 people. After all participants signed an informed consent form, a survey was distributed asking basic demographic information and questions assessing their identification as a Hillbilly or Yuppie. Both episodes of *Squidbillies* were shown (total runtime of approximately 23 minutes), and following the screening participants completed a survey packet with questions about character identification (of the central characters of both episodes, the hillbilly Early and the yuppie Durwood), enjoyment of the shows, and general opinions of Hillbillies and Yuppies (the general opinions questions were used as scale validations, and were not included in further analysis).

Measures

Self-identification. Self-identification was measured using an 18-item, six-response semantic differential scale that asked respondents to indicate which of two polar options they preferred related to a variety of statements. To create this scale, individuals were solicited via Facebook and in undergraduate interpersonal communication courses at the host institution to respond to prompts asking them to report “the first word that comes to mind when you hear the word (Hillbilly, Yuppie).” These responses were aggregated and thematic analysis was used to find emergent concepts. Word clouds using the raw list of responses for both prompts were created to give a visual example of the most-prominent words listed. Sample concepts from these analyses included speech patterns (i.e., accents, rate of speech, formality of communication), location (i.e., living in the North or South, country or city, and rural or urban areas), and economic status (i.e., clothing, money, vehicles driven).

These words were transformed into phrases, with sample items including “Do people think that you speak (with a heavy Southern accent; with a heavy Northern accent),” “If you had the option, would you choose to live (in a small rural area; in a large urban area),” “Do people perceived you as “being dirt poor; being filthy rich).” The six response options were presented with no value affixed to them; that is, respondents circled one of six “x” marks between each set of responses. Higher scores indicated that respondents identified more as Yuppies, and lower scores indicated that respondents identified more as Hillbillies. The 18-item measure had a scale reliability of $\alpha = .825$, with a sample mean of $M = 3.69$, $SD = .70$ and was normally distributed (skewness = $-.534$, kurtosis = $.589$).

Identify with character. Borrowing from Vidmar and Rokeach (1974), respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they felt the values of Early or Durwood (or neither) were closer to their own. The variable was dummy-coded “0” for identification with Early and “1” for identification with Durwood. Of the $n = 76$ who identified with one of the two characters, 92 percent felt that Durwood’s Yuppie values were more like their own ($M = .92$, $SD = .27$) and the variable was heavily skewed negative with a tight peak (skewness = -3.19 , kurtosis = 8.37). Other potential identifications were addressed, including whether or not respondents admired one character over another, liked one character over another, or thought that one character made more sense than the other; these questions were used in a parallel study and are not reported in this paper.

Liking of character. Measuring the liking of characters was done in two steps. First, participants were asked to complete the 15-item McCroskey and McCain (1974) interpersonal attractiveness scale for both Early and Durwood. The response options were modified to a six-response option of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” While all three dimensions of the scale were employed – social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, and task attractiveness – only the social attractiveness dimension was used in the current study. Reliability for this five-item subdimension was acceptable for both implementations of the scale ($\alpha_{\text{Early}} = .754$, $\alpha_{\text{Durwood}} = .722$). Respondents appeared to like Durwood ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.16$) more so than Early ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(79) = -2.57$, $p < .05$, and both variables were normally distributed (Early: skewness = $.205$, kurtosis = $-.877$; Durwood: skewness = $-.289$, kurtosis = $-.703$).

To create one continuous measure of social attractiveness for our path analysis, three steps were taken. First, scores for Durwood were subtracted from scores for Early. Then, five scale points were added to the outcome

measure. Finally, all scores were multiplied by -1 so that more negative scores would mean that one likes Early more than Durwood, with scale limits of -10 (maximum liking of Early, minimum liking of Durwood).

$$[(\text{Early SA score} - \text{Durwood SA score}) + 5] * -1$$

Average score for liking was $M = -4.66$, $SD = 1.17$, suggesting that participants slightly favored Durwood over Early; the measure was normally distributed (skewness = .029, kurtosis = 1.67).

Tendentious humor. Tendentious humor was measured by creating an eight-item, six-response Likert-style scale created by the researchers to assess the extent to which the humor in the show was perceived as harmful or victimizing toward one character and the social class that he represents. Sample items included “The humor in the show intended to demean one group of people at the expense of another” and “It was clear to me that the humor was meant to victimize people.” Higher scores indicate that respondents felt the humor was increasingly tendentious. The scale reliability was $\alpha = .859$ with a mean of $M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.14$, and the composite score was normally distributed (skewness = -.482, kurtosis = -.167).

Enjoyment. Enjoyment was assessed using five items culled from Raney and Bryant’s (2002) film enjoyment scale, adapted for assessing enjoyment of a television comedy. The scale used six-response Likert-style items with higher scores indicating higher enjoyment levels. Sample items included “The jokes in this show were hilarious,” “Overall, how much did you enjoy watching the show?” and “How much would you like to see more cartoons from this series?” The scale reliability was $\alpha = .957$, with a mean of $M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.53$, and the composite score was normally distributed with a slightly flat distribution (skewness = -.079, kurtosis = -1.31).

Results

To examine the questions as presented in Figure 1, path analysis was performed using AMOS 18.0 modeling software. Path analysis allows us to test both the individual hypotheses (the different links in the model) as well as the overall relationship of the links in terms of model fit. Significance tests with a critical p-value of .05 are used to assess the individual beta-weights in the model, and overall model fit is assessed using chi-square goodness-of-fit test (a test of the null hypothesis that the observed model fits perfectly with the theoretical model) and several fit indices, including CMIN/df (a minimum discrepancy statistic, which should be less than 2 according to Byrne, 1989), CFI (comparative fit index, which should be close to 1 according to Bentler, 1990), and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation, recommended to be lower than .08 according to Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

As the brunt of our literature review focuses specifically on the nature of Hillbilly stereotyping, it is curious to note that respondents in our study – while living in the southern Appalachian region of the U.S. – did not identify as Hillbillies as was expected *a priori*. Rather, the modal score from our identification composite measure was 4 and the median score was 3.78 (on a six-point scale); in other words, our sample identified more so as Yuppies than as Hillbillies (reasons for this surprising skew are presented in the Discussion section). We note this because for the balance of our results and discussion, we frame our data in terms of how Yuppies responded to *Squidbillies*, as this is in effect the population we (unintentionally) over-sampled.

The first hypothesis predicted that individual’s self-identification with either Hillbillies or Yuppies would be associated with which character (Early or Durwood) they identified more strongly. The beta-weight between these two indices was significant and positive, as predicted ($r = .529$, $p < .001$), indicating that respondents who identified more as Yuppies were significantly more likely to identify with Durwood, the Yuppie character, and those tending to identify as Hillbillies were more likely to identify with Early, the Hillbilly character (though as mentioned earlier, that number was too small for meaningful analysis). These results offer evidence in support of H1.

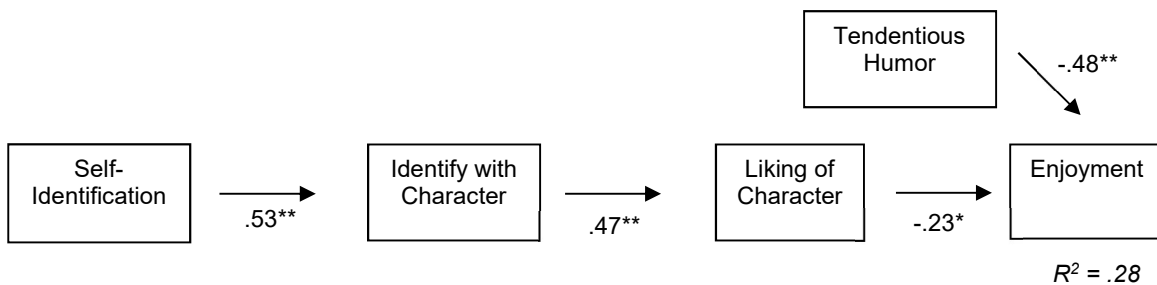
The second hypothesis predicted that identification with a character would lead to more favorable opinions of that character. The beta-weight between these two indices was significant and positive, as predicted ($r = .371$, $p < .001$). Respondents who liked Durwood better felt that Durwood was more socially attractive than Early (as those who liked Early better felt that he was more socially attractive), offering support for H2.

The third hypothesis predicted that individuals who had more favorable opinions of the Hillbilly character should enjoy the show more than individuals who had more favorable opinions of the Yuppie character. As our data suggested that far more favorable opinions of Yuppie characters were present, we tested the inverse of this

hypothesis – that individuals who reported favorable opinions of the Yuppie character (i.e., Durwood) would enjoy the show less than individuals who report favorable opinions of the Hillbilly character (i.e., Early). The beta-weight between these measures was significant and negative, as predicted ($r = -.230, p < .05$). Interpreted, respondents who had more favorable opinions of Durwood were less likely to enjoy the show. Our data provide evidence to support H3.

Our lone research question examined the role of tendentious humor in moderating the relationship specified in H3. A direct relationship between the tendentious humor composite and enjoyment composite was observed ($\beta = -.484, p < .001$). However, in order to test for moderation, regression analysis was employed looking at (a) the direct relationship between character liking and enjoyment, (b) the direct relationship between tendentious humor and enjoyment, and (c) the interaction of tendentious humor and character liking on enjoyment. For evidence of moderation, all three would need to be significant in a stepwise regression. While (a) and (b) were found, (c) was not significant ($\beta = -.168, p = .460$). Thus, while interpretations of humor as tendentious have a direct negative impact on enjoyment, this effect does not interact with one's opinions of the show's characters.

Figure 2. Observed path model, with coefficients and goodness-of-fit indices.



$\chi^2 = 8.72, p = .190$; $CMIN/df = 1.45$; $CFI = .939$; $RMSEA = .076$

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$

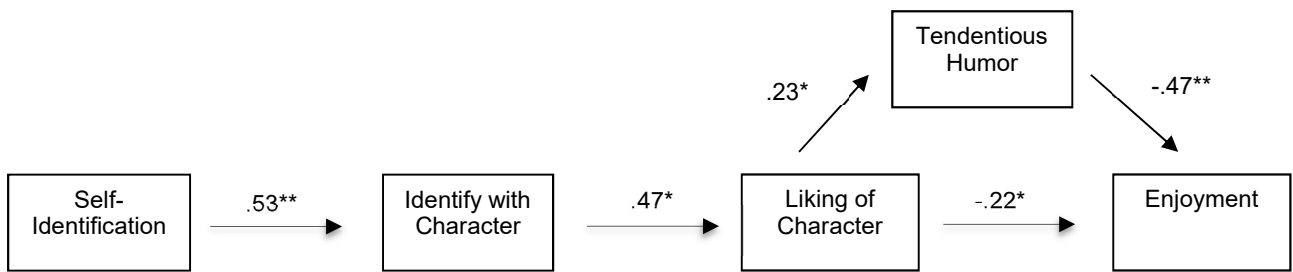
While our hypotheses are supported individually, perhaps more compelling is their ability to form a coherent and logical path model that delineates how self-identification as a Hillbilly or a Yuppie influences enjoyment. For this, overall model fit was assessed using goodness-of-fit indices from AMOS 18.0. Data failed to reject the null assumption that the data fits perfectly with the theoretical model ($\chi^2 = 8.74, p = .189$) and all fit indices were within acceptable ranges ($CMIN/df = 1.46$; $CFI = .942$; $RMSEA = .076$). Thus, we conclude that the observed data fits our proposed theoretical model. In other words, the degree to which one self-identifies as a Yuppie drives his or her identification with Durwood (the Yuppie character), which leads to increased liking of Durwood. However, Bowman & Groskopf (2010) demonstrated that because the show's humor is disparaging toward Yuppies, enjoyment for those who identify as Yuppies suffers; this contention is supported in part by the strong negative correlation between tendentious humor and enjoyment, see Figure 2. The overall model explained 28 percent of the variance in enjoyment.

Post-hoc analysis

While not hypothesized in our initial study logic, it seems logical that a direct relationship might exist between character liking and tendentious humor. That is, as one begins to like one character over another, this association might cause one to reinterpret the humor of a show toward a given character and his group as tendentious or not – similar to the hostile media bias effects discussed in Feldman (2014). Specifically we might expect that as one begins to like Durwood (due to one's self-identification as a Yuppie and subsequent identification with Durwood as a fellow Yuppie) one might reinterpret the show's humor as more tendentious toward that social group (as the show has been interpreted to be rather damning toward Yuppies, as intended by Fortier, personal communication, January 7, 2010; see also Bowman & Groskopf, 2010). To account for this potential relationship, a path was specified between character liking and tendentious humor, and both the individual path significance and overall model fit were re-assessed.

With the revised model, we see a significant positive association between character liking and tendentious humor ($r = .230, p < .05$). This suggests that as liking towards a character increases (in this case, the Yuppie character), the humor in the show was interpreted as increasingly tendentious towards that character (again, in this case the Yuppie character). This finding is particularly applicable to the current study, as prior research (Bowman & Groskopf, 2010) suggests the two episodes of *Squidbillies* viewed in this study are particularly disparaging toward Yuppies; recall that higher liking scores indicate more liking of Durwood (the Yuppie character). As with the original proposed model, data again fail to reject the null assumption that the data fits perfectly with the theoretical model ($\chi^2 = 5.34, p = .376$) and all fit indices were well within acceptable ranges (CMIN/df = 1.07; CFI = .993; RMSEA = .029). The revised model explained 32 percent of the variance in enjoyment, see Figure 3.

Figure 3. Observed path models of revised model, with coefficients and goodness-of-fit indices.



$\chi^2 = 5.34, p = .376$; CMIN/df = .993; CFI = .993; RMSEA = .029
 * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$

Discussion

Data in our study supported the hypothesized relationships between self-identification, character identification and liking, perceived humorous intent, and enjoyment. Using logic from the selective perception hypothesis, we found that viewers who self-identified as Yuppies were more likely to identify with and like the Yuppie character Durwood in our two episodes of *Squidbillies*. In turn, this increased identification and liking resulted in significantly lower enjoyment scores, as the show's humor was interpreted as being particularly tendentious towards Durwood and Yuppies. This data is particularly compelling in light of Bowman & Groskopf's (2010) analysis, which used the dramatic pentad (Burke, 1945; 1950) paired with personal interviews with the show's writers to determine that indeed these two episodes of *Squidbillies* were particularly crafted to invite a largely Yuppie audience along for a critique of themselves and their own culture – and perhaps, to learn something about themselves in the critique. Unfortunately for producers, data from our study suggests that Yuppies – or at least, those Yuppies identified herein – did not enjoy being the targets of derision, and in fact enjoyment suffered as identification with Yuppies characters increased. This negative relationship suggests perhaps that the eventual goal of the tendentious humor is potentially lost on the very audience for whom it was intended. Put simply, Yuppies perceived the show (rightfully) as being targeted at them, and their perception of the show's humor as tendentious had a negative effect on their enjoyment. This seems to be somewhat in contrast to Vidmar and Rokeach's (1974) results which showed that members of both salient groups enjoyed the show equally, based on individuals' selective perception that the target of tendentiousness was the outgroup, not their ingroup. Here, those who identified as Yuppies correctly identified the target of tendentious humor as the ingroup, rather than selectively perceiving the humor to be making fun of the Hillbillies (outgroup). Notably, this could also be the result of a boomerang effect due to having been immediately primed to think about their ingroup membership at the start of the study, which might have resulted in a more defensive position towards this temporarily salient identity.

Beyond finding support for the hypothesized model, our data made two additional contributions to the literature on audience responses to entertainment media. First, we developed a stable, reliable and seemingly valid metric to assess one's identification as Hillbilly or Yuppie. While this might seem to be a rather niche contribution, we know of no other research that has attempted to identify these strata of social identification. While the scale

needs to be replicated and further developed in future research – most notably, confirmatory factor analysis should be employed to further test for the scale’s validity and stability – any work examining the portrayal of these two groups could benefit from an understanding of how audience members identify with each. Second, our study used concepts from Zillmann and Bryant’s (1980) work on tendentious humor (Freud, 1908, 2008 trans.) to develop a reliable measure of one’s interpretations of show humor as more or less tendentious, which might aid researchers focusing on how humorous intent is processed by audience members. For example, one of the central tenets of disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976) involves judgments of the righteousness of outcomes befalling show characters. In sitcoms, outcomes are often tied to what results from the witty banter between liked and disliked characters. To this end, more careful focus on tendentiousness should strengthen theoretical models that aim to understand enjoyment of situational comedies and other similar programming.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

A natural extension of this research would be to replicate the revised model with populations that might have stronger identification towards Early – the Hillbilly character in our study. Such a replication should find that increased Hillbilly humor should increase identification with and liking of Early (the Hillbilly character), which should have a positive effect on enjoyment as these individuals should delight in the derision of the Yuppie character Durwood; an effect that should intensify as Hillbilly viewers interpret the show’s humor as increasingly tendentious. We can offer several anecdotal reasons why our participants did not identify with Early, most salient being the fact that students in our sample tended to be from wealthier communities in Georgia (both suburban and rural), and are of a socio-economic status that affords them attendance at small, private college – unlikely students that would see a lot in common with the hillbilly Early character (notably, the host institution does have students from all over the state). In addition, it may be the case that participants did not want to express identification towards a Hillbilly character in a social setting (a college theater, and on a survey being collected by researchers who are not from the region) – thus, social desirability effects could have been at work here. Future research might also consider looking at Yuppie groups from more distal populations, such as folks who do not live in Appalachia. One could argue that a more distal population may have stronger or weaker conceptions of a Hillbilly through their lack of real-world exposure to the stereotype. One cannot overlook the fact that the Hillbilly portrayals in *Squidbillies* are likely far more salient to individuals from Appalachia (and surrounding regions) than Northerners. In fact, the fictitious setting of *Squidbillies* is a small, isolated Appalachian county in the same geographic location as the host institution (one of the key inspirations for conducting the study in the first place). By contrast, individuals from Appalachia might be expected to have more experience encountering and processing so-called Hillbilly stereotypes and might possess more sophisticated heuristics regarding the stereotypes that influence enjoyment.

While our data were found to be a strong fit to the theoretical model, we recognize the potential for perceived humorous intent – the measure of tendentious humor in our study – to be explaining a large portion of variance in its own right. This being said, our revised model more clearly demonstrates how selective perception fuels one’s perceptions of humor as tendentious or not, but future research should continue to replicate and extend this model to more fully understand the relationship between self-identification, character identification, and perceptions of humor as they affect enjoyment. Related to this, we might also consider the relative length of exposure to these programs. In the short-term, our two episodes of *Squidbillies* were only about 30 minutes in total length, which might suggest that any identification effects could be rather temporary; notably, this would be representative of a normal viewing period for the program. In the long-term, we note that the content of these two episodes is unique as compared to the show’s larger themes (usually focused more singularly on Hillbilly humor), and thus we might wonder how the identification and perception effects in the current study might replicate with increased exposure to the program’s other episodes.

Notably, all show screenings were done en masse, with anywhere between 30 and 50 people in each session. Past work on audience presence in general (Zajonc, 1965; 1980) and how being in an audience can affect enjoyment of a spectator event (Hocking, 1982; Hocking, Margreiter, & Hylton, 1977) has suggested audience presence to serve as a significant predictor of arousal and enjoyment. To control and quantify this effect, future research should consider the addition of an isolated viewing experimental condition.

Finally, we recognize that our measure of identification was restricted only to examining the social attractiveness dimension of interpersonal attractiveness (McCroskey & McCain, 1974) – which might have made

the assumption that both Hillbillies and Yuppies are social groups with similarly valenced social connotations. For example, socio-economic status is the variable that most clearly distinguishes both social groups, with Yuppies often being viewed as being of a higher SES and thus, more desirable – for example, Eckes (2002) suggested that the pejorative Yuppie stereotype is often associated with being envious of the other. While the measure was adequate enough in terms of face validity and variance to help us understand character identification, other measures of parasocial interaction in passive media (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985) and character attachment and relationships in interactive media (Banks & Bowman, 2016) should be considered in replication.

Conclusion

Our study proposes a fusion between the selective perception hypothesis (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) and disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976) to demonstrate how one's self-identification drives interpretations of humor as tendentiousness, and the eventual effect of this process on enjoyment. Specifically, our study examined how individuals identifying as one group – in this case, Yuppies – were negatively affected by perceptions of show humor as being increasingly tendentious toward that group. Ironically, the show was written specifically for this audience as a way for them to safely critique themselves (as is the role of tendentious humor, cf. Freud, 2008:1905), yet that critique seems to have fallen on selectively deaf ears – or at least, unentertained ones.

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