

Witty or wicked?

The predictors and impact of agreement with user-generated political satires

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Abstract

User-generated content (UGC) satirizing the presidential candidates was widespread during the 2016 election in Taiwan. Using an experimental design, this study explored the predictors of viewer agreement to satirical UGC, and its influence on viewer attitudes towards candidates after watching the satirical videos from YouTube. Results showed that participants' agreement with the satirical UGC was predicted by their political cynicism and political information efficacy, but not by candidate favorability. Watching the UGC satirizing the presidential candidates effected the favorability toward the male candidates but not the female candidate. In addition, the evidence suggested that the frequency of exposure to satirical UGC is related to political information efficacy, but not with political cynicism or candidate favorability.

Keywords: *political satire, user-generated content, political cynicism, political information efficacy*

1. Introduction

Unlike official political advertisements, the user-generated content (UGC) of political videos posted on YouTube presents unauthorized perspectives; such perspectives are more likely to be perceived as representative of the average viewer, and play a critical role in engaging citizens in the democratic process. Statistics revealed that only 5% of the 2 billion views associated with political video content were of video content from the official presidential campaigns; the remaining 1.9 billion views were directed to user-generated creations.^[1] This corresponds with the opinion that much of the political parody and propaganda found on YouTube is created and disseminated by users much faster than information from the campaigns themselves.^[2]

Political satire deserves additional attention because the forms of satirical political communication have begun to shift considerably from TV programs to websites, generally YouTube. Research has explored the satirical implications of programming such as news and debates,^[3] talk shows,^{[4][5]} and comedy;^[6] the results indicated that exposure to such programming has the potential to influence political attitudes. Although it

remains unclear whether satirical content created by nonprofessional Internet users can potentially enhance or diminish voter favorability towards a candidate, there is evidence suggesting that watching UGC on YouTube is more likely to affect viewer attitudes than viewing content created by professionals.^[3] However, unlike comedy or talk shows, which draw on observations of reality to illustrate the humorous aspects of politics in general, “satire . . . scourges certain events, sometimes with brutality, and emphasizes their negative aspects almost entirely.”^[7] Viewer agreement with satirical UGC is a crucial factor regarding the influence of such videos. Using an experimental design, this study explored the predictors of viewer agreement with satirical UGC, and the results of satirical UGC on viewer attitudes towards candidates.

2. Literature review

2.1 Related works

Political cynicism refers to a sense of discontent and disaffection toward political institutions and figures.^[8] Today’s society in particular is troubled by growing levels of cynicism, which is the reason for the apathy of most young adults towards civic engagement. Some research has suggested that political cynicism may be linked to lower levels of political engagement and voting behavior,^{[9][10]} other scholars have argued that the negative and attacking style of advertising, horse-race journalism, and strategic news also contribute to political cynicism.^{[3][11]} By contrast, substantial evidence has indicated that exposure to negatively valenced programs, like talk shows or comedy, fosters a critical view of politics and positive political behavior.^{[9][12]} Despite the range of outcomes derived from exposure to ironic news or TV programming, there has thus far been minimal research addressing the widespread UGC of political satire on YouTube.

Political information efficacy is defined as the extent to which citizens are confident in their political knowledge and feel sufficient to engage in the political behaviors.^[13] Some level of political knowledge or information is necessary for active and satisfying participation in the political process,^[14] which can be increased through exposure to media messages, such as advertisements and political debate.^[15] McKinney and Chattopadhyay demonstrated that web interactivity can also enhance political information efficacy levels, particularly among young citizens;^[16] however, this result seems contradictory to the notion that most young citizens have limited political information and knowledge.^[17]

Favorability has often been conceptualized as simply the likelihood of an individual to vote for a given candidate;^[18] other literature has more specifically suggested that viewing political media content may affect individuals’ perceptions of candidates and their likelihood to vote for a specific candidate.^[19] In the current media environment that includes widespread access to the production and consumption of UGC, research addressing the effects elicited by satirical UGC is noteworthy.^[20]

2.2 Research structure and questions

This study examined the factors influencing viewer agreement to user-generated videos that satirized presidential candidates, and analyzed how the agreement affects perceived favorability toward the candidates. Figure 1 illustrates how the research was structured.

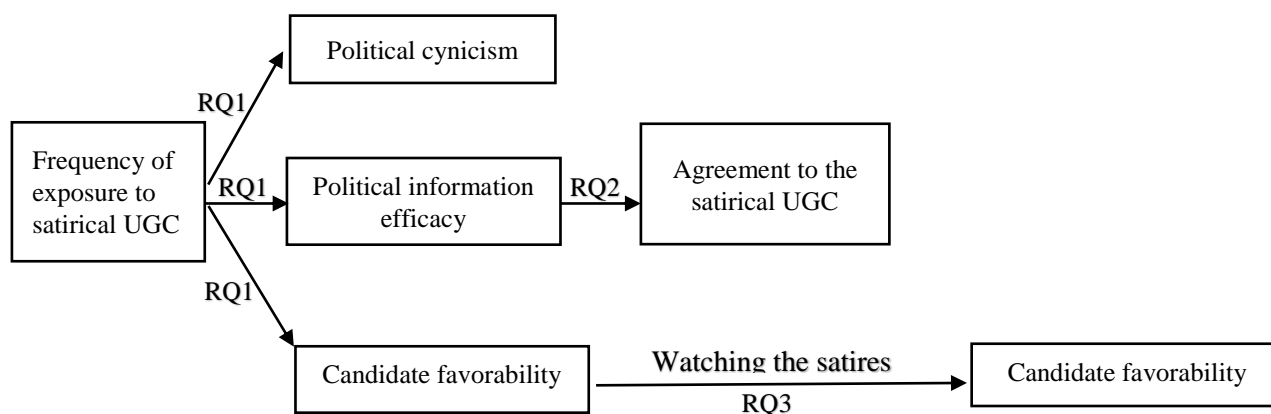


Figure 1. Research Structure

According to the research structure, three research questions were formulated as follows:

- RQ 1:** Is online satire exposure related to political cynicism, political information efficacy, and candidate favorability?
- RQ 2:** To what degree does political cynicism, political information efficacy, and candidate favorability predict agreement with the satirical UGC after controlling for demographic variables?
- RQ 3:** Is there a substantial difference of candidate favorability between before and after viewing UGC satirizing the three presidential candidates?

3. Method

3.1 Sample

A total of 441 participants were recruited from classes in the information communication department of Asia University to complete this study. The sample included 251 (57%) female and 189 (43%) male respondents. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 25, with a mean age of 20.29 (SD = 1.22).

3.2 Experimental procedures

The participants completed pretest and posttest questionnaires in exchange for extra credit. The pretest survey was designed to establish initial levels of political cynicism, political information efficacy, and candidate favorability among the students. Participants were then randomly shown UGC satirizing one of the three presidential candidates, and subsequently answered the posttest questions regarding their favorability of the candidates and basic demographic information.

3.3 Instrument

Political cynicism. Three items were adopted from earlier studies^[21] to determine the level of cynicism a respondent had with regard to politicians and government. The items comprised “Politicians are corrupt,” “Politicians are dishonest,” and “Politicians are more concerned with power than what the people need.” The Cronbach’s alpha reliability score (Cronbach’s α) for the index was 0.83.

Political information efficacy. Another three-item index indicated to what extent a respondent felt they possessed sufficient information to participate in politics.^[22] The items comprised “I feel that I have a pretty

good understanding of the important political issues facing our country,” “I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people,” and “I feel that I am capable of engaging in political process.” The index yielded a Cronbach’s α of 0.79.

Candidate favorability. Participants’ overall feelings of the candidates were measured on a feeling thermometer scale of 0 to 5, where 0 represented extremely unfavorable and 5 represented extremely favorable.

Exposure to the satirical UGC. One question measured the frequency of exposure to user-generated political satires among respondents, on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (rare) to 5 (often).

Agreement with the satirical UGC. Participants’ overall evaluation of their agreement toward the user-generated satirical videos was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (extremely disagree) and 5 (extremely agree).

4. Results

The first research question asked if exposure to user-generated videos satirizing presidential candidates among young citizens was associated with their political cynicism, political information efficacy, or favorability toward candidates. Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between satire exposure, and political cynicism, political information efficacy, and candidate favorability. The results indicated a positive relationship between satire exposure and political information efficacy ($r = 0.17$, $p = 0.00$); however, no significant relationship was found between satire exposure and political cynicism or candidate favorability. In particular, these results differed from previous studies that argued viewing satirical political news programs was related to cynicism.

The second research question concerned the predictive power of political cynicism, political information efficacy, and candidate favorability on participants’ agreement to satirical UGC. Multiple regression analyses were used to test predictability, and the results revealed that political cynicism and political information efficacy were significant predictors for agreement with the satirical UGC ($R = 0.33$, $R^2 = .11$, $F(3,436) = 18.02$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, political cynicism was the strongest predictor ($b = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$) for the agreement with satirical UGC, followed by political information efficacy ($b = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$); however, candidate favorability had no predictive power (Table 1). Thus, those who are more cynical or who have higher political information efficacy tended to agree with the satirical UGC.

Table 1. Regression on the agreement to user-generated satirical videos

	B	SE B	Beta	T	F	R ²
Political cynicism	.22	.038	.27	12.07*	18.02**	.11
Political information efficacy	.09	.038	.12	5.73*		
Candidate favorability	-.04	.036	-.05	-1.25		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

The third research question explored the potential effect of agreeing with the content of a user-generated satirical video, by comparing the mean candidate favorability between the pretest and posttest results. A significant difference was observed for the two male candidates, with respondents indicating a higher posttest favorability for Eric Chu of the Kuomintang Party and James Soong of the People First Party, compared with pretest favorability. Notably, no difference between the pretest and posttest results was found regarding Ing-Wen Tsai of the Democratic Progress Party (Table 2); further investigation must be conducted

to determine if gender or the format of satirical UGC made the difference.

Table 2. Comparison of candidate favorability

candidate favorability	Pre-test		Post-test		95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df
	M	SD	M	SD			
Eric Chu (KMT)	2.49	1.06	2.63	.79	-.23, -.06	-3.48***	440
James Soong (PFP)	2.70	1.07	2.88	.72	-.27, -.09	-4.06***	440
Ing-Wen Tsai (DPP)	2.88	1.08	2.92	.76	-.12, .03	-1.03	440

***p < 0.001

5. Conclusion

This article examined not only the relationship between exposure to online user-generated satire and political attitudes and knowledge among youth, but also the effect of the satirical videos on candidate favorability. The study focused on the 2016 presidential election in Taiwan, a national election during which online UGC satirizing the candidates was widespread. The results showed that online political satire exposure was positively related to political information efficacy, but revealed no relationship between the exposure to satirical UGC and political cynicism; this notably contrasts with previous research that has found viewing satirical political news political is related to cynicism. Another core concern of this study was viewer attitudes toward UGC satirizing political candidates, which has thus far been ignored in the literature; it was determined that political cynicism and political information efficacy were related to participants' agreement with the satirical UGC, but candidate favorability was not. It is reasonable to assume that viewers tend to disagree with UGC satirizing a candidate whom they already favor, and given that no relationship was found between candidate favorability and agreement with satirical UGC, user-generated satires might not be perceived seriously or perceived as witty videos. Lastly, this study suggested that watching UGC satirizing the presidential candidates prompted favorability toward male candidates, but not the female candidate; further research should examine if gender or the format of satirical UGC made the difference.

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