

Controversial Humor Appreciation and Acceptability in the Intergroup Context

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## Abstract

This study investigated the effect of intergroup context on the appreciation of controversial humor and the acceptability of controversial humor. Differences in humor appreciation and acceptability exist between people, especially for controversial humor. Social identity theory and self-categorization theory explain that people like in-group members more than out-group members and conform more to in-group members than to out-group members. This was taken as a base for a new possible explanation for controversial humor appreciation and acceptability. Participants were distributed into groups based on a minimal group paradigm. Next, they read a text, containing controversial humor, that was either said to be written by an in-group member or by an out-group member. The text was afterwards rated on appreciation and acceptability. It was found that the text was rated as more acceptable when it was said to be written by an in-group member than when it was said to be written by an out-group member. No difference was found between groups for appreciation. So, controversial humor is not seen as more appreciated when it comes from an in-group member in comparison to when it comes from an out-group member.

*Keywords:* in-group, out-group, controversial humor, appreciation, acceptability

## Effect of Intergroup context on Appreciation and Acceptability of Controversial Humor

Humor is important in everyday life. It has been found to serve many beneficial roles (e.g. Berk, Tan, Fry, Napier, Lee, Hubbard, Lewis & Eby, 1989; Szabo, 2003; Yovetich, Dale & Hudak, 1990; Zweyer, Velker & Ruch, 2004). But what is funny for one, may not be funny to others. People, namely, differ in their perception of what is funny and what is not. A recent and expressive example is that of Dutch football analyst and TV host, René van der Gijp. Van der Gijp made a sketch in television program *Voetbal Inside*, which he, colleagues and many others loved, but which many as well hated. The day before a Belgian transgender had her coming out on Dutch television. René van der Gijp openly made a mock by dressing up as a woman with a wig and asked his fellow hosts to call him Renate from then on (van der Gijp, 2018). Many critical exclamations in the media were made. Some months before he had already been accused of homophobic, racist and sexist utterances (Bergman, 2017). To the criticism on the sketch, van der Gijp responded by saying that his joke was just a joke and that the regular viewers of the program did understand that (van der Gijp, 2018). On twitter it went wild, and both proponents and opponents of the joke reacted. The discrepancy between proponents and opponents might be due to the group of regular spectators, like van der Gijp (2018) said, belong to. It might be the case that regular spectators of the program like and accept van der Gijp and his joke more because they feel that they are in a same group. Co-host of van der Gijp, Johan Derksen, did acknowledge once that their humor and their jokes are indeed sometimes wrong and controversial, but that they are not immoral (Derksen, 2017). Controversial humor can be seen as offensive and can shock some people, but can be loved by others. Humor and morality intertwine in controversial humor. Controversial humor does not necessarily violate moral values and someone who laughs at jokes that mock with others is not necessarily immoral (Hietalahti, 2016), just like Derksen (2017) felt and said.

Research in the Netherlands about Dutch comedians showed a similar difference. Comedians most loved by some, are most hated by others. Age, gender and educational level have been found to be predictors of this difference (Kuipers, 2001). It was found that controversial humor is more appreciated by younger people and more disapproved by older people. The humor that was disapproved and rated as shocking by these older people, was liked more by males than by females. This indicates the difference in appreciation for controversial humor between males and females. Another difference in appreciation of controversial humor was found between different educational levels. Higher educated people like controversial humor in general more than lower educated people. However, within the higher educated group there is a difference as well (Kuipers, 2001). In different research, it was found that people tell more controversial jokes and like controversial jokes more shortly after a disaster. The human deprivation after a disaster makes people want to bond together, over the shared value of the disaster (Faina, 2013; Oring, 1987). According to the relief theory of humor, humor and funniness are experienced because the feeling of stress is reduced and anxiety and psychological tension are relieved (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002; Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009), which is needed in times of disaster.

One possible explanation for these differences, may be that the appreciation of humor depends on whether the sender of the humor is an in-group member or an out-group member. In humor, the sender can be of influence on appreciation. Hooper, Sharpe and Roberts (2016) found for example that the same text was rated as funnier when it was said to be written by a man, than by a woman. It is as well found that a message can be perceived as more acceptable and persuasive when the sender has a high likeability (Cialdini, 2014; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Likeability can be obtained by being an in-group member. We know that individuals tend to conform more, associate more and behave more like their in-group members than like their out-group members (Platow, Haslam, Reicher & Steffens, 2015) or conform more to in-group

norms than to out-group norms (Van Knippenberg & Wilke, 1992). According to Nail, MacDonald and Levy (2000), we conform because of five reasons: we want to be correct, we want to be socially accepted and avoid rejection and conflict, we want to accomplish group goals, we want to maintain a social identity and we align ourselves with similar or liked others. These reasons might result from the need for belongingness: the strong innate need to achieve and maintain valuable relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

To which groups individuals conform, changes from time to time according to the self-categorization theory. The self is context-dependent and individuals can shape their self-concept based on three different levels of inclusiveness: a personal identity (I vs. you), a social identity (we vs. they) and a superordinate human identity (all people) (Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). When the self is defined based on the social identity categorization, it is defined as a member of a social group as compared to other groups, and becomes meaningful only by doing so. By merely making 'us' and 'them' salient, people enhance similarities within their group and enhance differences between their own group and other groups (Hornsey, 2008; Turner et al., 1987). Situations that emphasize or highlight group-identity facilitate motivation to cooperate and communicate within that group. It also leads to changing one's attitudes in accordance with the norms and values of that salient group, especially when personal identity salience is lowered (Reicher et al., 1995).

Groups and perceived in-groupness can even be created without real-world relevance. Tajfel, Billig, Bundy and Flament (1971) demonstrated that the favoring of in-group members was not based on personal interest in that group, or its members, but could also be formed arbitrarily. Individuals in this study did a non-relevant task. They were led to believe that they would be categorized based on the characteristics of the test. In fact, they were randomly categorized as either under-estimators or over-estimators (Study 1) or as either Klee-

appreciators or Kandinsky-appreciators (Study 2). Afterwards they were asked to allocate money to groups, and they still allocated more money to their fellow group members than to out-group members, although these groups were based on nothing relevant. This became known as the minimal group paradigm.

This in-group favoritism can occur in different social dilemmas. When people are asked to allocate money or points to the different groups it was found that participants gave more money or points to in-group members than to out-group members (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Hein, Silani, Preuschhoff, Batson and Singer (2010) showed that a stronger empathy response is found in the brain when an in-group member is in pain than when an out-group member is in pain and that this also resulted in a difference in actual helping behavior. Stallen, Smidts and Stanfey (2013) found that there are more positive associations found with in-group members than with out-group members, which suggests that we evaluate in-group members more positively than out-group members. They found as well that participants conformed more to in-group judgements than to outgroup judgements, which might be due to the apparent difference in approval of in-group actions (Stallen, et al., 2013). Individuals smile more when they believe canned laughter over an audiotape of a comedian making jokes comes from in-group members than from out-group members (Platow et al., 2015). The overt behavior of in-group members led to similar behavior in participants. It was as well found by Kuipers (2001) that younger people dislike what older people like, and older people dislike what younger people like. These studies show that humor appreciation has thus been found to be sensitive to social influence. To find out whether social identity theory can shed new light on the appreciation and acceptability of controversial humor, the present study will examine the effect of intergroup context on appreciation and acceptability of controversial humor.

As an additional factor, we measured general acceptance in humor. Some people are in general more accepting of humor than others. This difference especially shows when the

humor is seen as controversial. To rule out that this difference overrides or changes the effect of the proposed difference induced by social identity, general acceptance will be measured using the cavalier humor belief scale (Hodson, Rush & MacInnis, 2016). It may be that acceptance and liking influence each other. This research will take a step in exploring this correlation, but it will not be the main focus.

### **Present research**

The present research will investigate the influence of the sender of controversial humor on the appreciation and acceptability. As described above, the appreciation and acceptability of comedians by some, and not by others, may be due to a perceived feeling that a comedian is, at that moment, part of their salient in-group. Abovementioned literature led to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: controversial humor will be more appreciated when it is coming from an in-group member than when it is coming from an out-group member.

Hypothesis 2: controversial humor will be more accepted when it is coming from an in-group member than when it is coming from an out-group member.

Hypothesis 3: the difference in appreciation of controversial humor between in-group sender and out-group sender is smaller for people high in cavalier humor beliefs than for people low in cavalier humor beliefs.

Hypothesis 4: the difference in acceptability of controversial humor between in-group sender and out-group sender is smaller for people high in cavalier humor beliefs than for people low in cavalier humor beliefs.

Participants in this research will be reading a text that contains controversial humor that will be either said to be written by an in-group member or by an out-group member. Who belongs to someone's in-group or out-group will be defined based on a minimal group paradigm task. After reading participants will rate the text on appreciation and acceptability.

## Method

### Participants and design

One hundred and three participants ( $M = 26.62$  years,  $SD = 9.24$  years; 26 men and 75 women) took part in the online questionnaire. They were recruited via paid research participants Facebook-pages where they had a chance to win a €15 coupon (approximately \$18,5). Participants were randomly allocated to one of two experimental conditions: *in-group sender* ( $n = 46$ ), and *out-group sender* ( $n = 57$ ). The main dependent variables were appreciation of controversial humor and acceptability of controversial humor. All participants gave informed consent.

### Materials and procedure

Beforehand, participants were told that the study was about humor. They were led to believe that this research consisted of two parts. The first part was an online survey and the second part was said to be a competitive team task that they would receive via e-mail one week later. The information about the second part was in fact part of the cover story. This was done to add a perceived competition effect to the team distribution. In reality, they did not do the competitive team task afterwards.

For the presumed distribution into teams, participants performed a minimal group paradigm task, which was successfully used by Stoeckart, Strick, Bijleveld and Aarts (2018) before. Participants were led to believe that the division into teams was based on human differences in perceiving the environment. Participants were presented with seven pictures, of variable numbers of colored shapes (circles, squares and triangles). Each picture was shown on screen for three seconds. After every picture, participants indicated how many shapes they thought were present. Irrespective of their answers, participants were all categorized as ‘*global-perceivers*’, a category of people described as generally perceiving the abstract concepts and bigger picture, in contrast to ‘*detailed-perceivers*’, a category of people



described as generally perceiving the details. The choice to categorize all participants into the global-perceivers team is based on findings that a global (abstract) mindset leads to stronger thinking about morality than a detailed (concrete) mindset (Napier & Luguri, 2013). As we wanted participants to focus on the morality of the overall text, a global mindset was more fitting than a detailed mindset.

Next, a text containing controversial humor was shown. It was either said that it was written by someone they would cooperate with the following week (i.e., a global-perceiver), or someone who was in the opposing team (i.e., a detailed-perceiver). The information that was given to participants in the in-group condition, where the writer was as well categorized as a global-perceiver, can be found in appendix A. The information that was given to participants in the out-group condition, where the writer was categorized as a detailed-perceiver, can be found in appendix B. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these conditions.

The used text is an existing column, published in *Metro*, an online Dutch newspaper (Umar, 2018), from which words identifying the writer were removed. This text was chosen based on a separate pilot test ( $n = 20$ ), in which four existing columns were compared. Predetermined criteria for selecting the columns for the pilot test were that they had to be written in Dutch (1), somewhat touching or crossing a moral edge (2), and at least somewhat perceived as funny (3). The column by Umar (2018) was rated as moderately funny ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), moderately entertaining ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ) and moderately acceptable ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) on a seven-point Likert-scale. Because we hypothesized that a text would be rated as more appreciated and more acceptable in the in-group condition than in the out-group condition. It was therefore important that the chosen text was not predominantly funny and accepted, nor predominantly not funny and not accepted. To make sure that participants actually read the text, moving to the next page was only enabled after 40 seconds.

Subsequently, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about humor appreciation and acceptability (the main dependent variables). The questionnaire consisted of statements to which participants indicated their agreement. Responses for all questions were measured on Likert-type scales with endpoints ranging from 1 (*disagree very much*) to 7 (*agree very much*). Seven questions were asked to measure appreciation of the text, for example 'I think this text is entertaining' ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Five questions were asked to measure acceptability of the text, for example 'I think this text is okay' ( $\alpha = .88$ ). This was followed by checks for the manipulation with both the writer and the group. First, three questions were asked to measure identification with the writer, for example 'I feel connected to the writer of the text' ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Second, it was asked if they correctly remembered in which group they were categorized and in which group the writer of the column was categorized. And lastly, the identification with the global-perceivers group, their group, was measured with two questions, for example 'I see myself as a member of the global-perceivers team' ( $\alpha = .86$ ). To measure participants' general acceptance of humor, the cavalier humor beliefs Scale, translated to Dutch, was used ( $\alpha = .80$ ) (see Hodson et al., 2010). The specific questions and the order of these questions can be found in Appendix C.

To make sure that participants did not expect an e-mail with a competitive task anymore, it was mentioned that only some participants had to take part in the follow up part and that they were randomly distributed into the group that did not have to. It was mentioned that they, thus, would not receive an e-mail the next week. In fact, all participants received this same message since the second task was part of the cover story only and was there to enhance competitive feelings. Participants generally completed the study within 15 minutes.

### **Results**

The data of five participants were removed from all analyses because they did not indicate correctly which group they were categorized in. Twenty-four participants were removed

because they did not indicate correctly which group the writer of the text was categorized in.<sup>1</sup>

Normality was tested by executing a Shapiro Wilk test for both dependent variables and showed that appreciation was significantly non-normal ( $p < .001$ ) and that acceptability did not deviate from normality ( $p = .133$ ). Normality for appreciation did not improve after Log transformation ( $p < .001$ ) nor Square root transformation ( $p = .001$ ) and we decided therefore to continue analyzing with the non-transformed data for appreciation, executing both a parametric and a non-parametric test.

**Correlations between main variables**

Pearson correlations were calculated for the main variables in this research and can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

*Pearson Correlations of model variables (n = 103)*

<i>Measure</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Intergroup context	---				
2. Appreciation	.07	---			
3. Acceptability	.26**	.43**	---		
4. CHBscale	.06	.27**	.50**	---	
5. Acceptability X Intergroup context	.93**	.16	.49**	.21*	---

Notes: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Manipulation check**

<sup>1</sup> Analysis was as well run without removing participants based on incorrect categorization ( $n = 133$ ). One-way ANOVA showed no significant effect for intergroup context on appreciation of controversial humor,  $F(1, 131) = 0.10, p = .754, \eta^2 = .001$ . For acceptability of controversial, one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference between in-group writer ( $M = 4.31, SD = 1.26$ ) and out-group writer ( $M = 3.87, SD = 1.27$ ),  $F(1, 131) = 4.11, p = .045, \eta^2 = .03$ .

To check for manipulation two ANOVA's were executed with independent variable intergroup context and dependent variables identification with the writer and identification with the global-perceivers team. One would expect that identification with the writer is higher in the in-group condition than in the out-group condition. Against expectations, no difference was found between in-group condition ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) and out-group condition ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) for identification with the writer,  $F(1, 101) = 0.88$ ,  $p = .350$ . A difference was found, again not in line with expectations, for the identification with the global-perceivers,  $F(1, 101) = 5.71$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ . It was expected that there would be no difference between both conditions as in both conditions participants were categorized in the same team. Details will be discussed in more detail in the explorative analysis section.

### **Main analysis**

To analyze the effect of intergroup context on the appreciation of controversial humor, we conducted a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and a Mann-Whitney U test with intergroup context (in-group vs. out-group) as an independent variable of appreciation of controversial humor. ANOVA showed no significant difference for appreciation between groups,  $F(1, 101) = 0.48$ ,  $p = .491$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . Participants did not rate the text significantly funnier when it was said to be written by someone from within their team ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) in comparison to when it was said to be written by someone in the other team ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). The Mann-Whitney neither showed a significant difference between groups ( $U = 1236.5$ ,  $p = .620$ ,  $r = -.05$ ). The first hypothesis can therefore be rejected.

For acceptability of controversial humor, another one-way ANOVA was executed, with again intergroup context as the independent variable. This yielded a significant main effect of intergroup context on the acceptability,  $F(1, 101) = 7.450$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . As hypothesized, participants rated the text as more acceptable when it was said to be written by

an in-group member ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) than when it was said to be written by an out-group member ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ), which confirms the second hypothesis.

To investigate the hypotheses that cavalier humor beliefs moderate the effect of intergroup context on appreciation and acceptability of controversial humor, two separate regression analyses were executed. It was expected that the effect of our manipulation (intergroup context) would be higher for participants with a low cavalier humor belief score than for participants with a high cavalier humor belief score. Independent variables were intergroup context (in-group and out-group), standardized cavalier humor belief scores, and their interaction. One regression examined the relation of these independent variables on the appreciation of controversial humor, and the other examined the relation of these independent variables on acceptability of controversial humor. Results indicated that cavalier humor beliefs did not significantly moderate the effect of intergroup context on appreciation,  $b = .005$ ,  $t(99) = .018$ ,  $p = .986$  nor moderate the effect of intergroup context on acceptability,  $b = .29$ ,  $t(99) = 1.32$ ,  $p = .189$ . This suggests that the significant main effect of intergroup context on acceptability of controversial humor was due to the manipulation alone, irrespective of prior feelings of cavalier humor.

In abovementioned regression it was further found that the cavalier humor belief score is a significant predictor of acceptability,  $b = .52$ ,  $t(99) = 3.45$ ,  $p = .001$ . The cavalier humor belief scale measures general acceptability in humor, which thus appears to predict acceptability of a specific case of controversial humor as well. Another regression showed a similar outcome for the appreciation: the cavalier humor belief score appears to predict the appreciation of controversial humor,  $b = .38$ ,  $t(99) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .046$ . This suggests that cavalier humor beliefs can be a predictor of appreciation of controversial texts. Furthermore, another linear regression with acceptability, intergroup context and their interaction as independent variables and appreciation of controversial humor as the dependent variable

showed a significant predictor effect of acceptability scores on appreciation,  $b = .53$ ,  $t(99) = 3.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , irrespective of intergroup manipulation, interaction:  $b = .12$ ,  $t(99) = -.58$ ,  $p = .561$ . Relevant correlations can be found in Table 1.

### **Explorative analysis**

To explore the effect of group identification, a part of the identification as was measured to check for identification, another ANOVA, with independent variable intergroup context and dependent variable identification with the global-perceivers team, was executed. This ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference between groups in identification with the global-perceivers team, *after* reading the text and after indicating both appreciation and acceptability, as discussed above,  $F(1,101) = 5.71$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ . Participants who read a text that was said to be written by an out-group member identified more with the global-perceivers team ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) than participants who read a text that was said to be written by an in-group member ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ). Thus, it seems that people identify more with their in-group after someone they do not like, after all we like in-group members more than out-group members (Platow et al., 2015), says something controversial, or offensive, than when the same thing is said by someone from within their in-group. To further look into these effects and the relation that appreciation and acceptability have on identification with the in-group, a regression was executed. The independent variables were appreciation of controversial humor and acceptability of controversial humor, and the dependent variable was identification with the in-group. This showed that appreciation was a significant predictor of identification with the in-group,  $b = .32$ ,  $t(100) = 2.16$ ,  $p = .033$ ;  $r = .25$ ,  $p = .005$ , but acceptability was not,  $b = .07$ ,  $t(100) = .44$ ,  $p = .660$ . Then, another regression was executed (independent variables appreciation of controversial humor, intergroup context and their interaction and dependent variable identification with the in-group). Here again, the intergroup context was found to be a significant predictor of in-group

identification,  $b = -.69$ ,  $t(99) = -2.65$ ,  $p = 0.009$ . Meaning that the in-group identification was lower for participants in the in-group condition than for participants in the out-group condition. The interaction of intergroup manipulation and appreciation was not found to be a significant predictor of in-group identification,  $b = -.09$ ,  $t(99) = -.34$ ,  $p = .736$ , so we can tentatively conclude that appreciation alone might have an effect on in-group identification.

To investigate the relation between gender and controversial humor, two separate ANOVA's were executed with gender as an independent variable and appreciation and acceptability of controversial humor as dependent variables. Kuipers (2001) did find that males like controversial humor more than females. The data from participants who stated that they did not want to indicate their gender was excluded for this specific analysis. After removing there were 101 participants left. Contrary to Kuipers (2001), no difference between males ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) and females ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) was found in the appreciation of the controversial humor,  $F(1,99) = 0.98$ ,  $p = 0.325$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ . However, a gender difference was found for the acceptability. It was found that males ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) rated the controversial humor as significantly more acceptable than females ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ;  $F(1,99) = 4.22$ ,  $p = 0.043$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ).

### Discussion

People differ in their perception of controversial humor as Kuipers (2001) found. Social identity of the sender is investigated as a possible explanation in this study. Platow and colleagues (2015) showed that people like their in-group members more than their out-group members. More specifically, this research examined the effect of intergroup context on appreciation and acceptability of controversial humor. We hypothesized that the text would be rated as more appreciated (1) when it was said to be written by an in-group member, in comparison to when it was said to be written by an out-group member. We did not find what we expected. Instead it was found that there was no difference in appreciation between the

text that was said to be written by an in-group member and the text that was said to be written by an out-group member.

Further, we hypothesized that the text would be rated as more acceptable (2) when it was said to be written by an in-group member, in comparison to when it was said to be written by an out-group member. As expected, we found that a text was indeed rated as more acceptable from an in-group member than from an out-group member.

It was also expected that the difference between in-group and out-group sender would be smaller for participants high in cavalier beliefs than for participants low in cavalier beliefs for both appreciation (3) and acceptability (4) of controversial humor. We did not find that cavalier beliefs interacted with our manipulation. Thus, controversial humor is seen as more acceptable from an in-group member than from an out-group member, irrespective of cavalier humor belief.

Acceptability of controversial humor and cavalier beliefs were found to be predictors of appreciation of controversial humor. Thus, more acceptance of the text had a relation with more appreciation of the text, as was found by Hodson and colleagues (2010) as well. However, as mentioned above, the difference between groups in acceptability did not lead to a difference in appreciation. It can be argued that there might be other related factors that are of importance for the appreciation of controversial humor, such as individual differences in taste.

A comparable study was carried out, parallel to this study, by Douven (2018). In her study appreciation and acceptability of controversial humor were again dependent variables. Where current study manipulated groups by using a minimal group paradigm, Douven (2018) used real-world groups: right-wing and left-wing political preferences. Contrary to present research, but in line with her expectation, it was found that the text was more appreciated from an in-group sender than from an out-group sender. An explanation for the difference between the research by Douven (2018) and this study might be found in the paper by Kraus



and Fussel (1996). They argue that the relationship between the sender and the receiver of a message influences the interpretation of the message. Communicators have different vantage points for message interpretation. The perspective taking model focuses on the sharedness of these vantage-points. To comprehend the controversial humor text, a shared context is needed (Kraus & Fussel, 1996). Because in this research the in-group members had no history together nor prior knowledge and beliefs about each other, it is possible that the text and intended meaning was not understood well enough. This in contrast to the study done by Douven (2018), where prior knowledge and beliefs (maybe even stereotypes) about the point of view of the writer were likely present. Comprehension of humor has often been found important for appreciation of humor (e.g. Derks, Staley & Haselton, 1998; Moran, Wig, Adams, Janata & Kelley, 2004; Wyer & Collins, 1992), which might underlie why the lack of prior knowledge about each other's vantage point is a possible explanation for the different findings between current study and the study by Douven (2018). Further research is needed to examine this relationship.

It was further found that males had a higher acceptance of the text than females. Taking the predictor effect of acceptability on appreciation into account this might be another reason why no difference between groups was found for appreciation. The participants were randomly distributed over the groups, and no counterbalancing for gender was used. This, unfortunately, had the unforeseen effect on the male-to-female ratio, with a higher male-to-female ratio in the out-group condition than in the in-group condition. If acceptability predicts appreciation, and males had a higher acceptability, this might override the effect of the manipulation. Further research is needed to explore this mediating relation.

Another interesting exploration that needs further research was the lower group-identification with the in-group after reading the controversial text from an in-group sender than after reading the text from an out-group sender. Literature on the importance of humor in

dating and friendships (Goodwin, 1990; Hewitt, 1958; McGee & Shevlin, 2009) demonstrated that we want to affiliate and be close to people we find funny. Nevertheless, that we want to be close to some does not automatically imply that we want to distance ourselves from non-funny people. However, this is what seems to have happened in this study. A possible explanation for why people distance themselves from the group when someone from their group writes non-funny things might be explained by the fact that they do not want to be held personally accountable for the things said by their in-group members. Several theories in psychology, such as self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), suggest that humans have an innate need to evaluate the self positively. Humor is one factor that can have an influence on this positive self-view (Kuiper & McHale, 2009). An adaptive humor style (self-enhancing and affiliative humor) has been found to strengthen positive self-esteem and related happiness, whereas a maladaptive humor style (aggressive and self-defeating humor) led to lower social self-esteem (Kuiper & McHale, 2009; Liu, 2012). It might thus be, that in order to maintain a positive self-esteem, participants distanced themselves from the controversial, maladaptive humor of their in-group.

Another explanation for this finding may be that we identify more with our in-group the moment an out-group member acts unacceptable. Parker and Janoff-Bulman (2013) for example argue that for morality, which has a connection to controversial humor, the opinion and beliefs of in-groups are dependent on the pure existence of out-groups. In-groups have meaning because identification with the in-group is besides identifying as 'being like one's in-group' also identifying as 'not being like them' (Parker & Janoff-Bulman, 2013). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as well assumes that individuals want to maximize differences between in-groups and out-groups. For controversial humor, we found lower acceptability of a text when it was written by an out-group member than by an in-group member. As Platow and colleagues (2015) argued, we conform more to norms of an in-group.

One may then assume that norms of the in-group may correspond to one's own norms. If the morality-opinion of an out-group member is opposite to one's own opinion, and therefore, assumed, opposite to the opinion of one's in-group, this may lead to stronger identification due to the need for approval and correctness to one's in-group (Nail, et al., 2000).

Voci (2006) found that when in-group values are threatened, in-group identification had a stronger effect on in-group bias than when the in-group values were not threatened. Maybe the participants felt the need to defend in-group norms and sought affiliation and confirmation through identification, which would then result in more in-group bias in order to maintain a positive evaluation about the group, and oneself. As abovementioned, people want to maintain a positive self-view (Steele, 1988). Further research is needed to explore this relation.

Further interesting for this finding, Brewer and Pierce (2005) found that in-group members are less tolerant and accepting of an out-group member when the individuals have high overlap with the in-group in comparison to individuals that have low overlap with the in-group. We found that the controversial humor by an out-group member was rated as less acceptable than the controversial humor by an in-group member. Maybe the effect found by Brewer and Pierce (2005) works the other way around as well. When an out-group member is seen as less acceptable, this leads to the need for higher overlap with one's in-group. Stronger identification may hypothetically be one way to achieve this possible overlap. How this works is still unclear and the examining of underlying factors is, how interesting it may be, beyond the scope of this research.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the used minimal group paradigm and especially the clarity of the task instruction. While the goal was to ask participants to indicate how many shapes were present in total, irrespective of the type of shape, many participants indicated how many

different shapes (e.g. triangles, squares, and circles) there were. However, this was the same for every round; every picture had triangles and squares and circles. The answer these participants gave was three, in every round. It can be imagined that, after, say three rounds, they started doubting if what they did was correct. This may have influenced the identification with the group, as participants were led to believe they were categorized based on this task. The doubting may have led to lower identification with the group because a thought that might have been came to mind was: "I am categorized, but I did it wrong. If I did what was asked maybe my answers would have been different and maybe I would then have been categorized in a completely different group." However, these feelings and thoughts were not measured and it is therefore only hypothetical.

The Shapiro-Wilk test showed no normal distribution for appreciation and transformations did not improve normality neither. As normality is one assumption for ANOVA, this might be one underlying limitation for the absence of the expected difference of appreciation.

Another limitation was that there was no difference between conditions for the identification with the writer. It was expected that if the manipulation worked identification with the in-group writer was significantly higher than the identification with an out-group writer. Maybe this was due to the fact that these teams did not actually perform the competitive task (yet) and that participants did not meet the members of the other team.

Further, the experiment was carried out online, which reduced control of what participants did in the meantime. This may have had an effect on how serious the participants read the text and filled in the questions. It is desirable to execute a similar research in a lab-setting to control for this limitation.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this study examined the effect of intergroup context on the appreciation and acceptability of controversial humor to amplify the different factors that have been found to explain differences in controversial humor appreciation and acceptability between people. It was found that people accept more in controversial humor when it is believed to be written by an in-group member than when it is believed to be written by an out-group member. No difference was found for appreciation. So, if van der Gijp wants his humor to be accepted, without being assaulted, he should probably better keep in mind that the audience and he share a common group.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### **In-group manipulation**

Next week you will receive an e-mail with a competitive task. You and your teammates can collect points and win with that! Which team will win? The detailed-perceivers or you, the global-perceivers?

You will get to read a text written by someone you will cooperate with next week. Together you will battle against the detailed-perceivers team. The writer of the column was, just like you, categorized as:

#### **Global-perceiver**

She is a real winner and she is therefore determined to score more points than the opponents of the detailed-perceivers team. When friends speak about her, they say that she is quite competitive and she will do anything within her power to win. She is definitely ready to battle next week and beat them!

## Appendix B

### Out-group manipulation

Next week you will receive an e-mail with a competitive task. You and your teammates can collect points and win with that! Which team will win? The detailed-perceivers or you, the global-perceivers?

You will get to read a text written by someone you will battle against with next week. She will be on the opposing team next week. The writer of this column was, in fact, categorized as:

### **Detailed-perceiver**

She is a real winner and she is therefore determined to score more points than you! When friends speak about her, they say that she is quite competitive and she will do anything within her power to win. She is definitely ready to beat you and your fellow global-perceiver teammates next week!

Appendix C

Specific questions and order (English translation)

Appreciation of controversial humor

1. I think this text is funny
2. I think this text is jolly
3. I had to chuckle because of this text
4. I think this text is entertaining
5. I think this text is amusing
6. I think this text is well written
7. I enjoyed reading this text

Acceptability of controversial humor

1. I think this text is acceptable
2. I think this text goes too far (reverse scored)
3. I think this text crossed a line (reverse scored)
4. I think this text is hurtful (reverse scored)
5. I think this text is okay

**Manipulation check**

Identification with the writer

1. I identify with the writer of the text
2. I feel connected to the writer of the text
3. I think the writer and I look alike

In which group were you categorized?

- Global-perceivers
- Detailed-perceivers

In which group was the writer of the text categorized?

- Global-perceivers
- Detailed-perceivers

Identification with the global-perceivers team

1. I see myself as a member of the global-perceivers team
2. I identify with the global-perceivers team