Laughing Matters: Late-Night Political Comedy Television & Individual-Level Affective Polarization

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LAUGHING MATTERS: LATE-NIGHT POLITICAL COMEDY TELEVISION &
INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

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An Independent Study Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Course Requirements for
Senior Independent Study: The Departments of Communication Studies & Political Science

February, 2020

Advisors: Angie Bos, Ph.D., and Denise Bostdorff, Ph.D.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my friends,
Thank you for your ceaseless comradery and laughter. Almost more important than days spent working are the days spent not—be it unspeakable Mario Party betrayals or nights out at JAFB, you all are the cornerstone of my Wooster experience. May the past four years be only a starting point for our friendships.

To Julia,
Here’s looking at you, kid.

To the College of Wooster faculty,
Thank you for your inexhaustible patience and counsel. Without your guidance, Drs. Bos and Bostdorff, this study would never have been completed. Thank you for always greeting me with friendliness, warmth, and encouragement.

To my family,
Thank you for this. Thank you for all of this, everything—I would not be the person I am today without your unconditional love and support. You’ve taught me to roll hard on my convictions, to double down on my price, and to live without contradiction. Here’s to looking ahead.
ABSTRACT

This study considers the effects of consuming late-night political humor on audience members’ individual-level affective political polarization. Existing literature suggests that many late-night comedy television programs already influence viewers’ political engagement, including voting likelihood and political talk likelihood. Programming like The Daily Show (TDS) employs satiric critique within broader parodic framework to engage audience members’ political identities. These identities are incredibly emotional and, combined with comedic capacity to provoke anger, exert significant influence over individual behavioral tendencies. Subsequently, it makes sense to consider the affectively polarizing capacity of these shows—measured both by favorability, or ingroup confidence, and social distance, or hostility towards members of opposing political parties. This study implements experimental research design to test this theory, finding a mildly significant relationship between consumption of TDS and individual-level affective polarization that is heavily mitigated by a variety of other independent variables.

Keywords: late-night comedy, polarization, political humor, Trevor Noah, Donald Trump.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Political polarization is the current most pressing threat to American democracy. It short-circuits government, drains our economy, and kills public faith in key national institutions. Moreover, it directly affects our social-emotional behavior; some research even suggests that political polarization within families drastically impacts social interaction at holiday meals (Jilani 2018). Left unchecked, this political disease will bring our country to a standstill.

Coincidentally—or maybe uncoincidentally—the pronounced rise of American polarization parallels rapid evolution of national media consumption habits. This transformation is epitomized in the breakneck re-centering of political news content in entertainment media; an ever-growing number of young voters now turn to shows like Last Week Tonight and The Daily Show (TDS) for their political news rather than programming like CNN or NBC. Over a third of American youth now report consuming late-night political comedy television at least once a week; at the same time, political polarization has reached record highs (Baumgartner and Becker 2018).

This study attempts to consider these phenomena collectively, quantitatively defining the relationship between late-night political comedy consumption and viewers’ individual levels of affective political polarization. In the following chapter, I first briefly explain the foundational motivation for this project. I then justify my research, and delineate key terminology. I conclude with a summary outline of my experimental methodological design.

Purpose

Late-night political comedy television programs like TDS are often classified as ‘infotainment’ or ‘soft news’ and, consequently, are excluded from discussion of news programs’ political rhetoric and impact. This study is intended to challenge that categorization by assessing
these programs’ structural formatting and testing for a direct relationship between content exposure and audience members’ individual-level affective polarization. This project will quantitatively analyze data collected via a survey experiment to measure the impact of TDS, one of the most popular American late-night political comedy television programs, on viewers’ affective political polarization (Baumgartner and Becker 2018).

**Rationales**

Despite years of research concerning both late-night comedy television and political polarization, little has been done to define or test for any relationship between the two. Any attention given thus far to entertainment-based political media—or ‘soft news’—exclusively emphasizes late-night comedy programming’s impact on consumers’ political engagement. Though we consequently have an increased understanding of what this exposure means for audience members’ political knowledge, interest, and talk, we know very little about how it may affect their individual-level affective polarization (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009; Landreville et al. 2011; Lee 2011; Moy et al. 2005). Moreover, political polarization is too often treated exclusively at an ideological or elite level—sometimes with focus on gerrymandered redistricting or similar political maneuvers—to the neglect of social-emotional considerations. This study fills that gap in knowledge by testing for a potential relationship between political comedy and affective political polarization.

Uncovering a link between consuming late-night comedy television and affective polarization is not the only motivator for this study. Traditional research concerning late-night comedy shows often also fails to consider different *genres* of comedy; satire and parody are decidedly different approaches to humor, and there must be a clear distinction made before any analysis can occur (Compton 2010; Hariman 2008). Studies concerning *Saturday Night Live*, for
instance, should not be treated or understood the same way as studies focusing on TDS (Warner 2007). This project will both further clarify that distinction and focus on political satire—in the experimental design—to generate new and more accurate data.

Finally, an ever-increasing number of young voters are turning to late-night shows for political news, and it is important that we understand what this shift means for our broader American democracy (Baumgartner and Becker 2018). Pronounced polarization is essentially tribalism; we significantly disrupt and alter our national political culture when we isolate ourselves in like-minded groups. Legislative gridlock damages governmental function, costs us billions of dollars annually, and reduces public confidence in our institutions. Worse, the antagonistic restructuring of our political culture severely abbreviates and reforms our individual social lives. One recent study found that Thanksgiving dinners are significantly shorter in regions where Americans share family across party lines; researchers estimate that polarization eliminated 34 million hours of cross-partisan discourse in 2016 alone (Jilani 2018). Increased affective polarization will bring our nation to a standstill if left unchecked; this study serves as a foundation for future conflict resolution.

Definitions

Not all late-night comedy is created equal. TDS and similar programs primarily couch satiric humor, or “the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize,” in a parodic framework (Higgin 2017, p. 36). Parodic structure, defined as “the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material,” duplicates and mimics existing entities—in this case mainstream political news sources—to subtly undermine and jam popular culture (Hariman 2008, p. 250).
Affective polarization is a uniquely delineated element of broader political polarization. It refers to reinforced ingroup identity and outgroup hostility, both behavioral tendencies highly motivated by emotion. Consequently, affective polarization is operationalized in this study as especially reliant on anger and is generally defined both through favorability toward presented political content and through social distance from members of opposing political parties.

**Method**

I created a survey experiment to test for a potential relationship between exposure to late-night comedy and viewers’ levels of political polarization. Representatively sampling American citizens via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform, I randomly assigned two treatments. One group viewed a segment from *TDS* concerning President Trump’s border wall construction, while the other read an exact transcript of the same clip manipulatively attributed to *CNN*’s Anderson Cooper. Both factions then completed the same survey, designed to measure the effect of each respective treatment on individual-level affective polarization. Participants were compensated. Finally, I scaled and recorded survey question responses to reliably compare these two distinct data sets.

**Conclusion**

Millions of Americans—myself included—regularly consume late-night political comedy television without once thinking about its possible influence over political behavior or thought processes. This is potentially catastrophic for our national democracy. The following study addresses that probability and quantitatively establishes a relationship between consumption of such programming and individual-level affective political polarization.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Relatively early in his polemical career, English poet and civil servant John Milton declared laughter and anger “the two most rational faculties of humane intellect” (Samuel 1972, p. 1). This connection serves as the grounding theoretical structure behind this study and, accordingly, is the primary consideration of this chapter. Comedic capacity to elicit anger suggests the genre is elementally imbued with the power to alter audience behavior; this emotional movement—alternately described as ‘affect’—is a distinct component of broader affective polarization. Such is the purpose of this study: to measure any relationship between consuming political comedic television content and individual-level audience members’ affective polarization.

Humor is a pervasive and integral part of our daily life. It has become a part of many of our daily routines—we consume it in stand-up specials, the music we listen to, and the television shows we watch. Despite this almost quotidian prominence and relevance, however, the type of comedy we enjoy has varied wildly across the years. Recently, we have witnessed an exponential rise in the percentage of young American voters turning to late-night political comedy television as either their primary source of news or as a complement to mainstream news consumption. Moreover, researchers Moy et al. note measurable decline in traditional news outlet viewership—nightly network news, daily newspapers, and local television news outlets all report roughly ten percent drops in audience numbers even as late-night comedy viewership rises (2005). This paradigm shift has yet to be adequately addressed in either communication studies or political science literature.

Though myriad scholars have begun assessing the consequences of this new comedic era, the studies that do exist almost exclusively measure the effect of political humor on audience
engagement (e.g., Baek and Wojcieszak 2009). Such literature, consequently, often neglects the relationship between political identity and emotional or affective polarization. This study fills that gap in knowledge by explaining how the emotional interrelatedness of political identity and satirical comedy exacerbates viewers’ individual-level affective polarization. Here, late-night political comedy is epitomized in and measured with *The Daily Show (TDS)*, and affective polarization is operationalized both in measurements of favorability and pronounced social distance.

In the following chapter, I synthesize and critique existing literature pertinent to my topic. This encompasses a range of specific concepts and theories, each of which is addressed in these next pages. First, I examine the emotional qualities inherent in political identity. Next, I provide a comprehensive rhetorical critique of comedy itself, especially considering its subversive political machinations. I then examine late-night political comedy television programming and its immediate political effects on audience behavior before clearly conceptualizing affective polarization. Finally, I explicitly delineate and construct the new theoretical framework that guides this project.

**Political Identity**

Political identity is deeply emotional. This is not itself a groundbreaking revelation—political ideology and partisanship are emotionally gladiatorial even on social media—but this fact is epistemologically critical to my study.

Social identity theory posits that an individual’s sense of collective identity arises from group membership, often creating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality that is conceptually identical to political partisanship and party affiliation. Henri Tajfel’s 1979 realization that the groups to which people belong are an important source of pride and self-esteem is crucial to this study—
the ingroups to which we belong employ emotion politically, regulating when and how we share our feelings such that we maintain and facilitate proper social group function (Huddy et al. 2015; Shields 2005). Essentially, those groups upon which we predicate our self-identity use emotion as a political tool to preserve and promote said identity; often, differentiation from the norms of disliked outgroups elicits peer approval and self-pride, while conformity to outgroup norms results in disapproval or shame (Suhay 2015). Consider, for instance, the immediate and explicit conflict often found in cross-partisan families—disconformity to familial political ingroup values often provokes terse disapproval or dislike. Political identity and emotional expressivity are so closely interrelated, in fact, that research suggests the average person can adequately predict another individual’s partisanship using only information visually extracted from the face (Peterson et al. 2018).

This political-emotional relationship underscores the relevance and prominence of affective polarization, as I discuss later in the chapter. Ideological differentiation and elite-level disagreement are also, notably, often subordinate to affective behavior.

**Comedic Rhetoric**

Comedy is a communicative and markedly dialogic process. Such foundational understanding of the genre is important to this study; it is virtually impossible to truly employ fully nonnormative, quantitative research methods without this informational literature synthesis.

Humor is primal. It persists throughout millennia and exists innately from birth (Ziv and Labelle 1984). Though early forms of comedy were limited and slapstick, entertainment quickly evolved to encompass a range of techniques and strategies. The following section considers the two most prominent genres of humor in contemporary society: parody and satire. Both are of vital importance to this study. Though late-night political comedy television routinely employs
satiric advocacy content, it is regularly framed in a parodic format mimicking the presentation of mainstream or ‘hard’ news media.

**Forms of Comedy: Parody and Satire**

Generally, it is understood that there are two hegemonic forms or genres of comedy—parody and satire (Compton 2010; Hariman 2008; Warner 2007). Though these genres initially seem to share many characteristics, they differ both in foundational purpose and structure; the two are employed differently to accomplish distinctly different ends.

The word ‘parody’ itself translates directly to “beside the song” (Hariman 2008). Fittingly, the form is predicated on exaggerated mimicry; parody is the act of taking an item or situation and reproducing it humorously through duplicity or embellishment (Hariman 2008). This remediation or reproduction refracts society back on itself, extracting elements we find confusing or funny and magnifying them (Hariman 2008). It is a process that strips targets of individuality, turning their actions into cartoonish caricature and consequently removing the gravitas of original performance. It also reveals fundamental truths about individuals or events previously couched in behavioral mannerism and verbose rhetoric—essentially, parody is elementally concerned with the destabilization of hegemonic norms (in keeping with the subversive nature of comedic entertainment). Parody occurs frequently even in daily social interaction, but *The Colbert Report* is arguably the pinnacle of this comedic form, in which late-night comedy host Stephen Colbert adopts the persona of a radical, far-right conservative intellectual. When considering the Iraq War in one segment, for instance, Colbert tells his audience that “doubts can happen to everyone, including me, but as a responsible journalist, I’ve taken my doubts, fears, moral compass, conscience, and all-pervading skepticism about the very nature of this war and simply placed them in this empty Altoids box” (Warner 2007, p. 24).
Mocking his targets—conservative journalists—by exaggerating confusing or hypocritical features of their public appearance, Colbert employs parodic humor to reveal the absurdity of the situation. Here, as is often the case with parody, the comedic reproduction of a real message or action demonstrates the simple fundamental truth that “public media and democratic politics alike are delusional, hopelessly self-absorbed, [and] pathetically conventional” (Hariman 2008, p. 272).

Satiric humor, our second comedic form, is decidedly more complex. This form employs irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and critique stupidity or vice, and is often politically oriented. There are two key types of satire: Horatian and Juvenalian. Horatian satire is often self-directed, emphasizing playfulness and laughter. Because lighthearted self-critique ameliorates reputation (or approval ratings), this comedic subgenre is commonly employed by those attempting to seem warm or engaging (Warner 2007). Even definitionally, self-directed humor offers the user an opportunity to “ridicule [their] own behavior in a light-hearted and engaging way,” connecting with the audience on a personal level. Psychological research concerning Horatian humor suggests it is often seen as “genuinely funny” because it promotes solidarity, encourages viewers to take matters less seriously, and humanizes authority figures (Becker and Haller 2014, p. 43). Consequently, politicians often use Horatian satire to maximize their likeability among viewers different from the traditional mainstream news audience. Al Gore, for instance, harnessed these shows’ power in the 2000 presidential elections to boost his approval ratings and popular support (Young 2006). Antithetical to its counterpart, Juvenalian humor is other-directed and emphasizes aggression and judgment in scathing critique of everyday life (Becker and Haller 2014). This is the chosen comedic subgenre of most late-night political comedy television hosts because of its short-term capacity to provoke agreement among
viewers—in line, in certain regards, with functional social identity theory (2014). Additionally, Juvenalian humor is virtually always employed to create mental or behavioral change, as ironic or comedic criticism serves almost exclusively to identify and correct existing problems (Hariman 2008; Hart 2013; Lee 2011).

Understanding these comedic forms’ tandem capacity to influence an audience emotionally and behaviorally is a critical component of this study. Though the overarching parodic framework of late-night comedy television is important to appropriately contextualize its programming, it is the satiric content that most directly affects an audience. Political satire is shown to elicit distinct feelings of anger, which can have repercussions for political engagement and behavior (Chen et al. 2017; Hoon and Kwak 2014; Samual 1972). Anger produces both a sense of entitlement and a sense that a perpetrator has intentionally harmed or threatened that which we care about, generating a self-righteous certainty and sense of control along with confidence in one’s ingroup and its ability to fight back (Aristotle 1954; Brader 2012; Shields 2005; Stevens 2002). This emotional reaction to satiric humor is explicitly considered further in this chapter’s concluding section, but is important to recognize as we proceed with this study. Furthermore, satire and parody are different from “traditional punchline-oriented late-night comedy” in format, common content, and political consequences (Hoffman and Young 2011, p. 163). Significant differences exist, that is, between satiric and parodic programs like TDS or Last Week Tonight and stand-up comedy specials such as John Mulaney’s The Comeback Kid or Kevin Hart’s Irresponsible. We cannot—and should not—lump all late-night comedy programming together as ‘soft news’ or ‘infotainment.’
Subversive Comedic Intent

All comedy, regardless of genre or context, is created with subversive intent (Hariman 2008; Warner 2007; Young 2006). Parodic humor, as discussed, instrumentally reveals situational truth through duplicitous embellishment or neutralization of gravitas. Satire, concordantly, exposes societal flaws through either self-deprecating or biting critique. The subversive intent of both comedic genres is evident; though not limited to any specific usage, both satire and parody lend themselves strongly to political employment.

Indeed, political humor is demonstrably subversive. Television programs like TDS exist to disrupt and expose mainstream political media, alternatively interpreting events and individuals to ‘jam’ the hegemonic message (Warner 2007). These shows succeed by using “emotional and aesthetic modalities similar to those employed by political branding itself,” essentially creating parodic messaging to reveal the limitations and shortcomings of the hard news to which we are constantly exposed (Warner 2007, p. 19). Consider, for instance, the work of media activist Kalle Lasn. Lasn’s digital project (www.adbusters.org) routinely runs multiple “subadvertisement” campaigns employing alternative imagery within traditional branding technology format and design layout. “A well-produced print ‘subadvertisement,’” Lasn writes, “Mimics the look and feel of the target ad, prompting the classic double-take as viewers realize what they’re seeing is the very opposite of what they expected” (Lasn, 2000, p. 131).

Subversive messaging is appealing because it is couched in cynical realism, encouraging audience members to feel self-righteous anger and self-gratifying satisfaction that they are too clever to blindly follow societal hegemony. Late-night television hosts use Oz-like political models to “throw back the curtain on serial deceptions,” using their platform to present a world where unseen forces attempt to manipulate and deceive us daily (Hart 2013, p. 347; Hmielowski
2011). *TDS*, especially, epitomizes this model. In one memorable installment, ex-host Jon Stewart suggests that we must “give up the pipe dream once and for all that an inspirational leader can challenge the status quo.” Rather, we are “number one in aspiring political leaders telling us how great we are,” so we should have monthly political conventions in every state and inject billions into the “balloon-drop, straw-hat, and dead escort-removal industries” (as qtd. in Hart 2013, p. 349). Such rhetoric is designed to elicit audience members’ self-gratifying confidence in their own cleverness, while its emphasis on political rhetoric and strategy lowers our general trust in government (Hart 2013). Stewart frequently invokes such political motive to remind audiences that politicians are often underhanded or self-serving.

Established literature concerning humor also identifies four common dimensions of an individual’s affinity for humor (Becker and Haller 2014; Hmielowski 2011; Ziv and Labelle 1984). The first emphasizes the importance of incongruent information—certain individuals default to comedic response, often in the face of either the unexpected or socially contradictory. This dimension contains two key sub-concepts: understanding of societal norms, and an understanding of what is ‘actually’ funny. An individual must comprehend cultural and societal expectations in order to recognize inconsistencies, but simultaneously will only identify middling incongruency as funny. That is, individuals generally do not ascribe comedic value to inconsistencies that stray too far in either direction (Hmielowski 2011).

The second dimension is superiority. This dimension is most applicable to Juvenalian satire, as it deals with the aggressive or hostile function of humor; audiences often ascribe greater comedic value to those jokes or events that supply them with feelings of superiority. As an established approach to identifying unacceptable behavior, other-directed humor is often used to mask perceived insecurities or inadequacy (Ziv and Labelle 1984). Consequently, political
comedians and satirists routinely joke at the expense of certain individuals and party establishments, for “laughing at the mistakes of others allows individuals to feel more secure with their own beliefs and removes insecurities they may have about their own behaviors or preferred political group” (Hmielowski 2011, p. 99). This dimension is interrelated with social identity theory, as previously contextualized by political identity.

The third common dimension of affinity for humor is grounded in socially awkward situations. In such environments, comedy is used to alleviate tension, almost as a defense mechanism (Hmielowski 2011; Ziv and Labelle 1984). This dimension reminds us that humor can be instrumental in reducing anxiety; in a political context, it elicits assuredness and comfortability in our own political ideology.

The final dimension demonstrates humor’s social capacity. We use comedy to connect with each other; research shows that individuals often seek out others they find funny (Hmielowski 2011). Social bonds are formed in dialogic agreement over what is subjectively funny, and often other-directed humor targeting elite individuals or groups is a powerful uniter. The classic inside joke, as well, can strengthen relationships between certain individuals (Hmielowski 2011; Ziv and Labelle 1984).

**Mediated Political Comedy**

Having attained an understanding of comedic form and its subversive nature, we must now consider the distinct preferred content presented to us in late-night comedy television: political humor. Though most existing literature concerning the immediate consequences of political comedy begins with an initial appraisal of audience demographics—such as prior political knowledge, pre-existing interest, and audience ideology—this section will begin with a preliminary discussion of format. Structurally, parodic programming influences audience
understanding of satiric content, promoting emotionality, which serves as the connection between political humor and consequent affective behavioral tendencies. It is only after this examination of format that audience demographics will be identified, after which I will consider the immediate consequences of consuming late-night comedy, including increases in political discussion, knowledge, and guest popularity.

**Format**

As previously discussed, the parodic structure of late-night political comedy television is intended to ‘culture jam,’ or subvert hegemonic messaging from mainstream news media (Warner 2007). Programs like *TDS* only make sense within this format, as a twisted mimicry of traditional, hardline news. Consequently, these shows are structurally similar to those one might find on a large, traditional network. Warner notes, for instance, that “watching the show with the volume turned down might not alert you to the fact that this is anything other than one of the myriad news options now available” (2007, p. 24). This overarching parodic framework comedically contextualizes the content, enclosing any Juvenalian satiric content in lighthearted atmosphere.

This parodic structure does give way to important deviation, however. Though late-night comedy television programs share elemental and indispensable structure with traditional programming—‘straight’ delivery of news, often via monologue, followed by panel discussion or guest interview—hosts operate on a more conversational or dialogic model of communication. The hybrid political interview model, a broadcast news format in which the journalist is positioned not just as investigator but as socio-political advocate, offers audience members an “escape from the reality of a hyper-partisan political climate and the reliance on mainstream news outlets that are increasingly deemed untrustworthy” (Becker and Goldberg 2017, p. 132).
Audience Demographics

It may come as no surprise that late-night comedy television programming often caters to an overwhelmingly young audience (Young 2006). This demographic affinity for such content is partially motivated by the negative correlation between age and political knowledge, and it bolstered by ingrained media consumption habits (older citizens are exponentially more likely to consume those mainstream news outlets they grew up with).

Late-night political comedy television audiences are also often well-educated, though some research suggests a large percentage of viewers tune in for pure entertainment value (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009; LaMarre and Walthers 2015; Moy et al. 2005). This educational background and pre-existing political knowledge are important when considering the polarizing consequences of political comedy consumption.

Finally, liberal or Democratic partisans are far more likely to watch TDS and similar programming (“Section 4”). This is primarily because these shows often feature liberal hosts and tend to critique or ridicule conservative political figures and policies.

Consumption Consequences

Exposure to late-night comedy television programming significantly influences audience members’ political engagement. This influence manifests in myriad tangible behavioral consequences including increased discussion of politics with likeminded conversational partners, increased general political knowledge, the creation of affective positive negativity—upbeat conceptualization of downbeat news or content—and favorable perceptions of guest candidates. In the following paragraphs, I account for each of these political behavioral corollaries.

Those who regularly consume late-night political humor do engage in political talk with more individuals more often, but they also show a heightened tendency to talk with people who
share their political ideology (Landreville and LaMarre 2011; Lee 2012; Moy et al. 2005). Summarily, these viewers often fail to engage with members of their respective opposing political parties, preferring instead to interact with those who hold the same partisan views. Scholar Hoon Lee demonstrated this behavior in one notable study that utilized existing mail surveys and conducted a separate experiment (2012). Lee gathered experimental data from a 2011 online experiment originally conducted by the research firm Qualtrics. Of the 2,301 adult panelists invited, 861 agreed to participate, and 758 successfully completed the experiment. These participants were chosen randomly and represented a range of sexes, median household incomes, education levels, ethnicities, and partisan identities. After giving consent, individuals were randomly assigned to one of three treatments: one group watched a short clip from TDS including several segments on a recent government bailout of big companies, while the second viewed a compilation of NBC’s Nightly News clips on the same subject. Both videos presented the same basic content—the Treasury Secretary’s appearance at a Congressional hearing—and were the same length. The third group, a control group, watched a neutral segment covering a new Disney Resort in Orlando. After the experiment, every participant completed a questionnaire measuring their “emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions” regarding the economy. With each response coded on a scale, the findings were conclusive: consuming late-night comedy has little effect on viewers’ willingness to discuss politics with non-likeminded others (Lee 2012, p. 656).

Literature also suggests that late-night comedy television programs increase viewers’ general political knowledge (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009). However, the same research indicates that exposure to late-night comedy television is only associated with “increases in relatively easy
political knowledge” and has virtually no influence on consumers’ political knowledge about more complex or difficult issues (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009, p. 795).

Often, political comedy teaches audiences valuable critical reasoning skills through creation of an emotional or affective response. Late-night political comedy programming shares the same subversive intent with its genre counterparts; consequently, many program hosts strive to highlight the gap between idealism and realism (Lee 2012; Pfau 2007). Consider, for instance, Trevor Noah’s evisceration of President Trump’s border wall construction; juxtaposing the President’s early comments about impenetrability with recent reports of breaches emphasizes the disparity. This ‘positive negativity,’ as it is often called, teaches audiences critical reasoning skills essential to participatory democracy by creating a distinctly affective response—harsh Juvenalian criticism elicits anger from an audience, affecting behavioral tendencies one way, while light-hearted Horatian presentation increases “viewers’ sense of self-efficacy” (Lee 2011, p. 7).

Programs like TDS also routinely invite candidates to the show for guest appearances. This can have direct and immediate consequences on audience members’ perceptions of these public figures; candidates who acknowledge and cooperate with parodic imitation (like that of Saturday Night Live, Between Two Ferns, or TDS) often enjoy a substantial boost in ratings (Young 2006). Presidential willingness to engage with Saturday Night Live (SNL) impersonations, especially, have profound positive effects on individuals’ popularity. Presidents Gerald Ford, George H.W. Bush, William Clinton, and Barack Obama all enjoyed higher approval ratings after cooperating with their SNL comedic counterparts (Compton 2010; Higgie 2017). The persuasive power of late-night comedy television over an audience is again evident here and is something to be mindful of as we progress with this study.
While four measurable consequences of viewing late-night comedy television exist—increased political discussions with likeminded conversational partners, heightened general knowledge of politics, creation of positive negativity, and positive perceptions of political figures who cooperate—these consequences are often mediated by viewers’ preexisting value systems, including both partisan ideology and political interest/prior knowledge (Arpan et al. 2009; Becker and Haller 2014; LaMarre and Walthers 2015). That is, the effects of consuming late-night comedy are strengthened or weakened by audience members’ personal identities.

The first mediator is straightforward; political comedy television programming is broadly perceived as liberally biased (Arpan et al. 2009). Controlling for viewer partisanship, researchers are still uncovering nuances in this media bias phenomenon. For instance, Republican consumers are less likely to embrace mediated messaging from any outlet, but they also perceive less bias in Fox News’ coverage of conservative politicians than in that of late-night comedy television programming (Arpan et al. 2009). Essentially, viewer partisanship plays an enormous role in mediating the political effects of exposure to late-night political humor (Xenos et al. 2009; LaMarre and Walthers 2015). Moreover, consumers are “more likely to appreciate comedy that targets an individual or group toward which they feel a negative affect” (Becker and Haller 2014, p. 36). This research extends social identity theory to late-night comedy television programming, once again confirming the power of ingroup and outgroup norms.

Political interest and prior knowledge also critically mediate the effects of late-night comedy consumption. Communication studies scholars and political scientists often divide these audiences into two distinct groups: those with political interest and prior knowledge, and the inattentive public (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009; LaMarre and Walthers 2015; Moy et al. 2005). The term ‘inattentive public’ refers to those who tune in purely out of curiosity or for
entertainment value but lack a particularly strong prior interest in the content or broader political context. Political humor influences the inattentive public much more strongly than it does the informed public; Heather LaMarre and Whitney Walthers found in one 2013 study that inattentive voters who consume soft news—like late-night comedy programs—are not only more likely to vote, but to display higher levels of political interest after watching. This relationship is partially facilitated by both individual smug satisfaction at ‘getting’ a joke, which generates positive affect that increases desire to further engage, and the Dunning Kruger Effect (a cognitive bias in which people assess their cognitive ability as greater than it is).

Affective Polarization

Partisan gridlock is a real phenomenon. Too often, however, academic consideration of polarization exists at an ideological or elite level and neglects consideration of the affective or social-emotional aspects of such behavior. This is a distinct mistake, especially considering recent polarizing behavioral tendencies among the American public. One 2014 Pew Research Center survey epitomized this trend, finding that 15 percent of Democratic and 17 percent of Republican respondents were unhappy with the idea of an immediate family member marrying someone of the opposing party. This mutual dislike is much higher than it ever has been before and extends even into quotidian life—we socially distance ourselves from opposing partisans through spending habits, romantic decisions, and even official organizational membership (Iyengar et al. 2012). In the following paragraphs, I will both define affective polarization and briefly review contemporary motivation for such behavioral trends.

Though pronounced affective polarization is a distinctly recent American political phenomenon—despite flurries of historically similar national behavior—it is not in and of itself a new concept. Campbell et. al originally connected political identity with emotional behavior in
1960, noting that while ideological membership strongly influences partisan choice, affect has an equal (if not stronger) effect on partisan bonding. Moreover, those who strongly identify with a distinct political party are highly unlikely to break that partisan bond even if the party’s ideology changes, further suggesting emotional affect plays a crucial role in broader polarization.

Coalescence of political identity with social identity has increased dramatically in just the past few decades, creating an aggressively hostile electorate fragmented into radicalized parties despite broadly common individual ideological positioning (Iyengar et al. 2012; Mason 2013; Mason 2014).

The American press corps epitomizes the wholesale affective polarization currently plaguing our nation. Partisan media outlets have expanded rapidly in recent years and now dominate the American cable news market. These programs’ rise in popularity parallels intensifying national political polarization, causing scholars to examine public attachment to partisan media. These researchers have and do repeatedly emphasize the increasingly diverse and partisan media environment as a causal mechanism (Levendusky 2013). Consumers now have unprecedented choice in the media they consume—selective exposure is a well-documented phenomenon at this point—and consequently emphasis is placed on the effects of this personalized consumption on political polarization (Iyenger et al. 2012; Levedusky 2013). Partisan media are consumed most frequently by likeminded viewers on either end of the political spectrum; scholar Levendusky found that viewing like-minded media reinforces attitudes and radicalizes audiences, with effects lasting several days (2013). This confirmation directly facilitates affective polarization since the ability to engage selectively with like-minded media allows consumers to self-validate, often at the expense of disliked political figures or partisans.
Moreover, exposure to messaging that contradicts or directly attacks one’s worldview often pushes consumers to retreat into their existing beliefs and values. This phenomenon, colloquially dubbed the ‘backfire effect,’ is influential in research challenging personal opinions (Nyhan and Reifer 2010). Still, the consequences of consuming opposite-minded or crosscutting media are not as pronounced as the consequences of consuming likeminded media. This is primarily because exposure to crosscutting media causes viewers to disregard both presented information and the source itself, whereas exposure to likeminded media bolsters audiences’ confidence in their political values and beliefs (Levendusky 2013).

Political polarization is powered by systemic issues like gerrymandered redistricting and by contributing factors like elite conflict and ideological difference, but is in essence an affective phenomenon. This understanding is important both to my study holistically and to the creation of a distinctly new theoretical framework.

**Theoretical Construction**

Holistic consideration of political identity (and social identity theory), comedic rhetoric, and late-night political comedy television allows us to construct a working theory through which we may proceed. It follows such: emotional identities, if critiqued or attacked, produce affective response. Moreover, critiques couched in satire specifically produce anger as audiences perceive harm, losses, and threats or uncertainty about the outcome of a specific situation (Bredvold 1940; Sienkiewicz 2018). This perception consequently encourages us to adjust our behavior defensively such that we reduce uncertainty and increase personal control, often retreating to an ingroup’s norms and expectations at the expense of an outgroup (Aristotle 1954; Brader 2012, Landreville and LaMarre 2011; Stephens 2013). Hostile or Juvenalian satire especially, in which other-directed targets are humiliated and/or insulted, promotes aggression. Researchers
Weinstein, Hodgins, and Ostvik-White tell us clearly that “enjoying others’ misfortune is an indirect and acceptable way for socialized individuals to express aggression without incurring the self or social censure associated with direct aggression….Although hostile humor is socially acceptable, it nonetheless is aggressive behavior” (2011, p. 1048). Certain specific joke structures, as well, directly provoke decidedly negative emotion (Chan 2014). Concordantly, voters who identify strongly with a distinct political party experience anger more readily (Groenendyk and Banks 2014).

I propose a positive, direct relationship between exposure to late-night political humor and individual-level consumer affective polarization. Political identity’s elemental emotional quality interrelates directly with affective behavior, especially when coupled with Juvenalian satiric capacity to elicit further anger, and so relevant programming should have strong political consequences for its audiences. My distinct proposition is that these consequences amalgamate in affective political polarization; the anger generated by parodic ‘culture jamming’ messages reinforces affective behavioral tendencies and facilitates affective polarization.

Affective polarization should be observed regardless of participants’ individual partisanship, even as strong partisans are expected to experience the phenomenon more strongly. Though late-night political comedy television overwhelmingly caters to liberal viewers through other-directed jokes targeting conservative politicians and policies, this political partiality will serve to entrench and radicalize Democratic audience members further in their own ideology. Concordantly, conservative response to crosscutting threatened values will force consumers back into their own ingroup, consequently lowering the demographic’s willingness to engage in dialogic communication outside their party. Essentially, both parties’ members should experience observably increased levels of affective polarization.
Allying the deeply rooted emotionality of political identity with the satirical capacity to provoke anger affords us unique insight into the enormous influence late-night political comedy television exerts over its audiences’ behavioral tendencies. This emotional quality—or affect—is a crucial component of affective polarization; late-night political comedy consisting primarily of other-directed political satire designed to provoke anger either confirms and validates like-minded viewers or forces tangible behavioral response taken to neutralize the threat. Affective polarization, defined by mutual dislike and social distance, is an evident product of this process.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study considers the effect of consuming late-night political satiric content on audiences’ affective polarization. The primary independent variable is varied content delivery (or treatment), operationalized here as either exposure to a TDS clip or a verbatim written transcript manipulatively attributed to CNN’s Anderson Cooper. The dependent variable is individual-level affective polarization, or polarization embedded in favorability and social distance measurement rather than purely ideological disagreement. There are no true moderating or confounding variables in this study; literature suggests that a relationship should be observed regardless of audience orientation or demographic.

Informed by existing research relevant to my study, my hypothesis predicted a positive linear relationship between exposure to late-night political comedy and individual-level audience affective polarization. This hypothesis and its corresponding null hypothesis are as follows:

H₁: Consumption of late-night political comedy television, such as TDS, heightens or exacerbates audiences’ individual-level affective political polarization.

H₀: There is absolutely no relationship between consumption of late-night political comedy television, such as TDS, and audiences’ individual-level affective political polarization.

Experimental Design

To test this hypothesis, I employed an experimental survey design. Experimental methodology allows for high internal validity—meaning cause and effect can be better isolated—as well as minute, systematic control of conditions and variables, allowing researchers to better tailor structural design to specific research. Experimental designs are also repeatable, which ensures results can be retried under a myriad of external conditions to validate and verify
findings. These three advantages benefitted my project, and allowed me to draw concrete causal conclusions about my hypothetical relationship.

Each methodological approach does, of course, have certain disadvantages as well. Experimental designs are often low in external validity, meaning results cannot always be generalized to a broader population. I used Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) users to address this challenge—though not perfect, as I explain momentarily, MTurk often helps alleviate external validity issues by providing access to a representatively large and diverse user base. This platform also resolved a second flaw with my experimental methodology: lack of control over external variables. Online surveys, such as the one conducted here, do not account for setting, mood, or any number of other factors that can potentially influence participant response. The scale of my sample diminished these concerns. Employing a real TDS clip additionally enhanced external validity, accurately reflecting real mediated content in a way that a mock video would not. Finally, the artificial nature of many experimental designs often interferes with results; consumption of TDS in my experimental design was markedly different than regular, normal exposure to the show.

**Primary Independent Variable**

To successfully operationalize my independent variable, I exposed participants in my study to a specific late-night comedy television program. I chose to incorporate clips from TDS for two specific reasons: first, no research has focused on the show since Trevor Noah’s debut as host, and second, the show’s comedic form is typical of the genre (employing pronounced Juvenalian satiric humor couched in a broader parodic structure).

Participants randomly assigned the treatment viewed a three-minute TDS clip comedically critiquing construction of a Southern border wall. Though I originally intended to
include both this clip and a similar clip discussing the same issue from a conservative perspective, I ultimately decided this would not be reflective of the current late-night political comedy landscape, which trends overwhelmingly liberal (Moy et al. 2005; Warner 2007). In the chosen segment, Trevor Noah juxtaposes Trump’s original claims about border wall impenetrability with recent reports of smugglers routinely breaching construction, emphasizing comically disparate expectations with reality (selected still images from this clip are shown below in Table 3.3). This brief clip is linked here, with a full transcript available in the attached Appendix.

Table 3.3—TDS Treatment Images

I also included a treatment designed to measure the relationship between more objective news consumption and individual-level audience political polarization. This treatment manifested as a verbatim transcript of the TDS clip, and provided comparative value to measure any existing relationship between general news consumption and affective polarization. This narrative appears below and is also included in the Appendix.
ANDERSON COOPER: But it seemed like this was a wall-themed weekend for Donald Trump, because on Friday, at a rally in Mississippi, the president was boasting once again about just how impenetrable his border wall is.

DONALD TRUMP: This is a very serious wall. This is the exact-- everything they wanted. I said give me the specifications for the wall. They said, “Well, sir, we’d like steel, but would also like concrete and would also like rebar.” I said, “Well, what do you want? Which one?” So I did all three. Because it’s a different form of cutting. You can cut through steel but you can’t through the concrete, and then you can’t through the hardened rebar. We got it all. And, “We also need see-through, sir. Got to see who’s on the other side.” That makes sense, right?

COOPER: (mimics Trump): “Yeah, that makes sense. You got to have a see-through wall because if the wall is not see-through, the only way to know what’s on the other side is by yelling, ‘Marco’ and hope they yell, ‘Polo!’ That’s the only way. But some Mexicans aren’t named Marco. A lot of people don’t know that, folks. A lot of people don’t know that.” (normal voice): But, yes, on Friday night, Trump gave his usual unhumble brag about how nothing can get through his wall. And you know how, in a sitcom, when they cut right to the next scene? Uh, cut right to the next scene.

TV REPORTER: According to The Washington Post, Mexican smuggling gangs have repeatedly sawed through sections of Trump’s new border wall. Smugglers are using a cordless tool known as a reciprocating saw that pretty much sells at hardware stores for as little as $100, and when you fit it with specialized blades, the tool can pretty much slice through steel and concrete barriers within minutes.

COOPER: Yep, that’s right. Just after Trump bragged about his super wall, we learned that smugglers have been cutting through the new border wall with basic tools that you can buy at any hardware store. And I honestly wouldn’t be shocked if the guys at Home Depot showed the smugglers how to do it, because...cause those guys will help you with any project. Yeah, they don't judge. They’ll just be like, “Hey, buddy, you need help with anything?” You’re like, “Yeah, uh, I want to open a safe that's not in my house.” It's like, “Okay, you'll need a power drill. Aisle seven. Wait, wait, wait, wait. Is this a bank safe?” “Uh, yeah.” “Oh, then you need a blowtorch. Aisle five. Aisle five. Also zip ties for the guards. Aisle two. My man.” Now, you might think that Trump would be humiliated by the news that smugglers are cutting through his uncuttable border wall, but clearly, you don’t know Trump. When asked if he was concerned that people were able to cut through the border wall he has been touting for so long, this was the president’s response.

TRUMP: I haven’t heard that. We have a very powerful wall. But no matter how powerful, uh, you can cut through anything, in all fairness. You know, cutting... cutting is one thing, but it’s easily fixed. One of the reasons we did it the way we did it, it’s very easily fixed to put the chunk back in. But we have a very powerful wall. But you can cut through any wall.
COOPER: Okay, hold on. Hold on. Hold on. For four years, this guy told us the wall would be impenetrable. But now he’s like, “Yeah, of course. You can cut through anything. Of course.” In a span of a few hours, Trump’s wall went from being Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson to literally any other guy named Dwayne. That’s what just happened there. What happened? Huh? And also, if Trump is saying he built it on purpose to be something that’s easy to open and then close, it isn’t a wall. My man, you’ve built a door. I feel like that’s where this whole thing is headed. Trump’s just gonna come out like, (mimicking Trump): “We put a door on the southern border. So much easier. They can open it, but afterwards, it can also be closed. And who’s gonna close it? Mexico! Close the door! Close the door!”

**Dependent Variable**

I observed and measured the study’s dependent variable—individual-level affective polarization—in two distinct categories. I operationalized the first, favorability, through ‘feeling thermometer’ questions about people and policies presented in messaging. Each thermometer asked participants to rate their feelings towards three distinct subjects on a one-to-100 scale. I operationalized the second subcategory, social distance, through questions designed to measure participant attitudes in partisan-related social situations. I considered these two distinct aspects of affective polarization collectively, as per existing research methodology. These questions are as follows:

**Table 3.5—Affective Polarization Measurement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>Social Distance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. How do you feel about President Trump? 1-100 feeling thermometer scale.</td>
<td>5. How high a threat do you think your opposing political party poses to our country? Extremely low/moderately low/nonexistent or unsure/moderately high/extremely high.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do you feel about President Trump’s border wall construction? 1-100 feeling thermometer scale.</td>
<td>6. How comfortable would you be with your child or a close family member marrying someone from your opposing political party? Extremely uncomfortable/moderately uncomfortable/neither uncomfortable nor comfortable/moderately comfortable/extremely comfortable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How do you feel about Trevor Noah? 1-100 feeling thermometer scale.</td>
<td>7. How often do you consider the partisanship of potential connections when establishing friendships or relationships?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Never/infrequently/unsure/frequently/always.

8. How confident are you in your opposing political party’s ability to lead our country? Extremely unconfident/moderately unconfident/neutral/moderately confident/extremely confident.

9. How likely are you to discuss this issue with a member of your opposing political party? Extremely unlikely/somewhat unlikely/neither unlikely nor likely/somewhat likely/extremely likely.

**Content Control and Demographics**

To ensure those completing my experimental survey gave attention to their assigned treatment, I included an easy control question about the message theme. Those incorrect answers were segregated, and responses for these surveys were not aggregated into my larger data set.

My experimental design included a brief series of demographic questions. These questions emphasized and reinforced the value of random assignment; this section of the survey confirmed the validity of my response set. Random assignment ensured that members of each treatment group were the same, confirming realistically representative samples. I modelled these questions on existing research measures—specifically LaMarre et al.’s work—and asked participants about distinct identities. I chose to eliminate certain items I deemed irrelevant to my own research, as my experimental model did not account for intervening or antecedent variables. The included control questions were as follows below.

**Table 3.6—Content & Demographics Measurement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Which of the following best describes the issue addressed in this news messaging? Obamacare is failing; smugglers are breaking through President Trump’s border wall; impeachment hearings are delayed; economic downturn is killing small businesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. How old are you, in years? Fill in the blank.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. How often do you watch The Daily Show or other satirical news programs? Frequently/often/sometimes/rarely/never.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Choose the option that best describes your political affiliation. Strong Democrat/leans Democrat/independent or unaffiliated/leans Republican/strong Republican.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedure

Rather than rely on College of Wooster students to complete my experimental research design, I used Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. MTurk is billed as a “marketplace for work that requires human intelligence” and allows users to complete brief tasks for minute compensation—in this case, completing a short survey. MTurk is one of the best platforms for quickly gathering large and diverse samples, and is incredibly cost-effective. The website additionally allows researchers to overcome many of the concerns about the usual undergraduate demographic—often characterized as Western, educated, affluent, and liberal—by controlling conditional characteristics. MTurk also has its flaws, of course. Participants are not always attentive; the financial incentive to complete as many tasks as possible means many neglect careful consideration of questions. Users also skew young, further affecting random sampling. Still, these disadvantages are easily addressed with content manipulation checks and conditional participant qualifications.

Participants were linked to the accordant Qualtrics survey and subsequently shown a consent form informing them both of their rights and the benefits of completing said survey. Further, respondents were informed that only American citizens over the age of 18 would be permitted to take the survey. If participants gave their consent to these conditions, they were directed to the questionnaire.

Participants were then immediately asked either to view or read their randomly assigned treatment. The goal was to simulate a traditional viewing experience without priming participants to consider content in a specific way. Following this content consumption, participants were asked to complete an evaluation designed to measure their affective
polarization. The survey ended with sequential demographic questions and a debrief elaborating the purpose of the study. MTurk users were compensated $0.25 upon completion of the survey.

**Analysis**

I conducted several statistical analyses—including comparison of means, chi-squared tests, bivariate regressions, and multivariate regressions—to assess my data. I originally expected a positive, statistically significant relationship between exposure to *TDS* (my independent variable) and audience members’ individual-level affective polarization (my dependent variable). These completed analyses allowed me to concretely test this hypothesis, as discussed further in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS & ANALYSIS

This section is the apex of this study; the following pages clearly and concisely answer my research question and begin to resolve my project. In the following chapter, I first descriptively summarize the response to my experimental survey. I then outline my statistical methodology, explicitly describing my work in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), before briefly summarizing analysis output.

Sample Descriptive Statistics

Once published on Amazon’s MTurk marketplace, my survey garnered 707 total responses. Each participant received $0.25 upon survey completion. Of the initial recorded responses, 200 were incomplete. I eliminated these, narrowing my valid sample size to 507. I then excluded 43 responses from noncitizens and five responses from underage (younger than 18 years old) MTurk users. I also removed responses from the 101 participants who incorrectly answered my manipulation check question asking about the basic content of their treatment—indicating that their answers were unreliable—as well as the 85 respondents who self-reported Independent or neutral partisanship, reflecting their ultimately extraneous relevance to any study concerning two-party partisan polarization. Ultimately, I winnowed my data to 273 complete, usable responses (n=273).

In all, 142 participants watched the late-night comedy treatment clip critiquing Trump’s border wall construction; 131 read the transcript attributed to Anderson Cooper. Approximately 190 respondents identified themselves as Democrats, while just 83 identified as Republican. Respondents recorded an average age (as a calculated mean) of 35.77 years, with 12.21 standard deviation. Participants reported watching late-night political comedy television at a 2.84 mean—meaning the average respondent consumed that content just a little less infrequently than
‘sometimes’—with 1.14 standard deviation. These descriptive statistics correspond incredibly closely to the broader demographics of Amazon MTurk users, which skew younger, liberal, and more likely to regularly consume news media (“Mechanical Turkers”).

**Independent Variables**

Each treatment group reported approximately the same descriptive independent variable measurements. Simple comparison of means indicated virtually identical participant demographics—the average respondent assigned the treatment video was 35.73 years old (with 11.72 standard deviation); the average respondent assigned the written transcript was 35.82 years old (with 12.77 standard deviation). The mean media consumption among those who watched the TDS clip was 2.87 (with 1.13 standard deviation); it was 2.8 (with 1.15 standard deviation) among those who read the transcript. Further statistical analysis confirmed similarities between each treatment group’s partisan composition as well (with a 2.356 chi-square value).

In other words, participants in both groups were decidedly young, reported that they sometimes watched late-night comedy television in their daily routines, and were split equally by partisanship. This close interrelatedness allowed both better comparison and opportunity for individual variable isolation.

**Dependent Variables**

Earlier in my study, I segmented affective polarization into two distinct elements: favorability and social distance. I chose to do so to match existing surveys and studies in the field. Surprisingly, however, these components did not appear to be the most reliable measurements of affective polarization; these shortcomings and limitations are discussed further in the next chapter.
Those who viewed the treatment video reported a mean favorability rating of 49.36 (with 3.5915 standard deviation), and a mean social distance rating of 3.59 (with 0.89 standard deviation). Those who read the transcript reported a mean favorability score of 43.13 (with 24.37 standard deviation) and a mean social distance rating of 3.45 (with 0.85 standard deviation). These raw statistics mean relatively little in and of themselves, but speak to subsequent statistical analysis output confirmed by simple difference of means tests (p=0.030 for favorability, showing statistical significance, and p=0.173 for social distance, indicating a lack of statistical significance).

**Bivariate Regressions**

Once I confirmed that our two treatment groups matched descriptively—as established in the prior discussion of independent variables—I then ran individual analyses to directly test the effect of exposure to each treatment on favorability and social distance, respectively.

Given a common alpha value (p=0.05) to test for significance, I first conducted a bivariate regression to check for any relationship between treatment exposure and favorability score. This favorability measurement, one of my two dependent sub-variables, documented the relationship between treatment exposure and audience members’ attitudes toward the political content of each treatment (as used by Iyengar et al. 2012; Higgie 2017; Skoroda 2018). I found a p-value of 0.030, indicating enough significance to reject our null hypothesis. These results are graphed below in Table 4.1. Essentially, most individuals who consume late-night comedy television programming subsequently feel more positive about the directly presented policies and individuals post-exposure—a genuinely surprising cross-partisan finding further explained by later multivariate analyses (it is decidedly nonplussing to suggest that liberal audience members
would, after watching Trevor Noah eviscerate conservative policy, then be more supportive of said policy).

Table 4.1—Treatment & Favorability Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>unstandardized coefficients</th>
<th>standardized coefficient</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(constant)</td>
<td>43.132</td>
<td>2.058</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20.960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>treatment</td>
<td>6.232</td>
<td>2.853</td>
<td>0.132</td>
<td>2.184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I then ran another bivariate regression to analyze the relationship between treatment exposure and social distance. I received a p-value of 0.173—higher than the alpha value—indicating a lack of significance. This model is charted in Table 4.2. Consequently, we can conclude that exposure to TDS does not influence audience members’ feelings toward general members of their opposing political party—although the B coefficient or slope is still positive, as anticipated, indicating some insignificant relationship between consuming TDS and exacerbated social distance rating.

Table 4.2—Treatment & Social Distance Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>unstandardized coefficients</th>
<th>standardized coefficient</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(constant)</td>
<td>3.447</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>45.311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>treatment</td>
<td>0.144</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>1.367</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multivariate Regression Models

Though I had already established some significance between treatment exposure and affective polarization, I additionally ran two multivariate regressions to test the comparative effects of each independent variable—age, partisanship, and average late-night comedy consumption—on my two dependent sub-variables. These further analyses allowed me to
understand better both the unique, individual importance of each variable and their play on each other. These model tabulations are presented in Tables 4.3 and 4.4, respectively.

**Table 4.3—Multivariate (Favorability Scale)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>unstandardized coefficients</th>
<th>standardized coefficient</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(constant)</td>
<td>-0.424</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
<td>0.945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>treatment</td>
<td>3.368</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>1.459</td>
<td>0.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partisanship</td>
<td>27.163</td>
<td>0.528</td>
<td>10.498</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>-0.353</td>
<td>-0.182</td>
<td>-3.693</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>media use</td>
<td>7.849</td>
<td>0.376</td>
<td>7.502</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I found no statistical significance between my treatment and any favorability scaling (p=0.146). I did, however, find significance between each of the independent variables and consequent individual-level affective polarization. This makes sense, considering the limitations of my study: it will come as no surprise to anyone that life-long partisanship identity, age, or repeated late-night comedy television consumption influenced participant behavior much more than exposure to a single three-minute video. Still, there are consequential findings from this endeavor—first, the older we are, the less favorable we feel about those policies or figures critiqued in late-night comedy television programming (indicated by a negative B coefficient). Second, a relatively high 7.849 B coefficient indicates that the more often individuals watch late-night comedy, the more broadly favorable their attitudes are toward presented content—but that Republican viewers are much more likely to report higher favorability ratings of policies and political figures presented in *TDS* than their Democratic counterparts (indicated by a positive 27.163).
I also failed to find any significant relationship between my treatment and audiences’ individual-level social distance rating (p=0.364). Still, however, each independent variable did significantly influence social distance ratings. Most favorability scale findings hold true here as well—except for one; my study indicates that the older individuals are, the lower their social distance rating. The negative B coefficient here suggests that younger individuals are mildly less comfortable interacting with members of opposing political parties than their elders, a fascinating finding despite its irrelevance to the immediate matter at hand. It is unclear why this is, although I would probably attribute it to a socio-technological generational divide.

**Summarization of Results**

It is evident from these statistical analyses that exposure to late-night comedy television programming does moderately affect audience members’ individual-level affective political polarization. It is also clear, however, that watching TDS bolsters only audience members favorable perception of explicitly presented content, and that this relationship is markedly stronger among Republican viewers—there are few to no consequences for audience members’ relationships with members of their opposing political party. Moreover, any effects of exposure to TDS or similar programming are intensely mitigated by other identifying independent variables—age, partisan identity, and average late-night comedy television consumption.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In this study, I intended to uncover and understand the relationship between exposure to late-night political comedy television programming, like TDS, and audience members’ individual-level affective polarization. I consulted literature from both political science and political communication scholars to inform one key hypothesis: that there is a positive, direct, linear relationship between consumption of TDS and viewers’ affective polarization. I then tested this hypothesis using an experimental research design (specifically a Qualtrics survey published on Amazon’s MTurk marketplace). Participants in the survey were shown either a TDS clip or a manipulated transcript and consequently asked a series of questions intended to measure favorability and social distance (two components of affective polarization).

This chapter is intended both to summarize the entire study, recapping my structural research processes, and to consider further the pragmatic consequences of my findings. I first highlight notably major conclusions, after which I consider the pragmatic implications of the study. I then discuss the challenges and limitations of my work, as well as opportunity for future research, before providing some final thoughts about the project.

Major Conclusions

Initial bivariate regressions indicated a mildly significant relationship between exposure to TDS and audiences’ individual-level affective polarization. This relationship only holds for the favorability subcomponent of affective polarization, however, as there is no indication that such programming influences audiences’ social distance rating. Essentially, this means that late-night comedy television only impacts viewers’ perceptions of the political policies or figures directly presented and discussed in the show; TDS and similar programs do not impact audience members’ personal perceptions of their opposing political party counterparts. This dichotomous
The observed relationship is almost certainly facilitated by the time-sensitive nature of the study, a notable methodological design flaw discussed further in a later section. The dual multivariate regressions run further explicated the strength of this relationship. Considered alongside other powerful independent variables (age, regular media consumption, and partisan identity), treatment assignment did not matter—but everything else did. That is, these other traits were predictive of individual-level affective polarization. The older participants were, for instance, the less favorable they were about anything presented in their assigned treatment. Surprisingly, both consistent consumption of late-night comedy television and Republican partisanship bolstered feelings of favorability—even when media content critiqued their representatives and policy, Republican viewers reported much higher favorability ratings than their Democratic counterparts.

These favorability findings correspond almost identically to those from the social distance multivariate model, with one exception—age. Here, data suggests that the older you are, the lower your social distance rating. Or, in other words, younger individuals are moderately less comfortable interacting with members of their opposing political parties than their elders.

**Implications**

Political polarization is one of, if not *the*, most pressing threats to our contemporary American democracy. This fragmentation freezes governmental efficiency, holds our national economy hostage, and degrades public faith in key institutional powers. Moreover, it hurts us on a personal level, steamrolling through friendships, family ties, and potential romances. It is only once we understand the origin of this polarization, however, that we can begin to address it or protect ourselves from any potential influence. This study arose of this necessity and an informed guess about the power of late-night political comedy television programming. My
conjecture, as it turns out, was roughly correct—consuming late-night political comedy television does affect audiences’ perceptions of political figures and issues in a way traditional news media do not, even if that influence does not extend to audiences’ perception of their opposing political party counterparts. TDS, among similar television programming, is actively shaping our internal political conceptualizations.

I opened this study with the explicit conjecture that consuming late-night comedy television programming observably exacerbates viewers’ individual-level affective political polarization. Consequent statistical analyses proved this hypothesis only partially correct—I found significance for just one aspect of affective polarization—but should be treated cautiously, both because certain findings remain fascinatingly inexplicable (cross-partisan favorability significance, for instance) and because of the limitations of the employed single-exposure treatment method.

“Laughing Matters” exists as a basis for future research. Further consideration of the issue could simply extend this work, focusing on narrower influence (highlighting just favorability effects, for instance) or reworking the experiment with repeated treatment exposure, but could also deviate significantly. I chose to ground my work in late-night comedy television out of personal interest and casually observed behavior, but similar studies could—and probably should—be conducted on the effects of talk radio, podcasts, or any other media.

**Limitations**

This research project provides an initial template, as previously mentioned, for any future research concerning audiences’ individual-level reaction to satirical television programming. Researchers interested in this issue, however, should spend time constructing more reliable measurement; running Cronbach’s Alpha tests for each affective polarization subscale revealed
flawed question groupings. Essentially, certain questions (i.e., “How comfortable would you be with your child or a close family member marrying someone from your opposing political party?”) used in this study do not all measure their intended effect well, and further reflection and editing would be beneficial. For instance, replacing questions grounded in individual social scenarios with questions about partisan perception—asking about emotional state rather than hypothetical behavior—might yield better results.

Moreover, the partisan nature of my treatment content posed an interesting challenge. Ideally, I would have included both liberally-biased and a conservatively-biased late-night comedy television content. Unfortunately, it was incredibly difficult to find any substantive contemporary television program presenting conservative political comedy, which necessitated a decidedly more partisan methodological structure.

In addition to flawed measurement construction and partisan treatment challenges, formatting and medium became evidently problematic throughout this study. Though the ‘control’ transcript attributed to Anderson Cooper matched the TDS clip verbatim, there is still undeniably a pronounced difference between watching a performance and just reading the particular words used. Tone, body language, and other presentational elements are all vital to messaging interpretation.

I would also like to address one other intensely significant shortcoming of the project: time frame. Ideally, this study would have measured the effects of prolonged or repeated exposure to TDS content over a longer period. This is a complicated observation to make in a real-world setting, however, because of the abundance of other potential intervening or moderating variables that complicate causation. Furthermore, the academic time constraints placed upon the project made any prolonged or repeated treatment virtually impossible.
Ultimately, it is highly likely that a one-time exposure treatment is not enough to observe any significant relationship or effect. This shortcoming is especially pertinent to the social distance aspect of affective polarization, as repeated exposure to *TDS* or similar programming is virtually guaranteed to shape personal social behavior more than exposure to a single video.

**Final Thoughts**

This project and its statistical analyses paint a picture of a country divided by much more than media consumption, though exposure to certain programming does matter. These findings point to the importance of personal identity in affective polarization—including both partisan identity and age—and consequently suggest that our political thought and behavior are dictated by those traits we use to define ourselves. This confirms the value of social identity theory—referenced much earlier in my literature review—and means any effort we make to resolve polarization must begin with collective reflection of our own deep-rooted principles and ideologies (Huddy et al. 2015; Shields 2005; Suhay 2015).
WORKS CITED


https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_save_thanksgiving_from_political_arguments#inbox/_blank (January 22, 2020).


Skoroda, Jeffrey J. 2018. The College of Wooster.


APPENDIX

Table 3.1—Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER
Political Media Consumption
Principal Investigator: Nicholas Shereikis

Purpose
You are being asked to participate in an independent research study. This survey is intended to gather information regarding late-night political comedy television exposure and political polarization.

Procedures
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to consume a brief piece of political media content before answering a series of questions. The survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete.

Risks
There are no direct or indirect risks associated with participation in this survey.

Benefits
Following completion of the survey, you will be credited $0.25 to your MTurk account.

Confidentiality
Any information you give will be held confidential. All data will be stored on a password protected Microsoft Word file, and reported in aggregate form only. This file will be deleted once all data is collected.

Costs
There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the survey described above.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
You may refuse to participate in the survey. If you decide to participate, you may change your mind about being in the study and withdraw at any point during the process.

Questions
If you have any questions, you can contact me by email at nshereikis20@wooster.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Angie Bos, at abos@wooster.edu.

Consent
By continuing, you are indicating that you have decided to participate in this survey, that you have read and understood the above information, and that you are at least 18 years of age.
TREVOR NOAH: But it seemed like this was a wall-themed weekend for Donald Trump, because on Friday, at a rally in Mississippi, the president was boasting once again about just how impenetrable his border wall is.

DONALD TRUMP: This is a very serious wall. This is the exact-- everything they wanted. I said give me the specifications for the wall. They said, “Well, sir, we’d like steel, but would also like concrete and would also like rebar.” I said, “Well, what do you want? Which one?” So I did all three. Because it’s a different form of cutting. You can cut through steel but you can’t through the concrete, and then you can’t through the hardened rebar. We got it all. And, “We also need see-through, sir. Got to see who’s on the other side.” That makes sense, right?

NOAH: (mimics Trump): “Yeah, that makes sense. You got to have a see-through wall because if the wall is not see-through, the only way to know what’s on the other side is by yelling, ‘Marco’ and hope they yell, ‘Polo!’ That’s the only way. But some Mexicans aren’t named Marco. A lot of people don’t know that, folks. A lot of people don’t know that.” (normal voice): But, yes, on Friday night, Trump gave his usual unhumble brag about how nothing can get through his wall. And you know how, in a sitcom, when they cut right to the next scene? Uh, well, cut right to the next scene.

TV REPORTER: According to The Washington Post, Mexican smuggling gangs have repeatedly sawed through sections of Trump’s new border wall. Smugglers are using a cordless tool known as a reciprocating saw that pretty much sells at hardware stores for as little as $100, and when you fit it with specialized blades, the tool can pretty much slice through steel and concrete barriers within minutes.

NOAH: Yep, that’s right. Just after Trump bragged about his super wall, we learned that smugglers have been cutting through the new border wall with basic tools that you can buy at any hardware store. And I honestly wouldn’t be shocked if the guys at Home Depot showed the smugglers how to do it, because...’cause those guys will help you with any project. Yeah, they don’t judge. They’ll just be like, "Hey, buddy, you need help with anything?" You’re like, “Yeah, uh, I want to open a safe that's not in my house.” It's like, “Okay, you’ll need a power drill. Aisle seven. Wait, wait, wait, wait. Is this a bank safe?” “Uh, yeah.” “Oh, then you need a blowtorch. Aisle five. Also zip ties for the guards. Aisle two. My man.” Now, you might think that Trump would be humiliated by the news that smugglers are cutting through his uncuttable border wall, but clearly, you don’t know Trump. When asked if he was concerned that people were able to cut through the border wall he has been touting for so long, this was the president’s response.

TRUMP: I haven’t heard that. We have a very powerful wall. But no matter how powerful, uh, you can cut through anything, in all fairness. You know, cutting... cutting is one thing, but it’s easily fixed. One of the reasons we did it the way we did it, it’s very easily fixed to put the chunk back in. But we have a very powerful wall. But you can cut through any wall.
NOAH: Okay, hold on. Hold on. Hold on. For four years, this guy told us the wall would be impenetrable. But now he’s like, “Yeah, of course. You can cut through anything. Of course.” In a span of a few hours, Trump’s wall went from being Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson to literally any other guy named Dwayne. That’s what just happened there. What happened? Huh? And also, if Trump is saying he built it on purpose to be something that’s easy to open and then close, it isn’t a wall. My man, you’ve built a door. I feel like that’s where this whole thing is headed. Trump’s just gonna come out like, (mimicking Trump): “We put a door on the southern border. So much easier. They can open it, but afterwards, it can also be closed. And who’s gonna close it? Mexico! Close the door! Close the door!”

Table 3.3—TDS Treatment Images

Table 3.4—Narrative (attributed to CNN’s Anderson Cooper)

ANDERSON COOPER: But it seemed like this was a wall-themed weekend for Donald Trump, because on Friday, at a rally in Mississippi, the president was boasting once again about just how impenetrable his border wall is.

DONALD TRUMP: This is a very serious wall. This is the exact-- everything they wanted. I said give me the specifications for the wall. They said, “Well, sir, we’d like steel, but would also like concrete and would also like rebar.” I said, “Well, what do you want? Which one?” So I did all three. Because it’s a different form of cutting. You can cut through steel but you can’t through the concrete, and then you can’t through the hardened rebar. We got it all. And, “We also need see-through, sir. Got to see who’s on the other side.” That makes sense, right?

COOPER: (mimics Trump): “Yeah, that makes sense. You got to have a see-through wall because if the wall is not see-through, the only way to know what’s on the other side is by yelling, ‘Marco’ and hope they yell, ‘Polo!’ That’s the only way. But some Mexicans aren’t
named Marco. A lot of people don’t know that, folks. A lot of people don’t know that.” *(normal voice)*: But, yes, on Friday night, Trump gave his usual unhumble brag about how nothing can get through his wall. And you know how, in a sitcom, when they cut right to the next scene? Uh, well, cut right to the next scene.

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COOPER: Yep, that’s right. Just after Trump bragged about his super wall, we learned that smugglers have been cutting through the new border wall with basic tools that you can buy at any hardware store. And I honestly wouldn’t be shocked if the guys at Home Depot showed the smugglers how to do it, because...‘cause those guys will help you with any project. Yeah, they don't judge. They’ll just be like, “Hey, buddy, you need help with anything?” You’re like, “Yeah, uh, I want to open a safe that's not in my house.” It's like, “Okay, you’ll need a power drill. Aisle seven. Wait, wait, wait, wait. Is this a bank safe?” “Uh, yeah.” “Oh, then you need a blowtorch. Aisle five. Aisle five. Also zip ties for the guards. Aisle two. My man.” Now, you might think that Trump would be humiliated by the news that smugglers are cutting through his uncuttable border wall, but clearly, you don’t know Trump. When asked if he was concerned that people were able to cut through the border wall he has been touting for so long, this was the president’s response.

TRUMP: I haven’t heard that. We have a very powerful wall. But no matter how powerful, uh, you can cut through anything, in all fairness. You know, cutting... cutting is one thing, but it’s easily fixed. One of the reasons we did it the way we did it, it’s very easily fixed to put the chunk back in. But we have a very powerful wall. But you can cut through any wall.

COOPER: Okay, hold on. Hold on. Hold on. For four years, this guy told us the wall would be impenetrable. But now he’s like, “Yeah, of course. You can cut through anything. Of course.” In a span of a few hours, Trump’s wall went from being Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson to literally any other guy named Dwayne. That’s what just happened there. What happened? Huh? And also, if Trump is saying he built it on purpose to be something that’s easy to open and then close, it isn’t a wall. My man, you’ve built a door. I feel like that’s where this whole thing is headed. Trump’s just gonna come out like, *(mimicking Trump)*: “We put a door on the southern border. So much easier. They can open it, but afterwards, it can also be closed. And who’s gonna close it? Mexico! Close the door! Close the door!”

Table 3.5—Affective Polarization Measurement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>2. How do you feel about President Trump? 1-100 feeling thermometer scale.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. How do you feel about President Trump’s border wall construction? 1-100 feeling thermometer scale.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social Distance

5. How high a threat do you think your opposing political party poses to our country? Extremely low/moderately low/nonexistent or unsure/moderately high/extremely high.

6. How comfortable would you be with your child or a close family member marrying someone from your opposing political party? Extremely uncomfortable/moderately uncomfortable/neither uncomfortable nor comfortable/moderately comfortable/extremely comfortable.

7. How often do you consider the partisanship of potential connections when establishing friendships or relationships? Never/infrequently/unsure/frequently/always.

8. How confident are you in your opposing political party’s ability to lead our country? Extremely unconfident/moderately unconfident/neutral/moderately confident/extremely confident.

9. How likely are you to discuss this issue with a member of your opposing political party? Extremely unlikely/somewhat unlikely/neither unlikely nor likely/somewhat likely/extremely likely.

Table 3.6—Content & Demographics Measurement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>1. Which of the following best describes the issue addressed in this news messaging? Obamacare is failing; smugglers are breaking through President Trump’s border wall; impeachment hearings are delayed; economic downturn is killing small businesses.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>10. How old are you, in years? Fill in the blank.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>11. How often do you watch The Daily Show or other satirical news programs? Frequently/often/sometimes/rarely/never.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>12. Choose the option that best describes your political affiliation. Strong Democrat/leans Democrat/independent or unaffiliated/leans Republican/strong Republican.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.7—Debrief Text

Thank you again for your participation in this study. The purpose of this investigation is to determine if and how exposure to late-night political comedy television programming alters viewer perception of political polarization. To accurately reflect the late-night political comedy television landscape, treatment included only The Daily Show segments containing liberal bias as well as a control message, or written delivery of the same information falsely attributed to CNN’s Anderson Cooper. You were randomly shown one piece of mediated content, and consequently asked questions designed to measure your emotional state and sense of political polarization. I anticipate that participants shown late-night comedy television programming will report higher feels of anger and hostility, as well as political polarization, than those exposed to written content attributed to mainstream press. Thank you again for your participation. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact either me at nshereikis20@wooster.edu or my advisor, Dr. Angie Bos, at abos@wooster.edu.
### Table 4.1—Treatment & Favorability Scale

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<tr>
<td>(constant)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>treatment</td>
<td>43.132</td>
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<td></td>
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### Table 4.2—Treatment & Social Distance Scale

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<td></td>
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### Table 4.3—Multivariate (Favorability Scale)

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### Table 4.4—Multivariate (Social Distance Scale)

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