

ABSTRACT

A Polysemic Exploration of Stereotypes and Racial Humor in *Tosh.0*

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This case study uses content and rhetorical analyses to address the neutralizing effects of performance strategies used in the racially charged humor of “Tosh.0.” Selected clips were analyzed and discussed through the lens of Ambivalence Theory, which supports the idea that multiple meanings are possible and probable in comedic content due to the incongruous nature of humorous discourses. The researcher viewed multiple clips of the show and coded them based on stereotype, humor theory and performance strategy. Findings indicate that *Tosh.0* employs racial stereotypes unequally throughout the show with the greatest amount of negative stereotypes aimed at Blacks. Daniel Tosh also utilized Superiority Theory most frequently with his jokes and depended heavily on “Distance and Disclaimer” methods to avoid accusations of racism. A content analysis of specific clips highlights the polysemic nature of the humor in *Tosh.0*, meaning that interpretations differ based on the inherent views of the person watching.

A Polysemic Exploration of Stereotypes and Racial Humor in Tosh.0

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In the world of television, comedies often reflect the trends, issues and ideas of the current generation. Because of this, the scholar can learn much by studying what makes people laugh. While certain elements of comedy may always remain the same, notable changes have taken place since TV comedies emerged in the fifties. As each generation grows more jaded, TV comedies have adapted and evolved to become edgier than ever before (Dukes, 2012). Nowhere is this more evident than in the programming of Comedy Central.

Comedy Central is home to the most outrageous shows to be shown on television and it is unafraid to push the boundaries of social acceptability (Battaglio, 2015). Programs feature jokes, skits and commentary that would outrage former generations and viewers on the broadcast networks. At the same time, Comedy Central's programs often discuss America's most controversial topics with extreme bluntness. One of those topics is the state of racism in the United States. For years, Comedy Central has featured controversial programming, including, *Chappelle's Show*, *South Park*, and *Mind of Mencia*, all of which deal with the topic of racism in a variety of ways. (Perks, 2008, p.1). One of the most bold and brazenly offensive shows on the network is *Tosh.0*. It has been successful in attracting those who do not usually watch much television but who instead gravitate to online content and gaming. Meg James of the *Los Angeles Times* says, "To make the concept resonate with the Facebook and Twitter crowd, including video game

players, producers lubricated *Tosh.0* with the oil of the Internet: sarcasm and ridicule” (James, 2011).

Previous studies on race and comedy have looked at the topic in a variety of ways. The biggest inspiration for this paper stems from an essay titled *Criticism as Polysemic Exploration: Chappelle’s Show, Humor and Race*. In it, Perks (2008) argues that criticism, as polysemic exploration is a fitting approach to rhetorically analyzing humorously mediated discourse. Perks (2008) uses the theory of ambivalence to discuss possible hegemonic and counter-hegemonic readings of the racial humor from several sketches of *Chappelle’s Show* (Perks, 2008). Zakos (2009) has also written extensively on the use of racial satire in *Chappelle’s Show* to challenge dominant stereotypes. Another intriguing study is Richard Howells’ *‘Is it Because I is Black?’ Race, Humour and the Polysemiology of Ali G*, in which Howells discusses how Sacha Baron Cohen is able to “get away with” sexist and racist material (Howells, 2006).

This paper is similar to Howells’ in that it observes the methods a white comedian employs to be able to perform racial comedy. However, this analysis fills a different void in the literature. To date, there have been no academic papers published that analyze the humor in *Tosh.0*. This is surprising because *Tosh.0* is a popular and controversial show that features a unique brand of comedy.

In the show that bears his name, Tosh acts as both a commentator and an active participant in the show’s sketches. Unlike Sacha Baron Cohen’s Ali G, Tosh’s character is not as blatantly satirical. The host of *Tosh.0* looks like Daniel Tosh, sounds like Daniel Tosh, and has the same name as Daniel Tosh. This has important implications when it comes to the interpretation of his humor—a subject addressed later. Furthermore,

although the goal of Howells' paper is to better understand how a white comedian is able to successfully deliver racial material, Howells is vague in his description of Cohen's methods. This analysis attempts to clarify Tosh's methods by discussing them in terms of performance strategies and humor theory as described by Perez (2013) and Shouse (2007).

It is my hope that analyzing various clips from *Tosh.0* will allow readers to see examples of racial humor that are current and fresh. Just as blackface minstrel shows displayed the racial insensitivity of times past, these clips provide a picture of where at least one segment of society is in its enjoyment of racial humor.

In light of the aforementioned features, this paper adds to the current literature an in-depth analysis of a show that has received no academic scrutiny despite its popular and controversial nature. Host Daniel Tosh has been criticized for his highlighting of stereotypes and for his use of racially charged commentary. Some scholars and critics assert that Tosh targets minorities and exploits them for entertainment while others praise his ability to level the playing field by insulting everyone equally (Mekelburg, 2015, Kersey, 2012, "Stuff Black People Don't Like," 2011).

Though the show may be offensive to some, *Tosh.0* continues to find success. In 2013, the show was renewed to carry on through 2016 (*Tosh.0 Renewed*, 2013).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overarching Theories

To address the question of why race-based humor is entertaining, this literature review is guided by three overarching theories: 1) Incongruity Theory 2) Superiority Theory and 3) Relief Theory. This section also discusses three different performance methods for the successful delivery of racist humor as well as the importance of ethnic history and social position in the enjoyment of racial humor. Furthermore, the literature review examines stereotypes in mass media messages, and then focuses specifically on traditional portrayals of Blacks, Asians and Whites. Finally, it ends with a discussion of polysemic interpretation and the Theory of Ambivalence.

Why is Racism Funny?

How can something as hurtful as racism possibly be considered funny? In today's hypersensitive, politically correct culture, topics like race are largely avoided in everyday conversation. In comedy, however, this is clearly not the case. Comedians such as Dave Chappelle, Ari Shafur, and George Lopez have made a living with racial humor. The volatile and shocking nature of these jokes is exactly what makes them so alluring to many (Shouse, 2007). The enjoyment of racial humor by a section of society is well summarized in three theories that have come to be used by humor theorists over the years. The first of these is called Incongruity Theory. This theory is used to explain the mental process that takes place when an individual "gets" a joke. The theory states that people

find humor in the unexpected or “that which clashes with what we would have expected in a certain set of circumstances” (Morreall, 1987, p. 6). Incongruity Theory is widely applicable to a variety of jokes and has seen prolific use throughout the TV ad industry in recent years. Old Spice’s entire advertising platform, for instance, is built upon squeezing the most bizarre and unexpected images and scenarios into a thirty-second time spot for laughs. This theory is based on the idea that surprise is the main factor involved in the production and reception of humor (Kant, 1952; Shurcliff, 1968).

Another important concept is Superiority Theory. The theory emphasizes the “abusive, confrontational nature of humor” (Shouse, 2007, p. 3). It is described as the “mockery, ridicule, and laughter at the foolishness of others” (Keith-Spiegel, 1972, p.6). Though Superiority Theory can be directed towards anyone, it is often used to degrade minorities (Shouse, 2007). According to Rappaport (2005), racial stereotypes and slurs are the “mother’s milk” of racial humor. Inherent in the use of these is the idea that the person presenting the joke and those laughing at it are in some way superior to those who are the subject of the joke. Many researchers believe racial superiority humor has moved from the spotlight to settings that are more intimate. According to Perez (2013), studies have found that racist talk persists today in the form of stereotypes and prejudicial statements in private discussions and jokes among family, friends and the workplace (Perez, 2013, p. 480). However, it can be seen in public situations such as television as long as there is a redeeming quality to the joke that makes the statement paradoxical. As Shouse (2007) says, “the clown may play at being a bully, without some element of incongruity the bully is not likely to be seen as a clown” (p. 4). Thus, Superiority Theory’s humor is only passable in public settings if the “bully” is clearly seen as a

“clown” or ignorant fool. Archie Bunker, from *All in the Family*, is a clear example of this.

The last form of humor comes from Relief Theory, which states that people experience humor when their level of tension is increased and then suddenly removed (Shouse, 2007, p. 4). Frequently, this release is associated with overcoming social taboos (racism, in this case). The comedian will make an initial statement that seems overtly offensive, then, follow it with a statement that explains or justifies what was said.

The Problem with Racial Humor

Successfully delivering racial humor is a complex and often difficult endeavor. It is even harder on television and in person in an intimate “comedy club” setting because jokes are subject to the scrutiny of the masses of viewers. Many scholars contend that humor can be used to avoid confronting the full source of potentially traumatic situations. This is possible because humor “takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the febleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation” (Burke, 1937/1984, p.43). Rhetoric scholar John Meyer (2000) writes that he believes that humor can be used as a tool that “allows communicators to transcend recurring arguments or patterns because messages with humor can get people to laugh at contradictions as a way to accept their existence.” However, Meyer also warns that humor is a “double-edged sword” that can also be used to divide people in a multitude of ways (Timmerman, 2009, p.169).

Likewise, Carpio (2008) has written extensively on the history of African American humor as a tool to confront racial stereotypes. She maintains that humor can offer a means of response for minorities, claiming that, “by most accounts, African

Americans have faced racism in its various manifestations and guises with a rich tradition of humor that instead of diminishing the dangers and perniciousness of racism, highlights them.” She also states that minorities can use comedy to “inhibit the images, exaggerate them, and dislocate them from their habitual contexts” (Carpio, 2008, p. 4, 13-15).

However, all viewers do not always perceive these “exaggerations” the same way. Two general interpretations can come from racial humor. Comic representations of race can be identified as a parody of the stereotype or a reaffirmation of that stereotype’s existence and validity (Ji Hoon, Gabbadon & Chernin, 2006, p. 158). It is this problem that caused Dave Chappelle to leave his show on Comedy Central in 2006. After a white camera operator laughed a little too hard during the shooting of one of Chappelle’s skits, the comedian realized that his performances could be having the wrong effect on some viewers. Fearful that his show was promoting stereotypes, Dave Chappelle left a \$50 million-dollar deal and what could have been the most successful sketch-comedy show in cable history (Engel, 2014).

Mixed Signals

Banjo (2011) highlights the disconnect that often occurs when Whites enjoy racial comedy delivered by Blacks. He points out that although comedy is seen as a safe place for communication about controversial topics such as race, not all interpretations of ethnic comedy are equal. Social identity (social position in the hierarchical classification system) affects the delivery and perception of these jokes. Michael Richards’s failed racial tirade in a West Hollywood comedy club in 2006 is an example of this (Cooper, 2008 p. 1).

White comedians must be careful when using racially charged material because the identity of black humor lies within the context of other ethnic histories and the psychology of immigrants' cultural adaptation (Banjo, 2011, p. 139-141). Whiteness scholars (those who study the white race) contend that race is a social construction that assigns more value to people of European descent while marginalizing other groups. As a result, all racial groups (including Whites) are socialized into the belief that White is natural, universal and normal. Having socio-historical roots reaching as far back as colonization, the ideology of Whiteness also confirms Whites as superior (Banjo, 2011, p. 139).

Superiority Theory states that enjoyment of humor messages is derived from a falsely constructed sense of superiority to the disparaged (Hobbes, 1968). In other words, the perceiver not only fails to identify with the disparaged, but also receives gratification from seeing what is perceived as an "inferior" group belittled because it makes them feel more positive about themselves. Therefore, the enjoyment of stereotyping Blacks is considered to be influenced by Whites' sense of superiority towards Black culture (Banjo, 2011, p. 142)

Stereotypes in Media

Much of the humor in *Tosh.0* stems from Daniel Tosh's prolific use of racial stereotypes. Many of these stereotypes will be discussed in the paper, so it is important to have a reference point in order to understand them fully. There has been a good deal of research regarding the portrayal of different races in American media—specifically Whites, Blacks and Asians.

White People

As Banjo (2011) mentioned, white skin is generally considered the norm in American media. Because Whites have such a dominant presence in our entertainment, it is difficult to pin down specific examples of stereotypes of white people. However, they do exist. One of the most common stereotypes of the group is that of the self-involved, uncool, oblivious, and insensitive fool. These portrayals show White people who are generally uneducated about races other than themselves and unable to understand complicated ways in which non-Whites behave. They are also in denial about racism, choosing to believe it does not exist (Diamond, 1996, p. 279). Another popular stereotype of white people seen in media today originates from “white trash” culture. Taylor (2015) explains that this stereotype involves coarse bigotry, inappropriate nostalgia for the Confederacy, and a strange southern variant of racial conservatism. By midcentury, “white trash” people were understood to be poor rural whites whose class position explained their violence, ignorance, and primitive notions of race—all characteristics that made them ill-suited to the economic and political success of the metropolitan New South (Taylor, p. 70, 2015).

Interestingly, however, the usage of the white trash stereotype has declined in recent years (Taylor, p. 74, 2015). Just as often, “white trash” today is synonymous with white victimization (Taylor, p. 74, 2015). Taylor points out that the term has been used as a racist epithet that marks out certain a certain class of White people as their own separate breed. Taylor adds that this is an important specification because it is dissimilar to conventional forms of racism seen in other ethnicities. Rather than a stereotype that

makes sweeping generalizations about an entire race, white trash is seen as a subgroup whose actions do not necessarily reflect on Whites as a whole (Taylor, 2015, p. 76).

Black People

America has come a long way in its portrayal of Black people in media. However, scholars contend that the treatment of both White and Black people in entertainment continues to be unequal. According to Spigner (1994), limited and demeaning images of Blacks are still passively accepted today because they provide employment in Hollywood. Although Black actors such as Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey and Spike Lee have proven that the group has creative rights in the industry, a proliferation of Black stereotypes in the entertainment media persist (Spigner, 1994). Such stereotypes involve killers, prostitutes and pimps, drug dealers and sidekicks (Spigner, 1994). Welch (2007) argues that the linkage between Blacks and crime was galvanized following the civil rights movement. Since that time, the perpetuation of the idea that crimes today are overwhelmingly committed by young, black men has become commonplace in mass media messages. Because of this, Americans have become familiar with the image of young black males as violent criminals. In fact, these beliefs have become so ingrained in the public consciousness that race does not even have to be mentioned for a connection to be made between the two (Welch, 2006, p. 276). Kennedy (1997) explains that the reputation of African Americans as criminals can be traced back to the enslavement of Africans in the United States. It was not until the 1970s and early 1980s that the stereotype of the young black man evolved from a petty thief or rapist into that of an ominous criminal predator (Welch, 2006, p. 276).

Another popular stereotype for Black people is that of the drug user. The genesis for this stereotype can be traced back to the well-known war on drugs of the 1980s. This had a significant impact on the Black population by funneling much of it through the criminal justice system due to the newly passed crack cocaine laws (a drug predominately used by poor racial minorities) and targeting the small users with extreme penalties, while virtually ignoring criminals further up the distribution ladder. Before the “crack epidemic,” cocaine in powder form was used frequently in White communities, with little acknowledgement from law enforcement (Campbell, 1994). When the drug was transformed into a more affordable and accessible form that began to be used heavily by Blacks, crack became a prioritized target of the criminal justice system. This, in turn, promoted punitive policies that hit the Black population especially hard (Welch, 2006).

Asian Americans

When discussing the stereotyping of Asian Americans, one must travel back to the late 19th century and the evolution of “the yellow peril.” During this time, the West feared that the “yellow race” could threaten the domination of the white race due to the large population size of East Asia, the strength of China’s military and Japan’s rise as an imperial power. In the United States, the fear of Asian migration became known as the yellow peril. Asian immigrants’ different appearance and cultural traditions were perceived as a great threat to American identity (Lee, 1999). After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the yellow peril stereotype was inflated, leading to the detention of Japanese Americans in concentration camps (Okimoto, 1994). This stereotype was further advanced in films like “Fu Manchu” where an Asian began to be perceived as someone

that “possessed superhuman intellect and ambition” and “was subhuman in his immorality and ruthlessness” (Fong, 2002, p. 190).

The primary stereotype for Asians has come to be known as the “model minority.” Two articles published in 1966 mainstream media are often considered responsible for the construction of this stereotype: “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” and “Success Story of One Minority in U.S.” These articles celebrated Asians as the model minority group with close family ties, a focus on education, and a respect for the law (Kawai, 2003). This stereotype uses the “success” of Asian Americans to deny the existence of institutional racism and “prove” that American society is reasonably fair (Kawai, p. 114). At first, this stereotype seems to be opposite to the “yellow peril” stereotype in the sense that it sounds positive. Scholars, such as Kawai, however, assert that the two stereotypes are inseparable. Kawai explains, “Asians as the yellow peril embody ‘foreignness’ and ‘masculinity’ that threaten the U.S. identity as a White Christian nation; on the other hand, Asian Americans who make efforts to succeed silently and diligently—without demanding or protesting anything—symbolize the ‘model minority and ‘docility’ or ‘femininity’ and confirm colorblind ideology.

It is important to note that the model minority stereotype is tied to the concept of racial triangulation. Scholars have posited that Asian Americans have been racially triangulated with African Americans and White Americans. Although Asian Americans are often valorized as the “model minority” and considered superior to African Americans and other marginalized groups, they are nevertheless ostracized as unchangeably foreign and thereby beneath Whites on the social ladder (Kawai, 2005).

Strategies for the Performance of Racial Humor

Because of the importance of social identity, racial humor can easily hurt or offend. Raul Perez (2013) writes that there are certain strategies that comics must employ to be successful with racial humor. Without these strategies, the intended joke is simply an insult. Although racial comedy is nothing new, it has experienced massive change over the years. From the pre-civil war period to the pre-civil rights era, blackface minstrel shows were one of the prominent forms of humor in American society that functioned to subordinate black Americans. Until the civil rights period, white performers unabashedly painted their faces black using burnt corks while imitating, mocking, and caricaturing southern and northern African Americans. Humor was used to force immigrants to Americanize through ridicule of language and customs (Perez, 2013, p. 481). However, the seismic shift in public racial discourse in the post-civil rights era influenced the world of stand-up comedy. By the early 1990s, ethnic and racial minorities had gained enough political power to make it difficult to direct hostile humor against ethnic and racial groups in the media and public forums (Perez, 2013).

Some scholars contend, however, that overt racism has been replaced by a new “racetalk” that is subtle and color-blind. They argue that the current period of race relations is comprised of elusive forms of racism that has produced contradictory attitudes and realities. Bonilla-Silva (2010) calls it “racism without racists” (Perez, p. 480). Because of the shift in racial discourse, Apte (1987) warns that it must be made clear to the audience that the performer is not a racist when performing ethnic and racial stereotypes in public. Perez (2013) believes this is accomplished by employing certain performance strategies that help preserve a veil of “authentic inauthenticity” for the

performer. This purposefully invoked veil on the part of the performer works to ensure distance between literal claims and comedic intent and is maintained through rhetorical performance strategies. He argues that the strategies listed below are intended to deny racism or racist intent in performances that engage in offensive racist discourse in public (Perez, 2013, p. 483-484).

1. Self-Disparaging humor (making fun of yourself before making fun of others),
2. Equal Opportunity Offender (making fun of a variety of people),
3. Distance and Disclaimer methods (playing a character, using an accent, etc. to indicate that the offender is a fool and should not be taken seriously).

Polysemic Interpretation and the Theory of Ambivalence

Many scholars have covered the topic of stereotypes and racial humor over the years and their conclusions generally tend to fall on one of two sides: hegemonic (promoting the superiority of one race or group over another) and counter-hegemonic (promoting equality among races) (Perks, 2008, p.1). While many of these arguments are certainly valid and well supported, selecting a single, definitive argument about the meaning of a humorous text in order to categorize it is extremely difficult. Fiske (1986) explains that jokes are similar to metaphors and irony in that they rely on the collision of discourses. This means that neither the text nor intention behind the text can ever control every potential meaning this collision creates (Fiske, 1986, p.402). Jokes create room for individual viewers to use their own subjectivity, thereby leading to polysemic (multiple different) interpretations. A polysemic analysis is appropriate for *Tosh.0* because of the intentionally convoluted nature of the jokes often employed by the show.

The Theory of Ambivalence provides a productive framework for understanding the subversive or oppressive characteristics of race-based humor in *Tosh.0*. The theory

was used by Herman Gray to inform his analysis of *In Living Color*, the sketch-comedy show that aired on FOX in the early 1990s. In the paper, Gray concludes that the ambiguous nature of racial representation in *In Living Color* has the potential for contradictory effects on prejudice. The Theory of Ambivalence supports the idea that multiple meanings are possible and probable due to the incongruous nature of humorous discourses. In other words, viewers who actually harbor stereotypes can interpret racial humor as representations of reality and viewers who do not harbor stereotypes can understand racial humor as a critique of those who hold stereotypical views (Perks, 2008).

Background

I'm not a misogynistic and racist person, but I do find those jokes funny, so I say them.

- Daniel Tosh (Hibberd, 2011)

Tosh.0 premiered on Comedy Central on June 4, 2009 (Allyourtv.com, n.d.). Although it was originally only slated for 10 episodes, the show is now on its seventh season due to its immense popularity (Seidman, 2009). By 2010, the show had already replaced *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as the highest rated non-cartoon program on Comedy Central (Kersey, 2012). In 2010, it attracted more men in the 18-to-34-year-old demographic than *The Office*, NBC's most successful comedy at the time. Daniel Tosh—a young comedian who gained popularity in the early 2000s—hosts *Tosh.0*. The show makes an interesting study because it is one the first successful shows to focus on the Internet. *Tosh.0* produces a prolific amount of web content and Tosh has amassed a huge online following because of it. He has more than nine million Twitter followers (Stuever, 2014). Each episode begins with a cold open of a clip from an online video. Tosh makes humorous comments and jokes about the video and proceeds to do so for a

selection of other videos or pictures. He is often video-shopped into the videos so that he can add to their humor.

The show's calling card is something called, "Web Redemption," where an individual from a famous (embarrassing or ridiculous) online video is invited to hang out with Tosh and redeem the events that occurred in the viral video. Tosh usually interviews them in a sketch format and has them recreate their actions in slightly different circumstances. A substantial percentage of Tosh's comments and jokes deal with race and stereotypes. He even has a segment called "Is it Racist?" where he shows videos that contain racial stereotypes or race-related topics and asks the audience whether it should be considered racist. Tosh performs racist and sexist material nearly every episode and manages to avoid criticism for the most part. Paul Kersey of VDare.com explains, "Tosh invites his viewers, watching safely on their own televisions, to enjoy jokes so verboten that they cannot be repeated in public without bringing on the flash mobs and the diversity commissars. Playing a character of ambiguous sexuality, cracking jokes that can be construed as both pro-gay and homophobic at the same time, Tosh hosts a show that is a 21st century version of "America's Funniest Home Videos" (Kersey, 2012). According to Kersey, *Tosh.0* serves an important purpose in critiquing the hypersensitive nature of culture. He believes "laughing at these jokes is a subtle form of protest. Through the medium of comedy, Daniel Tosh has shown that there are tens of millions of people who are skeptical of the Politically Correct culture now being imposed upon America. For now, watching *Tosh.0* is a therapeutic salve for this totalitarian culture's increasingly onerous demands" (Kersey, 2012.).

However, not all reviews of the show are positive. The popular blog, *Stuff Black People Don't Like*, believes Tosh makes racism appear acceptable with his show saying, “Tosh has profited off of the plethora of hilarious clips on YouTube featuring black people in compromising and stereotypically Black situations.” “He has successfully monetized stupidity to an extent America’s Funniest Home Videos could only dream of doing, and he’s done it by relying on a steady stream of video clips featuring black people acting black.” The article goes on to say, “Tosh is making it socially acceptable to make fun of black people” (Stuff Black People Don’t Like, 2011). David Mekelburg, writing for splicetoday.com believes *Tosh.0* is often funny, but that the show tends to portray different races unfairly. He states, “Tosh’s community, the upper-middle-class white male, seems to be the calm eye in a storm of crazy people. Tosh reserves empathy for wealthy Whites (it’s important to make the wealthy distinction—poor people of all colors get lambasted) that he rarely bestows on anyone else. He hits on the harmless stereotypes: Whites are poor at sports, a little too stiff, and definitely can’t rap” (Mekelburg, 2013). In the following sections, I will explore these issues and discuss Tosh’s portrayal of race in terms of humor theory, performance strategies, and stereotypes.

Research Questions

This paper poses the following research questions:

RQ₁: Are polysemic interpretations of Tosh.0’s humor possible?

RQ₂: How does Tosh.0 stereotype Whites, Blacks and Asians? Are all races treated equally?

RQ₃: Does Tosh.0 feature the aforementioned humor theories? If so, which humor theory does Daniel Tosh most frequently employ?

RQ4: Does Tosh use the commonly known performance strategies of “Self-Disparagement,” “Equal Opportunity Offender,” and “Distance/Disclaimer” to neutralize the offensiveness of the racial material?

In addition to these questions, the show’s content was analyzed through the lens of ambivalence theory in order to show how polysemic interpretation of its humorous material is possible.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

In order to quantify the race-related humor in the show, clips were coded based on their use of racial stereotypes. Each clip was analyzed in order to determine which humor theory was most evident and which performance strategy (if any) was used to neutralize the offensiveness of the racial humor throughout the show.

The researcher used ComedyCentral.com as a research tool to find a sample of *Tosh.O* clips. The website separates every episode of *Tosh.O* into clips that can be searched by entering keywords or tags. The study began by searching the website's database for clips involving racial humor. Once a comprehensive list of clips had been collected, they were separated based on which race received the majority of jokes. In the search, 23 clips were found involving racial humor directed towards Whites, 52 clips regarding Blacks and 25 regarding Asians. These three races were selected for analysis because they seemed to be the primary targets of racial humor in the show. Although some clips featured Hispanics, it was clear that Whites, Blacks and Asians received the most attention.

Next, 10 clips were randomly selected for each race and then coded for stereotype, humor theory (Shouse, 2007), and performance strategy (Perez, 2013) in order to determine the most prevalent categories. In the findings and discussion section, I chose to elaborate on the clips that most clearly demonstrate Tosh's use of racial humor throughout the show and best exemplify the opportunity for polysemic interpretation.

Information on stereotypes in the literature review was used to create a list of stereotypes that could be applied to each race. To do this, common stereotypes from every race (i.e. oblivious White person, drug-using Black person and bad driving Asian person) were combined into one list so that each race could be compared equally. Because several *Tosh.0* clips were viewed before creating the list, the researcher added a few other stereotypes that seemed common throughout the show. Finally, a Mockery/Generalization stereotype was included for each of the races. This category was necessary because sometimes the racial humor did not fall neatly into a single category. The complete list of stereotypes and their operational definitions are listed in Table 1.

Table 3.1

Stereotypes Coded in Comedy Clips

Stereotype	Operational Definition
Athletic	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being good at sports.
Un-Athletic	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being bad at sports.
Bizarre/Strange	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as behaving strangely. Their behavior seems foreign and abnormal.
Bad Driver	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being bad at driving a car.
Cool	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being up-to-date with current clothing trends, cultural references, or music and is knowledgeable about the behavior of races different than their own.

(continued)

Stereotype	Operational Definition
Uncool	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being out-of-touch with current clothing trends, cultural references, or music and is unknowledgeable about the behavior of races different than their own.
Criminal	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as a criminal.
Dangerous	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being prone to violence or seen engaging in violence. An individual portrayed as a threat.
Dumb	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being unintelligent.
Smart	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being abnormally intelligent.
Drug-User	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as a common user of drugs.
Fearful	A White, Black or Asian who is afraid of other races.
Gross	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being gross or participating in behavior that is generally considered to be gross by society.
Mockery/Generalization	This category was selected any time Tosh imitated another race's accent, made fun of a race in a unique way or made a sweeping generalization about a race that seemed to infer all members of that race were the same.
Poor	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as lacking money.
Racist	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being racist

(continued)

Stereotype	Operational Definition
Rich	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as having a lot of money.
Southern Idiot	A White, Black or Asian who is portrayed as being uneducated, bigoted, and from the South.

When coding for humor theory, the goal was to determine how many times a specific theory was evident in each clip. To accomplish this, I analyzed every instance in which laughter was elicited from the live audience and then tried to interpret the source of the laughter. If the laughter appeared to come from an unexpected image or comment, then Incongruity Theory was selected. If the laughter appeared to come from Tosh's mockery or ridicule of a person or people group, Superiority Theory was chosen. If the laughter appeared to come from a release of tension in the audience, I selected Relief Theory.

When coding for performance strategy, I counted each time one of Perez's methods was evident. If Tosh did something to humble or demean himself before making fun of others, Self-Disparaging was selected. If Tosh made fun of multiple races in the same clip, then Equal Opportunity Offender was selected. When Tosh used an accent, dressed up in a strange outfit, played a character or said something to indicate that he was not racist, I selected Distance and Disclaimer. The clips analyzed are listed in Table 3.2. For a full listing of all the clips gathered, see the Appendix.

Table 3.2

List of Randomly Selected Clips

<i>Asian</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
Guy on Car Hood	Blackface Kid	Bad Ventriloquist
Face Foot Fetish	Adding an A	Alabama Leprechaun
Asians Stay Warm	30 for 30: Nerf Hoops	Kick Fight
Splits Race	Tacos Del Rio Fight	Watermelon Eating Contest
Chopstick Skills	Redneck Stuntman	Living Photograph
Asian People What?	White Break-dancer	African Creatures
31-Legged Race	National Spelling Bee	Black Guy in a Mosh Pit
Amazing Asians	Epic Beard Man	Crackhead Tossing
Thai Pile Up	Average Homeboy	Zombie Attack
Asian Ping Pong Army	Alabama Political Ad	Pole Dance

CHAPTER FOUR

Polysemic Interpretations in Tosh.0

RQ₁ Are Polysemic Interpretations of Tosh.0's Humor Possible?

Treatment of Whites

White stereotypes were the hardest to analyze due to the lack of attention given to Whites in the show. Although many clips involve white people, it is rare that their race is commented on, much less mocked. The only times that the race of Whites was addressed came when other races were mentioned. This supports the idea that Tosh.0 comes from a largely hegemonic perspective (Banjo, 2011). Whites are considered the norm and their race is only mentioned to highlight how other races differ. Mekelburg's comments about the show being racially insensitive tend to be mostly accurate. In the rare instances where white people are targeted, Tosh's insults tend to center on appearance or individual attacks (Mekelburg, 2010). There were also the fewest cases of mockery or generalization regarding Whites, which was Tosh's most frequently used method for racial jokes aimed at other races throughout the show. The few times Whites are shown in a negative light, they are depicted most frequently as "racist," "southern idiot" and "uncool". Whites were also the only race to be coded as "fearful," "rich," and "un-athletic" which agrees with Mekelburg's description of Whites receiving the "harmless stereotypes" on the show (Mekelburg, 2010). One memorable clip titled "Alabama Political Ad," features an example of one of Tosh's most common White stereotypes. The clip is part of Tosh's running "Is it Racist?" segment. Before the clip begins, Tosh states that, "the Alabama

thing already makes it semi-racist, but let's withhold judgment." The political ad is then played, showing Tim James, an Alabama candidate for governor who talks about requiring the Alabama driver's test to be given only in English. Tosh mocks James' southern accent saying, "If you call that English" and accusingly deems the clip racist, "but at least they're not being racist towards black people for once" (Tosh.0, Ep. 212). The last statement is particularly interesting because Tosh intentionally separates himself from Alabamans even though he himself is white and from the South. He treats that group of people as an anomaly rather than the norm and generalizes that all Alabamans are racist. This is in line with the description of "white trash" as a "subgroup" of the white population rather than a stereotype that reflects on Whites as a whole (Taylor, 2015, p. 76). Although a white character is the butt of the joke in the clip, Tosh's comments are focused more on where James comes from than his race. His last comment is also confusing because Tosh himself frequently makes fun of Blacks on the show yet condemns Alabamans for it.

One interesting White clip is a "Web Redemption" clip titled "Blackface Kid." This clip is a particularly good example of the possibility for polysemic interpretation because in it, Tosh bounces back and forth between stances on racism—condemning it at times and making racist jokes as well. The clip features a news report about a 7-year-old boy who wore blackface to dress up as Martin Luther King Jr. for a class project. After showing the news report, Tosh says, "While blackface does promote negative stereotypes, it's also how Robert Downey Jr. got an Oscar." This is a great example of the ambivalent nature evident in many of Tosh's jokes. In the first half of the statement, he acknowledges the offensive nature of blackface. In the second half, he seems to suggest

that blackface is actually funny. For this Web Redemption, Tosh has the 7-year-old come in for an interview in a classroom setting. The boy's last name is King and Tosh asks him if he is related to Dr. King, grinning as the joke goes over the kid's head. "One day being black and look how much trouble you got into" he says, slipping in a subtle racial comment that can, again, have different interpretations (Tosh.0, Ep. 421). Was he saying look how much trouble the kid got in for pretending to be black? Or, was he saying that being black means you get into more trouble? The answer is left for the viewer to decide. These are the show's favorite type of jokes—potentially offensive statements that are hidden beneath other meanings to leave Tosh blameless.

Later in the Web Redemption, Tosh asks the kid to read Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. He quickly cuts him off—saying he has already lost interest just like when his girlfriend tells him about her dreams. By belittling the famous speech, Tosh is intentionally insensitive to Black culture. In doing so, he reinforces the "insensitive white guy" character that is designed to mock Whites who fail to understand the speech's significance. Toward the end of the sketch, Tosh brings in the boy's mother and asks her if she would let him wear the makeup again—to which she says yes. Tosh seems to be in real disbelief at the woman's arrogance and actually gives the boy good advice, telling him to dress up as someone who does not offend anyone next time. It seems the sketch ends on a positive note that disapproves of racial stereotypes. The sketch then cuts to a scene of the boy at another Historical Figure Day at school. This time, he is dressed as Osama Bin Laden. The boy spouts off American hate speech until he is fake-shot by two boys in Navy SEAL uniforms who, of course, yell "Roll Tide" as they kill him—another accusing jab at Tosh's favorite target-state. The clip ends with "junior SEAL team six"

phoning the president, played by Tosh, who is wearing half-Black face. “You get it? ‘Cause he’s half-black.” Tosh says. The camera pans out to Key and Peele (two biracial comics with their own Comedy Central show) who disapprove. “Can someone get me some barbecue chips?” Tosh says in an overly stereotypical Black voice. Key and Peele yell in protest as the video ends. Tosh’s views on blackface and racism are unclear in this Web Redemption. It seems that the overarching goal of the sketch is to point out inconsistencies that are seen in America today. He is trying to ridicule the idea of blackface causing such outrage while it is largely acceptable to stereotype middle easterners. Tosh also tries to lessen the seriousness of blackface by wearing it himself and having Key and Peele join in on the joke. The fact that two biracial celebrities are willing to be in skit lets the audience know that it is permissible to laugh. He could argue that the ultimate butt of the joke is Tosh—who plays the ignorant white person.

Treatment of Blacks

Out of the three races under analysis, Blacks were featured in the greatest number of clips containing racial humor (more than Whites and Asians combined). This directly refutes the claim that Tosh offends all races equally. Tosh often switches up the delivery of his jokes to avoid being seen as overtly racist. For example, in one clip called “Black Guy in a Mosh Pit,” Tosh plays the role of a commentator, spouting off stereotypical comments about the lone black person in a crowd of Whites at a rock concert. His first comment is: “How scary for all those white people.” Although this is a racial stereotype, the humor comes from the incongruity Tosh is presenting. Using Ambivalence theory, this statement actually has potential for a variety of interpretations. Tosh’s words can be taken at face value and seen as a reinforcement of a common stereotype.

However, his comment can also be viewed as making fun of white Americans. He is mocking Whites' fear of Blacks by showing a black man in a sea of crazy white people. The idea that a crowd of Whites could be afraid of one black person is incongruous and points out the ridiculous nature of a belief held by some in society today. In typical Tosh fashion, however, his next two jokes are blatant generalizations with no redeeming qualities. "Of course he's the tallest one" "Gotta protect that purple drank." Tosh's third comment, however, deserves more attention. He says, "Now he knows how I feel every time I go to Hometown Buffet." At first, this statement appears to only have one interpretation--that Tosh is insinuating most black people are poor and eat at Hometown Buffet. However, if one acknowledges the fact that Tosh is playing a satirical character, there is another possible interpretation. The joke is in the idea that Tosh knows what it feels like to be a minority. He is relating his fictional experience to the black man's experience in the video. The self-centered nature of Tosh's character fails to realize that the comparison he draws is completely inaccurate. In America, Blacks are minorities at all times. Comparing an isolated experience at a restaurant to life as a minority is clearly foolish. Therefore, this comment could be seen as a mockery of white attempts to relate to life as a Black. Thus, reaffirming the oblivious, racially insensitive white stereotype explained by Diamond (1996) in the literature review. It is also important to remember that though Tosh is making fun of eating at Hometown Buffet, he too eats there in the joke.

His last comment is the most offensive and it presents a common practice seen in today's culture. Tosh says, "I wonder how many wallets he lifted...because he looks like a criminal....it has nothing to do with race."(Tosh.0, S3 EP 23). Tosh is mocking

America's politically correct culture. It is an example of how people still harbor racist thoughts but often make excuses to disguise their true beliefs. In the video, there is nothing that makes the black man look like a criminal. It is clear that Tosh is stereotyping him and therefore being racist. Tosh's character, however, sees no problem with his generalization.

One of Tosh's most popular segments, "Is it Racist?" provides another example of his use of distancing methods. In these segments, Tosh features clips that are either questionably or overtly racist and asks the audience to decide. One of the clips features a local, white news anchor who says, "The worst creatures come out of Africa." The audience laughs at the awkwardness of the statement and the fact that the news reporter has a black co-anchor. It is clear that the white news anchor was not trying to make a racist comment but that his words could provide racist interpretations. By showing this clip, Tosh is able to feature a racist joke without even having to deliver it himself. Although he and the producers are responsible for what is seen on the show, Tosh comes off as a blameless host. He did not create the video. He is simply asking if it is racist. Tosh pushes the envelope further by then video editing himself into a fake news studio as another reporter. He proceeds to make several intentionally racially offensive jokes regarding Blacks. It is interesting that even though the clip of the reporter did not have racist intent, Tosh used it as an excuse to make truly racist jokes of his own. Once again, his racism is supposedly neutralized because of polysemic interpretations. He is able to fall back on the fact that he is actually mocking the white reporter in the video. The idea is that he is mocking the stupidity of the White reporter, but the fact remains that he is still making racist jokes (Tosh.0, Ep. 621).

Treatment of Asians

Asians had the second most clips regarding racial humor. Tosh uses very different stereotypes for this people group. The majority of jokes focus on the cultural differences between Asians and Americans. Although he did employ common stereotypes, the majority of the humor seemed to come from what we Americans view as bizarre antics and forms of entertainment in Asian countries. One example of this comes from a clip titled "Splits Race." The video features two Asian women racing one another as they scoot forward in the splits position. Another video, called "Face Foot Fetish," shows an Asian man having his face walked on by a woman. "Who says there are no good roles for Asian Americans anymore?" he says jokingly. "Please wipe your feet on my oriental mug." These comments seem to have little weight behind them in comparison to those directed at Blacks. Another clip, called "Guy on Car Hood," shows a Japanese man trying to break in the windshield of a moving car. "How can people so good at building cars be so bad at driving them?" Tosh says. "Asians should be required to use their hazards at all times." He is most offensive when he says, "100 percent of suspects get away in Japan. Let me guess, he was about 5'6, dark hair, had a black belt" (Tosh.0, Ep. 327). This is a clear racial stereotype. Apparently, Tosh sees no need to mask some racist comments aimed at Asians with polysemic interpretations or distancing methods.

The effect of Tosh's comments does differ across races. This, I think, is attributable to Banjo's theories on social position and ethnic history. When Tosh is making fun of poor white people, he is not generalizing about the entire white race. He is making fun of a certain type of White: the uneducated, poor type. Making fun of Asians is different from making fun of Blacks because Asian society evolved separately from the

West. Their customs are different and their entertainment seems strange to us. The humor in Tosh's jokes towards Asians comes mostly from pointing out the differences between two cultures rather than from a majority people group disparaging a minority people group. Furthermore, Whites' relationship with Asians has been considerably less tenuous than with Blacks. Though the cultures have clashed in the past, the pain of slavery and segregation is obviously not a factor. When Tosh makes fun of a black person, however, it is different. His comments are not specific. They are directed at black people as a whole. The added social history between Blacks and Whites makes racist humor more volatile. Because of this, even if Tosh were to insult Asians and Blacks an equal number of times (which he doesn't), it would be impossible to equate the two.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings and Discussion

RQ₂: How Does Tosh Stereotype Whites, Blacks and Asians? Are All Races Treated Equally?

For the clips coded, it became clear that Tosh employs different stereotypes with varying frequencies across the three different races. Table 5.1 indicates that Whites seemed to be treated less cruelly than the other races. Portrayals tended to often show them as square, nerdy or culturally unaware. Although this is in line with stereotypes mentioned in the literature review, it can hardly be considered harsh treatment. Whites were portrayed as a “Southern Idiot” or a “racist” far more than any other race. The “Southern Idiot” and “racist” stereotypes share the common trait of racial discrimination in their descriptions, but it seemed that Tosh ridiculed Southern Whites more harshly. Furthermore, Whites were the only race to be coded as “fearful.” He even made several jokes that alluded to his own fear or judgment of other races as a white person. Whites were also portrayed as “smart” 11 times, Asians only once, and Blacks none—another instance of Kawai’s (2005) thoughts on “racial triangulation.”

Along with having the clips that contain the most stereotypes, the data strongly suggests that Black people are treated most harshly on the show. They are portrayed as “dumb,” “dangerous,” “drug-using” and “criminal” far more than the other two races. In addition, Blacks were either mocked or generalized nearly six times as much as Whites and far more than Asians.

Asian Americans were most often shown acting in a manner that would be considered strange and bizarre to American audiences. This fits with Kawai’s description of Asians as “unchangeably foreign.” Unsurprisingly, Asians were the only race to be coded as “bad drivers.” They were also coded as “gross” far more than Whites or Blacks. Asians were mocked or generalized the second most out of the three races observed. Interestingly, this goes along with “Model Minority” stereotype mentioned in the literature review. Asians were targeted more than Whites but not as much as Blacks.

Table 5.1

Occurrence of Stereotypes by Race

<i>Stereotype</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Asian</i>
Athletic	2	2	3
Un-Athletic	8		
Bizarre/Strange	1	1	16
Bad Driver			4
Cool	1	4	1
Un-Cool	33	1	
Criminal	2	7	3
Dangerous	4	14	2
Dumb	7	24	
Smart	11		1
Drug-User	2	8	
Fearful	6		
Gross	1	4	10
Mockery/Generalization	13	61	39
Poor	3	17	7
Rich	4		
Southern Idiot	17	1	
Racist	16	3	

RQ₃: Does Tosh.0 Feature the Aforementioned Humor Theories? If So, Which Humor Theory Does Daniel Tosh Most Frequently Employ?

Shouse’s humor theories were found to be present in the show. In order to create humor, Tosh most frequently employed Superiority Theory, followed by Incongruity and Relief Theory. Table 5.2 indicates the comedian employed Superiority Theory most frequently when joking about Blacks. Again, the correctly used form of Superiority Theory is the character of Archie Bunker in “All in the Family.” In that case, it was clear to most all viewers that, the “bully” is clearly seen as a “clown.” Archie Bunker was presented as a laughable bigot; therefore, his racist statements of superiority were seen as wrong which ultimately caused racism to be seen in a negative light. The character of Daniel Tosh is not so blatantly dumb.

Table 5.2

Comparison of the Frequency of Different Humor Theories Applied to Races in Randomly Selected Tosh.0 Clips

<i>Humor Theory</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Asian</i>
Incongruity	20	17	20
Superiority	7	34	20
Relief	1	1	

RQ₄: Does Tosh Use the Commonly Known Performance Strategies of “Self-Disparagement,” “Equal Opportunity Offender,” and “Distance/Disclaimer” to Neutralize the Offensiveness of the Racial Material?

Table 5.3 indicates the most prevalent performance strategy used in the show is Distance/Disclaimer. Tosh often plays a character of some sort in skits and web redemptions. Equal Opportunity Offender was also seen in several clips. It is interesting that Equal Opportunity Offender was most used in clips that had a majority of white

racial humor. This further supports the point that Tosh goes easier on Whites as a whole—often making fun of other races after Whites are teased.

Table 5.3

Frequency of Performance Strategies Employed When Joking About Each Race

<i>Performance Strategy</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Asian</i>
Self Disparaging	1	1	
Equal Opportunity Offender	13	7	
Distance/Disclaimer	15	6	4

Is Tosh able to claim he is an Archie Bunker? As these clips were viewed, there were some instances where Tosh’s jokes seemed to be devoid of any performance strategies that would regularly be used to neutralize their racism and offensiveness. In these situations, no performance method was counted. Tosh would often make racist jokes that ended without any statement to justify his comments. He does not always use the “equal opportunity offender” strategy or the “self-disparaging” strategy and there are no specific distance or disclaimer methods within some of the clips.

If Tosh’s humor is viewed on a broader scale, however, it could be argued that he has already put in work to create a distancing method in that he is no longer viewed as a reality-based figure but as a satirical character. Since the first episode, Tosh has developed a persona that is expected to say offensive things. Although he uses Perez’s performance strategies frequently throughout the show, he can also go without them when needed because, as Kersey (2012) says, Daniel Tosh is considered a character. This brings up the polysemic nature of comedy. Because of the show’s format, many viewers can fail to realize that he is playing a character. Tosh is called the “host.” The

term “host” usually refers to figures grounded in reality rather than satire. Even Dave Chappelle intentionally separated his duties as host and character. While Tosh can claim he has distanced himself by creating this character, it is possible that this concept is lost on some people. However, it does not matter whether people are missing the satire or simply disapproving of the humor. The result is the same: Tosh’s racial comments are offensive to some.

Summary of Results

RQ₁: As I described in the treatment of Whites Blacks and Asians sections, there are copious examples of polysemic jokes in “Tosh.0” Tosh enjoys making statements that can be taken in a variety of ways. When he does this, he can blame the audience for interpreting the joke as racism even though he is the one who put the racist thought in their heads.

RQ₂:As discussed in the findings and discussion section, the three races experienced very different treatment throughout the clips sampled. Whites were often shown as fearful of or racist towards minorities. Whites also had the least generalizations made about their race and received the greatest amount of positive stereotypes such as “rich” and “smart.” Asians were treated as the “model minority” and most of Tosh’s jokes towards them focused on societal differences rather than statements about their race. Blacks had the greatest number of clips with racist humor in them and also received the greatest amount of negative stereotypes such as: “dumb,” “drug-user” “criminal,” and “dangerous.” Results show that Tosh’s racial humor is not distributed equally amongst Whites, Blacks and Asians. Blacks are targeted far more than the other two races.

RQ₃: Taking all clips into consideration, it was found that Daniel Tosh most frequently uses Superiority Theory followed closely by Incongruity Theory. Interestingly, his use of Superiority Theory was seen most with his jokes regarding Blacks. Going back to the Kawai's thoughts on racial triangulation, It would make sense that the greatest amount of superiority humor was aimed at the minority that is often perceived to be the lowest in the racial hierarchy.

RQ₄: The results show that Tosh does employ "Self-Disparagement," "Equal Opportunity Offender," and "Distance/Disclaimer" to neutralize the offensiveness of racial material. However, it is clear that Daniel Tosh does not depend on these strategies within every clip. Because Tosh's body of work is a continuously running show, he is able to depend upon what I call "long-form" versions of these strategies. This is particularly true when it comes to "Equal Opportunity Offender" and "Distance/Disclaimer." In the case of "Equal Opportunity Offender," Tosh is able to make overtly racist jokes without using specific performance methods because he has made fun of various races in past episodes. Since no one has counted these specific instances (until now), he can argue that he targets all races equally. Tosh leans on his long-form version of "Distance/Disclaimer" most heavily throughout the show. He wears different costumes, displays opposing opinions and plays characters so that his racist comments are not taken seriously. *Tosh.0* relies on the fact that Daniel Tosh has created a TV persona who is supposed to say offensive things.

CHAPTER SIX

Limitations

One of the limitations of this paper was the number of clips viewed. Although I tried to find every clip involving racist humor, it is possible that there are more instances on the website. Future studies could employ a larger sample size. This would involve viewing every episode of “Tosh.0” and coding each comment he makes about race to ensure thoroughness.

Future studies might also include an audience reception component. It would be useful to show clips of “Tosh.0” to people of different races and ages in order to gain a better understanding of viewers’ response to the material. For instance, research questions might include: Are older minorities more easily offended by Tosh’s jokes? If that is the case, what does that mean for the issue of racism in future generations?

Some of the racial humor in the show was difficult to fit into a certain stereotype category. Future studies might build on this study’s findings by including a more exhaustive list of stereotypes in order to quantify Tosh’s racial jokes that are more obscure.

It should also be mentioned that websites such as WorldStarHipHop.com provide a plethora of video clips involving Blacks for *Tosh.0* to feature. Although this does not rectify *Tosh.0*’s unequal treatment of Blacks, the concentration of video clips devoted almost exclusively to *one* race on a *single* popular website could help explain the vast difference in the amount of clips each race had.

Even with these shortcomings, this paper is valuable in that it proves Tosh's use of racist humor to be unequal amongst Whites Blacks and Asians. Furthermore, this paper shows that Daniel Tosh most frequently employs Superiority Theory when making racist jokes and depends most heavily on "distance/disclaimer" methods to avoid accusations of racism. By analyzing specific clips, I was able to provide examples of polysemic interpretations that are possible with many of his jokes and skits. This, in itself, is a method for deflecting accusations of racism. Overall, this paper can help get the ball rolling on a topic that deserves attention. Racial insensitivity can only be erased with a concerted effort. It is important that future generations are aware of the hurtful ways in which comedy can be used.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

Interpreting the societal effect of *Tosh.0* is a complicated task. It is difficult because the creators of the show have intentionally created a program that is defensible against accusations of racism. Tosh supporters point to the fact that he is portraying a satirical character and claim that he should not be taken seriously. Another point of defense (one that Tosh fans are exceedingly fond of) is the idea that Tosh attacks all types of different people and races. They say this makes him equally offensive to all and therefore not a racist. However, I believe the data proves these claims false. Blacks had by far the greatest amount of racial clips and the stereotypes used to describe them were generally more negative than with Whites and Asians.

As described previously, *Tosh.0* has the potential for polysemic interpretations. The show's humor can be interpreted as promoting stereotypes or critiquing those who hold them. However, this interpretation is completely dependent upon whether viewers perceive Tosh as a satirically based character or a reality-based person. The problem is that Tosh never explicitly states his intentions. I think this is because doing so would detract from the show's edginess and entertainment value for some. Audiences never see Daniel Tosh speak in-depth about his views on racism. He refuses to take part in any interviews or to discuss the show in detail. The literature review mentions that humor can be used to disrupt stereotypical views and heal racism. However, this is only accomplished if comedians ridicule racists. It must be clear that those with racist thoughts are the real targets of the joke. In *Tosh.0*, this is purposefully unclear, meaning that the

show's jokes can be understood as promoting racial stereotypes. Dave Chappelle faced the same issue with his show. Chappelle, however, made it clear that he was portraying different characters. His goal was to lessen the pain of racism by laughing at it. Although Chappelle's intentions were pure, he realized the danger caused by polysemic interpretation (Chappelle, 2013). Fearful of being more of a problem than a solution, he responsibly stepped out of the limelight and left his widely popular show for good. Tosh, however, throws racism in the audience's face for shock value, then asks them to decide whether he has gone too far. He hides behind jokes with double meanings and purposefully presents inconsistent perspectives and opinions in order to keep viewers from pinning him as a racist. Because of this, it is my opinion that *Tosh.0* does more to perpetuate racism than it does to weaken it.

In my mind, it takes a mature, observant and somewhat educated person to understand that Tosh is supposedly mocking racist views. This person can look at the show and see it from a counter-hegemonic perspective. They can comprehend the idea of Tosh being the brunt of the joke for his ignorance and racist views. Even if this person is interpreting these jokes in a progressive way, is the show accomplishing anything? These types of people have already formed their own opinions about the world. They understand that stereotypes can be wrong and hurtful. In their case, the show is not teaching them anything. It does nothing to weaken racism and only reaffirms the belief that racism is wrong for those who already think that way.

However, there are also younger fans of the show that are still forming their worldview. Tosh provides these viewers with no disclaimer that his racist humor is ironic. They only see the racial stereotypes and offensive jokes delivered episode after

episode. It seems more likely that these impressionable viewers could start to view the jokes as a harmless part of reality rather than spontaneously develop the ability to interpret them satirically.

This is why studies of this nature are important. As Meyer has said, racial humor is a double-edged sword. It can both heal and hurt. In the case of racial humor, there is hardly a gray area. As stated in the literature review, overtly racist humor is only acceptable if the person saying the joke is disparaged first. To quote Shouse, “the clown may play at being a bully, without some element of incongruity the bully is not likely to be seen as a clown” (Shouse, 2007, p. 4). Tosh simply does not do enough, in my opinion, to always be seen as the clown. After conducting the research, the conclusions are surprising. When I started this paper, I set out to prove that *Tosh.0* was progressive and that this type of programming could help heal racism in America. However, the more I researched, the less my hopes were found to be true. As Banjo (2011) mentions in his paper, not all interpretations of ethnic comedy are equal. There is too much room for the wrong interpretations.

The majority of the show is ridiculous, edgy and fun. However, more attention must be given to its racial humor. Daniel Tosh needs take some form of responsibility for his words. Comedians today must be careful with their jokes and at least somewhat clear in their intentions. The only way to solve the problem is if *everyone* is laughing together.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Complete List of Clips Found

Asian

Is it Racist? -Asian People What?
Amazing Asians
Parallel Parking
Asians Stay Warm
Thai Pile-Up
Asian Ping Pong Army
Christopher Walken Impression Mashup
White Break-dancer
Face Foot Fetish
Is it Racist-Slurs
The Adventures of Big Ass Baby
Asian Jump Rope
Cars in Snow Carnage
Guy on Car Hood
Harmonic Kissing
Japanese Pole Pull Down
31-Legged Race
Guess What Happens Next-Fire Crotch Stomp
Splits Race
Doll Wrestle
Japanese Chiropractor
The Worst Driver in China
Dessert Bees
Video Breakdown-Hits and Run
Mud Divers

Black

Black Twitter
McDonald's Segregated Website
Average Homeboy
Six Skinheads See A Black Guy
Pole Dance Uncensored
The Angry Black Preacher
Blackface kid

Black Santa
Is it Racist? African Creatures
Web Redemption-Prancing Elites
Web Redemption-misses every layup
Wig Dive
Porn Theatre
Bubb Rubb
Stereotypes are not Always True-Uncensored
Writer's Dance Off
Living Photograph
Six Skinheads see a Black Guy
I did a Handrail
Tickle Blackout
Is it Racist? Slurs Web Redemption Bad Ventriloquist
Todd Glass' Awful Prank Show
Nerf Hoops
Crack Ninja
Baby Oil Kid
Funeral Dance
Black Kid at Rave
Bus Hits UT Student
Zombie Attack
Nasal Pore Hummus
Kick Fight
Sweet Brown
Black Pool Party
Mean Black Girls Hate Aeropostale
White Break-dancer
Watermelon Eating Contest
Responsible Friend
Crackhead Tossing
Ballbershop
Is it Racist? Adding an A
Alabama Leprechaun
Surfer Interview Fail Extended Interview
Black Guy in a Mosh Pit
Racist Baby
Pole Dance
Behind the Crappy Internet Music "Chocolate Rain"
Nobody in the Metro
Bug in Mouth Reporter
Dildo Fight
Chicago Al's Sex Tips
Is it Racist? National Spelling bee

White

The Stunt Guy
Spoken Word Fail Guy's Web Redemption
Pool Jumping
Average Homeboy
Karate Kid vs. Gangsta
Six Skinhead See a Black Guy-may want to comment on
Kayak Water Polo
White Power Milk
Bad DJ
Nerf Hoops
Gingers have souls
Is it racist? Slurs
Bad Ventriloquist
Blackface kid
60 minutes with Krispy Kreme
Tickle blackout
White break-dancer
Black guy in a mosh pit
Fire Dunk-USE this one
Is it Racist? Adding an A
Tacos Del Rio fight-use this one
Tosh Daniel Webchat-highlights differences
Jet Ski Parking-says white trash titanic.
Video Breakdown-sleepy cab driver-says whites shouldn't be driving cabs.

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