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More engagement equals more persuasion? How entertainment experiences predict attitudinal effects of satirical news articles

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Abstract: Previous research found that satirical news has mixed effects on attitudes among the public: both large, small, and no effects have been observed. Our research aims to improve our understanding of the explanatory mechanisms behind persuasive effects of satirical news. It tests the prediction that satirical news increases negative attitudes toward satirical targets (e.g., politicians, journalists) through increased hedonic engagement (i.e., enjoyment) and eudaimonic engagement (i.e., appreciation). Two experiments were conducted in which participants were exposed to satirical and regular news articles, one in the United States (Study 1, $N = 679$) and one in the Netherlands (Study 2, $N = 675$). Results showed that a satirical news article targeting a company elicited more company distrust than a relevant (but not an irrelevant) regular news article, consistently across countries. Contrary to predictions, the main effects were suppressed rather than explained by higher levels of hedonic engagement with satirical news and were explained by lower instead of higher levels of eudaimonic engagement. Going against earlier findings and based on two different interpretations of the message discounting hypothesis, we explain why our work demonstrates that entertainment experiences can also reduce rather than produce effects of satirical news articles on negative target attitudes.

Keywords: satirical news; humor; hedonic entertainment; eudaimonic entertainment

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1 Introduction

Satirical news (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *The Onion*) is a popular genre for information and humorous commentary about current affairs (e.g., Becker and Waisanen 2013). An important aim of satirical news (a specific type of satire) is to hold politicians, journalists, and other societal actors accountable for their performance and behavior (e.g., Painter and Hodges 2010). Given that satirical news inherently provides criticism on issues, events, people, and organizations in the news (e.g., Baym 2005), dozens of experiments have been conducted to identify the persuasive effects of satirical news on message-congruent attitudes of the general public (e.g., attitudes towards politicians; support for policy issues; e.g., Becker and Waisanen 2013). Various studies showed that satirical news can have persuasive effects by changing its audience's perceptions on social actors and issues (e.g., Anderson and Becker 2018; Boukes and Hamelers 2020; Skalicky et al. 2023). However, a meta-analysis demonstrated that evidence for persuasive effects of satirical news is limited (Burgers and Brugman 2022).

The effects reported in previous satirical news research vary considerably in occurrence, size, and direction, and were shown to depend on study design choices (Burgers and Brugman 2022). To gain more insight into the underlying causes of the persuasiveness of satirical news, several scholars have argued to pay more research attention to entertainment experiences (Becker 2020; Holbert et al. 2014). While the political and journalistic impacts of satirical news are both well worth studying (see Becker and Waisanen 2013 for a literature review), the genre first and foremost seeks to entertain audiences, often through humor (Becker 2020; Holbert et al. 2014). Consequently, it is argued that entertainment experiences with satirical news may be closely connected to its persuasive effects (Becker 2020; Holbert et al. 2014).

A variety of theories and models can be used to take an entertainment perspective to study satirical news. Based on a comprehensive synthesis of information-processing literatures, Schneider et al. (2021) proposed an *extended dual-process model* that links entertainment experiences to persuasive effects. This model postulates that entertainment media can influence public attitudes in two ways: (a) implicitly, through hedonic engagement (e.g., enjoyment or pleasure), and (b) reflectively, through eudaimonic engagement (e.g., appreciation of meaning or purpose; Schneider et al. 2021). Applied to satirical news, this would mean that the genre is persuasive when its humorous content leads to enjoyment, and its critical content leads to perceptions of meaningfulness of information (e.g., Tchernev et al. 2021).

However, the predictions that these two types of positive entertainment experiences lead to attitudinal effects of satirical news have to date been under-investigated (Becker 2020). For instance, Peifer (2016) found that hedonic

engagement had both positive and negative attitudinal effects, but eudaimonic engagement was not taken into account in this study. Möller and Boukes (2022) demonstrated that only eudaimonic engagement, but not hedonic engagement, positively impacted topic-related behavioral intentions, but satirical news effects on attitudes were not tested. A study by Strick (2021) on humor more generally showed that funny, meaningful content increased individuals' positive emotions and reduced their negative emotions, but this too does not provide evidence about effects on attitudinal persuasion. The main contribution of the current research is thus to improve our understanding of the attitudinal effects of satirical news, by examining entertainment experiences as explanatory mechanisms.

In addition, experimental studies on the persuasiveness of satirical news may differ on two dimensions which have seldomly been compared directly: the role of (a) different experimental control groups (O'Keefe 2023) and (b) cultural context (e.g., Holbert et al. 2014). In this project, we take on both dimensions by testing the effects of satirical news using different control groups (i.e., irrelevant vs. relevant regular news) and in different cultural contexts (The United States vs. the Netherlands). The relevance of these design choices for satirical news effects on persuasion is discussed below.

2 Satirical news effects

According to the mentioned meta-analysis of seventy satirical news experiments, satirical news does not by default have persuasive effects on outcome variables such as attitudes (Burgers and Brugman 2022). This contrasts many claims made in the literature about the power of satire to persuade (e.g., Baym 2005; Becker and Waisanen 2013; Leicht 2023). Overall, earlier studies found both no, small, and large effects, sometimes in opposite directions (Burgers and Brugman 2022). It is likely that various boundary conditions (i.e., specific circumstances or factors) determine whether persuasive effects of satirical news on attitudes occur.

When and how entertainment media such as satirical news have persuasive effects has been the subject of much research (e.g., Becker and Waisanen 2013). Schneider et al. (2021) reviewed previous research that examined the persuasiveness of entertainment media that addressed politics and society. They found two routes of experience-related persuasion. On the one hand, people often consume entertainment media such as satirical news to regulate their mood and arousal (Schneider et al. 2021). Such pleasure-driven motivations are commonly called hedonic motivations (e.g., Oliver and Bartsch 2010). When audiences engage with media hedonically, they generally have a low motivation to reflect on the information that is provided. Because audiences are engaged nonetheless, the information can still be

transferred implicitly, resulting in automatic and unconscious persuasion (Schneider et al. 2021).

On the other hand, individuals may be motivated to consume entertainment media for reasons that involve more complex social and cognitive rewards (Schneider et al. 2021). Entertainment media such as satirical news can be perceived as meaningful, for instance, because they help people learn more about themselves and the world around them (Droog et al. 2020), and because they can make difficult topics easier to understand (Jennings et al. 2019). This is commonly called eudaimonic engagement (e.g., Oliver and Bartsch 2010). Often when this is the case, audiences thoroughly reflect on the provided information, which can prompt reflective persuasive effects, where information is transferred consciously (Schneider et al. 2021).

As discussed before, few to no studies in satirical news research have tested these proposed routes of persuasion of entertainment media (Schneider et al. 2021) in relation to attitudinal effects. To address this gap, we focused on the attitude towards the satirical target as the attitudinal effect of interest. The meta-analysis of satirical news experiments found only tentative evidence for the persuasive effects of satirical news in general, but showed that effects are likely to occur when a target (e.g., politicians, journalists) is criticized rather than an issue (e.g., societal trends, policies; Burgers and Brugman 2022). By focusing on attitudes about the satirical target (from now on labelled target attitudes), we optimized our ability to test the routes of persuasion. In line with such earlier studies, we used regular news as the control group. Based on the above, we hypothesized the following:¹

H1: Satirical news exposure leads to more negative target attitudes than regular news exposure.

Following the model by Schneider et al. (2021), we next hypothesized that these effects would be explained by increased engagement with the satirical news, via two routes:

H2: There is a positive indirect effect of exposure to satirical (vs. regular) news on negative target attitudes through hedonic engagement, such that exposure to satirical news leads to more hedonic engagement which, in turn, leads to more negative target attitudes.

H3: There is a positive indirect effect of exposure to satirical (vs. regular) news on negative target attitudes through eudaimonic engagement, such that exposure to satirical news leads to more eudaimonic engagement which, in turn, leads to more negative target attitudes.

¹ We preregistered our research, including the hypotheses, on the Open Science Framework (OSF): <https://osf.io/u9dgr/>. Although our predictions have not changed, we have revised the wording of the hypotheses to enhance their alignment with the paper's argumentation.

3 Differences in control groups

When examining the persuasive effects of satirical news, the choice of the comparison condition is crucial. Previous research has used, at least, two different types of control groups. This decision is based on different assumptions regarding the composition of the satirical news audience (Burgers and Brugman 2022). Some researchers expose participants in the control group of satirical-news experiments to information that is irrelevant to the topic of the satirical news condition. This decision is in line with the assumption that satirical news mostly appeals to individuals who normally consume little regular news, because satirical news makes current affairs more fun and easier to keep up with and understand (e.g., Baym 2005). Following this assumption, satirical news would often be people's first introduction to the topic at hand. Other researchers expose participants in the control group to relevant information (i.e., regular news about the topic) because they assume that satirical news particularly attracts people who are already interested in consuming news (e.g., Young and Tisinger 2006). After all, audience members often require some background information to fully appreciate the humorous, satirical critique.

The meta-analysis on satirical news effects found similar persuasive effects of satirical news when compared to both types of control groups (irrelevant information; relevant information, see Burgers and Brugman 2022). However, most analyzed studies included only one of these control groups. In order to validate the meta-analytic finding that exposure to satirical news drives persuasive effects (rather than the characteristics of the regular news control group), we simultaneously include both types of control conditions in our experiments. This is also in line with a call for more scholarly attention to how much the choice of a control group impacts the interpretation of results (O'Keefe 2023). Thus, to ensure a complete understanding of the effects of satirical news, we compared satirical news effects to both (a) a control group in which participants were exposed to unrelated news about a different target (i.e., irrelevant regular news) and (b) a control group in which participants were exposed to related news about the same target that was mocked in the satirical news condition (i.e., relevant regular news).

4 Differences in cultural context

Most satirical news experiments have been conducted in the USA (Burgers and Brugman 2022). Satirical news effects observed in US studies may, however, not always generalize to other countries because countries often differ in cultural, social, and political contexts (Holbert et al. 2014; Leicht 2023; Skalicky et al. 2023). Although

empirical evidence on differences in satirical-news reception across cultures is very limited, some current research suggests that the same satirical news article may be perceived differently across cultures (e.g., O'Connor 2017). For instance, Skalicky et al. (2023) found cultural differences between the UK and New Zealand in liking of the satirical article, and O'Connor (2017) found that political candidates discussed in satirical news were evaluated differently in the USA and the UK. As such, a core question for research on satirical news is whether effects found in the USA generalize to other countries and cultural contexts or whether they are specific to the USA. To test the potential influence of these contexts we conducted our experiment in both the USA (Study 1) and the Netherlands (Study 2; i.e., identical design and set-up). The Netherlands was chosen because this European country is characterized by a similar interest in satire as the USA (Boukes 2018), while it differs from the USA in terms of its satirical-news landscape (Brugman and Burgers 2025). American satirical news outlets generally have a clear political orientation, being either liberal or conservative (Young 2019). This is possibly the result of the country's two-party political system. The Netherlands operates under a coalition government system where both left- and right-leaning parties can collaborate in governance. This dynamic encourages satirists to be more adaptable and nuanced in their political critique, allowing them to respond effectively to shifting alliances between parties – whether they move from opposition to coalition or vice versa. Consequently, Dutch satirists are associated with (investigative) journalism (Nicolai et al. 2022), potentially more strongly than is the case for their American colleagues. As a result, we expect there could be differences in how American and Dutch audiences respond to the same satirical news content.

5 Study 1: United States

5.1 Methods

5.1.1 Design and participants

In contrast to most earlier experiments that exposed participants to television show segments (Burgers and Brugman 2022), we varied a written article that participants were exposed to. The experiment had a unifactorial between-subjects design that varied the article type. This allowed us to create three text versions (satirical news vs. relevant regular news vs. irrelevant regular news) that were as similar as possible in terms of length and provided information but that differed in genre. For the satirical news condition, we created three versions of a satirical news article in which satire was operationalized using different linguistic means (i.e., without a figurative frame/with only literal language, with a metaphorical frame, and with a hyperbolic frame).

Originally, we additionally aimed to test whether our findings would vary between different types of figurative framing in satirical news. Because no significant differences in any of the outcome variables were found between these three versions of the satirical news article (see Appendix B in the Supplementary Materials), we have in this article collapsed these in one satirical news condition. For clarity and focus purposes, we thus only report the results related to our hypotheses comparing satirical news, irrelevant regular news, and relevant regular news (*H1*, *H2*, *H3*). Results related to our hypotheses regarding the persuasive effects of specific forms of figurative framing in satirical news are reported and discussed in Appendix B in the Supplementary Materials.

A preregistered *a-priori* power analysis suggested a required sample size for the five conditions of around 700 to achieve a power of 0.80 (Cohen's *f* of 0.13 following Walter et al. 2018). We ultimately collected 750 participants to include a buffer of approximately 5 % for excluding participants based on our predetermined criteria. They were recruited online in May 2022 by means of panel service *Prolific* (<https://app.prolific.co/>) and were excluded from analysis when they (a) withdrew their consent within 48 hours of survey completion ($n = 0$), (b) did not have the American nationality ($n = 31$), (c) did not grow up speaking English ($n = 10$), (d) were younger than 18 years of age ($n = 0$), (e) failed one or both attention checks² ($n = 16$), and (f) showed signs of straight-lining³ ($n = 13$). The total sample consisted of 679 participants, which was close to the desired sample size. The average age of participants was 38.70 years ($SD = 12.70$). 53.9 % of participants identified as female, and 60.1 % had an undergraduate degree or higher. On average, participants identified slightly more often as liberal than conservative ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.70$; 1 = *very liberal*, 7 = *very conservative*). See Appendix A in the Supplementary Materials for more details.

5.1.2 Stimulus materials

The manipulation of article type consisted of both a general source cue and the actual article text. Regarding source, participants were informed that the article they were going to read was either taken from a website “that covers current affairs” (both regular news articles) or from one “that makes fun of current affairs” (satirical

2 These checks were (a) a timer on the article page that kept track of reading time and (b) an open question asking participants to summarize the main point of the article. Participants were excluded from analysis when they read the article in less than 8 seconds (i.e., where the distribution of reading times seemed to take on the shape of a normal distribution in the histogram we plotted) and/or provided a nonsense answer to the open question.

3 Participants were considered to engage in straightlining when the standard deviations of their general company distrust scores (which included an item that deviated in scoring direction from the others), and hedonic and eudaimonic engagement scores were all zero.

news). This general source cue ensured that, as is typically the case in real life, participants were aware of the media context of the articles and would therefore interpret them as intended (i.e., serious vs. satirical).

Next, for the creation of the article text, we adapted a satirical news article created by *The Onion* (2019). This article mocked news about advertisements from fast-food conglomerate McDonald's about having added healthier items to their menus, which was part of the new corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaign the company launched to promote healthier diets and lifestyles. The satirical article conveyed skepticism about McDonald's true motives for the CSR ad campaign, suggesting it served to increase McDonald's profits.

The regular news articles were created based on the satirical news article to maintain the same article structure and reflected a typical non-satirical way to report on the same campaign. The relevant regular news article described that McDonald's was adding healthier items to the menu as well but without the humorous criticism. The irrelevant regular article described the CSR campaign of another company, Adidas (i.e., and how the company was adding more sustainable clothing to its catalog). See Appendix C in the Supplementary Materials for the texts belonging to the article types and for a visual example.

5.1.3 Procedure

At the start of the questionnaire, participants first answered questions that covered several potential control and demographic variables: their demographics, regular news consumption, and general attitudes towards a list of companies, including McDonald's. Depending on the experimental condition, participants were then presented with one of the articles. They were asked to carefully read it and answer questions about it. Subsequently, the target attitude variables were measured followed by the mediator variables (i.e., hedonic and eudaimonic engagement) to avoid potential demand effects caused by participant awareness of the goal of the survey questions. The following control variables were measured last: fast food consumption, satirical news consumption, and disparagement and complex humor preferences. In the debriefing of the study, we thanked participants and emphasized that the article they had read was "fabricated by the researchers for the purpose of the study" (regular news) or "distorted facts about the company for a humorous effect" (satirical news).

5.1.4 Measures

The below variables were measured by asking to which extent participants agreed with various statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Negative target attitudes. We measured the outcome of interest in this study by focusing on company distrust in two ways. General company distrust was measured using Newell and Goldsmith's (2001) corporate trust scale. We rephrased one negated item into a non-negated item to prevent confusion among participants. Participants indicated their agreement with four statements: (a) "I trust McDonald's" (reverse coded), (b) "McDonald's makes truthful claims" (reverse coded), (c) "McDonald's is honest" (reverse coded), and (d) "I am skeptical of what McDonald's tells me". Participants who read the Adidas article were warned beforehand that some questions may not be related to the article and were subsequently also presented with these statements about McDonald's. All items were averaged to form a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$; $M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.29$). We additionally measured company distrust more concretely in relation to the intended message of the satirical news article. Participants were asked to which extent they agreed with the statement: "*McDonald's is truly committed to helping people make healthy life choices*". Scores on this item were reverse-coded to indicate participants' distrust of the company's commitment to the CSR objective ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.33$).

Hedonic engagement. Hedonic engagement was measured using Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) three-item enjoyment scale. In the original scale, one item asked whether participants had had a good time reading the article, but the articles used in our study were possibly too short for participants to experience having had a good time. We therefore replaced that item to improve the fit of the scale to the stimulus materials with (a) I enjoyed reading the article. Participants also indicated to which extent they (b) had fun reading the article, and (c) thought the article was entertaining. A scree plot indicated that the three items belonged to only one factor. The scale was shown to be reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$; $M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.45$).

Eudaimonic engagement. Eudaimonic engagement was measured using Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) three-item appreciation scale. In the original scale, one item asked participants to which extent they were moved by the article. However, this study's articles were not meant to be moving. To improve the fit of the scale to the stimulus materials, we replaced this item with (a) The article encouraged me to reflect on the topic of the article. We additionally asked participants to which extent they found that the article (b) was meaningful and (c) thought-provoking. Again, only one factor emerged from the scree plot. This scale was also found to be reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$; $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.36$).

Text perceptions. To determine whether participants' perceptions of the articles differed from each other in expected directions based on the genre of the articles, we asked participants to which extent they would describe the article as (a) funny, (b) critical, (c) easy to understand (reverse coded to indicate perceived complexity), (d) believable, (e) objective, and (f) informative. In line with the manipulations, the

satirical news articles were predicted to score higher on a, b, and c, and the regular news articles to score higher on d, e, and f.

5.2 Results

The data, code, and output for this study are openly available on OSF: <https://osf.io/u9dgr/>. See Figure 1 below and Appendix D in the Supplementary Materials for the variable means and standard deviations per article type.

5.2.1 Randomization checks

We checked whether participants were evenly assigned to the experimental conditions across a set of relevant participant characteristics. Randomization was successful when conditions did not significantly differ from each other in terms of these characteristics. This was shown to be the case for age ($F(4, 674) = 1.71, p = 0.15$), gender ($\chi^2(4) = 3.55, p = 0.47$), level of education ($\chi^2(20) = 15.45, p = 0.75$), self-reported conservatism ($F(4, 674) = 0.39, p = 0.81$), television news consumption ($F(4, 674) = 0.27, p = 0.90$), print newspaper consumption ($F(4, 674) = 0.80, p = 0.52$), satirical news consumption ($F(4, 674) = 1.54, p = 0.19$), prior attitude towards McDonald's ($F(4, 674) = 0.90, p = 0.46$), and fast-food consumption ($F(4, 674) = 0.71, p = 0.59$). However, we found significant differences between conditions in online news consumption ($F(4, 674) = 3.00, p = 0.02, \eta^2 = 0.02$), disparagement humor preferences ($F(4, 674) = 3.99, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.02$), and complex humor preferences ($F(4, 674) = 2.64, p = 0.03, \eta^2 = 0.02$). These variables were measured at the end of the survey to avoid priming participants about the study objectives. This meant that they were measured after condition exposure, which may explain these differences in scores between conditions. The three variables were therefore included as controls in the hypothesis testing.

5.2.2 Text perception checks

Analyses of the text perceptions showed that the article types (satirical news, irrelevant regular news, relevant regular news) differed as expected (see Appendix E in the Supplementary Materials for the statistical details, including exact p -values, and Figure 1 for a visual overview of the results). The satirical news articles were considered funnier and more critical than the regular news articles. The regular news articles were also found to be more believable, objective, and informative than the satirical news articles. The satirical news articles were finally only perceived as more complex than the relevant regular news article, with no significant difference when compared to the irrelevant news article. None of the text perceptions differed

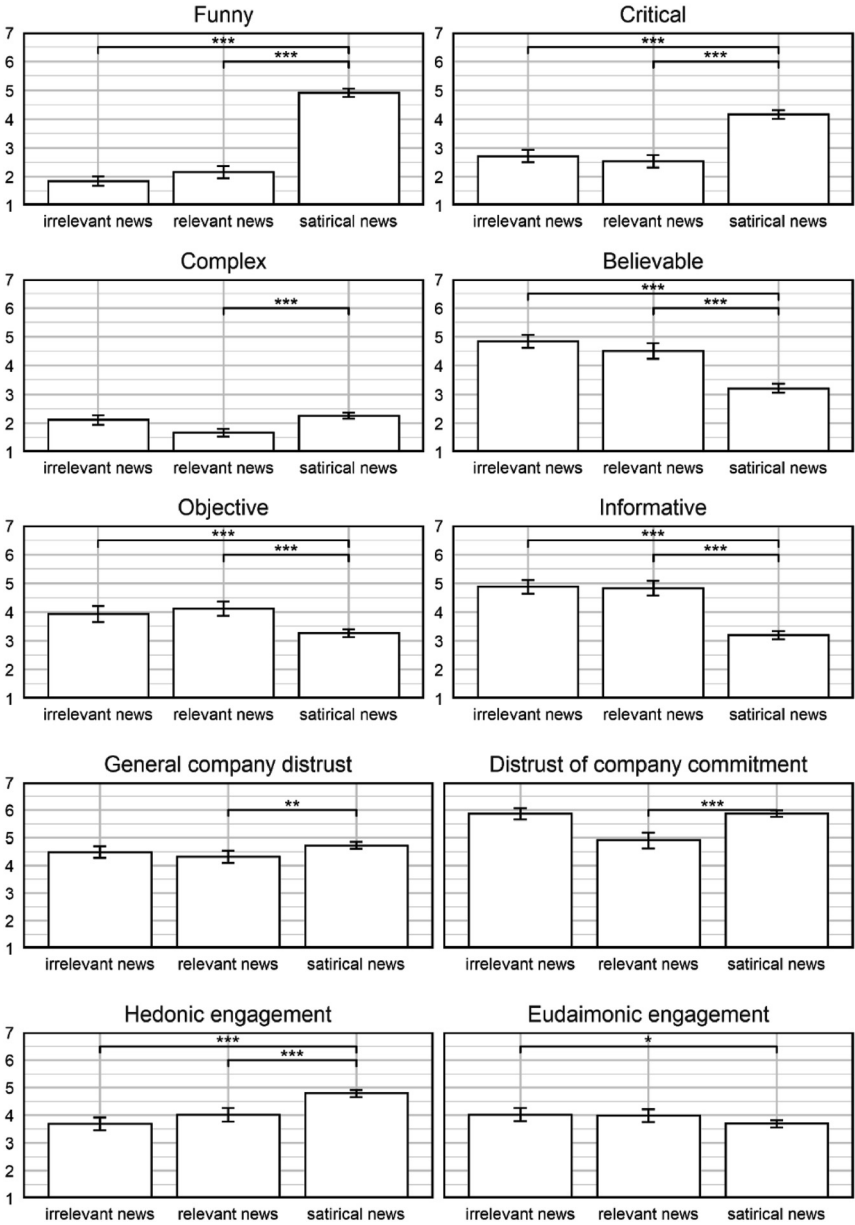


Figure 1: Study 1 means with 95 % confidence intervals (CI). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; no bracket indicates a non-significant comparison; significance levels were determined based on pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni correction.

significantly between the three figurative framing versions of the satirical news article.

5.2.3 Hypothesis testing

H1 predicted that satirical news would lead to more negative target attitudes than regular news. Separate ANOVAs with article type (irrelevant regular news, relevant regular news, satirical news) demonstrated significant differences in general company distrust ($F(2, 673) = 6.21, p = 0.002$) and distrust of company commitment ($F(2, 673) = 30.51, p < 0.001$). Pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni correction (see Appendix E in the Supplementary Materials, and see Figure 1) showed that, contrary to expectations, there were no significant differences between satirical news and irrelevant regular news in general company distrust ($p = 0.10$) or distrust of company commitment ($p = 1.00$). In line with the hypothesis, however, satirical news exposure led to both more general company distrust ($p < 0.001$) and distrust of company commitment ($p < 0.001$) than relevant regular news exposure. This means that *H1a* was partially supported by the data.

H2 predicted positive indirect effects of satirical news, compared to regular news on negative target attitudes through hedonic engagement. To test this mediation hypothesis, we used the PROCESS function for R (model 4; Hayes 2017) with 5,000 bootstraps separately for each dependent variable. Results showed that, compared to both types of regular news, hedonic engagement was higher for satirical news. Higher hedonic engagement, in turn, led to lower scores on both types of company distrust (see Table 1 for the regression estimates). This resulted in negative indirect effects of hedonic engagement on the effects of satirical news versus *irrelevant* regular news on general company distrust (estimate = -0.30 , 95%CI [$-0.41, -0.19$]) and distrust of company commitment (estimate = -0.24 , 95%CI [$-0.35, -0.15$]), as well as negative indirect effects of hedonic engagement on effects of satirical news versus *relevant* regular news on general company distrust ($b = -0.22$, 95%CI [$-0.34, -0.13$]) and distrust of company commitment ($b = -0.19$, 95%CI [$-0.30, -0.10$]). We thus, unexpectedly, found suppression effects: positive direct effects of satirical news on company distrust, but negative indirect effects via hedonic engagement. These effects were opposite to what we hypothesized in *H2*.

H3 predicted a positive indirect effect of satirical news, compared to regular news, on negative target attitudes through eudaimonic engagement. PROCESS results showed that satirical news was associated with less eudaimonic engagement compared to both types of regular news. Lower eudaimonic engagement was next associated with higher scores on both types of company distrust (see Table 1 for the regression estimates). In other words, we observed positive indirect effects through eudaimonic engagement on the effects of satirical news versus irrelevant regular

Table 1: Standardized regression estimates for the effects of satirical news in study 1 on company distrust, via audience engagement.

| X | M | Y | X → M | M → Y | c | c' |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Satirical vs. irrelevant news | Hedonic engagement | General distrust | 0.75 (0.13)*** | −0.31 (0.04)*** | 0.22 (0.13) | 0.52 (0.13)*** |
| Satirical vs. relevant news | Hedonic engagement | General distrust | 0.51 (0.14)*** | −0.35 (0.04)*** | 0.36 (0.13)** | 0.58 (0.12)*** |
| Satirical vs. irrelevant news | Hedonic engagement | Distrust of commitment | 0.75 (0.13)*** | −0.27 (0.04)*** | −0.02 (0.12) | 0.22 (0.12) |
| Satirical vs. relevant news | Hedonic engagement | Distrust of commitment | 0.51 (0.14)*** | −0.28 (0.04)*** | 0.93 (0.13)*** | 1.13 (0.13)*** |
| Satirical vs. irrelevant news | Eudaimonic engagement | General distrust | −0.22 (0.13)* | −0.21 (0.04)*** | 0.22 (0.13) | 0.16 (0.12) |
| Satirical vs. relevant news | Eudaimonic engagement | General distrust | −0.25 (0.13)* | −0.27 (0.04)*** | 0.36 (0.13)** | 0.27 (0.12) * |
| Satirical vs. irrelevant news | Eudaimonic engagement | Distrust of commitment | −0.22 (0.13)* | −0.27 (0.04)*** | −0.02 (0.12) | −0.10 (0.12) |
| Satirical vs. relevant news | Eudaimonic engagement | Distrust of commitment | −0.25 (0.13)* | −0.33 (0.04)*** | 0.93 (0.13)*** | 0.82 (0.12)*** |

Standard errors are shown in parentheses; X = predictor, M = mediator, Y = outcome; c = total effect of X on Y; c' = direct effect of X on Y; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

news on general company distrust (estimate = 0.06, 95%CI [0.01, 0.13]) and distrust of company commitment (estimate = 0.07, 95%CI [0.01, 0.15]), as well as versus relevant regular news on general company distrust (estimate = 0.09, 95%CI [0.02, 0.16]) and distrust of company commitment (estimate = 0.11, 95%CI [0.02, 0.21]). However, in contrast to what we had predicted, the positive indirect effects were caused by negative paths, not by positive paths. *H3* was therefore not supported by the data.

5.3 Conclusions

To summarize, Study 1 examined satirical news effects on negative target attitudes among American participants. In comparing satirical news with regular news, we found persuasive effects of satirical news on the two company distrust variables when relevant regular news was the control group, but not when compared to irrelevant regular news (*H1*). Surprisingly, hedonic engagement (*H2*) suppressed the persuasive effects. Eudaimonic engagement (*H3*) explained them but in an opposite way to what was hypothesized (i.e., through less rather than more eudaimonic engagement with satirical news compared to regular news).

6 Study 2

6.1 Methods

Dutch participants were recruited in May 2022 via *PanelClix* (<https://www.panelclix.nl/>) and received a reward set by the company (€2.10). While initially 758 completed surveys were returned, an additional 180 were requested because too many participants failed the (simple) attention checks. Out of the 938 Dutch participants, several were again excluded from analysis in case they (a) withdrew their consent within 48 hours of completing the survey ($n = 0$), (b) did not have the Dutch nationality ($n = 32$), (c) did not grow up speaking Dutch ($n = 20$), (d) were younger than 18 years of age ($n = 1$), (e) failed one or both attention checks ($n = 179$), and (f) showed signs of straight-lining ($n = 31$). 675 participants remained.

The average age of participants was 49.20 years ($SD = 16.20$), 50.2 % identified as female, and 44.5 % had an undergraduate degree or higher. On average, participants neither clearly identified as left- or right-leaning ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.29$).

The design and procedure for Study 2 was identical to Study 1. The instructions, stimulus materials and measures were translated by the first author of this paper into Dutch and checked by the two co-authors – all native Dutch speakers and fluent in English – for accuracy and naturalness. The scales for general company distrust (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$; $M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.19$), hedonic engagement (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$; $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.18$), and eudaimonic engagement (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$; $M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.26$) were also found to be reliable in Study 2. Distrust of company commitment was again measured with a single item ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.52$). See Figure 2 and Appendix D in the Supplementary Materials for the means and standard deviations for each article type.

6.2 Results

6.2.1 Text perception checks

The article types, again, scored almost entirely as expected relative to each other (see Appendix E in the Supplementary Materials for the statistical details, including exact p -values, and Figure 2 for a visual overview of the results). The satirical news articles were perceived as funnier and more complex than the regular news articles. Results further showed that the regular news articles were perceived as more believable, more objective, and more informative than the satirical news articles. The satirical news articles were only considered more critical than the relevant regular news

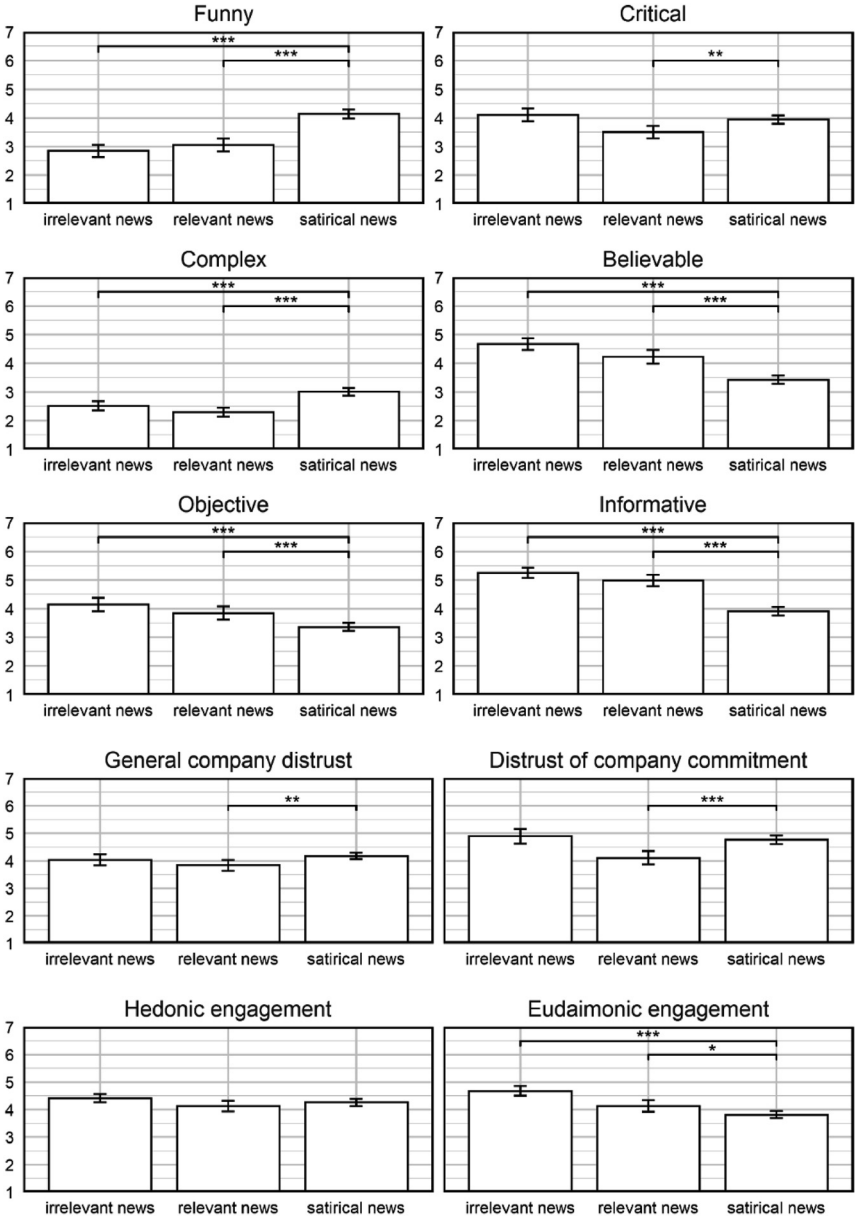


Figure 2: Study 2 means with 95 % confidence intervals (CI). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; No bracket indicates a non-significant comparison; significance levels were determined based on pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni correction.

article, with no significant difference found when compared to the irrelevant regular news article. We also again found no significant differences between the versions of the satirical news article in text perception scores.

6.2.2 Randomization checks

Participants were evenly assigned to the conditions across almost all participant characteristics: age ($F(4, 670) = 1.02, p = 0.40$), gender ($\chi^2(4) = 5.95, p = 0.20$), level of education ($\chi^2(20) = 20.18, p = 0.45$), self-reported conservatism ($F(4, 670) = 0.06, p = 0.99$), television news consumption ($F(4, 670) = 1.81, p = 0.13$), print newspaper consumption ($F(4, 670) = 0.47, p = 0.76$), satirical-news television show consumption ($F(4, 670) = 0.52, p = 0.72$), satirical-news online blog consumption ($F(4, 670) = 0.70, p = 0.59$), attitude towards McDonald's ($F(4, 670) = 0.53, p = 0.72$), and fast food consumption ($F(4, 670) = 0.83, p = 0.51$). In contrast to Study 1, randomization to conditions was also successful in Study 2 with respect to online news consumption ($F(4, 670) = 0.65, p = 0.63, \eta^2 = 0.004$) and complex humor preferences ($F(4, 670) = 1.75, p = 0.14, \eta^2 = 0.01$). However, participants in the conditions differed, just like in Study 1, regarding their disparagement humor preferences ($F(4, 670) = 3.50, p = 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.02$). This is why this variable was included as a covariate in the subsequent analyses.

6.2.3 Hypothesis testing

Following *H1*, we expected target attitudes to be more negative after exposure to satirical than regular news. Results of the corresponding ANOVAs demonstrated significant differences in general company distrust ($F(2, 671) = 4.38, p = 0.01$) and distrust of company commitment ($F(2, 671) = 12.43, p < 0.001$) between article types. Pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni correction (see Appendix E in the Supplementary Materials and Figure 2), however, found no significant differences between satirical news and irrelevant regular news in general company distrust ($p = 0.49$) or distrust of company commitment ($p = 0.84$). Nevertheless, general company distrust ($p = 0.01$) and distrust of company commitment ($p < 0.001$) were indeed significantly higher in case of satirical news than compared to relevant regular news. In line with Study 1, *H1* was partially supported.

H2 predicted that, through hedonic engagement, satirical news exposure would lead to more negative target attitudes compared to regular news. Results of PROCESS analyses revealed no significant indirect effects of satirical news on both company distrust variables via hedonic engagement. Surprisingly, hedonic response scores did not differ significantly between article types, while higher scores on hedonic engagement were in fact associated with lower scores on both types of company distrust (see Table 2 for the regression estimates). This was the case when irrelevant

regular news was the control group for effects on general company distrust (estimate = 0.04, 95%CI [−0.003, 0.10]) and distrust of company commitment (estimate = 0.07, 95%CI [−0.01, 0.15]) (but note that the lower limits are close to zero), and when relevant regular news was the control group for effects on general company distrust (estimate = −0.03, 95%CI [−0.11, 0.04]) and distrust of company commitment (estimate = −0.04, 95%CI [−0.14, 0.05]). For a different reason than in Study 1, *H2* was not supported. Nevertheless, if in Study 2 satirical news had increased hedonic engagement, this would have been indicative of suppression effects given the negative paths found from hedonic engagement to both company distrust variables.

H2 predicted that, through eudaimonic engagement, satirical news exposure would lead to more negative target attitudes compared to regular news. Results of PROCESS analyses showed positive indirect effects of satirical news on company distrust through eudaimonic engagement. Contrary to the expectations, satirical news produced more eudaimonic engagement compared to both types of regular news, with higher eudaimonic engagement scores being associated with reduced levels of both types of company distrust. Positive indirect effects were found of eudaimonic engagement on the effects of satirical news versus irrelevant regular news on general company distrust (estimate = 0.23, 95%CI [0.14, 0.33]) and distrust of company commitment (estimate = 0.35, 95%CI [0.23, 0.49]). The same was true for the

Table 2: Standardized regression estimates for the effects of satirical news in study 2 on company distrust, via audience engagement.

| X | M | Y | X → M | M → Y | c | c' |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Satirical vs. irrelevant news | Hedonic engagement | General distrust | −0.16 (0.12) | −0.23 (0.04)*** | 0.15 (0.12) | 0.10 (0.12) |
| Satirical vs. relevant news | Hedonic engagement | General distrust | 0.09 (0.12) | −0.33 (0.04)*** | 0.34 (0.11)** | 0.37 (0.11)*** |
| Satirical vs. irrelevant news | Hedonic engagement | Distrust of commitment | −0.16 (0.12) | −0.27 (0.05)*** | −0.11 (0.15) | −0.18 (0.14) |
| Satirical vs. relevant news | Hedonic engagement | Distrust of commitment | 0.09 (0.12) | −0.33 (0.05)*** | 0.65 (0.14)*** | 0.70 (0.14)*** |
| Satirical vs. irrelevant news | Eudaimonic engagement | General distrust | −0.70 (0.12)*** | −0.27 (0.04)*** | 0.15 (0.12) | −0.08 (0.12) |
| Satirical vs. relevant news | Eudaimonic engagement | General distrust | −0.26 (0.12)** | −0.34 (0.04)*** | 0.34 (0.11)** | 0.24 (0.11)* |
| Satirical vs. irrelevant news | Eudaimonic engagement | Distrust of commitment | −0.70 (0.12)*** | −0.34 (0.05)*** | −0.11 (0.15) | −0.47 (0.15)** |
| Satirical vs. relevant news | Eudaimonic engagement | Distrust of commitment | −0.26 (0.12)** | −0.40 (0.05)*** | 0.65 (0.14)*** | 0.50 (0.13)*** |

Standard errors are shown in parentheses; X = predictor, M = mediator, Y = outcome; c = total effect of X on Y; c' = direct effect of X on Y; * *p* < 0.05; ** *p* < 0.01; *** *p* < 0.001.

effects of satirical news versus relevant regular news on general company distrust (estimate = 0.10, 95%CI [0.02, 0.19]) and distrust of company commitment (estimate = 0.15, 95%CI [0.03, 0.28]). Just like in Study 1, the combination of negative rather than positive paths did not support *H3*.

7 Conclusions

Taken together, the results of Study 1 are almost entirely replicated in Study 2. A main difference was that no indirect effects through hedonic engagement were found because hedonic engagement was not higher after satirical news compared to regular news exposure. We will next discuss the theoretical implications of the results for both studies.

8 General discussion

To advance our understanding of the persuasive effects of satirical news, we explored two types of entertainment experiences as explanatory mechanisms (Becker 2020; Holbert et al. 2014). Drawing upon the extended dual-process model (Schneider et al. 2021) and building on insights provided by a meta-analysis of satirical news effects (Burgers and Brugman 2022), we conducted experimental studies in two countries. The studies tested the attitudinal effects of satirical news (i.e., on target distrust), as compared to both irrelevant and relevant regular news, and tested the mediating effects of hedonic and eudaimonic engagement. Our findings have several implications for satirical-news research and theory.

A first objective of the current research was to compare satirical news effects on target attitudes between control conditions. The findings point to the importance of explicitly justifying the control group in satirical news experiments (Burgers and Brugman 2022). Contrary to *H1*, we only found persuasive effects of satirical news compared to relevant not irrelevant news. Both regular news articles were relatively neutral in tone. The satirical news article was the only article that took a critical stance toward the company. It is possible that while the satirical news article might have therefore increased company distrust, the relevant regular news condition might have increased company *trust* (due to a lack of criticism), sufficiently widening the gap between scores in both conditions to find significant effects of satirical news. By contrast, the irrelevant news article might not have impacted trust in the company of interest, because participants in this condition were not provided with relevant information to base their judgments on, not resulting in a large enough gap in scores. Future research should further explore this dynamic of the different

genres affecting trust and distrust differently in parallel by complementing the study design with a critical relevant regular-news article.

Drawing on a comprehensive synthesis of research into the information processing of entertainment media (Schneider et al. 2021), a second main goal was to test whether the persuasive effects of satirical news on negative target attitudes would be explained by higher levels of both hedonic (*H2*) and eudaimonic (*H3*) engagement. Our findings contradicted these predictions. That is, mediation analyses showed that higher levels of hedonic engagement counteracted the effects of satirical news on company distrust (*H2*, Study 1), and lower rather than higher levels of eudaimonic engagement were associated with persuasion (*H3*, both Study 1 and 2). Results therefore surprisingly revealed that satirical news is most likely to result in more negative attitudes towards the target when they consider the satirical criticism neither thought-provoking nor funny rather than the other way around.

While unexpected given previous media entertainment research (Schneider et al. 2021), the finding about the role of hedonic engagement is in line with previous research into an important humor concept commonly referred to as message discounting (Nabi et al. 2007). Message discounting assumes that messages in satirical news are often discounted as “just” a joke. As a result, individuals tend to consider satirical messages as irrelevant to their own judgments and therefore engage in more counterarguing of satirical news (Nabi et al. 2007). It is thus possible that suppression effects of hedonic engagement occurred because people discounted the joke as irrelevant and accordingly engaged in counterarguing. This is supported by results from Droog and Burgers (2024, Studies 1–3) who demonstrate that message discounting can reduce the persuasiveness of satirical news.

However, some researchers have argued that message discounting facilitates rather than hinders persuasive effects of satirical news (e.g., LaMarre and Grill 2019; Polk et al. 2009). They proposed that message discounting results in little to no reflection of a message and, and consequently, in the implicit transfer of information. Our unexpected finding with respect to eudaimonic engagement could be explained by this alternative interpretation of the concept of message discounting. It opens up the possibility that satirical news increased negative target attitudes when eudaimonic engagement was low. Then, our participants may have discounted the satirical message as simply being something humorous but not meaningful at a deeper level. This could have led them to heuristically process the message, and consequently, be implicitly persuaded by it (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). We recommend that future research tests our explanations by measuring actual information processing variables (i.e., counterarguing, cognitive elaboration) when examining the indirect effects of the two entertainment experiences on the persuasiveness of satirical news.

Another contribution of this research was that the experiment was conducted in two countries to test whether findings would generalize across country contexts

(Holbert et al. 2014). The findings were almost entirely consistent across countries. This is a crucial insight given that most current satirical-news research has been conducted in a US setting (see Burgers and Brugman 2022). A main difference was that satirical news was associated with more hedonic engagement than regular news in the US, but no difference was found in the Netherlands. This could have to do with how consumer attitudes likely differ between these countries towards the issue that McDonald's focuses their CSR campaigns on. Fast food does not pose as much of a threat to public health in Europe, compared to the USA (e.g., Offer et al. 2010). As a result, the perceived issue importance and urgency of the humorous criticism of McDonald's new CSR campaign may have differed between American and Dutch participants, and therefore enjoyment of the humorous criticism too. To explain country-specific differences in satirical news effects on negative target attitudes such as company distrust, future research could focus on differences in issue attitudes.

Finally, a key limitation of this research is that the stimulus materials consisted of only one article set about one company. In addition, while we contrasted effects of satirical news with both regular news and irrelevant news, a third control condition that could be explored is the use of opinionative news with a non-humorous but critical content. We therefore hope future research can build on our work and test the generalizability of the effects for other satirical jokes about other targets in other settings. Furthermore, future research on persuasive effects of satirical news could also strive to further study how the interplay between audience members' interpretations of satirical news and emotions evoked by the satirical news affects persuasion.

Overall, this research adds to the scholarly understanding of how satirical news can have persuasive effects through entertainment effects (Becker 2020; Holbert et al. 2014). Our research contradicted previous related research on the topic (Möller and Boukes 2022; Peifer 2016; Schneider et al. 2021) because the satirical news article was more persuasive than (relevant) regular news, but this was not explained by *higher* enjoyment and appreciation of satirical news. Findings instead pointed to message discounting as an essential explanatory mechanism, both in its original meaning (i.e., counterarguing; Nabi et al. 2007) and in another, common interpretation of it (i.e., little cognitive elaboration; e.g., LaMarre and Grill 2019; Polk et al. 2009). This paper accordingly explored the reasons why entertainment experiences can in fact also reduce rather than produce attitudinal effects of satirical news. A next step in future research would be to understand when these indirect effects are negative or positive. This could resolve the puzzle of why previous research has produced mixed findings regarding the attitudinal effects of satirical news.

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Data availability: The data that support the findings of the two studies reported in this paper are openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository at <https://osf.io/u9dgr/>.

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