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Sensation Seeking, General Aesthetic Preferences, and Humor Appreciation as Predictors of Liking of the Grotesque

The research is based on a model of humor appreciation that was developed thirty years ago by means of a three-mode factor analysis (Ruch 1981). In this study 110 adults rated 48 jokes on 5 criteria. Based on factor analysis a model of humor appreciation was derived that is composed of a classification of jokes and cartoons and of basic dimensions of responses to humor. Both content and structure contributes to individual differences in humor and two structural dimensions (i. e., incongruity-resolution, nonsense) and one content dimension (sexual humor) need to be distinguished. Jokes and cartoons of the incongruity-resolution humor category are characterized by punch lines in which the surprising incongruity can be resolved. The common element in this type of humor is that the recipient first discovers an incongruity which is then resolvable upon consideration of information available elsewhere in the joke or cartoon. Nonsense humor also has a surprising or incongruous punch line, but the punch line may 1) provide no resolution at all, 2) provide a partial resolution (leaving an essential part of the incongruity unresolved), or 3) actually create new absurdities or incongruities. The responses to humor seem to be two-dimensional, as factors of funniness (representing all positive responses) and aversiveness (representing the negative responses). Thus, maximal appreciation of jokes and cartoons consists of high funniness and low aversiveness; while minimal appreciation occurs, if the joke is not considered funny but is found aversive. However, a joke can also be considered not funny but be far from being aversive; or it can make one laugh although there are certain annoying aspects.

Berlyne (1972) postulated that collative variables (such as novelty, incongruity, anomaly etc.) contribute to the stimulus potential of a variable, which, in turn, affects the appreciation of the artwork. These thoughts were used as a bridge to explore individual differences in humor appreciation (Ruch 1992). In short, appre-

ciation of INC-RES is hypothesized to be a manifestation of a broader need of individuals for contact with structured, unambiguous, stable forms of stimulation (i. e., preference for redundancy), whereas appreciation of the nonsense structure in humor reflects a generalized need for uncertain, unpredictable, and ambiguous stimuli (i. e., preference for stimulus uncertainty).

Earlier research used Wilson's (1973) dynamic theory of conservatism who postulates that this trait reflects a *generalized fear of both stimulus and response uncertainty*. This should lead more conservative individuals to show greater avoidance and dislike of novel, complex, unfamiliar, incongruous events and to prefer and seek out stimuli which are simpler, more familiar and congruent. This hypothesis was validated for visual art, poetry, and music. Not surprisingly, then, the hypotheses that conservative persons find incongruity-resolution humor more funny and nonsense humor more aversive than liberals could be substantiated. While conservatism does not predict the *seeking* of stimulus uncertainty, the trait of sensation seeking (Zuckerman 1994), and in particular the component of experience seeking (ES), does. ES involves the seeking of stimulation through the mind and the senses, through art, travel, even psychedelic drugs, music, and the wish to live in an unconventional style. There is evidence that ES is closely related to the novelty and complexity dimensions of stimuli. Therefore it was hypothesized and substantiated that ES will be positively related to appreciation of nonsense humor (Ruch 1992).

The present study expands the former by studying the relationship between humor appreciation and appreciation of the grotesque. As an art form the grotesque is described as an arbitrarily distorted, exaggerated representation, which seems ridiculous, absurd or scary. The grotesque seems to involve a structural element (i. e., the exaggerated deviation from the reality) and also content elements, like the fearful or disgusting. It is argued that both do add to the arousal potential of the text and hence will be appreciated by the same people that also like more incongruous (both initial and residual incongruity) forms of humor, more complex (vs. simple) visual art and by the high experience seeker. The *Test of Appreciation of the Grotesque* (TAG) was constructed on utilizing texts by authors such as Burroughs, Charms, Henscheid, von Kleist, Morgenstern, Rosendorfer, Schneider, and Valentin. Twelve experts were asked to rate the degree of grotesqueness of 81 text excerpts on a scale ranging from »0 = not at all« to »6 = very much«. The inter-rater reliability was high and the total score was used to select six excerpts of low, middle and high level of grotesqueness. The TAG was then given to 110 adults who also rated the 30 jokes and cartoons of the 3 WD (Ruch, 1992) for their perceived funniness and aversiveness. Furthermore, they filled in the Sensation Seeking Scale by Zuckerman (1994) (measuring level of thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, disinhibition and boredom susceptibility) and the Barron-Welsh Art scale (BWAS; Barron/Welsh 1952), which measures preference of complexity vs. simplicity in visual art.

The results confirmed liking and aversiveness of the grotesque were uncorrelated. Furthermore, the main hypothesis was confirmed which stated that a general tendency underlies these domains of aesthetics. Liking of grotesque texts correlated positively with appreciation of nonsense and preference for complexity in visual arts. Incongruity-resolution humor correlated only with liking of low level of grotesqueness. Aversiveness of all humor categories correlated positively with aversiveness of the grotesque, presumably due to the shared tendermindedness and negative affectivity. As expected, experience seeking is the subscale of sensation seeking predicting aesthetic preferences. Two step-wise regression analyses were computed with age, gender, the four sensation seeking subscales, the BWAS complexity and simplicity scales, and the 3 WD scores as predictors, and liking and aversiveness of the grotesque as criteria. Funniness of nonsense and Experience Seeking together correlated at .57 with the liking of the grotesque. Finding the grotesque aversive was even better predicted (multiple correlation of .64) by aversiveness of nonsense humor, aversiveness of sexual humor and negatively by ES. It is argued that more studies are needed comparing different domains of aesthetics. The framework of the experimental aesthetics encourages interdisciplinary research, which allows combining well-founded theories and empirical methodology.

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Full-length article in: JLT 3/2 (2009), 333-352.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Willibald Ruch/Julia Malcherek, Sensation Seeking, General Aesthetic Preferences, and Humor Appreciation as Predictors of Liking of the Grotesque.

In: JLTonline (05.11.2010)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-001295

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-001295>