

# A Case Study of Comedian Hannibal Buress and Humor as an Agent for Change

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## Abstract

*Comedian Hannibal Buress was launched into the national spotlight after a YouTube clip of his stand-up routine went viral in October 2014. In the clip, Buress addressed the sexual assault allegations against Bill Cosby, fueling renewed interest in the case in the public eye, leading to Cosby's arrest in December 2015. This case study examined the material in Buress' stand-up comedy specials to contextualize the clip and determine which classical theories of humor his work employs, as well as persuasive methods used to engage audiences and address sociopolitical subject matter.*

## I. Introduction

Within the past five years, stand-up comedian, writer, and actor Hannibal Buress has hurtled toward the pantheon of modern comedy A-Listers, with Buress' act being compared to critical and commercial darlings Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari, as well as Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, and other incisive Black comics (Zinoman, 2011). While his resume includes stints writing for both *Saturday Night Live* and *30 Rock* and supporting roles on cult-television hits *Broad City* and *The Eric Andre Show*, Buress inadvertently found himself in the national spotlight and the subject of major media scrutiny only after an online clip from a performance in Philadelphia in October 2014 went viral (Hsu, 2015). In the clip, Buress criticizes actor and comedian Bill Cosby for his seemingly conflated image as a moralistic, elder statesman for the Black community in light of 13 allegations of sexual assault at the time of the performance.

"Thirteen? And it's even worse because Bill Cosby has the fucking smuggest, old Black man public persona that I hate. Just gets on TV; '*Pull your pants up, Black people, I was on TV in the '80s! I can talk down to you because I had a successful sitcom!*' Yeah, but you raped women, Bill Cosby. So, brings you down a couple notches. '*I don't curse on stage!*' Well, yeah, you're a rapist, so, I'll take you sayin' lots of 'motherfucker's on *Bill Cosby: Himself* if you weren't a rapist . . . I want to just at least make it weird for you to watch Cosby Show reruns. Dude's image, for the most part, is public, teflon image. I've

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done this bit on stage, and people don't believe it. People think I'm making it up . . . If you didn't know about it, trust me. You leave here and google 'Bill Cosby rape.' It ain't funny. That shit has more results than 'Hannibal Buress'" (Eye Sight, 2014).

The joke had been a part of Buress' act for approximately six months by the time it was filmed and uploaded to YouTube by user 'eye sight,' but the clip skyrocketed Buress further into the limelight while simultaneously reigniting the controversial Cosby case for both the media and the general public. In the wake of the coverage of Buress' call-out, many other accusers stepped forward, leading to Cosby being charged and arrested for sexual assault in December 2015 (Elber). Speaking at a Television Critics Association event in January 2016 to promote his first special since the incident, Buress stated he was merely "doing a joke in my show and that shouldn't influence public opinion. I don't know if it should go that far. It's weird to me that a joke did that" (Elber).

While he downplays the role his joke had in the situation, Buress' material undoubtedly *did* influence public opinion, eroding the very same 'teflon image' of Cosby that the joke was deriding. One joke, which was never formally released aside from fan recordings uploaded online, set off a chain of events that irrevocably altered the image of Cosby in the American pop culture landscape and called into question the public's tendency to overlook heinous crimes when committed by beloved celebrities. Buress claims that he told the joke without intending repercussions for Cosby, but less than two minutes of on-stage riffing permanently shifted the zeitgeist for both Buress and Cosby alike (Raymer, 2015). The Cosby bit and its ensuing media frenzy led some, including GQ's Taffy Brodesser-Akner, to label Buress "a feminist hero" during an interview. Buress does not readily embrace the label; however, he claims his only prerogative is to be funny. But as Brodesser-Akner (2015) points out in the GQ profile piece, Buress' "main comedic jam is parsing things people say and do and then correcting them . . . Buress is like the smart-aleck kid brother who harps on your every error and hyperbolic moment, and who would be insufferable if he weren't incredibly funny."

Stand-up comedy, as an art form, is in a unique rhetorical position where the rules and taboos otherwise imposed on communication are temporarily suspended. Humor has a powerful potency as a persuasive tool, and beyond the old adage that it is only the court jester who can get away with criticizing a king, there is a scholastic and societal merit to understanding how humor can act as an agent for cultural change (Martin, 2007). And while Buress may not be a comedian with an overtly sociopolitical agenda, time and time again his material veers toward loftier subject matter, taking seemingly innocuous or outlandish premises and addressing issues of race, sex, and gender, the American political landscape, and cultural obsessions with drugs, alcohol, and violence. It's only because of his comedic skill that his carefully crafted bits can weave salient political points and poignant morality into his narratives, all the while giving off an air of spontaneity.

Through the veil of humor, comedians like Buress are able to get on a soapbox and influence the masses. In order to understand Buress' act and the influence he may have on his audience, it is necessary to understand the history and evolution of American stand-up comedy, particularly the subgenre known as 'charged humor,' as well as having operational working knowledge of the classical, sociological theories of humor and the nuanced, persuasive techniques employed by the performing comedian.

## II. Literature

In order to contextualize the works of Buress, one must first understand the three classical theories of humor, which explain how the material elicits the desired audience response of laughter. One must also understand the rhetorical methods employed when humor is used as a persuasive device, as well as the sociological role of the stand-up comedian. Then, to understand Buress' work in the canon of American stand-up comedy, one must understand the history and evolution of the art form, as well as having an understanding of Buress' comic persona.

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### ***Theories of Humor***

The three primary sociological theories of humor, collectively referred to as the classical theories of humor, suggest that comedy could be traced to three distinct types of interactions. There are other fringe theories of humor, but the universality of the three classical theories makes them prime focuses for research.

The relief theory suggests humor is drawn from the build-up and release of tension, often as a defense mechanism, in order for a speaker to vent or explore deeper feelings they might not otherwise be willing to address. The relief theory accounts for exposing vulnerabilities, the way one can find humor in situations that might otherwise be stressful, tragic or flat out unfunny (Sen, 2012). Relief theory accounts for the old idiom that laughter is the best medicine, as well as offering an explanation, via an expression of relief from stress, as to why one laughs when tickled (Lynch, 2002).

The superiority theory suggests humor relies on one party using ridicule, derision, or other put-downs to raise the speaker to an elevated position while drawing attention to the weaknesses, fallacies, and other drawbacks of a particular target or opponent (Dadlez, 2011). Self-deprecating humor can also fit the superiority theory, as one targets oneself in order to deflect attention from a point of weakness before another party targets the speaker in turn (Lynch, 2002). Superiority theory is one of the earliest humor theories, and in order for it to be employed successfully, the target of the humor must be established as inferior according to agreed upon (whether explicitly or implicitly) in-group/out-group social criteria (Sen, 2012). The superiority theory was supported by the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but is most often credited in its modern form to Hobbes, who wrote in *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* that “the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (Hobbes, 1994). In other words, superiority theory involves building oneself up at the expense of another, or at the expense of oneself in the case of self-effacing humor (Dadlez, 2011).

The incongruity theory relies on contradictions and incongruities in both the content and subject matter of the humorous message as well as the means by which that message is communicated to an audience. This theory accounts for the notion of ridiculousness, the exasperated reaction of incredulity one experiences in situations that seem irreconcilable with usual circumstances (Sen, 2012). The incongruity theory plays heavily on subverting one’s expectations in the case of stand-up comedy either by the comedians themselves doing or saying something unexpected, or by the subject of a joke initially being presented in a particular light as one thing, and then, through the course of the joke, being revealed to be something different than what the audience had been led to believe or expect. The inherent humor of incongruity theory relies on the initial realization of the incongruity, or ridiculousness, as well as its resolution, typically in the form of addressing how and why the ridiculousness is outside the norm (Lynch, 2002).

When the classical theories of humor were first being developed and researched, scholars looked at each independently, believing there could be a singular, comprehensive theory explaining why and how we find humorous material to be funny. More modern approaches look to synthesize the three different theories as different means of approaching the same goal (Sen, 2012). In many cases, a comedian could make use of all three classical theories in a single joke in an effort to make the audience laugh. Most often, superiority and incongruity theories overlap and interplay in the same context (Dadlez, 2011).

### ***Humor as a Persuasive Device***

In Lynch’s study of humor in the context of communications research, humor, especially in the context of stand-up comedy, is in its essence a message communicated from one party to another, with the implicit psychological motivation of entertaining the receiver. But whether the message is successful is dependent on the receiver’s understanding of the humorous message, which adds a social context and function for comedy that cannot be dismissed.

Lyttle’s (2001) research into humor as a persuasive device found three methods of persuasion theory utilizing humor to convey a message and achieve a desired outcome with an intended audience. Lyttle’s research found that humor can create a positive mood for the audience, making them less likely to disagree with the content of a persuasive message, that humor in the form of ironic wisecracks and sarcasm can distract from potential counterarguments to the persuasion, and that self-effacing humor can improve the credibility of its source by suggesting the source is being more honest by exposing vulnerabilities, thereby improving the persuasive effects of the message.

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In Nabi et al.'s (2007) study of the persuasive effect of humorous messages pertaining to social issues, it was found that past studies have attempted to quantify "humor's potentially unique ability to encourage consideration of positions that might otherwise be dismissed or ignored were humor not present to capture attention" (p. 31). But the scientific nature of the results is strenuous, considering the subjective nature of comedy. The study also found that the more naturalistic and conversational the context humor is presented in, the more effective its persuasive message can be. This is because the humor not only hooks the audience, but also keeps the audience enthralled longer. Nabi's study noted that past research often found that humorous messages can be a double-edged sword, with the humorous message's persuasive effect diminished by its potential to be dismissed as merely a joke. To counteract this potential pitfall, Nabi suggests, "The conclusion of a humorous message should reestablish serious intent. This would short-circuit the minimizing effect of discounting while still maintaining the benefit of the close information processing generated by entertaining messages" (pp. 50-51). Nabi also found that audience members who dismiss a message as a joke in the moment may retain the information, and after a gestation period it could potentially influence or alter their views after having had more time to process the message's content. The research found that "humor may have paved the way for attitude change by indirectly reducing counterargument and enhancing argument quality perceptions" (p. 39).

### ***The Role of the Comedian and the Sociology of Humor***

Stand-up comedy is an essential, though often overlooked, part of society. Mintz (1985) believes that stand-up "is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic and deeply significant form of humorous expression . . . performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past, and present" and its roots can be traced back to more primitive forms as part of live theatrical performances, circuses, vaudeville, and burlesque. It is only in recent history that stand-up has come to take on a more immediately recognizable form, but even that has developed and changed with each passing generation of comedians. Eras in stand-up are defined by the biggest working comedians, who set the tone, and influence those who come after. (Mintz, 1985). The comedian takes on a role with a grander purpose than to simply fire off punch lines; the comedian is, as Mintz puts it, "our comic spokesperson [and] mediator, an 'articulator' of our culture, and as our contemporary anthropologist" (p. 75).

Mintz (1985) attests that humor is the most revealing facet of a society, a cultural cornerstone that can be placed under sociological and anthropological lenses to tell us about the values, traditions, opinions, and contradictions of a particular people. Humor can reaffirm public opinion or reinforce common beliefs or accepted societal norms, but it can also take those same standardizations and shine a fresh light on them, surprising audiences by opening new lines of inquiry on seemingly familiar material. Jokes can be agents of chaos, using hyperbolic distortions of truth and reality to foster a fictionalized narrative for pure entertainment purposes, or they can be used to unite an audience under a shared notion, viewpoint, or in-group. Subconsciously grouping the individual members of the audience together as a cohesive collective is the reason comedians often begin their sets by working the room, addressing the crowd as a unified entity and testing the waters through the audience response and interactions to the comedian's opening statements. (Mintz, 1985).

### ***A History of American Stand-Up Comedy***

The earliest inklings of stand-up comedy in America, at least in a form recognizable when compared to its present-day incarnation, can be traced to late 19th century forms of entertainment including vaudeville, minstrel shows, circus clowns, and humorous speeches and monologues from clever performers. These performers were branded as "humorists" rather than comedians, notably including Mark Twain, whose works have stood the test of time more so than any of his contemporaries. In these early forms, these precursors to comedians, including "jugglers, contortionists, regurgitators, tumblers, ventriloquists, animal acts, minstrels, sketch artists, and musicians," performed a myriad of performances as part of variety shows (Krefting, 2014, p. 38).

By the 1950s, stand-up had begun "moving away from traditional jokes both in formula and content. Instead of the standard set-up and punch line, then repeat," trends shifted in favor of comedians who told narratives with humor woven throughout, a style that allowed performers to build a rapport with their audience members, who were given the impression that the comedian's act was a window into their personal lives (Krefting, 2014). As the art form developed, it began to take on features that, while staples of today's stand-up

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comedy, were quite novel in the 1950s, particularly comedians who would directly address members of the audience in conversation, using brief question-and-answer sessions as grounds for improvisational humor (Krefting, 2014).

In the 1950s and 1960s, comedy began to become an outlet for some to satirize culture and society, lampooning, at its core, the social contracts adopted in one way or another by most, if not all, members of society. Some comedians pushed more boundaries in regards to subject matter and adult language, with comedian Lenny Bruce garnering a reputation for being arrested for performing his raunchy material (Maslon, 2008). This trend continued into the 1970s, with some of the most successful comedians, like George Carlin and Richard Pryor, becoming stars in their own right by doubling down on the obscenity-ridden style of Bruce. The antithesis to these more vulgar comics were family-friendly names like Bill Cosby and Steve Martin, who were able to use their wider appeal to successfully crossover into other art forms, particularly television and film (Krefting, 2014).

But outside of the biggest names in the business, stand-up comedians were struggling to make ends meet. In the late 1970s, most mid-level and rookie comedians performed solely for exposure, rather than pay. Comedian Tom Dreesen took action in March 1979 and formed a union, the Comedians for Compensation, with other working comedians, to protest The Comedy Store in Los Angeles, California. Dreesen's union went on strike for six weeks, and garnered support from many of the biggest names in the business, which ultimately led Comedy Store owner Mitzi Shore to agree to pay \$25 for each performance. Despite the settlement, this new standard was not regularly enforced, which opened the door for other venues to standardize their wages and attract performers (Krefting, 2014). There were typically three levels of comedians: an opener, a feature, and the headliner. These newfound standards led to a proliferation of comedy clubs, even some chains, which spread across the United States.

By the mid 1980s, stand-up comedy had gone from being a career with little-to-no stability or chance at upward mobility to one where working comedians could support themselves and make a living telling jokes. By the 1990s, live comedy performances were a staple of entertainment across the country; Comedy Central gave stand-up comedy a regular home on television; and premium cable networks like HBO and Showtime provided an additional platform for comedians in the form of hour-long specials, which became a new mark of prestige. In contrast with appearances on the late-night talk show circuit on network television, these cable specials allowed comedians to perform their material without having to censor themselves (Krefting, 2014).

The downside to the advent of Comedy Central and HBO comedy specials was that fans now had a number of alternatives to brick-and-mortar comedy clubs, which led to a slight downturn for clubs after the boom of the 1980s. By the turn of the century, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, comedy entered “the age of the ironic and the age of the awkward, wherein the public finds humor in the exploration of tragedy and in moments of heightened self-consciousness” (Krefting, 2014, p. 73). This gave rise to alternative comedy, a form of humor that “was more intellectual, satirical, and even charged at times, requiring a knowledge base from audiences” and featured an “anecdotal and stream-of-consciousness style of delivery,” which allowed comedians to experiment with form, content, and style in a way that was inventive, fresh, and perhaps most importantly, finding a mainstream audience (Krefting, 2014, p. 74).

### ***The Comedy Stylings of Hannibal Buress***

“Charged humor,” defined by Krefting (2014) as “humor-challenging social inequality and cultural exclusion” (p. 2), challenges and subverts elements of society that the masses may take for granted at face value. As Krefting (2014) puts it, “Jokesters unmask inequality by identifying the legal arrangements and cultural attitudes and beliefs contributing to their subordinated status—joking about it, challenging that which has become normalized and compulsory, and offering new solutions and strategies” (p. 2). The challenge for comedians employing charged humor, historically, has been finding and maintaining mainstream success among audiences who often don't want the dissonance in their worldviews called into question. In order to make a living telling jokes, comedians often had to curtail more challenging subject matter in order to appeal to wider demographics and position themselves as more marketable talents. Krefting (2014) found that comedians who preferred charged humor could instead “throw in a charged zinger here and there [and] have better chances of success than others whose material is charged throughout an entire show” (p. 4).

It's to that extent that Buress makes use of charged humor, carefully and precisely choosing when to punctuate his jokes with sociopolitical subtext. In the April/May 2015 cover story of *The Fader*, Buress' infamous Bill Cosby bit is described as exemplary of his approach to comedy. “To those familiar with

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Hannibal's work, the bit captured something essential about his point of view as a comic, the way his jokes rely on bemusement, skepticism, a kind of made-you-think discomfort," profiled Hua Hsu (2015, para. 9). Buress uses primarily storytelling jokes rather than directly addressing social issues. Hsu describes Buress' role as a moralistic comedian, one who is "more of a witness than a critic. His humor doesn't depict a larger social world so much as it fixates on how that world occasionally intersects with the strange contours of his own life" (Hsu, 2015, para. 27). Much like the *GQ* profile explains that it's the wit of Buress' on-stage persona that lends him the goodwill to point out uncomfortable truths, Hsu notes Buress "always maintains a quality of baffled incredulousness" (para. 27).

In a *New York Times* profile piece published three years prior to the Cosby incident, Zinoman (2011) praises Buress' subtle use of sociopolitical themes, particularly race, which in Buress' act, "is more of an implicit theme, emerging satirically . . . Mr. Buress approaches race the same way he does most subjects: from the side, with a hint of the absurd" (para. 13). Zinoman (2011) also connects Buress' success to "his distinctive delivery, which manages to sound laid back and propulsive at the same time, like a mellow stoner who speaks in the cadences of a Baptist preacher" (para. 13). In his own words, Buress describes his joke writing method as observational and procedural, explaining, "I look at stuff like a math problem and try to figure out how it works and why people do certain things and what things mean" (Raymer, 2015, para. 9). Sometimes those subjects are hyper-specific to Buress' personal life, and other times those topics have sweeping ramifications for society and pop culture at large.

### III. Methods

To examine how Buress employs the classical theories of humor to influence the audience and address sociopolitical subject matter, this case study employed a content analysis based on coding material presented in Buress' stand-up routines across four major releases.

The material examined in this study includes Buress' four major stand-up specials including 2010's *My Name is Hannibal* comedy album, 2012's album and Comedy Central special *Animal Furnace*, 2014's album and Comedy Central special *Live from Chicago* and 2016's Netflix special *Comedy Camisado*, alongside the viral clip of Buress' bit on Bill Cosby from October 2014. With the exception of the Bill Cosby clip, which was evaluated first, the rest of Buress' material was analyzed in chronological order in an effort to analyze his career trajectory and development of his onstage persona and craft.

The content was coded under three separate critical lenses, first looking at each joke and determining which classical theories of humor it utilized: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory. Jokes could be categorized into more than one theory or no theory, as any individual joke could utilize any of the three theories, a combination of the three, or hypothetically none at all. Jokes were analyzed based on the narrative content and the observed relationship between the comedian and the audience. Jokes using relief theory eased tension, either between the audience and the comedian, or the comedian and the subject of the joke. Jokes using superiority theory position the comedian into a high ground position, in opposition to either the audience or another figure in the narrative. Jokes using incongruity theory target contradictions and incongruities in society at large, or within the context of specific narratives.

Next, each joke was examined to determine which uses of humor and persuasion theories were being utilized, as exemplified in Lyttle's (2001) research: building rapport with the audience in order to increase the comedian's likeability; using ironic wisecracks to distract or discredit a counterargument; and/or the use of self-effacing humor to improve the comedian's credibility.

Lastly, the content was coded by sociopolitical subject matter, namely race relations, sex/gender/relationships, defiance of authority/police, American politics, violence, drugs/alcohol, and two broader, comprehensive categories: defiance of social norms/etiquette and the application of social norms/etiquette to the absurd. These categories emerged naturally when the author reviewed the material in each routine, with subsequent categories and themes emerging in later works, which then required returning to the older material to further code its content.

Each joke for the coding heuristic was drawn from the album track lists, since the distinctions for each bit was pre-determined by Buress, the ultimate authority on his own routines. In the case of *Comedy Camisado*, which is only available as a streaming special on Netflix, the names of each bit and the divisions

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between any two bits were determined by the researcher by following the formatting of the previous three albums and by taking verbal cues and segues from the performer as ways to divide the material in a manner reflective of the album track listings.

#### IV. Findings/Results

The study found that incongruity theory was employed by 59 jokes (81.9% of 72 in total), followed by superiority theory (80.6%) and relief theory (63.9%). Forty-six jokes employed superiority and incongruity theories, and 34 jokes employed all three theories, as shown by Table 1.

**Table 1. Breakdown of jokes by theories they relied on**

	<b>Relief Theory</b>	<b>Superiority Theory</b>	<b>Incongruity Theory</b>	<b>Superiority &amp; Incongruity Theories</b>	<b>All Three Theories</b>
<b>Number of jokes with observed characteristic</b>	48 out of 72	58 out of 72	59 out of 72	46 out of 72	34 out of 72
<b>Percentage of total jokes</b>	63.9%	80.6%	81.9%	63.9%	47.2%

The study found that ironic wisecracks were utilized by 65 jokes (90.3% of 72 in total), followed by self-effacing humor (77.8%) and building rapport with audience (56.9%). Fifty-six jokes utilized two persuasive strategies, and 24 jokes three persuasive strategies, as shown by Table 2.

**Table 2. Breakdown of jokes by persuasive strategy they relied on**

	<b>Building Rapport with Audience</b>	<b>Ironic Wise-cracks</b>	<b>Self-Effacing Humor</b>	<b>Utilized Two Persuasive Strategies</b>	<b>Utilized Three Persuasive Strategies</b>
<b>Number of jokes with observed characteristic</b>	41 out of 72	65 out of 72	46 out of 72	56 out of 72	24 out of 72
<b>Percentage of total jokes</b>	56.9%	90.3%	63.9%	77.8%	33.3%

The study found that the thematic element of defying social norms appeared in 53 jokes (73.6% of 72 in total); followed by applying social norms to absurdity (61.1%); violence (48.6%); sex, gender, or relationships (47.2%); drugs or alcohol (30.1%); race relations (29.2%); defiance of authority/police (29.2%); American politics (8.3%) and religion (5.6%), as shown by Table 3.

**Table 3: Breakdown of jokes by categorical thematic content or subject matter**

	Race Relations	Sex, Gender, Relationships	Defiance of Authority / Police	U.S. Politics	Religion	Violence	Drugs / Alcohol	Defiance of Social Norms	Applying Social Norms to Absurdity
<b>Number of jokes with observed characteristic</b>	21 out of 72	34 out of 72	21 out of 72	6 out of 72	4 out of 72	35 out of 72	22 out of 72	53 out of 72	44 out of 72
<b>Percentage of total jokes</b>	29.2%	47.2%	29.2%	8.3%	5.6%	48.6%	30.1%	73.6%	61.1%

The study also found that 16 jokes (22.2% of 72 in total) had thematic content or subject matter pertaining to 5 or more of the categories enumerated in Table 3, followed by 47.2% pertaining to 3 or 4 categories, 27.8% pertaining to 1 or 2 categories, and 4.2% containing no sociopolitical content, as shown by Table 4.

**Table 4: Breakdown of jokes by spectrum of thematic content or subject matter**

	No sociopolitical content	1 or 2 categories	3 or 4 categories	5 or more categories
<b>Number of jokes with observed characteristic</b>	3 out of 72	20 out of 72	34 out of 72	16 out of 72
<b>Percentage of total jokes</b>	4.2%	27.8%	47.2%	22.2%

## V. Discussion

As was to be expected, every Buresse joke studied could be attributed to at least one theory of humor. This result was unsurprising, as it is Buresse's intention to entertain and amuse his audience through humor; it is, after all, the reason he is performing a routine on stage in the first place. It is also unsurprising that Buresse makes the most use of superiority theory and incongruity theory, as this is in line with the typical Buresse joke structure. Buresse builds his act around identifying the incongruities in his daily life, in American society and pop culture, and even in hypothetical scenarios entirely of his own design, positioning himself to have a moralistic high ground through the course of his narrative, and then setting about fundamentally dismantling any potential opposition through ironic wisecracks, dismissing counterarguments, and projecting a sense of victory or accomplishment.

The Cosby bit makes use of all three theories of humor at different points in the joke. Superiority theory comes into play when Buresse positions himself as having a moral high ground over Cosby, citing the 13 existing allegations of sexual assault as reason enough to dismiss Cosby's own preachy morals.



Incongruity theory is invoked when Buress points out that Cosby so readily lords his morality over others in spite of the heinous crimes he's alleged to have committed, and again when Buress points out that despite knowledge of these accusations, Cosby had until that point escaped unscathed in the public eye. Buress uses relief theory when he jokes that he simply wanted to make it uncomfortable for the audience to revisit *The Cosby Show* after having been enlightened on the true nature of its star, humorously addressing the elephant in the room while at the same time suggesting that in spite of these criticisms, Cosby would face no repercussions, or so Buress anticipated at the time.

Buress made effective use of all three theories of persuasion, but 90% of his material makes use of ironic wisecracks; as a comedian, ironic wisecracks distracting from the counterargument of his rhetorical opposition is his bread and butter. This is the sarcastic, smart-aleck persona captured in the GQ profile. Interestingly, in *My Name is Hannibal*, Buress eases into the ironic wisecracks as the set progresses, but in all three following specials, the ironic wisecracks are unrelenting, appearing in nearly every joke. In his first two specials, Buress was less willing to use self-effacing humor, only rarely positioning himself as the butt of a joke, but in his later two specials, self-effacing humor works itself into almost every bit, allowing Buress to laugh at himself and relate more to audiences. It is understandable that his least used method of persuasion was rapport building, as once he has established his comic persona, he has already predisposed the audience to like him and be on his side. It is noteworthy that in his first two specials, much of the rapport building occurs toward the beginning of his routines, while in *Live from Chicago* there was more rapport building toward the back half of his set and in *Comedy Camisado* he builds a rapport throughout the entire set.

The Cosby joke, understandably, exclusively makes use of ironic wisecracks as a persuasive theory. Of note, however, is that at the end of the bit, Buress assures his audience that what he's discussing is, in fact, not hyperbolic at all, imploring the audience to conduct their own research and to take the issue he's raising seriously. This is exactly the action Nabi's research suggests comedians take in order to reaffirm the seriousness of a persuasive message and to counteract those in the audience that might dismiss a message as just another joke.

*My Name is Hannibal* featured by far the least amount of sociopolitical content, with no jokes covering more than four categories, but the material covered more ground in the second half of the album. In contrast, his second special, *Animal Furnace*, addresses the most sociopolitical topics by a solid margin, nearly doubling that of *My Name is Hannibal*. *Animal Furnace* also includes significantly more jokes addressing sex, gender, and relationships, a trend that continued with *Live from Chicago* and *Comedy Camisado* as well. Both of his later two specials had significantly more sociopolitical content than *My Name is Hannibal*, although neither quite reaches the frequency with which *Animal Furnace* addresses such topics. Both of the later two specials also tend to feature more sociopolitical content in the back half of the set list. Interestingly, *Comedy Camisado* includes more jokes that only address a single sociopolitical topic than previous specials, as well as two jokes that do not cover any sociopolitical subject matter. Prior to the material on *Comedy Camisado*, the only other joke that did not cover any sociopolitical material was the opening joke to *My Name is Hannibal*, which strictly functioned as a means of establishing a rapport with the audience. It is worth noting that this was the only special in which the distinction from joke-to-joke was defined by the researcher, as *Comedy Camisado* is a Netflix-exclusive special and does not have an accompanying album or track listing.

The Cosby joke material covered four different categories of sociopolitical content, all while adhering closely to a singular subject. It is set apart from Buress' other material by how directly and aggressively he targets his subject. Buress holds nothing back, and the blunt fearlessness and directness with which he addresses such controversial sociopolitical issues, including rape culture and the notion that American celebrities are somehow above the law, is uncommon compared to the rest of his body of work. As Krefting noted, charged humor is most effective when deployed sparingly. Perhaps because in some ways the Cosby bit both stands out among Buress' comedic repertoire and exemplifies his comic persona and sensibilities, the infamous joke managed to both boost Hannibal Buress' public profile to the A-List of stand-up comedy and spur the takedown of the seemingly untouchable Cosby (Krefting, 2014, p. 2).

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## V. Conclusions

The comedy of Buresse frequently employs incongruity theory and superiority theory, as exemplified in the way he positions himself against his rhetorical targets, drawing attention to the contradictions of daily life and the inherent ridiculousness of his interactions with others. Buresse employs persuasive theories in order to keep the audience on his side in the scenarios described in his narrative comedy, utilizing ironic wisecracks in nearly every joke in order to dismiss any counterarguments to his positions. This is a key component of his on-stage persona.

While Buresse doesn't consider his material primarily sociopolitical, nearly 96% of the material studied addressed a sociopolitical topic in some way, shape, or form, with 69.4% of the material studied addressing three or more sociopolitical subjects. While this material is not always as controversial as his infamous Cosby bit, Buresse makes effective use of persuasive techniques throughout his routines. Given the right circumstances, it would not be inconceivable for another Buresse joke to go viral and have the widespread ramifications and influence on public opinion that his jokes targeting Bill Cosby did.

Tracing back to the old adage "a lot of truth is said in jest," or even further back to the era when court jesters were the only people who could get away with criticizing the king to his face, comedy has been one of the most powerful forms of communication. Just as the title of his most recent release, *Comedy Camisado*, suggests, Buresse engages his audience with a surprise attack: not just with unpredictable punch lines, but by raising salient sociopolitical points and sparking discussion. Buresse is a comedian who understands the power of the platform he has, and rather than being an overtly political comedian and risk bisecting his audience, he peppers his sociopolitical comedy into his set at just the right moments. It's not just about getting the audience to laugh at what he says, it's about getting them to engage with what he has to say on a higher level. Just like in the viral clip where he targets Cosby, Buresse is hyper-aware that his audience can and will Google anything he tells them to.

Further research into the persuasive effects of humor, particularly sociopolitical subject matter, and its influence on audiences could expand upon this case study by including the bodies of work of other stand-up comedians, first by cross-examining the works of Buresse with his contemporaries and their direct influences. Expanding further, additional research may study the most influential comedians of each era and tracing a "comedic lineage" of charged humor to further contextualize the influence of sociopolitical stand-up routines. When studying comedians of different eras, research must account for the cultural and societal differences and ensure that the performances are rooted in the historical and social contexts of the time period they were performed.

Additional research on Buresse's comedy, particularly an entire tour of sets would make for a larger, more insightful case study. Research could analyze how a larger sample size of vastly different audiences, when they are made up of different demographics and engaging the material in different settings, are more or less persuaded by the comedy routine. Studying the effect of humor in persuasion theory could be furthered by examining the differences in audience engagement and reactions between live audiences witnessing a stand-up comedy routine performed in real time and those listening to recorded material through a digital platform where material could be paused, replayed, fact-checked, and researched by a motivated audience member.

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