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PC Is Back in *South Park*: Framing Social Issues through Satire

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Abstract
This study takes an extensive look at the television program South Park *episode "Stunning and Brave." There is limited research that explores the use of satire to create social discourse on concepts related to political correctness. I use framing theory as a primary variable to understand the messages "Stunning and Brave" attempts to convey. Framing theory originated from the theory of agenda setting. Agenda setting explains how media depictions affect how people think about the world. Framing is an aspect of agenda setting that details the organization and structure of a narrative or story. Framing is such an important variable to agenda setting that research on framing has become its own field of study. Existing literature of framing theory, comedy, and television has shown how audiences perceive issues once they have been exposed to media messages. The purpose of this research will review relevant literature explored in this area to examine satirical criticism on the social issue of political correctness.*

It seems almost unnecessary to point out the effect media has on us every day. Media is a broad term for the collective entities and structures through which messages are created and transmitted to an audience. As noted by Semmel (1983), "Almost everyone agrees that the mass media shape the world around us" (p. 718). The media tells us what life is or what we need for a better life. We have been bombarded with messages about what is better. Our entire lives have been manipulated by some unseen entity with remarkable leverage over us. We are told on a daily basis what is real through lies or particular versions of truth. Sometimes it seems the only thing to believe in is a humorous skepticism of what we are told, generally through the satirical inspection provided by comedy. Comedians such as George Carlin, Bo Burnham, John Stewart, and John Oliver seem to be the only entities expressing truth in what we see in the media. Their exceptional skepticism is the mirror we have for seeing a false consciousness. For many, the cartoon series *South Park* has been the closest companion for truth, by challenging us in what we believe and why we believe it. In a continuing example of grotesque, *South Park* reveals a social *faux pas* through literary travesty. We

are shown the truth and are able to deal with it because humor is sometimes the best way to accept hypocrisy.

This paper examines the *South Park* episode "Stunning and Brave" to discover what message is being framed and how the message is being framed. The episode is a useful model to examine the discussion of political correctness through comedic satire. Comedy expressed through satire acts to reveal an incongruity of social offense. Offense by humor is a remedy to alleviate the paradoxical nature of internalized and externalized social mechanisms. In this case, the humor is presented through an episode of *South Park*. The episode "Stunning and Brave" conveys the dialectical nature of political correctness in the current social climate. I examine the episode through framing theory because framing is a powerful means for the media to convey an ideology. Media discourse is a necessary process for social debate, not only as an act of catharsis but also to exercise the social development of cultural expression. To that end, I will first explain the significance of mass media and its role in communication.

Mass Communication and Media

Mass communication is the process by which media organizations produce and transmit messages to audiences. Mass communication is also the process through which messages received by the audience are sought, consumed, and understood (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). The audience is a collection of individuals who watch messages from the media. Because an audience is an amalgamation of individuals, there are several viewpoints on how an audience is characterized. Some scholars argue that the audience is composed of different communities that are highly differentiated. There are audiences within audiences, each one a type of an interpretative community. Each interpretive community has its own meaning on messages that are consumed. For Fish (1980), interpretive communities exist around specific content presented by the media. Content is interpreted through a shared pattern of what is seen and heard. To understand how the media affects an audience through televised programming, there must be an understanding of shared cultural values of the interpretive communities.

Lindhof (1991) outlined two variables for interpretive communities: *content* and *interpretation*. Content is the type of programing and other media consumed by a community, and interpretation is the shared meaning of the programs. People are brought together by common experiences or feelings. Individuals place themselves within particular definitions that fit in their self-categorization: mother, rebel, outcast, athlete, nerd, innovator, etc. Individuals find meaning with others who are in the same group. We tend to find attachment to constructs

that agree with our definitions of social roles. It is easy to feel a part of something when we find similar characteristics with others.

We share characteristics by what we choose to watch and how we interpret what we watch. For example, Comic-Con is an annual convention for fans of popular culture, science fiction, fantasy, and a number of other genres together. Comic-Con is an international convention held in San Diego every year to appreciate and create awareness of comics and other art forms, through celebration and recognition of the historic and ongoing development of comics and art culture through visual, audio, and digital media. Comic-Con has grown from a small group of about 300 attendees in 1970 to over 130,000 fans in attendance by 2012 (2012). People who identify with cultures associated with Comic-Con appreciate a shared experience with ideas represented through media. This shows the impact that media has had on individuals in the last 40 years. We are brought together by the messages that media feeds us, and we categorize into groups depending on how we like how particular narratives are framed. Framing theory helps categorize types of programming. The effect of framing on us may seem innocuous, since the process of framing is only examined in an academic setting. Learning about framing theory is a good first step to understand how the process of framing messages affects us.

Framing Theory

Shaw and McCombs (1977) claim that media depictions affect people's experience with the world. Media establishes issues or images shown to the public, and media is selective in what is reported. Media depictions such as news stories change individuals' perceptions of an issue, which in turn affects their actions. Shaw and McCombs state that the media is incredibly successful in telling the audience what to think. Media acts as a gatekeeper in regards to decisions of what should be known. Gatekeeping is a result of establishing which issues are important, and deciding what aspects of those issues are important. Agenda setting is also achieved by priming, or the repeated attention of specific issues to create prominence. Agenda setting as a function is prioritized from media agenda, to public agenda, to policy agenda. Agenda setting is successful when all the parts of a story cohesively work together in a frame.

Framing is the process of putting a piece of media together, such as its organization and structure. Todd Gitlin (1980) applied the term "framing" when studying how CBS was covering events on the student movement during the 1960s. Gitlin found that news stories trivialized the student movement by repeatedly focusing on the contradictions and strains of the movement, while

implicitly stressing that the movement was a deviant group against normal values. Gitlin credited the media as being the leading factor in the failure of the New Left movement because of how well and how often the media criticized the movement. Gitlin's work was inspired in part by the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Antonio Gramsci was a neo-Marxist theorist and politician. Gramsci believed that organizations in capitalist societies legitimized and maintained power through cultural hegemony, in which one set of ideas controls or subverts other ideas (1971). Those who achieve power dominate others because of their ability to control the perception of reality of the groups they control.

Media depictions are framed through various textual features such as story title, language, metaphors, images, and sound. Baldwin Van Gorp (2007) took framing further as a "bridging concept" (p. 61) between culture and cognition. Frames are packages for individuals to synthesize the human experience. Media depictions are a way to virtually learn about life. All media does this regardless whether what is presented is fact or fiction, comedy or drama; *South Park* is no exception to the rule. If *South Park* is sending a message through its content, there must be a definition of what type of content *South Park* is. The show's messages are reflective of the cultural aspects of the interpretive communities. However, knowing that the media frames messages is not enough. We must discover what messages are being framed and how they are being framed. This has led to the research question: What messages are framed in the South Park episode "Stunning and Brave," and how are the messages framed?

South Park Background and Episode Synopsis

South Park is an animated television series created by Matt Stone and Trey Parker. The show centers on the adventures of four children—Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman—who live in the small Colorado town of South Park. The children's experience is sensationalized through humorous, often nonsensical events and characters. The show addresses a wide spectrum of social, cultural, and political issues. The episodes are usually present issues immediately relevant to the audience by referencing current events. *South Park* has been known for its outlandish humor and social commentary. *South Park* is a prime-time comedy show with approximately 3.5 million viewers, mostly males ages 18-24. The show has won four Prime Time Emmy awards (Comedy Central, 2007). The show began in 1997, and is currently in its 19th season.

Season 19, in contrast to earlier seasons, is a serialization. In literary terms, a serial is a narrative broken up into pieces, in relation to a larger body of work. Traditionally, serializations started in the 19th Century in print format, with texts

connected linearly with a theme so publishers could bind the work into volumes when the sequence was finished (Brake and Demoor, 2009). The literary and film franchise *Harry Potter*, for example, is a serialization. The story of Harry Potter is a serial which takes place over seven books (or eight films). While episodes in *South Park* are generally disjointed, with barely any attachment to one another other than adding to the *South Park* universe, Season 19 works as a story arc that incorporates a particular theme, political correctness.

"Stunning and Brave" is the first episode of the 19th season of *South Park*. The episode parodies political correctness and social justice warriors by introducing PC Principal. The episode opens to a school PTA meeting, where Mr. Mackey is announcing that Principal Victoria has been fired and replaced by PC Principal, a muscular White man wearing sunglasses. PC Principal condemns the citizens of *South Park* and vows to make social justice a priority for the denizens:

> **PC Principal**: All right, listen up. My name is PC Principal. I don't know about you, but frankly I'm sick and tired of how minority groups are marginalized in today's society. I'm here because this place is lost in a time warp! Students who still use the word "retarded!" A teacher who said women without wombs should get an AIDS test! A chef "person of color" who the children had sing soul songs and who the children drove to kill himself! Let me ask you this. We're in Colorado, right?! Where are the Hispanic kids?! Huh?! Where are the ethnic and racial minorities?! I Googled *South Park* before I came here, and I cannot believe the shit you're getting away with! People claiming to be advocates of transgender rights, but really just wanting to use the women's bathroom! A white man who thinks he's Chinese and built a wall to keep out Mongolians. What the fuck is this?! Are you fucking kidding me?! I'm telling you all, this is done! Like it or not, PC is back, and it's bigger than ever! Woowoowoo You hear that?! That's the sound of 2015 pulling you over, people! Suck it!

PC Principal as a Social Justice Warrior (SJW) is an agent of social change for the city. In part, he iterates the actual demographics the real city of *South Park* has become, as well as the social change in the recent American political environment. Above all else, PC Principal acts as a literary agent to challenge the theme of the fictional town by degrading the infamous notoriety the town has achieved in its fictional narrative. For illustration, Dr. John Watson in the Arthur Conan Doyle series of books *Sherlock Holmes*—from a literary standpoint—is an agent to guide the audience through Holmes' logic. If Sherlock Holmes acted only by himself, there would be little need to explain his line of reasoning. Watson is

a medium for the audience that forces Holmes to explain the abductive reasoning he uses to deduce and thwart crime.

The first scene of the episode "Stunning and Brave" reveals the theme of what the episode will entail. All subsequent scenes play a theatrical version of social justice in defense of political correctness.

In scene 2, Kyle is given detention by PC Principal for saying that Caitlyn Jenner is not a hero. When Kyle and his father take protest, PC Principal violently lashes out. Scene 3 takes place in the local bar between Randy Marsh, Stuart McCormick, and Gerald. When the group begins to criticize Caitlyn Jenner, they are confronted by a group of violent, politically correct college men similar to PC Principal. PC Principal and the other social justice advocates later create a frat house in South Park. In scene 4, Stan, Butters, Kenny, and Kyle convince Cartman to take a stand against PC Principal. Cartman attempts to blackmail PC Principal, only to be savagely beaten for using exclusive language:

> **Cartman**: PC Principal, you have Butters' underwear, and now (drops underwear into the urinal to soak in urine) Oh my gosh, it's got your DNA all over it. This certainly doesn't look good for you. I don't need to tell anyone about this. No, I think we have an understanding. Capisce?
> **PC Principal**: What did you just say?
> **Cartman**: You mean about keeping your dick out?
> **PC Principal**: "Capisce?!" You're associating Italian-Americans to intimidation tactics?! You'd better watch your micro-aggressions, bro!
> **Cartman**: Oh-kay. Look, you don't want to end up like the spokesman for Subway, do you?
> **PC Principal**: Did you just use a term that excludes women from an occupation?! (picks up Cartman and slams him against bathroom stall) Did you just say "spokesman" instead of "spokesperson?!" When women are just as capable at selling sandwiches as anyone?! (slams Cartman against bathroom mirror, shattering it) Are you purposely trying to use words that assert your male privilege?!
> **Cartman**: No, I'm sorry! I was just trying to frame you for raping Butters!
> **PC Principal**: Do you think Italian-Americans and women are less important?! (pins Cartman to the floor and beats him) You dare use words that alienate two communities of people who have to deal with biases like yours on a daily basis?!

The absurdity here is that Cartman is attempting to blackmail PC Principal with a false accusation of child molestation. The joke is that PC Principal is angrily taking

umbrage at Cartman's unintentional marginalization of historically oppressed groups. The grotesque humor begins when PC Principal begins physically assaulting Cartman (a muscular man in his late 20s to early 40s beating an overweight 4th Grader).

In scene 5, Randy goes to the fraternity house and is pledged into the fraternity after a series of hazing rituals and drinking. Afterwards, Kyle, Stan, Butters, and Kenny visit Cartman in the hospital, who has accepted defeat and accepted himself and the others as bigots. By scene 6, Randy's final task to become a fraternity brother is to check Kyle's privilege. In the final scene, Cartman takes retribution against the fraternity, only to have the event stopped by Kyle, who capitulates that Caitlyn Jenner is a hero.

While the text provided may serve as a poor imitation to the episode, the text offers some idea of the humor of *South Park* as well as what the episode "Stunning and Brave" entails. Several aspects of political correctness have been revealed: fraternity hazing, micro-aggressions, ethnic marginalization, suppression of unpopular ideas, oppression through justification, equal rights, etc. The episode not only reveals some areas for social discourse, but also achieves the primary goal of being funny. Humor is a necessity for the human condition. Humor is a way for the body and soul to exhale unpleasantness. Significant research has been conducted on the purpose of humor, such as the television series *South Park*, and its effect on its audience.

Political and Social Communication through Humor

Hariman (2008) concluded that prime-time TV comedies are an essential part of contemporary public culture by producing work that comments on politics and society. Jones (2004) also describes that political humor in American entertainment is a form of intellectual engagement; media approaches serious issues by distorting social phenomena to a comedic end. Similarly, Hariman (2008) argues that genres of political humor such as parody "are essential resources for sustaining public culture" (p. 248). Comedic television shows such as *South Park* frame messages to be humorous and thought-provoking.

Humor is such an essential part of life because discovering or using humor is an aspect of the human experience (Berger, 1997). Even though a message is framed to be entertaining, not everyone will enjoy what is being shown. Using comedy to push cultural and social borders offers avenues for communication. Purdie (1999) asserts that comedy criticizes everyday reality through words and deeds. Meyer (2000) offers three theories of humor. First, humor functions to reduce stress. Second, communication through comedy achieves its humor by

surprising its audience. Third, issues are funny when presented in a way that violates social norms and common practices.

Rose (1991) defined parody as "the comic refunctioning of performed linguistic or artistic material" (p. 119). TV programming such as *The Daily Show*, *Politically Incorrect*, and *Dennis Miller Live* are representations of a genre that combines entertainment and politics, blurring the boundaries defining each concept (Jones, 2004). LaMarre, Landerville, and Beam (2009) suggest that although a television program may parody and satirize individuals, groups, and beliefs, audience members already have expectations regarding what they consume before they experience it. The work of LaMarre, Landerville, and Beam provides evidence that political satire in media frames its content with a complex set of messages. The messages have a significant effect in forming audience attitudes and strengthening audience members' beliefs.

Because satire frames information to be ambiguous, messages framed through satire can reach broader interpretive communities within a large audience population. Work from scholars such as Balcetis & Dunning (2006), Kunda (1990), and Long & Toppino (2004) have proven the age-old chestnut that people see what they want to see. This indicates that interpretive communities do share characteristics of content consumed and the process for its interpretation. Stewart and Clark (2011) explain that *South Park*'s storylines satirize topics such as radical environmentalism, encouraging dialog between binary viewpoints. Crawford (2009) found that animated cartoons, through the nature of their features, can address serious issues in ways that other forms of media cannot. Animated works subvert mythic traditions and honored establishments. Media's framing sometimes homogenizes cultural perceptions of particular groups. Geertz (1975) asserts that the media maintain representations of cultural patterns and perceptions.

Although perceptions of particular groups are normalized through media representations, media can also act as a means to change perceptions by presenting new models of mental constructs (Kennedy, 2008). While humor and satire are used to discuss social issues, there needs to be clarity on a more specific social issue. Chidester (2012) argues that episodes of *South Park* frame issues dialectically in order to foster messages about sensitive subjects. With the intent to understand the tactics of framing messages, research must show why the audience consumes the media. As previously stated, the media affects its audiences' perception of reality. From an ideological standpoint, ideas are the primary construct through which abstraction creates a physical understanding of

the universe perceived—in other words, what you think is real. And what you think is affected by what you are exposed to.

Imagination Is Reality

Lippmann (1959) asserts that the public acts upon "the pictures in our heads," not to actual events in the world. Lippmann calls these mental images the pseudo-environment. Individuals respond to the pseudo-environment because the real world is too complex, too interchanging. Individuals are ill-equipped to successfully interact within an environment that is complex and interchanging. Individuals must synthesize an intangible construct of reality. A pseudo-environment provides an adequate framework to manage successful interaction. Media provides the answer through agenda setting.

Marx and Sienkiewicz (2009) support the claim that a media text such as *South Park* creates messages that use offensive humor which is socially acceptable when framed in a larger context (2009). Although media in the context of framing has been primarily associated with news agencies, Geoffrey Baym (2005) proposes that shows like *The Daily Show* and *South Park* are what he calls "discursively integrated media," which is a blend of entertainment, marketing, news, and politics (p. 262). The form and fluidity of *South Park*'s show style is a means to talk about the world, understand the world, and act within the world. Just as *The Daily Show* blurs the line between entertainment and education, *South Park*'s use of discursive integration mixes entertainment with arguably important social issues. The creators of *South Park* frame their message to achieve two goals. Tueth argues that *South Park* is a representation of transgressive humor that has grown in prominence in the last 30 years. Transgressive humor challenges messages mainstreaming into media (2005). Audiences have an understanding of the role satirical commentary plays, particularly in reference to notable social approvals.

Hart claims that messages in *South Park* are understood by its audience (2002). Matheson (2001) claims that hyper-irony occurs when a message takes a position to undercut the position. Sometimes the humor of the show is so advanced that the audience may not understand the message that is being portrayed. Humor, because of its subjective nature, can be misinterpreted. It may be natural that humor, or a show such as *South Park*, affects a wide audience to the extent that nuances of interpretation are solidified by a particular group. The show may unintentionally disturb its audience when they are (for lack of a better word) hit by some joke that has significant relevance to them. Dobson (2006) contends that *South Park* is often misunderstood, and that the show aims to

criticize ideas presented in each episode through hyper-irony. Dobson dictated that the level of humor used on the show is so advanced that the show must incorporate base humor to reach audiences. Just as Dobson has shown the narrative of the use of subverting viewer's expectations established by some of *South Park*'s storylines, the function can be applied in a more general way. This supports framing theory in the organization and structure of the television series *South Park*.

Humor Achieves Liberation

By its nature, the comedy series *South Park* can be vitriolic. Some humor is not for everybody. Exposing truth is a delicate balance of revelation and jubilation. But why use satire for humor and social commentary? What purpose does humor serve on an individual and social level? As mentioned earlier, dominant forces use hegemony to subtly influence the masses into accepting the power structure imposed (or conceded) upon them. Traditional media exerts its influence to insure it has enough viewers to justify its content and to generate ad revenue. While *South Park* may achieve the same end, I believe its objective is to bring a different result. Ideology is maintained by a fragile or subtle acceptance of conventional social morality. *South Park*, on the other hand, subverts convention through humor. Humor has been widely philosophized in terms of relief, superiority, and a signal.

Humor at its core violates some pattern or expectation. This follows a classical concept of humor as far back as Aristotle. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle mentioned that comedy proceeds from a speaker creating an expectation, and then violating that expectation (1941). Even Cicero noted, "The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh" (*On the orator*). From a classical philosophical standpoint, humor was construed as a negative emotion up until the 20th Century. Philosophers believed that humor subverted reasoning, and inhibited rationale thinking. It wasn't until the 20th Century that humor was seen as a means of achieving catharsis. Beattie (1779) saw laughter as a combination for "two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances…acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them" (p. 320). German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer extends and clarifies this idea by stating, "The cause in laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real

objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (1977).

Take, for instance, a large dog named "Tiny" or a small dog called "Biggie." In this case, the humor of incongruity stems from the irony of the size of the dog against the name of the dog. The idea is humorous because the size of the dog in relation to the implied size of the dog based on the name does not match. In a similar vein, a nickname may be ironically accurate, such as a small person nicknamed "Tiny." In this example, a small individual given a nickname to denote his or her small stature violates the irony of a nickname, thus creating humor. While not as simplistic, *South Park* regularly forces its watchers to examine their sense of morality and convention. By upsetting the notion of righteousness through revelation, humor is the result of exposing hypocrisy.

Conclusion

The media is a force that shapes our lives, whether we want it to or not. Messages transmitted through media are designed in such a way as to be as easily consumed as possible. The media has a hidden agenda in its manipulation of which messages you are being shown. Like any good con, what is hidden from you occurs right in front of you. The spectacle of the message makes it difficult to discern objectivity or truth. Agenda setting is the theory that media depictions affect how people view the world. One way agenda setting is achieved is through framing, the careful construction of a message. Messages are framed in a particular way so as to focus on a particular issue. Framing expresses a particular ideology. This presentation of ideology maintains hegemony, which is the control or subversion of other ideas. Hegemony allows groups to exert control over others, and the media controls the message.

The artistry of communication distorts our reality. The television show *South Park* also frames messages by satirically mocking contemporary social issues. The 19th season of *South Park* particularly focuses on the issue of political correctness. "Stunning and Brave," the first episode in the 19th season of *South Park*, introduces PC Principal as an agent of political correctness and a metaphysical obstacle to drive the comedic scenes. In several scenes, PC Principal and his associates act as social justice warriors by bullying, chastising, or physically assaulting the denizens of *South Park*. Humor creates discourse and sparks debate by pushing the boundaries of taste. Humor is the dialectical tension between two ideas that clash against

each other. Laughter is our expression of understanding when an incongruity has occurred.

Satire has character because the design of its outrageousness coerces the flow of ideas and opinions in the quest for truth. Comedy exaggerates its viewers' tastes or views on matters of public concern. Issues are more complicated than the messages that are neatly packaged and sent to us. Sometimes laughter is the best way to remind us that not everything is as clear-cut as what we are shown.

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