

Summer 2016

Examining humor as a rheotrical tool: A case study on *The Read*

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Examining Humor as a Rhetorical Tool: A Case Study on *The Read*

Edrees Nawabi

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of:

Master's in Arts

Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication

August 2016

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound gratitude and appreciation to a number of individuals, without whom this thesis would be impossible. First and foremost, I must thank my mentor and my Thesis Chair, Dr. Jennifer Almjeld. Dr. Almjeld, your never-ending guidance, assistance, and instruction has made me a better writer, rhetorician, and researcher. You held my head up high through trying times and gave me direction when I felt lost.

Next, I'd like to thank the rest of my Thesis Committee: Dr. Cathryn Molloy (WRTC) and Mr. Michael Smith (WRTC). You all went above and beyond what is expected of a Thesis Committee, and for that, I'm deeply thankful. You have all inspired me greatly to further my studies and pursue my dream of teaching at the university level, while pursuing my interests in rhetoric.

They say it takes a village to raise a child. Throughout my graduate school experience, I have learned that completing a thesis requires a similar amount of effort. The faculty and staff at James Madison University, especially in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication (WRTC) department, have been extremely helpful as I completed my Master's Degree. The faculty and staff in WRTC have taught me so much and in so many ways, to which I am greatly thankful for. To Dr. Traci Zimmerman, who introduced the major to me and inspired me to teach in the future, I'm forever thankful. To Ms. Kristin Knapp and Ms. Sandra Purington, who were always available to help with whatever I needed and always kept their door open for a chat, I'm deeply thankful. To the rest of the WRTC faculty who have left nothing but positive impressions, important life lessons, and experiences I will take with me on to the next chapter of my life, thank you

so much. Lastly, I'd like to thank Dr. Jennifer Jacovitch who provided much guidance, introduced me to the great Jim Corder, inspired and influenced me as a teacher and rhetorician, and has been a great friend to me over the past four years.

I need to thank my fellow graduate students who were part of my cohort for the past two years. You have all immensely and positively impacted my life with all of your help, inspiration, and fun conversations. Each member of the cohort had something unique to add to the group and we all got along so well. I'm very grateful that our group provided a stress relief in trying times.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my family, who without their support, I would have never even made it to graduate school. To my parents, who sacrificed everything to make my life better in any way, who supported me through thick and thin, and who always checked in to see how I was doing, I'm forever thankful and know that your sacrifices don't go unappreciated.

Thank you all. I couldn't have done it without you.

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Abstract

As race relations reach their worst state since the early 1990s, the Black American community has resorted to new and savvy rhetorical moves to communicate their point of view. This thesis takes on the podcast, *The Read*, in order to examine how humor is used as a rhetorical tool within the Black American community. Using a case study method, this research takes on a close examination of the five most popular episodes of *The Read* that aired between August 2015 and December 2015. The three philosophical theories of humor, superiority, relief, and incongruity, are coded within eleven controversial topics in order to examine how often those theories are used. While the relief theory of humor wasn't used as often as the other two theories, the way the relief theory was used point to interesting moves by the hosts of *The Read*. 1) The relief theory allowed for the hosts of the podcast to use the tagline "Comedy", even though they discuss difficult issues concerning race. 2) The relief theory of humor is almost never used on its own, almost always overlapping with the incongruity theory of humor and/or the superiority theory of humor. Although the focus of this thesis was on race, the other two theories of humor yielded interesting results. 3) The superiority theory was used the most in the five episodes of the podcast, and was used most often when discussing popular culture and celebrity gossip. 4) Although the incongruity theory of humor wasn't used as often as the superiority theory, it proved to be the most versatile theory of humor. Future studies involving humor, especially studies involving race and humor, can find valuable information in this piece regarding how humor is used; however, future studies should consider larger sample sizes, conducting interviews to understand the effect of each humor, and non-Western humor formulations in their study.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Since 2011, there has been mounting civil unrest regarding race relations, especially among Black Americans. This unrest stems from police shootings of unarmed Black Americans, that led to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement. In February 2012, Trayvon Martin from Sanford, Florida, who was seventeen years old, was the first in a stream of shootings that became particularly controversial; the stories of Dontre Hamilton from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Eric Garner from New York City, Michael Brown from Ferguson, Missouri, Ezell Ford from Los Angeles, Darrien Hunt from Saratago Springs, Utah, twelve-year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio, Eric Harris from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Freddie Gray from Baltimore have sparked a lengthy discussion on race in America (“Freddie Grey,” 2015). Trayvon Martin’s death in 2012 sparked the creation of many movements across America, as many saw the seventeen year-old’s death as a racial injustice. George Zimmerman, who fatally shot Martin, was accused of being careless, racist, and using unnecessary force by many, but Zimmerman was acquitted of any charges thanks to Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law (Ruffin 2015). Freedom rights groups formed during the trial for George Zimmerman in the summer of 2013, like the Dream Defenders in Daytona Beach, Florida, the Million Hoodies Movement for Justice in Washington DC, and the Baltimore Bloc in Maryland (Ruffin 2015). Unfortunately, Martin’s Death was just the beginning of a stream of race-related shootings that sparked public outcry and activist efforts in recent years.

The Black Lives Matter movement was unique because it recognized the power of social media and started the trending hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” (Ruffin 2015). Formed in the summer of Zimmerman’s trial, Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD) members, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, created the

“#BlackLivesMatter” hashtag. Memes, tweets, blog posts, and vlogs dedicated to race relations in America were constantly shared on social media sites attached with the hashtag. The discussion around race relations has snowballed with the use of internet media, social media, vlogs, and podcasts (McDonald & Walsh 2014; Penney & Dadas 2014). Racial tensions are becoming increasingly aggressive, but there’s one podcast that is using humor to discuss these issues: *The Read*. This study takes on a case-study approach to examining how *The Read* uses humor to communicate and argue from a perspective that is representative of both the Black American and the LGBTQ+ communities. In this cultural moment, *The Read* provides an example of one of the many savvy rhetorical responses to the racial tensions that rhetoricians need to investigate. To better understand the use of humor in this very unique moment, where *The Read* provides input into the conversation on race relations, this study examines the five most-popular episodes of the podcast between August 2015 and December 2015.

Scholars have rarely studied the rhetorical effects of humor and many of those who have gave the rhetorical tool less credibility than many other rhetorical tools. Scholars in journalism were the first to coin the term “infotainment”, and they gave it a negative connotation, noting the deterioration of professional journalism into entertainment (Demers 2005). As information communication evolves, there is a shift in ways viewers consume news and information through entertainment. This shift is evident in the steady decline of ratings for conventional news networks like CNN, FOX, and NBC among eighteen to thirty-five year-olds, while networks that host comedy news shows, like Comedy Central, HBO, and IFC enjoy steady increases in viewership among eighteen to thirty-five year-olds (Maglio 2015). As people increasingly consume

information through this genre, the lack of understanding of the rhetorical effects of humor become apparent. This case study therefore analyzes how humor is used to communicate and to argue in order to set up the genre for more investigation by other scholars.

In Johnathan Rossing's 2008 piece "Two critical theories walk into a bar...", readers are led to the conclusion that critical race studies and critical rhetoric studies will find much room to research and grow when looking at comedy. In this piece, Rossing provides reasoning for the cross-disciplinary research gap for critical race studies and critical rhetoric studies in comedy. For Rossing, a primary goal for critical race studies is to re-center inquiry and experience from the margins so that "issues of conflict, change, and inequality reorient our thinking and feeling to address matters of human difference" (2008). In his analysis, Rossing borrows from Michael Calvin Mcgee's analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,

Racial comedy is an inventive practice where we can see the power of these critical disciplines intersect with the promise of perspective shifting and social transformation. Through comedy we see that "Culture, society, even our very identities are matters of representation" and questioning or changing representations is the strategy that may help us "eliminate undesirable effects" such as racism. Comedy possesses a rhetorical force so that 'masses of persons begin to respond to a myth' through shared, collective behavior. (Rossing 2008)

Humor, therefore, presents rhetoric researchers with an interesting conundrum as the power of the genre is recognized, but it is not effectively researched.

America is currently in a time and place where new strategies have to be considered to ease tensions between communities. The study of rhetoric enables scholars to examine how truth and facts can be manipulated through many factors, like genre, form, and timing. In his foundational text, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation” Richard Vatz says, “The facts or events communicated to us are *choices*, by our sources of information... The second step in communicating ‘situations’ is the translation of the chosen information into meaning,” which Vatz says is an artistic process (1973). With Vatz’s explanation of the two-step process of communication, rhetoric scholars examine communication with the speaker or author holding power in that they decide what is discussed and how.

Background and The Read’s Rhetorical Situation

The Read is an online podcast that first aired on February 28, 2013. With one hundred fifty-three episodes, it is one of the top-fifty most popular podcasts categorized under “Comedy”, according to iTunes, iHeartRADIO, and Soundcloud. These three media-hosting websites – iTunes, iHeartRADIO, and Soundcloud – are the three platforms where one can listen to *The Read*. The podcast, known for its humor in approaching controversial topics in the Black American and LGBTQ+ communities, is hosted by Kid Fury and Crissle West. Through the three years that *The Read* has aired, the show has seen a steady increase in popularity with 83,700 listeners in the pilot episode, titled “Volume 1” in February, 2013 and 250,000 listeners in the August 6, 2015 episode, “O_OFest” (Soundcloud 2016); therefore, the hosts’ social, cultural, and political influence is clearly growing.

In order to understand the rhetorical situation created by and used in *The Read*, this study delves into the many aspects of this online sensation: the background of the speakers, the growth of the audience, and the purpose of the show. Kid Fury is a gay, Black American male from Miami, Florida and grew up in a Jamaican American home that disapproved of his sexuality for religious reasons. Kid Fury chose to protect his identity for his family's sake, so he took on the pseudonym "Kid Fury"; however, the origin of the name is never explained to listeners. In 2006, he created the "Kid Fury" blog, which was all about celebrity-gossip, but Kid Fury's peak in popularity came in 2011, when his video "Shit Black Gays Say" received 1.5 million views and propelled him to internet-celebrity status. Crissle West, on the other hand, comes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Outside of the racism and homophobia she experienced in the state, West doesn't talk about her time in Oklahoma too much. West has written for four magazines housed in New York City and appears on many radio shows in NYC, podcasts within [The Loud Speaker Network](#), and the [Comedy Central](#) TV show, "Drunk History". With the background of the speakers in the podcast explained, the reader may have a better understanding of these podcasters.

The stars can be seen taking on a variety of communication categories that conform to important theories of humor, including, but not limited to, sarcasm, sass, and snark. West and Fury use humor to discuss topics in order to add on to the entertainment aspect of the show, so it's extremely important for the audience to understand the cultural context of the jokes the speakers make. Since its first season, *The Read* has been the most popular podcast on [The Loud Speakers Network](#), which is a company that produces podcasts (Soundcloud). *The Read* averages about 100,000 plays per episode on the

Soundcloud website. It's difficult to pin down the demographic make-up of listeners to *The Read* because of the anonymity the internet allows, but the majority of the 54-thousand subscribed listeners to the podcast on Soundcloud are Black Americans under the age of 35 (Raptopoulos 2014). Many listeners of the show interact with the stars of *The Read* on social media websites like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. A dedicated and growing fan-base has been instrumental in *The Read's* growth and popularity. Over the past two years, every live show of *The Read* has been sold out; this includes tours in New York, Washington DC, Miami, Seattle, St. Louis, and Charlotte. The show also allows for a great deal of audience participation with the "Listener Letters" and "The Read" segments. The growth in popularity in listeners and people who interact with the show proves how powerful and pervasive the podcast and its conversations have become.

The Read has a two-part purpose; one is explicit and the other is implicit. The hosts of *The Read* explicitly talk about how they use *The Read* to unwind and to heal. Both Fury and West use *The Read* in a similar fashion as those who use a journal to write about what bothers them. The second purpose is mostly implicit and is fulfilled by The Loud Speakers Network's selection for creating a podcast aimed at the LGBTQ+ community within the Black American community. The audience hears how two Black Americans in the LGBTQ+ community approach controversial topics, like the exclusion of Black Americans in the 88th Academy Awards, Justin Bieber's racist remarks in 2015, and Caitlyn Jenner's transition from male to female. Of the sixteen podcasts on The Loud Speakers Network, *The Read* is the only one to have both hosts representative of the LGBTQ+ community (West & Fury 2013). *The Read's* two-part purpose, therefore, helps the creators and the audience because it helps the hosts unwind and the audience receive

a perspective they don't often receive. With racial tensions at arguably their worst since the early 1990s, *The Read* provides a way to digest difficult information through humor. Considering *The Read* uses the concept of infotainment to a positive end, informing its audience of their stance on race and LGBTQ+ issues, the podcast is ripe for analysis, because it mostly uses appeals to the hosts' gay, Black American credibility (*ethos*) and to the audience's emotion (*pathos*).

In order to conduct a case study on *The Read*, this study adopts methodological approaches used in Katherine Chandler's 2014 piece, "Poisonwood Persuasions", and Limor Shifman's 2007 piece, "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-Based Comic Texts". Shifman's piece examines the rhetorical tactics of jokes online compared to pre-internet humor. The takeaway from this piece is the way Shifman breaks down communication on the internet into thirteen distinct categories. Episodes of *The Read* will be broken down into categories based on the categories Shifman came up with. On the other hand, Chandler's analysis of how humor has impacted the conversation on global warming and environmentalist tactics provides an explanation of the three philosophical theories of humor: incongruity theory, relief theory, and superiority theory. These philosophical theories of humor break down humor into three categories of form, each with a distinct effect. For instance, the superiority theory of humor is humor with the intention of elevating current self-worth and has the most potential to offend because it puts others down; however, superiority theory could also be about feeling superior to one's former self. *The Read* will be examined and coded for its use of these three theories of humor among the controversial topics in Shifman's piece (2014). These coding strategies will allow for an examination of both steps of

communication mentioned by Vatz earlier in this chapter: what content is chosen and how they're communicated.

In the next chapter, a literature review will be provided, offering background for the study of humor, establishing the rhetorical importance of this study, and further explaining the three philosophical theories of humor and how it applies to this study. Chapter 3 explains the methodology driving this case study, which is based on Shifman's 2014 piece and three philosophical theories of humor. NVivo, an analysis tool for text-based data, was used in order to code the qualitative data into which theory of humor it falls under. In Chapter 4, the results of the analysis of *The Read's* discussion topics and what theory of humor Kid Fury and Crissle West use to communicate are found. For instance, Justin Bieber's use of the N-word or the lack of diversity in the Academy Awards will be discussed in order to see how often each controversial topic uses humor. Breaking down the podcast this way allows for rhetoric scholars to see how this community uses humor to communicate to mass audiences, to relieve tension in controversial issues, and to exemplify the absurd. Finally, this study concludes in Chapter 5 with findings related to the analysis of this podcast and implications of this study and then offers further threads of investigation in terms of studying humor. With that in mind, this case study now transitions into literature that provides the framework that guides this case study.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

In order to study the use of humor in mediating discussions surrounding issues like racial inequality, gender inequality, and other topics facing marginalized groups like Black Americans and the LGBTQ+ community, this study performs a close reading of the podcast *The Read*. This podcast is an example of how Black Americans are reacting rhetorically to complicated racial tensions and using humor to talk about a wide variety of topics; for example, celebrity gossip, politics, and everything Beyoncé. Before focusing on *The Read*, this chapter contextualizes the 1) history of the study of humor, 2) the three philosophical theories of humor, and 3) the rhetorical importance of studying humor. This study takes on a close reading of a popular podcast called *The Read* by first establishing the history of the study of humor. Doing this enables the audience to understand the importance of this study and why the current gap in knowledge exists in the study of humor as a rhetorical tool. Although philosophy focuses on meaning-making and rhetoric focuses on communication tactics, this study first turns to philosophy to understand the forms and the effects of humor on society and discourse. Philosophy takes on a rational and objective point of view, “what the object is for itself”, while rhetoric is seen as the art of persuasion, “reaching to man’s ‘passions’” (Grassi 1987). Aristotle’s three appeals, *logos* (logic), *ethos* (character/credibility), and *pathos* (emotion), are said to incorporate philosophy as a means to persuade, while philosophy sees its discipline as an end; therefore, incorporating the philosophical theories of humor will aid this case study’s approach in categorizing humor and providing it with credibility as a rhetorical tool (Grassi 1987). Because the scholarly study of humor as a rhetorical tool is fairly limited, this study presents the history of the study of humor, then discusses current literature that begins to give humor credibility as a rhetorical tool. Philosophy and rhetoric share many

of the same core scholars like Aristotle, Plato, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, and Rene Descartes.

A Negative History

The study of comedy in philosophy is fairly limited. This study turns to philosophy because philosophy establishes reality through observing the world, while rhetoric establishes reality through discussion and persuasion, so philosophy allows rhetoric researchers to administer form to examine argument. Also, this study turns to the field because rhetoric and philosophy share a lot of the same core thinkers and teachers like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. Although Aristotle, Plato, and other ancient philosophers briefly talked about comedy, it was never for more than a few paragraphs. In these times, philosophers would use the word humor to refer to funniness or laughter, not humor as it is understood today: as a rhetorical tool and genre of communication that isn't only about entertainment. Plato and Aristotle were very forthright in criticizing humor because they focused on scornful or mocking laughter, instead of other aspects of comedy, like wit, comedy, or joking. Plato, who was humor's biggest critic, treated laughing as an emotion that "overrides self-control", and as a tool for malicious intent with the constant of vulgarity (*Laws*, 7: 816e). Later on, Aristotle came to agree with his teacher and argued for the limitation of comedy, noting how malicious and scornful most humor was. Even though he agreed with Plato that laughter was a sign of losing self-control, Aristotle believed "tasteful" jokes, which are "ready-witted... are thought to be movements of the character," (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, 8). Despite Aristotle's tolerance of humor, most ancient Greeks provided a foundation for a negative view towards comedy that lasted through the development and spread of Christianity.

Christianity, more specifically, *The Bible*, has had a great role in culture that has influenced how humor has been perceived. As Christianity developed its major text, *The Bible*, negative comments about laughter and humor continued. In *The Bible*, God's spokesmen are prophets, and they connect laughter with hostility. For instance, God's prophet *Elijah* ridicules *Baal's* prophets for their god's powerlessness, then slays the prophets (1 Kings 18:27). Later on, a group of children humiliated Elisha for his baldness. Elisha responded by "cursing them in the name of the Lord; and two she-bears came out of a wood and mauled 42 of them (2 Kings 2:23). In *The Bible*, the Christian God only laughs with hostility: "The Lord who sits enthroned in heaven laughs them to scorn; then He rebukes them in anger, he threatens them in his wrath (Psalm 2:2-5). Later Christian philosophers like Saint Ambrose (337CE-397CE), Saint Jerome (347CE-420CE), Saint Basil the Great (330CE-379CE) and Saint John Chrysostom (349-407) emulated Plato and Aristotle's stance toward humor: laughter is representative of loss of self-control. Saint Basil wrote in *The Long Rules* that "raucous laughter and uncontrollable shaking of the body are not indications of a well-regulated soul, or of personal dignity, or self-mastery," (in Wagner 1962: p. 271). Moreover, Saint John Chrysostom warned that humor and laughter are linked with idleness, irresponsibility, lust, and anger (in Schaff 1889, 442). The religious and philosophical view towards humor was considerably negative and nothing changed in Europe through the Middle Ages.

There was rapid change across Western Europe as Reformers grew influential in Western Europe, but the religious and philosophical attitude toward humor and laughter didn't change. Puritans were the harshest critics of comedies, as they outlawed comedies

when the Puritans came to power in England during the seventeenth century (Morreal 2012). William Prynne (1600-1669) wrote over 200 books and pamphlets arguing that Christians need to live serious and somber lives, explaining that laughter and humor are “mere lascivious vanities” (1633). The negative religious attitude toward humor continued from its base in Christianity to influence secular philosophy.

Three Philosophical Theories of Humor

It was around this time that both Thomas Hobbes and Rene Descartes wrote their critical take on humor, which eventually evolved into the superiority theory of humor. Hobbes’ *Leviathan* explains that the source of laughter is feeling superior to your fellow man:

Sudden glory is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. (Morreal 2012)

On the other hand, Descartes’ *Passions of the Soul* considers laughter as “an expression of scorn and ridicule” (in Morreal 2012). Hobbes, Descartes, Plato, and Aristotle all helped develop the superiority theory of humor. This theory of humor posits that amusement comes from a feeling of superiority. The superiority theory of humor is the category of humor that has the most potential to offend since it puts others down and elevates another’s, but most likely, the speaker’s self-worth.

Daniel Tosh of *Tosh.O* is famous for using the superiority theory in his television show, where he ridicules people in clips from online videos. Tosh also puts up a façade that he is wealthy and extremely handsome, adding to the elevated feelings of self-worth,

making Tosh's routine entertaining to many. Superiority theory has the potential to offend almost every time because it posits people as a means instead of an end because it makes people the butt of the joke; therefore, superiority theory will be examined as a tool to elevate self-worth and the theory that has the highest potential to offend. Comics like Daniel Tosh, Todd Glass, Joan Rivers, Kathy Griffin, and Lisa Lampanelli are all champions of the superiority theory of humor, building successful careers. Even though this theory has the most potential to offend, when one uses the superiority theory of humor to compare their current self to their former self, it will most likely have positive impacts, like getting others to connect with the speaker, developing *ethos*, and avoiding offending others. An example of this is Tina Fey's and Amy Poehler's memoirs, *Bossypants* (2011) and *Yes Please* (2014), which explain their experiences in an entertaining way. Superiority was the dominant view of humor by those who created and shared information for almost 2,000 years; however, one 18th century philosopher turned the tide and set the stage for what is now known as the relief theory of humor.

Lord Shaftesbury's 1709 essay, "An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor" was the first to suggest humor as a form of relief. In that time, it was believed that nerves carried "animal spirits" (gases and liquids like air and blood), so Lord Shaftesbury suggested pressure built up in the nerves and causing bodily responses and manifestations and suggested laughter was one way to release that pressure:

The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves and be revenged upon their constrainers. (in Morreal 2012)

Although the reasoning is flawed, the concept was easy to understand for most and eventually received credible, biological reasoning by Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud in the early 20th centuries. In Spencer's 1911 essay, "On the Physiology of Laughter", he explains how nervous energy "always tends to beget muscular motion, and when it rises to a certain intensity" (p. 299). As an example, Spencer points to how when someone feels anger, "nervous energy produces small aggressive movements such as clenching our fists," eventually leading to an attack on the person causing the emotion (p. 302). With this same reasoning in mind, Spencer explains how laughter is the release of nervous energy: it starts with an involuntary smile, then to the vocal cords, and finally, at its peak, "it spills over to the muscles connected with breathing" (p. 302).

Spencer's relief theory is valuable, but Sigmund Freud's explanation of the relief theory of humor has become the widely accepted explanation of the theory. Freud begins by explaining the three laughter situations: *der Witz* ("jokes" or "joking"), "the comic", and "humor" (1905). In all three situations, there is a release of nervous energy, but in *der Witz*, there is a repression of the nervous feelings; in the comic, the energy is used to think; and in humor, the energy is used to feel emotions (1905). The relief theory of humor received credibility because many can easily relate to the idea of laughter bringing people back to homeostasis through a release of nervous energy. Homeostasis, which has its roots in biology, but was applied to psychology, explains that when someone is psychologically stressed, they need some sort of reprieve to bring them back to a state of balance, causing the body to revert back to normal physiological functions (Golstein & Kopin 2007). The relief theory of humor is particularly important to this study of *The Read* as it explains how comedians are able to talk about topics that have the tendency to

cause stress, like race, gender, and religion because it eases the tension through humor. Relief theory may explain the rise of infotainment in that it makes difficult topics that were previously taken up in traditional news programs more digestible. Infotainment falls under the relief theory of humor because the entertainment aspect allows the audience to easily digest the information while making an emotional connection that will make the information memorable. This is best exemplified in an example from John Oliver, host of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, as he discussed abortion laws. In this episode, the host says,

Our main story tonight is breast implants. Some are against them, others believe they're fine in rare cases and many believe you should be able to get them whenever the f*** you want... Sorry, did I say breast implants? I meant abortions. Tonight's main topic concerns abortions. (Oliver 2016)

This joke at the beginning of his argument allows Oliver to ease the audience into a very polarizing debate. Relief theory influences the audience's emotions to ease them into controversial topics, while the superiority theory of humor plays with character. Modern champions of the relief theory of humor include Jon Stewart, Trevor Noah, Amy Poehler, Chris Rock, Kevin Hart, and Amy Schumer. The relief theory of humor brought on a major shift in understanding humor's capacity; however, the beginning of the 18th century brought on another theory of humor.

While the superiority theory of humor explains that amusement is derived from feeling superior to another being and the relief theory of humor explains that laughter comes from a release of nervous energy, the incongruity theory of humor explains that laughter can also be the result of an incongruous situation – “something that violates our

mental patterns and expectations” (Morreal 2012). Immanuel Kant was the first to give credibility to humor in the field of philosophy, focusing on one passage in Cicero’s *On the Orator*: “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,” (ch. 63). Kant explains,

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd. Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. Therefore its cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reflex effect of this upon the mind (1911 [1790], First Part, sec. 54).

Absurdity has a lot to do with the incongruity theory of humor, which is why this theory is the leading approach by both comedians and by humor researchers (Morreal 2012). Søren Kierkegaard also saw how incongruity caused laughter, but categorized it as “contradiction” instead of “incongruity” (1846):

The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction... . The comic apprehension evokes the contradiction or makes it manifest by having in mind the way out, which is why the contradiction is painless. The tragic apprehension sees the contradiction and despairs of a way out. (1846)

The incongruity theory of humor allows for laughter at what is contradictory to expectations. What is known as British humor, which is a form of humor that is much more sarcastic than American humor and modern comedians like Tina Fey, Jimmy Carr, Ricky Gervais, Aziz Ansari, and Louis C.K. are champions of this form of humor. Although some psychologists, like Thomas Schultz (1976), argue that the laughter at a contradiction creates homeostasis in the brain, therefore it is relief theory, the general consensus is that the two theories of humor are unique.

Because the three philosophical theories of humor provide categories of form and the effects of each form, they will guide this case study on *The Read*. Although these three theories of humor come from philosophy, they are applicable to a study on rhetoric because they help categorize humor into forms and tactics. The incongruity, relief, and superiority theories of humor will help rhetoric scholars understand the savvy rhetorical tactics the podcast employs when covering a variety of controversial topics. An understanding of the history of the study of humor is important as this literature review moves towards the rhetorical significance of humor.

Rhetorical Significance

Up until the eighteenth century, humor was seen only as a form of entertainment and almost completely disregarded as a rhetorical tool. This section of Chapter 2 is divided into two parts in order to prove humor's efficacy as a rhetorical tool: 1) Effect on Persuasion and 2) Versatility. Through these parts, many scholars will be explored, showing that humor is gaining momentum in the field of rhetoric to gain credibility, but there is still work to be done.

Effect on Persuasion

Humor is a major part of American culture, so it is fascinating to find how little rhetoric researchers know about the topic. Skalski and Tamborini's article, "Effects of Humor on Presence and Recall of Persuasive Message" (2009) was a qualitative research project created to examine whether audiences were able to more accurately and effectively recall a persuasive message through humor. The researchers found audience opinions were influenced by the message more often when humor was involved, but the message itself wasn't as accurately recalled (2009). The outcome of this research posits the speaker/author as having a perceived credibility. Lastly, Skalski and Tamborini's research concludes humor has the power to ease psychological reaction with the positive effect of humor, an explanation of the relief theory of humor explained earlier in this chapter (2009). These positive effects allow for discourse on racial tensions because humor has the power to ease the audience into participation with less insecurity of offending someone. Also, comedians are given a platform to speak and an audience to listen and watch because their work is considered art, but it has the power to persuade. For instance, Trevor Noah of *The Daily Show With Trevor Noah* compares Donald Trump to an African dictator, so viewers would be more likely to view Trump as silly or thoughtless and less likely to remember the facts of the story ("*The Daily Show*" 10/01/2015). Political humor is perhaps the only genre where a great deal of research and scholarship has been conducted.

Communication researchers investigate political humor because of the great impact it has through aspects of popular culture like *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show With Trevor Noah*, and *The Read*; therefore, there is – comparatively – a great deal more

research in political humor than any other genre. Although naysayers have pointed to political humor as a sign of American culture's demise, where individuals are unable to have conversations of importance without the element of entertainment, otherwise known as infotainment, political humorists have continued to grow in popularity. In "Political Humor and Its Dis-Content" (2012), author Iain Ellis poses multiple questions about the pervasiveness and efficacy of political humor and humorists. Specifically, Ellis focuses on Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and Bill Maher:

The comedic angles Stewart, Colbert, and Maher bring to our national affairs offer a different model from that provided by the mainstream news services. Because the latter only consider socio-political concerns through the prism of the two-party system, they are loath to entertain any viewpoints or opinions that exist beyond the parameters of the propaganda machines provided by each side. As Stewart often points out, Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN do not offer variant voices on issues or the news, only counter-weight shouters hired to create political drama and higher ratings... Using satirical argument and art, critical humorists deconstruct the "fair and balanced" myths of the news systems, in the process chastising the party spokespeople they predictably trot out and pander to for access. By observing and documenting this media-politico conspiracy of convenience from behind the scenes, Stewart *et al.* perform the age-old functions of satire: to expose, ridicule, and-implicitly-call for action and change. (2012)

Humor, specifically, satire, clearly affects the audience because it shows a different point of view. Satire also exposes and ridicules the opposing view, and calls the audience to action, which is the purpose of all communication. Moreover, Ellis argues

that “political humorists *serve* the republic, offering insight into, and critiques of corruption, hypocrisy, and extremism, all the while engaging citizens in ways neither the traditional news media nor academia can – or will – do” (2012). Therefore, one can begin to understand the value humorists provide for their fellow citizens and accept humor as a valuable rhetorical tool that scholars need to understand.

Versatility

One of the most interesting facets of humor is its ability to insert itself into any genre. Limor Shifman took on this idea in the 2007 piece “Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-Based Comic Texts”. In this piece, Shifman examines which controversial topics individuals made jokes about and what kind of jokes they made. Using tactics from popular theorists (Ellis 2002; Foot and Schneider; Kuipers 2002; Oring 2003; Warnick 2002), Shifman broke down the content into thirteen categories: 1. Sex, 2. Gender, 3. Mass Media, 4. Children/Teenagers, 5. Politics, 6. Computers/Technology, 7. Sports, 8. Specific People, 9. Ethnicity, 10. Transportation, 11. Habits, 12. Workplace, and 13. Profession (2007). One of the major findings in this piece is the move from verbal jokes in the pre-internet era to humor that uses visuals. Although the results of this study don’t point to any universal set of values for humor, the study shows how pervasive humor is.

One possible reason for the versatility of humor is that humor is subjective and can be interpreted in many different ways based on their background. There are a variety of interpretations that one can receive from the same joke and Arthur Asa Berger’s 1994 piece, “No Laughing Matter: Eight Scholars in Search of a Joke”, exemplifies the variety of interpretations. The author uses interviews to explain eight different interpretations to

the same joke; each interpretation represents a different field of study – rhetorical, semiotic analysis, communications theory, psychological analysis, sociological analysis, philosophical, political science, and feminist perspectives. The rhetorician examines how a joke is funny, while a psychologist may approach it with a psychoanalytical lens, a feminist approach may focus on misogynistic constructions of a joke, and so on (1994). Although the piece offers no conclusions of its own, it brings to light the complexity of different interpretations of humor. Because humor’s versatility allows it to influence any genre, this study now dives into examples that have incorporated humor in order to portray how pervasive, impactful, and useful humor is as a rhetorical tool.

To begin with, Tina Fey, with her brainchild show “30 Rock”, where she plays Liz Lemon, has created a new space for women to challenge stereotypes. Risa Shiman, author of “Comedy as Feminist Rhetoric, Liz Lemon Style”, wrote about how well Fey used sardonic humor, which falls under the incongruity theory of humor, in order to portray stereotypes as the ridiculous thing they are: “Sardonic humor has the potential to start a dialogue about topics that otherwise seem overdone and tired and whiny, as well as to explore and to raise questions about concepts that are controversial or just plain confusing” (2012).

Fey draws her audience in by wrapping her often serious message in humor; therefore, she is creating a spectacle in order to gain credibility to address absurd stereotypes. She is able to make the audience understand that when Fey writes a sketch where “Amelia Earhart crashed her plane because of menstrual cramps, the show exposes the irrationality of a common stereotype” and thus Fey addresses a troubling reality by making the audience laugh at it (Shiman 2012). When her character says, "I will not calm

down! Women are allowed to get angrier than men about double standards," Fey is pointing to the stereotype and taking it to the extreme and into an ironic reappropriation that makes the audience rethink what the "double standard" means to them. Fey has created a space for feminists to engage humor as a new rhetorical tool and use it to their advantage.

Although the study of humor in feminist studies is increasing, racial humor has been present for a long time, but not many critical race scholars have investigated humor. In Johnathan Rossing's "Two critical theories walk into a bar..." (2008), readers are led to the conclusion that critical race studies and critical rhetoric studies will find much room to research and grow when looking at comedy. In this piece, Rossing provides reasoning for the cross-disciplinary research gap for critical race studies and critical rhetoric studies in comedy. For Rossing, a primary goal for critical race studies is to re-center inquiry and experience from the margins so that "issues of conflict, change, and inequality reorient our thinking and feeling to address matters of human difference" (2008). As an example, Rossing points to a blog titled "The Message" and how it created a satirical news report titled, "When White People Can Say the N-Word". The author of the satirical piece says the only time to use the "N-Word" is during Civil War reenactments, when it is part of a larger word, like vinegar, or "when they really mean it". The report is finally concluded with an assessment that the "N-Word" is off limits to everyone. Rossing says the report "effectively satirized public discourses regarding the 'N-word' and attempted to construct new meanings, judgments, and actions out of reconstructed fragments" (Rossing 2008). In his analysis, Rossing says,

Racial comedy is an inventive practice where we can see the power of these critical disciplines intersect with the promise of perspective shifting and social transformation. Through comedy we see that ‘Culture, society, even our very identities are matters of representation’ and questioning or changing representations is the strategy that may help us ‘eliminate undesirable effects’ such as racism. Comedy possesses a rhetorical force so that ‘masses of persons begin to respond to a myth’ through shared, collective behavior. (2008)

While the power of humor as a rhetorical tool is recognized here, it isn’t effectively researched, therefore, humor presents an interesting gap in research for rhetoric scholars. In order to examine comedy’s rhetorical function, it is important to understand how humor’s versatility can become a double-edged sword that causes alienation, dehumanization, and fear.

Of particular interest to this case study on *The Read* is how humor has the potential to offend, especially with ever-growing concerns over bullying and cyber-bullying. Simon Weaver showed in his 2011 piece, “Jokes, Rhetoric and Embodied Racism”, how humor can be hurtful. For this piece, Weaver brings up examples of racist humor in five different online spaces and examines them as objects of inclusion and exclusion. Objects of inclusion would depict inferiorization and exploitation, particularly through stereotyping. In the author’s analysis, Weaver claims this method of racist jokes tend to create a dichotomy of racists and racial minorities, based on stereotypes (2011 p. 422). On the other hand, objects of exclusion tend to break this dichotomy and push the racial minorities out of the racists’ world. These jokes do not have to rely on stereotypes and can simply compare people to waste. Weaver analyzes these types of racist jokes

promote a dangerous form of racism that could easily transform into violence (424). With the lack of a credible foundation, complex interpretations causing problems and with a great variety of ways that jokes can offend, comedy has a Grand Canyon-sized cliff to climb in terms of finding credibility as a communicatory tool.

With an understanding of 1) the history of humor in philosophy, 2) the three philosophical theories of humor, and 3) humor's rhetorical significance, one can begin to understand how this study came to be and what its purpose is moving forward. Humor's history with rhetoric has been fairly limited, limiting the genre to a form of entertainment; however, many scholars, especially communication researchers finding the impact of political humor on major elections, are giving humor credibility as a rhetorical tool. This chapter establishes the background knowledge necessary to examine *The Read* as a savvy rhetorical "text" that is in response to growing racial tensions. As this study moves forward to Chapter 3, where the methodology of the case study will be discussed, some of the works, specifically, Limor Shifman's 2007, "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-Based Comic Texts", and John Morreal's 2013 entry into the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), "Philosophy of Humor", will be referenced.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

In order to best understand how humor is used as a rhetorical tool, this project undertakes a case study on the podcast *The Read*. Data from the podcast was collected through the following strategies. The researcher performed a close reading of the five most popular episodes of *The Read* from between August 2015 and December 2015. The content was divided based on the subject matter and the categories are based on Limor Shifman's study, explained in Chapter 2, on "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction" (2007). The second strategy for data collection was to code the content based on the three philosophical theories of humor: incongruity theory, relief theory, and superiority theory. This approach allowed for analysis by examining how Crissle and Fury inform and entertain by utilizing the three philosophical theories of humor. This case study approach collected qualitative data to find a potential relationship that positions humor as an effective rhetorical tool by looking at how often each theory of humor was used in each controversial topic.

The Read used humor in a variety of ways, while taking on controversial topics that are popular in American culture, especially in New York City, where the show is based. Since Kid Fury and Crissle West come from states with vastly different cultures compared to New York City – Miami, Florida and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma – the topics they talked about are from a unique point of view, often disagreeing with native New Yorkers who write in to the show. Because West and Kid Fury come from a religiously conservative background, they have an understanding and an ability to empathize with religiously conservative listeners who don't agree with the LGBTQ+ community and socially liberal listeners who support the LGBTQ+ community. This understanding of different cultures allows *The Read* to reach many different audiences

and speak to topics from a unique point of view. Both of the hosts are homosexual, Black Americans and therefore bring in marginalized points of view from minority communities often marginalized based on race and sexuality; therefore, *The Read* is ripe for a case study analysis. As racial tensions continue to get more aggressive, a look at *The Read* allows for rhetoricians to gain insight into how movements like the Black Lives Matter gain popularity using unique rhetorical tactics, like humor, to make their arguments heard.

Background

Case studies specifically analyze one person, topic, event, or community; however, in this research, the data will focus on one podcast: *The Read*. Case studies are used to investigate a topic in far more detail than might be possible if researchers were to instead deal with a large number of research participants with the aim of “averaging” rather than understanding a phenomenon in depth. Because of a lack of scholarship regarding humor and because of the negative assessments of humor, as was explained in Chapter 2, a case study is most appropriate here because it allows the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis of *The Read*'s use of humor to communicate to begin to form a more generalizable theory of the ways humor works as a rhetorical tool. An in-depth analysis allows for the researcher to make connections between the theory of humor used and the topic covered, finding how the communication is affected. While the researcher has listened to all episodes of *The Read* to familiarize himself with the show and the hosts, the five most popular episodes of the podcast between August 2015 and December 2015 have been transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to the topic and the three philosophical theories of humor, which will be further discussed later in this

chapter. This podcast, known for taking on controversial topics, like police shootings, black-on-black crime, and rappers' feuds on social media, is a space to examine how humor is a rhetorical tool worth analyzing, especially as a text produced by and for the Black American and LGBTQ+ communities so often at the heart of conflicts in America. *The Read* was on the forefront of this cultural and social movement to make Black Americans' voice heard, starting in February 2013, months before the Black Lives Matter movement was created.

A rhetorical analysis of *The Read* provides readers with an understanding of the work of such societal discourse might do in critiquing racial tensions in our society and may help communication researcher understand why rhetorical tactics work and why they don't. Using Richard Vatz's "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation", as a framework, this project considers specifically when the author says, "The facts or events communicated to us are *choices*, by our sources of information... The second step in communicating 'situations' is the translation of the chosen information into meaning" which Vatz says is an artistic process (1973). For this case study, the researcher examined how comedy is used as a rhetorical tool to communicate and construct meaning. Therefore, the research question motivating this case study is:

How is humor used as a rhetorical tool to negotiate perceptions of reality?

Using this research question, the case study examined *The Read's* use of humor through a variety of controversial topics, focusing mainly on race and other issues shaping American society.

Data Analysis

The piece that is foundational to this case study's methodology in data coding is Limor Shifman's 2007 piece, "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-Based Comic Texts." The article examines the rhetorical tactics of jokes online compared to pre-internet humor. Using tactics from popular theorists (Ellis 2002; Foot and Schneider; Kuipers 2002; Oring 2003; Warnick 2002), Shifman breaks data down by content into thirteen categories: 1. Sex, 2. Gender, 3. Mass Media, 4. Children/Teenagers, 5. Politics, 6. Computers/Technology, 7. Sports, 8. Specific People, 9. Ethnicity, 10. Transportation, 11. Habits, 12. Workplace, and 13. Profession. Shifman's structure helped her test her hypothesis, and this study borrowed this structure, adding, changing, and deleting categories that apply to an examination of Crissle West and Kid Fury's humor so that this study may code how humor is used. The researcher chose to limit the number of controversial topics because the topics offered by Shifman do not all apply to *The Read*, like "Children/Teenagers" and "Specific People".

Like Shifman (2007), the methodological framework for this study is broken down into categories to see what is talked about. The first step was to divide *The Read*'s topics of conversation into categories useful in categorizing the podcast, which is based on Shifman's method of categorizing. Kid Fury and Crissle West's sass, awkwardness, and rhetorical savvy give them the opportunity to create a homeostasis that allows the podcast hosts to talk about controversial topics. Homeostasis, as was explained in Chapter 2, is a concept that finds its roots in biology, where homeostasis is considered the "normal" biological state of human beings, where stress causes an imbalance of bodily functions. This concept is then applied to psychology, where psychological stress

influences physiological processes and the goal is to bring the individual back to homeostasis after stressful situations (Golstein & Kopin 2007). The controversial topics for content covered in *The Read* were narrowed down to:

- 1) Sex (includes relationships, sexuality, and gender)
- 2) Race
- 3) Celebrity Gossip
- 4) Politics
- 5) Sports
- 6) Technology (includes gaming)
- 7) Profession
- 8) Habits (includes etiquette)
- 9) Pop Culture (includes music, television, movies, plays, and books)
- 10) Family Issues
- 11) Other

These categories allow for categorizing the podcast episodes and examining humor as a rhetorical tool. After dividing the data into these categories, this case study examined how many times humor was used in each of the topics using the philosophical theories of humor. Using the three theories of humor to examine *The Read's* rhetorical tactics allows for an understanding of the quantity of use for each type of humor in the controversial topics; therefore, a better understanding of the three philosophical theories of humor is required. Typically, the superiority theory of humor is connected with celebrity gossip and popular culture because the general public tends to have a love-hate relationship with celebrities. The incongruity theory of humor is ambiguous, so it is applicable to all topics. The relief theory of humor is most often identified with discussions of sex and race because they tend to be difficult topics to talk about, so a reprieve is warranted.

The incongruity theory, which is cognitive in nature, presumes that amusement is derived from the unexpected. One may perceive an interaction or experience to be humorous because it contradicts past experiences, cognitive frameworks, or expectations.

The incongruity theory is a product of Immanuel Kant's understanding of humor, but has its grounding in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Chandler 2014). This theory of humor plays with logic, one of the three Aristotelian rhetorical appeals – *logos* (logic), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (character). The incongruity theory is the most common form of humor used. One may categorize parody as part of the incongruity theory because it makes something real into something bizarre enough to laugh at. Jon Stewart, the former host of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, may have been the champion of parody as he mocked the way journalism had devolved into partisan banter (Colletta 2009). One may also consider silliness a form of incongruity theory because silliness normally entails taking an expectation and stretching it to its extreme. An example of silliness is when Fury gets angry and raises the volume of his voice, in an overdramatized anger. Using incongruity theory, this project examines particularly how humor influences conversations on race. Irony also falls under the incongruity theory of humor because it violates expectations. Ironic re-appropriations, where the author/speaker uses irony to re-appropriate a stereotype, rendering it powerless because the audience laughs at the stereotype, is used to dispel false stereotypes (Shiman 2012). When the author/speaker uses the incongruity theory of humor, they can point to contradictions or bizarre occurrences in a way informs the audience of the situation and calls the audience to action.

Similarly, the relief theory of humor has the potential to effect the audience's understanding of the topic and call the audience to action by playing with emotional appeals – *pathos*. Relief theory argues that amusement is derived from the release of built-up emotion: "the basic principle of all such theories is that laughter provides relief for mental, nervous and/or psychic energy and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle,

tension, strain, *etc.*" (Chandler 2014). Relief theorists include Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer. Skalki and Tamborini's research, mentioned in Chapter 2, studies the effect of relief theory (2009). Relief theory may be a particularly important theory when understanding how *The Read* operates, specifically around discussions of race in America. Relief theory in humor allows for a reprieve for the Black American community so they may handle tragic police shootings in a less depressing way. Using relief theory, the researcher can measure how humor can influence the audience's reaction, impact speaker/author credibility, and provide a space for more participation because it eases tensions. The relief theory of humor also sets the stage for the author/speaker to talk about topics that may seem uninteresting or that polarize the debate.

Along with the relief theory, the superiority theory was coded in this project to examine how the hosts of *The Read* build their *ethos* and bring down others' character and credibility. Aristotle's *ethos* is considered an appeal to the author's/speaker's character and credibility, so when the superiority theory of humor is used, the author/speaker is making an *ethos* appeal. The superiority theory is "mockery, ridicule, and laughter at the foolish actions of others for the humor experience" (Chandler 2014). Amusement, seen through the lens of superiority theory, emerges from elevated feelings of self-worth after the denigration of a target. Thomas Hobbes popularizes superiority theory, but both Aristotle and Plato saw superiority in humor. The superiority theory was marked as harmful in the eyes of Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero because it has the potential to diminish and haze realities (Chandler 2014). In terms of coding, this case study looks for when the hosts meant to elevate self-worth or were purposefully offending an

individual or a community. The three theories of humor outlined help communication researchers better understand comedy's rhetorical effect and how they line up with Aristotle's three rhetorical appeals.

In order to examine the type of humor *The Read* used in relation to the topics covered, these three philosophical theories for humor will guide in coding the amount of times they are used in each controversial topic. Incongruity theory, relief theory, and superiority theory was used to further code and contextualize the controversial topics that are based on Shifman's 2007 work. By doing this, the study will be able to categorize the way *The Read* uses humor in each category and how often the hosts use each of the three philosophical theories of humor. For instance, superiority theory will allow me to examine *The Read*'s use of inappropriate and offensive humor. The title of Kid Fury and Crissle West's podcast is meant to tell potential listeners that they are going to be "reading" people. "Reading" people means that someone is going to tell someone about themselves or about someone else in a humorous way using the superiority theory. For instance, in Fury's "read" of pop star Rihanna, he ridicules Rihanna for letting her dog kiss her face. Fury goes into an over-the-top description of the germs associated with a dog's mouth, then discusses why, in his experience, dogs aren't even allowed into the kitchen in Black American's home (*The Read* October, 2015). Documenting and understanding the ways these philosophical theories of humor are used in this popular podcast will provide a great foundation for future analysis of the effect humor has on the speaker and the audience. Understanding how often the hosts use these theories will be paramount in this case study's research on humor as a rhetorical tool. Although the primary purpose of this case study was to code how much each theory of humor was used

in the controversial topics, there was a direct focus on topics related specifically to race. If humor's rhetorical effects are recognized by communication researchers, then there will be a better understanding of how humor can be a viable and credible rhetorical tool.

Chapter 4 - Findings

As was discussed in the previous chapter, this case study looks at how often *The Read* and its hosts, Kid Fury and Crissle West use the three philosophical theories of humor within the controversial categories modeled after Limor Shifman's study on "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction" (2007). The five most popular episodes that aired between August 2015 to December 2015 on its most popular media-hosting website, *Soundcloud*. The podcast episodes mostly focused on current events, especially in popular culture and celebrity gossip because both hosts have a history for writing in those fields and have admitted that is what their target audience wants to hear about (Sands 2013). Considering *The Read's* hosts position themselves as representatives of specific communities related to race and sexuality, studying ways they use humor to communicate their stance on popular issues offers ample opportunity to research ways the three theories of humor are utilized, particularly regarding discussions of race and current affairs in America.

In this chapter, the researcher presents findings from this case study regarding how often the incongruity theory of humor, the relief theory of humor, and the superiority theory of humor are used when the hosts discuss each controversial topic in each of the five most-popular episodes of *The Read*. The controversial topics considered, which are based on Shifman's 2007 study, are broken down into 11 categories. Those topics include: 1) Sex (includes relationships, sexuality, and gender), 2) Race, 3) Celebrity Gossip, 4) Politics, 5) Sports, 6) Technology (includes gaming), 7) Profession, 8) Habits (includes etiquette), 9) Pop Culture (includes music, television, movies, plays, and books), 10) Family Issues, and 11) Other. This data was drawn from the five most popular episodes of *The Read*: 1) "Difficult Dumbasses", which aired on August 20, 2015

and has over 282,000 plays, 2) “Serena and Hotline Bling”, which aired on August 27, 2015 and has over 326,000 plays, 3) “Billy Ray’s Burden”, which aired on September 4, 2015 and has over 269,000 plays, 4) “Anal Training Day”, which aired on October 22, 2015 and has over 247,000 plays, and 5). “Da Hee”, which aired on November 4, 2015 and has over 242,000 plays. Findings regarding the use of specific theories of humor in connection with specific topics are organized around each of the episodes. In order for the audience to gain a better understanding of the episode, a brief synopsis will first be provided. Each episode is then further categorized based on the three theories of humor. This case study will then present the data on how often each theory of humor is used when discussing the different controversial topics. An important note before moving forward is that there are many instances where what the hosts said was coded under two or more theories of humor or controversial topics. The same concept is also applied to the controversial topics, where discussions were coded under two or more controversial topics. Also, the NVivo software used for coding the theories of humor doesn’t allow for extrapolation of data to show how many times there was overlap between the three theories of humor or between the eleven controversial topics, so this case study couldn’t find the specific amount of times the theories of humor or the controversial topics overlapped.

“Difficult Dumbasses” – August 20, 2015

This episode started off a little differently than most episodes, giving the “Black Excellence” to a character – “Moon Girl” – rather than a real person. The first “Hot Topic” discussed was Matt Barnes starting a rumor that he’s dating Rihanna, but the pop star shuts the rumor down in a fantastic way using Instagram. Then, they talked about Ciara and Russel Wilson’s feud with Ciara’s ex-boyfriend and father to her child, Future.

The first question in the “Listener Letters” segment, an anonymous listener wrote to the podcast because they were considering breaking up with her Caribbean boyfriend because “He doesn’t see the police killings as a problem because ‘black people kill each other all the time’” (40:25). The second letter involved a woman who was seeking advice about what to do about her brother who was in the closet, but contracted HIV and continues to sleep around with other men. The last letter was from a woman asking advice about whether she should keep her recently divorced, ex-husband in her life, considering he had been cheating on her with her best friend for over a year and just found out she was pregnant with her ex-husband’s baby and the ex-husband impregnated the best friend as well. Fury’s read in the final segment of the show was about how Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum’s mistreatment of Black American stars and people questioning light-skinned Black Americans’ credibility, like Shaun King. Crissle West’s read went to Amy Poehler for the show she produces, *Difficult People*, where one of the recurring jokes in the pilot was about R. Kelly urinating on Blue Ivy – Jay Z and Beyoncé’s only daughter.

In this episode, the hosts used the superiority theory of humor the most, where this theory of humor covered 59.35% of the episode. The incongruity theory of humor was used 36.35% of the time, and the relief theory of humor was used 34.51% of the time. The incongruity theory of humor was used in 37 topics. The relief theory of humor was used in 34 topics coded. There were 67 topics covered throughout the episode. The superiority theory of humor was used in 53 topics. The three theories of humor overlapped on many occasions, but as was stated above, Nvivo doesn’t track the number of times the three theories of humor overlapped. Overall, there were 67 topics coded, but

it is important to note once again that many of the controversial topics overlapped, so individual discussions were coded into multiple categories. An example of this instance while using the incongruity theory of humor is when Kid Fury was discussing the renewal of the Marvel comic “Moon Girl” during the “Black Excellence” segment: “Her name is Lunella Lafayette and the comic book is about her adventures with a giant red Tyrannosaurus rex around New York City and she’s described as ‘an Inspector Gadget type’, but she actually knows what she’s doing” (7:24). There is a move in this discussion that includes both topics of race and popular culture because Moon Girl’s status as a Black American is emphasized while describing this character in a comic book. Therefore, if one were to add the amount of times the controversial topic, for example, “race” was discussed in all three theories of humor, they will find that number equals more to the total amount the topic is discussed.

Incongruity Theory of Humor

While coding for the incongruity theory of humor, this case study looked for incongruous situations – “something that violates our mental patterns and expectations (Morreal 2012). This theory of humor plays with logic. One may categorize parody as part of the incongruity theory because it makes something real into something bizarre enough to laugh at. One may also consider silliness a form of incongruity theory because silliness normally entails taking an expectation and stretching it to its extreme. The second “Hot Topic” was about the rapper and Ciara’s ex-boyfriend, Future, angrily Tweeting at Ciara’s boyfriend, Russell Wilson for holding Ciara and Future’s baby, Future Zahir Wilburn. As the hosts of *The Read* began discussing this feud, Kid Fury described Ciara with a silly amount of pleasantries, like “Queen of All”, “Prom Queen who rode the activity bus”, and “Prays at the flagpole” (19:56). This move by Kid Fury is

incongruously humorous because one wouldn't expect for a popstar to be described in such a positive way – clearly, Ciara is not “Queen of All”.

The incongruity theory of humor covered 36.35% of the “Difficult Dumbasses” episode. Using the Nvivo software, this case study counted how many times the incongruity theory of humor matched up with each of the controversial topics. Of the 67 topics discussed, 37 were coded as part of the incongruity theory. Incongruous discussions mostly involved sex, at 10 out of 13 discussions coded as using this theory of humor. Discussions covering popular culture used the incongruity theory 7 out of 17 times. Race and popular culture were tied for the second-most amount of discussions coded as incongruous at 7, but many of those topics overlapped with sex. Popular culture and family issues were the two controversial topics that used the incongruity theory the least, in terms of percentage. Discussions on celebrity gossip, habits, other, sports, and technology used the incongruity theory of humor 50% of the time. The results of how many times each controversial topic used the incongruity theory of humor can be found in Table 1.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Incon. | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 7 | 10 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 8 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 17 | 0 | 10 | 13 | 2 | 2 |

Table 1. Table with how many times the incongruity theory was used in each controversial topic in the “Difficult Dumbasses” episode.

Relief Theory of Humor

Relief theory argues that amusement is derived from the release of built-up emotion: "the basic principle of all such theories is that laughter provides relief for mental, nervous and/or psychic energy and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle,

tension, strain, etc." (Chandler 2014). Using relief theory, the researcher coded when Kid Fury and Crissle West used humor to ease or release tension. The hosts of the podcast would also laugh while the other person was discussing their "Read" in order to relieve tension and these instances have also been coded. The relief theory of humor sets the stage for the author/speaker to talk about topics that may seem uninteresting or that polarize the debate. Every episode of *The Read* begins with the hosts introducing themselves with pseudonyms that are meant to be silly. For instance, Fury introduces himself as Johnathan Quest, a famous children's cartoon character, which comes across as silly, before he begins to talk about more serious issues. This introduction helps the hosts transition into more serious topics with a tension reliever. Although the Nvivo software doesn't allow the researcher to track how many times the theories of humor overlapped, relief theory was seldom used alone in this episode, and was instead almost always coded with incongruity and/or superiority.

The relief theory of humor was used 34.51% of the time in the episode "Difficult Dumbasses". This theory of humor was coded to see how many times it was used in each controversial topic using the Nvivo software. Overall, this theory of humor was used in 34 topics in "Difficult Dumbasses". Although relief theory wasn't used as often as the other two theories of humor, it was used to talk about more difficult topics, like family issues, sex, and race. The relief theory of humor was used most often when discussing sex at 9 times coded, while race and family issues were used the second-most often, each at 6 times. In the "Difficult Dumbasses" episode, the hosts tended to use the relief theory most often when introducing the episode, introducing a new topic, or switching tone from

playful to serious or serious to playful. The results of how many times each controversial topic used the incongruity theory of humor can be found in Table 2.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Relief | 2 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 6 | 9 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 8 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 17 | 0 | 10 | 13 | 2 | 2 |

Table 2. Table with how many times the relief theory was used in each controversial topic.

Superiority Theory of Humor

The Nvivo software coded how many times the superiority theory of humor was used in each category of controversial topics. The superiority theory of humor posits laughter deriving from elevated feelings of self-worth, which usually comes from making fun of others. This theory of humor comes in many forms, with sass, malevolent sarcasm, and malicious jokes on individuals leading the way. In this episode, Fury talks about how Rihanna responded to Matt Barnes starting a rumor that they're dating by saying on Snapchat: "Y'all need to get this gay ass, trash ass nigga something like that out of here", to which the basketball player took offense to being called gay. Kid Fury responded:

Not [offended by being called] trash, but gay. Like, "listen, I'll be trash, I'll even be broke, but I draw the line." And then he like sends or DMed and said some shit like, "I see you like to play games, bitch. We'll see who is left." It's madness, but the point is, she [Rihanna] won't feel this bull shit. Like, you imagine this whole relationship with her and she's never even mentioned my nigga. (14:09)

There is a move by Fury to put down the basketball player Matt Barnes for making up rumors that he's dating the pop-star using malicious jokes. The fact that Kid Fury raises the volume of his voice and begins to get riled up also shows that the host's intent is to put down.

The superiority theory of humor covered 59.35% of the “Difficult Dumbasses” episode. Using the software Nvivo, this case study recorded how many times each discussion of the 11 controversial topics used the superiority theory of humor. The title of this episode, “Difficult Dumbasses” is a use of superiority as it explains the frustrations the hosts have with the celebrities they talk about in the podcast. Superiority was coded in 53 discussions and was the most-often used out of all of the theories of humor in this episode. Popular culture topics represent when the hosts used the superiority theory of humor the most often, with 14 instances coded out of 17 total. Race and sex were talked about using the superiority theory of humor 10 times each, but it should be noted that many of the discussions about race and sex centered around popular culture and celebrity gossip. In terms of percentage, the superiority theory of humor was least used when the hosts were discussing family issues, habits, and other topics. Considering popular culture was the most discussed topic in this episode and superiority theory was the most often used theory of humor in that topic, a trend that will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Table 3 shows how many times each topic relied on superiority in order to be humorous.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|-------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Super | 8 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 14 | 0 | 10 | 10 | 2 | 2 |
| Total | 8 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 17 | 0 | 10 | 13 | 2 | 2 |

Table 3. Table with how many times the superiority theory was used in each controversial topic.

Serena and Hotline Bling – August 27, 2015

“Black Excellence” in this episode was given to Mariah Brown, the first Black American and youngest high school student in Delaware to receive a pilot license through the JROTC program and Jasmine Twitty, who at 25, is the youngest county judge in South Carolina history. One of Kid Fury’s favorite popstars, Chris Brown, named his newest album after his only child, “Royalty” and the hosts discussed how the musician

hasn't gotten into trouble in a long time. The next hot topic discussed was the rumors that Serena Williams is dating pop-star Drake because he was a spectator at all of her Wimbledon matches; the title of the episode comes from this discussion. Moving on to the "Listener Letters" portion of the show, the first question asked the hosts what was their favorite flavor of Talenti gelato or Blue Bell ice cream, as they discussed it in the previous episode ("Difficult Dumbass"). The second question was about someone who was concerned about her roommate having sex with many men and the men would eat the author's food while walking around the apartment in his underwear. Kid Fury's "Read" was about how people have been doing "Viligo Face" (blackface to people suffering from the skin condition vitiligo) in order to support model Winnie Harlow and people who say they're supporting the Black Lives Matter movement through tactics like this but are actually hindering it. Crissle West didn't have a "Read" of her own, but instead tagged along onto Kid Fury's.

There were 37 total topics that were discussed, but there were many instances when what was talked about was coded twice because it applied to multiple topics; therefore, many discussions were coded more than once. The incongruity theory of humor covered 38.8% of the show, the relief theory of humor covered 38.3% of the show, and The superiority theory of humor was the theory that covered the most of the episode at 69.21%. The incongruity theory, although only covering 38.8% of the episode, was used in 23 discussions throughout the show, 21 times for relief, and 27 times for superiority. The reader should be reminded once again that the three philosophical theories of humor and the controversial topics overlap on many occasions, but those instances can't be coded through the software Nvivo.

Incongruity Theory of Humor

This episode used a lot of silliness and parody, as both of the hosts of *The Read* tackled celebrity gossip in a playful manner. An example of when Crissle West is silly during this episode is when Kid Fury introduced the rumors that Drake and Serena Williams are dating and West pretends she's speaking for Serena Williams and says, "I'm in love, but Drake couldn't handle it. I'm the most dominant athlete in sports right now. I'm still going to be rich and the baddest bitch" (39:15). In this example, this false sense of superiority is incongruous because Serena Williams is known for being humble, so it's very unlikely she would say something like that. This example was coded for superiority, incongruity, celebrity gossip, sex, and sports and exemplifies how a discussion can be in multiple theories of humor and in multiple controversial topics. It is superiority because it makes Serena Williams superior to her competitors and her love interests.

In the episode "Serena and Hotline Bling", the incongruity theory of humor covered 38.8% of the episode. Although it is the second-most often used humor tactic in the episode, its duration doesn't last long when the hosts used this method; therefore, the incongruity theory was used 23 times, but only covered 38.8% of the episode. Celebrity gossip and sex were the two topics that used the incongruity theory the most at 5 times each, but discussions about popular culture used the incongruity theory 4 times. Even though celebrity gossip used the incongruity theory the most out of the other controversial topics, it only employed the tactic half the time. At a rate of 71.4%, sex used the incongruity theory of humor the most for topics that were discussed more than twice. On the other hand, popular culture and sports were discussed 66.67% of the time using the incongruity theory, and race used the incongruity theory 60% of the time it was discussed. Technology, politics, and other controversial topics were not discussed in this

episode. The incongruity theory of humor's in each of the controversial topics has been visualized in Table 4.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Incon. | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 0 |
| Total | 10 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 0 |

Table 4. Table with how many times the incongruity theory was used in each controversial topic.

Relief Theory of Humor

At the beginning of “Serena and Hotline Bling”, Kid Fury introduced himself as “Minty Fresh”, introducing the show in a silly way, allowing the hosts to dive into the serious “Black Excellence” segment without any tension. This example of relief theory also applies the incongruity theory because of its silly and bizarre quality. According to the relief theory of humor, jokes ease the audience into a difficult discussion, as was explained in Chapter 2, but a release of nervous energy in the form of laughter is also coded as an example of relief theory. The hosts of *The Read* often laugh to relieve this tension and come back to homeostasis during or after they start their “Read”. For instance, during Fury’s “Read”, Crissle West brought up how a high school student in South Carolina made a prom dress out of Confederate flags and Fury burst out into laughter, followed by a shocked, “Bitch, what?” (1:24:14). When Fury is shocked by the explanation West gave, he is clearly distressed, but his laughter and his question restores his feelings to normal. The laughter Fury experienced was part of the relief theory of humor because it exemplifies how laughter restored Fury’s homeostasis.

The relief theory of humor covered 38.3% of the episode “Serena and Hotline Bling”. It was the least-used humor tactic in this episode at 21 instances of the relief theory. All of the discussions about race (5), profession (2) and sports (3) used the relief theory. Profession, race, sex, and sports were the only controversial topics to use the

relief theory of humor a majority of the time, while celebrity gossip employed the humor tactic 40% of the time the hosts discussed celebrity gossip. For more data about how many times the relief theory of humor was used in each controversial topic, please refer to Table 5.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Relief | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 0 |
| Total | 10 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 0 |

Table 5. Table with how many times the relief theory was used in each controversial topic.

Superiority Theory of Humor

Shade, malicious sarcasm, “reading”, sass, and a false anger with the purpose of entertainment were coded in the superiority theory of humor because they either elevate one’s self or put others down. Using the Nvivo software, the researcher went through the transcript of this episode and coded these humor tactics as part of the superiority theory. *The Read*’s discussion of Serena Williams and Drake’s rumored relationship used the superiority theory of humor throughout the discussion, which took up 20 minutes of the 95-minute episode. For instance, Kid Fury pretended he was Serena Williams and said, “‘Oh yeah, I could have whooped that hoe’s ass a little bit more, but, you know, I’m starting to feel bad for her. I can see her eyes tearing up.’ And she’s totally a perfectionist, like ‘No. You know. I let these bitches have it... You ride’” (38:29). This example was coded as superiority theory because Kid Fury is not only putting down Serena Williams’ tennis competitors, but also her sexual competitors. Another example of *The Read* using the superiority theory of humor is when Kid Fury is discussing what happened in the previous episode of *Love and Hip-Hop*, where he says, “Look at the way that Joseline [Hernandez] had on a fucking Johnny Quest wig this season!” (46:23). This

exclamation by Fury shows how superiority was coded, but also shows how this tactic was used to discuss celebrity gossip and popular culture.

In the episode “Serena and Hotline Bling”, the superiority theory of humor covered 69.21% of the episode. It is the most used tactic in the episode at 27 coded instances and it is used in the largest amount because popular culture and celebrity gossip were the two most-talked about controversial topics. Kid Fury and Crissle West’s humor tactics toward these two topics has been well-documented, as they treat celebrities and popular culture stars with superiority. Celebrity gossip used the superiority theory of humor 80% in its discussions. Discussions about race also used the superiority theory 80% of the time, but it was only employed 4 out of the 5 times the hosts talked about the topic. Discussions surrounding habits, popular culture, and professions used superiority 100% of the time. Popular culture, habits, and professions were the three topics where the hosts used the superiority tactic of humor 100% of the time. Race and sex employed superiority as its humor tactic a majority of the time. For more information about the data gathered from “Serena and Hotline Bling” and its use of the superiority theory of humor, please refer to Table 6.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|-------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Super | 8 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 10 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 0 |

Table 6. Table with how many times the superiority theory was used in each controversial topic.

Billy Ray’s Burden – September 4, 2015

This episode of *The Read* started off giving “Black Excellence” to Kyle Jean-Baptiste, who played “Valjean” in the Broadway production of “*Les Misérables*” and was slated to perform in an upcoming production of “*The Color Purple*”. He was the first Black American to play the lead in “*Les Misérables*”, but hours after his last performance

in the production he died in an accident. *The Read* then dove in to the “Hot Topics”, which mostly revolved around the Video Music Awards (VMAs), hosted by Miley Cyrus. The other topics of conversation in this segment were about *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, rumors of Adelle’s upcoming album, and Paula Deen and Alexa Vega in *Dancing With the Stars*. One “Listener Letter” was from a gay male, who felt like people were treating him like he was feminine. The final “Listener Letter” came from someone who said that their friend has been sleeping around, but has a boyfriend. The author asks whether she should tell the boyfriend the friend has herpes. Fury’s “Read” was on people who come to social events and aren’t social at all. West’s “Read” went to Kim Davis, the Rowan County Clerk who refused to give wedding licenses to homosexual couples.

The superiority theory of humor covered 74.45% of “Billy Ray’s Burden”. The relief theory of humor covered 31.96% of the discussions in this episode. The incongruity theory of humor covered 25.42% of the episode. In total, there were 48 controversial topics tracked, and the incongruity theory was coded 22 times. The relief theory was used in 21 discussions. The superiority theory was coded in 41 of the 48 total controversial topics tracked. Much like in the “Serena and Hotline Bling” episode, discussions involving the superiority theory of humor lasted longer than those that involved incongruity or relief theory. The difference in coverage causes a discrepancy between the amount of times each theory of humor was coded and how much the theory covered in the episode because. All of the discussion in the “Hot Topics” segment involved popular culture and celebrity gossip, especially since the hosts spent a great deal of time on the VMAs, but much of the discussion about the VMAs revolved around Miley Cyrus’s cultural appropriation and how “Taylor Swift is a demon” through her racist/ignorant

actions (36:15). While Kid Fury’s “read” dealt with habits and race, Crissle West’s “read” dealt with race, sex, politics, profession, and other controversial topics (religion).

Incongruity Theory of Humor

Silliness, parody, light-hearted sarcasm, and preposterousness were coded in the incongruity theory of humor because they all violate the audience’s expectations and cause incongruity. An example of when *The Read* used this theory is when Kid Fury was discussing how Kanye West received his Lifetime Achievement Award from the VMAs:

KF: So, people thought, okay, he’s about to come up here and talk about like iPods and quote Toy Story and equate it to life, I don’t know, lasers – whatever. So, I thought that would be good. And he goes up there and he instantly starts rambling and I’m like ‘YES!’ At some point he is going to pull that bedazzled mask from his back pocket and put it on and start – but he just continues to ramble and then he, like, pauses and then keeps saying, ‘Bruh!’ ‘Bruh!’ ‘Bruh!’ over and over again. And Kim is sitting there, you know, looking pleased as punch, even though she don’t know what he’s talking about because I don’t know what the fuck he’s talking about

CW: That nigga cannot complete one thought.

KF: And I’m just trying to find the mute button. (37:01)

This example was coded as part of the incongruity theory of humor because Kanye West’s actions in previous VMAs have been “rude” and much worse (Willing 2009), so people expected more of the same. When the hip-hop star accepted his award, the audience was confused and no one was insulted, violating what the audience expects from Kanye West. This instance of incongruous humor was also coded for superiority because the hosts are putting Kanye West down. This instance is also an example of

when two theories of humor are coded in the same discussion, which Nvivo doesn't allow for the researcher to track. In this discussion, Fury talked about how the award went to Madonna and Justin Timberlake, but went to Michael Jackson way too late and never went to Missy Elliot. This discussion used superiority as it puts the hip-hop star down and lessens his intelligence and used relief in that it opened up a conversation about race through West's antics; therefore, this discussion was coded for race, sex, popular culture, incongruity, relief, and superiority.

The incongruity theory of humor covered 25.42% of the episode "Billy Ray's Burden". Although this humor-tactic was used in 22 discussions, it didn't cover a great amount of the episode. Popular culture, which was discussed 8 times, and race, which was discussed 12 times, were the two controversial topics that used the incongruity theory the most at 5 times for each topic. There were no coded entries for the use of the incongruity theory in all 4 of the discussions on celebrity gossip. There wasn't much incongruity in the discussions for this episode, perhaps because both of the hosts of the show started the show in a negative mood; Kid Fury had a health concern – he thought he had Appendicitis – and Crissle West had been feeling down because of the Kim Davis situation and how awful the VMAs were (0:00-6:52; 1:22:09). For more specifics of how often the incongruity theory of humor was used in "Billy Ray's Burden", please refer to Table 7.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Incon. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 4 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 12 | 6 | 0 | 0 |

Table 7. Table with how many times the incongruity theory was used in each controversial topic.

Relief Theory of Humor

Something as simple as a laugh to bring the speaker back to homeostasis was coded as relief theory. On the other hand, something as complicated as a joke Crissle West makes in the middle of her “Read” on Kim Davis was coded as relief theory because it helps relieve not only the speaker, but the audience from the seriousness surrounding the Kim Davis situation (1:24:26). Also, in this episode of *The Read*, Fury starts of the show singing a Frank Sinatra song in a purposefully, off-key way in order to entertain. These instances of relief theory are coded as such because they relieve tension to create homeostasis, ease transitions between different tones, and introduce the show in a way that allows for an easier discussion of controversial issues.

The relief theory of humor covered 31.96% of “Billy Ray’s Burden”. The relief theory of humor was coded in 21 discussions during this episode. Even though the incongruity theory of humor covered less of the episode and had more coded discussions, the discussions relying on relief humor were longer than those relying on incongruity. Race had the most amount of coded discussions at 7 out of 12. Sex discussions were coded 4 out of 6 instances as relief. 100% of discussions on politics were in relief, but was only discussed on 3 occasions. Discussions about popular culture, other topics, and celebrity gossip used the relief theory 25% of the time. For more information about the data that was extrapolated from Nvivo, please refer to Table 8.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Relief | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 4 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 12 | 6 | 0 | 0 |

Table 8. Table with how many times the relief theory was used in each controversial topic.

Superiority Theory of Humor

The title of the episode, “Billy Ray’s Burden” is a reference to how awful Miley Cyrus is and that she is Billy Ray Cyrus’s burden to bear, setting the superior tone for the episode. Malicious jokes, malevolent sarcasm, sass, and shade were all coded as part of the superiority theory of humor because they either put down other individuals or make the speaker superior. When Crissle West and Kid Fury talked about how Taylor Swift lied when she said that “College Graduation” by Kanye West was the first album she bought on iTunes, and Crissle West said, “slowly, you [Kid Fury] are getting me on this side of, like, Taylor Swift is like a demon. I’m being converted because she’s just constantly full of shit,” to which Kid Fury yells back, “Keep your eyes open! That’s all I’m saying people” (36:15). This discussion was coded as an instance of superiority theory because both hosts are talking down to Taylor Swift, equating her to a lying demon. Superiority humor was also judged to be used in discussions of popular culture, habits, race, and sex because the hosts are talking about her habit of lying, how Taylor Swift is representative of “White women’s ignorance” (40:02). Another example of superiority in this episode is when Kid Fury and Crissle West were recapping Miley Cyrus’s performance as host of the VMAs. Kid Fury began by impersonating Miley Cyrus using a loud, high-pitched voice:

KF: ‘I’m Miley Cyrus! I love to smoke pot and sleep with whoever I want. I love rap music! Look at my dreads! Look at all these black bitches! Ooo, Glitter! Pass me that heroin. Snoop Dogg, what’s up? YAHOO!’ Like 24 hours a day. Bitch, sit down and shut the fuck up. Why do you have dreads? The dreads were more entertaining than Miley Cyrus! They were funnier than Miley Cyrus was.

CW: I didn't expect her to actually do a good job though. I expected her to do exactly what she did, which was go up on that stage high as hell, looking crazy and saying whatever the fuck came into her dumbass head. (18:26)

This discussion about Miley Cyrus touches on popular culture, race, sex, habits, and other controversial topics. The fact that this popstar was made fun of because she culturally appropriated from the gay, Black American community, and she has become symbolic for drug abuse is why this discussion reached so many controversial topics.

The superiority theory of humor was covered in 74.45% of the episode "Billy Ray's Burden". This tactic of humor was both the most covered and most coded theory of humor in the episode. Although most of the episode "Billy Ray's Burden" discusses VMAs, the superiority theory of humor was coded in 41 discussions. At 74.45% coverage, "Billy Ray's Burden" and its use of the superiority theory of humor is the second-most coverage for any theory of humor across all five episodes of *The Read* in this case study. Race was the most coded controversial topic in this episode, with 10 out of 12 of its discussions coded for superiority. Popular culture, as is expected because of its discussion of the VMAs, was the second-most discussed topic using superiority with 7 out of 8 of its discussions coded for superiority. All discussions regarding celebrity gossip (4), family issues (1), politics (3), profession (3), and sex (6) were coded for superiority. Every category of controversial topics that were discussed in this episode involved the superiority theory of humor in at least one of its discussions. Table 9 further exemplifies the data retrieved from Nvivo.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|-------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Super | 4 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 7 | 3 | 10 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 4 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 12 | 6 | 0 | 0 |

Table 9. Table with how many times the superiority theory was used in each controversial topic.

Anal Training Day – October 22, 2015

In summary of the episode, the hosts talked about Oprah Winfrey investing into Weightwatchers, Lamar Odom overdosing on drugs, Tidal’s show at the Barclay’s Center, where Beyoncé, Damien Marley, Nicki Minaj, and Lil’ Wayne performed, and racism in New York City’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The episode began with giving “Black Excellence” to Zendaya Coleman for tweeting that a magazine cover had altered her appearance to make her “more white”. Also, Oprah bought shares in Weightwatchers and the company saw a 170% increase in stock value in 24 hours. The “Hot Topics” consisted of news that Ciara isn’t pregnant, Lamar Odom’s current status, Chris Brown’s new album cover, and a show at the Barclay’s Center by artists signed on to the production company Tidal. The “Listener Letters” started with a listener complaining about how he wants to have anal sex with his fiancé, so he bought her anal trainers, but it didn’t work out. The third “listener letter” was about neighborhood gentrification in Washington Heights, where a lot of Dominican immigrants live. Crissle West’s “read” was about her experience with MTA, while Kid Fury focused on people’s outrage the new *Star Wars* had John Boyega, a Black British actor, as the lead.

With over 249,000 plays on Soundcloud, “Anal Training Day” was the most popular episode in this sample. Unlike the other episodes in this sample, this episode used the incongruity theory the most, with 59.54% coverage throughout the entire episode. The relief theory covered 51.19% of “Anal Training Day”. The superiority theory of humor covered 53.88% of the episode. There were 49 controversial topics discussed in this episode. Of these 49 topics, 33 topics were coded for incongruity, 31 were coded for relief, and 32 were coded for superiority. There were two discussions that lasted more than 15 minutes in the show: Fury’s read about the controversy the new *Star Wars* movie

had stirred, and the performance Tidal put on at the Barclay's Center in New York City. Five discussions in this episode were about technology, mostly about Kid Fury talking about new social media websites, new video games, and his experience uploading YouTube videos.

Incongruity Theory of Humor

This episode was the only episode in the sample where the incongruity theory of humor had been coded more than the other two theories of humor. The incongruity theory is an appeal to logic, where amusement comes when logical expectations aren't met. Silliness, juxtapositions, parody, bizarre metaphors, false anger, and irony are all part of the incongruity theory of humor, therefore, they were coded as such in "Anal Training Day". An example of this type of humor in "Anal Training Day" is when West says Beyoncé's "Pony tail on like the Eiffel Tower. Perched. At attention. Just giving you an old, fountain of youth, ass-pose; a high-prom pony. Just old blonde waterfall of creole greatness nigger. I thought that at any moment, she was going to flip around and be like 'Pterodactyl!' and transform into the pink [Power] Ranger" (42:36). This metaphor was incongruous because it is a bizarre way of communicating how Beyoncé looked in this situation; it showed the popstar's greatness, but does nothing for the listener to understand what she looked like.

The incongruity theory of humor covered 59.54% of the episode and was coded in 33 controversial topics out of 49. Popular culture had the most amount discussions coded as incongruous at 7, which is more than the relief theory (5) and the superiority theory (6). This was different from all the other episodes of this case study because the superiority theory was used the most in this topic in the other 4 episodes. Celebrity gossip, race, and technology used the incongruity theory 4 times each, while race only

used this theory 50% of the time. At 80%, discussions on technology had the highest rate of use for the incongruity theory, while discussions about celebrity gossip was only used this theory 66.67% of the time. For more information about how often this theory of humor was used across the controversial topics, please refer to Table 10.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Incon. | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 6 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 9 | 4 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 5 |

Table 10. Table with how many times the incongruity theory was used in each controversial topic.

Relief Theory of Humor

According to the relief theory of humor, laughter is a reaction that comes from dealing with a stressful situation, causing your physiological makeup to go back to normal. The relief theory posits that amusement is a form of reprieve when dealing with difficult situations to bring people back to homeostasis. An example of the relief theory is when Fury and West's fake introductions, where they introduce themselves as someone or something else in order to set the tone for the show. Other examples of this type of humor include the hosts laughing out of shock and when the hosts tell a joke before or after a serious discussion. When Kid Fury was talking about Zendaya's tweet claiming she had been photoshopped, West responded with a cackle, saying "Oh, so people ain't supposed to look like that? You mean to tell me she's black? You mean to tell me 19 year-olds aren't supposed to look like that? They snatched her whole soul hips!" (4:19). West's first cackle was coded as relief theory because she is reacting to the absurdness of Zendaya having to deal with this situation. As West continued her stream of questions, her volume got louder, ending with the exclamation. This move was clearly a line of sarcastic questioning, which was coded for incongruity because it is bizarre to have to ask

such questions, it was coded for superiority because it is putting down people who believe women look like that in real life, and it was coded for relief because amusement is used as a tactic to bring the speaker to homeostasis: in order to relieve herself of the built-up tension this situation put West through, she unleashed her stresses in this amusing way. The relief theory's connection to the other theories of humor will be further discussed in Chapter 5. The discussion about Zendaya's tweet was one of the few instances throughout this entire case study where all three theories of humor were coded in the same discussion.

In "Anal Training Day", relief theory covered 51.19% of the discussions. The relief theory was used in 31 out of the overall 49 discussions. Discussions about race used the relief theory the most, with 6 out of the 8 discussions on the topic using this theory. This episode's discussion from the "listener letter" about gentrification in Washington Heights used the relief theory the entire time the hosts talked about it. Discussions surrounding popular culture used the relief theory 5 times out of 9. Discussions on celebrity gossip, habits, and professions, used this theory 4 times each; however, habits used this theory 100% of the time, while discussions on celebrity gossip and habits used it 66.67% of the time. For more information about the data extrapolated from the Nvivo software, please refer to Table 11.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Relief | 4 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Total | 6 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 9 | 4 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 5 |

Table 11. Table with how many times the relief theory was used in each controversial topic.

Superiority Theory of Humor

This theory of humor posits that amusement comes from elevated feelings of self-worth, usually by putting others down. In this episode, there were many examples of the

superiority theory of humor, but the example that most exemplified this theory is when the hosts discussed Chris Brown's new album cover. The new album cover is a portrait of his 1-year-old baby, Royalty. Kid Fury and Crissle West were especially cruel to Chris Brown for naming his baby "after a check" and then putting that baby on the cover of his album. Kid Fury talked about how "he's not out here being a cokehead on Instagram", but that he's expecting him to be in the news for something stupid in the coming months (25:20). West explain he's "a different kind of stupid" for naming his baby this and for putting his baby's portrait on his album cover, "like, he's a different kind of money-grubber" (26:37). This is an example of the superiority theory of humor because the hosts are clearly putting the popstar down for his parenting skills and for the name he gave his child.

Even though the superiority theory of humor is the most often theory of humor used in every other episode in this sample, "Anal Training Day" used the superiority theory in 32 out of 49 discussions. This theory covered 53.88% of the episode, not spending too much time using this theory. Popular culture used superiority in 6 out of 9 discussions, or 66.67% of the time. Celebrity gossip also used the superiority theory 66.67% of the time, but was used in only 4 out of 6 occasions. Race used this theory in 5 out of 8 discussions, or 62.50% of the time. Family issues, habits, sex, and technology all used the superiority theory of humor 3 times, but family issues and sports were the only topics to use this theory 100% of the time. For more information about the data retrieved from Nvivo, please refer to Table 12.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|-------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Super | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 6 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 9 | 4 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 5 |

Table 12. Table with how many times the superiority theory was used in each controversial topic.

Da Hee – November 4, 2015

Like all of the other episodes of *The Read*, this episode started with giving “Black Excellence” to a 20 year-old named Jewell Jones who was voted on the City Council of Inkster, Michigan. The second “Black Excellence” was given to 21 year-old Tommitrice Collins, who took her college psychology test while she was going through labor and passed. “Hot Topics” in this episode include reviewing a Trick Daddy interview, rumors about Adelle and Beyoncé working together, Patti Labelle’s sweet potato pie, Ronda Rousey’s loss to Holly Holm, and a 9/11 widow returning his wife’s “Woman of the Year Award” because Caitlyn Jenner won the award in 2015. The first of the “Listener Letters” were about an open, straight relationship, involving two queer individuals, where the male wasn’t upset the female had sex with other females, but had a problem when she was with other men. Crissle West’s “Read” was about the racism and xenophobia that started after the November, 2015 Paris Attacks. Kid Fury’s “Read” went to people who compared Nicki Minaj to Missy Elliot.

“Da Hee” was a unique episode, having more elements of humor than any other episode before, resulting in the second-most views out of any episode of *The Read* at over 241,000 plays on Soundcloud alone, being the only episode in this case study to discuss all 11 controversial topics, and recording the longest show in the given timeframe at 1:43:05. The incongruity theory of humor covered 37.86% of “Da Hee”. The relief theory of humor covered 32.24% of the episode. The superiority theory of humor had a coverage percentage of 70.38%. There were 48 controversial topics discussed in this episode. The incongruity and was coded 36 times across the controversial topics. The relief theory was coded 29 times through “Da Hee”. The superiority theory of humor was coded 39 times across all of the episode. The “Hot Topics” and “Read” segments of this show were much

longer than they normally were because the hosts spent a lot of time discussing the controversy around Caitlyn Jenner winning the Woman of the Year Award from Glamour Magazine and Crissle's "Read" was abnormally long and covered Muslim xenophobia.

Incongruity Theory of Humor

The incongruity theory posits that humor comes when expectations aren't met, when logic is broken, resulting in parody, light-hearted sarcasm, silliness, irony, and false anger for effect being coded as incongruous. When Kid Fury brought up Patti Labelle's sweet potato pie, the host went into great detail about how "life-changing" the Wal-Mart produced pie was (23:39). One wouldn't expect something as simple as a sweet potato pie from Wal-Mart to be worthy of such praise and hailed as a transformative experience; therefore, this discussion was coded as incongruous. Another example of the incongruity theory of humor comes from the "Listener Letter" segment, where a listener wrote in asking about her open, straight relationship, involving two queer individuals. Before Crissle West was done reading the letter, Kid Fury said, "girl, bye", and explained how the author should drop her boyfriend because he's clearly not committed, getting jealous when the author sleeps with men, but not with women. This instance fell under the incongruity theory of humor because Fury's false anger at the author for not breaking up with her boyfriend before doesn't match up with the audience's expectations about Fury and his previous relationship advice.

The incongruity theory of humor received its second-highest coverage percentage in this case study at 37.86% in this episode. While the incongruity theory of humor was coded 36 times in the Nvivo software for use when discussing the controversial topics, there were instances of note in the data. Popular culture and race were the two controversial topics that used the incongruity theory of humor most often, each using the

theory of humor 7 times in their discussions. The incongruity theory wasn't used as often in sex, only employed in 50% of discussions in the topic. On the other hand, family (1), other controversial topics (1), politics (4), profession (2), and technology (2), all used this humor tactic in 100% of instances. Celebrity gossip used the incongruity theory in 71.42% its discussions. Both sports and habits were mentioned twice, but coded for incongruity 50% of the time. Please refer to Table 13 to see the data extrapolated from the Nvivo software.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Incon. | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 7 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 8 | 2 | 9 | 10 | 2 | 2 |

Table 13. Table with how many times the incongruity theory was used in each controversial topic.

Relief Theory of Humor

The relief theory of humor explains that laughter comes from a release of nervous tension, to restore homeostasis, and to transition or introduce topics. When the hosts of *The Read* would laugh out of shock, tell a joke to introduce or switch a topic, or using a pun to answer one of the "Listener Letters" were coded as relief. In this episode, Fury brings up Trick Daddy's interview with Esquire Magazine and made fun of his horrible grammar. After the host poked fun at the rapper's grammar, both of the hosts began talking about the horrible school system for Black American children, especially in Miami, Florida, Kid Fury's hometown. The host brought in his personal experiences going to high school in the South Florida city, explaining the discrepancy in spending between suburban and inner-city schools. This example is coded as relief because Kid Fury uses the superiority theory of humor in order to ease the audience into his discussion about the current status of public schools for Black Americans.

Overall, the relief theory of humor covered 32.24% of the “Da Hee” episode. The relief theory of humor was used 23 times in all discussion during the episode “Da Hee”. This humor tactic was most-often used when discussing race and sex, which were discussed using the relief theory of humor 7 times each. The hosts didn’t use the relief theory when discussing family issues, other controversial issues, sports, or technology, and discussed celebrity gossip and habits 50% or less. Percentage-wise, popular culture and race were the two topics that used the relief theory the most often at 75% or higher. For more information about the data extrapolated from the Nvivo software, please refer to Table 14.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|--------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Relief | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 7 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 8 | 2 | 9 | 10 | 2 | 2 |

Table 14. Table with how many times the relief theory was used in each controversial topic.

Superiority Theory of Humor

As covered in Chapter 2, the superiority theory of humor is when amusement comes from elevated feelings of self-worth or putting others down. An example of the superiority theory of humor in “Da Hee” is when Kid Fury introduces the story of a widow returning his wife’s Woman of the Year award from Glamour Magazine. In this discussion, the hosts originally thought the widow was returning the award because Caitlyn Jenner didn’t have enough good qualities to win the award, but were quickly proven wrong after doing a simple Google search; however, when the hosts read the quote from the widow that referred to Caitlyn by her former name, Bruce Jenner, tempers flared, calling the widow a bigot for not acknowledging Caitlyn Jenner’s transformation. Kid Fury said,

The only reason I brought this up – because I was going to skip it – is because I find myself being very sensitive to Caitlyn Jenner, although she is a complete doofus. It's not because she's Caitlyn. It's because she's trans. It's not just her because Caitlyn has made it very clear that she has no idea what it's like for the average transgender person in the world, she has no idea what it's like from the perspective of most people in the LGBTQ community. I think that just because she has so many liberal people who are kind of like applauding her and being like, “good job for you”, she's trying to be like, dance around the fact that she doesn't see it, though she is a part of that community. So you know how like these women who went out to – she was speaking somewhere, like Chicago House or someplace – and there was a protest outside and they were saying “being a woman is more than just heels and dresses and trans people like us face this amount unemployment and this amount of homelessness and all of this stuff”. I kind of agree with so many of these feelings, but then I'm sensitive at the same time because I've always had issues with transphobia because for instance, like I used to say – and forgive me for saying the word – I used to say “tranny” because I thought that it was like a shortened version of “transgender”. (49:38)

This discussion then transitioned into how hurtful the word “tranny” is. This discussion was coded for the superiority theory of humor because Kid Fury not only feels superior to the “doofus” Caitlyn Jenner, but superior to his former self for ending his use of the word “tranny”. This discussion was also coded for relief, sex, habits, and popular culture.

At 70.38%, the superiority theory covered the episode “Da Hee” the most. The superiority theory of humor was coded in 11 discussions in the “Da Hee” episode. Sex

was the most often discussed topic using the humor tactic with 8 out of 10 instances coded. Popular culture was the highest percentage of topics that used the superiority theory of humor more than 4 times at 87.5%. Celebrity gossip, at 85.7%, also employed the superiority theory of humor. 100% of family issues (1), other controversial topics (1), politics (4), sports (2), and technology (2) employed the use of the superiority theory of humor. For more information about the data gathered from “Da Hee” and its use of the superiority theory of humor, please refer to Table 15.

| Topic | Celeb Gossip | Family | Habits | Other | Politics | Pop Cult. | Prof. | Race | Sex | Sports | Tech |
|-------|--------------|--------|--------|-------|----------|-----------|-------|------|-----|--------|------|
| Super | 6 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 1 | 6 | 8 | 2 | 2 |
| Total | 7 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 8 | 2 | 9 | 10 | 2 | 2 |

Table 15. Table with how many times the superiority theory was used in each controversial topic.

In this chapter, the researcher examined how often each of the three theories of humor were used in the eleven controversial topics in the podcast, *The Read*. The eleven controversial topics were based on Limor Shifman’s study on “Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction” (2007). The three theories of humor, which were explained in Chapter 2, were from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. *The Read* has proven to be a good object of study because it has brought interesting findings. This study was done under the lens of race, as it looked at how savvy rhetorical moves by the Black American community has occurred since the George Zimmerman hearing. In the final chapter, I will discuss trends in the data from this chapter. I will discuss humor, which is the rhetorical tool under investigation here, and what it has to offer to impact racial relations as a rhetorical tool.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Discussion

Relevancy to Rhetoric

The main purpose of this study has been to establish humor's efficacy as a rhetorical tool through a case study on a podcast titled, *The Read*. Because of *The Read*'s uniqueness, in that it is hosted by two homosexual, Black Americans, it takes on a variety of controversial topics, and particularly those related to race. *The Read* employs all three philosophical theories of humor (Morreal 2012), therefore, this podcast was ripe for a case study. The literature review in Chapter 2 provided an opportunity to go in-depth about past research on humor and its relating topics and to demonstrate the gap in research that this study hopes to speak to. Although philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes disqualified humor, where they only saw the negative aspects of it, others like Sigmund Freud and Immanuel Kant provided new areas for humor to impact through the relief and incongruity theories of humor (Morreal 2012). In order to further study humor with the hope of leaving a positive impact, this case study examined how often the three philosophical theories of humor were used in each of the controversial topics listed in the "Methods" chapter. The podcast's five most popular episodes that aired between August 2015 and December 2015 were studied. The podcasts were transcribed from December 2015 to March 2016, then coded and analyzed from March 2016 to June 2016. With the methodology discussed in Chapter 3 of this study in mind, the case study hoped to find substantial data to prove humor's efficacy as a rhetorical tool over a variety of genres.

As was noted in the previous chapters, the guiding research question for this case study was to examine how often the theory of humor was used in each controversial topic in order to gain an understanding of how Kid Fury and Crissle West implemented humor

as a rhetorical tool. Although the primary purpose behind this research was to examine rhetoric as a rhetorical tool, the study was motivated by savvy rhetorical movements that have resulted from civil unrest following Trayvon Martin's death and the Black American community's response. The controversial issues coded were based on Limor Shifman's 2007 piece "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-Based Comic Texts". Overall, there were 249 controversial topics discussed in the podcast's five episodes. The major findings in this case study were: 1) the relief theory was used 136 times out of the 249 total topics coded, but it was used in order to introduce a new topic or segment, especially the introduction to the episode and in sex and race; 2) the superiority theory was used 192 times out of the 249 discussions in all five episodes of *The Read*, and was used the most when discussing popular culture and celebrity gossip; 3) the incongruity theory was in a distant second, and was used 151 out of the 249 topics discussed in all five episodes of the podcast, but was most often used when discussing sex, race, politics, technology, profession, habits, family issues, and other controversial topics; and 4) the relief theory of humor rarely can stand on its own and almost always works with either the incongruity and/or superiority theories in order to relieve nervous tension.

Trends in the Data

This case study found interesting results for the relief theory of humor and the controversial topic where it was used. Amusement, according to the relief theory of humor, comes from a buildup of nervous tension that is released through laughter. On the show's official website, the hosts say, "As transplants to NYC, *The Read* also serves as an on-air therapy session for two friends trying to adjust to life and rats in the big city";

therefore, it is clear that the hosts of *The Read* already use the podcast to help their own, built-up nervous tension (2013). Out of the 249 topics that were discussed in the five episodes of *The Read*, 136 were coded using the relief theory of humor, the least out of the three philosophical theories of humor. The relief theory was mostly used when introducing a topic or switching the subject. Using the relief theory in the introduction proves useful because it sets the tone of the topic that *The Read* will take on next. In every episode of the podcast, Kid Fury and Crissle West introduce themselves using the identity of someone they look up to, someone they find entertaining, someone who expresses how they feel at that moment, or someone they hate. For instance, in the episode, “Anal Training Day”, Fury introduces himself as “Drake’s Choreographer” because he was making fun of Drake’s dance in “The Hotline Bling”, while West introduced herself as “Beyoncé’s Pink Leotard” because West had just been to a Beyoncé show where she was wearing a pink leotard and it impressed West. This tactic allows the hosts, both of whom famously have been diagnosed with anxiety, to not only ease themselves into the show, but ease the audience into the serious tone of the “Black Excellence” segment. Although the relief theory was the least used theory of humor in this case study, it was used the most when the hosts were talking about sex, race, and politics. This study was done with the purpose of understanding how new and interesting rhetorical tools are employed to communicate and better race relations, so these findings are especially interesting. When these difficult topics are first introduced with a joke, it eases the audience for the tension the controversial topic will bring.

Along with introducing controversial topics, the relief theory was often used when either switching subjects or switching moods. Because of this theory’s ability to relieve

tension, the hosts of *The Read* used the relief theory in order to move from a lighthearted, entertaining tone to a serious, somber tone. As a transition, the relief theory was used in in sex, race, and family issues. For instance, in the episode, “Da Hee” (11/19/2015), the hosts talk about a Trick-Daddy interview, while Fury and West ridicule the rap-star for his poor grammar. Then, the hosts tell one more joke about the poor grammar and move on to how little funding high schools with mostly Black Americans get compared to their majority White American high school counterparts. Fury described the state of high schools in Miami, where both he and Trick-Daddy call home, explaining how his high school was of inferior quality compared to other high schools in the district (11/19/2015). This transition, not only in topic, but in tone and mood, is eased through the use of the relief theory. The relief theory allows for the hosts to use the tagline “Comedy” for their show, but continue to talk about controversial issues and topics. This gives the hosts of *The Read* the ability to talk about silly things, like NeNe Leakes’s wig, and transition into serious issues, like LGBTQ+ perceptions and treatment within the Black American community (11/19/2015). The relief theory gives humor credibility as a rhetorical tool because it eases transitions and allows for discussions of difficult topics without the stress that those difficult topics come with. The primary purpose for this study was to find new and savvy rhetorical tools that are employed, especially as race relations in America have denigrated to how they were in the early 1990s; however, there were other interesting findings of note that came from this case study.

The superiority theory of humor was used 192 times out of 249 total controversial topics discussed in *The Read*, partly because celebrity gossip and pop culture were the two most talked about topics in this sample. The superiority theory of humor posits

laughter deriving from elevated feelings of self-worth, which usually comes from making fun of others. Although the superiority theory was used in all controversial topics the researcher coded for, it was most prominent in celebrity gossip and popular culture; however, the superiority theory of humor wasn't the most used theory of humor in other topics. The superiority theory of humor comes in many different forms, with sass, "reading", malevolent sarcasm, and malicious jokes on individuals leading the way. Because celebrity gossip and popular culture were the topics the superiority theory was used most often, Kid Fury and Crissle West would make fun of celebrities and the art they created. The surname, "Kardashian", which earned its fame through celebrity sex tapes, reality TV, and modeling, is heard at least once per episode. Every time someone in the Kardashian family is mentioned, Fury and West use the superiority theory of humor to make fun of the family. This brings up an interesting concept, where celebrities earn their fame through how much the general audience hates the celebrity(ies), but are still considered successful because they are famous and wealthy; therefore, the hosts here can be said to love hating the "Kardashian" family. In other words, the general audience loves to hate certain celebrities, providing the celebrities with fame and fortune, which makes the celebrity successful in the eyes of many. The hosts of the show rarely used the superiority theory of humor in the "Listener Letters" section of the podcast, displaying a respect towards their audience, but not necessarily celebrities. The superiority theory's trends provide insight into which topics were most associated with the theory.

While the superiority theory of humor was focused on popular culture and celebrity gossip, the incongruity theory of humor was used most diversely. The incongruity theory of humor was used 151 times out of the 249 topics that were discussed

in the five episodes of *The Read*. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the incongruity theory of humor explains that amusement comes when expectations are contradicted, usually to an absurd level. Examples of this form of humor are satire, irony, and absurdity, but Fury and West use absurdity the most, especially when the hosts are excited about a topic. The hosts of *The Read* demonstrate a false excitement or anger by raising the volume of their voice, increasing the rate at which they speak, and speaking in a rhythmic pattern.

Depending on the stance of the speaker, the hosts could give the topic more or less power through overdramatizing. For instance, Fury introduced a story in October 22, 2015's episode "Anal Training Day" about Oprah Winfrey investing into the diet company, Weight Watchers, explaining in far too much detail how Winfrey will take over the world in 2016. This overdramatizing is amusing because no one expects Winfrey to become the world's supreme leader in 2016. This form of amusement takes what people expect and flips it on its head, but expectations – as small as voice volume and as big as the topic of evolution – are contradicted to a purposeful effect. Sometimes that purpose can be as simple as to entertain, but in the case of a "Listener Letter", where an audience member inquired about how her queer, open relationship with her boyfriend, Fury responded by joking that women are more likely to steal this girlfriend than a man because a woman can provide what the author of the "Listener Letter" wants. This serves the purpose of entertaining because Kid Fury's response is over-the-top, while it informs the audience about the problems the community is facing: close-minded men. The incongruity theory of humor is diverse because both form and content have the potential to cause incongruity and break expectations.

The final interesting trend found in this case study is that the relief theory of humor rarely stands on its own; it almost always needs to be incongruent or cause feelings of superiority in order to relieve tension. Relief theory in *The Read* was only used by itself when Kid Fury or Crissle West would laugh, not only in amusement, but as a clear release because there is a buildup of tension. For instance, whenever Crissle West takes on a “Listener Letter” where the author has a problem with their boyfriend, the host always gives a frustrated chuckle, saying, “How many times do I have to tell you to drop these niggas?” This relief of tension is one of the few instances where the relief theory can stand on its own. In every other case, the relief theory is combined with incongruity or superiority to relieve tension that allows for an easier and more inclusive discussion about controversial topics. *The Read* proved to be a substantial study to rhetoric because the podcast uses the three theories of humor to talk about controversial topics, bringing in a unique point of view to a minority community.

Discussion – Methodology

Although trends in the data pointed to significant evidence of how often the three theories of humor are used in these controversial topics, this case study could have improved the methodology to yield substantial evidence to interpret trends and effects of humor. Only the five most popular episodes of the podcast between August 2015 and December 2015 were studied, so future studies could benefit from a much larger sample size. The podcasts were transcribed from December 2015 to March 2016, coded and analyzed from March 2016 to June 2016. Given more time and financial support, this case study would have been able to expand on the sample size, producing more

substantial results. An increased sample size would have provided more significant and reliable results.

For future research, adding surveys of the audience and the hosts of the podcast would be key to gauging the effects of the three theories of humor. Such surveys rely on repeating questions given to a large group of people – mostly listeners of *The Read* – might allow researchers to augment a close reading, like the one done in this case study. The responses could be analyzed to obtain information that can be generalized about the whole population; therefore, questionnaires for *The Read*'s hosts and listeners would have proved useful in analyzing the effect of the three theories of humor on the controversial topics. This case study could be improved in the future if the hosts of *The Read* would respond to any of the communiques attempted by the practitioner. Humor, which is the ability to express yourself in a funny way, and comedy, which is humor for the sole purpose of entertainment (Mankoff 2014), are personal processes much like the formulation of language, so it would have been helpful if the hosts of *The Read* had given more information about their background, so the practitioner of the study could understand why these three theories of humor were used the way they were. Lastly, while this case study focused on theories of humor developed from Ancient Greek Philosophy, future studies might include other theories of humor to expand the canon of humor theories and studies. Even though *The Read* used theories from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, there is little research on other theories of humor, especially outside of Western philosophy and rhetoric. With a bigger sample size, a survey, and more information about the hosts of the podcast, future case studies may find more substantial results.

Discussion – Future Research

The purpose of this case study was to prove humor's efficacy as a rhetorical tool and that has been done, considering the trends discussed in chapter four, especially with the relief theory of humor. In order to continue on the lines of inquiry provided by this study, the researcher recommends a study to find how often other forms of media use the three theories of humor in the controversial topics they discuss. For instance, William Holderness's 2010 thesis, "Why We Worship the Economy: a Burkean Analysis of South Park's Margaritaville" examines the famous television show through Burke's incongruity and only examines one episode of the show. Other aspects of popular culture that are meant to be humorous or comedic should also be examined, especially from minority communities. A study of how a minority community challenges the hegemony through humor as a rhetorical tool can provide insight into critical race studies and rhetoric. *The Read's* link to the Black Lives Matter movement isn't explicit, but conducting a study comparing and contrasting the cultural accomplishments of the Black American community's fight for civil rights in the late 1960s to the 1980s with the current Black Lives Matter movement will help communication researchers gain insight into how the fight for civil rights has evolved, especially with the use of humor.

In order to further enhance the field of rhetoric's understanding of humor, communication researchers and philosophers need to find and consider non-Western formulations of humor. The three theories of humor provide a base to understand the different forms and functions of humor, but they are solely based in Western philosophy and rhetoric; therefore, many cultures have been ignored. A more inclusive idea of the different forms of humor would help researchers continue to study humor as a credible

and global rhetorical tool. Much like the formulation of language, humor is dependent on the individuals' experiences and the culture they grew up in, so focusing solely on Western theories of humor ignores much of the population.

The Read has proven to be a relevant and meaningful case study because it has provided insight into how often the theories of humor are used in each controversial topic. The major trends in this study were: 1) the relief theory was used rarely, but it was used in order to introduce a new topic or segment, especially the introduction to the episode and in sex and race; 2) the superiority theory was used most often in all five episodes of *The Read*, especially when discussing popular culture and celebrity gossip; 3) the incongruity theory was in a distant second, but was used a lot when discussing sex, race, politics, technology, profession, habits, family issues, and other controversial topics; and 4) the relief theory of humor works with both incongruity and superiority in order to entertain: relief theory can rarely stand on its own. Because of these trends, the research has fulfilled its main purpose of this study: to prove humor's efficacy as a rhetorical tool. This case study provides a good starting point to further research humor as a rhetorical tool, especially in the Black American community. Although humor has a history where it is rarely discussed, and when it is, it's seldom discussed in a positive way, communication researchers need to further research humor as a rhetorical tool in order to better understand the functions and effects of language, especially in argument. As race relations continue to get worse, this case study has provided valuable information about how the Black American community is using interesting rhetorical tactics to make their voices heard.

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