

New Zealanders’ interpretations of a satirical public service announcement

Ashleigh Hume and Stephen Skalicky

Victoria University of Wellington

Abstract

The aim of this project was to measure how New Zealanders respond to satire targeting racism in New Zealand. Following Pfaff and Gibbs (1997), we conducted a study using a short satirical video called Give Nothing to Racism starring New Zealand director and actor Taika Waititi. The video features Waititi compelling New Zealanders to support racism through small, easy acts such as laughing at racist jokes, with the satirical implication being these acts are what contribute to systemic racism. Thirty-one New Zealanders watched the video and were then interviewed in order to gauge their recognition of the satirical intentions, as well as their understanding of the satirical message. Next, we informed participants about the satirical intentions of the video, who then watched the video again, and asked if they had any additional thoughts. Unlike Pfaff and Gibbs (1998), all but two of our participants recognised the satirical nature of the video during the first viewing. Like Pfaff and Gibbs, our participants provided a variety of interpretations, reflecting the indeterminate nature of satirical inference.

Keywords: satire; criticism; systemic racism; semi-structured interviews

Introduction

In a 2018 interview, New Zealand film director Taika Waititi responded to an interviewer’s idealised description of New Zealand as “like Australia without the racism” with “Nah, it’s racist as fuck” (Denny, 2018). Waititi’s comment drew immediate backlash on social media from people across Aotearoa New Zealand. Many commenters denied being racist while simultaneously providing observations that Māori people “are just as racist”, among other contradictory assertions (The Spinoff, 2018). One commenter sarcastically pointed out that New Zealand is “so racist [that] we allow a brown person to become a famous director”, as though Waititi’s status is proof that racism no longer exists while also asserting that his success is due purely to Pākehā New Zealanders “allowing” him to have his career. Other commenters avoided

the accusations of racism entirely by attacking Waititi himself (“Taika, making it big somewhere and yapping like a dog”).

Satirical Criticism

According to Condren (2012), satire is a type of criticism that has its roots in literature and contains an “ethically critical edge” (p. 378) mixed in with ridicule and humour. Yet, as has been argued over the years, satire is more than a literary genre (Phiddian, 2013; Test, 1991), and is better understood as a rhetorical mode or type of discourse, mediated through a satirical object and interpreted in myriad ways by an audience (Pfaff & Gibbs, 1997; Simpson, 2003). As such, any one satirical object can elicit a wide variety of reactions and inferences from an audience. Moreover, results from empirical studies suggest that it is common for audiences to draw inferences from satirical objects which do not reflect the intentions of the satirist (Pfaff & Gibbs, 1997). Reasons for the fragility associated with the recognition of meaning have been attributed to individual differences of the participants, such as topic specific knowledge (Boukes et al., 2015), generalised background knowledge (Skalicky & Crossley, 2019), perceptions of authorial sincerity (Pfaff & Gibbs; 1997, Skalicky, 2019, 2022), and personal beliefs and ideology (LaMarre et al., 2009; Pfaff & Gibbs, 1997).

One of the earliest studies to document variation in interpretations of satirical texts was Pfaff and Gibbs (1997), who asked American university students to read satirical stories from the book *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (Garner, 1995). This book contains satires of political correctness framed as classic children’s stories, such as Little Red Riding Hood and The Three Little Pigs. In their first experiment, Pfaff and Gibbs (1997) had participants read five stories and then write down the main point of the story. After reading the stories, only 23% of the answers indicated the stories were satires of political correctness, whereas 65% of the answers identified some serious allegorical and/or moral point to the stories. Pfaff and Gibbs (1997) then informed the participants the stories were intended as satirical critiques of political correctness and asked them to repeat the procedure. Even though participants were told of the satirical nature of the stories, after the second reading the number of participants who indicated they recognised satirical critique of political correctness increased to only 47% (from 23%). In a series of follow-up questions, Pfaff and Gibbs (1997) found that reasons for these varied responses were in part due to a tendency on the part of the participants to prefer their own interpretations of the stories, even when they were told the intentions of the satirist were counter to those interpretations.

A series of psycholinguistic studies reported similar low levels of satire recognition. In a reading time experiment using satirical news texts, Skalicky (2019) found that only

32% of participant summaries reflected recognition of any satirical intentions. A follow up study found even lower rates of satire recognition, with data suggesting participants across two experiments were more likely to summarise the surface level meaning of a satirical text when compared to satirical meaning (Skalicky, In press). However, in both of these studies, participants rated satirical texts as non-serious and humorous, indicating some recognition of satirical intentions, even if their summaries did not capture a satirical meaning.

Other empirical research has investigated the specific reasons why such variation and resistance occurs in satirical interpretations. For instance, LaMarre et al. (2009) found that American university students who identified as politically conservative were more likely to interpret clips from *The Colbert Report* (an American satirical news show mocking political conservatives) as serious and genuine, even if they also recognised the humorous qualities of the show. Similar effects have been noted in other studies (e.g., Boukes et al., 2015).

In all, the research exploring audience perceptions to satire coheres to suggest that audiences possess relatively high levels of agency when deciding how to interpret a satirical work, but also that measuring and/or assessing the comprehension of satirical text can be difficult.

There has been relatively little research into Kiwi interpretations of satire. A study by Skalicky et al. (2021) found that New Zealanders interpreted satirical messages differently from a UK sample of participants depending on the “psychological distance” of the issue. For example, Kiwi participants tended to discount the message of the satire if it concerned a place that was geographically distant, even if it was an issue that also affected New Zealand.

Current study

The aim of our study is to offer a partial replication of the Pfaff and Gibbs (1997) study using satire that is both New Zealand produced and aimed at New Zealand society. This approach allowed us to use semi-structured interviews as a means to fully explore the nature of reactions to satirical material. An additional motivation behind the current study is to further explore reader responses to satire in the New Zealand context. Specifically, we aim to test whether Taika Waititi's assertion that New Zealand is “racist as fuck” resonates with Kiwis. However, we do so using a satirical rather than direct version of Taika's characterisation.

The following research question guides our study:

- How do Kiwis interpret a satirical critique of systemic racism in New Zealand?

Method

Material

We chose a short satirical video called *Give Nothing to Racism* starring New Zealand director and actor Taika Waititi (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2017). The video was part of a campaign by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission to raise awareness of racism in New Zealand. The two-minute video features Waititi exhorting New Zealanders to support racism through small, everyday acts such as laughing at racist jokes.

The visual style of the video mimics the genre of public service announcements and fund-drive videos, realised by shooting in a black and white aesthetic. Waititi speaks directly into the camera, imploring the audience to “help racism to survive” as though he is eliciting donations for a charity or attempting to raise awareness about an issue. The latter half of the video includes a Frequently Asked Questions portion, in which Waititi responds to (hypothetical) commonly asked questions with answers ranging from the serious to the ridiculous. For example, in response to the question, “What’s in it for me?” Waititi replies in a deadpan tone, “Nothing. There’s no benefit whatsoever to being racist”. However, he responds to “My mum says being a bit racist is bad” with a sillier “Aw, shut up mum!” The playfulness of the latter example serves as a clue that belies the sincere pretense of the video.

Through depicting these seemingly innocuous behaviours as constituting systematic racism, the satirical critique in the video is aimed in part towards New Zealanders who may otherwise not consider themselves racist yet may still be complicit via small actions which nonetheless contribute to racism. In addition, the video can also be seen to be targeting New Zealand society as a whole, in that systemic racism is even a problem in the first place (reflected by Waititi’s response to the interview question cited above). The video is available on the internet (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2017, YouTube, 2017), and a full transcript of the video can be found in Appendix A.

Procedure

Data was collected from participants using the online video conferencing platform Zoom. Participants individually joined a meeting session with one of the researchers

and were then asked to watch the video, which the researcher played. After watching the video, participants were asked a series of questions following a semi-structured interview protocol. We employed semi-structured interviews because this approach gave participants the opportunity to express their views and ask clarifying questions, while also allowing the researchers to keep the conversation on-topic; the questions for the interview are provided in Appendix B. After these initial questions, participants were informed of the satirical intentions of the video, and then were asked to watch the video again. After the second viewing, participants were asked the remaining questions from the interview protocol, including whether their perception of the video changed and whether they had any additional comments. On average, the interviews took 15 to 20 minutes. The meetings were recorded, and automatic transcripts provided by Zoom were manually checked and corrected for subsequent analysis.

The answers were then categorized in order to answer the following questions: whether the satirical intent of the video was recognised by the participant, who the participants thought the message and target of the video/satire was, and whether participants thought the message of the video/satire was an effective message (and why). Participants were also asked about their perception of Waititi's personal views on systemic racism.

Participants

We recruited a total of 31 New Zealanders for this study. A snowball method was used to recruit participants, in that acquaintances, co-workers, and friends without knowledge of the purpose of the study were initially contacted and asked to get in touch with others that may be interested in participating. In total, 18 of the participants identified as female and 13 as male. Participant ages ranged from 18 to over 60. Most of the participants identified as New Zealand European, with one identifying as Māori. There were also two people originally from the United States, three from the UK, one person from the Philippines, and one from Borneo; however, they had all been in New Zealand for a significant period of time (around ten years) and were familiar with Waititi and his work.

Results

Recognising Satirical Intent

Of the 31 participants, only two did not realise that the video was satirical after the first viewing. The remaining 29 participants were aware of the satirical intentions during the first viewing, and provided a wide range of answers regarding their perceptions towards the meaning and targets of the satire. This includes participants who indicated

they did not find the video funny, but still recognised the intention of the video was to be satirical and humorous.

Participant Interpretation of Satirical Message

When asked what they thought the message of the video was, answers fell broadly into three categories. The first category was labelled *don't be racist*. Six answers were included in this category. These answers broadly reflected surface-level interpretations of the message. For example, one participant simply said, “don't be racist” and did not elaborate on how they arrived at this interpretation of the main message of the video. Other answers included “do the opposite of what he's saying” and “don't support racism”. These answers suggest these participants were aware of the humorous and satirical intention of the video, but it is unclear whether their interpretations reflected an awareness of the video targeting racism in general or systematic racism specifically.

The second category was labelled *our everyday actions contribute to racism*. Fourteen answers were included in this category. These included more detailed answers which delved deeper into the content of the video. For example, one participant said that “insidious, casual occurrences of racism are far more normal in New Zealand society than individuals might be aware.” Another participant said, “even laughing along to racist comments still counts as racism”. Yet another interviewee said that the message was essentially, “if you're doing these things, you are supporting racism”. The participants in this category seemed to recognise both the satirical intention as well as wider implications of the video, with some participants drawing upon their own knowledge of racism in New Zealand to elaborate on their viewpoints.

The third category was labelled *raising awareness of casual racism*. Eight answers were included in this category. These answers were similar to those in the second category in that the participants appeared to understand the wider implications of the video, but also explicitly spoke about awareness. For example, one participant said that the message was about “combating and raising awareness about racism in a clever way” and another said “[Waititi] uses sarcasm to make people realise that they might be being a little bit racist.”

Three answers did not fall into these categories. Two of these answers were from the participants who did not pick up on the satirical intent during the first viewing. Their interpretations of the meaning of the video reflected this initial lack of recognition. One participant said the meaning was “it's okay to be racist,” while another participant said the meaning was that “we should be racist”.

The final participant's answer was ambiguous and did not immediately fit into any of the above categories. This participant indicated that the purpose of the video was not to tell people what to do; however, they did not clarify further, hence the ambiguity.

Participant Interpretation of Satirical Target

Fifteen of the interviewees did not identify any specific entity as the satirical target, instead indicating racism itself was the target through answers such as "it's more attacking the concept, rather than any particular person" and "it was a blanket 'this is not ok' [statement]". One said that they thought it "wasn't especially critical" of any group at all. Of those who did identify a more specific target, the most frequent answer was that the video was targeted towards white, middle-class people who do not necessarily think of themselves as being racist but may indulge in casual racism such as laughing at racist jokes (four participants). Two of the participants thought the video was specifically targeted towards men, although one of these interviewees stated that they were not sure why they thought that. Another two thought that the video was meant for younger people who may be more inclined to give into peer pressure, and one participant just said that "racists" are the target.

Participant Interpretation of Satirical Effectiveness

Twenty-four participants thought that the satirical strategy was more effective than a serious approach would have been. However, a few of these participants noted that satire does not work with everyone, which affects the potential effectiveness of the message. Others found the video too light-hearted given the subject matter and thought that it would benefit from being serious as opposed to satirical. As one participant put it, "in its current form, you might just watch that and brush it off with a laugh because of the nature of the comedy". Another participant thought that the video would be more effective if the viewers "knew it was satire from the beginning" as people may not understand the message otherwise. Another interviewee thought that the entertaining nature of the video might mean that the message could get lost or overlooked.

Two interviewees thought that the message was "preaching to the converted", and one said that "if you're willing to listen to Taika Waititi, you aren't likely to be overtly racist". However, they did not elaborate on why they thought this. Others thought that genuinely racist people would not necessarily see the video as a condemnation of their actions, so the satire would be ineffective. One participant said that the video was "unlikely to do anything to convince someone who is... an extremist" but would be effective for those who are not aware of their own racist microaggressions.

Two people pointed out that the satire may not have worked if it were delivered by someone less well-known than Waititi, who is well known for his satirical and deadpan humour. In fact, three participants specifically said that the humour in the video was “very Taika”. Another participant said that the video was “quite funny, Taika always is”. Yet another interviewee noted that they “just enjoy Taika as a person”, calling him “hilarious”. It is possible that the presence of Waititi indicated that the video was satirical and meant to be funny, which may not have been the case with a different person presenting the video.

Comments After Second Viewing

After watching a second time, 11 of the participants opted to add no further comments. Of the two participants who did not initially recognise the satirical intentions, one changed their mind about the message and its effectiveness, calling it “genius”, while the other did not have a change of opinion, although they acknowledged that “you can see some of the humour” after being informed of the satirical intent. Of the remaining 20 participants, most noticed a different detail during the second viewing, such as paying more attention to Waititi’s body language, but did not have anything additional to add about the satire or message itself. Ten of these participants paid particular attention to the black and white aesthetic on the second viewing, noting that it was “clever” and made the viewer “concentrate on what he’s saying instead of the visuals”.

Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, participants were also given the opportunity to voice any other thoughts they had about the video. Twenty-eight participants responded positively to the video and satire and thought it was a good approach; as one participant said, it was “a fresh way to address a topic we hear a lot about”. Two participants acknowledged that the video made them feel “uncomfortable”, but both stated that this was a good thing as it made them think more closely about their own behaviour. Of the participants that did not respond positively, one noted that the video was “too glib in some places”, while another noted the satirical approach “might not change behaviour as it’s making light of [racism].”

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to explore New Zealanders’ reactions to a satirical critique of racism in New Zealand society. To do so, we used a video featuring Taika Waititi developed as part of the *Give Nothing to Racism* campaign which satirically criticised systemic racism in New Zealand. Following methods from a prior study exploring American university students’ reactions to a satire of political correctness (Pfaff & Gibbs, 1997), we asked 31 New Zealanders to watch the video and participate

in semi-structured interviews as a means to gauge the nature of their reactions to the satirical critique.

The results suggest our participants had little difficulty recognising the satirical intentions of the video. The two participants who did not initially recognise the satire were different genders and from different age groups, and one was originally from the Philippines while the other was born and raised in New Zealand. Therefore, we cannot extrapolate any demographic reason why these participants may not have recognised the satirical intent. After watching the video for a second time, one of these two changed their mind about the video completely, whereas the other appeared to resist any satirical interpretation even after being explicitly told about it.

These results differ from those of Pfaff and Gibbs (1997), where only 23% of respondents recognised the satirical nature of the text upon their first exposure to it. One reason for this difference could be that racism is seen as a much larger problem (almost) universally, whereas political correctness is a relatively newer concept that has not reached the same level of exposure (or consensus). Therefore, it may be the case that it is easier to identify satirical intent in relation to more prominent problems such as racism, as a famous figure such as Taika Waititi openly and seriously supporting racism would be unthinkable to most of New Zealand society.

It is also possible that the presence of Taika Waititi clued the audience in to the fact that the video was satirical. This could be an example of the audience considering the nature of the satirist in their responses, similar to the case with Stephen Colbert in LaMarre et al. (2009). Waititi is well-known for comedy, so the audience may expect him to be funny, and this may therefore affect how they interpret the video. Another study with a less well-known figure may show different results.

That being said, despite the clear evidence that participants were capable of recognising the satirical intent, the range of interpretations formed from the satire suggests a hesitance to identify a satirical critique of New Zealand society as a whole. Of the 31 participants, only two brought up their own past experiences of ignoring or participating in racism, with the goal of learning from it and doing better. Even participants whose answers indicated the point of the video was to raise awareness of casual racism still tended to use distancing language when it came to talking about racism. For example, when identifying the satirical target as “white people”, the participants would not acknowledge that they themselves were part of that community. One participant even said point-blank that they “aren’t racist”, seemingly attempting to distance themselves from any potential culpability. However, it is important to note

that participants were not specifically asked about their own experiences of witnessing racism in New Zealand, so may not have been using distancing language intentionally.

Moreover, some participants, while claiming to understand the message, showed through their answers that they did not interpret the video to be a satire of systemic racism. For example, one interviewee stated that fans of Waititi aren't likely to be overtly racist; however, the subject of the video was not overt racism, but rather more subtle, everyday instances of racism. Other participants talked about "casual racism" but did not make any connection between these casual instances of racism and larger societal or systematic racism. While the participants were not expected to use the specific term *systemic racism*, knowledge of the systemic nature of racism was extrapolated from their answers.

Limitations

There were some methodological limitations which should be addressed. It was noted after data collection that the word "target" may have primed the interviewees towards thinking of a target audience as opposed to a satirical target, leading to some discrepancy in their answers. This question should be clarified in future work. In addition, there were a few limitations with the method of recruitment. For example, as the initial contacts were known to the researcher conducting the interviews, they skewed towards a demographic that was largely Pākehā, Wellington-based, and politically left-leaning. As was noted in Pfaff and Gibbs (1997), a homogenous, liberal audience may respond to satire differently than other audiences. As such, a larger scale study collecting data from across Aotearoa New Zealand could help address this limitation.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore New Zealander's reactions to satire targeting a major issue in New Zealand society. As it stands, we can say with reasonable confidence that while the New Zealanders in our sample were good at recognising satirical intent, there were a range of interpretations formed among these participants. These results align well with Pfaff and Gibbs (1997) and further attest to the nature of satire as a co-constructed inference with multiple possible interpretations (Simpson, 2003; Skalicky, 2022).

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Appendix A. Transcript of Video

1. as new zealander of the year i'm calling on every one of my fellow kiwis
2. to help support a very important cause
3. racism (pause) needs your help to survive
4. you may not be in a position to give much to racism
5. but whatever you feel comfortable giving will make a huge difference
6. you don't have to be a full on racist
7. just being a tiny bit racist is enough
8. a smile a cheeky giggle even a simple nod in agreement
9. it all adds up and it gives others the message that it's ok
10. frequently asked questions about racism
11. but i'm not a real racist can i still help
12. of course even if you don't come from a racist background that's ok
13. being a bit racist is super easy
14. how do I spread the word
15. you don't actually have to talk people into it
16. just be a bit racist and they'll feel the social pressure to follow along
17. my mum says being a bit racist is bad
18. aw shut up mum
19. what's in it for me
20. nothing there's no benefit whatsoever to being racist
21. but ask yourself what if everyone stopped giving to racism
22. what kind of future would that be for our children
23. if i only give a little bit will it even make a difference
24. not to you no
25. but to the people receiving the racism
26. they'll be getting hundreds of small bits every day
27. so it will add up it will be noticed
28. how do I show my support
29. you might not want to wear a t shirt that says how much of a racist you are
30. no thanks i'm racist on the inside
31. (shrugs and shows t shirt saying "racist on the inside")
32. but you can laugh at racist comments it does the same thing (laughs)
33. remember the only thing that can keep racism alive and help it grow
34. is feeding it nurturing it
35. and that's where you come in
36. will you help it flourish
37. what will you give to racism

Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Which ethnic group do you identify with? Which gender do you most identify with?

Are you familiar with Taika Waititi's work? What else of his have you seen?

We're just going to watch a quick video that he made a few years ago. (show video)

After 1st viewing

What did you think about the video?

Do you think Waititi was being serious in this video? Why or why not?

What did you think the main message of the video was? Do you agree with it? Did you think it was an effective way of getting the message across? Why/why not?

Did you think anything in the video was funny?

This video was satirical and Taika Waititi wasn't being serious. Does knowing that it's satire change anything for you?

Now that you know it's satire, let's watch it one more time. (show video again)

After 2nd viewing

Did your understanding of the video change in any way? If so, how?

Do you think the video was critical of or targeting any particular group? If so, who?

What do you think Taika Waititi's views towards systemic racism in NZ are?

Is there anything else you'd like to add?