

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH SEMINAR



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The Power of Satire to Change Attitudes Towards Refugees

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Abstract

The recent influx of refugees from Syria and Ukraine has placed refugee integration and asylum policies at the center of public debate. While previous research has explored factors shaping attitudes toward refugees—including economic concerns, religious affiliation, and misinformation—interventions aimed at correcting misperceptions have shown mixed results. This study examines the potential of satire, particularly through political cartoons, as an alternative means to influence public attitudes toward refugees. Given satire's demonstrated ability to reframe social and political issues, we investigate whether it can serve as a more effective tool than factual information alone in shifting perceptions and fostering empathy. Using a survey experiment conducted with 900 French citizens recruited via an online platform, we test the impact of different types of stimuli on refugee-related attitudes. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: a control group with non-refugee-related content, a cartoon-only group (exposed to political or non-political satire), a text-only group receiving factual information about refugees, and a combined condition featuring both cartoons and text. The stimuli emphasized contrasts in the treatment of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees, appealing to humanitarian values.

Our results reveal significant differences in how participants perceived refugees based on the type of stimulus received. The combination of satire and factual information had the strongest positive impact on perceptions of refugee contributions and a modest but notable increase in policy support for more inclusive measures. However, exposure to satire alone sometimes heightened perceptions of threat, particularly concerning Ukrainian refugee groups. While factual text was more effective in reinforcing national responsibility toward refugees, the combined exposure to satire and information generated the most sustained shifts in attitudes.

Demographic factors-including education, income, and political affiliation-moderated the effectiveness of satire, with more pronounced shifts observed among younger, female and left-leaning participants. Additionally, participants' engagement with the cartoons (measured through enjoyment, perceived cleverness, and message agreement) correlated with the degree of attitude change. By leveraging satire as a means to challenge biases and reframe narratives, our research vindicates the potential of humor to complement traditional information campaigns in fostering more empathetic and inclusive attitudes toward refugees. Our findings suggest that integrating satire into public communication strategies could enhance support for refugee policies and promote more constructive debates on migration and asylum.