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Truth in Comedy: The Influence of the U.S. Satirical Series South Park on Young Europeans' Worldview

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Truth in Comedy: The Influence of the U.S. Satirical Series *South Park* on Young Europeans' Worldview

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Table of Contents

Introductory Remarks	2
Literature Review	4
Chapter 1: Theoretical Review	8
1.1 Soft Power Theory.....	8
1.2 The “Other”	10
Chapter 2: Methodology and Research Methods	13
2.1 Focus Groups.....	13
2.2 Thematic Analysis	15
2.3 Discourse Analysis	16
Chapter 3: Case Study Analysis	18
3.1 The Impact and Effectiveness of Political Satire	18
3.2 Cultural and Generational Context	20
3.3 Risks of Political Satire.....	23
3.4 Discourse Analysis of Online Discussion Boards.....	25
Summary of Findings	31

Introductory Remarks

In March 2025, *Saturday Night Live* aired a skit of the White House clash between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky. The skit begins with a voiceover, saying: "Yesterday, President Trump hosted Ukrainian president Zelensky at the White House, and it went really, really well. The world is now a safer place." In the skit, Trump welcomes Zelensky "to this incredible trap." Vance then tells the Ukrainian president: "You haven't said thank you to us once the past 15 seconds I've been yelling at you" (*Saturday Night Live*, 2025). The skit racked up over 16 million views on YouTube, with one of the top comments reading, "As a Ukrainian, I want to say a huge thank you for not standing beside this and sharing the truth in comedy. It was both sad and funny to watch. I want to say thank you to all Americans who support us in this difficult time. This means the world to us. We see it, and we appreciate it."

Political satire is a type of commentary that uses humour, sarcasm, and exaggeration to criticise political systems, individuals, and events. By frequently fusing satire with sharp criticism, it acts as a tool for holding those in positions of authority accountable and provoking critical discourse among viewers. Political satire can be found in a variety of media, such as cartoons, print magazines, late-night monologues, and television programmes. It can range from humorous and light-hearted to brutal and scathing. It challenges conventional news narratives and promotes public discussion and introspection by providing a reinterpretation of political realities. To paraphrase that Ukrainian fan of *Saturday Night Live*, political satire may indeed share the truth through comedy.

This is indeed a topic that has been widely studied in the academic realm. However, one gap that can be identified in the research is the issue of how young European audiences engage with contemporary American political satire, their consumption of which seems to be significantly higher than their consumption of satire produced in Europe or within their respective countries or localities. While political satire has been extensively analysed, understanding its specific impact on young people's engagement with and attitudes towards global issues remains an underexplored area. Investigating this could reveal whether satire not only informs but also shapes the

opinions of youth, particularly European youth, potentially influencing their engagement with important political discourses.

This thesis uses *South Park* as a case study of popular political satire produced in the United States that is consumed by young European viewers. Since its 1997 premiere, the television show has been incredibly successful with younger audiences, drawing in both teenagers and young adults who value its daring social criticism and inappropriate humour. The show's success is exemplified by its 26-season run and its exceptional ratings, standing at 8.7/10 on IMDb at the time of writing. Young individuals who might otherwise avoid traditional news sources find the show entertaining and approachable due to its humorous language, style, and animated format. The show has a reputation for addressing current global and political issues with immediacy. This timeliness allows viewers to see real-world events reflected in satirical scenarios, which can reinforce or reshape their perceptions of these issues. This is of course particularly beneficial for the purpose of research, as it allows for the study of how a particular episode affects viewers' perceptions of current events as they unfold in real-time. Despite its reputation for being offensive, *South Park* frequently challenges viewers to think critically about popular culture and media narratives. Episodes on topics like nationalism, consumerism, and the legal system, for instance, challenge viewers to consider these issues critically.

The research question for this study is as follows: How do young European audiences engage with contemporary American political satire as a way to understand global affairs? The study takes a qualitative approach, utilising focus groups to assess how young people interpret and respond to political satire. Focus groups are especially well-suited for this exploration, as they allow for direct interaction with participants, enabling the researcher to observe their reactions to political satire in real-time. The sample consists of young adults aged 18 to 25 from diverse political backgrounds, selected through convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method where researchers select participants who are easiest to access or readily available, and snowball sampling is a method where existing participants recruit future participants from among their acquaintances. In the focus groups, the participants are shown a *South Park* episode with a strong political focus, and afterwards the researcher guides the discussion through questions pertaining to the messaging of the episode as well as questions regarding the general

topic of political satire. Once the focus groups conclude, the data is analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights. In addition, the researcher conducts an online discourse analysis pertaining to the *South Park* episode in order to understand one discursive context in which political views are formed. The researcher utilises Reddit as the main source of the discourse analysis, as this is the online discussion board which contains the most accessible discourse pertaining to *South Park* and its individual episodes.

The following sub-section will provide a literature review on the topic of political satire in order to gauge what has been determined in the academic realm. Afterwards, the first chapter of this thesis will be a theoretical review in which the main theories guiding the analysis will be explored in-depth, with the main one being soft power theory. The second chapter will pertain to the research methods utilised for the study, namely focus groups and the subsequent thematic analysis of such, and the examination of online discussion boards via discourse analysis. The third chapter will constitute the findings of the study, and will be divided into three sections based on the following themes: the impact and effectiveness of satire, cultural and generational context, and risks of satirical media.

Literature Review

Political satire is by no means a new phenomenon, and there exists quite a bit of literature to showcase this. For example, in the modern era alone Cullen & Gaunt (2019) explore the transnational dimensions of British graphic satire from the early 1800s through the early 1900s. In another example, Weaver (2010) explores how early 20th-century black performers like Bert Williams and Ernest Hogan used minstrel comedy to critique racism, subtly celebrating black culture and resisting Jim Crow, while also conforming to stereotypes for white audiences' acceptance. Furthermore, Bryant (2006) highlights how Czech humour under Nazi rule served as symbolic resistance. These examples demonstrate that political satire has long been a powerful, nuanced tool for marginalised groups to critique oppressive systems, offering both a form of subtle resistance and a means of cultural expression in the face of adversity.

Over the past few years, scholars have increased focus on political satire's role in democracy due to concerns over a crisis in public communication, including misinformation, polarisation, and distrust in political elites. Satire's influence in this crisis is debated; some view it as a divisive factor, while others see it as beneficial to democratic engagement. Critics argue that satire simplifies political issues, contributing to cynicism and distrust in traditional media (Fox and Steinberg 2020; Hart and Hartelius 2007). Supporters claim satire promotes democratic values, portraying satirists as credible voices that critique power structures and inspire political engagement (Crittenden, Hopkins, and Simmons 2011). Some scholars describe satire as an experimental form of journalism or even a 're-invention' of political journalism (Baym 2005).

Lichtenstein and Wagner (2021) conducted interviews with German satirists to understand their perspectives on their role in society and journalism. The study found that satire is seen as inherently critical, playful, and morally driven, often defined as "enlightenment via laughter" (p. 8). While satire critiques those in power, satirists see it as politically neutral, aiming to reflect diverse viewpoints. The satirists' backgrounds influence their self-identity; those from performing arts identify as entertainers, and those from journalism view themselves as journalists utilising satire to report on current events. That being said, regardless of background, the satirists prioritise entertainment and social critique. They aim to engage audiences in critical thinking by highlighting societal issues and encouraging political participation. Furthermore, the study found that satirists tend to balance personal expression with an openness to diverse perspectives, often avoiding overly partisan or activist stances. While politically active, they avoid strict partisanship, with some prioritising freedom of expression over polarising stances.

Political comedy may appear in various forms, be it news shows, memes, cartoons, or stand-up routines that critique authority and resonate with audiences facing social and political challenges. Webber et al. (2021) explore these various forms in an anthology of essays. Jessyka Finley's essay looks into how comedians like Sarah Cooper and Stella Nyanzi use humour to critique authoritarian figures, namely Donald Trump and Yoweri Museveni, highlighting the tension between power and humour. Rebecca Krefting's essay examines how comedians like Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle utilise humour to promote causes like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Cynthia Willett

and Julie Willett's essay looks into a prank carried out by K-Pop influencers on TikTok, whereby K-Pop fans used hashtags typically linked with white supremacist groups in order to substitute racist content with K-Pop content. This anthology showcases the diverse forms that satire may take and how each form may serve a different purpose; for example, unlike traditional satire, pranks do not aim to 'expose' but to disrupt and unnerve.

The issue of offensive comedy is of course a very topical one. There is a growing critique of humour that mocks marginalised groups, challenging the traditional 'special' status of humour in society. Comedy is deeply tied to social and political values with jokes reflecting diverse perspectives, which may include racism, sexism, or otherwise. Scholars suggest that some comics use humour to promote bigotry in a subtle way (Weaver 2011; Pérez 2013). Research indicates that sexist or racist humour can reinforce harmful attitudes, increasing the likelihood of discriminatory behaviour and normalising prejudice, especially in receptive audiences (Ford 2000; Romero-Sánchez et al. 2010). Research also indicates that younger people may be more accepting of blunt humour (Kuipers 2011), making them an important group to study. Lion and Dhaenens (2023) explore what 'taking offence' means for audiences, especially young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. They address both public controversies and personal experiences with offensive jokes, including microaggressions. The qualitative study, consisting of 35 participants of predominantly Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds, focused on how these individuals perceive and react to ethnic humour. Focus groups were chosen as the study methodology in order to capture diverse opinions on complex socio-cultural issues, a method that is also used in this thesis. Participants generally saw humour as potentially harmful, advocating for ethical limits, especially for 'punching down' humour. Judgements about humour's offensiveness were influenced by context and the identity of the joke teller. Self-deprecating humour was often viewed as less problematic if the teller shared an identity with the joke target. Thus, differences were noted in the perception of humour based on the relationship between the teller and the target.

In conclusion, the literature shows that political satire is a longstanding and complex kind of social commentary that may be used to engage audiences in political discourse as well as to act as a tool for resistance. Some academics criticise its ability to spread disinformation and cynicism, while others emphasise its significance in challenging

repressive structures and encouraging democratic participation. The way satire has changed over time, from news programmes to stand-up comedy, memes, and even online activism, reflects how flexible it is in response to the political and social climate of today. But while discussions over offensive humour and moral limits go on, the effects of satire continue to be a complicated and contentious topic that is influenced by audience reaction and cultural settings.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Review

1.1 Soft Power Theory

The concept of soft power gained prominence in the post-Cold War era, when ideological competition was no longer framed in purely military terms. Joseph Nye (2004) identifies three types of power. The first is coercion, achieved through military or economic threats. The second is inducement, achieved through payments or incentives. These two types are known as “hard power”. The third type of power is that of attraction, which is referred to as “soft power”. In international politics, a nation may achieve its desired policy outcomes because other nations wish to emulate it. Soft power is mostly derived from the ideals that a nation embodies in its culture, in the examples it sets through its internal policies and practices, and in the way it manages its relationships with other nations. A nation's chances of achieving its goals are increased when its policies and culture uphold universal ideals and interests. The United States in particular benefits from a universalistic culture.

Unlike hard power, soft power does not belong to the government to the same extent. The American government does not control many soft power resources, and they are only partially responsive to its objectives. Subliminal images and messages about individuality, consumer choice, and other ideals are frequently found in popular entertainment, and these messages have significant political ramifications. In a world of prevalent mass media, the distinction between entertainment and information has never been as clear-cut as some may believe, and it is getting increasingly blurred by the day. Because popular culture is not directly controlled by the government, it does not necessarily result in the precise policy outcomes that the government may want. Additionally, it may affect several groups within the same country in conflicting ways (in Chapter 3, we will explore how different ideological groups might react to a South Park episode with an inherent political bias). According to Nye (2008), popular culture is important because it influences foreigners' perceptions of the United States, frequently before they come into contact with its formal diplomacy or policy. American entertainment is widely available throughout the world, and foreign viewers frequently

grow to love or respect American culture, which enhances their opinions of the United States overall. Aspirational identification – the desire to imitate the American way of life – can result from this over time. This contributes to the notion that the United States is a "shining city on a hill," as Ronald Reagan (1989) put it in his farewell address to the nation; as a result, the U.S. is positioned as a nation that the rest of the world should emulate.

Soft power as a concept is becoming increasingly important in today's globalised world. With social media and globalisation continuously bringing cultures and countries closer together, the ability to influence others by non-coercive means becomes increasingly vital. With the advancement of online mediums like TikTok and YouTube, non-state actors now contribute significantly towards a country's soft power. These decentralised sources can amplify, contradict, or subvert official narratives, rendering it difficult for a government to completely manage its international image. That being said, audiences are not passive consumers of cultural products. They interpret, adapt, and even resist foreign content based on local contexts. American TV shows can be appropriated in unforeseen ways that reflect the cultural values or political grievances of the audience.

Naturally, soft power theory has drawbacks and restrictions. Firstly, other nations' actions can undermine or contradict the efficacy of a country's soft power initiatives. As demonstrated by the South Korean Wave, K-Dramas, and Turkish soap operas in the Middle East, the United States is not the only nation that uses media and television to exercise soft power. Countries have been fighting back against the dominance of American content, which has sparked worries about cultural imperialism and the standardisation of media landscapes around the world (Eqbal, 2025). Secondly, the effects of soft power, including shifts in attitudes, perceptions or behaviour are frequently intangible and challenging to measure. In chapter 2, this methodological concern will be explored in more detail. Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, cultural products are only effective if they are in line with the values of the audience (Nye, 2008). For instance, in conservative nations, such as those with a Muslim majority, Hollywood movies that feature violence and nudity may turn off viewers rather than draw them in. They could elicit anger or moral reaction rather than praise. Additionally, pop culture attraction only succeeds when the larger message is regarded as genuine and consistent.

1.2 The “Other”

Phenomenology is the traditional source of the concept of the "Other," which is the understanding of one's own existence and world in relation to others', leading to the idea of "us" as opposed to "them" (Cooper, 2018). This type of Othering is acceptable and even beneficial. However, Othering is contemporarily associated with marginalisation, which is harmful and unacceptable. Proponents of this concept include Simone de Beauvoir, a feminist theorist who describes how women are historically constructed as the “Other” in relation to men (Beauvoir, 1949). Another proponent is Edward Said, a postcolonial theorist who developed the concept of Orientalism, referring to the depiction of Eastern societies as exotic, backward, and different (Said, 1978). In this sense, “Othering” means labelling a certain people as so different to us that they are almost incomprehensible. For the purpose of this thesis, we will be looking at the Othering of political and ideological adversaries.

Cooper (2018) explores the Othering of Donald Trump and his supporters. The rhetoric surrounding the 2016 election (as well as the subsequent 2020 and 2024 elections) was so scathing that it implied that a candidate and his followers were not legitimate participants in a democratic process and dismissed their humanity. Some of the criticism directed at Trump during the campaign and early in the presidency focused on alleged flaws in his character or mental state. It is reasonable to argue that a number of the campaign's main attacks on Trump and his followers constitute Othering, going beyond *ad hominem*, and deviating from the traditional jousting that characterises political rivalry. However, when it comes to the problem of Othering, it is challenging to draw a clear line between acceptable attacks and unacceptable attacks. When acts of speech essentially demonise the rival as less than human or suggest that the Other does not deserve full participation in democracy, it can be said that the border has been crossed from *ad hominem* into Othering.

According to Finkel et al. (2020), a new kind of polarization is characterized by members of one party having a fundamental dislike for their rivals. The growing inclination of one political group to see its opponents as morally reprehensible is known as "political sectarianism," as described in the article. Sectarianism is a strongly moralised political identity that considers the other viewpoint to be disdainful. This is

the reason why out-party hatred is now a stronger predictor of voting behaviour than in-party love. Even though Republicans and Democrats are very different at present, partisans greatly exaggerate these distinctions. Political sectarianism is exacerbated by their perception of opposing partisans as more socially different, ideologically radical, politically active, disdainful, and uncooperative than is typically the reality. The public's political sectarianism encourages politicians to use anti-democratic strategies in their quest for political or electoral triumphs. Trump's denial of the 2020 election results and his approval of the riots of January 6th serve as proof of this. If voters think the damage to democracy will be minimal while the repercussions of the vile opposition winning the election will be disastrous, then supporting such a candidate may seem like a reasonable choice.

The media landscape has impacted political sectarianism as Americans have been more open to absorbing information that has been skewed by political viewpoints. Political sectarianism has increased in recent years due to the influence of social media platforms like Facebook and X that act as a medium for political discourse. In order to retain users and generate income from advertising, social media algorithms optimise user engagement. These algorithms may have the unintended consequence of polarizing opinion within sectarian bubbles. Put another way, the algorithm's goal is commercial (ad targeting, consumer engagement), but its consequences extend into the political sphere. Political sectarianism may become self-reinforcing as it becomes more extreme, driving ardent partisans further into media enclaves that support their morally superior narratives (Finkel et al, 2020). This could make mitigating efforts more challenging. Platforms have commercial incentives to prioritise content that maximises engagement, which often includes emotionally charged or polarising material. Even with regulations, platforms may resist fundamental changes that reduce profitability. Moreover, defining what constitutes 'harmful' political content without infringing on free speech is legally and ethically complex.

Wojczewski (2020) takes on another perspective, positing that Trump himself engages in the act of Othering with regards to the establishment, the elite, and foreign Others. According to the article, populism is a rhetorical technique used to create a collective identity of 'the people' by uniting different unfulfilled social needs and pitting them against an Other that is alleged to be impeding their fulfilment. By distinguishing between various forms of Othering, the article demonstrates how the Trumpian

discourse combined nationalist and populist sentiments by using foreign policy as a means of creating a collective identity of the people as both a nation and an underdog, as well as propelling Trump to a position where he can assert that he is the 'true' representative of the people.

1.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has examined how Othering and soft power influence contemporary politics and culture in ways that extend well beyond governments and official regulations. The factors influencing political identities and ideas around the world are more varied and intricate than ever before, ranging from TikTok trends to Hollywood films, and from campaign speeches to internet echo chambers. Soft power is not predictable or controlled, even while it can be used to represent a country's values and draw people to its way of life. Individuals interpret, reject, and remix cultural messages according to their own values and experiences rather than merely absorbing them.

In a similar vein, the idea of the "Other" demonstrates how quickly political disputes can degenerate into profound moral differences. It's not enough to simply disagree with someone in today's hyperconnected, highly polarised media landscape; you also need to believe that they are dangerous or fundamentally incorrect. Both the contentious rhetoric in political debate and the soft power of American pop culture emphasise how crucial perception, identity, and influence are in determining how societies view one another and themselves. As we move forward, the key comes in recognising these processes without letting them further divide us.

The next chapter will delve into the methodology and research methods utilised in this thesis. It will describe the reasoning behind the selected approach, describe the data collection and analysis process, and go over the advantages and disadvantages of the employed techniques. It is crucial to have a paradigm that encompasses not just what is being said or demonstrated, but also how it is perceived and interpreted, as soft power and political Othering are intricate and frequently subjective phenomena.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Research Methods

2.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups were chosen as the main method of collecting data for the purpose of this thesis. Focus groups were first used in market research, and later adopted in the social sciences. The term 'focus group' was first coined by Austrian-born psychologist Ernest Dichter in the 1940s to describe discussions with small groups aimed at gathering insights into people's attitudes and opinions about products and services (TED-Ed, 2017). Focus groups seek to involve small groups of people in more candid conversations as opposed to surveying huge numbers of people with simple questions and measurable responses.

For the purpose of this thesis, two focus groups were conducted as opposed to just one, so that the data reflects the diversity of European youth. Each focus group had six to eight participants, which is a good balance between allowing everyone to offer their thoughts and allowing for a range of viewpoints (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The sampling method used was convenience sampling and snowball sampling, which ultimately led to a variety of political views being represented. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method where researchers select participants who are easiest to access or readily available, and snowball sampling is a method where existing participants recruit future participants from among their acquaintances. That being said, although they were sufficiently varied to reflect such diversity, the participants were similar enough to feel at ease conversing with one another.

Prior to the focus group, the participants were read their rights and were asked to sign consent forms showcasing that they consented to being recorded for the purpose of this thesis. Then, they were collectively shown the episode "Spring Break" (season 26 episode 6) of South Park. This episode satirises the MAGA movement as well as the toxic masculinity trend spearheaded by figures like Andrew Tate. It was chosen for its overly political nature and its relevance to contemporary current affairs. After the

episode was completed, the researcher gently guided the discussion while also controlling the conversation to get good data. The discussion questions were as follows:

1. How often do you engage with political satire, and can you give examples of such?
2. Do you think the episode influenced your understanding or opinion of the issues that were tackled?
3. Do you view satire like South Park as a credible way to learn about political issues?
4. Did the portrayal of characters or events seem biased to you? How did that impact your perception of the message?
5. Did the humour make the political issues seem more approachable, or did it downplay their seriousness?
6. Do you think young audiences are more susceptible to the views presented in satirical shows?

The focus groups were recorded via audio, and the speech was then transcribed. As outlined in the consent forms, the audio was promptly deleted after the transcription was complete.

There are of course a number of limitations to the method. First of all, something or someone can alter their behaviour just because they are being observed. This is known as observer interference. The researchers' presence, peer pressure from the rest of the group, or even just the fact that they are participating in a focus group may all have an impact on the responses that participants provide. Secondly, because the focus groups make use of a small sample size, it is difficult to generalise the results. Small groups undoubtedly lead to deeper interactions; however this comes with the consequence of representing limited perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

2.2 Thematic Analysis

The opinions expressed by focus-group participants formed a diverse set of qualitative data. To make sense of it, the first method I used was thematic analysis, which entails going over a collection of data, finding patterns, methodically coding, determining themes, and crafting a narrative. This can be used across a range of theoretical frameworks.

There are various types of thematic analyses, the two main ones being inductive thematic analysis and theoretical thematic analysis. The researcher will be making use of the former. Inductive thematic analysis is a bottom-up, data-led approach. This implies that rather than being predetermined, the codes and themes will be emerging through the researcher's study of the data as it is processed. As one gets to know their data better, they can add, remove, or modify codes and themes, making this a fairly adaptable method.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases of thematic analysis. The first phase is familiarisation with the data; this means transcribing, reading, and re-reading the sources. The second phase involves generating initial codes by systematically coding interesting features. These represent the meanings and patterns that can be seen in the data. Then, one searches for themes by collating codes together. A theme is a synopsis of the content or a key idea that captures the essence of related content. The next step is reviewing the themes, refining them for coherence and consistency. Then comes defining and naming themes, involving detailed analysis and clear definitions. The last step is producing the report, this being the final write-up with the narrative and data extracts. There are also a number of important considerations to take into account. It is imperative that theoretical positions are clearly articulated. Furthermore, the researcher must avoid assuming that themes 'emerge' passively – it is important to recognise that the researcher plays an active role in the creation of such, and therefore the themes are generated by the researcher themselves rather than 'identified'. Finally, it is vital that the themes are coherent and distinct from each other. A good-quality thematic analysis involves accurate transcription, equal attention in coding, comprehensive theme development, and clear analytic narrative supported by data extracts.

After transcribing and coding the data, the researcher of this thesis formulated three key themes from the focus groups: the impact and effectiveness of political satire, cultural and generational context, and risks of political satire. These themes will be explored in detail in Chapter 3, where the findings of the thematic analysis will be outlined.

The strengths of thematic analysis are that it is both simple and flexible, with the ability to adapt to different research methods. It allows for both rich description and detailed interpretation of data. That being said, the method has a number of shortcomings. First of all, results are occasionally imprecise. Additionally, the procedure is too basic for more delicate research goals, and there is a chance for inconsistency and a lack of rigour. Common pitfalls include failing to provide meaningful analysis beyond description, developing overlapping or incoherent themes, and mismatching analysis with theoretical claims (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

2.3 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is another technique of qualitative analysis, which focuses on the meaning of language in spoken or written communication within its context. According to Foucault, discourse consists not only of spoken or written words, but all claims made about something in the form of texts, gestures, pictures, and ideas (Rose, 2001). Language, thoughts, and behaviour are part of discourse, which combines power and knowledge. Topics with significant societal relevance may be examined through discourse analysis. Since discourse analysis' fundamental tenet is that language is always employed in a particular context and from a certain viewpoint, the approach is frequently referred to as the study of language in context. Research topics that focus on social, political, or cultural issues and how they vary across communicative contexts are typically best suited for discourse analysis. Discourse analysis questions how these themes are produced and what external power relations they reflect, in contrast to thematic analysis, which concentrates on generating and analysing themes internal to a given dataset.

The study of how language both reflects and affects power hierarchies is the focus of critical discourse analysis, a subset of discourse analysis. The language could be

utilised to explore the power relations it portrays. This method, which is socio-political in nature, looks at how language creates and maintains social power structures. This point of view holds that every text, document, and interview has a cultural or other type of context. In a good discourse analysis, language is interpreted in the social, cultural, political, and historical settings in which it occurs. Critical discourse analysis also treats language as an exercise of social power, either reinforcing existing power relations or contesting them.

Keller (2011) outlines five steps of discourse analysis. The first steps are the formulation of a research question and the conduction of a literature review. These steps have already been done in the 'Introduction' section of this thesis. The next steps involve data sampling, coding, and the presentation of results. The data used for the purpose of this discourse analysis will be extrapolated from the Reddit discussion board r/southpark. This discussion board was chosen for its rich, user-generated content reflecting diverse public discourse on pop culture, satire, and sociopolitical commentary. Reddit is an incredibly popular discussion board and r/southpark consist of 2.4 million members, making it a very relevant dataset. As a space where anonymity fosters candid communication, it provides fertile ground for examining the ways in which discourse constructs and contests meaning. The content will then be coded accordingly, and the results will be presented in chapter 3.4.

Discourse analysis allows for the analysis of a range of data types; speech transcripts and interview responses are just two examples of the many kinds of data that can be included in such. The approach draws attention to subtleties and contextualising elements, which means that one's analysis and conclusions may have practical applications in the field of study. However, it might be argued that the method's primary weakness is the subjectivity and dependability of the data interpretation. While the interpretive nature of discourse analysis is its strength, it also invites critiques concerning replicability and researcher bias. For instance, two researchers working with the same set of data might emerge with differing results due to the subjectivity of the qualitative method. However, methodological rigour can be maintained through transparency in coding procedures, reflexivity, and triangulation with other data sources. It is for this reason that discourse analysis is not the only method that will be used in this thesis, and the usage of both the focus group transcriptions and the Reddit discussion board provides a rich variety of data.

Chapter 3: Case Study Analysis

3.1 The Impact and Effectiveness of Political Satire

As outlined in chapter 1, the network of cultural producers and media conglomerates serves as the soft power agent in this situation rather than a conventional governmental actor. The creators of South Park and the entertainment sector as a whole take on the role of de facto cultural diplomats. With this in mind, this subsection will start off the thematic analysis by delving into the impact and effectiveness of political satire.

The participants expressed a reasonable level of prior knowledge pertaining to the politics behind the episode, namely that of MAGA and toxic masculinity, and therefore they were not being introduced to these topics for the first time in a satirical form. The episode was thus considered entertaining rather than insightful. When asked whether the episode influenced their understanding or opinion of the issues that were tackled, the participants asserted that this was not the case; rather, their beliefs were simply reinforced. This highlights a limitation of soft power when the message is too aligned with viewers' existing values.

This reinforcement is not necessarily exclusive to those who agree with the episode's message. The ridicule of MAGA may serve to increase political polarisation by characterising Trump supporters as an 'Other', which in turn offends them and fuels their anti-leftist sentiment. The same goes for those who subscribe to the ideology of toxic masculinity, which is also ridiculed in the episode. From a soft power angle, this "Othering" weakens the show's ability to build consensus or shared understanding (this is not to say that such consensus-building was ever a goal of the show's creators) – instead, it may harden existing identities, making persuasion through attraction even more difficult. In critiquing these beliefs, the episode does not serve to change the minds of those who subscribe to them, but rather it achieves the opposite effect. Paradoxically, the satirical critique of MAGA might reinforce MAGA beliefs amongst those who already hold them. The episode was perceived by the participants as blunt, lacking the subtlety or nuance that may be effective in challenging one's beliefs.

Satirical media, in this case, failed to attract or persuade the ‘Other’ (e.g., MAGA supporters), and instead deepened divisions – an unintended polarising effect of soft power. One focus group participant said:

“I think that an episode like this, I don’t think it’s meant to change people’s minds. I think it’s going to re-enforce your beliefs regardless. If you’re anti-MAGA, this episode you’re going to laugh at it, it’s going to re-enforce your anti-MAGA beliefs. If you are MAGA, you’re going to see this and say, this is woke, you know, this is made to make fun of us but they don’t know what they’re talking about. It’s just going to radicalise you either way.”

The participants posited that the episode made the issues easier to understand – more ‘digestible’ – due to their simplification. They suggested that it may expose certain topics to people who may be less knowledgeable about the issues being satirised, similarly to how one might get exposed to such issues through TikTok or YouTube – in fact, multiple participants expressed that their first exposure to politics was through satirical social media. This is a key function of soft power: making complex or uncomfortable topics approachable through culture. The episode thus acts as a conversation-starter and a gateway for one to potentially do further research into the topics at hand. For example, the participants asserted that had they not known who the “Romanian sex trafficker” in the episode was referring to, they would have done their own research to fill the gaps of their knowledge. This is soft power in action: exposing audiences to political ideas in an indirect, less confrontational way. The implication of this is that the episode could only really be insightful for those that are at a starting point with regards to political exposure, and therefore might not be as effective for those who are already news literate.

“I think it is a digestible way to get into that scene. I think most of us, if not all of us, our first kind of exposure to politics that we understood something of was through media like this, through satire. At least for me personally it was. And then you start doing research, you start learning about what it actually is. But I think a piece of media like this can be important because it’s a good entryway into it, you know? At the end of the day it’s funny, and if it’s funny it’s going to make you interested in it somewhat, I think.”

The participants agreed that the characterisation of MAGA and toxic masculinity in a humorous and more 'approachable' way also had the effect of downplaying their seriousness. There were some disagreements, however, as to whether this could be characterised in a positive or a negative way. Some expressed that the more they are exposed to such issues in a satirical manner, the less it impacts them. Furthermore, the simplification of the issues at hand results in a limited depth in terms of how far they may be explored – a limitation of soft power when depth is sacrificed for appeal. On the other hand, other participants expressed that the satirical episode was not met with the same levels of anxiety and dread that usually accompany their consumption of news from more traditional sources. It allows one to step back from the seriousness of it, and to properly digest what is happening rather than just blocking it out. Satirical media thus offers one an alternative to just avoiding serious issues entirely.

"I don't think [the comedy] is necessarily bad because it's more stomach-able. I feel like you can take in more information if you're not feeling sad for example, that the information is making you feel really heavy. And you just go, "I'd rather not hear about this". Me personally, when it comes to political stuff and news, I'm very careful what I consume because I'm an anxious person so whatever I consume needs to be in a kind of comedic light for me to feel, "Okay I can stomach this" and feel like everyone's dealing with it. So I do appreciate the comedy in it."

3.2 Cultural and Generational Context

This subsection will address the cultural and generational contexts regarding the European youth who consume South Park. Starting off with the cultural context, the participants posited that since they lived in Europe, they were unable to identify what exactly in the episode was representative of real life and what was made up or exaggerated for comedic effect; this was especially difficult due to South Park's theatrical and exaggerative nature. They therefore did not know the true extent to which MAGA culture was deeply entrenched; for example, one participant questioned

whether the extravagant MAGA merchandise shops, as depicted in the episode, existed in real life.

“I know that they usually over-exaggerate the jokes pretty hard. So for someone that is not very into the political stuff in America, I’m not sure how much extreme it is, to what it actually is.”

The cultural influence of the U.S. is evident in how European youth engage with American political themes, despite physical and political distance. South Park becomes a cultural ambassador, however flawed or subversive. This role may of course be unintentional from the perspective of the creators, but this does not take away from the fact that the show undoubtedly positions itself as such. The participants agreed that even though they lived in Europe and the American elections did not *directly* affect them, one should still have empathy for the goings-on of the other side of the world. Furthermore, they posited that Europeans “internalise” messaging that was meant to apply to Americans, especially given the fact that younger generations are consuming more and more American media. This internalisation suggests that American ideological and political frameworks are spreading via cultural products like TV shows, shaping global discourses – even in places where the direct political impact (like U.S. elections) is minimal.

Moving on to the generational context, the participants understood that South Park is a long-running show that started off in the late 90s, and at that time certain offensive jokes were a lot more commonplace. This “90s humour” stuck around throughout the later seasons of the show, and therefore it has a reputation for being very politically incorrect in comparison to other satirical media. The participants were of the opinion that if a show like South Park were to come out nowadays, it would probably not be very popular due to generational differences in viewer tastes and preferences. One participant described the typical South Park viewer as *“one of those people who in the early 2010s discovered atheism and then kind of found more progressive policies, but then they’re still a bit conservative at heart”*. Another described the target audience as *“people that have been watching since the 90s and never let go”*. This is why specifying the generational context is all the more important, as the study would probably have quite different results had the focus group participants been of the older generation of

South Park viewers. Older or younger viewers might have a completely different experience in their consumption of political satire.

The participants expressed that young people nowadays are more influenced by social media platforms and online influencers rather than shows like South Park, due to the fact that they are consuming less TV series in favour of TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram Reels. The evolution of media from TV to TikTok (which is not owned nor operated by a U.S. company) shows how the U.S. adapts its cultural exports to new platforms, maintaining influence in an era of fragmented media consumption. That being said, clips of South Park have made the rounds on social media platforms such as TikTok and X, and therefore we can assume that despite this consumption disparity, the show can still have a similar impact on young consumers as do memes, influencers, and other forms of video. This is especially the case with how quickly technology has advanced, as social media platforms specifically curate what you see according to your own tastes. This means that the more South Park clips one watches, the more South Park clips one will come across on their feeds, as well as other satirical shows. Furthermore, it is worth noting that since it is clips, gifs, and memes of South Park that circulate on social media, rather than full episodes, this may contribute to the humour of the show being misinterpreted and the political critique being lost.

“I feel like people with poor media literacy still really gravitate towards South Park even when it’s making fun of them. Like people share clips of the show that would be making fun of them if the mirror wasn’t covered in haze or whatever. And it’s always been a problem with the show.”

Given the interconnected nature between satirical TV and social media, this then calls into question the issue of media literacy. The participants posited that young people are not media literate and tend to take what they see online, including shows like South Park, at face value. Given the fact that South Park would not be subject to the same fact-checking mechanisms that tend to be present in traditional media, this risks exposing youth to the “*wrong opinions*”, as one participant put it. This highlights a double-edged nature of cultural influence. While it spreads values and visibility, it may also distort or misinform, especially when satire is misunderstood. The power to influence perceptions can lead to unintended consequences. Such risks of satirical media will be further developed upon in section 3.3.

3.3 Risks of Political Satire

This subsection will outline the potential risks of political satire. Firstly, today's youth have a tendency to take what they see on their screens at face value, and may even mimic certain behaviours that they witness. Multiple participants recounted anecdotes of youth attempting to re-create South Park humour in real life, thus coming across as rude, or getting in trouble at school as they quote mischievous characters like South Park's Eric Cartman verbatim. The consumer of the satire might not realise that the content is ironic or sarcastic in nature, and this may especially hold true for young viewers. This makes shows like South Park susceptible to misinterpretation, and viewers might walk away with the wrong message or the wrong idea regarding how to behave. They might admire traits in fictional characters that are by no means meant to represent what is 'good'. This aligns with soft power's capacity to shape individual and collective identities subtly – not through state propaganda, but through the cultural attractiveness and comedic stylings of influential media figures. This becomes particularly risky when the show depicts aggression towards minorities as a funny joke, for example. One participant made reference to the South Park episode '*The Entity*' (season 5 episode 11), which is an episode built entirely upon anti-Semitic jokes and stereotypes; the participants agreed that an episode like this could have dire consequences if watched by those who are young and impressionable.

"I think rather than being susceptible to the views in the show, something like South Park, they can be susceptible to misinterpreting it as well. Which can be even worse. Like I could easily see how a lot of the stuff in this episode could be misinterpreted. Or like in the example you brought up of the Jewish cousin, how that could so easily be misinterpreted if you're young, you know what I mean?"

Political satire may also be inherently biased, for example, the episode shown to the participants had a clear bias against MAGA and toxic masculinity. This might not seem particularly risky from the point of view of someone who holds those beliefs, but a piece of satire could in theory be biased in favour or against any political figure or ideology. One participant pointed out that the show is built around the perspective of two men – these being creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone – whose views are being

internalised by consumers of the show. Although the point of political satire is to convey a message, it is important to note that satirists have both talents and flaws, the latter potentially involving glaring blind spots. Their biases will inevitably spill over into their work, which would then be internalised by viewers. The episode shown to the participants portrayed MAGA supporters as insane fanatics with a huge mob mentality, without any nuance whatsoever. Furthermore, certain youth might not have the language to be constructive in their critique of the satire that they are consuming, making the messaging of the satire all the more likely to be internalised without any scepticism whatsoever. This is not a necessarily healthy way for youth to be deconstructing issues. Under soft power theory, even satire carries the ideological fingerprints of its creators, influencing public perception and political socialisation – especially when critical thinking skills are underdeveloped.

Young people naturally absorb information at higher rates than their older counterparts (Frank et al, 2022), and therefore it is sensible to assume that young people's high consumption of political satire will have a certain effect on them. A very common assertion by the participants throughout the focus groups was that the over-exposure to political satire leads to desensitisation. The young generation are so used to seeing such depictions on their devices that they seem to disregard the fact that such events affect people in real life. The participants expressed dismay at the fact that, despite the humour of the episode, the topics being portrayed had real-world implications, such as Donald Trump taking office.

The question of what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable subject matter for humour will remain a persistent and contested issue in public discourse. Some participants expressed disapproval at the fact that January 6th footage was played for laughs in the episode. As has already been touched upon in section 3.1, this could work to effectively downplay the seriousness of the issue at hand by making light of it in a humorous way. One participant asserted that the episode conceptualised “*flirting with fascism*”. This leaves viewers unable to appreciate how important the issue is. Soft power is not always benign; when satire trivialises authoritarianism or hate speech, it risks desensitising audiences and undermining civic seriousness, especially when young viewers fail to contextualise the humour. It is then up for debate whether this is the fault of the satirical TV show or of the viewers themselves who fail to understand the humour.

3.4 Discourse Analysis of Online Discussion Boards

This subsection will constitute a discourse analysis of the online discussion board r/southpark on Reddit. The thread in particular to be analysed is “Weekly new episode discussion thread S26E6 (Season 26 Finale)” (Reddit, 2023). This thread was created for the purpose of discussing the episode in question, and received over 700 comments, which provides ample relevant data. The author chose 22 of the most relevant comments, pertaining to how much engagement it received and whether the comment discussed the politics of the episode.

Two main themes were identified in this regard. The first theme was the role of Andrew Tate in the episode, with 6 commenters expressing the fact that they were disappointed in Tate’s lack of a role in the plot. The second theme was the over-usage of Trump as a subject of political satire, with 8 commenters expressing disapproval at South Park’s tendency to satirise Trump in multiple episodes. Aside from these two main themes, a number of smaller-scale themes were identified, which will be discussed towards the end of this sub-section.

u/Miserable-Ad2094: *Genuinely feel like a lot of modern south park is written by manatees. Nothing is ever fully leaned into, there's only ever glimmers of the harsh satire they once ruled with. Feels like they're genuinely scared to fully say anything about anything anymore [...] Same with the Tate bit, they don't have Randy start a podcast, they don't bluntly comment on a lot of these men of influence online complaining about masculinity nowadays, they're scared to even call him Tate hahah I feel like they don't have as much legal freedom as they used to.*

This commenter expresses the fact that they believe South Park should be harsher and more overt in their critique of Tate. The idea that modern South Park is written by manatees suggests that the satire being produced nowadays is lazy and uninspiring. They express nostalgia for the ‘old’ South Park which was freer and more savage. In this sense, an idea of South Park’s ‘golden age’ is established, which is a very common trope amongst consumers of any media. The repeated use of the word “scared”

implies a sense of cowardice amongst the writers. This cowardice is then explained by the potential legal consequences that the writers may face, which calls into question the concept of freedom of speech of satirists.

[deleted user]: *I'm actually glad they barely did anything with Tate. He's not worth it imo. He's just a troll, the type of guy that would be happy to be made fun on South Park, so I like that they denied him that. And they made fun of his stupid ideology with Randy so I feel like this is the perfect Andrew Tate episode.*

This comment offers a differing viewpoint to the rest of the commenters. They express the fact that Tate's minimal role in the episode is actually a good thing as it does not give him the attention that he craves. The commenter suggests that exposure in the media, even negative exposure, can be empowering for infamous figures such as Tate. They see a lack of attention as a form of critique in and of itself, with Tate being deprived of the discursive oxygen that the other commenters claim he deserves. The characterisation of Tate as a "troll" with a "stupid ideology" effectively disempowers and Others him in discourse.

u/Dimension_Soul: *I'm not american, and for me the only [supposed] advantage of trump losing 2020 election was south park [stopping] making 20 f***ing episodes about him, but the f***er is literally getting arrested and he still being put in the show.*

Over here, despite evidently disliking Trump, the commenter expresses contempt over the fact that Trump is continuously satirised by South Park. Firstly, the phrase "I'm not [A]merican" goes to show how contemporary American political satire is a far-reaching commodity which impacts people outside of its country of origin. This comment implies a sense of fatigue with regards to American dominance of global media, which is a consequence of American media's soft power. Secondly, the commenter expresses the opinion that Trump losing the 2020 election as well as his arrest should act as endpoints with regards to media attention. This represents the idea of media stagnation – its inability to move on from Trump. It is important to note that at the comment's time of writing, Trump had not yet been nominated as the Republican candidate for the 2024 election. In hindsight, the comment comes off as uninformed given the fact that nowadays Trump is one of the world's most powerful figures, and his 2020 loss and arrest did not end his legacy. That being said, the overexposure to

Trump in satire is regarded as over-the-top and unwarranted, and this is a sentiment which is echoed amongst other comments under the thread. Furthermore, the vulgarity of the comment shows the emotion of the person writing it, implying that this is an issue they feel very strongly about.

u/gopnikflopdicc:** Honestly it just feels so boring to be listening to yet another trump joke after having Multiple seasons of garrison Trump and them saying no more heavy politics only for them to come back to it this episode despite being 3 years into a presidency full of gaffs and f ups? Sh*t I don't even like Trump but the [god damn] same 6 jokes about him can only go so far.*

In this comment we see yet again disillusionment regarding the overexposure of Trump in political satire. The commenter does not express political opposition, making it clear that they are not a fan of Trump, but rather they indicate that they believe the satire to be repetitive and boring. The fact that the show's creators allegedly promised "no more heavy politics" only for them to not keep their word elicits a sense of betrayal and disappointment from the viewers. The phrase "despite being 3 years into a presidency full of gaffs and f*** ups", presumably referring to the Biden administration, implies that the creators had lots of material to work with and yet they chose to make fun of Trump yet again. Over here the creators are showing a political bias that is antithetical to the original goals of the show, which was to be impartial and to make fun of anything and everything. The commenter mentions the "same 6 jokes" about Trump, presumably referring to gags such as his orange complexion, his hair, and his speech patterns. These jokes, according to the commenter, are overused and worn out.

***[deleted user]:** Depicting the Garrison-Trump supporters as hard partiers or brainless drones was funny at first but now it's a bit old. There are some supporters like that for sure of course. They could have made an episode looking at why people are still hanging onto Trump after all this time instead of just saying "they're brainless drones ha!"*

This commenter takes issue with the fact that the episode lacks nuance and simply portrays the Trump supporters as "brainless drones". The fact that this portrayal was "a bit old" shows yet again the phenomenon of media consumers being disillusioned by overexposure to certain themes. Furthermore, the assertion that "some supporters

are like that for sure” acknowledges that the depictions are not wholly inaccurate, but rather that they lack a more layered analysis. The commenter implies the episode to be shallow in nature, and subtly calls for satire to be more analytical and informative rather than dismissive and punching down. The commenter does not wish for Trump supporters to be Othered, but rather for them to be analysed and understood.

u/digital-barfly:** I understand why some are disappointed with the finale, but I think a lot of the criticism is misplaced. I think people are averse to the Trump political era itself and are just taking it out on the show. No doubt, classic adventures with the boys are great, but when something with the cultural gravity of a trump re-election campaign spins up, south park has to do its goddamn duty and fold it into the show. [...] Nevertheless, Garrison embodied Trump in a fresh, enduring way; even given the avalanche of forgettable Trump jokes in other comedies. I think this episode was no different. The 2024 Trump campaign told as the story of an old queen sneaking out to night clubs and Grindr dates in Myrtle Beach? Pure. Fing. Gold.*

This commenter expresses the fact that the satire is a casualty of Trump-era exhaustion rather than a creative failure. This redirects the blame onto Trump and his supporters themselves, rather than the creators of the show. The commenter greatly values South Park as a cultural ambassador, describing its “duty” to critique the goings-on of the country. Over here, Trump’s re-election campaign is framed as a grievous issue that is worth giving attention. The commenter acknowledges the “avalanche of forgettable Trump jokes in other comedies”, conceding that certain Trump jokes are indeed boring and repetitive. That being said, South Park is elevated to a higher status than other forms of satire, implying that not all satire is equal and that some have discursive and informative value while others do not.

***u/Pilk_Drinker:** Finally some reality based on-the-nose social commentary that isn't just "Both sides are equivalent and are equally bad!!"*

Here, the term “on-the-nose” is used positively to describe a piece of satire that is overt and blunt in their criticism. This commenter expresses relief at the fact that South Park is “finally” taking a stand on an issue rather than their usual centrist approach. This is because South Park has a history of espousing ‘both sides are bad’ rhetoric. For example, in season 7 episode 4 “I’m a Little Bit Country”, the show critiques both

proponents and opponents of the Iraq war, portraying them as equally contemptible. The commenter implicitly advocates for satirical critique that acknowledges the disproportionate absurdity and harmfulness of one side over the other, rather than creating a false equivalency.

[deleted user]: Can't wait for the Twitter accounts to post clips of Randy and say some sh*t like "good on South Park to finally stand up to the liberal agenda" or some sh*t not realizing South Park is making fun of them

This comment touches upon the theme of satire's misinterpretation and co-opting by groups that the satire is actually mocking. The commenter expresses a good level of media literacy and understanding of the messaging and intentions of political satire. As a result, a distinction is made between those who misunderstand the humour and those who 'get it'. The phrase "good on South Park to finally stand up to the liberal agenda" is a mockery of right-wing social media accounts who frequently post clips of South Park and other shows without any context, which inevitably skews the message in their favour.

u/TDancer10973: I wasn't familiar with Warhammer or Andrew Tate in this episode. Searched the web to find information on both. Hopefully, I wasn't the only one. LOL

This comment serves as evidence that satire can be a gateway to learning more about the topics being satirised. It reveals a viewer with a knowledge gap who responded with curiosity and a willingness to learn more. The fact that the commenter revealed such is particularly surprising in an environment where social media users' cultural awareness is often performatively exaggerated. Nonetheless, this confirms South Park's role as an exposure to new topics to those who might be uninformed.

3.5 Conclusion

The discourse analysis of the Reddit forum and the focus group findings show a common concern about the dangers of ideological prejudice, desensitisation, and misinterpretation in political humour. Concerns regarding the impact of such media on

young people or viewers who are less media literate, criticisms of oversimplification, and a generational tiredness with Trump-focused humour are all evident in both sets of data. Crucially, the focus groups and Reddit users both draw attention to how satire might backfire due to its crude characterisations, lack of subtlety, or ability to become viral clip bait devoid of important context. But they also recognise that satire can pique audiences' interest or expose them to novel political topics, highlighting the duality of soft power in modern media culture.

Summary of Findings

This thesis was centred around the topic of political satire and its real-world implications, particularly exploring how European youth engage with and are affected by contemporary American political satire. This topic is of utmost importance given the global domination of American media which is consumed and internalised by youth outside of the United States. The objectives of this thesis were to explore the impact and effectiveness of political satire, the cultural and generational context in which it thrives, and the potential risks of such. These concluding remarks will reflect upon and summarise the findings of the thesis, and will also outline the ways in which such findings are relevant to the fields of international relations and media studies.

The researcher's original hypothesis prior to the conduction of the research was that political satire increases political apathy and contributes towards a cynical worldview. This hypothesis was partially correct, particularly pertaining to the cynicism, however the apathy part was challenged. One of the main findings of the research is that political satire serves to reinforce pre-existing values amongst consumers. Furthermore, political satire acts as a gateway to learning more about the issues that are tackled, allowing one to further explore the political messaging that is being portrayed. On the other hand, the portrayal of such matters also comes with the consequence of downplaying their seriousness, making them seem less significant and critical than they actually are. The research also makes clear that it is pertinent to understand the cultural and generational contexts in which the satire thrives. For example, European youth in particular are often unable to tell what concepts in the satire reflect reality and which are made-up or exaggerated for comedic effect. That being said, the youth expressed that although the politics of the United States often does not directly affect them, one should still pay attention to and have empathy for the goings-on of the other side of the world.

This research contributes to the fields of international relations and media studies. This contribution is mainly practical and empirical in nature, as the findings are verifiable by observation rather than just by theory or pure logic. Because of the research that has been conducted, we now have a clear understanding of how European youth are affected by and internalise a nearly-homogeneous media landscape, in particular how

this affects their political views and tendencies. The findings offer new insights into how global media operates and the societal and cultural effects of such. By demonstrating how a non-governmental cultural producer, in this case the producers of South Park, can function as a soft power agent by influencing international opinions of the United States through humour and satire, this case study contributes to the validation of some components of Nye's theory of soft power. The fact that South Park frequently parodies American institutions, politics, and foreign policy does not necessarily mean that its function as a soft power tool is compromised. Its readiness to criticise the United States, on the other hand, might be viewed as an expression of fundamental American principles like free speech and critical thinking. This supports Nye's theory that soft power lies not only in official narratives but also in the allure of a society's culture and values, even (or particularly) when those cultures are irreverent and self-reflexive. Soft power, according to Nye's theory, is the capacity to influence others' preferences by co-optation and attractiveness as opposed to force. As a worldwide media sensation, South Park helps with this by spreading an image of American creative freedom and cultural openness, which may appeal favourably to people abroad even when the show's substance criticises American politics.

The research also has a number of broader implications. Firstly, it sets the scene for further research into how political satire affects consumers, not just Europeans or youth, but also other groups or society as a whole. Research of this nature is pertinent as political satire is a widespread commodity that surely affects all societal groups in one way or another. This research could also be applicable outside of the academic realm, for example by making satirists aware of the potential consequences of their work, or by giving educators the incentive to teach their students about media literacy. The findings could also inform decisions, such as the decision of whether or not to publish or broadcast a piece of satire, or which demographics to target. Alternatively, it could inform debates pertaining to whether a piece of satire is acceptable or appropriate, and whether it serves a purpose beyond poking fun at social issues and politicians.

The research of course possesses a number of limitations. Firstly, only around 20 individuals participated in the focus groups, which is a very small sample size and one could argue that this might be insufficient to make general conclusions about the impact and effectiveness of political satire. Secondly, both thematic analysis and

discourse analysis are subjective research methods that can provide a very biased output. The researcher acknowledges their positionality in formulating the findings of the research, and how their own preconceptions and biases might have seeped into the analysis.

That being said, there are opportunities for refinement. Subsequent replications of this research on a larger scale as well as the triangulation of various research methods could serve to verify the claims made in this thesis. There are specific areas and questions that future researchers can explore, such as how the impact and effectiveness of political satire varies amongst generations, or how it varies amongst different ethnic populations. The homogenisation of American media is an emerging trend and there is definitely room for further exploration in this regard. Further research could take a more long-term approach to explore how the impact of satire is changing over time. There is also the potential to take a quantitative approach, perhaps through the use of surveys or content analysis. The topic could also be explored outside of the field of international relations, perhaps taking a more sociological or psychological approach to understand other nuances that might be absent from the analysis of this thesis.

As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, political satire is far more than a means to an end of comedy – it is a powerful cultural phenomenon mirroring and shaping the political consciousness of its audiences, in this case, European young people who have access to American media. While the research contradicted the initial suspicion of increased apathy, it confirmed that satire both generates political cynicism and interest, with a tendency to be a double-edged sword. In reaffirming current values while also provoking critical thinking, satire occupies a unique space in the global media marketplace, one warranting as much respect as it does criticism. The findings of this project contribute to scholarship at the intersection of media studies and international relations, especially where media effects, soft power, and transnational cultural flows are involved. They also pave the way for a more subtle examination of how youth interact with difficult political truths under the guise of humour and irony. Lastly, the study underscores the value of media literacy and cultural competence in a world where satire often speaks more loudly than policy. As the world becomes more connected by the day and media increasingly transcends borders, how political

communications are received globally will only become more essential. It is hoped that this research provides a foundation for that ongoing discussion.

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