

Adrienne Truscott's *Asking For It*:

A Theoretical Application of Mass Media Persuasion on Performance Art

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Abstract

Adrienne Truscott is a performance artist and comedienne whose performance *Asking For It: A One-Lady Rape About Comedy Starring Her P*ssy And Little Else!* satirizes rape culture and rape jokes. In this performance, Truscott does a standup routine while nude from the waist down, drinking alcohol, and surrounded by framed photos of politicians and celebrities who have condoned or committed sexual assault. Examining the communicative elements of this performance from within a framework of mass media persuasion reveals how Truscott's techniques modify her audience's attitudes about rape and rape culture. This framework is composed of Expectancy Violations Theory, the intersection of social activism and humor, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which are all related to how humor can persuade audiences. These applications demonstrate several elements of persuasion: Truscott improves audience perceptions of her message by disrupting their expectations; Truscott uses humor to reframe feminist issues of rape culture; and Truscott's performance elicits peripheral processing to ease audience acceptance of her political messages. An understanding of how Truscott's performance persuades her audience to change their attitudes about rape and rape culture informs how humor can and is used as a powerful technique for changing behaviors.

Adrienne Truscott's *Asking For It: A Theoretical Application of Mass Media Persuasion on Performance Art*

Standup comedian Lenny Bruce was arrested repeatedly on obscenity charges in the 1960s (Official Website of Lenny Bruce, n.d.). He built his comedy on eradicating politically-correct speech in favor of starting conversations about difficult issues that deserve attention and standing up for those in oppressed positions. As a result of his arrests, Bruce's career was destroyed, although he was given a posthumous gubernatorial pardon (Official Website of Lenny Bruce, n.d.). Discussion of twenty-first century issues suffers due to similar perceptions of political correctness. Following Bruce's confrontational style, Adrienne Truscott, a performance artist and comedienne, draws from the historic reappropriation of problematic words by the disparaged group (like "queer" for the LGBTQ+ community and the n-word for the black community) in an aim to reclaim the rape joke for feminist causes. She endeavors to redefine rape jokes by shifting the punchlines of the jokes away from the victims of rape, and towards rape culture and rapists (Czajkowski, 2016). Examining Truscott's performance within a theoretical communication studies framework reveals how Truscott effectively persuades her audience, strengthening already negatively-valenced attitudes towards rape culture and partially converting positively-valenced attitudes towards rape culture. Truscott's *Asking For It: A One-Lady Rape About Comedy Starring Her P*ssy And Little Else!* aims to discredit socially-acceptable forms of victim blaming and subvert the rhetoric of rape culture.

Asking For It Description

Truscott is a performer who focuses on upsetting the normal conversations surrounding difficult to discuss topics. Her *Asking For It* performance blends standup comedy and performance art to satirize rape jokes, specifically focusing on the role rape jokes have had in

standup comedy culture. In *Asking For It*, Truscott performs wearing only a blonde wig, open denim jacket, bright pink and purple bras, and teetering pumps—in other words, she performs nude from the waist down. In addition, she encourages alcohol consumption among her audience and drinks cheap beers during the set (Spenser, 2016). In combining these factors, Truscott provides the “opportunities” for rape that people commonly use to condemn victims as “asking for it”—a revealing outfit and intoxication. The performance art element of her routine has the message that since she is not raped every performance night, her performances actively debunk the victim-blaming claims of rape rhetoric.

On her performance stage, Truscott displays framed photographs of dozens of notable or famous individuals that have made (and not renounced) public comments about rape that are problematic or feature victim-blaming elements—including standup comedian Daniel Tosh and politician Todd Akin (Spenser, 2016). Featured prominently in her set is a photo of Bill Cosby, who, despite not publicly forwarding rape culture rhetoric, has been embroiled in sexual assault accusations for several years, and was found guilty of assault in 2018 (Bowley & Hurdle, 2018; Spenser, 2016). By providing this symbol of rape culture on stage, Truscott forces the audience to link the rape jokes and commentary she makes to a concrete part of culture: revered celebrities. When her jokes shift to more serious observations about the state of rape culture in the world, Truscott allows the audience to slowly recognize that the issues she addresses are real problems in the world, and not simply light-hearted jokes. When this shift occurs, the photographs act as a real-world representation of society’s collective condoning of rape culture.

By taking a medium often used to advance rape culture—standup comedy—and shifting the tone to explicitly condemn rape culture, Truscott challenges her audience’s expectations. Upon first entering the stage, she violates expectations for normal dress and demeanor, wearing

her deliberately unorthodox outfit and joking about a typically taboo topic—rape. With her jokes about rape culture at the opening of the show, she fulfills the audience’s expectations for humor in a standup set. As her commentary shifts to more serious and thought-provoking observations on society, she violates the expectations for humor by switching quickly to more serious discussion of the social issue of rape culture.

As with any public speaking context, Truscott’s performance has an element of performer-audience relationship. The previously described shift from joking about rape culture to condemning the problematic rhetoric has a tangible effect on the audience. Reviewer Aebischer (2017) claims there is a divide in the audience, manifested by “the laughs of the sexists in the room who booked because they saw ‘rape comedy’ in the title, and the curious patrons who know the difference between yes and no” (p. 3). This difference, Aebischer claims, is the timing of the audience response. Hoots and hollers echo from the back of the crowd as Truscott jokes her way into mentioning that statistically, someone in the room is a rapist. But as she turns her material towards reviling rape, Aebischer (2017) reports that the hooting men in the background sidle out of the room. *Asking For It* confronts rape culture and social attitudes towards rape. Although this confrontation can be uncomfortable for some of the audience members, Truscott influences viewer attitudes about rape.

Elements of Persuasion in *Asking For It*

A performance like Truscott’s with a politically-charged message has elements of persuasion taking place as the artist attempts to persuade the audience to adopt their message. One way Truscott attempts to persuade her audience is her gimmick of providing the circumstances attributed to “asking for it” and furthering her reasoning that the only necessary component for a rape is a rapist. Truscott attempts to convince the audience to accept her

perspective that rape culture is a problem and to condemn situations that condone rape and victim-blaming attitudes.

One concern that immediately emerges when considering Truscott's performance from a communication and persuasion perspective is how impactful her performance and message really are. Her aim may be to open a continuing dialogue about the issues incurred by rape culture. If so, this paper is one testament to her success; just as the articles by *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and others written about her demonstrate that, at the very least, people are talking about her, and at least peripherally, about her message. However, Truscott likely hopes to make a concrete change on her audience's perceptions, even if she does have goals of impacting the wider society as well. Therefore, an attempt to better understand the blended comedy and performance art piece raises the question: How does Adrienne Truscott's *Asking For It* performance effectively modify audience perceptions of rape culture? Attempting to answer this question invites scrutiny of the role of humor in persuading audiences. Undoubtedly, the use of humor before and during transmissions of persuasive messages impacts the message's efficacy and audience perception. Three elements of persuasion that impact how audiences receive Truscott's message are Expectancy Violations Theory, the role of social activism in humor, and the combination of the Elaboration Likelihood Model and the sleeper effect. Positioning Truscott's performance within the broader communication studies conversation about the intersection of humor and political commentary demonstrates the efficacy of her persuasion techniques.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Burgoon and Jones (1976) first articulate Expectancy Violations Theory as a nonverbal behavior involving breaking proximal expectations. Expectancy Violations Theory has since

evolved to describe effects on source evaluation, including greater liking of a socially attractive individual and reduced liking of an unattractive individual (Meyer, 1997). Applying Expectancy Violations Theory to peoples' experiences of humor explains the source of humor as a perception of a normal pattern followed by a violation of that perception (Meyer, 1997). Walther-Martin (2015) further applies Expectancy Violations Theory to humorous mass media messages in political contexts. Their study empirically finds that mass media has the capacity to elicit expectancy violation, which in turn increased the viewer's perception of humor in the performance, as well as eliciting more favorable opinions of the source. Notably, political ideology moderated the effects of Walther-Martin's (2015) experiment.

Social Activism in Humor

The intersection of social activism and humor has been a vital part of furthering social progress. Standup as a global phenomenon has begun to challenge limited perspectives and to extend human rights conversations, becoming a "significant form of advocatorial theatre" (Luckhurst & Rae, 2016, p. 1). While acknowledging the limitations of *Inside Amy Schumer's* feminist perspective, Tully (2017) claims that through satirizing normalized patriarchal actions, inverting the grotesque, and juxtaposing feminist issues with pop culture, Schumer creates biting feminist commentary that debunks myths about feminism. Particularly important to Tully's observations is irony, which she argues Schumer and other feminist comics use as a vital element of their commentary. Applying Luckhurst and Rae's (2016) observations of standup comedy to Tully's (2017) investigation of Schumer reveals that feminist activism has found a voice in the social media age by using irony and comedy to expose the problematic aspects of some feminist issues. Despite these findings, research has found a limitation on politically persuasive humorous messages: Individuals are more likely to select attitude-consistent media (Knobloch-Westernwick

& Meng, 2009). This results in people who do not already agree with feminist ideas to be less likely to watch shows like Schumer's that are explicitly marketed as feminist.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model articulates that people process messages more or less closely according to their ability and motivation. Invoking the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Young (2008) observes that the humor in late-night political comedy suspends argument scrutiny by impacting the viewer's ability and motivation; in other words, when people perceive a joke, they are less likely to think critically about the content, and therefore create fewer counterarguments, resulting in more effective persuasion. The sleeper effect means that an audience discounting the credibility of a message source does not entirely negate the persuasive effects (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007). Investigating the persuasion of humor with a political message, Nabi, et al. (2007) observe a sleeper effect occurring after only a week; in other words, despite message discounting, the political message of the humorous presentation significantly modified the audience attitude after only a week.

Expectancy Violations Theory, social activism embedded with humor, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model all showcase the effects humor can have on persuasion. When used in mass media studies, Expectancy Violations Theory explains how a presenter may elicit humor and source liking from audience members. When this humor is paired with socially-charged messages, the presence of humor changes how people perceive the message and whether or not they accept the message as true, which has importance for studying political communication. Finally, when considering how people process persuasive messages in a group context, implications concerning the Elaboration Likelihood Model emerge. When people process messages peripherally, their understanding of the message content while disregarding the

seriousness creates the opportunity for the sleeper effect to impact a person's attitude about a political message and the message source. These elements contribute to understanding how persuasive messages operate, and the influence of humor on the efficacy of persuasion. Humor significantly changes persuasive messages, and particularly politically persuasive messages. This influence has implications for how people perceive humorous messages, how political persuasion operates, and how different levels of processing impact a person's attitudes.

Applying Persuasion Concepts to *Asking For It*

Theories of humor and persuasive message processing are appropriate for investigating the efficacy of Truscott's performance art piece. Since the performance is ostensibly a standup comedy routine and utilizes subversive humor—rape jokes that satirize rape culture rather than victims—understanding how humor impacts cognitive processing and persuasion is vital to understanding Truscott's performance. Specifically, Expectancy Violations Theory is appropriate for investigating her performance since mass media messages can elicit expectancy violation (Walther-Martin, 2015), and Truscott certainly violates her audience's expectations. She creates the perception of a typical standup comedy routine, then violates that expectation with partial nudity, satire about rapists and public figures, and commentary on rape culture. In addition, viewing analyses of other performances that embed feminist messages and political commentary within humorous content and the effects of this mixing appropriately matches Truscott's performance, since she critiques rape culture inside of a standup set. Finally, the Elaboration Likelihood Model and sleeper effect complement Truscott's performance since her audience experiences peripheral processing and discounting of her message before ultimately absorbing the political bent of the message. Each of these lenses provides a uniquely intricate understanding of Truscott's performance. Expectancy Violations Theory, the relationship

between social activism and humor, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model form an appropriate theoretical framework of persuasion to answer the question of how Truscott's *Asking For It* performance changed audience perceptions of rape and rape culture.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Truscott's performance elicits expectancy violations, which affects the audience perception of her as a performer as well as of her message. Humor occurs after a normal pattern is disrupted (Meyer, 1997). Truscott creates the expectation of a normal pattern of standup with the advertising and structure of her performance, then disrupts that pattern with partial nudity, as well as commenting directly on rape culture and joking about rapists rather than victims. Walther-Martin's (2015) study on Expectancy Violations Theory in humorous and political mass media messages relates well to Truscott's performance, since she presents a politically charged message about rape culture in the context of a standup set to an audience. Since Truscott will have violated her audience's expectations, the audience will tend to believe her message is funnier and have more favorable views of her. The people in the audience that agree with Truscott's message will be more likely to have positive reactions to her performance. Through Expectancy Violations Theory, Truscott successfully improves the audience perceptions of her as a performer and of her performance.

Social Activism and Humor

The combination of social activism and humor in Truscott's performance intersect to create the "advocatorial theatre" that Luckhurst and Rae (2016) describe (p. 1). Tully (2017) uses three tenets to describe commentary debunking myths about feminism: satirizing normalized patriarchal actions, inverting the grotesque, and juxtaposing feminist issues with pop culture. Truscott satirizes the normalized patriarchal action of joking about rape through mimicking rape

jokes people have made while physically embodying the illegitimacy of their arguments. In addition to satirizing patriarchy, Truscott inverts the grotesque. Female genitalia has traditionally been considered grotesque, but by unabashedly and comfortably exposing her crotch, Truscott inverts this understanding, and encourages people to restructure their thoughts about women. Finally, Truscott juxtaposes the feminist issues of rape and rape culture with the popular culture of the framed photos of comedians. In addition to fulfilling these three tenets of Tully's (2017) article, and therefor disrupting the misconceptions of feminism, Truscott's performance uses irony to disrupt the zeitgeist. The framed photographs of the men who have perpetuated rape culture are ironically displayed in a traditionally reverent fashion, since through the course of the show they are instead shamed for their attitudes and actions related to rape or rape culture. A second instance of irony in Truscott's performance is the fact that Truscott begins the performance with some typical rape jokes—the jokes she ultimately confronts as problematic—before shifting to satirize rapists and rape culture as a whole. Using humor as a vehicle for social activism, Truscott performs *Asking For It* and successfully disrupts her audience's understanding of the feminist issue of rape culture.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model, in the context of Truscott's political comedy, influences the audience's engagement with her message. When viewing Truscott's performance, audiences see cues associated with standup routines, and follow mental pathways toward receiving jokes. The peripheral state of mind brought on by the humor in the performance, in addition to altered consciousness due to alcohol consumption, means that the audience receives Truscott's political message condemning rape culture with less circumspect attitudes. Rather than probing an argument for weaknesses and counterarguments, those in a peripheral state of

mind tend to follow heuristics. Despite—or perhaps due to—discounting Truscott’s message as a joke, the audience will eventually show effects of having their attitude toward the object of study modified by Truscott’s persuasive message against rape. The uncomfortable spectators at Truscott’s event more than likely had some subconscious responses to the performance (Nabi, et al., 2007). Thus, while witnessing *Asking For It* is likely to have a greater effect on those sympathetic to the message, the sleeper effect reveals that the people who slipped out of the room as she performed were also impacted by the performance.

Conclusion

Looking at the communicative elements of Truscott’s *Asking For It* performance reveals some of the techniques she uses to convince her audience to adopt her position of opposing rape culture. Looking critically at Truscott’s performance within a theoretical framework of communicative persuasion elements, this essay aimed to comprehend how effective Truscott’s performance was for both sympathetic and unsympathetic viewers. Although Truscott has not been condemned and arrested for addressing social issues like Lenny Bruce was in the 1960s, she still faces backlash for actively and creatively opposing rape culture. Understanding how Bruce and Truscott’s confrontational strategy and performances persuade audiences to question and disrupt their perceptions of rape culture can help political scholars and activists understand the power of humor as a political tool.

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