

Between Laughter and Identity Challenges: The Dark Jokes Phenomenon and Its Role in Social Space

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Abstract

Originally restricted to select comedy club circuits, dark jokes gradually transcended their insular boundaries, permeating broader public domains and mass media platform. This study aims to in-depth examine students' attitudes and perceptions toward the phenomenon of dark jokes using a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through an online questionnaire involving 24 psychology students aged 18–22, divided into two groups: 14 students from Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and 10 students from non-Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Thematic analysis yielded three main themes. First, dark jokes are perceived as a humor orientation that falls on the spectrum between normality and ethical violations. Second, the acceptance of dark jokes is largely determined by social context, such as interaction space, generational affiliation, and age similarity. Third, the practice of dark jokes becomes part of self-presentation in society, reflecting not only the content of the joke but also the identity of the listener. These findings demonstrate the potential of dark jokes as a marker of social identity, containing opportunities for building group solidarity as well as challenges in the form of potential social conflict. This study highlights the importance of local context in understanding controversial humor and recommends optimizing social media as a safe space for expression. Further studies with in-depth interviews are needed to explore the psychological and sociocultural dynamics more comprehensively.

Keywords: dark jokes, humor, student perception, social identity, university students

Abstrak

Awalnya terbatas pada sirkuit klub komedi tertentu, lelucon gelap secara bertahap melampaui batas-batasnya yang terisolasi, meresap ke ranah publik yang lebih luas dan platform media massa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji secara mendalam sikap dan persepsi mahasiswa terhadap fenomena dark jokes dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner daring yang melibatkan 24 mahasiswa psikologi berusia 18–22 tahun, yang terbagi dalam dua kelompok, yaitu 14 mahasiswa dari lingkungan pesantren dan 10 mahasiswa dari lingkungan non-pesantren. Analisis tematik menghasilkan tiga tema utama. Pertama, dark jokes dipersepsikan sebagai orientasi humor yang berada dalam spektrum antara kenormalan dan pelanggaran etika. Kedua, penerimaan terhadap dark jokes sangat ditentukan oleh konteks sosial, seperti ruang interaksi, afiliasi generasi, dan kesamaan usia. Ketiga, praktik dark jokes menjadi bagian dari presentasi diri di masyarakat, yang tidak hanya merefleksikan konten lelucon tetapi juga identitas penikmatnya. Temuan ini menunjukkan potensi dark jokes sebagai penanda identitas sosial yang mengandung peluang untuk membangun solidaritas kelompok sekaligus tantangan berupa potensi konflik sosial. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya konteks lokal dalam memahami humor kontroversial dan merekomendasikan optimalisasi media sosial sebagai ruang ekspresi yang aman. Studi lanjutan dengan wawancara mendalam diperlukan untuk mengeksplorasi dinamika psikologis dan sosiokultural secara lebih komprehensif.

Kata kunci: dark jokes, humor, identitas sosial, persepsi mahasiswa, mahasiswa

Introduction

The phenomenon of dark jokes is increasingly common in Indonesian public spaces and social media. Despite its popularity, public response to this type of humor remains fraught with stigma and controversy (Azis, 2021). The term "dark jokes" is intentionally used in this article because it is more widely recognized. For those who enjoy them, dark jokes are not just a sense of humor but also a marker of identity, both personally and as part of a community (Perego, 2018). However, in societies that tend to be heteronormative, dark jokes are often perceived negatively. Those who enjoy them are often accused of experiencing moral disengagement and a lack of empathy (Aminrais, 2019; Aulia & Adriani, 2020). In other words, there is a conflict of perspectives: what some consider funny is considered by others to be a violation of moral values.

These conflicting perspectives have real social consequences. When the majority group negatively views a minority group, in this case, dark joke enthusiasts, it can hinder the creation of positive intergroup relationships. As a result, the minority group tends to respond by distancing itself or even withdrawing from broader social interactions (Brown et al., 2019; Lenggogeni et al., 2022). A person's perspective on social reality, in turn, is strongly influenced by their immediate environment. The more frequently a viewpoint emerges in everyday interactions, the more strongly it shapes a person's personal beliefs and behavior, which ultimately contribute to the collective dynamics of society (Grieve et al., 2019). Thus, a person's attitude toward dark jokes never emerges spontaneously but is always linked to their social environment, cultural values, and the political climate surrounding them.

In Indonesia, opposition to dark jokes is quite strong. Hawari et al., (2022) identified three main reasons why dark jokes are considered unacceptable in public spaces. First, many people consider dark jokes dangerous because they risk offending others. Second, this humor is considered to mock things prohibited by religion. Third, dark jokes are seen as social criticism of existing inequalities, but delivered in an inappropriate manner. The media reinforces this view by consistently framing dark jokes as inappropriate, taboo, deviant, contrary to religious norms, and dangerous for the younger generation (Apoorva et al., 2022; Hart et al., 2022). Consequently, these persistent negative perceptions hinder the growth of social awareness that fosters positive relationships between individuals and groups (Aillaud & Piolat, 2012; Chowdhury, 2021).

Despite the increasing prevalence of dark jokes in everyday conversation, academic research on this topic remains scarce, particularly in Indonesia. Existing research tends to focus on narrow thematic issues, such as their relationship to religion (Torres-Marín et al., 2022), language and local wisdom (Kumari et al., 2023), or simply as entertainment (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). What has been overlooked are studies that systematically examine perceptions of dark jokes from two perspectives simultaneously: first, as a legitimate humorous orientation; and second, as a potential violation of human values, particularly empathy. This gap is crucial to fill because the controversy surrounding dark jokes ultimately stems from the psychological tension between freedom of expression and moral responsibility.

The theoretical urgency of this research lies in its contribution to social psychology, particularly in understanding how individuals negotiate their humorous identity amidst normative societal pressures. When dark jokes are viewed solely as a violation of empathy without considering their function as humor orientation and identity markers, stigmatization and social polarization are difficult to avoid. Conversely, a more balanced understanding of these dynamics can pave the way for more constructive intergroup dialogue. This issue becomes even more relevant when examined among university students. Students are the most active generation on social media and are also at a critical stage in identity formation. Furthermore, comparing Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) and non-Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) students allows researchers to understand how different value systems shape how individuals view controversial humor. Based on these gaps and urgency, this study poses three main questions:

1. How do students from Islamic boarding schools and non-Islamic boarding schools differ in their perceptions and attitudes toward the phenomenon of dark jokes on social media?
2. What psychological dynamics, specifically the interplay between empathy and humor identity, underlie these perceptions?

By answering these questions, the study aims to explore in-depth student perceptions and attitudes toward dark jokes and compare the perspectives of Islamic boarding school and non-Islamic boarding school students. The results are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the social psychology of humor and provide a practical understanding of how young people interpret controversial humor and its implications for social cohesion in Indonesia.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore university students' perceptions and attitudes toward dark jokes. A qualitative design was considered appropriate due to the sensitive and potentially controversial nature of the topic, particularly in the Indonesian context where dark jokes are often met with stigma and moral judgment (Azis, 2021). Given the exploratory aims of the research, this approach allows for a nuanced understanding of participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes.

Participant were 24 psychology students aged 18-22 year enrolled at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim in 2022. A convenience sampling technique was applied due to limited resources, including time and funding. The sample consisted of two subgroups: 14 students from Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) backgrounds and 10 students from non-Islamic boarding school backgrounds. This division was intentional to allow for preliminary comparative insights into how different sociocultural environments might shape perceptions of dark jokes. Detailed demographic information is presented in Table 1.

It is important to acknowledge that convenience sampling poses limitations regarding the representativeness of the sample. Participants were self-selected, which may introduce bias, as those who chose to participate might hold stronger opinions, either positive or negative about dark jokes compared to the general student population. Consequently, the findings are not intended to be generalized but rather to provide in-depth contextual understanding.

Data were collected using an open-ended online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The use of an online questionnaire, rather than in-depth interviews, was a pragmatic decision driven by time and budget constraints, as well as the sensitive nature of the topic. It was anticipated that some participants might feel more comfortable expressing controversial opinions anonymously rather than in face-to-face interactions. However, this method inherently limits the depth of data obtained, as it precludes the possibility of probing responses or observing non-verbal cues. This trade-off is acknowledged as a limitation of the study. The questionnaire comprised 20 open-ended items designed to capture participants' understanding of dark jokes, their personal attitudes toward this humor style, and their observations of societal responses. The questions focused on non-sensitive aspects such as perceptions of dark jokes and public responses to them. Example questions included: "What do you know about dark jokes?", "How do you view the humor style of dark jokes as dangerous?", and "How does your background influence your perspective on dark jokes?"

The instrument was assessed for content validity and logical coherence by three experts: two with backgrounds in psychology and one in social sciences. Based on their feedback, several questions were rephrased for clarity. Subsequently, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of students from both *pesantren* and non-*pesantren* backgrounds. Pilot participants provided input on the wording and comprehensibility of certain items, which led to further revisions before the main data collection began. At the beginning of the online form, participants were presented with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, benefits, limitations, and their rights and responsibilities as participants. To ensure ethical

compliance, participants were required to read and digitally sign an informed consent form, indicating their voluntary agreement to participate before proceeding to the demographic questions and main questionnaire. All data were anonymized, and pseudonyms are used in this report to protect participant identities.

Results And Discussion

Results

Data from the open-ended questionnaires were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun & Clarke, (2006). The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, all responses were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization with the data. Second, open coding was conducted independently by two researchers to identify meaningful units of text related to the research questions. Third, the researchers met to compare codes, discuss discrepancies, and collaboratively develop preliminary themes. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Fourth, the themes were reviewed, refined, and defined. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, peer debriefing was conducted with a senior researcher not involved in the coding process. It should be noted that due to the absence of recorded interviews, member checking was not feasible. Additionally, data saturation was assessed by the research team during the analysis process; after coding responses from all 24 participants in the **Table 1.**, no new codes or themes emerged, suggesting that the data adequately captured the range of participant perspectives within the constraints of the sample.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Data

Demographic Aspects	Islamic Boarding School (N=14)		Non-Islamic Boarding School (N=10)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	Gender			
Man	8	57.14	6	60
Woman	4	28.57	4	40
Age (Years)				
18-20	9	71.43	5	50
21-22	5	64.29	5	50
Province/Island Origin				
DI Yogyakarta	1	7.14	0	0
DKI Jakarta	2	14.29	2	20
Banten	1	7.14	1	10
Jawa Barat	1	7.14	0	0
Jawa Tengah	1	7.14	2	20
Jawa Timur	5	35.71	3	30

Demographic Aspects	Islamic Boarding School (N=14)		Non-Islamic Boarding School (N=10)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	Sumatera	1	7.14	0
Sulawesi	1	7.14	0	0
Kalimantan	1	7.14	1	10
Bali and Nusa Tenggara	0	0	1	10
Humor Orientation				
Religion	4	28.57	0	0
Death	3	21.43	2	20
Disaster	2	14.29	3	30
Disability	2	14.29	2	20
Political	2	14.29	1	10
Not willing to mention	1	7.14	2	20
Have Dark Jokes Friends				
Yes	14	100	10	100
No	0	0	0	0

This study aimed to explore students' perceptions and attitudes toward dark jokes. The term "dark jokes" is used throughout this analysis as it is the most commonly employed term in Indonesia, although some participants also referred to the broader concept of "dark humor." Data from open-ended questionnaires were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved iterative reading, open coding, and theme development. To enhance transparency, it should be noted that coding was conducted independently by two researchers, who then met to compare codes, resolve discrepancies through discussion, and collaboratively refine themes. This process yielded three overarching themes: (1) perceptions of dark jokes as humor orientation versus humorous behavior; (2) acceptance of dark jokes in social contexts; and (3) self-presentation strategies among dark joke enthusiasts. These themes are summarized in **Table 2.** and elaborated below with illustrative participant quotes. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities.

Table 2. Summary of Result

Theme	Subthemes	Islamic Boarding School Students (n=14)	Non-Islamic Boarding School Students (n=10)
Perception of Dark Jokes: Orientation vs Behavior	Dark jokes as deviance	Viewed as humorous behavior deviating from religious and cultural norms; associated with defamation and moral offense.	Viewed as nonconformity with religious and heteronormative teachings; seen as vulnerable individuals or groups.
	Dark jokes as identity	Recognized as self and social identity; influenced by educational background.	Viewed as an expression of humor that has "gone wrong."
	Dark jokes as inherent tendency	Attributed to genetic and psychosocial factors as part of adjustment process.	Seen as reasonable under certain conditions; influenced by friendship.
Acceptance of Dark Jokes	Spectrum of acceptance	Moderate stance: neither complete acceptance nor total rejection; diversity in individual responses.	Majority react positively, but negative responses (hate, discrimination) persist.
	Contextual variation	Acceptance varies based on interaction space and audience.	Participatory discussions on dark jokes are emerging in cyberspace.
Self-Presentation Strategies	Selective disclosure	Some express identity freely; others conceal it due to fear of rejection. Openness limited to trusted groups.	Do not openly demonstrate preference due to stigma; adjust to supportive friend circles.
	Identity negotiation		Some cultivate a "controversial" identity; self-image influenced by environmental reactions.

Participants from both groups grappled with a fundamental tension: whether dark jokes should be understood as a legitimate humor orientation or as problematic humorous behavior. This distinction was not merely semantic but carried implications for how participants evaluated both the jokes themselves and the individuals who enjoy them.

Dark Jokes as Deviance. A prominent subtheme across both groups was the perception of dark jokes as a form of deviance. Among Islamic boarding school students, this deviance was framed primarily in moral and religious terms. One participant explained:

"Dark jokes are humorous behavior that deviates from religious and cultural norms. They are often related to defamation and offend morality." (Fatimah, 20 years old)

Non-Islamic boarding school students similarly associated dark jokes with nonconformity, though their emphasis was more on social than religious norms. As one participant stated:

"Dark jokes are a form of humor that doesn't conform to religious and heteronormative teachings. They target vulnerable individuals or groups." (Akbar, 20 years old)

What is analytically significant here is not simply that both groups perceived deviance, but that the basis for judging deviance differed. Islamic boarding school students anchored their evaluations in religious-moral frameworks, while their non-*pesantren* counterparts invoked broader social norms and concerns about vulnerable populations. This suggests that perceptions of dark jokes are filtered through distinct interpretive lenses shaped by participants' sociocultural environments.

Dark Jokes as Identity. A second subtheme positioned dark jokes not merely as behavior but as a marker of identity. This was particularly evident among participants who identified as dark joke enthusiasts. One non-*pesantren* participant articulated this perspective clearly:

"Dark jokes are a humor orientation that is a choice for each person, just like deciding whether they are religious or not. Dark jokes themselves are a personal choice that should be acceptable in society — on condition that both parties understand each other so that there are no misunderstandings and no harm." (Ariq, 20 years old)

Another participant extended this reasoning to link dark jokes with social identity more broadly:

"Literally yes, these are things that refer to taking a perspective, orientation, identity, expression, that is not the same as what many people think." (Adit, 19 years old)

These statements reveal that for some participants, dark jokes function as a form of self-definition and social positioning. However, it is important to note that this identity-based framing was more pronounced among non-*pesantren* students. Among Islamic boarding school participants, identity discussions were more cautious, often qualified by acknowledgments of moral tension.

Dark Jokes as Inherent Tendency. A third subtheme, emerging more strongly from Islamic boarding school participants, involved explanations of dark joke enjoyment as rooted in inherent predispositions. One participant offered a notably nuanced view:

"For me, this is not appropriate, but because there are genetic factors too, I can't just say that someone's expression like that is wrong and prohibited." (Risky, 20 years old)

This framing invoking genetics and psychosocial factors served an important rhetorical function: it allowed participants to maintain their moral reservations about dark jokes while simultaneously avoiding outright condemnation of those who enjoy them. By attributing dark joke enjoyment to factors beyond individual control, participants could navigate the tension between personal values and tolerance. Another participant elaborated on this multifactorial understanding:

"People who often use dark jokes as an expression of humor cannot be blamed because it can have many causes: genetics, the surrounding environment (including social media), or unbalanced social conditions." (Firza, 22 years old)

This perspective represents a form of "moral reasoning" that seeks to reconcile disapproval of content with acceptance of persons an analytical nuance that would be lost if findings were presented only descriptively.

Acceptance of Dark Jokes

The second theme concerns how participants perceive societal and peer acceptance of dark jokes. Rather than a simple binary of acceptance versus rejection, findings reveal a complex spectrum of responses shaped by context, audience, and medium.

Spectrum of Acceptance. Both groups reported that acceptance of dark jokes is far from uniform. Among Islamic boarding school students, a moderate stance predominated:

"We are moderate towards dark jokes, not accepting them completely, but not rejecting them completely either. Some of us express greater acceptance and tolerance, while others show opposition or rejection. It reflects differences in our attitudes and values." (Aisyah, 21 years old)

This statement is analytically telling, it explicitly acknowledges intra-group diversity, suggesting that even within a relatively homogeneous educational environment, attitudes toward dark jokes are negotiated rather than simply inherited.

Non-Islamic boarding school students reported a somewhat different pattern:

"The majority of students react positively, but there are still some who remain negative. The behavior we receive is quite diverse: some are accepting, but others are hateful, and even discriminatory." (Budi, 20 years old)

The mention of "discriminatory" responses is striking, indicating that for some participants, rejection of dark jokes can escalate beyond mere disapproval into active hostility. This finding complicates any simplistic narrative of increasing societal acceptance.

Contextual Variation in Acceptance. A critical analytical insight emerging from the data is that acceptance is not a fixed attribute but varies significantly across contexts. Participants from both groups noted that responses to dark jokes depend on factors such as interaction space, audience composition, and regional culture. One participant's reflection on geographic variation is particularly illuminating:

"During the time I lived in city, the general public's context for discussing dark jokes was very good and safe, very different from when I lived in village. There, the community was not open to inclusively discussing dark jokes. They only saw different points of view as discriminating against someone's bad things through dark jokes." (Yusuf, 18 years old)

This account reveals that acceptance is locally negotiated, shaped by the "character" of specific communities. It also highlights a key analytical point: when participants report on "societal acceptance," they are often generalizing from highly specific local experiences.

Then, both groups identified social media as an arena where acceptance of dark jokes is more readily available. One participant described how digital platforms enable selective self-presentation:

"A friend on Instagram uses a special account to create dark jokes content and keeps it private, so there are no restrictions for those who hate it, and the possibility of following for those who like it." (Hasbi, 20 years old)

The use of "alter accounts" or secondary profiles emerged as a significant strategy for navigating acceptance. As another participant observed, non-*pesantren* students appeared more open to expressing support through social media, suggesting that virtual spaces may lower the barriers to acceptance. However, it would be analytically superficial to present virtual spaces as unproblematic havens. The very need for separate accounts and selective disclosure underscores that acceptance in virtual spaces is conditional and often anonymized—a form of "closeted" acceptance that differs qualitatively from open societal endorsement.

Self-Presentation Strategies

The third theme concerns how participants who enjoy dark jokes manage their self-presentation in various social contexts. Findings reveal a continuum of strategies ranging from open expression to careful concealment, with most participants navigating somewhere between these poles.

Selective disclosure. Across both groups, participants described disclosing their appreciation for dark jokes only in carefully selected contexts. An Islamic boarding school student explained:

"They don't have the freedom of expression like people who don't enjoy dark jokes. Their place of expression is very limited to an environment that can accept them — in my environment, it's in the circle of friends." (Nayaka, 20 years old)

This statement captures a key dynamic: enjoyment of dark jokes is not something to be broadcast indiscriminately but is reserved for "safe" audiences. Another participant elaborated on the rationale for such selectivity:

"Usually people choose to tell stories between other people who enjoy dark jokes or with people who can accept the content of the joke." (Reza, 22 years old)

The analytical significance here lies in what these strategies reveal about the perceived risks of disclosure. Participants' careful management of their humor preferences indicates an awareness that dark joke enjoyment can be a stigmatized identity, requiring strategic concealment in certain contexts.

Identity negotiation. For some participants, particularly among non-*pasantren* students, self-presentation involved not merely concealing but actively negotiating identity. One participant described a complex balancing act:

"Sometimes I don't dare to make dark jokes and prefer to blend in and adapt to my circle of friends, especially in my area where religion is thick." (Zidan, 21 years old)

The phrase "blend in" is analytically rich: it suggests that in some contexts, participants suppress their humor preferences to avoid standing out, while in others particularly with supportive friends they can "be who they are." This oscillating self-presentation reflects the ongoing negotiation between authenticity and social safety. Another participant offered a stark warning about the consequences of poor self-presentation:

"The rules for those who enjoy dark jokes are to know the limits and conditions when creating, discussing or sharing dark jokes content. Dark jokes are hated because of you." (Ardhan, 19 years old)

This statement is significant because it assigns responsibility to dark joke enthusiasts themselves for the negative perceptions they encounter. It suggests an internalized awareness that acceptance is not simply given but must be earned through appropriate boundary management. And also, an interesting concerned differences between urban and rural contexts. One participant observed:

"A small number of dark jokes fans in the urban society where I live are a little mixed with hetero society because they are associated with various appropriate professions." (Fikri, 21 years old)

This observation hints at a class dimension to dark joke acceptance: in urban settings, association with "appropriate professions" may confer legitimacy that rural enthusiasts lack. However, the data are insufficient to develop this insight fully, pointing to an avenue for future research.

Discussion

Dark Jokes as Contested Identity

The findings indicate that dark jokes are perceived not merely as a humor orientation but also as a marker of identity both personal and social. However, it is crucial to avoid oversimplifying this relationship. The identity associated with dark jokes is fluid, contextual, and often contradictory. On one hand, some participants explicitly linked dark jokes to self-expression and a sense of belonging to particular groups. This aligns with Ellis, (2015) view that identity shapes self-concept and self-image. For dark joke enthusiasts, this identity can serve as an orienting framework for interpreting social experiences (Greijdanus & van der Voorn, 2022). On the other hand, the findings also reveal that not all dark joke enthusiasts identify themselves as part of a "dark joke community." Several participants concealed their humor preferences due to fear of social rejection. This highlights a tension between chosen identity and

ascribed identity. This indicates that dark joke identity often must be hidden or expressed only selectively a form of "identity work" that can be psychologically taxing.

We can understand this tension using cognitive dissonance theory. When someone enjoys dark jokes but lives in an environment that condemns them, there is a mismatch between what they feel ("I enjoy this") and what they experience ("People around me hate this"). This mismatch can cause discomfort and even self-blame. Over time, this can affect mental health (Morrison et al., 2023; Webster & Heintz, 2023). It is important to note that not all participants experienced this tension in the same way. Students from *pesantren* backgrounds faced stronger social pressure, so they tended to hide their identity rather than try to negotiate it. This suggests that environment plays a big role in how people manage their humor preferences (Lee et al., 2017).

Superiority theory of humor by Berger, (1987) helps explain another dynamic. In dark joke contexts, laughter can arise when enthusiasts feel "superior" because they understand jokes that others find offensive. But this feeling is unstable. The same person can quickly go from feeling superior to feeling stigmatized when they are outside their safe circle. This shows that the social identity linked to dark jokes is situational and fragile. Meanwhile, people who dislike dark jokes tended to see all enthusiasts as the same as one homogeneous group. This kind of generalization, as explained by social identity theory (Billig et al., 1971), can lead to stereotypes, prejudice, and conflict between groups. But interestingly, some participants who disliked dark jokes actually saw enthusiasts as people fighting for freedom of expression. This shows that out-group perceptions are not always negative; they can be mixed, containing both criticism and recognition (Armitage & Conner, 1999).

Rather than simply saying that dark jokes are a social identity, this study offers a more nuanced view: dark jokes function as a contested identity something that can be a source of pride and stigma at the same time, depending on social context and how well someone can navigate their environment.

Social Media: An Ambivalent "Safe Space"

The findings suggest that social media is often seen as a "safe space" for dark joke enthusiasts to express themselves. Participants mentioned using alter accounts on Instagram or Twitter to create dark joke content without facing rejection in the real world. At first glance, this seems to support the idea that virtual spaces offer more freedom of expression (Dyrel & Poppi, 2018). But we need to ask critical questions: Is social media truly safe, or does it only give an illusion of safety?

First, what does "safe" actually mean in this context? Safe from social judgment? Safe from legal trouble? Safe from verbal attacks? The findings show that even on social media, dark joke enthusiasts have to hide their real identities using alter accounts. This is not genuine safety it is conditional safety that comes at the cost of being authentic. The use of alter accounts actually proves that even on social media, dark joke expression is not completely free from risk. It is just moved to a more hidden space (Aristyawati et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2016).

Second, does social media truly protect people, or does it create echo chambers that actually deepen social division? When dark joke enthusiasts only interact with like-minded people through alter accounts, they might feel safe, but they also lose chances to talk with people who think differently. This can strengthen stereotypes and reduce empathy between groups. In other words, "safe spaces" on social media can become segregated spaces that make social fragmentation worse (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Kumari et al., 2023).

Third, research on alter accounts (Aristyawati et al., 2023; Leukfeldt et al., 2017) often highlights freedom of expression but rarely discusses the psychological costs of having a split identity. Managing two accounts, one for "normal" life and one for "hidden" interests can cause stress, including anxiety about being discovered, feelings of being inauthentic, and exhaustion from constantly managing how others see (Lenggogeni et al., 2022). Unfortunately, this aspect was not explored in this study and should be examined in future research. Instead of simply celebrating social media as a safe space, this study

highlights that ambivalence is the defining feature of digital spaces: they offer freedom but also trap users in anonymity; they enable connection but also reinforce separation.

Socio-Cultural Context: Religion, Politics, and Generation

The findings confirm that acceptance of dark jokes is strongly influenced by participants' backgrounds. Students from Islamic boarding schools backgrounds were more likely to judge dark jokes using moral and religious frameworks, while non-Islamic boarding school students more often referred to broader social norms. This matches previous research showing that people with strong religious involvement tend to have more negative attitudes toward aggressive humor (Nijholt, 2020; Stoeber, 2015; Yan et al., 2017). However, deeper analysis reveals that religious influence is not uniform. Some *pesantren* participants showed moderate attitudes, acknowledging that genetic and social factors might explain why people enjoy dark jokes. This indicates that even within religious environments, people actively negotiate between religious teachings and contemporary understanding.

Political factors also play a role. Research shows that people with conservative political orientations tend to have more negative attitudes toward dark (Dyrel & Poppi, 2018; Neuendorf et al., 2014; Welch et al., 2009). In Indonesia, although the political system is democratic, freedom to express dark jokes in political contexts remains limited. But we should not oversimplify: not all conservatives automatically reject dark jokes, and not all liberals automatically accept them. What might matter more is tolerance for ambiguity and cognitive flexibility variables not measured in this study (Gubanov et al., 2019). Generational factors also emerged as important. Younger participants tended to be more open to dark jokes. But explaining this only through social media exposure is too simple. Younger generations may also have different understandings of humor more experimental, more ironic, and more comfortable with boundary-crossing content. However, this could also mean they are more vulnerable to normalizing content that might be problematic (Clancy et al., 2020; Coates & Coates, 2020).

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of an online open-ended questionnaire, while ensuring anonymity, limited the depth of the data. Without direct interaction, researchers were unable to explore responses or clarify ambiguities, potentially missing psychological nuances. Second, convenience sampling resulted in an uneven distribution of participants (14 Islamic boarding schools, 10 non-Islamic boarding schools), limiting representativeness. Self-selection bias may also mean participants have stronger opinions and limit generalizability. Third, although two researchers conducted thematic analysis collaboratively, inter-rater reliability was not formally calculated. Fourth, member checking was not possible due to time constraints, increasing the possibility of misinterpretation. Despite these limitations, this study makes a significant contribution by exploring an under-researched topic in Indonesia and offering a framework for understanding dark jokes as a complex social and psychological phenomenon.

Conclusion

This study reveals that perceptions of dark jokes among Indonesian university students are shaped by a complex interplay between personal identity, social context, and cultural values. Rather than viewing dark jokes merely as a humor style, participants demonstrated that dark jokes function as a contested identity simultaneously a source of belonging and stigma. Students from Islamic boarding school backgrounds tend to evaluate dark jokes through moral-religious frameworks, leading to more defensive identity strategies, while non-*pesantren* students engage in more active identity negotiation. However, both groups share the experience of navigating between self-expression and social acceptance, often limiting authentic expression to trusted circles or anonymous online spaces. Social media emerges as an ambivalent space offering conditional freedom through alter accounts while potentially reinforcing echo chambers. The study also confirms that religion, political orientation, and generational differences continue to shape reception, with older and more religious individuals tending toward rejection, while younger generations show greater openness.

This research extends social identity theory by demonstrating that a preference for dark jokes can be a marker of identity, the management of which depends on social context and religious values. The findings also challenge the humor superiority theory: the sense of "superiority" among dark joke enthusiasts is fragile and easily stigmatized outside of safe circles. Therefore, a practical approach is needed. Educational institutions need a safe dialogue space to discuss differences in humor openly and respectfully. For social media users, the use of alter accounts is a reminder that even anonymous expression carries psychological risks. For mental health practitioners, the tension between humor preferences and environmental demands needs to be recognized as a potential source of stress for students. Future research should employ in-depth interviews, longitudinal designs, and diverse participant samples to deepen understanding of how humor-based identities evolve and how digital spaces shape their expression.

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