

Offensive Humor

The Harmful Side of Humor

Asst.Inst. Fatin Khalil Ibrahim

Al Huda Universty College

fatenkhalil@uoalhuda.edu.iq

الدعابة المسيئة : الجانب الضار للفكاهة

م.م. فاتن خليل ابراهيم

كلية الهدى الجامعة

fatenkhalil@uoalhuda.edu.iq

للفكاهة تأثير كبير على حياتنا ، لا يمكن لأحد أن ينكره ، يمكن أن يكون إيجابيًا أو سلبيًا اعتمادًا على كيفية استخدامها. يمكن أن يكون مصدرًا للراحة والبهجة ، وقد يكون أيضًا مصدرًا للحزن والأذى. تهدف الدراسة إلى معرفة آراء الناس حول الدعابة المسيئة. تجري الباحثة استبانة وزعت عبر الإنترنت على ١٠٠ شخص من ثلاث بلدان مختلفة (العراق والأردن وسوريا) . يستخدم النهج الكمي في تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها. أظهرت الدراسة نتائج مختلفة ، منها أن غالبية الأشخاص يعتقدون أن الدعابة يجب أن يكون لها حدود من حيث موضوعاتها خاصة (الدين ، السياسة ، المظاهر الجسدية) ، ويمكن التعبير عن الفكاهة بشكل إيجابي دون التسبب في ضرر لأي شخص ، أما الدعابة التي تعتمد على التقليل من شأن الأشخاص بأي طريقة فأنها تعتبر نوع من انواع التمر.الكلمات المفتاحية: الدعابة ، الدعابة العدوانية ، حدود الدعابة ، الأذى اللفظي ، أخلاقيات الدعابة.

Abstract

Humor has a significant influence on our life, an influence no one can deny, which can be both positive and negative depending on how people use it. As it can be a source of relief and delight, it also can be a source of grief and harm. The study aims to find out people's opinions about offensive humor. The researcher conducts a questionnaire that has been distributed online to 100 people from Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. The Quantitative Approach is used in analyzing the collected data. The study shows various results, some of which are that majority of people believe that humor should have limits in terms of its topics especially (religion, politics, and physical appearances). Humor can be expressed positively without causing harm to anyone; otherwise, it is considered bullying.

Keywords: Humor, Offensive Humor, Humor Limits, Verbal Harm, Humor morality.

Introduction:

When we hear the word humor, many things come to our minds, like laughing, jokes, and joy, we mainly focus on the bright side of humor and neglect the dark side that includes harm and humiliation, and this is because of nature of the word itself. We can't neglect that under the cover of humor; a lot of insults and bad behavior are delivered. If one takes a look closely at the daily conversations, they would notice that some people say negative things like (harsh criticism, mocking, and contempt) then follow it the phrase "I am just kidding" in order to alleviate the situation. In other words, sometimes the aim behind humor can be so mean, in this case, humor turn to damaging, which is something we can witness a lot lately.

Humor turned out to be a way of bullying mean on a wide range and many people accept it completely because it is funny! In many TV shows, movies, or series, making fun of someone's physical appearance (the way they look or dress) the way they talk, etc. becomes something normal and gets justified as "comedy". Over time, humor in its various shapes has been used as a way of criticizing kings and the ruling class by mocking them continually, the same thing happening nowadays with politicians. Criticizing the actions is not the problem, but mocking the personal shape and features that have nothing to do with one's responsibilities and duties.

Literature Review:

Since we use humor in our daily communication and various sides of our lives, distinctly it has a great influence on our lives; work, personality, beliefs, and even physical and mental health (see Timothy Curran, Anastacia Janovec & Kimberly Olsen 2019), (Nuraly S.Akimbekov and Mohammed S. Razzaque 2021), (John B. Nezelek, Peter L. Derks, and John Simanski 2020).

As a tool of great importance and role, it certainly has many functions in the communication process. Graham (1992) elicits three main functions for humor, positive affect negative affect, and expressiveness. "Positive affect can be seen as a way to offer inclusion. Negative uses of humor can be seen as a form of control, and expressiveness addresses self-disclosure." (1992, p.175)

Graham (1992, P.167-168) listed 24 functions of humor used in communications:

1. To transmit verbally aggressive messages (Berkowitz, 1970; Civikly, 1989; Landy & Mettee, 1969).
2. To demean others (Civikly, 1989; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976).
3. To entertain others (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Stocking & Zillmann, 1976; Weaver et al., 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988).
4. To show a sense of humor (Martin & Lefcowt, 1984).

5. To disarm potentially aggressive others (Bradney, 1957; Civikly, 1983, 1989; Zillmann & Stocking, 1976).
6. To allow others insight into another's state of mind (Civikly, 1983; Linstead, 1985).
7. To help one adjust to a new role (Vinton, 1989).
8. To play with others (Baxter, 1990; Betcher, 1981, 1988; Cheatwood, 1983; Civikly, 1983, 1989).
9. To decrease another's aggressive behavior (Baron & Ball, 1974; Civikly, 1983, 1989; Whitacker, 1975).
10. To minimize anxiety (Bricker, 1980; Civikly, 1983, 1989; Smith & Powell, 1988).
11. To reduce boredom (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Roy, 1960).
12. To facilitate relationship patterns (Sykes, 1966).
13. To help others relax and feel comfortable (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Landy & Mettee, 1969; Smith & Powell, 1988).
14. To ease the tension wrought by new or novel stimuli, such as new information (Civikly, 1983; Ullian, 1976; Vinton, 1989).
15. To disclose difficult information (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Smith, et al., 1971).
16. To let others know what I like and dislike (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Kane, et al., 1977).
17. To increase liking by others (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Derks & Berkowitz, 1989; Goodchilds, 1959).
18. To develop one's own sense of humor (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976).
19. To control others (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Goodchilds, 1959).
20. To express feelings (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Freud 1905/1960).
21. To defend my ego against possible damage (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976).
22. To put others in their place (Byrne, 1956; Civikly, 1989).
23. To avoid telling personal information about myself (Civikly, 1983, 1989; Sprowl, 1987).
24. To allow one to cope with a serious subject (Obrdlik, 1942; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988).

The issue I raised here is not against humor itself, since we can't ignore the significant role of humor in the various sides of our life, however, the messages that are delivered under the cover of humor can be harmful and offensive to many. Humor has a flexible nature that enables it to include different types of thoughts and feelings, whether negative or positive. When someone presents humor (any type of humor like cartoons, verbal humor, gesture or body language, caricatures, etc.) that address another person, culture, religion, or nation negatively, and this joke gets an appreciation, that can tell a lot about the beliefs of the speaker of the joke, the audience, and the society as well. For LaFollette and Shanks (1993) humor can divest one's belief since they think that the joke can be humorous for people only if they are convinced of the meaning behind it to be right or real. In other words, people would not accept or appreciate a joke if they think that its content is inaccurate. That means the person's beliefs determine what's funny and what's not.

So according to LaFollette and Shanks, your humor represents your beliefs, which means only if you despise a certain person, culture, religion, nation, etc. you allow yourself to produce humiliating jokes about it. "Certain types of racist humor have been widely used to reinforce racial, sexual, and national stereotypes. The initial tellings of the "jokes" develop stereotypic descriptions of the minorities, while the institution of telling such jokes sustains those stereotypes." (1993, p.337) The authors admit the existence of racial humor and its function in society. They believe that what determines if the joke is offensive or not is not the content of the joke, but the teller themselves. That means if the teller of the joke belongs to the same group of the joke object, regardless of its content it will not be offensive, and vice versa. For instance, a woman would accept a sexiest joke if the teller is another woman, and she would reject the same joke if the teller is a man. In fact, it is a confusing perspective, so the researcher decides to ask people about their opinion about this point in the questionnaire.

In her essay "Toward an Objective Ethics of Humor" Jennifer Marra (2020) believes that the best way to determine whether a joke is morally acceptable or not is to measure it objectively. Since humor is a way of expressing thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, it represents the community and its culture, so supporting offensive or aggressive kinds of humor means that the community is adopting these kinds of thoughts. Therefore it is not possible to separate the joke's content from morals, on the other hand, we can't adopt a subjective perspective to judge the morality of the joke's content, because simply what's considered humorous or offensive can differ from one person to another. The author suggests developing an objective approach according to the role that humor play in society as a "symbolic form" of expression, which means it should not be isolated from the social ethics that are applied to other serious ways of

expression. In other words, what is considered offensive, when it is expressed seriously, is still offensive when it is expressed humorously.

Hiroaki Yamane et al (2021) developed a technique that categorizes jokes into moral and immoral jokes. The results show that jokes that have topics like “loyalty” and “Authority” are classified as good jokes and considered funnier than jokes that have topics like “Fairness, purity, harm, cheating, and degradation” which are classified as bad jokes. According to this study, the morality of a joke is mainly related to how much fun this joke is, and moral jokes are more entertaining than immoral ones. Probably, due to that moral jokes offend no one, so that makes them get more appreciation.

Shauta Brown (2020) thinks that judging actions, behaviors, or thoughts according to various criteria like (right/wrong – good/bad – moral/immoral) can be a little bit difficult when it comes to humor since it exists as a contradictor to the serious life, which makes deciding that a certain joke is bad or immoral complicated, since it is not serious and not real in the first place. The author used the term “comic loophole” to describe the situation when the joke teller attempts to avoid the responsibility resulting from using offensive topics as content for their jokes and justifying the matter as “Just a joke” or accusing the audience as “they don’t have a sense of humor” taking advantage of the unserious nature of humor.

Methodology:

The researcher conducts a questionnaire that aims to find out people’s opinions about aggressive or offensive humor, and to which extent they accept it and use it in their life. The questionnaire consists of 12 questions, 10 of them require a Yes/No answer and the other two require a full answer. In addition, information like (gender, age, and academic achievement) have been taken into consideration as well. The questionnaire has been distributed as an online google form to several people who belong to three countries Jordan, Iraq, and Syria. It is important to mention that the questionnaire was randomly distributed to adults, males, and females, whose knowledge of English was not required; therefore the questionnaire was distributed in the Arabic language. The researcher gets 100 responses. The responses to the questionnaire questions have been analyzed automatically by the Google Form Program. The researcher adopted the Quantitative Method to analyze the collected data from the questionnaire.

The respondents’ demographical information analysis shows the following:

Table (1)

Gender	Male	Female
Percentage	41.4%	58.6%

Table (2)

Educational Achievement	School Certificate	Diploma	Bachelor	Higher Education
Percentage	24.2%	5.1%	34.3%	36.4%

Table (3)

Age	Frequency N(100)	Percentage
18	7	7%
19	8	8%
20	13	13%
21	7	7%
22	5	5%
23	2	2%

24	4	4%
25	6	6%
26	8	8%
27	4	4%
28	2	2%
29	3	3%
30	3	3%
32	2	2%
31	1	1%
33	2	2%
34	4	4%
35	4	4%
37	3	3%
38	2	2%
39	3	3%
40	1	1%
41	1	1%
44	1	1%
48	1	1%
49	1	1%
50	1	1%
63	1	1%

The respondents' answers were as the following:

Table (4)

Question	"yes" percent	"No" percent
Do you think that humor should have some boundaries?	95%	5%
Do you usually use humor as a cover when you want to say something offensive or hurting, in order to avoid the tension of confrontation?	52%	48%

Do you think that criticize and mock others is an essential side of humor?	10%	90%
Are there any kinds of humor that you don't accept?	95%	5%
If you have been a target of a harsh joke, would your reaction be positive and accepting, because it's just a joke after all?	22%	78%
Usually, do you like and laugh on harsh jokes when you're not the target?	35%	65%
Do you think that offensive or aggressive humor is somehow related to bullying?	91%	9%
Do you think that using offensive humor is still count as freedom of speech and shouldn't be restricted?	13%	87%
Would you accept an offensive joke if the teller belong to the same category as you (religion,	25%	75%

nation, minority, gender, color, etc.)?		
Would being a target of mockery be more acceptable, when the teller share the same mocked topic with you?	29%	71%

As for question numbers (5) and (10) which required written answers, there are numerous. The respondents mainly agree on the bullying aspect of humor in their answers to question number (5. In your opinion, what are the kinds of humor that are unacceptable and might hurt you or others?), since most of them mention bullying directly or refer to it in their answers. The answers are as the following:

(Bullying, scorn, humor that is based on underestimating others, hitting as a joke, mockery, critical humor, and all types of humor) one can notice that there are people who refuse all kinds of humor and consider it as something bad due to the abuse of humor that we witness these days.

Question number (10) in your opinion, what are the topics that you don't accept them being as a humor target? For example: (Religion, Politics, Traditions, physical appearance, etc.). Religion is the chosen to be the topic that most respondents do not reject it to be a target of humor, then physical appearance and shape in the second place, traditions, all the topics mentioned in the question, politics, anything serious, and finally some respondents are willing to accept humor no matter what the target is. (2 respondents)

Result and Conclusion:

According to data analysis, the researcher reaches the following results:

Most people believe that humor should have certain limits and boundaries in order to not convert from being a source of joy to becoming a source of hurt and grief for people. These boundaries are in terms of the topics, where people consider joking about religion and physical appearances is unacceptable. They believe in the good nature of humor since 90% of them think that humor can be used without the need to mock or even criticize others.

Using offensive humor should be restricted and not considered a freedom of speech because even the freedom should be restricted and have certain limits when it became at the expense of others. It seems that humor is used as a way that helps to say things like opinions, points of view, or probably confessions, etc. that one feels uncomfortable saying frankly, since it keeps the speaker protected from any kind of anger, displeasure, or disappointment that s/he could face, just by saying "I'm kidding" or "it was just a joke. I don't mean anything by it".

On the other hand, "it was just a joke" would not work every time, since people would reject the harsh joke whether they are the target or not, even if the intention is to laugh and it is merely a joke. They believe that harsh humor which takes things like physical appearance for instance as a target is closely related to bullying. A harsh joke is still harsh and harmful regardless of the intention of the speaker, his/her relation to the target of the joke, or whether he/she shares the same targeted topic or not.

References

- LaFollette, H., & Shanks, N. (1993). Belief and the Basis of Humor. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 30(4), 329-339.
- Brown, S.(2020). Closing the Comic Loophole. *Ethics in Comedy: Essays on Crossing the Line* (pp.28-39). North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers.
- Marra, J.(2020) Toward an Objective Ethic of Humor. *Ethics in Comedy: Essays on Crossing the Line* (pp.17-27). North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers.
- Graham, E. E., Papa, M. J., & Brooks, G. P. (1992). Functions of Humor in Conversation: *Conceptualization and Measurement. Western Journal of Communication (Includes Communication Reports)*, 56(2), 161-183.
- Yamane, H., Mori, Y., & Harada, T. (2021). Humor meets morality: Joke generation based on moral judgement. *Information Processing & Management*, 58(3), 102520.
- Curran, T., Janovec, A., & Olsen, K. (2021). Making others laugh is the best medicine: humor orientation, health outcomes, and the moderating role of cognitive flexibility. *Health Communication*, 36(4), 468-475.

Akimbekov, N. S., & Razzaque, M. S. (2021). Laughter therapy: A humor-induced hormonal intervention to reduce stress and anxiety. *Current Research in Physiology*, 4, 135-138.

Nezlek, J. B., Derks, P. L., & Simanski, J. (2021). Relationships between everyday use of humor and daily experience. *HUMOR*, 34(1), 21-39.

Appendix (A): Samples of Questionnaire Created according to Google Form:

Responses cannot be edited

استبيان

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته ...
تقوم الباحثة بأجراء بحث يهدف الى معرفة متى تتجاوز الفكاهة الحدود المقبولة لتصبح عدائية ومُهينة، تحت عنوان " الفكاهة الجارحة : الجانب الضار من الفكاهة " . لذا نرجو التكرم بالإجابة على فقرات الاستبانة التي بين ايديكم بكل دقة، وذلك بأختيار العبارة التي تتوافق مع وجهة نظركم او رأيك الشخصي. ونود ان نحيطكم علماً بأن هذه المعلومات هي لأغراض البحث العلمي فقط , آمليين أن يساعد ذلك على تحقيق الاهداف المرجوة من البحث, شاكرين لكم حسن تعاونكم. الباحثة: فائق خليل الدليمي .

* Required

* الجنس

ذكر

أنثى

عادةً هل تستخدم الفكاهة كخطأ لإيصال أو قول شيء جارح /قاسي. وذلك لتتجنب المواجهة او قد ما ينتج عنها عند
* قوله بشكل صريح؟

نعم

لا

* هل تعتقد أن انتقاد الآخرين والسخرية منهم هو جانب اساسي من الفكاهة؟

نعم

لا

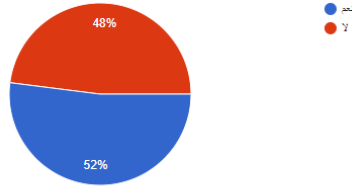
* هل هناك اي انواع من الفكاهة لا تقبلها؟

نعم

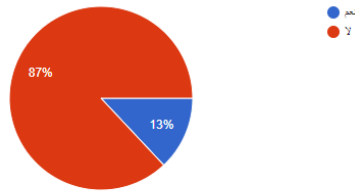
لا

Appendix (B): Samples of Participants' Responses in terms of numbers and rates made by Google Form:

عادةً هل تستخدم الفكاهة كمنهارة لإيصال أو قول شيء جارح /قاسي، وذلك لتجنب المواجهة أو قد ما ينتج عنها عند قوله بشكل صريح؟
100 responses



هل تعتقد بأن الفكاهة اللادعة / القاسية هي حرية تعبير ولا يجب أن تُقيد؟
100 responses



حسب رأيك، ما هي أنواع الفكاهة غير المقبولة والتي قد تؤذي الآخرين؟
100 responses

- الفكاهة التي تسخر من الآخرين
- التقليل من شأن الآخرين
- الكلام الخيز لائق والتصريف والكلم يتكرر امام الآخرين ومحاولة استنقاص من شخصياتهم
- ...عن اللون والشكل الخارجي، الوضع المادي
- الفكاهة التي تؤدي الى جرح المقابل
- الفكاهة التي يبراد منها الثمير او الشتم او الكلام المبرح وهي منتشرة بكثرة في مجتمعاتنا
- التجريح بالكلام وعبر الحد بحيث تتحول الفكاهة الى فله احترام
- سخرية وتهمر
- الانتقاد

بما هي المواضيع التي لا تقبل أن تكون هدف للسخرية والفكاهة اللادعة؟ على سبيل المثال: (الدين، السياسة، التقاليد، المظهر الخارجي)
100 responses

- الدين
- المظهر الخارجي
- الدين والمظهر الخارجي
- الدين ، المظهر الخارجي
- الدين / المظهر الخارجي
- الدين
- الدين و المظهر الخارجي
- الدين والتقاليد
- جميعها