



## PERCEPTION OF TABOO HUMOR IN INTERCULTURAL ONLINE COMMUNICATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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### Abstrak

Pandemi memaksa orang untuk berdiam diri di rumah dalam waktu yang lebih lama, menyebabkan aktivitas dan interaksi sosial pun berpindah dari dunia fisik ke dunia digital. Pergeseran perubahan ini mengungkapkan sifat buruk dari perilaku netizen Indonesia di internet, yang dicap sebagai 'Netizen paling kasar' di Asia Tenggara karena ketidak sopanan dalam komunikasi daring. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis persepsi pengguna internet Indonesia terhadap penggunaan kata-kata tabu yang digunakan dalam humor dalam komunikasi daring antar budaya. Data primer dan sekunder dikumpulkan dengan metode observasional dan metode deskriptif kualitatif digunakan untuk menyajikan analisis. Temuan observasi ini menunjukkan bahwa secara umum, 75% penonton di TikTok dan YouTube memiliki persepsi positif terhadap penggunaan kata-kata tabu di tempat umum dengan mempertimbangkan kesadaran konteks, waktu, dan niat.

**Kata kunci:** antarbudaya, komunikasi, tabu, humor

### Abstract

As the pandemic is forcing people to stay at home for a longer period of time, activities and social interactions also moved from physical to digital world. This shift of change revealed the unfavorable nature of Indonesians' netizen behaviors in the internet, labelled as 'The rudest netizen' in Southeast Asia for their ferociousness in online communication. This paper aims to investigate the perception of Indonesian internet users at the use of taboo words used in humor in intercultural online communication. Primary and secondary data were collected by observational method and qualitative descriptive method was used to present the analysis. The finding of this paper suggested that generally, 75% of the audiences on TikTok and YouTube have positive perception toward the usage of taboo words in public setting by taking context awareness, timing and intent into consideration.

**Keywords:** intercultural, communication, taboo, humor

### PENDAHULUAN

Humor is essentially a social phenomenon and laughter are found in all cultures and variety of contexts because the origins of this idea can be found in the evolution of human behavior (Flamson & Barrett, 2013) as "the necessary stimulus for laughter is not a joke, but another person," (Provine, 2004). We do laugh alone once in a while – e.g. when we watch comedy show, reading funny books or when we suddenly reminded of a hilarious





experience. However, we tend to laugh more often when we are with other people. Humor can be found between strangers in a bus ride and spouse who have been married for years.

Throughout the course of regular day, we are exposed to a variety of different types of humor delivered through various mediums and for various purposes. Some of this hilarity comes from the media. We encounter humor in newspaper, social media posts, and comedy movies. Television provides a constant dose of humor in the form of sitcoms, podcasts, stand-up comedy, political satire, and humorous advertisements. Nowadays everybody uses humor, from politicians, religious leaders, motivational speakers, to teachers and netizen (internet citizen), frequently employ humor in their speeches, sermons, lectures, posts and comments.

By 2021, there are 202.6 million internet users in Indonesia, with 170 million being social media users (Kemp, 2021). These number underwent significant increase due to the pandemic forcing people to stay at home for a longer period of time. As a result, activities and social interactions also moved from physical to digital world. This shift of change revealed the unfavorable nature of Indonesians' netizen behaviors in the internet, labelled as 'The rudest netizen' in Southeast Asia by Microsoft due to the increase of hoaxes, frauds and scams, hate speech, and discrimination (News Microsoft, 2021). However, in the midst of these negative wave, the writer found an interesting anomaly where people view humor in rude and taboo words. Taboo is defined by Wardhaugh (2010), as the restriction or avoidance of behavior in any culture that is thought to be damaging to its members, causing them worry, embarrassment, or shame. Religion and death are two areas of culture where taboo exists, and it has recently become taboo to be sexist, racist, homophobic, or critical of physical or mental deficiencies (Blake, 2018). In addition to this, Battistella (2005:72) proposes four sorts of forbidden words: epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity. The above points are also supported by Swan (1995:550), stating that taboo is defined as "anything that mentions taboo bodily parts, something related to sexual behavior, and something related to the lavatory."

Humor is a wide term with various definitions. Cambridge Dictionary defines humor as "the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny, or the quality of being funny". It can be either verbal and non-verbal or combination of both. The presence of humor required cognitive ability because it involves language understanding ability to both the trigger and also the receiver (Lyttle, 2007; Mietusch, 2013). In addition, humor can happen intentionally and unintentionally (Wyer and Collins, 1992). Kuoper et al. (2004; Martin, 2007), classified humor into four categories, self-enhancing, self-defeating, affiliative and aggressive. Although humor is for everyone, the ways people use it are different in accordance to their own cultures. Thus, humor is universal but at the same time culturally specific (Jiang et al., 2019). In contrast, however, Garanina&Artemyeva (2017), stated that humor is a symbolic violation of social norms, because "you can temporarily violate the rules by playing with reality in the way that negates social restrictions and ignores the usual consequences of behavior". The cultural aspect of humor can be traced from the use of taboo words in making jokes.

In terms of definition, intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication has always been hard to distinguish. As both terms often used interchangeably, finding a clear dividing line is even harder. Originally, intercultural communication is defined as communication between persons from various national cultures that is limited to face-to-face interactions (Gudykunst, 2003). However, Gonzalez (n.d.) provided clear understanding of Intercultural and cross-cultural as follow:

'CROSS-CULTURAL' means a comparison and contrast between two cultural groups. For example, a cross-cultural study of Brazilians and Mexicans when they





celebrate a birthday shows that Mexicans love to focus on cooking and sharing of the food, while Brazilians love the dancing – even grandmas are dancing the samba. ‘Intercultural’ refers to what happens when people from these two groups come together. As a Mexican, one may complain that there’s not enough food, but they love the dancing and join the group. Thus, INTERCULTURAL is what happens when the two (or more) culturally-different groups come together, interact and communicate. Both terms describe important aspects of the study.

Humor is frequently employed as a powerful speech act in cross-cultural communication to break the ice, develop relationships, or diffuse a tough circumstance. However, while "funny" is universal, it is rarely translated and is very personal, context, and culture particular.

As a result, many culturally relevant jokes, caustic remarks, and ironic remarks go unnoticed, misinterpreted, or hurtful. Previous studies have been conducted to evaluate the role of humor in communication, such as taboo words in movie *Deadpool* (Lestari et al, 2019), taboo words used in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Wene&Ena, 2020), and taboo words in internet meme (Mashita, 2016). However, this article focuses more on people’s perception on the taboo words when they are inserted in sentences or phrases as humor.

**METODE**

To develop hypothesis, the data were collected by observational method; this is a data collection method that uses indirect observation to gain information about a phenomenon with the writer as a complete observer. The indirect way of observation entails investigations into mechanical recording or other types of recording, such as photographic or electronic (Kabir, 2016). Steps taken by the writer to obtain data were as follow: first, data were collected by observing lives and tiktok posts by the owner. Taboo words were gathered and arranged in tables. Data were then classified into groups by Battistella to identify which category of taboo word each data belonged to. This step was followed by sampling the first 10 comments from each post, to be analyzed in evaluating perception of general audiences towards the taboo words. This writer uses explanatory qualitative descriptive method to present the analysis.

The primary source of data is a Tiktok under the account of (@tantelalapunyacerita), an account who is experiencing a sudden boom in popularity in the last few months. This account is owned by a woman from Manado, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. She often goes live and interacts with tens of thousands of audiences across the country while sometimes introducing some products in between. In addition, the writer obtained secondary source data from YouTube platform, where live videos were saved by viewers and uploaded on YouTube. YouTube appeals to wider audience than TikTok; hence, the writer used it as comparing element to evaluate viewers’ responses.

Data collection was conducted through observation which resulted in data compilation presented as follow.

**Table 3.1: Taboo words found from 4 data sources**

Source	Words found
Data 1	‘..mengocokburung-burungtetanggaanda....’ ‘num pang pipis’
Data 2	‘jahanam...’, ‘setan..’
Data 3	‘sange..’, ‘baupaniki..’, ‘Yerusalem lama danYerusalembaru’
Data 4	‘sunatanrosul’, ‘cupang-cupangdarisuami....’ ‘terangsangsuami...’, ‘jomblo di alamkubur...’ ‘janda yang kekeringan..’





	<p>'komentarpentontonjahanam' 'mantanamarhumdanamarhumah..'</p>
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**Table 3.2: Responses from viewers**

Data	Responses
1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. endorsbuknsembrgendrnsnih□= <i>this is not your ordinary endorsement</i></li> <li>2. semuadiendorse..smpetetanggadiendorse□= <i>she endorsed everything, even the nighbors</i></li> <li>3. Snack nyakokbsapanas? □= <i>how can the snack be hot?</i></li> <li>4. onerkenapabisapanasoner□□□= <i>owner, how can it be hot</i></li> <li>5. cape□□= <i>im tired</i></li> <li>6. nonton live cumanumpang pipis □□□□= <i>watching live like releasing your pee</i></li> <li>7. Akuudhhbeliidanbarusampaitadi ,enakbgtttcoklatnyabanyakkk= <i>I've bought and received the product. The chocolate was really delicious</i></li> <li>8. Numpang pipis □□□= <i>releasing your pee</i></li> <li>9. Pertamatantangakak□= <i>I'm wheezing</i></li> <li>10. Kokpanass□□□= <i>why hot?</i></li> </ol>
2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. cocokjdanggota DPR...tdkbisa di aturPartai□□□□□= <i>she is suitable as a member of the parliament; the party won't take her for granted</i></li> <li>2. "bintangtamudari bikini botom" plissngakak□□= <i>a guest star from bikini bottom</i></li> <li>3. sempat-sempatnyadiareponkomenygyjuaksuaminya□□= <i>she still has time to respond to comments asking if her husband is on sale</i></li> <li>4. endorsbukansebarangendors= <i>not your ordinary endorsement</i></li> <li>5. bintangtamunyadri dunia kartunjghadir□= <i>a guest star from cartoon world is also present</i></li> <li>6. kaget pas kaki y naik meja□□□= <i>I was shock when she put her foot on the table</i></li> <li>7. tanteoiicaepkniketawaterus□□□= <i>aunty, aunty I'm tired of laughing</i></li> <li>8. Ngakaksampeakugksadarhpkujatuh. untunggk papa2 cumalecetdikit= <i>I dropped my phone from laughing so hard, thank God it's still working</i></li> <li>9. ngakaksampeingusan □= <i>I laughed with my snot running</i></li> <li>10. disinidoang owner dimaki" tapimalahngakak□= <i>you can only see it here, where owners of the product are being cursed at</i></li> </ol>
3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. harusnyaakusebagaipenontontersinggung di cacimakitapiinikokmalahsenangmalahanketawa□□□= <i>I'm supposed to be offended getting cursed at, but I'm laughing</i></li> <li>2. cumadisini yang di cacitetapsenanghati= <i>I'm happy even though I'm being cursed at</i></li> <li>3. Yerusalem yang barusampaiYerusalem yang lama□= <i>New Jerusalem to old Jerusalem</i></li> <li>4. tetapnontonwalaupun di cacimaki□= <i>I keep on watching even though getting cursed at</i></li> <li>5. YerusalembarudanYerusalem lama□□= <i>New Jerusalem to old Jerusalem</i></li> <li>6. gwnonton live nya. diarahin orang ygngasihendorsan. karnapakebahasawuhan□= <i>I watched the live, the owner got razzed for using wuhan language</i></li> <li>7. kitasemuaterkutukkk□= <i>we are all cursed</i></li> <li>8. Sumpahhhsejakadatantelalaaqjadingakakkksendiri□□□□□= <i>I swear to God, even since tantelala existed, I always laugh</i></li> <li>9. Tetapnontonwalaupun di maki□= <i>I keep on watching even though getting cursed at</i></li> <li>10. rugiklaugknontontatelala, bikinawetmudacaciandnhinaanya□= <i>not watching tantelala is a lost, her cursing keeps you young</i></li> </ol>
4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Beliauinirezeki anak2nya bagus2.yg Rafadansekaranglagihamilrezekianak juga bagus... suksesselaluTanteLala..= <i>both of her children came with blessings, I pray for your success, tantelala</i></li> </ol>





2.	Ya Allah TanteLalangakakeeee= <i>Oh my God, tantelala, I'm wheezing</i>
3.	Sakitperutgwliatmukanyaklulgmarah□□□= <i>I'm laughing till my stomach hurt, her angry face is so funny</i>
4.	Tantelalaselalulucu□sukasekalitongkrongi video yang adatantelalamenghubursekali= <i>I really love watching videos with tantelala in it, very entertaining</i>
5.	Tantelucu. D bercandainjdnyaasyik= <i>Tante is so funny, she is nice to have fun with</i>
6.	Sehataselaluyantelala, salampemula gotong royong= <i>stay healthy, tantelala</i>
7.	"keranjangmayatyasayangya" □= <i>she said coffin, my dear</i>
8.	Ngos-ngosanliatTanteLala= <i>I'm out of breath just looking at her</i>
9.	wakakakaka...lotion anti cupang...kocakk...tante= <i>hahaha hickey resistant lotion...hilarious.</i>
10.	□□□□□tantaLala□aduhmenghibursekali e marahnyalucu□□□□tantaLala! RusiadanUkrainalagiperangtanta= <i>tantelala, your anger is so entertaining. Rusia and Ukraine are at war, tante.</i>

## HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

### a. Taboo words

#### i. Epithet

A number of slurs related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, appearance, and disability are included in the term 'epithet' (Bastiella, 2006). Epithet tend to occur as a form of verbal frustration and anger in emotive words in the form of interjections that are not intended at anyone in particular and are used by speakers to vent fury and emotion e.g. nigga, faggot, bitch, retarded, motherfucker. However, it may also be directed at someone by characterizing the victims' physical, mental, or emotional characteristics. Epithet are found three times in the data. First, *setan*. In English means 'ghost', however when used in different context as the data above, its meaning equivalent to fucker! or motherfucker! in English. Next is *jahaman*, which translate similarly to fucking shit, and last, *komentarpnontonjahanam* which means 'fucking viewers' comments.

#### ii. Profanity

Profanity can be classified as religious cursing, according to (Batistella, 2005), because it frequently involves the foul-mouthed usage of what is deemed sacred. The speaker's intention is not to demonize God or anything associated with religion, but it could be used to indicate an emotional reaction to particular motivations. Words like Jesus Christ, Goddamn, and hell are classified as profanity. The data above shows that profanity is the least used taboo words, with only two usages, *sunatanrosul*, meaning circumcision of 'rosul' – the messenger of God in Islam and *YerusalemlamadanYerusalembaru*, meaning 'Old and New Jerusalem'.

#### iii. Obscenity/vulgarity

Obscenity/vulgarity is words that mentions anatomy sexual activity (Batistella, 2005) and words referring to sexual organs and acts. Obscene words tend to generate disgust which serves as the sole reason why they are prohibited in the public. Five obscene words are found in the data, and place first in terms of frequency usage. The first one was the phrase *mengocokburung-brungtetanggaanda* which equivalent translation in English is 'fondling your neighbors' penis'. Mentioning penis is considered taboo since is not something done so casually in public spaces, especially in Asian culture, including Indonesia. Another example of obscenity/vulgarity is *numpangpipis* which translated to 'releasing your pee' in English. Even though the words are not something explicit or disgust people, it is still frowned upon if used carelessly in public setting. Next is, *sange*. *Sange* is a newly popular slang, meaning 'horny' in English. The word *terangsang* in phrase *terangsangsuami*, is another word that possessessimilar meaning as the previous





one. However, *sange* weighs more negatively compared to the latter. The last example found from the data is the word *cupang*, which means ‘hickey’ in phrase *cupang-cupangdarisuami*, meaning ‘hickeys from your husband’. This word is not as taboo as all previous words above, nevertheless, still taboo to use in public.

Aside from three major categories mentioned above, another four taboo phrases found under death and critical of physical or mental deficiencies category of Blake (2018). First, the word *baupaniki* can be offensive when directed at other people. *Paniki* is Manadonese word for ‘fruit-eating bat’. Saying *baupaniki* is an insult to people by implying that they smell like fruit-eating bat. Second is *jandakekeringan*, can be translated as ‘pitiful widow’ - a widow no one wants to marry that she withers. Third phrase is *jomblo-jomblo didalam kubur*, which means ‘those single people in their graves’ and lastly *mantanalmarhum dan almarhumah*, meaning your ‘deceased exes’. These phrases are equally offensive and rarely found in day to day public conversation.

b. Responses

Public’ perception of the taboo words is evaluated through viewers’ responses under each video, ten responses each. The following table shows the result:

**Table 4.1 Viewers’ responses to taboo words**

Responses	Positive	Negative	Neutral
this is not your ordinary endorsement			√
she endorsed everything, even the neighbors			√
how can the snack be hot?			√
owner, how can it be hot			√
I’m tired			√
watching live like releasing your pee	√		
I’ve bought and received the product. The chocolate was really delicious			√
releasing your pee	√		
I’m wheezing			√
why hot?	√		
she is suitable as a member of the parliament; the party won’t take her for granted	√		
a guest star from bikini bottom	√		
she still has time to respond to comments asking if her husband is on sale	√		





a guest star from cartoon world is also present	√		
I was shock when she put her foot on the table	√		
aunty, aunty I'm tired of laughing	√		
I dropped my phone from laughing so hard, thank God it's still working	√		
I laughed with my snot running	√		
you can only see it here, where owners of the product are being cursed at	√		
I'm supposed to be offended getting cursed at, but I'm laughing	√		
I'm happy even though I'm being cursed at	√		
New Jerusalem to old Jerusalem	√		√
I keep on watching even though getting cursed at	√		
New Jerusalem to old Jerusalem	√		
I watched the live, the owner got razzed for using wuhan language	√		
we are all cursed	√		√
I swear to God, even since tantelala existed, I always laugh	√		
I keep on watching even though I'm getting cursed at	√		√
not watching tantelala is a loss, her cursing keeps you young	√		
both of her children came with blessings, I pray for your success, tantelala	√		
Oh my God, tantelala, I'm wheezing	√		
I'm laughing till my stomach hurt, her angry face is so funny	√		





I really love watching videos with tantelala in it, very entertaining	√		
Tante is so funny, she is nice to have fun with	√		
stay healthy, tantelala	√		
she said coffin, my dear	√		
I'm out of breath just looking at her	√		
hahaha hickey resistant lotion...hilarious.	√		
tantelala, your anger is so entertaining.	√		
Rusia and Ukraine are at war, tante	√		

The above table represents 40 responses from 4 data sources. The first 30 responses are taken from the primary source TikTok, whereas the last 10 are taken from secondary source YouTube. The result showed that 30 comments responded to the words that were uttered by the host. This accounts to 75% of the total responses. Whereas, only 10 comments or 25% talked about the product she was displaying. A study by Dore (2020), concluded that using humor to advertise product and services can backfire as there is no guarantee whether it will garner the desired feedback. Even so, this case, is again an anomaly. None of these comments reprimanded the host for using all the taboo words. In contrast, the responses were colored with amuse and laughter, which implies that the general audience are fairly receptive towards the said words. It is proven by the smiley emojis in the comments, indicating the words uttered by the host were not in any means offensive to the viewers. Some of them went as far as feeling happy being jokingly cursed at.

Andrew (2010), stated that:

For humor to be successfully understood and enjoyed across the cultural divide; not only must the purveyor be aware of the previously mentioned social conventions, but also adept at communication, selecting content, sensing an opportunity and spinning a good yarn (story).

He suggested one must pay attention to three factors before using taboo words in humor, context awareness, timing and intent. Knowing your audience, being attentive towards both cultural and personal taboos, beliefs and perspectives, and having a fundamental sense of appropriateness are all examples of context awareness. Timing is another factor, and it necessitates linguistic comprehension, a degree of common background knowledge, environmental sensitivity. Intent is also important because it is frequently hidden and may be part of the humor. The reception of comedy is determined by how intent is interpreted. A lighthearted joke, a witty remark, an intriguing anecdote, a







scathing remark, or a sharp insult can all come from the same speech, but the results will vary greatly depending on how the listener interprets it.

The data suggested that @tantelalapunyacerita's host, voluntarily or not, has assessed these three factors before making jokes. She understood that religion is a sensitive topic which may cause discomfort to the audiences, proven by the least type of taboo words used – the profanity. Furthermore, there was not any political and racial related words in the data. In contrast, obscenity and vulgarity dominated the taboo words in her humor because netizens are gradually more accepting in hearing and talking about this topic.

## **PENUTUP**

Given the fact that social media platform such as TikTok and YouTube are popular in Indonesia, used by wide ranges of people from various ethnic, religious and socioeconomic background, it is safe to conclude that 75% of the audiences have positive perception toward the usage of taboo words in public setting. However, before using taboo words in humor, one must pay attention to context awareness, timing and intent. All in all, the sole purpose of this paper is to evaluate people's perception of taboo words used in humor across culture in Indonesia.

This article is limited to only the analysis of the taboo words used on intercultural online humor and how the general public responded to it. Further studies are needed to investigate how far people of Indonesia are open to the usage of taboo words in humor and jokes.

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