



From Jokes to Harm: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Humor and Harassment in TikTok Comment Sections

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how humor in TikTok comment sections can gradually transform into discriminatory and verbally aggressive discourse. While online humor is often perceived as harmless entertainment, limited research has examined how repeated joking practices on TikTok contribute to the normalization of ethnic stereotypes and subtle harassment. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) supported by microaggression theory and Goffman's concept of face-threatening acts, this study analyzes a total of 18 comments collected from five viral TikTok videos, selected based on their high engagement, public visibility, and the presence of controversial identity-based humor. The data were documented through screenshot-based qualitative collection to preserve original linguistic features. The findings reveal recurring patterns of ethnic labeling, blame attribution, and dehumanizing humor that function as microaggressions and reinforce social hierarchies. Beyond identifying linguistic patterns, this study highlights important implications for digital literacy, ethical online participation, and the need for stronger content moderation to prevent humor from becoming a socially accepted form of harassment.

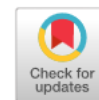
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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms increasingly shape how humor, identity, and conflict are expressed in contemporary digital communication. Platforms such as TikTok not only facilitate entertainment and creativity but also amplify public speech, emotional reactions, and collective meaning-making through algorithmic visibility. Humor, as one of the most dominant communicative forms on TikTok, travels rapidly across diverse audiences who may not share the same cultural background, sensitivity, or interpretive framework. While humor can foster solidarity and engagement, it can also function as a subtle vehicle for harassment, exclusion, and symbolic violence when tied to identity categories such as ethnicity, race, or religion.

From a theoretical perspective, humor has long been understood as ambivalent. Billig (2005) argues that humor may simultaneously unite and marginalize, depending on who is included or excluded from the joke. In digital contexts, this ambivalence becomes more pronounced. Dynel (2016, 2021) explains that online humor often blurs the boundary between playful teasing and aggression, particularly when insults are framed as jokes. Recent studies on digital microaggressions further show that repetitive, seemingly trivial remarks can accumulate into meaningful harm by reinforcing stereotypes and unequal power relations (Williams et al., 2016; Benner et al., 2024).

TikTok, as a platform characterized by short-form videos, participatory comment sections, and algorithmic amplification, provides a particularly fertile environment for such dynamics. Research on TikTok communication has shown that comment sections frequently become sites of cyberbullying, identity-based mockery, and collective harassment (Zito, 2022; Gresita & Hasfi, 2024). However, much of the existing research focuses on overt cyberbullying or user responses to harassment, rather than examining **how humor itself Transforms Into Discriminatory Discourse Through Linguistic Repetition and Audience Participation**.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on the micro-level linguistic processes through which humor in TikTok comments shifts into ethnic stereotyping and verbal harassment. Specifically, it examines how repeated jokes, sarcastic remarks, and identity labeling function as microaggressions and face-threatening acts within online interactions.

Based on these aims, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How is humor linguistically constructed in TikTok comment sections related to ethnic and regional identities? (2) In what ways does humorous discourse transform into discriminatory or harassing language? (3) How do repetition and audience participation contribute to the normalization of ethnic stereotypes on TikTok?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to broader discussions on digital discourse, online harassment, and the ethical implications of humor in participatory media environments.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as the aim is to examine meaning, ideology, and power relations embedded in naturally occurring online discourse rather than to generalize statistically.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The data were collected from TikTok comment sections between March and May 2025. Five videos were selected based on three criteria: (1) high public visibility and engagement, (2) the presence of humor related to ethnic or regional identity, and (3) observable public controversy or debate in the comment sections. From each video, three to four comments were purposively selected, resulting in a total of 18 comments. All usernames were anonymized, and the data were documented via screenshots to preserve original wording, emojis, and formatting. As the data were publicly accessible, no private information was collected, following common ethical practices in online discourse research.

Analytical Framework and Operationalization

The analysis is guided primarily by Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, examining textual features, discursive practices, and broader sociocultural contexts. This framework is complemented by van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to understand how shared stereotypes and social knowledge are reproduced through language. CDA was operationalized through several steps: (1) close reading of comments, (2) identification of recurring lexical choices, modality, and pragmatic functions, (3) interpretation of how humor functions as microaggression and face-threatening acts, and (4) contextualization within broader social and cultural discourse.

Sample Size Justification and Reliability

Although the sample size is relatively small, it is justified by the depth-oriented nature of CDA, which prioritizes detailed interpretation over numerical breadth. To enhance analytical reliability, the researchers engaged in collaborative discussion and cross-checking of interpretations, ensuring that emerging themes and categorizations were mutually agreed upon.

Data Source

The data consist of screenshot-based TikTok comments collected from five creators. Each video produced three to four comments that display humor shifting into harassment, stereotyping, or derogatory remarks. The creators and their corresponding data sources are:

@putra...nias – a video of friends posing together, accompanied by comments implying ethnic-based stereotypes related to the Nias community.

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@krynnct_ – a personal trend video where commenters repeatedly use the phrase “Nias bujang,” indicating a normalized discriminatory joke.

@royac0 – CCTV footage of metal theft, with commenters introducing ethnic and religious stereotypes unrelated to the content.

@medantalk – a news video of a theft incident, followed by comments linking crime to specific ethnic and religious groups.

@el.manuk127 – a meme about the “Willy Salim cooking incident” in Palembang, where commenters post jokes framing Palembang people as thieves or gluttons.

Research Procedure

The researchers first identified TikTok videos whose comment sections showed patterns of humor that shift into discriminatory tones. After selecting the videos, the researchers chose three to four comments per video that clearly displayed stereotyping, harassment, or negative labeling. Each comment was captured through screenshots to preserve original wording, emojis, and formatting. The comments were then labeled and organized according to their respective videos. Contextual notes were written to explain the situation behind each comment, ensuring clarity during analysis. All data were compiled systematically to be examined using the CDA framework.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a consistent pattern across the five datasets: humor in TikTok comment sections frequently transforms into discriminatory discourse through repetition, exaggeration, and identity-based labeling. While many comments are framed as jokes, their linguistic structure and pragmatic function indicate microaggressions, defined as subtle verbal acts that communicate hostility or exclusion toward marginalized groups.

Data Findings

Concrete examples from the data illustrate this transformation clearly. In Video 1, comments such as “*Nias tukang pangkas rambut*” reduce an entire ethnic group to a single occupation. Although presented humorously, this repeated association functions as a microaggression that limits social identity and reinforces a hierarchy between “normal” and “other.” According to microaggression theory, such remarks accumulate over time, producing emotional fatigue and symbolic exclusion rather than isolated offense.

The findings also show how joking contributes to stereotype reinforcement. In Videos 3 and 4, ethnic and religious identities are inserted into crime-related narratives despite having no relevance to the video content. This reflects broader patterns identified in studies on digital hate and online humor, where repeated joking normalizes biased assumptions and shifts them into “common sense.” Over time, such humor reshapes public perception by linking certain identities with deviance or immorality.

Video 1 – Account: putra...nias

This video simply shows the creator and his friends posing with a friendly caption: “We are from the Nias tribe, we want to be greeted by our Batak brothers.” At the denotative level, the content contains no negativity, provocation, or triggering elements. However, the comment section reveals a shift from seemingly harmless humor toward ethnic stereotyping.

Sample Comments

“anak anak 15, remaja 20, dewasa 25”

“pangkas dewasa 15, pangkas remaja 13, pangkas anak2 10rb”

“Nias tukang pangkas rambut”

These comments revive the stereotype that Nias people are predominantly barbers. While some users may intend such remarks as “jokes,” the comments reflect microaggressions – a subtle form of verbal aggression that reinforces social inequality under the guise of humor.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, such recurring comments demonstrate how digital discourse reproduces existing societal hierarchies. Humor becomes a mechanism that reinforces the position of the marginalized group by repeatedly associating them with a single occupation.

The key issue is repetition. As studies on racial humor note, when a stereotype is repeated across multiple contexts, it becomes normalized and socially accepted, even when it marginalizes the targeted group. The audience may not intend direct discrimination, yet their participation strengthens a “shared cultural script” that categorizes Nias people in a simplistic and inferior way.

From the perspective of Goffman’s face-threatening acts, these jokes publicly undermine the positive social face of the content creator by imposing an unwanted identity. The harm does not stem from a single insult, but from the collective repetition of the same joke, which transforms humor into a socially accepted mechanism of degradation.

Moreover, because the video content itself does not reference barbers or anything related to the jokes, the comments illustrate a disconnect between content and audience reaction. This suggests that the stereotype has become deeply embedded, surfacing automatically regardless of context. This aligns with what scholars identify as habitualized racism, where discriminatory behaviors appear routine and therefore invisible to those who practice them.

Video 2 – Account: krynnt_

In this video, the creator only follows a TikTok trend using her face. The content is neutral. However, because the creator is known or perceived to be Nias, users reproduce the stereotype “Nias bujang,” demonstrating how ethnicity becomes a trigger for humor regardless of content.

Sample Comments

“Nias bujang”

“tumben ga ada ‘nias bujang’ 🐱”

“bujanginamm niasss 🥰”

“yang ini nias tapi tidak bujang 🥰”

A supportive comment: “you’re so beautiful, don’t listen to what they say”

The recurrence of the phrase “Nias bujang” shows the transformation of an ethnic stereotype into a widely circulated meme. Although users frame it as humor, this reflects a form of identity reduction, where the individual’s entire identity is collapsed into a single racialized label. The humor is not directed at the content but at the ethnic identity of the creator.

The existence of a positive, comforting comment also reveals that some viewers perceive the jokes as potentially harmful. This indicates a discursive struggle in the comment section: some normalize the stereotype, others resist it.

This phenomenon aligns with theories of identity-based harassment, where individuals become targets not because of their behavior but because of socially assigned group labels. Humor in this sense operates as a weapon that is socially sanctioned because it appears harmless on the surface.

The persistence of this stereotype in unrelated contexts demonstrates how TikTok encourages algorithmic amplification of running jokes, allowing discriminatory humor to spread rapidly across comment sections. This supports the argument made in the introduction that social media – while providing users freedom of expression – also creates environments where group-based humor turns into normalized harassment.

Video 3 – Account: royac0

The video shows CCTV footage of a metal-theft incident in Medan. The content does not mention any racial, religious, or ethnic identity regarding the perpetrators. However, users insert their own racial and religious interpretations.

Sample Comments

“medan + batak + kristen kombinasi yang sempurna 🐱”

Reply: “oh ya? Si paling berdoa di jalan sama indomaret”

Here, humor becomes a platform for labeling and generalizing identities not presented in the video. The first comment links place (Medan), ethnicity (Batak), and religion (Christianity) in a single frame of humor. The reply intensifies the conflict by attacking religious behaviors.

This escalation illustrates how humor can trigger counter-hate, where one joke leads to retaliatory insults aimed at different identity groups. Unlike isolated jokes, this dynamic creates intergroup hostility, where groups defend their identities by degrading others.

This directly relates to the concept of discursive polarization, a process in which public comments begin as playful but escalate into antagonistic discourse because of differing levels of tolerance and sensitivity to identity-based humor.

Importantly, these comments distort the original content. The video does not identify the thieves, yet viewers fill the gap with stereotypes, demonstrating how public assumptions about crime are racialized online. This reflects broader social patterns where crime is often linked to certain groups, not based on evidence but on societal prejudice.

Video 4 – Account: medantalk

This account uploads a news-related video showing two men stealing metal using a pedicab. Again, the video provides no ethnic or religious identifiers – but users independently insert them.

Sample Comments

"Medan already filled with islam + jawa 🤔"

Reply: "That's a Karo kafir doing it"

This dataset shows how identity-based humor becomes dangerous in open digital spaces. The first comment makes a sweeping generalization about Islam and Javanese people, implying that their presence is undesirable or responsible for crime. The reply escalates the conflict by using the word "kafir," an openly derogatory term.

This is an example of humor collapsing into hate speech. What begins as a supposedly light-hearted remark quickly transitions into explicit verbal violence. The shift demonstrates how humor is not a stable category; instead, it is fluid, and in diverse digital audiences – with different cultural sensitivities – jokes often turn into offenses.

Furthermore, this pattern reveals the risks of context-free humor on platforms like TikTok. In offline settings, jokes are told among familiar people who share similar cultural backgrounds. Online, humor becomes unpredictable because the audience is global and heterogeneous. This gap reinforces the argument in your introduction that TikTok's open comment system becomes a breeding ground for racial tension when humor is used without contextual sensitivity.

Video 5 – Account: el.manuk127

This video responds to a viral incident where food (rendang) disappeared during a public cooking event in Palembang. Although the meme itself is comedic, the comment section shifts toward collective insults targeting Palembang people.

Sample Comments

"If I lived near Palembang my rendang would disappear too 🤔"

"Hide your meat during Eid 🤔🤔 ... 'beware of Palembang figures'"

"Padang = Malin Kundang, Palembang = rendang thief"

"Java = pests, Palembang = greedy 🤔🤔"

"Palembang city is the cleanest, the rendang is gone before it's done 🤔"

"Palembang monkey boss 🤔"

This dataset demonstrates the clearest case of humor escalating into explicit ethnic harassment. The comments show several problematic patterns:

Collective labeling – All people from Palembang are framed as thieves.

Dehumanization – The use of "monkey" as a metaphor strongly echoes racialized insults found globally.

Comparative degradation – Pairing ethnic groups with negative traits ("Java = pests").

Moral judgment – Associating an entire cultural group with immoral behavior (stealing food).

This aligns with theories of collective harassment, where the target is not an individual's behavior but a generalized identity group. Humor becomes a method of reinforcing ingroup-outgroup boundaries, elevating one group while devaluing another.

In connection with TikTok's algorithmic environment, viral incidents often trigger mass participation. As users repeat similar jokes, the humor shifts from individual expressions into a crowdsourced form of discrimination, amplifying its impact. This is an example of networked racism, where digital platforms accelerate and normalize discriminatory narratives because they are perceived as "just jokes."

Importantly, the societal implications extend beyond emotional impact. These practices contribute to the normalization of bias in digital public spaces, where discriminatory language is legitimized through laughter, emojis, and collective participation. TikTok's algorithmic environment amplifies this effect by rewarding engagement, allowing harmful jokes to circulate widely and rapidly. As a result, humor becomes not only a linguistic strategy but also a social mechanism that sustains inequality and exclusion.

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate clear patterns showing how joking practices on TikTok frequently shift into forms of discrimination, ethnic stereotyping, and verbal harassment. Although many users frame their remarks as harmless humor, the comments collected from the five TikTok accounts indicate that humor is often used as a socially acceptable disguise for expressing bias, prejudice, or hostility. These patterns support earlier research on digital microaggressions (Sultana, 2022; Rahmawati & Indera, 2023) while also revealing new insights specific to Indonesian online culture.

A striking pattern can be seen in the comments directed at TikTok users of Nias ethnicity. In the first data set, the TikTok creator merely posts a group photo with the caption "kami dari suku nias pengen disapa oleh saudara kami suku batak." Despite the harmless nature of the content, the comment section immediately shifts into repeated stereotypes such as "pangkas dewasa 15," "pangkas remaja 13," and "Nias tukang pangkas rambut." These comments illustrate the phenomenon described by Milner (2013) as "ambivalent humor," where repetitive jokes blur the line between playfulness and discrimination. The persistence of these jokes suggests that certain ethnic identities are automatically linked with stereotypical occupations, implying that humor becomes a vehicle to reinforce narrow cultural representations. This aligns with Nugroho's (2021) argument that Indonesian digital interactions often reflect unresolved cultural biases.

The second data set further strengthens this observation. Despite posting a simple personal video, the creator receives comments such as "Nias bujang" and "yang ini nias tapi tidak bujang," indicating how ethnic jokes have become normalized to the point where they are used regardless of context. The presence of a counter-comment like "gausah dengerin kata orang yaa kakk you so beautiful" reveals that some users recognize the harmful implications of these jokes, suggesting that the humor is not universally accepted but still prevalent enough to create emotional discomfort. This supports Goffman's (1967) concept of face-threatening acts, where public remarks damage an individual's social dignity even when disguised as humor.

The third and fourth data sets demonstrate another dimension: the connection between humor and social conflict. In the CCTV footage of metal theft, comments such as "medan + batak + kristen kombinasi yang sempurna" shift the narrative away from the actual incident and instead introduce religious and ethnic stereotypes. The hostile reply "oh ya? Si paling berdoa di jalan sama indomaret" shows how humor can escalate into direct confrontation. A similar pattern appears in data four, where the joke "Medan sudah diisi islam + jawa" receives a hostile counter-comment: "Itu si kapir karo pelakunya." These interactions reveal how humor is used to provoke, challenge, or retaliate, creating conflict between groups. Rather than functioning as entertainment, humor becomes a tool for expressing group-based antagonism, which aligns with research suggesting that discriminatory humor reinforces in-group/out-group boundaries (Sultana, 2022).

The fifth data set highlights how humor can target collective identities rather than individuals. Comments mocking Palembang residents — such as "kalo idul adha sembunyiin daging kalian woi," "palembang=rakus," and "palembang kera boss" — indicate that viral incidents (in this case, the "Willy Salim cooking" event) can lead to widespread stereotyping

of entire groups. These comments illustrate the speed at which TikTok's algorithm amplifies humor trends, enabling discriminatory remarks to spread rapidly. This supports the idea that TikTok's participatory culture facilitates the reproduction of stereotypes, as users mimic comments that gain visibility and engagement.

Across all data sets, it becomes evident that humor is not functioning as innocent entertainment but as a discursive tool that shapes how certain ethnic or regional identities are perceived. The repeated use of the same jokes (e.g., "Nias bujang," "pangkas," "Palembang rakus") reflects a pattern of normalization, where harmful language becomes part of everyday online interaction. These findings expand upon earlier literature by showing how localized Indonesian stereotypes operate within digital humor spaces, which has not been widely explored in previous research.

Another key point revealed from the data is the emotional and psychological impact on targeted individuals or groups. While commenters may dismiss their words as "just jokes," the consistency and intensity of these remarks increase the likelihood of emotional harm. The apologetic or corrective comments found in data two – where a user reassures the creator's appearance – indicate that some users recognize the negative effects of such humor. This reinforces the argument that humor can produce subtle but significant forms of harassment that are often overlooked because of their playful framing.

The patterns across all data also show a significant gap between TikTok's community guidelines and actual user behavior. Despite policies prohibiting hate speech and harassment, the platform continues to host comments that clearly contain ethnic slurs, stereotypes, and personal attacks. The rapid pace of user interaction and the reward system of likes and visibility make harmful humor difficult to regulate, suggesting that platform design itself contributes to the spread of discriminatory discourse.

Taken together, these findings provide a deeper understanding of how humor functions within Indonesian TikTok culture. The data indicate that discriminatory jokes are not random or isolated occurrences but part of a larger system of social meaning-making shaped by cultural tensions, online anonymity, and TikTok's algorithmic environment. This reinforces the need for more awareness about the consequences of humor and highlights the importance of promoting more respectful communication practices in digital spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that humor on TikTok often functions as more than entertainment; it operates as a discursive strategy that enables stereotype reinforcement, blame-shifting, and the erosion of empathy toward ethnic and regional groups. Through repeated joking practices, discriminatory meanings become normalized and socially acceptable, particularly within TikTok's participatory and algorithm-driven environment. Practically, these findings highlight the need for stronger content moderation policies, improved digital citizenship education, and increased user awareness of how humor can perpetuate harm. Educators and platform designers may use these insights to promote more ethical online interaction and critical digital literacy. This study is not without limitations. The small sample size, focus on a single platform, and interpretive nature of CDA limit generalizability. Future research could expand the dataset, compare multiple social media platforms, or examine users' perceptions of humorous harassment to further understand how digital humor shapes social relations.

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