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Exploring the Multifaceted Humor Function of Dark Humor in Trevor Noah's Show "Son of Patricia"

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46 ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to gain insight into Trevor Noah's intention for employing dark humor through applying Attardo's humor function framework to his stand-up comedy performance "Son of Patricia". This qualitative research utilized a phenomenological methodology. The investigation aimed to explore the phenomenon of dark humor based on Trevor Noah's personal experiences as conveyed in his act. The study analyzed dark humor found in Trevor Noah's stand-up show "Son of Patricia" through the lens of Attardo's (1994) humor functions. The result showed that the frequent humor function found was defunctionalisation for amusement and the jokes often involve playing with the language followed with social management, decommitment and mediation. Exploring the multifaceted humor function of dark humor in Trevor Noah's show "Son of Patricia" revealed a nuanced and thought-provoking approach to comedy. Noah skillfully employed dark humor as a tool for social management, shedding light on sensitive issues such as race, politics, and societal norms. While dark humor can be polarizing, Trevor Noah demonstrates its potential as a powerful vehicle for social commentary and awareness.

Keywords: function of humor; dark humor; stand-up comedy

INTRODUCTION

Seeking enjoyment from one's surroundings is a means of enriching life with excitement. One outcome of this pursuit is the development of humor. Most humorous exchanges occur within three conversational turns or less, with many instances being a single utterance (Attardo, 2015). Another strategy for fostering unity through comedy is what has been termed "humor support," comprising discursive techniques aimed at acknowledging and enabling comic deviations, (Hay, 2001). These approaches seek to establish comedic footing and recognize instances of levity, thereby facilitating social bonding among participants. In brief, humor appears most effective at rapport building when exchanges are concise yet mutually recognized, and when speakers support each other's comic framing of discussions.

According to Murstein and Brust (1985), humor is important as a social phenomenon in attraction and interpersonal communication. Humor is important in relationships because it increases engagement and promotes psychological well-being (Aristyanti et al., 2020). Humor, as a powerful social and cultural phenomenon, often serves as a mirror reflecting the

complexities of human experiences. It is proven in some researches which has been done for several years. Humor is commonly used in social contexts to build unity among participants (Kotthoff, 2009; Konsenko & Rintamaki, 2010; Hall, 2013). In addition to building unity, sharing jokes also creates an in-group versus out-group distinction such as in a group of friends (Haugh & Bousfield (2012), work environment (Plester & Sayers, 2007), and within families (Everts, 2003).

In 1994, Salvatore Attardo delved into the intricate world of humor, dissecting its various functions and shedding light on its multi-faceted nature. Attardo's exploration into the functions of humor provides a nuanced understanding of how humor serves as a dynamic tool in human communication. Attardo (1994) classifies the functions of humor in communication into four distinct categories; social management, decommitment, mediation, and defunctionalisation.

There are two broad categories of humor: light humor and dark humor. Light humor can help to strengthen personal relationships and friendships (Ruch & Hofmann, 2017), promote humanity, wisdom, and transcendence (Ruch & Poyer, 2015), deal with adversity, shortcomings, and the human condition in a humorous way (McGhee 2010), repair and address issues and wrongdoings (Ruch & Heintz, 2016). Dark humor has the potential to both unite and divide. While laughter and levity can bring people together and promote resilience in the face of adversity, humor can also marginalize or demean when used to mock others or promote hostility (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). Jokes that instill dread or deliberately humiliate their target can lead to lasting fear of ridicule and isolation (Ruch et al. 2014). As with any communication, the context, intent, and effect must be carefully considered to avoid needlessly hurting individuals or groups. When wielded without empathy or care, what begins as a laugh can leave emotional wounds that do not easily mend. Dark humor, characterized by its exploration of morbid, taboo, or socially sensitive subjects, holds a unique position in the comedic landscape. Its functions extend beyond mere entertainment, encompassing social critique, coping mechanisms, and the challenging of societal norms.

Research on dark humor has explored how people process historical events. Two news articles examined this phenomenon; one from an Italian publication (Dynel & Poppi, 2018) and the other discussing reactions to the September 11th attacks (Faina, 2013). Both found that communities utilized dark humor to understand better the events they experienced. In healthcare, studies have investigated dark humor, or humor dealing with sensitive issues, and its effects (Demjén, 2016; Bischetti & Bambini, 2021). In these analyzes, patients were found to employ dark humor as a coping mechanism when confronting illness. Dark humor has also been studied in particular group settings (Prusaczyk & Hodson, 2020; Neuendorf et al., 2014; Sulistyowati et al., 2020; Dynel, 2021)

Research has explored the role of dark humor in educational contexts. Bullough (2012) examined the use of comedy among educators in light of increasingly stringent accountability standards. The author sought to understand how humor might help teachers cope with the pressures of such measures. In another relevant work, Dueñas et al. (2020) investigated the potential uses of comedy in anatomy laboratories. Specifically, the researchers aimed to determine whether, when, how, and why humorous approaches could be employed during basic science instruction in the labs.

Stand-up comedy is a method of conveying humor through a live performance. A stand-up comedian will deliver a set consisting of multiple jokes and comedic observations from a stage or prominent position within an establishment. Typically, a stand-up set will run 10-45 minutes. During this time, the comedian aims to make light of various aspects of the human experience through their witty observations and storytelling skills. Common subjects that lend themselves well to comedic exploration include social issues, peculiar happenings, emerging trends, satire of politics and current events, and more (Astuti & Zulaeha, 2018). Much of a

stand-up comedian's material is derived from forming opinions on such topics or drawing from their own unique life experiences. Through the craft of joke writing and skilled delivery, stand-up comedy allows performers to use humor as a lens to comment on society and everyday absurdities. When executed effectively, it provides audiences an entertaining escape and perspective on the world around them. Furthermore, Michael (2013) utilized sociological functionalist theories to analyze the social ramifications of humor and educational jokes in confronting discrimination experienced by Muslim Americans following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks. His examination highlighted the intricate identities and presumptions faced by comedic performers in relation to addressing sensitive social issues through their craft. By leveraging theories surrounding the functional role of humor in society, the author provided perspective on navigating complex cultural tensions through comedy and its potential as a medium for challenging prejudices.

Linguistic pragmatics are also areas of focus within stand-up comedy research. Ruiz & Linares (2020) examined the primary linguistic methods employed by two renowned Spanish female comedians in challenging heteronormative norms. This study analyzed the subjects, recipients, discourse tactics, and linguistic signals. Adetunji (2013), in his work, highlighted the main pragmatic techniques Nigerian stand-up comedians utilize to engage their audiences in developing the interactional context for humor. Lestari & Indiatmoko (2016) identified the forms of conversational principles and pragmatic parameter violations, the patterns of conversational tenets and pragmatic parameter violations, and the factors that influence conversational principles and pragmatic parameter violations in Dodit Mulyanto's stand-up comedy course.

Trevor Noah, a South African comedian and host of "The Daily Show," is renowned for his astute observations on global affairs, and his stand-up special, "Son of Patricia," stands out as a remarkable canvas where he masterfully employs dark humor to navigate through sensitive issues. Trevor Noah's comedic style is deeply rooted in his ability to dissect and analyze societal norms and behaviors. "Son of Patricia" is no exception, as it becomes a platform for the comedian to employ dark humor as a vehicle for social commentary. Through his witty and incisive remarks, Noah addresses pressing issues such as race, politics, and cultural disparities, using humor as a means to provoke thought and introspection. In this article, the writer will dissect the multifaceted functions of dark humor as employed by Trevor Noah in "Son of Patricia," shedding light on how it serves as a lens through which audiences can engage with, reflect upon, and perhaps even challenge societal norms.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach. As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, qualitative research is firmly grounded in real-world phenomena. The study sought to explore the phenomenon of dark humor based on the personal experiences of Trevor Noah. Accordingly, an interpretivist perspective was deemed appropriate as a qualitative methodology given the research objectives of problem exploration and phenomenon investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Moreover, the study's focus aligned with phenomenological concepts. Phenomenology entails exploring common social phenomena from the perspective of direct observers and participants (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). Phenomenology aims to deepen our understanding of what it means to inhabit a given experience (Heidegger, 1962). This study aimed to analyze collected data and gain deeper insights into the intentions underpinning instances of dark humor addressed in the research questions.

The researchers in this qualitative study served as both a data collector and observer. The object of this study was Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy performance entitled 'Son of Patricia'. As collector, they transcribed Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy performance "Son of Patricia" in its entirety, creating a written record for analysis. As observer, the researcher also collected data by directly observing the performance. The transcription served as the primary data source. The researcher later analyzed it using Attardo's (1994) framework of humor functions.

The framework's humor functions—social management, decommitment, mediation, and defunctionalisation—served as criteria for categorizing dark humour statements. The instrument of this study dealing with the function of humor was presented in tables. Specific criteria for each humor functions were listed as a checklist and became the instrument for this study. The researchers grouped each instance based on its comedic context and assigned it the relevant function. They then counted the instances of each to determine prevalence. This process yielded sub-data about the different humor functions' usage. The researcher presented and elaborated on the analytical results. As the concluding observer, they also summarized the full data collection and analysis. The study aimed to understand the intentions behind Noah's use of dark humor through applying Attardo's humor function lens to his "Son of Patricia" performance transcription. The framework provided a structured means of systematically categorizing and quantifying the instances of dark humor.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The result and discussion chapter of this article delves into a comprehensive analysis of the humor functions within the realm of dark humor, as exemplified in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy show "Son of Patricia." This chapter aims to unveil the nuanced layers of humor embedded in the performance, dissecting its impact on the audience and exploring the socio-cultural implications of employing dark humor as a storytelling tool.

Through a meticulous examination of key elements of humor function, the researchers unveil the intricacies of Trevor Noah's mastery in navigating the delicate terrain of dark humor. The chapter endeavors to shed light on the underlying mechanisms through which laughter becomes a vehicle for addressing complex and often uncomfortable subject matters.

THE FUNCTION OF HUMOR EXECUTED BY IMPOLITENESS STRATEGIES IN DARK HUMOR BY TREVOR NOAH'S STAND-UP COMEDY PERFORMANCE

The present study aimed to analyze collected data and gain deeper insights into the intentions underpinning instances of dark humor addressed in the research questions. After transcribing the performance and taking out the dark humor, there are 51 dark humor listed as the source of data in this study. All of them were analyzed through the function of humor theory by Attardo (1994). The function of humor's analysis result can be seen in the table below.

TABLE 1. The Function of Humor's Analysis Result

No	Types of Impoliteness Strategy	Total
1	Social Management	20
2	Decommitment	12
3	Mediation	5
4	Defunctionalisation	21
	Total	58

Table 1 shows that most of the time, dark humor was delivered as defunctionalization or playful purpose, with 21 in total, followed by social management, with 20 in total. The next function

is decommitment with 12 jokes. The last function is mediation with five jokes. There are also some jokes which carry two humor functions at once.

THE INTENTIONS OF HUMOR EXECUTED BY IMPOLITENESS STRATEGIES IN DARK HUMOR BY TREVOR
NOAH'S STAND-UP COMEDY PERFORMANCE

There are various intentions behind expressing humor. The purpose of humor itself reveals these intentions. As Attardo (1994) noted, the purpose of humor is directly gleaned from its effects in any given discourse. This also applies to the dark humor found in stand-up comedy performances by Trevor Noah.

The most commonly found function of humor is defunctionalisation (data 1, 2, 3, 5, 12, 16, 18, 19, 21, 26, 28, 31, 32, 34, 35, 37, 38, 43, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51). This serves a playful goal. Typically, the jokes play with language. This function is seen throughout Noah's stand-up comedy shows. For example, in the opening of one performance, Noah poked fun at LA's infamous traffic (data 1 & 2).

Data 1:

I love LA. I love everything about LA. Even the things people hate about LA, I love. I love the traffic in LA. It's like one of my favorite experiences. Yeah, when you don't live here, it's great.

In his opening stand-up comedy show at a recent Los Angeles performance, comedian Trevor Noah quipped about the city's notorious traffic issues. While traffic congestion is a well-known pain point for LA residents and visitors alike, Noah's comment was likely meant more in jest than as a serious statement of fact. By joking about a topic most audience members could relate to from their own experiences navigating the city's roads, Noah aimed to break the ice and set a lighthearted tone as he launched into his act. The traffic joke served as an easy, recognizable way for Noah to connect with his LA crowd right from the show's start through shared understanding of a common frustration, even if the details of the specific remark may not have been entirely accurate. A skilled comedian's opening moments are crucial for engaging the audience. Noah demonstrated his ability to do so through playful reference to a real-life issue on many residents' minds.

Data 2:

I love driving out here you know. And while I'm out here, I get to listen to the radio, you guys have great radio stations because you're always in your cars you know. In New York, Radio's not a big thing for me living in New York. I ride my bicycle, walk the streets. I can't listen to music because I'll die.

Stand-up comedy provides an engaging opening for performers to connect with audiences. Research by Adetunji (2013) highlighted the primary techniques Nigerian stand-up comedians leverage to involve viewers in establishing an interactive context for humor. Additionally, comedy offers a means of stress relief. This finding agrees with the study by Dueñas et al. (2020) which found that while dark humor can serve as a stress reliever, individuals employ highly personalized evaluations to determine when and what type of humor is suitable.

Using humor at the outset allows comedians to capture audience attention memorably. By studying how other performers have successfully engaged crowds, comics can identify approaches to draw in watchers involuntarily. Once involved, viewers may find the content provides temporary stress reduction. However, each person's assessment of what is appropriate is unique, so navigating diverse sensibilities requires sensitivity to potential viewer interpretation and reaction. An engaging performance balanced with consideration for all in attendance can set the stage for a successful show and meet the dual goals of entertainment and care for everyone present.

Even in discussing his experiences with racism and politics, Noah skillfully incorporated defunctionalisation function into his commentary on such topics. In one segment

about President Trump's immigration policies, Noah playfully mocked Trump's proposal for a transparent border wall, rightly pointing out the flawed logic of such a plan (data 31, 32).

Data 31:

I don't know what the see-through wall is. But at this point I'm just worried that a contractor will come along and trick the president. He'll take him to the border and be like, "There it is, Mr. Trump. Your invisible wall." And to make sure he's gonna buy it, he's gonna hire a troupe of Mexican mimes to be like, "Oh my God you can't get through it." It works. Like the mind of Donald Trump.

Noah continued to poke fun at Trump's notion of a see-through wall, highlighting how nonsensical the idea was. He even imagined a scenario where a contractor might take advantage of Trump by misleading him about the wall's capabilities. In the end, Noah wryly compared Trump's line of thinking to the proposed transparent wall that would still allow easy passage, driving home the point that this proposal was not a serious solution. This joke served the purpose of humorously critiquing the policy in a thoughtful manner.

Data 32:

The only way it works is if you take your board or solar panel and lean it at an angle to get the 25 rays, but if you do that, you've created a giant ramp from Mexico to shoot into America. Just like, "Ora le..." The mind of Donald J. Trump. The J stands for Jesus. A lot people don't know that. A lot of self-loathing going on there.

The findings align with previous research by Sulistyowati et al. (2020) demonstrating that humor can be an effective tool for political commentary and criticism. While that past study examined different media such as political cartoons, both investigations showcase how satire and comedy can shed light on flawed proposals or administrations in a memorable way that promotes deeper consideration of the issues. Noah's segment effectively employed humor to respectfully analyze and bring attention to perceived shortcomings in the referenced immigration plan.

The following function of humor frequently found is social management (data 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15, 17, 23, 24, 25, 34, 37, 33, 37, 38, 40, 45, 46, 48). According to Attardo (1994), social management in humor includes social control, conveying social norms, ingratiation, discourse management, displays of cleverness, establishing common ground, social play, and repair. This function is expected to often be present in Noah's stand-up comedy performances given his inclusion of significant racial and political subject matter. However, this function is more likely to be found in his jokes about racism. For instance, in his jokes comparing holiday cultures between black and white people (data 3 & 4), Noah also provided a shared understanding of the differences.

During a holiday experience in Bali, Noah observed how some tourists enjoyed visiting and interacting with local residents in their homes (data 6, 7, 8). In recounting this observation, Noah humorously ridiculed the behavior of these tourists, pointing out their lack of consideration for personal privacy and space. It seemed the tourists enjoyed an experience that invaded the intimacy of someone else's domestic environment.

The anecdote appeared aimed at social correction. Through comedic framing, Noah aimed to embarrass the tourists by highlighting the inappropriateness of their actions. This approach aligns with Martin & Ford (2018) which stated that hostile or aggressive humor can function as a form of criticism, especially regarding behaviors that are deemed socially inappropriate. The telling of this experience suggests humor was used to draw attention to a cultural insensitivity and implicitly encourage more respectful engagement with local communities.

Data 23:

I was watching the news one day, and there was a guy at a rally, and they were asking him about immigration and families being separated, etc. and this guy, regardless of his politics, he was being really mean and xenophobic, and racist. You know, just acting real presidential. And the journalist asked him, the journalist asked him about children and he just went straight in he was like, "Boy, I tell you what, I don't give a damn about any of these goddamn Mexicans. They came over here. They ain't supposed to be here, boy. Wooo! It's our country now, you hear? That's right, boy. Go back to where you came from. Wooo! These Mexicans ain't done nothing good. Ain't bought nothing good to America. We don't need y'all. Come on, Bubba. It's Taco Tuesday."

Racism was the topic of discourse in data 23, 24 and 25. Noah discussed the racism that immigrants often face in America. As an immigrant himself, Noah pointed out this negative behavior and poked fun at racist individuals. This use of humor in social management can help build solidarity within a group. These findings align with research by Haugh and Bousfield (2012) that found jocular mockery, or humorous teasing, fostered unity by creating an in-group of like-minded peers. However, in Noah's case, in-group solidarity forms within the broader community rather than just among friends. This finding is also consistent with Attardo (2015), which determined that humor can be a means to establish commonality and togetherness through comedy.

Humor can serve an important role in defusing tensions and redirecting intentions toward more constructive ends as decommitment function. The ability to lighten moods through jest, while also gaining insight or working through difficulties, represents an important social function found in many contexts. This function is found in some context of Noah's jokes in the show (data 9, 10, 29, 30, 34, 35, 36, 39, 41, 42, 44).

Data 9:

There's a group of men gathering snakes to bring out to us. And so, I'm like, "Yeah, no, no. I don't." No, because you see as a black person, culturally, I'm trying to not die.

In one example, while visiting the island of Bali, Noah faces the prospect of attending a snake show without adequate safety protocols. Rather than confront the situation aggressively, he makes a joking refusal that helps resolve the issue without conflict. Moments such as this demonstrate how humor can be a tool for both declining harmful courses of action and exploring alternatives in a way that eases interpersonal dynamics. When used skillfully, humor provides an opportunity to probe issues and work toward satisfactory solutions while also lifting spirits in the process. Its presence in navigating trying circumstances, as seen in Noah's experience abroad, underscores its social and emotional value.

Through his comedy, Trevor Noah aims to build community and foster understanding. His jokes help create solidarity and sympathy among his audience. This aligns with research by Attardo (2015) and Haugh and Bousfield (2012) on how humor can form bonds within a group. Noah also uses comedy to shed light on the ironic realities Black people face, helping others comprehend their experiences. This finding is consistent with Faina's (2013) assertion that humor assists with navigating today's complex media landscape.

Additionally, Noah discussed apartheid in one of his performances, which can deepen comprehension of racism's painful history in Africa. By addressing challenging topics through comedy, Noah aims to both entertain and educate, bringing important historical and social issues to broader public awareness in an accessible way. His efforts demonstrate how humor, used skillfully, can strengthen community ties and further understanding across differences.

Many more of Noah's dark jokes nudge about taboo issues. While some find such humor too provocative, it can also open important discussions that may otherwise go unexplored. As Plester and Sayers (2007) discovered, humor allows people to bond over topics that challenge social conventions. Their research examined workplace interactions, whereas this study provides new insight into how stand-up comedy similarly enables meaningful exchanges on difficult subjects.

Additionally, this aligns with Demjén's (2016) finding that humor serves as a mechanism for addressing frightening, sensitive or embarrassing experiences. Through laughter, individuals and communities can process and gain perspective on such issues in a supportive environment. Where some may feel powerless, comedy gives voice and fosters collective strength. Previous analysis focused on patients coping with illness, yet this study broadens understanding of humor's role in cultural dialog by exploring performances aimed at Black audiences.

Overall, while pushing boundaries risks offense, Noah who broach taboo topics with skill and care may facilitate crucial conversations. His work builds on research demonstrating humor's power to build bridges of understanding across differences. Further examination of stand-up routines' complex engagements with sensitive issues merits ongoing discussion.

Mediation is the last humor function found within Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy performance (data 11, 14, 16, 20, 22). Through satire, comedy can initiate difficult conversations or ease tense interactions. It can also help resolve conflicts. For example, in Noah's anecdote about meeting President Obama, he recounts an embarrassing moment where he misunderstood Obama referring to aides as having AIDS (data 20). By sharing this story and allowing the audience to laugh at his mistake, Noah is able to mediate the awkwardness of the situation and move the interaction to a more positive space. Humor serves to lighten tense discussions and bring people together. Within Noah's performance, satire functions as a mediating force, whether to start challenging talks or reconcile disagreements. Comedy has the power to ease conflicts and open doors to understanding.

Data 20:

I said, "I'd love to, thank you. I'm sorry, a show for what?"

He said, "For my aides, Trevor."

I said, "You have AIDS?" And then, and then he explained what he meant. And I wanted the earth to swallow me whole because I had just looked at the President of the United States and asked him if he had AIDS.

Noah defused the potentially awkward situation by turning his embarrassing moment into a joking anecdote. This aligns with Hay's (2001) assertion that using laughter and humor can benefit interactions in multiple ways, such as enabling back-and-forth conversation, self-deprecating jokes, and expressions of disbelief, sympathy, or support. At the conclusion of Noah recounting his experience of meeting Barack Obama, he sarcastically parodied Donald Trump within the retelling. By injecting this humor, Noah aimed to feel better about his embarrassing situation and preempt any awkwardness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, exploring the multifaceted humor function of dark humor in Trevor Noah's show "Son of Patricia" reveals a nuanced and thought-provoking approach to comedy. Noah skillfully employs dark humor as a tool for social management, shedding light on sensitive issues such as race, politics, and societal norms. Through his wit and insightful observations, he navigates the fine line between amusement and discomfort, challenging the audience to confront their own preconceptions and biases.

The effectiveness of dark humor in "Son of Patricia" lies in its ability to serve as a mirror to society, reflecting the absurdities and contradictions that often go unnoticed. By tackling serious topics with humor, Noah provides a unique perspective that encourages critical thinking and discourse. The comedian's use of personal anecdotes and global experiences further enhances the accessibility of these themes, fostering a sense of shared humanity among viewers.

While dark humor can be polarizing, Trevor Noah demonstrates its potential to be a powerful vehicle for social commentary and awareness. "Son of Patricia" not only entertains but also challenges its audience to confront uncomfortable truths, fostering a more profound understanding of the complexities within our society. Ultimately, Noah's exploration of dark humor transcends mere laughter, leaving a lasting impact on viewers by encouraging them to question, learn, and engage with the world around them in a more thoughtful and introspective manner.

As audiences continue to crave content that goes beyond mere entertainment, there is a growing need to delve deeper into the nuanced world of comedy, particularly dark humor. Future explorations could focus on the evolving landscape of humor in the context of societal shifts and changing cultural norms. Additionally, analyzing the audience's reception and the impact of dark humor in fostering conversations about critical issues could provide valuable insights into the role of comedy as a catalyst for social change. Examining how comedians like Trevor Noah navigate the evolving boundaries of humor in an ever-changing world can offer a compelling perspective on the broader cultural implications of laughter and satire.

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