

Just a Joke? Audience Interpretations of Sexist Humor in Ludruk Performances

Dyan Rahmiati¹, Eni Maryani², Susanne Dida³, and Purwanti Hadisiwi⁴

¹ Department of Communication Studies, Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia

^{2,3,4} Department of Communication Studies, Padjajaran University, Bandung, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Sexist humor has emerged as a controversial issue at the intersection of gender, communication, and traditional entertainment. While often dismissed as harmless amusement, such humor can reinforce gender stereotypes and normalize social bias, particularly in local performance contexts. This study explores audience interpretations of sexist humor in 'Ludruk', a traditional Indonesian theatre from known for comedy content that incorporates gendered themes. Adopting an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the research involves six participants who regularly attended Ludruk performances. Through in-depth interviews conducted in the local Javanese dialect, the study examined participants' interpretations, emotional responses, and the cultural and social context shaping their perspective. The findings indicate that participants generally view sexist humor as mere entertainment, rarely considering its broader societal implications. Male participants emphasize humor delivery and comedic timing, while female participants often rationalize their laughter as a means of social conformity, avoiding being perceived as overly critical. The immersive performance environment of Ludruk, combined with its improvisational and participatory nature, fosters social bonds among audience members and between performers and spectators. These cultural dynamics, deeply rooted in Javanese social norms and expectations of group harmony, contributed significantly to the acceptance and normalization of sexist content. This study highlights how humor operates within specific cultural contexts and how social laughter functions as a mechanism of social cohesion, even when problematic. It underscores the importance of critically examining traditional entertainment practices that may perpetuate gendered social norms under the guise of innocuous fun.

KEYWORDS

sexist humor;
audience
interpretations;
Ludruk
performance;
gender norms;
cultural context

INTRODUCTION

Sexist humour is a controversial topic that lies at the nexus of entertainment, communication, and gender. Sexist humour serves as a cross-class and cross-gender pleasure, despite being frequently written off as simple entertainment. In order to conceal its role in upholding patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, this consumption is frequently excused as "just a joke" (Grey & Ford, 2013; Lawless et al., 2020a; Weber et al., 2023). Although many societies view sexist jokes as harmless and acceptable,

acceptance varies. Sociocultural settings, where gender roles are established and upheld by assigning men and women different value systems, have a significant influence on how sexist humour is perceived (Lawless et al., 2020a; Thomae & Pina, 2015).

Similar to racist humour, sexist humour can undermine social norms by eliciting laughter that supports dubious notions of masculinity and femininity (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010). In this situation, women face a "double bind": if they laugh, they seem to support the ridicule of their gender; if they don't, they run the risk of being called humourless. Men and women experience sexism in humour differently. For men, sexist humour reinforces patriarchal social norms by expressing masculine solidarity and dominance, frequently at the expense of women.

Research on humor emphasizes how crucial sociocultural and cognitive elements are in determining how each person perceives humour. The importance of context and cognitive flexibility in humour responses is covered by Papousek et al. (2019). While Pedrazzini et al. (2020) discover that adolescent humour creation involves complex cognitive processes, Jackson et al. (2021) demonstrate that humour comprehension evolves over time. Intertextuality in humour interpretation is the main topic of Tsakona and Chovanec (2020). According to recent research, digital humour promotes social interaction and coping, particularly in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic (Alkaraki et al., 2023; Aslan, 2021). Although research has focused on humor in recent years, the understanding of sexist humor in local performing arts like Ludruk Theater continues to be understudied. This research analyzes Ludruk's humor which is striking for its complexity concerning culture, social relations, and gender which is both performed and mediated.

In performances of Ludruk, which is a form of East Javanese theater, even female audience members laugh at sexist jokes. However, their endorsement is not genuine, but rather a reaction to norms that seek social concord. As Sherratt and Simmons-Mackie (2016) point out, in collectivist contexts, laughter is a tool for preserving group cohesion. According to Dezechache & Dunbar (2012) laughter serves social and biological purposes, bonding groups and reinforcing their identity. Thus, in the context of Ludruk, social laughter has a strong sociocultural character and functions to maintain equilibrium, which in this case promotes culturally defined rukun values.

This study examines the ways in which Ludruk audiences normalise sexist humour and examines their consumption patterns and motivations. Few studies have been conducted on sexist humour in conventional frameworks, and the majority have concentrated on the While much of the prior scholarship centers on performers and content creators, this research shifts the focus to audience reception, a critical but understudied domain in humor and gender studies. viewpoint of the performer or creator. This study is novel because it incorporates local Javanese cultural norms and social contexts while emphasising the audience's perspective. By demonstrating how audiences reinterpret and negotiate sexist humour within performance contexts, it seeks to advance the conversation on cultural revisioning. A more complex understanding of the cultural normalisation of sexist humour in a dynamic and context-specific way can be gained by directly examining audience perspectives.

METHOD

This study used phenomenological techniques, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to investigate how participants understand sexist humour in Ludruk performances. Studies that concentrate on comprehending culture as interwoven practices and processes are a good fit for IPA. It recognises that participants and the researcher interact as meaning interpreters (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The study was able to examine participants' interpretations from both their own and their wider sociocultural realities by using IPA. This method was crucial for addressing the ways that humour is filtered through gender, social bonding, group attachment, and cultural norms rather than being just entertainment. Six participants, three men and three women, who had seen Ludruk performances at least twice were interviewed in-depth and in a semi-structured manner in order to gather data.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants in order to guarantee diversity in terms of age, educational background, and socio-economic status. Over the course of three months, from February to April 2024, interviews were conducted in the local Javanese vernacular and verbatim transcriptions were made. Participants were able to express themselves more freely and maintain cultural authenticity by speaking the local tongue. Each participant gave their informed consent, and interviews were transcribed, and then analysed. The four stages of IPA analysis were applied to the transcripts: (1) initial notations and coding, (2) meaning unit extraction, (3) thematic clustering, and (4) interpretative synthesis.

This approach found common patterns among participants and recorded a range of individual interpretations. It offered the depth necessary to comprehend how viewers perceive, defend, and deal with sexist humour in conventional performance settings. Limitations pertaining to the small, homogeneous sample were recognised, and reflexivity was used to address possible researcher bias. The results of the interpretative analysis demonstrated how cultural and social factors influence audience expectations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Performance Context and Improvisational Dynamics

According to the phenomenological interviews conducted for this study, the sociocultural setting of the group viewing of "Ludruk" has a significant impact on how viewers perceive and react to sexist jokes. Ludruk performances typically take place during social gatherings such as parties or local functions in Javanese ethnic communities, promoting strong group identity and sociological intimacy. Such caricature laughter reduces group tensions and promotes social cohesion, even though humour in these situations is frequently contentious and ridiculous. Here, laughter serves as more than just entertainment; it fortifies bonds within the group and compel adherence to social norms. Audiences recognise that humour, particularly jokes or riddles pertaining to social situations, would upset the cultural balance known as *rukun*, which is a highly esteemed

ethos in Javanese culture, if there were no laughter. In these social contexts, even potentially damaging content is seen as safe.

Exaggerated improvisation demonstrates Ludruk's skill at fusing provocative humour with patriarchal social control. Women, dishonesty, and money are common themes in core Ludruk jokes, which keep audiences laughing while upholding patriarchal standards. Senior Ludruk performer Cak Liwon (interview, April 14, 2024) described how *wedokan* (about women) humour reinforces gender stereotypes. Through humour, these performances uphold established power relations and reinforce traditional perceptions of women's looks and behaviours. The audience's participation helps to ensure that these dynamics continue. The spoken humour of *kidungan* and the physical and dialogic humour of *dagelan* are distinguished by the audience's responses, especially their laughter. Audience reactions to physical performative sexism, such as inappropriate touching or exaggerated impersonations, were more powerful than those to verbal humour. These occurrences were frequently minimised or disregarded, written off as light-hearted teasing.

To elaborate on this dynamic, another informant, Bu Atik (52), highlighted the informal and crude nature of Ludruk humour, saying: "The joke from Ludruk is like that; there are no rules, the language used is crude, and swear words are also fine." The performances' authenticity is enhanced by their straightforward costumes, coarse language, and everyday settings, which lessens the critical examination of sexist narratives. According to Mallett et al. (2016), humour acts as a masking frame, obfuscating sexism and counteracting feelings of harm. Slapstick elements like mock violence, ridicule, and exaggerated body language intensify these effects. These actions subtly reinforce gender hierarchies and stereotypes, despite being presented as harmless and intended to generate cathartic laughter (Moss, 2021; Peacock, 2014).

Humor in *Ludruk* is delivered in two formats: *kidungan* (monologue songs) and *dagelan* (dialogue-based skits). These segments blend slapstick, satire, and stereotypes. The language is straightforward, using Surabayan Javanese, and the humor often targets themes of women, deception, and money. Audiences are more responsive to sexist humor presented through interactive physical comedy than through monologue songs. Due to the informal and spontaneous nature of performances, audience members rarely label this humor as sexist. Instead, it is perceived as authentic and benign, reflecting everyday situations and attitudes. The performative context provides a shield against criticism, allowing humor to be interpreted as entertainment rather than ideology (Mallett et al., 2016; Chavez & del Prado, 2023).

Shared Laughter, Divergent Motivations

Audience members laughed together, but for different reasons. To fit in, defuse tension, or show support for the performers, many participants continued to laugh despite acknowledging that they were uncomfortable with the sexist content. According to Winick (n.d.), laughter is a complex affective signal that is impacted by interpersonal dynamics and social contexts. This study shows how gender dynamics, cultural norms, and group behaviour interact to create Ludruk's sexist humour, which goes beyond

individual preferences. Humour can be used to maintain social relationships even when it reinforces inequality. Despite being dismissed as unimportant, humour actually influences how people perceive society and how they adopt gender roles. In certain cultural contexts, humour facilitates conversations about identity and social norms by highlighting the distinctive qualities of place and time (Norman 2018). This process is especially noticeable in cross-cultural interactions, where humour makes connections possible that might not otherwise happen.

The focus of this section is on how audiences deal with the subtleties of sexist jokes, supported by cultural and psychological settings that permit moral and emotional distance (Walker & Humes, 2013). This distancing technique is consistent with the idea of performance distance (Hibberd, 2014), in which viewers are able to separate themselves from the offensive content thanks to the theatrical structure. The study discovered that although both men and women found the jokes amusing, the reasons behind their enjoyment varied greatly.

Female Viewers: Using Symbolic Displacement to Distancing

Instead of seeing sexism in Ludruk as a direct provocation, female participants frequently saw it as a humorous and remote problem. The *tandak*, a male actor who dressed like a woman and exaggerated her features, was a key figure in this. In order to reduce potential offence, the study uses symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) to demonstrate how *tandak* enabled cognitive distancing, allowing women to laugh at an exaggerated portrayal rather than real women.

Butler's (1990) idea of gender performativity is best illustrated by *Tandak*, who shows how performances both parody and reinforce gender stereotypes. The reasoning was repeated by numerous female participants: "It's not offensive—after all, they're not real women." This intentional cognitive distancing exposes a psychological tactic whereby viewers protect themselves from potentially damaging humour by perceiving it as a manufactured performance.

The *tandak* character's exaggerated, caricatured behaviour, which embodies the idea of "otherness," perpetuates stereotypes. Because of this, male actors can avoid offending actual women directly. Female viewers often rationalized their laughter by dissociating from the humor's target, especially when the joke was directed at *tandak*. Because the performers were not "real women," the jokes were seen as symbolically displaced. *Tandak*, male performers playing female roles, serve as symbolic others. Their exaggerated femininity dilutes the perceived sexism of jokes by redirecting humor away from real women. This dynamic reinforces audience detachment from the object of ridicule and enables sexist messages to be interpreted as harmless play (Kochersberger et al., 2014; Pérez & Greene, 2016). Kochersberger et al. (2014) support the idea that *tandak* performances lessen the impact of sexist humour by portraying it as staged artifice by arguing that humour aimed at anonymous groups is viewed as less problematic. This symbolic otherness is further reinforced by cultural norms

Male Audience: Presenting Comedy as Tradition and Role

The majority of male participants viewed sexist humour in Ludruk as an essential and culturally embedded component of traditional theatrical storytelling, concentrating on its performative rather than ideological aspects. They viewed the stage as a place for role-playing, based on Goffman's (1959) theory, where behaviours and expressions should not be confused with one's own convictions or actual goals. Male viewers were better able to interact with potentially offensive content in a light-hearted way because of this framing, which helped them discern between performance and reality.

This is consistent with the idea of "cognitive play mode," as defined by Grey and Ford (2013), in which viewers understand humour using a light-hearted framework that suspends moral judgement. Because Ludruk is culturally and historically framed as traditional theatre, male audiences are shielded from critically analysing humor's wider societal implications. Audiences' propensity to accept humour as harmless when it conforms to cultural norms facilitates the normalisation and perpetuation of gender biases through repeated, ritualised performances (Lawless et al., 2020a). Male viewers, meanwhile, emphasized that the humor was part of traditional performance and should not be interpreted literally. This framing supported a cognitive and emotional distance that normalized sexism through humor.

Furthermore, male viewers frequently used the improvised and exaggerated aspects of sexist humour to defend their enjoyment. When humour is presented as theatrical exaggeration and playful role reversal, it successfully depoliticises potentially contentious material and turns it into entertainment that is acceptable in society. Male participants easily disassociated themselves from personal responsibility through cognitive and emotional detachment because they believed that such humour was harmless and essential to their cultural identity (Lawless et al., 2020a; Pérez & Greene, 2016).

The Entertainment Stage and Social Laughter

The communal performance context influences the audience's response to humour in Ludruk performances, particularly in East Javanese communities where collectivism is a deeply ingrained cultural norm. Humour serves both social negotiation and entertainment purposes in the distinctive environment created by East Javanese society, which is characterised by its openness and direct interactions. Here, laughter is more than just entertainment; it preserves group cohesiveness, fosters community ties, and lessens conflict (Sherratt & Simmons-Mackie, 2016; Dezecache & Dunbar, 2012). Rather than expressing true enjoyment, audience laughter frequently denotes adherence to social norms and a calculated reaction to maintain social harmony. The purposeful application of humour emphasises its function in group social negotiation. Audience members, especially women, reported feeling subtly pressured to join in on the group laughter despite their discomfort with sexist humour.

Additionally, Javanese society's cultural emphasis on social harmony (*rukun*) affects audience reactions, especially among male viewers. Javanese customs place a high value on maintaining harmony within the community and avoiding conflict, particularly

in public settings (Permanadeli, 2016). Therefore, societal pressures to fit in and refrain from upsetting social cohesiveness are reflected in the widespread laughter and tolerance for potentially harmful humour. In the end, sexist humor's normalisation through cultural and performative framing diminishes critical engagement and upholds established power dynamics. According to Perez and Greene (2016), comedic intent serves as a rhetorical shield that shields comedians from criticism and deters critical audience reactions. Under the pretence of harmless, socially acceptable entertainment, this dynamic upholds traditional gender hierarchies.

Despite their discomfort, the women in the audience remained silent so they wouldn't be branded as cultural outcasts. This demonstrates the cultural and psychological expertise required to deal with sexist humour while preserving social harmony. When interpreting sexist jokes, their methods demonstrate the intricate interaction of gendered performance, symbolic distancing, and sociocultural adaptation. By preserving social harmony and promoting conformity, which is a defining characteristic of East Javanese culture, their laughter served as a compliance mechanism. This bolsters the claim made by Dezechache and Dunbar (2012) that laughter has two purposes: it strengthens social ties and controls group dynamics by imposing conformity through shared experiences.

Technical and performative aspects like timing, delivery, and overall execution were frequently used by male participants to assess humour. This viewpoint supports the assertion made by Grey and Ford (2013) that gendered cognitive processes, such as social identities and role expectations, impact how potentially offensive humour is interpreted. Sexist humour becomes even more legitimate as a normalised mode of communication in East Java, where directness and light-hearted mockery are culturally accepted interaction styles.

The social context in which sexist humour is presented has a significant impact on audience reactions, supporting the claim made by Grey and Ford (2013) that "setting matters." Because of the familiar, performative environment, humour is more likely to be viewed as socially acceptable and non-threatening in communal Ludruk performances. Implicitly accepting that humour in this situation is light-hearted and apolitical reduces critical thinking and strengthens acceptance within the group. As a cultural valve, sexist humour in Ludruk performances allows sensitive or taboo subjects to be discussed without obvious social consequences (Morreall, 2020). Within well-defined moral and ethical bounds, humour fosters a socially acceptable forum for controversial discussion (Attardo, 2014).

According to the study, audiences—male and female—are typically hesitant to interact critically with sexist humour. According to similar research by Chavez and del Prado (2023), humour is more easily accepted in performative contexts because it is thought to be disconnected from real-world applications. Nonetheless, gender norms and prevailing social structures are frequently reflected in and subtly reinforced by Ludruk humour.

As a result, Ludruk humour is in a difficult position since it is both commercialised as entertainment and subtly promotes ideology. This duality stifles critical engagement

and upholds current social hierarchies under the pretence of harmless entertainment, which is consistent with East Java's cultural acceptance of direct and occasionally provocative interactions.

Humor as 'Just Entertainment'

Viewers' interpretations of sexist humour in Ludruk performances reveal nuanced layers influenced by both individual viewpoints and ingrained cultural norms in East Javanese society. The majority of participants saw sexist humour as an essential component of the show—expected, accepted, and seldom questioned. It is evident from using Schutz's phenomenological framework (Schutz, 1967) that audiences create mental barriers between performance and daily life, which hinders more in-depth critical thought. Although the female participants expressed discomfort with certain jokes, particularly overt physical gestures directed at *tandak* performers, disparaging remarks about women's appearances, or stigmatising speech, they largely internalised this discomfort and refrained from publicly criticising it. They talked about the internal conflict between the need to preserve group harmony and the awareness that sexist humour is inappropriate. According to Permanadeli (2010), this dynamic emphasises a socially constructed "silencing of dissent," highlighting the cultural expectation that public confrontation—especially by women—disturbs communal harmony.

These results are consistent with those of Bemiller and Schneider (2010) and Lawless et al. (2020a), who observe that women frequently respond negatively to sexist humour but choose to remain silent in order to prevent social consequences. In the collectivist culture of East Java, where social cohesiveness and conflict avoidance influence interactions, this tendency is especially noticeable. Therefore, humour serves as a social glue instead of a platform for ideological criticism.

Informants Sexist humour in Ludruk performances was viewed as pure entertainment in this study, with little consideration given to its wider social ramifications. The two primary forms of sexist humour in Ludruk are comedy sessions (*dagelan*) and song narratives (*kidungan*). While *dagelan* entails interactive interactions between comedians, *kidungan* is usually a verbal monologue. Ludruk humour frequently targets stereotypical gender themes with satire, slapstick, and derision.

According to senior Ludruk comedian Cak Liwon, the three main themes of Ludruk humour are money, lies, and women. Jokes about women, particularly those that highlight physical stereotypes, consistently elicit high levels of audience participation. Perceptions of stage actions as obvious and readily identifiable as sexist are reinforced by the fact that audiences react more favourably to sexist humour presented through dialogic actions than to verbal *kidungan* monologues. The use of simple, informal language (*boso Suroboyoan*) in Ludruk performances promotes spontaneity and authenticity. This casual tone lessens the audience's propensity to examine or condemn sexist messages by implying that they are not meant to cause harm. The idea that humour lacks social responsibility is further supported by the presumption that it is merely a form of free expression. When sexist messages are humorously presented, they frequently employ complex rhetoric that masks underlying prejudices (Mallett et al., 2016). Because of this

rhetorical complexity, audiences are unable to recognise such messages as sexist. According to performance studies, audiences typically view all staged elements as existing within a "safe zone" of entertainment. This perception is supported by the widely held notion that the main purpose of performance is to provide entertainment. As a result, those who criticise sexist humour are frequently written off as being too critical or unentertaining (Chavez & del Prado, 2023; Kanyemba & Naidu, 2019).

This phenomenon is explained by McGraw and Warren's (2010) benign violation theory, which holds that humour works best when it defies expectations while maintaining the audience's sense of security. Audiences interpret sexist humor in Ludruk as "just humor" through a lens shaped by Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Though the jokes violate social norms, they are accepted as benign due to cultural framing, performance tradition, and symbolic displacement. The *tandak* provides a social and narrative buffer, distancing the audience from direct associations with sexism. Because Ludruk functions within conventional, entertainment-based frameworks, breaking gender stereotypes is viewed as harmless. The dismissal of criticism against sexist humour as personal aversion rather than a valid academic or societal concern is a result of cultural norms that value harmony and cohesion. The development of social ties and stress relief are two reasons people go to Ludruk performances. Ludruk celebrations with family or neighbours are a prime example of Javanese culture, which places a high value on social harmony and unity. The focus on rukun, the foundation of social order, is highlighted by studies by Mulder (2005) and Geertz (1973). In Ludruk, humour serves as a cathartic outlet, enabling viewers to laugh at misfortunes without fear of dire consequences (Peacock, 2014; Moss, 2021).

The majority of Ludruk actors, including those who crossdress to play female roles, are men. Because sexist humour frequently centres on male actors who exaggerate feminine characteristics, this practice adds another level of entertainment value. By highlighting exaggerated gestures, tone, and appearance, these crossdressers produce incongruities that make people laugh. When the target is a crossdresser, audiences—especially women—tend to be more tolerant of sexist humour. The reason for this is that crossdressers are seen as symbolic rather than actual representations of female identity. Accordingly, jokes about crossdressers are not viewed as detrimental to women in general (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). According to Zhuang (2016), viewers of drag shows are able to discern between the performer's true identity and their stage persona, which promotes tolerance for such humour. Because of this distinction, crossdressers are placed in a gender-ambiguous environment where social structures are not threatened by breaking the rules.

People who identify with the female social category are more likely to enjoy sexist humour (Kochersberger et al., 2014). In addition to being a humorous tactic, cross-dressing acts as a symbolic shield to divert possible criticism of Ludruk's sexist content. Furthermore, as long as the actors seem unoffended and the material is interpreted as role-playing, audiences usually ignore sexist humour. More tolerance is fostered when stage actions are viewed as fictional or role-based. Audiences unwittingly take a lenient

attitude towards morally dubious humour in a cultural setting that values harmony and *nrmo*.

Ludruk Audiences' Social Laughter and Entertainment Stage

Sexist humour frequently acts as a "cultural safety valve" in entertainment, enabling the expression of taboo subjects without fear of social backlash (Morreall, 2020). Since humour cuts across formal social boundaries, it provides a comfortable environment for discussing delicate topics like sexism (Attardo, 2014). Because of this, the entertainment stage is a protected area where traditional moral and ethical standards might not be entirely applicable.

Results indicate that the social context of Ludruk has a significant impact on the decreased propensity of both male and female audiences to criticise sexist humour. Audiences frequently accept staged content because they perceive it as fictional rather than representative of reality, as noted by Chaves and Del Prado (2023). A deeper examination, however, shows that a large portion of this material is extremely pertinent to real-world situations. Ludruk humour frequently ignores ideological ramifications and blurs subject boundaries.

Laughter in response to sexist humour frequently serves as a social negotiation tool rather than necessarily indicating consent. Laughter aids in social norm adaptation and group harmony in collectivist cultures, such as the Ludruk community (Sherratt & Simmons-Mackie, 2016). To avoid being called humourless, even awkward audience members may laugh. Therefore, "social laughter" is more than just a way to express enjoyment; it is a strategic social mechanism.

A complex behaviour that serves vital social purposes is social laughter. In addition to expressing feelings, it strengthens ties within the group and promotes a sense of community. According to research, laughing together improves relationships, increases pain tolerance, and releases endorphins (Dezecache & Dunbar, 2012). Studies also indicate that men focus on humor's delivery, while women rationalize their laughter to align with social norms and avoid negative labeling, reinforcing the idea that excessive seriousness conflicts with humor's core function.

Ludruk's performative and social context increases tolerance for sexist humour. Since many audience members are from nearby communities, the setting is more personal and welcoming than in formal settings. Ludruk's improvisational style, in which humour emerges naturally from audience interaction, emphasises how important audience-performer interaction is in determining humour dynamics.

The study's conclusions imply that social and cultural settings have a big impact on whether or not sexist humour is accepted. Furthermore, the findings show that laughter can be an adaptive reaction to dominant social norms rather than necessarily indicating approval. This emphasises the importance of interpreting humour in terms of its production, consumption, and negotiation within particular cultural contexts in addition to its content.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the function of entertainment in the context of traditional Javanese performing arts, with a focus on the Ludruk stage. How

the entertainment stage encourages social laughter among Ludruk audiences is the main research question.

Sexist humour frequently serves as a "cultural safety valve" in entertainment settings, allowing people to discuss taboo subjects without fear of social backlash (Morreall, 2020). According to Attardo (2014), humour is a medium of expression that cuts across the formal boundaries of social interaction and allows for more casual conversations about delicate topics like sexism. As a result, the entertainment stage turns into a culturally protected area where standard moral and ethical principles might not be entirely applicable.

The social context of the performances is a major factor in the tendency of both male and female audiences to ignore sexist humour, according to the findings. Because staged content is perceived as fictional rather than a reflection of reality, audiences frequently tolerate it, as noted by Chaves and Del Prado (2023). A deeper examination, however, shows that a large portion of the material is highly applicable to actual experiences. Humour is frequently viewed in Ludruk as amusement that ignores ideological overtones and blurs subject boundaries.

Ludruk's improvisation demonstrates how humour is influenced by audience reaction and cultural background in addition to content. While audience members' social relationships produce complex group dynamics, the Ludruk stage encourages interactive engagement between performers and spectators. The meaning of shared laughter varies; some people laugh to fit in even though they are aware of bias. Social cues in the environment shape laughter as an affective tool (Winick, n.d.).

Therefore, Ludruk's sexist humour cannot be understood based only on the jokes it contains. It results from the interplay of gender values, cultural norms, and social structures within the community. This study demonstrates that humour plays a significant role in forming, negotiating, and upholding social and gender values, which is consistent with Weaver's (2010) theory that jokes are rhetorical and responses political (Pérez & Greene, 2016). Even when presented as "just entertainment," humour has an impact on social structures and power relationships.

'It's Only Jokes' viewers' reactions to sexist humour reveal a wide variety of nuanced interpretations. Not everyone expressed their disapproval of the joke's content directly. Some female informants, for example, reported feeling uneasy about sexist behaviour that occurs on stage, such as inappropriate touching of female actors, disparaging remarks about dark-skinned women, or jokes about fathers who are desperate to keep their daughters from becoming spinsters. But because preserving social harmony was valued more highly than conflict, this unease was usually repressed.

In this situation, there is an emotional tension between wanting to maintain group harmony and acknowledging inequality. Especially for women, suppressing critical responses is an adaptive tactic to prevent social conflict and preserve group ties. According to Sheratt and Simmons-Mackie (2016), this can be viewed as a relational coping strategy in which behaviour and emotional expression are modified to avoid social rejection or conflict within social networks.

Cultural factors play a significant role in this benign framing. East Javanese norms discourage confrontation and prioritize group harmony. Female audience members especially internalize roles as peacekeepers, avoiding criticism in favor of social unity (Permanadeli, 2010). As such, even problematic humor becomes normalized when embedded in entertainment. Humor is viewed as tradition, not ideology, which reduces sensitivity to its gendered implications. Group harmony is a cornerstone of social functioning in Javanese culture, not just a normative value. As evidenced by the idea of "women as coolers" (Permanadeli, 2015), women have historically been essential in maintaining this harmony in both the home and social domains. As a result, women's reactions to sexist humour frequently result from a cultural expectation to avoid causing conflict, even if it means sacrificing emotional support or personal criticism. According to earlier research, sexist humour typically elicits a more negative response in women than in men. However, female audience members frequently repress their outrage in order to avoid conflict with Ludruk's largely male audience. They can avoid the "social cost" of coming across as too critical or unhumorous by using this tactic.

Tolerance for sexist humour is fostered by the desire for mutual harmony. Women are essential to the preservation of peaceful coexistence, which is a fundamental value in Javanese society. Javanese women play a vital role in preserving social harmony through their domestic responsibilities, as Risa Permanadeli points out in *Dadi Wong Wadon*. This is also true in the entertainment industry, where women steer clear of conflict even when they are aware of discrimination or harassment. Through these mechanisms, Ludruk becomes a space where symbolic violence is sustained under the guise of laughter (Bourdieu, 2001). Humor masks power dynamics while reinforcing social norms. The implications extend beyond the stage: laughter, as a socially embedded response, plays a role in reproducing or challenging cultural narratives.

Sexist humor's portrayal as "just a joke" needs to be understood as a component of a more intricate sociocultural dynamic. This framing serves as an adaptive tactic in situations such as Ludruk performances, allowing audiences to enjoy entertainment without igniting direct conflict. But it runs the risk of stifling critical awareness of humor's ingrained gender bias (Riquelme et al., 2021). According to a number of studies, humour that reinforces stereotypes can support discriminatory ideologies if it is accepted without question. Even political humour can spread harmful ideas if it is not considered, according to Ödmark and Harvard (2021). Askanius (2021) points out that sexist humour frequently serves to uphold social hierarchies in digital media, with entertainment serving as a buffer against responsibility.

Therefore, societal pressures to maintain community stability as well as audience misunderstandings are the main causes of the normalisation of sexist humour. "Just humour" is not a sign of ignorance but rather of a collective compromise in societies where harmony is valued highly. This emphasises how important it is to understand humour in light of its social context, taking into account not only its content but also how it is received and negotiated (Kanyemba & Naidu, 2019; Pérez & Greene, 2016). This study urges a differentiation between humor's comedic intent and its social impact,

promoting greater awareness and critical engagement in its interpretation (Riquelme et al., 2021).

Audiences largely view sexist humour in Ludruk performances as pure entertainment, frequently without giving its wider social ramifications enough thought. Because social laughter is so common and serves to preserve group harmony, cultural norms, ingrained gender roles, and social interaction dynamics all play a part in the acceptance of sexist humour. While female participants, who might feel confined by social pressures, tend to accept sexist humour as a way to fit in with society's expectations, male participants usually appreciate such humour for its delivery and comedic elements. The collaborative and improvised character of Ludruk reinforces the traditional acceptance of sexist humour.

The idea that sexist humour is "just entertainment" highlights a tendency in society to value entertainment over critical analysis of underlying gender biases. Social pressures, especially for women, prevent open challenges to sexism even when audiences are aware of it. This normalisation serves as an example of how entertainment both negotiates and reinforces gender-related social norms.

Examining how changing media environments and the digitisation of performances affect how people perceive sexist humour is crucial, especially for younger generations who might reinterpret more conventional forms of humour. Understanding the dynamics surrounding the reception of sexist humour in diverse cultural contexts would be improved by broadening the scope of research to include a variety of traditional art forms and geographical contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how sexist humor is rationalized and normalized in traditional cultural performance. Audiences frame such humor as harmless, rooted in tradition, and removed from real-world consequences. This interpretive distance is supported by cultural values, performance context, and gender roles. Sexist humour in Ludruk performances operates within intricate sociocultural contexts. Female audiences frequently justify discomfort in order to fit in with cultural norms of harmony, whereas male audiences concentrate on performative elements. Ludruk's improvisational, participatory approach fosters a group atmosphere in which humour serves as a social glue and a tool to reinforce gender stereotypes. These revelations highlight the necessity of conducting a critical analysis of conventional entertainment practices and their function in upholding social norms.

The findings contribute to communication and gender studies by showing how humor operates as a medium for ideological transmission. The symbolic function of *tandak*, the prioritization of social harmony, and the performance tradition of Ludruk all shape how humor is understood. These elements collectively create an environment where sexist humor is not only tolerated but normalized. Future research should explore

comparative contexts, including digital media and contemporary comedy, to assess how similar mechanisms of justification and distancing operate across genres and platforms.

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