Identities Are No Joke (or Are They?): Humor and Identity in Vivek Mahbubani's Stand-up

Abstract

Using the lenses of humor studies and narrative analysis, this paper discusses the stand-up comedy of Vivek Mahbubani, a Hong Kong-born stand-up comedian of Indian descent. Mahbubani uses humor about ethnicity-related issues to highlight the irrationality of racial discrimination and stereotypes. Specifically, Mahbubani challenges people's preconceived ideas about the speakerhood of Cantonese and the local identity. The present study demonstrates how this comedian has effectively built humor into his narrative as a response to oppression, thus engaging the local, ethnically Chinese audience to reflect on the social and ethnic tension felt by minorities in Hong Kong. This study further argues that Mahbubani's comedy reflects a more general trend in stand-up comedy: humor as a vehicle for a more inclusive and progressive grand narrative across different cultures; this trend stands in stark contrast to earlier ethnic jokes that often made minorities the target of verbal humor.

Keywords: Humor, Semantics, Stand-up comedy, Vivek Mahbubani, Asia

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the stand-up comedy of Vivek Mahbubani, a performer from Hong Kong of Indian descent. Since 2005, Mahbubani has been active on the Hong Kong stand-up comedy circuit, performing both in Cantonese and English. In 2007, Mahbubani won the "Hong Kong's Funniest Person" title in the Cantonese language category of the competition; then, in 2008, he won the same award in the competition's English language category. He has also received the Top Outstanding Young Persons Award (TOYP) in 2018. Mahbubani's acts are unique among Hong Kong comedians, because they often include jokes about the challenges and racism faced by individuals in Hong Kong who are not ethnically Chinese. His jokes often challenge the assumptions that only ethnically-Chinese people are Cantonese speakers. The speakerhood issue is often addressed through his narration of self and self-deprecating humor in native Cantonese, which is both empowering and entertaining. The discrimination faced by is not uncommon amongst South Asians (often second or third generation immigrants) in Hong Kong. Despite having lived in Hong Kong for a long time, or even being born and raised in the city, members in the ethnic-minority community are often seen or referred to as foreigners. This perpetual foreigner stereotype is discussed more often in the context of the United States, where ethnic diversity and conflicts are more pronounced. This study aims to demonstrate that a similar tension can be found elsewhere. We show that immigrants of minority races are often seen as perpetual foreigners. Hong Kong is home to many ethnic minorities born and raised there, yet they are not accepted as locals by the predominantly ethnically Chinese community.

Mahbubani's success as a stand-up comedian is interesting in that it provides insight into the study of humor and comedy in Hong Kong. Stand-up comedy is not as popular in Hong Kong as it is in the United States. Before Mahbubani, stand-up comedy in Hong Kong was typically performed by celebrity comedians, such as Dayo Wong and Jan Lam, both of whom were already

successful in television and radio. Their comedy shows were often one-off programs in larger stadiums similar to pop-music concerts. Mahbubani became the first comedian dedicated to doing stand-up in nightclubs, performing for a significantly smaller audience—in venues that allow for interactions between the actor and the audience. Mahbubani's unique ethnic background and ethnicity-themed jokes can be seen as his trademark, especially in his earlier acts.

This study discusses Mahbubani's acts from two perspectives: a semantic/pragmatic approach towards humor and a "narratives of self" perspective in the context of ethnic humor. The semantic/pragmatic approach is common in humor studies, and we engage it to explore the various themes in Mahbubani's routines that speak directly to race/racial discrimination, language use/acquisition, and othering of minorities in Hong Kong. We analyze the mechanisms underpinning the humor in his jokes, more specifically, through incongruity-resolution (Attardo, 1994; Brock, 2017) and benign violations (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Researchers have conducted studies into humor across languages and cultures (Alden, Hoyer, & Lee, 1993; Lee & Lim, 2008; Yue, Jiang, Lu, & Hiranandani, 2016), but these studies often occur in the context of advertising. It is not entirely clear if previous analyses of humor in commercials across cultures can be applied to ethnic humor.

The second approach follows the examples of previous work (Lowe, 1986; Ochs & Capps, 1996; Juni and Katz, 2001; Gilbert 2004). These researchers discuss ethnic issues from a sociological point of view. This body of literature shows that audiences often react differently to the same jokes, demonstrating the necessity of discussing the cultural and social background when analyzing the ethnic jokes of a particular region. Humor reveals the premise and background of the jokes, which in turn, provides information about a community's beliefs, regardless of its members' own awareness or admission. Using video data of Mahbubani's comedic acts and interviews, we analyze his stand-up acts using narratives of self as a framework (Ochs & Capps, 1996). In essence, the stand-up acts become his personal narratives, "verbalized, visualized, and/or embodied framings of a sequence of actual or possible life events" (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 24). Through narratives, storytellers, such as Mahbubani, explore their various historical, cultural, and personal positionings in the world in relation to others through the act of (re)telling their experiences.

These two approaches to analyzing the comedic routines, the semantics/pragmatics and narratives of self approaches, are two sides of the same coin. The semantics of humor provide a framework for analyzing individual jokes. Humor theories, which are based on semantics and psychology, guide our discussion of how Mahbubani uses incongruity and benign violation to trigger laughter, similar to jokes in other genres. Because these humorous violations often reveal stereotypes and discrimination against ethnic minorities, these stand-up routines should be investigated as parts of a larger narrative and commentary on oppression. The narrative approach, and more specifically, the discussion of ethnicity and speakerhood, helps contextualize Mahbubani's comedic routines that address the racial tension between the Chinese majority and South Asian minorities (e.g., stereotypes of South Asians and discrimination against them). Furthermore, the narrative approach complements the semantic approach by illustrating how Mahbubani's comedy manifests deeper social functions. While the superficial entertainment function of stand-up comedy can be explained by semantics-based humor theories, the narrative approach helps us better understand the comedian's intention to expose, ridicule, and comment on discrimination against minorities. Thus, the humor analysis of individual jokes shows how the performer connects with

the audience by exposing discriminatory behaviors as the target of the jokes. The mockery of discriminatory behaviors serves a larger function to address the deeper distrust or discrimination against ethnic minorities, which may not always surface in observable behaviors.

Mahbubani's comedic routines include jokes about race-related encounters in Hong Kong (e.g., being a terrorist for Halloween because "people think he looks like one," and bilingual Cantonese-English exchanges with a police officer checking his identification). We argue that Mahbubani's routines disrupt master narratives of legitimacy and authenticity about Hong Kong Cantonese speakerhood and identities, providing powerful counter-narratives mediated by ethnic and self-effacing humor. Many of Mahbubani's performances also include metalinguistic and metapragmatic commentaries about the appropriateness of Cantonese language use. The variety of themes of humor, on the one hand, forces the audience to confront the sociolinguistic realities that South Asians face in Hong Kong society. On the other hand, the comedic acts also help the audience relate to Mahbubani as an in-group member of the Hong Kong community through their shared language and experience.

2. A Brief Review of Humor Studies

2.1 Benign Violation and Stand-up Comedy

This study adopts the Benign Violation Theory (henceforth *BVT*; McGraw and Warren, 2010) as the general framework of humor. Compared to older theories, such as the superiority theory (CITE) and the Generalized Theory of Verbal Humor (Raskin & Attardo 1994). BVT has received less attention in the literature. The condition that jokes are some form of violation seems similar to incongruity theories. What BVT adds to the analysis of humor is that the violations should be benign for the jokes to be funny. While incongruity adequately explains a lot of humor, McGraw and Warren (2010) criticized that incongruity theories are too broad and they may wrongly include incongruent cases that are not funny. Instead, they suggested applying the principle of benign violation to rule out some of the incongruent but unfunny scenarios. For a situation to be benign, one of the following conditions must be met: "(a) a salient norm suggests that something is wrong but another salient norm suggests that it is acceptable, (b) one is only weakly committed to the violated norm, or (c) the violation is psychologically distant" (McGraw & Warren, 2010, p. 1142). Perhaps, a more casual way to capture the ideas posited in BVT is to apply the following assessment to a joke: "If it bends, it's funny. If it breaks, it's not funny" A violation alone is not a sufficient condition for a humorous effect. Something breaking can be interpreted as a situation where the violation is too serious from the audience's perspective; thus, it is not funny. If the violation is weakened by other norms (McGraw and Warren's [2010] condition a), is weakly committed (condition b), or is subjectively weakened (condition c), like something bending that might, potentially, return to its original shape, it would be considered benign and the jokes would be viewed as funny.

BVT explains the potential discrepancy between intended and perceived humor. Although the judgment of whether a violation is benign can be subjective, it can, nevertheless, be independently tested based on an individual's background or belief system. McGraw and Warren (2010) used experimental paradigms from psychology to illustrate how naive participants may respond to intended humor, instead of relying on scholars' interpretations. In one of their experiments, they compared the scenarios of two organizations giving a Hummer SUV as a

promotional prize to recruit new members. One experiment compared the scenarios of two organizations giving a Hummer SUV as a promotional prize for member recruitment. For a credit union, the promotion is expected to involve no violation. A church, however, is not expected to use gifts to recruit new members. Non-religious participants were found to be amused by the church scenario, which can be interpreted as a sign that they find the violation to be benign. This is relevant for the present study on ethnic humor, as the jokes rely on both violation and the benign nature. It can well be the case that the same joke related to ethnic minorities is intended to be funny, but is not perceived as being so. BVT provides a clear framework for that discrepancy. The present study will demonstrate that BVT provides an accurate explanation of ethnic jokes, which often describe encounters with racial tension or discrimination. For an audience that does not perceive any violation in scenarios of racial discrimination, the jokes are not funny, probably because they believe members of an ethnic minority who are treated badly actually deserve it. For audience members that are offended by ethnic jokes, as the racial discrimination triggers their own unpleasant memory, the violations are significant and not benign, thus, rendering the jokes not funny.

Stand-up comedy is a special form of humor, not only because stand-up is always performative and interactive in nature, but also because of its association with its social function to ridicule and subvert the hegemony. Mintz (1985) stresses the importance of live performance for witnessing socio-cultural mediation. This observation in stand-up comedy is particularly clear in contemporary stand-up shows and late night television shows, which are typically hosted by comedians. Smith (2015) acknowledges that jokes can "express the contradiction and inadequacies of the social structure" (p.577), although they should not be expected to cannot change or resolve the contradictions. This function of subversion is often conducted through the onstage persona. (Mintz 1985; Gilbert, 2004). The persona can be the aggressive target of the jokes, or the observant narrator that walks the audience through the humorous situation. In her discussion on the politics of stand up comedy, Gilbert (2004) shows that stand up comedians often create onstage personas that represent "cultural construction and cultural critic, participant and observer, performer and performed" (p.329). Although the on-stage persona and the comedian are closely related, they should not be understood as the same entity. Koziski (1984) likens stand-up comedians to anthropologists, in that comedians also look at "seemingly unrelated customs, behaviors and artifacts in their society", "see novel interconnections" and "break down social life into its basic structure". In this context, this study investigates Mahbubani's comedy as another example of how stand-up comedy serves as a vehicle of social comments. In the close analysis of his jokes, it is shown that Mahbubani plays both roles as the onstage persona and also the anthropologist-commentator through his comedic acts.

2.2 Ethnic Humor, Narrative, and Identity

A line of research focuses on the relation between humor and identity, often under the larger context of the study of ethnic humor. Davies (1982, 1990, 2002) provided useful generalizations that guide our study. Davies convincingly shows that the function of ethnic jokes is not merely to mock minority groups, as Superiority Theory may suggest. Rather, ethnic jokes reduce ambiguity (of the identity of minority groups), thereby making it less frightening. As long as there is ambiguity about whether a group of people belong to a specific society, ethnic jokes would

be made to reduce that ambiguity so that the boundary between social groups can be construed more easily. As Nilsen and Nilsen (2006) and Rappaport (2005) noted, the landscape and dynamics in ethnic humor and the appreciation of the jokes have changed a lot since the 1990s.

It is important to distinguish between racial or ethnicity-themed humor and racist humor. With the rising awareness of political correctness, along with the growing critical mass of ethnic minorities as media consumers, it is rare to see racist humor (jokes that target ethnic minorities). Rather, it is often the case that comedians (especially in the United States and among English-speaking audiences) would make fun of their own identity and experience as an ethnic minority or mock the irrational and ridiculous fear and hate against minorities (most notably racism against Muslims). The current trend of ethnic humor is drastically different from the earlier ethnic-themed jokes, which can be analyzed in terms of superiority over and hostility against minorities. In contrast, contemporary ethnic jokes are often performed by ethnic minorities[1] and the targets of the jokes are either ethnic stereotypes or racist behavior, in addition to in-group ridicule of the performer's own heritage. The present study categorizes this type of humor, where the comedian is part of the target group (e.g., Ronny Chieng's rant about Asians being good at mathematics), as ethnicity-themed humor, but not racist humor[2]. Juni and Katz (2001) focused on ethnic humor directed at the narrators, themselves; they analyze the humor from the perspective of defense and acculturation. Specifically, they see self-mockery as a defense mechanism used to control victimization. Similar positions have been advocated by Leung (2014), with examples from Hoisan-wa (a Sinitic language spoken in Chinatown in San Francisco) under the narrative analysis framework (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Juni and Katz's (2001) Self-defense Theory is a response to what they call the "masochistic interpretation of ethnic humor" in earlier works on ethnic humor, which is considered a sign of self-hatred in self-directed jokes in earlier works (cf. Freud, 1905; La Fave, Haddad, & Marshall, 1976; La Fave, 1977). Moreover, Demjén (2016, 2018) studied humor as a coping mechanism for cancer patients and argued how joking about bad situations can help patients psychologically process their experience. These survival dynamics and coping mechanisms are important for destigmatizing ethnic humor that was once deemed pathological; they promote self-empowerment of oppressed minorities by encouraging them to foreground the challenges they face in their lives. This line of research has a direct impact on the present study, as a significant portion of Mahbubani's comedy deals with racial issues and tension in a context with different languages and cultures.

2.3 Race and Identity in the Hong Kong Context

Racial tension and identity issues have often been the source of incongruity and humor. Given that 88.1% of the population in Hong Kong are native Cantonese speakers, and 92% are ethnic Chinese (HKSAR Census, 2016), South Asian immigrants (e.g., those from India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand) who do not speak Cantonese or other Chinese languages, and whose skin tones are different from that of Chinese, often find themselves being seen as the "other" and face discrimination, based on language, race, cultural customs, religion and clothing (Erni & Leung, 2014). While discrimination against locals of South Asian descent has

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[1] To name a few comedians with commercial success: Mindy Kaling, Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj, Gabriel Iglesias, Kevin Hart, and Russell Peters.
[2] Acknowledgement to be inserted here.

gained the awareness of the general public recently, accusations of terrorism, "fake refugee" or free-riding social welfare are still common (Leung, 2016; Singh & Lo, 2017; Ng, 2018). The social tension and discriminatory rhetoric in Hong Kong are similar to other regions where some people view immigrants and asylum seekers as problems.

Socio-ethnic studies have investigated both the general trend of integration among South Asian immigrants and the younger generations (Erni & Leung, 2014; Kwok & Narain, 2003; Detaramani & Lock, 2003) and the comparison between different groups (Lock & Detaramani, 2006). Invariably, scholars have identified some form of the perpetual foreigner problem (Wu, 2002; Devos & Banaji, 2005; Huynh, Devos, & Smalarz, 2011) that describes how immigrants and their children are always seen as foreign to the region, regardless of their length of stay. Studies (Plüss, 2005; Kwok & Narain, 2003) have shown that South Asian immigrants have had to find a unique way of adapting in the Hong Kong community, rather than trying to fit themselves into the British/foreign mold or integrating into the local ethnic Chinese people, given their limited social resources. The immigrants' knowledge of Cantonese varies, and so does the degree of integration. Many second-generation South Asians are treated as foreigners and have problems finding jobs, or even renting apartments. Ng, Kennedy, and Hue (2018) concluded that younger locals of South Asian descent identify with Hong Kong, despite the difficulties they face. This indicates a tension between South Asian locals, who are often born and raised in Hong Kong, and who identify with the city, and the ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong, who often treat them as the "other". Erni and Leung (2014, p. 206) stated that "identity theories suggest that ethnicity is formed through complex negotiations within the self and between groups. They also suggested that 'self' and 'other' are caught in unpredictable and complex forms of entanglement if 'difference' is to be taken seriously." For Mahbubani's comedy, which often involves themes related to ethnicity, we argue that this complex negotiation is an effective way to engage with the mainstream, Chinese-centric narrative, in which the difference is actually taken seriously by being foregrounded in jokes.

3. Themes and Narratives in Mahbubani's Stand-up Comedy

We analyzed 19 video clips of Mahbubani's stand-up acts (ca. 93 minutes in total), and five interviews that others conducted with him in English and Cantonese (ca. 85 minutes). Purposive sampling is used for the selection of materials. The clips were selected based on how well the materials can illustrate the relation between Mahbubani's comedic work and the social context. Therefore, both stand-up routines and interviews related to Mahbubani's creative process were included. Other clips with Mahbubani, such as commercials or interviews of his own personal life unrelated to comedy, were excluded, because they are not representative of how his work responds to racial tension. Although there are numerous video clips publicly available online, many clips appeared to be duplicates. These video clips were discarded from our analysis. To ensure that readers can find the original materials, the cited examples below are all from YouTube.

This section elaborates on the several recurring themes and the narratives of these comedic routines, under the previously discussed frameworks of the humor theories and the narrative of self.

3.1 Speakerhood of Cantonese

Mahbubani's routines often include mockery/commentary on the speakerhood of Cantonese. As a person of Indian descent, Mahbubani is often assumed to be a foreigner in Hong Kong who does not speak Cantonese, despite being born and raised in the city. In their introduction to the special issue on language and speakerhood in migratory contexts, Reiter & Rojo (2019) maintain that speakerhood "involves being confronted with the norms, requirements and the values that define who is considered to be a speaker of the 'language' or 'languages' of the receiving community and being assessed in accordance with a given measure, that is, a canon of speakerhood in a particular community." That is, it is common that members of the receiving community and their views are part of the experience of migrant speakers. In Hong Kong, it is often presumed that a Cantonese speaker must be ethnically Chinese. Given that over 90% of the population is ethnically Chinese (HKSAR Census 2016), it is rare to see people who are not ethnically Chinese in Hong Kong, with the exception of tourists, expatriates, and domestic workers (primarily from Southeast Asia). In addition to the presumption that these non-ethnically Chinese people do not speak Cantonese[3], they are also, typically, not considered to be part of the local community because they have less interaction with local affairs, such as politics or education. While this presumption makes the city more foreigner friendly (because English is automatically used in communications), it also creates a sense of separation and exclusion between (perceived) local people and foreigners. South Asians are often perceived as foreigners, and they are not expected to be speakers of Cantonese simply because they look different than people that are ethnically Chinese. However, since many South Asians not only speak Cantonese, and are, in fact native speakers of Cantonese that were born in Hong Kong and raised there, the choice of speaking to them in English can be perceived as an exclusion of Cantonese speakerhood rather than as a sign of friendliness and inclusion by the ethnically Chinese locals. Thus, the use of English is a constant reminder that South Asians are not seen as part of the local community.

In his earlier works, Mahbubani often began his routines with the premise that he speaks fluent Cantonese, and he pointed out that this is not expected by many locals. This premise of speakerhood is important in understanding the humorous effect as well as the significance of Mahbubani's jokes. He once explained his ability to speak Cantonese as a superpower; because people would always assume that he did not understand Cantonese, he could listen to these unsuspecting people like a spy. In his performances, it can often be observed that the audience was initially surprised by Mahbubani speaking in Cantonese, to which he would add, "Yeah, you heard me right; I am really speaking in Chinese", to amuse the audience. Mahbubani was a student of creative media, and he noted that his classmates would include him in their film assignments to make the films look "more international", and they would make friends with him to look cool:

They would love to become my friend so they can look cool. Imagine you are with me hanging out, and the other people would think "*Wow, you're so cool. You have a foreigner friend. Your English must be so good*". But they don't realize, 我係同佢哋講中文㗎嘛 (I speak in Chinese with them after all).

Title: Vivek《笑自己 自己笑》 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXC-yYkPYGI

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[3] Some domestic workers have Cantonese training. Understandably, these non-native speakers often have accents when they speak in Cantonese. This phenomenon has often been a source of mockery both in personal conversations and, unfortunately, public representation

In the interview excerpt presented above, Mahbubani framed the wrong presumption that he does not speak Cantonese and is seen as a foreigner into an incongruent situation and source of humor. The choice of using Cantonese for the punchline emphasizes the fact that Mahbubani's friends do speak Cantonese with him, depicting a cynical, yet cheeky, image of them, almost as if they have the intention of deceiving people that their English was good. This has, in turn, magnified the incongruity of the humorous situation. Another joke that highlights the presumption of Mahbubani not understanding Cantonese is his frequent encounters with police officers, in which the officers start the conversation in English, but fail to pronounce his last name. In several performances of this joke, the officer pronounces his name, Mahbubani, as "Muhammad" or even "Muhammad-ed" ([moʊhæmədəd] with the added [əd]). Mahbubani then goes on to comment that the added [əd] was used as a past tense marker, because the officer thought of *Mohammed* as a verb meaning, "to terrorize", and Mahbubani was a terrorist.

Across all these cases, one can see that Mahbubani first invites the audience to experience his side of the narrative by stating the premise that he does speak Cantonese, despite not being ethnically Chinese. In his earlier stand-up acts, this is an important part of the comedic setup. Not only is the premise important for getting the audience to see the situation from Mahbubani's perspective, it is also crucial for seeing the incongruity in the scenarios (such as the unsuspecting characters who wrongly presumed that Mahbubani cannot speak or understand Cantonese). This effectively creates the expectation for the audience to see how Mahbubani responds to these "schlemiel" characters. These unsuspecting characters are the target of the jokes that represent the stereotypes and discrimination at a more abstract level.

It is also important to note that Mahbubani has always kept the violation benign and easily resolved. Throughout many performances, Mahbubani has never directly accused any of the characters (fictional or real) of racism. Based on our observations from the video clips, most of the audience members are bilinguals living in Hong Kong, as evidenced by Mahbubani's frequent code-mixing in the comedic acts. At a pragmatic level as a performer, it would be important to maintain a friendly rapport with the audience. The same strategy can also be explained by BVT; the jokes are humorous when the violation is benign. In Mahbubani's language-themed jokes, the humor effect and the challenge against speakerhood of Cantonese are inseparable. The established preconception that only ethnic Chinese people speak Cantonese is the source of the incongruity. The same routines would not have worked as effectively, if at all, for other performers who are ethnically Chinese. In these cases, the comedy arising from humorous situations clearly embodies the challenge of the speakerhood of the Cantonese language.

3.2 Appearance, Body Features, and Race

The second theme in Mahbubani's jokes is the direct reference of the appearance and body features of a person of Indian descent. In an interview, Mahbubani recounted his life as a primary school pupil at an all boys' school:

Some of the kids raised their hands and like "oh, teacher, why is there a girl in the class?" "I was like, I'm a girl? You really have bad taste!" And then he explained "'cos you have long

eyelashes". So, I guess long eyelashes equals girls. So, I went home, took a pair of scissors and I was gonna cut it. My mom said, "No, don't do it."

<div align="right">
Interview by Jennifer Wong at "About Tonight", Channel 31 Melbourne
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_DQQ0om_lQ
Retrieved on January 6, 2019
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By telling the story through a child's perspective, the apparent racism and ignorance become less biting and more controlled, as the audience can more easily forgive a child's lack of awareness about different races. Mahbubani is skillful in turning the otherwise racist comments into objects of ridicule. Another example of ridicule related to body features is also about body hair. Mahbubani set up the joke by saying that the long hair on his arms and legs is often seen as a disadvantage. However, the hair can also act as mosquito traps and stop mosquitoes from biting. By turning the target of racist comment to an advantage, and further exaggerating the benefits, the joke challenges the stereotype that takes body hair as a negative. He has other jokes that rely on the premise that "Indians all look the same". The target of the joke was the imaginary paparazzi that followed him and took photographs. Mahbubani would lose them by hiding in the Chungking Mansion, which is known for being populated by members of South Asian and African communities, leaving the paparazzi confused and thinking, "all Indians look the same, like Agent Smith in *The Matrix*". In another segment, Mahbubani talks about his speed dating experience:

I sat down with one girl and she seemed really nervous. I said to her, "Don't worry, I speak Cantonese." And her first question was, "Do you speak English then?" I was like, now I am in trouble. "Hm, with so much hair, do you get thin tan lines under the hair strands?" "Huh? Not really, that never happened." Then she asked a classic question. She looked at me sincerely and went, "Were you naturally born Indian?"

<div align="right">
"Caught between Cultures"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgedWsYI0eY
Retrieved on January 7, 2019
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The first two questions in the excerpt presented above demonstrate the issues on speakerhood and body features discussed above. The last question—"Were you naturally born Indian?"—shows that the nervous lady simply forgot that one cannot change one's race. The comedic effect comes from the incongruity and opposition between the fact that one cannot change one's race and the false premise of the question that implies that one can. Thus, the joke foregrounds that race is not an option; therefore, it is irrational to discriminate against someone for things over which they have no control.

Following the logic mentioned by Juni and Katz (2001, p. 124), the act of self-mockery helps avoid "uncontrollable punishment". By initiating the mockery, the performer is in control of the aggression and limits the damage. In the story of the classmate connecting Mahbubani's eyelashes to him being a girl, he further explained that, instead of whining about discrimination, his attitude has been: "Oh, let me go fix it". The same attitude of "fixing the problem" applies to how he engages the audience in thinking about race discrimination. The implication of Mahbubani's race-themed jokes is two-fold. On the one hand, these jokes demonstrate a mechanism of psychological defense

that is similar to the ones used in other ethnic communities that are better studied (e.g., Jewish humor in the United States context). On the other hand, these jokes about racial differences show Mahbubani's awareness about how to gain the audience's allegiance to his side of the story and understand the irrationality of acts of discrimination.

3.3 Other Stereotypes of People of Indian Descent

Racial stereotypes can often be manifested in terms of profession, customs, and habits. Typical stereotypes in Mahbubani's jokes include Indian men being in computer and IT-related professions, knowing yoga, and eating curry every day. The following segment is an opening of an interview:

> People ask me if I always eat curry. I said "No".
> "Can you do yoga?" "No!"
> "Did you come here on a flying carpet?" "No!"
> "Are you a terrorist?" "Oh, yes, I am."

<div align="right">

Performance at the annual dinner of DSOBA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzXow33XMCY
Retrieved on January 8, 2019

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By establishing the pattern to deny stereotypes about Indian culture, in his comedic segment, Mahbubani intends to prime the audience to expect the next ridiculous stereotype. On its own, the initial setup can be seen as jokes about the racists (which should be evident in the third question about the flying carpet); the fourth question goes even further by asking if Mahbubani is a terrorist. Here, the audience is primed to expect "no" from the established pattern. In contrast, the segment achieves its humorous effect through the punchline: "Yes, I am (a terrorist)." This goes against the established pattern in the previous three question-response pairs, and it creates the incongruity or opposition in the joke. It is also strategic that the question about being a terrorist is the last one, especially after the question about the flying carpet, which, of course, is impossible. By this point, the audience is expected to know that the questions are all racially biased. Consequently, the incongruity becomes more pronounced, which makes the intended sarcasm more evident. Thus, the humorous interactions are social commentary in disguise; they reveal the ridiculousness of the stereotypes and discrimination. Related to the same theme, Mahbubani directly addresses a stereotype as an object of ridicule:

> "Let me just clarify something: Just because I am Indian, doesn't mean I know Yoga, okay? When I was born, I didn't come out [mimic Indian dance] like that, okay?"

<div align="right">

Performance at the annual dinner of DSOBA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzXow33XMCY
Retrieved on January 8, 2019

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While this segment does not carry the formal "setup-punchline" configuration, it does show the opposition between the imagined and implicit question: "Can you do yoga?" Here, the opposition lies in how obvious it is that nobody is born knowing yoga, and that it has to be stated

overtly. Once it has to be overtly stated to the audience, it is humorous because the incongruity of the racial bias is foregrounded.

As part of the attempt to break the master narrative that treats South Asians in Hong Kong as foreign, Mahbubani directly addresses the bias and ignorance, without calling anyone racist or discriminatory. In the context of a stand-up comedy show, doing so helps maintain a light-hearted atmosphere. This choice can be further explained by the need to keep the incongruity from being too serious, as BVT Theory would predict. Similar to the jokes on speakerhood and physical appearance, jokes about cultural stereotypes show the irrationality of the racial bias, and they serve as part of the larger discourse to show the unity between the performer and audience.

This section noted that the various themes in Mahbubani's comedy work together to demonstrate to the audience that ethnic minorities should be equal members of the community, without preaching to the audience to convey the intended message. Some of Mahbubani's jokes on city life and the shared Hong Kong experience are left for future research, due to the space limit. In a broader sense, the Mahbubani's stand-up comedy demonstrates how humor can be used to effectively communicate with the audience on more serious socio-cultural issues, such as identity, race, and discrimination.

4. Implications

This close study of Mahbubani's comedy highlights the importance of a situated understanding of the social situation in verbal humor. The humorous effect can only be achieved if the audience understands the background of the various comedic routines related to the speakerhood of Cantonese, the self-mockery about body features, and the stereotypes of Indians in Hong Kong. The mockery and stereotypes in the Hong Kong context might be different from those in other regions and cultures, regardless of their (in)validity. According to Attardo and Raskin (1994) humor represents a "collaboration between speakers and hearers". To achieve the intended humor, Mahbubani successfully helps the audience understand and resonate with the premises of his jokes (e.g., how people are genuinely surprised by Mahbubani speaking Cantonese), which are local in nature. Mahbubani's comedy highlights how humor relies on the understanding of a joke within its local context, as defined by shared experience and speakerhood.

Specific to the development of ethnic humor, this study of Mahbubani echoes the same change seen in trends about ethnic jokes in Anglophone contexts, in which the jokes have shifted from targeting ethnic and racial minorities to targeting racist behavior. It is possible that racist jokes (jokes that target ethnic minorities), which used to be perceived as funny due to a lower awareness of race discrimination, are no longer thought to be funny. The change can also be attributed to the performers' skills in relating to their audience. In various interviews, Mahbubani speaks of joking as his "new angle to life", and explains how he uses humor as a tool to respond to discrimination, rather than whining and complaining. We interpret this approach as resolution of incongruity, which is part of the humor mechanism. By making the violations in social encounters more benign, the humor effect can be achieved. Through this study of Mahbubani's comedic routines, we argue that the situated understanding of the premise is essential to ensure the humorous effects.

Despite the superficial differences in the jokes, such as local references of places and people, Mahbubani's comedy does not show qualitative differences from ethnic humor in other regions, as

previous studies on cultural difference in perceived humor might suggest (Yue & Hui, 2014; Yue, Jiang, Lu, & Hiranandani, 2016). For example, there is no apparent evidence for the individualistic vs. collectivist distinction between the (so-called) East and West. In view of Mahbubani's comedy, one may say that the premise is that he looks different from the majority, which indicates the need for integration and recognition in a more collectivist society. However, we argue that it is hasty to attribute these jokes as evidence for collectivism in the Asian context or "the East". Similar ethnic jokes about racist behavior can easily be found in Anglophone contexts from comedians with minority backgrounds, so the ethnicity-themed jokes cannot be used as evidence for the claim of collectivism in Asia. A difference between Mahbubani and some comedians in the United States is that Mahbubani does not joke about Indians, collectively. For comedians in North America, it is not uncommon to joke about stereotypes used against their own race. Russell Peters, a Canadian comedian of East Indian descent, jokes about how "Indians are cheap", and they are proud of it. Ronny Chieng, a Malaysian comedian, has routines about the stereotype of overachieving Asians. This difference between Mahbubani and other comedians with ethnic minority backgrounds can be explained by the lack of critical mass of audience members in Hong Kong that are of South Asian descent. By our informal observation, in the context of the United States, the audience often consists of a mixed group of people that are members of (perceived) majority and minority communities. In the video clips of Mahbubani's performances, it is rare to see people of South Asian descent in the audience. Therefore, it is possible that Mahbubani's comedy routines target a mixed audience with both locals who are mainly ethnically Chinese and also English speakers, including mostly the expatriate community in Hong Kong. Instead of humor on the Indian culture (which the audience does not share) or traditional Chinese heritage (which Mahbubani may not identify with), Mahbubani jokes about the impatience of Hongkongers on escalators and how they select their seats in local transportation, which can be seen as self-deprecation that helps him connect with the audience, who also live in the fast-paced and crowded city of Hong Kong. In this context, self-deprecation of the "impatient Hongkonger" stereotype serves an additional purpose of shaping and constructing the Hong Kong identity. Gilbert (1997:153) maintains that "with the exception of wordplay and certain types of observation humor, jokes are always told at someone's expense". In Gilbert's discussion, the target of the joke appears to be the onstage personas or the narrator. Mahbubani's humor shows that self-deprecation can be more (pro)active than simply damage control. Self-deprecating jokes can also help foregrounding the ridiculous reaction or the master narratives. The target of the jokes related to stereotypes can be the racists / stereotyping behaviors themselves.

The present study adds to the debate on the construction of the local identity of Hong Kong (Steinhardt, Li, & Jiang, 2017; Fung, 2001) by demonstrating the power of popular culture and shared language identity. Laughter and humor motivate members of the audience to put themselves in the position of minority groups and experience the observations of a local "foreigner". Awareness raising and mutual understanding between racial and cultural groups are beneficial for social integration. This study has demonstrated how ethnic humor can be a medium to raise awareness of minority groups.

Instead of an East-West contrast, this study shows the effectiveness of using humor to dissolve the "Us vs. Them" dichotomy, across the performance of Mahbubani and his peers in the Anglophone context. By using the local Cantonese language and the local lifestyle as the medium

and materials of the performance, Mahbubani's comedic routines break the narrative of false equivalence between ethnicity and identity in Hong Kong. For Mahbubani, the identity of Hong Kong is defined by mentality, which is reflected in how people respond to the shared city experience, in addition to speakerhood and residence[4]. Through the ridicule and commentary of stereotyping, Mahbubani disrupts the master narratives of authenticity about Cantonese speakerhood in Hong Kong. His comedic acts invite the audience to confront the social and linguistic realities faced by South Asians and, potentially, question their own stereotypes.

Many issues discussed in the present studies may be interesting for a future discussion on comedic acts in neighboring regions, such as Singapore or India. Since the demographic composition, the manifestation of stereotypes and the dynamics among races can be very different, a thorough comparison must be facilitated by a more in-depth discussion on each of these regions. Such a comprehensive comparison among these regions is beyond the scope of the present study. We hope this study can be of interest for such a comparison in the future.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to discuss ethnic humor in the Asian context, which has received little attention in previous studies. The work by Vivek Mahbubani, a prominent stand-up comedian of Indian descent who is based in Hong Kong, has been closely analyzed from the viewpoints of the themes of his jokes, humor theories, and the narrative as identity construction. Similar to his peers in Anglophone contexts, jokes about stereotypes and (mis-)communications between ethnic groups are frequent in Mahbubani's stand-up routines. However, his jokes on Cantonese speakerhood and people's surprise about his knowledge of Cantonese set his comedic acts apart from the Anglophone contexts, where everyone is expected to understand English. Moreover, we have noticed that his racial humor is limited to body features or diet, rather than ethnic customs and cultures, as commonly seen in stand-up comedy in the United States. This difference can be attributed to the lack of a critical mass of South Asian audiences in Hong Kong, which would have been the target audience for self-deprecation about their own cultures.

In light of humor theories, especially Incongruity Theory and BVT, Mahbubani's ethnic jokes have shown how he uses his life experience and showcases the irrationality of some of his encounters to amuse the audience. We have argued that comedic acts are more than mere entertainment. They have also effectively foregrounded and problematized the irrationality of racial stereotypes. Mahbubani's approach, in turn, serves as a counter-narrative to disrupt the mainstream narrative that defines Hong Kong identity based on ethnicity, and to establish the local identity for South Asians.

Overall, Mahbubani's stand-up comedy has showcased the use of humor as an effective communication tool. The perceived humor in his jokes that target racist behavior echoes a trend in ethnic humor away from racist jokes that target minorities. Specific to the Asian context, we hope this study enriches the understanding of the dynamics of Mahbubani's comedy and contributes to the discussion about racial dynamics in Hong Kong among diverse ethnic groups.

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[4] This can also apply to many expatriates from Europe and North America, who are minorities by number, although they may not be considered ethnic minorities in the Hong Kong context. This further supports that the identity of "Hongkonger" is not based on race or speakerhood of Cantonese, but the Hong Kong mentality as Mahbubani described. Acknowledgement to be inserted for this footnote.

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