On the boundary between humor and offense:
a socio-pragmatic approach to Hellish Gags memes in Taiwan

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background information

Offensive humor or dark humor is a comedy style widely discussed in the Western world after 1960 (Britannica, 2023). It often addresses topics that are serious or unpleasant, related to human suffering, or taboo to cause discomfort, deep thought, and amusement in the audience. In recent years, the trend has expanded to Taiwan, causing the craze to spread and result in another expression of humor - the Hellish Gags memes (HGM). Because of the internet's high spreading speed, memes from hellish jokes are produced on a grander scale and at a higher penetration rate. However, most of the HGM in Taiwan involve death, disabilities, tragedies, and stereotypes, especially on race, gender, and region. These sensitive and inappropriate memes negatively impact individuals and communities, causing emotional distress to target groups. Motives for sharing harmful memes are due to political factors, ignorance, desensitization, or seeking attention. This phenomenon has gone mainstream online, raising awareness in the public. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct research in this area to warn the public about its impact. However, although there is plenty of research in Taiwan investigating the Linguistics and Pragmatics aspects of humor, jokes, and memes, none of them like the Western focuses on offensive humor, which results in a large gap between the studies. Due to the gap, the Taiwanese lack knowledge and understanding of the controversial topic, affecting culture, social, and psychological development.

1.2. Research questions

1. What types of HGM violate the taboo of the Taiwanese, causing offense?
2. What word and picture combinations (WPC) do memes consist of?
3. How to manipulate the meme to maximize the humor and appropriate level and minimize the offensive level?
4. Will offense decrease when the memes target fewer people in society?
5. What is the connection between offensive, humor, and the linguistic strategy used to express it? Where is the boundary?

This research aims to fill the gap between offensive humor and memes, creating a report that directly addresses the linguistic knowledge used in HGM, and how it causes offense and impoliteness. The research will raise awareness in the public since Taiwan is currently in the digital age, having a significant amount of samples. With a better understanding of language, humor, and communication, people can further investigate the ethnic and psychological side of the HGM for later research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Humor

Relevance theory (RT) is a cognitive pragmatics for communication. According to Yus (2017), it focuses on the inferences the listener makes while attempting to understand the speaker's communicative intentions by what the speaker has said. RT is used to interpret the humorous messages of memes noted below (Yus, 2017). The gap between the hearing and interpretation is bridged through inference. Hearer maximizes relevance while minimizing mental effort, balancing between the two. When no suitable interpretation is present, the hearer's cognitive ability analyses alternative interpretations with more mental effort.

Note that the report focuses on how readers interpret HGM instead of speakers. However, it is a reference for the speakers to maximize humor and minimize offensiveness.

The application of RT explains the formation of humor in memes. Based on Yus (2017), Humor forms by "clashes" when readers' interpretation conflicts with speakers' explanations. Humor appears during the "cumulative processing (decoding plus inference) of the different parts that the utterance is made of" (Yus 2017). Curcó's (1995) discussion also emphasizes interpretive clashes. The study demonstrates how the speaker fosters the listener to examine contradictory opposing content: a highly implicated premise (key assumption), which clashes with the assumption in the context of interpretation (target assumption).

Yus (2013) proposed the Intersecting Circles Model (ICM), a classification of jokes, that includes seven types resulting from a combination of three Circles, used when analyzing memes. Utterance interpretation includes disambiguation (punning). Make-sense frame constructs an appropriate setting or scenario for the meme's interpretation. The cultural frame consists of society or cultural concepts (stereotypical information).
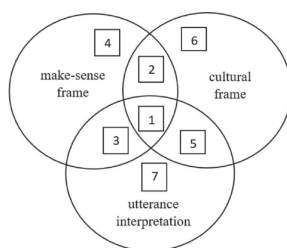

Figure 1. The ICM of humorous communication (Yus 2013).

Punning, a part of lexical pragmatics, is a factor that increases the humor of memes. According to Yus (2017), each pun has three labels due to its heterogenous. First is the punning structure, including (a) two possible parallel senses (b) one sense, another, etc. Second is sense relationship, labels such as homophony, homonymy, polysemy, etc. Last is inferential strategy, how hearers interpret the pun using the utterance interpretation.

2.2. Politeness and Offense

Politeness is linguistic pragmatics, determined by social circumstances. The paper will not specifically address any influential elements of politeness but set as control variables. The meme's target is groups, not individuals. The next is based on Culpeper (2011).

Spencer Oatey (2008) modified Brown & Levison's (1987) argument and proposed rapport management, the management of harmony-disharmony between individuals. The social identity face is crucial for group members to be acknowledged and preserve their social identities. Sociality rights include equity rights and association rights. The disobedience of social identity face and two types of sociality rights are the causes of offense in the HGM. Threats to goodwill or harmony between individuals are linked to "face, rights, or interactional objectives". Spencer Oatey's rapport challenge orientation, seeks to disrupt harmonious interactions between interlocutors, resulting from the inclusion of taboos.

2.3. Meme and multi-modality

A meme is a unit of information consisting of words and pictures. Yus (2018) suggested that memes are easily replicated and communicate from person to person, similar to the biological concept of genes. Understanding a meme involves the manipulation of the texts and pictures and the identification of possible connotative meanings in them. Visual detail contributes to visual explicatures and implicatures similar to verbal utterances. The audience makes inferential hypotheses to comprehend its role in the meme. Internet memes are digital files created by Internet users that are shared online.

This report focuses on the HGM, an internet meme that involves various topics such as disabilities, tragedies, death, racial discrimination, etc., to evoke sadness and humor. Most of them are politically incorrect and unethical, altering social values. HGM involves taboos, making them offensive and inappropriate. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2023), taboos are "negative norms" that are a subject, word, or action prohibited or restricted due to social or religious reasons. Most of them are not enforced by the government but are improper and offensive to discuss within a cultural group by consensus.

3. Research Methodology

This research paper utilizes qualitative critical analysis to collect memes and make generalizations. Additionally, quantitative analysis is used when examining the two questionnaires, explaining the meaning of the data collected to draw a final conclusion.

3.1. Survey and generalization of HGM

Examples of HGM are from Dcard, a social media site for college students, and Facebook (the HGM club). The qualitative critical method is utilized to analyze the pragmatics or socio-pragmatic aspect of the existing memes, including the WPC, the targeted

groups, the ICM that causes humor, and the inference strategies listeners use to interpret humor (reference assignment, disambiguation, etc.).

A mini-database is built on Google Sheets, consisting of 62 HGM. The topics, sub-topics, and target groups are labeled. The popular HGM spread by the Taiwanese covered six topics: death, disability, inauspiciousness, gender, region, and ethnicity. The comments under each post of memes are recorded and analyzed. It's clear that the Taiwanese tolerance level of HGM will vary due to topic differences, as well as the time and location, with the farther or longer the less impactful. However, due to the interaction participants' expectations of communication in the HGM club, the differences aren't significant because of bias.

3.2. The first questionnaire

3.2.1. Purpose

This survey aims to investigate the impact of topics and target groups on the humor and offensiveness of the HGM. The memes collected were specifically designed to find out the Taiwanese taboos that cause the most offense, and the relationship between the offensive level and the target population in Taiwanese society.

3.2.2. Method

The questionnaire is made in Google Forms, containing the 20 most representative memes from the six topics in the corpus, placed in random order. Trigger topics include various taboos, such as discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, etc. The memes chosen are from different perspectives or different time periods to observe the subjects' reactions.

Table 1. A detailed description of the memes used in the first questionnaire.

Topics	Num of memes	Subtypes
Death	2	Death of father, death of president
Disability	3	Down syndrome, physical disability, Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Stephen William Hawking)
Gender	3	LGBTQ+, women, both women and men
inauspiciousness	4	Formosa fun coast dust explosion, Atomic bombings of Japan, Syrian Civil War, African famine
Ethnicity	5	Jews, Africans, Hakkas, Fujianese, Aboriginal people
Region	3	Taichung, Taipei, and Northern people

5 questions are under each meme. Do you understand what the meme is conveying? Do you think the meme is funny? Do you think the meme is appropriate? Does the meme offend you? Does the meme offend anyone besides you? A Likert scale of 1 to 7 points

(strongly disagree to strongly agree) is used in every question to measure the attitude of the individual. The form is sent on Dcard, PTT, NCCU, and NTU Exchange Edition, focusing on people aged 18 to 25, the majority of whom look at or make the HGM. The questionnaire is anonymous but requires information about gender, age, place of residence, and degree of passion for memes since they are all factors that might affect the person's choice. The form will be released for one week to collect responses.

3.2.3. Data analysis

The Google form will be linked to a Google sheet to analyze the data. Each topic will be placed into separate sheets for easy comparison. The people who do not understand the memes will be deleted from the calculation process to ensure the highest accuracy. Each question except the understanding one will occupy three rows from the sheets shown below.

The top of the table is labeled 1 to 7, matching with the survey's Likert scale. 1-3 represents the people who disagree; 4 represents neutral people; 5-7 represents people who agree. The first row shows the number of people who chose the top number. The second row shows the percentage, dividing the first-row number by the total. The third row shows the weighted number, having the middle (4) set as 0, two sides times 3 (1), 2 (2), 1 (3), 1 (5), 2 (6), and 3 (7) respectively. It is because the disgust or joy of those who choose the ends will be stronger. In addition, the percentage and weighted number of people who chose 1-3 will be added together, same with 5-7. This analyzing method will show people's preferences and emotions, comparing them to others to find out the most offensive or funny meme or topic.

3.3. The second questionnaire

3.3.1. Purpose

The Second survey aims to discover the effect of WPC, pragmatics, including the ICM, and puns on the humor and offense of the HGM. The research also aims to determine the manipulation that produces the lowest offense and most humor, and the delineation of it.

3.3.2. Method

Two sets of HGM are created based on the result of the first survey, one relates to the 2021 Kaohsiung building fire (a topic that violates Taiwanese taboos), and the other relates to the Taiwanese indigenous peoples (a topic that is controversial). Each set contains 5 memes, one directly attacks the target group, other four cause humor with different WPC (additive, duo-specific), including punning along with cultural and make-sense frames. Some create more than one clash (when interpretation conflicts with speakers' explanations). The picture for the meme in one set will be the same, serving as the control group.

Table 2. The linguistic strategies used in the 2021 Kaohsiung building fire funny memes.

	Image A	Image B	Image C	Image D
WPC	Additive	Duo-specific	Duo-specific	Additive
Cultural frame	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pun	1 (polysemy)	1 (metaphorical)	2 (metaphorical)	1 (metaphorical)
Num of clashes	1	1	2	1

Table 3. The linguistic strategies used in the Taiwanese indigenous peoples' funny meme.

	Image E	Image F	Image G	Image H
WPC	Duo-specific	Additive	Duo-specific	Additive
Cultural frame	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Make sense frame	Yes	No	Yes	No
Pun (homophone)	1	0	0	1
Num of clashes	2	1	1	1

Four questionnaires will be released, each having one funny meme and one purposely attacked meme of each set, chosen randomly. The funny meme will be placed before the purposely attacked meme to make sure the audience feels surprised. Some irrelevant HGM will be interspersed in the middle to minimize the effect of seeing two memes with the same topic. The survey will also be made using Google form and sent to the universities' exchange edition with questions and a structure similar to the first one, requiring 20 responses.

3.3.3. Data analysis

The data from each survey will be placed on separate Google Sheets, a total of 4. The average, median, and mode for the direct attack meme (DAM) from each survey will be calculated for cross-comparison by being the controlled factors. The percent change of the three factors (humor, appropriateness, and offense) between the DAM and the funny meme of the same survey will be calculated, as well as the average of change, maximum change, and median of change to see how much the pragmatics techniques affect people's choices. The data will be compared between the four funny memes of the same topic to draw a conclusion.

4. Research analysis and results

4.1. The first questionnaire

The survey collected 78 responses, revealing a positive correlation between humor and appropriateness (the humor level increases, the appropriate level increases, and vice

versa), and a negative correlation with the offense (the offense level decreases with the increase of the other two, and vice versa), with 3 kinds of exceptions including seven memes.

Table 4. Three examples of outliers from each kind of exception.

	Ethnicity	Gender	Region
	為什麼客家人不喝溫水 因為小氣鬼喝涼水	先生 你相信一見鍾情嗎 小姐 可以與妳共進晚餐嗎	
Appropriate	37.3%	49.3%	42.1%
Inappropriate	37.3%	36.9%	25%
Offensive	62.6%	44.6%	56.5%
Inoffensive	22.7%	44.6%	31.6%
Relationships	High offensive Medium appropriate	High appropriate Medium offensive	High appropriate High offensive
Possible reasons	Commonly known stereotype. Most Hakka acknowledge this trait	Stereotypes of both women and men are mentioned evenly.	Stereotypes of every region in Taiwan, no specific group is targeted.

The exception shows that some or most people are inconsistent when examining the HGM. In conclusion, highly offensive memes are related to an unusual and recent disaster with high casualties, and directed at individuals or victims of the event (topics such as death, inauspiciousness, and disability). Medium offensive memes involve stereotypes, are relatively controversial, and don't conform to trends (topics such as ethnicity and gender). Low-offensive memes don't offend any specific person or mention any special events and normally contain stereotypes of all groups equally (topics such as region).

4.2. The second questionnaire

All four surveys have 20 responses, not repeated. By examining the data, it's clear that humor memes are more appropriate and less offensive than the DAM. However, the number of changes depends on the topics and the pragmatics adjustments. The humor meme of Taiwan Indigenous people has an average increase of 2 for appropriateness and an average decrease of 1.15 for offensive, which is much greater than the humor meme of the 2021 Kaohsiung building fire with an average increase of 0.34 for appropriateness and an average decrease of 0.26, showing that using an accident with heavy casualties as HGM violates Taiwanese

taboos, not be taken pleasure in. Additionally, comparing memes of the same topic across surveys shows the effect of pragmatic changes in humor, appropriateness, and offense.

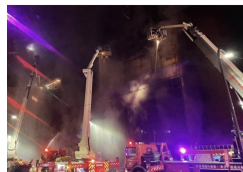Table 5. 2021 Kaohsiung building fire memes comparison (lowest and highest).

	Lowest change (Image D)	Highest change (Image C)
Increase in appropriateness	Average 0	Average 0.65
Decrease in offense	Average 0	Average 0.7
Method used	Additive Cultural frame One pun	Duo-specific Cultural frame Two puns
Possible reasons	The exaggeration shown in the pun "barbecue" causes disrespect for the victims, a similar idea to the 2015 New Taipei water park fire.	Two puns: "火" and "熱度" cause two clashes of the meme, one in front of the other, creating humor while lower offense

Table 6. Taiwan Indigenous people memes comparison (lowest and highest).

	Lowest change (Image H)	Highest change (Image G)
Increase in appropriateness	Average 1.75, 2 for medium	Average 2.35, 3 for medium
Decrease in offense	Average 0.5, 1 for medium	Average 1.7, 1 for medium
Method used	Additive Cultural frame One pun	Duo-specific Both cultural frame and make-sense frame
Possible reasons	The pun causes a greater clash if adds "Aboriginal" before the "原", emphasizing the pun	"我是原住民" causes less offense as it is said from the target group's mouth

Therefore, the duo-specific WPC influences the audience more than the additive, since the picture emphasizes the word instead of bringing in new information, creating a more impactful clash. As all the memes have cultural frames (events or people only Taiwanese are familiar with), an additional make-sense frame engages the audience, making the meme more appropriate by providing an unexpected answer from the mouth of the target group, causing a sudden realization. Similarly, an additional pun creates one more clash by having ambiguity. The more clashes, the more appropriateness, and lower the offense.

5. Conclusions and further work

Dealing with the issue of online HGM, the study explores the relationship between humor, appropriateness, and offense by using qualitative critical analysis and quantitative analysis, to discuss the pragmatic effect of memes on the audience, and its impact on society and cultural significance. This study points out topics that would seriously offend Taiwanese taboos and pragmatics adjustments that reduce the offense. It sets a standard for the producers of HGM, reducing social chaos or disputes. Humor doesn't eliminate the harm caused by inappropriate topics or words in memes, therefore, the study works as a warning that raises awareness in the public. The report provides significant insights into culture and language, encouraging critical thinking and appropriate online activity of individuals and society.

Humor is affected by many factors, such as familiarity with memes, and personal laugh points. Therefore, one limitation of the report is that humor's relationship with appropriateness and offense isn't determined clearly, a topic worthy of future research.

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