

HUMOR AS A BRIDGE AND BARRIER IN THE BIG SICK (2017)

RIDHWAN, M. A.¹ – HASHIM, H. U.^{1*}

¹ *Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author
e-mail: haidaumiera[at]uitm.edu.my*

(Received 22nd November 2025; revised 10th February 2026; accepted 18th February 2026)

Abstract. Humor plays a complex role in intercultural communication, serving both as a means of social bonding and as a potential source of misunderstanding. This study examines the use of verbal humor in intercultural interactions by analysing selected scenes from the film *The Big Sick* in the 2017. Drawing on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) and Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), the study explores how humor reflects differing cultural orientations and levels of intercultural sensitivity between the main Pakistani and American characters. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, purposively selected scenes were analysed to identify humor mechanisms such as script opposition, narrative strategies, and linguistic choices, alongside corresponding stages of intercultural sensitivity. The findings indicate that the Pakistani character frequently employs self-deprecating and minimising humor as a strategy to manage cultural tension and negotiate identity, often aligning with the Minimization stage of intercultural sensitivity. In contrast, the American character tends to use more direct and ironic humor, reflecting greater openness to cultural difference and emotional expression, commonly associated with the Acceptance stage. The analysis demonstrates that humor functions both as a bridge that facilitates connection and as a site where cultural differences become visible. While shared humor can enhance mutual understanding, divergent humor styles may also reveal underlying cultural assumptions. By integrating GTVH and DMIS, this study offers a nuanced perspective on the interaction between humor and intercultural sensitivity in mediated discourse. The findings contribute to intercultural communication research and provide pedagogical insights for language education and intercultural awareness training.

Keywords: *humor, intercultural, cultural sensitivity, verbal communication*

Introduction

According to Altakhaineh et al. (2024), humor that one cultural group might find amusing can be offensive or confusing to another which illustrates the phenomenon of pragmatic failure. This phenomenon is showing where communicative intentions are lost in translation (Altakhaineh et al., 2024). In situations of pragmatic failure, humor can fail as a social tool (Altakhaineh et al., 2024). Altakhaineh et al. (2024) also stated that this situation often highlights the cultural barriers instead of overcoming them. Humor is a complex and culturally specific type of expression that differs greatly depending on the social and cultural setting (Nabila et al., 2022). However, sometimes what one culture thinks is humorous, the other culture may think it as offensive or misunderstood (Altakhaineh et al., 2024). Altakhaineh et al. (2024) also highlight that this is an example of how thin the line between amusement and offensive. Soon, this complexity is particularly evident in intercultural communication (Mohebbi, 2023). This is due to the humor intended to bridge social and cultural divides instead of creating misunderstandings and reinforcing stereotypes (Mohebbi, 2023). “*The Big Sick*” (2017) serves as an illustrative case of how humor functions within a cross-cultural romantic relationship. In this relationship, it will expose the cultural tensions and misunderstandings that arise between a Pakistani family and the American family. This study is underpinned by three research questions as: (1) What are the types of humor

used by the main Pakistani character in *The Big Sick*? (2) What are the types of humor used by the main American character in *The Big Sick*? (3) How does the humour used by the Pakistani character compare with the American character in *The Big Sick*?

Literature review

General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)

Humor is a complex cultural phenomenon that acts as a means for social connection, emotional relief, and conflict resolution (Nabila et al., 2022). Next, one of the main humor theories that is relevant to this research is the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) that was developed by Ruch, Attardo and Rashkin. However, this theory does not come from its own since GTVH builds upon Rashkin's Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) from 1985. SSTH eventually introduced the six Knowledge Resources (KRs) that play a crucial role in the creation and understanding of humor. Above all, GTVH is particularly useful in intercultural studies. This is because it explains why humor usually does not translate effectively between cultures. Additionally, when two people with different cultures lack the shared script (SO) or prefer different narrative strategies (NS), the joke will fail to provoke laughter. It does not stop like that, but the worst case scenario will lead to misunderstandings too.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

The Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was created by Bennett in 1986. In this model, Bennett explains how individuals interact and experience cultural differences. Moreover, this model presents a six stages of progression that moves from ethnocentrism is central to ethnorelativism. Bennett (1986) defines ethnocentrism as the belief that one's own culture. On the other hand, ethnorelativism defined by Bennett (1986) as involving the understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural perspectives. Above all, Bennett (1986) stated that this framework is not only theoretical but also practical. This is due to this framework offering a clear roadmap for enhancing cultural sensitivity. Hence, this could promote more impactful and genuine intercultural interactions among people.

According to Perkmann et al. (2021), a review of previous studies highlights the significant academic focus. In this research, the previous study will focus on humor, cultural sensitivity, and pragmatic failure in intercultural communication. Researchers have explored how humor can enhance social connections and conflict resolution. However, they also face the risk of misunderstandings when cultural and linguistic norms differ. Moreover, the research on cultural sensitivity highlights the importance of recognizing and adapting to cultural differences to enhance effective communication especially in diverse and globalized contexts (Saaida, 2023). Humor has been widely studied as a complex and multifaceted tool in intercultural communication (Nabila et al., 2022). This humor also serves to both connect and divide individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Nabila et al., 2022). Rucynski (2023) highlights that humor can promote solidarity and create a sense of shared understanding in intercultural settings. Then, Rucynski (2023) also stated that this is especially when individuals have enough cultural awareness and sensitivity. Moreover, humor can act as a universal language that transcends barriers (George et al., 2023). George et al. (2023) also stated that this ability enables people to bond over shared experiences and discover common ground in their interactions. However, Warren et al. (2021) also point out the potential downsides of

humor in these contexts. They caution that a lack of cultural knowledge or misinterpretation of humorous intent will lead to alienation, offense, or even conflict (Warren et al., 2021). Then, these instances of miscommunication highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in successfully navigating humor between different cultures.

Building on this, Cheng, Dong, Kong, Shaalan and Tourky (2023) examine humor as a way to address cultural differences. In the same time, Cheng, Dong, Kong, Shaalan and Tourky (2023) emphasise its dual role in intercultural exchanges. On one hand, humor can effectively break the ice, easing tensions and fostering closer relationships between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Cheng et al., 2023). Other than that, Feldman (2024) stated that humor can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, perpetuate cultural misunderstandings or even deepen existing divides if not used thoughtfully. For example, humor that depends on culturally specific references or assumptions can alienate individuals who do not share the same cultural context that lead to feelings of discomfort (Feldman, 2024). Together, these past studies highlight the dual-edged nature of humor in intercultural communication. Thus, these past studies also demonstrate its potential to either unite or isolate individuals while depending on the context and the cultural awareness of those involved.

Materials and Methods

Research design and approach

According to Ghanad (2023), there were two types of research design that were used in organizing an analysis. The first one was qualitative research design and the second design was quantitative research design (Ghanad, 2023). Since this study used a content analysis approach, qualitative research design was a suitable design to use. Qualitative research design was the best design to use because it provides a deep understanding of any complex situations especially in context where the meanings, interactions and subjective interpretations played an important role in this research (Lim, 2024). For this study, the aim was to focus on analysing the intercultural setting that occurred in *The Big Sick* (2017) film that focused on two characters from different cultural backgrounds. To strengthen the reason why qualitative was the best design, Lim (2024) confirmed that qualitative research design was an ideal choice to present the contextual depth and the cultural elements of humor.

Additionally, the deep understanding of the content analysis approach was a must for this research. Content analysis was a systematic method that was used to analyse the textual and also visual content (Serafini and Reid, 2023). To be specific, Serafini and Reid (2023) also stated that this approach focused on seeking and identifying patterns in the content, themes and the meanings that occur in the content. Since this confirmed that this study used a content analysis approach, it eventually helped to connect the theoretical concepts such as humor theories and intercultural communication frameworks by using the examples from *The Big Sick* (2017) to gain the deep understanding of humor across different contexts (Droog and Burgers, 2023). Above all, this study also adopted a comparative perspective to analyse and differentiate the types of humor that were used by the main characters of the film which are Kumail the Pakistani character and Emily, the American character. To get a clear view of this perspective, Taherdoost (2022) stated that comparative approach helped to discover the cultural differences in any research. In this study, this kind of approach discovered the

cultural differences especially in the humor styles, social functions and impact of the interpersonal dynamic of the main characters.

Setting and sample

In films, setting was the important aspect that showed the time, place and environment of the entire film showing (Zaidel, 2023). Zaidel (2023) also stated that setting was an important thing that film needed to have. The reason behind it was that the setting gave the audiences a feel of the narrative and gave them the feel of tone, mood and even understanding the meaning that the film tried to deliver. Other than that, this research paper was based on Michael Showalter's masterpiece, "The Big Sick" (2017), a comedy-romantic film. Moreover, this film told the story of Kumail Ninjiani, a Pakistani comedian and his relationship with Emily Gordon, an American psychology student. In this film, it followed Kumail and Emily as they encountered the cultural differences between them, their family expectations and an unexpected health crisis that left Emily in a coma. In addition, this film highlighted the challenges of intercultural relationships, the importance of cultural sensitivity and explored the themes of love. "The Big Sick" (2017) offered a deep understanding on how cultural norms and values shaped interactions with one another through the humor and heartfelt scenes.

Above all, this film is chosen based on the purposive sampling. Purposive sampling or also called as judgemental sampling is a non-probability method of sampling that the units are included in the sample because of their characteristics (Thomas, 2022). Thomas (2022) also stated that this type of sampling is one of the common sampling methods used in qualitative research. This is due to its usefulness to identify information-rich cases or for maximizing the limited resources (Thomas, 2022). However, López (2023) stated that this purposive sampling approach poses a considerable risk of research biases such as observer bias. Other than that, this film was purposely selected as it aligns with this research's objectives to analyse the intercultural context within the characters that came from different cultural backgrounds. According to Villamin et al. (2024), mentioned that purposive sampling could increase the quality and the relevance of the data by ensuring that the analysis is focussed, rich and aligned with the research objectives. This method helps to select a few scenes that are really effective to show the cultural dynamics of humor that are relevant to this research. Furthermore, "The Big Sick" (2017) offers examples of humor arising from cultural differences and clashes that illustrate this film is an ideal source to do the analysis for the role of cultural sensitivity and its impact on intercultural communication

Research instrument and materials

In this study, the qualitative research instrument and materials was designed to analyse the humor and also cultural sensitivity in "The Big Sick" (2017). The main research instrument used for this research was a content analysis guide based on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) that categorised humor into few types such as affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing and self-defeating. The Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was also used since this research was about cultural sensitivity. Content analysis was a systematic method that was used to analyse the textual and also visual content (Serafini and Reid, 2023). Content analysis was a systematic technique involving either human or computer-assisted methods to identify and understand the patterns, meanings and relationships within the data (Serafini and

Reid, 2023). Moreover, this instrument provided a structured method for identifying and categorizing examples of humor and the cultural sensitivity in a few scenes and the interactions shown in “The Big Sick” (2017). At the same time, coding schemes of both frameworks were used. The purpose of these coding schemes were to help in categorising types of GTVH and stages of DMIS in the film.

Furthermore, “The Big Sick” (2017) was selected because of its unique display of intercultural interactions and relationships. The other reason for selecting this film was because it showed the use of humor to navigate the cultural differences that strengthen its relevance to the research objectives. Throughout this film, all the key scenes and dialogues that highlighted the humor were noted. To make sure the relevance accuracy of the data, the script that was obtained from an online resource such as Daily Script was carefully cross verified. After that, each segment of the transcript was carefully analysed using a content analysis framework that examined the type of humor, the cultural context and the characters involved. This comprehensive evaluation provided a deeper understanding of how humor could affect cultural sensitivity and influence intercultural communication.

Data collection and analysis procedure

According to Taherdoost (2021), data collection procedure was a process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest. It meant that in this procedure, it involved identifying data sources, selecting suitable methods for collecting information and making sure that the data is accurate (Taherdoost, 2021). In this research, the data collection procedure was used to do a systematic analysis of humor and cultural sensitivity in “The Big Sick” (2017). To further explain, this section outlined the step by step process using the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The first step started with purposely choosing the film “The Big Sick” (2017) as the main source of the data through purposive sampling where this film rich with the intercultural narrative and sense of humor in dealing the cultural differences. Next, familiarisation with the film by watching the film multiple times in order to understand the context of this film such as plot, themes and the character dynamic of the main characters. After that, this process continues with verification of the script. The script of the film was obtained from an online resource such as Daily Script and carefully cross verified. As soon as the script was verified, the next step was the integration of frameworks such as General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). After that, a final list of scenes that showed humor and cultural sensitivity theory categorised. These scenes were used as the coding scheme for this research. After the categorisation, the content of each sample within every category was thoroughly examined. Hence, this process ensured that the information is both trustworthy and consistent.

The data analysis of this study was designed to carefully examine the types and the function of humor in “The Big Sick” (2017) by using thematic analysis as the primary method. According to Hitit and Hallenbeck (2021), this process helps to recognise, categorise, and analyse patterns in the humor-related interactions present in the film. The research started with a detailed review of the verified transcript of “The Big Sick” (2017) with multiple views of the film to gain a deep understanding of its content. After that, the important scenes and dialogues that touch the humor in intercultural interactions will be noted. Next, both the GTVH and DMIS frameworks were utilized to

make sure that the multidimensional analysis of humor addressed its structure, purpose and cultural implications. Then, the selected dialogues and the interactions of humor were marked, categorized and assigned to both frameworks. To make sure the data was solid and reliable enough for this research, the analysis underwent a peer review and got the academic supervisor consultation. After getting the feedback later, there was another process of refining the data. After all of them were done, the findings were presented using a descriptive method. According to Tracy (2024), this descriptive method was used to highlight all the key humor from the film along with their context. Finally, the last process of this data analysis was the usage of table and visual representation to show the findings in each category.

Reliability and validity

According to Ahmed and Ishtiaq (2021), reliability and validity were crucial in research to ensure the accuracy of data and the credibility of conclusions. To achieve these standards in this study, several key methods were used. Firstly, the audit trail technique was employed. This step was to carefully document every aspect of the research process, such as selecting film scenes, identifying humor that are used by the main characters and interpreting the cultural sensitivity in the film. Moreover, this approach promotes transparency by allowing others to review and verify how decisions were taken and how all the data was analysed. So, it really helped in supporting the reliability of the findings. Secondly, the peer review method was used. In this method, it involved getting the feedback from the specialist and the research supervisor. This was to make sure to assess the research progress and findings. After that, the experts checked for accuracy, quality, and reliability, helping to identify any biases or mistakes and ensure that the research meets high academic standards. In addition, the ethical consideration and approval for this study were granted by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee (FERC). This kind of approval is very important to make sure that the study fulfilled the ethical standards and the use of public data were respected. Furthermore, the study was using Cohen's Kappa as a statistical technique to determine how frequently the researchers agreed on the analysis of film scenes. Then, the researcher analysed the identical scenes with the help of the co-researcher, Aysha Nisreina Sofea Binti Abdul Alim by using a common coding system to find the humor. Above all, Cohen's Kappa were used to assess their analysis's similarity, to confirm the reliability and trustworthiness of the humor identification process. Hence, using these methods, the research aimed to make sure the reliability and validity of the data findings. At the same time, it also aimed to uphold the high academic standards and provide a meaningful understanding into the cinema of humor.

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents a critical analysis of humor and cultural sensitivity in selected scenes from *The Big Sick* (2017). Other than that, the analysis is guided by three research objectives and each research objective supported by two representative scenes from the film. Moreover, the analytical frameworks applied are the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). GTVH is used to examine the structure and function of verbal humor in the characters' dialogues. On the other hand, DMIS is set to identify the stages of intercultural sensitivity the characters demonstrate. Therefore, each section contains a

scene description, key dialogue, GTVH and DMIS tables, and concludes with an explanation that interprets the humor and cultural sensitivity within the framework of intercultural communication.

Types of humor used by the main Pakistani character

The findings were analysed and reorganized according to a scene by scene analysis. In scene 1, the elements identified include Script Opposition (SO), Language (LA), Situation (SI), Logical Mechanism (LM), and Narrative Structure (NS) based on GTVH theory. Additionally, this scene features the Minimization and Acceptance stages of the DMIS model. An explanation of how both theories apply to scene 1 follows. In scene 2, the study again observes Script Opposition (SO) under GTVH theory. Along with that, Kumail used the Acceptance and Minimization stages of DMIS in this scene. Hence, this will be followed by an explanation of how both theories function in scene 2.

Scene 1: Kumail's Stand-Up Routine

In this opening scene of the movie, it started with Kumail performing his stand-up routine where he humorously describes life in Pakistan to the Western audience. In this scene, there are several materials that occurred which are self-referential, touching on prayer, arranged marriage, and delayed media access. Hence, this performance from Kumail served as a form of identity negotiation. This is due to Kumail using comedy as a safe space to reconcile his cultural background with his American environment. This scene shows the indication of exaggeration, irony and situational contrast. Additionally, Kumail also uses this moment to frame his Pakistani heritage in ways that are accessible and humorous to the American audience. For example, he used Script Opposition (SO) by comparing cricket with baseball. This type of approach eventually creates a cognitive dissonance that prompts laughter while inviting cultural reflection. In addition, Kumail's references to religious practice and arranged marriage are softened through the Language (LA) mechanisms. This use of understatement and irony, making these sensitive or foreign concepts more acceptable. From the DMIS perspective, Kumail mostly operates in the Minimization stage. This is due to how he tends to overlook cultural differences to highlight shared human experiences. However, his references to culturally specific content, such as the mention of Pakistani media lag. Moreover, this eventually could indicate a developing move toward Acceptance. Therefore, Kumail's routine shows how a bicultural speaker navigates the cultural boundaries using comedy not only about the idea of fitting in the community but also to challenge assumptions.

Scene 2: Kumail Talking with Naveed

Kumail discusses the topic of arranged marriage with his brother, Naveed. During their discussion, Naveed casually mentions that he only met his wife once before marriage. As a comedian, Kumail responds with a metaphorical joke. He is comparing that single meeting to watching a movie trailer. Eventually, this moment shows the internal cultural difficulties Kumail experiences while highlighting his desire for using humor as a coping and communication strategy. This scene illustrates how humor operates for both across cultures and within cultural communities to navigate the identity and social expectations. From their discussion, Kumail uses a reference to a "movie trailer" as more than just a punchline. However, that line captures the disconnection between his upbringing and the Western norms that he has taken on.

According to GTVH from table 8, this represents a Logical Mechanism where metaphor connects the cultural logic. Whereas, a single arranged meeting is humorously likened to watching a trailer before committing to the full “movie” of marriage. As a result, the humor is effective precisely because it directly contrasts with the Western ideals of dating and romantic love. According to the DMIS perspective from table 9, Kumail shifts from the Minimisation to the Acceptance stage. This started when the use of humor downplays the emotional complexity of arranged marriage by reframing it in terms of Western pop culture. From that perspective, it suggests Minimisation. However, the minimisation shifts when the shared laughter and the fact that this joke is exchanged with a close family member. So, it reflects an emerging acceptance stage. This is due to acceptance is an ability to acknowledge cultural differences without rejection or ridicule. Hence, this scene effectively demonstrates how humor can be a medium to encourage cultural negotiation rather than abrupt cultural rebellion.

Types of humor used by the main American character

The findings were analysed and reorganized according to a scene by scene analysis. In scene 3, the elements identified include Script Opposition (SO) and Language (LA) by Emily based on GTVH theory. Additionally, this scene features the Acceptance stages of the DMIS model. After that, an explanation of how both theories apply to scene 3 follows. In scene 4, the study again observes Script Opposition (SO), Language (LA) and Narrative Strategy (NS) under GTVH theory. Along with that, the Acceptance stage of DMIS is also used by Emily in this scene. Hence, this will be followed by an explanation of how both theories function in scene 2.

Scene 3: Emily’s Post-Show Banter

Shortly after Kumail’s stand-up performance, Emily initiates a flirtatious conversation. Their exchange is lighthearted and features sarcasm, sexual innuendo, and quick wit. Emily demonstrates her ability to use humor as a tool to express attraction, challenge social norms, and explore cultural boundaries. Based on the conversation between Emily and Kumail, Emily made a bold move by using humor there. This is due to the humor that Emily used by Emily in this scene is bold, confident, and characteristic of a distinctly American communication style. Other than that, her flirtatious comment uses Script Opposition by collapsing the boundaries between public and private discourse. To be precise and easy to understand, she eventually turned a sexual compliment into a stand-up heckle. According to GTVH, this situation creates humor by introducing the element of surprise and incongruity. Additionally, the Language (LA) resource is equally important. The main reason is because the phrasing is intentionally provocative since it serves both as a joke and a subtle challenge to Kumail’s cultural comfort zone. Moreover, Emily’s behavior spans the Acceptance stage based on the DMIS perspective. This is due to Emily’s provocative humor revealing her ease with culturally sensitive topics like sexuality and public-private norms. Other than that, her openness reflects her own cultural style. For example, she doesn’t mock Kumail’s background at all. Instead, she just playfully tests the boundaries to build connection. Even though the way Emily's tone is more friendly or flirtatious, she actually shows curiosity rather than judgment. By doing so, she signals a desire to connect across cultural differences. Therefore, this emotionally intelligent

approach aligns with the Acceptance stage of the DMIS, where individuals recognize and adapt to diverse worldviews.

Scene 4: Emily's Bathroom Confession

This scene happened in a hospital room while heavily medicated. Even in that kind of situation, she still remains humorous even in distress. She makes a self-deprecating joke about having soiled herself. By using this potentially embarrassing moment, she wanted to maintain an emotional connection with Kumail. This scene we can see Emily's use of candid or self-deprecating humor. From that, it helps her to navigate personal vulnerability and foster deeper intimacy. Moreover, what might typically be an embarrassing or private admission becomes a moment of comedy in her hands. Next, according to GTVH, her humor arises from the Situation resource, which a natural but taboo moment made absurdly graphic. Other than that, there is also the Script Opposition (SO) by contrasting social expectations of discretion with brutal honesty where she complains about no matches or air freshener. Finally, the Narrative Strategy (NS) comes into play through surprise moments. For example, when Emily unexpectedly reveals that she needs to use the bathroom after initially expressing a desire for coffee. Thus, this act eventually adds an element of humor to the situation. Nevertheless, this scene reflects Emily's place within the Acceptance stage from the DMIS perspective. This is due to her openness in sharing something socially uncomfortable that signals a maturity in handling personal and emotional exposure. Additionally, she does not attempt to hide her bodily need or make any excuses. However, she just exaggerates it for comedic effect. Therefore, this humor fosters authenticity in her relationship with Kumail. Not just that, it also demonstrates her willingness to operate across emotional and cultural boundaries. Additionally, the communication strategy is deeply interpersonal while the content is rooted in bodily function. By doing this, it will show how American-style humor values honesty and levity even when confronting will be a bit discomfort. Other than that, Emily's boldness is not culturally dismissive. Hence, it invites connection and honesty as the hallmarks of Acceptance-level in intercultural sensitivity.

The comparison of humor used by the main Pakistani and American character

For this part, Emily and Kumail interact with each other. In this scene, Emily and Kumail interact with each other while both of them use humor as the main elements of the conversation. As usual, the findings were analysed and reorganized according to a scene by scene analysis. Starting with scene 5, the elements identified include Script Opposition (SO), Target (TA), Situation (SI), Language (LA), and Narrative Structure (NS) based on GTVH theory. Additionally, this scene features the Minimization and Acceptance stages of the DMIS model. An explanation of how both theories apply to scene 5 follows. In scene 6, the study again observes Script Opposition (SO), Target (TA), Situation (SI), Language (LA), and Narrative Structure (NS) under GTVH theory. Along with that, the Acceptance and Minimization stages of DMIS were used in this scene. Hence, this will be followed by an explanation of how both theories function in scene 6.

Scene 5: Morning After Banter

In this scene, it happened in the morning after Kumail and Emily slept together. In that scene, they shared a light and sarcastic exchange. Emily jokingly insists she is “not that kind of girl” and mocks traditional dating norms. Kumail is Kumail, he counters Emily's statement with dry humor. Therefore, this scene shows how both characters use humor rooted in different cultural styles. For example, Emily's blunt sarcasm alongside Kumail's observational wit. This contrast, highlighting their respective cultural comfort zones. This intimate scene not only reflects the couple's growing emotional closeness, but it also showcases their distinct humor styles rooted in different cultural experiences. As for Emily, she uses bold, self-deprecating, and sexually charged jokes that challenge typical social expectations. To add, this is the characteristic of American humor's tendency toward openness and taboo-breaking. Moreover, her statement about “sex on a first date plus a hand job” flips traditional gender and dating scripts into a joke. That kind of joke functions within Script Opposition (SO) in GTVH by playing on expectations of modesty versus liberation. On the other hand, Kumail responds with understated, reaction-based humor. His remark, “Well I haven't had that yet!” shows Targeting (TA) and Narrative Strategy (NS) happening. This will maintain the comedic rhythm while not overpowering Emily's boldness. Furthermore, his dry wit later continues in his Uber joke as he said “Your driver will be ready as soon as he puts his pants on”. Kumail's joke shows a strategic use of self-deprecating humor to ease the post-intimacy awkwardness. In terms of intercultural sensitivity, Emily's humor reflects the Acceptance stage of DMIS. In addition, she's comfortable being direct and humorous about her own vulnerabilities without judgment. From that, it shows Emily's cultural fluidity. In the case of Kumail, his style leans more toward Minimization. This is because he uses humor to normalize and manage discomfort. By doing so, Kumail subtly avoids addressing deeper tensions or differences while attempting to harmonise his cultural background with Emily's expectations. In this way, humor serves as emotional camouflage. Above all, this comparison reveals how humor can both connect and subtly delineate intercultural style. Similarly, Emily engages through openness, whereas Kumail uses understatement to manage ambiguity. Thus, their shared laughter signifies the beginning of mutual cultural appreciation.

Scene 6: Watching a Horror Film

In this scene, Kumail introduces Emily to a 1969 horror film starring Vincent Price. From Kumail's point of view, he sees it as an opportunity to connect over something meaningful, while Emily quickly sees it as a subtle compatibility test. Their humor in the scene reflects their differing cultural expectations. To be precise, Emily's rooted in sarcasm and social awareness while Kumail's in structure and sincerity. This film-watching scene explores more than just differing tastes in cinema. Eventually, it serves as an example of cross-cultural communication in relationships. Kumail, for example, he deeply invested in the 1960s horror genre by introducing the film with scholarly reverence. Moreover, his enthusiasm is beyond personal preferences which is also cultural. For Kumail, presenting this film is a way to bond with others, sharing a part of his identity and aesthetic sensibilities that are grounded in both seriousness and narrative structure. However, Emily has a different point of view. She immediately recognises the unspoken dynamic at play. For example, watching this film serves as a “test.” In response, she uses sarcasm as a shield by saying things like “I love it when men test me on my taste.” Through her sarcasm, she humorously critiques a common trope in Western dating culture, where women often feel judged for their cultural

literacy. As a result, her Script Opposition (SO) works on multiple levels. The level starts as she contrasts expected romantic behavior with evaluative scrutiny, as well as passivity with assertion. On the other hand, Kumail insists by saying “Just take it seriously”. By expressing this, Kumail signals his investment in the moment. Nonetheless, when Emily yawns and jokes about it being boring, the interaction shifts again. After that, Kumail tries to preserve the mood, but Emily's ironic tone shows her cultural preference for playful honesty over politeness. Furthermore, Kumail operates from the Minimization stage of DMIS by trying to smooth over differences through emotional appeals. In contrast, Emily shows the Acceptance stage. She acknowledges a social pattern and playfully calls it out without hostility. This exchange of humor highlights deeper values. From Kumail's humor, he reveals his desire for validation and connection without conflict. Conversely, Emily's humor gently challenges societal norms and roles. Thus, despite their mismatch in tone, the laughter they share suggests mutual attraction and shows the beginning of cultural curiosity.

Conclusion

This study explored how humor functions in intercultural settings by analysing the selected scenes from *The Big Sick*. Moreover, using the guidance from the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), the analysis focused on the different types of humor used by the main Pakistani and American characters. Additionally, this analysis also focused on how these types reflect or hinder cultural sensitivity. The analysis revealed that Kumail, the main Pakistani character, often used humor as a tool to deflect tension or minimise the cultural differences between him and others. His style often reflected the Minimization stage of the DMIS. In this stage, individuals acknowledge cultural differences but assume shared human values override them. Following that, this was evident in his use of self-deprecating humor where it is a technique that helped him to navigate cultural expectations without directly confronting them. Moreover, this tendency aligns with Shaikh and Vyas (2022) who note that self-defeating humor is commonly used to cope with social tension and capable of masking discomfort in multicultural interactions. Other than that, Kumail reached the Acceptance stage most of the time especially when he openly acknowledged his cultural background or critiqued it in a reflective, humorous manner. Therefore, this is also an example of what Bennett (1986) describes as moving toward ethnorelativism.

On the other hand, Emily, the main American character, showed humor with greater boldness and emotional transparency. This is due to her sarcasm and directness shows her comfort in confronting uncomfortable truths. Therefore, this behaviour often positions her at the Acceptance stage of the DMIS. This style aligns with the findings of Ladilova and Schröder (2022), who highlighted that Western humor frequently relies on directness and irony. This is due to Emily's ability to address uncomfortable truths through humor that made her cultural sensitivity more apparent. However, she also showed the signs of the Minimization stage by assuming shared values and humor norms. According to Mohebbi (2023), there are also concerns of humor raised where it lacks cultural grounding and can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or misunderstandings. From the comparative analysis, it revealed that humor is a connector and also a divider in their intercultural relationship. As stated by Feldman (2024) and Rucynski (2023), humor in intercultural communication is also considered as a double

edged sword. This is because humor has the ability to create emotional closeness or trigger any unintended offense. For example, Kumail preferred structured or indirect humor, while spontaneous and ironic jokes were Emily's favorite type of approach and could lead to unexpected clashes in their comedic styles. Additionally, the GTVH framework provides a structured overview to analyse their humor types by showing how Script Opposition (SO), Narrative Strategy (NS), and Target (TA) shaped each character's approach to humor. Simultaneously, DMIS defined their communicative behavior. Therefore, the cultural sensitivity impacted the success or failure of their humor in an intercultural relationship can be seen.

In short, this study could confirm that humor in intercultural communication is complex, diverse and culturally influenced. In addition, the interaction of GTVH and DMIS provides a comprehensive framework for analysing. However, this analysis encompasses not only the structure of humor, but also the intercultural mindset that underlies it. Therefore, it is essential to be aware of cultural context in order to use humor effectively across cultural boundaries.

Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahmed, I., Ishtiaq, S. (2021): Reliability and Validity: Importance in Medical Research. – *Methods* 12(1): 2401-2406.
- [2] Altakhaineh, A.R., Abu Hasheish, M., Hamaydeh, D. (2024): Pragmatic Failures in Intercultural Communication: Evidence from Jordan. – *Psycholinguistics* 36(2): 38-62.
- [3] Bennett, M.J. (1986): Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). – *Idr Institute* 1(10): 1-8.
- [4] Cheng, B., Dong, Y., Kong, Y., Shaalan, A., Tourky, M. (2023): When and how does leader humor promote customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior in hotel employees? – *Tourism Management* 96: 12p.
- [5] Droog, E., Burgers, C. (2023): Metaphorical humor in satirical news shows: A content analysis. – *Metaphor and Symbol* 38(3): 275-290.
- [6] Feldman, O. (Ed.) (2024): Communicating political humor in the media: How culture influences satire and irony. – *Springer Nature* 309p.
- [7] George, A.S., George, A.H., Baskar, T. (2023): Emoji unite: Examining the rise of emoji as an international language bridging cultural and generational divides. – *Partners Universal International Innovation Journal* 1(4): 183-204.
- [8] Ghanad, A. (2023): An overview of quantitative research methods. – *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis* 6(8): 3794-3803.
- [9] Hitit, Z.Y., Hallenbeck, P.C. (2021): Analytical procedures, data reporting and selected reference values for biological hydrogen production. – *Biomass and Bioenergy* 147: 23p.

- [10] Ladilova, A., Schröder, U. (2022): Humor in intercultural interaction: A source for misunderstanding or a common ground builder? A multimodal analysis. – *Intercultural Pragmatics* 19(1): 71-101.
- [11] Lim, W.M. (2024): What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. – *Australasian Marketing Journal* 33(2): 199-299.
- [12] López, M. (2023): The effect of sampling mode on response rate and bias in elite surveys. – *Quality & Quantity* 57(2): 1303-1319.
- [13] Mohebbi, A. (2023): The use of cultural conceptualisations as a translation strategy for culture-specific jokes and humorous discourse: A remedy for a malady? – *Ampersand* 11: 1-11.
- [14] Nabila, K.B., Ena, O.T., Bram, B. (2022): Investigating Verbal Humor in Selected Mr. Iglesias Sitcom Shows Episodes. – *ENGLISH FRANCA: Academic Journal of English Language and Education* 6(2): 393-410.
- [15] Perkmann, M., Salandra, R., Tartari, V., McKelvey, M., Hughes, A. (2021): Academic engagement: A review of the literature 2011-2019. – *Research Policy* 50(1): 1-20.
- [16] Rucynski, J. (2023): Exploring humor and cultural differences through intercultural humor misunderstanding case studies. – *Kobe JALT Journal* 4(1): 45-54.
- [17] Saaida, M.B. (2023): The role of culture and identity in international relations. – *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences* 4(1): 49-57.
- [18] Serafini, F., Reid, S.F. (2023): Multimodal content analysis: Expanding analytical approaches to content analysis. – *Visual Communication* 22(4): 623-649.
- [19] Shaikh, M., Vyas, M. (2022): Do humour styles have a relation with self-esteem? A scoping review. – *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology* 13(3): 321-326.
- [20] Taherdoost, H. (2021): Data collection methods and tools for research: A step-by-step guide to choose data collection techniques for academic and business research projects. – *International Journal of Academic Research in Management* 10(1): 10-38.
- [21] Taherdoost, H. (2022): What are different research approaches? Comprehensive review of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method research, their applications, types, and limitations. – *Journal of Management Science & Engineering Research* 5(1): 53-63.
- [22] Thomas, B. (2022): The role of purposive sampling technique as a tool for informal choices in social sciences research methods. – *Journal of Research Methodology* 2(5): 1-8.
- [23] Tracy, S.J. (2024): *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact.* – John Wiley & Sons 368p.
- [24] Villamin, P., Lopez, V., Thapa, D.K., Cleary, M. (2024): A worked example of qualitative descriptive design: A step-by-step guide for novice and early career researchers. – *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 81(8): 5181-5195.
- [25] Warren, C., Carter, E.P., McGraw, A.P. (2021): Being funny is not enough: The influence of perceived humor and negative emotional reactions on brand attitudes. – In *Humor in Advertising*, Routledge 20p.
- [26] Zaidel, D.W. (2023): The art of film: Perspective on neural clues to repeated attraction to movie watching. – *Neuropsychologia* 180: 4p.