Ethnic-Cultural Bullying: an Instagram Netnography Study on *SARA* Speech by the Madura Tribe and Social Change

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how *SARA*-related discourse targeting the Madurese ethnic group is produced and normalized through digital interactions on the Instagram account @fuadsasmitaa. Employing a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm, this research applies netnography as the primary method. Data were collected through virtual observation and documentation of 20 highly engaged posts and their comment sections. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of discourse, audience responses, and mechanisms underlying the normalization of ethnic-based bullying. The findings reveal that humorous content, although not explicitly conveying *SARA*-related messages, encourages audiences to generate derogatory comments toward the Madurese ethnic group. Repeated interactions between content and audience responses contribute to the normalization of *ethnic-cultural bullying* in digital spaces, reinforcing psychological stigmatization and ethnic polarization among social media users.

Keywords: SARA Content; Bullying; Netnography

Ethnic-Cultural Bullying: Studi Netnografi Instagram pada Ujaran SARA Suku Madura dan Perubahan Sosial

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji bagaimana ujaran SARA terhadap suku Madura diproduksi dan dinormalisasi melalui interaksi digital pada akun Instagram @fuadsasmitaa. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dalam paradigma konstruktivis dengan metode netnografi. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi virtual dan dokumentasi terhadap 20 unggahan dan kolom komentar dengan tingkat keterlibatan tinggi. Analisis dilakukan menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola wacana, respons audiens, dan mekanisme normalisasi bullying berbasis etnis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa konten humor yang disajikan akun tersebut, meskipun tidak secara eksplisit memuat ujaran SARA, memicu audiens untuk memproduksi komentar yang merendahkan suku Madura. Interaksi berulang antara konten dan respons audiens membentuk normalitas ethnic-cultural bullying dalam ruang digital, sehingga memperkuat polarisasi dan stigma etnis secara psikologis di kalangan pengguna media sosial.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Konten SARA; Bulliying; Netnografi*

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital technology has brought about a shift in the way individuals interact and communicate. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, have grown from simple image-sharing tools to complex ecosystems of personal expression, cultural identity, and digital community building. These platforms offer space not only for creativity but also for controversial discourses, including jokes, sarcasm, and even hate speech. In the Indonesian context, Instagram has become a popular arena where social values and stereotypes intersect with daily online behavior (Bij de Vaate et al., 2023). Within this realm, ethnic and cultural identities are often framed in narratives that are both humorous and harmful. Among the groups frequently portrayed in negative light are the Madurese people. Known for their strong cultural identity and history, the Madurese have increasingly become subjects of ethnic-based jokes and insinuations on Instagram. These digital expressions, while often masked as humor, carry latent messages that stereotype and marginalize. As these portrayals are circulated and echoed through comments and shares, they begin to shape social perceptions and interactions in the offline world (Surahmat et al., 2024). This normalization of prejudice through humor forms the basis for what is termed ethnic-cultural bullying in the digital space. The focus of this study is to explore the phenomenon of ethnic-cultural bullying, specifically targeting the Madurese ethnic group on Instagram. The content shared on public accounts, particularly those using comedic tones, has the potential to foster a culture of tolerance toward hate speech under the guise of entertainment. The research examines how such content is created, shared, and responded to by followers, with attention to how these interactions may contribute to broader social change, especially in communities around Surabaya and Madura. This study emerges from the recognition that not all hate speech is explicit. Subtle cues in humor, memes, and comments often carry discriminatory undertones that reinforce group-based biases (Bricker & Godioli, 2025). By observing how users engage with such content, the research aims to understand the digital behavior patterns that enable hate to be disguised as entertainment. The study seeks to provide a cultural reading of Instagram usage patterns and their effect on collective attitudes, especially in relation to ethnic minorities.

The research is guided by the following questions: How is ethnic-cultural bullying expressed through Instagram content and user interactions? In what ways do followers respond to SARA-related (ethnic, religious, racial, intergroup) messages, and how do these responses reflect deeper social attitudes? And how do these online practices affect social perception and behavior toward the Madurese people? The main objective of this study is to describe and analyze the content and follower engagement in Instagram posts that contain, imply, or provoke SARA-related themes. It aims to uncover patterns that show how digital communication can lead to the marginalization of a particular ethnic group. Furthermore, the study seeks to observe how repeated exposure to such content affects public perception, potentially shifting social norms and psychological responses. The study is expected to offer valuable insights for media literacy advocates, digital platform designers, and cultural researchers. Understanding how ethnic stereotypes are reinforced in digital spaces may help in creating more inclusive and responsible digital environments. It may also contribute to the development of content moderation policies that consider local cultural sensitivities (Harmi et al., 2022). From a theoretical perspective, this research is grounded in the framework of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which emphasizes how online environments

affect the way messages are constructed and interpreted. The netnographic method is applied to observe and document the behaviors of Instagram users, particularly around accounts that generate high engagement through humorous or controversial content (Kozinets, 2019). The study also draws from psychological concepts related to identity, prejudice, and group behavior in online communities (Hogg et al., 2004).

While previous studies have examined online hate speech through humor (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021), cultural symbolism (Bij de Vaate et al., 2023)and value formation among youth(Saud et al., 2025), they largely focus on content, symbols, or attitudinal outcomes. There remains a lack of empirical research that examines how ethnic-based bullying is enacted, normalized, and reproduced through everyday digital interactions within specific cultural contexts. This study addresses this gap by employing a netnographic approach to analyze anti-Madurese discourse on Instagram, offering an in-depth understanding of ethnic stigmatization as a culturally embedded form of online bullying. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on interactional practices rather than isolated content, its attention to a specific ethnic group in Indonesia, and its use of netnography to capture the lived dynamics of digital hostility.

Literature Review

The discourse surrounding cyberbullying and online hate speech has expanded rapidly alongside the growth of digital platforms. Social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, has been identified as fertile ground for the proliferation of toxic communication practices) (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying transcends space and time, occurring continuously and often anonymously, which increases its psychological impact on victims (Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo, 2021). Hate speech in the digital realm frequently masks itself behind humor or sarcasm, which makes it more socially acceptable and harder to regulate (Bricker & Godioli, 2025). This aligns with the online disinhibition effect theory, where users behave more aggressively due to the perceived distance and anonymity provided by digital interfaces (Kozinets, 2019). These dynamics challenge platform moderators and researchers to distinguish between satire and subtle discrimination.

In the Indonesian context, several studies have shown that ethnic and cultural identities are often targeted through memes, video captions, and joke-based content (Bij de Vaate et al., 2023)The Madurese ethnic group, in particular, has frequently been represented in oversimplified and negative narratives, especially in comedic content. These representations, although not overtly violent, carry implicit meanings that reinforce ethnic stereotypes (Bij de Vaate et al., 2023). The danger lies in their repetition, which can lead to normalization—a process by which viewers internalize prejudiced messages without critically reflecting on their implications. When hate becomes embedded in laughter, it is no longer questioned but accepted, creating a subtle but persistent form of digital violence (ElSherief et al., 2018).

Ethnic-cultural bullying in digital spaces is not always recognized as harmful because it often takes the form of entertainment. This makes it more insidious, especially when content creators and their audiences claim that offensive material is just a "joke." Research from (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021)and (Saud et al., 2025) illustrates how younger audiences, particularly in Southeast Asia, may absorb these messages as normal or even

aspirational, depending on their social context and digital literacy levels. Humor, as a discursive tool, has the capacity to either build empathy or exacerbate divisions, depending on how it is framed and received (Sah & Peng, 2023). This reinforces the need to study the semiotic environment of social media—not only the message itself but also its form, tone, and the interactions it stimulates.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study is anchored in the framework of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which investigates how communication processes are altered when mediated by technology. The CMC perspective recognizes that digital platforms shape how identities are constructed, meanings are negotiated, and communities are formed (Walther, 2015) (Cheah, 2025). CMC theory is especially relevant in analyzing how humor and visual media contribute to constructing group identity and reinforcing cultural assumptions. Through comments, likes, and shares, social media users collectively negotiate what is acceptable and what is offensive—often without explicit awareness of the consequences of their engagement.

The netnographic method, as introduced by (Kozinets, 2019), offers a powerful qualitative approach for studying online cultures. It involves deep immersion into digital communities, observing patterns, interpreting meanings, and uncovering the cultural logics that shape user behavior. Netnography allows researchers to capture authentic expressions within naturally occurring conversations, making it ideal for exploring the layered and context-dependent nature of ethnic-cultural bullying on Instagram. This method has been used in various studies to analyze community behavior in platforms like Reddit, TikTok, and Instagram, revealing how digital cultures often evolve distinct norms, vocabularies, and ideologies (Cheah, 2025). Finally, this study also draws on key psychological frameworks, particularly social identity theory and the concept of in-group/out-group dynamics (Hogg et al., 2004). These perspectives help explain how users may unconsciously engage in behaviors that favor their perceived group identity while demeaning others. Online platforms facilitate the creation of echo chambers where like-minded users reinforce each other's biases, often without accountability. Over time, such spaces can normalize discriminatory attitudes and desensitize users to the real-world impact of their online expressions (Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo, 2021). By combining netnographic methods with CMC and social psychology, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how ethnic-cultural bullying develops, spreads, and becomes socially tolerated in the digital age.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm to explore how meanings related to SARA are constructed through digital interactions on Instagram (*Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches - John W. Creswell, Cheryl N. Poth - Google Books*, n.d.).Netnography was used as the primary method, as it is suitable for examining online cultural practices and interactional patterns (Kozinets, 2019). The research focuses on the Instagram account @fuadsasmitaa**,** selected due to its high engagement and recurring discussions referencing ethnic identity, particularly concerning the Madurese ethnic group. The data were collected from January to April 2025, a period deliberately chosen to capture recurrent interaction patterns rather than isolated incidents. This four-month timeframe allowed the researcher to observe the continuity and stabilization of ethnic-related narratives across multiple posts and comment threads. A total

of 20 posts and their associated comment sections were selected based on high engagement levels and the presence of SARA-related expressions. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

First, the researcher conducted repeated readings of posts and comment threads to achieve data familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated inductively to identify recurring expressions, symbols, and interactional patterns related to ethnic references. Third, these codes were organized into broader themes representing forms of ethnic stereotyping, humor-based derogation, audience responses, and normalization processes. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research objectives to explain how ethnic-based bullying operates within everyday digital interactions. Ethical considerations were applied throughout the research process. The study relied solely on publicly accessible Instagram content, without accessing private or restricted accounts. All usernames and identifiable personal information of commenters were anonymized to protect individual privacy. The researcher adopted a non-participatory observational role, refraining from engaging in or influencing online interactions. These procedures follow ethical guidelines for online qualitative research. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher engaged in prolonged interaction with the data to identify consistent patterns across posts and comment threads. Reflexivity was maintained to minimize interpretive bias, particularly given the sensitivity of ethnic-related issues. In addition, thick description was employed to provide sufficient contextual detail, enabling readers to assess the plausibility and transferability of the findings.
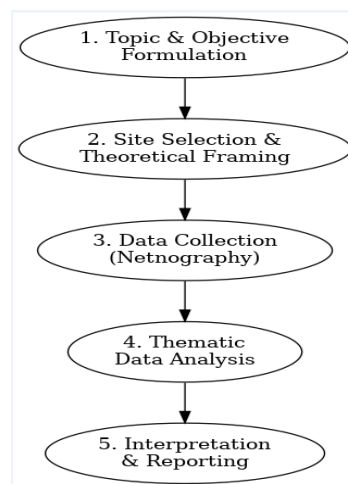
Figur 1 research follows a five-step flow

RESULT

Normalization of SARA Humor in Digital Culture

The digital environment has redefined how humor is created, shared, and consumed, especially on platforms like Instagram. In this study, humorous content involving the Madurese ethnic group is frequently presented through memes, captioned videos, and visual exaggerations. Although these forms are framed as "entertainment," their repeated exposure

embeds negative ethnic representations into mainstream online culture.

What is initially perceived as a harmless joke gradually turns into a normalized social behavior, shaping the way users perceive and engage with ethnic identities (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Many users do not immediately recognize these jokes as problematic. Instead, the humorous format shields the content from criticism, reducing resistance and ethical scrutiny. This is closely related to the concept of moral disengagement, which suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in or accept harmful behavior when it is distanced from direct moral consequence(Bricker & Godioli, 2025).

On Instagram, humor provides this psychological distance. It serves as a "safe zone" where users can express stereotypes without feeling guilty or responsible for potential harm. The content examined in this study often involved sarcastic remarks, exaggeration of stereotypes, and humorous depictions of Madurese behavior, especially relating to temperament and violence. This is a textbook example of aggressive humor—a style of communication where humor is used to target or ridicule others (Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo, 2021). Such humor may appear playful on the surface but can reinforce cultural inferiority and social distance between ethnic groups. The concern becomes more serious when these portrayals are consistently shared and affirmed through likes, emojis, and comments. Repeated exposure to this type of humor over time contributes to the desensitization of users. They begin to view these jokes not as instances of discrimination, but as normal content that is part of their digital ecosystem. This pattern reinforces social perceptions where ethnic mockery is accepted—even expected—in certain contexts. It also aligns with previous findings by (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021), who observed that digital humor often functions as a vehicle for cultural microaggressions, especially in regions with diverse ethnic compositions like Indonesia.

An important element that amplifies the normalization is the collective reinforcement in the comment section. In this study, many followers of @fuadsasmitaa responded with similar jokes, laughing emojis, or personal anecdotes that perpetuate the same stereotypes. This digital mimicry creates a sense of community, where shared laughter around offensive content fosters in-group cohesion at the expense of the out-group—in this case, the Madurese. According to social identity theory (Hogg et al., 2004), such dynamics reinforce group boundaries and can legitimize exclusionary attitudes. The humorous tone also plays a role in blurring the boundaries between offense and entertainment. Users become unsure whether a post is intended as critique, praise, or pure humor. This ambiguity allows them to participate in the conversation with fewer ethical constraints. As ElSherief et al. (2018) point out, the ambiguity in language—especially in humor—makes hate speech harder to identify and regulate. On Instagram, the algorithm's preference for engaging content often elevates such posts, giving them more visibility and cultural weight.

Interestingly, even users who might not consciously hold prejudiced views may join in, perceiving it as social bonding. This behavior is a form of diffused responsibility, where the sense of personal accountability diminishes in group settings (Sah & Peng, 2023). Humor facilitates this diffusion, offering a socially sanctioned format to express ideas that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate. In such an environment, it becomes difficult to separate genuine humor from implicit bias. As a result, what begins as seemingly light-hearted content evolves into a discursive norm, where mocking certain ethnic traits becomes part of the platform's cultural grammar. This shift reflects (Kozinets, 2019) view of digital communities

as spaces where repeated symbols, jokes, and patterns evolve into shared meaning systems. For followers of accounts like @fuadsasmitaa, ethnic humor is not just tolerated—it becomes a mode of communication and entertainment that defines their engagement.

This normalization process has tangible consequences beyond the digital space. As suggested by (Saud et al., 2025), youth exposed to stereotypical humor online may carry these perceptions into their offline social interactions, reinforcing prejudice in school, work, or community settings. When digital representations of ethnic groups consistently lean toward mockery, they shape public imagination and alter collective memory, especially in younger generations who spend significant time online. Therefore, the study underlines the urgent need to reframe digital literacy programs. It is not enough to teach users about cyberbullying in general terms. They must be guided to critically evaluate the humor they consume and share—especially when it involves ethnic or cultural references. Public awareness campaigns, platform-based interventions, and academic discourse must collaborate to break the cycle of normalization, promoting empathy and respect as core values of digital culture.

Echo Chamber and Comment Reinforcement

A striking pattern that emerged from the analysis of @fuadsasmitaa's Instagram account was the consistency and repetition found in the comment sections of SARA-themed posts. Followers not only consumed the content but actively engaged with it, often by echoing the stereotypes or adding their own variations of the joke. These repetitive responses created an environment in which certain ethnic narratives, especially those targeting the Madurese group, were not only accepted but normalized. The comment section became an active site of cultural reproduction, where bias was reinforced through humor and shared assumptions.

This phenomenon exemplifies what communication scholars describe as a digital echo chamber, a condition where users are primarily exposed to opinions and narratives that mirror their own. The nature of social media algorithms, especially on platforms like Instagram, encourages content that generates engagement—likes, comments, and shares—which often includes controversial or emotionally charged material (Seibel, 2019). Once a post involving SARA humor gains traction, its visibility increases, attracting even more engagement that reinforces the original message.

Within this environment, followers' comments tend to affirm rather than challenge the stereotypes embedded in the original content. For instance, when a post jokingly exaggerates a Madurese stereotype, dozens of users may respond with similar anecdotes, laughing emojis, or additional "insider jokes." This interaction dynamic creates a form of spiral reinforcement, where each comment builds upon the previous one, escalating the narrative and deepening its perceived validity. The more users participate in the joke, the more normalized and "true" the stereotype appears to become.

This cycle is not only driven by algorithmic amplification but also by social conformity—a psychological tendency in which individuals align their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors with those of a group (Hogg et al., 2004).On Instagram, users may feel pressure to "go along" with the crowd, especially when they see a post already widely accepted by peers. In such contexts, deviating from the dominant sentiment—such as criticizing the joke or calling out its discriminatory tone—risks social rejection or being labeled as humorless. The role of group approval is central here. When users observe others making similar jokes

without consequences—and often with social rewards in the form of likes or positive replies—they become more likely to imitate that behavior.

This reinforcement loop mirrors findings by (Sah & Peng, 2023), who noted that online normative environments heavily influence user participation in potentially harmful discourse. The Instagram comment section, in this study, functioned as a digital space where shared ridicule became a form of group bonding.

Moreover, some users participated not to express genuine belief, but simply to "belong" within the online community. This is particularly evident among younger users who may lack awareness of the social consequences of their comments. As(Kozinets, 2019) explains, digital communities develop their own symbolic systems, where shared references—like inside jokes or meme formats—signal group membership. In such environments, repeating or escalating a SARA-related joke can serve as a kind of social currency.

This group dynamic contributes to the erasure of individual responsibility, as users often feel that their comment is "just one among many." This diffusion of accountability, combined with the disinhibiting nature of online spaces, leads to a relaxation of moral standards. As (Bricker & Godioli, 2025) humor enables individuals to participate in marginalizing others while distancing themselves from direct culpability. The crowd provides cover, turning individual microaggressions into collective acts of digital bullying.

The spiral of reinforcement also affects how neutral or undecided users interpret the content. If they encounter a post accompanied by hundreds of laughing reactions and joking comments, they are more likely to interpret the original message as harmless fun rather than a discriminatory act. This form of perceptual alignment is a hallmark of echo chamber environments, where repeated exposure shapes interpretation and reduces critical engagement (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

As a result, the comment section does not merely reflect audience opinion—it actively shapes the discourse. It transforms potentially controversial content into socially accepted narratives, thus playing a key role in the normalization of SARA-themed humor. The comment threads become spaces where social values are negotiated and, often, where lines of respect are blurred. In light of these findings, it is important to recognize the comment section not as an afterthought but as an integral part of meaning-making in digital communication. For researchers, moderators, and educators alike, understanding how users collectively reinforce problematic narratives can inform better strategies for content literacy and platform governance. Breaking the spiral of conformity and enabling critical voices to be heard is essential if digital spaces are to become more inclusive and reflective.

Blurred Boundaries Between Entertainment and Discrimination

The distinction between entertainment and offense has become increasingly difficult to draw in the era of digital communication. On platforms like Instagram, content creators often use humor as a rhetorical device, relying on visual memes, ironic captions, and exaggerated characterizations. In the context of this study, posts that contain implicit ethnic references—especially targeting the Madurese—are packaged as comedy. Yet, for some audiences, what is perceived as lighthearted entertainment may carry deeply discriminatory undertones. This ambiguity forms the core of the problem: users are not always aware that they are engaging with or supporting harmful narratives.

This blurred line is especially evident in posts where humor is directed toward cultural stereotypes. These stereotypes are often presented through exaggeration—depicting Madurese individuals as temperamental, violent, or primitive—traits that have long been used as tools of marginalization in Indonesian discourse. When such portrayals are wrapped in laughter, they become socially permissible. (Bricker & Godioli, 2025) note, humor often serves as a moral buffer, allowing users to "opt out" of responsibility by framing their behavior as harmless fun rather than active discrimination.

One key factor amplifying this ambiguity is the design of the platform itself. Instagram's algorithm prioritizes content that garners high engagement—likes, comments, shares, or reactions. Posts that provoke laughter, even when they are borderline offensive, are likely to be promoted by the algorithm and appear on more users' feeds (Seibel, 2019). In this study, posts involving ethnic humor consistently generated more interaction than neutral or informative content, suggesting that the platform's logic inadvertently rewards controversial material.

The reaction metrics—such as laughing emojis, tagging others, or commenting "LOL"—play a critical role in reinforcing the comedic frame of the content. When users see a flood of positive reactions to a SARA-related post, they are socially cued to interpret it as humorous rather than offensive. This is where framing theory becomes particularly relevant. In digital environments, the meaning of a message is not just in the content itself, but in how it is received and interpreted by the audience. Frames are socially constructed and reinforced through shared behavior, creating consensus around meaning (Goffman, 1974; Walther, 2015).

The ambiguity is further complicated by the visual and linguistic affordances of Instagram. Creators often rely on contrastive visuals, regional accents, or emoji symbolism to add humor or irony to their posts. These digital tools allow for playful layering of meaning, but they also make it more difficult to determine whether a message is satirical, serious, or offensive. In this environment, intent becomes almost irrelevant—what matters is the effect of the content on different audiences.

The Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) perspective helps explain how these dynamics unfold. CMC theory suggests that in online settings, communication is stripped of many social cues, making it easier for users to misinterpret messages or ignore their deeper implications (Walther, 2015). Without facial expressions, tone of voice, or contextual nuance, a sarcastic comment can easily be taken as a factual statement—or vice versa. This creates an environment where discrimination can hide in plain sight, disguised as casual humor.

Importantly, the interaction does not stop at the post itself. The comment section becomes an extension of the content's frame, where audience interpretation is both visible and performative. When one user makes an ambiguous joke, others often respond by reinforcing the tone, rather than questioning the message. This social validation adds another layer of ambiguity—if no one seems offended, then the content must be acceptable. The absence of critical voices enables the dominant frame—comedy—to remain intact, even if it marginalizes certain groups. This lack of boundary clarity poses challenges not only for audiences but also for researchers and moderators. What constitutes hate speech is not always defined by the presence of explicit slurs; it may also reside in tone, implication, and repetition.

As ElSherief et al. (2018) observed in their linguistic analysis of hate speech, subtle markers often carry just as much harm as overt ones. The reliance on comedic forms masks the discriminatory impact, making such content harder to flag or report. This problem becomes even more serious in multicultural societies like Indonesia, where ethnic sensitivities are deeply embedded in social memory. Humor that targets specific ethnic traits may seem harmless to some, but it reinforces systemic patterns of exclusion and disrespect. For the Madurese community, being the subject of consistent ridicule—even in "joke form"—can contribute to psychological marginalization and collective shame (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021) (Saud et al., 2025).

To address this, it is crucial to foster critical media literacy that helps users recognize the implicit biases embedded in digital humor. Audiences must be taught to question not just what is being said, but how and why it is being framed that way. Social media platforms, in turn, should develop better moderation frameworks that consider context and audience reception—not just keywords. Without such interventions, the boundary between entertainment and discrimination will remain dangerously blurred, allowing digital prejudice to thrive in disguise.

DISSCUSION

Digital Humor, Ethnic Representation, and the Normalization of SARA Discourse

The findings of this study demonstrate that humorous content on Instagram functions not merely as entertainment but as a communicative strategy that subtly reproduces ethnic stereotypes. In line with recent communication studies, humor in digital environments often operates as a discursive shield, allowing discriminatory meanings to circulate with reduced moral resistance (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Within the context of @fuadsasmitaa, ethnic references to the Madurese are framed through comedy, enabling audiences to participate in stereotyping practices without perceiving them as harmful.

From a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) perspective, the absence of direct social cues in online interaction facilitates ambiguity in message interpretation (Walther, 2015). This ambiguity allows users to disengage from ethical responsibility, particularly when humor blurs the boundary between critique and mockery. Recent studies confirm that such ambiguity is a key factor in the persistence of online ethnic harassment, as users rely on collective reactions—likes, emojis, and repetitive comments—to define what is socially acceptable (High et al., 2022).

Echo Chambers and Collective Reinforcement of Ethnic Stereotypes

The comment sections analyzed in this study function as digital echo chambers where ethnic narratives are repeatedly affirmed. Algorithmic amplification on Instagram prioritizes content that generates high engagement, inadvertently reinforcing controversial or polarizing humor (Seibel, 2019). This aligns with recent communication research indicating that platform design plays a crucial role in shaping discursive norms, particularly in relation to identity-based content (Kumar & Shah, 2018).

Through the lens of Social Identity Theory, these interactions reflect in-group cohesion formed through shared humor at the expense of an out-group (Hogg et al., 2004). Similar patterns have been observed in multicultural societies, where digital humor becomes a

mechanism for reinforcing symbolic boundaries between ethnic groups (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021) In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is especially sensitive due to the historical and cultural weight of ethnic relations.

Ethical and Cultural Implications in the Indonesian Context

The normalization of SARA-related humor has broader social implications beyond the digital sphere. Recent Indonesian studies emphasize that prolonged exposure to ethnic stereotyping online can influence youth attitudes toward diversity and social cohesion (Saud et al., 2025). From a communication ethics perspective, this reflects a shift in moral perception, where repeated symbolic violence becomes culturally tolerated.

In this regard, insights from Communio—which emphasizes communication as a relational and ethical practice grounded in human dignity—are particularly relevant. Communication that reduces cultural identity to ridicule undermines the dialogical nature of social interaction and weakens communal solidarity (Communio, recent issues). Digital humor, when detached from ethical reflexivity, risks transforming communication from a space of encounter into a site of exclusion.

Implications of the Study

Theoretically**,** this study contributes to communication scholarship by integrating CMC, social identity theory, and digital ethics to explain how humor operates as a vehicle for ethnic-cultural bullying in social media environments. It extends existing research by demonstrating how normalization occurs not through explicit hate speech, but through repetitive, ambiguous humor embedded in everyday digital interaction.

Practically**,** the findings highlight the urgency of strengthening critical digital literacy programs in Indonesia. Media literacy initiatives should move beyond generic discussions of cyberbullying and address the ethical dimensions of humor, stereotypes, and audience participation. For platform governance, the study suggests that moderation strategies must consider contextual and interactional cues—such as comment patterns and audience reinforcement—rather than focusing solely on explicit language.

CONCLUSION

This study describes how ethnic-cultural bullying on Instagram—particularly targeting the Madurese community—is often disguised as humor. Through repeated exposure to posts and comments that contain SARA-related jokes, users begin to perceive such content as normal. The digital environment, supported by platform algorithms and social interaction patterns, allows this type of content to spread easily. Comment sections play a key role in reinforcing these messages, forming a cycle where humor becomes a cover for discrimination. The blurred boundaries between entertainment and offense make it difficult for users to recognize the harm in what seems like "just a joke." Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. First, digital literacy programs should help users recognize and question biased humor, especially when it targets ethnic groups. Second, content creators need to be more aware of the social impact of their work, particularly when using cultural references in comedy. Third, social media platforms should improve their moderation tools to detect subtle forms of bullying that are hidden behind humorous framing. Lastly,

further research is needed to explore similar patterns in other online communities and cultural contexts.

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