HUMOUR AS A SOCIALLY CONDITIONED REFLEX: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This research survey looks into the idea of whether our sense of humour is a socially conditioned reflex. We borrow the concept of Benign Violation Theory (BVT) to understand the psychology of the speaker of a joke and the listener of a joke and how puns work in a developing country where one has to place themselves in a social hierarchy and their existence revolves around their social status. The power struggle between the speaker and the listener is realized via the psychological distance between the two and that of the joke and them. An online survey was conducted among various age groups and gender groups of Indian citizens. The questionnaire used for the purpose consisted of multiple-choice questions, spread to participants through various online social media platforms. The survey focuses on the language of jokes, how the language of jokes has evolved and how language is used to manipulate jokes. India is a land of multi-diversity in its every nook and turn, how would it be able to incorporate puns into its society without harming any individual or identity? With stand-up comedies and other comedy reality shows emerging in the new media platforms, would the people of the country be able to address the concerns of humour irrespective of the social status and power asymmetry of the speaker and the audience? Would humour perception be able to integrate itself into Indian culture?

Keywords: Benign Violation Theory (Bvt), Psychological Distance, Social Status, Culture, Power Asymmetry, Humour Perception.

1. Introduction

This is an online survey analysis conducted within Indian society, to understand how Indians perceive humour. It is conducted as a sociolinguistic survey, carried out to acknowledge the evolution of language and "bad joke", keeping in mind the social hierarchy existing in the Indian society. It is further evaluated whether "our humour is only a socially conditioned reflex or not."

The thought for this paper emerged from an incident of a socially and morally questionable joke expressed "casually" by a famous

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Mollywood actor during one of his film promotions while interacting with his female colleague in the film:

The female actress when asked about her experience with the prominent male actor replies that the actor is like 'jaggery' (jaggery is a traditional raw cane sugar which is dark in colour. Here, the actress intended to mean that 'the person is very sweet'), to which the actor "jokingly" replies that she isn't addressing him as 'the whitish sugar' but prefers 'the brownish-black jaggery'. He further asks her how she would feel if he addressed her the same way, to which the actress and the audience laugh wholeheartedly.

When the above case became a controversial topic, the actor's supporters and fans came out with various justifications, some of which include that the actor was 'being funny', and that even though he was a famed and celebrated actor, he was being 'cool and was easing the atmosphere' with his 'jokes' to be 'considerate' to the young and budding actress, and that people should start considering 'jokes as jokes and shouldn't bug into its political correctness', and many more.

1.1. Benign Violation Theory

Caleb Warren and Peter McGraw proposed the Benign Violation Theory in 2010. Caleb Warren is a University of Arizona Professor of Consumer Behaviour. Peter McGraw is a marketing and Psychology Associate Professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder. McGraw is also the director of the University of Colorado, Boulder's Humour Research Lab (affectionately known as HuRL). The theory contends that humour exists only when three requirements are met: (1) a scenario is a violation; (2) the situation is benign; and (3) both perceptions take place at the same time. It builds on the work of linguist Tom Veatch and incorporates existing theories of humour. For instance, play fighting and tickling, which make people (and other primates) laugh, are benign infractions since they are aggressive acts that pose no bodily threat.

A violation, according to the Benign Violation Theory, is anything that threatens someone's beliefs about how the world should be. In other words, if anything appears to be menacing, unpleasant, or simply unnatural, it may be called a violation. Incongruities are violations where the reality of a situation does not match someone's expectations of what the situation should be. Keeping this in mind, violations can take numerous forms, including physical, psychological, cognitive, behavioural, logical, and moral ones. Physical infractions can take the shape of play fighting or tickling, which exposes the subject to a potential physical threat. Psychological infractions can take the shape of sarcasm or an insult that violates a person's mental well-being. Cognitive breaches can take the shape of a joke or pun, in which the person anticipates one thing and the joke or pun serves up an unexpected alternative. Behavioural infractions, which are usually

related to a social or cultural incongruity, might manifest as someone acting in a way that is not ordinarily acceptable in a specific environment. For example, someone catching his breath in a lift, burping loudly at the dinner table, or falling over during a solemn funeral service. Logical violations arise when a person encounters something unusual or illogical that does not conform to the regular processes, norms, or patterns. Moral infractions might include anything that calls into question a person's moral views, such as when someone questions your religious or political beliefs. It is critical to emphasise that a violation can only occur if the person experiencing it understands it to be one. There are several instances where a violation is more visible and is likely to be regarded as a violation by the majority of individuals. Other examples of infractions, on the other hand, are less well-defined and open to interpretation.

As a result, it is typical for a given circumstance to be regarded as a violation by one individual but not by another.

Violations do not generate humour on their own. A breach must also be seen as benign to generate laughter. To clarify, the term 'benign' refers to something that is regarded as safe, acceptable, and/or non-threatening. As with infractions, the person determines whether a situation is benign or not, with different options being offered by different people for the same event. One person may think a scenario is harmless, whereas another does not. A joke that mocks a certain political position is an example of this. If the person is already hostile to the stance or has a weak association with it, being mocked will likely make the violation seem innocent, and so the joke will be hilarious.

Most transgressions, on the other hand, do not make people chuckle. For a violation to be humorous, it must also be viewed as innocuous. That is, it must appear to be okay, safe, or acceptable. According to HuRL research, there are three ways that a violation can appear to be innocuous:

- Alternative norms (for example, one meaning of a word in a pun doesn't make sense, but the other does).

- Commitment to a violated standard (for example, men find sexist jokes funnier than women).

- Psychological distance (for example, "comedy is tragedy plus time").

2. Research Questions

- Does social hierarchy play a role in whether a joke is acceptable or unacceptable in society?

- Can language tools be used to manipulate jokes into good or bad?

- Are people in Indian society expressing their unacceptability towards socially and morally questionable jokes?

- Have languages revolving around the context of joke evolved in India?

3. Methodology

Data was collected for this research article from online survey questions spread through various social media platforms. The age category included in the survey is 18-29, 30-49, and 50+ years. While the gender category is female, male, and transgender. The total number of responses received was 76, out of which 18-29 age group received the maximum responses, 64. From age group of 30-49, 9 responses were received, and the category 50+ received the least number of responses, 3. As for the gender category, we received a maximum number of responses from female participants, that is 57. There were no responses from the transgender category.

A total of 31 questions were included in the survey, involving the participant's age, gender, suggestions/ comments/ extra input, etc. We used the random sampling method and randomly selected 4 participants from each age category, which includes 2 females and 2 males each.

4. Literature Review

Similar to how language serves this objective, humour's main effect is the externalisation of ideas and conceptualization. This externalisation serves as a means of expressing specific emotions, a social tool, and an intellectual exercise, among other things. Some people can support themselves through a career as joke tellers thanks to the active engagement of this human ability. As a result, it is possible in a culture to use a sequence of jokes to express one's own opinions and worldview. According to Chafe (1994: 9), "The essence of human understanding: the ability to interpret particular experiences as manifestations of larger encompassing systems" is this characteristic of Homo sapiens that is inherent to them. By levelling the playing field, humour enables people to form social groupings with those they can relate to. Research on humour has recently been conducted in several fields, including linguistics (Raskin, 1985; Atardo & Raskin, 1991), semiotics (Dorfles, 1968), and psychology (Freud, 1960). According to Freud, using humour can help ease the psychological stress brought on by depression. Naturally, psychological researchers are more interested in humour's function in people's lives than they are in the linguistic and technical details of its creation. According to Dorfles (1986:102), humour will be viewed as a specific type of message that is effective when there is a change in the relationship between the sign and its referent. He continues by explaining that the sign's funny effect results from the fact that it no longer refers to its "natural" referent but rather to a different, "paradoxical" referent. The extent and level of shared comprehension in humour, as Raskin observes, "seems to be generally recognised to vary directly with the degree of the participants' social backgrounds" (1985: 16). The shared common ground and knowledge base that serve as the cornerstone of culture are created as a result of
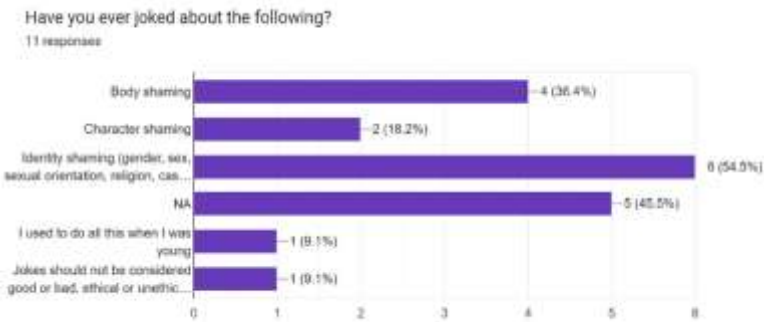
this collective understanding. Thus, humour develops into a people's voice that is used frequently and in a variety of settings. It is a way for us to share knowledge and moral convictions while also emphasising our sense of community and common identity.

Complex cognitive, cultural, and social factors that interact with humour and language to produce a very particular kind of understanding between individuals are abundant. The definition of what is or can be amusing has never been clearly defined by prior theories of humour. However, this phenomenon has strong connections to the fields of cognition, culture, and society. For instance, humour is deeply ingrained in and influenced by culture. Our shared cultural experiences serve as the inspiration for jokes, witty insights, puns, ironies, satires, and punchlines that make us laugh. We can better understand the linguistic, cognitive, and cultural influences on humour by studying the humour of languages across a wide range of cultures, language families, and typologies. We can also observe these influences as cultural reflections in humour. A joke or a narrative can contain the very essence of a person's worldview, and language is the medium through which the abstract can take on shape and be communicated to others.

5. Data Analysis and Elicitation

5.1. Figure 1

Graphical representation of the answers to whether the participant had ever joked about someone's body, character, identity (gender, sex, sexual orientation, caste, religion, colour, etc.)

Have you ever joked about the following?
11 responses

Body shaming	4 (36.4%)
Character shaming	2 (18.2%)
Identity shaming (gender, sex, sexual orientation, religion, cas...	6 (54.5%)
NA	5 (45.5%)
I used to do all this when I was young	1 (9.1%)
Jokes should not be considered good or bad, ethical or unethic...	1 (9.1%)

*Jokes should not be considered good or bad, ethical or unethical. The whole point of jokes is that anything goes.

5.2. Figure 2:

Graphical representation of the responses about whether the participants had ever pretended to enjoy the jokes from a speaker of higher authority.

Did you ever have to pretend to enjoy a joke that you felt unacceptable just because of the higher social hierarchy of the speaker of the joke (elder, tea...is person, politician, social media influencer, etc.)

11 responses

5.3. Figure 3:

Graphical representation about whether the participants had ever pretended to enjoy the jokes to which the participant felt unacceptable but was said by a friend/ fellow.

Did you ever have to pretend to enjoy a joke that you felt was unacceptable just because the speaker/listener is your friend/fellow?

11 responses

5.4. Figure 4

Graphical representation about whether the participants had come across instances when a particular joke is acceptable in a language/ dialect and not in some other.

Have you come across instances where a particular joke is considered "bad" in a specific language (also dialect) but "acceptable" in specific another language (or dialect)?

11 responses

5.5. Figure 5

Graphical representation of whether the participants had come across situations where a bad/ unacceptable joke was manipulated by the speaker to be an acceptable one with the aid of various language tools.

Have you come across any situation where the speaker manipulated a "bad joke" using language tools to satisfy a higher social hierarchical audience?

11 responses

5.6. Figure 6

Graphical representation about whether the participants think that a joke's acceptability is also determined by the language used to convey the joke.

Do you think that a joke's acceptability can depend on how they use the language to convey the idea?
11 responses
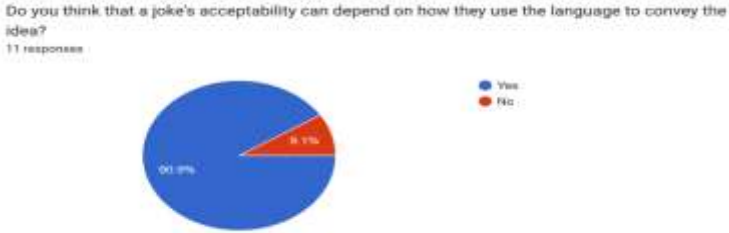
5.7.   Figure 7

Graphical representation of whether the participants had come across words/ phrases/ sentences which was neutral in the past but is now being used in the context of joke.

Have you come across any sentence/ phrase/ word that was neutral in the past but now is being used in the context of a joke?
11 responses
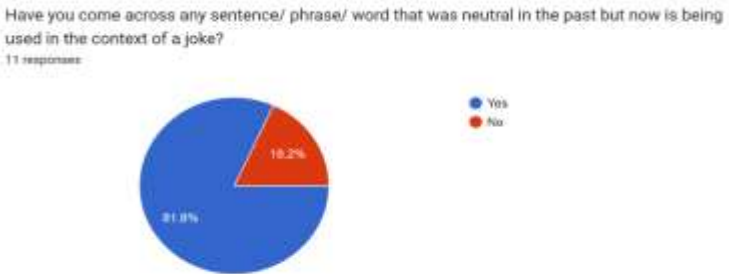
5.8. Figure 8

Graphical representation about whether the participants had engaged in listening/ and cracking jokes depending on the social hierarchy of the speaker.

Do you think that we engage with jokes depending on the Social hierarchy of the listener/ speaker?
11 responses
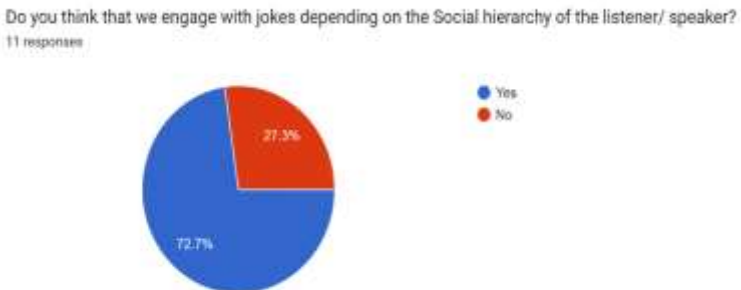
5.9. Figure 9

Graphical representation about whether the participants had ever a joke as toxic later in their life.

Have you ever laughed at a joke, which you later came to realize as toxic?
11 responses
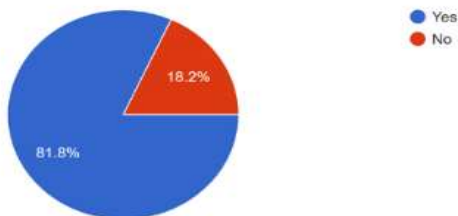
5.10. Figure 10

Graphical representation of what could be the possible reasons for not realizing a toxic joke immediately but realized later on in their life.

What could be the possible reasons why you had not previously realized that particular joke was toxic?
11 responses
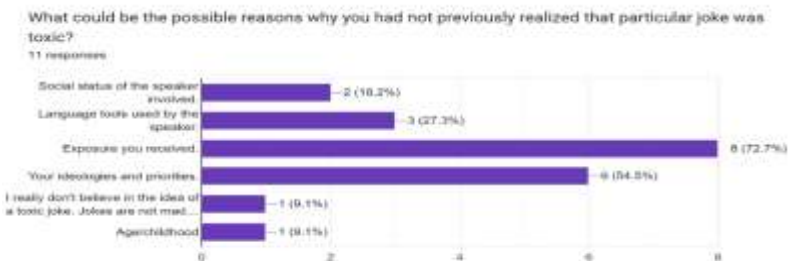
*I don't believe in the idea of a toxic joke. Jokes are not made to tutor people on ethics or values. The purpose of a joke is to have an unconditional laugh.

5.11. Figure 11

Graphical representation about whether the participants had ever come across people justifying a toxic joke because of the social status of the speaker of the joke.

Have you ever come across people justifying a toxic joke, because of the social status of the speaker involved?
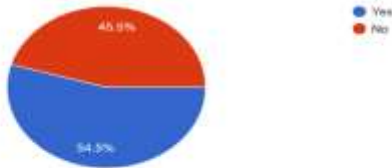11 responses
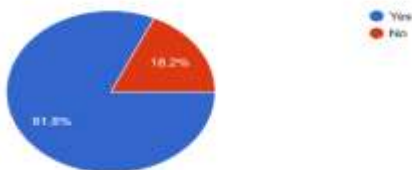
5.12. Figure 12

Graphical representation of whether the participants think that the language associated with the status of the speaker can make a joke acceptable/ unacceptable.
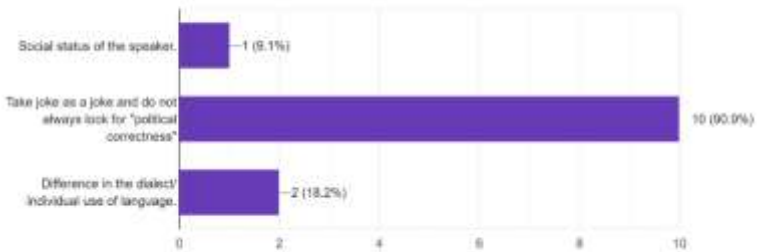
Do you think that the language associated with the social status of the speaker makes a joke acceptable/ unacceptable?
11 responses

5.13. Figure 13

*Graphical representation about the justifications that the people had given for a toxic joke.*

What are the explanations you had come across in such situations to justify the said toxic joke?
11 responses

5.14. Figure 14

Graphical representation about whether the participants think that the language revolving around the context of joke has evolved.

Do you think that the language revolving around the context of jokes has evolved?
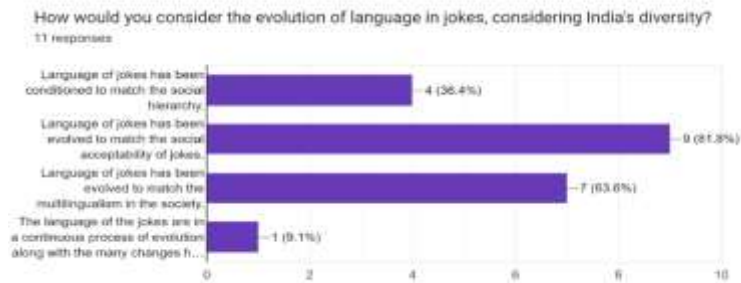11 responses
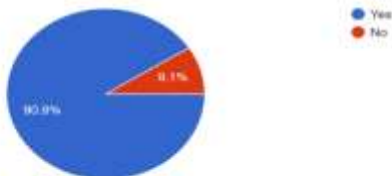
5.15. Figure 15

Graphical representation of how the participants evaluate the context of humour considering India as a developing country.

How would you evaluate the evolution in the context of humour considering India as a developing country?
13 responses
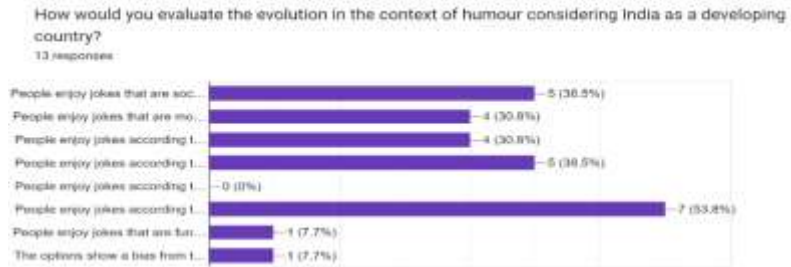
a. People enjoy jokes that are socially acceptable.

b. People enjoy jokes that are morally acceptable.

c. People enjoy jokes according to the audience's social status.

d. People enjoy jokes according to the hierarchical difference between the speaker and listener.

e. People enjoy jokes according to the speaker's social status.

f. The options show a bias from the researcher to prove that there is a hierarchical ethical dimension to enjoying a joke. These factors matter only in theory among academics and intelligentia. People simply live in the moment and enjoy the joke. Else none would be able to laugh at oneself.

5.16. Figure 16

Graphical representation on how the participants would evaluate the evolution of jokes considering India as a diverse country.

How would you consider the evolution of language in jokes, considering India's diversity?
11 responses

*The language of the jokes is in a continuous process of evolution along with the many changes happening in society.

6. Limitations

There were lesser responses from the age categories: 30-49 and least from 50+. There were zero responses from transgender category.

In comparison to females, the number of responses from male were less. Questions in the survey lacked examples of jokes to the question pointed to for reference to the respondents and let the participants evaluate from their day-to-day experience. Though it has a positive side that the survey doesn't limit the respondents thinking and world view there might be an issue of misinterpretation of the questions by the respondents. A participant also pointed out in the survey that certain options show a bias from the researcher. It was also pointed out by a participant, "Why take jokes so seriously and kill the whole point of it! Why analyse a joke when the whole point is to not analyse."

7. Conclusion

People tend to engage in jokes depending on the social hierarchy. They pretend to enjoy the jokes of speakers from a higher class/caste/category while looking down and questioning the same jokes when the hierarchy changes. Language plays an important role in the development and in establishing humour. When language tools are employed efficiently, a bad joke can be weaved into the best one and vice versa. It can be very well used to manipulate jokes. Thus, language is an important component in expressing humour. It is also important to understand that society has started expressing its non-acceptance of bad jokes which can typically harm the social and moral integrity of the society.

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Appendix

7.1. Survey Questions

1) Age category:

- 18-29

- 30-49

- 50+

2) Gender

- Female

- Male

- Transgender

3) Highest Educational Qualification

- 10th/ SSLC

- 12th/Plus two/ Diploma

- Degree

- PG/ and above

4) What kind of jokes do you often listen to?

- Physical/Slapstick Humour

- Deadpan/Dry Humour

- Wordplay/Puns

- Witty Humour

- Satirical Humour

- Self-Deprecating Humour

- Surreal/Absurd Humour

- Aggressive Humour

- Other

5) Do you enjoy jokes that would include the following?

- Body shaming

- Character shaming

- About identity (race, colour, religion, caste, gender, sex, sexual orientation....)

- None of the above

- Other

6) Have you ever joked about the following?

- Body shaming

- Character shaming

- About identity (race, colour, religion, caste, gender, sex, sexual orientation....)

- None of the above

- Other

7) Have you ever come across jokes that might fall into the following?

- Body shaming

- Character shaming

- About identity (race, colour, religion, caste, gender, sex, sexual orientation....)

- None of the above

- Other

8) Have you ever expressed your non-acceptance against jokes that might fall into the categories of body shaming, character shaming, identity shaming, etc.?

- Yes

- No

9) Did you ever have to pretend to enjoy a joke that you felt unacceptable just because of the higher social hierarchy of the speaker of the joke (elder, teacher, employer, media person, politician, social media influencer, etc.)?

- Yes

- No

10) Did you ever have to pretend to enjoy a joke that you felt was unacceptable just because the speaker/listener is your friend/fellow?

- Yes

- No

11) Have you come across instances where a particular joke is considered "bad" in a specific language (also dialect) but "acceptable" in specific another language (or dialect)?

- Yes

- No

12) Have you come across any situation where the speaker manipulated a "bad joke" using language tools to satisfy a higher social hierarchical audience?

- Yes

- No

13) Have you encountered any instances where you use more than one language simultaneously to express the joke?

- Yes

- No

14) Have you encountered any instances where a joke is expressed in one specific language and an interjection is used in another language to dramatically affect the joke (E.g., ooh! Ayyoo!)

- Yes

- No

15) Do you think that a joke's acceptability can depend on how they use the language to convey the idea?

- Yes

- No

16) Have you come across any sentence/ phrase/ word that was neutral in the past but now is being used in the context of a joke?

- Yes

- No

17) Do you think that we engage with jokes depending on the social hierarchy of the listener/speaker?

- Yes

- No

18) Have you come across a situation where a joke is considered bad/unacceptable just because the speaker of the joke is from a lower social status?

- Yes

- No

19) Do you think a joke can be bad/ unacceptable when the audience's social status changes?

- Yes

- No

20) Do you think a joke becomes bad/ unacceptable when the speaker's social status changes?

- Yes

- No

21) Have you ever laughed at a joke, which you later came to realize was toxic?

- Yes

- No

22) What could be the possible reasons that you had not previously realized that particular joke was toxic?

- Social status of the speaker involved.

- Language tools used by the speaker.

- Exposure you received.

- Your ideologies and priorities.

- Other

23) Have you ever come across people justifying a toxic joke, because of the social status of the speaker involved?

- Yes

- No

24) What explanations have you come across in such situations to justify the said toxic joke?

- Social status of the speaker.

- Take a joke as a joke and do not always look for "political correctness"

- Difference in the dialect/ individual use of language.

25) Have you come across situations where people manipulate toxic humour using various language tools?

- Yes

- No

26) Do you think that the language associated with the social status of the speaker makes a joke acceptable/ unacceptable?

- Yes

- No

27) How would you evaluate the evolution in the context of humour considering India as a developing country?

- People enjoy socially acceptable jokes

- People enjoy morally acceptable jokes

- People enjoy jokes according to the audience's social status

- People enjoy jokes according to the speaker's social status

- People enjoy jokes according to the hierarchical difference between speaker and listener.

28) What kind of people would you like to be engaged with?

- People who make you laugh

- People who laugh at your jokes

- Both

29) Do you think that the language revolving around the context of jokes has evolved?

- Yes

- No

30) How would you consider the evolution of language in jokes, considering India's diversity?

- The language of jokes has been conditioned to match the social hierarchy.

- The language of jokes has evolved to match the social acceptability of jokes.

- The language of jokes has evolved to match the multilingualism in society.

- Other

31) Do you have any suggestions to include?