

## Which Person Walks Into a Bar? A Typology of Globally Spread Humor on Twitter

ASAF NISSENBAUM

DAVID FREUD<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Our study examines user-generated global humor through an analysis of comic items spread on Twitter. By addressing the inherent conflict between the locality of humor and the globalizing digital participatory sphere, we aim to uncover the features of global user-generated humor. A long-term sample of humor keywords in multiple languages, including more than 250 million tweets, was processed and filtered to locate items reaching global audiences ( $N = 734$ ), which were then analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively (a subset of 143). We found that such items focused on “the universal” rather than on a multicultural exchange. Additionally, the comic failures featured in the sample were outlined, ranging from the personal and concrete to the societal and abstract. These findings portray digital global humor as a liminal space existing everywhere and nowhere at once and as balancing individual failures through collective laughter while presenting ambiguous subversive messages.

*Keywords: humor, failure, digital culture, globalization, localization*

Bricks, according to the BBC podcast “50 Things That Made the Modern Economy,” are one of our most ancient and ubiquitous technologies (Harford, 2019). They were conceived of independently in cultures around the globe and created in roughly the same shape—one that fits into the human hands laying them. Thus, similar bricks were used by vastly different cultures to build iconic structures: From the storied Tower of Babel to the Wall of China and the Chrysler Building in New York, all were composed of that same basic component. This article sets out to better understand such basic components in a field less solid but probably as ancient—humor. While humor has always been used everywhere, its global flow has grown significantly with the emergence of digital culture, raising the question, what are its fundamental properties that persist

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Asaf Nissenbaum: [Asaf.Nissenbaum@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:Asaf.Nissenbaum@mail.huji.ac.il)

David Freud: [david.freud@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:david.freud@mail.huji.ac.il)

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across cultures and continuously manage to fit like a brick in a hand? In other words, we aim to investigate the properties of global humor.

However, the phrase "global humor" currently depicts what is at the same time mundane, familiar, and banal, and an inherently contradictory and unlikely mix. This is because many Web users casually experience the flow of humor across the world through various social media feeds (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2020), while our understanding of humor is that it emanates from a specific, local, and even intimate understanding of situations or identities being played on for comic effect (Oring, 2008; Raskin, 1985). Given the complexity of humor as a format of communication, we chose to focus our analysis on one specific feature: failure.

Failure, as a universal human experience, has been described as inherent to humor in both classical scholarship (Bergson, 1900) and recent research on digital culture (Milner, 2012; Szablewicz, 2014). Building on this notion, the current study outlines the literature on humor's locality and/or globality, its viral and cross-lingual diffusion, and the sociological concepts of failure, addressing the apparent contradiction between global humor and the importance of characterizing its content. We then turn to Twitter as a prominent social media platform used around the world to locate and analyze comic items that have been shared by members of several locales and cultures. The resulting corpus allowed us to review the identities represented in global humor, which mix universality and uniqueness. This was followed by a typification of a range of five comedic failures featured in global humor, along with the redemptive features that prevent them from becoming tragic and enable their subversive edge. We conclude by suggesting that global humor achieves popularity by existing as liminal globality, suspending local distinction to enjoy a worldwide collectivity. This notion is substantiated by demonstrating how global humor balances personal failures with collective laughter and how this balance creates ambiguity in the inherent subversiveness linked to humor and failure.

### **Which Person Walks Into a Bar?**

Generations of humor researchers have shown that what people laugh about is tailored to specific cultural, linguistic, and political conditions. This is because understanding the semantic content of humor requires decoding implicit cues, plays on expectations, and intertextual references that its creators take for granted (Raskin, 1985). Thus, the consumption of humor requires not only simple linguistic literacy but also an understanding of various embedded contexts derived from the circumstances of its communication (Bell, 2009). Oring (2008) noted two kinds of external context required for humor interpretation: cultural context, which includes values, concepts, and attitudes encompassed or carried through humor, and social context, which refers to how humor should be performed, such as the appropriate timing, setting, and relationships. Thus, enjoying humor functions as a symbolic boundary, reflecting and reinforcing cultural identities through shared knowledge, taste, and values professed by a shared appreciation of a specific repertoire of humorous content (Kuipers, 2009).

This is not to say, however, that no common comedic ground exists among disparate cultures. Researchers have studied the globally shared features of humor, noting fundamental similarities in how laughter is created and its roles (Davies, 1990; Oring, 2003). Across myriad cultures, comic texts are used

to demark group boundaries, regulate behavior, discuss values, and more, while sidestepping limitations and taboos through being “just jokes.” These similarities, however, are found in the structure and functions of humor; content and topics remain culturally specific. For example, Davies’s (1990) seminal research noted how various cultures’ jokes mock similar features (e.g., stupidity, cunningness, uncleanliness), but also how these are assigned according to local cultural knowledge, namely, stereotypes of the peripheral groups in each society.

But the locality of humor can be brought into question nowadays simply by surveying a common user’s Instagram or Twitter feed and the multiple examples of globally spread comedy it regularly supplies. The flow of global humor has been found to go through a user-generated localization process, which imports some features (such as stereotypes about nonlocal ethnicities), but does so within frames reflecting local affinities (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015). Thus, the polysemic meaning of digital humor allows Web users to reappropriate globally spread items and facilitate local discussions of both political issues and personal experiences (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017). These local discussions also include reactions to prominent events on the world stage, events that were found to generate different comic takes in different cultures and yet maintain some shared framings of the global developments (Kuipers, 2005; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2020). Nevertheless, localization processes do not negate the external origins of globally spread humor and often create a kind of “secret agents of globalization” that are superficially localized through literal translation, but carry over foreign values and perspectives (Shifman, Levi, & Thelwall, 2014, p. 727).

While these studies have enhanced our understanding of how humor functions in the global cultural sphere, they have tended to focus on the ways in which global flows operate within the cultural and social contexts of specific cultures. In other words, studies focusing on how global humor is adopted in different settings raise the question of what characterizes such transcultural humor in the first place. While no cultural item is truly extraterritorial, there is nevertheless a sphere of humorous content that is being passed around digitally, crossing one cultural border after the other and getting localized, reappropriated, or simply translated. This study is the first to focus solely on this type of “international” humor, conceptualizing it as a meeting point between processes of viral distribution and globalization.

### **What Do You Get When You Mix Virality and Globality?**

Humorous content has been repeatedly found as a driver of wide diffusion on the Web: from e-mail attachments in the 1990s to witty tweets in the 21st century. A study of viral advertisements identified humor as one of the main factors motivating the user-based spread of such items (Golan & Zaidner, 2008). Additionally, amusement has been found to be a prominent way for Web content to raise emotions, which is key to enhancing Web-based distribution (Berger & Milkman, 2012). More broadly, entertaining content, which often relies on humor to keep a light and casual tone, has been associated with greater user engagement and sharing (Tafesse, 2015).

This spreadability of humorous content may be useful for illuminating a more specific kind of virality that takes place across cultural and linguistic borders. Studies have noted the rarity of such diffusion; even in social media platforms that operate globally, most posts remain confined to their originating language and geographic environment (Hale, 2014; Jin, 2017; Kamath, Caverlee, Lee, & Cheng, 2013). Research on

Twitter has noted that the main predictors of cross-lingual cascading are the popularity of the originating users' language, the presence of multilingual users, and popular topics (Hale, 2014; Jin, 2017). However, not all languages are equal, and a special place is reserved for English-speaking users, whose posts are more likely to spread cross-lingually than other common languages on the platform (Hale, 2014). Moreover, certain languages have been found to have stronger ties than others because of their cultural connections (Hong, Convertino, & Chi, 2011). As to the content being proliferated, studying Twitter hashtags reveals that despite the digital medium, physical distance is a main factor in their reach, with only 25% ever reaching farther than 1,000 miles from their originating location (Kamath et al., 2013). Here again, not all origins are equal, and content from cosmopolitan cultural centers like London or Los Angeles reaches farther than equally active, but less symbolically prominent, locations. Similarly, a study of Twitter use in the United States found that most Twitter trends are popular within a delimited in-country region (e.g., the Midwest or the South), but that metropolitans across the country share a distinct set of trends, which correspond to global rather than regional trends (Ferrara, Varol, Menczer, & Flammini, 2013). These findings stress the distinctive properties of global Twitter content as existing and emanating from specific culturally cosmopolitical environments.

The impactful patterns found in these studies, however, largely overlook the themes or content of border-crossing topics, besides anecdotal notes mentioning celebrities or popular sporting events (Jin, 2017). In other words, the literature on virality and on globality of content remains largely mutually exclusive, unmindful of items that accomplish both and their characteristics. Although not directly concerned with propagation patterns, this study aims to shed some light on this issue by typifying digital humorous items with global reach. To make the analysis of a multifaceted and messy field like global humor viable, we focus on a fundamental component of humor, social media, and worldwide human experience as a whole—failure.

### **When Do You Call a Failure Successful?**

Despite the relative scarcity of scholarship devoted to unpacking the social roles of failure (Malpas & Wickham, 1995), an overview of the work in this realm reveals two main trajectories: first, analysis of failure as a personal occurrence, mitigated by social practices to conserve existing norms, and second, analysis of failure as a social construct, emanating from hegemonic control and potentially subverting it. Both of these accounts see failure as intertwined with mechanisms of coping or managing its effects by offering forms of redemption. Thus, the way failure and its counter-effects are represented in humorous texts conveys wider messages about social (or global) forces and their place in individual lives.

The first framing can be found in Goffman's (1952) interactionist theory, which depicts failure as a personal event taking place within a social system and managed in such a way as to maintain the system's stability. Failure is defined here as mishandling a task that one is expected to succeed in (e.g., keeping a job), which results in losing a part of one's identity (e.g., a capable employee). Failure translates into (partial) self-destruction, in which a claim to one or more social statuses is desecrated because holding them can no longer be justified. The failing person loses both the practical role and position and socially loses face by appearing unsuccessful. Such harsh realizations require what Goffman termed "cooling out," borrowed from con artists' methods of dissuading victims from calling the police and threatening their operation. For Goffman, it is a

recourse allowing for the loss of status to be eased through various justifications. This is needed to avoid anger, despair, or other extreme reactions engendered by losing face and the resulting disruption of norms or acceptable demeanor. Cooling out thus results in belittling the failure's importance, alternating it with another status, or simply obscuring it from social view. The loss of status through failure is therefore redeemed by keeping other roles and relying on them to reformulate one's identity toward oneself and others, without completely shaking the social structure in which the person is embedded.

Goffman's focus on individual failures and their systemic balancing is supplemented by a wider view, which sees failures' disruptive features as having socially meaningful and sometimes positive effects. Halberstam (2011) built on queer theory to argue that failures and their portrayals have great value and meaning for those not conforming to dominant ideologies (by nature or by choice). By tracking artistic depictions of failure from children's animation movies to performance art, Halberstam revealed how success is inevitably tied to the normative and accepted ways of life, while narratives of failing characters lead to subversive resolutions. Showing and celebrating failure creates an alternative evaluation of life experiences that is not tied to idealized patriarchal and capitalist life. These alternatives are often childish or childlike, in that the characters have yet to learn (or manage to unlearn) adult ways. Thus, they substitute domesticity, individualism, and materiality for the communality of eccentrics or outcasts and, in doing so, revolt against external social expectations. Experiences of failure also allow for the unmasking of socially accepted lies of positive outlook and optimism and reveal glossed-over biases, deficiencies, and the people left out or behind by the dominant ideologies. In short, narratives of failures do not only eschew social order, but subvert it, as "all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 120). In other words, what Goffman (1952) views as an individual's process of loss and recuperation of public status and face can also be viewed as the subversion of societal hegemony and construction of alternative lives. When considering entire groups operating outside of hegemonic ideals, failure and its redemption translate into the creation of different, subversive, and more aware identities altogether.

Both of these accounts are relevant to humor, given the intrinsic role of failure in producing laughter, as argued in a seminal work by Henri Bergson (1900). According to Bergson, different forms of humor, from physical falls to witticisms or comic characters, result from failures and, specifically, the lack of flexibility or adaptability when needed. The rigidity of actions or thoughts and automatic or mechanical behaviors are framed as fundamental failures at being human. Such rigidity prompts laughter because it shows an inability to meet social expectations and requirements for success and, instead, betrays a person's eccentricity or inadequacy. In other words, laughter is a response that clarifies the correct way of living and being by mocking incorrectness. Accordingly, Bergson too sees humor as having a corrective role by offering redemption; humorous accounts of failure integrate cues of the victim's compensatory features or a path for positive change and thus keep the comic from becoming tragic. This conceptualization largely disregards the subversive possibilities noted earlier, but its main importance is in demonstrating the link between humor and failure. The mismatch of social expectation and individual behavior results in laughter and therefore reveals what these expectations are, which behaviors are found to be inadequate, and how critically or uncritically these expectations are accepted.

The link between humor and failure is foregrounded by current analyses of humor in the global and digital age that seem to echo Bergson's (1900) focus. First, Davies's (1990) account, which focused on the globally shared structures of oral jokes, noted their underlying preoccupation with inadequacies related to fitting into current society, namely, being too stupid or too cunning to live a successful life. More recently, Milner (2012, 2016) noted that Internet memes tend to focus on winners and losers. The judgment embedded in the distinction between success and failure is used reflectively to note desirable and undesirable qualities in current society as they play out in different circumstances. However, this judgment is intertwined with a certain crowd of users, mainly the young Western men who dominate this culture, and their discussion of failure or success doubles as a reinforcement of their group identity. Thus, their humor offers sympathy for in-group failures and failing qualities, mitigating their implications while mocking those on the outside. A similar case is found in a Chinese meme that focused on a class of losers unapologetically ignoring normative, competitive, and materialistic life paths (Szablewicz, 2014). Szablewicz analyzed this meme as solidifying existing norms for some (i.e., mocking failure in the name of social productiveness), while offering others a space for debating or subverting what makes a "loser," thus presenting, once again, a redemptive aspect. Failures in digital humor therefore continue the introspection of social roles and norms, but add a preoccupation with community and identity as funny failures play out.

Failures and redemptions are, therefore, source material through which comic content processes social dynamics, such as roles and norms, subversive identities, or boundary work. Typifying which failures are reflected in humor may thus shed light on contemporary perceptions of social positions. Moreover, when failure is examined within the context of comic items that traverse geographic and linguistic borders, the implications may relate to fundamental perceptions on human experiences and exchanges in current global culture. This study builds on these assertions to address the following question: What types of failure are embedded in the user-generated humor that acquires worldwide distribution, and how are they associated with notions of identity in global culture?

## **Methods**

### ***Sampling***

To analyze the amorphous entity of global, border-crossing humor, we cast a wide net by collecting an extensive sample and employing both platform metadata and manual coding to narrow it to the most relevant posts. To this end, we turned to Twitter, a global platform that allows for large-scale content collecting (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). Because each included language required dedicated resources, the corpus was limited to four—Arabic, English, German, and Spanish—chosen for their popularity on Twitter in particular (Mocanu et al., 2013) and the Web in general (see [internetworldstats.com/stats.htm](http://internetworldstats.com/stats.htm)) and for the diverse cultures they represent. Although these languages do not, obviously, fully represent all cultures on the planet, they were used as a starting position from which to locate some common denominators. Thus, while the initial sampling is missing several prominent populations, the subsequent analysis (detailed later) ensured a wider range of sources. A collection of 16 terms marking humor<sup>2</sup> (tested and used in Nissenbaum

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<sup>2</sup>The terms included comedy, fail, fun, funny, haha, hahaha, hilarious, humor, humour, joke, jokes, laugh, laughing, lol, meme, memes.

& Shifman, 2020) were translated into each sampled language and scraped from Twitter by four dedicated servers running the DMI-TCAT application (Borra & Rieder, 2014). These operated simultaneously for a whole year—from January 30, 2018, to February 6, 2019—to allow for content cascades to play out fully and fulfil their potential to cross linguistic and cultural borders. This resulted in a collection of 263 million tweets,<sup>3</sup> which constituted an initial sample that was filtered and coded to locate cases of global humor.

### ***Data Filtering and Sorting***

This sample underwent a second phase of processing that aimed to locate “border-crossing” content. Following a preliminary filtering of users with fewer than 100 followers, we listed all intra-Twitter links appearing in the sample, that is, any retweet, retweet with comment, or posted URLs that direct users to a second tweet. This list was then cleaned of any broken or unresolvable links (because of privacy settings or other restrictions), and any duplicates were merged. This stage resulted in about 18.5 million tweets that had been linked to from within our corpus—in other words, tweets that were shared in some form by one or several Twitter users sampled.

While we initially expected to find linguistic variance in the tweets’ texts and accompanying comments, in reality, only a few items included additional text, and fewer than 50 items were commented on in more than three languages. We turned, instead, to the users’ chosen interface languages as an indicator of their preferred language (as cited in Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013; Graham, Hale, & Gaffney, 2014) and probable cultural affiliation. Although this is not an exact indication for tracking a specific language, we employed it to evaluate the versatility of each tweet’s linguistic sources—a tweet disseminated by multiple users with myriad interface languages can be assumed to have been seen, appreciated, and deemed share-worthy by a diverse group of people from across the globe. Moreover, this view of the corpus diversified its sources beyond the initial four languages that were sampled, to represent the choices of myriad users from across the world.

Thus, we subsequently filtered the corpus to include only tweets shared by users with more than 20 different interface languages, which ensured a widely diffused and diverse collection as well as a manageable corpus for in-depth analysis. To further focus on easily shareable content with a global appeal, we excluded tweets without images or videos attached, resulting in 969 items. Of these, manual coding (described later) filtered out nonhumorous tweets, thus finalizing the corpus for this research ( $N = 732$ ). A second scrape of Twitter was used to collect the full metadata available for these items, revealing that they were retweeted 12.8 million<sup>4</sup> times and solidifying indications of the corpus’s popularity and cross-lingual spread.

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<sup>3</sup> Per language (in millions): Spanish—108.8; English—108.7; German—29; Arabic—16.5.

<sup>4</sup> This number represents data scraped from Twitter during the filtering process and differs from the sum of sharing instances from within the initial sample, which reached 3.4 million and includes not only retweets, but also other forms of sharing.

### **Coding and Analysis**

#### *Quantitative Content Analysis*

Quantitative methods were used (a) to screen the sample by analyzing whether tweets were intended as humorous, as noted earlier, and (b) to code physical and/or verbal humor, social identity representation, and language use. Humorous intent was defined broadly for this study as any attempt to amuse or raise a smile, ensuring the inclusion of a wide variety of comedy and the avoidance of preestablished definitions of global humor. Humorous items were then coded as *physical*, meaning relying on actions or bodies to create laughter, and/or *verbal*, meaning relying on words (spoken or written) to create laughter. This distinction indicated the basic components driving the humor in our sample. Finally, *social identity* (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity) and language helped determine which people, identities, and cultures are represented in the items analyzed. Together, these variables helped to generate a basic understanding of both the global nature and the humorous mechanisms embedded in “global humor.”

These coding categories were developed through several pilot reliability tests by two coders (graduate students), which included modifications of the codebook as necessary to ensure its clarity. The codebook’s intercoder reliability scores were calculated for 70 tweets coded independently using Krippendorff’s (2004) test, with variable scores ranging between 0.84 and 0.71 (above the 0.66 cutoff point for exploratory studies). The language of tweets and of any included media was written in by the coders to accommodate any language that the corpus might include. Apart from English, only Korean and Spanish appeared prominently in the sample (36 and 14 items, respectively), and these items were translated to English by native speakers (including annotations to explain any wider contexts being alluded to). The coding results for these items were then reevaluated by translators to verify their validity.

#### *Qualitative Analysis*

Qualitative methods were used to deepen our understanding of the corpus, both in the categories analyzed quantitatively and in our investigation of its representation of failures, following the literature described earlier. This analysis was conducted by the principal investigators on a subsection of the corpus composed of tweets coded as humorous and shared using 30 or more interface languages ( $n = 142$ ), that is, the items with the most varied linguistic distribution in our sample. Building on the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the analysis included a repeated comparison of theoretical categories from previous studies with categories emerging inductively from the current corpus. These were applied to two analytical trajectories: (1) indications of identity, including mentions or allusions to cultures, nations, or regions, and (2) representations of failures, along with their central themes or topics and their balancing by elements of success or redemption.

### **Findings**

Our analysis of global, user-generated humor touched first on the identities it reflects, before describing representations of failure. While the former was largely uniform, except for a single, glaring



outlier, the latter provided five types of failure and appropriate redemptions, ranging from the personal to the societal.

### ***The Uniquely Universal and the Universally Unique***

While humor being spread by users of myriad languages might have been expected to reflect differing tastes or provide a symbolic meeting point between cultures, this was not the case in our sample. Somewhat nonintuitively, the content presented in the humorous items could have come from anywhere or from nowhere at all. In this section, we argue that this marks these far-reaching tweets as universal rather than global.

This universality was reflected in both the kind of humor and the people appearing in the corpus. A majority of tweets relied only on physical humor (53%), a few included only verbal comedy (12%), and about a third (35%) combined both. Our sampling of tweets that include media may partly explain this bias toward the physical, which is often more visual. Nevertheless, the emphasis on physical humor is striking—global humor appears to be created mostly through gestures and actions, from embarrassing falls to adorable expressions (more on these later) rather than through words in speech or texts. A qualitative assessment confirmed this notion, as the physical humor in the sample was limited to basic and widely recognizable realms of comedy. It tended to show mundane parts of life in most of the developed world—walking city streets (and tripping), buying expensive gadgets (and breaking them), or watching renowned celebrities (as they mess up). These situations and humorous failures allowed content to traverse language barriers at the cost of cultural specificity or exchange of ideas, which were largely absent. Global humor is therefore universal, not in the sense that it fully applies to all people, but in that it distills those experiences that would be both clear and amusing to most people; any markers of locality that might be confusing or tedious to explain fail to make the cut.

Another reflection of the corpus's bland universality is the represented people and their unmarked and unvaried profile. As in previous analyses of digital humor (Milner, 2016; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018), we found depictions of the most hegemonic identities: Teenagers or adults appeared in 88% of tweets, while children appeared in 5% and seniors in only 2%; men appeared in 83% of tweets, while women appeared in only 22%. Here again, this humor tended to tell the stories of the most recognizable and well-represented population, relying on its ubiquity to appeal to wide audiences. The representation of ethnicity in the corpus is more complex. Exclusively Latin/Hispanic and Black participants were recognized by coders in only 1% and 4% of items (respectively), while exclusively White/Caucasian participants appeared in 12% of them. Another 10% contained multiple ethnicities, the majority of which included White people with another ethnic group. While these results seem to reflect hegemonic tendencies of representation, a surprising result was the high rate of appearances of people recognized as Central/East Asian (57% of tweets). As explained later, these items predominantly featured one group: K-pop boy bands.

The unexpected frequency of Central/East Asian participants in the corpus seems to emanate from a different mode of creating global appeal that features unique protagonists, but keeps the universal frame. Qualitative analysis revealed that the vast majority of these tweets depict South Korean pop (K-pop) boy bands, primarily Bangtan Boys (commonly known as BTS). K-pop, which has seen wide circulation in the

East Asian region in recent years, is now reaching Western cultures through distribution (by fans and promoters alike) over social networks and content platforms such as YouTube (D. Y. Jin & Yoon, 2016). Its appeal is centered on a combination of familiar media genres in novel settings; from television to music, K-pop creators build on global (mostly American) formats and aesthetics, filtered through the unique sensibilities and idiosyncrasies of a formerly peripheral Asian culture (Kim, 2007). Moreover, K-pop is advantageously positioned between global identities: It is unaffiliated with the West, which holds negative hegemonic/colonial connotations for many, yet delivers highly polished entertainment in line with American production standards (Lyan, Zidani, & Shifman, 2015). In this, however, it abandons much of the South Korean worldview and values in favor of more globally palatable cultural products (Lie, 2012). The K-pop-related items in our corpus follow this pattern, as their comedy mostly sidesteps their cultural origins. Instead, these tweets deal with the band members' antics (e.g., playful barbs or mimicking), gestures (e.g., funny dances), and attractiveness (e.g., cute expressions of joy, shyness, or friendship). While their South Korean background likely shapes how these are expressed, the band's depiction seems highly comparable to any other boy band that reaches global fame, focusing on small relatable moments rather than any wider connotation. Accordingly, they included little mention, comic or otherwise, of lyrics, musical style, or artistic value. Simply put, while K-pop represents a break from well-established cultural influences, global humorous tweets engage mostly with its basic, relatable, and easily understandable components.

In terms of identity, the story of global humor is, therefore, that of the uniquely universal and the universally unique. We found the former in forms (physical humor) and populations (young men) that are unique in their interpretative accessibility or hegemonic status for the vast majority of audiences, making them universally familiar and thus spreadable on a global scale. We found the latter in what is thought of as novel (K-pop)—an emerging cultural force that is gaining global recognition while hailing from outside the established culture capitals of the West. This is not, however, a contradiction, but the continuation of a pattern: Its uniqueness extends only as far as its universality remains unblemished. Accordingly, K-pop is noted for relying on familiar forms and production values, and nearly all K-pop content in our corpus dealt with physical humor (evident in cute expressions or funny dances) and young men (boy band members). Nevertheless, this does not mean that global humor on Twitter is banal; rather, its meaning and implications arise from a more general social context, which we will now unpack through an analysis of failures.

### ***A Typology of Failure***

Our qualitative analysis revealed five types of failure in the comic texts, ranging from the personal and concrete to the social and abstract. Each was composed of not only the failure itself but also its redemption—the counterbalance or “cooling out” that made these items comic rather than tragic. Together, they outline an underlying structure of local and global cultural relations, emanating from the aggregation of individuals and moments appearing in these tweets.

*Failure in Physical Actions*

This type of failure refers to comedy coming from unsuccessful attempts at everyday activities with uncomfortable results.<sup>5</sup> Such tweets included the classic blunders of falling down, hurting yourself, making a mess, or dropping a fragile object (e.g., resulting in a broken smartwatch, as seen in Figure 1). They also extended to unwitting acts by animals and children behaving in peculiar or exaggerated ways (e.g., spinning on a turbine vent or screaming maniacally). K-pop band members are represented here through awkward and clumsy dance moves on stage or in rehearsal—failures when compared to their usually elegant performances. These posts therefore represent a failure to meet societal demands at the basic level of completing actions successfully and adequately in a human environment (even if performed by animals, which are generally portrayed in urban surroundings or having human contact). They seem to draw their humor from slapstick, ludicrous accidents, or violence befalling onscreen characters acting in disregard of their environment, which was popular in the early days of cinema. The wide appeal of this basic form translates into global success, especially as the user-generated version draws on amateur participants and unintended comedy.

The variations within this type also clarify the redemption for this failure, namely, *being free*, as expressed through uninhibited or daring behavior. The people falling or dropping precious items are often inebriated and/or trying some kind of stunt showing bravery, while the professional performers are daring to act foolishly. Animals and children are similarly free in their actions and disregard their implications. These qualities soften the (often literal) blows of physical failure and, as such, subvert the implied criticism toward unseemly behavior: It demonstrates that, for example, drunkenly falling off a chair while eating a pizza is not only humiliating (and funny) but also happens to those who dare to live life to the fullest.

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<sup>5</sup>To clarify, the “failure in physical actions” category is narrower than physical humor: Whereas the former deals with failed acts, the latter includes humorous actions that succeed, such as making a funny face or gesture.

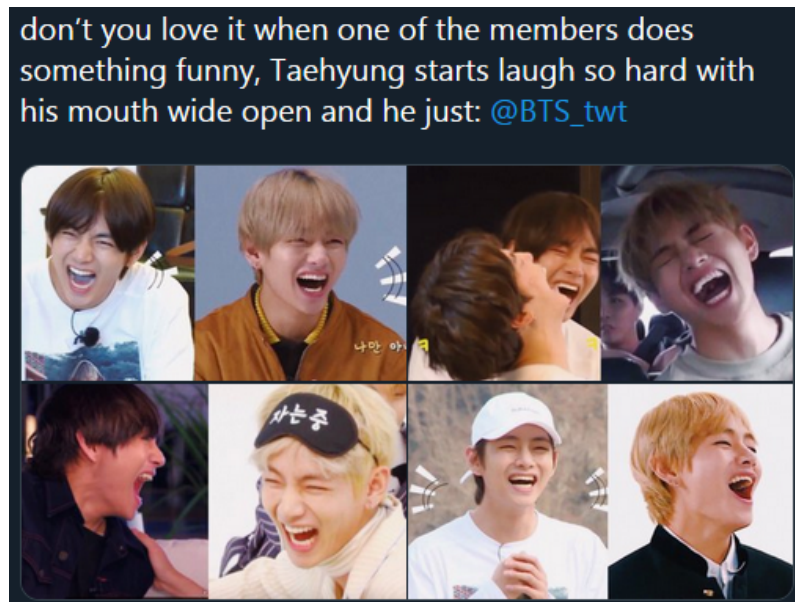


**Figure 1. Failure in physical actions (Source: Sampled Twitter post).**

#### *Failure to Maintain Face*

The second type of failure relates to mishandling a public image and displaying the “backstage” of private thoughts or behaviors that are not deemed publicly acceptable. It is, thus, not separate from failure in physical actions, but continues it, albeit focusing more on the complete face a person aims to project rather than specific actions. It includes gazes, facial expressions, and behaviors that are, themselves, not accidental, but accidentally become public: laughter at a solemn event, an overly adoring look at a friend, or a disrespectful comment meant to be unheard. This is especially relevant to celebrities, who in this corpus are primarily K-pop stars; their expected coolness and charm are repeatedly broken by overly excited smiles, confusion, or embarrassment, allowing the audience to peek behind their cultivated façade. While such candidness is generally seen as advantageous in current digital culture, for celebrities and common users alike (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015), it still holds comic tension in its subversion of expected behavior. This is evident in how these tweets are contextualized—not as self-revealing, but as drawing attention to others who are losing face (intentionally or not). This is especially true of K-pop stars; their face-threatening moments are searched for and collected by their fans (as exemplified in Figure 2), who revel in their idols’ displays of goofiness between well-executed dance maneuvers. Another variation is found in those who display a lack of understanding of expected norms, with children, again, featuring often and behaving in the

wrong manner—for example, running in slow motion during a sports match. Together, failures in maintaining face are, quite simply, failures to internalize the expectations of what should be projected to your social surroundings because of a lack of control or ignorance.



**Figure 2. Failure to maintain face (Source: Sampled Twitter post).**

The redemption of this type of failure is found in what we term *being authentic*. While not entirely denying expectations, as in the case of physical failures, here, those misbehaving do so to follow an internal truth or implacable emotions. As noted earlier, this authenticity may not be the result of a chosen openness, but rather arises from being pointed out, yet it still seems to be an attractive feature. This is especially potent for celebrities, who gain a sense of closeness with fans through their (supposedly) spontaneous expressions. The subversion here is, accordingly, of social expectations for self-control and face management, which are not met in order to reach a higher ideal of meeting one's own expectations.

#### *Failure in Social Relations*

This third type relates to failures happening within direct social interactions: being rejected, mocked, or denigrated while communicating with another person. Here, too, the failures are not entirely distinct from the previous type, but often coincide; a single interaction can involve failing socially and in maintaining face, with the key difference being the depiction of direct dialog. While many of the failures of this type were obviously lighthearted comic jabs (especially among K-pop stars), others seemed to seek the comic in dark situations. Examples include conversations (as seen in Figure 3) in which one side receives negative feedback, as well as recounts of such exchanges, in which the author describes his or her social failure and hurt feelings. Another variation of this type reversed the viewpoint: The author displayed others' lacking social skills, including mostly people trying to fit in, such as a teacher creating memes about himself

or one of Trump's gaffes. These are therefore failures in being sociable or desirable, having value, and being able to exert value while interacting with others.

The redemption of this type of failure is found in *being sympathetic*. Those failing appear at vulnerable moments that draw identification and commiseration as experiences shared by many. However, this dynamic corresponds with the aforementioned research, which notes how representations of failure and "losers" are contingent on in-group relations and boundaries (Milner, 2012, 2016; Szablewicz, 2014). Accordingly, the redeeming sympathy for failures in social relations relies on a shared sense of similar fortune. It is gained by drawing on the universal features referred to earlier as a way of forming a sense of belonging among a highly heterogeneous and widespread audience.



**Figure 3. Failure in social relations (Source: Sampled Twitter post).**

#### *Failure in Intercultural Relations*

This fourth type of failure also touches on social dynamics, but the failures here deal not with personal relations, but with collective, cultural ones. These were rare in the sample and mirrored the identities described earlier because they included two sources: American people and K-pop stars. About the former, tweets referred to their lack of world knowledge on the one hand (e.g., inability to name countries on a blank world map) and expectations of world dominance and leadership on the other (see Figure 4). About the latter, their interactions in visits to the United States and their interviews in English resulted in

funny mispronunciations and awkward cultural misunderstandings, displaying a lack of knowledge about such an influential and dominant cultural power.

These expectations of cultural awareness and aptitude in worldwide codes are redeemed by what we term "being communicative," namely, the ability to overcome communication barriers. Americans do this through the dominant stature of their culture: They do not know much about the world, but, by virtue of being American (and thus easily speaking the lingua franca), they are portrayed as coherent and interesting enough to be entertaining for anyone in the world watching them, albeit as the butt of the joke. For the K-pop stars, the charisma and charm that come with their celebrity position are presented as enabling them to reach their interviewers and audiences without the need for eloquence. This subverts the need for a global commonality in favor of the kind of universal appeal described earlier.



**Figure 4. Failure in intercultural relations (Source: Sampled Twitter post).**

#### *Failure to Create Meaning*

The final type of failure in our corpus is more abstract and stems from an inability to produce meaning. Its main component is nonsense humor, which refers to comedy that makes no statement about reality beyond the text itself and instead focuses on the process of meaning-making and how it can be broken (Katz & Shifman, 2017). Texts of this type include references to peculiar phenomena that are enjoyed for their own sake: for example, the noncurved banana that brings good luck (as seen in Figure 5). Another

example is found in seemingly random juxtapositions (e.g., synchronizing a popular song with a scene from *The Simpsons*), demonstrating how the meaning of a scene can be changed but without creating any ultimate message or statement beyond the play on meaning. Finally, other items focused on allusions to well-known digital culture and humor, especially meme templates (e.g., presenting old images similar to a popular photo-based meme), making pastiche-style references based on the familiarity of the sources rather than any message about them.

While nonsensical art tends to come from a long-standing tradition of postmodern thought, global humor seems to focus on a specific element to form the redemption of these failures: being communal. As noted by Katz and Shifman (2017), in digital culture, nonsense tends to build on the familiarity of a certain crowd who can both decode and appreciate its rejection of meaning-making. Nevertheless, the use of nonsense in global humor emphasizes how such communality acts as redemption for the failure to create meaning; the common culture and identification as netizens offset the eccentricity of not making sense. In this, it subverts expectations of wider legibility for the uninitiated, asserting the requirement of belonging to enjoy this humor.



**Figure 5. Failure to create meaning (Source: Sampled Twitter post).**

### **Conclusions**

This study tracked and analyzed a unique group of texts: humorous content that was shared through social media across many languages. Via extensive, sustained sampling and a multilayered data filtering process, we identified such prevalent humorous tweets. We analyzed them to trace the kinds of humor and the identities featured in globally spread comic tweets, classifying their patterns as uniquely universal and universally unique. Then, we focused on the failures featured in global humor and their underlying portrayal of social norms. We identified five types of failure, each compounded with a form of redemption, making the failure more comic than tragic while also conveying a normative message. These



lead us to three main conclusions describing the position of global humor as liminal space, the balance of the personal and the collective in humorous failures and redemptions, and the ambiguous subversiveness of such failures.

According to our first conclusion, global humor exists to a large extent in a liminal space. Despite the evidence on the importance of locality in studies of humor (Oring, 2008; Raskin, 1985) and of global diffusion (Hale, 2014; Kamath et al., 2013), we found that digital global humor largely neglects locally distinctive qualities or relationships. This is evident from our corpus's reliance on universality in terms of form and participants and its focus on highly relatable and globally recognizable comic failures. Thus, borrowing from Turner's (1969) classical definition of liminal space, we view global humor as characterized by a temporary erasure of individual identities in order to create an encompassing collective. Here, however, the identities being suspended are national and cultural ones, thus creating a collective, global experience of laughter. This collectivity is formed by sharing comic tweets stripped of distinctive features and leaning on ubiquitous forms. In this lies what we see as liminal globality: a logic underlying a global flow of culture that is based on excluding markers of local or specific cultures and identities. Topics, characters, and allusions are therefore whittled down to elements that are so widely recognizable that their origins no longer matter; this, in turn, enables their flow to myriad global and cultural locations with relative ease. In other words, liminal globality allows for an enjoyable sense of global belonging without distinctions, entrenched in seemingly common human experiences and ideas (even if their origins are usually Western or American). It should be noted that this spread of liminal global texts does not negate the well-documented patterns of glocalization, but represents a related, parallel process.

Our second conclusion delves into the frame of liminal globality by tracking the failures, redemptions, and subversions featured in global humor. We argue that the meaning of human failure in the global digital age is a balancing act: While individuals fail miserably, shared laughter offers collective ways of overcoming such failures without questioning deep-rooted norms. The emphasis on individual failure is evident from the types of failure featured in global humor, which touch on personal deficiency in the most fundamental aspects of life. From basic daily functions to the creation of meaning, these failures stem from a person's qualities (or lack thereof) and his or her inability to conform to society's demands. While failure is associated with the media's protagonists, the different forms of redemptions in the corpus, such as being authentic, sympathetic, or communicative, offset these failures by obtaining a positive social image or status. Therefore, such redemptions ultimately reflect a collectively desirable narrative, namely, that your own misadventures or downfalls are redeemable through the forgiving collective gaze of an audience the world over.

This ties into our final conclusion, as the balance described earlier is associated with a specific type of subversiveness: The redemptions for the failures portrayed do not reinstate the protagonist's social status, but seem to throw off societal demands altogether. In other words, they are subversive by suggesting that failure is acceptable as long as it is met with laughter. The redemptions offered here avoid questioning the norms defining what is deemed a failure. Thus, the balance of individual failure and collective redemption may define a common ground, providing an easy solution to the trials of modern society in a way that is both appealing and relatable to a wide, heterogeneous audience. Simultaneously, such a balance dulls the subversion of discussing failures; the inherent polysemy of humor (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014)

makes redemption through laughter a mix of sympathy and ridicule—an ambiguity that stunts the possibility for poignant social critique. Together these patterns indicate that liminal globality may necessitate not only universal and nonspecific content but also ambiguity, balancing out different messaging and offering a comfortable narrative for different viewpoints.

Overall, these conclusions display some unexpected dynamics of globally spread humor. However, further research is required to confirm and expand their implications. Although this article focused on content analysis, the paths of distribution leading to global spread are also worthy of attention and are likely to reveal more about how border-crossing digital items are formed, their common routes for spreading, and, possibly, subgroups of texts with different reach and characteristics. Future studies may also take on a wider range of languages as a point of departure, to further diversify our view of global humor distribution. More specifically, the unexpected prominence of K-pop references in our sample invites a more focused inquiry into South Korean and East Asian content's roles and positions in globally distributed digital culture. While this study characterized globally spread items in themselves, our data indicate that their dissemination process involves different techniques of local recontextualization—for example, through comments or captions—an aspect of global humor that calls for a subsequent study. Finally, the focus on content in this study would be greatly supplemented by an analysis of how global humor is received. Such an investigation could build on the current findings to ascertain users' perceptions of global humor as conveyed through social media and its role in local cultural exchanges.

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