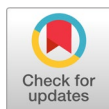


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The Evolution of Humour: A Generational Analysis Dad Jokes and Dark Humour among Boomers and Gen Z

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Abstract

Humour can be seen as entertainment but in addition, it indicates the cultural values, emotional coping methods, and social images that are particular to various generations. Despite extensive research on humour as a topic, there is minimal scholarly literature to explain the impact of specific humour types and preferences. To fill this gap, the paper explores unique humour preferences through a psychological, social, and cultural framework that helps shape the humour styles of Baby Boomers and Generation Z. Both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews were used in a mixed-methods design that enabled a detailed investigation. A sample of 50 purposively selected participants was drawn to represent each of the generational cohorts with respect to their demographic characteristics. Quantitative data would be collected via structured questionnaires to assess differences in humour preferences, and qualitative data were collected through 8 semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed definite generational distinctions: Baby Boomers enjoyed dad jokes because of their emotional congruence and their ability to establish deeper connections, whereas members of Generation Z preferred dark humour because of its role as a coping mechanism and means of social identification. Moreover, Generation Z was more open to sharing humour online even when it involved taboo topics compared with Baby Boomers, who appreciated humour in more closed and traditional environments. The study concludes that Baby Boomers tend to prefer humour that reinforces tradition and evokes a sense of emotional familiarity, whereas Generation Z is more drawn to humour characterised by complexity, subversion, and responses to contemporary fears and concerns. These findings can guide educationists, media practitioners, and mental health care providers in promoting empathy, communication models, and emotional adaptation among age groups.

Keywords: baby boomers, dad jokes, dark humour, generational

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humour, generation Z

Introduction

Alongside being purely entertaining, humour can tell much about the actual norms of our society, the identity of our generations, and how our minds adapt to stressful realities. The ability to understand how humour varies across generations enables one to realize how culture, societal practices, and psychology shift with time. The contrasting styles of humour between Baby Boomers and Generation Z can reveal changes in attitudes towards authority, trauma, identity, and the community. Dad jokes are a special type of humour in this larger context. They are stereotyped to refer to father figures because they have straightforward puns, formulaic joke endings, and deliberate cringe-worthiness (Hye-Knudsen, [2021](#)). In contrast, dark humour often addresses serious or taboo topics through irony, sarcasm, or absurdity, reflecting the broader cognitive and emotional functions of humour (Hurley et al., [2011](#)). Given the very different socio-historical contexts in which Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012) were raised, it is reasonable to expect that their humour preferences also differ.

Existing research indicates that generational engagement with humour varies considerably. Hye-Knudsen ([2021](#)) suggests that dad jokes are a form of “benign violation,” gently breaking social expectations in a way that feels safe. These jokes help reinforce social bonds, particularly within families. According to Ullmann (2024), people belonging to older generations frequently express care through humour, trying to keep relationships alive.

This study is grounded in Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, [2010](#)), which argues that humour arises when a social or moral norm is violated in a way that is still perceived as non-threatening. It also draws on Incongruity Theory (Martin, [2007](#)), which suggests that humour is produced when there is a gap between what is expected and what occurs. These theories aid in the understanding of how the various generations can be inclined to react in varying ways to certain styles of humour.

In the meantime, Generation Z is more attracted to dark, nonsensical and meme humor. Partlow and Talarczyk ([2021](#)) found that absurdist content in memes was associated with higher humour ratings among Generation Z students. This preference may reflect the economic, technological, and political instability many in this generation have grown

up with.

While dad jokes are light, wholesome, and associated with familial interaction (Hye-Knudsen, [2021](#)), digital humour can also provide Generation Z with a means of expressing identity and responding to contemporary social experiences (Aronson & Jaffal, [2021](#)).

Although humour has received increasing scholarly attention, there remains a noticeable lack of comparative research on how specific humour forms—particularly dad jokes and dark humour—differ across generations. While some studies explore general age-based humour preferences (e.g., McGraw & Warren, [2010](#); Hancox & Green, 2016), and others examine generational humour in online spaces (Partlow & Talarczyk, [2021](#)), few delve into how these distinct styles reflect generational identities and coping mechanisms.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combined structured surveys ($n=50$) with short, semi-structured interviews ($n=8$) to measure humour preferences and explore the underlying cultural and psychological factors. This study addresses this gap by providing a comparative analysis of generational humour preferences within a unified framework. To address this gap, the study poses the following research questions:

- How do Baby Boomers and Generation Z differ in their preferences for dad jokes and dark humour?
- What social, emotional, or cultural factors influence each generation's use and perception of these humour styles?

Based on the existing literature, the study hypothesizes that:

- Generation Z will report a significantly higher preference for dark humour compared to Baby Boomers.
- Baby Boomers will show a stronger positive emotional response to dad jokes than Generation Z.

This study used a mixed-methods approach, including surveys to measure humour preferences and short interviews to explore underlying reasons. Participants from both generations were selected using purposive sampling.

The study provides a solid rationale for the study's value—highlighting intergenerational communication, culture, and psychology. Moreover, the

study positions humour as both a mirror of evolving societal values and a coping mechanism shaped by generational experiences.

Literature Review

Humour is defined as a social and cognitive phenomenon that enables individuals to navigate emotional and relational complexities (Martin, [2007](#)). In recent decades, scholars have increasingly examined how humour preferences vary across generations, particularly focusing on distinct types like dad jokes, associated with the Baby Boomer generation, and dark humour, prevalent among Gen Z.

The scope of existing literature covers humour's psychological, social, and cultural functions, with some works exploring how humour acts as a reflection of generational values and societal contexts. However, while much research focuses on either a specific generation or a specific humour style, comparatively few studies directly investigate how different generations relate to different humour types within the same framework.

General findings suggest that Boomers gravitate toward safe, familiar, and bonding-oriented humour (Lynch, [2002](#); Hye-Knudsen, [2021](#)), while Gen Z engages with humour that is darker, edgier, and often rooted in coping with existential anxieties (Partlow & Talarczyk, [2021](#); Aronson & Jaffal, 2021). Yet, the nuances of how these humour styles function intergenerationally, and what this reveals about evolving cultural and psychological landscapes, remain underexplored.

In the following sections, including the review will address key topics, the general psychological and social functions of humour, humour and generational identity, dad jokes and their role among Boomers, dark humour and its rise among Gen Z, the impact of digital media on humour evolution, and emerging gaps and future research directions.

Humour has long been recognized as an essential part of human interaction, promoting both psychological well-being and social cohesion. Martin ([2007](#)) identifies humour as a tool for stress relief, emotional regulation, and social bonding. Morreall ([2009](#)) similarly argues that humour helps people reframe challenges, offering emotional flexibility through laughter. Building on these foundations, Hurley et al. ([2011](#)) propose the *cognitive incongruity theory*, suggesting that humour helps the brain resolve conflicting information creatively, reducing mental tension.

Martin focuses on emotional and relational outcomes, whereas Hurley et al. (2011) place greater emphasis on the cognitive processes underlying humour. McGraw and Warren (2010) propose Benign Violation Theory, which holds that humour arises when something is perceived as both a violation and benign or acceptable. The strength of their model lies in the fact that it extends over the emotional, cognitive, and social levels and could serve as a universal model to be applied to any age and humour type. In short, all of these underpinning theories have some aspects of the psychological benefits of humour in common, but their emphasis varies, with some laying stress on emotions (Martin, 2007; Morreall, 2009) and some on the processes underlying cognition (Hurley et al., 2011; McGraw & Warren, 2010). Such dissimilarities go a long way to explain why various people are attracted to varied styles of humour.

The key that will play a significant role in the formation of humour preferences is generational identity, which is shaped by historical, cultural, and technological experiences. According to Thorson and Powell (1993), how followers perceive humour may be influenced by life changes like what war or economic changes have done in different age brackets. Fink and Walker (1977) demonstrated that humour can help restructure interpersonal communication in situations involving embarrassment, highlighting its role in managing uncomfortable social interactions. In explaining the preference of Gen Z towards humour oriented to uncertainty and existentialism, Arnett et al. (2018) provides the concept of emerging adulthood prompting the proposed pathway to adulthood which is delayed due to individualism and late transition to adult roles. Twenge (2017) further notes that the two generations, Millennials and Gen Z, have been exposed to the dynamism of changing technology and an increase in mental health consciousness and, therefore, are inclined towards irony and darker humour in their lives which the Boomers did not encounter as they lived in a more stable, socially cohesive age.

Dad jokes embraced by Boomers reflect their socio-cultural context, highlighting values of stability, tradition, and strong family bonds. Lynch (2002) defines dad jokes as puns that are easy to see coming and that can spread warm and familiar feelings in a family. Hye-Knudsen (2021) then builds on this and describes dad jokes in the context of benign violation as mild subversions that give rise to humour without any discomfort. Torres et al. (2020) points to the performance aspect of dad jokes: they serve to

strengthen the authority of parents yet do so by cutting it with self-deprecating humour. Whereas Lynch speaks of the family, Hye-Knudsen speaks of cognitive play and Torres speaks of power and passion in families. In combination, they demonstrate that dad jokes help to articulate emotional safety and commonality of standards.

The popularity of dark humour among Gen Z testifies to their approaches to the issues of the modern world. Partlow and Talarczyk (2021) stated that this humour gives cathartic relief to from the continuous social and political pressures such as a mental health crisis or climate anxiety. Partlow and Talarczyk (2021) found a significant relationship between the absurdist content of memes and the humour ratings given by Generation Z students. These studies highlight different aspects of contemporary digital humour, including generational identity and conflict (Aronson & Jaffal, 2021), absurdist humour among Generation Z (Partlow & Talarczyk, 2021), and online collective identity.

Online technologies have profoundly affected the way humour is changing through generations. According to Shifman (2014) memes reduce the form of humour into smaller bite-sized material that can be easily shared to fit into the high digitization pace of Gen Z. Highfield (2018) demonstrates how social media facilitate the circulation of political and irreverent forms of expression, allowing everyday users to engage with controversial and socially significant topics online. According to Phillips and Milner (2017), digital humour is an ambivalent concept that swings back and forth between irony, sarcasm, and seriousness. They find that online communities promote the style of boundary-testing humour, which tends to be darker and meta-textual. What Shifman (2014) pays attention to is the form of the meme culture, Phillips and Milner (2017) are examining its emotional tone, and Highfield focuses on the social outcome. The combination of these perspectives tells us how generational humour preferences are essentially shaped by modes of communication, such as digital communication and face-to-face interaction.

It has been proposed that comparative studies indicate that humour is an indication of greater cultural change, which is not a taste issue. Fink and Walker (1977) also stressed humour as a defence mechanism in stressful settings. As shown by Thorson and Powell (1993), major historical events determine what every generation considers funny. As described by Zillmann (2000), the reactions to humour depend on the individuals in terms

of their experience and cultural expectations of a particular society that may excel in assigning different meanings to the same joke to Boomers in the present case and Gen Z. According to the study by Hofmann et al. (2017), Boomers prefer positive or neutral humour, and Gen Z feels more at ease with humour that borders on off-beat social norms. Boomer humour tends to embrace that sense of belonging and emotional stability in most instances, but Gen Z humour is built on a foundation of uncertainty and psychological complexity. To sum up, all these studies present a thematic variation: humour reflects the cultural and emotional context of an age.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined generational variations in humour preferences, particularly in relation to digital culture and identity construction. Studies conducted within the past five years suggest that Generation Z demonstrates a greater preference for ironic, absurd, and dark humour, often mediated through online platforms, whereas Baby Boomers tend to favor affiliative and socially cohesive humour styles. Moreover, humour has been identified as a coping mechanism among younger cohorts, particularly in contexts of social uncertainty and digital overstimulation (Patel, 2024). Cross-cultural research further indicates that generational humour differences are influenced by shifting norms surrounding emotional expression, media consumption, and social identity formation (Jiang et al., 2019). These recent findings underscore the importance of examining humour evolution not only as a psychological construct but also as a sociocultural phenomenon shaped by generational experience.

Overall, the literature review indicates that humour has significant psychological, social, and cultural functions for every generation. Humour, particularly dad jokes, reinforce traditional values and provide emotional safety among Baby Boomers, allowing families to bond with each other (Lynch, 2002; Hye-Knudsen, 2021; Torres, et al., 2020). In Generation Z, dark humour is one of the coping mechanisms used by the younger generation to cope with current global instability, mental health issues, and existential (Fink & Walker, 1977; Aronson & Jaffal, 2021; Partlow & Talarczyk, 2021). In addition, the rise of digital platforms has transformed humour into more immediate, boundary-pushing, and community-oriented forms, particularly suited to Gen Z's communication styles (Highfield, 2018; Phillips & Milner, 2017; Shifman, 2014). Humour, in all its forms, continues to reflect and shape how each generation navigates the world.

Research Gap

While studies have explored either dad jokes or dark humour individually, such as the social bonding functions of dad jokes (Hye-Knudsen, [2021](#)) and the identity-shaping role of dark humour among Generation Z (Partlow & Talarczyk, [2021](#)) few have offered a direct, comparative analysis of generational humour within a unified framework. Much existing research treats dad jokes and dark humour in isolation, without systematically examining how different generations interpret, produce, and respond to these contrasting forms of humour. This highlights a conceptual gap: the absence of an integrated framework for examining humour preferences across generations.

The proposed paper will address this gap through offering a comparative examination of the way Boomers and Gen Z cope with dad jokes and dark humour and examining what cultural, psychological and social processes influence the use and taste of humour in Boomers and Gen Z.

Methodology

Based on a mixed-methods approach to research, the paper investigates generational gaps in the use and perception of humour, specifically dad jokes and dark humour. Quantitative and qualitative measures are combined to provide both measurable comparisons and a deeper understanding of how the participants interpret humour in social and emotional contexts. The ontological perspective for this research is constructivist, according to which reality is socially constructed and influenced by generational and cultural contexts. Epistemologically, it works within the interpretive tradition, with a focus on the need to discern the ways people within their daily lives interpret humour, relying on personal experiences and social contexts.

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, through which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analysed together. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, whereas, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. This design allowed the researchers to replicate findings and gain a deeper and more in-depth picture of generational preferences for humour.

The purposive sampling technique was adopted to represent the two target generational groups; Baby Boomers and Generation Z. Participants were selected based on their generational age and their ability to reflect on

and analyse humour styles. This ensured that the data gathered were pertinent, specific and well-informed. Additional criteria included a minimum education level of high school completion to ensure participants could engage with the study's materials and provide informed responses. A total of 50 participants (25 from each generation) completed the questionnaire, and 8 individuals (4 from each generation) participated in in-depth interviews.

The main data collection tools utilised in this research included questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide. This questionnaire was divided into three parts. The initial part entailed demographic data with age, gender, and occupation. The second part included multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions aimed at evaluating humour preferences, the frequency of humour participation, and the use of humour in social contexts. In the third section, each of the participants received memes that were seen as good examples of either dad jokes or dark humour. They were asked to evaluate the memes on five levels of perceived funniness, their relatability, emotional reaction (e.g. comfort, embarrassment, degrading, funny), as well as their sharing potential in a social scenario.

The semi-structured interviews were meant to discuss the experiences of humour among participants and the emotional responses in more detail. During the interview, different thematic areas were examined that covered humour coping, social dynamics of humour usage, views on generational humour, responses to the content of the memes, and understanding of dad jokes. The memes selected in the questionnaire were also presented to the participants to discuss their reactions, interpretation, and readiness to share them. This permitted the research to go beyond superficial liking and explore the cultural and psychological importance of the reception of humour.

Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to analyse the quantitative questionnaire data and identify the trends, and differences between the two generations. Comparative analysis like cross-tabulation was applied to investigate the spread of humour preferences involving different age groups.

Thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse qualitative data such as responses given by the participants through open responses to questionnaires and interview transcriptions. This

was done by becoming familiar with the data, creating some initial codes, searching for themes, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. Manual thematic coding was conducted to identify patterns across participants' narratives during their interviews on topics concerning their preferences in terms of humour and the emotional reaction to it. The qualitative data were interpreted in a structured manner by coding the answers into larger themes. The main themes presented were emotional contentment, irony, generational affiliation, media exposure, and acceptance of topics that are considered taboo. During interpretation, the results of both quantitative and qualitative phases were merged, which allowed a better and deeper comprehension of the dynamics of generational humour.

The choice of research design and analysis was informed by relevant theoretical perspectives. The knowledge on how individuals understand the extent of humour and offence relationship was based on the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, [2010](#)). Martin's ([2007](#)) Incongruity Theory was useful in explaining the cognitive side of participants' engagement with humour, especially in memes. The Social Identity and Coping Theories (Aronson & Jaffal, [2021](#); Morreall, [2009](#)) shed some light on the emotional and group-related purposes of humour in various generations.

In a bid to make it valid, the questionnaire was piloted prior to its full implementation to see whether it was clear and relevant. The questionnaire and the interviews involved the same stimuli to present the same humour, and had the modified material checked by field experts to ensure cultural adequacy and generational balance. To limit bias, an independent researcher monitored the coding of the interview data in qualitative analysis. The internal validity of the findings and overall credibility of the research were strengthened with the triangulation of methods - questionnaire versus interviews - and triangulation of participant type.

Before the data collection, ethical approval was obtained. All participants provided informed consent and were made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage. The use of dark humour was explained beforehand, and participants were allowed to skip any content that caused discomfort. All data were anonymized and stored securely, ensuring confidentiality and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

Findings

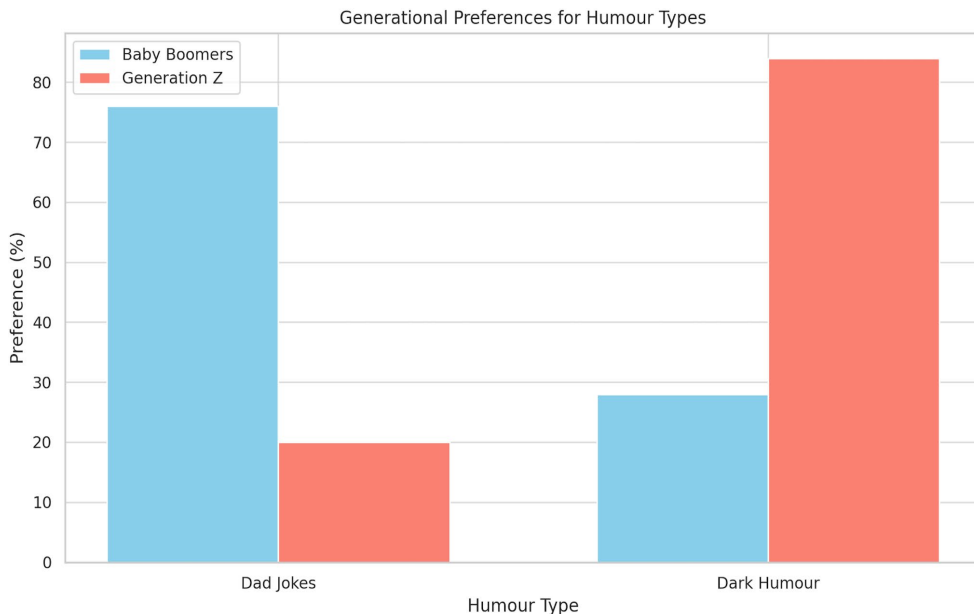
The quantitative data collected through the structured questionnaire provided measurable insights into generational humour preferences. The sample consisted of 50 participants, evenly divided between Baby Boomers ($n = 25$) and Generation Z ($n = 25$). The analysis focused on three core areas: humour style preference (dad jokes vs dark humour), emotional response to memes, and the social context of humour sharing.

Descriptive statistics revealed a clear generational divide in humour preferences. Among Baby Boomers, 76% indicated a strong preference for dad jokes, describing them as “familiar,” “wholesome,” or “harmless”. In contrast, only 20% of Gen Z participants reported finding dad jokes funny, with the majority rating them as “predictable” or “cringeworthy”.

Conversely, dark humour was more strongly favoured by Generation Z, with 84% expressing a high level of enjoyment. Many described dark humour as “relatable,” “therapeutic,” or “honest”. However, only 28% of Boomers expressed comfort or appreciation for dark humour, often citing it as “too cynical” or “inappropriate”.

Figure 1

Generational Preferences of Humour Types



Here's a visual representation of the humour preferences between Baby Boomers and Generation Z. This bar chart clearly shows the generational divide: Baby Boomers prefer dad jokes, while Generation Z strongly favours dark humour.

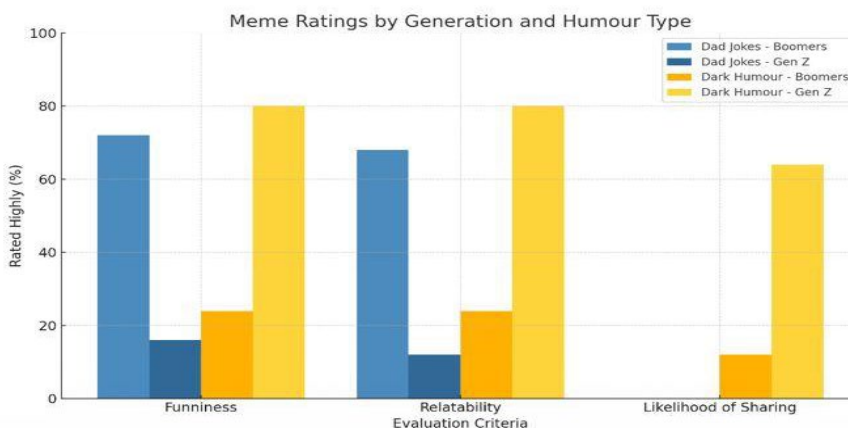
Participants were presented with memes exemplifying both dad jokes and dark humour and asked to evaluate them across four dimensions: funniness, relatability, emotional response, and likelihood of sharing. Results showed that:

Dad Joke Memes: Rated highly (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale) by 72% of Boomers for funniness and 68% for relatability. However, only 16% of Gen Z participants rated them similarly high on funniness, and just 12% found them relatable.

Dark Humour Memes: Rated highly by 80% of Gen Z participants for both funniness and relatability. Notably, 64% also indicated they would share such memes online or with friends. In contrast, only 24% of Boomers rated dark humour memes as funny, and just 12% indicated they would share them.

Figure 2

Meme ratings by Generation and Humour Type



Here is the graphical representation of meme ratings across generations and humour types. Gen Z respondents were more likely to associate dark humour with emotional release, using terms like “cathartic,” “edgy,” or “truthful”. Baby Boomers associated dad jokes with emotional comfort,

describing them as “safe,” “lighthearted,” or “family-friendly”. When asked about the social context of sharing memes, 88% of Gen Z participants reported they regularly shared dark humour memes in private digital spaces (e.g., group chats), while Boomers more commonly reported sharing dad jokes in face-to-face or family-oriented contexts.

Cross-tabulation analysis highlighted statistically significant trends between generations. A large majority of Boomers (92%) preferred humour they would feel comfortable sharing with children or elders. Conversely, Gen Z was quite open to taboo humour, as 76 percent would share dark humour in informal social media contexts.

The trends indicate that humour is not merely a matter of individual taste, but it is also a part of more general generational values and types of communication. Whereas Boomers are more likely to prioritize warmth, tradition and shared decency, Gen Z is more inclined to value emotional authenticity, irony and digital expressiveness.

The data were gathered through a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with eight participants (four from the Baby Boomer generation and four from Generation Z). Thematic analysis was used with an inductive coding approach. There were five key themes identified: (1) Humour as a Coping Mechanism, (2) Social Bonding Through Humour, (3) Generational Norms and Humour Boundaries, (4) Digital Media and Humour Exposure, and (5) Emotional Responses to Humour Styles. The two generations portray different trends on in how the two generations perceive, apply and interpret humour.

Both generations emphasized the psychological role of humour in coping with stress. Nonetheless, Gen Z respondents often referred to dark humour as a coping mechanism for anxiety and existential issues. According to one of the Gen Z interviewees, “It is not that I laugh at something dark because I am insensitive. It assists me in working out what I cannot really say aloud”.

Conversely, Baby Boomers tended to define humour in terms of being optimistic or being emotionally resilient during difficult situations: “The family always makes light jokes to overcome a difficult situation. It is how we keep hopeful”.

Dad jokes were considered to be a sign of family unity and social closeness by Baby Boomers. One of the participants said, “Family dinners

are not complete without dad jokes, they put us off, but they also unite the family”.

Memes and in-group references were the frequent methods of social bonding in Gen Z, and humour was the means of signaling belonging within the peer groups: “We demonstrate it through sending memes, even when they are dark. It is our own language”.

Boomers preferred humour which was considered to be harmless or clean and shunned jokes that they deemed to be distasteful. Gen Z, in its turn, felt more at ease when it comes to browsing taboo or controversial issues: “We were socialized to know what is right. One Boomer said: Some of the things that kids laugh at now is too far”.

A Gen Z participant said, “I do not believe that humour must be restricted. Another one said, if it is funny, it is funny”. This deviation is indicative of the wider generational distinction of what is socially acceptable or emotionally acceptable in humour.

The Gen Z members would also repeatedly state how online platforms have influenced their humour. The source of comedic influence was often mentioned as algorithms, trends, and dynamics of social media: “My primary sources of comedy are Instagram and Twitter. I look at two or three dozen jokes a day it alters the way I think”.

In comparison, Boomers cited sitcoms on TV, radio programmes, or live comedy as their sources of humour in their early years, which would indicate a more organised and less individually-defined exposure to humour: “We were waiting to see shows. It is all immediate and constantly in flux now”.

The reactions of people to humour styles were very different. Boomers stated that they were reassured and nostalgic about dad jokes: “They are like the best friend of my father; he was loaded with puns and goofy jokes”.

Gen Z respondents expressed a sense of catharsis through dark humour: “Dark jokes help me laugh at the stuff I’m scared of. It makes the world feel less overwhelming”. This theme highlights how humour not only entertains but also serves as a form of emotional regulation tailored by generational context.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts from eight participants (four Baby Boomers and four Generation Z). An inductive

coding method was used, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method. Initial open codes were generated from the raw data, which were then reviewed and grouped into five overarching themes relevant to the study's focus on humour styles and generational differences.

Table 1

Coding Process

Initial Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
"Laugh to deal with stress"	Psychological Coping	Humour as a Coping Mechanism
"Dark humour helps with anxiety"	Psychological Coping	Humour as a Coping Mechanism
"Family jokes bring us together"	Social Bonding	Social Bonding Through Humour
"Sharing memes is our way to connect"	Social Bonding	Social Bonding Through Humour
"Dad jokes are harmless"	Generational Norms	Generational Norms and Humour Boundaries
"Some jokes go too far now"	Generational Norms	Generational Norms and Humour Boundaries
"TikTok is main comedy source"	Media Influence	Digital Media and Humour Exposure
"We watched comedy shows on TV"	Media Influence	Digital Media and Humour Exposure
"Dad jokes remind me of my father"	Emotional Connection	Emotional Responses to Humour Styles
"Dark humour helps me face fears"	Emotional Regulation	Emotional Responses to Humour Styles

Discussion

This study set out to explore how humour preferences, specifically dad jokes and dark humour, differ across Baby Boomers and Generation Z, and how these preferences reflect deeper psychological, cultural, and generational identities. The findings, drawn from both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, support and further extend the literature discussed in the introduction and review of related theories.

The quantitative results demonstrated a clear generational divide in

humour preferences. Baby Boomers rated dad jokes higher, whereas Generation Z reacted more positively to dark humour. This difference aligns with Social Identity Theory, which states that common cultural experiences form the basis of group-based preferences and behaviour. Having been brought up in times of increased social cohesion and more traditional family formation, Boomers prefer more predictable and safe forms of humour, which is in line with Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, [2010](#)), in which humour is required to involve a violation but must be perceived as non-threatening. This principle is also common when it comes to dad jokes, as such puns are light and violate linguistic expectations without causing discomfort.

The increased interest in dark humour among Generation Z is a result of the more uncertain social environment, which is characterized by digital oversaturation, world crises, and the increased level of comfort with subversion. This choice conforms to Incongruity Theory (Martin, [2007](#)), according to which humour can be seen as a solution to cognitive dissonance, which Gen Z seems to have adopted in the form of satire and irony.

The outcomes of the interview reveal a definite generational difference in the sense of humour. The strongest preference among the generations was dark humour by Generation Z and dad jokes by Baby Boomers. The findings can be compared with Aronson and Jaffal ([2021](#)), whose study highlights the role of digital humour in expressing generational identity and responding to contemporary social experiences. This liking of emotionally rich humour can be used to validate the Incongruity Theory by Hurley et al. ([2011](#)) because Gen Z appears to work out and resolve conflicting or taboo issues through ironic, absurd or layered humour.

Conversely, the popularity of dad jokes among Baby Boomers supports the conclusions of Martin ([2007](#)) and Hye-Knudsen ([2021](#)), who state that humour has a social bonding purpose and acts to enforce norms. Boomers identified dad jokes as jokes with a sense of familiarity, family, and emotional security, as was predicted in the Benign Violation Theory by McGraw and Warren (2010), which states that such jokes in a way break expectations in a socially acceptable way.

The results also indicated variations in the emotional and cognitive impacts of humour across the two groups. Baby Boomers reported that they

found dad jokes comforting and funny, which focused on familiarity and emotional warmth. This conforms to conventional ideas of humour as an instrument of enforcing social conventions and emotional affiliation.

On the contrary, Gen Z could relate to dark humour and described it as smart, which means more than just mental involvement but also a way to deal with emotional distance. This confirms the theory of Morreall (2009), who posits that humour is one of the means of reframing distressful events and fostering psychological flexibility. Dark humour provides both emotional detachment and intellectual amusement to Gen Z, who are frequently struggling with anxiety, identity confusion, and social unbalance. The Benign Violation Theory can also help here, because Gen Z seems to accept more severe violations of norms as long as they are framed through irony or common cultural knowledge, which helps turn discomfort into laughter.

The other important finding was that the different contexts in which each generation was comfortable sharing humour were different. Boomers were less adventurous and would share humour with immediate family or fellow age mates. This observation relates once more to Social Identity Theory, as they made their humour choices in a way that would preserve social harmony and common norms in intimate environments.

On the contrary, Generation Z was more willing to share humour over the internet even when it contained taboo or controversial subjects. This means that there is increased acceptance of ambiguity and social risk, which is consistent with Highfield (2018)'s assertion that digital media encourages more boundary-bridging and more provocative humour. Online sharing habits of Gen Z also demonstrate performative humour, in which people select and distribute humour as a way of establishing identity and a sense of belonging in the online world. Their behaviour is in line with performativity and self-presentation models of digital anthropology and humour studies.

The interview data identified two roles of humour, namely coping and bonding. Gen Z uses humour (particularly dark or meme-related) as a psychological means of emotional regulation, which confirms the findings of Fink and Walker (1977) and Arnett et al. (2018) that focused on the stress-adaptive nature of humour. The irony and existentialism of Gen Z also speak to the idea expressed by Twenge (2017) that due to a society in rapid change and a digital overload, a generation is more sensitive to a more

complex, at times cynical, emotional expression.

Boomers, in their turn, defined humour as a means of sustaining relationships and strengthening the shared values, which aligns with Torres et al. (2020). The fact that they like wholesome or predictable styles of humour shows their orientation towards stability and continuity of emotions, a characteristic feature of the more integrated social world of their youth.

As it was discovered in both survey and interview data, digital platforms play a significant role in the consumption of humour, particularly among Gen Z. This observation confirms Shifman (2014), and Phillips and Milner (2017), who posit that online humour is more divisive, unclear, and edgy. The preference of Gen Z for memes also served as a form of emotional expression and the creation of social identity.

On the contrary, Boomers used conventional media and felt uncomfortable with the speed and style of online humour. This is an example of a generational change in not only the style of humour but even the medium in which humour is consumed, an indication of how technological context mediates humour taste.

In both generations, humour was viewed as a means of psychological release, but in a different way. Baby Boomers were inclined to comedies that serve to enhance reassurance and familiarity, and they use it to affirm stability and collectivity. Generation Z, though, turned to humour, and, in particular, dark memes, as a means of facing and dealing with awkward truths like mental health, the collapse of society, or existential dread.

This supports the concept of Aronson and Jaffal (2021), who argued that humour, especially dark humour, facilitates cognitive reappraisal, which makes people redefine unpleasant experiences in a less distressing manner. The difference in the styles of humour demonstrates that every generation selects different approaches to regulate emotions: one of them is by strengthening safety, and the other is through laughing in discomfort.

These results add to the existing humour literature by showing that generational humour is not merely stylistically different but also functionally adaptive. The fact that Boomers adore dad jokes supports the Benign Violation Theory of low-stakes contexts, in which the violation of norms (e.g., wordplay) is softly performed. The attraction of Gen Z to dark humour demonstrates the ability of humour to develop into a social

commentary weapon, which is based on incongruity, ambiguity, and subversion.

This study presents a multi-dimensional insight into how various age cohorts may approach humour in the cultural and technological environments in which they belong.

The results support both of the initial hypotheses: It is true that Generation Z has shown a higher preference for dark humour than Baby Boomers, and uses it as a psychological coping tool. Baby Boomers have more positive emotional reactions to dad jokes and correlate them with family closeness and ethical limits. These findings respond to the research questions by showing the evident generational differences in humour preferences and demonstrating the cultural, emotional and social determinants of these preferences.

The research demonstrates that humour is much more than a source of entertainment; it is a reflection of cultural identity, an emotional need, and a shared experience across generations. Although both generations employ humour as a means of social interaction and as a stress reliever, the nature and purpose of humour is quite different. Dad jokes are traditional and bonding, and whereas dark humour is uncertain and adaptively resilient in a disintegrating world.

This discussion enhances our knowledge of how humour develops as historical, technological, and psychological change occurs. It is not only a contribution to the study of humour at large but also to intergenerational communication and mental health studies, implying that the awareness of such differences in humour can lead to empathy and help overcome the generational gap.

On the whole, the themes produced by the interviews indicate that humour has the same functions, which are psychological coping, emotional regulation, and social bonding, whereas the style, content, and context of humour are strongly influenced by generational identity and technological factors. Where Baby Boomers are attracted to humour which supports tradition, order, and family, Generation Z is more inclined towards disorganised, multi-dimensional, and digitally connected humour. The Boomers' preference for dad jokes reflects an affiliative style of humour characterized by social bonding, familiarity, and emotional connection. These findings do not only validate the hypotheses that were put forward at

the beginning of this research but also elaborate on them by showing the subtle emotional and cultural definitions of humour styles. They give an excellent understanding of the way humour develops as a cultural object, which is influenced by the historical background, media world, and psychological demands.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Companies that have several generations working in their organisation need to adjust their communication strategies to account for differences in humour, so they can understand each other and work together in both educational and workplace environments. Recognizing these preferences can enhance rapport and teamwork between age groups.
- The use of humour, particularly dark humour, among Generation Z, should not be dismissed as an ineffective emotional coping response by mental health practitioners. This awareness can improve therapeutic approaches and youth-centred mental health interventions.
- Future studies should be extended to larger, culturally diverse samples, and include other generations, such as Millennials and Gen Alpha. Exploration of other forms of humour such as satire or irony, and longitudinal studies, would further help to understand how humour preferences change with time.
- In digital literacy education, the issues of intergenerational differences can be addressed by including humour analysis, specifically meme-based humour, to bridge the gap in online cultural knowledge between generations.
- Lastly, the generalizability of this study to other sociocultural settings will assist in ascertaining whether these generational humour patterns are universal or culture-specific to inform more generalized applications.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations. The sample size, particularly in the qualitative phase, was relatively small, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Humour interpretation is highly subjective and influenced by personal, cultural, and digital literacy factors,

which may have affected the consistency of responses. Moreover, the study's reliance on meme-based content assumes a certain level of digital familiarity, which may differ across generations, especially among older Baby Boomers.

Conclusion

This paper examines generational humour preferences among Baby Boomers and Generation Z, focusing on dad jokes and dark humour through a mixed-methods approach that includes a survey and interviews. The results indicate that humour is a complex social-psychological tool closely linked to generational identity and cultural context.

Quantitative data showed that Generation Z preferred dark humour, while Baby Boomers preferred dad jokes. Qualitative interviews clarified that Gen Z uses dark humour to cope with anxiety and criticise social problems, whereas Boomers enjoy dad jokes for strengthening family relationships and providing emotional comfort. The direct comparison of these two humour styles across generations helps fill a significant research gap, as well as extend the application of existing theories of humour, including Benign Violation and Incongruity Theories, to the environment of digital culture and intergenerational contexts. The addition of meme culture also highlights the changing role of humour in creating generational worldviews and coping mechanisms.

The research contributes to understanding humour as a marker of social identity and psychological need, and its significance extends to improving communication between generations in the family, workplace, and educational institutions. Nevertheless, the sample size and cultural specificity limit the generalisability of the findings, highlighting the need for wider, cross-cultural studies.

Altogether, the study highlights the importance of humour as a lens through which generational experiences can be understood, offering practical applications across various fields and providing opportunities for further exploration of humour's role in social bonding and resilience.

Author Contribution

Mubashra Mushtaq: writing – original draft, conceptualization, formal analysis. **Amra Raza:** Supervision, writing – review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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