

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of The Study

Humor was a multifaceted phenomenon; the study of humor cannot be limited to one field of study. It encompassed elements of language, literature, psychology, sociology, and culture (Attardo, 2020). Thus, this study delved into the literary and linguistic facets of grief-inspired humor, generally known as dark humor.

In literature, scholars examined how humor was employed as a literary device to convey meaning, evoke emotions, and engage readers. According to Fry (2014), humor in literature served as a form of "play" with language, challenging conventional narrative structures and inviting readers to actively participate in the text. Literary analysis of humor often involved examining elements such as irony, satire, parody, and wit to uncover deeper layers of meaning and social commentary (Hutcheon, 2013).

From a linguistic perspective, it was explored how humor was constructed and conveyed through language, including wordplay, ambiguity, incongruity, and pragmatics. Attardo (2001) emphasized the importance of linguistic mechanisms such as incongruity resolution and script opposition in generating humorous effects. Linguistic analysis of humor involved dissecting the linguistic features and strategies employed by comedians to elicit laughter and provoke thought (Drew, 2019).

In the context of grief-inspired humor, often referred to as dark humor, the literary and linguistic dimensions took on added significance. Dark humor involved navigating sensitive and taboo topics such as death, loss, and tragedy through comedic means. As Freud (1927) famously observed, humor served as a coping mechanism for dealing with distressing or uncomfortable situations, allowing individuals to confront difficult emotions in a lighthearted manner.

An extensive emotional reaction to loss and grief included a variety of emotions like sadness, rage, bewilderment, and desire. Be it the loss of a loved one, the breakdown of a relationship, or a major life transition, sorrow was a common human emotion that cut across social and cultural differences. Nonetheless, grief could be transformed into humor via the artistic skill of comedy. Humor appeared as a coping strategy during sadness, providing a unique form of comfort and social interaction (Heinrich, 2022). Humor had a calming effect on grief, which was characterized by increased emotional intensity and pain. People who used a humorous perspective that embraced the darker parts of the emotional spectrum to negotiate the complexity of loss were said to engage in dark humor, which was a common manifestation of this interaction between grief and comedy (Rayle, 2013).

Dark humor presented itself as a brave ally in the face of extreme sadness, taking on the harsh truths of grief with a twisted yet oddly poignant humorous twist. It was a daring kind of expression that tested the bounds of acceptable behavior and subverted social standards. Dark humor was like a defiant undercurrent that was unaffected by sadness. Rather, it deftly negotiated the

waves of grief while providing a subversive critique of the ridiculousness and unpredictable nature of life's darkest moments (Anderson, 2019). When people laughed at themselves, even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances, this kind of ironic and paradoxical humor could help them take charge of the uncontrollable. Dark humor broke beyond the boundaries of standard mourning responses by defying expectations and creating a space for nontraditional healing and connection in the most unlikely places on the emotional map. The act of stand-up comedy was one technique to showcase this type of humor.

According to Coper (2015), stand-up comedy was an act in which a comedian performs live in front of an audience, usually speaking directly to them. Dark humor was a major theme in stand-up comedy as performers negotiated the complex terrain of touchy and sometimes forbidden issues. The comedian transformed into a provocateur, using bold humorous criticism to subvert social standards and push the bounds of acceptable behavior. The dark humor in stand-up was distinguished by its courage to address painful realities, traumatic experiences, and the most sinister facets of human existence.

Several comedians have incorporated elements of their own lives, such as tragic or difficult times, into their performances, urging audiences to join them on a path of resilience and coping through humor. A study on three Netflix comedy specials: "Baby J" by John Mulaney (2023), "Alive from New York" by Pete Davidson (2020), and "I Wish You Would" by Trevor Noah (2021), highlights this approach.

In "Baby J," John Mulaney turns his struggles with addiction into a source of comedy, offering a cathartic experience for his audience "Mulaney's ability to turn his struggles with addiction into a source of comedy not only humanizes him but also offers a cathartic experience for his audience" (The New Yorker, 2023). Pete Davidson's "Alive from New York" showcases his vulnerability by addressing his breakup and the loss of his father, creating a powerful connection with viewers "Davidson's raw and honest approach to his personal life allows audiences to see the human behind the humor, creating a powerful connection" (Variety, 2023). Trevor Noah's "I Wish You Would" uses dark humor to navigate the pandemic and critique systemic injustices, engaging viewers with important issues through comedy "Noah's ability to infuse humor with social critique makes his comedy both entertaining and thought-provoking, encouraging viewers to engage with important issues" (The Guardian, 2023).

The Benign-Violation Theory (BVT), developed by Peter McGraw, was used to analyze the show's content. BVT explained why a person might be humorous while they were mourning and why the recipient might or might not find comedy attempts originating from this place of sadness to be humorous (Heinrich, 2022). BVT could be used in the context of dark humor to explain why people found it funny to discuss certain forbidden or sad topics. When it came to dark humor, breaking social conventions about what was suitable or acceptable to jest about was usually involved. When the context or joke framing made the violation more acceptable, given that it was understood to be a type of comedy, that was when the benign aspect entered the picture. However, to be able to utilize

BVT one must have had previous knowledge of the social and cultural norms that served as context.

Context referred to the surrounding circumstances, environment, or conditions that influenced the interpretation and understanding of a particular event, statement, or action. It provided the framework through which individuals made sense of the world around them, shaping their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. As Dynel (2016) aptly stated, "Humor is essentially contextual; it is the interaction between text and context that yields humorous interpretations" (p. 45). However, to effectively utilize Benign Violation Theory (BVT), one must have had previous knowledge of the social and cultural norms that served as the backdrop for humor. Understanding the context in which a joke or comedic act occurred was crucial for assessing whether a violation of norms was perceived as benign or harmful. Without a grasp of the cultural, social, and situational factors at play, it became challenging to accurately interpret the comedic intent and impact of a humorous stimulus. Therefore, contextual knowledge acted as a vital lens through which to analyze and appreciate the nuances of humor, facilitating a deeper understanding of how violations and benignity interacted to produce comedic effects.

The following utterance from the Netflix show 'Baby J' is one of the examples of dark humor through the perspective of the 5 stages of grief and BVT:

Mulaney: Kids, you think your dad's weird now? **Wait for his dad to die. Then he goes on a whole quest.** He'll wanna take more family pictures but be angrier during them.

Based on the five phases of humor, the retelling above fell into the genre of truth-telling with a hint of anger or satire, since the humor centered on the father's increasing angst during family photos following the loss of his own father. This was consistent with the phase of the grieving process where people might become angry as they struggled to accept their loss.

Thus, utilizing BVT, the joke could be further explained as follows when it had been shown that it indeed originated from a place of grief: Norm 1 (Being Violated): was the social norm that demanded grieving be expressed gravely and seriously. Norm 2 (Not Violated, rendering the utterance benign): photographing after the death of a loved one. The way this joke handled a sensitive issue (death) by adding unexpected and seemingly improper ingredients resulted in a benign transgression that made people laugh. This joke was an example of dark humor.

Numerous earlier studies had examined how grief might inspire humor, particularly dark humor. A. Anderson's (2019) research, "The Best Medicine: An Exploration of Laughter and Dark Comedy," delved into the genre of dark comedy, which was a type of humor that embraced subjects or themes typically considered inappropriate for public discourse or entertainment. In this study, BVT served as the research framework. Thus, in line with current studies, it was also found that dark comedy could be an effective means of raising sensitive issues and challenging social norms that could otherwise go unchallenged.

A. B. Heinrich (2022) conducted research titled *"Is Loss a Laughing Matter? A Study of Humor Reactions and Benign Violation Theory in The Context Of Grief,"* Consider the use of humor as a coping mechanism. This research,

which began with BVT in mind, found that humor often acts as a unifying factor and can be beneficial even in the most trying situations. The study found that humor may be a very effective strategy for assisting someone in coping with their loss. It can also enhance relationships by promoting trust and increasing communication.

Furthermore, in research by Ahmed, et al. (2023) titled "*Humor in Chetan Bhagat's The Girl in Room 105 and One Arranged Murder: A Study with Special Reference to His Creation of Dark Humor and Satire*," the contents of Bhagat's book are examined. His books are full of "dark humor," a type of humor that views human existence as sarcastic and senseless but, in some way, humorous, or that portrays pains and sufferings as extremely cruel. The term "dark humor," often known as "dark comedy" or "dark humor," refers to the notion that humans are helpless victims of circumstance and personality, and it is widely employed in low comedy and farce.

This research analyzed dark humor in three distinct Netflix stand-up comedy specials using the Benign Violation Theory (BVT) and the five stages of grief theory as a framework. As the research approach, content analysis was used to carry out this study. Content analysis, as it pertained to this study, involved closely examining the language and expressions that comedians used in Netflix stand-up comedy specials.

## 1.2 Problem of The Study

Based on the background above, it is formulated some research questions as follows:

1. What stages of grief are presented in the selected Netflix comedy specials?
2. How is grief represented as dark humor in Netflix comedy specials?
3. Why do comedians utilize dark humor in their Netflix comedy specials?

### **1.3 Objectives of The Study**

Based on the previous research questions, the objectives of this research are then specified as follows:

1. To find out what stages of grief are presented in the selected Netflix comedy specials.
2. To find out how grief represented as dark humor in Netflix comedy specials.
3. To find out why comedians utilize dark humor in their Netflix comedy specials.

### **1.4 Scope of The Study**

The two main objectives of this research were to use Willett & Willett's (five stages of grief theory) to analyze the phases of grief present in each show and to apply McGraw's (2010) Benign Violation Theory (BVT) to the analysis of dark humor. The examination included a detailed analysis of the humorous material found in Netflix specials, particularly in the episodes "Baby J" (2023) by John Mulaney, "Alive from New York" (2020) by Pete Davidson, and "I Wish You Would" (2021) by Trevor Noah. Transcripts were used to collect the data. The purpose of this study was to shed light on the literary and linguistic aspects of comedy in grief.

### **1.5 Significance of The Study**

This study analyzed the interactions between Benign Violation Theory (BVT) and the five stages of grief theory in the context of stand-up comedy. The



research expanded our understanding of the literary and linguistic elements of dark humor as well as the mental processes involved in the appreciation of prohibited or morbid topics after mourning by analyzing the manner in which the dark humor in these specials complied with BVT.

The findings may aid in the understanding of how comedy, particularly dark humor, might be used to help people manage the complex emotions connected to loss by fellow researchers, comedians, content creators, and mental health practitioners. Furthermore, the study expanded on the research's relevance by discussing the limits of humor, social norms, and most importantly the versatility of language.

