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Comedy out of tragedy: impoliteness as a ritual of entertainment

Abstract: A stand-up comedy by American-Singaporean Jocelyn Chia concerning the missing Malaysian flight MH370 triggered significant backlash and public controversy, according to Malaysian and Singaporean media outlets, sparking discussions on the boundaries of comedic expression. Drawing from the concept of "entertaining impoliteness", this research examines the use of impoliteness in comedy, focusing on how it is creatively deployed within the rituals of the comedic form. The study explores the balance between using impolite language for humor and ensuring that it remains connected to the core purpose of comedy. The findings highlight that while impoliteness can enhance creativity, its usage is limited by the need to align with the comedic ritual, as deviating too far from the main theme risks confusing or alienating the audience. This work offers insights into the structure of comedic impoliteness and suggests that while creativity can drive comedic innovation, it must always return to the central ritual of comedy. Building on this, future work could explore how comedians in different cultural contexts negotiate impoliteness and audience expectations in their performances.

Keywords: impoliteness; entertaining impoliteness; creative impoliteness; stand-up comedy; ritual

1 Introduction

Culpeper's introduction of "entertaining impoliteness" in 2005 integrated humor, comedy, and jokes into the study of impoliteness, culminating in a new branch of research. "Entertaining impoliteness" has since been applied to various contexts, such as political cartoons (e.g., Abdel-Raheem 2021, 2022), films (e.g., Dynel 2013a), and television shows (e.g., Culpeper 2005). However, what is far less explored is how perceived impoliteness is used as a vehicle of humor in stand-up comedies. This aspect is imperative, as Culpeper (2005: 35) pointed out: "the salience of 'impolite' signals engulf the context, with the result that targets often take offense in

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contexts where they theoretically should not". Clearly, this indicates that there seems to be a disconnect between how speakers and listeners assign what is deemed offensive language, even in conversations that occur in specific contexts (Parvaresh and Tayebi 2021). In this regard, the analysis of instances of comedic acts serves as a pertinent example highlighting the disconnect. This study examines a comedic act by American-born Singaporean comedian Jocelyn Chia (henceforth JC), about the missing flight MH370 (BBC 2023).

In March 2014, a Malaysia Airlines flight vanished from radar screens 39 min after departing from Kuala Lumpur en route to Beijing. The disappearance of Flight MH370 led to the loss of 239 lives and left grieving families seeking answers to their loved ones' fate. The viral stand-up comedy sparked controversy among Malaysians, particularly families of the missing, due to the tragic MH370 flight disappearance (Says 2023). JC's previous topics on her YouTube channel, such as "Why She Dumped Him" and "Jocelyn Chia Demonstrates Why Liberals Can't Fight", typically explored personal relationships, social commentary, and political satire without significant backlash. In contrast, her reference to MH370, a recent tragedy, provoked accusations of hate speech, leading TikTok to remove the video for violating its policy (New Straits Times 2023b). Singaporean officials issued apologies on JC's behalf for the perceived insensitivity (Channel News Asia 2023a; New Straits Times 2023a), and Malaysia's Inspector General of Police requested Interpol's help in locating her (Channel News Asia 2023b).

The routine, performed at Manhattan's Comedy Cellar in April 2023 (BBC 2023), was later posted online, triggering significant backlash (The New York Times 2023). JC defended her performance, citing its prior success despite the controversy (BBC 2023). Despite its brevity, this incident warrants study for its profound impact on public opinion, especially concerning sensitive subjects. Studying this incident can shed light on the fine line between humor and offense, and how comedians navigate this terrain. Drawing on Culpeper (2005, 2011) and Kádár (2017, 2024) this paper: 1) analyzes instances of perceived entertaining impoliteness by examining the language used by JC, and its potential to create dissonances between language and context, and 2) explores how entertaining impoliteness in comedy is ritualized.

1.1 What defines stand-up comedy?

Stand-up comedy, characterized as a solo performer delivering humor directly to an audience with minimal use of props or staging (Mintz 1985), draws on humor that is deeply embedded in the cultural and social values of its time and place (Kuipers 2008). To that end, the distinction between "humor" and "joke" is drawn. While the former is an umbrella term designed to evoke amusement (Bell 2015; Dynel 2009,

2017), the latter consists of two parts: the build-up or setup and the punch or punchline (Hockett 1972, 1977). Studies have shown that the interpretation of stand-up routines is strongly shaped by context (e.g., Adetunji 2013; Filani 2017; Rutter 2000; Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009). According to Filani (2017), context in humor can be categorized into two types: the "context-of-the-joke" and the "context-in-the-joke". While the former refers to shared beliefs among those engaging with the humor, the latter focuses on elements such as the joke's content, the target of the humor, and the activity or scenario portrayed in the joke. As such, understanding the cultural nuances of humor is essential for comedians to connect with diverse audiences (Kawalec 2020; Vigouroux 2015). In Western societies, stand-up comedy reflects neoliberal individualism, emphasizing entertainment and personal goals (Kawalec 2020), while also providing marginalized groups media visibility but risking stereotype reinforcement (Vigouroux 2015). Western comedy prioritizes spectacle and catharsis, contrasting with Native American cultures' communal focus (Kawalec 2020). Meanwhile, comedians from Africa leverage varied semiotic resources to assert visibility (Vigouroux 2015).

Stand-up comedy takes place within specific interactional contexts, where, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1978) emphasizes, "the contexts and processes of joke telling are at least as important as the texts of the jokes themselves to any understanding of the meaning of humor" (Mintz 1985: 73). Rutter (1997, 2000) identifies three key aspects in stand-up comedy – the performer, the compère, and the audience – each with overlapping roles that shape the interaction. This interactional dynamic is further elaborated by Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009), who describe the structure of a typical stand-up performance. It begins with an introduction, where the presenter announces the comedian, warms up the audience, and sets the tone for the show. Following this, the comedian enters, greets the audience, and guides them on how to respond. The performance then progresses through multiple joke sequences, culminating in the closure, where the comedian delivers final remarks and thanks the audience before leaving the stage. Afterward, attention shifts as the audience awaits the next act. Throughout the performance, comedians use various rhetorical and performance techniques to signal that the punchline is approaching, encouraging laughter as the expected response (Rutter 1997). However, "[w]hether or not the people involved in a joke-telling event are amused, jokes force a stance on identity. Sometimes that stance involves not getting 'it,' sometimes it involves rejecting 'it,' and sometimes it involves laughing in recognition of 'it'" (Queen 2005: 254). This highlights the significance of understanding how humor functions within specific social contexts and structures.

In Malaysia, for instance, humor styles are less pronounced compared to many other countries. Schermer et al. (2019) found that Malaysia consistently scored lower in various humor styles, including affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and

self-defeating humor, when compared to countries like Brazil, Canada, and Chile, or even other Asian nations like Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. This indicates that Malaysians may exhibit less inclination towards using humor in social interactions compared to individuals from these countries. Nevertheless, Malaysia had some of the lowest internal consistency values (reliability) for certain humor styles, particularly for self-enhancing and self-defeating humor, which implies that the humor responses from Malaysia may not accurately reflect the intended constructs due to cultural differences or misinterpretations (Schermer et al. 2019). This could help explain the intense backlash against Jocelyn Chia's performance, as the social context in which her jokes were delivered likely influenced the audience's reaction, leading to the offense reported in the media.

1.2 What is the relationship between impoliteness, entertainment and creativity?

Prior to the calls for considering impoliteness as a separate area, Bousfield and Culpeper (2008) noted that scholarly work on impoliteness is commonly ignored. Notably, research into impoliteness tends to perceive it as a form of anomalous behavior or pragmatic failure that is not deserving of attention (Bousfield and Culpeper 2008). In addition, scholars have given various definitions of impoliteness (e.g., Bousfield 2008; Bousfield and Locher 2008; Culpeper 2005, 2011; Kienpointner 1997), leading to a lack of consensus on its definition. For instance, while Culpeper (2005: 38) takes intentionality into account in his definition, stating that "impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behavior as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)", in 2011, Culpeper offers a broader perspective. He defines impoliteness as "a negative attitude towards specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organization, including, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction…" (Culpeper 2011: 23). This shift reflects a broader understanding of impoliteness, linking it to social expectations and interactions within specific contexts. This aligns with existing literature, which emphasizes that the evaluation of impoliteness is shaped by expectations, experiences, and social values (Kádár and House 2021; Locher and Watts 2008; Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018; Spencer-Oatey 2005; Tayebi 2018; Zhao and Ran 2022).

Impoliteness can serve to entertain (Culpeper and Holmes 2013), often at the expense of the target (Culpeper 2011). While entertaining impoliteness involves a victim or a potential victim, the target may not always be aware of the offensive act, nor does the target always have to be a real person (Culpeper 2011). In cases like

graffiti, blogs, or fictional works, the target's identity is often ambiguous or entirely fictional. Culpeper (2011) further argues that what makes this type of impoliteness entertaining is the audience's ability to recognize its possible impact on the target. This understanding is crucial for it to be considered entertaining impoliteness. Although impoliteness often provokes negative emotions like anger or hurt, it can also entertain when the focus shifts from the target to an observing audience. Such entertainment often arises from symbolic violations of social norms, much like how audiences historically enjoyed gladiator fights or still find amusement in aggressive sports or media (Culpeper 2011). Entertaining impoliteness in television, particularly in reality shows, often involves presenters using sharp, face-attacking comments to create memorable moments (see Culpeper 2005; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013; Toddington 2015). This is because "being able to carve an idiosyncratic face-attacking style, as it were, has proven a useful discursive means of turning some of the presenters of these shows into celebrities" (Lorenzo-Dus 2009: 164). This suggests that unique language use can be a powerful tool in creating entertaining content. In this regard, Culpeper (2011) emphasizes that a key feature of entertaining impoliteness is creativity. Specifically, "[i]mpoliteness is often creative, and in fact achieves its effects through their creativity" (Culpeper 2013: 6).

Drawing on Carter (2004), Culpeper (2013) explains that linguistic creativity involves crafting meanings that go beyond their surface level, encouraging audiences to make inferences rooted in specific contexts. Carter's (2004) analysis of proverbs emphasizes this idea, highlighting how their metaphorical and indirect nature fosters interpretive engagement and creative inferencing. In addition, impoliteness becomes creatively expressive when multiple semiotic forms are brought together in unexpected ways, as evident in multimodality studies (e.g., Andersson 2023, 2024). Vásquez and Creel (2017) for example, show that Tumblr Chat authors use creative strategies such as polyvocality and double-voicing to craft humorous, relatable posts that are more likely to be widely reblogged. This is due to the fact that creative language use on social media can serve various functions, from boosting the speaker's social image and entertaining audiences to establishing alliances and reinforcing group belonging through shared opposition (Andersson 2023). As a result, this phenomenon is increasingly studied within online interactions, where creative aggressive language is often used as a form of entertainment (Toddington 2015), due to the anonymity afforded by online platforms (e.g., Andersson 2021, 2023; Hardaker 2010, 2013; Kapoor 2022; Vladimirou et al. 2021).

While creativity in impolite language has been acknowledged in various contexts, its role in comedic performances, particularly stand-up comedy, requires further examination. Stand-up comedians often utilize impolite language creatively to push boundaries, challenge societal norms, and engage audiences in ways that go

beyond simple humor. This involves not only verbal aggression, but also an understanding of how humor and impoliteness intersect within the structure of comedy, where the ways in which context and delivery play crucial roles has yet to receive sufficient scholarly attention.

1.3 What is ritual, and how does it relate to stand-up comedy and entertaining impoliteness?

According to Kádár (2017), interactions often embody ritualistic practices, crucial for reinforcing or establishing moral codes within interactions. These could include "forms of behaviour which are polar opposites, such as highly formalised and institutionalised interaction versus socially controversial ritual insults and aggression" (Kádár 2024). When a ritual is conducted to form an interpersonal relationship, it serves a creative function that simultaneously embodies both transgressive and restorative elements, playing a creative function in forming interpersonal relationships (Kádár 2017). In pragmatics, 'ritual' can be viewed in two interconnected ways: a literal sense and an abstract sense (Kádár 2024). Literally, it covers a range of actions, from formal ceremonies to everyday behaviors like small talk. Kádár (2024) further highlights that these behaviors might not carry factual content, but they hold important social significance, creating connections or maintaining civility. Abstractly, 'ritual' refers to standardized interactions governed by communal norms and shared expectations of roles and responsibilities.

In this regard, Miller (2024) highlights how stand-up comedy acts as a ritualized space, revealing societal aspects and offering liberation from norms tied to family, class, and gender. It often involves routine or formalized interactions, such as repeated opening lines, introductions, or "crowd work", which mirror everyday social rituals like small talk (e.g., Rutter 1997, 2000; Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009). These performances challenge societal prescriptions, provide cultural and social critique, and offer psychological relief (Adetunji 2013; Bingham and Green 2016; Kawalec 2020; Lindfors 2017; Miller 2024; Mintz 1985), while balancing the connection between trust and authenticity in comedy (Abrahams 2020). The comedian must establish not just the effectiveness of their jokes, but also their trustworthiness in the eyes of the audience (Abrahams 2020). However, what audiences consider authentic may not align with the comedian's true self, prompting them to either conform to audience expectations or create an inauthentic persona. This dynamic is further complicated by industry pressures to balance authenticity with marketability (Abrahams 2020).

Apart from these ritualized routines, stand-up comedy draws heavily on ritualized language to connect with audiences. Lindfors (2017) emphasizes that

emotional expression, shaped through verbal, non-verbal, and contextual means, is essential for fostering this connection. Through strategies like confessions or moralizing judgments, they evoke shared experiences and establish emotional and social bonds (Lindfors 2017). These strategies contribute to comedy's entertainment value, which lies in its ability to elicit emotional, aesthetic, voyeuristic, and secure pleasures, while also evoking a sense of superiority in audiences who laugh at the perceived failings or absurdities of others (Culpeper 2011). Over time, these routines and language become expected and ritualized components of the comedic routine (see Rutter 1997, 2000 for further discussion) because of the pleasures they generate. Audiences come to anticipate these patterns, knowing they will experience emotional engagement, aesthetic satisfaction, voyeuristic intrigue, and a sense of superiority. The repetition of these ritualized elements not only reinforces the comedian's ability to connect with the audience, but also solidifies the pleasure derived from both the content and the structure of the performance.

2 Methodology

Upon checking the original link posted by JC, the researcher noticed that some parts (the audience interactions with JC) were not included. As such, the video is extracted from this link, https://youtu.be/nHZiSluKz6o?si=8h3M8vxWU99goeKa, which contains the interactions that were originally part of the viral video, as shown in the following transcript:

(0:00) JC: my country ↑Singapore after we gained

(0:03) independence from the British (0.2) we were a

(0:04) struggling little nation (0.2) in order to

(0:07) ↑survive (.) we formed a ↑ union with a ↑larger (.)

(0:08) more ↑powerful country (.) ↓Malaysia=

(0.08) An audience member: =WOOO! ((scream)) ((laughs))

(0.11) JC: where are you from? Malaysia or Singapore?

(0.13) An audience member: ↑Malaysia!

(0.15) JC: ↑ Malay::sia? okay oh yeah fuck you assholes! (h) (0.3)

(0.18) Audience: ((laughs))

(0:19) JC: >when my prime minister went on TV to ↑ announce that you guys had dumped us (.) he

(0:21) ↑cried::: (.) < because he thought we're not gonna

(0:23) ↑survive without ↑you::: (.). But ↑then forty years

(0:25) later::: we ↑became a ↑first ↑world ↑country (.)

(0:27) and you ↑guys::: (.) Malaysia what are you ↑NOW

(0:30) still a <developing country:::! ? (0.2)

(0.34) Audience: ((cheers)) ((laughs))

(0:34) JC: ↑Awwww! ::: ↑Boo!::: (0.2)

(0:40) ↑Fuck you ↑Malaysia!::: (0.2)

(0.41) Audience: ((laughs)) ((clapping))

(0:43) JC: Isn't that ↑best breakup revenge?::: (.)

(0.:45) ((crowd laughs))

(0:46) now ↑Malaysia you're

(0:47) trying to come around like in <Eh:, Singapore::,

(0:48) you're looking good lah::, (0.2)>

(0:51) and we're like <I know::,?

(0:54) but why haven't you ↑visit me in ↑40 ↑years:::?

(0:57) ↓Aiyah I tried::: but you know:: ↑, MY

(01:03) airplanes cannot fly:: ↑, (0.5).

(01:05) Audience: ((laughs))

(01:08) JC: [↑WHAT? Malaysian Airlines going missing not funny ↑HUH::?

(01:10) Audience: ((laughs))]

(01:10) JC: some jokes don't ↓land::= (0.7)

(01:14) An audience member: =Oh what the ↑hell!

(01:16) An audience member: ↑Oh my ↑God::::

(01:18) this joke ↑kills in Singapore ((laughs))

(01:19) Audience: ((laughs))

(01:20) An audience member: You are definitely ge(h)tting a↑ bad yelp review

(01:22) JC: I am getting a ↑bad yelp review from the Mala(h)ysians

(01:24) that's okay they don't have ↓internet ((laughs))

(01:25) Audience: ((laughs))

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative and involves analyzing the content and language used in specific stand-up comedy. The former is done to acquire "valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff 2019: 24). The controversy surrounding the joke is deeply rooted in its context. Content analysis helps in understanding how the joke's context, delivery, and language may have contributed to its reception and the resulting backlash. Salient features were identified and presented to subject matter experts to ensure the reliability of the analysis. The results of the interrater reliability test showed that the overall interpretations of the data were largely consistent, with a similarity index of 85.7 %.

A short scene is enough to analyze impoliteness as a ritual in stand-up comedy, as these performances often rely on repeated and structured uses of impoliteness to generate humor, reflecting the ritualized nature of comedic interaction (Rutter 1997, 2000; Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009). Stand-up comedy, as a performative art, relies on rehearsed routines where impoliteness often functions as a central tool to challenge norms and elicit laughter. Ritualized comedy employs strategies like exaggeration, taboo-breaking, and audience provocation, which repeatedly test the boundaries of acceptability while reinforcing shared cultural understanding of social norms (Adetunji 2013; Mintz 1985). The scene illustrates Miller's (2024) assertion that impoliteness in stand-up is a communal ritual, with the audience participating by laughing or expressing disapproval, thereby creating a shared interpretative framework. JC's performance encapsulates this dynamic, where ritualized impoliteness operates not just as isolated remarks, but as a structured sequence that builds on prior comedic conventions (Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009; Rutter 2000). Focusing on one scene reveals the layered and repetitive mechanisms that ritualize impoliteness, emphasizing its significance in generating humor and managing audience expectations.

3 Findings and discussion

3.1 The structure of the comedic act

From 0:00 to 0:09, JC opens the act by providing a situational background that sets the foundation for the performance. This introduction establishes the context for what follows and primes the audience for the theme. From 0:10 to 1:24, JC repeatedly delivers punchlines that circle back to the central theme of the comedy: "Breakup Revenge". In this context, the concept of breakup revenge is reimagined as the relationship between two "ex-partners", Malaysia and Singapore. JC uses impoliteness creatively to generate humor, but this impoliteness is not random or directionless. Instead, every punchline ties back to the central thesis of the performance, as illustrated in Figure 1.

JC's stand-up comedy performance centers on the theme of "breakup revenge", using the historical split between Singapore and Malaysia as a metaphor for post-separation dynamics. Within this overarching narrative, impoliteness functions as a ritualized tool for delivering humor, highlighting the idea of one party triumphing over the other in a playful yet confrontational manner. These creative instances of impoliteness are not arbitrary; they are anchored to the central storyline, ensuring the performance remains cohesive. The audience can easily follow the thread of the act, recognizing that the provocative language and insults are not random, but serve as deliberate callbacks to the "breakup revenge" storyline.

3.2 The ritualization of impoliteness

The study's findings shed light on how impoliteness is progressively ritualized through the unfolding structure of Jocelyn Chia's stand-up routine. Rather than
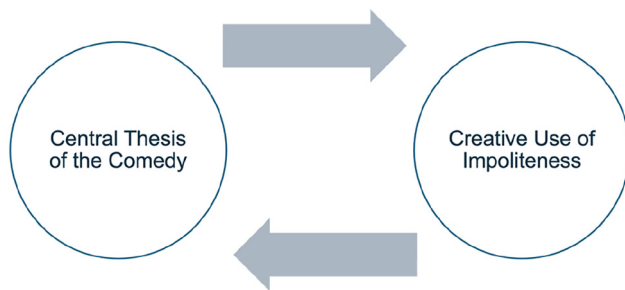

Figure 1: The ritualization of creative impoliteness within stand-up comedy.

appearing as isolated strategies, impolite acts emerge sequentially across different phases of the performance beginning with the opening act that establishes context, followed by dissociating moves that initiate provocation, escalating through mocking and condescension, extending through external mismatching and joke extension into morally sensitive territory, and culminating in the closing act through callback and re-incorporation. This organization is reflected in the sections that follow (3.2.1–3.2.7), which show how each aspect functions as a form of impoliteness.

3.2.1 The opening act

In the opening act, context is first established, and the act itself is not considered impolite. However, this is discussed to provide a contextual understanding that serves as a precursor to the upcoming impolite strategies employed by JC. The provided excerpt exemplifies how JC employs a situational setup to create a foundation for humor. In the act, JC starts by providing historical context related to her country, Singapore. She mentions that after gaining independence from British rule, Singapore was initially a struggling nation. This information sets the stage by offering the audience a clear understanding of the background situation, building credibility and rapport with them (Attardo and Chabanne 1992; Greenbaum 1999). The introduction or set-up of a joke is ritualized and serves to set "the background against which and in reason of which the punch line appears" (Attardo and Chabanne 1992: 169), allowing the audience to relate to the circumstances and be on the same page before the punchline is delivered.

> (0:00) JC: my country ↑Singapore after we ↑gained
>
> (0:03) independence from the British (0.2) we were a
>
> (0:04) struggling little nation (0.2) in order to
>
> (0:06) ↑survive (.) we formed a ↑union with a ↑larger (.)
>
> (0:08) more ↑powerful country (.) ↓Malaysia=
>
> (0.08) An audience member: =WOOO! ((scream)) ((laughs))

Following that, JC introduces another layer to the context by mentioning that Singapore entered into a union with Malaysia for survival. Independence is generally linked to self-sufficiency, yet Singapore, after gaining independence, depended on Malaysia for its survival. This shift creates a comedic effect, through the unexpected mention of Malaysia. This reflects the principles of the incongruity theory of humor, which explains that comedy often comes from the gap between what is

expected and what actually happens, especially when it occurs in a safe or non-threatening way (Attardo 1994; Berger 1976; Canestrari and Bianchi 2013; Dynel 2011, 2013a, 2013b; Larkin-Galiñanes 2017; Meyer 2000). As Attardo and Chabanne (1992) add, an object or idea is not humorous by itself, it becomes humorous only when placed in a situation that makes it seem out of place or inappropriate. This incongruity is therefore ritualized: the unexpected or inappropriate is deliberately framed within the performance structure, allowing the audience to interpret the disruption as intentional and comedic rather than offensive. The audience's laughter at 0:09 suggests their recognition of this disruption, likely triggered by the irony of Singapore once relying on Malaysia, despite JC's framing of Singapore as more powerful today. This irony becomes part of the evolving joke and sets the stage for what follows.

3.2.2 Impoliteness act I: dissociating

This act follows immediately after JC's successful opening, where she has already completed the core elements of Rutter's (2000) stand-up introduction sequence: establishing context. What follows now is a transitional moment that shifts from contextualization to audience engagement and the introduction of impoliteness through dissociation. In this act, JC engages in a playful interaction with the audience by asking a question about their origin, specifically whether they are from Malaysia or Singapore. However, her response to the audience member's answer, "Malaysia", includes a seemingly impolite phrase ("fuck you, assholes").

> (0.11) JC: where are you from? Malaysia or Singapore?
>
> (0:13) An audience member: ↑Malaysia!
>
> (0.15) JC:↑Malay::sia? okay oh yeah fuck you assholes! (h) (0.3)
>
> (0.18) Audience: ((laughs))

Although the phrase appears offensive, it works as part of a common strategy in comedy where social rules are bent to create humor. This moment can be seen as a playful manipulation of Rutter's (2000) "framing of response" and "evaluation of the comedian" steps. Having established herself as a credible voice through national identity and audience rapport, JC now reframes the audience's interpretative stance – moving from shared context to provocative distance, a mark of dissociative impoliteness. The laughter that follows suggests that the audience understands this breach as intentional and humorous, reinforcing Rutter's (2000) point that stand-up is a co-constructed event.

This kind of shift can be explained through dissociation, which is a strategy where a speaker distances themselves from the other, refusing to acknowledge shared beliefs, values, or perspectives (Culpeper 1996). This targets the other person's "positive face", their need for approval and mutual respect, undermining social harmony and making them feel excluded (Culpeper 1996). In this interaction, dissociation occurs in two ways: first, between linguistic impoliteness and the stand-up comedy setting; second, between the comedian, JC, and the audience.

The first dissociation involves suspending established social norms. Her shift from a polite inquiry to the insult "fuck you, assholes" (Culpeper 2011) creates a rupture between expected decorum and comedic transgression. This provokes laughter by exploiting surprise, distancing herself from the audience while framing the insult as humorous rather than personal. The shared understanding of this frame affirms the humor despite the impoliteness.

In the second type of dissociation, JC distances herself from the audience by saying "fuck you, assholes" after referencing her Singaporean origin, targeting a Malaysian audience and drawing on the historical tension between the two nations post-1965. Rather than expressing real hostility, she satirizes their strained relationship, aligning with Lau's (1969) observation that both countries treated each other as politically and socially foreign. The insult "fuck you, assholes" reflects the bitterness often found in post-breakup relationships, emphasizing the transition from love to animosity. The ritualized use of impoliteness highlights the unresolvable bitterness that persists even after the relationship is over, reinforcing the theme of "breakup revenge".

3.2.3 Impoliteness act II: mocking

Following the first impoliteness act, JC shifts from engaging with the audience to adopting deliberately abrasive footing. Here, JC employs a series of statements that involve a form of superiority assertion, through the use of mocking and pointed criticism, which plays a pivotal role in generating comedic impoliteness.

> (0:19) JC: >when my prime minister went on TV to ↑ announce that you guys had dumped us (.) he

> (0:21) ↑cried::: (.) < because he thought we're not gonna

> (0:23) ↑survive without ↑you::: (.). But ↑then forty years

> (0:25) later::: we ↑became a ↑first ↑world ↑country (.)

> (0:27) and you ↑guys::: (.) Malaysia what are you ↑NOW

(0:30) still a <developing country:::! ? (0.2)

(0.34) Audience: ((cheers)) ((laughs))

(0:34) JC: ↑Awwww! ::: ↑Boo!::: (0.2)

(0:40) ↑Fuck you ↑Malaysia!::: (0.2)

(0.41) Audience: ((laughs)) ((clapping))

A key strategy here is sarcasm and mock politeness (Culpeper 2005, 2011), seen in JC's exaggerated delivery of "↑Awwww! ::: ↑Boo!:::". While it may seem sympathetic, the tone turns it into a cutting remark targeting Malaysia's perceived inferiority. Her mocking imitation of crying further ridicules Singapore's former Prime Minister and highlights the past dependency on Malaysia, evoking the metaphor of a breakup where one partner doubts the other's ability to cope alone. Crucially, JC's performative "boo" acts as a reversed disaffiliative response, parodying the traditional role of booing as audience disapproval (Clayman 1993). By sarcastically directing it at the audience, she reclaims control and reinforces her authority, preemptively mocking them for perceived national shortcomings. This inversion illustrates how comedians can co-opt audience resistance as part of their routine. JC also employs personal criticism and negative evaluation to assert a hierarchy between nations, contrasting Singapore's "first world" status with Malaysia's continued development. This reinforces a sense of inadequacy aligning with Culpeper's framework (1996) by undermining Malaysia's positive face, the desire to maintain a favorable self-image.

The clearest instance of impoliteness appears in the personalized vocative "Fuck you, Malaysia!", which illustrates bald on-record impoliteness (Culpeper 1996, 2011). Though overtly aggressive, the phrase functions as a performative tool within the comedic frame rather than genuine hostility. Like a triumphant ex mocking a former partner, JC's joke highlights Singapore's superiority over Malaysia, reinforcing lingering tensions. Drawing on superiority theory (Attardo 2008; Culpeper 2005), the humor arises from perceived inferiority, with audience laughter signalling recognition and alignment with the implied hierarchy.

3.2.4 Impoliteness act III: condescending

Similar to Section 3.2.3, this routine shows another impoliteness framing. By casting the Malaysia–Singapore split as a "breakup", and positioning Singapore as the triumphant ex-partner, JC reframes the audience's interpretative stance.

(0:43) JC: Isn't that ↑best breakup revenge?::: (.)

(0.:45) ((crowd laughs))

(0:46) now ↑Malaysia you're

(0:47) trying to come around like in <Eh:, Singapore::,

(0:48) you're looking good lah::, (0.2)>

(0:51) and we're like <I know::,?

The line, "Isn't that the best breakup revenge", frames the historical separation of the two countries as a humorous "breakup", setting the tone for the ensuing jokes. This allows JC to align herself with Singapore, using the breakup metaphor to describe the perceived post-separation dynamics between the two countries. In this act, JC employs "patronizing behavior (including condescending, belittling, ridiculing, and demeaning behaviors): Producing or perceiving a display of power that infringes an understood power hierarchy (cf. Equity rights)" (Culpeper 2011: 109), by claiming Singapore and Malaysia are not equal in terms of progress. The line "now Malaysia you're trying to come around like in <Eh:, Singapore::, you're looking good lah::," reinforces this, portraying Malaysia as a dependent ex-partner seeking validation from a more successful Singapore. JC reinforces the notion that Singapore has moved forward and Malaysia is trying to catch up: "(0:46) trying to come around like in Eh:, Singapore::, (0:48) you're looking good lah::". Here, the humor relies on a perceived imbalance of power or progress. By implying that Malaysia, the "ex-partner", is coming back to admire Singapore's successes, the joke diminishes Malaysia's agency and casts it as a dependent figure trying to reconnect with its more successful "ex".

Further, it is through this humor that JC marks her alliance with Singapore, as a fellow member of the group by claiming, "and we're like I know::". The specific use of "we" can be related to the social identity theory, which posits that the groups to which individuals feel they belong significantly shape their self-perceptions, identities, and interactions with others (Abrams and Hogg 1998; Billig and Tajfel 1973; Tajfel 1970, 1979, 1981; Tajfel and Turner 2004). Nevertheless, the incorporation of the colloquial particle "lah" mimics real-life conversation. By employing this linguistic device, she briefly alleviates the "conventions of reserve and politeness" (Goddard 1994: 160). This aspect emphasizes the playful nature of the act rather than it being construed as an aggressive attack.

3.2.5 Impoliteness act IV: external mismatching

In this subsequent act, JC builds on the previous setup to deliver a punchline that further highlights the power imbalance between Malaysia and Singapore.

> (0:54) but why haven't you ↑visit me in ↑40 ↑years:::?

> (0:57) ↓Aiyah I tried::: but you know:: ↑, MY

> (01:03) airplanes cannot fly:: ↑, (0.5).

> (01:05) Audience: ((laughs))

Culpeper's (2011) concept of non-conventionalized impoliteness, which relies on the disruption of conversational expectations rather than formulaic rude expressions, can be applied to analyze this excerpt. The speaker's question "but why haven't you ↑visit me in ↑40 ↑years:::?" seems confrontational and carries an implication of neglect. The marked intonation, particularly the exaggerated rise on *visit* and *40 years*, hints at disapproval, placing the interlocutor in a defensive position. However, the response, "↓Aiyah I tried::: but you know:: ↑, MY airplanes cannot fly:: ↑", subverts the expected trajectory of an apology or explanation. Instead, the speaker uses humor, marked by exaggerated phonetic features, rising intonation, and a mocking facial expression, to deflect the implicit accusation. This response aligns with context-driven impoliteness (external mismatch), wherein the reference to "MY airplanes cannot fly" clashes sharply with the real-world connotation of aviation safety, particularly in the wake of Malaysia Airlines' tarnished reputation following the MH370 tragedy. The response reframes the failure to visit as contingent upon larger systemic issues (the failure of Malaysia Airlines). This shift exemplifies non-conventionalized impoliteness through its creative violation of expectations, simultaneously positioning Malaysia as a less successful entity within the theme of "breakup revenge".

Importantly, the exchange shows ritualized impoliteness that is expected within the context of comedy. By referring to a well-known aviation tragedy and Malaysia's national image, the speaker's impoliteness becomes more than just a personal insult; it acts as a comment on broader cultural issues. The humor, therefore, does not only affect the relationship between the speakers, but also touches on shared concerns about national identity and public perception. Stand-up comedy often serves as a way for comedians to question social norms, criticize cultural values, and encourage reflection through humor (Greenbaum 1999). In this context, ritualized impoliteness helps the audience deal with uncomfortable social topics, and strengthens a sense of group belonging through shared laughter.

3.2.6 Impoliteness act V: extending

Following the punchline in the previous act, JC extends the joke by making another direct reference to the MH370 tragedy.

(01:06) JC: [↑WHAT? Malaysian Airlines going missing not funny ↑HUH::?

(01:10) Audience: ((laughs))]

(01:10) JC: some jokes don't ↓land::= (0.7)

Culpeper's (2011) concept of form-driven and context-driven impoliteness is evident here, particularly in an external mismatch, where the humor (the surface content of the joke) directly clashes with the cultural and historical context surrounding the event (the tragic disappearance of the Malaysian plane). JC's attempt to make light of a tragedy intentionally breaks the expected convention of respectful acknowledgment, especially within public discourse around such an event. Additionally, the rising intonation at the end of "not funny huh" indicates the speaker's challenge or provocation, forcing the audience to acknowledge the humor (whether they choose to accept or reject it) (cf. Queen 2005). This contributes to form-driven impoliteness, where the surface form of the language (a direct, blunt question in response to a somber topic) violates conversational expectations around sympathy or seriousness.

Despite the sensitive topic, the audience's laughter reflects the dual nature of humor in this context. It signals a ritualized acceptance of uncomfortable humor, with the audience implicitly acknowledging the discomfort of the subject matter. In comedy, an implicit contract allows jokes to disrupt boundaries due to the agreed-upon context of entertainment, normalizing taboo subjects within specific cultural settings like stand-up comedy. While the exact cause of the laughter cannot be definitively determined, one possible explanation, aligned with Hay's (2001) argument, is that laughter without reservations often signifies agreement with the conveyed message. In this case, the audience's laughter may suggest their endorsement of the view that humor about the tragedy is inappropriate. However, another plausible explanation is that the audience simply finds the joke funny, independent of its underlying critique or alignment with any sentiment regarding the tragedy. This interaction reflects ritual identities, allowing the audience to express their reactions, be it agreement, amusement, or both, without direct confrontation.

There are two interpretations of JC's line, "some jokes don't ↓land::=". First, it signals that the joke about Malaysia Airlines was not funny or did not resonate with the audience, highlighting that it failed to achieve the intended humor. Second, the use of "land" can be seen as a reference back to the earlier joke about Malaysia Airlines and the MH370 tragedy, where the plane, in a literal sense, failed to land.

This reflects form-driven impoliteness (Culpeper 2011), where the failure to "land" the joke corresponds to an external mismatch between the tragic event and the comedic tone. The mention of "land" also aligns with non-conventionalized impoliteness in the form of a creative, albeit risky, violation of conversational and cultural norms. Here, the humor undermines the gravity of the tragedy, intensifying its offensiveness through its context-driven insensitivity. As a result, the audience audibly expresses surprise at JC's approach, suggesting that the external context mismatch, where the tragedy is misaligned with the comedic response, may have elicited varied reactions.

(01:14) An audience member: =Oh what the ↑hell!

(01:16) An audience member: ↑Oh my ↑God::::

(01:18) this joke ↑kills in Singapore ((laughs))

(01:15) Audience: ((laughs))

The phrase "Oh what the ↑hell!" may indicate discomfort for some audience members or, alternatively, a reaction of sheer surprise rather than unease. This highlights the clash between the light-hearted intent of humor and the emotional weight of the tragedy for certain listeners. While laughter is present, the reaction also underscores how humor addressing deeply sensitive topics can create tension.

Finally, JC responds to the audience's mixed or negative reaction with a deflection, reinforcing the ritualization of impoliteness. By claiming that the joke "kills in Singapore", JC redirects the perceived failure of the joke to an external factor, specifically the cultural context of Singapore, suggesting that the joke works in a region with different social norms and standards for humor. This response is an attempt to reframe the joke's failure by validating its appropriateness elsewhere, thereby distancing the joke from the negative reception. The phrase also works as an attempt to regain control over the situation and reassert confidence in the joke's value. Additionally, the reference to Singapore could also imply a contrast between the two countries: as Singapore is seen as a prosperous, "successful ex", the joke is more acceptable there, in contrast to Malaysia's post-crisis reputation. Thus, JC uses Singapore as a cultural anchor to mitigate the discomfort created by the sensitive subject matter and position the joke within a more acceptable context. As Kawalec (2020) argues, stand-up comedy is deeply embedded in Western traditions of spectacle and individual expression, where pushing limits and provoking tension are not only expected, but celebrated as part of the performer's craft. Within this context, laughter becomes a culturally sanctioned response to even morally or emotionally sensitive material.

3.2.7 The closing act

Building on the impoliteness strategies examined in the earlier acts, from dissociation and mimicry to condescension and indirect mockery, the closing act functions as a strategic closure of the performance. In line with Rutter's (2001) identification of re-incorporation as a key stand-up technique, the closing act exemplifies how JC revisits earlier themes of Malaysian inferiority through the punchline, "they don't have internet". This callback to earlier references, particularly in Sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.5, emphasizes the act's cohesion and signals a narrative closing. By referencing a previously implied stereotype, the comedian invites the audience to recall shared frames of meaning, thus prompting laughter not from the punchline alone, but from its relation to prior discourse. As Rutter (2001) explains, such callbacks function as signposts that both reinforce the comedian's structure and reward the attentive audience.

> (01:20) An audience member: You are definitely ge(h)tting a↑ bad yelp review

> (01:22) JC: I am getting a ↑bad yelp review from the Mala(h)ysians

> (01:24) that's okay they don't have ↓internet ((laughs))

> (01:25) Audience: ((laughs))

There are two interpretations of this interaction. First, the mention of a negative Yelp review may indicate audience dissatisfaction and a perceived failure of the joke. It interrupts the casual flow of the performance and introduces a more formal kind of criticism, suggesting a stronger disapproval of JC's act. Possibly, the humor that exceeds the cultural or emotional limits of the tragedy prompts the audience member to take an oppositional stance, calling attention to the failure of the joke in an explicit way.

 In the second possible interpretation, the interaction shifts as the audience member begins to engage more directly in the comedy by referencing the negative Yelp review. By doing so, they become active participants in the performance rather than passive consumers. This reflects Rutter's (1997, 2000) observation that an audience member's interjection is not simply a critique, but part of the performance dynamic, where the boundary between comic and audience becomes fluid. Rutter (1997, 2000) terms this kind of exchange "pseudo-dyadic", a simulated one-to-one interaction within a group setting, which supports the illusion of intimacy while enabling a shared interpretive space. This participation is characterized by a back-and-forth rhythm that acknowledges the sensitive nature of the joke while simultaneously playing along with it. It becomes an instance of ritualized impoliteness in

which a socially taboo subject, such as the Malaysian Airlines incident, is negotiated collaboratively and continuously extended by both the performer and the audience.

The joke "(01:24) that's okay, they don't have ↓ internet ((laughs))" exhibits context-driven impoliteness. This is evident in the cultural stereotype of Malaysia being technologically inferior to Singapore. By exaggerating this divide, JC creates humor that is predicated on a deeper context of regional rivalry and the historical "ex-partner" dynamic between Malaysia and Singapore. The mention of a lack of internet plays into the audience's pre-existing knowledge of this disparity, making the joke humorous within this specific context.

4 Conclusions

This article has examined how impoliteness in Jocelyn Chia's comedic performance evokes laughter by leveraging context and audience expectations. These strategies are accepted within the comedic frame, underscoring the importance of context in interpreting impoliteness. By framing the historical tensions between Malaysia and Singapore as a metaphorical breakup, JC ritualizes impoliteness to emphasize the theme of "breakup revenge". JC employs dissociation, mocking, and condescension to create a layered comedic structure. Dissociation contrasts social norms with provocative humor, while mocking and condescension amplify perceived hierarchies between the two nations. These strategies deepen audience engagement by drawing on shared cultural and historical references. This illustrates how ritualized impoliteness, when embedded in a comedic framework, can serve both narrative and humorous functions while challenging social norms. However, this creativity is inherently limited by the need to remain tethered to the central thesis of the comedic work. Despite its potential to provoke, impoliteness must ultimately converge with the thematic core of the comedy. Deviating too far from this thesis risks alienating the audience, undermining the comedic purpose, or causing misinterpretation.

JC's performance demonstrates how a comedian can engage with Kádár's (2017: 199–200) four interactional style choices within ritual discourse: (1) "construction of identities by fulfilling ritual roles", (2) "building up personalized identity within a ritual role", (3) "making unexpected interactional moves as a performer, defying the norms of the ritual role without clearly violating what the performer is ratified to do", and (4) "failure to perform one's ratified ritual role". JC clearly operates within the first three style choices without entering the fourth. She fulfills her ritual role as a comedian by using impoliteness to discuss sensitive issues like national rivalry, an approach accepted by the audience as part of the comedic setting. She also develops a personal comedic voice through her language and storytelling, aligning with Kádár's (2017) second style choice. By making unexpected moves such as mocking and

condescending remarks, she defies polite norms while still staying within the bounds of what a comedian is allowed to do. Importantly, her ability to sustain this balance and avoid failure of her ritual role shows that the performance remains interactionally ritualized, reinforcing how context governs the audience's interpretation of impoliteness in her act.

While this study highlights the creative use of impoliteness in comedy, it is also necessary to reflect on its ethical limits. Referencing tragedies such as MH370 can be emotionally distressing and raises moral questions about what is appropriate in a comedic setting. Kawalec (2020) notes that stand-up comedy often celebrates boundary-pushing and shock as part of its Western roots, where laughter can be a way to respond to even uncomfortable topics. However, humor is shaped by cultural and emotional contexts. As Vigouroux (2015) points out, audience expectations and cultural norms greatly influence how jokes are received. Ethical boundaries in comedy, therefore, are not fixed but negotiated through cultural expectations, audience demographics, and the emotional proximity to the events referenced.

A central limitation of this study is its reliance on a single performance, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. While the detailed analysis of JC's act offers insight into the creative and contextual dynamics of impoliteness in comedy, it does not reflect how such strategies may function across other comedians, audiences, or cultural settings. Comedy is inherently dynamic and context-sensitive; audience responses vary based on demographic makeup, national sensitivities, and performance conditions. Future studies could extend this work by examining multiple performances by the same comedian, or comparing routines across performers and cultural contexts. Such studies would deepen our understanding of how ritualized impoliteness is deployed, interpreted, and ethically negotiated across diverse comedic environments.

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