# Perceptions of 2024 Education Management Students at Universitas Negeri Jakarta Toward Sexist Humor

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how students in the 2024 Education Management cohort at Universitas Negeri Jakarta perceive sexist humor. Unlike prior research that attributes tolerance of such humor mainly to gender bias, this study traces the underlying social dynamics. Using a descriptive qualitative method with observation and semi-structured interviews across six participants (three male, three female), data were analyzed thematically. Findings show all participants recognized sexist humor as gender-biased, triggering emotional responses such as anger, sadness, and insecurity. Female participants viewed it as harassment tied to gender inequality, while male participants saw it as context-dependent, despite experiencing internal guilt. The study identifies three underexplored dynamics: social pressure as the primary driver normalizing sexist humor, social hierarchy (seniors, lecturers, authority figures) discouraging student response, and internal conflict among male students that rarely surfaces outwardly. The study concludes that strengthening gender literacy and communication ethics at the program and institutional level is essential to reducing the normalization of sexist humor and fostering a safer, inclusive academic environment.

## ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji persepsi mahasiswa angkatan 2024 Program Studi Manajemen Pendidikan UNJ terhadap humor seksis. Berbeda dari studi sebelumnya yang cenderung mengaitkan toleransi terhadap humor seksis semata dengan bias gender, penelitian ini menelusuri dinamika sosial di baliknya. Menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif melalui observasi dan wawancara semi-terstruktur pada enam partisipan (tiga laki-laki, tiga perempuan), data dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil menunjukkan seluruh partisipan mengenali humor seksis sebagai bentuk bias gender yang memicu respons emosional seperti marah, sedih, dan rasa tidak aman. Partisipan perempuan memaknainya sebagai pelecehan yang berkaitan dengan ketimpangan gender, sementara partisipan laki-laki cenderung memandangnya kontekstual meski mengalami konflik batin berupa rasa bersalah. Studi ini mengungkap tiga temuan yang jarang dibahas: tekanan sosial sebagai pendorong utama normalisasi humor seksis, peran hierarki sosial (senior, dosen, figur otoritas) dalam menghambat respons mahasiswa, dan konflik internal mahasiswa laki-laki yang tidak selalu tercermin dalam respons mereka. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan pentingnya penguatan literasi gender dan etika komunikasi di tingkat program studi maupun institusi untuk menekan normalisasi humor seksis dan mewujudkan lingkungan akademik yang inklusif dan aman.

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**KEYWORDS**
Gender differences, Sexist humor, Student perception

## INTRODUCTION

Humor is a form of culture that has developed across many countries, including Indonesia, and its use in group communication can strengthen emotional bonds and cohesion (Kane et al, 1977; Martin, 2007; Mukhlis, 2016). However, humor that harms specific individuals or groups is known as disparagement humor, which aims to mock or belittle a particular social group in a negative way (Parrot & Hopp, 2019). Such humor can also function as a subtle means of negotiating social power between groups (Bitterly, 2022). One form of disparagement humor is sexist humor, defined as humor containing elements of insult, stereotyping, manipulation, or objectification based on sex (Lafrance & Woodzicka, 1998). The differential experience of sexist humor across gender lines is inseparable from a longstanding debate in humor research regarding whether and how men and women differ meaningfully in their use and experience of humor (Greengross, 2020).

Various studies show that sexist humor is often packaged as light-hearted joking so that it appears harmless, even though it can obscure perceptions of the discriminatory nature of the message being conveyed and increase tolerance toward sexist behavior (Mallet et al., 2016; Yasmine & Gusnita, 2024). This pattern extends beyond campus settings into professional environments, where sexist jokes directed at female employees are similarly normalized as ordinary workplace banter despite concealing elements of harassment and gender inequality (Oktaviani, 2025). Perceptions of sexist humor are also shaped by gender. Men tend to find it funnier and less offensive, whereas women tend to feel more threatened by it (Parrot & Hopp, 2019; Lawless et al., 2020). This phenomenon aligns with the concept of rape culture, a set of social practices that collectively normalize sexual violence and reinforce power relations in society (Kessel, 2022). In the rape culture pyramid by 11th Principles (2018), sexist attitudes and rape jokes sit at the very base, reinforcing the culture that justifies gender-based harassment and violence.

Data from the Safe Public Space Coalition (Koalisi Ruang Publik Aman, 2022) show that out of 4,236 respondents in a survey on sexual harassment in public spaces, 3,037 people (78.89% women and 29.6% men) had experienced verbal sexual harassment, with sexist comments being one of the most commonly reported forms both offline and online. On campus, statements such as *"why are you dressed up so nicely, who are you trying to impress?"* are still frequently heard and reinforce the notion that sexist humor is merely harmless joking (Tantri et al., 2024). Preliminary interviews with four students from the 2024 Educational Management cohort at Universitas Negeri Jakarta revealed varied perceptions: some considered it light joking, others felt uncomfortable or even disturbed, with responses ranging from silence, to laughing along, to confusion about how to react.

Based on this background, the present study focuses on how students of the 2024 Educational Management Study Program at Universitas Negeri Jakarta perceive sexist humor, including the impacts they experience and the differences between female and male students. The study is limited to sexist humor in the form of jokes, comments, or remarks that degrading, objectify, or stereotype a particular gender, whether delivered through direct interaction or digital media within the campus environment. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of social communication regarding gendered differences in perceiving sexist humor, while practically it may serve as a reference for students and campus authorities in fostering more sensitive communication and a more inclusive academic environment.

## METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, which according to Yusuf (2017) is used to uncover a condition within its context in order to find deep meaning or understanding of a problem. This approach was considered relevant because sexist humor is a social phenomenon often regarded as normal within the campus environment, requiring the researcher to capture the context, language, and expressions that arise naturally among students.

Data were collected through two techniques: observation and semi-structured interviews. Observation was conducted by directly observing interactions among students of the Educational Management Study Program on campus, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants (three female and three male students from the 2024 cohort), both in person and online via Google Meet, lasting approximately 30–60 minutes per session and recorded with participant consent. The interview questions covered participants' experiences, interpretations, and the psychological or social impacts they felt in relation to sexist humor.

Data analysis used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke in Heriyanto, 2018) following the stages described by Creswell (2018): organizing the data, thoroughly reading the transcripts, and a tiered coding process consisting of open coding (assigning initial codes to units of meaning), axial coding (grouping related codes into categories or subthemes), and selective coding (determining the core themes that represent the most fundamental meaning across the data). Data trustworthiness was maintained through field notes documenting

the context and nonverbal expressions of participants, as well as member checking to confirm that the transcription and the researcher's interpretation matched the participants' intended meaning.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Participant data for this study are presented in Table 1. The six participants were students of the 2024 Educational Management Study Program at Universitas Negeri Jakarta, selected based on their willingness to participate and their relevant experience with sexist humor on campus.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Participant Data

| Code | Sex | Age | Residence |
|---|---|---|---|
| N1 (YT) | Male | 19 | 0.075 |
| N2 (AF) | Female | 19 | 0.166 |
| N3 (AQ) | Male | 19 | East Jakarta |
| N4 (IK) | Male | 20 | South Jakarta |
| N5 (NR) | Female | 19 | Bekasi |
| N6 (KA) | Female | 19 | South Jakarta |

As shown in Table 1, six participant codes (N1–N6) were assigned to the informants, consisting of three male and three female students of the 2024 Educational Management cohort. Analysis of the interview data through open, axial, and selective coding produced five major themes that structure the discussion below: (1) students' understanding of sexist humor, (2) the presence of sexist humor within the campus environment, (3) students' perceptions of and responses to sexist humor, (4) the normalization of sexist humor, and (5) perceptual differences between male and female students.

### Observation Result

Observation within the Educational Management Study Program found that sexist humor appears fairly often in students' daily interactions, typically as spontaneous joking, gendered labeling, body-related comments, and sexual joking regarded as harmless by some. One participant frequently used stereotypical labeling toward classmates (e.g., calling a male student "whiny like a girl"), while another regularly made flirtatious or sexually toned remarks toward his own male friends, showing that sexist humor is not confined to men targeting women but also occurs between male peers as perceived camaraderie. Other participants displayed clear discomfort, responding with raised eyebrows, looking down, withdrawing from conversation, faint smiles, or awkward laughter, confirming that sexist humor is not received uniformly across students.

### Understanding of Sexist Humor

*Understanding of Sexist Humor.* Students defined sexist humor as joking containing a gender element with the potential to demean one sex, most commonly linked to comments about the body, appearance, or gender roles. As one informant put it, it is "a joke related to gender... something demeaning that shouldn't be made into a joke," while another described it as joking that "intends to demean, that drags gender into it." Reported forms ranged from verbal remarks, such as labeling an emotional man as effeminate, or positioning a passing woman as an object of attention, to nonverbal cues such as deliberate glances or "body scanning." This supports Lafrance and Woodzicka's (1998) view that sexist humor can be conveyed both verbally and nonverbally, and reinforces Utama et al. (2023), who found that sexism often surfaces through implicit social cues accepted without question in daily interaction.

### Student Perceptions of Sexist Humor

All six informants reported discomfort upon hearing or witnessing sexist humor, with several also describing anger, offense, or sadness at its continued presence "even in a setting as ordinary as campus." Behavioral responses varied: some chose silence as a safer option to avoid escalation, others confronted the perpetrator directly, from a firm "don't do that" to a blunt retort, while others admitted laughing along despite discomfort, to avoid appearing humorless or disruptive to the group. One participant reflected that repeated exposure had led her to begin normalizing such jokes herself. These patterns align with Perdani's perception theory (in Nurhayati & Ratnaningsih, 2022), which links perception to functional factors such as emotion and personal experience, and with Baron and Byrne's concept of social conformity (in Mardison, 2016), whereby individuals adjust behavior to group norms to avoid appearing different. All participants agreed sexist humor constitutes harassment rather than harmless joking, consistent with the concept of disparagement humor (Parrott & Hopp,

2019) and with Kessel's (2022) concept of rape culture, in which sexist joking normalizes gender inequality under the guise of harmless fun.

### Student Perceptions of Sexist Humor

Normalization emerged from two directions: perpetrators who justified their joking as "just kidding," making confrontation feel pointless, and recipients who grew accustomed to or personally normalized such humor through repeated exposure. This mirrors findings that gender-based microaggressions in academic settings are perceived as more acceptable when delivered as jokes (Midgette et al., 2023). This study also identified social pressure as an underexplored factor: some students admitted laughing or staying silent for fear of appearing unable to fit in with the group. Social position further shaped willingness to respond, as students were notably more reluctant to confront seniors, lecturers, or other higher-status figures, weighing potential social or academic consequences before reacting, reflecting both social conformity theory and Kessel's (2022) rape culture concept, in which unequal positioning between perpetrator and recipient normalizes sexist behavior. Normalization was also found rooted in family upbringing, with one participant describing how her family had long normalized gendered labeling (e.g., girls should be "soft," boys "must be tough"), illustrating how early exposure reinforces later acceptance of sexist humor.

### Perceptual Differences Between Male and Female Students

Female informants viewed sexist humor as a clear violation of ethics that normalizes discrimination and creates insecurity, describing it as "not okay, not allowed" and inherently a form of insult. Their emotional reactions tended to be strong and negative such as sadness, anger, discomfort, disgust, with responses usually involving rejection or direct confrontation, though some admitted laughing along to avoid awkwardness despite deep internal discomfort. Male informants, by contrast, viewed sexist humor as more ambiguous, admitting they still struggled to distinguish it from general demeaning joking, describing it as "still a real challenge... figuring out what counts as sexist humor or not." For them, humor was only clearly classified as harassment once it became vulgar or overly explicit, with discomfort typically emerging after reflection rather than in the moment. The clearest distinction, then, lies in where each group drew the line between joking and harassment: women tended to see sexist humor itself as harassment, while men perceived a "thin line" that only became harassment once clearly excessive, with women responding more assertively and men more inclined to normalize it as ordinary group dynamics.

### Discussions

These findings show that students can identify sexist humor as carrying gender bias with the potential to demean, consistent with Lafrance and Woodzicka's (1998) view that sexist humor asserts the inferiority of a group through both verbal and nonverbal means, and with Utama et al. (2023), who found sexism often surfaces through implicit cues accepted without question. Observation data corroborate this, showing the phenomenon manifesting visibly in everyday behavior rather than existing only conceptually.

The strong discomfort and offense reported from particularly among female students align with Argüello-Gutiérrez et al. (2022) and Lawless et al. (2020), who found women react more strongly because sexist humor carries an implicit threat to their gender identity, while men tend to tolerate it unless it becomes excessive. The tendency to laugh along or stay neutral to conform to group norms illustrates a broader normalization process, consistent with Prejudiced Norm Theory (Ford & Ferguson, 2004) and with Tantri et al. (2024), who found sexist humor is often accepted as harmless when delivered by a close friend or peer, a pattern reinforced by social conformity theory (Mardison, 2016).

Sexist humor also generated internal conflict, particularly for male students caught between personal discomfort and preserving group relationships which align with Bouckaert et al. (2022), who found sexist humor can produce ambivalence among individuals who feel powerless to refuse due to power dynamics. Similar avoidance patterns appeared in students' relationships with seniors and lecturers, connecting to Kessel's (2022) rape culture concept, in which sexist joking is treated as too minor to protest. A further concern is the long-term blurring of the boundary between humor and harassment: several informants admitted that sexist humor, though initially disturbing, gradually became normalized and stopped eliciting strong emotional reactions which consistent with Mallet et al. (2016), who found sexist humor can dampen perceptions of a message's discriminatory nature over time.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that students of the 2024 Educational Management Study Program at Universitas Negeri Jakarta are able to recognize sexist humor as humor containing gender bias, which produces emotional impacts such as anger, sadness, discomfort, and a sense of insecurity, as well as social impacts in the form of a tendency to stay silent or laugh along in order to fit in with the group. Female students tend to interpret sexist humor as a form of harassment with stronger emotional reactions, while male students see it as more context-dependent, though they still experience discomfort in certain situations. Social pressure, social position, and internal conflict all influence how sexist humor is responded to, indicating that responses to sexist humor are shaped more by everyday social dynamics than by personal values alone. These findings underscore the need to strengthen gender literacy and communication ethics on campus, both through individual student awareness and through institutional policies that are more sensitive to issues of gender equality.

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