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# Inclusive Comedy and Disability Representation in *Clash of Mutants*

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**Abstract -** This study is a qualitative case study examining the representation of disability in digital media, focusing on the inaugural episode of *Clash of Mutants* on YouTube. Grounded in Communication Studies and Representation Theory, as well as the social model of disability, this study analyzes how meaning is constructed through *dark comedy*. It hypothesizes that the use of the label *mutants* within *dark comedy* creates ambivalent meanings, simultaneously enabling *inclusive representation* while reinforcing stigma. This research applies a qualitative case study design. The data consist of one episode analyzed through qualitative content analysis of visual and narrative elements, supported by 100 audience comments explored using sentiment analysis. The main outcomes include forms of representation, narrative framing, and audience reception toward *inclusive representation* in digital communication. The findings reveal ambivalence: persons with disabilities are presented as active subjects in digital entertainment yet framed through stereotypes of incapacity. The contrast between formal competition aesthetics and disabled bodies opens space for *inclusive representation* while reproducing stigma through *dark comedy*. Audience reception is dominated by hegemonic-dominant readings, with viewers emphasizing entertainment over critical reflection, thereby normalizing the *mutants* label. These findings align with prior studies on humor's dual role as critique and marginalization. In conclusion, this case study highlights the complexity of *dark comedy* in shaping *inclusive representation*. Theoretically, it integrates representation, humor, and reception studies; practically, it informs more ethical and participatory content strategies.

**Keywords**: Disability Representation; Subversive Humor; Youtube; Clash Of Mutants; Inclusive Communication.

## Introduction

In the dynamic digital era, media plays a strategic role in shaping public perceptions of social issues. Advances in information technology and digital transformation have enabled individuals to perform various social functions more easily and effectively (Dylian et al., 2025), including in the representation of disability and inclusivity. Although persons with disabilities constitute a significant portion of Indonesia's population, their representation remains marginalized and often overshadowed by social stigma and barriers to inclusion.

Digital platforms such as YouTube provide new spaces for the emergence of alternative narratives that are not only entertaining but also capable of fostering public discourse on frequently overlooked issues. Furthermore, the rise of online media strengthens the role of digital spaces as effective and influential sources of information that attract public attention (Sokowati & Hassan, 2025)

One notable phenomenon is the program *Clash of Mutants* on the YouTube channel of Tretan Muslim. Inspired by *Clash of Champions* by Ruang Guru this program adopts a parody and satirical approach. Participants, labeled as "mutants," are individuals with disabilities presented within a competitive format filled with humor, controversy, and a distinctive style of *dark comedy*. The inaugural episode garnered 2.5 million views and 5,651 comments within the first three months, reflecting significant public attention while also sparking debate on disability representation in digital spaces.

Behind its comedic appeal, *Clash of Mutants* raises ethical dilemmas. On the one hand, humor can function as an effective tool of social critique to deconstruct stereotypes and encourage audiences to appreciate diversity (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022; Bonnici et al., 2023). On the other hand, satire and *dark comedy* risk reinforcing stigma and offending the sensitivities of persons with disabilities. Satire itself plays a substantial role in shaping public opinion (Crittenden et al., 2011; Rahimi, 2015). As noted by Fife (2016), audience responses to satire vary widely, ranging from strong support to sharp rejection. This ambivalence indicates that humor is not neutral but rather a cultural practice embedded with ideological dimensions.

Previous studies have extensively examined disability representation in media. Vertoont et al. (2022), through collective textual analysis, found that representations of intellectual disability produce images that are both un/recognizable and dis/empowering. Södergren and Vallström (2023) highlight how disability representation in social media influencers oscillates between inclusion and commodification. Meanwhile, Goethals, Mortelmans, and Hove (2018) identify the dominance of heroic and tragic narratives in Flemish print media, while Pearson and Misener (2022) reveal that Canadian Paralympic athletes seek more authentic representation. Aspler, Harding, and Cascio (2022) emphasize the importance of intersectionality in television representation. These studies demonstrate that disability representation is often caught between empowerment and the reproduction of stereotypes.

However, there remains limited research specifically examining *dark comedy* as a representational strategy within participatory digital platforms such as YouTube. Moreover, most studies tend to separate media text analysis from audience reception, leaving a gap in integrative approaches that combine meaning production, humor strategies, and audience interpretation within a unified analytical framework. In the Indonesian context, research on subversive humor as a medium for inclusive representation of persons with disabilities remains relatively scarce.

Based on this gap, this study raises a fundamental question: whether digital humor practices that claim inclusivity genuinely deconstruct disability stigma or instead reproduce new forms of marginalization within subtle entertainment formats. Thus, *Clash of Mutants* becomes academically significant as a case study that enables an in-depth exploration of disability representation in contemporary digital comedy practices.

This research focuses on a single case study, namely the inaugural episode of *Clash of Mutants* on one YouTube channel; therefore, its findings are not intended to represent the entirety of humor culture in Indonesia. Rather, this study aims to provide a contextual understanding of how specific digital humor practices frame disability representation within the interplay between media production and audience reception.

## Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework that combines Representation Theory, the concept of subversive humor, and Encoding/Decoding Model to examine disability representation in digital media. These approaches are interconnected to understand representation not merely as a textual product but as a dynamic process involving meaning production, mediation through humor, and audience interpretation within digital culture.

Representation theory is used to analyze how meanings about disability are constructed through language, visual elements, and narrative structures. According to Stuart Hall (1997), media does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs it through ideological processes. In this context, the way persons with disabilities are portrayed in media content shapes public understanding and social attitudes

toward them. Thus, representation becomes a site of meaning-making where power relations and cultural values are negotiated.

To further explore how humor operates within this representational process, this study adopts the framework of subversive humor (Billig, 2005; Lockyer & Pickering, 2008). This perspective views humor, particularly *dark comedy* as a double-edged practice. On the one hand, it can function as a tool for challenging dominant norms and offering critical commentary on social issues. On the other hand, it may reproduce unequal power relations, especially when directed at marginalized groups. In the case of *Clash of Mutants*, the use of *dark comedy* raises questions about whether humor facilitates inclusive representation or reinforces existing stereotypes about disability.

The selection of subversive humor is based on its relevance in examining power relations and resistance within comedic practices. Unlike superiority theory, which interprets humor as an expression of dominance over others (Pacheco & Meyer, 2021; Perks, 2012), or relief theory, which frames humor as psychological release and emotional catharsis (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009), subversive humor enables a more critical analysis of the ideological and political dimensions of humor. In the context of disability representation, the focus shifts from why audiences laugh to how such laughter may challenge or reinforce social structures that marginalize persons with disabilities.

In addition, this study incorporates audience reception theory through the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1997) to understand how media meanings are interpreted by audiences. Within this framework, audiences actively negotiate meaning through three positions: hegemonic-dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. By analyzing audience responses particularly YouTube comments, this study captures how viewers interpret humor and inclusive representation in diverse ways. As noted by Stuart Hall (1997), audiences are not passive recipients but active interpreters of media texts.

By integrating these three theoretical perspectives, this study conceptualizes representation as a multidimensional process involving production, mediation, and reception. This framework enables a comprehensive analysis of how *Clash of Mutants* constructs meanings of disability through *dark comedy*, how such meanings are embedded within power relations, and how they are interpreted and contested by audiences in the digital public sphere.

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**Material and Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore how humor functions as a tool of social critique and how disability representation is constructed in the first episode of *Clash of Mutants*. The primary analysis is conducted through qualitative content analysis of elements within the video, including narrative structure, participant characterization, dialogue, and visual components such as framing and program packaging. The focus on a single episode allows for an in-depth examination of meaning construction; therefore, this study does not aim to generalize findings to the broader landscape of digital humor practices in Indonesia.

The primary data consist of the first episode of *Clash of Mutants* published on the YouTube channel of Tretan Muslim (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4j34_DDbyY), while supporting data are drawn from audience comments in the YouTube comment section. A total of 100 comments were selected as an exploratory sample to identify patterns of audience responses. This sample is not intended to represent overall public opinion but rather to provide an initial insight into audience reception tendencies.

Data collection involved transcribing dialogue, identifying key scenes, and examining visual elements and narrative structures. The data were then categorized into key thematic areas, including representations of equality, the reproduction of stereotypes, the use of subversive humor, and the presence of potentially "punching down" humor. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns of meaning, which were subsequently interpreted using Representation Theory and the concept of subversive humor.

To examine audience response tendencies, comments were analyzed using sentiment analysis techniques through Microsoft Excel 2019 add-ins. However, this analysis was used only as a preliminary indicator to classify responses as positive, negative, or neutral and was not treated as a determinant of ideological meaning. The limitation of this tool lies in its inability to fully capture irony, satire, and cultural context; therefore, interpretation was complemented by qualitative reading of the comments.

Data validity was ensured through triangulation across video content analysis, audience comments, and relevant literature. Ethical considerations were addressed by using only publicly available comments without disclosing user identities. The researcher acknowledges their positionality as an academic concerned with inclusive communication issues; thus, interpretations were conducted reflexively to minimize normative bias in analyzing disability humor.

This study is limited by its focus on a single episode and a relatively small number of comments. Consequently, the findings are contextual and open to further development in more comprehensive future research.

## Result and Discussion

*Narrative: Competition Parody as an Ambivalent Representational Strategy*

The inaugural episode of *Clash of Mutants*, titled *"Duel Sengit Menghafal Gaplek"*, with a duration of 33 minutes, presents a parody of the academic competition format *Clash of Champions*. The narrative structure retains the aesthetics of a formal competition; however, substantively, it replaces academic challenges with absurd activities such as arranging domino cards or answering questions that lack academic relevance.




**Figure 1.** Gaplek Game in Clash of Mutants
Source: YouTube, Tretan Muslim (2024)

This contrast functions not only as a comedic strategy but also as a mechanism of meaning production. Within the framework of Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), the narrative demonstrates that persons with disabilities are not merely "presented," but are constructed within specific symbolic relations.

Ambivalence is concretely evident in scenes where participants struggle to complete simple tasks, followed by laughter and humorous commentary from the host. This pattern indicates that humor does not function solely as a critique of academic competition standards, but also directs the audience's attention toward individual limitations as a source of amusement.

The use of dark comedy (Godioli, 2024) creates space for the deconstruction of disability, which has often been treated as a taboo subject. However, in the absence of explicit critical markers, this strategy risks being received as conventional humor that reinforces stigma. Thus, humor in this context operates ambivalently: it opens space for inclusion while simultaneously reproducing social boundaries.

*Characterization: The "Mutant" Identity and the Production of Social Meaning*

Tretan Muslim acts as the host who guides six participants with disabilities, collectively referred to as the "Mutants Squad." The characterization of participants as "mutants" becomes a central element in the construction of representation. This identity is reinforced through parody profiles, such as the use of the term "RAM 512 KB" to replace GPA and the attribution of fictitious university affiliations.

This characterization generates a tension of meaning. On the one hand, *Clash of Mutants* departs from the pity-driven narratives commonly associated with medical or charity models by presenting

persons with disabilities as active subjects who participate in competition and comedic interaction. On the other hand, the humor constructed through metaphors of limitation—such as the simplification of cognitive abilities, shifts the focus from participation to the highlighting of difference as a source of amusement.

From the perspective of Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), this practice demonstrates that meaning is not neutral but constructed through symbolic choices. The use of the label "mutant" does not merely signify difference; it also produces particular associations that risk positioning persons with disabilities as the "other" subject to ridicule.

The connection to subversive humor is evident in the attempt to introduce satire toward social norms that marginalize persons with disabilities. Pathak (2022) suggests that such humor can function as a tool of resistance against dominant structures. However, its effectiveness is highly dependent on the context of production and the positionality of the actors involved. In this case, the dominance of non-disabled comedians in shaping the narrative raises representational concerns, as noted by Lockyer and Pickering (2008), who argue that humor directed at vulnerable groups risks becoming *punching down* when it is not controlled by those groups themselves.

Similarly, Wegner (2021) highlights that disability representation in comedy is often inherently ambiguous, operating between the intention to challenge stereotypes and the tendency to reproduce them. In this program, this tension is evident in the way disabled participants are given space to perform while simultaneously framed through humorous identities that emphasize their differences. Thus, the subversive potential of humor cannot be separated from power relations in the production process, making the boundary between social critique and the reproduction of stigma increasingly complex.

*Visual: Competition Aesthetics and the Exposure of Disabled Bodies*

Visually, the program replicates the aesthetics of a professional game show through stage design, lighting, digital graphics, and standardized costumes.




**Figure 4.** Tretan Muslim as Host and Participants ("Mutants") in the Competition Set of Clash of Mutants
Source: YouTube, Tretan Muslim (2024)

However, this aesthetic is produced in contrast with the representation of disabled bodies, which are exposed through visual techniques such as close-ups and slapstick scenes. For instance, moments in which participants experience motor difficulties while arranging objects are repeatedly displayed and reinforced through editing techniques, directing the audience's attention specifically toward aspects of physical limitation.

According to Bradbury (2023), such visual strategies do not merely represent difference but also contribute to constructing hierarchies of normality through the ways bodies are

displayed and emphasized. This finding aligns with Rees et al. (2018), who argue that visual framing in entertainment media can reinforce contrasts between professional production standards and bodily performances perceived as "deviating" from those norms.

On the one hand, participants with disabilities are presented as contestants without explicit medical labels such as "physically impaired," which may be interpreted as a form of normalization of participation in public spaces. On the other hand, the visual emphasis on physical difficulty risks shifting the focus from participation to the spectacle of the body, which, in certain contexts, approaches objectification.

Within the framework of the social model of disability, this situation can be interpreted as an implicit critique of non-inclusive competition systems, such as those based on speed or memorization, which inherently fail to accommodate diverse abilities. However, without explicit narrative cues guiding such interpretations, audiences are more likely to perceive these scenes as mere physical comedy. This suggests that the critical meaning of visual representation is not always effectively conveyed but depends on both the context of production and audience interpretation.

Furthermore, as argued by Gibson (2020), disability in media is not solely related to individual conditions but is a social construction shaped through representational practices. In this context, the visual representation in *Clash of Mutants* not only presents disabled bodies but also produces particular ways of seeing and understanding difference.

*Audience Reception: The Dominance of Entertainment and the Lack of Critique*

The episode attracted 2.5 million views, 77 thousand likes, and 5,651 comments within three months of its release. An analysis of 100 selected comments shows the following distribution: 93 neutral, 5 positive, and 2 negative.

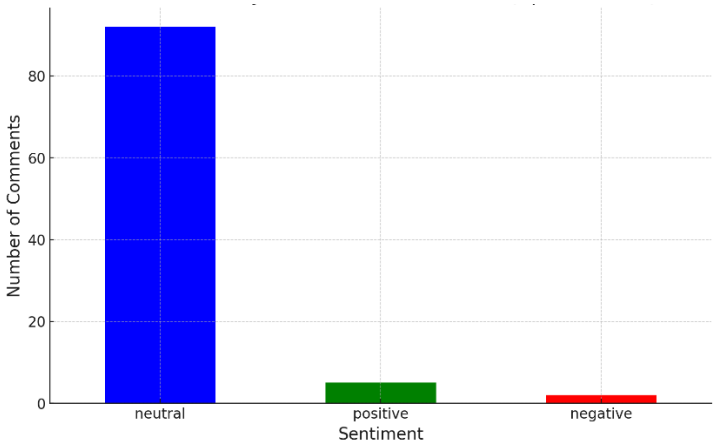



**Figure 2**. Sentiment Analysis of 100 YouTube Comments on Clash of Mutants Episode 1
Source: Author's data processing, 2024

The word cloud analysis reveals the dominance of supportive hashtags related to favorite participants (e.g., #timaan, #timidris, #timsaiful), indicating that audiences primarily focus on entertainment aspects rather than social issues. The results of the word cloud analysis are presented below:

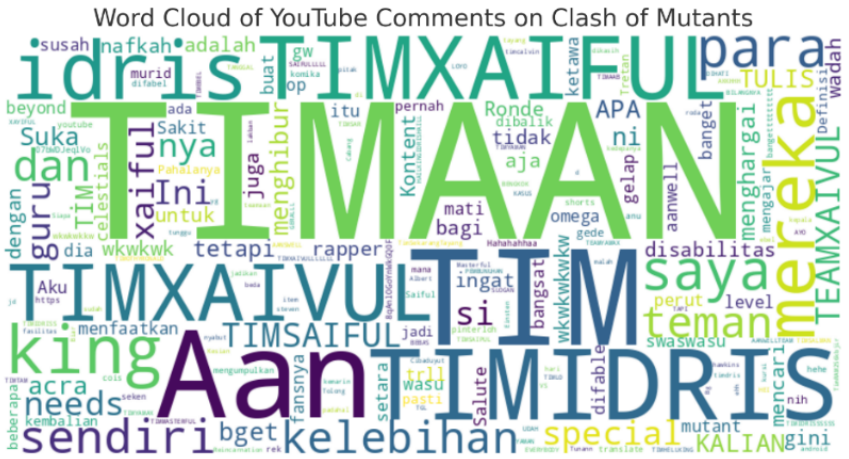



**Figure 3.** Word Cloud Analysis of 100 YouTube Comments on Clash of Mutants Episode 1
Source: Author's data processing, 2024

The dominance of the "neutral" category cannot be directly interpreted as a dominant reading. In many cases, neutrality reflects a focus on entertainment, the absence of critical reflection, or cultural tendencies to avoid open criticism. For example, several comments state: "so hilarious," "funny from beginning to end," and "respect, it turns out people with disabilities enjoy competing." These responses suggest that audiences emphasize entertainment value rather than issues of representation.

Within the framework of Encoding/Decoding Model proposed by Stuart Hall (1997), most audiences tend to accept the dominant meaning offered by the program, interpreting it as inclusive entertainment. However, audience reception is not solely determined by the text but is also shaped by external factors such as digital politeness norms that limit open criticism, platform algorithms that prioritize popular comments, and fan culture that encourages support for content creators.

A smaller portion of the audience reflects a negotiated position, accepting the humor as long as it is not perceived as degrading, while oppositional readings are rarely expressed explicitly. Nevertheless, there are indications of critical reflection in some comments that question the boundary between humor and exploitation, particularly in relation to disability representation. This suggests that audience interpretations are not entirely homogeneous.

In line with Collings (2018) and Wilde (2018), comedy is inherently polysemic and allows for multiple interpretations, ranging from acceptance to critique. Furthermore, Popovic (2018) emphasizes that responses to humor are strongly influenced by cultural context, indicating that the tendency to interpret the program primarily as entertainment is closely linked to prevailing social norms.

Thus, audience reception in this study demonstrates that humor is predominantly understood as a form of entertainment rather than as a critical discourse. The lack of critique does not necessarily indicate full acceptance but also reflects limitations in the visibility and articulation of critical perspectives within digital spaces.

*Synthesis: The Ambivalence of Representation in Digital Humor*

The findings of this study indicate that *Clash of Mutants* presents a form of disability representation that differs from conventional patterns, which tend to position persons with disabilities as objects of pity (Goethals et al., 2018; Zhang & Haller, 2013). In this program, persons with disabilities are portrayed as active subjects within the entertainment space, both as competition participants and as part of comedic practice.

However, this representation is not free from dilemmas. The humor employed operates within a tension between its potential for empowerment and the risk of reproducing stereotypes.

As argued by Reid et al. (2006) and T. R & Boopathi (2025), humor that is not reflexively constructed may reinforce stigma and exacerbate the marginalization of vulnerable groups. In this context, the effect of humor on audience perception becomes crucial, as meaning is shaped not only by the creator's intention but also by how it is interpreted by audiences (Ljuslinder, 2014; Wilde, 2018)

From the perspective of Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), the program produces dual meanings in which persons with disabilities are positioned both as equal subjects and as sources of humor derived from difference. This pattern aligns with the findings of Collings (2018) in the context of *dark comedy*, where disabled bodies often become central to humor due to their perceived deviation from normative standards. Thus, the representation produced is not singular but exists within a tension between discourses of empowerment and objectification.

Within the framework of subversive humor, the program holds the potential to challenge dominant social norms by bringing disability issues into the public comedic sphere. However, this potential is constrained by the fact that the production and control of humor largely remain in the hands of non-disabled creators. This condition suggests that humor is shaped not only by its form but also by the social positioning of those who produce and control the narrative.

Audience reception findings, which show a dominance of entertainment-oriented responses, further reinforce that this ambivalence is not only produced at the textual level but also reproduced in interpretive practices. In this case, the lack of critical responses does not necessarily indicate full acceptance but is also influenced by cultural norms, platform structures, and the dynamics of visibility within digital spaces.

Thus, *Clash of Mutants* can be understood as part of an emerging dynamic in the representation of disability within Indonesian digital media, where humor functions as a medium that simultaneously opens spaces for visibility while maintaining certain boundaries. The critique offered in this study is directed not merely at individual creators but at the broader structure of digital humor production that enables ambivalent representational practices to persist without sufficient critical reflection.

## Discussion

This study contributes to the field of communication, particularly to the study of disability representation in digital media. Theoretically, it extends the application of Representation Theory by integrating it with the concept of subversive humor and the Encoding/Decoding Model within a comprehensive analytical framework. This approach demonstrates that representation is not only produced through media texts but is also mediated by humor strategies and negotiated through audience reception practices.

Empirically, this study provides contextual evidence from Indonesian digital media, showing that the dominance of entertainment-oriented audience readings is influenced by cultural and structural factors, including platform algorithms. These findings highlight that audience reception is not solely determined by media texts but is also shaped by the broader digital ecosystem in which those texts circulate.

Practically, this study offers implications for content creators to be more sensitive in employing humor that involves vulnerable groups, particularly persons with disabilities. Inclusive representation should not merely involve the presence of disabled individuals but must also ensure that narrative and visual strategies do not reinforce unequal power relations.

## Conclusions

This study demonstrates that *Clash of Mutants* presents a form of disability representation that operates between two main tendencies. On the one hand, persons with disabilities are portrayed as active subjects within digital entertainment, departing from conventional representations that position them as objects of pity. On the other hand, the use of humor, particularly through parody, metaphor, and visual techniques such as close-ups and slapstick continues to risk emphasizing difference as a source of

amusement. These findings indicate that the representation produced is not singular but exists within a tension between the normalization of participation and the potential reproduction of stereotypes.

From the perspective of audience reception, the dominance of entertainment-oriented responses suggests that the program is more commonly interpreted as comedy rather than as critical discourse. However, this reception is not determined solely by the media text but is also shaped by cultural and structural factors, including tendencies to avoid open criticism, platform algorithmic logic, and fan culture dynamics. This reinforces that the ambivalence of representation is not only produced at the textual level but also reproduced in audience meaning-making practices.

Theoretically, this study extends the application of Representation Theory by integrating it with the concept of subversive humor and the Encoding/Decoding Model. This integration highlights that disability representation in digital media cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed through the interrelation of meaning production, humor strategies, and audience reception within the digital ecosystem.

Practically, the findings offer implications for multiple stakeholders. For content creators, it is essential to consider sensitivity in employing humor involving vulnerable groups, ensuring that comedic strategies do not rely solely on difference as a source of humor. For digital platforms, greater attention is needed regarding how algorithms shape the visibility of critical discourse and influence audience interaction patterns. In the context of inclusive communication, disability representation should move beyond mere visibility toward enabling equal and meaningful participation.

This study has several limitations, particularly its focus on a single episode and a limited number of analyzed comments. Moreover, reception analysis based on public comments may not fully capture deeper audience interpretations. Future research is therefore recommended to expand the scope of analysis across multiple episodes or platforms and to combine content analysis with methods such as interviews or focus group discussions to gain more comprehensive insights into audience perspectives.

In conclusion, this study highlights that humor in digital media holds the potential to function as an inclusive medium, yet it also carries the risk of reproducing stigma if not accompanied by critical reflection in both media production and consumption processes.

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