



Humor as Soft Power: Caricature and the Ethics of Political Criticism in Contemporary Media

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Political Humor, Caricature, Soft Power, Visual Ethics, Cultural Diplomacy, Digital Media

Received: 19, October

Revised: 20, November

Accepted: 30, December

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of visual humor in the dynamics of political communication, representation of power, cultural diplomacy, and ethical issues in the digital media era. Using an integrative literature review approach, this study synthesizes 34 academic articles from various fields, including political communication, visual studies, media ethics, and international relations. The analysis reveals five main themes: humor as a political communication strategy, caricatures as a visual representation of power, humor as soft power in cultural diplomacy, the ethics and responsibilities of visual humor, and the transformation of visual humor in the digital media era. This study confirms that visual humor is an effective and sensitive medium capable of influencing public opinion, shaping images of power, and mediating geopolitical relations, but at the same time is vulnerable to violating the ethics of representation. This article offers a conceptual model “Ethical Soft Power Framework for Visual Humor” as a theoretical contribution to understanding the role of visual humor in contemporary politics.

INTRODUCTION

Humor and satire in the era of mass media and digital technology are no longer just light entertainment, but have become an important part of public discourse and political communication. Political humor, particularly in visual forms such as cartoons, has great potential to influence public opinion through non-coercive mechanisms (Young, 2014). In relation to this influence, the concept of soft power, namely the ability to influence without coercion, becomes increasingly relevant when humor is used as a means of shaping political and cultural perceptions (Nye, 2004; Schneider, 2025). This integration of humor and soft power finds its most tangible form in political caricatures, which stand out as a visual medium that combines humor, distortion, and metaphor to convey socio-political criticism in a subtle yet effective manner (Abid & Dewi, 2016; Kazykenova, 2022).

Caricatures in contemporary media, both print and digital, serve a dual role, as a tool for criticizing power and as a form of “soft” entertainment conveying potentially controversial messages. However, the use of humor as an instrument of soft power through cartoons raises ethical dilemmas. On the one hand, humor allows for more publicly acceptable criticism; on the other hand, the visual distortion and symbolism in cartoons have the potential to violate the principle of fair representation, reinforce stereotypes, or provoke provocation (Chairani & Dwiana, 2025; Sukarelwati & Hardi, 2025). Therefore, ethics in political criticism through caricature is a crucial issue, especially in the era of social media, which accelerates the spread of visuals without adequate control (Irmadini et al., 2025; Mahendra & Herawati, 2025).

Caricatures in various media serve as a relatively safe channel for conveying political criticism that is difficult to express directly. Numerous studies have shown that these visual works often represent political figures and interest groups in ways that highlight leadership dilemmas and the dynamics of power struggles. Through simplification, hyperbole, or visual distortion, cartoons are able to capture sensitive issues without having to convey them through explicit verbal criticism.

Various studies have emphasized the relevance of humor and visual symbols in the process of constructing political meaning. Political humor plays a role in easing tensions and encouraging critical reflection on issues of democracy (Nugraha, 2023; Young, 2014). Political caricatures shape public opinion through visual techniques such as distortion and analogy (Abid & Dewi, 2016; Abouelenine, 2024). Furthermore, soft power in cultural communication utilizes the appeal of humor and popular media to influence perceptions (Schneider, 2025; Surahmat et al., 2023).

However, the integration of these three elements (humor, caricature, and soft power) in a single analytical framework is still rare. Furthermore, studies on how ethics are operationalized in cartoon criticism in digital media are also minimal, even though this issue is increasingly relevant amid the globalization of memes and political visuals (Haningtyas, 2025; Irmadini et al., 2025). The integration of these three elements: political humor, visual caricature, and soft power, remains under-explored. Furthermore, the ethical aspects of caricature

criticism and how they operate in contemporary digital media have not received adequate attention. Furthermore, most research on caricature focuses solely on the semiotic or visual aspects, without explicitly addressing the concept of soft power.

Although numerous studies have been conducted on political humor and political caricatures, there is little research directly linking this phenomenon to soft power theory, particularly how visual humor can function as a non-coercive tool of influence in political communication. Furthermore, the ethical aspects of caricature criticism, including limitations, responsibilities, and fair or provocative representation, have not been widely explored, particularly in the context of digital media and the globalization of memes or caricatures.

The rapid changes in contemporary media, including social media, also demand new analyses of how cartoons operate across platforms as a means of soft power, how audiences respond, and how ethical values and critique are implemented through viral visuals. Furthermore, empirical studies that combine visual analysis of cartoons, soft power theory, and communication ethics within a single framework are still very limited. Therefore, research is needed to fill this gap by examining how cartoons in contemporary media function as both political humor and an instrument of soft power, and how elements of ethical critique emerge and are operationalized within this context.

This study offers both theoretical and methodological novelties. First, it proposes a conceptual framework that integrates political humor, visual caricature, and soft power, expanding the previously fragmented literature. Second, it pays particular attention to the ethical aspects of critique in caricature, namely how visuals balance satirical functions, moral boundaries, and representational responsibilities. Third, its focus on contemporary digital and viral media provides empirical relevance to the dynamics of the current dissemination of political visuals. Fourth, through case examples from Indonesian media and/or comparisons with global contexts, this study provides empirical contributions that can be used for cross-cultural analysis.

Based on this background, this study asks three main questions: 1) How does visual humor in political cartoons function as a form of soft power in contemporary media? 2) How do ethical aspects emerge and are operationalized in political criticism through visual cartoons in mass and digital media? 3) How do cartoons influence the formation of public opinion through visual communication mechanisms within the framework of soft power and ethics? In line with these questions, this study aims to analyze the mechanism of humor in political cartoons as a form of soft power; examine ethical aspects in the practice of visual criticism; and, where relevant, compare the application of political cartoons in local and global media to understand their implications for political communication and public opinion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humor as a Political Communication Strategy

Humor in politics functions as a communication strategy capable of building emotional closeness, directing the public agenda, and critiquing power

without coercion. Humor has persuasive power because it can reduce audience cognitive resistance, simplify complex issues, and enable more socially acceptable criticism (Boukes, 2019; Young, 2014). Furthermore, humor helps politicians strengthen their populist image and connect with audiences, particularly the younger generation (Surahmat et al., 2023; Ulya et al., 2020). However, humor also has the potential to strengthen the legitimacy of power when used strategically by political actors themselves (Beck & Spencer, 2025). Thus, humor operates in three main functions: persuasion, resistance, and political image management.

Caricatures as Visual Representations of Power

Political caricatures not only present reality but also construct power relations through visual distortion, multimodal metaphors, and ideological framing. This representational practice encourages the public to reinterpret the legitimacy of power and creates a space for symbolic negotiation within political discourse (Dodds, 2010; Makinde, 2024). Caricatures function as “visual watchdogs,” exposing practices of power domination, corruption, and inequality through accessible satire (Ho et al., 2021). Contemporary studies emphasize the role of caricatures as a strategic communication tool, combining aesthetics, propaganda, and political communication in one concise yet powerful visual form.

Humor as Soft Power in Cultural Diplomacy

The concept of soft power demonstrates how humor serves as a symbolic resource that can garner sympathy, mitigate criticism, and strengthen a country or leader's image in the eyes of the international public (Brassett et al., 2021; Nye, 2004). Humor in digital diplomacy is gaining prominence due to its viral nature, multi-format nature, and flexibility in maintaining or challenging global political narratives (Chernobrov, 2022; Kopper, 2021). In this context, humor can be both a cultural asset and an indirect diplomatic strategy that plays a role in shaping global opinion.

Ethics and Responsibility in Visual Humor

The rhetorical power of humor raises ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding the representation of vulnerable groups, cultural stereotypes, and the potential for symbolic violence. Humor can be a “punching down” that perpetuates stigmatization when directed at groups that lack the power to retaliate (Sidhartani et al., 2019; Smuts, 2010). In the context of law and human rights, caricatures often spark controversy regarding the limits of freedom of expression and the protection of human dignity (Godioli, 2020; Pedrazzini & Royaards, 2022). Therefore, ethical analysis is integral to understanding humor as political critique.

Transformation of Visual Humor in the Digital Media Era

Digitalization has transformed the humor ecosystem into a participatory, rapidly disseminating, and algorithm-driven social media platform. Political memes have now become one of the most dominant and effective forms of

criticism influencing public discourse (Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Lestari et al., 2024). The shift from centralized production to public production (user-generated satire) has altered the representational power landscape: the public can criticize elites without traditional media gatekeeping (Rahman et al., 2024; Nugraha, 2025). This transformation has made humor a digital political force that can no longer be viewed simply as entertainment.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Study Approach

This study uses an integrative literature review, a form of research that aims to identify, assess, and synthesize previously published theories, empirical research results, and conceptual ideas on a particular topic (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). An integrative approach is used because it enables cross-paradigm analysis, combining empirical, conceptual, and theoretical articles to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thus, this study not only presents a summary of previous research results but also builds new theoretical understanding through a process of critical synthesis.

Data Sources and Search Bases

This study utilizes academic literature obtained from international scientific databases and reputable academic repositories, namely Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar, to complement open sources. Furthermore, several secondary sources, such as academic books and reputable national journals, were also considered to enrich the context, particularly in the discussion of caricature cases in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

Literature Search Strategy and Process

A systematic literature search was conducted using keywords related to caricature, political humor, soft power, cultural diplomacy, visual rhetoric, communication ethics, and moral representation, focusing on publications from 2010–2025 to ensure relevance to digital media developments and contemporary political dynamics. The process involved three stages: initial identification, which yielded 150 articles; selection and screening based on inclusion-exclusion criteria, resulting in 62 articles; and critical evaluation using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) guidelines, which resulted in 34 articles for thematic synthesis. Transparency of the process was maintained through the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow.

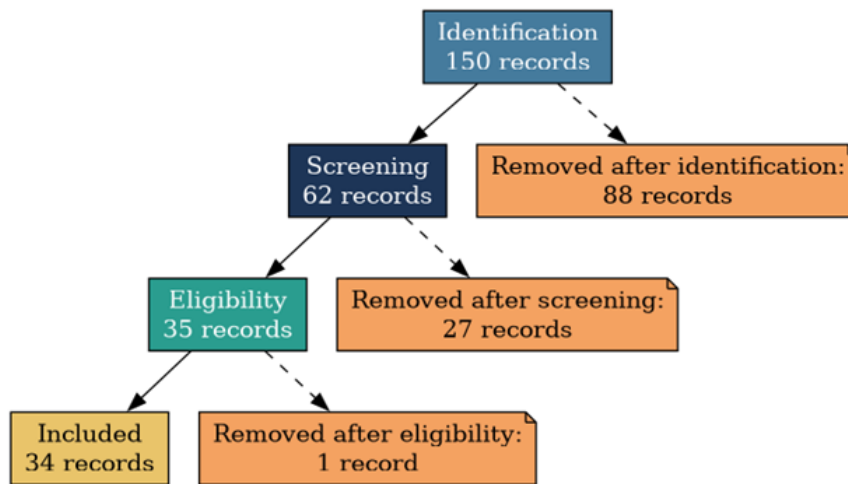


Figure 1. Literature Selection Flowchart (PRISMA)

The PRISMA diagram shows the stages of identification (150 articles), screening (62 articles), eligibility (35 articles), and inclusion (34 articles), with eliminations recorded at each stage to ensure accuracy and traceability.

Data Analysis and Synthesis Techniques

The data analysis in this study used thematic and conceptual analysis approaches. Thematic analysis was conducted through open, axial, and selective coding to identify concepts, group themes, and formulate interconnections between themes related to humor as ethical soft power. Furthermore, the conceptual analysis integrated theories of humor (Critchley, 2011; Lim, 2025), soft power (Nye, 2004), and communication ethics (Day, 2000; Habermas, 1993) to produce an “Ethical Soft Power Framework for Visual Humor” model, in accordance with Torraco’s (2005) literature synthesis approach (Torraco, 2005).

Validity and Reliability of the Study

To ensure the credibility and accuracy of the study results, several validation strategies were implemented. First, source triangulation was conducted using various databases and disciplines covering communication, art, politics, and ethics to minimize thematic bias. Second, cross-checking between authors involved two independent readers (peers) who reviewed a portion of the literature to verify the consistency of interpretation and the appropriateness of thematic categorization. Third, an audit trail and documentation were compiled through tracking tables throughout the search, selection, and coding process, allowing for traceability and replication of the research procedures. Fourth, the author's reflexivity was maintained by considering positionality, values, and potential interpretive bias, particularly in analyzing sensitive issues of ethics, morality, and ideology.

Study Limitations

The integrative literature review approach synthesizes 34 articles from 2010–2025 but relies on secondary sources, limiting primary empirical data collection such as original visual analyses of specific caricatures or audience reception surveys. The scope is confined to English and Indonesian publications

in major databases like Scopus and Google Scholar, potentially overlooking non-Western or niche journals with relevant regional insights on caricature ethics. Thematic analysis, while rigorous with triangulation, introduces interpretive subjectivity despite peer review and reflexivity measures.

Relevance and Methodological Contribution

The integrative literature review method was chosen because it can accommodate the interdisciplinary nature of the study. Political humor and caricatures cannot be analyzed solely from the perspective of art or journalism, so they require an integration of approaches from Cultural Studies, Political Communication, Visual Ethics, and Soft Power Theory. This synthesis provides a methodological contribution in the form of a conceptual model that explains the role of humor as a form of ethical soft power in contemporary media that combines elements of laughter, aesthetics, and human values as a medium for reflective social criticism.

Summary of the Study Process

The literature review process was conducted through several systematic stages, from initial identification to conceptual synthesis. These stages were designed to ensure that the sources used were not only topically relevant but also met academic quality standards and supported the development of the research's theoretical model. A summary of this process is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Stages of the Literature Review Process

Stage	Main Activities	Results
Identification	Literature search from 7 scientific databases	±150 articles found
Initial Selection	Filtering based on relevance and abstract	62 relevant articles
Critical Evaluation	Quality assessment and theoretical contribution	34 articles used
Thematic Analysis	Categorization of main topics	5 major themes emerged
Conceptual Synthesis	Integration of humor, soft power, and ethics theories	The “Ethical Soft Power in Visual Humor” Model

(Source: author synthesis, 2025)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The synthesized review of 34 scholarly works reveals five interconnected thematic findings regarding how visual humor operates within contemporary political communication; 1) humor as an increasingly significant persuasive political strategy; 2) caricatures as visual mechanisms of power representation; 3) humor as soft power in cultural diplomacy; 4) ethical challenges and representational responsibilities in humorous critique; and; 5) the transformation of humor through digital platforms. These themes collectively demonstrate that humor not only critiques and negotiates power but also functions as a cultural

asset that may reinforce diplomatic legitimacy yet simultaneously amplifies ethical vulnerabilities in a high-velocity media ecosystem.

Thematic Findings

1. Humor as a Political Communication Strategy

Humor serves as an increasingly central political communication strategy in the modern media landscape because it can attract attention, engage emotions, and frame issues persuasively and critically. This study synthesizes various studies and positions humor as a political communication mechanism that operates at the level of persuasion, resistance to power, and image management of political figures and institutions (see table 2).

Table 2. Studies on Humor as a Political Communication Strategy

Authors	Focus	Methods	Findings
(Beck & Spencer, 2025)	The dual function of humor: from criticism to legitimacy	Theoretical studies	Humor plays a dual role in attracting attention and legitimizing power.
(Boukes, 2019)	The effect of political satire on agenda-setting	Agenda-setting studies	Political satire influences the public, media, and political agendas.
(Ulya et al., 2020)	Humor strategies in millennial political communication	Interactive content analysis	Humor uses themes and language plays relevant to the audience.
(Risnawati et al., 2024)	The discourse structure of humor in political communication	Critical discourse analysis	A combination of humor and transitivity theory reveals candidates' political strategies.
(Brock, 2018)	Political satire and disruption in Russia and the US	Conceptual studies	Satire has the potential for disruption, with varying effects depending on the cultural context.
(Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2023)	Cartoons and memes depicting President Zelensky	Multimodal content and discourse analysis	Subversive or supportive humor depends on the socio-political context.
(Kodabux, 2024)	Political cartoons in Mauritius and cultural translation	Case studies and postcolonial translation theory	Cartoons as a mechanism for translating global culture to local audiences.

(Source: author synthesis, 2025)

Various studies confirm that humor is no longer merely entertainment, but works as a rhetorical mechanism capable of framing political issues, influencing public perception, and shaping relationships between political actors and audiences. Within the framework of political communication, humor functions at three levels: 1) as a tool for persuasion and public engagement; 2) as a tool for criticism, resistance, and delegitimization of power; and; 3) as a means of managing political image and persona.

Several studies have shown that humor, including political satire, is an effective communication strategy in attracting attention and increasing public engagement with political issues. Through agenda-setting mechanisms, humor can direct audience focus on specific topics (Boukes, 2019). In addition to serving as a tool to critique power, humor can also strengthen political legitimacy, especially when delivered by politicians themselves (Beck & Spencer, 2025). Its effectiveness is increasingly evident among the millennial generation, as it can build an emotional closeness between politicians and young audiences that is difficult to achieve through formal communication (Ulya et al., 2020).

Humor serves as a crucial mechanism of political resistance that challenges dominant narratives, particularly under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, where satire and political memes become disruptive forces that open up alternative spaces for people to express dissatisfaction and safely discuss sensitive issues (Brock, 2018; Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2023). In candidates' political communication, humor does not emerge spontaneously, but is a strategic construct reflecting transitivity strategies through the management of power relations through language choices and humorous narratives (Risnawati et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in the African context, political cartoons serve as a postcolonial translation space that translates global issues into local cultural contexts, making humor a reflective means of interpreting politics while simultaneously critiquing colonial legacies (Kodabux, 2024).

Humor is also used as a self-presentation strategy, particularly by political actors seeking to appear more humane, relaxed, or approachable to the public. Humor can have subversive or supportive effects depending on the social context and media framing (Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2023). Furthermore, humor is used by political figures to reduce social distance and strengthen popular identity. Humor is used to create an impression of closeness, defuse tension, and establish a popular leadership image (Nugraha, 2023; Surahmat et al., 2023). Analysis of various studies reveals several key mechanisms that explain why humor is effective as a political communication strategy:

- 1) Resistance reduction: Humor reduces the audience's cognitive resistance, making them more receptive to the political message being inserted.
- 2) Issue reframing: Satire works by recontextualizing the issue, exposing the absurdity of political policies or behavior.
- 3) Emotional softening: Humor reduces tension and opens up space for discussion of sensitive issues without triggering direct conflict.
- 4) Simplification and accessibility: Humor simplifies complex issues through irony, metaphor, and hyperbolic visuals, making them easier to understand.

- 5) **Virality and spreadability:** In the digital ecosystem, humor has high viral potential, increasing the reach of political messages.

Although humor enables public engagement and discursive resistance, its persuasive influence is not neutral. The effectiveness of political humor depends on audience identity and shared ideological assumptions, which may unintentionally reinforce partisan polarization. Therefore, humor operates as both connector and divider within democratic engagement.

2. Caricature as a Visual Representation of Power

Political caricatures in contemporary literature are understood as a form of visual representation that not only depicts figures or events but also produces, challenges, and negotiates power relations. Most studies (see the summary of the literature review in table 3) show that caricature works through distortion, multimodal metaphors, and visual symbolism to express critiques of power, convey particular ideologies, or open up interpretive spaces for ongoing political dynamics. Unlike verbal texts, caricatures package political messages through hyperbolic, ironic, and metaphorical visual language, making them a powerful tool for framing public understanding of power.

Table 3. Summary of the Study of Caricature as Visual Representations of Power

Authors	Focus	Methods	Findings
(Makinde, 2024)	Multimodal metaphorical representation in Nigerian caricature	Multimodal metaphor analysis	Effective use of metaphors for socio-political critique
(Ahmed, 2024)	The concept of arbitrary power through caricature	Philosophical and conceptual studies	Cartoons expose tyranny and the arbitrary nature of power
(Suprayuni & Juwariyah, 2019)	Humor and satire in mass media caricature	Qualitative descriptive studies	Mass media cartoons exaggerate contemporary phenomena to observe societal attitudes
(Dodds, 2010)	Popular geopolitics and caricature	Conceptual studies and discourse analysis	Cartoons reproduce and challenge global political narratives and power relations
(Umer et al., 2024)	Print media narratives through political caricature	Multimodal discourse analysis	The combination of visual and verbal narratives strengthens political narratives
(Rehman et al., 2021)	Representations of regional power	Semiotics (Peircean semiotics)	Cartoons as an important tool for uncovering ideologies

	through caricature		in representations of power
(Ho et al., 2021)	Critique of corruption through satirical Vietnamese caricature	Mixed-method content analysis	Corruption is portrayed as a systemic problem, humor as a reflection of social solidarity

(Source: author synthesis, 2025)

Based on the summary of the literature review (table 3), the findings of the analysis of the results of previous studies were obtained, namely; 1) caricature as a mechanism for representing power that is distorted and metaphorical; 2) caricature as a tool for framing the narrative and ideology of power; 3) caricature as a visual critique of the practice of power; and; 4) caricature as a public negotiation of symbols of power.

Research on political caricature shows that this visual medium plays a crucial role in constructing critiques of power through multimodal strategies. Political caricature in Nigeria employ metaphor, personification, hyperbole, and symbolic transformation to represent policies, scandals, and corruption in a safe yet communicative manner (Makinde, 2024). Caricature expose the arbitrary nature of power through visual distortions that demonstrate domination and injustice, making them a form of moral commentary on political practices (Ahmed, 2024). Furthermore, mass media caricature combine humor and aesthetic distortion not only as artistic expression but also as a tool of social analysis that reflects society's response to socio-political dynamics (Suprayuni & Juwariyah, 2019).

Several studies have emphasized that cartoons not only reflect power but also frame ideological narratives through multimodal structures that reinforce both pro- and oppositional political narratives (Umer et al., 2024), and represent relations of domination and political aspirations through iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs whose interpretations are influenced by cultural codes and collective memory (Rehman et al., 2021); in addition, cartoons also play a role in global geopolitics by shaping and challenging public imaginations regarding superpower narratives, interstate relations, and national stereotypes (Dodds, 2010). Caricature act as a visual journalism watchdog by using satirical humor to expose systemic corruption and hidden power dynamics, as seen in Vietnam (Ho et al., 2021), and in the Indonesian context through media caricature such as Tempo which use metaphors and visual distortions to criticize and frame public perceptions of the performance and integrity of leaders (Chairani & Dwiana, 2025).

This study reveals that caricatures function as an arena for symbolic negotiation between elites, the media, and the public, utilizing various symbols and distortions of body size to negotiate the legitimacy of leaders, critique the accumulation of power, and expose rifts in the political system. Thus, caricatures are not simply visual products, but rather discursive practices that complexly integrate aesthetic, political, and cultural aspects.

The representation of power in political caricatures is realized through various visual and symbolic mechanisms that enable the delivery of complex political critiques and narratives. Five key mechanisms frequently encountered include visual hyperbole, which exaggerates body parts to signify strength or weakness; multimodal metaphor, which uses objects and symbols to represent political conditions; visual irony and contradiction, which highlight the imbalance between claims and reality; ideological framing, which selects visual elements to support or criticize specific groups; and hidden political narratives, which contain implicit messages that can only be understood within a specific socio-cultural context. These mechanisms make caricatures an effective medium for communicating power dynamics in a meaningful and strategic manner.

These mechanisms show caricature not only comments on power but shapes its symbolic legitimacy. This situates cartoonists as unofficial political actors participating in agenda framing and ideological negotiation in the public sphere.

3. Humor as Soft Power in Cultural Diplomacy

The literature on humor in international relations and cultural diplomacy shows that humor has become an increasingly important instrument of soft power. Soft power (Nye, 2004) relies on a country’s or political actor’s ability to influence others through attraction, trust, and moral legitimacy, rather than through coercion. In the contemporary context, humor through satire, parody, memes, or humor-based public diplomacy has become a medium capable of expressing cultural values, refining political communication, and strengthening national image. In this section, the findings of various studies show that humor does not only function as a tool for entertainment or domestic criticism, but also as a cultural diplomacy resource that operates in a global arena that is competitive, hyper-mediational, and highly sensitive to political symbolism (see table 4).

Table 4. Summary of Studies on Humor as Soft Power in Cultural Diplomacy

Authors	Focus	Methods	Findings
(Jiang et al., 2019)	The influence of culture on the perception and use of humor	Literature review	Humor is universal, but culture influences how it is used and perceived.
(Zanella et al., 2024)	Analysis of the concepts of cultural diplomacy and soft power	Critical conceptual analysis	Dissonance and overlap in the concepts of cultural diplomacy and soft power require methodological clarity.
(Brassett et al., 2021)	The phenomenon of "Humorous States" in global politics	Conceptual study of international relations and diplomacy	Humor is a crucial tool in new diplomacy and global politics.

(Chernobrov, 2022)	Strategic humor in Russian public diplomacy	Case analysis	Humor is a fast, competitive, and multi-format messaging tool.
(Kopper, 2021)	Humor and irony in diplomatic tweets	Discourse analysis of two case studies	Humor with irony and ridicule has the potential to create affiliation and mediate conflict.
(Pan, 2025)	Conversational humor in intercultural communication in Southeast Asia	Conversation analysis	Analysis of humor failures and intercultural sensitivity in the use of lingua franca (ELF).

(Source: author synthesis, 2025)

Based on the summary of the literature review (table 4), the findings of the analysis of the results of previous studies were obtained, namely; 1) humor as an instrument of cultural attraction; 2) humor in public diplomacy and international communication; 3) humor as an extension of the state's soft power; and; 4) humor as a conflict mediator and instrument of global criticism.

Humor is viewed as a universal emotional experience, but its forms, norms, and sensitivities are strongly influenced by cultural context, making it a cultural commodity that can be utilized in diplomacy. Within the framework of cultural diplomacy, humor plays a role in creating cultural resonance due to its lighthearted, enjoyable nature and its ability to build emotional closeness across nations. Humor has the potential to strengthen cultural closeness and promote social values (Jiang et al., 2019), while conversational humor in Southeast Asian intercultural interactions serves as a marker of familiarity and a means of politeness in multicultural environments (Pan, 2025).

Contemporary studies show that humor is increasingly being utilized as a communication strategy in public diplomacy due to its competitive and efficient nature. For example, Russia's strategic use of humor through visuals and multi-platform formats to frame global political issues engagingly (Chernobrov, 2022). Furthermore, there is the use of humor in diplomatic tweets, which plays a role in creating affiliation, building relationships between countries, and mediating conflicts through irony and symbolism (Kopper, 2021). Subsequent studies have led to the concept of Humorous States (Brassett et al., 2021), namely countries that consciously use humor as a political and aesthetic asset to strengthen their global image. These three studies confirm that humor functions as a strategic communication tactic that can refine diplomatic messages, enhance national image, and mobilize global sympathy.

Within the framework of soft power, humor functions as cultural capital that reflects a nation's identity, values, and political style, while strengthening the link between cultural diplomacy and national appeal. Humor often serves as a connecting element between cultural diplomacy and soft power (Zanella et al.,

2024), particularly when integrated into performing arts, cultural festivals, films, or digital campaigns to broaden the spectrum of a nation's appeal. Humor's low-barrier nature, its ability to convey criticism without threat, and its ability to create greater emotional closeness than formal rhetoric make it an effective means of transferring cultural values. Thus, humor can be understood as a soft asset that operates at the emotional and symbolic levels, making it a flexible and strategic diplomatic tool.

Humor in diplomacy has an ambivalent function, as it not only strengthens solidarity but can also serve as a means of criticism and resistance in geopolitical contexts. In tweet diplomacy, humor is often used as a dig at other countries in political rivalries (Kopper, 2021). Furthermore, strategic humor allows countries to respond to international accusations with elegance and competitiveness (Chernobrov, 2022). While humor can act as a buffer to reduce tension, its sarcastic or provocative use has the potential to worsen relations between countries. Thus, humor in cultural diplomacy is a two-sided practice that can create closeness and solidarity, but also serves as a tool of delegitimization in global competition.

The integration of this study's findings identifies five key mechanisms explaining how humor operates as soft power. First, cultural framing, which showcases a nation's culture through jokes, language play, visuals, or satire, to shape positive perceptions through cultural appeal. Second, narrative softening, which serves to weaken the resistance of international audiences, making political messages more easily accepted. Third, emotional diplomacy, which activates positive emotions such as laughter, sympathy, and familiarity, benefits a country's position in international relations. Fourth, virality and digital reach emphasize the potential of humor to become viral content in digital diplomacy, expanding the reach of influence. Fifth, symbolic legitimacy, which demonstrates that the ability to use humor portrays a country as a confident, modern, and symbolically powerful entity, which is crucial for establishing international legitimacy.

Across contexts, humor becomes a diplomatic shortcut: critique that smiles. Yet its misinterpretation across cultural boundaries can also generate new geopolitical tensions, demonstrating the fragile nature of humor-based diplomacy.

4. Ethics and Responsibility in Visual Humor

The theme of ethics in visual humor, particularly political caricatures, memes, and digital satire, occupies a prominent place in contemporary studies. Visual humor possesses great rhetorical power because it can critique, explain, and expose injustice, but it can also injure, discriminate, and reinforce stereotypes. The various in-depth studies summarized in this study demonstrate that visual humor exists in tension between freedom of expression and moral responsibility, particularly when humor targets vulnerable groups, sensitive identities, or geopolitical issues (see table 5).

Table 5. Summary of Studies on Ethics and Responsibility in Visual Humor

Authors	Focus	Methods	Findings
(Sidhartani et al., 2019)	Etika dalam budaya visual meme, fokus diskriminasi gender	Ethical deconstruction & survey	Memes often violate ethics and tend to be discriminatory.
(Marra, 2019)	Mengembangkan teori humor yang menggabungkan kekuatan & etika	Philosophical dissertation	Humor theory must consider the power and ethics of humor.
(Smuts, 2010)	Apakah selera humor dapat salah?	Philosophical analysis	A sense of humor can exhibit dangerous negligence.
(Godioli, 2020)	Kontroversi kartun di pengadilan HAM Eropa	Forensic study of humor	Conflicts between freedom of expression and the protection of others' rights.
(Pedrazzini & Royaards, 2022)	Kasus kartun Charlie Hebdo dan El Universo	Discourse analysis, law, cartoonist survey	Controversy is fueled by the target, modality, and rhetoric of satirical cartoons.

(Source: author synthesis, 2025)

In the context of fast-paced digital media, visual humor is not only an aesthetic product, but also a political and social act that carries ethical consequences. Therefore, the ethics of visual humor need to be understood as a multidimensional practice that includes representation, creator intentions, cultural context, and public impact. Based on the summary of the literature review (table 4), the findings of the analysis of previous studies are: 1) visual humor and sensitivity of representation; 2) humor as a practice of power and potential abuse; 3) freedom of expression and protection of individuals and groups; and; 4) ethical challenges of visual humor in the digital era.

Visual humor (memes), as a product of visual culture, often crosses ethical boundaries, particularly regarding themes of gender and identity, through stereotypical or derogatory representations that reflect social biases and dominant ideologies (Sidhartani et al., 2019). In the context of political cartoons, the use of hyperbolic representations also raises moral issues when depicting certain groups in racist, sexist, or derogatory ways. These findings emphasize that humorous aesthetics are not neutral and must be accompanied by accountability for the social meanings they contain.

Humor has a power dimension, where the pattern of “who laughs at whom” reflects social and political hierarchies (Marra, 2019). Humor can function as a punch down when targeting vulnerable groups, or punch up when directed at figures or power structures (Smuts, 2010). In the context of caricature, misuse of humor occurs when the target is a minority group without bargaining power,

when social conventions are exploited to reinforce prejudice, or when humor is used for political manipulation and propaganda rather than critique. Therefore, the ethics of humor go beyond simply assessing humor, but also assessing fairness in power relations.

Visual humor, particularly caricatures, frequently enters the legal and human rights arena, as seen in cases before the European Court of Human Rights (Godioli, 2020) and media controversies such as Charlie Hebdo and El Universo (Pedrazzini & Royaards, 2022). The dilemmas that arise revolve around the limits of protection of freedom of expression, determining when humor violates dignity or incites hatred, and who has the right to set those limits. Three factors trigger humor controversies (Pedrazzini & Royaards, 2022), the target of the attack, the modality of representation (visual, metaphor, symbolic), and the rhetoric of satire (sarcasm, irony, hyperbole). When any of these elements exceeds social sensitivity, humor has the potential to turn into a symbolic attack. Digital media magnifies the ethical risks of visual humor due to its rapid dissemination, its indiscriminate nature, its ease of manipulation, and its ability to be produced by anyone without editorial mechanisms. The culture of laughter in the digital era has undergone significant changes, with humor becoming fast-paced, fluid, and often ignoring its social impact (Derkach et al., 2023; Irmadini et al., 2025). Viral political memes even have the potential to amplify disinformation, polarization, and trolling practices (Rahman et al., 2024). In these conditions, visual humor creates a new ethical landscape rife with ambiguity and requires critical attention.

A synthesis of various studies identified five main mechanisms that often trigger ethical violations in visual humor. First, offensive distortion in the form of derogatory physical visualizations, such as visual racism, sexism, or ableism. Second, cultural stereotyping through the misuse or demeaning use of cultural symbols or attributes. Third, dehumanization through symbols that depict individuals or groups as animals, objects, or figures lacking human value. Fourth, the normalization of symbolic violence by turning violence into humor, thereby softening practices of domination. Fifth, manipulative framing that utilizes humor to conceal political or ideological agendas, including covert propaganda. These findings confirm that visual humor is not value-free and requires a strict ethical framework.

Humor cannot be separated from power relations. The ethical failure of satire emerges when humor “punches down,” reinforcing inequalities rather than challenging domination.

5. The Transformation of Visual Humor in the Digital Media Era

The transformation of visual humor in the digital media era demonstrates a fundamental shift in how humor is produced, distributed, and consumed in the context of contemporary political communication. A literature review reveals that digitalization has transformed the humor landscape from an editorially controlled medium to an open, fast-paced, and global participatory ecosystem (see table 6).

Table 6. Summary of the Study of the Transformation of Visual Humor in the Digital Media Era

Authors	Focus	Methods	Findings
(Derkach et al., 2023)	The Transformation of Laughter Culture in the Context of Contemporary Challenges	Qualitative/descriptive research	Laughter culture adapts to social and artistic challenges, including digital media
(Nugraha, 2025)	Political Satire in Indonesian TikTok Videos	Multimodal critical discourse analysis	The use of irony, sarcasm, and visual/audio elements to critique dominant political narratives
(Zhu & Deng, 2023)	A Diachronic Analysis of Humor in US Media Texts	Quantitative corpus analysis	The significant increase in humor in media texts supports the infotainment hypothesis
(Lestari et al., 2024)	Meme Culture as Humor and Satire in Digital Media	Qualitative/descriptive studies	Meme culture as a crucial phenomenon in conveying criticism and information in practical and absurd ways
(Nugraha, 2024)	Political Satirical Commentary on Instagram	Critical discourse analysis	Humor is used to express dissatisfaction and shape public opinion
(Baumgartner, 2024)	A New Era of Political Humor	Special issue introduction review	The landscape of political humor is shifting drastically, requiring a new generation of research
(Chłopicki et al., 2025)	Digital Humor as	Special issue review	Memes and viral images as

	Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Art		contemporary art forms that require interdisciplinary analysis
(Rahman et al., 2024)	Ideology and Power through Visual Political Trolling in Malaysia	Qualitative approaches and visual content analysis	Visual trolling as an effective critique reveals hidden ideological narratives and power dynamics
(Halversen & Weeks, 2023)	Creators, Motivations, and Impact of Political Memes on Social Media	Survey and regression analysis	Memes as a medium of political expression motivated by humor, persuasion, and information, increase participation

(Source: author synthesis, 2025)

This study shows that digital visual humor has transformed the landscape of political communication in a faster, more interactive, and more difficult-to-control manner. This has a direct impact on power dynamics, popular culture, and democratic practices. Based on the summary of the literature review (table 6), the findings of the analysis of previous studies are: 1) shifts in laughter culture and adaptation to contemporary challenges; 2) humor as political criticism in the digital ecosystem; 3) virality, algorithms, and speed of dissemination; 4) public participation and decentralization of humor production; and; 5) changes in power relations in digital visual humor.

Humor (laughter culture) has undergone significant transformation due to the development of digital technology and social media, making it more fragmented, rapidly changing, and influenced by algorithmic logic (Derkach et al., 2023). Humor now exists in multimodal forms that combine images, short texts, emojis, music, and visual effects, differing from traditional caricatures. Meme culture is the most visible manifestation of digital humor due to its absurd, practical, easily produced, and reproducible nature, thus functioning as a communal template that is continuously replicated and given new meaning (Lestari et al., 2024). Digital humor is an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural “contemporary art form,” combining popular aesthetics, visual semiotics, digital linguistics, and politics (Chłopicki et al., 2025).

Digital visual humor has become a means of political critique independent of traditional media. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok mobilize the public

through irony, sarcasm, and multimodal games (Nugraha, 2023, 2024, 2025), as well as the practice of political trolling in Malaysia that disguises ideology through jokes (Rahman et al., 2024). This development expands humor's function from social surveillance to counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges dominant narratives through collective creativity.

In the digital era, virality has become a key characteristic of visual humor. Media integrate humor into news reporting as part of the infotainment logic to increase engagement (Zhu & Deng, 2023). Political memes are produced with various motivations: humor, persuasion, information, and platform algorithms encourage the spread of the funniest, most easily understood, or most emotionally evocative content (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). This virality makes humor integral to shaping public opinion and electoral dynamics, demonstrating that algorithms not only facilitate the spread of humor but also shape society's political language.

Unlike previous eras, which placed professional cartoonists at the center of visual humor production, the digital era has given rise to a culture of participatory remixing, where the public acts as producers, curators, and informal political analysts. Digital humor strengthens community identity, for example, through the creation and dissemination of memes by groups with similar political preferences, forming humorous echo chambers (Derkach et al., 2023; Lestari et al., 2024). Thus, digital humor becomes a discursive space that combines politics, creativity, and identity within a participatory ecosystem.

Digital transformation alters the power relations between humor creators, the public, and the subjects of humor through four main mechanisms. First, there is a redistribution of representational power because the public can criticize elites without relying on traditional media. Second, the fragmentation of political authority causes public figures to lose control of their self-image, while memes can quickly strengthen or damage their reputations. Third, humor functions as weaponized content used for political delegitimization (Nugraha, 2025; Rahman et al., 2024). Fourth, digital humor acts as informal diplomacy, becoming a global political language that transcends national and cultural boundaries. These findings confirm that humor is not only aesthetic but also strategic in the digital political ecosystem.

A synthesis of previous studies identifies five main mechanisms of change in visual humor in the digital era. First, multimodalization through the combination of visuals, sound, text, effects, and digital gestures creates more complex forms of humor. Second, communitarianization, where humor is produced and disseminated by communities, not single individuals. Third, algorithmization, which makes algorithms the determinants of humor by prioritizing engagement. Fourth, democratization and anonymity, which allow anyone to create humor without the constraints of identity or authority. Fifth, contestation of meaning, as humor can be used, changed, or reinterpreted for various political interests. These findings confirm that digital humor is not merely entertainment, but a dynamic socio-political phenomenon.

Algorithms often reward provocative satire, intensifying symbolic conflict and encouraging politically motivated trolling that masks manipulation as entertainment.

Interconnection Among the Themes

The five thematic findings do not operate separately. Instead, they form a relational ecosystem in which visual humor plays a rhetorical, representational, diplomatic, and ethical role in political communication. Humor as a persuasive strategy (theme 1) enables political actors to frame agendas while maintaining emotional closeness with audiences. This symbolic function becomes visually embodied in caricatures (theme 2), where distortion, exaggeration, and metaphor act as tools for negotiating the legitimacy of political power in the public sphere.

When such visual humor transcends local boundaries and becomes a tool for crafting international image, it enters the domain of soft power (theme 3). Here, humor transforms into a cultural asset that attracts rather than coerces global audiences, operating as diplomatic persuasion that smiles. However, humor's persuasive potential contains risks when ethical boundaries are ignored (theme 4), including misrepresentation, stereotyping, and symbolic violence that may harm marginalized groups.

The role of digital media (theme 5) amplifies both the potential and the risks of political humor. Meme culture, user-generated satire, and algorithmic virality allow humor to travel faster and reach broader audiences, yet also enable politically motivated trolling and emotive manipulation disguised as entertainment. Therefore, the political influence of visual humor must be viewed as an integrated structure in which power, attraction, and ethical accountability continuously intersect.

Ethical Soft Power Framework for Visual Humor

As a closing series of this study, it is important to visualize the integration of visual humor, soft power, and ethics within a single conceptual framework. The following figure presents the Ethical Soft Power Framework for Visual Humor, designed to explain how visual humor functions not only as a persuasive political communication tool but also as a soft power instrument imbued with moral values. This model positions visual humor (caricatures, memes, satire) as the primary medium interacting with the dimensions of soft power (cultural diplomacy, political image, non-coercive persuasion) and ethics (fair representation, moral responsibility, limits to freedom of expression). The relationship between these components is depicted through arrows indicating reciprocal interactions, emphasizing that the effectiveness of humor must be balanced with ethical awareness to maintain political and cultural legitimacy.

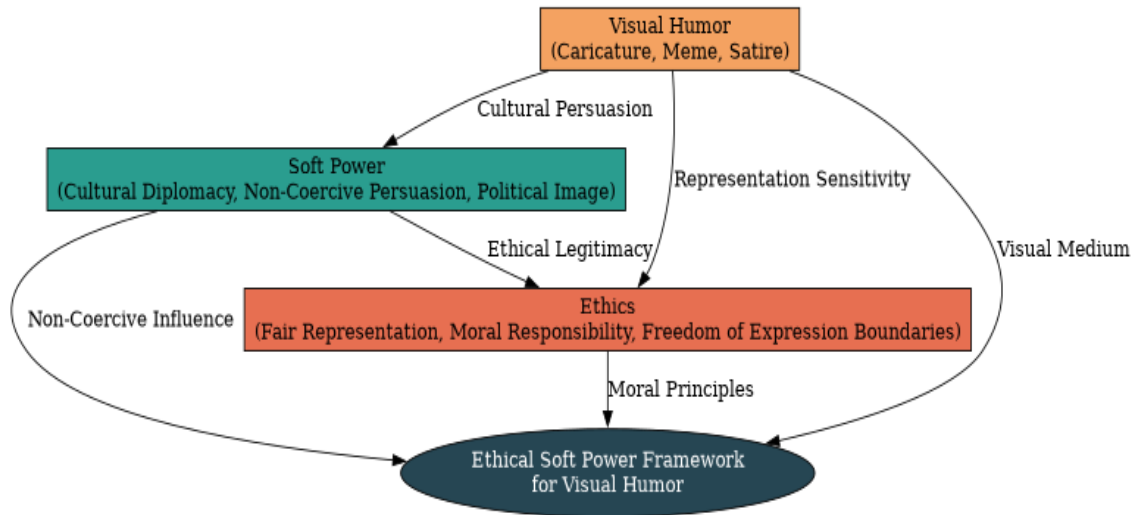


Figure 2. Ethical Soft Power Framework for Visual Humor

To provide clearer operationalization, the framework is further elaborated into three reciprocal domains illustrating the functions and ethical risks associated with political humor.

Table 7. Domains of the Ethical Soft Power Framework for Visual Humor

Domain	Key Functions	Risks When Ethics Fail
Visual Humor	Attraction, satire, simplification	Stereotyping, dehumanization
Soft Power	Diplomacy, legitimacy, cultural appeal	Manipulation, propaganda masking
Ethics of Representation	Fairness, dignity, accountability	Social harm, political polarization

This framework integrates three main dimensions:

- 1) Visual humor as a medium for political communication through caricatures, memes, and satire;
- 2) Soft power, which utilizes humor to build political image, cultural diplomacy, and non-coercive influence;
- 3) Ethics, which emphasizes fair representation, moral responsibility, and the limits of freedom of expression.

The arrows between the components indicate a reciprocal relationship: visual humor strengthens cultural appeal (persuasion), but must be tempered by ethical principles to maintain the legitimacy of soft power. This framework emphasizes that humor is not merely entertainment, but a strategic instrument that requires moral awareness in the digital ecosystem.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Visual humor plays a strategic role in political communication. First, it functions as a persuasive tool that lowers resistance, attracts attention, and simplifies complex political issues. Second, caricatures and other satirical visuals construct and contest political authority, allowing the public to negotiate the legitimacy of power. Third, ethical concerns become significant when humor operates as soft power in digital environments, as virality may trigger

stereotyping, misrepresentation, or symbolic violence. Based on these findings, this study proposes the Ethical Soft Power Framework for Visual Humor, which emphasizes that humor's political effectiveness must be grounded in ethical responsibility to maintain its legitimacy in participatory media ecosystems.

Future research may apply this framework in empirical settings such as election campaigns or international diplomacy to explore cultural differences in audience responses. Policymakers and visual communication practitioners should also adopt ethical guidelines to ensure political humor promotes democratic reflection rather than manipulation disguised as entertainment.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research may investigate audience perception and emotional responses to political humor using empirical approaches such as surveys, experiments, biometrics, or sentiment analysis across different cultural settings. This would provide richer insight into how humor influences political engagement, trust, resistance, and polarization. Comparative research between traditional and digital media platforms is also needed to understand the differences in message construction, dissemination speed, and socio-political impacts. In addition, longitudinal studies could capture the transformation of humor alongside changes in technology and political dynamics.

Advanced research can further develop computational models for analyzing political humor using artificial intelligence, multimodal analysis, and big data approaches, including studies on virality patterns, symbolic networks, or ideology embedded in memes. Research may also explore ethical soft power models in international diplomacy by comparing countries that systematically use humor as a communication strategy with those that do not. Finally, future work may expand the Ethical Soft Power Framework by adding metrics for ethical assessment, audience vulnerability mapping, or cultural sensitivity indicators to strengthen its practical applications in media policymaking and global communication strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Gratitude extends to Telkom University's School of Creative Industries for research support, peer reviewers for methodological insights, and open-access databases enabling comprehensive synthesis. Special thanks to visual communication colleagues for discussions on caricature ethics. This work builds on 34 scholars' contributions across political communication and media ethics.

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