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Playful recognition: Television comedy and the politics of mediated recognition

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Abstract: This article explores how media content may facilitate processes of recognition through playfulness and comedy. Mediated recognition is typically understood as a matter of respectful and positive representation of subaltern groups and in terms of struggles for visibility and dignity. Yet at the same time, the media address audiences in much less deferential ways that are nonetheless consequential to processes of recognition: by means of playfulness, subversion, and irreverence. This article introduces the concept of ‘playful recognition’ to account for the contradictory ways in which humor can incite recognition. The article empirically illustrates this concept drawing upon a case study of Svart Humor – a comedy show aired in Norway. On the one hand, this article explores an important yet neglected dimension of mediated recognition, on the other, it introduces a recognition perspective to the study of televised comedy.

Keywords: recognition, humor, comedy, multiculturalism, diaspora

1 Introduction

Recognition is often framed as a struggle for respect and dignity. Honneth, for instance, places recognition at the centre of both social change, conflict, and cohesion, in a work tellingly titled “The *struggle* for recognition” (Honneth, 1995, our emphasis). Similarly, the research on how the media facilitate processes of (mis)recognition has hitherto focused on struggles for visibility and self-narration (e. g. Couldry, 2010) or the ways in which media ascribe value to people and groups through representation (e. g. Maia, 2014). In this way, media and their representations become consequential to people’s sense of worth and sense of place in society, not least for groups that have traditionally been subjected to systematic misrecognition (e. g. Cottle, 2007, author; Nærland, 2019). In this research,

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mediated recognition is typically framed as a matter of respectful and positive representation.

Whereas such modes of representation are key in inciting recognition, the aim of this article is to direct attention to a very different dimension of how media representations may facilitate processes of recognition, namely that of playfulness. Humor and comedy employ a mode of communication that is not necessarily committed to a faithful representation of reality or goal-oriented. Humor shares a family semblance with play, often appealing to, and offending, audiences by means of fun, subversion, and ridicule (Kuipers, 2008, 2015; Palmer, 1994; Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). As such, humor can also incite prejudice and disrespect. These two latter aspects have indeed been a central concern in many critical studies of ethnic and racial humor, often grounded in feminist and post-colonial thinking (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008; Pérez, 2013, 2016; Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). Yet they miss what is perhaps a more unique feature of comedic expressivity: its unseriousness and associated playfulness and joy. In Norway, as elsewhere, the last decades have seen numerous comedy shows addressing issues connected to immigration, integration, and ethnic stereotypes. This way, humor depicts and valorises immigrant groups and their place in society, often with considerable emotional charge.

Whereas comedy may very well incite feelings of *misrecognition*, this article, in contrast, concentrates on how and by which means comedy incites recognition. To account for the contradictory ways in which humor can facilitate recognition, the article therefore introduces and qualifies the concept *playful recognition*. We conceptualize playful recognition as *occurrences in which recognition results from dialogical processes characterized by playfulness and the suspense of seriousness*. This concept was developed through a case study of *Svart Humor*, a humor show targeting minority youths, produced by the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK. Drawing upon a previously conducted empirical case study (Dahl, 2021; Nærland & Dahl, 2022), we illustrate how recognition emerged as a result of three key processes salient to *Svart Humor* and its reception. These are recognition through (1) the incitement of in-group feeling, (2) benevolent ridicule, and (3) inciting a sense of adaption to society. We argue that these processes are in turn enabled by the overall suspense of seriousness and playfulness that is inherent to comedy. Hence, we coin the term playful recognition.

The aim of this article is, on the one hand, to highlight an important yet previously unaccounted for dimension of how media facilitates recognition, and, on the other, to offer a new understanding of the politics of comedy.

2 Mediated recognition and humor in multicultural societies

Rooted in Hegel's master-slave dialectic, recognition is both a psychological concept that grasps mechanisms of identity formation at an interpersonal level and a concept that helps elucidate how groups develop identities in relation to each other in society. In his seminal essay 'The Politics of Recognition'. Charles Taylor (1994) terms recognition as a 'vital human need', arguing that:

[...] our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (p. 25)

At the heart of recognition theory thus lies the assumption that identities develop dialogically. Mis- or non-recognition from the surroundings prompt subjects to develop unhealthy identities, whereas receiving recognition – positive affirmation – is key to developing healthy identities.

In a world in which social, cultural, and political life increasingly relies on different forms of mediation, the media – in their widest sense – now constitute a basic condition for recognition. The media constantly mirror back images of their audiences, which in turn interpret and reflect upon these images. Thus, media and their representation of the world emerge as an obvious site for (mis)recognition – as a site for *mediated* recognition. A growing body of media scholarship attends to how media representations, in a variety of genres and institutional and national contexts, may afford recognition of various marginalized groups, or conversely misrecognition. This body includes studies of news (Cottle, 2007), television (Maia, 2014), social media (Lorenzana, 2016), public service media (Malik, 2014), and musical media events (Nærland, 2019) (see the editors' introduction and Campanella's article in this special issue for an extended account of the existing scholarship). These scholars typically frame mediated recognition as matter of respectful and positive representation of subaltern groups and as a part of struggles for visibility and dignity. However, the media in their manifold genres often address their audiences in much less deferential ways – through the suspense of seriousness, through humor, and through ridicule. The objective of this article is to highlight how such appeals may be consequential to processes of recognition and in this way add to our understanding of how mediated recognition can matter for marginalized groups.

Televised comedy offers a prime site where such processes of mediated recognition can be studied. For one, televised humor addresses audiences by means

of play and unseriousness (Boyd, 2004; Mulkay, 1988). Second, televised humor routinely thematizes issues related to immigration and is produced to address minority audiences themselves. This is not least the case in Norway with its significant increase in televised humor shows made for, by, and about ethnic minorities, so-called diaspora humor (Dahl, 2021).

Indeed, ethnic and racial humor have gained increased scholarly attention over the last years. A great deal of this literature has attended to questions about humor and its relationship to discourses of race, racism, and ethnicity (Gillespie, 2003; Gillota, 2013; Pérez, 2013, 2016; Weaver, 2010, 2011). The major focus of these studies is the use of stereotypes, their implications and even their subversions. We would also argue that there is a clear schism between humor optimists and humor pessimists, where the former (i. e. Gillespie, 2003; Gillota, 2013) tend to celebrate the emancipatory and subversive forces of ethnic humor, while the latter (i. e. Pérez, 2013, 2016) view this kind of humor as an unavoidable continuation of existing hegemonic power mechanisms and even as overtly racist. This schism partly relies on how the humor optimists and the humor pessimists hold incommensurable theoretical perspectives on representation, on communication, and on the social (see also Dahl, 2021). Furthermore, the literature tends to focus on texts and comedians rather than on comedy audiences, who arguably are the ones that both racist and anti-racist humor eventually impact (see also Sharpe & Hynes, 2016). Finally, we would argue that neither of these strands of humor research really takes into account how humor is inherently ambivalent and mercurial (Smith, 2021; Wickberg, 1998). Recognition theory, which accounts for both acts of and experiences of recognition *and* misrecognition, is one possible perspective which could account for different ways in which humor by means of its ambivalence and tensions can work in the social world and also for the interplay between texts and their audiences.

It is against this background that we identify on the one hand the need to better account for how playfulness and fun may incite recognition, and, on the other hand, how recognition forms part of humor appeal and reception and may thus be consequential to young immigrants' sense of worth and place in society. To account for such processes, we develop the concept of *playful recognition*. To substantiate this concept, we first turn to a recent case from Norway.

3 The case of *Svart Humor*

The Norwegian television show *Svart Humor* (literally “black humor”, and thus as in English a pun on humor about color and humor about transgression/taboo) was originally released as a show on social media in 2015 and later picked up by Norsk rikskringkasting AS (NRK), known in English as the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, where it appeared on their different platforms. Led by Yousef Hadaoui, a Moroccan-born Norwegian, the show mixes candid camera pranks with stunt interviews and sketches. The butt of the joke is almost constantly the cultural difference between an imagined Norwegian majority population and different subaltern groups – most notably immigrants but also people with a history of substance abuse, the poor, and the elderly. As argued elsewhere (Dahl, 2021), the show is typical for the 21st century wave of Scandinavian *diaspora humor*, comedy made for, by, and about people with a migrant background, which typically plays with ethnocultural differences and makes them a laughing matter. This should be understood in the context of a Scandinavian immigration discourse where ethnocultural difference is typically framed as inherently problematic (Gullestad, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Hervik, 2004, 2011; McIntosh, 2015; Yilmaz, 2016).

Svart Humor can thus be read as a playful subversion of the Norwegian immigration discourse, where difference is showcased and played with, instead of problematized. The show is characterized by an amicable, benevolent, and playful tone, with the persona of the host Yousef as a central element. He appears



Figure 1: Screen capture from *Svart Humor*.

as a sort of stunt reporter, sometimes performing candid camera pranks, sometimes interviews. The show is tied together by his friendly, relaxed in-between appearance, whereby he negotiates between one insider status (belonging to an ethnocultural minority) and a different insider status (representing the public broadcaster NRK and thus a form of official majority culture). Furthermore, the show constantly plays with ethnocultural difference by emphasizing, comparing, and decontextualizing different cultural elements from both minority culture and Norwegian official majority culture, for example, when an old white lady is challenged to speak immigrant slang or when immigrants and majority Norwegians discuss what Norwegian values are.

The show was popular among young Norwegians with an immigrant background, as demonstrated in our focus-group discussions, in the interaction on the show's social media channels, and by high viewing figures. In terms of textual appeal, audience composition, and audience engagement, Svart Humor thus offers a case through which we can illustrate the concept of playful recognition.

4 The concept of playful recognition

We conceptualize playful recognition as *occurrences in which recognition results from dialogical processes characterized by playfulness and the suspense of seriousness*. This concept emerged as a result of previously conducted empirical work on *Svart Humor* and its audience, published as two different studies. In the first one, Dahl (2021) conducted a close textual reading of *Svart Humor*. This study rhetorically analyzed how the show staged and intervened in the Scandinavian immigration discourse and by what means it did so. The study explored in-depth the question of how the show, through the particularities of humor in general and the show's specific humor techniques in particular, offered an alternative space for the representation of both minority identities and questions connected to immigration and integration. The major insight from this study is that the show offered textual possibilities for the recognition of ethnocultural difference without the routine problem-focus of most other content depicting immigrants.

Following this, we (Nærland & Dahl, 2022) conducted a study of the young immigrants and their reception of *Svart Humor*. We carried out focus-group interviews in Norway's second biggest city, Bergen, with 30 young immigrants aged 16–25 at differing levels of integration. Two of the groups were composed of first-generation non-Western migrants, who had recently arrived in Norway (the “newcomers”), while two of the groups consisted of either descendants of non-Western immigrants or young people that were born elsewhere but had

grown up in Norway (the “descendants”). All groups were ethnically mixed, but a majority of the participants had their roots in the Middle East or North Africa. People from these groups are both economically and culturally marginalized: Statistically, they have a weaker link to the labor market than the average (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012, p. 10), and their presence in Scandinavia tends to be problematized and othered due to stigmatization of their culture, especially of Islam (ibid; Gullestad, 2002a, 2002b, 2004). This is also experienced as a stigma by minority youths belonging to these groups (Andersson, 2000).

We started the focus-group sessions by showing five different sketches selected to reflect the thematic variety of Black Humor. Subsequently, we initiated group conversation, first letting the participants speak freely and generally about the show and then, towards the end, asking more specific questions from our interview guide. These questions focused on the reception of certain aesthetic features of the show, based on a textual analysis. This focus-group study clearly indicates that the young immigrants experienced positive emotions associated with the way that the show showcased milieus, characters, style, and language familiar to their own lives, and a positive affirmation of their place in society.

Drawing upon this combination of reception analysis and textual analysis, we developed the concept of playful recognition through the following three steps. First, we identified instances where the informants, through their engagement with the show, articulated experiences of positive affirmation of their value and place in society – that is, feelings of being recognized. Thereafter, turning to the text, we identified the televisual gestures that pivoted such articulations of being recognized. Finally, we interpreted these televisual gestures and their reception in light of basic recognition theory and humor theory. From these steps, it emerged that *Svart Humor* and its reception clearly facilitated processes of recognition – what we term playful recognition.

In the remainder of this article, we illustrate how playful recognition emerged as a result of three key processes salient in *Svart Humor* and its reception: recognition through (1) the incitement of in-group feeling, (2) benevolent ridicule, and (3) inciting a sense of adaption to society. Each of these processes accentuate aspects of both *Svart Humor*'s textual appeal and its reception. As we will show, these processes can be seen as textual-receptive – or dialogical – vehicles for the realization of recognition. Crucially, and as we will highlight in our conclusion, the underlying suspense of seriousness and playfulness inherent to comedy as a genre constitute a basic condition for these qualities to be effective towards this goal.

Recognition through the incitement of in-group feeling could be seen in occurrences when *Svart Humor* incited in-group feeling among our informants through ethno-culturally encoded gestures. It is a process in which humor

addresses minorities on their own ‘turf’, in their own language, and thus invites positive emotions of belonging to a group, that is at once specific and bounded, yet part of the larger society.

In *Svart Humor*, a central thematization of young immigrant culture is connected to language – for example, the use of so-called Kebab-Norwegian, a mix of Norwegian, English, and different immigrant languages. This can, for instance, be seen when Yousef, the program host, shows a sketch in which young dark-skinned boys improvise the weather report. Although the boys demonstrate a lack of knowledge about Norwegian geography, they also show a high level of energy and charisma and an impressive ability to (apparently) improvise lines and connecting the weather report to the current agenda about refugees or stereotypes about immigrants. The use of Kebab-Norwegian is central here, for example, when a boy of Somalian descent uses the word “Frollah”. This is a popular vernacular meaning “Oh my god”, typically used by people of Somalian descent, that adds to the comedy for people familiar with it.

Our informants were instantly familiar with the language used in the clip and interpreted this, and similar, clips as being *about them*, as in this excerpt from one of the descendants groups:

Moderator 1: Do you think it’s good that NRK makes a program like this?

(Multiple informants say yes.)

Moderator 1: Why is that?

Omar: Mmm ... It is like ... I am used to watching Arabic series, and then it was like, I have seen lots of episodes of that program. I found it funny since it like sort of was about us.

Further, the informants articulated social boundary-making along ethno-cultural lines. Most of our descendant participants claimed that they would interpret the show differently from a member of the majority population, and that this even made them enjoy the show *more* than a white Norwegian would:

Ahmed: I would think that this is much more fun for people with foreign backgrounds than for people with Norwegian backgrounds. Because we recognize ourselves in so much of what they say, right, when they start saying “yes Wallah brother” and all that stuff, that’s something we say ourselves daily, right, and something that is funny for us. Because ...

Fatima: The way we talk.

Khadije: Yes.

Fatima: ... It’s our parents, right. So they do see person ...

Ahmed: But other people don’t see this as funny, sort of. I can just look at a guy, if he says “Wallah”, just the way he pronounces it, it can be fun for me just because, right ... it is hard to explain, but it can just be fun for me, but that’s not understood by let’s say Norwegians. So, they [Norwegians] don’t get the point right. Or they don’t understand right ... well, I don’t know how to explain it (laughs).

Although Ahmed has some difficulties formulating what the source of comic enjoyment is, it appears to be connected to insider knowledge about language and to his own identity, as a contrast to an “ordinary” Norwegian identity: The humor potential comes from the ethnoculturally marked language he daily uses himself. It is an instance in which belonging to a specific group gave him the necessary competence to understand the comedy (Musser, 1991). The show’s comic treatment of his lived experience could thus be seen to incite belonging to what Fine (1983) calls *playful communitas*. For Ahmed, and for many other informants, the show incited both feelings of exclusive mastery of comedic code and a positive affirmation of belonging to an ethnoculturally bounded group. This we interpret as instances of recognition.

Recognition through benevolent ridicule could be seen at play in instances where benevolent ridicule of characters, style, or milieus, to which the informants themselves identified incited positive emotions. It is a process in which being joked about, somewhat paradoxically, can incite feelings of self-respect or being recognized as part of society. In our case, this process hinges on several premises. First, that the ridicule was interpreted as benign and good-hearted, in contrast to intentionally malign. Second, and related to the first, that the show host (Yousef) himself is of immigrant background.

The most exemplary instances of benevolent ridicule were employed in the “Do you want to be a thousionair”-clips from *Svart Humor*. Here, Yousef asks immigrants multiple-choice questions with tricky alternatives, often based on figurative idioms, for example: “How could you help a friend to come out of the closet”? The interviewees are lured into giving wrong or strange answers on questions about Norwegian language, history, and society, thus being subjected to a form of ridicule. However, the ridicule is embedded in a format that clearly breaks with the formal rules of a game show with cash prizes, one which emphasizes how this should be taken as less seriously and thus potentially a non-threatening form of ridicule. The clearest reference is in the title, the game show *Who wants to be a millionaire*, which plays with the seriousness of the show’s big prize. In the sketches, in contrast, the prize for winning is parodically low: NOK 50 (€ 5). Furthermore, Yousef never sanctions wrong answers. Instead, he will give the interviewee a hug, a consolation prize (for example, a date – either the fruit or the social event), and often starts a conversation about other topics. This way, an emphasis is put on the friendly and playful atmosphere surrounding it, which is helped by the fact that a large part of the sketches consist of Yousef walking around, doing small dances, and greeting people.

In one of these clips, Yousef asks a black man a question with four alternatives lettered A, B, C, and D – following the ordinary alternatives of the gameshow

that is parodied. However, the interviewee breaks with the script and answers “E” – a letter that does not exist on the list of alternatives. When we discussed this clip in one of our newcomer groups, the following conversation unfolded:

Reza: Somali! If he talks in Norwegian, we laugh, because it’s a bit funny.

Sara: And they talk Norwegian, right. That’s why everybody laughs.

Reza: It is hard for us because when we speak, it becomes a bit foreign.

Sara: (laughs)

As we can see from this excerpt, the informants in this group seemed to experience the show as mainly making fun of them, for example, by joking about their struggle with the Norwegian language. However, joking about this struggle was not experienced as offensive and hurtful ridicule but as benign and pleasurable. Interesting in this regard was how the show through ridicule accentuated our informants’ imagined relationship with the majority population. This seems to be caused by the style of the program in general and of the show host Yousef in particular:

Moderator 1: What ... was it someone ... what did you think about the show host? Who walked around interviewing people?

Hamza: I have seen him multiple times. So ... he is ... he just did something which is funny, yes ... but so, inside his heart there is nothing that ... if it is like that ... if everybody is just in for a laugh, yes, it is OK [...] but it would be bad if a Norwegian watched this and only got a negative image of immigrants.

Moderator 1: Yes, right. But he [Yousef] is an immigrant himself? [Multiple participants speak simultaneously.]

Abdi: Okay! So, for example ... He made that program to make people laugh, right. So I believe – I think it is good for Norwegians. Because Norwegians are quiet, right. They do not laugh, they are serious all the time. So it is a bit funny for them if they, like, watch that video. They laugh, and I think it is good.

This excerpt demonstrates how the show incited a form of benevolent self-deprecation, prominently discussed in the literature of ethnic and racial humor (Gillespie, 2003; Gillota, 2013; Malmberg & Awad, 2019; Pérez, 2013). Humor pessimists in general (Billig, 2005) and humor pessimists discussing ethnic humor in particular (Pérez, 2013) would typically reject the idea that such humor can be beneficial, arguing that being laughed at inherently is a position of subordination and marginalization. In this tradition, ‘laughing along’ and self-deprecation are interpreted as signs of how difficult it is to oppose power in the guise of humor. Following this line of thinking, ethnic humor is inherently inadequate as a vehicle for recognition. We would argue that the excerpt above indicates the opposite. It should be noted how our participants acknowledged the *possibility* of scorn-

ful and hurtful laughter and ridicule about their immigrant status but seemed to experience that this was not the case here: The sketch in question was experienced as benign. This interpretation suggests humor can be used to balance differences and identities in the modern world (Smith, 2021; Wickberg, 1998). In particular, we would like to point to Smith's (2021, p. 66) argument about how laughing at someone – including oneself – is a way to maintain individuality and difference while at the same time establishing mutuality with others. As quoted in the excerpt above, this benevolent self-deprecation was also experienced by our newcomer participants as a way to establish rapport with majority Norwegians.

Thus, we interpret these examples as an instance of recognition, brought about through play. Joking about potentially difficult aspects of immigrant identity and their relationship to Norway tackles a dominant pattern in the official discourse: immigrants' *differences* from the majority. Trivial cultural differences are in the Norwegian immigration discourse important markers of how un-Norwegian immigrants are (Gullestad, 2002a, 2004). In clips like the one discussed above, *Svart Humor* explicitly addresses trivial cultural differences. In *Svart Humor*, however, the individual's failure to integrate, by not answering questions about Norway correctly, becomes of secondary importance. Instead, what could have been experienced as a failure to integrate is laughed away, and our informants experienced a positive affirmation of their presence in society and thus recognition.

Recognition through inciting a sense of adaption to society could be observed in instances where jokes in the show presupposed knowledge of Norwegian culture, language, and society. Here, the incitement of recognition stemmed from the informants' feelings of, on the one hand, possessing this knowledge, and, on the other, awareness that others – in the show and/or in everyday life – lack such knowledge. This is in line with one of the mechanisms that Kuipers (2009) argues are instrumental in how humor marks social and symbolic boundaries: explicating social boundaries by drawing on insider knowledge in a joke or a comedy piece. As many of the sketches in *Svart Humor* are based on knowledge about Norwegian society, language, and culture, they allow for a feeling of recognition – through the affirmation of the informants' sense of high-level adaptation to Norwegian society.

The “Do you want to be a thousionair”-clips were often prime examples of this process. Understanding why these sketches are fun presupposes a certain command of the very Norwegian culture and language that the interviewees in the sketches lack. Thus, the humor potential in these clips is based on ridicule of the interviewees' lack of knowledge about Norway and Norwegian language. This ridicule is sanctioned as acceptable because it is carried out by a person

with an immigrant background – Yousef, who also comes across as benign and friendly. However, benign self-deprecation only tells half the story of how this textual gesture works. Yousef’s joking friendliness allows him to come across as a trickster, who uses his friendly attitude to lure immigrants to answer questions wrongly and thus demonstrates his power and superior adaptation into Norwegian society.

This allows for a specific viewer position enjoyed by our descendant participants. They identified themselves with Yousef more than with his interviewees. Further, they explained how they themselves used to trick friends who were less skilled in Norwegian in similar ways as those shown in the sketches. They also often mentioned their parents, who are mainly first-generation immigrants, as not appreciating this kind of humor. This explanation led us in one of the focus-groups to the following conversation concerning the clip mentioned above, where an interviewee answered “E”:

Moderator 1: What if the interviewees were your parents?

Ahmed: That would have been fun.

Khadidje: Yes, it would have been hysterical. (Many informants laugh.)

Moderator 1: Yes.

Moderator 2: Why so much fun, do you think?

Fatima: It would have been fun even if I’d never laugh about them in front of them (laughter).

Fatima’s last comment is interesting in light of Freud’s (1976) theory of jokes, whereby joking is seen as a socially acceptable way of opposing authorities. Watching the show provides her with an opportunity to laugh at her parents “by proxy”, so to speak. This is not trivial. The experience of being more competent than your parents in the majority culture can relate to ambivalent and difficult emotions, especially when your parents enact a culture of ‘absolute respect’ towards them. Watching *Svart Humor* creates an opportunity to process these emotions in an acceptable way, through humor and watching comedy. This makes it possible for our young informants to experience an affirmation of their adaption to Norwegian society and thus a *recognition* of their higher level of integration compared to their parents.

5 Conclusion: The suspense of seriousness and playful recognition

In this paper, we have illustrated how *Svart Humor* affords recognition through three processes: the incitement of in-group feeling, benevolent ridicule, and the incitement of a sense of adaption to society. These processes result from the interplay between textual gestures in the show and our informants' responses. The three processes may not be necessary components of playful recognition wherever it plays out but specific processes derived from our case. Other dimensions may be at work in other cases, for example, through the playful celebration of migrant culture and cultural interaction that can be found in another Scandinavian diaspora TV show, *Lilla al-Fadji's underbara resa* (see Dahl, 2021).

What is common for all these processes, however, is how they are enabled by the overall suspense of seriousness and playfulness inherent to comedy. Non-seriousness is a central feature of play, humor, and comedy; perhaps even *the* defining feature (Bateson, 1972; Mulkay, 1988). The suspense of seriousness means that the commitments of the communication, that is, the sender's intention, cannot be taken at face value (Mulkay, 1988; Raskin, 1985). Therefore, it is possible to interpret a joke as something different from the sincerely held opinions of the sender, regardless of the subject matter. Furthermore, the subject matter of the joke can through suspense of seriousness be experienced in a different light, where its ordinary connotations are no longer connoted (Bakhtin, 1968; Bateson, 1972). This is how one can joke about serious and distressful things like pain, existential uncertainties, or social hierarchies without engaging the troublesome emotions or practical problems connected to such real-life distress. Hence, the paradox that gives play and comedy their power is that they can handle serious business in unserious ways, which again can make them useful for serious means (Mulkay, 1988).

The suspense of seriousness creates a 'free space' with different rules than those that apply to ordinary communication. Here lies the potential for playful recognition. Furthermore, the suspense of seriousness points towards how humor facilitates recognition by means of its special qualities that make it different from other forms of communication. Given how humor and play can be seen as a free space from ordinary rules, that is, an alternative form, comedy may have a potential for affording recognition in instances when it hardly can be afforded by other mediated genres or forms.

To sum up, we have shown how processes of recognition are made possible through the suspense of seriousness inherent in comedy shows and other forms of humorous communication, including interpersonal joking and play. Recognition brought about by such processes is what we term *playful recognition*.

To clarify, playful recognition is not a special form of recognition but rather a set of processes that facilitate, or afford, recognition. The qualifier ‘playful’ should not only be read as referring to how recognition is afforded by comedy shows. More fundamentally, it refers to how the dialogical process of affording recognition can be qualitatively different from affording recognition through struggle. Playful recognition inherently foregrounds mirth, playfulness, and a ludic and unserious atmosphere as its indented experiential consequence. That being said, playful recognition, in line with the logic of play as reflective and humor as an unserious way to conduct serious business (Bateson, 1972; Mulkey, 1988), is, somewhat paradoxically of course, a part of the struggle for recognition more generally.

We argue that the concept of playful recognition is useful for several purposes. Firstly, it widens the field of mediated recognition by making it possible to understand how a popular media form, comedy, can work in this respect. This is especially important since ethnic and racial comedy is an important sub-genre of comedy, which leads us to our second point: Many humor optimists argue along similar lines (Gillespie, 2003; Gillota, 2013; Sharpe & Hynes, 2016; Willett & Willett, 2014), saying that comedy can challenge ethnic boundaries. We would argue that playful recognition offers a useful complementary perspective in this respect, as it both takes into account the particularities of comedy and its reception and links the analysis of comedy to a larger theory of social struggle. This leads us to the third and final point: Our informants’ discussions indicate that playful recognition seems to happen also in other contexts than comedy viewing, for example, in interactions with friends. Playful recognition does not need to be mediated. It hints towards a more fundamental aspect of how recognition may take place in human communicative interaction: through irreverent and playful everyday speech, for instance. It thus suggests that play is a fundamental communicative form that is under-explored in the overall literature of recognition.

It can be objected that humor is too ambivalent and mercurial, that it relies on floating identities, values, and differences, as it will always be unclear whether one laughs with or at someone (Smith, 2021; Wickberg, 1998), and that it is thus unpredictable as a communicative mode. We would, however, argue that it is precisely this ambivalence that makes playful recognition important. It opens up a space for dialogue which acknowledges difference and avoids the hard-stance taking and confrontation of serious discourse, as demonstrated in our section about recognition through benevolent ridicule. For some readers, Bakhtin’s (1968, 1981) dialogicality theory probably comes to mind, and we acknowledge that his theories have explanatory power for our case and the processes we have described. However, we join Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022) in their argu-

ment that although humor is fundamentally ambivalent, the interpretation of it in social contexts tends to be quite fixed. In this respect, *Svart Humor* is a part of a social and political reality that calls for the dialectical model of social life advanced by Hegel and Honneth, due to the heavy problem-orientation of the Scandinavian immigration discourse. Here, comedy serves as an alternative sphere and thus has a place in the struggle for recognition. This is also the core of how recognition theory has a strong explanatory power for comedy's social and political work.

That being said, playful recognition is not a magic pill for immediate and friction-free recognition. Albeit this paper is based on an empirical study showcasing what humor *did*, not just what humor *can do*, we do not claim that the show would necessarily lead to immigrants experiencing recognition: As we have shown in our discussion, the ambivalence of humor makes both the process and the result of playful recognition very open-ended and relative to the audiences. In the process of inciting a sense of adaptation, for instance, both recognition and comic enjoyment were clearly based on deprecation of peers and parents with lesser command of Norwegian language and customs. This could be interpreted as a sort of power play, in which the majority, or the minority having adapted to the majority's hegemony, mocks and racializes minority persons while using the excuse "just a joke", or where minority persons are forced to be funny at their own expense (Pérez, 2013, 2016). In addition to the power dynamics on the micro-level, it might be argued that inciting adaptation indicates the demand that immigrants have to integrate into Norwegian society. This mirrors the discussion of adaptive versus transformative recognition in the literature (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Taking these objections seriously, one should thus not assume that ethnic comedy always affords recognition, or that this process is only beneficial, even if we can find the communicative acts that playful recognition is comprised of in a textual analysis. We always need careful contextual consideration, and preferably studies of reception, before assessing how comedy works socially and civically.

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