

## The Virtual Manifestation of Indifference: The Normalization of Cancel Culture as Offensive Humor on Social Media

**Osman Vedüd Eşidir\*** / Assoc. Prof. 

Firat University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Journalism  
ovesidir@firat.edu.tr

**Gökhan Bak / Dr.** 

Independent Researcher  
gokhanbak2010@gmail.com

**Mevlüt Altıntop / Ph.D. Candidate** 

Erciyes University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of General Journalism  
mevlutaltintop@hotmail.com

\*Corresponding Author

### Abstract

Social media has evolved beyond merely influencing everyday life to become an indispensable part of the social fabric. Similar to real life, human emotions and behaviors such as happiness, enthusiasm, love, anger, hatred, sadness, pain, and peace emerge within social media environments, and these emotions collectively create a new ecosystem and culture. An important element of this new culture is the phenomenon of "lynch" (mob) culture, which also finds its place on social media. This study examines the lynch culture on social media, focusing specifically on Platform X. Following the announcement of the 2025 Higher Education Institutions Exam (YKS) results, posts related to a student who ranked first in Turkey in the equal-weight and verbal fields were analyzed. The analysis yielded three main findings: First, the subje-

ct was completely detached from its original context. Second, the student's image and mode of communication were used manipulatively and disrespectfully toward personal rights within social media interactions. Third, it demonstrated how insensitive, ruthless, and malevolent the lynch culture—also referred to as "offensive humor" and emerging as a product of popular culture on social media—truly is. This study contributes important awareness and insights regarding lynch culture in the new media environment.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Cancel Culture, Offensive Humor, Digital Lynching, Online Hate Speech.

**JEL Codes:** L82, L86, Z1

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## 1. Introduction

This study analyzes the conceptual framework of the phenomenon of lynching through various disciplines such as history, sociology, ethics, and law, while specifically focusing on the culture of lynching on social media within the context of humor. The study examines the process by which an ordinary individual suddenly becomes a trending topic on social media. M.İ.K.<sup>1</sup> is a recent high school graduate, largely unknown outside his immediate circle, who took the Higher Education Institutions Exam (YKS) on 21-22 June 2025. As of 18 July 2025, M.İ.K. was an ordinary individual; however, following the announcement of the YKS results on 19 July 2025, he became a trending topic on platform X and a figure discussed by thousands. According to the YKS results, M.İ.K. ranked first in Turkey in the equal weight and verbal fields (Ayhan & Candan, 2025). While his exam success was the initial reason for coming to public attention, the primary elements emphasized on social media were his physical appearance, behaviors, mannerisms, and speech style. Interviews conducted by traditional and new media outlets following the announcement of the exam results increased M.İ.K.'s visibility on these platforms. However, after the interview was shared on X, users began commenting predominantly on the student's appearance, manner of speaking, and behaviors rather than his academic achievement. The vast majority of these comments contained hate speech and involved serious attacks on his personal rights. Conversely, the presence of conscientious users who supported M.İ.K. and characterized these comments as irrational, violating personal rights, and lacking in empathy was also observed. These users emphasized the necessity of initiating legal processes, thereby taking a stand against the culture of lynching.

The study, which addresses the manifestation of lynching culture on social media, has three primary objectives. First, it argues that lynching culture on social media is more easily perpetrated than its real-world counterpart. Second, it demonstrates that lynching culture on social media is at least as ruthless as that in real life. Third, it examines how the phenomenon of humor—often used to comfort people during processes of justification—is inverted and repurposed within the actions and discourses of lynching on social media. These developments reveal how such dynamics not only erode fundamental values such as ethics, morality, and law, negatively

impacting individual and societal life, but also destroy human emotions, relationships, and social fabric. This underscores the critical importance of the study.

The study first outlines the literature review and methodology. Subsequently, comments on the post by the X (formerly Twitter) account that received the most interactions during the period when the YKS results were announced were subjected to content analysis, and visualizations were generated using the MAXQDA program. In the results section, the findings were interpreted in detail. The core emphasis of the study is that lynching culture on social media is attempted to be legitimized under a humorous guise. This tendency progresses alongside a detachment from values or a simplification of the emerging concerning situation. The phenomenon of "offensive humor," frequently encountered on social media, is particularly noteworthy in this context. Although humor serves functions such as amusement, entertainment, and provocation of thought, the propagation of attitudes that undermine human dignity—such as hatred, insult, and attack—through "offensive humor" constitutes a significant issue that warrants further discussion.

This study makes significant contributions to understanding and bringing visibility to the culture of lynching, which spreads rapidly on social media and threatens individuals' psychological, social, and legal rights. In the new communication environments brought about by digitization, recognizing the underlying dynamics of lynching and its methods of legitimization through humorous tools is of vital importance for raising societal awareness and developing effective intervention strategies. In this context, the study establishes a robust foundation for raising awareness among social media users, reviewing legal regulations, and reopening discussions on ethical values.

## 2. Literature Review

Lynching culture emerges as a complex social phenomenon based on the extrajudicial punishment of individuals by societal collectivity, eroding human rights and the principles of the rule of law. When considered as a part of social life, it appears to have accompanied humanity throughout history. However, its conceptualization and systematic use began in the post-modern era (Çubukçu, 2006). Etymologically rooted in 18th-century American history, the

<sup>1</sup> This study has been prepared in accordance with ethical principles, as per the decision of the Firat University Social Sciences Ethics Committee (Document Date and Number: 05.09.2025-38613). Within this context, the initials of the individual's first and last name (M.İ.K.) have been used instead of their full name, with the aim of protecting their personality rights from both an ethical and legal perspective. Furthermore, in line with these precautions, the photograph of M.İ.K. has been blurred to ensure privacy and anonymity.

term “lynching” is derived from the phrase “Lynch’s Law” (Nişanyan, 2022).<sup>2</sup> Over time, it has evolved into a global form of social violence, manifesting as a practice of collective extrajudicial punishment. In conceptual terms, it can be defined as “the application of physical or psychological violence by a community against an individual without due legal process, based on an accusation of wrongdoing” (Baki, 2013: 165). In dictionaries, it is described as “the act of multiple people beating and killing someone without trial or legal authority, using tools such as stones or sticks due to a behavior they consider criminal” (TDK, 2005: 1466). However, modern literature extends beyond this definition, treating lynching as a parallel punitive system that poses an alternative to the supremacy of law (Gambetti, 2007: 12). Additionally, it is important to note that lynching is often motivated by a quest for justice that holds social legitimacy, rather than being merely an act of violence—a nuance that should not be overlooked (Yılmaz, 2012: 34). On the other hand, the Turkish term “yargısız infaz” (extrajudicial execution) holds the same semantic meaning as the Western-origin lynch concept (Boyras, 2023).

Thinkers who have studied the concept and practice of lynching have demonstrated that this phenomenon, examined across various contexts, operates through interrelated and multidimensional mechanisms. Le Bon argues that crowds dissolve individual consciousness, giving rise to a “temporary entity dominated by primitive instincts.” According to Le Bon, crowds driven by lynching culture transform rational individuals into a conscience-less mob (Le Bon, 1997: 45). In other words, it can be argued that participants in lynching suspend their individual moral judgment and transfer their responsibility for “administering justice” to the collective structure known as the crowd (Peker, 2006: 31). Freud, on the other hand, explained this transfer as the individual’s surrender of superego control to a leader figure within the crowd (Freud, 2015: 68). Consequently, actions in lynching incidents are directed by the guidance of individuals capable of mobilizing the crowd. All of this indicates that lynching excludes rational understanding and behavior.

One of the most important motivations underlying the legitimization of lynch culture and lynching acts is the demand to fill the void created by the loss of legitimacy and trust in the state’s monopoly over punishment and its security-judicial mechanisms. Ku-

çuradi describes this situation as a “revenge spiral caused by the law’s failure to protect human dignity” (Kuçuradi, 2018: 89). The reasons for the emergence of this phenomenon vary across countries and encompass a wide range of factors, including economic conditions, traditions, authority vacuums, cycles of spontaneous violence, rigid religious interpretations, norms granting privileges to certain groups, cultural elements, and ideological positioning (Gambetti, 2007: 19). Therefore, lynching emerges in a vacuum of authority and continues to function as an uncontrolled authority.

Kuçuradi defines acts of lynching as “collective violations of human dignity,” emphasizing that these actions not only harm the victim but also deprive society as a whole of its humanity and moral integrity (Kuçuradi, 2018: 45). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the prominent figures of modern thought, highlighted the potential of collective will to suppress the individual, stating, “The tyranny of the majority is more dangerous than that of a single tyrant” (Rousseau, 2012: 56). Hannah Arendt, who argues that violent actions such as lynching culture have the potential to destroy the political sphere, characterizes this phenomenon as a “crisis of public space” (Yılmaz, 2012: 89). According to Arendt, the public sphere tends to erode when freedom and responsibility are abandoned, and in this process, the expanding bureaucracy and media’s activities—such as disinformation, manipulation, and propaganda—play a highly effective role. The crisis and collapse of the public sphere also blur the boundaries between public and private domains. In such a context, private initiatives begin to make public decisions, and truth is sacrificed to fiction (B., 2025). In this framework, individuals participating in acts of lynching operate under the belief that their actions are justified and legitimate. In other words, lynching is perceived as the “righteous reaction of the people.” This perception carries the risk of transforming lynching from a legitimized act into a collective moral value (Baki, 2013: 172), thereby raising significant legal concerns. Lynching, which often involves physical violence, is in a sense a form of torture, and legal systems define it as incompatible with human dignity. States based on the rule of law constitutionally safeguard this principle, and it is unequivocally supported by international structures and conventions. For instance, Articles 3 and 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as Articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention on

<sup>2</sup> Tanil Bora, who refers to the expression “lynch law” as “lynch justice,” traces the origin of the term to four different individuals bearing the surname “Lynch.” The common characteristic among these figures is their ruthless approach to punishment: “According to various sources, three of the four individuals claimed to have given their name to the term were judges. In 1493, in the town of Galway, Ireland, the notoriously cruel judge James Lynch convicted his own son of murder and personally hanged him from the window of his house. Judge Charles Lynch, during the American War of Independence, punished both ‘enemies’ loyal to Britain and any suspect of ordinary crime without trial, often by ordering them to be whipped. Another, Judge John Lynch, gained notoriety in late 16th-century North Carolina for his extraordinary severity. The only candidate for the term’s origin who was not a judge was William Lynch, a man who, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, organized a militia in Pittsylvania to personally punish a gang of bandits” (Bora, 2014: 8). Bora’s use of the expression “lynch justice” is problematic, as the concept of justice, in addition to being a scientific discipline, represents a broader category encompassing the entire process from the enactment of laws to their implementation (TDD, 2012: 785).

Human Rights, establish the right to life and the prohibition of torture as fundamental principles (United Nations, 1948; Council of Europe, 2021).

In classical literature, the phenomenon of lynching has been approached as a process of physical interaction, possessing the semantic dimensions outlined above. In other words, from its earliest emergence to the 21st century, it has been evaluated in relation to the tangible existence of humans. However, since the 2000s, the internet and information technologies, which have gained global prominence and increasingly pervasive influence, have transformed lynching into a different dimension. A process has begun in which human interactions are abstracted from the physical realm and transferred to a virtual environment. As with all human-related issues, lynching has also begun to manifest in virtual spaces, acquiring a digital dimension. This approach, referred to as digital lynching, is a continuation of classical lynching culture. Following these developments, lynching culture—which historically manifested through physical violence and social exclusion—has, with the rise of social media, become a phenomenon occurring on digital platforms. On these platforms, individuals can be subjected to public execution through a post, video, or news story (Lewis & Marwick, 2017). Social media, in particular, constitutes the most critical axis of this transformation. The viral mechanisms of social media platforms both accelerate these executions and disseminate them to broad audiences (Puryear, 2024). The most crucial aspect of this shift, which transforms traditional lynching mechanisms, is the evolution of violence from the physical to the symbolic (Korkmaz & Yazıcı, 2025). Digital lynching operates through reputational assassination, social exclusion, and hate speech, constituting a mechanism whose destructive impact is comparable to, if not exceeding, that of physical violence.

The literature on digital lynching indicates that lynching behaviors are shaped by crowd psychology, distrust in the legal system, and the transformative impact of social media. One of the most significant findings is that although lynching culture has deep historical roots in social structures, it has acquired a new and distinct dimension with digital transformation (Erem & Hasdağ, 2024). Research reveals that the profiles individuals create on social media often differ significantly from their real-life personas (Davidowitz, 2018). In the comfort provided by the internet, users tend to reveal their subconscious selves or transform into the individuals they aspire to be. In other words, people express their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors on social media with fewer restraints than they would in physical life (Bauman, 2012). This phenomenon is underpinned by psychological issues rooted in attention-seeking and dissatisfaction, such as the desire for acceptance, visibility, and popularity, as well as negative impulses like self-discontent and inferiority complexes

(Babacan, 2017). Over time, this dynamic transcends the boundaries of desensitization, unveiling the primitive, ruthless, and savage aspects of the human subconscious. What is defined as lynching culture in real life has thus become an inseparable element of social media, leading to violations of privacy and personality rights, as well as material losses and/or psychological victimization (Gönüllü, 2023).

Anonymity, which allows individuals to share content while concealing their identities, is one of the most critical factors sustaining this process. Demir and Özcan have demonstrated that while social media rapidly permeated daily life with its promises of free expression and unrestricted sharing, it has also evolved—through anonymity and mobile technologies—into a conducive environment for mass hate speech and lynching behaviors. In this regard, while social media creates a space for freedom, it simultaneously becomes part of a process that fuels lynching culture (S. T. Demir & Özcan, 2021). Yaşa analyzed how X (formerly Twitter) accelerates lynching culture through tweets containing the hashtag #YoncaEvcimik. According to content analysis results, lynching content on X exhibits a structure that is both “quickly produced and reshared” and “disseminated to broad audiences, damaging the target’s reputation and psychosocial health” (Yaşa, 2024). Demir and Özcan emphasize how social media’s initial emancipatory promises have transformed into “mass hatred and insecurity.” The authors conclude that “as lynching culture rises, the psychosocial and institutional repercussions of virtual causes in real life cannot be ignored” (S. T. Demir & Özcan, 2021). In his study on the dimension of ageism within lynching culture, Gönüllü revealed that discriminatory language and othering practices on social media reinforce the exposure of elderly people to public outrage and marginalization, creating both sociological and legal challenges (Gönüllü, 2023). Aslan Düzgün and Özkan’s study emphasizes that lynching is not merely a social psychological phenomenon but also a form of societal violence rooted in distrust of the legal system and violations of individual rights. In this context, lynching often manifests as a practice that undermines legal processes, disregarding evidence and the right to defense (Aslan Düzgün & Özkan, 2017). Akmeşe and Taşçıoğlu compared the concepts of lynching culture and cancel/cancellation culture—often conflated in literature—and demonstrated that lynching culture involves more radical processes. Their study highlights that lynching culture focuses on “targeting, discrediting, and marginalizing practices in virtual environments,” noting that “although the dynamics of the two phenomena differ, lynching culture more frequently refers to rapid, collective acts of virtual violence” (Akmeşe & Taşçıoğlu, 2025).

Unlike the examples cited above, this study focuses on the execution of lynching culture under the gu-



ise of humorous motivation. In one of the few studies addressing lynching culture within this context, Kutlu analyzed the “Luppo-buying uncle” case on Twitter (X) using a case study methodology and discourse analysis. The study demonstrated that lynching behaviors are not individual reactions but are shaped by dynamics of othering and punishment within an “organized crowd psychology” (Kutlu, 2023). In a study linking digital trolling movements to cyberbullying and lynching culture through the analysis of the film \*The Hater\*, Gönülşen concluded that humorous provocations (“trolling”)—especially when transformed into unexpected reactions by social media crowds—lay the groundwork for lynching campaigns (Gönülşen, 2022). These evaluations illustrate that users, in their activities on social media, can turn virtually any subject into an element of humor while producing content. This tendency not only reflects the normalization of discriminatory and violent behaviors under the pretext of entertainment but also highlights how humorous discourse can serve as a tool for the systematic mobilization of collective aggression.

Digital lynching, categorized within the framework of social media language as “offensive humor,” is among the foremost manifestations of this phenomenon. Gürler, who examines the phenomenon of offensive humor as a comedic element within a class-based framework, highlights its marginal language and destructive aspects, discussing its potential to either promote political correctness and address social inequalities or, conversely, to achieve the opposite (Gürler, 2020). In a study evaluating the concept specifically in the context of social media, offensive humor is defined as follows: *“Although offensive humor is observed across all new media applications, it is particularly prevalent on sharing sites. Within this framework, morally and ethically abnormal situations—such as people being offended, wronged, humiliated, harmed, or subjected to hate speech and violence—are normalized by being reinterpreted through a humorous lens. The most significant feature of offensive humor is the reduction of all these negative phenomena to entertainment and pleasure-seeking”* (Altıntop, 2024: 159). As evident from this, social media is a dynamic space where individuals and groups express themselves, share information, and engage in social interaction, yet it is also a platform where phenomena such as “lynching culture” and/or “offensive humor” intensively occur. In this context, while lynching culture is defined as psychological or behavioral attacks targeting individuals or groups through criticism, humiliation, or marginalization (Englander, 2024), offensive humor is characterized as an unbounded form of entertainment that pushes boundaries, often addressing taboo topics to attract attention or create a shocking effect (Phillips, 2016). In digital environments where such entertainment becomes normalized, combined with the veil of anonymity, individuals may develop

“online disinhibition,” making them more prone to verbal attacks and humiliating behaviors (Suler, 2004: 321–322). This situation inflicts serious harm on the psychological well-being of targeted individuals, leading to psychological stress, anxiety, and even outcomes as severe as suicide (Schoenebeck et al., 2023; Doe & Roe, 2022: 207).

Offensive humor is fundamentally based on the strategy of “addressing discomfort through laughter.” This type of humor engages with social norms, the boundaries of political correctness, and taboo subjects, possessing the potential to be both provocative and thought-provoking (Martin, 2017: 55–56). Some researchers argue that offensive humor serves to deconstruct social taboos, expose systems of oppression, or satirize repressive norms (Billig, 2005: 23–24). On the other hand, such humor can also marginalize targeted individuals or groups. Particularly when minority communities are involved, this form of humor can render them even more vulnerable psychosocially (Bicknell, 2007). Consequently, actions carried out under the guise of offensive humor on social media fall within the scope of lynching culture.

The notable relationship between offensive humor and lynching culture is clearly observable on social media platforms. When the offensive nature of humor elicits audience reactions and is persistently maintained despite these reactions, such responses can escalate into a top-down wave of lynching. If humor continues at the expense of the target’s vulnerability, it risks evolving into a frightening mechanism of “social pressure” or “collective lynching” (Shifman, 2007). On the other hand, employing elements of offensive humor within lynching culture carries the danger of legitimizing aggressive discourse. Lynching, when blended with a destructive style of humor, can take the form of an “agenda-setting execution,” targeting not only the individual but also their social identity (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020). Lynching experienced on social media can lead to severe psychological consequences for individuals, manifesting as symptoms such as shame, loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Lee & Nguyen, 2022: 233–234). Furthermore, this process can weaken an individual’s relationships within their social circle, damage their professional reputation, and lead to social isolation in their lives (Ayeni et al., 2022). At the societal level, lynching culture can create an imbalance between freedom of expression and the right to harm. Extending beyond criticism, this culture leads to the dominance of a social pressure formed through mobbing effects rather than a “collective conscience” (Thompson, 2020: 63–64). This phenomenon, which can also be defined as cyberbullying, may push legitimate criticism into a discouraging context. Additionally, the study reveals that the digital version of lynching culture, which utilizes tools such as offensive humor, normalizes lynching by making it commonplace and internalized.

It is essential to develop strategies at both individual and institutional levels to counteract lynching culture and the destructive effects of offensive humor. At the individual level, it is important for social media users to enhance their ability to question aggressive content, respond critically, and establish ethical boundaries (Smith & Storrs, 2023). Shifting public education toward content that raises online ethical awareness and expanding digital literacy programs will be beneficial in this context (Reynolds, 2022: 14–15). At the institutional level, it is critically important for social media platforms to strengthen their policies for monitoring and intervening against hate speech, harassment, and abusive content (Gillespie, 2018: 89–90). Additionally, recognizing the tendency of social platforms to promote anger-driven and lynching-related content through algorithms, taking measures to reduce algorithmic biases will also be advantageous (Zuboff, 2018: 250–251).

### 3. Methodology

The study employed the content analysis method, which offers researchers the opportunity to systematically examine complex social phenomena using diverse analytical sets and tools. In this context, statistical data and visualizations were obtained using the MAXQDA program. To ensure reliability in the analyses conducted with MAXQDA, the authors independently developed themes and performed coding. The validity of the research was ensured through systematic coding and analytical methods applied by the researchers during the content analysis process. Themes and codes were reviewed by each researcher, verified for shared semantic domains, and consensus was achieved. The visualization and statistical analysis features provided by the MAXQDA software served as tools enhancing the reliability of the study. Furthermore, the involvement of multiple researchers in the data collection and analysis stages minimized potential subjective interpretations.

Content analysis is a significant technique among qualitative research methods, aiming for the systematic examination of textual, visual, or symbolic materials. This method, which enables the structural investigation of datasets, is widely used across various fields in the social sciences, such as communication, history, psychology, ethnology, sociology, and anthropology. Communication is the field where content analysis—aimed at uncovering implicit/hidden meanings—is most frequently applied, and it is commonly employed in analyzing written, audio, and visual media content (Aziz, 2014: 123; Altıntop, 2024: 110). Through content analysis, researchers convert large volumes of qualitative data into quantitative data, facilitating the identification of thematic patterns and categories (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008: 234). This process utilizes measurement and evaluation-based techniques such as text categorization and coding,

thematic coding, and numerical comparison (Ö. Demir, 2019: 106). Different methodological strategies may be adopted, including predefined coding categories by the researcher (a deductive approach) or allowing categories to emerge naturally from the data (an inductive approach).

The implementation stages of content analysis encompass systematic steps, beginning with the clarification of research questions, followed by sample selection, definition of coding units, development of a coding scheme, intercoder reliability tests, and final analyses (Gökçe, 2019: 78). Ensuring intercoder reliability during this process is of critical importance, and specific criteria for it have been established by leading scholars in the field (Bilgin, 2006: 112). Without this, the validity and reliability of the findings may become questionable. Among the strengths of the method are its ability to facilitate the economical analysis of large datasets, its reproducibility, and its potential to minimize cultural biases (Karasar, 2013: 91).

In the content analysis process of this study, a total of 340 post contents were analyzed across different variables. The limited size of the dataset can be explained by several technical reasons. First, to achieve a clearer semantic domain, only comments (interactions) made directly on the relevant post were included in the analysis. The primary reason for this approach is the difficulty in tracking and coding indirect comments and interactions associated with the post. Second, as a natural consequence of the rapid flow of agendas on social media, the number of comments and/or interactions tends to remain low. In other words, the fast-changing nature of social media agendas means that interactions and comments on a given post occur within a short timeframe, after which the topic is largely “forgotten.” Third, connected to the second reason, only comments and/or interactions occurring within a single day were used within the scope of the study. Consequently, the dataset remains limited due to the technical and subjective dynamics of the research topic.

In the current era of digitalization, the analysis of social media content constitutes one of the emerging applications of this method. Particularly, analyses conducted through X messages or Instagram posts enable the real-time measurement of societal attitudes and trends (Yoğurtçu & Ünal, 2019). However, adhering to ethical boundaries, respecting data privacy, and protecting human participants are fundamental principles that must be carefully considered in such studies. In this context, utmost care has been taken to ensure that the study does not raise any ethical or legal concerns. Accordingly, approval was obtained from the Fırat University Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee during the preparation of the study, confirming compliance with ethical guidelines.

Table 1. Themes and Codes Used in the Study

Theme	Code
<b>Gender Distribution</b>	Female
	Male
	Gender Not Specified (Unknown)
<b>Identity Information</b>	Real
	Anonymous
<b>Comment Distribution</b>	Positive
	Negative
<b>Comment Content</b>	Hate Speech
	Praise/Swear
	Insult
	Image
	Humor
	Neutral
	Support

### 3.1. Explanation of Themes and Codes

Under the theme of Gender Distribution, the codes Female and Male were designated to identify accounts where the gender of the commenter is explicitly evident. The code Unknown was created for cases where the commenter's gender cannot be determined directly—due to lack of gender indicators in profile pictures, names, comment content, or if the account is explicitly institutional.

Under the theme of Identity Information, the codes Anonymous and Real were developed to classify the name used by the commenting account.

Within the Comment Distribution theme, the codes Positive and Negative were assigned to capture the overall positive or negative sentiment of each comment's content.

The codes under the Comment Content theme were designed to categorize comments based on their specific content. Coding within this theme differs from the others in that multiple codes can be applied simultaneously to the same comment. For instance, a comment containing hate speech may be coded with only one code from the Gender Distribution, Identity Information, or Comment Distribution themes, but it can be simultaneously assigned multiple codes under the Comment Content theme. This is because a comment with an attached image can also be humorous, contain hate speech, and include slang or insults all at once.

It is important to specifically highlight the Humorous code here, as it is directly related to the concept of offensive humor explained in the introduction of the study. Indeed, the parts coded as humorous in the comments align with the definition of offensive humor presented earlier.

In the comments, any visual content, slang, direct swearing, insults, or expressions that attack personal rights, disregard ethical and moral values, show a lack of empathy, or ignore legal rights are used under the guise of humor. The clearest indicator of this inference is the presence of symbols, images, names, texts, and nonsensical letter groups commonly used on social media to denote laughter or amusement.<sup>3</sup>

## 4. Findings

In Turkey, the placement of high school graduates into higher education institutions is carried out by the Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM) through an annual examination called the Higher Education Institutions Exam (YKS). The 2025 YKS was held on June 21–22, 2025. Each year, ÖSYM announces the results by publicly disclosing the names of top-performing individuals in core fields such as numerical, verbal, equal weight, and language. The results of the 2025 exam were announced on July 19, 2025, and the names of the top-ranking students in these core fields were publicized in the me-

<sup>3</sup> In social media language, a common interaction tool called "random typing" involves pressing random keys on the keyboard to create the impression of a laughter effect. The context of the text usually makes it clear that the intent is to convey laughter. Although random typing messages are similar, they can vary according to country and/or culture. For example, in Turkey, the most commonly used random typing expression is "asdfghjklkjhgfd" and its variations (Yakar, 2022).

dia. Among the top-performing students, M.İ.K. was announced as the first-place winner in the equal weight and verbal fields. On the same day, interviews were conducted with some of these high achievers through traditional and new media outlets. M.İ.K. was among the students interviewed. This study focuses on the content of comments that emerged abruptly on Platform X following the publication of the interview recording with M.İ.K. in the media. The majority of these comments were found to contain hate speech targeting M.İ.K., including expressions that amounted to insults violating personal rights.

To analyze the comments, a search was conducted on X (formerly Twitter) on July 20, 2025—the day following the announcement of the YKS results on July 19, 2025—using the keyword “M.İ.K.”.<sup>4</sup> From the search results, the post and its associated comments under the first institutional media profile listed in the “Popular” tab were accessed (Figure 1). The analysis of the comments was performed using the MAXQDA program. During this process, statistical data on the words used in the comments were first extracted, followed by the creation of interaction maps for the comments based on the themes and codes specified above.



Figure 1. Analyzed News and Source<sup>5</sup>

(Source: <https://x.com/>)<sup>6</sup>

According to the search results, all comments made on the main post within a single day were recorded and their texts were analyzed. Only the comments directly attached to the post shown in Figure 1 were included in the analysis. In other words, “reposts” and “comments on comments” were excluded from the analysis. Accordingly, a total of 340 posts were included in the analysis. As a noteworthy detail, the metrics displayed at the bottom of the post in Figure 1—“2K” (two thousand replies), “4K” (four thousand retweets), “8K” (eight thousand likes), and “41M” (forty-one million interactions)—indicate that the post received hundreds of times more interactions than the number of comments analyzed. As elaborated in the methodology section, the scope of the

research data was narrowed due to the impracticality of comprehensively analyzing such a vast volume of data in a study of this nature, as well as the risk of deviating from the research focus. In this context, the study exclusively encompasses direct comments on the relevant news post.

The analysis conducted using the MAXQDA software emerged through several distinct contextual processes. In the initial phase, all 340 comments made directly on the news post were recorded along with user information. In the second phase, the recorded data were cleansed of all extraneous information except the comment content, and the total word count across the comments was obtained. Accordingly, it was determined that 3,895 words were used ac-

<sup>4</sup> The search was conducted using the unabbreviated version of the student’s name.

<sup>5</sup> According to the YKS results announced on August 25, 2025, M.İ.K. was admitted to the law faculty at Galatasaray University, which was their desired program (Anadolu Agency, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Will be shared by the author upon request.



ross all 340 comments. The third phase involved a second round of filtering to remove words without standalone or contextual meaning, such as prepositions, numbers, adjectives, conjunctions, and random letter clusters. In the fourth phase, words were lemmatized (stripped of suffixes) and consolidated based on their root forms, with careful attention to

their semantic and contextual meanings within the text. During this process, priority was given to words with higher frequency counts. According to the analysis results, the top 60 most frequently used words (with the highest frequency counts) are as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. Words with a Frequency Count of 5 or More in the Comments (Top 60 Words)

S. No	Word	Frequency	S. No	Word	Frequency
1	child	81	31	eyes	11
2	study	65	32	to read	10
3	hour	54	33	question	9
4	frig (slang)	44	34	well	9
5	success	31	35	bro (slang)	8
6	human	28	36	man	8
7	looks	26	37	family	8
8	I am scared	25	38	God	8
9	comment	25	39	education	8
10	what is he/she saying	21	40	movement	7
11	young	21	41	friend	7
12	serial killer	21	42	solve questions	7
13	exam	21	43	bad	7
14	lesson	19	44	hell (slang)	7
15	life	18	45	normal	7
16	brother	17	46	social	7
17	resembles	15	47	video	7
18	psychological	15	48	YKS <sup>7</sup>	7
19	type	15	49	open	6
20	school	14	50	asocial	6
21	congratulations	14	51	lawsuit	6
22	to want	13	52	degree	6
23	first	13	53	real	6
24	head	13	54	grok	6
24	turned	12	55	work	6
25	appearance	12	56	camera	6
26	law	12	57	talk	6
27	good	12	58	lie	6
28	fuck (slang)	12	59	hard	6
29	intelligence	12	60	pity	6
30	guy (slang)	11			

<sup>7</sup> YKS: University entrance exam in Türkiye.



Table 4. Example of an Analysis Conducted with Expert Confidence Based on M.İ.K.'s Appearance

<b>G...</b>	"Honestly, he doesn't look like a normal person at all. His eyes and facial expressions give off some crazy psycho shit."
Expanding on this, many users made comments alleging that M.İ.K.'s eyebrows (f: 4), ears (f: 4), mouth (f: 4), brain (f: ), lips (f: 3), face (f: 3), hair (f: 2), fore-	head (f: 1), beard (f: 1), and physiognomy (e.g., Asperger syndrome, scoliosis f: 1, etc.) were abnormal (Table 5).

Table 5. Example of Discourse Framing M.İ.K. as 'Dangerous' Based on Appearance

<b>P...</b>	"The messy hair, beard, and eyebrows, that weird smile at the camera, the dead stares, the f...-up eye contact — this kid needs to be watched by the cops on a regular basis."
The expressions based on his appearance—such as zombie (f: 5), ugly (f: 4), FETÖ supporter (f: ), dangerous (f: 3), idiot (f: 2), scary (f: 2), pervert, stupid, sociopath, moron, monster, devil, moron, imbecile, etc.—reach the level of outright insults. Some users went even further by insinuating illness based on his	speech, facial expressions, and movements, accusing him of alcohol (f: 2) and drug (f: 4) use (Table 6). Calls from certain users urging authorities to intervene illustrate the extent of digital lynching culture—or in other words, the ignorance and cruelty of offensive humor culture.

Table 6. Discourse Claiming M.İ.K. Has a Psychological Disorder

<b>....</b>	"There's something wrong with this p..., he's got the potential to turn into a serial killer."
<b>Q...</b>	"These guys usually pop 2–3 different pills — prescription ADHD meds — just to focus."

As illustrated in Table 1, the word-based analysis provides a clear picture of the use of offensive humor in the comments. Indeed, the example comment sentences above confirm this observation. Consequently, offensive humor operates at a more advanced level when examined in full sentences. Upon reviewing the comments, it is evident that the constructed sentences contain hate speech—including explicit profanity, insults, and degradation—without any restraint (Table 7).

Table 7. Examples of Offensive Humor Comments

<b>B...</b>	"S... it up your eyebrows, stop flexing, a...."
<b>R...</b>	"You, f... rotten from reading, hair hasn't even seen a comb — and you're on TV. How many times is this gonna happen to you?"
<b>@n...</b>	"That m...f... g... couldn't even get a haircut from studying too much, and now he's bulls-hitting, f..."
<b>L...</b>	"Look at his face, f..., in his spare time, r... puppies and drinks their b.... you wouldn't trust him with the corner shop."
<b>R...</b>	"If everyone's saying the same thing, you gotta stop and think — it looked weird to me too, his expressions and that look in his eyes, like he's on something."

While the comments on the news article largely frame a predominantly lynching culture, as seen above, a significant portion of the comments also express opposing views. These comments emphasize that the insults and profanity directed at a young individual constitute a major legal, ethical, and moral problem. This insensitivity, which manifests as digital bullying and uses humor as a shield, is a manifestation of virtual-social decay. Furthermore, within these comments, there are suggestions that M.İ.K. and his family should resort to legal avenues against the insults and profanity directed at them.

A limited number of examples (Table 7) have been provided to illustrate the full context of the com-

ments and/or the manifestation of sentences within the framework of offensive humor. On the other hand, thematic coding was employed to outline a general framework of all posts in the context of offensive humor. This approach aimed to reveal a clearer picture through relationship density maps that highlight the semantic weight prevalent across the comments. For this purpose, codes were developed and applied to the comments on the news post to obtain an overarching perspective. The quantitative representation of the coding is visualized through a code cloud and the matrix of the coding system, as shown below (Figure 3).

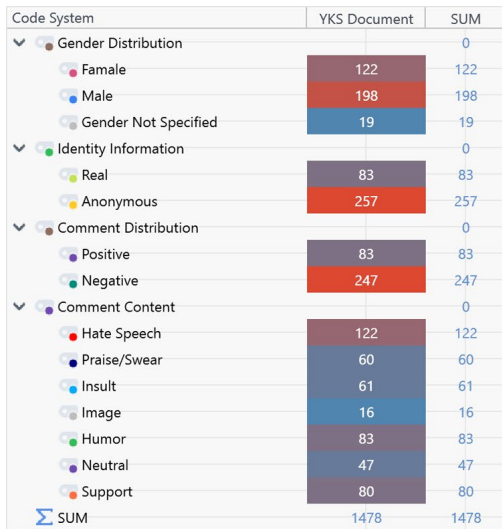


Figure 3. Code Matrix Browser and Code Cloud

At the outset of the analysis, four themes and fourteen codes under these themes were established. According to Figure 3, the highest frequency of coding in the comments is attributed to the anonymous code (257 occurrences). This is followed by negative

(247), male (198), female (123), and hate speech (122) codes.

In addition to Figure 3, the relational distribution among other codes within the entirety of the coded comments is illustrated below (Figure 4).

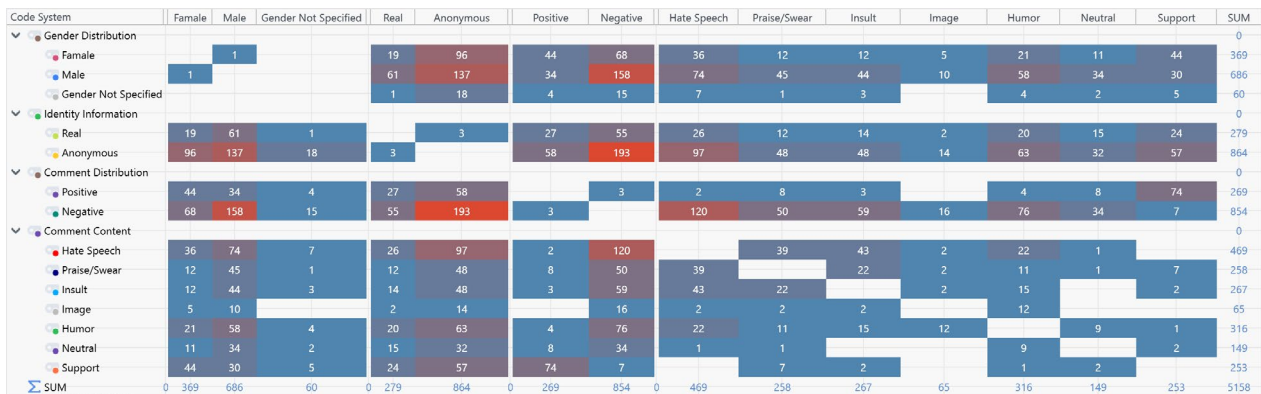


Figure 4. Code Relation Browser<sup>10</sup>

In Figure 4, the top five codes with the highest intersection/interaction frequencies, starting from the highest, are anonymous (f: 864), negative (f: 854), male (f: 686), hate speech (f: 469), and female (f: 369). These five codes also intersect with each other, revealing the most intense semantic interaction. The negative code most frequently intersects with the following codes, in order: anonymous (f: 193), male

(f: 158), and hate speech (f: 120). The second-ranked anonymous code most frequently intersects with male (f: 137), hate speech (f: 97), and female (f: 96). Excluding the male and female codes as agents, the anonymous (identity concealment), negative (malicious comments), and hate speech (malevolent remarks) codes directly reflect a distinctly negative semantic domain.

Table 7. Examples of Offensive Humor Comments

Gender	Name		Total
	Anonymous	Real	
Female	103	20	123
Male	137	61	198
Unknown	19	1	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>340</b>

<sup>10</sup> In Figure 4, it is observed that the codes for both female and male are assigned simultaneously. This is due to one of the commenting accounts being a shared account. Indeed, the profile image and name associated with this account contain data indicative of both female and male identities.

According to Table 8, between July 19 and July 20, 2025, a total of 340 distinct X users directly commented on the news post. For the majority of these users, their gender could be directly identified as female (123) or male (198) based on their profile pictures and names. On the other hand, a small number of users (19) had profiles where gender was not clearly discernible at first glance.

The most striking observation is that a significant portion of users who did not conceal their gender still used anonymous accounts (258 out of 340). In other words, three out of every four users did not display their real identities on their profiles; instead, they used first names without surnames, names of celebrities, fabricated expressions formed by adding to existing names or words, abbreviations, meaningless letter combinations, and/or symbols.

The code co-occurrence maps generated from the

coding results provide clearer insights into the content of the comments. The general code co-occurrence map for all codes is presented below (Figure 5). These maps visually represent how frequently codes appear together within the text (co-coding), illustrating the intensity of their relationships through graphical means. Such visualizations reveal the overall semantic tendencies of the coded text. In coding analysis, a high degree of interaction (co-occurrence/relationship) is interpreted as a strong semantic connection, whereas low interaction indicates a weaker connection. The spatial proximity of codes on the map similarly reflects semantic closeness: the closer the codes are positioned, the stronger their relationship and thus their shared meaning. Conversely, greater distance between codes signifies a weaker relationship and diminished semantic association (Altıntop & Altıntop, 2024).

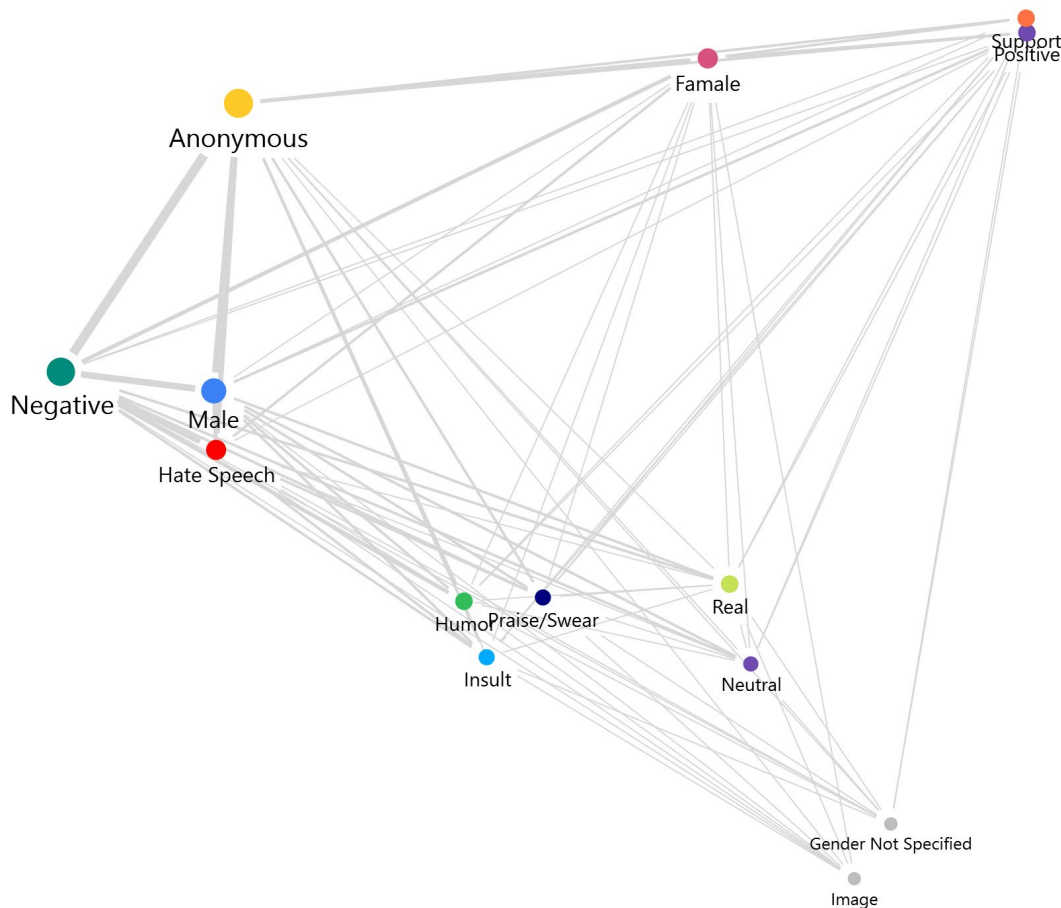


Figure 5. Code Co-Occurrence Map Covering All Themes

The colored nodes (points) shown in the map in Figure 10 represent the codes. The lines between the nodes indicate that these codes co-occurred within the same data segment. The size of the nodes and the thickness of the lines are directly proportional to the frequency of co-occurrence, reflecting the strength of the relationship. Conversely, smaller nodes and thinner lines indicate weaker relationships.

In this context, the map reveals three main clusters and one more distant cluster.

Examining the strongest “central cluster” of coding, it is evident that it predominantly represents negative meanings, containing the codes for negative, anonymous, hate speech, and male. The dense connections here mark the core semantic content of the analyzed text. The second cluster uncovers a dis-



course that can be described as “offensive humor.” This cluster includes the codes for humorous, slang/profanity, and insult, which have strong links to the central cluster and are also semantically associated with negativity.

The third cluster, which can be defined as an “isolated cluster,” consists of the codes female, positive, and support. This cluster represents the area of positive meaning within the text and on the map. However, the female code’s strong interactions with both the central and offensive humor clusters suggest that comments coded with “female” lie in an intermediate position between positive and negative meanings. In other words, the thematic domain

represented by the female code is situated between these two semantic poles.

The fourth and final cluster, referred to as the “distant cluster,” includes the codes ambiguous, visual, neutral, and real. While this cluster interacts with all others, it shows relatively stronger connections with the central and offensive humor clusters, positioning it closer to the semantic space created by these two clusters.

To illustrate the relationship between the nature of the comments and gender distribution, the code co-occurrence map covering the Gender Distribution and Comment Content themes is presented below (Figure 6).

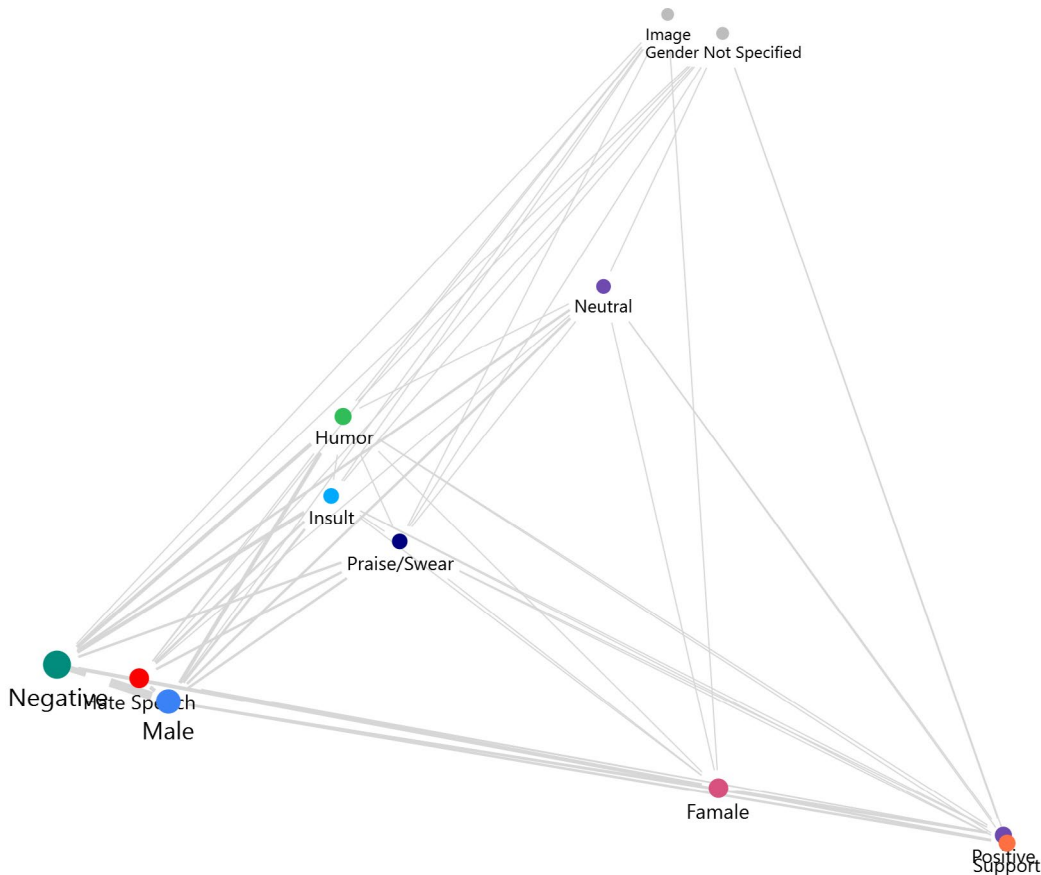


Figure 6. Code Co-occurrence Map Limited to the Themes of Gender Distribution, Comment Distribution, and Comment Content

In the limited map shown in Figure 6, four distinct clusters can be observed. The central cluster, formed predominantly around the Male code, exhibits the highest degree of intersections. Other codes within this cluster, such as Hate Speech, Insult, and Slang/Profanity, further confirm that negativity is the strongest thematic interaction in this map. The proximity and strong co-occurrence of the Humor code with this negatively oriented central cluster highlight the offensive humor dimension. Although the Female and Support codes demonstrate relatively strong intersections, their positioning on the periphery forms an isolated cluster. In other words, as also understood from the previous analysis, the cluster formed by these codes—characterized mainly by positive ten-

dencies—does not dominate the overall semantic landscape of the comments. The fourth cluster, consisting of Visual, Neutral, and Undetermined codes, forms a distant cluster with weak intersection links.

A general evaluation of this map reveals that the backbone of the network is formed by the Male-Humor-Insult-Hate Speech-Slang/Profanity axis. This axis represents the negative/critical/humorous-offensive discourses frequently co-occurring in the dataset. Conversely, the Female-Support axis, associated with positive/supportive expressions, remains isolated on the margins and thus has limited influence on the overall meaning. Although the Undetermined, Neutral, and Visual codes show scattered and weak connections, their relative closeness to

the Male-Humor-Insult-Hate Speech-Slang/Profanity axis contributes semantically to the negative context.

One of the most significant findings from this map concerns the isolated cluster characterized by positive meanings. According to the Gender Distribution theme, the Female code is distinctly separated from the Male code, which is embedded within the negatively loaded central cluster, and instead appears in the positively loaded cluster. In other words, women commenting on the news item were less in-

involved in the lynching culture and tended to post comments supportive of the targeted individual. Conversely, the language used by men contained more elements of offensive humor compared to that of women. Therefore, men contributed more frequently to comments containing hate speech, insults, and slang/profanity.

To reveal the semantic map within the comments themselves, the Comment Distribution and Comment Content themes were jointly analyzed (Figure 7).

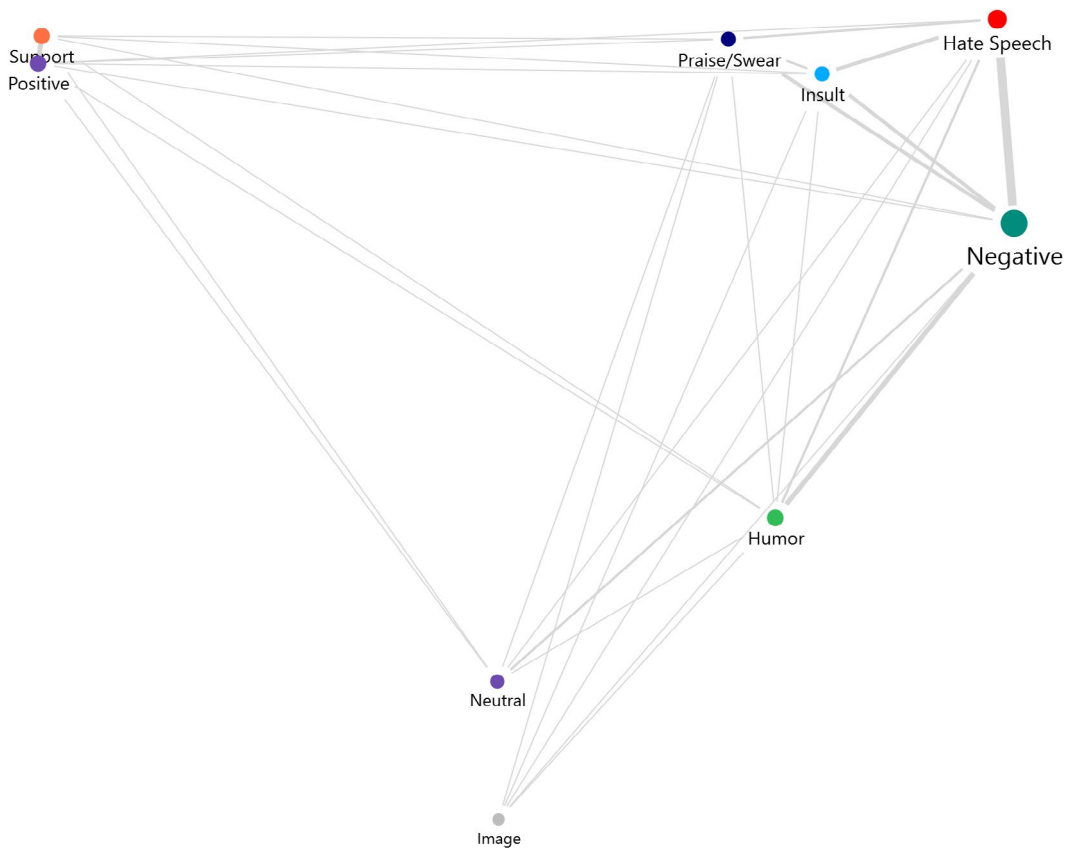


Figure 7. Intersection Map of the Comment Distribution and Comment Content Themes

In the map shown in Figure 7, four clusters are again observed. The node with the highest frequency of intersections in the central cluster is the Negative code. Surrounding this axis are the Hate Speech, Insult, and Profanity/Swearing codes. The proximity and strong relational intensity between the Humorous code and the central cluster indicate that the language used in the comments is of an offensively humorous nature. In other words, this language is malicious, aggressive, provocative, and derogatory. The Positive and Support codes form the distant cluster on the map. The distance of this cluster from the center diminishes the influence of positive semantic content within the overall text. The Neutral and Visual codes constitute a weak cluster; however, their connection to the central cluster reinforces the

negative semantic space.

Figure 8, which presents an analysis solely of the Comment Content theme, further clarifies these evaluations. In this visual, five distinct clusters—central, intermediate, and distant—can be seen. The core node of the general comment content is the Hate Speech code, with Insult and Profanity/Swearing codes positioned within the cluster. The negative semantic space, together with the Humorous code in strong relation to the central cluster, reveals the overall tendency of the comments and the offensiveness in the language used. The network connections between the Visual and Neutral codes from the distant clusters to the central code further reinforce this situation.

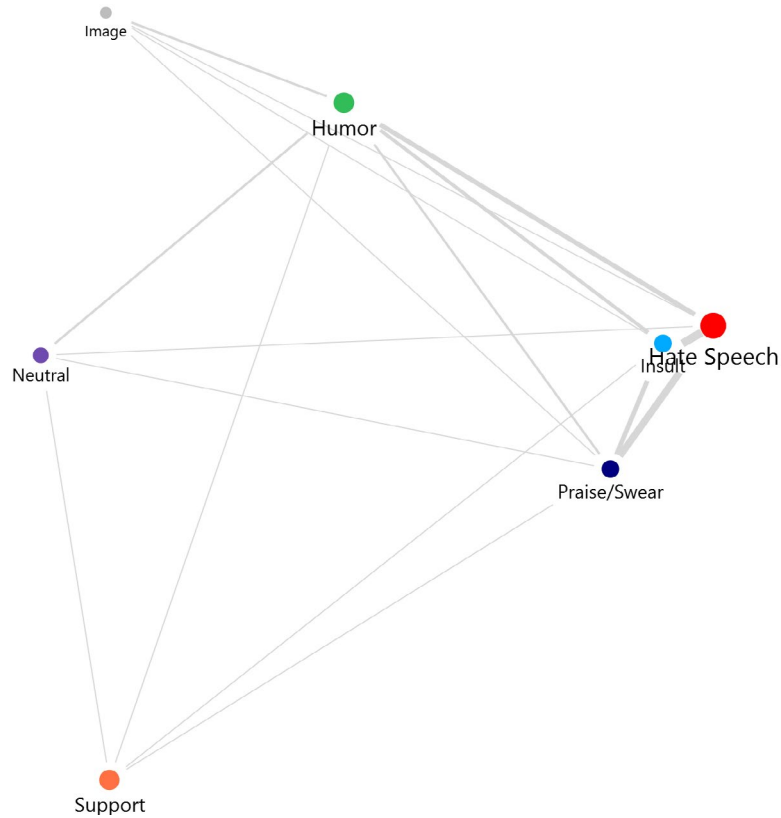


Figure 8. Intersection Map Within the Comments Themselves

This map reveals two important details. The first is that the Support code, which forms the third distant cluster, is linked to the central cluster only through the Profanity/Swearing code. This implies that individuals who react rationally against the offensive humor language and thus the digital lynching behavior have expressed their responses using language that includes profanity and swearing. In other words, to defend and support the person subjected to the lynching, an opposing offensive language has been used against those who carry out the lynching. However, as also seen on the map, this language does not intersect with the Humor cluster or code. Therefore, this offensive reaction should not be classified as offensive humor and, although it interacts with a cluster containing negative language, it should generally be considered outside the offensive humor axis.

The second detail is that the Visual distant cluster or code is linked exclusively to the Humor cluster or code. This relationship arises from the selection of visual elements attached to the comments in a manner that emphasizes their humorous aspect. Upon examination of the visual elements in the comments, it is observed that they predominantly consist of photographs of individuals captured as serial killers in real life, fictional killer characters from films, books, or other works of fiction, as well as manipulative images that have become trends on social media. This tendency in the visuals constitutes direct offensive humor. It is otherwise difficult to explain the association of the image and speech of a high school student who ranked in a national exam with these names. Indeed, the names listed in comments, whether accompanied by images or solely textual, confirm this observation (Table 9).

Table 9. Real and Fictional Characters Associated with M.İ.K. in Comments<sup>11</sup>

Name	Frequency	Explanation
<b>The man who appears in everyone's dreams</b>	3	The imaginary male figure that became an internet legend in 2006, claimed by many to have appeared in their dreams.
<b>Charles Manson</b>	2	The leader of the Manson Family cult in the 1960s, an American criminal who orchestrated numerous murders.
<b>Joker</b>	2	A fictional criminal mastermind who is Batman's arch-nemesis in the DC Comics universe.

<sup>11</sup> The names associated with M.İ.K. are not limited to those listed above. For example, actor Nejat İşler (f: 1) has been linked with an implication of alcohol addiction, and singer Teoman (f: 1) with an implication of depression. Some users who did not make negative comments have associated M.İ.K. with Cansel Elçin (f: 4), Mehmet Erdem (f: 2), and Halil İbrahim Ceyhan (f: 1) due to perceived resemblance.

<b>Frankenstein</b>	2	A fictional monster created by the scientist Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel.
<b>Richard Ramirez</b>	1	An American serial killer and rapist known as the "Night Stalker" in the 1980s.
<b>Joe Goldberg</b>	1	A fictional character from the Netflix series You, who is obsessive and homicidal beyond just being dangerous.
<b>Dahmer</b>	1	Jeffrey Dahmer, an American serial killer who murdered 17 people between 1978 and 1991.
<b>Dexter</b>	1	The main character of the TV series Dexter, a fictional figure who works as a forensic expert by day and a serial killer by night.
<b>Kubrick</b>	1	Stanley Kubrick was an American film director known for his use of dark visual and thematic elements. His films, which predominantly focus on thriller, crime, war, and drama genres, are noted for their high psychological depth.
<b>Tarantino</b>	1	Quentin Tarantino is an American film director known for his dialogue-heavy and violence-intensive movies.
<b>Godskin Noble</b>	1	A boss character from the video game "Elden Ring."
<b>Norman Bates</b>		He is a fictional character adapted from American writer Robert Bloch's 1959 novel of the same name, and became especially famous through Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film Psycho. He has formed a deep, pathological identification with his mother's personality in his mind, and is portrayed as highly introverted, socially inept, and psychologically unstable."
<b>Ted Bundy</b>	1	A notorious American serial killer from the 1970s who murdered numerous women.
<b>Saddam Hüseyin</b>	1	A politician who served as the fifth President of Iraq from 1979 to 2003, known for his authoritarian rule and the 2003 Iraq War.
<b>Mehmet Pişkin</b>	1	A person who came into the spotlight in 2014 with a suicide video in which they revealed their psychological struggles and feelings of life's meaninglessness, whose life and death sparked widespread reactions in Turkey.
<b>Cem Garipoğlu</b>	1	The defendant in a high-profile case in Turkey, known as the perpetrator of the murder of Münevver Karabulut in 2009.
<b>Semih Çelik</b>	1	The individual who, in 2024, killed İkbâl Uzuner and Ayşenur Halil before committing suicide.

The above findings demonstrate that users of the social media platform X employ a humorous style while engaging in discourse that disregards personal rights, easily overlooking empathy, moral and ethical values, social norms, and legal frameworks. Consequently, online mob culture and offensive humor emerge as interrelated phenomena that often reinforce and intertwine with each other. Mob culture has the potential to rapidly target individuals or groups, while offensive humor serves to provoke and intensify this hostile environment. This interaction poses risks of psychological and social harm. Therefore, multilayered intervention and prevention strategies are necessary, including individual ethical responsibility, media literacy, artificial intelligence literacy, platform regulation, and the restructuring of algorithms. It is clear that beyond individual accountability, systematic measures at institutional and societal levels are also urgently needed.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study revealed how the culture of online mobbing (digital lynching) emerges within the context of offensive humor on social media, which social dynamics shape this phenomenon, and which forms of interaction become prominent in this process. The research demonstrates that offensive humor is not merely an individual mode of expression; rather, it functions as a communicative tool through which social relations, power structures, and cultural norms are reproduced. The analyses showed that although offensive humor content produced and shared on social media sometimes remains within the bounds of social critique and humor, it often lays the groundwork for the spread of mob culture and the defamation of targeted individuals or groups.

The findings indicate that the culture of online mobbing is not limited to interpersonal interactions;

instead, it becomes a repetitive, circulated, and reinforced practice by broad networks of users. This shows that content created online is not merely a series of instantaneous reactions but rather a process that embeds itself in social memory and produces long-term psychological, social, and cultural effects on targeted groups. In this context, offensive humor becomes a vehicle for both individual reactions and collective mobilizations to gain visibility.

A key outcome of the study is the direct impact of social media platforms' technical operations, content flow algorithms, and interaction-promoting structures on the proliferation of mob culture. Specifically, the increased visibility of highly engaging offensive content facilitates its spread to wider audiences, thereby accelerating the expansion of mob culture. Additionally, anonymity and identity-masking possibilities on social media enable users to employ harsher, degrading, and aggressive expressions more freely, legitimizing and normalizing the culture of mobbing.

Another significant finding highlights that the boundaries of offensive humor vary across societies and even among different social groups within the same society. This underscores the importance of cultural context, social sensitivities, and past experiences in shaping perceptions of offensive humor. Consequently, the same expression or humorous element may be regarded as critical and creative by one group, yet perceived as hostile, derogatory, and exclusionary by another.

The study also reveals that offensive humor may exacerbate social polarization, reinforcing existing prejudices and further marginalizing targeted groups. This negatively affects both individuals' online experiences and the overall climate of societal communication. The persistence of mob culture contributes to the weakening of tolerance- and empathy-based communication on digital platforms, complicating constructive debate between opposing views and narrowing the channels of social dialogue.

In conclusion, this research identifies the intersections between mob culture and offensive humor on social media, demonstrating that digital communication environments undergo a transformative process with both individual and societal consequences. The findings emphasize the importance of social media users acting more responsibly in content creation and sharing, platform administrators developing content policies grounded in ethical principles, and public awareness efforts aimed at promoting conscious online communication. In this regard, the study offers significant insights relevant both to academia and social practices.

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