

# What is the funniest joke ever told?

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## Executive Summary

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No single joke can be definitively identified as the funniest ever told, as humor is a profoundly subjective experience shaped by an intricate interplay of individual neurological makeup, personality traits, cultural background, and contextual understanding [7, 11, 23, 14]. While cognitive mechanisms like incongruity resolution are fundamental to humor, their reception varies significantly across individuals and groups due to differing brain activity, evolving social norms, and personal dispositions [7, 11, 14, 26]. Efforts to find a universally funniest joke, such as the LaughLab experiment involving over 350,000 participants from 70 countries, consistently reveal substantial disagreement in joke ratings across diverse populations [1, 3, 4]. Therefore, the concept of a universally funniest joke remains a conceptual impossibility, necessitating diverse approaches to comedic content.

## Key Findings

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### The Profound Subjectivity of Humor

Humor appreciation is an inherently subjective experience, influenced by an individual's unique neurological characteristics, cultural context, and personal life experiences [7, 11]. Differences in brain structure and function, particularly in regions like the temporal lobe (meaning processing) and frontal lobe (incongruity resolution), contribute to varying senses of humor [7, 11]. For example, the right hemisphere is crucial for integrating information and recognizing non-literal language in humor [2]. Individual personality traits further serve as a "perceptual lens," significantly predicting preferred humor styles [26, 27, 28, 29]. The LaughLab experiment, which gathered nearly 2 million ratings from over 350,000 participants across 70 countries, revealed considerable cultural and individual disagreement in joke ratings [1, 3, 4]. This reinforces that humor's complexity prevents its reduction to a single, universally effective stimulus [4, 7, 9, 11].

## **Cognitive and Evolutionary Foundations**

Humor fundamentally originates from the cognitive process of detecting and resolving incongruities [7, 11]. The frontal lobe is actively engaged in identifying inconsistencies and subsequently resolving them, which is a critical component of humor comprehension [7, 11]. The resulting emotional responses and activation of reward pathways are acknowledged as outcomes of this cognitive processing [6, 11].

Laughter itself possesses deep evolutionary roots, with precursors in primate play vocalizations, suggesting a social function that predates complex language [8, 11]. Early forms of humor likely arose from observing mishaps within a group, thereby fostering social bonding [3]. Chimpanzees exhibit play vocalizations during physical contact that resemble laughter, further linking laughter's evolutionary basis to social interactions and group cohesion [5]. This social function also helps explain the prevalence of self-deprecating humor, which can signal humility, reduce perceived threats, and promote group acceptance [10]. Beyond simple tension release, mechanisms such as transgression and social boundary testing are crucial for appreciating 'dark' or 'offensive' humor, which often derives its appeal from violating social norms or exploring taboo subjects [9]. The earliest documented joke, a Sumerian bar joke from approximately 1900 BC involving a dog entering a tavern, exemplifies the enduring appeal of simple incongruity [3, 13].

## **Cultural and Generational Influences**

Cultural shifts significantly redefine what is considered funny over decades, making the concept of a "funniest joke ever told" largely specific to its cultural and generational context [13, 14]. Evolving social norms and changing taboo topics, such as religion and politics, influence humor's acceptability [14]. Jokes with political or self-deprecating themes reportedly showed significant cultural variation in the LaughLab experiment [17]. Eastern cultures, for example, have historically shown a more ambivalent attitude toward humor, often valuing seriousness and restraint, compared to Western cultures [13]. Studies indicate that Chinese participants link humor to negativity more frequently than North American participants [13, 30, 31, 32].

Generational differences also play a role, with Millennials often using sarcasm, irony, and absurdity for emotional distance, while Gen Z tends towards more vulnerable, self-deprecating, and dark humor to foster connection and address difficult topics [15].

This suggests a shift in *how* humor is utilized, rather than a fundamental change in its function as a coping mechanism or social tool [15]. The fragmentation of media and the rise of niche online communities further contribute to divergent and less shared comedic styles, as individuals are exposed to specialized humor that reinforces in-group preferences [15].

Despite these variations, certain comedic formats have achieved cross-cultural success through adaptation. Physical comedy, or slapstick, for instance, transcends linguistic barriers due to its visual nature and reliance on universally understood physical mishaps, as seen in the global appeal of Charlie Chaplin's films [12, 13]. Simple, relatable situational comedy, like the ancient Sumerian bar joke, also leverages shared human experiences [13]. Adaptations often involve softening potentially offensive material or emphasizing self-deprecating humor over direct satire [13]. The increased use of emojis by Gen Z can also function as a non-verbal cue to signal playful intent, potentially enabling more nuanced humor to be shared across cultural boundaries [15].

## **Personality and Humor Preferences**

Individual personality traits are strong predictors of humor preference. The Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ), which shows good internal consistency, is widely used to measure these styles [5, 6]. Individuals with Dark Tetrad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism) are consistently linked to negative humor styles, including aggressive and self-defeating humor [4, 5, 6, 7, 9]. Aggressive and self-defeating humor styles are strongly associated with impulsivity and feelings of entitlement [22]. While individuals high in psychopathy show a preference for aggressive humor [4, 5, 6, 7, 9], some research also indicates a diminished overall appreciation for humor, particularly the "cold-heartedness" component [10, 11, 24]. Sadistic tendencies are also linked to online trolling and a preference for aggressive and misfortune-depicting humor [25, 4, 6, 7, 9, 13].

Regarding the Big Five personality traits, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness predict funniness ratings [1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9]. For example, Openness is associated with a preference for nonsense humor, while Conscientiousness correlates with a preference for incongruity-resolution humor [24]. The preference for dark humor is primarily correlated with specific cognitive traits such as cognitive flexibility and pragmatic processing, rather than being a direct causal indicator of higher general intelligence [23,

24, 25, 20, 21, 22].

## Neurological Underpinnings of Humor Processing

A functional capacity for experiencing and responding to humor is inextricably linked to intact neural pathways that support broader cognitive functions and social skills [7, 11]. Humor processing involves crucial brain regions such as the temporal and frontal lobes, which are essential for language comprehension, knowledge access, incongruity detection, and emotional regulation [7, 11]. Disruptions in these regions, such as those caused by frontotemporal lobar degeneration or right hemisphere damage, directly lead to alterations or impairments in humor appreciation [2]. Conditions like gelotophobia, a fear of laughter, are also tied to reduced activity in brain regions associated with humor processing [1]. While humor can trigger reward pathways and potentially reduce stress hormones, benefiting the immune system, specific interventions or therapies utilizing humor for measurable cognitive or social well-being improvements are not detailed [6, 11]. Current neurological models of humor need to incorporate more nuanced understandings of specific structural and functional brain differences associated with dark personality traits to fully explain their distinct humor preferences, particularly for misfortune-depicting jokes [14, 16, 17, 19, 15, 18].

## Cross-Cutting Analysis

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The synthesis of findings across these reports strongly confirms that the quest for a single "funniest joke ever told" is fundamentally misguided. What emerges is a complex, multi-layered understanding of humor, where individual neurology, personality, and cultural context are not merely modifiers but primary determinants of what elicits amusement. While the cognitive mechanism of incongruity resolution appears as a universal foundation, its manifestation and appreciation are profoundly shaped by societal taboos, generational values, and individual psychological predispositions. The enduring nature of simple, incongruity-based jokes like the Sumerian bar joke highlights humanity's long-standing cognitive appreciation for unexpected juxtapositions, yet the LaughLab experiment unequivocally demonstrates that modern humor's reception is highly diversified. The strong correlation between specific personality traits and humor preferences, particularly the nuanced appreciation (or diminished appreciation) among individuals with dark traits, adds another layer of complexity, revealing that even a

broadly appealing joke might fall flat or be perceived differently by certain segments of the population. This combined perspective highlights that effective humor is not about finding a single 'master key' but rather about understanding and catering to diverse 'locks' shaped by unique human experiences.

## Recommendations

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Given the profound subjectivity and multifaceted nature of humor, any approach seeking to engage a broad audience with comedic content should embrace diversity in styles and themes [3, 7, 11].

**1. Diversify Comedic Content:** Acknowledge that different humor styles appeal to different personality types and cultural backgrounds. Comedy club owners, marketers, and content creators should offer a wide range of comedic approaches to ensure broader appeal [3, 7, 11].

**2. Consider Cultural and Generational Context:** When developing humor for specific audiences, factor in evolving social norms, generational values, and prevailing taboo topics. Jokes should be adapted to resonate with the target group's contextual understanding, or provide context where necessary [13, 14, 15].

**3. Utilize Foundational Principles for Broad Appeal:** For foundational humor, employ simple structures and incongruity-based humor, similar to physical comedy or simple situational jokes, which tend to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers more easily [3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12].

**4. Target Personality Segments:** For niche content, understand that personality traits predict humor preferences. Tailoring humor to known audience segments (e.g., appealing to openness for nonsense humor or conscientiousness for incongruity-resolution humor) can enhance engagement [24, 26, 27, 28, 29].

**5. Be Mindful of Maladaptive Humor:** Recognize that aggressive or misfortune-depicting humor, while appealing to some with dark personality traits, may not be universally well-received or promote broad social bonding [4, 5, 6, 7, 9].

## Limitations and Caveats

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The current body of research, while extensive, still contains gaps. Detailed demographic breakdowns (age, gender, cultural background, education level) for participants in fMRI

studies analyzing specific jokes are not consistently available, nor are comprehensive details on how neurological responses vary across these groups [4, 7, 11]. The specific ranges of scores on Big Five personality traits that correlate with preferences for different humor styles (e.g., slapstick, satire) are also not fully detailed [4, 5, 6, 7, 9]. Additionally, while a link between cognitive flexibility and dark humor appreciation is noted, whether this correlation varies significantly based on specific types of cognitive flexibility (e.g., set-shifting versus perspective-taking) remains largely unexplored [4, 6, 13]. The scale of potential online joke ranking manipulation by individuals with sadistic tendencies, such as the percentage of votes from users with high sadism scores or specific voting patterns, is also not quantified [7, 11]. Finally, despite extensive research, few universally appealing joke structures have been conclusively identified, underscoring that cultural and individual variations frequently outweigh common comedic mechanisms [2, 13].

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