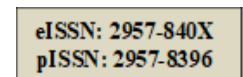


Laughing on Caste, Women Bodies and Skin Color: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Dark Humor in Punjabi Stage Dramas



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ABSTRACT

Punjabi stage dramas are a popular form of entertainment in Punjab and share a close relationship with the Punjabi people as they represent the culture and values of this region. However, these Punjabi stage dramas have become a platform thriving on humiliation, body shaming, misogyny, and eroticism. The present research focuses on finding the major types of dark humor present in Punjabi stage dramas. Also, it focuses on analyzing how the use of dark humor challenges people's self-esteem, and body image and how it humiliates the basic institution of marriage. This research made use of qualitative content analysis as a research design and carefully observed the episodes of stage dramas available on social media until reaching the point of saturation. After thematic analysis, the results of the study yielded five major themes that determined the major types of dark humor. The themes included prejudice based on caste, dark skin color, and appearance. Moreover, urban supremacy and rural prejudice were also found to be present in the stage dramas. The present research, being the first-ever study to be conducted in this field, explains the phenomenon under study from a cultural lens and also aims to contribute to the literature by providing a base for future studies in the field of sociology of humor.

KEYWORDS

Punjabi, Stage Dramas, Dark humor, Caste, Women's Bodies

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Punjabi stage dramas and Punjabi language goes hand in hand as they represent the people of Punjab province and showcase its culture (Eijaz et al., 2012). But the script of almost every stage drama follows the same pattern of mingling caste, sex, class, disability, and physique and creating jokes out of it (Saleem, 2022). It is particularly noteworthy that these dramas use the intervention of erotic and bold dance moves in between the act to make it more seductive which leads the main television channels to hesitate in doing the on-air streaming of these dramas, but their live recordings find a massive audience on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and other streaming websites (Pamment, 2017). The stage dramas mostly use Punjabi language to present the humor, often involving jokes, puns, and at some times, vulgar or dark humor. With the exclusive and excessive use of Punjabi language in these stage dramas for humor creation, it has become a public opinion among people especially non-Punjabi speakers that the Punjabis are non-serious, immoral, and people of shallow cultural values. With the presentation of obscene dance moves in stage dramas, people also believe Punjabis to be engaging in questionable and indecent activities (Eijaz et al., 2012). Contrary to this conception, the historical significance of the Punjabi language dates back to the language of legendary Sufi poets Waris Shah and Baba Bulle Shah. Unfortunately, in the present scenario, it is becoming difficult to defend that image with the present state of entertainment being provided through these stage dramas (Awais et al., 2020).

The Pakistani joke culture serves as a window into the lives of especially Punjabi people particularly exhibiting their lifestyle, and principal views, and reinforcing gendered stereotypes and patriarchal views through dense jokes (Khan et al., 2020). The kind of dark humor being presented in the theatre set involves making fun of individuals by hitting their self-esteem by criticizing their looks, attributes, and overall personality (LeBoeuf, 2007). This may include laughing by humiliating someone's facial features, skin texture, hair, physique, height, style of clothing, social position, job description, or habits. It can also involve mocking people by using analogies/comparisons or the use of negative and absurd metaphors. To give an idea, comparing someone with machinery, fruit/vegetable, gadget, or any animal can make the other person uncomfortable (Awais et al., 2020). The humor may also include the use of abusive language to make other people feel like an outcast, unworthy of attention, love, or respect through using different tactics like name-calling and others (Jay, 2009).

Although this is a popular narrative among the general masses that Punjabi stage dramas depict the culture and lifestyle of Punjabi people; unfortunately, the obscenity of content in these dramas not only fails to represent the Punjabi culture in its true essence but also misguides people about Punjab and its rich culture. In today's era commercial stage shows have become a hub for dark content blooming on casteism, sexism, racism, misogyny, and body shaming; hence serving as the greatest as well as most overlooked platform for promoting gender discrimination and misogynistic values. It also creates a

worry about a potential increase in violence against women due to excessive sexual objectification of the female gender in these dramas. One toxic trait of these dramas is the pattern of script used which only favors the hegemonic masculinity and brutally destroys every other person that falls out of this domain by taking the support of humor. In this case, it is a requirement to understand the basis on which the dark humor is constructed and how it is expressed in the theatre setting. Even after the immense popularity of stage dramas, there is negligible literature available on the relationship between Punjabi stage dramas and the dark humor used in them. The present research focuses on the major categories of dark humor used in stage dramas and also emphasizes analyzing how the use of dark humor challenges people's self-esteem, and body image and how it humiliates the basic institution of marriage. The present study will give a cultural analysis of the above-mentioned phenomenon and will try to bridge the gaps in the literature by providing a base for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical analysis of jokes is a great way to understand the cultural patterns that exist in a particular society including their beliefs, norms and values, stereotypes, and ideologies (Billig, 2005). In the views of many scholars who have researched the domain of humor, jokes are a strategic way to maintain prevailed gender order in society (Khan & Hussain, 2020). For instance, the concept of masculinity is forged into society so strongly that any man not complying with the defined masculine expectation is ridiculed as a female and is destined to get bullied by society members (Kahn, 2009). In general, subordinate masculinities, effeminate men who depict certain female qualities, women, transgender, and homosexuals are the most prominent target of dark humor (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In the context of Punjab, humor finds a strong link with the Punjabi language. On national television, due to the extensive use of the Punjabi language for comedy and entertainment purposes, there has developed an opinion in the minds of people that Punjabi is a non-serious language that is used only to crack jokes and also that Punjabi people are weird and ill-mannered people. Related research was done on the two most famous infotainment programs in Pakistan *Khabardaar* which is aired on Geo News and *Khabarnaak* aired on Express News, the results of which reported the use of Punjabi language completely for satire and jokes whereas Urdu for serious talks and spreading of information. The purpose of using Punjabi in jokes and comedy was described as the ability of the Punjabi Language to elicit laughter from the audience (Khan & Ali, 2016). Contrary to this argument, another research pointed out the Punjabi films of the 1970s to be filled with content of violence, revenge, rape, and injustice in the names of thriller and action (Khan & Ahmed, 2010).

Research on infotainment programs was conducted in 2010. The study used content analysis to determine the level of humor used in these programs and yielded results that described the humor used to be of low quality and based on unethical grounds. These

programs promoted humor by humiliating people's identities through name-calling, body-shaming, and using negative metaphors for comparison (Petkov et al., 2010). Related research was also done on two very famous Pakistani entertainment programs *khabarnaak* and *Hasb-e-hal* which described the talk shows to be using Punjabi Language to pick on politicians in a satirical and sarcastic manner. The research also raised points on the level of freedom given to the news channel in terms of expression (Ahmad, 2019).

Most of the time, researchers have found dark humor to be revolving around the institution of marriage as its target. A study conducted on the content analysis of Facebook jokes observed the joke pattern to be centered on ridiculing wives; showcasing how they are mostly dumb foolish, materialistic, unreasonable, toxic, and greedy. They are considered insecure and mostly the one who are spying on their husbands; while also having the presence of killer instincts. Weird comparisons of wives with Satan were considered to promote a negative opinion among people which would ultimately become a prevailing ideology (Abedinifard, 2016).

Disparaging humor is considered to be the most searched genre among humor studies (Burmeister, 2015; Maio et al., 1997; Olson et al., 1999). There are multiple studies indicating the humiliating nature of humor. For instance, one study conducted on comedy clips on different social media platforms found the humor to be targeting the physique and facial features of individuals, their weight in particular (Parrot, 2013). Another study conducted took into focus the portrayal of women in sitcoms and found out that women with below-average heights and looks were cast into negative and humiliating roles that elicited laughter among the viewers. Heightened women with average or above-average looks were given more prominent and positive roles and were portrayed as decent and beautiful. The laughter sound was noted to be more intense in those scenes where women were humiliated for their weight, hence contributing to the prevailing stereotype (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000).

The present research has reviewed the available literature on the use of humor and its link with the Punjabi cultural setup. To the researcher's knowledge, the previous literature could not explain the forms of dark humor represented in the Punjabi stage dramas, the relationship of these stage dramas with the shallow depiction of the Punjabi language and its effects on the negative image-building of Punjabi culture. The present research aims to bridge the above stated gap in literature.

3. METHODS

3.1 Study Design

Research design is like a roadmap that carries all the information on how to conduct a study. It is considered the main infrastructure of the whole research procedure (Akhtar, 2016). Qualitative and quantitative research are different from each other in the philosophical base, research conducting steps, and flexibility. The former provides more

room for flexibility and change according to the scenario whereas the latter is rather rigid in its nature (Draper, 2004). The present research is based on the inductive content analysis of Punjabi stage dramas to analyze the categories of dark humor being used in these dramas. Content analysis is such a method for researching which uses the researcher's observation skills to understand patterns present in the data (Krippendorff, 1980; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Sandelowski, 1995). The purpose of using inductive content analysis is to observe such data on which very little or no research has been present before, making it quite a challenging procedure (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Kyngäs, 2020).

3.2 Study population

The Study population contains a small part of the entire population under study that is representative of the whole sample and the results from which are going to be generalized on the entire population of a particular context (Byrne, 2001; Draper, 2007; Mason, 2017). The present research considered all the Punjabi stage dramas aired on any media platform as its study population. To make the research more updated on Punjabi culture, the sample was shortlisted to those dramas that were aired in the recent decade.

3.3 Study Sample and Data Collection

The perfect size of a study population in a qualitative study entirely depends upon the research questions and objectives (Marshall, 1996). In the present research, data was collected until reaching the point of saturation- when no more new information was received from the data collection procedure. The researcher collected data from 10 different stage dramas streamed on different channels and in different years. The sampling strategy for collecting data was carefully selected considering the research paradigm i-e ethnography, phenomenology, case study, etc to figure out the attached meaning people give to their everyday experiences (Sandelowski, 1993). The present study used a purposive sampling strategy to carefully select those stage dramas that were up-to-date and representative of the population. The inclusion criteria included those dramas with at least 100,000 views, 60 minutes in length, and are minimum of 5 years old to keep the data contemporary.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure is the crucial step of conducting research which leads the research towards completion. It explains the phenomenon by carefully analyzing the data collected in the form of words, images, videos, gestures, body language, and expressions through inductive content analysis (Chamberlain et al., 2003). The present study used inductive content analysis and thematic analysis to create themes by dividing the data into categories and then extracting subcategories and themes out of them. The unit of analysis was a laughing track/sound at the end of humorous lines (Awais et al., 2020). The overall purpose was to explain the pattern of dark humiliating humor used in Punjabi stage dramas.

4. STUDY FINDINGS

The demographics of the representative sample is explained in the table 4.1 below. Ten dramas were used for content analysis after which the point of saturation was achieved. The dramas were fulfilling the inclusion criteria that the present research mentioned. All of the dramas were at least an hour long, had more than 100,000 views, and were not older than 5 years. Each drama circled a different plot. But most dramas like *Baba Takka Sain*, *Sharmilay Nain*, and *Shadi mere yaar ki* revolved around the themes of infertility and unsatisfied spouses. Other dramas circled other different storylines.

Table 4.1: Demographics of the sample under study

Sr no.	Name of Drama	Release Year	Duration	Watch Count (Youtube)
1	Chakh Le Angoor	2023	69 minutes	143,431
2	Lo Phir Aagye	2023	68 minutes	496,927
3	Sharmilay Nain	2023	80 minutes	124,506
4	Baba Takka Sain	2022	81 minutes	1,022,299
5	Deewanay Huye Paagal	2022	80 minutes	484,987
6	Shadi Mere Yaar ki	2021	78 minutes	1,350,759
7	O Vekh Chiri	2021	86 minutes	1,343,170
8	Dil Thagdi	2020	104 minutes	1,200,279
9	Dhilay Ashiq	2019	80 minutes	1,776,154
10	Seeti Bajay Gi	2018	88 minutes	2,287,841

4.1 Themes under Dark Humor:

The content analysis of the present research yielded six themes as presented in table 4.2 under the category of dark humor in Punjabi stage dramas. The themes are as follows:

1. Casteism
2. Humiliating the Skin Color
3. Appearance Shaming
4. Urban Supremacy

Table 4.2: Major categories found under dark humor through the analysis of the study sample

Themes	Categories	Subcategories
Construction and expression of dark humor	Laughing on Caste	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stereotypes about certain castes 2. Prejudice against lower castes 3. Popular opinions about lower castes
	Hatred towards Brown	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People with dark skin shades are scary 2. A dark complexion is pitiable 3. Black color is a curse 4. Dark people are untouchable
	Appearance Shaming	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mocking the Face 2. Abusing 3. Humiliating the physique
	Urban Supremacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rural women have no sophistication 2. A liberal woman allows men to touch her

4.1 Laughing on Caste

The practice of caste prejudice is seen as prevalent in Punjab where respect, status, and value from society members vary from caste to caste (Shah et al., 2011; Khizar, 2023). People of higher caste consider themselves superior to the lower caste members. There are certain stereotypes attached to different castes as well as explained below:

4.1.1 Stereotypes about certain castes: The *Sheikhs* were depicted in the drama to be very tightfisted as represented in one of the dramas:

“Are you watching this sheikh sahib? A beggar once asked him for some money because he had no money to put elastic in his waistband. He gave him chewing gum to use as an elastic”

In another episode, this stereotype was delivered using the following humorous example: *“The sheikh of our street died while talking on a phone call because he suddenly realized he hadn’t subscribed to the call package.”* In another episode, *Araiya* caste was also mentioned as tightfisted but it was used only once which was considered more of a contextual act than a pattern.

4.1.2 Prejudice against lower castes: The Punjabi stage dramas also represented the division of castes as lower or upper. For instance, *Kamboh, Rajput, Gujjar, and Jutt* are considered upper castes whereas *Julahay, Naai/barber and Mochi* castes are considered lower castes as explained by previous literature as well (Shah et al., 2011). In the present research, the upper caste members are shown behaving rudely with lower caste members to whom the audience laughs too.

For instance, in one scene a member of the upper caste says this about a member of the lower class: *“One should hit him 100 times and consider it 1”* In another scene, the lower caste is humiliated as *“These people should be kept at the place they belong i-e the tip of one’s shoe or they will forget their status”* The audience’s laughing reactions to such acts of humiliation and mockery simply depict an internalization of such stereotypes deep into the culture.

4.1.3 Popular opinions about lower castes: Some castes were also labeled by attaching different stereotypes to them. Such as a lower caste called *Julahay or weavers* were considered illiterate and mannerless; *Mochi or cobblers* were called greedy and hasty for money; and *Naai or barbers* were tagged as mean and rough with their manners in their everyday dealings.

4.2 Hatred toward Brown Skin:

4.2.1 People with dark skin shades are scary: The results from the present research reported that dark skin complexion was represented as something to get scared of as represented in one of the stage dramas where one character is ridiculing the other black-colored character as:

This man asked his father to sleep while facing him as he gets scared at night. His father replied, “Do you want me to stay scared the whole night? You have a face like a burnt frying pan”

In another scene, one character berates the dark-colored character by saying *“Stupid! How many times have I asked you to not stand near me? I thought Doom’s Day had arrived”*.

4.2.2 Black skin color is pitiable: In the stage dramas, people were consoled for being

dark or people would sympathize with their spouses for the dark colors of their partners. One character described the grim situation:

“One night, robbers broke into this house, and by looking at them they stopped the robbery and gave them a prescription for skin whitening creams”.

In another scene, a fair woman was consoled for her dark husband by saying: *“Tsked! (Exclamation of disdain) I can just wonder and pity on you sister! What did you do to deserve this man?”*

4.2.3 Black color is a curse: In Punjab, people would label a person as cursed if he/she is dark-colored. People would also sympathize with the partner and consider it a curse to be the spouse of a dark-colored man as represented in one of the scenes:

“I am sure you have committed a great sin, the punishment of which is this (dark-skinned spouse). Give it a thought if you have ever been disrespectful to your parents or grandparents. I can’t seem to find any other explanation!”

In another drama, the dark man was seen ridiculing himself by saying: *“I can spoil the day of a black cat if it crosses me”* (Heavy laughter)

4.2.4 Dark people are untouchable: Another shocking aspect was the perception that dark people are dirty and untouchable as manifested in one of the stage dramas:

(A dark-complexioned man optimistically takes out his hand for *Salam* (a Muslim greeting) and the other person replies: *Keep the distance, you moron! I still have to offer my Juma prayer. You will make me unhallowed too.*

In another scene, a dark-colored cook is treated in such a demeaning manner by the other character: *“I will sue you all! All this time I have been eating meals that this loathsome man was preparing. I cannot even stand his sight, eating meals from his hand is unquestionable!”*

4.3 Appearance Shaming:

4.3.1 Mocking the face: Making humor by mocking one’s face or facial features was one of the most prominent themes of Punjabi stage dramas. Comparing the face/features with different ridiculing objects or using different metaphors was recorded. To give an idea following terms were used: *“Look at his face, it’s like a dog accidentally gets hit with a wall”* or sentences like *“It’s the same thing, looking at his face or looking at the leftover soap in washroom.”* In one scene the character insults the face by saying: *“Engineers made him sit in front to look at the face and created lemon squeezing machine.”* In one scene, the character mocks himself by narrating a story about how his face was ridiculed: *They showed me an iron’s flat side and said*

it's your face."

4.3.2 Abusing: The male characters in stage dramas were recorded to be excessively using abusive words and phrases. Some of these were *Haram-zada* (son from an illegal relationship), *a Rat*, *Saleya* (a person considered stupid, ill-mannered, and ignorant), *Dried up mice*, and *Pisti Kutti* (Dwarf bitch!).

4.3.3 Physique shaming: Ridiculing a person for being fat/slim or long/short heightened was also an observed pattern in stage dramas. Those women who possessed sturdy bodies were called out with different names such as *Sanda* (a bull), *John Cena*, *Mard* (a masculine), and *Undertaker* (a famous wrestler). Moreover, heightened female characters were mocked by saying *"Every time I look at your height, my opinion gets stronger that you will produce a calf in place of a human"*

Likewise, fat/slim people were also a target of humor in Punjabi stage dramas. For instance, a lean person was targeted as *"You want to assess her health? He lifted a cup of tea and went straight into a coma"* and sentences of self-criticism such as *"The police had to find me for 40 minutes after hitting me with a slipper. I was stuck beneath the slipper"* followed by heavy laughter from the audience. In contrast, the fat person was fat-shamed for his healthy body by giving remarks such as *"His parents refused to give birth to another baby after him because their bodies were left with nothing to create another"* (heavy laughter)

4.4 Urban Supremacy:

4.4.1 Rural women have no sophistication: Another theme that originated from the content analysis of stage dramas was urban bias or hate toward rural people and lifestyle. The characters were shown fantasizing and appreciating the urban people considering them sophisticated and modern whereas a simple disdain from rural people was noted by the behavior of the characters. One actor was seen staring at the body of some women shown to be from an urban area while saying *"I am in awe of how beautifully these women walk. Why would the women from my village walk like they are mentally unstable?"* (*While imitating a handicapped person*). In another scene, the male character expresses his hatred by saying *"I don't want to marry that **Pendu!** (A girl from a village with no fashion sense)"*

4.4.2 A liberal woman allows men to touch her: One most common misconception represented about women from urban areas was that they are liberal and do not bother being touched casually by random people. To give an idea, one male character puts his arm around the shoulder of a woman (shown to be very modern) and in response, the woman hesitates/shudders to which the male character says *'I perceived you as a liberal/broad-minded lady. Aren't you?'*

5. DISCUSSION

The present research was focused on analyzing how dark humor is created and expressed in Punjabi stage dramas and how represents the culture of Punjab. Moreover, it also focused on discussing how Punjabi stage dramas humiliate the basic institute of marriage through their dark humor. The study yielded five themes: Casteism, the humiliation of skin color, rural setup and body shaming. For the people of Punjab, Punjabi stage dramas provide entertainment and humor to especially the middle class. The humor used to be very family-friendly until 2000 after which it transformed into a rather vulgar part of the entertainment, thriving on bodies, sexualities, humiliation, and explicit comedy (Bilal, 2018). In addition to providing entertainment to Punjabi people, these dramas also serve to be a representation of Punjabi culture. Moreover, excessive usage of the Punjabi language for these jokes and puns has created a facade where Punjabi is considered a non-serious language, ultimately making Punjabis look like non-serious and ill-mannered people as well (Bashir et al., 2022).

The present research explained through content analysis how caste is a prominent factor around which humor in Punjabi stage dramas is shaped. The dark humor has targeted lower castes by humiliating their customs and values using words or gestures as a weapon. Such a related study conducted on the Pakistani infotainment program 'Khabardaar' aired on national television yielded similar results where linguistic and ethnic minorities were particularly targeted by the use of satirical and demeaning humor (Khan & Ali, 2016). This pattern also represents a situation of powerlessness among minorities and the reinforcement of this system through dark humor (Longo, 2010). The pattern of demeaning minorities was also reported in another study conducted in a Punjabi village where the humor created by humiliating lower caste (*Kammi, Musalli, Mirasi, Churha, and Kumhar*) - their culture and the way of living turned out to be most enjoyed genre of humor (Gazdar, 2007). These humor creators didn't hesitate even during the critical tenure of covid-19 pandemic, for instance, the study reported that the sheikh caste was mocked for being so tightfisted that they were using their shirts to cover their faces instead of buying masks (Khan et al., 2020); the results of which are consistent with the present research.

In addition to this, the present research also found skin color to be a major humor-creating factor in stage dramas. The culture of mocking dark-colored people for their skin tone in the scripts of stage dramas represented the region of Punjab as being obsessed with white skin colors, ultimately making it a standard of beauty there. Dark-colored characters were severely ridiculed and targeted in the stage dramas to the point of labeling them untouchables. This practice was not confined to stage dramas only, rather it was also utilized in comedy programs on national television as suggested by the previous literature. To give an idea, a dark and bald character in an infotainment program's set was called a punishment for the audience (Khan & Ali, 2016). This practice was not just confined to Pakistan, but India as well. Many Bollywood and Tollywood movies were observed casting dark-colored characters just to create a humor element in the movies as well as

promoting positive characters as fair-colored, beautiful, and friendly; hence promoting and reinforcing this belief (Deshpande, 2006). Even in Western countries Muslim students were targeted for their skin color and dressing sense in educational institutes (Chaudry, 2021).

Furthermore, hitting someone's self-esteem by targeting the body and facial features was also recorded as a way to create humor in Punjabi stage dramas. Comparisons, metaphors, and analogies were used in the infotainment program to create humor. For instance, the TV program 'Khabardaar' was reported to be comparing the targeted character with ill subjects to induce laughter among the audience (Bashir et al., 2022). This practice of highlighting one's negative attributes severely damages the self-image of a person and makes the flaw a master status for that person in addition to inducing laughter (Steele, 2012; Khan & Ali, 2016; Adler-Nissen & Tsinovoi, 2019; Brassett et al., 2021; Van Rythoven, 2022).

Apparently, in Punjab, people belonging to the urban areas are considered liberal, up-to-date, and very mannered as compared to rural areas as found by the present research. Hence, social class manifested itself as one of the most important factors for determining one's worth and that's why people belonging to high social class or urban areas considered themselves superior and more worthy as explained by previous literature (Berger, 1987; Cooper, 2008). In addition, the Punjabi language was attached to the people of rural areas-representing it to be the language of ill-mannered and backward people (Mansoor, 1993; Agha, 2003). Similar results were yielded by the present research as well about the Punjabi language.

The above-discussed literature represents how Punjabi stage dramas contribute to the negative representation of Punjabi culture. It also discusses how dark humor thrives on casteism, sexism, humiliation, and mockery; and targets the basic institute of marriage.

6. CONCLUSION

The province of Punjab is represented by its diverse culture and the Punjabi language serves as a window into the lives of Punjabi people and is also considered a language of Sufi saints and philosophers of the region of Punjab. Unfortunately, the image of the Punjabi language is being compromised severely due to its excessive use in Punjabi stage dramas which are comedy programs performed mostly in theatre settings and use dark humor to mock others. The present research aimed to analyze how dark humor is constructed and expressed in Punjabi stage dramas and how it represents Punjabi culture. The present research used inductive content analysis of stage dramas and the results gave rise to humor based on humiliating minor and lower castes, dark-colored people, different body types, rural/urban settings, and different shades of masculinities. The present research contributes to the sociology of humor by explaining humor from a cultural lens.

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