

Sexual jokes in Nigerian stand-up comedy: a multifaceted analytic approach

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Abstract

Nigerian stand-up comic artists explore emerging social, religious, and political issues as materials for comic entertainment within their performance space and community of practice. One of the resources for comic performance is the recourse to sexual contents which are deployed to reduce apprehension around stereotyped norms about sex and sexuality in the Nigerian sociocultural context. Drawing on ethnographic qualitative data using social media skits, audio-visual disks and semi-structured interviews, this article examines sexual jokes as ideological texts and rhetorical devices that embody the struggle between conservatism and postmodern conceptions of sex and sexuality. It highlights the recurrent themes and creative discourses of sexual humour which stand-up comedy performers exploit as artistic tools for the engagement of gender roles, sexual myths, sexual politics and social contradictions within a vulnerable socio-political and economic context. We adopt social relief theory and incongruity theory of humour comprehension to provide a nuanced understanding of sexual jokes and the sociocultural inhibitions that surround them. The dominant themes in these jokes include male sterility, faking orgasm, commodification of sex, prostitution, rape, and the use of aphrodisiac. The results indicate that sexual jokes are circulating within the comedy performance space as forms of protest against stereotyped sexual culture. In this way, male and female comedians, working with the tools and ideology of postmodernism, help to satirise conventional sexual values and radicalise their audiences against normative construction of sex and sexuality.

Keywords: sexual jokes, stand-up comedy, social relief theory, incongruity theory, postmodernism.

1. Introduction

Nigerian stand-up comedy is an established youth-based comic performance genre that derives part of its relevance from the socio-political commentaries it makes through humour. One of the major thematic thrusts of this comedy subgenre has been sex and sex related issues which have proven to be consistent sources of humour entertainment. Sexual narratives with comic effects enliven young people's social networks in Nigeria. This is against the backdrop of deeper social, economic and political problems (like unemployment, inequality and exclusion) which have impacted the ability of young people to make transition to adulthood. These socioeconomic challenges have partly contributed to the emergence and growth of stand-up comedy as a performative genre, particularly among comic artists who employ their shared cultural knowledge and life experiences in comic entertainment (Brodile, 2008; Foy, 2015; Katayama, 2006). The majority of the audience is equally younger people who consume comic contents as forms of emotional relief and for the articulation of social solidarity and transformation of their social bubbles into realities. Importantly, stand-up comedy in Nigeria is an essential component of ideological becoming, and a way of gathering new experiences and exhibiting differing social dynamics (Mensah, 2016; Mensah & Inyabri 2016; Inyabri & Mensah, 2021). The performance of comedy which is usually based on situational and cultural materials enables young people to develop habitus and subcultural capital typical of their outlook in coping with tough times.

Nigerian stand-up comedy is an emerging verbal genre that grows out of the social experience and reality of the Nigerian post-colony. Comedians use their art to satirise the people, speak directly to the authorities, reveal the absurdity of human behaviour and speak the "forbidden" to the stereotyped society. The latter function of comedy is the concern of this article given the "cultural relegation of the discourse of sex and sexuality to the realm of the unspoken" (Izugbara, 2005, p. 53). Stand-up comedy, therefore, provides a platform to talk covertly about the subject of sex in a way the conservative society would not overtly permit. The circulation of sexual jokes that communicate counter-cultural norms and value categories in the society is an essential component of the comedy enterprise in Nigeria. These jokes, according to Castro (1988), usually reveal the anxieties and fears of the comedians and the society they are part of.

This article attempts to illuminate the transformative potential of humour in everyday experiences of Nigerians. Our initial starting point is by analysing how comic artists deploy sexual jokes as discursive strategies to challenge conventional ideologies of sex and institutional reinforcement of heteronormativity. This serves to facilitate the creation of space for alternative narratives on sex and sexuality to emerge. The study also aims to unpack the thematic threads in sexual humour and to look closely at how jokes are intertwined with socio-political discourses. The study aims to broaden understanding of how humour can shape sexual behaviour and communicate counter-cultural norms and values. These jokes on sensitive and secretive topics of sexuality represent radicalised disruption and reconstruction of sexual discourses in an essentialist religious and cultural landscape such as Nigeria.

1.1 Historical trajectory of Nigerian stand-up comedy

Nigerian stand-up comedy is proof of the ingenuity and resilience of Nigerian youth. The art is culturally connected to other popular creative forms such as the Nollywood movie industry and Nigerian hip hop music. Stand-up comedy in the millennium is traceable to the serendipitous intersection of certain socio-economic, technological and cultural phenomena from the late 1980s through the 90s. First, the economic crunch of the mid 80s, intensified by crass corruption by military oligarchs had led to the Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) that desperately deepened the strife of Nigerians. SAP, among other austerity measures, impoverished the middle

class and reduced the social structure to the very rich and the desperately poor and dispossessed. Left with very little options, many Nigerians had to live by their wits while many others migrated to Euro-America in search of better living standards. The emergence of stand-up comedy, like Nigerian hip hop genre and the Home-video industry, has been traced to the catalytic phenomenon of migration to the West (Omoniyi, 2009; Inyabri, 2013; Inyabri et al., 2021). The relocation has facilitated the introduction of African American youth hip hop music, stand-up comedy, and video performances of John Stewart and Eddy Murphy through VHS cassettes to disenfranchised, and dispossessed youths. Young people in Nigeria found these images to be highly entertaining and an escape from their bad socioeconomic conditions.

However, the fact of migration intersects with the revolution in electronic technology at the same period to further radicalise the imagination of a waiting generation. The fabrication of small electronic gadgets such as the camera and the personal computer (PC) offered the Nigerian youth a completely new agency for mimicry, self-representation and reinvention (Ugor, 2009, 2012). Betiang (2011) has shown that this electronic revolution made it possible for a consequent media liberalisation in the Nigerian broadcast space, which meant that more Frequency Modulation (FM) radio stations began to emerge as private television stations also sprang up in major Nigerian metropolises. This affirmed Appadurai's (1996) assertion on the transformative power of migration and the electronic media in inaugurating a new modernity. The Nigerian youth made creative and cultural capital of these new modes through their own hybrid forms of cultural expressions. Stand-up comedy remains one of the legacies of this technological and sociocultural revolution that constitutes the realities of globalisation in sub-Saharan Africa.

But we must also foreground some other indigenous cultural factors that gave impetus to the rise of stand-up comedy and gave it its unique Nigerian character. Inyabri et al. (2021) have shown that contemporary stand-up comedy in Nigeria has antecedents in numerous indigenous cultural comic performances such as that of the court jester in palaces in mid-west and western Nigeria. Their study also asserts that stand-up comedy has cultural ancestry in *Ńjákírí*, the Igbo art of mutual gibes, which Oha (2014, pp. 7-8) identifies as "an ancient Igbo lore ... a seemingly less-too serious way that ... the Igbo, would, engage objectionable behaviour" and the itinerant comic masquerade of the Efik in southeastern Nigeria called *Ékpòròkò* (Stock fish) which moves around adjoining neighbourhood during festive periods to expose secret deeds perpetrated by community members in a jocular way. However, the immediate modern precursors of Nigerian stand-up comedy are the comic performances of Mazi Ukonu (Anyago Ukonu) and Nwekelebe popular in the 1960s. Also influential in the 1970s through the 80s were John Chukwu, Mazi Mperembe and Edesiri Onakpoma (Away-Away), whose performances were broadcast on government owned UHF television stations.

Alleluia Akporobome (alias Ali Baba) is better known as the father of modern-day Nigerian stand-up comedy. Acknowledged by every other Nigerian stand-up comedian after him, Ali Baba popularised Nigerian stand-up comedy from the late 1990s when he migrated to Nigeria's foremost entertainment and economic capital, Lagos. Bringing his experiences as a comic entertainer in his student days to bear, Ali Baba made stand-up comedy a business by courageously advertising it on bill-boards, television and the bustling FM radio stations in the mega city of Lagos. His entrepreneurial ingenuity was given impetus by the Nigerian media mogul, Opa Williams, who launched Nigerian stand-up comedy at the turn of the millennium as an electronically "mediated" art form (Adejumobi, 2014, p. 178) and a "commoditized product" (Inyabri et al., 2021, p. 115) through which comedians interrogate "the ethics ... surrounding the different ways in which individuals perform their subjectivity" (Adejumobi, 2014, p. 176). It was Opa Williams, who probably first provided the stage and remuneration that also launched many young Nigerian comedians such as I-go-die, Gordons, Basket Mouth, Bovi, among many others into stardom. Today their performances have been established as one of the world's

thriving entertainment brands with a peculiar youth politics at its core. The materialisation of sexuality and sex constitute a major thematic plank in the humour industry of this unique brand of comic art which we shall be engaging in this study.

1.2 Previous studies

Humour is an important comic form that shows fundamental absurdities in human nature or conduct (Turner, 1986). Sexual humour is an essential aspect of sexual communication. Brunner & Costello (2002) describe sexual humour as a category that relates to issues of either gender or sexuality. Previous literature on the relationship between humour and sexuality has been multifaceted. Historical and contemporary perspectives on humour have focused on its connection in an organisational structure (Hearn & Parkin, 1987; Hemmasi et al., 1994; Hemmasi & Graf, 1998; Herzog, 1999; Linstead, 1985). Milton et al. (2001) report that a good sense of humour is one of the valued qualities a teacher needs to possess in the sex education classroom in Australia. They maintain that humour helped ease tension about sensitive issues and lowered level of embarrassment for both students and teachers. Humour helps to break down the seriousness and embarrassment often associated with the subject of sex as well as enable learners to be comfortable with their own sexuality. Sexual humour can also be created and appreciated in the online environment (Shifman & Lemish, 2010). This study reports how humour about stereotypical gender representation and gender inequalities still prevail in comic texts. They argue that women are often portrayed as dependent, emotional, loquacious and nagging, and are depicted as a gender that is more concerned with self-beautification, sexualisation and shopping. This evidence blends with existing sexist norms and representation of women in internet humour which also justifies the difference between men and women in terms of their social behaviour.

A number of studies (Adekunle, 2021; Diaz-Perez, 2021; Okolo, 2018, Salcudean & Negrea, 2015, among others) have examined sexual humour by drawing insights from different methodologies and analytical principles. These studies explain how stand-up oral performance provides a space through which stand-up comedians can satirically voice their perspectives about sexual acts and orientations as manifest in the respective societies they inhabit. Thus, they conceptualise society as a resource from which stand-up comedians draw their materials. Tsaaio (2022, p. 1) sums up this argument thus: “stand-up comedy is believed to derive its animating force and performative energies from playful teasing of society”. Tsaaio’s summation suggests that there are contours of laughter embedded in the oral performance of stand-up comedians. Beyond evoking laughter, stand-up comedians creatively direct their audience’s attention to society’s rubrics. As Okolo (2018) observes, stand-up comedy in Nigeria, as in other countries, has over time become institutionalised as an instrument of social criticism, mirroring and satirising the experiences of people. The meaning of a joke, always extends beyond the linguistic borders to dwell on the social, cultural, political and religious significations encapsulated in the joke. A joke only becomes fully meaningful when the audience catches the underlying connotation.

Salcudean & Negrea (2015) have examined the interaction between humour and gender. The study aligns different codes of eroticism to different comedy subgenres, and observes the effect of heteronormativity and its exploration in contemporary comedy. With particular reference to American comedy, the authors depict the social construction and behaviour of male and female characters and their interactions. Drawing on data from two seasons of “Modern Family” and their translation into Spanish, Diaz-Perez (2021) studies jokes that contain sexual innuendoes. He clarifies that one defining feature of sexual jokes that cuts across cultures is the presence of sexual innuendoes, which are ontologically ambiguous, accentuating the fact that it is the ambiguity that induces laughter. He insists that sexual humour is universal, and that a

common feature of sexual humour is the strategic contextualisation of language. Diaz-Perez's findings are consistent with the earlier thoughts of Allan & Burridge (2006, p. 144), who point out that "the language of sexual pleasuring and copulating gives rise to a great deal of verbal play and figurative language." This play with language gives stand-up performance its hilarity. Other studies have exemplified how sexist humour functions as a sociocultural site for the enunciation of male in-group cohesion targeted at undermining women's sexual rights (Thomae & Pina, 2015) and as a weapon of sexual harassment and strategic debasement of women (Okolo, 2018). Okolo (2018), for instance, queries the weaponisation of humour against women and the Nigerian society's role in providing a fertile ground for the degradation of women. She examines two prominent Nigerian stand-up comedians, namely, Okey Bakassi and Basket Mouth, and hammers the duo for using their comic spaces to enhance the sexual violation of women. Also, she lambasts the Nigerian audience for their connivance in perpetrating sexual violence against women. In her scathing critique of both the Nigerian audience and the comedians, Okolo (2018, p. 139) contends that Nigeria is still engulfed in the "irresistible impulse myth".

In contrast with the typical critiques of existing norms, humour can sometimes be used to reinforce them. In a comparative study of stand-up performance drawn from three countries, namely, Gordons and AY (Nigeria), Trevor Noah (South Africa) and Richard Pryor (America), Adekunle (2021) avers that these comedians share a similar ideology, in that, they strategically activate their oral art as a veritable platform to lampoon homosexuality and its practitioners. He contends that the comedians, through their calculated stylistic choices, register their abhorrence toward the practice of homosexuality as evident in their respective societies. These studies testify to how stand-up comedy possesses the capacity to target the full range of peoples' sexual persuasions, "follies" and drives. In this regard, our study adds to growing body of literature on the sexualisation of stand-up performance, the significance of the verbal art form in lampooning sexual behaviours assumed to be deviant, upholding sexual beliefs as well as satirising conventional sexual orientation.

2. Theoretical framework

The study adopts a multifaceted approach towards data analysis and discussion. It relies on the social relief theory and incongruity theory to provide theoretical contexts to understand the nuances and subtleties of sexual humour in stand-up comedies. The relief theory of humour focuses on the emotional and physiological aspects of humour which targets suppressed desires. The theory was initially proposed by Herbert Spencer (1875) but expanded and popularised by Sigmund Freud (1960). The relief theory is one of the three different theoretical reasons for laughter (Matte, 2001). The others are the superiority theory which postulates that we feel better when we laugh at the misfortune of others, and the incongruity theory which states that we laugh when our perception of a situation suddenly changes. The relief theory maintains that humour is a form of reducing psychological tension and releasing psychic energy. In other words, the perception of humour is directly related to the release of built-up tension (Borgella, 2016). It can also be said that such relief or release is of negative affect. This justifies the claim by Perks (2012, pp. 125) that "laughter is a passionate persuasive force that drives out negative feelings." This evidence reveals that relief of tension has positive health outcomes as it decreases stress, anxiety and even physical pain (Borgella, 2016). In this connection, relief theory of humour is concerned with the release of nervous energy, repression and pent-up emotion in the performance of comedy acts.

Another significant highlight of this theory is that it offers an explanation of taboo subjects that are rendered as comic materials. It is said to provide an outlet for overcoming sociocultural

inhibitions and reveal suppressed desires. Thus, the relief theory justifies the violation of cultural values and norms particularly concerning taboo themes like sexuality, disability and death, among others. This position corroborates McGraw and Warren's (2010) description of humour as non-threatening violation of social norms. Raz (2012, p. 68) maintains that relief theory provides a way out of taboo and a license for banned thoughts, and that through humour, the energy inhibited by social etiquette can be released and bring relief to both the comedian and his/her audience. In most African contexts, the subjects of sex and sexuality are generally tabooed in open discussion. Such discussions can, however, be permitted covertly within same-sex space or other gendered circles. Cultural taboo and religious inhibitions on sex and sexuality are responsible for the decline of research and pedagogy on the subjects in Africa. They have created a profound tension in understanding modern conceptualisations of sexuality, sexual expression and sexual rights (Balarabe, 2022). Human beings are sexual beings, hence, sexual pleasure, gratification and satisfaction are themes that often resonate in stand-up comic renditions. The relief theory of humour has also been described as the "psychological safety valve" of the individual in the society (Turner, 1986, p. 11). There is a clear connection with social relief theory and the incongruity theory. The relief theory is socially construed as the difference between what people see and what they believe to be true. This is because the meaning consumers of humour make of it is based largely on their subjective experiences. This evidence further justifies Turner's (2011) conceptualisation of the notion of humour as the recognition and expression of incongruities or peculiarities present in a situation or character. The primary function of relief therefore is the reduction of dialectical affective tension, and the release of such energy may subconsciously overcome sociocultural inhibitions (Meyer, 2000).

The incongruity theory of humour hypothesises that the perception of incongruity is a potential source of amusement (Straus, 2014). It juxtaposes a normal situation with incompatible elements to elicit laughter. The theory explains why people find certain humorous situations funny, and what makes a situation funny. The theory establishes a correlation between human perception and reality, and when the perception involves a flawed use of logic, humorous stimuli are ignited. This relationship is further established between abstract knowledge and sensuous knowledge. Muses (2022) maintains that abstract knowledge refers to the way we understand the world through human filters whereas sensuous knowledge entails the world as it exists through the senses without the filter of human reason. The abstract knowledge is more complicated than sensuous knowledge, which is the natural and unshaped way of seeing things: humour is created from the disruption of the casual chain between the two forms of knowledge. Cundall (2007) argues that within this theoretical context, humour recognition requires the perception of an incongruity. This implies that humour arises from experience of normal course of events based on individual subjective interpretation of the world that is juxtaposed in the humour (with what is at variance) or violated. The theory broadly highlights the formal incongruous objects of amusement when "some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations" (Morreall, 2011, p. 405). According to Kulka (2007), the incongruity theory reveals the connections between the humorous and the aesthetics, that the enjoyment of incongruities forms the basis of aesthetic enjoyment. The theory has been critiqued, as have all humour theories, but we find it useful for conceptualising the obvious cognitive dimensions of sexual humour.

In this way, relief theory and incongruity theory provide coping strategies and conceptual patterns for handling sexual discourses. Olin (2016) argues that they seem to give a natural explanation on why sexual themes are dominant in humour. According to this thinking, sex is a source of repression, and societies have a way of suppressing sexual communication. Therefore, people derive amusement from the release of built-up emotions arising from relaxing sex-related tension. Certain sexual contents are amusing based on incongruity between abstract and sensuous knowledge. Perks (2012) maintains that the resolution of tension leads to a feeling of

pleasure, and this is why humour is believed to improve the disposition of the audience. The present study engages the relief theory and incongruity theory of humour as safe outlets to interrogate how stand-up comedians handle potentially taboo subject of sex and sexuality in their performance space in a bid to challenge orthodox perceptions of these ‘uncomfortable’ themes.

3. Methods and data

This study adopts an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis. Data for the research were generated from the performances of selected Nigerian stand-up comedians from commercial compact disc (CDs), live performances and semi-structured interviews with the audience which indicate high levels of subjective interpretations based on experiences and shared knowledge of the comic artists and their audience. The jokes were ideologically loaded with, in some instances, explicit contents and in some others coded sexual metaphors but with implicit effects. Commentaries were categorised according to relevant comic tropes. We used thematic analytical technique to sort the data into relevant social categories to allow for flexibility in their interpretation. This helped us to identify commonalities in patterns of meaning across data set and ensured deep engagement with the selected themes (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018; Clark & Braun, 2013).

One online platform, YouTube, was engaged in the data collection orientation in addition to two live performances at the Cultural Centre in Calabar, southeastern Nigeria. Videos and commentaries were compiled and categorised into the relevant humorous tropes. Audio and video data related to the sex and sexuality theme for a period that spans six months were extracted through random searches using the relevant tags. YouTube videos in the data set were gathered through searches in social networking sites. The data corpus therefore was comprised of threads of comments, audio and video materials which constituted the resources from which youth performance of humour on sex and sexuality were anchored.

We also shared the selected sexual jokes with 10 research participants for whom we relayed the videos, audio and text materials. They watched, listened, or read each item at least twice before they were interviewed. The 10 participants were five males and five females aged between 18 and 51 years. Our aim was to appreciate their interpretation and understanding of these comic performances in order to balance a set of evaluative judgments against another. Participants were recruited based on their interest in Nigerian stand-up comedy genre and their willingness to participate in the research. This was done in order to give the methodological orientation an ethnographic bent. Open-ended questions were asked about their perceptions of sexual contents in stand-up comedies, their understanding of the explicit messages and the lessons a conservative setting like Nigeria can learn from sexual jokes. As a result of the private nature of sexual discourses, informed consent was obtained from the participants in writing for all interviews and recording. Approval for the research was granted by the Directorate of Research and Development, University of Calabar.

The descriptive method of analysis has been adopted in the data interpretation and discussion. This approach enabled the researchers to summarise data in a meaningful way to see themes of sexual humour that may emerge. It aims to interpret the main features of data and to offer in-depth explanation (Mensah et al., 2023). The approach also offers insights into young people’s subjectivities about sexual humour and succinctly addresses these perceptions. Data were coded, translated and transcribed and relevant segments and materials selected for the analysis. For the analysis, we examine the various types of humour, and their social categorisation to see the dominant themes that have emerged.

4. Results and discussion

The study has identified seven thematic threads which have been highlighted and satirised in sexual jokes contained in our data corpus. These include: the culture of silence during sexual intercourse, alien sexual culture, promiscuity, gender inequality, rape, sexual virility, fake orgasm and transaction. In the analysis that follows, we examine the politics of sexuality that are embedded in these comic contents.

Excerpt 1

Nigerian men are fond of apologising to their wives when they are making love for offences they never committed. Example, you may hear something like “Honey I’m very sorry for the war in Iraq.” (Lady O) (Live performance at Cultural Centre, Calabar, April 2021).

This joke is used to ridicule the culture of silence during sexual intercourse by many Nigerian couples. Discourses of sex are often not openly talked about because of the influence of religion and culture. This claim reinforces the position of Aboh (2015, p. 95) that one is considered uncultured, ill-trained and lacking in manners if one describes or talks about sex openly.” Modern conceptualisation of sex particularly in Western cultures allows couples access to sexual communication which can improve sexual pleasure and satisfaction. These are significant determinants of a healthy sexual life which is a part of a healthy body and general well-being (Kontula & Meittinen, 2016). In an attempt for Nigerian men to break the deafening silence that usually accompanies sexual intercourse, they resort first to infelicitous apology which was not necessary in the first instance. Apology discourse is usually rendered under certain conditions, first, there must be an act of historical wrongdoing by the initiator whose feelings are represented by the utterance. Secondly, there must be a recipient of the apology who must have been offended by the initiator. An apology often serves as a restorative mechanism to heal old wounds in the process of reconciliation and forgiveness. However, in the joke in Excerpt 1, none of these conditions were met to fulfil the necessity of an apology, and this forms one of the humorous contents of the joke. Going by the incongruity theory, apology does not fit easily within the context of love-making, and forms an incompatible element which the comedian offers as an object of humour. A counter-narrative was also suggested to justify the act of apologising during intercourse. It has been perceived as a way of equalising the woman’s power in the particular sexual context.

Significantly, direct reference to the war in Iraq was irrelevant and inconsequential to the local condition of Nigeria and the circumstances of their love-making. The war is in faraway Iraq and it is not affecting anybody in Nigeria directly and thus renders the context of the apology inappropriate. In other words, the place, Iraq, does not align with an idealised representation of the reality of their love-making space. The reference to apology and Iraq, according to a participant (Chinedu, male, 32) describes the peak of sexual excitement which sometimes causes people to say incomprehensible things during sexual intercourse. Another participant (Ada, female, 28) argued that “women love to hear pleasant compliments (popularly called “sweet nothings”) that make them feel happy; so men use such expressions to flatter, and to set their partners’ mood right for steamy sex. It can add considerably to their pleasure.” The message of this humour is for couple to share meaningful conversations during casual sexual engagements to deconstruct stereotyped norms about African sexuality. The relief theory of humour in this case facilitates the release of suppressed desire at this joke which is a bundle of contradictions.

Excerpt 2

A story was told about a Nigerian politician and his security details. The politician went to a different town and two logistics (girls) were arranged and kept for him in a hotel room. Suddenly his security guards started hearing the politician screaming: “you are killing me; I’m dying; I want to die... The security guards were forced to open the door only to find out that their boss was having sex with two girls (Okey Bakassi).

The propositional content of the joke in Excerpt 2 reveals the randy nature of male politicians in Nigeria who travel far and wide in the course of their duties and engage in transactional sexual relationships with female partners. These girls are popularly known as *Runs Babes* who are commonly associated with consumer sex for the acquisition of luxury items and materials like mobile phones, cars, landed properties and money (Mensah et al., 2022). A humorous spice in this joke is that in the height of the man’s sexual pleasure, he alerted his security guards unknowingly to the danger of being killed or wanting to die. Perhaps the man did not know how to control his orgasmic experience. The security guards were duty bound to protect the life of their boss and were left with no option than to break into the room to save him from dying. This joke also condemns the attitude of sexual partners who scream and make utterances that do not fit the context of sexual intercourse. Another dimension to the interpretation of the claim to be dying may be the effect of transliteration from Nigeria’s indigenous languages. In some Nigerian languages, the height of pleasure or hunger is usually described with the intensifier *ówòt* (kill), example in Efik, *Íná é-nèm mí ówòt* (lit. Sex sweet me kill) ‘Sex is very pleasurable’. *Biòñ ó-dòñ mí ówòt* (lit. Hunger ruin me kill) ‘I’m very hungry’. It is possible that the man transliterated his sexual experience and pleasure based on the cultural semantics of his indigenous language into English thus cognitively creating the impression that it was the experience of orgasm and subjective sexual satisfaction that actually wanted to ‘kill’ him and not the girls. The incongruity theory juxtaposes sexual pleasure (a normal state of affairs) and death (which is rarely compatible in the setting), and reveals how they cannot work together. The emerging confusion is then replaced with humour to playfully circumvent the problem.

Essentially, having sex with two girls at the same time, a phenomenon popularly known as threesome (Male Female Female) is a sexual practice that is alien to the Nigerian cultural context where heteronormativity is the dominant sexual order. This also forms a strong humorous point that elicited laughter in this joke. Such a spontaneous sexual fantasy has been identified as a safe way to explore one’s sexuality (Karlen, 1988). However, in the context of this joke, this practice is regarded as a strange sexual experiment and the politician who indulges in it is believed to have deviated from the standard sexual norm. From a conservative perspective, this also adds to the dilemma of the Nigerian politician who is not only labelled as a failure and inconsiderate to the plight of poor Nigerian masses but is now exploring a new sexual territory that is “alien” to the culture. However, the intention of the comic artist is to reveal to his audience that the existence of this “alien” sexual culture that deviates from basic sexual norms, is gaining space and appeal among Nigerian elites. In this way, he highlighted a radically different conceptualisation of Africa sexuality ((Epprecht, 2018; Fiaveh & Mensah, 2023). The Nigerian politician is projected to have amassed more wealth from the common patrimony to himself and can afford to have a retinue of security details and sleep in the best luxury hotels with many girls simultaneously and having great sexual experiments. It is the caricature of the politician who embarrasses himself that is the message that brings relief to the audience. In justifying the timeliness of this joke, a participant (Edet, male 51) maintained that this category of jokes is used to mimic societal ills and is often targeted at changing the individual’s or society’s behaviour. He highlighted the incongruity between the politician’s lifestyle and that of the masses. He further argued that comedy, in this context, is a new form of communication

procedure popularly known as Social and Behavioural Change Communication (SBCC). Participants further revealed that this joke was also a way of breaking silence during sex, and commented that the politician was equally extravagant in expressing such sexual ecstasy.

Excerpt 3

A man has two brains: one in the head and the other in-between his thighs and they function separately. When one is asleep, the other is active. It's the reason that even in a burial ceremony where people are mourning, a woman can open her legs unknowingly for a man. The brain in-between the legs will be activated. Even if the brain in the head tried to caution it, it would ask if he was the one that killed the deceased (Okey Bakassi).

This sexual-oriented joke speaks to the dynamics of male promiscuity which is not constrained by place, space or time in the Nigerian cultural setting. It alleges that some men carry their brains in their trousers which have led them into compulsive sexual behaviour. Men who indulge in this practice may see it as male-privileging ideal, that is, to be sexually active and powerful. Certain African cultures encourage men to indulge in it and sanction women against it. Others view it as an outlet for frustration and depression. This risky sexual behaviour mainly manifests in having multiple sex partners or indulging in extra-marital affairs. It is not without its attendant effects such as contracting STIs, bladder infections or pain in the lower abdomen. The joke in Excerpt 3 calls attention to this transgressive behaviour and highlights how such an indiscriminate sexual behaviour is an affront on cultural values and norms. Burial ceremonies are usually solemn moments to commemorate the life of the deceased, and for a man to exhibit such a behaviour in such an occasion is the height of disrespect to the deceased. This is because within a family setting, the living can only be guaranteed a meaningful life if they live in harmony with the spirit of the ancestors. The comic artist also uses personification as a rhetorical device to foreground the antisocial sex life of the personae in the joke. This dialogue between the two brains shows the carefree attitude of men towards promiscuity and how they have rationalised it.

The kinds of tension that are released from this joke are created by (a) having brain in-between the thighs (instead of penis) which is metaphorically representing libidinal energy and voracious appetite for sex (b) violating a cultural norm (by having sexual intercourse during a funeral) and (c) rationalising the act (as one who did not kill the deceased). These are the dissonances which are recognised by the comic artist which do not fit into the audiences' conceptual patterns. In this joke, perceptions of situations suddenly change as a result of the (re)contextualisation of the original cognitive frame, setting up series of surprises for the audience (Beeman, 2000). A participant (Tobi, male, 42) submitted that this joke satirises the way young people engage in indiscriminate sexual experimentations at the risk of contracting STIs, unplanned pregnancy, abortion and even sexual abuse. He sees this comic rendition as a form of sex education that should guide young people to be circumspect about their sexual health. The message of the joke is a warning to young men and women to put their hypersexual urge under check in order to avoid sexual addiction and insecurity. They should practice sexual control and discipline.

Excerpt 4

A young man and a beautiful girl were trying to hook up (initiate a relationship) and the following conversation ensued between them:

Woman: You are talking about a relationship? So what can you offer in the relationship?

Man: I will give you love, attention, affection and plenty of money.

Woman: That's good.

Man ...and you, what do you have to offer in the relationship?

Woman: Pussy! Pussy!! Pussy!!!

(Lady O) (Live performance at Cultural Centre, Calabar, November 2021).

This joke is an attempt to illuminate the larger question of gender equality and traditional division of labour by feminist movements and human right activists in Nigeria who have made strenuous efforts to negotiate women's sexual and economic empowerment. The agitation has always aimed at increasing the degree of agency, improving economic options and expanding the bargaining power of women in sexual relationships. This joke can be classified as "sexist" in its expressive content. While the man brings love, affection and money, the only thing the woman could bring to the table was her body which is metaphorised as "pussy" (vagina). It clearly shows bias and discriminates against women. It intersubjectively promotes a sustaining practice and provides counter-narratives to the values, social shift and ideological transformations of the position of women in the society as articulated by feminist groups (Weeks, 2022). The joke clearly counteracts the ideals of self-invention and discovery by women and highlights the social meaning of sex based on cultural assumptions about cultural roles of women who are always placed at the margins of the society. The woman's response to the man's question clashes with the mental patterns and expectations of the audience in the spirit of incongruity theory of humour. The amusement lies in the woman's desire to contribute only sex to the relationship, setting up a surprise which translates to a physical expression of laughter. A research participant (Uduak, female, 32) interpreted this joke as "a sexist representation of women in the patriarchal space which places them at the fringes of the society and marginalises them in political, economic and all other societal concerns." Another participant (Mercy, female, 35) corroborated this claim by saying that the joke is a form of prejudice against women which is deeply entrenched in the larger social environment. She believed that the message of the comic rendition is to sensitise the society to end this kind of stereotypes against women.

However, since the sexual motif in this joke was creatively constructed and rendered by a female comic artist, another layer of interpretation could be possible and which can locate the joke within a discourse of agency. She may indirectly be canvassing for increased self-esteem and the need to enhance women's self-worth in romantic relationships in essentialist patriarchal environment like Nigeria. This position can allow access to the transformation of women from marginalised spectators to empowered agents. The joke would therefore condemn the superficiality that often characterises the role of women in sexual relationships. In this way, the joke would be a source of emotional strength to such women, and broaden or develop the concept of gender equality. Women should not only be beautiful and sexy but also economically empowered. This joke draws from a range of cultural resources and is interpretable from the prism of cultural norms and situated within social and historical contexts. The social relief theory facilitates greater flexibility in the context of this joke. It recognises that poverty increases the gender gap, and promotes structural dependence of women on men. This inequity in gender roles has diminished women's freedom and capacity in the society.

Excerpt 5

A gang of robbers broke into an apartment occupied by three women aged 29, 78 and 80 years respectively. Not finding any cash or valuable items to cart away, they opted to rape the women to compensate for their mission. The younger woman volunteered to be raped in the stead of the older women but one of the older women opposed the offer, stressing that she has to be raped too because she had not had sex for forty years since the death of her husband (Basket Mouth)

This joke brings to the fore the discourse of rape as a form of sexual violence which is still deeply entrenched in the Nigerian society as a patriarchal entitlement and as a way of affirming stereotyped gender identity and sexuality. Rape as a ramification of gendered violence is a taboo subject and belongs to the realm of the unspoken (Izugbara, 2005). The joke points to the context and regularity of rape cases in Nigeria, which unfortunately are underreported. It also draws awareness to the importance of the willingness of the victim to report rape cases; if the victims do not report, the perpetrators cannot be prosecuted. Traditional stereotyped perception of gender roles have been identified usually as an elemental reason for the disparity in rape prosecution. These traditional patriarchal perceptions are seen to be embedded in culture and religion (Albee & Perry, 1998). In this joke, in spite of identifying rape as the most excruciating form of sexual assault and criminal violation of rights and human dignity, the old woman still desired to be raped because she has been starved sexually for many years. She did not mind the emotional, psychological and physical trauma this experience will put her through. The absurdity in this joke anchors on the old woman's desire to be raped in spite of the inherent dangers associated with sexual violence and abuse. This attitude shows incongruity with normal expectations in the situation and thus triggers laughter. A research participant (Queen, female, 41) believed that the subtle message of the joke is that women of all ages are sexually active though sexual desire may decrease in some instances. They can express satisfaction with their sexual lives against stereotyped beliefs and misconceptions. Put together, the joke articulates the position that older people should not be starved sexually.

Beyond the rape theme in this joke, it also highlights the pervasive incidence of robbery which is adding up to the rising case of insecurity in Nigeria. Significantly, the rising inflation occasioned by the grim socioeconomic situation in the country is threatening living costs, as people no longer have money or valuable items at home. This is having a telling effect on business returns and household income. The overarching message of this joke is that the government, NGOs and public spirited individuals should provide social security to widows. This may be in the form of financial assistance, and those of them who wish to remarry should be encouraged to be healed and emotionally stable do so. This will open up their hearts again, give them renewed purpose in life and love and usher in a new future.

Excerpt 6

Men should try and save themselves from women who say: "Harder! Harder!! Baby, hit me harder" (during sex) because they are not caterpillars, and so they should not be led to their early graves in the name of sex. Men should desist from using aphrodisiac to satisfy women because women can never be satisfied sexually. They are only concerned about the money they will milk from men. All the screaming and moaning are pretences to get more money (Gordons).

This joke provides a nuanced cultural understanding of men's sexual power as depicted in the use of drugs and reveals that male gendered power is sexually constructed as hard, strong and aggressive which are stereotyped attributes that align with normative masculine norms. Athletic ability and sexual prowess are important attributes of masculinity which have been entrenched across social life and cultural systems. It also portrays the domination of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men. However, the sexual joke and motif in excerpt 6 warns men against valorising masculine sexual power as a heroic act despite the pressure from their partners in order to live longer. Some men act out their sexual conquest in order not to be seen as weak or effeminate because such a perception would be contrary to the ideal perception of masculinity (Mensah 2021). Male virility occupies a central place in sexual relationships and in defining male identity in such relationships especially in the African context where phallogocentric ideals, power and dominance are accomplished by strength and vigour and are often celebrated

as sexual capital or “traditional imaginaries of masculinity” (Ndjio, 2012, p. 626). One of the stereotyped images of the hegemonic masculine frame is sexual competence which brings greater joy in feeling that one is after all, sexually, a man. When the natural strength becomes inadequate, it is supplemented with aphrodisiac which has its attendant health implications. The incongruity theory of humour recognises the conceptual pairing of sexual pleasure and death which do not align, and brings about temporary confusion which is restored by comedy. This incongruity is an opposition between normal (sexual pleasure) and abnormal (death) which are used to create the humorous elements of the joke.

This warning is coming from the backdrop of life expectancy rate in Nigeria in which death rate is higher in men than in women. Of late, there has been rising cases of death during intercourse with men as primary victims. The joke also exposes fake sexual pleasure by women as a strategy for extorting money from their male partners. This act translates to the commercialisation of sexual pleasure which also creates the impression that the man has been performing well. Faking orgasm has been identified as a troubling feature of heterosexual relationships (Miller 2016). Extant literature has identified sexual incompatibility and the desire to end unwanted sex as the main causes of feigning orgasm (Frith, 2017; Jagose, 2010). Faking orgasm is also seen as a way in which women exercise agency and control over their sexual experience (Beres, 2018). However, in the comic rendition above, it is believed to be induced by pecuniary motivation. Women who practice transactional sex are broadly classified as gold diggers and their economic security is more important to them than love or romance hence; they often fake orgasm as a form of sexual communication to deceive their partners about their superlative performance in bed thereby attracting more patronage. Commenting on this tactic, a participant (Nkoyo, female, 38) maintained that “faking orgasm is not always a tricky situation initiated by the woman. It may be used to end bad sex, especially when the woman is not connected emotionally.” She reiterated that sometimes a woman may not have the feeling or mood for sex but has to succumb due to the insistence of her partner, and such cinematics often helps her out. This evidence reveals that some women have a sense of moral responsibility to their sexuality.

Excerpt 7

I went to Port Harcourt for the first time, and I was trying to locate the street I was going to when I met a young woman. I introduced myself and said, “I am Mr. X, please can I meet you?” The girl responded: “...in which hotel?” (Gordons).

There are three main social issues that are highlighted in this comic rendition: the problems of illiteracy, poverty and transactional sex among female youth in Nigeria. Literacy is a powerful tool for improving all aspects of a person’s life and is central to reducing poverty (Jasińska et al., 2019). For the young woman who could not process and understand the expression, “Can I meet you?” means that she lacks functional literacy skills in English. Essentially, the entire gamut of her thought when she is meeting a man for the first time is about patronage or gratification which creates the impression that she is a *Runs Babe* (commercial sex merchant). Existing literature on this transgressive sexual practice has described it as a form of prostitution by another name (Mensah, 2020; Mensah et al., 2022; Hunter, 2002; Okonkwo, 2018). Poverty is a major driver of this sexual economy which often paints the picture of vulnerability and victimhood of young women who are usually exploited during such transactional engagements. Gaining insights from the incongruity theory of humour, the comic actor reveals the contradictory scripts that are juxtaposed to generate this humour. The joke demonstrates the desire of a young woman who is desirous of having a sexual affair with a stranger for pecuniary reason. One participant (Agbor, male, 38) echoed that “some Nigerian girls are not ready to

engage themselves productively in order to pick their bills; they would rather sell their bodies and souls for money. Bad people have been killing them in hotels for rituals. I think the message of the comic rendition is apt.”

The joke also calls to attention the level of moral decadence in the Nigerian society in which young women offer themselves freely for sexual services in order to gain access to “permissive sexual culture” that defines a new mode of femininity (Moran, 2017, p. 121). This transgressive behaviour signifies a symbolic rejection of values, beliefs and norms intended for the moral growth of the girl-child. It also depicts lack of awareness of social standards and customs that are imperative for cultural socialisation and learning. The propositional content of this joke reveals how young women are redefining their stereotyped roles in sexual relationships by initiating such relationships. Such egalitarian attitude may be viewed as sources of agency and empowerment that break down gender barriers in heterosexual relationships and challenge “sexist” norms and cultural standards. As a highly patriarchal society, it is taboo for women to make sexual offers to men in Nigeria. However, economic hardship is forcing young women to break away from established sexual norms and expand the frontiers of their femininity. To this category of girls, sex is not only limited to marriage and procreation but can be commodified to make ends meet. This is an essential source of relief in this joke in addition to the expression of ignorance exhibited by the young woman when she was asked to introduce herself. People get relief from humour when a tension-filled situation is resolved.

6. Conclusion

Stand-up comic contents are personal creations and cultural productions with enormous transformative potential to bring about social change. Drawing insights from the social relief theory and incongruity theory of humour, this article provides a nuanced analysis and contextualised understanding of some dominant sexual themes in the Nigerian stand-up comedy space. Some thematic threads are used to satirise the culture of silence during sexual intercourse, others acknowledge alien sexual culture like threesome, and sexual promiscuity among Nigerian men. Some other thematic categories criticise the culture of rape, fake orgasm and transactional sex among female adolescents. The rendition of these comic motifs provides a prominent performance site to articulate counter-cultural beliefs and values about sex and sexuality. Based on our findings, sexual jokes are rhetorical devices with different layers of meaning. First, they are versatile discursive resources to deconstruct traditional sexual norms and standards. They also attempt to dismantle hegemonic knowledge about sex and sexuality. In this way, they provide alternative platforms to openly engage narratives of sex and sexuality against essentialist discourses based on local idioms and epistemologies. Within the humorous frame of sexual themes explored in this study, comic artists jocularly echo socially constructed distinctions between conservative sexual ideologies and the modern conception of sex and sexuality. Beyond these sexual themes, comic contents also illuminate broader social problems besetting the Nigerian socio-political context such as illiteracy, poverty and gender inequality which also deserve satirical commentaries, social critiques and critical judgments. This study contributes to existing body of knowledge on the social roles of humour in reforming societal attitudes and dominant ideology about sex – one that will move sexual discourses, behaviours and activities away from public morality.

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