



The Effects of 21st Century Digital Media on the Changing Perceptions of Women's Humour and Female Comedians

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose and significance of this study are to form an understanding of the ways in which media in the 21st century is affecting the perceptions of the audience towards female comedians and the humour industry with respect to women in general. The basic methodology used for the findings of this study is secondary data research. The study will make use of the digital, in particular, two new media platforms (Netflix, Amazon Prime Video) as reference points. It has been found through the objectives of this study that women have seemed to create a niche in the comedy industry in the present times. Digital media streaming platforms have played a huge role in not only drawing attention the various facets of female humour but also the widespread commercial opportunities that women are now able to take up with respect to comedy as their professional careers. The scope of this study is to bring to light the integral aspects and examples of the existence or absence of humour as a medium of expression for women in the times of pop culture.

Keywords: Digital Media, Expression, Humour, Women

1. Introduction

Human beings are constantly evolving with respect to time and their environment. Social and cultural norms form a large part of these alterations and more often than not, are a governing factor when it comes to modifications in attitudes. When it comes to humor and the field of comedy, these statements hold true and are challenged on a regular basis. Humor is a trait that is amusing or comic in nature, and has been used to mobilize existing beliefs and mindsets since a long time. Comedy is known to ridicule moral, as well as political traditions and conventions. Expression of socio-cultural issues through comedy enables a re-evaluation of pre-existing norms and makes the transition from blind acceptance to individual realities easier to process and understand. Humour



acts as a medium to break social barriers by creating a space where people are allowed to interpret and challenge rules and customs.

1.1 The Need to Address the Association Between Women and Comedy

Historically, women have not had it easy in the field of comedy due to age-old notions of what is, and isn't feminine. It is important to understand that at the core of it, humour is just another form of using language and women being social creatures, should be free to engage in varied linguistic capacities. Women are still considered to be unfunny and incapable of producing humour, in spite of the evidence present in literature and artworks. The basis of this assumption certainly has its roots in social and gender inequalities along with the existence of traditional power structures. As American actress and comedian Beth Littleford puts it, "Society gyps' women, because comedy is seen as boys' territory...women have to undo society's 'lady-izing'." Comedy was not seen as an acceptable method of social and cultural representation by women until a few decades ago.

The dynamic between the role of women in society and the multitude of layers present in women's humour is an unsettling one. On the one hand, women are consistently reminded of the fact that they are not programmed to be funny while on the other, women that produce comic material are made to feel like social disruptors of established systems. However, with the onset of technology and social networking platforms, this gap has certainly lessened by great extents. Humour is now viewed as a legitimate mode of communication for women and female comics are given due recognition for voicing their thoughts with the use of jokes and anecdotes, which can be attributed to the changing social status of women in the public sphere.

1.2 Scope and Importance of study

The scope and importance of this study in the field of Media and Humour research has far reaching implications. By identifying and analyzing the contributing factors towards women and laughter, it is possible to shed light on the differences in speaking and performance styles in the field of women comedy. This in turn will prove to be useful in understanding the limitations of how women are perceived in the entertainment and stand-up industry. Since a large part of this study is focused on women, it will take into consideration social and gender implications from different cultural contexts which will help in providing a panoramic view into how new age media is responsible for shaping thoughts, ideas and expressions.



2. Objectives and Research Statement of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are to (i) identify and gain insight into the responses and/or behavior towards women that produce humour and jokes. (ii) to determine what is the existing consensus in the name of women and comedy by correlating the role of digital streaming media with female humour.

The study also aims to highlight the shift, if any, from humour that centres on women as the predominant subject to humour that is produced and performed solely by women and the consequences of said transition in modern society. It strives to comprehend the origins of the problems of representation of women in the field of comedy and how the development of new age media platforms has brought a change in the field of female comedy.

3. A Review of the Literature

Lakoff (1975) claims that socially reinforced differences between men and women are reflective of the variations in their language and speaking styles. According to her, women's language has a higher frequency, frequent use of intensifiers and standard forms and less frequent use of swear words. She also suggests that characterizing women's language as a powerless one is an example of the gender inequalities.

(McGhee, 1979) claims that men are expected to be the 'initiators' of humour, women the 'responders', Deborah Tannen (1990) associates women's humour with rapport talk and its focus on establishing connections and shared experiences. It emphasizes displaying empathy for others because women see the world quite differently and are more likely to engage in positive humour, such as anecdotes.

Danielle Russell (2002) highlights the skepticism about women's comedic abilities and the consequent resistance it faces. There is a persistent denial that lingers surrounding the existence of humour in women. The creation of "female" humour is considered to be too aggressive for a "lady." Russell finds that self-deprecatory humour contrasts the power-role of a performer and complicates the audience/performer dynamic.

According to M. Padmanabhan (2002), female comedy has been elicited by women writers in their works such as Gokhale's 'Paro Dreams of Passion' or Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things.' She states that these literary works have used a range of strategies to humourously interrogate the subordinate status accorded to women in society. Elements of irony, satire and parody are deployed to discuss issues such as adultery, social inequalities, and political satire which continue to be disturbing and destabilizing.



Kotthoff (2006) describes the long history of women's humour as addressing sexual and sexist topics and identified four dimensions of joking as especially sensitive to gender: status, aggressiveness, social alignment, and sexuality.

Christina Rozek (2015) through her essay, indicates that a notorious gender divide exists in humour but this may have diminished because of changing social roles. She argues that women's lack of female role models in comedy, speaking styles, traditional gender roles and humour preferences may have contributed to the gender gap and recent changes may contribute to its subsequent narrowing.

A study carried out by Tosun et. al (2018) on whether the ideal sense of humour is gendered, showed that men are perceived as the embodiment of an ideal sense of humour partly due to the lack of female comics in society. It also holds evidence on the fact that a joke made by a woman is considered to be mean whereas the same jokes, when produced by a man elicits a laughter in response.

4. The Existential Gender Gap in Comedy

4.1 The role of gender in the social connotations of comedy

It is not possible to talk about women in any space without discussing the position and role of men in a particular field. A major part of the reason why women have been considered inept at being funny is the dominance of males in the field. For the longest of time, only men were seen as capable of producing jokes and it gradually developed into a social norm. Another factor that did nothing to help this gap diminish is the way men and women have been both, viewed and treated. It is acceptable for men to show deviant behavior and engage in laughter and mockery in public spaces while it is taboo and socially inappropriate for a woman to even attempt to suffice a giggle.

The historical narrative surrounding the presumption of whether women are permitted to be funny is uni-dimensional owing to the dormant behavior they were forced to express through socio-cultural conventions. As social inequalities crept in at an escalated rate, it became extremely difficult for women to rise from the constant discrimination and indifference that they faced on a regular basis. Patriarchy has always prevailed as a symbol of authority and power and has therefore proved to be detrimental to women's association with comedy. Social statuses and traditional cultural roles have played a significant part in determining the upper hand that males have over women. It is also important to note that all of the visual or literary evidence that is present corresponding to humour, is created by men either on women, or at the expense of women. Amongst a number of misconceptions surrounding the societal implications of this gender divide, a major one is that superiority overrules the basic trait of being funny; which is why the tradition of being comic has always been acknowledged as a male one.



A large proportion of the theoretical and empirical data that exists on female comics, is examined and reviewed by men which invariably brings into view a highly biased male perspective. Men were, and to some extent, are still reasoned to be the sole producer of jokes, while women remain the predominant subject of these jokes.

4.2 The growth of women's comedy

In several studies concerning women's humour, the consensus has reaffirmed the notion that the two main dimensions of gendered humour are: 1. Men are the creators of jokes and 2. Women are seemingly entertained by these jokes. However, the jury is still out on whether the origin of this gender gap lies in early socialization or role models. It can also be argued that qualitative differences in humour arise out of gender role definitions combined with culturally-sanctioned expressions. Walker (1988), in her book, *A Very Serious Thing*, suggests that women's humour has continued to be a hidden tradition because of the sheer absence of the subject from anthropology and sociology. She also claims that there exists a widespread failure to perceive the subtext of women's humour.

Since the 1900s, there has been change and evolution in the field of comedy pertaining to women. With the waves of feminism gaining momentum during those years, a more concentrated effort was made to identify and acknowledge feminist humour. This form of humour was defined by Naomi Weisstein (1973) as "any humour which recognizes common oppression, notices its source and the roles it requires, identifies the agents of that oppression."

As years passed by, a number of women rose to the occasion of performing funny content in private and public spheres. Women found support in other women and began sharing their stories and experiences in the form of anecdotes and light-hearted jokes. This helped build a community of females who wished to relieve their tensions through the art of laughter.

5. The Omnipresent Language Barrier

5.1 Language as an intrinsic factor of gendered humour

Humans are the only species that are capable of thinking and learning while using language as a primary mode of communication. Language forms an essential part of any kind of humour or joke and the line between appropriateness and 'having fun' can often be a blurry one, depending on the type and usage of language.

Each individual has a distinct style of speaking and expressing himself/herself and this uniqueness can either be maximized or marginalized upon by others. Men and women have completely different speaking styles which have a direct relation to the type of humour used. The standard form of language is assumed to be relating to the male while *women's language* is



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separate and demarcated distinctly. “Due to the social systems that are in place, men’s language is remarked to symbolize power and prestige on the social ladder.” Myers-Scotton (1997). Researchers of humour claim that socially reinforced differences on the manner in which men and



women speak and respond, are not only a reflection, but also a fundamental causative of gender inequalities.

Women are taught to repress their expression and refrain from engaging in certain social interactions from childhood and ‘laughing out loud’ is considered to be shameful and often, vulgar. The connotations attached to traditional speaking styles have resulted in the stigmatization of how women and humour are related to each other. The perennial denotation of men’s language as holding power has consequently led to the characterization of women’s language as powerless. A majority of conversations involving women include parts of language that are diminutive in nature. In her book, *Language and Women’s place* (1975), Lakoff suggests that these elements include hedges (“well” and “maybe”), tag questions (“isn’t it? “don’t I?”) and empty adjectives which indirectly imply that women’s speech is viewed as uncertain in ideas and willingness to change or be influenced. Men’s language on the other hand, contains phrases that are taboo as well as a frequent use of swear words and expletives. The irony lies in the fact that when the same language is attempted to be used by a woman, she will undoubtedly face backlash for doing so for seeming to step out of the pre-determined language boundary. This has a lot to do with the social status of women in a cultural setting and the inherent deficit of dominance and discourse that a woman is brought up with.

5.2 Differences in speaking styles and meanings attached to these styles

The stark differences in the speaking styles of men and women are major determinants of the type of humour that is expected of and accepted by society. Women are more prone to use positive styles of humour whereas men have been observed to participate in a fairly negative form of comedy. Men’s humour is reported to be competitive, aggressive and unabashed. They are seen to make jokes as a means to climb up the social ladder by using their inherited socio-cultural privilege to increase their social status. The social constraints surrounding the lifestyle of women have inherently led to the lack of acceptance of the possibility of dominance for them as a community; thus they are less likely to engage in self-enhancing humour and are seen to produce ironical anecdotes rather than strong jokes. Most women also seem to use self-deprecation as an undertone to their humour which is indicative of the existing gender roles. By indulging in a more self-deprecatory form of humour, the female comedian seemingly lowers her status through raising the status of the audience members. Despite this, the performer continues to be in charge of the microphone; a symbol of power. The submission of power, in this case, is an illusion. (Russell).

5.3 The influence of online streaming platforms, Netflix and Prime Video on audience perceptions of women’s humour:



Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have emerged to be the biggest and most accessible online streaming platforms of visual content in the 21st century. The two media giants have carved out their niche in the media industry and will certainly continue to do so as long as the internet exists. The revenues of both Amazon and Netflix stand at a whopping \$16 billion and \$3.6 billion respectively and continue to grow each minute. As of April 2019, Prime Video boasts of 10 million users while Netflix has a staggering viewership of around 30 million users around the world. The platforms focus on providing subscribers with content that focuses both on relevance and scores high on the entertainment factor as well, in the forms of movies as well as television shows. Prime Video has streamed about 41,000 media pieces while Netflix stands at 100,000.

In spite of the presence of several other online video streaming platforms such as Hotstar, Hulu, HBO Now, etc., Prime Video and Netflix continue to dominate the industry since their inception in 2005 and 1997 respectively. They are best known to feature top grossing shows such as ‘Black Mirror’, ‘13 Reasons Why’, ‘Orange is the New Black’, ‘The Crown’, ‘The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel’, ‘One Mississippi’, etc. that vary in genres as well as viewer age groups. Prime Video and Netflix have both created ‘originals’ as of May 2019 which are independently directed and broadcasted by the companies themselves. These original content pieces seek to provide the users with fresh, new-age content primarily emphasizing on pop-culture while some are solely dedicated to discussing socio-cultural issues that the 21st century faces. Netflix and Prime Video’s global strategy is quite impressive to note as the two media platforms showcase both, programs that target a more worldwide audience such as ‘The Office’ and ‘Friends’ as well as several country specific documentaries and stories such as ‘Period. End of Sentence’ and ‘Kim Jong Un: The Unauthorised Biography.’

For the millions of people who consume content through online video streaming platforms each day, especially through Netflix and Prime Video, it comes as no surprise that the mindsets of these audiences are shaped by a large percentage by these mediums. The field of female comedy is also no exception to this fact. The kind of programs and content that is broadcasted through these two competitors has had a considerable impact in the change in perceptions women’s humour. Female comedy has certainly seen a shift in terms of ‘social appropriateness’ as well as ‘socio-cultural diversity’ thanks to the way new media depicts these ideas.

5.4 Subjects explored and their meaning in a socio-cultural context with respect to comedy:

Since these streaming platforms largely act as multinational entertainment storytellers, it is imperative to understand the kind of content that they are willing to put out and the people involved in these programs. Female comedy has grown not just as a concept, but also as a field and most audiences of the 21st century seek to receive comic content through the means of digital media. This paper will discuss the major female-centric comedy programs as of May 2019 on both Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.



Netflix: There are currently a total of 25 female stand up programs on Netflix. These include: Growing and Leather Special by Amy Schumer, Freezing Hot, Elder Millennial and Confirmed Kills by Iliza Shlesinger, Baby Cobra and Hard Knock Wife by Ali Wong, Just Keep Livin' and I'm Gonna Die Alone by Jen Kirkman, In Trouble by Katherine Ryan, Relatable by Ellen DeGeneres, A Speck of Dust by Sarah Silverman, I Could 'a been your Cellmate by Mo'nique, Not Fancy by Anjelah Johnson and others encompassing women from all ages and cultural backgrounds.

The type of humour used by a majority of these female comedians is self-depreciating which can be traced back to the differential behaviours depicted by male and female comics. It is important to note here that a lot of the topics chosen by these women surround the very issues that have made their professional life difficult, such as hierarchical systems and patriarchy that surrounds the comedy industry even today. As Amy Schumer says, 'I wish we were raised more like men', it is clear that these women have not had it easy while entering the sphere of media and comedy. Relationships and dating seem to be another notable subject that is not only explored but analysed critically by female comics and enjoyed thoroughly by what looks like a largely female audience for most of these live shows. A number of performers also engage in creating characters and voice modulations, something that is not as prominent in the world of male humour. Iliza Shlesinger is an accurate example of the above fact as she doubles as a version of herself under the influence of alcohol and shifts constantly between the two personalities on stage. A lot of the older women artists indulge in jokes relating to everyday subjects such as marriage, pregnancies, finances and are applauded for scoring high on the 'relatability' factor. Women from varied cultures are now taking up comedy as a way to interact and make people aware of the conflicts that exist due to diversity at all levels. These artists also seem to be actively working towards building a reformed social identity by breaking the preconceived notions. Ali Wong, a famous Chinese-Vietnamese comedian talks about the stereotypes that are attached with Asian cultures and third world countries. She also talks about the financial freedom and responsibilities that come with becoming a famous female comedian in a foreign country. Such stories strike a chord with the audience not only because of how funny they may be but largely because of the fact that most of these are personal experiences faced by women all over the world. Jen Kirkman in her show talks about the stigmas associated with women who are unmarried after the age of 30 and describes how she laughed her way through her mid-20s and raging family. Artists that are mothers often joke about the differences in setting a standard between a good father and a good mother, they also discuss the 'shame' that comes with being a working mother even in modern times. A clear difference can be seen in female comedy as issues such as traditional gender roles, menstruation, and sexual harassment are widely discussed. This highlights a growing need for more information and awareness surrounding these topics. Most of the female comics indulge in exhibiting various emotions which are said to be 'typical of women.'



Prime Video: Prime Video currently has only 2 major shows depicting female humour; The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel and The Mindy Project.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel is the top grossing female comic show of the 21st century and traces the journey of a Jew housewife in the 50s and her career in comedy. It brings to light several issues concerning the Jews as a community as well as the limited roles Jew women were not only expected, but commanded to play in their daily lives. The protagonist is played by Rachel Brosnahan and the series has been critically acclaimed for its storyline and direction. The show focuses on the intricacies of being a ‘funny woman’ and highlights issues such as racism and sexism widely. The family show is set in a time when it was unthinkable for a woman to work outside of the house, let alone in downtown pubs and bars. In her book, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, Linda Mizejewski addresses the problem that many female comedians face: the presentation of the physical self. Women have been conventionally praised more for their physical appearance instead of their performances. The show highlights this through the character of Sophie Lennon, played by Jane Lynch. Sophie does not let any form of sex appeal overshadow her stand up skills as she dresses up in unflattering clothes serving as a gimmick to get praise from the audience. The show serves as an excellent example of the challenges faced by female comics in the backdrop of a setting that is kinetic and full of banter, which makes it more than just a feel-good-show.

The Mindy Project stars Mindy Kaling, an American comic and actress. The show revolves around the life of an Indian-American doctor in modern New York. It highlights instances where coloured women are seen in positions of influence and power and the show is a reference point for the transitions that women of colour go through in professional and personal settings. It navigates through the life of Mindy and the ‘humorous’ interactions she has with the American society through subtle indications of racism as well as gender inequalities. It has been acclaimed for its production value and character developments.

6. Conclusion

In an age where there is an abundance of political unrest, war threats and social revolts between different groups of society, a number of people are turning to comedy more than ever to seek relief in the form of laughter. Female comedians continue to deal with overcoming societal prohibitions along with creating material that provides a female-centric narrative using assertion and rhetoric. It is becoming increasingly important for influential media platforms such as Netflix and Prime Video to showcase what the audience wants to watch rather than what the producers wish to produce with respect to profits. While digital media continues to release female stand up specials, the numbers are still negligible compared to the plenitude of male comic shows. The reduced percentages of successful female comedians even in the age of media is a clear indication of the need to make both, producers and receivers of content, aware of the importance of women



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performers on a public platform. This indicates that little has changed with respect to the gender gap in the comedy industry.

Although, the recognition that women can be funny has been integrated into society, progress is still to be made regarding the perceptions of women as comedians as the position of power and authority associated with the field still proves to be problematic for the performers. The presence of women in the field of humour is still driven to some extent by the male ideals of a woman's role in society. This not only hampers the generation of authentic content but is also seen as a limiting view of their physical persona.

To summarise, the rise of female comedians serves as hope for several other women trying to make it to the industry. A major challenge that female comics will continue to face is the sheer resistance of the masses to accept their line of work due to misattributions of a woman's role that are deeply embedded in people's mindsets. However, the rampant usage of media across age groups and genders is successfully building a large following of female comics. It is now not considered impossible for women to consider comedy as a potential career choice. The role of media has definitely been able to bring a paradigm shift in the association of humour with women as an increasing number of people spend a considerable amount of time idolising the content that they are exposed to and consumers of. As long as women are able to push and work against society's prejudiced notions of humour by using digital media and the internet as a tool, women's humour will be viewed as a true art form.



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