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Perceptions of sexist humour on Kenyan stand-up comedy: Insights from the Churchill Show

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Abstract

This paper investigates how different audience demographics interpret verbal sexist humour on *The Churchill Show*, a leading Kenyan stand-up comedy program broadcast on TV47. Employing Norman Fairclough's sociocultural approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study delves into audience perceptions of humour that reflects gender biases, stereotypes, and power dynamics. The analysis draws on data collected through focus group discussions, where participants responded to eight selected excerpts of comedic content from nine episodes. The findings highlight diverse audience reactions, ranging from laughter and acceptance to unease and criticism, shaped by demographic factors such as age, gender, and cultural orientation. By analyzing these varied responses, the study sheds light on how sexist humour both reinforces and challenges prevailing gender narratives in Kenyan society. These insights contribute to broader discussions on the societal implications of humour and its role in shaping public attitudes toward gender.

Keywords

audience engagement, discourse analysis, gender dynamics, humour studies, Kenyan comedy, societal stereotypes

Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in shaping the delivery and perception of verbal sexist humor, which reflects societal norms, values, and power dynamics (Chilton, 1988; Davies, 2008). Verbal sexist humor often perpetuates gender stereotypes or mocks individuals based on gender, raising important questions about its impact on gender relations and cultural attitudes toward masculinity and femininity (Attardo, 2001). This type of humor is particularly relevant in stand-up comedy, a form that serves as both entertainment and social commentary, providing insights into contemporary issues through satire, irony, and wit (Attardo, 2001; Martin, 2007). In Kenya, *The Churchill Show* has emerged as a popular platform blending humor and cultural insight, drawing attention to the intersection of humour and societal values in a diverse audience. However, verbal sexist humor, especially in this comedic context, is a contentious and underexplored aspect of discourse that reflects broader societal power structures.

There has been considerable scholarly focus on the role of humour in society, with researchers emphasizing the use of stand-up comedy as a medium for social commentary (Davies, 2008; Billig, 2005). Studies of verbal humor, such as those by Norrick (2003), have primarily emphasized textual analysis of comedic performances. However, research on audience perceptions of verbal sexist humour remains limited. Some scholars have explored general audience responses to humor, but few have specifically examined how audiences perceive gendered humour and its impact on gender dynamics. Studies on verbal humour in Kenyan society have largely overlooked the particular implications of sexist humor in stand-up comedy, leaving a gap in the understanding of how gender issues are framed and interpreted by audiences (Chacha, 2017).

The existing literature primarily focuses on the textual analysis of humour, often neglecting the nuanced ways in which audiences interpret and respond to gendered humor, especially verbal sexist humour. Despite feminist efforts to challenge sexism and promote gender equality, sexist humor remains embedded in cultural practices and is often seen as harmless (Mills, 2008). While some research has explored the impact of humour on gender perceptions, little is known about how audiences in Kenya specifically respond to verbal sexist humour in the context of stand-up comedy. This study addresses this gap by exploring how viewers of *The Churchill Show* interpret and react to verbal sexist humour and how these reactions reflect broader cultural and societal dynamics.

The main research question guiding this study is: How do viewers of *The Churchill Show* perceive and interpret verbal sexist humour? The study aims to examine how audiences respond to humour that engages with gender issues, revealing the cultural and contextual factors that influence their perceptions. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Investigate how verbal sexist humour is understood and accepted by different audience groups.
2. Explore the cultural and contextual factors that shape audience reactions to sexist humour.

3. Analyze how verbal sexist humour influences societal attitudes toward gender roles and relationships in Kenyan society.

Method

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to thoroughly examine how audiences perceive and interpret gendered humour on *The Churchill Show*. The research design includes both content analysis and focus group discussions, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the topic from different perspectives.

The sample consists of three focus groups, each made up of six participants who are regular viewers of *The Churchill Show*. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age, and cultural background. This diversity allows for a broader representation of perspectives and helps to explore different interpretations of verbal sexist humour.

Data collection involved two main components: content analysis and focus group discussions. Eight selected excerpts from nine episodes of *The Churchill Show* were analyzed for verbal sexist humor, defined as humor that relies on gender stereotypes or engages in gender-based ridicule. The selection criteria for these humorous utterances were based on the presence of gender-based discriminatory attitudes, unequal power structures, or societal stereotypes. Focus group sessions were conducted where participants watched the selected clips. Guided discussions, facilitated by a moderator, explored participants' interpretations, feelings, and reflections on the humor. Specific questions were designed to probe deeper into the reasons behind their reactions, as well as the cultural and contextual factors influencing their perceptions.

The focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify common patterns and divergent perspectives in participants' responses. This approach helped in understanding the varied reactions to verbal sexist humour and the underlying cultural dynamics at play.

Results

From the data collected, the following themes and types of sexist humour were identified in the performances on *The Churchill Show*.

Gender stereotyping

Datum 1. *Chenye mwanamke anahitaji ni mwanaume mmoja mwenye atamtimizia mahitaji yake yote lakini mwanaume anahitaji kila mwanamke ili wamtimizie hitaji lake moja. (laughter)* (Comedian O, 2023, November, *The Churchill Show*).

(What a woman need is one man who can meet all her needs but a man needs every woman so that they meet his one need. (Laughter))

The joke perpetuates the stereotype of men as inherently promiscuous and unable to be satisfied by one woman, while depicting women as dependent on a single man for all their needs. Such stereotypes reinforce traditional gender roles and contribute to a patriarchal view.

Datum 2. *"Gentlemen, have you noticed that less attractive women and house helps tend to be highly fertile? (Laughter). You can date a slay queen for a decade or even longer, and she won't conceive. But just one encounter with your house help, and she'll claim to be nine months pregnant. (Laughter)" (Comedian O, 2023, November, The Churchill Show).*

Comedian O's humour reinforces societal views on beauty and fertility, suggesting a negative stereotype about reproductive capabilities of less attractive women versus attractive women ("slay queens").

Cultural stereotypes

Datum 3. *Wasichana wakalenjin ni warembo na hakuna kitu kitamu kama kuoa msichana Mkale. (laughter). In fact, msichana Mkale mrembo akikupenda huwa hawezi ngoja umtafute yeye atakutafuta na **akukwamilie kama glue.** (laughter).Unaona Chelagat amesimama kwa centre (puts hands akimbo to demonstrate how she stands) anangoja mzee yake. (Laughter) (Comedian W, 2023, November, The Churchill Show).*

(Kalenjin girls are beautiful and there is nothing sweet like marrying a Kalenjin girl. (Laughter). In fact, when a beautiful Kalenjin girl loves you she cannot wait for you to seduce her. She is the one who will seduce and **stick to you like glue.** (Laughter). You will see Chelagat standing in a center (puts hands akimbo to demonstrate how she stands) waiting for her husband. (Laughter)).

Comedian W's portrayal of Kalenjin girls as proactively seeking partners reinforces cultural stereotypes about specific ethnic groups.

Datum 4. *"Ukiwa na mwanamke wa Meru na usiende kazini, atakuambia hivi: 'Baba Kagwira, nilidhani wanaume wote wako kazini. Ni wewe peke yako uliyeamua kubaki nyumbani? Karani, niletee ile panga tulionoa jana." (Kicheko)" (Comedian M, 2023, November, The Churchill Show).*

(If you marry a Meru woman and decide to skip work, she might say, 'Father Kagwira, I thought all men were at their workplaces. Are you the only one who chose to stay home? Karani, hand me the machete we sharpened yesterday.' (Laughter))

Comedian M's depiction of Meru women using a panga when their husbands do not go out to work plays into cultural stereotypes of aggression. The humour plays into cultural stereotypes of Meru women being aggressive and intolerant of laziness in men.

Objectification and Body Shaming

Datum 5. *"Imagine life without beauty salons; we'd be seeing some ghost-like creatures." (Laughter)) (Comedian M, 2023, November, The Churchill Raw).*

Comedian M's reference to women looking like ghost creatures without beauty salons is a clear instance of body shaming. The above humour objectifies women by suggesting their natural appearance is unattractive, thereby promoting body shaming.

Datum 6. *"Geukia yule mrembo karibu na wewe umpatie hi-five, lakini usiguse uso wake; huenda ukaondoka nao mkononi. (Kicheko). Pia usivute nywele zake; anaweza baki na matuta ndani. (Kicheko)" (Comedian M, 2023, November, The Churchill Raw).*

(Turn to the pretty lady beside you and give her high-five, but don't touch her face—you might take it with you. (Laughter). And don't pull her hair; she might end up with lumps left. (Laughter))

Jokes about women's faces and hair potentially coming off highlight body shaming and objectification issues.

Relationship Dynamics

Datum 7. *"Tangu nianze mahusiano na Kinuthia, siku hizi sioni pesa zake. Afadhali awali. Sasa hivi pesa ya Kinuthia imekuwa kama mbunge: haionekani. (Kicheko)" (Comedian A, 2023, November, The Churchill Show).*

(Since starting a relationship with Kinuthia, I no longer see his money. Things were better before. Nowadays, Kinuthia's money is like a Member of Parliament—nowhere to be seen. (Laughter))

Comedian A's joke about not getting money from her partner reflects issues within relationships regarding financial dependence and control. It reflects dynamics where a partner's financial support diminishes over time.

Datum 8. *"...my husband left his phone at home, so I decided to check it. I saw the name 'Corona' and, out of curiosity, I called to find out which woman it was. To my surprise, it was my phone that rang! (Laughter)" (Comedian A, 2023, November, Churchill Show).*

Comedian A's humour about checking her husband's phone and finding "Corona" highlights trust issues in relationships.

Focus Group Results

Focus group discussions provided deeper insights into audience perceptions. Three focus groups, each consisting of six participants, were conducted to gather in-depth insights into the reception and interpretation of gendered humour in verbal expressions featured on *The Churchill Show*. The composition and responses of the participants are shown in the table 1.

Table 1. Composition of Focus Groups by Gender and Number of Participants

Focus Group	Gender	Age range	Number of Participants	Percentage
Focus Group 1	Male	18-30	3	50%
	Female	18-30	3	50%
Focus Group 2	Male	31-40	3	50%
	Female	31-40	3	50%
Focus Group 3	Male	41 and above	3	50%
	Female	41 and above	3	50%
Total	Male		9	50%
	Female		9	50%
Overall			18	100%

Perception of Sexist Humour

The participants' perceptions of the sexist humour were categorized into three main responses: Amusement, discomfort, and indifference.

Table 2. Perception of Sexist Humour by Focus Group Participants

Focus Group	Gender	Amusement	Discomfort	Indifference	Total
Focus Group 1	Male	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%)	6
	Female	1 (17%)	4 (67%)	1 (17%)	6
Focus Group 2	Male	4 (67%)	1 (17%)	1 (17%)	6
	Female	2 (33%)	3(50%)	1 (17%)	6
Focus Group 3	Male	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%)	6
	Female	1(17%)	4 (67%)	1(17%)	6
Total	Male	10 (56%)	5 (28%)	3 (17%)	18
	Female	4 (22%)	11(61%)	3(17%)	18
Overall		14 (39%)	16(44%)	6(17%)	36

Analysis of Perceptions

Amusement

Ten out of eighteen male participants (56%) found the sexist humour amusing. Four out of eighteen (22%) female participants found the sexist humour amusing. Overall, 14 out of 36 participants (36%) found the sexist humour amusing.

Discomfort

5 out of 18 male participants (28%) felt uncomfortable with the sexist humour. 11 out of 18 female participants (61%) felt uncomfortable with the sexist humour. Overall, 16 out of 36 participants (44%) felt uncomfortable with the sexist humour.

Indifference

3 out of 18 male participants (17%) were indifferent to the sexist humour. 3 out of 18 female participants (17%) were indifferent to the sexist humour. Overall, 6 out of 36 participants (17%) were indifferent to the sexist humour.

Gender Differences in Perception.

Male Participants

Majority (56%) of the male participants reported that the jokes were entertaining. This view, commonly held by majority of listeners of stand-up comedy, demonstrates a general tendency among the audiences to view sexist humour as just benign amusement. There was a relatively smaller group (28%) that opined their discomfort. This was a clear indication that they were able to recognize some aspects of sexist humour that were problematic. The rest (17%) of the study participants expressed their indifference which may signal their apathy or lack of sensitization on comedic content.

Female Participants

Majority (61%) of female participants reported their discomfort with the sexist humour. This is a clear indication of their high level of awareness and sensitivity as far as issues related to gender are concerned. The study recorded that 22% of women participants found the jokes amusing, which is an indication of a lower tolerance for verbal sexist humour. 17% of female participants just as male participants were indifferent which might reflect different responses ranging from lack of sensitization to tolerance.

All the focus group discussions revealed a clear gender difference in the way sexist humour is perceived. There was a high tendency of male participants to perceive the jokes as merely causing benign amusement, whereas female participants were more likely to express discomfort. These findings lay emphasis on the importance of adopting an approach to humour that is thoughtful; one that considers the different viewpoints of the audience and advocates for comedic content that is respectful.

Gender Stereotyping and Cultural Norms

Through focus group discussions, the different perceptions on gender stereotypes and cultural norms that are portrayed in the sexist humor on *The Churchill Show* were *highlighted*. Five out of nine (56%) of the male participants found these gender stereotypes entertaining. They were able to relate these stereotypes to real-life experiences. For instance, those jokes that imply that men require multiple partners (Datum 1) were perceived to be humorous exaggerations. One (11%) male participant acknowledged that these stereotypes are outdated in nature. However, he argued that they were harmless and part of the comedic tradition. There were 3 (33%) male participants who were indifferent to the humour. They found it neither amusing nor sexist. A total of three out of nine female participants (33%) found some jokes amusing but expressed their discomfort with jokes that portrayed women as dependent on men or as objects of desire. Some participants recorded that jokes about fertility and beauty

standards (datum7) were demeaning. Six (67%) female participants remarked the negative effect of such humour on societal attitudes, suggesting that it perpetuates inequality.

Cultural Stereotypes

4 (22%) participants discussed cultural stereotypes in the jokes. For instance, those jokes centered on Kalenjin girls (datum 3) were perceived as reductive in nature by a section of Kalenjin participants. 3 (17%) participants felt that in as much as these jokes are humorous, they have the potential to reinforce ethnic biases and stereotypes.

Impact on Perceptions

Through focus group discussions there was a revelation on how sexist humor influences audience perceptions and attitudes. It was observed that there was a generational shift in the perception of verbal sexist humour. Younger participants aged between 18 and 30 were especially critical of the sexist content. They perceived it as harmful and called for a more thoughtful approach to comedy. This shift is in line with observations by LaFrance and Vial (2016), who argue that younger audiences of comedy are more likely to challenge humor that reinforces gender inequality. 4 out of 6 (67%) of the younger participants found the jokes offensive, while the remaining 2 (33%) emphasized the need for stand-up comedy to challenge rather than reinforce stereotypes. They asserted that it is the responsibility of comedians to influence societal attitudes positively. Those participants who were older (above 40 years) were more likely to dismiss the jokes as benign amusement, reflecting more traditional views. 5 out of 6 older participants (83%) were more likely to see the humour as harmless fun and part of a long-standing tradition. It was observed that one (17%) older participant expressed nostalgia for less scrutinized comedy, arguing for a space in comedy for boundary-pushing and provoking thought.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

Through the analysis, it was apparent that verbal sexist humour is common on the *Churchill Show*. However, the reception of it among the audience is mixed. It was revealed that gender stereotypes and cultural norms are perpetuated through the discourse mode of humour. Some of the jokes reinforce traditional gender roles and societal expectations. This finding aligns with Fairclough's (2001) sociocultural framework in Critical Discourse Analysis, which emphasizes how language and discourse contribute to maintaining and challenging power structures within society. There was a sharp contrast in perception and reaction towards verbal sexist humour among the male and female participants. This contrast draws attention to the different levels of tolerance and sensitivity toward verbal sexist humor. Majority (56%) of the male participants found the humor amusing. They dismissed it as harmless exaggeration. This reaction aligns with studies on gender differences in humor appreciation (Crawford, 1995; La Fave et al., 1976), which suggest that men are more inclined to enjoy humor that upholds male dominance and traditional gender roles. Similarly, Ford and Ferguson (2004) in their

study remark that men are inclined to accept sexist as less harmful than women do. In contrast, majority (67%) of female participants perceived the humor to be offensive. This is a reflection of the wider concerns among women about the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and the normalization of discriminatory attitudes, as highlighted by Ford (2000), Ford and Ferguson (2004), and Greenwood and Isbell (2002). The key idea that these studies underscore is the potential of sexist humor to reinforce and perpetuate gender biases and legitimize discriminatory behavior.

Gender Stereotyping and Cultural Norms

Comedic content on *The Churchill Show* demonstrates the frequent nature of humour to perpetuate traditional gender roles. For instance, jokes that implying that men need many female partners or that women are overly concerned with their looks reinforce outdated traditional stereotypes. These observations align with the findings by Thomas and Esses (2004) who note that sexist humour frequently rely on and amplify gender-based stereotypes. Furthermore, the discomfort that was recorded in many female participants is an indication of the increasing awareness and rejection of such stereotypes, especially among younger women, as also observed by Swim et al. (2001).

Cultural stereotypes was another prominent theme that emerged in the study. There was an intricate interplay between gender and ethnicity in comedic narratives especially humour that targeted certain ethnic groups (such as references to Kalenjin girls or Meru women). On one hand there were some participants who could relate to these jokes while on the other hand some participants felt misrepresented. This echoes findings by Okigbo and Asemah (2012) who asserted that ethnic humor can both reflect and reinforce cultural stereotypes, often leading to misinterpretations and biases.

Audience Perception and Impact

The study highlighted the multifaceted nature of sexist humour on audience perceptions. Younger participants whose age range is 18 to 30 were perceived to be more critical. They perceived sexist humour as harmful and demanded for more accountability in comedy. This generational shift echoes what Lafrance and Vial (2016) have observed that younger comedy audiences tend to be more critical of humor that perpetuates gender inequality. In contrast, older participants who were above 40 years of age were more inclined to dismiss these jokes as benign amusement, therefore, reflecting traditional views on humor. These generational differences suggest a transformation in comedic preferences and sensitivities over time.

Cultural and Contextual Influences

Kenya's cultural context plays a big role in influencing the reception of sexist humour. For example, the mixed reactions to ethnic jokes show how humor not only reflects but also reinforces societal norms. There are those individuals who find such humour relatable. However, a section of the population finds it offensive and harmful. Ethnic stereotypes in jokes underscore the fine line between cultural representation and misrepresentation, emphasizing the role of context in shaping humor perception.

Contributions of the Study

This study adds significant value to the fields of linguistics, gender studies, and humour research by exploring audience perspectives on verbal sexist humour, an area often overlooked in favor of textual or performance-centered approaches. By prioritizing how viewers interpret sexist humour, the study offers fresh insights into how comedy influences societal understandings of gender roles and expectations within Kenyan culture.

The research also extends the application of Norman Fairclough's sociocultural framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), showcasing its relevance in examining Kenyan stand-up comedy. This localized focus bridges a gap in current scholarship by connecting humour as a creative expression with its broader socio-cultural impacts. In doing so, it highlights how comedy can serve as both a tool for challenging societal power structures and a means of reinforcing them.

Additionally, the study provides practical insights into how sexist humour perpetuates stereotypes and attitudes that undermine gender equality. By emphasizing the role of audience reactions, it equips educators, policymakers, and content creators with valuable information for developing strategies that encourage gender-sensitive communication in media and entertainment.

Implications of the Study

The findings from this study hold important implications for the entertainment industry, academia, and society at large. Comedy, as a form of social commentary, wields the power to shape perceptions and attitudes—either by reinforcing stereotypes or by challenging them. This underscores the responsibility of comedians and media creators to consider the societal impact of their work, especially in a culturally diverse context like Kenya. Misjudged humour targeting specific groups risks exacerbating divisions, while thoughtful, inclusive content can foster unity and understanding.

For academic researchers, this study lays the groundwork for future investigations into humor's role in reflecting and influencing societal values. It opens opportunities for comparative studies across regions, cultures, and media formats, offering a deeper understanding of humour's relationship with gender and power dynamics.

Media practitioners, including comedians and producers, have a unique opportunity to use their platforms responsibly. By crafting content that challenges discriminatory norms and promotes equality, they can contribute to a more inclusive cultural landscape. The insights provided by this study encourage the creation of comedy that entertains without marginalizing, helping to shape a media environment that respects diversity.

On a societal level, the study highlights the risks of normalizing humour that reinforces harmful gender stereotypes. These insights can guide public campaigns, educational programs, and advocacy initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the impacts of such humour. By engaging with media regulators, content creators, and other stakeholders,

society can take steps toward eliminating prejudices embedded in comedic narratives and promoting fairness in entertainment.

In conclusion, this study underscores the complex relationship between humour and gender, urging critical reflection on the values conveyed through comedy. By leveraging humour's potential to foster inclusivity, multiple sectors can work together to drive meaningful social change.

Conclusion

This study examined how verbal sexist humour in *The Churchill Show* is received by different audiences, revealing significant gender-based differences in perception. Male participants tended to find the humour more amusing, while female participants expressed discomfort, reflecting divergent sensitivities toward gendered humour. Cultural and generational factors also influenced reactions, with younger individuals being more critical of sexist jokes. The study found that the humour often reinforced gender stereotypes, with some participants recognizing these as harmful, while others saw them as a reflection of societal norms.

However, the study had limitations, such as the relatively small sample size and the specific focus on *The Churchill Show*, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. For future research, expanding the sample size and incorporating a wider range of media platforms would provide more robust insights. It would also be valuable to explore how education and media literacy influence perceptions of sexist humor, as well as conducting comparative studies across different cultural contexts to further understand the intersection of humour, gender, and culture.

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Appendix: *Focus Group Discussion Guide*

Question Category	Question
General Reactions	1. What were your initial reactions to the humour in the clip? 2. Did you find the jokes funny, offensive, or somewhere in between?
Specific Elements	1. Which specific jokes or segments stood out to you? Why? 2. What aspects of the jokes (e.g., language, delivery, context) influenced your reaction?
Perceptions of Gender Roles	1. How do you think these jokes reflect or challenge societal views on gender roles? 2. Do you believe that such humour reinforces gender stereotypes?
Cultural Context	1. How do Kenyan cultural norms and values shape your perceptions of this humour? 2. Do you think the reception of this humour would differ in another cultural context?
Acceptability and Impact	1. Do you think verbal sexist humour is acceptable in comedy? Why or why not? 2. What impact do you think this type of humour has on societal attitudes towards gender?