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Women Supporting Women: changing traditional gender perceptions in African women stand-up comedy

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Abstract: *Stand-up comedians do not only aim to get their audience entertained. They also try to trigger audience epistemic and ideological engagement with different humour contents. This is done by them through the transactional frames of ideologies and social identity embedded in comedic routines. This study seeks to analyse a growing presence of Rapport management framework and gender representations that challenge and seek to change existing gender stereotypes about women not supporting women. Three female African stand-up comedians have been selected for this study. Two joking performances of Helen Paul (Nigeria comedian), Tumi Morake (South African comedian), and Heiress Jacinta (Ghanaian comedian) were transcribed using the researchers' notations. Four jokes each were purposively selected from the performances of each of the comedians, and the transcribed data was analysed using Spencer-Oatey's (2000) Rapport Management theory, and van Dijk's (2000) ideological Square. The study reveals that African female comedians identify gender binaries and they use their jokes to project ideologies about it. These ideologies influence perceptions of the social identity of the African woman. It is evident, from the data, that the African female comedians predominantly challenge ideologies that are not positive about the female gender, sometimes by 'de-emphasising positive things about the male gender', but also by emphasizing female rapport that busts contrary stereotypes. In the process, the female comedians deploy several different linguistic strategies, which the study also explores.*
Keywords: *Gender ideology, African females, stereotypes, challenge, change, joking performances.*
Résumé : *Les humoristes ne visent pas seulement à divertir leur public. Ils essaient également de déclencher un engagement épistémique et idéologique du public avec différents contenus humoristiques. Cela se fait par eux à travers les cadres transactionnels des idéologies et de l'identité sociale intégrés dans les routines comiques. Cette étude vise à analyser une présence croissante du cadre de gestion Rapport et des représentations de genre qui remettent en question et cherchent à changer les stéréotypes de genre existants sur les femmes qui ne soutiennent pas les femmes. Trois comédiennes africaines de stand-up ont été sélectionnées pour cette étude. Deux représentations de blagues d'Helen Paul (humoriste nigériane), Tumi Morake (humoriste sud-africain) et Heiress Jacinta (humoriste ghanéenne) ont été transcrites à l'aide des notations des chercheurs. Quatre blagues chacune ont été délibérément sélectionnées parmi les*

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performances de chacun des comédiens, et les données transcrites ont été analysées à l'aide de la théorie de la gestion du rapport de Spencer-Oatey (2000) et du carré idéologique de van Dijk (2000). L'étude révèle que les comédiennes africaines identifient les binaires de genre et utilisent leurs blagues pour projeter des idéologies à ce sujet. Ces idéologies influencent les perceptions de l'identité sociale de la femme africaine. Il est évident, d'après les données, que les comédiennes africaines défient principalement les idéologies qui ne sont pas positives à propos du genre féminin, parfois en "minimisant les choses positives sur le genre masculin", mais aussi en mettant l'accent sur le rapport féminin qui brise les stéréotypes contraires. Dans le processus, les comédiennes déploient plusieurs stratégies linguistiques différentes, que l'étude explore également.

Mots clés : *Idéologie du genre, femmes africaines, stéréotypes, défi, changement, performances à plaisanterie.*

1. Introduction

Female comedians in Africa, are the minority in the stand-up comedy scene, when compared to the male comedians who dominate the African stand-up comedy genre. The few African comedians also transact ideologies and social identities relating to their gender, often in line with traditional cultural expectations and realities and contemporary role portrayal of women but sometimes in a challenging vein. In the process, they craftily manipulate the linguistic resources that would (independently or simultaneously) threaten established stereotypes and enhance rapport in the society in their routines while offering comic relief to the audience. As a rule, comedians are cultural ambassadors of their originating or adoptive countries as they heavily rely on cultural common ground in creating humorous contents. They therefore propagate or challenge cultural assumptions and realities in their context via their verbal and non-verbal choices. This study seeks to investigate the role portrayals of women in selected stand-up comedy performances with a view to discovering the dominant stances towards the femininity and masculinity ideologies which are enmeshed in African realities.

Of particular interest is the determination of the nature of interactional relationships between women. The idea that women do not support women is not just the stuff of roadside gossip but a topic that has been widely discussed. While the concept of "rapport talk" (Tannen 1990) attempts to tie women to supportive conversation styles that promote emotional connection and affiliative tendencies, it has not always been clear how this disaggregates between female-male and female-female relationships. The concept has ever since been dogged by criticism of perpetuation of "negative gender stereotypes" (Freed et al 1993) that are "*derived from a series of overarching binary oppositions*" (Cameron 2022, p. 30).

Still the stereotypes of women not supporting women persists. While some put the reason down to a general competition for scarce resources, others essentialise the relationship in through terms such as "female rivalry" (Kiner 2020), "*human female competition" (Benenson 2013), including "female intrasexual competition*" (Benenson 2020; Fisher 2004), and other related notions. A verbal strategy that appears to exemplify this stereotype is "female derogation", the verbal putdown of one female by the other. This strategy is particularly germane within the context of comedic representations. It also resonates well within semantic and pragmatic discourses of politeness, impoliteness and the dynamics of face value. In the sections that follow I link the discourses of face value and the concept of women supporting women in female comedic representations women,

as a counterpose to the stereotype of female-to-female antagonism, and as catalyst for a change in gendered perceptions.

2. Politeness principle, face threatening and female comedic representations

Comedic representations are classic face threatening acts. Face threatening acts often occur as a counterpose to politeness principles. The study of politeness has been traced to Lakoff who in 1973 associated politeness with three rules: don't impose (maxim of formality or distance), give options (the maxim of hesitancy), and make the other person feel good (maxim of equality or camaraderie). These rules are frequently violated in comedic representations in general; however, forms of female derogation in female comedic representations would appear to specifically propagate the stereotype that women do not support one another. The phenomenon is therefore worth studying as face threatening acts in female comedic representations.

Yule (1996, p. 134) asserts that "face" is the public image of oneself. According to him, it is the emotional and social sense of self that every person has and expects everyone else to recognise. Goffman (1967) cited in Blum-Kulka (1987) states that when individuals interact, they are concerned with presenting and maintaining a public image of themselves. That is, face is the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular context. Brown and Levinson, in their 1987 submission, refer to this as "positive face", that is, the concern of a person to be well thought of by others as positively contributing to the human world, while "negative face" is a person's wish to create a space within which he or she has freedom of action and the right not to be imposed upon.

Face Saving Acts (FSAs) meet positive face needs, while Face Threatening Acts in the course of conversation subverts them. Face Threatening Acts also represent the dynamics of power. Brown and Levinson note that impositions or FTAs are usually observed by considering the intricate variables of: P (power differential between speaker and hearer, for instance lecturer/ student relationship), D (the distance or proximity between them), R (the degree of imposition on the content of the utterance). Thus, power differential determines or affects the degree of impositions during conversations.

African female comedians often project themselves as members of a larger community; as important human beings and as women. The individual female comedian as a woman talks about her individual experiences which often include her school life, parents, childhood, and most importantly, her marriage. In their joke-telling, the female comedians often express the fact that they are proud females who have their own peculiarities and situations. However, the individual female comedian has a choice to make in her representation of other females; she may either consolidate the stereotype of women not supporting women through female derogation in her comic routines, or serve as a catalyst for a change of perception.

In making a choice, the female comedian can count on sundry affordances within the available politeness strategies. Commenting on the use of politeness strategies in stand-up comedy acts, Scharwz (2010, p. 132) states that:

> … we can find positive politeness strategies in the form of hedges, hesitation markers, question tags, or modal verbs. Stand-up comedians want to connect

> their audience and try to regularly integrate them. They want to express solidarity with them and often work with the "we"-strategy and indirectness in order to mitigate the rudeness of the direct statements and points of view that they want to impose on their audience. Even as they work with hostility strategies to express their superiority over specific opponents, it is obvious that they choose positive politeness strategies to soften the directness and thus, the impoliteness.

It is implied from Scharwz's assertion that the stand-up comedians have the possibility to engage or manipulate both face threatening and face saving acts in their performances in order to create a livelier audience by mitigating face affronts. What choice is made by the representative female comedians in this study, and how is this choice verbally represented? In the sections that follow, I analyse this choice within the concepts of the rapport management framework (Spencer-Oatey 2008, 2009, 2010) and the representation of ideology as a cognitive representation and reconstruction of the world around us (Fairclough 2003; van Dijk 2000).

3. The Rapport Management Framework

Spencer-Oatey (2008), in her contribution to politeness, came up with Rapport Management Framework (RMF), which is discursive in nature. RMF consists of three components of face (quality, relational and social identity), sociality rights (equity and association) and interactional goal (relational and transactional). Face, in RMF, is in consonance with Goffman's (1967, p. 5) submission on face "as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself". Spencer-Oatey (2009, p. 137) also argues for the need to keep or maintain both the speaker's and hearer's face by presenting them as respect-worthy persons.

The focus of RMF is on how interpersonal relations are managed, in which case language may be used to either "promote, maintain or threaten harmonious relations" (Spencer-Oatey 2000, p. 3). Furthermore, face as a phenomenon is associated with "persona/social value, which is concerned with people's sense of worth, dignity, honour, reputation, competence and so on". There are three types of face in RMF: Quality face, Relational face and Social identity face. Quality face is related to the self as an individual; relational face relates to the self in relationship with others and social identity face is related to the self as a group member.

The application of RMF to the analysis of stand-up comedy also makes sense in view of RMF's identity perspective which can be brought in connection with the creation of a specific persona by the stand-uper. Schwarz (2010, p. 118) states in this regard that "stand-up comedy does not aim to showcase an ideal person, but rather a specific person who creates their identity on stage". This is why the process of creating a specific stage persona ties in with Spencer-Oatey's concept of identity.

4. Ideology as cognitive representation and reconstruction of the world

The concept of ideology has been considered via different theoretical approaches or disciplines. As a linguistic concept, Fairclough (2003, p. 9) states that ideologies are

representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining, and changing social relations of power, dominance, and exploitation.

Ideologies are therefore "...special form of social cognition shared by social groups. Ideologies form the basis of social representations and practices of group members, including their discourse, which at the same time, serve as the means of ideological production, reproduction, and challenge (van Dijk, 2001, p. 12). Ideologies are exploited or used by individuals in a community and they are also used communally in societies. They are also transacted in discourses overtly and covertly as they are reflected in different ways and forms. In order to uncover both the implicit and explicit ideological constructions, van Dijk (2000, p. 42) states that it is necessary "to look for those properties of discourse that most clearly show the ideological variations of underlying context models, even models and social attitudes."

Van Dijk states further that ideologies are expressed via what he calls 'ideological Square', which consists of four principles: emphasise positive things about Us, emphasise negative things about them, de-emphasise negative things about us, de-emphasise positive things about them. The ideological square can be deployed to the analysis of discourse at different linguistic levels such as: meaning, propositional structures, formal structures, rhetoric and action, interaction, etc. This study focuses on meaning (that is, the examination of the semantic and pragmatic imports of ideologies about African female comedians) and Propositional structure, which consists of facts expressed by discourse interactant who is either the agent, patient, or recipient actions).

Ideological studies' focus is on word choices, which according to Johnstone (2008, p. 53) *"... can come to stand for a whole new way of seeing things, whole new ways of being, and those new ways of seeing things can come to seem natural, unchallengeable and right*". This study seeks to explore how the female comedians' word choices reflect ideological stance via the consideration of RMF, and the functions they serve.

5. Change of perception: how female comedians represent women

5.1.Quality Face: African woman's physical, social and religious identity

Helen Paul, a Nigerian female comedian, in most of her performances is always proud to state that she is a working class-mother and wife. Her representation of other women attempts to navigate the concept of an African woman's identity and certain cross-cultural traits and conflicts brought about by colonial values. Inevitably the comedian also has to navigate between face saving and face threatening acts in addressing other African ladies:

> Some of girls here are believing God to get married. You will be wasting your money buying Brazilian hair. It is not by Brazilian hair o. There are ways you can do it without the Brazilian hair. Marriage can still be done. You just work on yourself noni ["that is it"). You start from the bottom, don't give up. You understand, like me now. I don't give up. You understand, like me now, I don't have Brazilian hair, but if I reach home, I pack enough money home, Boda gan mo pe ohun o le dan nonsense wo! (Brother knows that he can't do nonsense). I'm starting from the bottom; I am here (AL). But I have not reached there, so it is not only about Brazilian hair, so if you know you are bold and beautiful, just remove it. Datum 1: Helen Paul

In the joke above, Helen Paul performs informative act humorously with the indirect act of educating. She portrays a personal identity of someone who is confident and who also contributes financially at home, and who has earned herself respect. There would be persons in the audience wearing Brazilian hair or planning to by one because they are "believing God [hoping to God] to get married." Although these references, also called jibes or taunts would appear to be face threatening, the comedian mitigates this by her discourse of empathy. By drawing attention to her own struggles, thereby employs the "we are together" rhetoric, she ultimately offers a helping hand to other women, thereby challenging the stereotype of women not helping women. She also speaks to a form of religious identity – one who "believes God for every conceivable thing." While identifying with this identity, Helen Paul also draws attention to the need to work to complete the belief in God.

5.2.Smashing stereotypes

5.2.1. African women are sly or deceitful? Not really, but if so, then so are men

Helen Paul, challenges women that they can be beautiful without wigs and other cosmetics. She is always bold to remove her wigs (which she refers to as part of "female packaging"). However, again she mitigates the face threatening potential of this apparently denigrating reference as indicated in the joke below:

If you can do like me here (removes wig), you can win twenty thousand naira (AL). ….
Oya, come if you can remove like that. Come, come, come; Let's show our real colour, come and remove it! Twenty thousand naira! What Mary Kay is doing is not good o! Haha! Men, we can deceive you. You think you are the only person only person that can deceive us- take us to fake houses…. Datum 2: Helen Paul

With the pronouns: 'we' and 'you', Helen Paul has identified a gender binary. However, in her contextual use of these pronouns she equalizes the two genders (female and male) behaviourally by asserting that both male and female can play the game, as it were. This belongs to the first principle of ideological square identified by Van Dijk (2000, p. 42), 'emphasise positive things about Us'. The comedian deflects the face threat to women, expressing a parallel ideology of men being deceitful and dishonest. African women's use of 'Mary Kay', an American beauty product line used worldwide, is for cosmetic purposes, which often does not allow them to be properly appraised or assessed by men beyond physical features. The comparison of ideologies about women and men in the joke elicited laughter from the audience, which is an affirmative stance.

Helen Paul also engages the female audience members in a bonding co-production of humor with them (asking them to remove their wigs as she does; referencing a female common ground feature such as Mary K, othering men, etc), while also implicitly stirring their hearts to believe the fact that they do not need men's validation. Without doubt, her comic routines fit into the paradigm of women supporting women and disrupts the stereotype that singles women out as 'sly' or 'dishonest.'.

The South African, comedian, Tumi also challenges the stereotyp that African women are sly, by countering with the ideology that African men are philandering and deceitful in nature. The following extract is taking from one of her joke performances:

I have come to appreciate one thing about guys is that they are also very naïve. Men are very convinced that when they are cheating, we don't know (CL & AL) – that is so cute! Let me tell you something, there is a big thing that happened in South Africa that reminded me of how powerful we are as women because what we did in South Africa is we found Homo naledi – now Homo naledi is an archaeological find. We found fossils of a woman who has been buried, like, for over a million years under the Earth's surface. And she was found by a team of exclusively female archaeologists. You can google this if you don't believe me. Female archaeologists found Homo Naledi, a woman buried over a million years under the Earth's surface. You do understand what this means? Do you understand what this means? It means means – I am not joking – if you are hiding a bitch, we will dig, and we will find her!

Datum three: Tumi (italics added)

Datum three also reflects the ideological square of 'emphasise positive things about Us', which logically means 'de-emphasise positive things about them'. This further reinforces the fact that African female comedians do not only identify, and equalise, the communal ideologies about the male and female gender. The adverbial 'also', italicized above, is pointed about this equalization. Though the comedian appears to accept the stereotype, it turns out to be a strategy to equalize it to both genders.

Tumi, in her jokes about females, promotes the strengths of women even though they are considered as being weak and gullible. She deploys the strategy of incongruity, comparing the ability of uncovering a buried human being (which is, a serious and/real-life happening), to discovering male philandering however deeply the men try to hide it. The humour is accentuated by a deliberate ambiguous use of the term, 'bitch.' Females sometimes use the term in a non-derogatory in-group context to refer to each other, but the term is often used derogatorily and can be applied to both women and men. In this context there is a rhetorical double entendre, as 'bitch' could refer to the female that the man is hiding or to the philandering that he is hiding. Tumi also challenges the notion of male ('I have come to appreciate one thing about guys is that they are also very naïve'), creating humour in the process by first using a face supportive term 'appreciate' and then subverting that with a face threatening one, naïve, for men. The routine therefore counts for a double demolition, demolishing the stereotype about male superiority and about female inferiority. She disclaims the social identity of women as being the weaker sex.

5.2.2. Women do not love themselves genuinely

There is a Yoruba (Nigerian) popular saying that a woman is a woman's enemy. This saying constitutes a common ground ideology in the Nigerian society and it is used in situations where a woman does not support another woman or she works for the down-fall of her fellow woman. This social identity of women is projected in the following joke of Tumi Morake:

I come from a generation, once again, where if our parents were cheating, we only find out at the funeral – because there will be other people that look like you but you have never met them in your life and they cry as hard as you, you know. Nowadays, you get Instagram, you get 'dmed' "the bitch is mine", "stay in your lane" – listen, I really don't mind mistresses, I really don't! I just need you to know your place and mineIf you are a wife, if he is cheating, don't feel bad about yourself. You are the restaurant; he is just

taking some 'takeaways' every once in a while, you know what I mean, you are a la carte – just believe in yourself, that is all I am asking. And the reason why I tell you this is because, I think, I have stayed married for so long I understand guys.

Datum 4: Tumi Morake

The above is another example where a comedic routine is used to serve partly as a women support structure. This joke identifies that women, in some situations, do not support one another; this is evident in a woman trying to displace another woman in her husband's life. However, Tumi Morake tries to seek a balance between the men and women ideology by encouraging the women not to feel bad about themselves when their husbands cheat. It is apparent that she is implicitly dissuading the women from demanding absolute loyalty from their spouses, but rather encouraging them to 'live with it' and be unbothered about a cheating man.

This joke shows the ideology of some African women: those who have made peace with cheating spouses by not hinging their happiness on their marriages. It is silent about those who walk-away. Hence, in some way, the joke does not seek the equity right of women who are condemned when they cheat. It is simply meant to find emotional support for women who are distressed by philandering husbands.

5.2.3. Subverting the ideology of the perfect body

Being comfortable in one's body is a growing campaign in African society, since the importation of the western culture (to most parts of Africa) which endorses certain body images, especially for women. The social identity of women is often construed on the basis of their physical attributes and this has led many people to depression. Having this common knowledge about their gender, female comedians are very vocal about this ideology by resisting and disagreeing with it. In the following joke, Jacinta, a Ghanaian comedian, makes herself the butt of her joke by stressing that she is fat and she is certain that she cannot become slim even if there is famine:

> I am just here to tell you to like yourself, love your body o; don't kill yourself. See there are some people if they like, let them eat this whole world trade centre, na so dem go be (gestures a slim person with her index finger) …. Me, you cannot see my shoulder bone even if there is famine (AL) you will never, for what? (AL). Love yourself as a woman; African woman, God gave us belle to use to wear Vlisco – hello? (AL) Without belle, you cannot wear Vlisco. Just imagine, dem just do me this six-yard skirt now, without belle how would I wear it now? (Just imagine they made this Vlisco clothe for me- six yards of it, without me not having a protruding tummy, how will it look on me) (AL).

Datum 5: Jacinta

Jacinta confronts the ideology of body-shaming women by expressing her satisfaction in herself. She calls on women and everyone seeing the performance of the joke to enhance quality face and social identity of women. Going forward to challenge perfect-body ideology of African women, she states that:

This is 2020, let us know what we are doing? It is not only when a man beats you that it is an abuse. There are so many forms of abuse; if a man cannot give you money to do your hair, it is abusive (AL) Hello, am I communicating? Am I making sense? (AR) If a man does not appreciate your natural body, it is abusive my sister. He is abusing you. If a man cannot look at you and say "baby, you are the best thing that happened to me" (AL), it is an abusive relationship (AL). You need to start looking for ways to get out of there. And last but not the least, a man that complains about a woman's falling breasts, tell him that, I, Jacinta Ocansey said (laughs mockingly) "when he wakes up in morning, his stand, does it stand the all day?" (AL) Thank you very much (AL).

Datum 6: Jacinta

Datum 6 opens with a rhetorical question aimed at provoking the female audience to think and also to emphasise the fact that the worth of a woman should not be determined or judged by her physique. Unlike Tumi Morake, in datum 4, she challenges women not to stay in unhappy relationships, but rather they should believe in their self-worth. Jacinta's transactional goal is informative and intended to improve the quality face of each woman and the equity rights of females in the African context. She also identifies the gender male/female binary, and she engages in the first ideological square, and its attendant implications. By advocating a sense of independence (You need to start looking for ways to get out of there. …), she is supporting women to stand up for themselves and not allow any man to body-shame them or make them inferior. Helen Paul's signature of asking women to remove their wigs, referred to earlier, is also a means of encouraging women to feel comfortable in their skin and not place too much importance on bodily features, while ignoring their professional goals.

6. Conclusion

African female comedians' performances consist of a preponderance reference to social identity, as a reflector of communal ideologies about women in African contexts. The above data analysis reveals that the comedians' leanings are towards the ideological stance of 'emphasise positive things about us' and 'de-emphasise positive things about them'. This shows that the female comedians identify the social identity of females and challenge these ideologies by presenting themselves (via "quality face"), as being independent and an important entity in the society. The analysed comedians, particularly Heiress Jacinta and Helen Paul challenge women not to be conformists, but resistors of inequality dictated by communal or societal ideologies.

The foregoing has revealed that African female comedians, via their linguistic choices, express ideologies that equalize female/male gender binaries. While they appear to concede to some of the binaries, this is often a feint strategy to ultimately challenge them, especially those that inferioris females. In doing this they attempt to bring about a change in stereotypic perceptions of women; they push back against male or patriarchal derogation of females, including such derogation by male and some female comedians; they also revolt against any sense of male superiority, and affirm equality rights and the independence of females.

In the final analysis the comedians push back against several established stereotypes, including the stereotype that women do not support women. Their comedic

representations tend to be supportive of women. The above also reiterates that power and dominance are transacted by the comedians to conform or disagree with established social identities. The studied female comedians are confronted with a choice to use their stage power to either sustain or transform negative gender ideologies, to aggravate or mitigate rampant female face threatening acts within the society and either maintain or change the face of gender stereotyping both in the field of comedic displays and in real-life situations. The studied female comedians have opted for transformation and ultimate change.

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