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(Un)funny women: TV comedy audiences and the gendering of humour

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Abstract
Based on data from an empirical study of TV comedy audiences in Britain and Norway, this article examines the ways in which focus group participants constructed gendered distinctions in relation to comedy. Analysing talk about two sketch shows dominated by female performers, it argues that both male and female participants represented such ‘women’s comedy’ as having limited appeal for male viewers. The article explores the assumptions underlying this perspective, and highlights a perceived conflict between femininity and comedic performance. Focusing in on the minority of participants who explicitly devalued female comedy performers, it examines how these viewers employed discursive strategies to promote this view while negotiating the focus group setting. The article draws on feminist work on humour and comedy, as well as studies of taste and television audiences.

Keywords
audiences, gender, humour, taste, TV comedy

Introduction: Gendering TV comedy
This article examines the construction of gendered distinctions in focus group discussions about TV comedy. Analysing participant conversations around sketch shows with mostly female performers, I will argue that these programmes tended to be marginalized as niche products with limited appeal to male viewers. This constructed a hierarchy that positioned male comedians above comediennes and reinforced the dominance of masculinity in TV comedy. My findings will be contextualized by previous studies which have discussed the marginalization of women in the spheres of humour and comedy. Helga Kotthoff (2006) argues that clowning and being deliberately foolish have been considered inappropriate forms of behaviour for women because patriarchal gender norms have
associated femininity with modesty and prettiness. She also notes that historically, women’s use of humour tended to be confined to the private sphere and therefore remained invisible, while Frances Gray emphasizes the importance of considering the relationship between humour and power:

Most feminist activity has been centrally concerned with silence, and with its breaking. Areas of oppression have not only to be identified but named, because only through naming can they become part of public knowledge … The field of comic discourse is perhaps the most fiercely guarded of all, against female clowns and female critics. It is for this reason that it is as important for women to assume these roles as it is for them to enter fields more apparently vital to the achievement of social change. (1994: 12)

Writing specifically about British comedy, Myra Macdonald (1995) points out that comedians have tended to train in working men’s clubs, which have been far less accessible to female performers. For a number of reasons there is currently a ‘male dominance of all aspects of the comedy industry’ (Mills, 2005: 111).

Brett Mills suggests that this gendered imbalance may constrain audience engagement with female comedians:

If society is unused to seeing women performing comedy and, when women do tell jokes, certain kinds of material are expected, it’s difficult to see how programmes diverging from such content will be made or, if they are, how they will be intelligible enough to an audience to become popular. The vast majority of major sitcom characters are male and sitcom content, as a whole, has developed in response to changes in social conditions for men. (2005: 213)

Addressing the question of how audiences engage with female comedy performers, this article focuses on the under-researched area of sketch comedy. While Monty Python’s Flying Circus (BBC 1969–74) has been analysed in several studies (e.g. Mähkä, 2007; Neale and Krutnik, 1990; Smith, 1999), academic research has tended to focus on sitcoms. Sketch comedy can be described in the following way:

[S]ketches are short, usually single-scene structures. They generally comprise a setting, one or more characters, and an internal time frame within which the comic possibilities of a premise of one kind or another – a situation, a relationship, a conversation and its topics, a mode of language, speech or behaviour, or some other organising principle – are either pursued to a point of climax and conclusion (sometimes called a ‘pay-off’) or else simply abandoned. (Neale, 2001: 62)

Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik (1990) underline that the brevity of sketches limits the need for narrative content, and propose that this makes their ‘non-developmental’ formal structure particularly suitable for visual gags. Thus, while humour can be seen as an underlying ‘tone’ in all comedy texts (Mills, 2005), and while sitcom narratives provide spaces for enjoyable comedic performances (Mellencamp, 2003), sketches can be seen to foreground the pleasures of comedy to an even greater extent. In this sense, a perceived conflict between femininity and comedic performance may be particularly evident in audience talk around sketch comedy.
Method

Data collection

This study is part of a larger empirical research project that examines the role of nationality and gender in audience engagement with TV comedy. It contributes to the rather scant field of TV comedy audience studies, where previous work has considered issues of race (e.g. Jhally and Lewis, 1992; Means Coleman, 2000), nationality (e.g. Biltereyst, 1991; Gray, 2007), sexuality (e.g. Cooper, 2003) and gender (e.g. Jermyn, 2004). For my study, data were collected through 25 focus groups which were run in Cardiff (UK) and Stavanger (Norway) in 2006. As Trine Syvertsen (1992) points out, these two case study countries are geographically close but differ significantly in terms of international power status, population size and demographic heterogeneity. This has also affected the development of their TV industries and their TV comedy output; while the UK successfully exports a range of TV programmes and formats, Norwegian domestic production is very limited and broadcasters rely on imports to fill their schedules. However, traditionally the countries have shared an emphasis on public service broadcasting, and Norway’s Norsk Rikskringkasting (NRK) continues to schedule a significant amount of British programming (Gripsrud, 1995). In addition, as both British and Norwegian broadcasters import US entertainment programming, the research participants in the two case study countries tended to be familiar with some of the same TV comedy programmes.

Participants

Because my research aimed to examine issues of gender and nationality, I wanted the participants to be relatively homogenous in terms of class and age. Targeting middle-class adults under the age of 60, students and white-collar workers were recruited through my university and a major civil service organization, as well as through friends and family. The participants were encouraged to invite others to join them for the focus group. The participants ranged in age between 17 and 59. The study did not aim for ‘racial’ or ethnic homogeneity within either country, but nevertheless, the vast majority of the respondents were white.

Procedure

Most of the focus group sessions lasted around three hours, and they all included the screening of the same two sets of British and Norwegian comedy programmes. The Office (BBC2, 2001–3) and Nissene på Låven (The Santas in the Barn, TVNorge, 2001) were dominated by male performers, while sketch shows Melonas (Melons, NRK1, 2001–6) and Smack the Pony (Channel 4, 1999–2003) were dominated by female performers. Along with my list of questions, these screenings were included to facilitate discussions around issues of gender and nationality. The recorded conversations were transcribed, participants were given pseudonyms, and the resulting text was coded using
the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In my analysis I compared male and female participants’ responses to generic devices such as comic performance and laugh tracks. Notable gender differences were only identified in discussions of Melonas and Smack the Pony, and these patterns were similar in the British and Norwegian datasets.

This article focuses on the conversations around the two sketch shows, and examines the ways in which male and female participants negotiated different perceptions of the relationship between gender and comedy.

Results and discussion

Marginalizing comediennes

I will begin by looking at extracts that most clearly articulated a gendered dichotomy of comedy. These participants marginalized Melonas and Smack the Pony by constructing hierarchies of TV comedy that positioned sitcoms over sketch shows, and male performers over female ones. The first example is from a group of four male British friends aged between 24 and 31 (group 12). Only one of these, Will, stated that he liked Smack the Pony. He did not participate much in this part of the conversation, but James, Ron and Charlie talked extensively about their reasons for disliking the two sketch shows. The following excerpt is from a discussion that took place immediately before we watched Melonas and Smack the Pony, and I have included it in order to highlight some of the assumptions that the rest of the conversation was based upon. I should note that British comedienne Victoria Wood was here mentioned as a joke, referring to James’ previous statement that her sketch show was ‘terrible’:

Ron: Me and James had a massive conversation, when was it? Monday.
James: Yesterday, was it?
Ron: Monday, with your girlfriend about how this is –
James: Oh God, don’t say it! [laughs]
Ron: This is our, um, sexism coming out here, because we don’t find, we couldn’t think of any lady comedian that we find funny at all.
Will: Victoria Wood.
Ron: Victoria Wood!
Moderator: What about Daisy in Spaced?
Will: Yeah!
James: Yeah, I like her, she’s quite funny.
Ron: She’s more like a boy, though. [Laughter]
Ron: We did have that conversation.
James: We did. I know. I didn’t want to bring that up. [laughs]
Ron: I’m sorry I brought it up.
James: It’s fine. We should talk about it, it’s good to talk.
This could be related to Mary Crawford’s argument that women’s humour has conventionally been represented as deficient:

Women are said to be uncreative in generating humor; to be incompetent tellers of jokes and stories, forgetting the punch line or obscuring the point; in general, to lack a sense of humor. (1992: 29)

A similar view was identified in Giselinde Kuipers’s study of joke-tellers in the Netherlands:

The seventeen interviewed women from the sample unanimously confessed that they could not remember jokes. In recent years, many women have told me, in almost precisely the same terms, that they ‘always immediately forget’ jokes. Given the fact that women are supposed to listen to men’s jokes, this seems efficient: They thus become the everlasting audience. (Kuipers, 2006: 47)

Kuipers found that this perceived inability was described by many of her highly educated male respondents. She suggests that it may be ‘partially due to a lack of interest, but mainly to a lack of practice’ (2006: 47). Underlining that remembering and telling jokes is a skill acquired through repeated practice, she argues that this competency is valued differently across social groups. Similarly, Nancy Walker emphasizes that ‘joking is learned behaviour and as such is influenced by social relationships’, and she relates women’s perceived deficiency as joke-tellers to ‘culturally determined standards of ideal female behaviour’ (1991: 61).

In my study, this stereotype was not only brought up by these male participants, but also by 25-year-old Sophie in the all-female British group 9. In the following extract, Sophie was discussing why she did not laugh at a *Smack the Pony* sketch in which a female dog walker is approached by a petitioner for local dog walkers, denies any familiarity with dogs, and, when pressed, appears to suddenly notice the pet before running away in a screaming panic attack:

Sophie: No. I think, maybe it’s ’cos I didn’t find what she did funny at the end. I liked where it was going, I liked … like you said, that you make up the first excuse that comes into your head, but then … the way that it ended, with her just sort of screaming like that, I didn’t find the screaming at all funny, just a bit silly. And I have to say, I think I might, I don’t know if it’s a stereotype, but in general I think in my head that female comedy isn’t going to be as funny. And I don’t know why that is, but that made me think, if that’s the sort of thing that I think of as really not very funny and I didn’t, that didn’t make me laugh at all. If it was all like that, I think I’d … I wouldn’t enjoy it that much. I don’t know, it was just, something about it, just didn’t make me laugh …

Moderator: Did you think of that as kind of what you had associated with women’s comedy?
Sophie: Yeah, it’s funny because, I think, in my final year I was in the university panto[mime], and it’s always ridiculous, you know – it’s filthy, and it’s got jokes and you know, it’s just stupid … It’s written by men, and we had this conversation during the panto, saying that loads of the girls didn’t have any of the jokes, and the guy who wrote it and everything, he was a sexist wanker. But he was saying that he didn’t think that women was funny, and we stopped talking about it and stuff, and I couldn’t think of a lot of funny women – and just now I was thinking, ‘Oh God, women comedy!’ And when the Norwegian stuff came on, I was thinking, ‘Oh yeah, this is really funny, why haven’t I thought that before?’ And I was thinking about all the female comedians that are actually really funny, like I love Absolutely Fabulous –

Kirsty: Yeah.

Sophie: And that’s really funny, and … French and Saunders –

Diane: And Jo Brand, I quite like her.

Sophie: I don’t find Jo Brand that funny –

Diane: I find her quite funny.

Sophie: Yeah.

Sophie’s anecdote could be seen to suggest the circulation of an ‘interpretative repertoire’ (Edley, 2001: 201) that constructs comediennes as inferior to comedians. While she had disagreed with the pantomime writer’s argument that women are not funny, nevertheless at some point she had adopted the view that on TV women are less funny than men, and had come to associate comediennes with stereotypically feminine qualities such as hysteria and silliness. Her account can be related to Kuipers’ (2006) study of Dutch joke-tellers, where half of her interviewees constructed women’s joke-telling as ‘inappropriate’:

Men can win admiration for telling a joke while women run the risk of being disgraced. In spite of diminished differences in power between men and women, differences in standards for masculine and feminine behavior still exist and these also cover the domain of humor and the telling of jokes. This does seem to be shifting: younger interviewees were less disapproving of joke-telling women. However, they, too, said that they most often told their jokes to other men. Sex roles seem persistent here too. (2006: 46)

Thus, most of Kuipers’s female interviewees remained in the role of listener: ‘Women who like jokes usually like them from their role as audience, not as performer: they laugh at jokes told by men’ (2006: 46). This can be seen as an example of how women may come to associate femininity with culturally normative traits and roles (Crawford, 1995). As Alice Sheppard argues: ‘Given a social perception in which the definition of woman contradicts a belief in her deliberate efforts at humor, males (and females) espousing traditional stereotypes will not view the product as humorous’ (1991: 39).

Another illustration of this patriarchal interpretative repertoire can be seen in the following discussion of Smack the Pony in the British, mixed-gender group 3:
Scott: I just never have found it particularly funny. Uh, so the Norwegian version was similar as well, and I just didn’t find it particularly funny. And that was that was actually strangely one of the few Smack the Ponies that I’ve actually seen before. So obviously I didn’t like it because it’s never made me go back to watch any more. I don’t particularly like it and I’ve seen the people in it in other things, and I don’t usually rate them anywhere. I don’t know, I mean, from my point of view maybe because it’s far more from a female perspective that women would find it funnier, and I do find women funny –

Alistair: Git! [laughs]
[laughter]

Scott: I know it sounds like that thing but if there was, if there was like a –

Alistair: To laugh with or? [laughs]

Natalie: Yeah!

Scott: No, oh, just purely at. No, women can be just as funny as men, obviously, but it’s almost because it’s all women, it’s so intentional. If if there was, like, a mix, then there wouldn’t be any particular slant, and I think some of the … sort of, silly humour –, some of the physical humour, or the the bit where they were singing – for some reason I think I could laugh more at really silly things like that if they were men. And it sounds really odd, but I think it’s because … men often hang around far more with male company and make each other laugh and funny faces, and just larking [sic] about – and for some reason, it’s just more identifiable.

These participants demonstrated an awareness of this interpretative repertoire, with Alistair humorously challenging Scott’s attempts to legitimate a gendered dichotomy of humour while negotiating feminist ideology as well as the mixed-gender setting with a running tape recorder. Struggling to avoid appearing sexist, Scott related his distaste for Smack the Pony to his individual gendered experiences, suggesting that they had reduced his ability to understand ‘a female perspective’ and made him associate humour with masculine playfulness. This can be related to Andrew Stott’s discussion of gender and comedy, where he notes ‘the often-repeated opinion that women are not as naturally funny as men due to the belief that comedy is boisterous and aggressive and therefore temperamentally unsuited to women’ (2005: 99). Having introduced some of the most overt ways in which men and women marginalized female comedy performers, I will move on to look at how participants adopted various strategies to legitimate their distaste for Smack the Pony and Melonas.

The gendering of quality and skills

In group 12, one such strategy was the positioning of Smack the Pony and Melonas within a stale sketch show genre. James here maintained:

Yeah, my main objection with [sic] both of those last two sketch shows is that it’s a tired old format, and I didn’t laugh because I’ve seen it before – regardless of who it was written by and who is in it.
James, Ron and Charlie then tried to use this perspective to explain their distaste in non-sexist terms:

Ron: But no, no – I reckon that if you showed us anything, a male equivalent as well, we’d just we’d still –
James: Yeah.
Ron: Find it –
James: Really boring
Ron: Yeah. I’m just trying to cover my –
James: Yeah!
Ron: Sexist back! [laughs]

However, in group 12, Ron was the only participant who claimed never to enjoy sketch shows, while James and Charlie argued that some British sketch shows, such as *Big Train* (BBC2, 1998–2002), *The Fast Show* (BBC2, 1994–7), *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (BBC1/BBC2, 1989–95), and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* were far better than *Smack the Pony* and *Melonas*. Thus, while this group positioned sitcoms above sketch shows in their hierarchy of TV comedy genres, they made exceptions for certain male-dominated sketch shows that were associated with notions of quality and innovation.

A second strategy devalued the comediennes’ abilities by representing sketch show performances as less demanding than those in sitcoms. In group 12, Ron maintained:

‘Cos it doesn’t do anything for the actors, anyone, not anyone, but I suppose anyone can act for a minute sketch, but … you’ve got no, kind of, you’ve got no characters.

Apart from Ron, James and Sophie, 30-year-old Arve in the all-male Norwegian group 23 was the only other participant who explicitly stated that he generally did not like comediennes: ‘But I’m thinking, like, funny girls, like, properly funny girls, the type that gets you in stitches, they don’t exist!’ After then having laughed loudly and repeatedly during the screenings of *Smack the Pony* and *Melonas*, Arve said: ‘I was quite surprised, actually, in a good way.’ Nevertheless, in the subsequent discussion, he upheld the hierarchical positions of male and female performers by claiming that the comic success of sketch shows relied solely on the script:

But in most cases, like, I mean, anyone could do those things – like at that place, the bar, sitting there and doing handstands and all that. Anyone could have done that sketch; the point is just, like, that it’s a bit funny … And when some of them were singing and that, it’s a bit funny, like, just the whole thing about who was the best and that. And anyone could have done it, but it was funny because the gag was funny. (Arve)

Stott identifies this as one of the ways in which women have ‘been denied the power to be funny’, arguing that ‘if women are seen to be funny, then this is thought to be a function of the genre rather than the qualities of the performer’ (2005: 99). Gray also sees this approach as a technique for excluding women from ‘the comic arena’: ‘Where women are visibly making people laugh, deny the existence of a conscious creative process’ (1994: 8).
Comediennes and ‘women’s issues’

A further strategy constructed Smack the Pony and Melonas as excluding male viewers. The notion of ‘women’s comedy’ was brought up in 20 out of the 25 groups by both male and female participants. No one said that men were unable to enjoy Smack the Pony or Melonas, but most British and Norwegian groups suggested that female viewers would enjoy them more because they would have a greater understanding of the female characters and the situations in which they found themselves. Describing ‘the perceived ghettoization of women’s comedy’, Stott highlights the belief that female comedians only discuss ‘women’s themes’ – relationships, shopping, and menstruation, for example – whereas male topics are thought to be unbounded and therefore to have universal appeal. (2005: 99)

In group 12, this idea was initially voiced by Charlie in relation to Smack the Pony:

I was a bit disappointed with it, when it came out, because I just thought, with the writers that were on it and the people who were in it, it should be better than it was. And I was a bit disappointed that it seemed, a lot of it seemed quite lazy. And it was, like, you’d expect something with a limited brief of ‘write something that is funny for a certain type, for [a] certain group of people’.

Charlie here implied that his distaste was not based on a dislike of female performers, but on the show’s perceived targeting of female viewers. This idea was supported later by James:

James: Yeah. I think, personally, the one where the two women were singing was funny, because it wasn’t using the humour that they were women, I thought, that’s what was funny about that one, and all the ones where, like, the woman who was on the touchline of the football field and doing the dancing and that, I didn’t find that funny at all. I didn’t find it funny that she was a woman not knowing what she was doing, and I didn’t find it funny that from a male point of view I might have expected her to do that, you know, as a stereotypical thing, which is not true, either. I just didn’t find it very funny. I don’t like comedy that that plays on one side of things, like if it’s a comedy of all about how black people are black, and isn’t that hilarious –

Ron: Yeah, or like…

James: I don’t find that funny. Or, you know, like, when a black comedian will say [shouts] ‘White folks do this! Black people do this!’ I don’t find that funny, and I don’t find it funny when they say –

Ron: I quite like Richard Pryor, though.

James: I don’t know, Richard Pryor talks about [inaudible] when he’s on crack. [laughter]

James: You don’t have to be black to do that. That’s hilarious! And his own insecurities –
Ron: And I like Chris Rock.
James: Yeah, but he doesn’t, um he does talk about um –
Ron: That’s his main joke!
James: Oh, I don’t know! [inaudible] He talks about other things –
Will: Yeah, but not in the same way. He’s not talking about the differences.
Ron: I think not, I think your point is, it’s not really funny, I suppose our generation doesn’t really like to take that piss out of another –
James: Yeah.
Ron: Doesn’t like to take that piss out of women, or doesn’t like to take that piss out of –
Will: Is that true, though?
James: I don’t know.
Ron: I don’t know!
James: Yeah, I, personally, don’t like comedy where the whole joke is, you know, we’re this collect group of individuals, I like comedy that everybody can laugh at, and it sort of –
Charlie: Mmm.
James: It sort of features all men, women, you know, people from different countries, things like that, that’s funny.

Here, both Will and Ron challenged James’ argument that he disliked all comedy that was based on representations of race or gender, and instead he ended up concluding that he wanted comedy to be accessible to everybody. However, this argument conflicted with two of his previous statements, in which he argued that Spaced (Channel 4, 1999–2001) and Nissene på Låven – both of which he described in very positive terms – primarily appealed to men in their twenties. This might suggest that James liked seeing himself as part of a narrowly-defined target audience, but objected to programmes that he perceived as being aimed at other social groups. Thus, while James’ utterances at this specific point in the discussion attempted to associate his viewing identity with ideas of egalitarianism and solidarity, some of his previous utterances constructed comedy as a masculine sphere. The white participants’ acceptance of black comedians talking about the experiences of black men further supported Stott’s (2005) argument that masculine issues are perceived to be universal.

**Gendered tastes and distastes**

Distaste for ‘women’s comedy’ can be linked to class. In an ethnographic study of youth cultures linked to music and clubbing, Sarah Thornton found that the mainstream was associated specifically with a working-class femininity: ‘Here, it is not possible to separate an embryonic critique of the status quo from ideas which express and support extant relations of power’ (1995: 166). This notion can be identified in the following extract from group 12; here, Ron and Charlie argued that the appeal of Smack the Pony was not simply reserved for female viewers, but for a particular classed subset of that audience:
Ron: But I don’t even think it’s all women, I think it’s, not being horrible, I think it’s a type of ... stereotype of woman, like a woman who likes to go out and drink Lambrini1 and get pissed on a Friday night.

James: [laughs]
Ron: That kind of, um, woman –
Charlie: Yeah.
James: I don’t know what kind of woman that is. [laughs] Sounds quite fun.

In this focus group, Ron constructed himself as a Spaced fan, and this extract illustrates Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt’s argument that fans will often ‘ridicule the naïve and easy pleasures of “ordinary people” in a way that reproduces the authority of bourgeois taste and draws on the terms and strategies of legitimate culture’ (2004: 28). Ron’s modifications of his derogatory statement suggested a negotiation with the focus group setting, in which I had previously responded affirmatively when James asked me if I liked Smack the Pony.

Ron’s argument set up a hierarchy of comedy viewers based on both class and gender. As Thornton argues, the disparaging of young working-class women is ‘a position statement made by youth of both genders about girls who are not culturally “one of the boys”’ (1995: 104). Another social group that was often constructed as ‘other’ was middle-aged people, generally in the form of parents, and particularly mothers. In the mixed-gender group 1, for example, the male participants associated Smack the Pony and Melonas with the tastes of middle-aged women:

Andrew: I can imagine my mum watching something like that Norwegian one and finding it pretty funny.
Michael: Yeah, I think you’re right, I think actually that’s a mum one.
Andrew: Yeah.
Dave: Yeah, and that’s sort of the [inaudible] thing about Smack the Pony as well, is that it seems to be harmless enough, it can appeal to older people.
Andrew: [inaudible]
Dave: Because we’ve got this sort of thing, younger people aren’t as easily offended by things –
Michael: Yeah.
Dave: We’re just sort of generally desensitized [inaudible] the cruder it gets, I don’t even notice most things, I’m so desensitized …
Michael: [laughs]
Dave: … by [inaudible] and just generally I’m not a person with very high moral standing when it comes to …
Michael: [laughs]
Dave: … life, um, so [laughing] when, whenever I’m watching things with my mum, they always go ‘Oh!’ and it doesn’t even register to me unless they’re there that there might be a problem with it. While a programme like that, my mum might be, ‘Oooh, isn’t that naughty!’ sort of chuckle, but she’s not gonna be offended in any way, while a lot of other comedy she would be.
Dave here constructed a particular type of masculinity associated with subcultural tastes and transgression. Exploring the ways in which ‘displays of transgression were used to constitute masculine identities’ in a particular Barcelona youth culture, Joan Pujolar notes that ‘their meanings and practices depend very much on the terms in which authority is defined at particular historical moments because, in a way, they are a negative reflection of it’ (2000: 53). In this case transgression, as described in Thornton’s (1995) study, could be seen as a resistance to the trajectory of ‘social aging’. As defined by Pierre Bourdieu, this is nothing other than the slow renunciation or disinvestment (socially assisted and encouraged) which leads agents to adjust their aspirations to their objective chances, to espouse their condition, become what they are and make do with what they have. (1984: 110–11)

Drawing on Bourdieu’s argument, Thornton maintains:

Subcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race are all employed in order to keep the determinations of class, income and occupation at bay. Interestingly, the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t. (1995: 105)

Thus Dave defined his viewing identity in opposition to the tastes of middle-aged women, who were contrasted with ‘younger people’. However, Dave and Michael also frequently highlighted a perceived difference between their own masculine tastes and female focus group member Ellie’s dislike for what they constructed as transgressive TV comedy:

M: So you can’t think of any comedies that have offended you?
E: No, not really. Maybe, some, maybe certain jokes have, but I suppose that’s more like stand-up comedians –
M: You don’t like Jam much, do you?
E: Pardon?
M: Jam, Jam.
D: [amused] You’ve watched Jam?
M: Chris Morris, the sketch show –
E: No, I don’t think –
M: I can’t imagine you would like that.

As Bourdieu argues, because we see our own tastes as natural, ‘tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance’ (1984: 56). Drawing on this idea, Henry Jenkins notes that:

The boundaries of ‘good taste’, then, must constantly be policed; proper tastes must be separated from improper tastes; those who possess the wrong tastes must be distinguished from those whose tastes conform more closely to our own expectations. (1992: 16)

Dave and Michael did so by contrasting feminized mainstream comedy with a transgressive masculine humour that women were unable to enjoy.
There were no marked gender differences in the numbers of male and female viewers who stated that they generally found the two sketch shows funny or ‘hit and miss’. *Smack the Pony* was the more popular of the two, while *Melonas* was more likely to be given the ‘hit and miss’ label. However, gendered differences were far more marked among the participants who explicitly stated that they disliked the two programmes. Five British men and one Norwegian man maintained that they did not find *Smack the Pony* funny, while no women made this claim. Similarly, eight British men, eight Norwegian men, two British women and three Norwegian women dismissed *Melonas* as not funny. This suggests that gendered tastes were more obvious in relation to distaste.

This is also reflected by gendered differences in language among the participants who disliked either of the programmes. The criticism offered by male participants tended to be far more direct and severe than that given by female participants, and this difference can be illustrated by the following two extracts. The first is from the all-female British group 24:

Moderator: What did you think about the Norwegian one, compared to this one, *Smack the Pony*?
Debbie: The Norwegian one seemed more in your face than *Smack the Pony* did, I think.
Moderator: How do you mean?
Debbie: I don’t know … it just seemed … they were all, like, really obvious … with the Norwegian one … I don’t know, they were really similar, but I just felt the Norwegian one was more, was trying harder than the other one.

The second extract is from the all-male Norwegian group 14, where the participants had previously argued that *Smack the Pony* was better than *Melonas*:

Moderator: This was from the ‘best of’ DVD.
Jonas: It was, was it? Oh dear!
Mads: In that case I will have to say, on behalf of everyone, thank you for bringing the ‘best of’ DVD. I’d rather not watch a normal episode.

**Challenging the gendering of comedy**

So far I have focused on the ways in which some participants constructed female-dominated comedy as inferior to male-dominated shows; however, as group 14 demonstrated, some male participants also claimed to enjoy at least some of the sketches. British 38-year-old Paul (group 3) was one of the few participants who explicitly rejected the idea that *Smack the Pony* was ‘women’s humour’:
I mean, I really like *Smack the Pony*, I think it’s very funny. There’s that sort of female comedian tag to it, but to me, I just see them as three very talented, sort of, funny women that are good script writers. I don’t really think of it as sort of gender specific, I just find it very funny. Obviously it’s coming from a certain point of view, but I just find some sketches are obviously a lot funnier than others. But I find it very funny and I think they’re very funny, and I presume the Norwegian one is a variation of, you know, a variation of that, that was kind of okay. But I do like *Smack the Pony*, I think it’s very funny.

Paul here argued that the sketches would ‘be coming from a certain point of view’, which presumably means that they were based on women’s experiences. He did not discuss how this might affect his engagement with the programme, but instead associated the programme with notions of comic skill and quality. Paul could here be seen as somewhat unwilling to discuss the role of gender in relation to comedy, but 22-year-old Gavin in the all-male British group 5 specifically described female-dominated comedy shows as progress in terms of gender equality:

Well, because they’re both predominantly … the sketch shows were both predominantly feminine; I suppose they were trying to say women can be funny, because it can often seem the contrary at times, because there is so much male starring comedy. So that, yeah, that’s good and important, a good and important statement to be made. I mean, it’s a social commentary inasmuch as these shows weren’t happening 10, 15 years ago and they are happening now and they are proliferating. So it does show a wider kind of societal thing, of women are becoming a lot more equal with men, and we are going in the right direction – and that’s social commentary in that regard.

Drawing on feminist ideology, Gavin here highlighted the idea that traditionally, TV comedy has been a male-dominated sphere. However, this utterance still constructed a debate premised on the patriarchal question ‘can women be funny?’, rather than on the question: ‘Why have women been constructed as unfunny?’ These issues of ‘why’ and ‘how’ are those that I have been trying to examine in this article.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined the ways in which focus group participants gendered humour and comedy in their discussions around two female-dominated sketch shows. Comedy centred around women was presented as less salient than comedy centred around men through the construction of a hierarchy of quality in which male comedy performers were positioned over female ones. Comediennes were devalued both on the basis of their perceived lack of skills and, more frequently, due to a perceived preoccupation with ‘women’s issues’ which had little relevance to male viewers. Drawing on literature that examines the relationship between gender and humour or comedy, I have argued that these gendered constructions can be related to a patriarchal opposition between comedy and appropriate feminine behaviour.
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Note

1. Lambrini is a brand of low-cost sparkling perry promoted with slogans such as 'Lambrini girls just wanna have fun'.

References


**Biographical note**

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