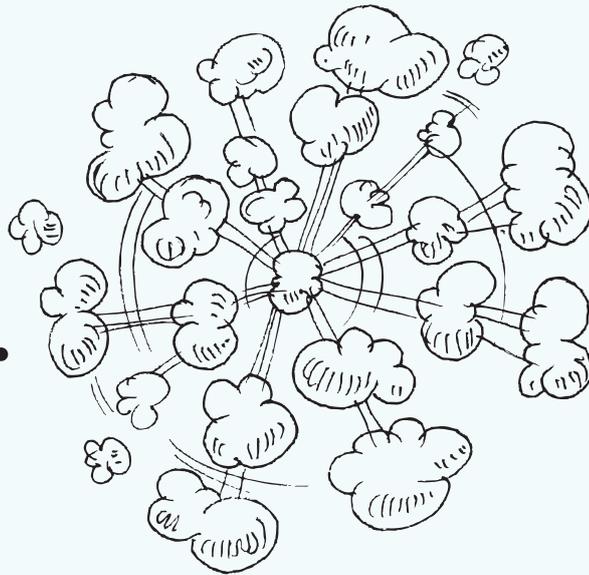


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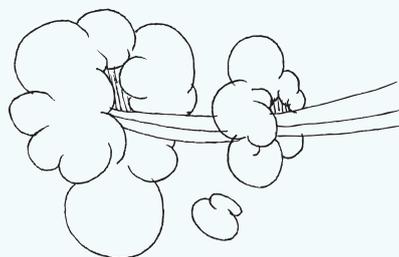
Dr Sharon Lockyer reports on her research into understanding live stand-up comedy from an audience perspective

While we may know the personal, emotional, practical or social reasons that underpin stand-up comedians' desire and motivation to perform live stand-up comedy, little is known about the motivations and desires of another very important dynamic in stand-up comedy performances – the audience. Why do audiences go to see live stand-up comedy? What are the motivations behind going to see live stand-up comedy? What is the appeal of live stand-up comedy for audiences? As a social scientist with a long-standing interest in examining the social and cultural role of comedy, these seemingly straightforward questions framed a small-scale empirical research project that I completed (with Lynn Myers, Brunel University) which examined live stand-up comedy from the audiences' perspective.

The project consisted of both an online survey and a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with stand-up comedy audiences¹. The interviews specifically examined how stand-up comedy audiences make sense of their stand-up comedy attendance, the motivations for attending live stand-up comedy and the appeal of attending live stand-up comedy. Findings suggest that live stand-up comedy entices audiences and encourages them to attend for a number of particular aesthetic, practical and social reasons that operate on two different levels.

These are the public/social level (as an audience member) and the private level (as an individual). Five main themes were identified in the semi-structured interview responses given by stand-up comedy audiences:

- 1) Respecting the comedian – an appreciation of the comic skills involved in live stand-up comedy is one of the main features attracting audiences to live stand-up comedy. Comedy audiences expressed respect towards, and appreciation of, the performative skills involved in stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy audiences also expressed admiration for the (lone) comedian who has the courage to position him/herself before an audience (which expects to be amused), and to maintain the audience's attention.
- 2) Expecting the unexpected – stand-up comedy audiences described the appeal of live stand-up comedy in terms of its unexpected and unpredictable potential. The 'unknown' or 'anticipation' involved in live stand-up relates to the stand-up comedians' actions, the content of the performance and the ways in which the comedian responds to the dynamics of the specific audience on the night. Some comedy-goers expressed explicit differences between the way in which expectation works with live stand-up comedy compared to other live performances, such as music and serious theatre, where there is an



... unexpected

element of predictability. Some stand-up comedy audiences expressed the appeal as the ‘sense of not knowing what you’re going to be laughing at’.

3) Proximity and intimacy – proxemics relations between the stand-up comedian and the audience were referred to as an attractive feature of live stand-up comedy. Respondents expressed their enjoyment of the limited distance and the intimacy between the comedian and the audience, with some audiences responding ‘there’s something quite exciting about being closer’.

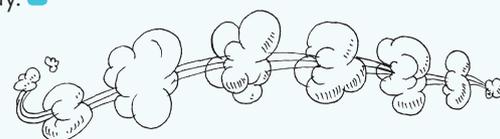
4) Opportunities for interaction – opportunities for interaction between audience members before, during and after the performance were another important motivating feature of live stand-up comedy. These experiences were compared to theatre performances where ‘you don’t interact, you’ve got to sit there quietly in a long row and watch the performance’. Post-performance discussions with those who have shared the comic experience were described as ‘exhilarating’ and ‘exciting’ by some stand-up comedy-goers. Although interaction between those who attend the stand-up comedy performance was encouraged and regarded as a positive feature of the experience, interaction between the stand-up comedian and the audience was generally discouraged, or in some cases feared due to the tension felt by the comedy-goer. Some interviewees recalled the horror of being ‘picked on’ by stand-up comedians. Others expressed the risk that accompanies attending stand-up comedy as ‘there’s always that possibility that it might happen’. For some stand-up comedy-goers this risk was related to the appealing unpredictability of stand-up comedy (as mentioned above).

5) Sharing the comic experience – the final theme identified in the stand-up comedy-goer interview data was the way in which attending live stand-up comedy resulted in a shared or collective experience of being in the same environment, sharing the comedic experience and being in ‘the moment’. These were experiences that most comedy-goers sought and valued. The shared comic experience works at two levels – first sharing understanding of the joke between the comedian and the audience, and second, sharing the laughter with other audience members.

1. The online survey revealed how often stand-up comedy audiences attend live stand-up comedy, the types of venue that stand-up comedy is seen in, the types of venues audiences prefer to experience live stand-up comedy in, and the extent to which individuals attend live stand-up comedy alone or accompanied by others (and if so, who they attend with).

However, the sociability of shared laughter is paradoxical. Although it is social and can bring people together in a shared experience, it can simultaneously be anti-social by excluding and dividing individuals and groups. One stand-up comedy goer explained how different types of laughter separates those audience members who have understood the joke (‘us’) from those audience members who are laughing in a different way which illustrates that they have not understood the joke (‘them’).

Although the themes were considered separately for the purpose of data analysis there is an element of overlap across the themes. Moreover, the features underpinning the appeal of stand-up comedy for some audiences can simultaneously cause conflict and cause tension for some members of the stand-up comedy audience. However, it is precisely such conflict and tension that attracts some stand-up comedy audiences. Taken together these themes illustrate the dynamic nature of audience engagement with live stand-up comedy. ■



The full research write-up of the stand-up comedy audience project can be read in: Lockyer, S., and Myers, L. (2011) ‘It’s About Expecting the Unexpected’: Live Stand-up Comedy from the Audiences’ Perspective, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, Vol. 8, N. 2, pp. 165-188.

Available at: <http://www.participations.org/Volume%208/Issue%202/2c%20Lockyer%20Myers.pdf>

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