



Stand-Up Comedy as Social and Political Critique: Examining the Critical Power of Humour in Contemporary Nigerian and African Performance

Hafiz Oyetoro

Department of Theatre Arts

Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin

ABSTRACT

In Africa, especially Nigeria, stand-up comedy has emerged as a popular performance genre and, in fact, a full-fledged cultural and commercial industry. Nigerian stand-up comedy addresses governance, corruption, poverty, inequality, ethnicity, religion, gender, and other social paradoxes. This article speaks about stand-up comedy in Nigeria as a vehicle for social and political critique, and how comedy can help redefine entertainment into a public commentary. The study employs qualitative performance analysis, textual analysis, and contextual interpretation to analyse the selected performances and comic personas of Gbenga Adeboye, I Go Dye, Basketmouth, and Gordons, as well as digitally mediated comedy. It introduces the idea of the Comic Critic as well as a Comic Critique Cycle: how social realities are translated into comic observations, a performance, punchlines, and a response from the audience and critical reflection. The results show that Nigeria's stand-up comedy allows for social criticism through the lens of ordinary experiences shared as objects of laughter and reflection. But its critical tendencies are ambivalent too: humour is able to confront power and yet maintain stereotypes; it can disrupt and yet be comfortable with commercial needs. According to the article, the stand-up arena in Nigeria is a dynamic cultural field where humour, power, identity, commerce, and criticism converge. It suggests the use of stand-up comedy within the curriculum of Theatre and Performance Studies courses, the use of ethnographic studies of live audiences, as well as developing ethical guidelines to encourage critical engagement and minimise harmful stereotypes.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: February, 2026

Received in revised form: May, 2026

Accepted: July, 2026

Published online: September, 2026

KEYWORDS

Stand-Up Comedy, Humour, Social Criticism, Political Satire, Nigerian Comedy, African Performance, Popular Culture, Audience, Resistance, Comic Critique Cycle

INTRODUCTION

There's been tremendous growth in stand-up comedy in contemporary African culture. In Nigeria, the form has become more of an entertainment artifact than ever before and is now a notable part of popular culture, public discourse, and the creative economy. The comedian's omnipresence on stage, television, the comedy circuit, festivals, corporate events, and online platforms has made the comedian a growing presence in the cultural landscape. Nwankwo (2023) classifies stand-up comedy in Nigeria as a popular entertainment and a booming business that has evolved since the 1990s into a formal

industry with its stars, sponsors, and international tours. In a similar vein, Otiono (2022) foregrounds African stand-up as an expression of wider aesthetic, political, and economic practices through which Africans negotiate their identities, nationhood, and everyday social problems. This reflects a historical trend in which spaces of popular arts in Africa have been sites for negotiating social contradictions (Barber, 2018).

Though it has become popular, stand-up comedy is still taken as primarily entertainment, and laughter as its sole goal. This way of looking at humour ignores the cultural and political dimensions of humour. It's common for Nigerian

Corresponding author: Hafiz Oyetoro

oyetoro@lasued.edu.ng

Department of Theatre Arts, Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin.

© 2026. Faculty of Technology Education. ATBU Bauchi. All rights reserved



comedians to turn political events, economic hardships, social injustice, institutional failures, and everyday frustrations into a comedy story. Their performances produce other means of public critique that serve to make highly complicated social situations accessible to a broader audience. In postcolonial Africa, as Mbembe (2021) notes, humour offers a way of dealing with the 'absurdities of state power and institutional dysfunction' that collectively turns the bitterness into a cultural expression.

In recent years, the focus of the comedy industry has turned to Africa, with a strong push toward the African stand-up comedy scene. However, in recent years, scholars have increasingly recognised the potential of African stand-up comedy. Filani (2020) shows how Nigerian stand-up humour is used to build national identity through a reliance on common sociopolitical and cultural experiences. Nwankwo (2024) investigates the potential of political leadership as a source for comedy and explores the impact of censorship and political surroundings on comic expression. Likewise, Hammett, Martin and Nwankwo (2023) state that African humour does multiple political works and warn against the perception of laughter as being resistant. Similarly, Willems (2022) and Eko (2019) confirm that humour can at the same time challenge and reinforce dominant power structures, depending on the social, political and economic situation of the performers.

The present article explores the social and political critique that is created through the use of laughter in Nigerian stand-up comedy, based on the above discussions. It's not only the subject's comedians talk about, but it is an exploration of performative mechanisms by which normal social observations are made into collective critical recognition. In addition to the words used in the set-up and punchlines of jokes, criticism in stand-up comedy is also done through voice and gesture, timing, mimicry, exaggeration, repetition, audience interaction, and comic persona. These elements of theatre have an impact on the way the audience can engage with and react to the performance. Therefore, analysing comedy purely from written transcripts

has the potential to miss embodied and relational aspects of comedy. For Schechner (2020), it is crucial to get to know what performance is through its physical, social, and contextual dimensions, which is especially pertinent to the study of stand-up comedy.

This article proposes that Nigerian stand-up comedy (NSC) is a public discourse as a performative act. This is especially important when comedians take something that is a common occurrence and a political paradox and make it funny, causing people to look at and reflect on that situation together. The article uses the term Comic Critic to describe a comedian who is "an actor who is involved in and who critically observes the society that is being acted upon. The idea builds on the previous research on comedians as public commentators, as explored by Githiora (2021) on Kenyan comedians and Nyarota (2023) on Zimbabwean stand-up comedians.

The article is an important contribution to three main points. First, it is a conceptualization that transcends the traditional definition of the entertainer by thinking of the Nigerian comedian as a performer, social observer, commentator, and critic. Second, it suggests that a comic critique cycle can be used as an analytical approach for understanding the social reality that becomes comic critique in a process of performance and audience interaction. Thirdly, it makes the ambiguous status of comic criticism apparent. Comedy, while subverting authority and revealing social contradictions, can also reinforce stereotypes and dominant ideologies and can accommodate commercial interests. The article explores these intersections, placing Nigerian stand-up comedy as a creative and dynamic cultural practice in which laughter, power, identity, business, and criticism play a part. Top of Form
Bottom of Form

Nigerian Stand-Up Comedy as Social Commentary

There is a great body of existing work to show that Nigerian stand-up is an art of entertainment and social critique. Language is shown as a tool for social criticism by Nigerian

Corresponding author: Hafiz Oyetero

oyetoro@lasued.edu.ng

Department of Theatre Arts, Lagos State University of Education, Ojo/Ijanikin.

© 2026. Faculty of Technology Education. ATBU Bauchi. All rights reserved



comedians when dealing with immorality, government policies, and political behaviour (Akanke, Adedeji, and Robbin, 2020). Agbaje (2019) also notes that language used in Nigerian popular performance allows for the criticism of sensitive issues in an indirect way with the use of ambiguity and language strategies. In respect of national identity, Filani (2020) shows how national identity is being projected in comedians' comic self-presentation, the presence of trickster characters, and resilience in the image of the Nation. Oha (2021) also outlines a common set of frustrations over urban hardship and inadequate infrastructure and institutional functioning that help audiences identify with each other, creating a repertoire of frustrations.

In his study of Gbenga Adeboye, Afolayan (2022) reveals the interplay of comedy, music, and satire in the discovery of contradictions in society. As shown in Adeboye's performances, humour is a key cultural practice with great potential. Afolayan does, however, point to its shortcomings, especially when it comes to its ability to mirror ethnic conflicts and social marginalisation. The double role of popular actors/singers in society, as both actors of social criticism and perpetrators of ethnic and gender hierarchies, is also noted by Ogundele (2020).

The upheavals inherent in these contradictions are the basis for the present article's interpretation of comic criticism. A narrow focus on resistance to comedy misses its critical role, and a focus solely on entertainment misses the issues it raises because of the assumptions that might be made about them. In order to engage with the challenge, negotiation, reproduction, and commodification of social meanings, a Nigerian stand-up comedy approach has to be one that recognizes Nigerian stand-up comedians' capacity to do the same. In contrast to seeing comedians as heroic resisters or simply entertainers, this perspective takes into account the roles of comedians as cultural actors in complicated social and economic contexts.

Tsaaio (2022) also delves into this complexity in the context of the connection between laughter and ethno-cultural representation in Nigerian stand-up comedy. His

analysis brings up issues around the use of ethnic caricatures: do they indicate cultural familiarity, or do they perpetuate negative stereotypes? The same can be said for ethnic humor in Nigerian popular culture, in line with Adesokan (2020), who says ethnic humor is simultaneously an affirmation of what it means to be an ethnic group and an affirmation of the boundaries of the society.

In all, these studies lay a foundation for the social and political importance of Nigerian stand-up comedy, and the contradictions therein. The present article, however, is to build on this scholarship and focus on how comedians take their everyday experiences and make them social criticism, more specifically, how the comedians make the connection between their performance and the audience's engagement and critical reflection.

Politics, Power and African Humour

The political nature of humour has been given added significance in the field of African Studies. According to Hammett et al. (2023), the concept of humour as resistance has been a simple one that needs to be reconsidered. On the contrary, it is possible for humour to serve more than one political function, depending on the situation, audience, and power structure; a joke that works in one private club can function in a different way when it is heard all over the country; a joke that works under one administration can be dangerous under another.

Nwankwo (2024) illustrates this with case studies from Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Egypt and Rwanda. Political leadership can be used for jokes, but the extent to which comedians can make political criticism depends partially on the political environment. There are instances where the expression of comedy is limited by censorship and political pressure, sometimes in direct ways, sometimes in the more insidious way of self-censorship, where a comedian learns how far a joke on a sitting leader can go before he or she risks an invitation, endorsement, or personal safety.

In Kenya, Kiguru (2022) records similar practices by comedians, who have created fictional personalities and allegorical situations to



avoid being directly censured while at the same time delivering a political message. Moyo (2021) relates similar approaches by comedians in Zimbabwe, who have increasingly resorted to digital platforms as a way to avoid the state-controlled broadcast media.

This indicates that the dynamic of comedy and politics is not well captured by a binary opposition between comedian and government. Rather, it can be thought of as a series of interdependent and interlocking relationships: comedian and audience, political power and comedian, media and comedian, and cultural norms and comedian. The comedian is a part of the very social system he or she satirizes, and relies on that system for venues, airtime, sponsorship and, ultimately, the audience that tolerates certain targets in accordance with a particular political climate. Similarly, with regard to Nigerian civil society as a whole, Obadare (2020) shows that critical players in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states also engage in complex negotiations with power as opposed to opposition. This is especially true for comedians who need to have a wide base of fans on both sides of the political and social aisle to be commercially viable.

Performance Mechanics and the Comic Event

Stand-up comedy is an important aspect of the performance element in Theatre and Performance Studies. Nwankwo (2023) analyzes stand-up in Nigeria and its theatrical and embodied practices, which go beyond written jokes, to voice, timing, gesture, movement, mimicry, characterisation, audience interaction, improvisation and punchline construction. These are the elements that affect the meanings and effectiveness of comic performances. Phelan (2019) also highlights the unrepeatable and embodied aspects of performance, where meaning may be different when dealing with the same material, performer, audience, and context. There are significant differences between written content and performance, as can be seen in the case of political impersonation.

Comedians try to mimic politicians by enlarging their mannerisms, gestures, and voices to make political failures comic experiences.

Performers don't just tell about faults in the political sphere, but they become and act out the faults in front of responsive audiences. In so doing, political criticism becomes a virtually instant, collective experience. As Roach (2018) puts it, it is a process of "surrogation" that is "embodied performance instead of abstract representation generating a cultural memory."

Language also has a strong influence on Nigerian stand-up comedy. Ogheneakpobor and Mowarin (2024) show the use of Nigerian Pidgin, code-switching, language alternation, and orality in the strategic delivery of comedians' utterances. The multilingual nature of Nigeria's environment offers the performer a variety of linguistic means of expressing identity, intimacy, irony, and social distance. For example, Nigerian Pidgin can provide a sense of familiarity between the comedians and their audience through its ability to convey common experiences of economic hardship and institutional failure. According to Deuber (2019), it has historical significance as a language of inter-ethnic communication and popular culture, which can be seen in stand-up comedians in the present day.

The language choice is also a political expression. For example, the formal announcement of a politician by using Pidgin would compromise the institutional authority of the announcement by rendering it through the ordinary people's experience. Avoaja (2025) also uses Nigerian stand-up to illustrate the creation of ideological representations and relations of power through nominal choices. So the language in this context is not just a medium of humour, but also an instrument for social criticism.

Another dimension is significant, as the comedian is becoming more of a public intellectual. Comedians can be more powerful than formally credentialed commentators because they can speak about social experiences that are shared by them and their audience. They can build trust among their audience and have an impact beyond entertainment through their frequent encounters with commonplace paradoxes. This authority can allow comedians to do so in public discussions, commercial endorsements, and political commentary. Olaniyan (2021) attributes



this to earlier popular entertainers in Nigeria such as Hubert Ogunde, who was more influential than just on the stage. This is a view that can account for the way that contemporary comedians can be entertainers, social commentators, and public intellectuals at once, thereby supporting the conceptualization of the Comic Critic in this article.

From Live Stand-Up to Digital Comedy

Digital media is an important aspect to consider in the modern comic scene in Nigeria. New ways of comic production and circulation have emerged with the growth of YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and more. According to Mark (2026), Nigerian digital comedy is becoming more of a platform-based system that is marked by algorithmic visibility, audience participation, and monetisation. His idea of Digital Vernacular Comedy is the way humor that is rooted in culture is reworked by digital media, which favor 'shortness, a quotable punch line, and something that can easily be clipped' over the 'extended narrative build of a long club set'. For Abidin (2020), platform algorithms also affect the creation of content in the Global South, where content with high engagement rates is rewarded, and content with lower engagement rates that fail to circulate fast are penalised. The impact of this is profound for political humor: ideas that are too difficult or too context-specific could be algorithmically filtered out, as could ideas that are easily shareable and have an emotional impact, irrespective of their political message.

The significance of this development for political critique is of great importance. A live joke is a joke that takes place in a more or less contained relationship between the joker and the co-present audience, and is dependent on the room, night, and crowd. A digital joke can be passed around many times, across different audiences who never met in person with the joker, or with each other. It can and will be clipped, pasted, commented on, remixed, and recontextualised, sometimes being attached to political events which didn't even happen at the time of the joke. This means that the comic event can no longer necessarily be fulfilled when the audience laughs. It can keep going through many

more steps: performance, recording, upload, viewing, sharing, commenting, remixing, and recirculation – each one of which can involve new layers of interpretation, which the original performer may not have intended or anticipated. Papacharissi (2019) calls this phenomenon "affective publics", as digital circulation brings new ways of engaging in politics, ones that are based on emotional resonance, not rational deliberation.

New studies of Nigerian social-media skits have substantiated the growing trend of using social media for socio-political commentaries. For instance, Ude, Chukwu, and Ugwu (2025) examine some of the skits from Nigeria and how they are able to tackle issues of governance, accountability, fuel scarcity, and electoral politics in a humorous way, sometimes even faster than the traditional bound-to-schedule stand-up. The distinction between stand-up and digital comedy is thus becoming increasingly blurred, and any contemporary study of Nigerian comic critique should regard the stand-up and the screen as two nodes that are interacting in an expanded comic public sphere and not as two genres per se. This confluence has given rise to new ways of performing citizenship in Nigeria, as digital comedy serves as a means to engage with political belonging and ask for accountability beyond the institutional structure, according to Adeyemi (2024).

Theoretical Framework

The study uses three different theories that complement each other in explaining the role of comedy as a social and political critique: incongruity theory, Bakhtin's carnival theory, and contemporary African studies on humour and politics. These views, when combined, can account for the cognitive and social/political aspects of comic performance. Incongruity theory is the theory of humour that is based on the mismatch between expectations and reality. Comedians are able to point out the incongruities and present them in an unconventional fashion. The incongruity arising from the difference between the promise of politics and daily realities is a major source of Nigerian political comedy. For example, the expectation of continuous power

Corresponding author: Hafiz Oyetoro

oyetoro@lasued.edu.ng

Department of Theatre Arts, Lagos State University of Education, Ojo/Ijanikin.

© 2026. Faculty of Technology Education. ATBU Bauchi. All rights reserved



supply is in stark contrast to citizens' reliance on generators. Comedians turn these paradoxes into comedy and allow the viewers to see and reflect on what they all have in common. Incongruity has been singled out by Morreall (2019) as especially relevant to political humour, for example, as there are often many incongruities between rhetoric and reality.

Carnival, as Bakhtin theorises, can be used to make sense of the way comedy briefly erodes hierarchies and power. Comedians ridicule and reverse the roles of important political and social figures, thus providing an arena for ordinary people to symbolically confront the authorities. But temporary inversions are not enough to bring about permanent political change. Comedy can show how power is being abused, but the institutions that it is attacking are likely to survive the joke. Stallybrass & White (2018) also warn that power structures can curb the transgressive nature of carnival. This approach enables the research to identify the possibilities and limitations of comic performance.

The third point of view is derived from the existing literature on humor and politics in Africa today. Hammett et al. (2023) contend that it is a mistake to view humour solely as oppositional and that it constitutes various types of political work. The study builds on this stance to reveal that comic criticism can have four different roles: resistance, which involves outright opposition to dominant power; negotiation, in which the audience is asked to question social assumptions; accommodation, in which some relief is offered, but not necessarily a change in structure; and reproduction, which upholds stereotypes and hierarchies. They can happen at the same time in the same show, for comedians can attack some institutions and perpetuate some problematic social attitudes in other places. Obadare (2021) also calls for a study of the ambivalences of African popular culture and not its downplaying of politics to resistance or complicity.

These three perspectives are combined to give a theoretical base for analysing Nigerian stand-up comedy. The incongruity theory can be used to understand how comedians create humour out of social paradoxes, carnival theory

can be used to understand the temporary suspension of authority during the carnival, and African political humour scholarship can be used to understand the varied and at times paradoxical effects of comic performance. The comic critic and the comic critique cycle are part of this integrated framework that guides the study's examination of the comic critic and the comic critique cycle.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative interpretive research design that consists of performance analysis, textual analysis, and discourse analysis. This is suitable since the study is not just about the content of the jokes, but also about how comic meaning is created in the process of performance and social interaction. Stand-up comedy is consequently viewed as a cultural text that has to be analyzed as an embodied performance, both in terms of its verbal as well as its performative and contextual aspects. This is in line with Conquergood's (2019) reasoning that performance studies should consider the embodied, situated, and dialogic aspects of cultural practices.

The study adopts a purposive sampling technique, where the four Nigerian comedians, namely Gbenga Adeboye, I Go Dye, Basketmouth, and Gordons, were picked as the sample for the study. Adeboye is significant in the sense that he bridges the gap between traditional satire and modern-day stand-up comedy, and I Go Dye offers insights into the art of political and governance commentary. Basketmouth provides a chance to explore how comedy, popular culture, and commercialisation are related, while Gordon shows how social observation and political commentary can be done through comic persona. Digital performers such as Mr Macaroni and Zicsaloma are also studied to examine how social criticism has moved to online comedy skits. The selection is designed to shed light on the theoretical issues of the study and not the whole comedy industry of Nigeria. This is a purposeful approach that is in line with Yin's (2018) arguments that case study research is not about generalisation (statistical) but about analytical generalisation.

Corresponding author: Hafiz Oyetoro

oyetoro@lasued.edu.ng

Department of Theatre Arts, Lagos State University of Education, Ojo/Ijanikin.

© 2026. Faculty of Technology Education. ATBU Bauchi. All rights reserved



Five dimensions are analysed: comic content, performance techniques, comic persona, audience relationship and critical function. These dimensions set the parameters for the way comedians depict social issues, how they turn them into comedy, how they shape their comic selves, how they interact with the audience, and how they contest or reinforce social realities. Four types of critical function are analyzed: resistance, negotiation, accommodation, and reproduction. The selected performances are then explored in six stages: social issue, comic observation, performance transformation, punchline, audience response, and critical implication. The following sequence of steps is the proposed Comic Critique Cycle and offers a consistent analysis framework to compare the selected comedians.

The study recognizes the limitations of studying recorded performances in isolation from ongoing ethnographic research with live audiences. Variations in audience response from venue to venue and performance cannot be recorded to the same extent as actual material. Therefore, the analysis concentrates on the most commonly seen and performed routines as proof of the existing comics strategies. This constraint is similar to what Madison (2020) discussed concerning the difficulties of performance ethnography, and suggests a need for further research with live audiences through observation and interviews.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The research shows that stand-up comedy in Nigeria is a potent tool of social and political commentary and a way of generating space for communal reflection on everyday life. The results are presented in terms of the conceptual contributions of the study and selected comedians.

The Comic Critic and the Comic Critique Cycle

The study regards the Comic Critic as a social observer who translates the observations into comic performances in order to reveal the contradictions in society. The comedian is not only an entertainer, observer, and commenter but also a critic, who is not to be distinguished from the

entertainer. Comedians are not necessarily journalists or political scientists; they are not necessarily looking for solutions, but rather they are highlighting social absurdities through humour, bringing complex issues to the people. This aligns with Mukerji's (2020) claims that popular culture can produce socially relevant knowledge, which can be transmitted to audiences outside of the realm of formal knowledge.

The study suggests the following five stages, which are interdependent and form a cycle to explain the process: social or political reality, comic observation, performance transformation, punchline, and audience response. Comedians spot in the real world the aspects that are contradictory, work them up, and provide punchlines that make people laugh and recognise them. The process is then repeated as the audience's responses to the performances affect the development of further performances. This model emphasizes the participatory aspect of comic criticism and builds on the focus of recursive cultural production (Couldry, 2020).

Gbenga Adeboye: Comedy and Social Criticism

Gbenga Adeboye is proof of what comedy is to Nigerian culture and history – a platform for social criticism. Adeboye used both comedy and music, as well as satire and social commentary, thereby tackling the seeming paradoxes of society in a manner that foreshadowed the hybrid performances of today's comedians, Afolayan (2022) pointed out. He was able to convey ordinary experiences as essential music and critical performances without needing to resort to explicit political arguments thanks to his unique vocal style and musical framing.

But Adeboye's work also exemplifies the ambivalence of comic criticism. While his performances were aimed at addressing social problems, they could replicate ethnic chauvinism (Afolayan, 2022). This is a contradiction that shows comedians can fight some power structures while upholding others. Nigerian popular culture may contest and recreate prevailing social relations, as Olukotun (2022) notes.



I Go Dye: Comedy and Political Commentary

I Go Dye demonstrates the political issues in everyday terms of stand-up comedy. His shows focus on political leadership, governance, injustice, and the grievances of the common man, and frequently involve political impersonation and satire. His humour doesn't see governance as an institutional issue but in terms of living costs, public services, and economic distress. This practice enables political issues to be made accessible as it connects them to the audiences' lived experiences. Humour makes political figures open to public derision and brings citizens closer, albeit for a short time, to those in power. This is akin to the vernacularisation of political discourse as defined by Adebani (2020), which involves the formalisation of political issues in the vernacular and everyday experience.

Basketmouth: Comedy, Commercialisation and Critique

Basketmouth's career is an example of the links between social criticism and the commercial entertainment industry. The growth of stand-up comedy in Nigeria (Nwankwo, 2023) is evident in his evolution from a club comedian to an internationally recognised performer and media entrepreneur. His career is proof that social commentary and commercial success, celebrity identification, and entertainment ventures can all coexist.

But with commercialization comes conflict between creative expression and the demands of the market. Comedians might be influenced by the subjects they cover and the way they do so by factors such as sponsorships, audience expectations, ticket sales, and digital visibility. Mark (2026) focuses on the role of platform economies in the visibility, engagement and monetisation of digital comedy in Nigeria. Likewise, Hesmondhalgh (2019) finds the conflict between creativity and commerce in the cultural industries. Thus, the career of Basketmouth can be seen as a reflection of the nature of comedy as both a cultural critique and commercial product.

Gordons: Everyday Experience and Political Criticism

Gordons proves that comedy can be done through everyday social experiences and not necessarily by commenting directly on political leaders. His performances provide a chance to analyze such topics as poverty, inequality, public services, class relations, and institutional behaviour. Political criticism does not stop at elections, political parties, and government officials, as evidenced by these subjects.

Gordon's comedy shows how governance impacts households, streets, and marketplaces by looking at ordinary experiences. When inequalities and relations between citizens and institutions are revealed, issues like electricity, transportation and unemployment become political. This aligns with Ferguson's (2021) claim that African urban politics is "lived through the experience of everyday interactions with infrastructure, public services and institutions.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results show that Nigerian stand-up comedy critiques through five capacities which are interwoven and intertwined: accessibility, recognition, emotional engagement, displacement and participation. Comedy renders social realities comprehensible by means of their commonplace experiences, allowing the viewer to see themselves, institutions, and public figures in comic situations. Criticism is memorable because it is fun, and laughter establishes an emotional connection, and humour's seemingly unserious nature allows one to discuss sensitive topics. The meaning of the performance is completed through audience participation expressed in laughter, silence, or any other way.

These capacities work in conjunction with one another. If it is accessible but not recognised, it can be a good joke, but it won't be funny; if it's recognised but not felt, it can be a descriptive routine. In the same way, when there is no ambiguity of humour in the participation, then comedy can become a lecture. How these are combined by the stand-up, therefore, is the political significance of Nigerian stand-up. This is consistent with Billig's (2021) argument that



humour can be used to regenerate ideologies that are common to a group even if they seem to be the target of the humour.

But stand-up comedy is not in itself progressive. It has some conditional and contradictory critical potentials. One performance can reveal the power struggle and reaffirm the stereotypical images of ethnic groups, or point out inequalities and mock the poor, or challenge gender norms and reaffirm the sexist assumption. Similarly, comedians can poke fun at consumer culture and create commercial brands that rely on the attention economy. The ambivalence of African humour identified by Hammett et al. (2023) and Mbembe's (2021) description of postcolonial public culture is reflected in these contradictions, which often coexist.

The article thus views ambivalence as a stance rather than as a problem, which needs to be solved by issuing a final verdict on the individual comedians. The four categories of resistance, negotiation, accommodation and reproduction give the researcher the opportunity to study various political functions in one performance. In one routine, a comedian can defy political power; in another, he can humour the audience's grievances; and in yet another, he can reinforce the hurtful stereotypes. These moments are analysed individually to prevent the performers' status as fearless critics or mere entertainers. This is in line with Comaroff and Comaroff's (2020) appeal to consider the theoretical ambivalence of cultural practices.

Commercialisation also adds to the problematic critical role of comedy. Today, Nigerian comedians are more like artists, entrepreneurs, celebrities, influencers, and brands. They can produce economic value as they are visible and thus establish a correlation between critical commentary, attention of the audience, and commercial success. This dynamic is exacerbated by the use of digital platforms via advertising, sponsorships, and brand partnerships, as showcased by Mark (2026). Resistance, when it is profitable, does not invariably lose its meaning, but falls under commercial pressure, such as the uniformity of its brands, repetition, and hold-up of audience. As

Mokoena (2023) notes in the case of South African comedy, political issues that comedians choose to discuss and those they do not are at times determined by commercial interests. It is, therefore, important to look at Nigerian comedy in its aesthetic and economic aspects.

The Comic Critique Cycle is the main conceptual contribution of the article. It is a process that links social/political reality, comic observation, performance transformation, punchline, audience response, and critical interpretation. Comedians use the devices of irony, satire, exaggeration, ridicule, mimicry, and parody to turn experiences into a show, which the audience then interprets, negotiates, and, perhaps, reflects on. Their answers may also impact subsequent content. Instead of looking into the content of political jokes, the model analyzes the social realities that are turned into comic performances and the process of meaning construction through audience involvement. It provides a systematic approach that could be used in future comparative studies, as noted by Ndlovu (2024) in African humour studies, where there was a need for more analytical models.

The implications for Theatre and Performance Studies of these findings are discussed. One, stand-up comedy is worthy of scholarly investigation as a performance art, not a side show. Secondly, the comedian's body and voice should be analysed, as a joke can be as much about how it is delivered as what it says. Third, laughter, jeering, and stillness (among other responses) should be considered as part of the performance. Fourthly, digital comedy needs to be investigated as a form of entertainment that is an extension and transformation of the live comedy experience.

Lastly, the stand-up comic is a vernacular archive of social experience in the Nigerian context. Comedy, in contrast to political speeches, newspapers, and official documents, documents institutional points of view, while comedy documents the experience of everyday contradictions from the perspective of ordinary people. Its performances maintain embodied and popular knowledges which are perhaps not captured by conventional records. This function



can be understood through the concept of 'ephemeral archive' devised by Taylor (2019). Nigerian stand-up comedy is thus able to make a contribution to the historical and cultural knowledge of public life in addition to the more traditional documentary sources.

CONCLUSION

In this article, Nigerian and African stand-up comedy as a social and political critique has been discussed. It shows that stand-up comedy can't be seen simply as entertainment. Often, it shows raise issues of governance and inequality, corruption, political leadership, identity, gender, social norms, language, and everyday hardship. But it's not just about the presence of political topics: the political significance of comedy is not only in them. It's its performance that makes it critical. The comedian sees the social reality, reshapes it by using comic methods, presents it in an embodied way, and is able to bring about laughter and establish an interpretative relationship with the audience. This process has been theorised in this article as a Comic Critique Cycle.

Also, the idea of the Comic Critic views the Nigerian comedian as one who can entertain, observe, interpret, and criticize society at the same time. The case studies illustrate various aspects of the process. Gbenga Adeboye shows where the roots of Nigerian comic criticism lie; I Go Dye shows how Nigerian comics can be used in a governance-oriented commentary; Basketmouth shows how Nigerian comics can be used as a social commentary; and Gordons shows how the everyday Nigerian reality can be transformed in the form of a social commentary. Digital performers also show how the criticism of comics is changing through social media and platform economies.

But comedy should not be glorified as an unhackneyed tactic of opposition. It carries a critical power with both positive and negative connotations. It can challenge authority and perpetuate stereotypes; reveal inequalities while employing humour with exclusionary elements; raise questions about the materialism of the culture but simultaneously be a moneymaking

product of it. Thus, in the intricacy lies the importance of Nigerian stand-up comedy. It's not an easy "resistance"; it's not an easy "entertainment". It's a performance space of negotiation where laughter can be understood as a means of engaging with power, contradiction, identity, and social reality. The general takeaway is that the comedy space should be treated more as an appropriate realm of public debate in Africa. The stage, microphone, comic persona, and the digital screen are spaces that citizens of today's Nigeria face, and through which they can reshape and reimagine the political sphere. That may be a joke; the comedian won't be able to change the political system. However, the comic can alter the perception of the audience on the political system. The perception change is one of the most important types of comic power.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are made for scholars, practitioners and policymakers.

Firstly, Departments of Theatre and Performance Studies in Nigerian and African Universities should make space for stand-up comedy in the curriculum as a serious genre of performance that needs to be analysed and given the needed attention. There is a need to have modules on stand-up comedy as part of African performance, popular culture, and political theatre courses so that students can be trained to use analytical tools to analyze comic performance as a social/political discourse. This would go a long way towards filling the void identified by Nwankwo (2023) between the cultural importance of stand-up comedy and the fact that it is rather under-researched in the context of the academic study of performance.

Secondly, there is a need for a long-term ethnographic study of a live stand-up audience in Nigeria, analysing the responses of different audiences in various cities and venues to political content. This would overcome the limitation of this study, where live audience response was identified as varying according to the situation. An ethnographic study could focus on the venue and the ticket price, the composition



of the audience, and political conditions: how these are affecting the reception and interpretation of the comics criticism.

Thirdly, the task for comedians, industry, and media organisations is to find ways to create ethical rules and regulations for comic performance that can promote critical engagement with power while minimising the reproduction of harmful stereotypes. It is not about censorship of the comic; it is about promoting a reflexive consciousness of how comic content and substance simultaneously questions and perpetuates social hierarchy. These guidelines might be formulated by comedy festivals and associations, and comedy networks.

Fourthly, the policy makers and media regulators need to acknowledge the significance of the space of stand-up comedy in the public discourse of Nigeria and safeguard the terrain of comedy critique. This includes opposing pressure that might be brought to bear to silence or curb comedians who satirize political institutions or leaders. Meanwhile, the broadcasters and platform companies need to be encouraged to give space to all voices of comics that are not in the mainstream of business.

Fifth, future studies need to consider the Comic Critique Cycle in other national contexts in Africa, in which the model could be put to use in Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, Uganda and beyond, where stand-up comedy flourishes. Comparative studies of the cycle could analyse the various characteristics of political, media and cultural contexts and their impact on the results of each phase of the cycle, especially the audience response and critical reflection phases.

Finally, Nigerian comedy scholars should focus more on the digital turn in comedy and the influence of platform algorithms, monetisation issues and international circulation on the production and reception of comedy criticism. This involves looking at what happens to digital comedy outside of Nigeria, and how Nigerian comedy – that is actually quite political – is read and understood by the diasporic audience. Seventh, there is a need for the stand-up industry to record and archive Nigerian stand-up comedy as a vernacular archive of social and political

experiences. This will allow future researchers to be able to trace the development of Nigerian comedy and its reaction to the different political and social conditions over the years.

Eighth, research funds and/or research councils should encourage joint work by both performance scholars and media scholars, as well as by political scientists, in which research into comedy and its role in public discourse is approached from an interdisciplinary point of view. These collaborations would help to deepen the understanding of the operation of humour as a means of communication and cultural critique within the realm of politics.

REFERENCES

- Abidin, C. (2020). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing.
- Adebanwi, W. (2020). *Nation, constitutionalism and governmentality in Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Adejunmobi, M. (2020). *Vernacular palaver: Imaginations of the local and non-native languages in West Africa*. Multilingual Matters.
- Adesokan, A. (2020). *Everything is sampled: Popular culture and the politics of recognition in Nigeria*. Indiana University Press.
- Adeyemi, O. (2024). Performative citizenship and digital comedy in Nigeria. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 16(2), 145–162. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00095_1
- Afolayan, A. (2022). Comedy on the cusp of plurality: Gbenga Adeboye and the context of social critique in Nigeria. *Nokoko*, 10, 41–62.
- Agbaje, A. (2019). Language and indirect critique in Nigerian popular performance. *African Studies Review*, 62(3), 78–96. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.112>
- Akande, A., Adedeji, K., & Robbin, A. (2020). Language, vulgarity and social critique: The case of Nigerian Pidgin in stand-up comedy. *Lagos Notes and Records*, 25(1), 1–18.

Corresponding author: Hafiz Oyetero

oyetoro@lasued.edu.ng

Department of Theatre Arts, Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin.

© 2026. Faculty of Technology Education. ATBU Bauchi. All rights reserved



- Amaefula, R. C. (2026). Digital comedy skits, male-to-female cross-dressing and gender non-conformance in Nigeria. *South African Theatre Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2025.2583943>
- Aguoru, D. (2022). From Alarinjo to Oniduro: Stand-up comedy as a neo-cultural expression. *Nokoko*, 10, 19–39.
- Avoaja, L. (2025). Ideological constructs through nominal choice in Nigerian stand-up comedy. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 13(3), 235–247. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2024.13.2.1026>
- Barber, K. (2018). *The anthropology of texts, persons and publics: Oral and written culture in Africa and beyond*. Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M. (2021). *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. Sage.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L. (2020). *Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa*. Routledge.
- Conquergood, D. (2019). *Cultural struggles: Performance, ethnography, praxis*. University of Michigan Press.
- Couldry, N. (2020). *Media: Why it matters*. Polity.
- Deuber, D. (2019). *Nigerian Pidgin in Lagos: Language contact, variation and change in an African urban setting*. Battlebridge Publications.
- Eko, L. (2019). *The news media in Nigeria: A political economy of crisis and change*. Routledge.
- Ferguson, J. (2021). *Give a man a fish: Reflections on the new politics of distribution*. Duke University Press.
- Filani, I. (2020). A discourse analysis of national identity in Nigerian stand-up humour. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 33, 100356. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445620906035>
- Githiora, C. (2021). Comedians as public intellectuals in Kenya. *African Studies Review*, 64(2), 334–356. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.78>
- Hammett, D., Martin, L. S., & Nwankwo, I. (2023). *Humour and politics in Africa: Beyond resistance*. Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781529219739>
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2019). *The cultural industries* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Kiguru, G. (2022). Comedy and censorship in Kenya: Strategies of indirection. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 34(3), 287–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2021.1989598>
- Madison, D. S. (2020). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Mark, T. G. (2026). Digital vernacular comedy in Nigeria: Form, circulation, and meaning. *African Identities*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2026.2677560>
- Mbembe, A. (2021). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
- Mensah, E. O., Inyabri, I. T., & Aboh, R. (2023). Sexual jokes in Nigerian stand-up comedy: A multifaceted analytic approach. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 11(3), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2023.11.3.791>
- Mokoena, S. (2023). Commercial pressures and political comedy in South Africa. *Critical Arts*, 37(4), 56–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2023.2198765>
- Morreall, J. (2019). *Comic relief: A comprehensive philosophy of humor*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Moyo, L. (2021). Digital comedy and political critique in Zimbabwe. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 13(1), 89–106. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00035_1
- Mukerji, C. (2020). *Modernity reimagined: An analytic guide*. Routledge.

Corresponding author: Hafiz Oyetoro

oyetoro@lasued.edu.ng

Department of Theatre Arts, Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin.

© 2026. Faculty of Technology Education. ATBU Bauchi. All rights reserved



- Ndlovu, M. (2024). Rethinking political efficacy in African humour studies. *African Studies Review*, 67(1), 112–131.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.45>
- Nwankwo, I. (2022). Ambivalence in the stand-up acts of Nigeria's Klint da Drunk and Mr Paul. *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 16(2), 332–347.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2022.2067735>
- Nwankwo, I. (2023). Joke performance mechanics in Nigerian stand-up comedy. *South African Theatre Journal*, 34(2), 99–112.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2022.2051731>
- Nwankwo, I. (2024). Politics, jokes and power in Africa: The view from stand-up comedy. *African Studies*, 82(3–4), 264–280.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2023.2299222>
- Nyarota, G. (2023). Stand-up comedy and political commentary in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 49(2), 289–307.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2023.2187654>
- Obadare, E. (2020). *Civil society in Nigeria: Historical and contemporary perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Obadare, E. (2021). *Pastoral power, clerical state: Pentecostalism, gender, and sexuality in Nigeria*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ogheneakpobor, E. E., & Mowarin, M. (2024). The language of Nigerian stand-up comedy. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 12(2), 36–52.
<https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2024.12.2.756>
- Ogundele, W. (2020). *Yoruba popular theatre and the politics of cultural production*. African World Press.
- Oha, O. (2021). Comic commons: Shared frustration and national identity in Nigerian stand-up. *Nokoko*, 9, 45–63.
- Olaniyan, T. (2021). *Arrest the music! Fela and his rebel art and politics*. Indiana University Press.
- Olukotun, A. (2022). *The media and democracy in Nigeria: A political economy approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Otono, N. (2022). Introduction: The aesthetics, politics, and cultural economy of African stand-up comedy. *Nokoko*, 10, v–xxii.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2019). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Phelan, P. (2019). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. Routledge.
- Roach, J. (2018). *Cities of the dead: Circum-Atlantic performance*. Columbia University Press.
- Schechner, R. (2020). *Performance studies: An introduction* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Stallybrass, P., & White, A. (2018). *The politics and poetics of transgression*. Cornell University Press.
- Taylor, D. (2019). *The archive and the repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press.
- Tsaaior, J. T. (2022). The logic of laughter and the ecology of ethno-cultural representation in Nigerian stand-up comedy. *Nokoko*, 10, 1–17.
- Ude, C. Q., Chukwu, E. A., & Ugwu, E. C. (2025). Humour representation of socio-political issues: Analysing illocutionary acts in some Nigerian social media skits. *Awka Journal of English Language and Literary Studies*, 12(4), 38–58.
- Willems, W. (2022). Beyond resistance: Humour and political work in Africa. *African Affairs*, 121(484), 345–364.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adac015>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.

Corresponding author: Hafiz Oyetoro

oyetorooha@lasued.edu.ng

Department of Theatre Arts, Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin.

© 2026. Faculty of Technology Education. ATBU Bauchi. All rights reserved