

Comedy in the Era of a Pandemic: A Content Analysis of COVID-19 Comedy Skits

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Abstract

In a critical health situation, humour in the form of comedy is still prevalent in the public domain as a stimulus to induce mirthfulness in an audience. Even though humour is found to have a positive relationship with health and it could be a tool for effective communication during critical health situations, studies on the content and strategies used in comedy skits during the corona virus invasion are limited, if not non-existent. In this study, the researchers analysed ten comedy skits of “The Winlos” and “Mark Angel Comedy” to ascertain the content and the rhetorical strategies used in the comedy skits. Using the Burkean Dramatic Criticism approach and the theory of humour as analytical frameworks, the study revealed that the content of comedy skits on the corona virus pandemic covered the nature of the virus, the preventive measures and government interventions. Moreover, the study revealed that the comedians in the selected comedy skits used rhetorical devices such as simile, irony, slang, rhetorical questions and paralinguistic devices to achieve comic effects. Based on the informative nature of the comedy skits on the pandemic, the researchers recommend incorporation of comedy skits in the risk communication plan when dealing with a pandemic.

Keywords: Comedy, Pandemic, COVID-19, Humour, Communication.

Introduction

Pandemics are large-scale outbreaks of infectious diseases that can greatly increase morbidity and mortality over a wide geographic area and cause significant economic, social and political disruption (Madhav, Oppenheim, Gallivan, Mulembakani, Rubin & Wolfe, 2018). Jones *et al.* (2008) claim that the number of pandemics over the

past century has increased greatly compared to previous centuries of the human race. The increase in the occurrence of pandemics could be attributed to social factors such as global travel and integration, urbanisation, changes in land use and greater exploitation of the natural environment (Jones *et al.*, 2008). Media reportage during pandemic periods can trigger fear among citizens if it is not done professionally. Barrett and Brown (2008) found that fear alone made over 500, 000 people in Surat, India, during the 1994 outbreak of plaque to flee from their homes. While fear is just one of the social reactions of people to the pandemic situation, the adverse stress, boredom, economic tensions, strict governmental regulations and family emotional trauma cause one to wonder what might be going through the minds of people as they comply and anticipate possible victory over the pandemic.

In such a situation of trauma and adverse social disruption, humour is said to be a priceless tool to help people contain the aversion in their lives (Antonovic, 2015). Gremignic (2012) conceptualizes humour as the ability to perceive, enjoy and express what is amusing, comical, incongruous or absurd. It usually expressed through laughter triggered by a stimulus. There are diverse forms of humour that serve as stimuli. One common form of humour is comedy (Cernerud & Olsson, 2004). Comedy is defined as a stimulus that elicits emotional response and the accompanying physical response or behavior such as laughter, smile, titter among others. It could be based on written messages, spoken messages, and sketches among other text types. The emotional responses such as laughter that are triggered by humour especially comedy are said to have a beneficial effect on health (Gremignic, 2012). It is noted in the studies that humour promotes health in areas like cardiovascular functioning, respiratory functioning, muscle relaxation, among others (Gremignic, 2012). It is found to be relevant in mitigating pain, stress and physical symptoms. In this regard, the use of humour through comedy skits in the era of a pandemic is vital and worth investigating.

In addition, Cernerud and Olsson (2004) argue that humour has a salutogenic factor-meaning that can be used as an effective introductory message in the communication of public health programmes. Hennefeld, Berke and Rennett (2019) assert that “comedians are often better equipped to explain current events than scholars or journalists” (p138). This might be an overstretched

statement by Hennefeld *et al.* (2019), their argument, however, is that comedians are providing content that is useful to the audience understanding of present happenings. What is common between the two studies, Cernerud and Olsson (2004) and Hennefeld *et al.* (2019), is the call for researchers to investigate ways of associating contemporary comedy to the social, political and cultural realities of the present day. As they put it, comedy studies have been widely marginalised; yet comedic issues have a crucial bearing on nearly every aspect of contemporary life, media, culture and interdisciplinary humanities scholarship. This present study explores the contents of comedy skits on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives of the Study

1. What content is communicated in comedy skits on COVID-19?
2. What rhetorical strategies are used by the comedians to achieve the comic effect?

The study will position comedy as a cogent tool to promote public health communication as proposed by Cernerud and Olsson (2004) on how to integrate comedy in the four models (information, behaviour change, client focus and collective model) of public health programmes. Lastly, the study presents humour as a stress and pain mitigation factor and equally vital in mitigating the effects of symptoms, improving physiological functions and enhancing emotional states of individuals.

Literature Review

Pandemics are of global concern because of their impact on the survival of humans. A pandemic is defined as an epidemic occurring over a wide area, crossing international boundaries, and usually affecting a large number of people (Porta, 2014). Moreover, Madhav *et al.* (2020) contend that pandemics come with high morbidity, mortality as well as economic, social and political disruption. Since the consequences of pandemics are far-reaching, the need to prevent their possible occurrence is an ultimate goal for every nation and the World Health Organisation. Smolinsky, Hamburg and Lederberg (2003) posit that the need to prevent outbreaks required national and international regulations. In view of this, the World Health Organisation proposed on International Health System in 2009 that was signed by many countries as a way to upgrade health systems

and structures to combat the possible occurrence of pandemics. Despite these efforts, the world has experienced a ground-breaking pandemic popularly called COVID-19, after WHO released the name of the novel corona virus. Nadeem (2020) describes the corona virus as an invisible enemy.

Communication is an instrument in the containment of a pandemic in that provision of adequate physical and communication infrastructure and effective risk communication capacities reduce the spread risk of a pandemic (Oppenheim *et al.*, 2017). The use of traditional media by key stakeholders to inform the public is inevitable and commendable; nevertheless, the fact that social media has created virtual communities where the users are equally producers are worth mentioning in the consideration of the communication component in the pandemic situation. Proliferation of technological devices has made access to internet services easier, thereby, empowering social media as powerful communication tool, among users.

Comedians just like any other users of virtual communities reach their followers with their comic skits through social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc. Comedians are equally noted to be interested in providing edutainment contents to calm their audience while disseminating relevant information. These comedy skits could serve as opportunities for quarantine and socially isolated citizens who are caught up in fear and dread due to pandemic to turn to comedy for emotional relaxation and withdrawal from the fear and tension created by the pandemic. What it means is that comedy skits could be a vital communication tool if harnessed well, to help in the communication intervention during pandemics. The fact is that pandemic risk communication is not the preserve of communication experts but also stakeholders who through their role in society could assist in passing relevant information to the public.

Humour, Laughter and Health

To better understand comedy skits, the concepts of humour, laughter and how they relate to human health are worth clarifying. The old adage laughter is the best medicine informed Frya and Williams to question “*Is Humour the Best Medicine?*” Gremignic (2012) asserts that a question on humour-health relation does not relent itself to

a simple answer though it may appear as a simple question. One reason for Gremignic's position is that health is not a unitary concept because gleaning from the World Health Organisation's definition of health reveals that it encompasses the physical, emotional and social well-being of a person. In the same way, humour is a multifaceted concept that involves cognitive, emotional, behavioural, physiological and social aspects.

One of the most common expressions of humour is laughter. It is argued that the relationship between humour and health could be categorised into three mechanisms (Gremignic, 2012). First, physiological change mechanism is based on the idea that physiological changes produced by laughter train and relax the muscles; improve breathing; stimulate circulation; increase production of endorphins that reduce pain; decrease the production of stress hormones; and strengthens the functioning of the immune system (Dionigi & Gremigni, 2010). Second, the positive emotional state mechanisms are based on the idea that humour triggers positive emotional state, and therefore, indirectly creates tolerance for pain, strengthens the immune system and reduces cardiovascular consequences caused by negative emotions. Third, the stress moderating mechanism is based on the idea that humour leads to humorous vision and the ability to see the funny side of problems which consequently, mitigate the negative consequences of adversity and creates a coping strategy for problems. These mechanisms explain how humour and for that matter comedy affect health positively. The physiological processes triggered by comedy help improve the functioning of some body organs such as heart, lungs among others.

The Concept of Comedy

The study of humour brings to bear the role of comedy in achieving humour. Cernerud and Olsson (2004) identify diverse kinds of humour such as cartoon, clowning, farce, jest, pun, riddle, joke, satire, comedy, and slapstick, among others. Comedy is defined as a stimulus of humour that elicits emotional behaviour such as laughing, smiling, chortling, guffawing, tittering, giggling, etc. Gremignic (2012) acknowledges that laughing is the most common expression of humour, which can be elicited through comedy. Hennefeld, Berke and Renneth (2019) identify three European

scholars of twentieth-century who are named to have driven the discipline of comedy. These three scholars are regarded as the three Bs of comedy who provided the orthodoxies to comedy studies. One of them is Henri Bergson, whose approach to comedy was based on using humour as corrective measures to critique social ills. Another one is Mikhail Bakhtin, whose approach to comedy was based on employing carnivalesque laughter to mock authority and subverts sovereign tyranny. The last philosopher, George Bataille, provided an approach of comedy that both correct social ills through humour and at the same time criticizing authorities. These ingrained orthodoxies to comedy are found to be less effective in explaining the comedy of the 21st century. Hennefeld, Berke and Renneth (2019) called for a comedy enquiry that relates the field to the twenty-first-century culture, society and politics.

Hennefeld, Berke and Renneth (2019) are of the view that comedy studies are widely sidelined yet comedy issues greatly affect nearly every facet of contemporary life such as media, culture and interdisciplinary scholarship. To the authors, "Comedians are often better equipped to explain current events than scholars or journalists" (Hennefeld, Berke & Renneth, 2019, p.138). It is, therefore, imperative to consider the effectiveness of comedy in public health programmes. In this area, a cogent idea has been raised earlier by Cernerud and Olsson (2004) on the possibility of adopting humour in public health communication programmes. Cernerud and Olsson (2004) conceptualises humour as a salutogenic factor, which means it can be used to prepare grounds for vital information to be communicated. They observed that the use of humour in population-based health promotive intervention strategies is a field lacking evidence-based knowledge. Cernerud and Olsson (2004) argued that humour could be relevant to population health promotive programmes because it can serve as health-promoting action that introduces the health programme messages. Two, it can reduce the risk factors in health promotion by serving as a vehicle for the message. In other words, the authors propose that humourous contain can still include health messages that are beneficial to the audience.

Cernerud and Olsson (2004) identified four models for public health promotion where humour could be integrated. First, the behaviour change model focuses on encouraging individuals to change their behaviour. This involves appealing to audiences to

change their lifestyles to fit positive healthy lifestyles. In this model, the authors considered humour as effective in mimicking the defect of the negative lifestyles and positioning the new lifestyle as the most ideal. The second model of public health promotion is the informed model. This model involves increasing the knowledge and understanding of a population on appropriate choices for the situation. In this model, Cernerud and Olsson (2004) identified humour as a possible tool for creating reinforcement. The third model is a client-focused model. This involves providing care for patients. The authors considered humour as a supportive care tool that can keep patients in a constant positive emotional state. Fourth, the collective model or societal model considers providing societal education on health prevention and promotion. In this model, Cernerud and Olsson (2004) identified humour as an effective way to avoid a lack of communication.

In a Nigerian based study on comedy, Azeez and Doghudge (2016) explored the discussive process through which Papa Ajasco comedy series condemn wrong social behaviour in society. The authors conducted a content analysis of some selected skits of Papa Ajasco series to ascertain the pattern as well as how the comedians criticize social ills in a jovial way. They also interviewed ten audience members of Papa Ajasco series to know the benefits they derive from the series. Azeez and Doghudge (2016) found that the series help a majority of the audience to relax their minds and relieve themselves of the tensions of work and life. Even though Azeez and Doghudge (2016) found that the melodrama by Papa Ajasco criticizes social ills; the audience found the skits to be mainly jokes. In relation to this work, Azeez and Doghudge's (2016) study reveal through empirical evidence that comedy is vital in relieving audience of their tension and worries of life. This is remarkable because a pandemic period is usually followed by tension and fear. This current study considers how comedy skits could contribute to public health communication in a pandemic period.

In Ghana, Arhin (1988) traced the origin of concert parties in Ghana to the early 1900s. The author discovered that concert parties started in 1918 by a man called Teacher Yalley. According to Arhin (1998 cited Efua Sutherland, 1970), Yalley began his career at his school's Empire Day Concerts in 1918, when he joked, sang and danced, wearing fancy dress with wig, moustache and the make-up of an American black-and-white minstrel. This was further

followed by Yalley organising expensive ticket shows mostly in English for the urban rich people. In 1920s, another man called Bob Johnson contributed to the development of concert parties into a professional practice (Arhin, 1988). His shows were characterised by Bazz music with black-and-white minstrel. Bob developed his comedy to target the poor people in urban and rural areas. Johnson's comedy shows were described as schoolboy penny shows while Yalley's own remained the upper-class shows and the Accra Vandeville shows (Arhin, 1988). According to his interview with comedy stakeholders in Ghana at the time, Arhin (1988) found that the Second World War increased the demand for comedy shows because the ex-allied troops enjoyed comedy in the Indians and other western countries. When they returned, they still had the need for comedy content. In this time, Arhin (1988) revealed that Bob Vans formed the Burma Jokers in 1946 to meet this need. This Burma Jokers group performed their comedy shows in the Pidgin English and in 1948 the group was renamed the Ghana Trio because it was created to contribute to the rising nationalist sentiment of the day. It is said that the comedy became much rooted through the television broadcasting of comedy content.

The work of Arhin (1988) provides the historical tradition of comedy in Ghana and the fact that the media has promoted its growth and relevance in the Ghanaian society. Also, the role of comedy in promoting nationalism after the Second World War was documented by Arhin. From these African based comedy studies, the place of comedy as a relieve capsule for stress and tensions among audience (Azeez & Doghudge, 2016) as well as its role in the nationalist struggle in Ghana are noted (Arhin, 1988). Drawing from these studies on the place of humour in health communication, this article investigates the content of humourous comedies and the strategies employed in them to aid the audience in understanding the pandemic crisis while being entertained, informed and educated.

Theoretical Fortification

In this study, the researchers adopt the Theory of Humour proposed by Lorena Antonovic in 2015. In the article entitled *Theory of Humour*, Antonovic (2015) proposed the relationship between humour and pain, specifically painful moments. The theorist argued that humour occurs in painful situation/ traumatic situation as an

aid to help individuals' growth and development to contain the situation. Further, the theorist named the theory *Painful Humour Theory*. Painful humour theory is based on the assumption that the frequency of humour and laughter in traumatic life situations or events plays a vital role to make an audience resilient to the situation. Antonovic (2015) considered humour as a coping mechanism that helps individuals to grow and mature to fully cope with the aversion. Humour is, therefore, regarded as a form of communication of pain in handy at such critical times to help the public cope with the critical situation. This theory is relevant in understanding the place of humour in the pandemic situation. It provides a basis to understand humour as communication that guides the audience through stressful, traumatic moments of life. Humour theory projects humour as an effective tool to help individuals adjust to the change due to the crisis. The current study sees the painful theory of humour as a way to understand the effect of humour in the COVID-19.

Methodology

In this study, the researchers adopted the descriptive research method. Descriptive research involves making observations on a phenomenon of interest and recording these observations as they are presented (Tavakoli, 2012). The researchers seek to make observations on how comedy skits present information on the corona virus to amuse viewers and at the same time inform them of key issues regarding the pandemic. The researchers, therefore, are to describe the content of the comedy skits and their relevance in pandemic risk communication.

Description of Comedy Groups (Producers)

To achieve the objectives of this study, the researchers purposefully selected two comedy groups, namely, The Winlos and Mark Angel Comedy. The Winlos is a Nigerian based comedy group pioneered and produced by Ohis and Anwinli Ojeikere. The Winlos came to the limelight after their comedy skits entitled *God Told Me to Marry You* went viral. Also, Mark Angel chaperones Mark Angel Comedy. The series of skits on YouTube often featuring children comedians like Emmanuella and Sister Success have attracted worldwide attention with their 2013 *This is Not my Real Face* skit going viral.

These two comedy groups were selected because they have large subscriber base of over a million and their comedy cuts across most cultures.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The researchers used a purposive sampling method to select the comedy skits. Purposive sampling involves the selection of samples based on certain known characteristics (Reinard, 1994). The researchers selected comedy skits of *The Winlos* and *Mark Angel* based on the content-specific purpose. The selected comedy skits must be based on COVID-19. Two, the selected comedy skits must be within the timeline of February to May 2020. Third, the selected comedy kits must be in the English with clear and high audio-visual quality content. In all, the researchers sampled twenty comedy skits within the time frame and after a careful scrutiny of the content based on these characteristics, ten comedy skits were selected with five comedy skits from each comedy group. The selected comedy skits have over ten thousand viewers and each has comments and likes from viewers, which were relevant to help the researchers know the reaction of the audience to the skits. The comedy skits selected were all downloaded from the YouTube channels of the comedy groups. The selected videos were transcribed and processed for the analysis.

Analytical Procedures

The researchers adopted Burke's Dramatic Criticism Method (BDCM) as an analytical guide. Kenneth Burke developed BDCM in 1945 as a poet, essayist and critic. The Burkean approach to content analysis is based on the idea that humans are essentially the same, with the same drives and motives. Burke (1950) argues that identification unites people by the use of shared ideas, images and attitudes and this encourages acceptance of messages from others. Burkean approach is based on the *dramatic pentad*, which involves five elements. One, act is an element, which involves the symbolic action actually exchanged in the communication. This is what is contained in the message document, in the present study, the video skits. Two, scene is the setting in which the action takes place. The scene includes the situation, time, place, characters and effects of the messages. Third, agent is the actor or rhetor who/that performs the act in this

study the characters in the video skits. Fourth, agency consists of the symbolic and linguistic strategies used to secure identification. This refers to the arguments, the interests, irony, and satire among others. Lastly the purpose of the message is the intention of the rhetor. In this study, the purpose of the comedians is to entertain and to educate the audience who watch their videos. Burkean dramatic pentad provides a way to organise communication and to explain how people influence one another (Reinard, 1994).

Results of the Data

The overriding purpose of this study is to assess the content and the strategies used by comedians to educate and entertain their audience in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. As already established, 10 comedy skits were sampled for the study and the researchers analysed their content using Burkean dramatic criticism and theory of humour as theoretical guides.

Content of the Comedy Skits

The content is regarded as the act of communication according to Burkean approach. The act is what is obtained from the transcription of the audio-visually. From the content, the researchers found that the comedy skits' content on the corona virus could be categorised into three major themes: the nature of corona virus, the preventive measures of corona virus, and the government intervention to contain the virus. The first major theme in the comedy skits was that the comedians tried to explain the nature of the COVID-19 to their target audience in a humorous manner. The actors in the comedy explained what COVID-19 is, the symptoms of COVID-19 and the ways it is transmitted. This is an excerpt from Mark Angel Comedy on what COVID-19 is:

COVID-19 is the disease caused by the Novel Coronavirus COVID-19 is looking for a way to travel from one place to another. And it needs our help. If we do not help it, it will not travel from one place to another." (Excerpt from Social Distancing)

The comedian captured the fact that it is a viral disease and it is transmitted through contacting an infected person. The virus is transmitted through contact and so maintaining social distancing is the best way to prevent it from spreading. *The Winlos* captured the mode of transmission of COVID-19 in this excerpt by the pastor:

With your hands you just washed. Don't you know your hands are not supposed to touch your face? You don't clean your face with your eyes Leviticus. You use tissue paper because of the virus. Take tissue. I dash you, I dash you! (Excerpt from Stay at Home). In this excerpt, using an infected hand to touch strategic body parts leads to getting infected with the virus.

Moreover, The Winlos covered a discussion on what might have been the possible origin of the COVID-19 virus. In the comedy skit entitled *Conspiracy theory troubles*, three actors in the skit associated the origin of the virus to three things. One of the actors attributed the origin of the virus to God who is using it as a means to register his anger against humanity. Another actor associated the virus to the 5G networks as the possible cause of the virus. The last person attributed the virus origin to the end-time plagues of God. As captured in this excerpt: "It is clear from my research that the 5G network is the source of this virus. See it here" (*Conspiracy Theory Troubles*). The comedians also touch on the symptoms of the virus. In Mark Angel Comedy, the excerpt below captured the possible symptoms of the virus: AUNTY EBERE: but wait oh! How do we know someone has contacted this virus? AUNTY: see, the person will have dry cough, sour throat, high fever and difficulty in breathing (Social Distancing). In this skit, the comedians identified dry cough, sour throat, high fever and difficulty in breathing as the symptoms of the virus.

The Preventive/Precautionary Measures of COVID-19

As part of their content, the comedians presented the precautionary measures proposed by the medical professionals and government of many nations. Among the precautionary measures highlighted by the comedians were social distancing, hand washing, sanitizing the hands, avoiding contacts with infected persons and quarantine. Mark Angel Comedy and The Winlos highlighted: EMMANUELLA: erh, cover yourself with the blood of Jesus but maintain social distance AUNTY: yes, and when you want to cough, you cough your sleeve (illustrating) after touching any surface, wash your hand with soap and water or use alcohol-based sanitiser. (Excerpt from Social Distancing). PASTOR: Leviticus, and you are even sitting close. Separate yourselves. Have you not heard of social distance? Minimum of three feet apart. You part yourselves like the red sea.

Leviticus, hope you washed your hand before you come in. These excerpts demonstrate the informative content of comedy skits in educating audience about the precautionary measures to avoid covid-19 infection, though the comedians did that in a humorous manner.

Government Intervention to Contain the COVID-19 Situation

The spread of the corona virus to new territories prompted governments of different countries to initiate preventive policies that could reduce the possible spread of the virus. Among the measures put in place in by governments were total or partial lockdown, closures of schools, closure of churches and restrictions of transportation. In the comedy skits, the comedians considered the lockdown as a government initiative to help contain the situation and prevent possible spread. In The Winlos comedy, the following excerpt captured the lockdown. PASTOR: Which soul? Which soul? Even the government told us, we that have passion that is burning, we should shut down. Every stay indoor, we obey. Leviticus, who are you? It is now that you feel fire in your bones that you want to go out to evangelize. When they say everybody stay indoors. Leviticus stays indoor. Why are you like this? Why is your life upside down? Here the pastor actor captured the lockdown of the country including the churches. The comedian saw the lockdown as a measure that stopped normal church activities, social activities and movement of all people. In Mark Angel Comedy, the comedian captured the economic demands of the lockdown by indicating how people have to buy extra foodstuffs, secure accommodation and stay at home without work. Here is the excerpt: SUCCESS: We are talking about how to stop coronavirus, you are talking about iPhone. See your scatter scatter hair, I'm sure you have coronavirus. If you like don't use your money and pay your house rent (leaving) and stay at home. It's not only iPhone 11 Pro, it's COVID-19 Pro.

Aside from the lockdown and closure of public places, the comedians also exposed donations and feeding policies some countries implemented to assist patients of covid-19 and even less privileged people as containment measures. In the Winlos comedy, the elder question where the billions of *Naira* the government received from donation went to. He attributed it indirectly to

corruption because the office holders in the news said the money got burnt. Here is the excerpt: ELDER: (still shouting) Which kind nonsense be this na. they use this country o. erh, ten billion. okay, what of the money wey they say everybody dey donate: bank will donate, erh? See erm na!they say the building wey they keep the ten billion don catch fire. They think we nor get sense for this country (he speaks his native language). In another sense, Mark Angel comedy captured the feeding system for patients where they indicated the insufficiency of the food served to the patients in ironically manner. UNCLE MARK: (whispers) Emmanuella die. (She shakes her head) Emmanuelle die, die. (Using his hand to indicate time out) die (Emmanuella shakes her head, she eats all the food, washes her hand and drink) (Corona Food).

Aside these measures the comedians disclosed, they also projected the possible implications of the measures to citizens. In the Winlos, the comedians revealed that the Lockdown has cut off social ties, inability to access medical care for other diseases, and unnecessary expenditures on organisation due to online streaming. This excerpt captures their view: ELDER: Swear for me? Oh! Money no dey again. You don use erm do live streaming. You take do stream live. I warned you o that that streaming you dey do, enodey stream live. You say you dey stream live. Abeg come kommot my house. Kommot my house. Oya kommot my house, social distancing. (Dilemma of a Worried Elder). The streaming of church meetings brought high costs to religious bodies and other organisations. The Winlos projected social life before the virus and social life after the virus. Before the virus, people spent huge sums of money on weddings due to large numbers of attendees, but during the lockdown, wedding cost was low due to the restriction on social gatherings. In terms of church activities, the evangelism could be done from house to house but during the COVID-19, evangelism is restricted.

Also, church elders could pray for church members who are sick by laying hands, but during the COVID-19, they cannot lay hands on the sick. Here is one excerpt on the laying of hands. Male Speaker: Pastor please come and lay your hands on her, she is sick. Leviticus: No, I will pray for her from here (standing at a distance with hand stretched towards the sick). Distance is not a barrier in the realm of the spirit. Mark Angel Comedy also captured the pain that some couples are going through as a result of the lockdown.

They humourously designed a business idea to make husbands pretend to be covid-19 patients so that they can come in as a quarantine team to take them out of the house to their preferred location. This excerpt captures it: KBROWN: now, they are many in their house. They want to leave their houses because their wives are choking them in the neck and they don't know a way to breakout. Now, we will be the people breaking them out.

Rhetorical Devices Used to Create Comic Effect

Creating humourous content is not an easy task since what is funny can be relative. However, actions coupled with appropriate words that use the right rhetorical devices can create amusement. Burkean dramatic criticism identifies agency which comprises the symbolic and linguistic strategies used to create a communicative effect. The setting and actors according to Burkean approach all add to the comic effect. The comedians had a series of comical devices, but the most dominant devices used were simile, rhetorical questions, irony, and paralinguistic devices.

Simile is the comparison of things using words such as 'like', 'as' among others. This usually creates a comic effect incongruity.

- (a) Look at your beard like toilet brush. (Mark Angel Comedy, Corona Food)
- (b) Simple! Buy the iPhone and be living in the store. (Mark Angel Comedy, Social Distancing)
- (c) It's not only iPhone 11 Pro, it's COVID-19 Pro. (Mark Angel Comedy, Social Distancing)
- (d) You part yourselves like the red sea. (The Winlos, Stay at Home)

In the examples above, the comedians used the literary device, simile, to compare two things so that they could amuse their audience. In example a), the comedian used simile to satirically compare the beard of the other actor to a toilet brush. In this sense, the audience can visualise toilet brush, which is usually scattered and dirty hence the comic effect of amusement is achieved. In example b), the comedian compared the Iphone play store to a normal store where goods are sold. This allowed the comedian to satirically critique the other actor to live in the Iphone store, which is not a normal store. In this satirical comparison, the comedian

makes it clear to the audience that the making of choice to buy Iphone when you have not paid your rent is foolishness. In excerpt c), the comedian compared Iphone 11 Pro to COVID-19 in order to establish that both are equally important and focusing on COVID-19 pro is advisable since it is the current situation everyone is battling. In the last excerpt, d), the comedian instructed the other two actors to part themselves like the red sea. This is in a way comparing social distancing to the biblical incident of the red sea being divided for the Jews to pass through. To the comedian, social distancing is like the parting of the red sea. Not only is this to achieve the comic effect, but also it is appealing to an authoritative sacred book (Bible) to explain social distancing to the comedian who poses as an evangelist in the midst of the corona virus pandemic.

Rhetorical question is a literary device that involves the use of interrogatives that do not demand answers. It is an effective device in engaging the audience to find answers to the questions. Usually, in comedy, the questions are obvious that the audience can see the folly of the actor and that makes the audiences feel superior, hence, a comic effect is created. In the following examples, The Winlos used rhetorical questions to ask why the actor (evangelist) will start his evangelism under lockdown period when the government instructed all should stay at home.

Why are you like this? Why is your life upside down? They will say stay house, that's when you want to go out. Leviticus why? (The Winlos, Stay at Home).

In the Mark Angel Comedy, the comedian used rhetorical questions to explain why he is beating the other actor. In that sense, the audience understands the rationale behind the beating but might not get answers as to questions.

Er-erh, so why did you (steps on the man's foot) match me? Idiot! Why did you match me? (Mark Angel Comedy, Social Distancing).

Irony is literary where the speaker says something and means the opposite. It is usually used to criticize the folly in society. In the sampled comedy skits, it was obvious that the comedians used irony to show the folly of certain behavior that is not helping the containment of the coronavirus. In this excerpt from the Winlos,

the comedian remarked that the country is proudly produced by Wale Adenuga when in actual sense the comedian is referring to the politicians as the producers of the country because the politicians have embezzled the money that is supposed to be used to fight the covid-19 cases. ELDER: Na how I dey find exercise book so. I never dey see erm for newspaper. (he shouts in his native language) see, make you read o! Jesus, where I go run go. I talk erm say this country is proudly produced by Wale Adenuga. Na movie we dey watch o (The Winlos, The Dilemma of Worried Elder).

In this irony, the comedian referred to a movie producer as the producer of the country meanwhile the target group he is mocking are the politicians who are running the country in their own interest. In Mark Angel Comedy, the comedians used irony to mock people who might choose status symbols instead of things that can help them contain the covid-19 pandemic. In this irony, the comedian refers to iPhone 11 pro play store as living store where people can live. This mimics the folly of those who will make choices that are not helping the critical moment. SUCCESS: eh nah! I think your landlord will chase you out of the house on Monday? And the iPhone has Apple store? SUCCESS: Simple! Buy the iPhone and be living in the store. (Mark Angel Comedy, Social Distancing).

Slang is the use of specialised words that are known to the speaker and audience. In the comedy skits, the comedians sometimes resorted to the use of pidgin and vernacular to convey some comic effect to the audience. In this excerpt From The Dilemma of a Worried Elder, the speaker used Pidgin English to communicate his dissatisfaction about the government embezzling the money that was supposed to be used for the fight against corona virus. ELDER: See erm na! They say the building wey they keep the ten billion don catch fire. They think we nor get sense for this country (he speaks his native language). In National Lockdown by Mark Angel comedy, the comedian used the local word oga which means boss or master to refer to the client they are trying to break from his wife's torment due to the lockdown. The use of the word Chineke is a dialectic name for God. These slangs allow the comedians to capture to comic effect vividly to their target audience. In Burkean Dramatic Criticism, the use of slang can help establish identification which enhances the acceptance of the message from the speaker. BAZE 10: you are doing well. (He laughs) oga, oga take it easy now. It's okay. In fact

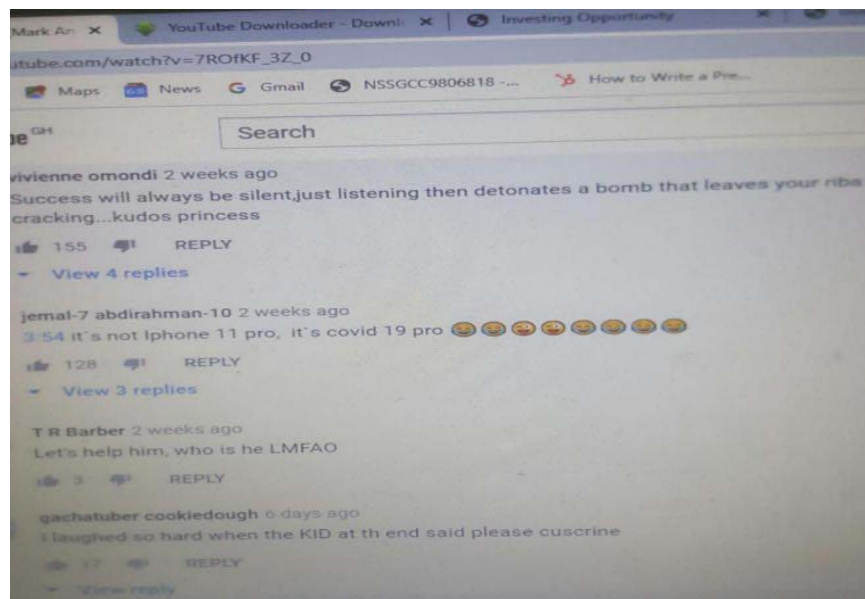
let's stop here now (National Lockdown, Mark Angel Comedy).
UNCLE MARK: chineke! Emmanuella. I'm calling this number and your phone is ringing.

Paralinguistic devices are the use of non-linguistic cues such as eye contact, tone, movement, voice among others to achieve a communicative effect. In the selected comedy skits, it was obvious that achieving comic effect was not only the words, but actions performed led to the amusement. In the following excerpts, the paralinguistic devices were captured in parenthesis and underlined for easy identification. UNCLE MARK: (whispers) Emmanuella die. (She shakes her head) Emmanuelle die, die. (Using his hand to indicate time out) die (Emmanuella shakes her head, she eats all the food, washes her hand and drink). UNCLE MARK: Emmanuella, go to the fridge and get our visitor drink. (Emmanuella and Uncle Mark exchange stares)

From these examples, whispering usually requires a low tone which implies the actor said it that way to achieve a comic effect. The issue was the actor (Mark Angel) whispered to alert the other actor (Emmanuella) he should die so that others can get the food to eat. This was in reference to the isolation treatment that patients of covid-19 are going through in the isolation centers. The shaking of head, indicating time through hand and exchanging of stares all added to the drama that the actors were engaged in communication that is not supposed to be noticed by the isolation center managers. To better understand the comic effect of the comedy skits, the author reviewed some of the comments that viewers wrote in the comments section of the YouTube channel. It was an emphatically clear audience of both comedy groups that express their laughing mood by indicating with series of emojis that show they found the skit funny. Moreover, some of the audience expressed their understanding of the comedy skits by explaining the information in the content while others express the actors who are making the skits mirthful. Below are some shots from the YouTube Channel of both comedy groups that captured some audiences' comments about the skits.



The Winlos: Life before and after the Corona Virus



The Winlos: Social Distancing

From these shots of the comments section of the comedy skits, one can see the emojis expressing laughter and the writing of the viewers expressing their appreciation and what they are learning from the skits. It is therefore succinct, even though not empirically proven from participants that the comedy skits achieved their purpose that is to entertain the viewers. According to Burkean Dramatic Criticism,

the fifth factor is the purpose of the communication. Since the purpose of most comedy is to entertain at the same time educate, the comments above show the comedians achieved their goal.

Mark Angel Comedy: Social Distancing

In the same way, Mark Angel Comedy skits were received with laughter and comments from viewers indicating their level of learning from the skits. The comments indicated that the viewers are conversant with the actors. For instance, the first comment: Success will always be silent, just listening then detonates a bomb that leaves your ribs cracking,...kudos princess (By Vivienne Omondi). Apparently from the shot, 155 viewers consented to the statement of Vivienne by liking and 3 replying it. This implies that viewers are aware of the actor's comic potentials and they can predict the possible outcome of these skits. In effect, Burkean Approach fourth factors that demand that actors should be known and credible to the audience is achieved hence the acceptance of their humorous content will be easier.

Discussion of Results

Comedians are not detached from the social happenings around them rather they understand the happenings and present them in a way that helps the audience to understand and cope with the social situation. As postulated in the theory of humour, the frequency of humour in a critical situation helps people to develop and cope with the situation. With regard to content, the comedians rightly identified the cause of COVID-19 to be corona virus and its symptomatic patients of COVID-19 show cough, sore throat, fever, and cold among others. This is consistent with the literature in that Liu *et al.* (2020) found COVID-19 to be caused by a single-strand RNA virus that is zoonotic in nature while Huang *et al.* (2019) mentioned the symptoms stated by the comedians plus others such as diarrhea, myalgia, pneumonia and dyspnea. This means that comedians highlighted the very obvious symptoms for their target audience. Even though the comedians associated the virus possible origin to God as His way of punishing wrongs or 5G networks, those ideas are not consistent with the literature. Adhkari *et al.* (2020) indicated that the COVID-19 virus originated from seafood in Wuhan, China. The comedian's association of the virus with God or 5G could have been triggered by the comic effect. The theory of

humour indicated that when comedians explore the new unexpected areas of critical situations it leads to humour and trivializing the negative effect of the situation on an audience.

Moreover, the comedians delve into the possible measures put in place by government to contain the situation. The measures they captured included social distancing, restriction of public gathering, the recommendation of precautionary measures such as hand washing, using alcohol-based sanitizers, coughing under the elbow, avoiding hugging among others. The public health measures named by the comedians, thus social distancing and restriction on movement and public gatherings, quarantine, self-isolation, are found to be effective measures to contain the COVID-19 from spreading. Bootsman and Ferguson (2007); Adhikari *et al.* (2020); Omoera, Onyemuchara, & Okwuowulu (2020) recommended similar precautionary measures as ways to avoid infection with a virus. The comedians exaggerated the measures as in The Winlos comedy skit, *Stay at Home*, the Pastor character wittily captured self-isolation by asserting that the brother Leviticus should go and hide in the secret place of the Most High God and social distancing is nicely described as parting yourself from others like the red sea. Equally important is the fact that the comedians exposed the audience not to take for granted aspects of the government measures. According to the theory of humour, people are amused when the traumatic event is explored in a humorous way beyond what is known (Antonovi, 2015). In this light, the comedians pointed out the life during the coronavirus has led to cut down the costs of social gatherings, new strategies of ministering to church members and time with family members. Time with family members was nicely captured when the comedian found playing with toys at home as a way to avoid boredom as an alternative to going to the cinema to watch movies. However, they also highlighted the fact that some couples may experience hard times if the couples are not in good times and families may be facing insufficient food supply due to the lockdown. This exposure to the positives and negatives of the lockdown will aid the audience to understand and cope with the pandemic according to the theory of humour postulation.

The content equally captured the fact that the government interventions were also laden with a lot of defects. For instance, isolated patients did not have enough food to eat and remain in the camps and likewise, money that was meant to fight the pandemic

has been turned to private pockets for no reason. Moreover, the comedians found the intervention as a hard time for organisation like the church, which are organising their services online. The cost of streaming is high and income is dwindling. It is, therefore, an eye-opener of the defect of the system put in place to contain the situation. As Oppenheim *et al.* (2017) indicated in their Preparedness Index that public health infrastructure is key component. This however, is not in good shape in developing nations; hence the quarantine centres are lacking basic necessities that can make their stay meaningful. In this case comedy as Hennefeld, Berke and Renneth (2019) captured Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy about comedy is employed as carnivalesque laughter to mock authority and subverts sovereign tyranny. In this light, the comedians are using comedy to point the ills of the political system and in Henri Bergson's approach of comedy to correct the social ills of society. Therefore, concerning the content, it is of no doubt to side with Hennefeld, Berke and Renneth, (2019) that comedians are often better equipped to explain current, even though they do that in relation to available scholastic and journalistic information rather independent information only.

A critical look at the content of the comedy skits on coronavirus as discussed above begs one to consider Cernerud and Olsson's (2004) proposal on the possibility of adopting humour in public health communication programmes. This is very laudable in a sense as far as the comic effect is concern audience are likely to turn to humourous content as a relief from stress and pain in a traumatic situation like covi-19. This is best explained by Cernerud and Olsson's (2004), idea that humour plays a 'salutogenic' by introducing the health messages to the audience on the vehicle of humour. This valid because beyond the amusement and emotional reactions triggered by the humour, the audiences acknowledge in the comments section that there was educative information in the comedy intended to enlighten them on the COVID-19. It is, therefore, relevant to point out that, in this study, the researchers consider the information model of public health programmes as the model to integrate comedy in carrying out public health programmes during pandemics. This is because the information model seeks to equip people with knowledge and understanding of a health issue. And since the comedy skits contained vital information, using comedy skits as a vehicle to communicate public health information will

not only be informative, but novel to the audience who find comedy as a source of relief during a pandemic situation.

In essence, therefore, considering comedy in developing risk communication is potential tool to combat the pandemic. This is because it brings with its effective communication that is communicated in the context of humour to accelerate the health process, since humour has an impact on muscle relaxation, cardiovascular function, respiratory function, stress reduction, symptoms reduction and many more (Gremignic, 2012; Fry & Williams, 1994, Pan *et al.*, 2020). As Antonovic (2015) concluded in the theory of humour that humour is a form of communication of pain in handy at such critical times to help the public cope with the critical situation. Using humour in public health programmes does not take away the comic effect in humour rather the comic effect becomes a vehicle for the health message to ride on. In selected comedy skits, the researcher found rhetorical devices that were used to create comic effect. The devices that were predominantly used include simile, rhetorical questions, irony, slang and paralinguistic devices. The devices were predominantly used to make certain characters look inferior by deviating from the normal (incongruity). For instance, the use of simile to point to Brother Leviticus to distance himself from sister Lizzy like the parting of the red sea is a clear example of an actor deviating from the prescribed precautionary measure and another character using comparison to communicate the incongruity. As indicated by the incongruity perspective to humour, the audience further broadens their perspective of the traumatic situation when one audience folly is exposed through comparison.

The use of rhetorical questions revealed mastery over the subject and engaged the audience to find answers to those questions, which further enforce their understanding of the situation. Rhetorical questions are obvious to the audience that they can feel confident and superior over the actor who is been asked and that further creates a humourous response from the audience. Cernerud and Olsson (2004) argued that the superiority theories perspective explores the feeling of mastery, self-esteem and confidence that is elicited as a result of a humourous response to a stressful situation. The use of irony clearly pointed out the folly of some people in society's folly response to the pandemic situation. Through irony the comedians created scenarios that criticised social practices that

are not consistent with fighting the virus. For instance, an evangelist who decides to evangelize from house to house is not following the precautionary measures. Likewise, a person who uses huge money to buy luxury good rather than focusing on basic necessities may be helping the lockdown period. Through irony, the comedians mocked diverse social groups in a very humourous way that amused and educated the audience.

The use of slang created what Burke called identification where the speaker uses symbols that are shared among them in order to facilitate the acceptance of the message. In this area, the use of pidgin and vernacular in the skits aided their audience who understood these slang and vernacular to laugh (Arhin, 1988). These were complemented with the use of paralinguistic devices such as movement, intonation, eye contact among others to complement the verbal messages. In all, the comedians achieved their comic effect through the use of rhetorical devices. This was succinct in that the audience expressed what they learned in the comments section and the use of emojis showed that the comedy skits entertained them (Azeez & Doghudge, 2016). Gremegnic (2012) identified laughing as the most common expression of humour. The laughing or mirthful state that the audience expressed is believed to have triggered the effects of the physiological relationship between humour and health. The physiological changes mechanism postulates that laughter trains and relaxes the muscles; improves breathing; stimulates circulation; increases the production of endorphins that reduce pain; decreases the production of stress hormones; and strengthens the functioning of the immune system (Dionigi & Gremigni, 2010). These health benefits could make incorporating comedy in health communication programmes an effective tool than the routine public engagement methods used by public health experts.

Conclusion

This study has explored comedy in an era of a pandemic by looking at how the Mark Angel Comedy skits and The Winlos skits contributed to the edutainment of audience in the COVID-19 season. The researchers, after analysing the content of the comedy skits on the corona virus, ascertained that the content covered factual information on the nature, preventive measures and government

intervention on the corona virus. The researchers also discovered that the use of simile, irony, rhetorical questions and slang as rhetorical devices aided the comedians to create and achieve their comic effect. In the discussion, the researchers established that since humour has a positive relationship with health, the use of humour in pandemic risk communication could make public health programmes more effective than they used to be.

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