Examining Sexist Inferences on *The Churchill Show's* Stand-Up Comedy

Naftal Nyakundi, Benard Mudogo & David Barasa
Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

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Abstract

This study explores the implicit gender biases present in the performances of specific stand-up comedians featured on *The Churchill Show*, broadcast on Kenya's TV47. Employing Fairclough's (2001) sociocultural framework within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the paper delves into the nuanced expressions of verbal sexist humour articulated by these comedians. A descriptive research design is utilized, along with purposive sampling and thorough content analysis, to reveal the subtle sexist inferences and examine how they are constructed through language. In November 2023, selected stand-up performances were transcribed verbatim for detailed analysis. The transcriptions were meticulously coded to highlight instances of sexist humour, which were then analysed within their cultural and contextual settings. The content analysis focused on humorous elements that reflect or reinforce power imbalances, societal stereotypes, and gender-based discrimination. The results underscore the role of these inferences in sustaining sexist stereotypes and ideologies within Kenyan society. By scrutinizing the comedic narratives from *The Churchill Show*, this paper contributes to the academic conversation surrounding humour, language, and gender representation. Understanding the linguistic underpinnings and implications of verbal sexist humour is vital for addressing societal attitudes towards gender and promoting equality. Additionally, this paper illuminates the broader sociocultural factors that influence comedic discourse in Kenya.

Introduction

The Churchill Show, broadcast on TV47, is a prominent platform for stand-up comedy in Kenya and provides a rich context for exploring implicit sexist inferences in comedic performances. This paper investigates how specific stand-up comedians craft humour that suggests sexist attitudes, the cultural and contextual cues that enable these inferences, and the broader implications of these comedic strategies on audience perceptions and societal attitudes. By focusing on these inferences, this study aims to illuminate the subtle yet pervasive mechanisms through which verbal sexist humour operates, contributing to a deeper understanding of its role and impact within comedic discourse.

Verbal sexist humour involves demeaning, objectifying, and stereotyping individuals based on gender, and it has garnered significant scholarly interest due to its societal implications and the complex linguistic strategies employed in its formulation. This type of humour serves as a vehicle for articulating societal perspectives, reinforcing stereotypes, and perpetuating discriminatory beliefs (Woodzicka, 2015). Analysing language in this context can reveal vital insights into the motivations, biases, and aspirations of those who create comedic content (Tannen, 2022; Itieba et al., 2023; Barasa, 2023).

Inferences play a crucial role in understanding verbal sexist humour, specifically regarding how audiences derive implicit meanings that extend beyond the explicit statements made by comedians. This study focuses on pragmatic inferences, which involve contextual and situational cues that allow listeners to grasp the underlying attitudes and assumptions within the humour (Cutting, 2002; Ndonye, 2015). Levinson (1983) suggests that explicit linguistic structures often activate these inferences indirectly, making them essential for comprehending nuanced communication in comedic contexts.

Verbal sexist humour typically relies on gender-based stereotypes and biases, often at the expense of marginalised groups (Mills, 2008; Ford et al., 2013). The choice to focus on *The Churchill Show* is intentional, given its substantial influence on comedic themes and public perceptions. Stand-up comedy allows performers to entertain while simultaneously providing social critiques. To understand the linguistic mechanisms underpinning verbal sexist humour, exploring the cultural and contextual factors that shape comedic language is essential. Fairclough's (2001) sociocultural framework within Critical Discourse Analysis serves as a lens to examine how comedic language reflects and reinforces societal norms and power dynamics, particularly those associated with gender roles and expectations (Attardo, 1994; 2017).

This study analyses how inferences related to gender stereotypes are constructed and received by audiences, thereby linking the notion of inference to the pragmatic analysis of the data within the CDA framework. It is also essential to consider the potential effects of exposure to verbal sexist humour. Research indicates frequent exposure can normalise discriminatory attitudes and behaviours (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Ford, Boxer, et al., 2008). Moreover, findings by Thomae and Viki (2013) suggest that such exposure may heighten the likelihood of men engaging in sexual violence.

Materials and Methods

This study utilised a descriptive research design within the qualitative paradigm, as Creswell (2013) outlined. This approach aims to uncover and report findings and identify fundamental principles and solutions to the research questions. The design was particularly suitable for interpreting language use within the context of *The Churchill Show*, focusing on both entertainment value and the potential disparagement of genders. Descriptive research seeks to portray phenomena through verbal descriptions rather than numerical data (Wiseman, 2015; Patton, 2015), making it ideal for a study that relies heavily on textual data.

The primary data consisted of utterances from live comedic performances on *The Churchill Show*. From eight episodes aired in November 2023, seven utterances containing sexist inferences were selected based on specific inclusion criteria that emphasised gender stereotypes, biases, and discriminatory attitudes. The decision to analyse only seven utterances was guided by the principles of content analysis, which emphasises depth over breadth. By focusing on fewer carefully chosen utterances, the study could provide a more thorough and nuanced exploration of each instance of verbal sexist humour.

Additionally, the selection of these utterances reflects their clear representation of the core themes relevant to the research objective. While there may have been other instances of sexist humour in the episodes, these seven were identified as the most illustrative examples, providing rich data highlighting the linguistic and sociocultural mechanisms at play. This approach allowed for a detailed examination of the implicit meanings and contextual factors influencing the humour, which may be lost in a larger sample size.

Purposive sampling was employed to collect the necessary data, ensuring that the selected utterances directly addressed the research focus. For data analysis and presentation, content analysis was used, with observation and audio recordings serving as data collection tools. The coding and categorization

process organised the identified sexist inferences into themes related to gender stereotypes, roles, biases, and societal expectations. Each utterance was coded according to the specific sexist inference it conveyed, such as "men as providers," "women as caregivers," and "gendered expectations." This systematic coding facilitated a structured analysis of the implicit meanings present in the comedic content.

Results and Discussion

Sexist Inferences Regarding Women

The analysis of sexist inferences primarily highlighted the portrayal of women within comedic discourse. A prominent theme identified was the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and societal roles.

Theme: Societal Roles and Gender Stereotypes

These roles encompass expectations and norms that dictate acceptable behaviours and responsibilities based on gender. Such norms often position women as primarily suited for domestic or caregiving roles, while men are expected to fulfil financial and leadership responsibilities in public spheres (Crawford, 2000).

Inference: Dependency of Women on Men

In a performance by comedian O on *The Churchill Show* in November 2023, the following statement was made:

Example 1

"...mwanamke anahitaji mwanaume mmoja mwenye atamtimizia mahitaji yake yote lakini mwanaume anahitaji kila mwanamke ili wamtimizie hataji lake moja." (Comedian O, 2023, November, Churchill Show).

(Translation: "A woman needs one man who can meet all her needs, but a man needs every woman to have his one need met.")

This statement implies that a woman's fulfilment hinges entirely on a single male partner, suggesting that women should look to men for complete support and satisfaction. This perspective underscores traditional gender norms, framing men as the primary providers and depicting women as reliant on them for their well-being. The comparison between a woman needing one man and a man needing multiple women highlights the unequal expectations placed on genders in relationships. It suggests that women have all their needs met by one partner. In contrast, men are portrayed as having needs that extend beyond a single relationship, emphasising a disparity in societal expectations.

Historically, women have often been stereotyped as dependent on men for emotional and physical support (Ivan et al., 2023; Tannen, 2022). From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, using the word "need" concerning women indicates a dependency. This framing portrays women as incomplete without a male partner, suggesting that their value is inherently tied to their relationships with men. Such language reinforces gender expectations and overlooks the diversity of relationship dynamics and individual autonomy.

A Critical Discourse Analyst might interpret this utterance as indicative of an unequal power dynamic, positioning men as the providers of women's needs and thus maintaining a superior status. This dynamic reinforces patriarchal structures, where men wield economic and social power over women, shaping the roles and behaviours of both genders within relationships.

Example 2

"... kuna jamaa alipigwa na mkewe kwa mwiko jikoni mpaka akafa. Jamii yake ilificha chanzo cha kifo chake." (Comedian F, 2023, November, Churchill Show).

(...there is a man who his wife hit with a cooking stick in the kitchen until he died. (Laughter). His family hid the cause of his death).

In this utterance, the comedian's reference to a cooking stick—a tool typically associated with the kitchen—subtly reinforces the stereotype that the kitchen is a woman's domain. This implication suggests that women are confined to the private, domestic sphere, particularly the kitchen. The joke insinuates that a man's presence in this space is inappropriate, leading to a violent response from the wife. The underlying message is that the wife's anger and subsequent violence stem from her husband's intrusion into her territory.

The idea of a cooking stick being a lethal weapon is an exaggeration that plays on the stereotype of women as physically weaker and harmless. The humour relies on the situation's absurdity, highlighting gender norms and reinforcing the stereotype that women's roles are limited to domestic duties. Historically, women have often been relegated to the private sphere, while men engage in public activities and hold had been used, the implicit gender bias could have been reduced. Furthermore, by depicting a domestic tool as a weapon, the joke implies that women must rely on domestic means to exert influence or power, further entrenching the stereotype of women as confined to the home.

In summary, the comedian's joke leverages traditional gender stereotypes, reinforcing the notion that women belong in the home and kitchen while men dominate the public sphere. This aligns with the enduring view that women's roles should be limited to domestic duties and caregiving.

Theme: Physical Appearance and Societal Beauty Standards
An additional theme from the data analysis centres on physical appearance and societal beauty standards. This theme highlights the expectations placed on women to conform to specific aesthetic criteria, often judging their worth based on physical attractiveness.

Inference: Women Are Not Attractive Without Makeup
The analysis revealed an inference suggesting that women are perceived as unattractive without makeup. Societal beauty standards dictate that women should meet particular physical criteria, often placing their worth on appearance, with makeup considered essential for enhancing attractiveness.

Enduring stereotypes surround women's physical appearance (Mills, 2008). Society frequently criticises women based on rigid, unrealistic beauty standards, which can confine their self-perception and behaviour. One prevalent stereotype is that women need makeup to be deemed attractive. Humorous comments on *The Churchill Show* often draw attention to these beauty standards, contributing to body shaming and reinforcing patriarchal control over women's bodies.

This discourse reflects a broader societal expectation that women must adhere to specific beauty standards to gain validation and acceptance, thus perpetuating a cycle of self-doubt and conformity.

Example 3

"... huyo mrembo karibu na wewe mpe high five lakini usiguse uso wake. Unaweza baki kwa mkono. (Laughter). Nywele pia usivulute, anaweza baki na matuta... (laughter)" (Comedian M, 2023, November, Churchill Raw).

(...Give high five to that beautiful lady near you but do not touch her face. it can remain in your hand. (Laughter). Do not pull her hair too; she might remain with humps inside.

This utterance, delivered by a male comedian, suggests that touching a woman's hair could result in her losing it, while touching her face could cause it to "come off." Such statements objectify women and devalue them based on their appearance, reducing them to mere objects of physical pleasure. Phrases like "it can remain in your hand" and "do not pull her hair; she might remain with humps inside" imply that women are unattractive without makeup or artificial positions of authority (Crawford, 2000; Miriam, 2022).

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, this language use perpetuates social stereotypes and norms (Fairclough, 2001). The comedian's choice of the term "cooking stick" reinforces traditional gender roles and domestic expectations. This choice suggests that women's responsibilities should be confined to domestic chores while men occupy the public sphere, where they assume more authoritative roles. If a more neutral term like "object" or "instrument" enhancements. This humour perpetuates the notion that without makeup, women's natural appearance is deemed insufficient or unattractive.

This type of humour reinforces patriarchal ideologies by placing value on women based solely on their looks. The suggestion that women require makeup to be attractive can undermine their self-esteem, making them feel inadequate or insecure about their natural appearance (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Such societal pressure can drive women to overuse makeup or even pursue cosmetic procedures to conform to these narrow beauty standards.

Critically analysing such discourses is essential to highlight opportunities for resistance and empowerment (Fairclough, 2001). Challenging societal beauty norms can encourage individuals, particularly women, to embrace their diversity and natural beauty.

Theme: Behavioural Stereotypes
Another theme identified from the data analysis is the reinforcement of behavioural stereotypes, which emphasises traditional gender roles and societal expectations. These stereotypes consist of ingrained beliefs and assumptions about typical behaviours and characteristics associated with women. Common perceptions include views of women as emotionally unstable, jealous, poor drivers, careless, overly talkative, troublesome, materialistic, and promiscuous. Such stereotypes often portray women as irrational or lacking self-control.

The analysis revealed a sexist inference suggesting that women are promiscuous, reinforcing negative societal attitudes and expectations. This perception contributes to a culture that not only objectifies women but also stigmatises them based on unfounded generalisations. These behavioural stereotypes limit women's identities and perpetuate harmful narratives that undermine their agency and individuality.

Inference: Women as Promiscuous

Example 4

  "Ladies, stop generalising that all men are the same. Who told you to taste all of them? (Laughter). That energy you are focusing on all of them, can you manage one? Have you tasted me? (Laughter)." (Comedian O, November 2023, Churchill Show).

In this context, the phrase "to taste" serves as a euphemism for engaging in sexual relations. The statement "who told you to taste all of them?" implies that women have had sexual encounters with multiple men and should instead focus on a single partner. This humour suggests that women are naturally promiscuous or inclined to pursue various sexual relationships, reinforcing the stereotype that women are promiscuous.

This stereotype is deeply embedded in traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The joke promotes the idea that women, unlike men, are inherently promiscuous when they engage in multiple relationships, while men are often excused or even encouraged to do so. This double standard underscores the belief that it is acceptable for men to have multiple sexual partners but not for women.

Addressing women collectively as "ladies" groups them under a negative stereotype of promiscuity. It places the blame on women for their perceived promiscuity, suggesting that this behaviour is a moral failing. Phrases like "Have you tasted me?" and "can't you manage one?" objectify women, reducing them to mere objects of male desire and implying that their worth is tied to their sexual behaviour or relationships with men.

In many cultures, women's promiscuity is heavily stigmatised, as they are expected to uphold moral standards by being faithful. This observation aligns with Goldman and Waymer's (2015) argument that media often portray women as morally flawed or perverse. By examining and challenging these stereotypes, we can address the harmful impact of such humour and work towards more equitable and respectful representation of women in media and society.

Inference: Women as Indirect Communicators

Example 5

 "If a man proposes a relationship to an African woman and she answers "no" she means "yes." (Laughter). For us men, when we tell a lady we love her, we mean exactly that." (Comedian S, November 2023, Churchill Show).

In this example, the comedian depicts women as individuals who do not express their true intentions when faced with romantic proposals. This statement implies that African women lack straightforwardness, leading to the inference that they are indirect communicators. This sweeping generalisation is both broad and inaccurate. The humour here carries a sexist undertone, stemming from an androcentric viewpoint that centres on male perspectives and experiences. It suggests that while women often say the opposite of what they mean, men are portrayed as sincere and direct in their communications.

This contrast positions women as inferior communicators compared to men. The idea that a woman's "no" actually means "yes" perpetuates the harmful stereotype that women enjoy playing hard to get. This implication disregards women's explicit rejections and suggests that they can be interpreted as consent, which is deeply problematic. It reinforces the dangerous notion that a lack of explicit and affirmative consent equates to agreement, undermining the critical importance of explicit consent in romantic and sexual interactions.

Theme: Emotional and Intellectual Stereotypes
The theme of emotional and intellectual stereotypes emerged in the data analysis. These stereotypes encompass common perceptions regarding women's cognitive abilities and emotional traits. Often, women are portrayed as lacking intelligence, being enigmatic, or perceived as irrational. This perpetuates the notion that women are less logical or rational than men, further entrenching gender inequalities in how communication and decision-making are viewed in society. Such stereotypes not only diminish women's capabilities but also limit their potential by reinforcing outdated and harmful narratives about their intellectual and emotional capacities.

Inference: Women are Irrational, Incomprehensible, and Mysterious

Cultural stereotypes often portray women as mysterious and difficult to understand, a notion prevalent across many societies (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1999). This stereotype shapes our interpretations of women's behaviours, but it is essential to recognise that women, like men, possess diverse personalities and experiences. Generalising the complexities of an entire gender oversimplifies their unique diversity. The following example illustrates this inference.

Example 6

"...I don't understand women. Man has produced engineers, doctors, and many more, but we cannot understand women. Women cannot even understand themselves. (Laughter)." (Comedian Y, November 2023, Churchill Show).

In this comedic statement, the comedian implies that women are inherently difficult to understand, even by themselves. This assertion reinforces the stereotype that women are absurd and fundamentally mysterious. It suggests that women are universally incomprehensible and irrational, which is a sweeping generalisation that ignores their individuality and complexity. The claim that "women cannot even understand themselves" presents a false universal truth based on limited perspectives.

Such statements simplify and undermine the rich diversity of women's experiences and behaviours. This humour perpetuates the stereotype that women's thoughts and emotions are irrational compared to men's, reflecting a broader societal belief that women are less logical. This kind of rhetoric can contribute to the normalisation of self-doubt and internalised misogyny among women arising from living in a patriarchal society.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, this statement highlights underlying power dynamics and ideologies. By depicting women as irrational, the comedian reinforces a patriarchal viewpoint that positions men as rational and women as irrational. This dynamic serves to justify unequal treatment and discrimination against women.

Fairclough (2001) states that critically analysing discourse can reveal hidden ideologies, challenge dominant gender norms, and address power imbalances. The portrayal of women as incomprehensible serves to disempower and marginalise them while promoting male dominance. By perpetuating these stereotypes, the utterance upholds societal norms that view women as less capable, thereby maintaining gender inequality.

Sexist Inferences Targeted at Men

Sexist humour also extends to men, revealing a range of problematic inferences categorised under two main themes. The first theme revolves around sexuality and gendered relationships.

Theme: Sexuality and Gendered Relationships

This theme encompasses stereotypes related to men's roles in relationships and their sexuality. It includes beliefs that men are primarily driven by sexual desires and hypersexuality, as well as perceptions that they are untrustworthy or fearful of commitment. Moreover, it suggests that men can be disruptive to women, reinforcing traditional gender roles where men are expected to be dominant.

Inference: Men are Sex Driven and Hypersexual

The stereotype that men are insatiably eager for sex is prevalent in society. However, research shows that men's and women's levels of sexual desire are often more comparable than commonly portrayed (Mills, 2008). The notion that only men possess a high sex drive is an oversimplification and misrepresentation.

Example 7

"...Men are confused elements... they work so hard and get money to marry good-looking girls. The same men will go and cheat with ugly madams. (Laughter)." (Comedian O, November, 2023, Churchill Show).

In this instance, phrases like "men are confused elements" and "cheat with ugly madams" portray men as impulsive and lacking self-control. This humour reinforces the stereotype that men are primarily driven by sexual urges, implying that these desires dictate their actions. By broadly referring to "men" without acknowledging individual differences, the statement perpetuates the stereotype of hypersexuality as a universal male trait rather than a complex aspect of human behaviour.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, this remark upholds ideologies that foster sexist attitudes. It supports the patriarchal view that men are inherently more sexually driven and prone to infidelity. At the same time, women are valued primarily for their physical appearance and ability to fulfil men's desires. Such beliefs not only justify men's infidelity but also objectify and diminish women.

Moreover, the comedian's use of terms like "ugly madams" reinforces sexist beauty standards, devaluing women based on societal norms. These beauty standards often serve as tools of oppression, signalling women's inferior status and detracting from their capabilities, ultimately reducing them to mere objects (Jeffereys, 2005; Gathatu & Chai, 2015). By labelling women as "good-looking girls" or "ugly madams," the comedian diminishes their worth to physical appearance, overlooking their other qualities and attributes.

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy routines on *The Churchill Show* reveal a significant prevalence of sexist inferences aimed at both men and women, though the focus is predominantly on women. These inferences reinforce harmful stereotypes, depicting women as dependent on men and intellectually inferior, trivialising their efforts to improve their appearance and characterising them as irrational or promiscuous. In contrast, men are often portrayed as hypersexual. Such stereotypes not only normalise gender discrimination but also contribute to the marginalisation of both genders.

To foster social justice and gender equality, it is crucial to challenge these negative representations. Promoting critical media literacy and encouraging the analysis of humour can help reduce the internalisation of these stereotypes, particularly among men, who may inadvertently perpetuate biases against themselves. Addressing these issues is vital for cultivating a more equitable society.

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