

## WHOEVER LAUGHS AFTERWARDS LAUGHS BETTER GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE ROMANIAN STAND-UP COMEDY

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### ABSTRACT

The main theme of this work is the gender, studied in stand-up comedy shows. This paper is exploratory and aims to find the answers to three research questions: **1.** How are gender stereotypes used in the stand-up comedy? **2.** How do men and women artists differ? and **3.** Are there significant differences between the shows broadcast on television and those published only on the Internet? To find out the answer, I used the qualitative content analysis method, because this method is best suited to my study, allowing me an in-depth analysis. I resorted to this method of analysis, as I consider relevant the way in which gender stereotypes are represented and used in the stand-up Romanian comedy. The conclusions of the research show that gender stereotypes are mainly used directly, but also indirectly through ironies or allusions. There are also counter-stereotypes. The results also showed that men and women doing stand-up comedy have different ways of approaching and producing humor, but also that the media and the Internet are two sources of content that offer different types of stand-up. comedy.

**Keywords:** Gender, gender stereotypes, sociology of humor.

### THE RELEVANCE OF THE THEME

In a world divided into hours of work, traffic, household chores and rest, people are constantly looking for ways to relax, and stand-up comedy has become an increasingly considered option. It is said that laughter is the best medicine. I consider this fact to be sociologically relevant, because stand-up comedy is gathering more and more viewers and can create and change models of femininity and masculinity. If a few years ago the stand-up comedy was only on the Internet

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or in the places where it was performed, it is now increasingly being broadcast by the media, especially in the TV shows about humor or talent. The stand-up comedy shows are very different from each other, even if they are done by the same artists. They approach various topics, most often inspired by everyday life. Most Romanian comedians have said that people laugh at jokes about situations in which they find themselves.

The gender also makes its presence felt in stand-up comedy shows. Gender differences are an inexhaustible source of humor, focusing in particular on the different ways in which women and men think and act. Also relevant in terms of gender is the fact that, in our country, most comedians are men. In addition to using gender stereotypes, we often encounter different ways in which comedians make people laugh. These include irony or self-irony, but also sexist jokes, made by both women and men. These have led to the formulation of research questions, according to which I propose to discover how stereotypes are used, how different men and women who practice stand-up comedy are, but also whether there are major differences between the television shows and those on the Internet.

#### **THE GENDER FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman introduced the phrase „doing gender” and thus distinguished between sex (written in the birth certificate), sex category (what sex the person declares) and gender (validation of the sex category in interaction processes). According to them, the gender is permanently realized in the embedded routine and in the daily interactions. Gender is not a component of our fixed identity, but a product of social interactions. (Grünberg, 2010).

In video games and beyond, the gender is a rich and easily accessible cultural resource. Once a character is defined as male or female, a broad repertoire of stereotypes becomes available to players to understand what is expected of them or what should be done. Occasionally, this provides the opportunity to surprise if expectations are contradicted. Gender is thus used as a rhetorical resource, making it possible to convey a meaningful and persuasive message through alignment or non-alignment with expectations. (Rughiniş, 2015) This also applies to stand-up comedy shows. Audience expectations are different depending on the type of comedian. From a man it is expected to make quite a lot of jokes about women, misogynistic jokes. As in most areas the innovation is sought, so is the stand-up comedy, the comedians constantly seeking to surprise through new texts and approaches.

Regina Barreca, a university professor and comedian, brings the gender into the conversation, emphasizing men's and women's differing views on what constitutes humor. While men may find the misfortune of a fool or the embarrassment of a subordinate to be humorous, women focus on restoring control

over their lives. Humor allows women to gain perspective by ridiculing patriarchal culture. In addition to gender differences in humor, Barreca stresses the importance of age, race, ethnicity and class in our perspective on humor. (Barreca in Bemiller, Schneider, 2010).

The connection between gender and language exists at the individual, institutional and structural levels. It contributes to the creation of inequalities through education, work and politics at the institutional level and results in the creation of gender representation frameworks. Such representations feed on individual constructions of meaning, illustrating the connection between micro and macro processes (Bemiller, Schneider, 2010). Gender differences are made both individually and structurally. Not only does the individual use a set of stereotypes to define masculinity and femininity, but also the society, which establishes behaviors and interactions based on gender. Gender differences vary historically, but also from one culture to another, having an important impact on the individual's life. From a sociological point of view, gender is also a social classification, achieved through hierarchies, power and inequality, not just by differentiation. The point of interest is represented by gender stereotypes, which underlie gender biases and discrimination. (Grünberg, 2010).

#### **HUMOR AND STAND-UP COMEDY**

The relationship between humor and gender has become increasingly complicated. Although there is no humorous activity that is exclusively in the field of women or men, joking styles still play a role in social typing. When researchers began to study empirical humorous communication, its relationship with status was discovered. Anyone who makes other people laugh has, as Coser predicts, momentary control of the situation. With the help of humorous remarks, an actor can reformulate a situation and redirect people's attention. In this sense, humor in formal contexts is related to status and can affirm the dominant position in a hierarchical social structure. (Coser in Kotthoff, 2006).

Most of the jokes made in stand-up comedy shows are about sexual temptation. This is a taboo subject on which people often have fun. In all cultures people joke about sex. Jokes are especially suited to make such topics funny. Anthropologists, such as Gershon Legman, who made up large collections of jokes, have found that sexually explicit jokes play an important role inside the culture and that a large part of these jokes are done by women. Meanwhile, the women's movement has produced changes in the field of standard jokes. In all industrialized countries, jokes for men have become commonplace, and at the same time, women have become very active in cartoons, comedies, stand-up comedy shows or the cabaret scene. (Legman, in Kotthoff, 2006).

### GENDER AND MEDIA STEREOTYPES

Gender stereotypes refer to „one-sided and exaggerated images of men and women, repeatedly used in everyday life. They are usually found in the media, operating on widely accepted simplifications”. (Marshall, 2003)

Ellen Seiter argues that the media is populated by stereotypes and is something people have already become accustomed to. Stereotypes are easily recognizable in television, where their frequency has been constantly documented by researchers. She also argues that the study of stereotypes offers a point of intersection between quantitative and qualitative research, between social sciences and human perspectives, between cultural studies and administrative approaches. The assumptions about stereotypes influence the way we think about media effects and the ideological analysis of television. (Seiter, 1986)

The most common gender stereotypes are those where girls have to wear pink, and boys blue; women must be feminine and sensitive, men must be strong and leaders; women do not know how to lead and must be domestic, and men should bring money in the family. We are hit daily by these things being familiar with them. Stand-up comedy is mainly focused on funny situations in which people find themselves, and such uses of gender stereotypes are topics often addressed by comedians. These stereotypes are either accepted in stand-up and used as such, or ironized and somewhat abolished.

Erving Goffman identifies gender exposures as prescriptive expressions of gender and argues that we as humans display our gender through clothing, communication and behavior. He published in 1976 a study on how gender is transmitted in the United States through the print media. Goffman analyzed over 500 photographs in newspapers and magazines, noting that: men are represented in larger sizes than women and largely in a dominant position at the symbolic level, that women touch objects, but are not shown manipulating objects. He also noted the predominance of images in which women are represented as dependent on men. (Goffman, 1979)

Media is a social institution and has a major role in forming gender stereotypes and prejudice in a society. The Romanian media mainly promotes occupational, relational stereotypes (women as mothers, lovers, daughters of someone), verbal and nonverbal behavior, but also language, colour, location (men present more in the public space, and women in private space). „Newspapers, television, radio, advertising abound in symbolism and gender messages that implicitly or explicitly advocate more for the complementarity of gender roles and the separation of the world of women from that of men than for the public and private partnership between them. Most of the time, content supersaturated by gender stereotypes is promoted, because that is what the media consumer wants too.” (Grünberg, 2010)

## METHODOLOGY

This work consists of analyzing the stand-up comedy shows. I have chosen for this analysis shows made in the last three years that were broadcast on television, but also shows available only on the Internet.

I included in the analysis the most watched stand-up comedy shows that were broadcast on television or only available on the Internet and containing at least two uses of gender stereotypes. As for the quantitative part, we chose ten stand-up comedy performances on TV and ten on the Internet. The selection criterion for the TV shows was the number of views on YouTube (over 500K). Until recently, in Romania, the amount of stand-up comedy in the media environment was very small. With the emergence of talent shows that have as a general theme humor, the promotion of comedians promoted on television began. Such a program is „iUmor”, broadcast on Antena1 every Sunday. I considered this show to be relevant to my analysis, because it was the audience leader on countless occasions. This criterion also applies to shows available only on the Internet (over 100K), which have been filmed in cafes and pubs where stand-up comedy is performed.

As for the gender of comedians, it is already known that stand-up comedy is a male-dominated territory, which is why we could not find enough of many shows performed by women. The stand-up comedy numbers broadcast on television that exceed 500K views on YouTube and were made by women were only three. The stand-up comedy exclusively for women on the Internet is very low in quantity, and so I did not find any shows made by a woman who exceeds 100K views on YouTube.

## RESULTS

After analyzing the 20 stand-up comedy shows, we reached the following results:

a) The most addressed topics are family, Internet, advertisements, sex and couple life. The topic most often addressed is the sexual life, which appears in 8 of the 20 shows.

*Table 1*  
The distribution of the main topics

Video (V)	TV Show										Internet Videos									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Internet	X				X							X							X	X
Sexual life			X			X					X	X		X	X	X	X			
Family		X									X	X	X		X	X				
Commercials			X		X				X							X			X	
Couple life		X			X					X					X		X			

b) A large number of stereotypes, especially gender stereotypes, are used in these shows. There are 114, specifically 81 about women and 33 about men. Gender stereotypes are used directly, raw, but also suggested by allusions and ironies. Table 2 shows which stereotypes are most used and how often they appear. The stereotype that the man is strong, placed in the leading position appears in 8 of the 20 shows. The stereotype about the materialistic and profitable woman is also used many times. In 7 shows I identified the stereotype where the woman is portrayed traitorous and in 6 a scarlet woman.

*Table 2*  
The distribution of the main stereotypes

Video (V)	TV Show										Internet Videos										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
The naive woman				X	X				X		X									X	
The woman without principles		X	X								X			X	X					X	
The woman who is an awful driver											X		X				X	X			
The materialistic woman		X	X			X					X		X		X		X			X	
The quarrelsome woman												X		X	X	X	X	X			X
Careful mother													X	X	X	X					
Strong man/ leadership position			X	X	X						X			X	X				X		X

The gender stereotypes in these shows are used either directly or indirectly, through ironies or allusions. Out of a total of 114 gender stereotypes, 72 of them are used directly, while 42 of them are suggested by irony (30 of them) and self-irony (12 of them). In terms of irony, it is almost equally divided, 16 of the suggested stereotypes being about women and 14 about men. In my analysis I have included three shows that are performed by women. In all of these, self-irony appears, which may suggest that women are far more at ease with making jokes about their own person, ironizing their own person. Of the 17 shows in the analysis that are performed by men, only 9 of them identified gender stereotypes made by self-irony.

In addition to gender stereotypes, in the 20 shows we also identified occupational stereotypes (bad cop), stereotypes related to the intersection of gender with age (faithful old lady) and the region of origin (drunken Moldavian).

c) Oppositional stereotypes are used in 8 of the 20 shows. I think that they have the main purpose of producing humor. Most of them are not exaggerated and

thus become credible to the public. Most often I have come across the oppositional stereotype that the woman is ruling, in a dominant position, contrary to the stereotype that the woman is married to the man and has to stay home to raise the children.

The rest of the oppositional stereotypes used are the following: in V2 – the feminized man, in V5 – the man subjected to the woman, in V12 – the man who believes in signs, the caring father, in V15: the manipulated man, the gentle father, in V17: the hard grandmother, the man subdued, the man kept on a tight leash, in the V19 – the sensitive man, and in the V20 – the man not driving cars, the father who feeds the child. Added to this is the counter-stereotype of the female leader, who appears in V7, V15 and V17. Regarding the gender difference, in the 20 shows 11 oppositional stereotypes about men and only 4 about women are used.

d) Following the analysis of the 20 shows (10 from the television and 10 from the Internet) we came to the conclusion that the two sources of content differ in terms of stand-up comedy. In tables 1 and 2 it can be observed that the topics covered are much more diverse and numerous in the shows available only on the Internet. About sex life is discussed in 6 of the 10 performances, while on television, this topic is addressed in 2 of the 10 shows.

Also, the number of oppositional stereotypes is much higher in the online environment. Counter-stereotypes appear in 5 out of 10 shows on the Internet, while only 3 out of 10 shows on the television can identify oppositional stereotypes. The significant difference from my point of view is that I identified 15 counter-stereotypes in this analysis, of which 12 are used in the shows available on the Internet and only 3 in the television shows.

## CONCLUSIONS

As I mentioned above, I identified 114 gender stereotypes in the 20 shows, which are largely about women (81). Gender stereotypes are used mainly directly, but also indirectly through ironies or allusions. I also identified the use of oppositional stereotypes in almost half of the shows. Oppositional stereotypes are mostly about men and indirect, being suggested by irony or self-irony.

Also, the research has revealed that men and women doing stand-up comedy have different ways of approaching and producing humor. Women use irony and self-irony more often, whereas men prefer to amuse their mainstream audience by using stereotypes about women and counter-stereotypes about men.

Another conclusion is that the media and the Internet are two sources of content that offer different types of stand-up comedy. In the shows exclusively in the online environment, much more stereotypes and counter-stereotypes are used, but also a greater diversity of the topics addressed. The lack of censorship and a very large audience brings about the relaxation of the artist through the lack of pressure and thus, a subject such as sexual life becomes much more accessible, without involving consequences.

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