# 'It's About Expecting the Unexpected': Live Stand-up Comedy from the Audiences' Perspective

Sharon Lockyer and Lynn Myers
Brunel University

## Abstract

A dearth of research exists that examines live stand-up comedy from the audiences' perspective. This empirical article redresses this neglect by examining the appeal of live stand-up comedy to audiences and revealing their motivations for going to see live stand-up comedy. These interests are explored through an online survey and a series of semi-structured interviews with live stand-up comedy goers. The online survey uncovers the frequency of attending live stand-up comedy, the types of venues that stand-up comedy is seen in, the types of venues that audiences prefer to experience live stand-up comedy in, and the extent to which individuals attend live stand-up comedy alone or accompanied by others, and if so, who they attend with. The one-to-one semi-structured interviews extend the investigation by analysing the specific reasons why audiences attend live stand-up comedy. Five main themes emerge from the semi-structured interview data: respecting the stand-up comedian; expecting the unexpected; proximity and intimacy; opportunities for interaction; and sharing the comic experience. The article illustrates the differing ways in which audiences engage with live stand-up comedy at both the public and private level.

**Keywords:** stand-up comedy; audiences; liveness; unpredictability; proximity; interaction; shared experience.

When stand-up comedian Judy Carter noted that 'stand-up is big business' (1989: 153) she was probably unaware of just how big it would become. In April 2009 The Comedy Store, a stand-up comedy venue with premises now in London, Manchester and Mumbai, was predicted to take over £2.5 million by the end of the same year (Salter 2009) and stand-up comedian Lee Evans broke box office records in October 2010 when he sold nearly £7 million of tickets for his 2011 tour in one day (Chortle, 2010a). Comedy critic Brian Logan argues that since 2003, and in particular during 2009-2010, there has been an 'explosion' in stand-up comedy, so much so that it has 'hit the stratosphere' (2010). Evidence for this upsurge according to Logan includes the increasing number of television programmes based

on stand-up comedy (e.g. *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* [BBC2 2009-] *Live at the Apollo* (BBC 1 2004-), *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow* [BBC1 2009-] and *Comedy Rocks with Jason Manford* [ITV1 2010-11]) , the increasing number of books written by stand-up comedians reaching the top of book charts (e.g. Michael McIntyre's *Life & Laughing: My Story* gained top position in the *Sunday Times* bestseller list in the first week of its release selling 15,610 copies in the first week and 115,000 copies over five weeks [Chortle, 2010b]), the increasing number of stand-up comedians acting as commentators on serious discussion television programmes (such as *Question Time* [BBC1, 1979-]), the increasing number of stand-up comedians on long multi-date large arena-style tours (e.g. Alan Carr, Lee Evans, Peter Kay and Jason Manford) and their increasing presence on social media (such as Twitter and Youtube). This popularity is also evident via the increasing ticket sales at comedy festivals. The Leicester Comedy Festival 2011 saw record ticket sales, with 20,000 tickets sold ahead of the start of the festival - which was approximately 3,000 more sales than at the same point in 2010 and included both larger and smaller venues and established and up-and-coming comedians (This is Leicestershire, 2011). The Edinburgh Festival Fringe sold nearly two million tickets in 2010, a 5% increase on sales in 2009 (BBC, 2010).[1]

Although there is a growing body of literature focussing on stand-up comedians and their motives, their performative techniques and their socio-political functions (Cook, 1994; Double, 1997, 2005; Gilbert, 1997; Glick, 2007; Horowitz, 1997; Koziski, 1984; Limon, 2000; Lockyer and Pickering, 2005; Mintz, 1985; Seizer, 2011; Wagg, 1998; Zoglin, 2009) little research has been conducted on stand-up comedy audiences' motives for attending live stand-up comedy and the appeal of stand-up comedy for audiences. This timely article rectifies this imbalance as it examines live stand-up comedy from the audiences' perspective and it does so through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods – an online survey and a series of one-to-one semi-structured interviews with stand-up comedy audiences.

## On the Importance of Comedy Audiences

The importance of the audience in the comedy process is widely recognised. Zillman and Cantor's (1996) Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth points to the significance of the audiences' disposition to both the joke teller and the target of the joke in determining the outcome of the joke – whether it generates laughter, or disapproval, which Billig (2005: 192) refers to as 'unlaughter'. Hay's (2001) model of Humour Support highlights the importance of the receiver of a joke recognising, understanding and appreciating a joke in order for it to be successful. Further, Jerry Palmer (1994) argues that comic meaning is dependent on a number of interrelated factors: the settings and contexts in which a joke is told, the competence of its delivery, the identity of the teller, and the audience of the joke.

The centrality of the audience in the comedy process is also demonstrated through the use of studio audiences and canned laughter in television sitcoms, sketches shows and comedy

game shows. These are useful devices to demonstrate to the television viewer that s/he is watching a comedy programme and to signal how the programme, and individual moments within it, should be interpreted (see Mills, 2005). Audiences are equally important in live stand-up comedy performances. Stand-up comedian and academic Oliver Double agues 'take the audience away from stand-up comedy and it starts to look weird … stand-up comedy without an audience is only half there' (2005: 106). Each of Double's defining characteristics of stand-up comedy refers to the audience. In addition to funniness, Double's tripartite definition of stand-up comedy includes:

> Personality: It puts a person on display in front of an audience, whether that person is an exaggerated comic character or a version of the performer's own self.
>
> Direct Communication: It involves direct communication between performer and audience. It's an intense relationship, with energy flowing back and forth between stage and auditorium. It's like a conversation made up of jokes, laughter and sometimes less pleasant responses.
>
> Present tense: It happens in the present tense, in the here and now. It acknowledges the performance situation. The stand-up is duty-bound to incorporate events in the venue into the act. Failure to respond to a heckler, a dropped glass or the ringing of a mobile phone is a sign of weakness which will result in the audience losing faith in the performer's ability. (19)

This important relationship between the stand-up comedian and the audience is carefully negotiated before the comedian appears on stage via a judiciously organised introduction given by the compere (Rutter, 2000). In his ethnographic analysis of the performative features of live stand-up comedy performances where the compere introduces the stand-up comedian to the audience Rutter identifies six 'moves' (2000: 465) which are consistent across venues, performers and audiences. Although all of the six structural features to some extent involve the audience, three in particular relate to the audience. These include: 'framing of response' (467) whereby the compere encourages the audience to greet the oncoming comedian in a particular manner (this can range from asking the audience to 'go crazy' through to 'give him the benefit of the doubt' [468]); 'request for action' (469) from the audience (e.g. applause prior to the compere announcing the name of the act); and 'audience applause' (476), for example, following the compere's introduction. Such moves and sequencing demonstrate that stand-up comedy is 'an ordered performance which develops through negotiation between compere, performers and audience' and that the involvement of the audience and performers 'is vital to the successful organisation of live stand-up comedy' (481).

This involvement of both the stand-up comedian and the audience is further scrutinised by Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009) in their examination of the practices used by stand-up comedians to create an 'interactional context' in their performance and to encourage joke appreciation and acceptability. Strategies used by stand-up comedians include: asking the audience questions to encourage participation and to gauge the dispositions and temperament of the audience; colloquial language; fillers (such as exclamations and catchphrases); surveys (involving the audience in the preface of a joke by testing their reactions); 'pags' (sequentially constructed punchlines based on the audiences' acceptance of previous punchlines); and referring to the audience in the punchline. For Scarpetta and Spagnolli stand-up comedy audiences are both 'coconstructors of the situation' and 'coresponsible for it' (229).

Despite the recognition of the important role played by audiences in stand-up comedy performances, little research has focused specifically on live stand-up comedy audiences. A body of literature exists which explores the dynamics, interpretative practices and peculiarities of film and television comedy audiences (Alters, 2003; Chiaro, 2010; Chitnis et al, 2006; Gray, 2006; Jhally and Lewis, 1992; Kuipers, 2006; Lewis, 1991; Means Coleman, 1998; Mills, 2005, 2010; Park et al, 2006), yet a limited body of literature focuses the dynamics and interpretative practices of *live* stand-up comedy audiences (Freidman, 2011).

Building on the work of Kuipers (2006) who analysed television comedy and comedy taste cultures and hierarchies in the Netherlands, Friedman (2011) examines contemporary comedy taste cultures in Britain through a large-scale survey and a series of in-depth interviews of audiences at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.[2] Interestingly Friedman identifies patterns in cultural capital and taste that are dissimilar to existing studies and concludes that:

> this research finds that field-specific 'comic cultural capital' is mobilized less through taste for certain legitimate 'objects' and more through the expression of rarefied but diffuse *styles* of comic appreciation. In short, it is embodied rather than objectified forms of cultural capital that largely distinguishes the privileged in the field of comedy. (2011: 367; original emphasis)

For example, respondents with 'high cultural capital' articulated their comedy preferences in relation to their perceived sophistication (comedy and comedians that are 'intelligent', 'clever' or 'complex') and distanced themselves from the widely held view that comedy should inculcate amusement and pleasure in its audiences. Respondents with 'low cultural capital' also articulated a preference for 'clever' comedy, but this cleverness was related to the comedian's skill and aptitude for generating humour from everyday experiences. In contrast to 'high cultural capital' respondents, 'low cultural capital' respondents expressed the view that comedy is intimately linked to the creation of laugher and instilling positive

emotions in its audience (Freidman, 2011). Whereas Friedman's study sought to add to the existing literature by examining taste in contemporary British comedy, the current article aims to extend the literature by analysing the *appeal* of contemporary live stand-up comedy for audiences and to reveal their *motivations* for attending live stand-up comedy.

## Data and Methods

### Data Collection

In order to address these research aims, a mixed method approach (Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, 2003) to data collection and analysis was adopted. An online survey was combined with semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face. The online survey included both open and closed questions about stand-up comedy attendance (both those who do and do not attend live stand-up comedy could complete the survey). It also included Likert-type scales in order to examine if, or the extent to which, there is a relationship between attending stand-up comedy and psychological well-being (e.g. self-esteem, anxiety and depression). The online survey was designed and administered using *SurveyMonkey*, an online survey tool, and was accessible via http://www.comedyquestionnaire.com/. Details of the online survey and requests for completion were circulated via email discussion lists available to the researchers in late February 2011.  The discussion of the online survey data in this article focuses specifically on findings related to stand-up comedy *attendance* (not on psychological well-being). The semi-structured interviews sought to examine in detail the appeal of stand-up comedy and to explore how stand-up comedy audiences make sense of their stand-up comedy attendance.

A range of attitudinal, behavioural and experiential questions were thus included in the semi-structured interview guide. Participants in the semi-structured interviews were recruited via two main strategies. Firstly through the online-survey - by survey participants indicating at the end of the online survey that they would be willing to partake in a semi-structured interview about their stand-up comedy attendance – and secondly via 'snowballing sampling' (Sturgis, 2008). This involved asking those who had participated in the semi-structured interview if they knew anyone else who may be willing to be interviewed and following-up any suggestions made. Depending on the preference of the interviewee the semi-structured interviews were conducted in either the participant's home or at his/her place of work. This ensured that travelling time and cost for the interviewees was kept to a minimum and thus built 'cultural sensitivity' into the research design (Seiber, 1993).

### Data Analysis

The online survey was administered in order to provide a broad overview of the trends in stand-up comedy attendance. The online survey data were analysed via descriptive statistics as they are 'about the best way to describe or summarise data' (Procter, 2008: 369). Following the advice of Stokes (2003) and Fielding and Thomas (2008) the semi-structured

interviews were digitally recorded (with the consent of each interviewee). The interviews were professionally transcribed using intelligent verbatim transcription immediately after the completion of each interview in order to maintain research momentum, to provide a permanent record of the qualitative data and to facilitate analysis (Bogdan and Knopp Biklen, 2003). The transcribed data was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998; Seal, 2004; Smith, 1992). This approach to analysis 'focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behaviour' (Aronson, 1994). The analytical technique employed the popular 'scissor-and-sort' (or 'cut-and-paste') approach often used by qualitative researchers (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Morgan, 1997; Frankland and Bloor, 1999). This involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, identifying those sections that are relevant to the central research questions, inductively developing a classification/coding system for the major themes identified, and then highlighting the parts (phrases, sentences or longer extracts) within the transcripts that corresponded to each theme using a colour-coding technique. This again involved reading and re-reading the transcripts as themes emerged, and greater familiarity with, and insight into, the content of the transcripts was created. Once the coding process was complete the colour coded copies of the transcripts were cut and sorted so that all parts within each transcript that related to a particular theme were placed together ready for analysis (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Fielding and Thomas, 2008).

## Findings and Analysis

### Online Survey

Between late February 2011 and mid-July 2011 277 people completed the online survey. Respondents were split between male and female and were of diverse ages, religion and countries of residence, but the majority were aged between 21-30 and 31-40, were of Christian faith and resided in the UK (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1: Online Survey Respondent Characteristics**

| Category | Number of Respondents | Category | Number of Respondents |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | **Age Group (in years)** | |
| Female | 135 | 16-20 | 32 |
| Male | 113 | 21-30 | 69 |
| Declined to say | 29 | 31-40 | 56 |
| | | 41-50 | 38 |
| | | 51-60 | 26 |
| **Religion** | | 61-70 | 13 |
| Christian | 76 | 71-80 | 1 |
| Atheist | 46 | Declined to say | 42 |

| Agnostic | 21 | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Humanist | 6 | **Country of Residence** | |
| Buddhist | 3 | UK | 230 |
| Jewish | 3 | Canada | 6 |
| Hindu | 2 | India | 2 |
| Muslim | 2 | USA | 2 |
| Declined to say | 118 | Ireland | 1 |
| | | Libya | 1 |
| | | Malta | 1 |
| | | Tristan da Cunha | 1 |
| | | Declined to say | 33 |

Two hundred and forty eight participants responded to the question that inquired about whether or not they like stand-up comedy. Ninety three per cent (n=230) indicated that they like stand-up and only 7% (n=18) replied that they dislike stand-up comedy. No significant gender and age differences were identified for whether respondents liked or disliked stand-up comedy. As can be seen in **Table 2**, television is the most popular media format through which respondents engage with stand-up comedy (95% of respondents who answered the question), followed equally by stand-up comedy on the internet (49%) and available on DVD (49%). Radio stand-up comedy is less popular being listened to by 46% of respondents, as are newspaper columns/articles (20%) and books (18%) written by stand-up comedians. Such responses reflect the 'dominance of mediatized representations' (Auslander 2008: 10) in contemporary culture.

**Table 2: What forms of stand-up comedy (excluding live stand-up comedy) to you watch/listen to/read?** Multiple answers were permitted.

| Stand-up Comedy Format | Response % | Response Count |
|---|---|---|
| Television | 95% | 186 |
| Internet | 49% | 95 |
| DVD | 49% | 95 |
| Radio | 46% | 90 |
| Newspaper Columns/Articles | 20% | 39 |
| Books | 18% | 36 |
| Other[3] | 3% | 5 |
| **Total Respondents** | | **196** |

One hundred and ninety nine participants responded to the question 'Do you go to live stand-up comedy?' Sixty two per cent (n=123) of these respondents indicated that they attend live stand-up comedy, whereas 38% (n=76) indicated non-attendance at live stand-

up comedy. No significant gender and age differences were identified for whether or not respondents attended live stand-up comedy. Nearly one third (31%) of respondents who attend live stand-up comedy do so once a year, 27% attend twice a year, and 10% attend 3 times a year. Four, 5 or 6 visits to see live stand-up comedy a year each received 6-7% of responses and 7, 8, 10 or 12 times a year each received between 1-3% of responses. One respondent attended 20 times a year, another attended 36 times and other individual respondents attended either 50 or 200 times a year. Although there was a spread of responses in terms of the number of times respondents go to see live stand-up comedy, there was more consistency in relation to the type of venue that live stand-up comedy is viewed. Smaller arenas/theatres and small comedy clubs were more popular venues than larger arenas. Fifty five per cent of respondents who answered the question 'where do you usually see live stand-up comedy?' indicated that they attend live stand-up in small arenas/theatres compared to 38% seeing live stand-up in large arenas (see **Table 3**).

**Table 3: Where do you usually see live stand-up comedy?** Multiple answers were permitted.

| Venue | Response % | Response Count |
|---|---|---|
| Small Arenas/Theatres | 55% | 66 |
| Small Comedy Clubs | 51% | 62 |
| Medium-sized Comedy Clubs | 46% | 55 |
| Large Arenas | 38% | 46 |
| Small Rooms in Pubs | 31% | 38 |
| Other[4] | 10% | 12 |
| **Total Respondents** | | **121** |

Further, when asked what type of venue is *preferred* when seeing live stand-up comedy a clear preference towards smaller comedy clubs and small arenas/theatres was indicated (see **Table 4**). Large arenas were the least desired venues for seeing live stand-up comedy performances.

**Table 4: Where do you prefer to see live stand-up comedy?** Multiple answers were permitted.

| Venue | Response % | Response Count |
|---|---|---|
| Small Comedy Clubs | 53% | 63 |
| Small Arenas/Theatres | 40% | 47 |
| Medium-sized Comedy Clubs | 39% | 46 |
| Small Rooms in Pubs | 18% | 21 |
| Large Arenas | 15% | 18 |

| Other[5] | 9% | 11 |
|---|---|---|
| **Total Respondents** | | **119** |

It is clear from the data gathered that going to see live stand-up comedy is regarded by many as a social event. Of those who answered the questions 'who do you usually go to see live stand-up comedy with?', 68% of respondents indicated that friends accompany them when attending live stand-up comedy, 42% of respondents signalled that a partner/wife/husband also attends, and 21% of respondents revealed that they see live stand-up comedy with family members. Only 4% of respondents indicated that live stand-up comedy is attended unaccompanied (see **Table 5**).

**Table 5: Who do you usually go to see live stand-up comedy with?** Multiple responses were given in some cases.

| Attends With | Response % | Response Count |
|---|---|---|
| Friends | 68% | 89 |
| Partner/Wife/Husband | 42% | 54 |
| Family Members | 21% | 27 |
| No One – attends on own | 4% | 5 |
| Work Colleagues | 2% | 3 |
| Carer | 1% | 1 |
| Other Comedians | 1% | 1 |
| Housemates | 1% | 1 |
| Acquaintances | 1% | 1 |
| **Total Respondents** | | **130** |

The online survey data was supplemented by a series of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with stand-up comedy audiences. It is to these semi-structured interviews that we now turn.

***Semi-structured Interviews***
Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with live stand-up comedy goers. Five interviewees were male and 6 were female. Two interviewees fitted into the 31-40 year old age range, 6 into the 41-50 year age range, 1 into the 51-60 year age range and 2 into the 61-70 year age range. Three interviewees identified themselves as Christian, 7 indicated that they do not subscribe to any particular faith and 1 interviewee declined to say. All interviewees were resident in the UK. Interviewing time totalled 600 minutes, with each semi-structured interview lasting an average of 55 minutes. This resulted in 139 A4 pages and 69311 words of transcription being produced, and these were analysed thematically.

### 1) Respecting the Stand-up Comedian

The semi-structured interview data demonstrated that the appreciation of the comic skills involved in live stand-up comedy is one of the main features attracting audiences to live stand-up comedy. In her analysis of theatre audiences, Susan Bennett maintains that theatrical performance 'encourages audiences to appreciate the actors' skill' (1997: 152). However it is not simply an appreciation of the performance skills involved in stand-up comedy, but a *respect* given towards the stand-up comedian, as expressed by a 50 year-old female[6]:

> I like a really good laugh and I like to see somebody brave it, as it were, in front of an audience. I think there's nothing more life affirming than being with a group of other people watching somebody entertain you on a stage. I think it's the bravery of the stand-up comedian because he or she is all on their own and they're braving the whole storm. They're there to entertain you. It's almost like a respect as well to go. I go to be entertained but also because I also go because I admire the courage that it probably takes to stand up in front of a whole bunch of people.

The lone stand-up comedian is admired for his/her courage to position him/herself before an audience which is expecting to be amused. Ross describes the stand-up comedian's position in relation to the audience as a '"naked" confrontation' (1998: 101). A 45 year-old female explained it in the following way:

> I just think it's the most dangerous activity anybody could do. I can't imagine doing stand-up, and I admire anybody who's prepared to get-up and lay themselves open and on the line like they do, in front of a group of people who are just saying, right, make me laugh. It's like bungee jumping for me. I get a real thrill out of watching it, and the more on the edge the comedian is, the more I enjoy it and the more I admire them. I like people that are prepared to take a risk.

Another respondent made a distinction between seeing a West End show that includes a number of performers and a lone stand-up comedian:

> It's also where you'll go and see a West End show and it's impressive, but to see one man stand up for up to two hours and just entertain a crowd, I can't imagine how that must feel, that you haven't got people that have come to see a show which you happen to be part of, you are what people have come to see and I just think it's a phenomenal talent to hold that many people's attention for that long. For me the best sort of comedy you can get is actually when you go and see someone stand there and just make you laugh. (32a year old male)[7]

## 2) Expecting the Unexpected in Live Stand-up Comedy

In addition to discussing their admiration for the stand-up comedian's ability to single-handedly entertain an audience, many respondents described the appeal of live stand-up comedy in terms of its unexpected and unpredictable potential. This related to both the stand-up comedian's actions, the content of their performance and the ways in which the stand-up comedian responds to the dynamics of the specific audience. In relation to the behaviour of the stand-up comedian respondents commented on the 'unknown' or 'anticipation' involved in live stand-up comedy and expressed similar comments to those below:

> It's the unexpected that I enjoy with stand-up, not knowing what's coming, what the material is. I often get quite disappointed when you go to see a comedian and you've seen them a number of times before and they're drawing on the same material over and over. So it's the sense of not knowing what you're going to be laughing at (32b year-old male).

> It's that unpredictability. It's because you don't know what's coming. You know what's coming with a band, you know when they play their music. But, you don't know whose coming on or what they are going to say or how they are going to be. (63 year-old female)

Although this unpredictability may be easier to achieve if the line-up of a particular stand-up performance is unknown, the comment by the 32 year-old male above suggests that even with familiar stand-up comedians spontaneity in the performance is important. This respondent, as did others, articulated a clear distinction between live stand-up comedy and other types of live performances:

> It's a different experience really, usually because the other live performances are a production of some sort, and that goes back to what I was saying about stand-up, the concept of standing-up and thinking on the spot as opposed to a rehearsed piece of work where you've worked with a director, lighting, etc. That's what I'm saying. It's about expecting the unexpected with stand-up and that's the difference, you don't know what's going to come. Whereas you know the work of a director or a singer or whatever, so you go in with the expectation of a format, whereas the stand-up is hoping to feel that it's just going to happen there on the spot. So it's a different production value I think.

Some respondents expressed a preference for seeing stand-up comedians who go on to be very popular in the early stages of their careers because as they become more popular their performances lose their appeal:

> It's funny how normally the big, big comedians, the ones that are probably the biggest names, so like at the moment it would be Lee Evans and Michael McIntyre, I tend to like them earlier on in their career. Whether or not it gets samey but there's just something that tends to change, or whether or not it's just not fresh and new anymore and therefore, not that as funny, and it loses the edge slightly. (32a year-old male)

This respondent had previously seen Lee Evans and Michael McIntryre perform in what he referred to as 'medium-sized theatres' (seating 500-1000 people) and had watched them on DVD. Such responses provide interesting opposition to Auslander's view that comedy audiences are 'only too happy to come to a club to hear the same jokes they had already heard' (2008: 34-5) on television. Further, some respondents deliberately employ strategies in order to preserve and extend the unexpected and unpredictable nature of live stand-up comedy, as explained by a 43 year-old male:

> A lot of the comedians I go to see, I know what kind of humour they've got, but if I know I'm going to see a comedian, I would try and avoid watching any of their material. Whereas if you're going to see a band, you'd actually listen to that material so you knew it better when you went to the venue, so it's the complete opposite.

These explanations can be understood in light of the Incongruity Theory of humour and comedy. According to Nilsen and Nilsen (2000) this theory was first asserted in the 1600s by Blaise Pascal and suggested that 'nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which ones sees' (Pascal, quoted in Nilsen and Nilsen 2000: 163). For a number of respondents the importance of the unexpected in live stand-up comedy performance was not limited to what the stand-up comedian said or did him/herself, but extended to the 'interaction' with audience and how he/she responds to the specific dynamics of the audience on the specific performance occasion:

> With live comedy there's that sense of the unexpected might happen because of the dynamic with the audience as well. So you never quite know. I think you could have the same comedians on two consecutive nights but because the audience is different, the dynamic might be different, and heckling and things like that and how the comedians handle that. There's always that slight air of the unexpected. (45 year-old female)

Reacting to the specific occasion of the live performance is an important feature of live stand-up comedy (Double, 2005). Further, Ross argues that as stand-up comedians do not

typically create a 'fictional text, they also have to respond to actual circumstances – unexpected noises like sirens or mobile phones' (1998: 101). It is such dynamics of live stand-up comedy that appeals to many respondents.

*3)  Proximity and Intimacy*

As well as discussing the importance of the unexpected in live stand-up comedy a number of interviewees specifically referred to the proxemic relations between the stand-up comedian and the audience. Respondents expressed that they enjoy the limited distance between the audience and the stand-up comedian. As a 61 year-old female put it: 'there's something quite exciting about being closer'. A 45 year old male explained 'it's the spatial closeness that I find rewarding because it makes me feel more part of what's going on. I like the feeling of being part of what's going on'. Some respondents express this closeness in terms of being able the see the performer - 'to not touch, but you know to be part of it' (63 year-old female) - and the 'intimacy' it creates within the stand-up comedy performance space:

> I tend to find that the appeal of live stand-up as well as that atmosphere is the fact that that person is right in front of me. So I lose that barrier really of 'I'm watching it on a TV, I'm watching it on a screen', because they're right there in front of me. To me it feels that takes it up a level and makes it funnier, that they're standing right in front of me and they're making me laugh. I'm accustomed to putting a DVD in and seeing Lee Mack make me laugh, but to actually see him there, you appreciate the fact that everyone else is laughing which adds to the atmosphere, but at the same time he's talking to you and you're laughing at it. I think that's one of the things that makes live stand-up and actually going to the venues, that gives it that extra edge. I think if you gave me two identical performances, if I watch it on DVD I'll find it very funny, but I'll probably tell you that it's funnier if I'd gone to see it live just because of that exchange. (32a year-old male)

Such explanations support Bennett's observation that the 'lessening of distance leads to fuller engagement with the spectator' (1997: 15). Although this reduced distance is important in all live performances, closeness and intimacy is especially important in stand-up comedy. As Ross argues 'unlike other performances on a stage, the audience are not just the "fourth wall" – present, but not acknowledged as present ... The solo stand-up comedian is addressing the audience, not other performers on the stage, and needs to build a rapport' (1998: 101). For some respondents it is precisely this rapport and the feeling of being directly spoken to that entices them to live stand-up comedy. A 58 year-old male described it thus: 'I defy anyone to say they don't think this, you get this business about he's talking to me, she's playing for me. You get that kind of feeling you've been hooked in'. The feeling of intimacy and being close to the stand-up comedian is such an important part of attending live stand-up comedy that some interviewees explained that whether or not they

attend a live stand-up performance depends on the seats that can be secured, as conveyed by a 32a year-old male:

> I probably won't go and see someone if the seats that are left aren't very good, because I don't want to sit at the back and watch a dot on the stage. Because on TV you're still going to pick up the expressions because the camera is there. On a live one, particularly on bigger ones, you're going to have it up on screens anyway, but I want to be able to see everything that's going on because a lot of people are animated. So with the Hammersmith Apollo as an example, I'll try and get at least front half of the stalls, beyond that I'll probably look for another date, or another venue.

This respondent continued to express, as did a number of other respondents, what he regarded as the limitations of live stand-up comedy in large arenas that he had attended with friends:

> Everyone that I've gone along with have all said the same thing, 'fantastic venue the O2 but not for stand-up comedy.' Rock concert, yes, absolutely, even if you can't see them, it doesn't really matter because they're up on the big screen, you've got the wow factor of the music. But for one man to be in that monster of a venue, I don't think stand-up really works.

The value placed on close proximity and intimacy in live stand-up comedy explains the preference for smaller and medium-sized venues as shown in the online survey data (Table 4). It has been argued that intimacy is created in large rock concerts through the use of large video screens (Connor, 1989). The semi-structured interview responses suggests that due to the different performance dynamics of live stand-up comedy it is difficult to create intimacy in larger arenas with screens – as it involves one person on stage in front of an audience of 20,000-23,000 (capacity of the O2 arena in London), with few, if any props. As the interviewee notes above, the solitary voice of the stand-up comedian is significantly different to a rock concert where the sound of the music is able to fill the large arena. Yet this preference for smaller venues due to the feeling of intimacy was not shared by all respondents. For example, one respondent explained how live stand-up comedy in smaller venues can result in a reduction of the 'drama' in the stand-up comic's performance:

> In a small venue you're not going to get that kind of striding the stage presence you can get from a really good performer. Ultimately, by definition, the big movements become miniaturised so you've missed some of the drama, if you like, and it becomes much more just focussed on the narrative rather than physical comedy. (58 year old male)

### 4) Opportunities for Interaction

Another important and prevalent theme to emerge from the semi-structured interview data is that the possibilities for interaction between audience members appeals to live stand-up comedy audiences. Interaction between the interviewee and those who s/he is attending the live stand-up comedy with is important before and during the stand-up comedy performance. A 45 year old female described as 'it's more sociable in lots of ways, you have the breaks between acts and you're drinking. In many ways it's a more sociable night out than going to sit and watch a performance, so there's other reasons to go'. Similarly a 43 year old male explained it as:

> I suppose in the theatre if you go to see a play, you don't tend to interact, you've got to sit there quietly in a long row and watch the performance. Whereas I think with the comedy, you could go in and in places like *Jongleurs* you're around the table, you've got a few drinks, you've had a good chat with your friends, and then a comedian comes on and they interact with the audience, and then they'll go off and you've got another few minutes and then the next. So it's a whole different night out because it's more communicating with your friends rather than, like going to the cinema where you're sitting in a dark room in a straight line.

For others interaction with those who have accompanied the respondent to the stand-up comedy performance is particularly important post-performance. This was described as being 'exhilarating' and 'exciting' by some respondents. Another explained it as:

> I want to come out of whatever it is I've been to see talking about it in terms of, 'my god wasn't that good'. Even if it was rubbish you've got a talking point and you've got something that you can have a laugh about. So you've got something you use to talk afterwards, after the event. I think I do that with stand-up comedy. (50 year-old female)

Again we can see the semi-structured interview data reflecting and offering an explanation to the data gathered via the online survey where only 4% of respondents indicated that live stand-up comedy is attended alone. As the semi-structured interview data have revealed the importance placed on using the live stand-up comedy experience to facilitate social interaction it is understandable why most stand-up comedy goers attend with friends, their partner/wife/husband and family members (see **Table 5**). Such responses reinforce Bennett's view that:

> In a publicly experienced cultural event, the opportunity to talk about the event afterwards is important socially […] Reception of a performance can be prolonged by group discussion of all aspects from general appreciation to

specific questions to other group members about small details of the production. (1997: 165)

Although interaction with friends, family, and partners who have accompanied the interviewees to see live stand-up comedy was encouraged and interpreted as a positive addition to the experience, interaction between the stand-up comedian and the audience was generally discouraged, and it some cases negatively perceived. Some, although not all, respondents stated that they would not heckle the stand-up comedian, and others recalled the horror of being 'picked on' by stand-up comedians. As one respondent explained:

> I've been picked on quite a few times, I've dealt with it but it wouldn't be something that I would be looking for, I wouldn't be a heckler looking for it, that's for sure. So you feel part of it, you're not detached from it, but you're not in the firing line. (44 year-old female)

There is thus a tension experienced by some stand-up comedy goers. As noted in the 'proximity and intimacy' theme above, some live stand-up comedy audience members gain considerable enjoyment from the close proximity and intimacy experienced, particularly in small venues. Yet, some audience members do not wish to be 'too close' that it encourages direct communication from the stand-up comedian to the individual audience member. One respondent clearly expressed it as:

> There's something about the communication, the contact you get with the comedian and especially in the small venue. And the other side of that is we have this business about, 'oh my god, don't sit too close, so you don't get picked on'. (58 year-old male)

Another interviewee put it this way:

> I don't want to be picked on; who does? They can be cutting can't they? And deliberately so and it's for everybody else's entertainment but nobody wants that to be them, you've got to be a good sport, haven't you? I think anything that you've got a level of closeness but you're not so close that you're squirming, that's my way of describing it. (50 year-old female)

Although interviewees may try to sit strategically to prevent, or at least attempt to reduce, the likelihood of being 'picked on' they were aware that 'there's always that possibility that it might happen'. This adds to the unpredictability experienced in live stand-up comedy, which as was noted above, is appealing to many live stand-up comedy goers. One interviewee, at the time of the interview, had recently been to see a live stand-up comedian

and had selected a seat in the venue that she thought she would be 'safe' sat in. The interviewee recalled how the stand-up comedian walked to where she was sat and:

> More or less said to us all, you think you're safe here or something, and then walked away again. They must know. If you're up for it, as it were, you sit right at the front. So he was just having a little play with people, he was really nice actually, but that must be part of it, them reading the audience, who's going to play along with this? (61 year-old female)

Auslander (2008) questions whether enjoyment of the interaction between a performer and audience is dependent on being present at the live performance, or whether pleasure can be experienced by witnessing a performer engage with an audience when watching it on television. Although this may be possible, the above discussion and the interviewee responses would suggest that watching mediatized stand-up comedy cannot capture the ambivalence experienced by live stand-up comedy audiences – watching stand-up comedy on television does not create the tension of being close, 'but not so close that you're squirming' or are able to be 'picked on'.

*5) Sharing the Comic Experience*
The final theme that emerged from the semi-structured interview data was the way in which attending live stand-up comedy resulted in a shared or collective experience of being in the same environment, sharing the comedic experience or being in 'the moment'. These were experiences that most respondents sought and valued. A 45 year-old male described it as 'being in the same space where you can share an experience of laughing is important when it comes to establishing and maintaining friendships. I mean you can laugh when you're on your own but it's not the same'. Another expressed it as:

> It's that collective laughter and that sense of being raucous where everyone's yelling, in hysterics at this one person, and the one person knowing what they're doing is great and obviously working the room. It's that collective sense of belly laughing and the absurdity of it all. (32b year-old male)

Similarly a 50 year-old female interviewee outlined:

> A lot of it, I think, is in that moment. A lot of it is mass audience, a lot of it's being with other people that are all laughing at the same time. I think you get an awful lot out of that. So I think a lot of it is being caught up in the moment with other people that are also finding something that you find funny.

Such responses reflect Bergson's view that laughter is social and 'it is always laughter of the group' (1911/1999: 11). They also bring into sharp relief Critchley's observations that joke

telling involves a 'social contract' between the joke-teller and the audience members. This social contract operates on 'tacit consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking' (2002: 5). In order to experience shared laughter joke tellers and audiences must first have a shared understanding in relation to what is comic, or not – without shared understanding between the joke tellers and audiences shared laughter is unlikely to be experienced. Thus the shared comic experience operates on two levels – firstly sharing the *understanding* and secondly sharing the *laughter*. Such observations suggest limitations to Auslander's (2008) assessment of the sense of community in live performance. Auslander argues that this sense of community is derived from 'being part of an audience, and the quality of the experience of community derives from the specific audience situation, not from the spectacle for which the audience has gathered' (2008: 65). In live stand-up comedy the 'spectacle' (stand-up comedian) and his/her understandings of what topics can or cannot be joked about are fundamental to the sense of community. If the stand-up comedian's understanding is not shared by all, or a few, of the audience members then the joke is unlikely to create laughter, thus jeopardising the sense of community.

Usually a live performance is judged 'good or bad, satisfactory or unsatisfactory, by the collective group and applause is measured accordingly' and the act of applauding 'confirms the audience's position as collective and confirms, both for audience and performers, their ability to make meaning from the production' (Bennett, 1997: 163). The interview data suggest that in live stand-up comedy it is the collective laughter that fulfils the role that applause accomplishes in other types of live performance.

However, there are limits to sociability of shared laughter as laughter is paradoxical. Although it is social and can bring people together in a shared experience it can simultaneously be anti-social by excluding and dividing individuals or groups (see Billig, 2005). One of the interviewees explained how different 'types' of laughter can separate those members of the live stand-up comedy performance who are laughing in a way that signals they have understood the joke ('us') from others audience members who are laughing in different way which is interpreted as suggesting they have not understood the joke ('them'):

> There's good and bad laughter, now there's a thought. Implicitly, without explicating it, that's what I'm made to feel, especially at a live gig, there are people you hear laughing and you think, no, you ain't got it, that's not the joke. I suppose that's part of it, you perhaps feel reinforced by that. What you interpret, this is all incredibly constructionist, what you actually interpret someone else as meaning by it gives you the sense of some kind of elevation or whatever. Of course you may be completely wrong, they may have got it better than you did, but it is that. So that actually suggests something I hadn't thought about before which is that there's a kind of cipher or template in you as to

what's the joke, and I know it. I and my friends and other people who've had the revelation know it, and there are others that don't. The mere articulation of it makes you feel a bit queasy but nevertheless I'm sure it's true. (58 year old male)

## Conclusions

Live stand-up comedy is an increasing popular mode of entertainment. Despite this, to date, understanding live stand-up comedy from the audiences' perspective has been overlooked in comedy studies, media and communications, sociology, cultural studies and performance studies. This article significantly advances our understanding of audiences' motives for attending live stand-up comedy and the appeal of live stand-up comedy for audiences. Although the survey data suggests that watching stand-up comedy on television is the most popular way in which audiences engage with stand-up comedy, going to see live stand-up comedy is a habitual social event for many. Live stand-up comedy entices audiences and encourages them to attend for a number of particular aesthetic, practical and social reasons. These have been described as five main themes: respecting the stand-up comedian; expecting the unexpected; proximity and intimacy; opportunities for interaction; and sharing the comic experience. Further the interview data illustrated that sometimes these themes conflict and can cause tension in some members of the stand-up comedy audience. Although these themes have been treated separately in the article, taken together they demonstrate the dynamic nature of live stand-up comedy audiences. These themes reveal that live stand-up comedy audiences engage with stand-up comedy on two specific levels – the public/social level (as an audience member) and private level (individual).

The findings suggest that existing literature focussing on the appeal of live performance cannot be wholly applied to the appeal of live stand-up comedy performances. Whilst some of these themes reflect the positive qualities related to attending other types of live performance identified by Auslander (2008), the specific intricacies of the comedy process - such as the important role the element of surprise fulfils in the comedy process and the significance of the shared understanding between stand-up comedian and audience - suggests there are unique features involved in the appeal of live stand-up comedy and the motivational forces encouraging audiences to attend a live stand-up comedy performance. These findings clearly reveal that the recurrent justifications put forward by audiences when explaining why they value live performance as identified by Auslander (2008: 8) have limited application to live stand-up comedy. The predominance of mediated performance over live performance, as identified by Auslander, has little resonance for some live stand-up comedy audiences. As noted above Auslander has argued that audiences will happily go to a comedy club to listen to jokes that have already been heard on television. The data presented in this article and some of the themes identified, especially 'expecting the unexpected', suggest

that such argument has limited relevance and meaning to contemporary live stand-up comedy audiences.

The exact opposite applies for some live stand-up comedy goers as deliberate strategies will be employed by some live stand-up comedy audience members to prevent exposure to the stand-up comedian's mediated performance (where relevant) prior to seeing him/her live. The need for some live stand-up comedy audiences to employ such strategies suggests that some live performances are becoming more like their mediated counterparts, which supports Auslander (2008). However, on the other hand it counters other views held by Auslander, especially the belief that mediated performances are privileged over the live performance. For some live stand-up comedy audience members this is reversed as a privileging of the live performance is evident. Further, the intense and direct relationship between the stand-up comedian and audience in live stand-up comedy, the social aspect of comedy and the importance of the shared understanding and appreciation between the stand-up comedian and audience casts doubt on Auslander's view that the sense of community obtained by live performance is simply derived from the just being part of an audience. With live stand-up comedy the precise comic performance and performer that the audience observes, the comedian's attitudes toward what can/can't be joked about, and how these resonate with the audience, in combination, help to create a sense of community. Therefore the data presented within, and the arguments made, highlight the limitations of some of the existing theory and literature on the appeal of live performance, which do not acknowledge the dynamic, fluid, intricate and contradictory nature of the motives for attending live stand-up comedy performances and their appeal to audiences.

A limitation of the study has been the small number of survey and interview participants. Although the survey participants were diverse in age, most resided in the UK and were of Christian faith. Interview participants also resided in the UK. In the future it will be important to study the experiences, attitudes and behaviour of a more diverse group of stand-up comedy audiences. Further, the current study has examined stand-up comedy audiences in general, yet stand-up is a vibrant and diverse form of comic expression, and there are many differing types of comedy. Future lines of inquiry could fruitfully focus on the motivations of audiences of particular types of stand-up comedy and/or particular stand-up comedians – these would suitably complement the insights provided by the present study.

## Acknowledgements

## Biographical notes:

Sharon Lockyer is a Lecturer in Sociology and Communications in the School of Social Sciences, Brunel University, UK. Her research is located in the sociology of mediated culture and critical comedy studies. Contact: Sharon.Lockyer@brunel.ac.uk.  Lynn Myers is a Professor of Psychology in the School of Social Sciences, Brunel University, UK. Her research interests include coping and emotion as well as investigating why we do or do not adhere to recommended treatment guidelines. She enjoys going to live stand-up comedy.  Contact: Lynn.Myers@brunel.ac.uk.

## References

Alters, Diane, '"We Hardly Watch That Rude, Crude Show": Class and Taste in *The Simpsons*', in Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (ed.) *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 165-184.

Aronson, Jodi (1994) 'A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis' [WWW document] URL http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/BackIssues/QR2-1/aronson.html [visited 25 July 2011]

Auslander, Philip, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2008.

BBC (2010) 'Fringe Box Office Breaks Records' [WWW document] URL http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-11132987?print=true [visited 23 June 2011]

Bennett, Susan, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd edition, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Translated from the French by Cloudesley Breton and Fred Rothwell, Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1911/1999.

Billig, Michael, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005.

Bogdan, Robert, C, and Knopp Biklen, Sari, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods*, 4th edition. Boston and New York: Pearson Education, 2003.

Boyatzis, Richard, E, *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage, 1998.

Bryman, Alan, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, London and New York: Routledge, 1988.

Cater, Judy, *Stand-up Comedy: The Book*, New York: Dell, 1989.

Chiaro, Delia, '"In English Please!": Lost in Translation: *Little Britain* and Italian Audiences', in Sharon Lockyer (ed.) *Reading Little Britain: Comedy Matters on Contemporary Television*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2010, pp. 183-207.

Chitnis, Ketan S, Thombre, Avinash, Rogers, Everett M,  Singhal, Arvind, and Sengupta, Ami, '(Dis)similar Readings: Indian and American Audiences' Interpretation of *Friends*', *The International Communication Gazette*, 68, 2006, pp. 131-45.

Chortle: The UK Comedy Guide (2010a) 'Lee Evans Breaks Box Office Records' [WWW document] URL http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2010/10/17/11948/lee_evans_breaks_box_office_records [visited 27 June 2011]

Chortle: The UK Comedy Guide. (2010b) 'McIntyre Tops Bestsellers' List' [WWW document] URL http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2010/10/25/12004/mcintyre_tops_bestsellers_list [visited 23 June 2011]

Cook, William, *Ha Bloody Ha: Comedians Talking*, London: Fourth Estate, 1994.

Connor, Steven, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

Creswell, John, W, *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, London: Sage, 1994.

Critchley, Simon, *On Humour*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Double, Oliver, *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy*, London: Methuen, 2005.

Double, Oliver, *Stand-up!: On Being a Comedian*, London: Methuen, 1997.

Fielding, Nigel, and Thomas, Hilary, 'Qualitative Interviewing', in Nigel Gilbert (ed.) *Researching Social Life*, 3rd edition, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008, pp. 245-65.

Frankland, Jane, and Bloor, Michael, 'Some Issues in the Systematic Analysis of Focus Group Materials', in Rosaline S. Barbour and Jenny Kitzinger (eds.) *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999, pp. 144-55.

Friedman, Sam, 'The Cultural Currency of a "Good" Sense of Humour: British Comedy and New Forms of Distinction', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 62, 2011, pp. 347-70.

Gilbert, Joanne, R, 'Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17, 1997, pp. 317-30.

Glick, Douglas, J, 'Some Performative Techniques of Stand-up Comedy: An Exercise in the Textuality of Temporalization', *Language and Communication*, 27, 2007, pp. 291-306.

Gray, Jonathan, *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*, New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

Hay, Jennifer, 'The Pragmatics of Humor Support', *Humor*, 14, 2001, pp. 55-82.

Horowitz, Susan, *Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Jhally, Sut, and Lewis, Justin, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.

Koziski, Stephanie, 'The Stand-up Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 18, 1984, pp. 57-76.

Kuipers, Giselinde, 'Television and Taste Hierarchy: The Case of Dutch Television Comedy', *Media, Culture and Society*, 28, 2006, pp. 359-78.

Lewis, Justin, *The Ideological Octopus: An Exploration of Television and its Audience*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

Limon, John, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000.

Lockyer, Sharon, and Pickering, Michael (eds.) *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005.

Logan, Brian (2010) 'Stand-up Comics Hit the Boom Time' [WWW document] URL http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2010/nov/10/standup-comics-boom-time [visited 11 November 2010]

Means Coleman, Robin, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humour*, New York and London: Routledge: Gardland Publishing, 1998.

Mills, Brett, '"I'm Anti-Little Britain, and I'm Worried I Might Start Laughing": Audience Responses to *Little Britain*', in Sharon Lockyer (ed.) *Reading Little Britain: Comedy Matters on Contemporary Television*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2010, pp. 147-70.

Mills, Brett, *Television Sitcom*, London: British Film Institute, 2005.

Mintz, Lawrence, E, 'Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', *American Quarterly*, 37, 1985, pp. 71-80.

Morgan, David, L, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage, 1997.

Nilsen, Alleen, and Nilsen, Don, *Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor*, Arizona: Oryx Press, 2000.

Palmer, Jerry, *Taking Humour Seriously*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Park, Ji Hoon, Gabbadon, Nadine G, and Chernin Ariel R, 'Naturalizing Racial Differences Through Comedy: Asian, Black, and White Views on Racial Stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2*', *Journal of Communication*, 56, 2006, pp. 157-77.

Procter, Mike, 'Analysing Survey Data', in Nigel Gilbert (ed.) *Researching Social Life*, 3rd edition, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008, pp. 353-71.

Ross, Alison, *The Language of Humour*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Rutter, Jason, 'The Stand-up Introduction Sequence: Comparing Comedy Comperes', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32, 2000, pp. 463-83.

Salter, Jessica, 'Laughing off Britain's Recession' [WWW document] URL http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/recession/5145112/Laughing-off-Britains-recession.html [visited 27 June 2011]

Scarpetta, Fabiola, and Spagnolli, Anna, 'The Interactional Context of Humor in Stand-up Comedy', *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 42, 2009, pp. 210-30.

Seale, Clive, 'Coding and Analysing Data', in Clive Seale (ed.) *Researching Society and Culture*, 2nd edition, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004, pp. 305-21.

Seiber, Joan, E, 'The Ethics and Politics of Sensitive Research' in Claire M. Renzetti and Raymond M. Lee (eds.) *Researching Sensitive Topics*, London: Sage, 1993, pp. 14-26.

Seizer, Susan, 'On the Uses of Obscenity in Live Stand-up Comedy', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 84, 2011, pp. 209-34.

Smith, Charles, P (ed.) *Motivation and Personality: Handbook of Thematic Content Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Stewart, David, W, and Shamdasani, Prem, N., *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*, Newbury Park and London: Sage, 1990.

Stokes, Jane, *How to do Media and Cultural Studies*, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003.

Sturgis, Patrick, 'Designing Samples', in Nigel Gilbert (ed.) *Researching Social Life*, 3rd edition, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008, pp. 165-81.

Tashakkori, Abbas, and Teddlie, Charles (eds) *Handbook of Mixed-Methods in Social and Behavioural Research*, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage, 2003.

Tashakkori, Abbas, and Teddlie, Charles, *Mixed-Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage, 1998.

This is Leicestershire (2011) 'Leicester Comedy Festival Ticket Rush Has Organisers Full of Smiles' [WWW document] URL http://www.thisisleicestershire.co.uk/Comedy-festival-ticket-rush-organisers-smiles/story-12073848-detail/story.html [visited 23 June 2011]

Wagg, Stephen, 'Punching Your Weight: Conversations with Jo Brand', in Stephen Wagg (ed) *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, London and New York: Routledge 1998, pp. 111-36.

Zillman, Dolf, and Joanne, Cantor, 'A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth', in Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (eds.) *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Application*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 1996, pp. 93-115.

Zoglin, Richard, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*, New York, Berlin and London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

## Notes

[1] Comedy accounts for 35% of the Fringe programme, theatre accounts for 29% and music 16%. The remainder of the programme is made up of a combination of musicals, opera, dance and children's shows (BBC 2010).

[2] In her analysis of television comedy audiences and taste cultures and hierarchies, Kuipers (2006) identified four difference humour tastes – 'old-timers', 'celebrities', 'lowbrow' and 'highbrow' – which were linked to social background variables of age and education. For example, 'old-timers' were positively correlated with age whereas the 'celebrities' humour taste was negatively correlated with age, and the 'lowbrow' humour taste negatively correlated with education whereas a 'highbrow' humour taste had a weak correlation between education level. The 'Old-timer' humour taste comprised comedians who had been performing since, and popular from, 1960 and earlier. The 'Celebrities' humour taste included the three most popular comedians at the time that the research was conducted. 'Lowbrow' humour tastes relate to humour that is largely based on stereotypes and the particular framing of the humorous intent through funny voices and canned laughter. 'Highbrow' humour taste included humour that was satirical or ironic in tone (Kuipers, 2006).

[3] 'Other' responses included 'comics', 'records', 'CDs' and 'magazines'.

[4] 'Other' responses included specific locations including 'Edinburgh Fringe', 'Leeds Festival' and 'Festivals'.

[5] 'Other' responses included 'Edinburgh Festival', 'don't mind as long as it's good' and 'television – it's cheaper'.

[6] Permission was given by all interviewees for quotations to be used the write-up of the research as long as their names were not used.

[7] Two 32 year-old males were interviewed. In order to make a distinction between the two interviewees one has been referred to as a '32a year-old male' and the other as a '32b year-old male'.