

Performing Gender: Identity Construction of Female Comedians in Stand-up Comedy

Ruimeng Ma

*Faculty of Art and Social Science, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore
e1538517@u.nus.edu*

Abstract. Stand-up comedy has emerged as a growing cultural space in China where performers use humor to subtly challenge social norms. This study employs a critical discourse analysis approach to examine how gender shapes the comedic strategies and identity performances of female comedians. Drawing on selected performance scripts from a popular Chinese stand-up show), the research analyzes how comedians negotiate gender roles, and engage with the patriarchal ideology through satire, irony, and storytelling. Findings reveal that female comedians often foreground personal narratives to critique patriarchal values, expose gender-based double standards, and navigate controversial topics. These patterns reflect how language operates as a site of both resistance and reinforcement of social norms, and how stand-up comedy offers a stage for the negotiation of gendered identities in contemporary China.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, humor, gender identity construction, script analysis

1. Introduction

In recent years, stand-up comedy has gained unprecedented visibility in China as both a popular entertainment form and a cultural site for public discourse. The rise of streaming platforms and televised competitions has brought comedians to mass audiences, transforming comedy from a niche performance style into a mainstream cultural phenomenon. Within this expansion, the increasing participation of female comedians represents a significant development. Their performances, often rooted in everyday experience, provide new opportunities to explore how humor can challenge gender norms, negotiate social expectations, and construct alternative identities for women in contemporary Chinese society.

Existing research on stand-up comedy has primarily focused on its linguistic and discursive mechanisms of humor [1,2], the social commentary and performative function of comedians [3], and representations of gender roles within comedic texts [4,5]. While these studies provide valuable insights, most tend to treat comedians as a general group, without examining how female comedians in China specifically use humor to resist, reinterpret, or accommodate patriarchal ideologies. Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to the discursive and linguistic strategies through which humor itself becomes a site of gendered identity negotiation. As a result, the intersection of humor, gender, and identity performance in Chinese stand-up comedy remains an underexplored area.

Addressing this research gap, this paper therefore will examine how female comedians in contemporary Chinese stand-up comedy construct gendered identities through humor and language. By analyzing publicly available performance scripts, it investigates how comedians employ linguistics and rhetorical strategies to reveal, challenge, or reproduce patriarchal values as a double-edged discursive tool – one that simultaneously contests and coexists with dominant ideologies. Accordingly, this research seeks to answer two questions: a) How do female comedians linguistically and discursively construct gendered identities in their performances?

b) In what ways do their humor and narrative choices challenge or negotiate traditional gender ideologies within the Chinese sociocultural context?

2. Methodology

This research adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, informed by the tradition of Fairclough [6], to examine how humor functions as a site of gendered identity construction. CDA provides a framework for exploring how discourse both reflects and shapes social power relations. It is particularly appropriate for stand-up comedy, where everyday experiences and institutional ideologies are recontextualized through humor and narrative. By combining CDA with perspectives from feminist discourse analysis, this study situates comedy as a performative act through which speakers negotiate identity and challenge dominant social hierarchies.

The analysis focuses on two complementary dimensions. First, it investigates textual features – including lexical choices, irony, exaggeration, and framing – that female comedians use to construct particular stances toward gender norms. Second, it interprets these features within discursive and social contexts, revealing how performances engage with broader structures such as patriarchy, marriage, career hierarchies, and body politics. This multi-level approach allows the study to trace how micro-level linguistic strategies link to macro-level ideological processes.

2.1. Data selection

The dataset consists of performance transcripts from 20 female comedians featured in a nationally broadcast Chinese stand-up comedy program. These performances were selected because they explicitly engage with gender-related themes such as body image, family, marriage, and professional life. Transcripts that focused solely on general entertainment, commercial endorsement, or non-gendered humor were excluded. Since all materials were publicly available and performed for broadcast, no identifying personal information was included, and ethical considerations were observed in all analyses.

2.2. Analytical procedure

Each script was examined at three levels of CDA:

Textual analysis – identifying humor strategies (e.g., irony, hyperbole, incongruity) and key linguistic constructions that index gendered meanings.

Discursive practice – analyzing how comedians recontextualize familiar social conversations (e.g., doctor–patient talk, workplace interactions, family advice) to produce critical distance and laughter.

Social practice – interpreting how these narratives expose or destabilize patriarchal ideologies and normalized gender hierarchies within Chinese culture.

This framework allows for a systematic and context-sensitive analysis of humor as discourse. The advantage of this approach lies in its ability to integrate micro-level linguistic description with macro-level sociocultural interpretation, enabling a nuanced understanding of how female comedians perform identity and critique power simultaneously.

3. Data analysis

This section examines how female comedians construct and negotiate gendered identities through humor in three recurring thematic domains: the female body, women's careers, and marriage and family relationships. Across these themes, humor functions as both a discursive defense mechanism and a strategic critique, allowing comedians to transform personal experience into social commentary. Using the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, each example is examined in terms of how linguistic choices expose, reproduce, or subvert patriarchal ideologies.

3.1. The female body: resisting medical and social control

The doctor said, "After reviewing your medical report, we've concluded that you actually have excessively high levels of male hormones. To put it bluntly, you're a bit 'super male'. But it's not a problem – just find a man, have a baby, and your hormones will stabilize."

I said, "What's the use of stable hormones? My whole life is unstable!"

In this performance, the comedian recounts a medical consultation in which a doctor attributes her hormonal imbalance to her failure to marry and reproduce. The humor arises from the absurdity of treating heteronormative marriage as a medical solution. Linguistically, the doctor's statements reproduce patriarchal discourse through imperatives ("find a man") and prescriptive logic that links women's health to reproduction. The doctor's authority is represented not merely as medical expertise but as a social disciplining mechanism, where biological difference becomes moralized.

The comedian's punchline – "My whole life is unstable!" – shifts the evaluative focus from biology to social reality. By contrasting "stable hormones" with an "unstable life," she redefines stability not as bodily conformity but as emotional and social autonomy. Through irony, she undermines biomedical authority and exposes the gendered assumptions that define women's value through reproduction. In CDA terms, this humor deconstructs the ideological power embedded in professional discourse, turning laughter into a subtle form of linguistic resistance. The comedian thus performs both awareness and critique, recasting a moment of gendered subjugation as a site of empowerment.

3.2. Women's career and professional stereotypes: reclaiming agency through irony

As soon as I sat down, her boss placed a glass of alcohol in front of me. I said, 'I don't drink'. Her boss said, 'But aren't you flight attendants all supposed to be good drinkers? I thought to myself, what do you mean 'all flight attendants are good drinkers'? Did every flight attendant you've ever seen stand by the airplane door playing 'fifteen-twenty' drinking games? No. Not a chance.

This performance draws on workplace experience to reveal the sexualized and objectifying stereotypes faced by women in professional settings. The boss's generalization ("all flight attendants are good drinkers") employs categorical modality, treating an unfounded assumption as fact. Linguistically, the phrase "all supposed to be" erases individuality and constructs women as interchangeable subjects defined by male expectations. It also reinforces a broader ideology of

professional femininity, where female employees' worth is tied to sociability, charm, and emotional labor rather than competence.

The comedian dismantles this discourse through hyperbole and rhetorical questioning. Her sarcastic imagery – flight attendants drinking by the airplane door – exposes the absurdity of the stereotype. By shifting from direct dialogue to interior monologue (“I thought to myself...”), she invites the audience to share her evaluative stance, forming a collective interpretive community that judges the boss's behavior. Humor here performs a coalitional function: it allows female audiences to recognize and laugh at structural injustice without direct confrontation.

Viewed through CDA, this exchange exemplifies how humor mediates power relations. The boss's utterance represents the dominant ideology of gendered professionalism, while the comedian's response transforms humiliation into critique. Her linguistic strategy converts imposed identity into self-defined agency, demonstrating how everyday misogyny can be neutralized through humor's rhetorical flexibility.

3.3. Marriage and domestic power: exposing violence and parental logic

My mom said my eldest sister was abused because she married a man who was too tall and too strong. Then my dad saw one who was thin and small, and he said, 'This one will do! This little thing is great! My daughter won't lose out with him – he can't even fight.'

Here, humor arises from the grotesque logic through which the comedian's parents interpret domestic violence. The description of husbands as “too strong” or “too small” constructs marriage as a physical contest rather than an emotional partnership. The father's remark – “He can't even fight” – redefines safety not as mutual respect but as the absence of a capable aggressor. Such discourse exemplifies how patriarchal ideology normalizes male violence by attributing its cause to women's “poor choices” in partners, rather than to systemic gender inequality.

The comedian recontextualizes this family conversation with black humor, allowing audiences to recognize the absurdity of these inherited beliefs. Her ironic framing (“this little guy is perfect”) exposes the contradiction between parental care and patriarchal reasoning. By bringing private family dialogue into a public comedic space, she denaturalizes domestic violence and turns silence into laughter-based awareness. The humor here functions as a discursive unmasking: it transforms passive acceptance of gender norms into collective critical reflection.

This routine also highlights the intergenerational dimension of patriarchal discourse. Parents' well-intentioned advice perpetuates structural bias by rearticulating women's safety as their personal responsibility. Through satire, the comedian breaks this cycle of moral transmission, transforming inherited logic into public critique. Her humor, though self-deprecating on the surface, is fundamentally subversive, using laughter to reframe the power dynamics of family and marriage.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study examined how female comedians in contemporary Chinese stand-up comedy construct gendered identities through humor, using Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how language mediates social power and ideology. The findings show that comedians use three key discursive strategies – ironic recontextualization, hyperbolic contrast, and frameshifting of everyday narratives – to transform socially constrained experiences into moments of laughter and critique.

Humor functions as a discursive negotiation between individual agency and social constraint. Following Fairclough's [6] view of discourse as both constitutive and shaped by social structures, the comedians recontextualize authoritative discourses – medical, professional, and familial – into

comic frames that reveal their contradictions. Rather than directly rejecting patriarchal ideology, they destabilize it through irony and exaggeration, allowing audiences to recognize and question normalized gender hierarchies. In this sense, laughter becomes a subtle form of ideological reflection.

Within the CDA framework, agency lies in the speaker's ability to reposition themselves within dominant discourses. The comedians' humor illustrates this process: they parody gender norms, manipulate social expectations, and use self-deprecating wit to reclaim narrative control. Yet, their agency remains contextually bounded by platform regulation and audience reception, requiring a careful balance between critique and conformity. Humor thus emerges as a socially acceptable yet critical mode of resistance.

This study extends CDA into the realm of popular entertainment, demonstrating that stand-up comedy serves as a site of ideological negotiation where social meanings are both reproduced and reimagined. It shows that humor can operate as a linguistic strategy for articulating critique within restrictive discursive environments. Although limited by its focus on textual transcripts from a single televised program, the research highlights how female comedians use humor to expose contradictions in everyday ideology and reframe gendered experience. Ultimately, stand-up comedy emerges not merely as entertainment but as a discursive space for negotiating power, identity, and belief through laughter.

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