Stand-up comedy is no joke

Stand-up comedy in the UK is very popular and many people aspire to make their living as a comedian. However, very few make it to the top with many giving up their dream, not because they are not good enough, but for other reasons.

This research investigated the lived experience of stand-up comedians in the East Midlands. It found that people from working class backgrounds, women, people of colour and disabled people, are disadvantaged and more likely to leave the industry.

Stand-up is individualistic and informal, but it might be possible to address many of the issues faced by comedians if they used trade unions to protect their rights.

Introduction

The stand-up comedy sector in the UK is thriving. Hundreds of thousands of people attend live shows and festivals to watch thousands of individuals perform, and some estimates suggest that the industry is worth hundreds of millions of pounds.[1]

Most people, even those who would not consider themselves comedy fans, know the 'big names' such as Peter Kay, Sarah Millican and Michael McIntyre. They will also understand that these 'stars' have reached the top of a very competitive pyramid. What is usually hidden from the public is the reasons many aspiring comedians never make it and leave the industry.

Research

Research from a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant funded project has explored why aspiring performers who are not white, male, straight and able-bodied are less likely to become established on the comedy circuit and thus, eventually make a living from stand-up. It found that people from working class backgrounds, women, people of colour and disabled people, are disadvantaged. The causes were found to be both structural and cultural. The research proposes it might be possible to address them if comedians self-organised, through trade unions and other similar organisations, in a way like other performative artists, such as actors.

Stand-up comedy is an under-researched industry. To help address this, the research interviewed active stand-up comedians and promoters, based in the East Midlands, about the challenges they faced working in the industry. The research provided insights into two key areas; the need for financial self-sufficiency and how many stand-ups are disadvantaged due to their background or personal circumstances.

1. Success in stand-up requires stamina, grit and, particularly, money

The interviews found that aspiring comedians must complete an 'apprenticeship'. This lasted for several years during which they often performed for free and sometimes paid for the privilege from their own pocket. The comedians rationalised this by saying that a successful gig

raised their profile and meant they could gradually access better quality and larger venues. This was how they started to get paid (more) for their work. One participant, Paul, described how after a decade in the industry he was 'now starting to do it properly'.

There was an underlying assumption by the interviewees that they needed to work for free, or for next to nothing. Sadia noted the early career advice she had been given "you've just got to go and do gigs". But she found it "quite an expensive thing to do" and as a result she "racked up a little bit of a credit card bill."

Other respondents considered the financial burden as part of the high level of commitment needed to succeed in the industry:

"You want to be a stand-up comic and you make very little money from it, but there's an awful lot of outlay both emotionally and financially, and you just kind of have to, you have to trust yourself, you have to go with it. You're either in or you're not". (Rik)

This resignation that 'it is what it is' and that there was a simple choice of being "in or not" indicated that the status quo was assumed to be rigid and resistant to change. The participants could not imagine there was another way for the sector to work.

Research[2], conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, has shown that women and non-binary people, LGBTQ people, disabled people, working class people and people of colour were most likely to consider leaving comedy after they have started to develop their career. One key cause of this was a lack of money.

Among the interviewees for this study, Brian, a white middle class man who performed stand-up but also generated a steady income as an event organiser, recognised his privilege. He said, "So, I think, as you know, I'll be honest, I'm a white, middle-aged man who is not uncomfortably off. I'm not rich, but equally I've got no kids, I've got very low outgoings, what have I got to worry about?"

Rik, who had a steady office job, saw doing comedy as a reward in itself and was prepared to pay to perform. "I know that I'm gonna have to spend 50 quid [..]. But getting on a stage and hearing people laugh, because of what I've said, that's worth that [amount of money]".

The attitude, that appearing on stage was something that the individual had to do and was a validating experience that was worth paying for, mitigated against those that didn't have a financial buffer by normalising the situation where performers were paid little, or nothing. Those who could, pursued strategies to make their money go further.

For instance, Stephen, who counted comedy as his primary source of income, said it was "not a living. I still live with my parents, which

"You want to be a stand-up comic and you make very little money from it, but there's an awful lot of outlay both emotionally and financially, and you just kind of have to, you have to trust yourself, you have to go with it. You're either in or you're not." (Rik)

is really not the dream scenario." Peter had a similar experience, saying "I guess that I lived with my parents a bit too long so that it could be financially easy for me to do comedy".

Living with your parents longer than you want to could be seen as a disadvantage in its own right, but many aspiring stand-up comedians did not even have the choice of reducing their outgoings by staying in their family home.

Although all the people interviewed had been paid for their comedy performances at some stage, the promoters and venues also generated revenue from the shows for which the comedians were not paid. This inequality in the distribution of the proceeds was recognised, and disliked, by the respondents, but action had not been taken to correct it.

The interviewees indicated that progress in the sector and ultimately, their success as performers, was very dependent on their personal efforts. This mindset implied that they perceived comedy as a noble challenge that was difficult but ultimately worthwhile. For instance, Brian described how he "flogged [himself] to death" at the start of his career, but that he could be choosier about his gigs now that he was more successful.

The need to gain experience while not being paid is found in many creative industries, but there are unique aspects to stand-up comedy. It is very informally structured and opportunities often rely on word of mouth and networking. Comedians have little institutional protection and their success is often at the whim of a promoter.

2. Performers who are not white, male, straight and able-bodied are disadvantaged

Stand-up comedy is an extremely competitive industry, with supply higher than demand. Some routes to success are very confrontational and can make people, especially women, feel uncomfortable.

A key example mentioned by the interviewees were the so-called Gong Shows, where a comedian was given a short amount of time to make the audience laugh and if they were not successful, they were 'gonged' off the stage. Sadia described the format as gladiatorial and said there was "something that doesn't sit right" with her about the format. She found the events reinforced the very masculine nature of the comedy scene.

However, she had been told she had to take part in the events because they were the "only way to get known". Sadia commented that comedians felt vulnerable when they started out and that "You've got to grow a thick skin".

Stand-up comedy is an extremely competitive industry. Some routes to success are very confrontational and can make people, especially women, feel uncomfortable.

The comedy industry is heavily male dominated, despite many initiatives to address gender disparities. Sometimes, organisers avoided having more than one women in a line-up. Sally commented "I got bumped off gigs because there was a women already on. I also see that promoters are trying to spread a small number of women across their gigs." Her gender had an impact in other ways too. She had seen "Somebody who I think is less good than me opening and I'll be in the middle spot, and I'll be getting 60 quid and they'll be getting 100." Sadia said that "she is very rarely" on the same line-up as another woman.

To counter this two of the women interviewed had started their own initiatives, in the form of events with all-women line-ups, which made a positive attempt to create a more corporate environment. Marie started her own comedy night in the East Midlands because she felt that women were often tokenised. Her intention was to create a "supportive environment". Sadia organised 'non-competitive, supportive and nurturing' comedy nights.

This agency contrasted with the men, who sometimes admitted the need for more diversity in the industry but did not feel there was anything they could do about it. For instance, male promoters were able to acknowledge the need for diversity while distancing themselves from doing anything about it.

Brian, a promoter, identified the need to get more women in line-ups but did not feel he could do much about it. He acknowledged that there had been a push to solve the problem but noted that he felt "women are treated almost like a separate species in comedy", but justified this by saying this was because they were different "because in the professional ranks , there are maybe 10 or 12 per cent of comics who are female".

His assumption was that this proportion could not be changed and would be self-perpetuating. He justified this by saying that "people often say 'I want a female because I've got three other men on the bill.'"

Paul, also a promoter, agreed that the industry needed to be proactive when addressing the lack of diversity. He suggested that quotas might be necessary since, "a diverse group of people aren't going to want to do comedy because they're not seeing somebody that is [like] them on stage". He had been proactive in ensuring there was more diversity on the line-ups he organised and had contacted a diverse range of acts before choosing from the "100 emails from straight white comedians".

Gigs with line-ups that are heavily male dominated do not represent wider society.

Promoters sometimes argue that they use mainly male comedians because that is what audiences want. However, there is very little evidence of market research into the backgrounds that audiences

"Marie started her own comedy night in the East Midlands because she felt that women were often tokenised. Her intention was to create a "supportive environment"."

want to see in performers. It is possible that, because the mix does not reflect society, overall audience numbers are lower than they could be since members of the public feel excluded. As a result, making comedy more diverse could increase revenues as larger and different audiences would be attracted.

The underrepresentation of women in the industry has been naturalised and as a result, women face additional barriers. The interviews revealed evidence that this is true in the East Midlands.

Brian, for instance, was ambivalent about considering comedy as an exploitative industry, stating 'Let's be clear about this, the artists let themselves be exploited.' This suggested that exploitation was perceived as something you accepted as part of wanting to be a comedian. Brian framed comedy as a labour of love, and characterised comedians as uniquely masochistic in wanting to pursue comedy as a job. For example, he admitted that at times he 'just really, really hated' comedy, but that the 'need to be loved' was enough for him to carry on. There was clearly an ambivalence here between on the one hand, not enjoying the experience, while on the other, needing to perform and clearly deriving satisfaction from it.

Stand-up is not structured in a way that enables change

Stand-up comedy mirrors many other creative industries in seeing unpaid internships and low pay as a rite of passage. However, it is much more informally structured. Research[3] showed that opportunities often relied on word of mouth and networking. Because there was little institutional protection, performers were at the whim of a promoter's preference. As this research has shown, most performers and promoters did not feel they had the agency to create change.

The culture of the sector means it can be defined as both a hobby and a job. However, this lack of clarity has enabled the perpetuation of inequalities, particularly in terms of finances, with certain groups more able to treat stand-up comedy as a hobby. This meant that those who must treat comedy as their primary source of income were disadvantaged in two ways. The hobbyists allowed promoters and venues to keep the fees from gigs low, while the expectation that artists would work for little or nothing over multiple years has led to many from disadvantaged backgrounds having to leave the sector.

The culture of the stand-up comedy sector is individualistic and despite many similar initiatives across the country to address the issues raised in this brief, the lack of a centralised approach in the sector, means these have usually been geographically local in focus and only

The culture of the stand-up comedy sector is individualistic and despite many similar initiatives across the country to address the issues raised in this brief, the lack of a centralised approach in the sector, means these have usually been geographically local in focus and only funded for a short time.

funded for a short time. Consequentially, the lessons learned were not shared and, when the funding ran out, the work was lost forever.

Stand-up comedians, especially those from minority groups face real challenges. These are widely recognised by those within the industry but the individualistic nature of the job meant that the interviews revealed little discussion of structural change. In contrast to other creative industries that have their own rate cards (for example Equity, Musicians' Union and BECTU have rate cards for actors, musicians, and television workers), comedians do not have a standard contract. Since the job is often presented as a monetised hobby, rather than something which requires labour, there has been a tacit assumption at the lower levels of the industry that comedy performance is not a form of labour that requires payment.

As a result, lonely, isolated comedians exist in a world of low pay and often, poor conditions. Those who are not white, male, straight and able-bodied face many other disadvantages. Without an organisation to act as a focus, workers in the industry will not be able to create the critical mass needed to drive change that would benefit performers, promoters, venues and audiences.

Recommendations

Research funding should be made available to raise the understanding of the stand-up comedy sector to the same level as that of other creative industries. This would enable the professionalisation of the sector in ways that would protect the performers, venues and promoters and improve the audience experience.

Audience research should be commissioned to identify what audiences want and to test assumptions that minoritized comedians are less likely to be popular with audiences.

Arts Council England should consider reviewing its definition of the sector as a commercialised art form so that it can fund underrepresented performers in the industry.

The performing arts and entertainment trade association, Equity, should continue to work with the researchers to identify ways that it can make its provision more appropriate for those in the stand-up comedy sector. It should act as a point of focus and critical mass to bring about the changes in working practices that are needed.

Existing representative bodies should cooperate to pull together a comprehensive plan to improve the quality of the stand-up comedy sector.

References

1. O'Neill, A. (2015) 'Edinburgh Fringe: Why Up- and Coming Comedians are Making Serious Bucks', **Evening Standard**, www.standard.co.uk/esmagazine/ edinburgh-fringe-why-upandcoming-comedians-are-making-serious-bucks-a2488811.html

2. 'Live Comedy Association report' (2020, 2021) Anon, (2020) Live Comedy Association, https://livecomedyassociation.co.uk/ [Accessed 30/08/2022].

3. Butler, N., & Stoyanova Russell, D. (2018), 'No funny business: Precarious work and emotional labour in stand-up comedy', **Human Relations**, 71(12), 1666-1686.

Claire Sedgwick is a researcher in the creative and cultural industries. Between 2020-2023 she was the principal investigator on the British Academy Leverhulme Small Research Grant funded project, The Cultural Economy of Comedy in the East Midlands. A book based on this research Inequality in Contemporary Stand Up in the UK will be published as a Palgrave Pivot as part of the Palgrave Studies in Comedy series.

Claire Sedgwick – Lead
c.sedgwick@tees.ac.uk
claire_louise_sedgwick@hotmail.co.uk