

## PERFORMANCE MECHANISMS OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN ALIBABA'S STAND-UP COMEDY

Hafiz Adebimpe Oyetoro PhD  
Department of Theatre Arts  
Lagos State University of Education  
Ijanikin, Lagos  
Lagos State  
[adabapata4@gmail.com](mailto:adabapata4@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*This study explores the mechanics and significance of audience interaction in the stand-up comedy of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome, widely regarded as a pioneer of the modern Nigerian stand-up comedy industry. Stand-up comedy is conceptualized as a dialogic performance form characterized by direct engagement with the audience rather than a purely monologic delivery. Adopting a qualitative research design, including ethnographic case studies, participant observation, and interviews, the study investigates how Ali Baba utilizes interaction to create what may be described as "socio-aesthetic harmony." His performance style is grounded in breaking the "fourth wall"—the psychological barrier between performer and audience—to facilitate dialogue, inclusivity, and shared experience. A hallmark of his technique is spontaneity, which enables dynamic audience engagement and helps maintain performance control. His aptly titled Spontaneity series exemplifies this principle by training comedians in improvisational joke creation based on real-time audience interaction. Specific interactional strategies identified include physical involvement, stage aesthetics, and audience adaptation—entailing the deliberate adjustment of language, diction, and content in response to the audience's social background, class, and religious or political orientations. The study finds that Ali Baba's success is closely tied to the audience's ability to relate to his content. By positioning the audience as a collaborative partner and employing established theatrical techniques such as strategic pauses for laughter and responses to audience interjections, he has transformed stand-up comedy in Nigeria into a communal, therapeutic, and professionally viable art form.*

**Keywords:** Stand-up Comedy, audience engagement, Ali Baba, Performance Aesthetics, Spontaneity, fourth wall.

### Introduction

Stand-up Comedy is an art in which a comedian performs by interacting directly with an audience. It has been in existence since classical Greek and Yoruba monarchical history. It was not regarded in Nigeria as a serious art until the emergence of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) in the early 1990s when it transformed into an industry. Existing literature on Stand-up Comedy have focused on the historical perspectives, the performer's style and the business management with little attention paid to text and stage aesthetics. This study, therefore, investigated the text and stage aesthetics of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy, with a view to documenting his contribution to the entertainment industry in Nigeria.

Performances serve as vital vehicles for human expression, shaped by and impacting the cultures from which they emerge. Within this sphere, stand-up comedy stands out as a unique subgenre where a performer interacts directly with a live audience, utilizing their body and voice to create a shared humorous experience. While humour is innate to all human societies and its roots can be found in classical Greek traditions and the historical court jester tradition of several cultures of the world, like those of the Ancient Yoruba Oyo Empire, for example, professional stand-up comedy as a formal industry is a relatively recent development in Nigeria.

The transformation of stand-up comedy from unorganised jesting into a multibillion-naira industry began in the early 1990s with the emergence of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba). Before this period, comedic performers were often poorly remunerated and held in low social regard, viewed merely as "jesters" or "clowns". Ali Baba revolutionised this perception by glamorizing and professionalizing the craft, famously using billboards to declare that "Comedy Business is a Serious Business". His arrival initiated a radical transition, changing the form and content of the art and making it a viable tool for national economic development and youth empowerment.

Central to Ali Baba's success is his mastery of audience engagement, which defines stand-up as a dialogic form performed *with* an audience rather than for one. This interaction is achieved through specific performance mechanics, such as the deliberate breaking of the "fourth wall"—the psychological barrier between the stage and the spectators. Ali Baba utilizes various technical strategies, including spontaneity, improvisation, and

pantomimic dramatization, to foster a conversational atmosphere that integrates the audience into the narrative process.

Despite the industry's rapid growth and Ali Baba's status as its "front-runner," existing academic literature has primarily focused on historical perspectives, gender discourse, and business management. There remains an academic lacuna regarding the specific text and stage aesthetics that facilitate effective audience interaction. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining the mechanics of Ali Baba's comedy, which exemplifies a "socio-aesthetic harmony"—the marriage of artistic beauty with functional social commentary. Understanding these mechanics is crucial for documenting Ali Baba's contributions and establishing a standardized performance methodology for future generations of Nigerian comedians.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing case study and ethnographic methods to investigate the performance and audience engagement mechanics of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba). The methodology is designed to provide a systematic and comprehensive procedure for collecting information from key informants strategically positioned to offer credible data on the text and aesthetics of his comedy.

The research is anchored in Henri Bergson's theory of laughter, which serves as the primary analytical lens for evaluating the creation of humor and its reception. This framework facilitates the analysis of how Ali Baba's performances create "socio-aesthetic harmony" through the interplay of relief, incongruity, and superiority. Primary data was gathered through a multi-method approach involving interviews, direct observation, and textual analysis: Key Informant Interviews (KII): Structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with Ali Baba and five purposively selected associates who have worked closely with him. These respondents include prominent comedians and producers such as Ayodeji Richard Makun (AY), Helen Paul, Segun Ogundipe, Opa Williams, and Bunmi Davies. The researcher engaged in participant observation during the 2018 Ali Baba's Spontaneity Series and watched the Ali Baba January 1st Concert., Being a "thespian in embryo" and a professional within the industry allowed the researcher to capture nuanced performance details from an insider's perspective. The study involved a close reading and content analysis of purposively selected audio-visual recordings of Ali Baba's performances spanning from 1993 to 2021,. These recordings represent various performance contexts, including local and international guest appearances and personal shows and also Secondary Sources: Information was supplemented by a robust review of existing literature, including textbooks, academic journals, magazines, periodicals, and internet sources regarding the global and Nigerian history of stand-up comedy.

### **Stand-up Comedy and Dramatic Techniques**

In contrast, Nwankwo (2014) defines stand-up comedy as a performance style in which a comedian takes the stage to amuse the audience with light-hearted stories, musical numbers, mime, and other forms of entertainment, with the main goal being to make them laugh. According to Rao (2011), Stand-up Comedy, which is defined as a solo performer's purposefully humorous performance on a stage in front of an audience, is becoming increasingly popular in today's media and entertainment landscape. The performance component that is a part of Stand-up Comedy is captured by this definition. It highlights how unique the involved artist is. Therefore, Stand-up Comedy is a type of comedy where the performer, also known as a stand-up comedian, gets up on stage and engages with the audience directly. A stand-up comedian, until recently, was a solo performer who amuses his audience by telling humorous jokes on stage. Stand-up Comedy can also be described as a performing art form and a social structure that revolves around the "production and consumption" of "humorous narrative." According to Mintz (1985), a Stand-up Comedy show is characterized as a meeting place where a lone performer interacts with an audience while acting hilariously or stating humorous things directly (Filani, 2015).

Stand-up Comedy has not been the subject of as much scholarly research as other genres. Still, researchers who have attempted to define Stand-up Comedy agree that the distinctive feature of the comic subgenre is its performance component (Jason, 2000).

Stand-up Comedy is a conversation show, according to Ian (2008). This suggests an environment in which the audience the stand-up comic is speaking to is free to respond, participate, and engage. A live audience is included in the mediation process when it is conducted through recording and broadcasting. Despite its extreme polarisation, it is still a dialogic form that is performed with an audience rather than for one. It's also clear that the audience and stand-up comedian interact and form creative connections. Lesley (2011:198) shares this viewpoint, contending that there is a tangible and satisfying expression of performer/audience relations in addition to intra-audience relations. Laughter, a stimulus response to the humorous performance of the stand-up comedian, makes this interaction possible. Lesley uses comic Mike Nichols, who asserts that stand-up is the only creative life in which the enjoyment and the work happen simultaneously, to support his position. In all other forms of artistic

endeavour, including theatre, the payoff occurs one act or more later. Most of the time, it happens months, years, or never at all.

From all indications, Stand-up Comedy evolves from stage drama and it shares striking similarities with stage drama. For instance, both of them are primarily stage arts. Secondly, the two forms of arts showcase performance nuances. Both make use of characters and characterization. They involve direct interaction and spontaneous response between performers and audience irrespective of the fourth wall (the psychological wall between performers and audience). Aside these, the two forms of performances also entail the use of technical elements such as lighting, sets and scenery and the use of audio-visuals for performance enhancement. Onyerionwu (2010:45) posits that:

First, like the core dramatic theatre, Stand-up Comedy is essentially a stage art. Secondly in the process of performance, both forms accommodate the aesthetics of presentation in the form of visuals and histrionics. Thirdly, both artistic mediums recognize, to a large extent, the premium on immediacy and spontaneity. Fourthly, music and dance are adjunct artistic phenomena to both arts of the theatre... Perhaps the most notable distinctions between the two art forms are that unlike in theatre drama, Stand-up Comedy does not have the luxury of generic divisions.

From all indications, it is clear that stage drama has not gone into extinction; it has only expanded by replicating itself in a novel form known as Stand-up Comedy.

Moreover, it is evident that stand-up comedians and audiences engage in creative interactions. Lesley (2011:200) concurs, stating that there is "that physical and most gratifying manifestation of both performer/audience relations and intra-audience". Laughter, which is a stimuli response to stand-up comedians' comic performances, facilitates this relationship. Mintz (1985:75) sees the concept of Stand-up Comedy beyond the simple definitions given to it by aforementioned scholars. According to him, a strict, limiting definition of Stand-up Comedy would describe an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle. Yet Stand-up Comedy's roots are... entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences that are richer, more complex than this simple definition can embrace. We must therefore broaden our scope at least to include seated storytellers, comic characterisations that employ costume and prop, team acts.

Since, there might not be a dialogue, in the sense of a mutual exchange of ideas between at least two persons, in this case between the comedian and the audience. The audience is there to listen and deliver the laughter, although there can be verbal interaction in the form of heckling, a term used to refer to those in the audience who disrupt the act by making fun of the comedian's inability to make them laugh. The comedian might also address specific members of the audience, making them part of the act usually as a target for jokes. Thus, a Stand-up Comedy act can be regarded as a dialogue, although with a very limited interaction between performer and audience. Stand-up Comedy has not been the subject of as much scholarly research as other genres. Still, researchers who have attempted to define Stand-up Comedy agree that the distinctive feature of the comic subgenre is its performance component (Jason, 2000).

### **Audience Involvement and Participation**

A deliberate effort is made to consistently break the fourth wall, an imagined partition separating the artists and the audience, in order to foster a dialogue, integrate the audience, and educate them. He directly involves the audience by bringing some members of the audience physically on stage as in the case of the "Intimidation" joke where he invited Ejiro, his second son (a huge young man) to lead out a participant in the manner of a bully. He could have ordinarily narrated that without involving anybody but he specifically involved the audience to constantly remind the audience that he was merely cracking a joke thus while entertaining them, he informs and educates.

Ali Baba, in one of the jokes in America, directly addressed the photographer and told him to snap an action picture of him where he punctuated the joke by bringing the photographer into the narrative. He told him to snap his picture while in action. Thus, the photographer who is part of the audience is "dragged" into the scene. Ali Baba in his performance at *The Circus* is seen coming on stage with a disposable plastic cup of wine which he brought from the midst of the audience to show his participation, identification and involvement with his audience. Ali Baba identifies members of his audience by name at *The Circus* when he said "Kate shut up" during the rendition of one of his lines. This shows a high level of the familiarity he has with his audience. Ali Baba controls audience involvement in his performance. He is never in a hurry when the audience laughs heartily because of a punch line. Ali Baba would rather pause for them to enjoy that moment or join in the laughter. This is observed to function as transition between jokes.

Therefore, wetting the ground so that others do not take offense when the jokes are at their expense. Some of such jokes told at his own expense are: “Women’s passion for money”, “Calabar and dogs”, “Becoming a Comedian”, “Wedding Counsellor” and so on which were told at the *Ali Baba January 1st Concert* in the 2018 edition.

It is noteworthy that there is no human being or any human situation that is perfect. That is the basis of the incongruity theory of laughter as detailed by Bergson. Incongruous situations, when craftily juxtaposed, provoke laughter. In the same vein, when a comedian who is expected to be top-notch tells a joke that the audience does not consider funny and the comedian, to save face laughs at his own joke, incongruity, as postulated by Bergson, is at play. Ali Baba performs his Stand-up Comedy from a well-informed perspective which makes his jokes popular, enriching and enduring. Ali Baba carefully integrates the Brechtian dramaturgy that he fuses the performance space with the auditorium as he often directly engages the audience in an interactive conversation, thereby breaking the fourth wall. This enables the audience to see him as part of them who cannot have sinister motive or intention against them. This careful utilisation of Brechtian technique makes Ali Baba able to get away with whatever jokes cracked at the expense of the audience. His joke, apart from entertaining, always showcases pedagogical and moral values. The jokes are not empty entertainment or shallow amusement, but, they provoke functional laughter. Beneath every humorous rendition is something to take away. So, the audience can distinguish Ali Baba’s Stand-up Comedy from those of his predecessors and can be aptly described as a serious comedian.

It is pertinent to note that within the context of this study, aesthetics is seen from the perspective of intrinsic qualities of stand-up comedy performance. As such we are seeing aesthetics from the point of view of performance elements inherent in Ali Baba’s Stand-up Comedy. A critical examination of Ali Baba performance shows that he employs the use of spontaneity which thrives on improvisation. This is one of the strongest elements of Ali Baba’s performance style. Spontaneity, as it is used within his performance, enhances the natural artistic interaction between him and the audience. It also affords him an effective control of the audience. Although most comedians are naturally funny, Nwankwo (2014), citing Ajaye (2002:37), asserts that in order to be a professional performer, one must be able to “be funny on demand regardless of your emotional state”. He believes that the ability to make people laugh is fundamental to the craft of Stand-up Comedy, regardless of the performer’s emotional state.

Characterisation is another element of Stand-up Comedy. This deals with various character interpretations as shown in role playing and switching which commands stage shows. Nwankwo (2014) feels that Ajaye’s major preoccupation is to emphasise the fact that it is difficult to make a group of people laugh. Therefore, it behoves on the Stand-up comedians, irrespective of their emotional state, to be in control of their arts and adopt an effective performance mechanism that grasps the interest of the audience.

Additionally, Ali Baba pioneered content creation for the burgeoning industry upon which others after him built. He created jokes with different thematic preoccupations on which his junior colleagues constructed their jokes. He ensured the continuity of the industry even when it seemed its end was imminent. At a point comedians were recycling jokes, and the entertainment value of the industry was diminishing. Ali Baba took a proactive step by creating a new window for generating novel jokes. This he launched with the establishment of *Ali Baba’s Spontaneity* where comedians were stimulated to create jokes impulsively.

Another notable merit of Ali Baba’s performance is his dexterity at being spontaneous. For example, he was spontaneous in cracking joke with Chidi’s career as a track runner in America where he said “after running on the field, he ran to America”. He was also spontaneous in his jokes in *January 1st Concert, Night of a Thousand Laugh, The Circus* and so on. He, in most cases, goes about a retinue which he moderates as occasion demands. Nevertheless, he is dexterous at creating joke extempore as event unfolds. Therefore, in some cases, he may not need some of the jokes in his archive but creates new jokes as the event unfold. This often gives the impression that the audience or occasion owns the jokes. Spontaneity is fuelled by an innate ability to improvise. A spontaneous artist is entrenched in his performance and has totally internalised the activities of the day. Thus, he is able to showcase uncommon talent of creating out of the available without prior preparation. This artistry has earned him the title of “King of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy”.

Stand-up Comedy has not been the subject of as much scholarly research as other genres. Still, researchers who have attempted to define Stand-up comedy agree that the distinctive feature of the comic subgenre is its performance component (Jason, 2000). Also, at the event in Elevation Church in Mainland, Ali Baba’s jokes were all religious jokes because of the kind of people that constitute the audience of the event. Generally, Ali Baba’s performance is conversational. He intentionally integrates the audience into the general atmosphere surrounding his jokes. He gives the impression of a story teller who though, drawn from the audience, retains his ties with the

audience he is almost inseparably linked up with them. Members of the audience freely interject and Ali Baba never allowed any interjection to go unattended. In some cases, he punctuated the ongoing narrative to build around the interjection. This performance nuance is intentional to keep the audience spellbound.

### **Dramatic and Narrative Techniques in Alibaba's Performances**

Ali Baba varies the narrative techniques he employs in his jokes. Two major narrative techniques are common: The first-person narrative technique and the eye of God (omniscient) narrative technique. In some cases, he narrates his jokes around himself assuming a character in the joke whose story is narrated from his point of view. In such cases, he employs the "first-person narrative technique. He often employs the dialogue or conversational style. He switches from characters and imitates the various characters' manner of speaking and gesticulating. This technique enhances believability as in the case of "seeing is believing". Examples of jokes told from the first-person point of view are: *Baba Ibadan*, *Jumbo Honourarium*, *Event Planner and Marriage counsellor*, *Women's passion for money*, *Calabar and Dogs*, *Intimidation*, *Corporate bellman/waiter*, *Naija Hospital*, *Monarchs are human too* and *Indian Ambassador and his snake*.

When the setting calls for it, He uses the eye of God/Omniscient narrative technique where he can achieve a panoramic point of view narration. Examples of such jokes include but not limited to: *The sadist client*, *Aftermath of boxing match*, *Transferred epitaph*, *Expensive shopping mall*, *Dino Melaye*, *Lamborghini*, *Warri no dey carry last*, *Dan and his lion pet*. *Mysterious Warri house* etc.

Ali Baba, in one of the jokes in America, directly addressed the photographer and told him to snap an action picture of him where he punctuated the joke by bringing the photographer into the narrative. He told him to snap his picture while in action. Thus, the photographer who is part of the audience is "dragged" into the scene. Ali Baba in his performance at *The Circus* is seen coming on stage with a disposable plastic cup of wine which he brought from the midst of the audience to show his participation, identification and involvement with his audience. Ali Baba identifies members of his audience by name at *The Circus* when he said "Kate shut up" during the rendition of one of his lines. This shows a high level of the familiarity he has with his audience. Ali Baba controls audience involvement in his performance. He is never in a hurry when the audience laughs heartily because of a punch line. Ali Baba would rather pause for them to enjoy that moment or join in the laughter. This is observed to function as transition between jokes.

### **Interactional techniques in Alibaba's Stagecraft**

This section details how these interactions are achieved, specifically through the style of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) specifically by "breaking the Fourth Wall", using laughter as a stimulus-response, verbal interaction, spontaneity and improvisation, physical involvement, conversational narrative, and incorporating staff or other stage personnel.

The first dramatic technique apparent in Alibaba's work is "breaking the fourth wall". He deliberately breaks the "fourth wall" which was a result of drama's heritage from realism and surmounts the imaginary psychological partition between the performer and the audience—to facilitate dialogue, integration, and education. The interaction in stand-up comedy is primarily driven by laughter, which serves as a physical and gratifying manifestation of the relationship between the performer and the audience. Alibaba uses this staple feature of stand-up as a measure of his interactive effect on the audience. As long as they are laughing, he is in control and the primary aim of the art is being fulfilled.

While often a monologue, stand-up becomes a dialogue through heckling (audience disruptions) or when the comedian addresses specific audience members, often making them the target of jokes. Ali Baba, for example, is noted for identifying audience members by name, such as telling a guest, "Kate shut up," during a performance. The performance is often structured as a conversational show, where the audience is free to respond and participate in the mediation process. Ali Baba varies his narrative techniques, sometimes using a first-person point of view to enhance relatability and engagement.

Another undeniable hallmark of Ali Baba's style is spontaneity, which fosters a natural artistic interaction and allows the comedian to maintain effective rapport with a specific audience. He even established a show called *Spontaneity* to encourage comedians to create jokes impulsively based on audience interaction. This improvisation can be verbal or physical. Comedians may bring audience members physically onto the stage to help activate the audience into the possibility of them being as co-performers. In one instance, Ali Baba invited a participant to the stage during his "Intimidation" joke to demonstrate a scenario involving his son. Interaction can extend to those working the event; for example, Ali Baba has been known to "drag" photographers into his narrative by giving them specific instructions on when to take his picture during a joke.

Just like in the theatre, or in most performance scenarios, there are also structural and environmental factors that influence Alibaba's stagecraft. The physical layout of the performance, such as a semi-thrust or runway stage, is designed to move the performer closer to the audience, integrating them more deeply into the act. Alibaba utilises this in his stage aesthetics. He often favours the down-stage area to enhance this proximity to the audience. This physical proximity is reinforced by the sense of psychological relatability that is the hallmark of Alibaba's showmanship. Successful interaction requires an understanding of audience psychology, including their status, class, age, and religious or political leanings, which informs the comedian's choice of content and diction.

While performing, Ali Baba aims to know his audience. This is evidenced by his intuitive comic timing. Comedians must keep a close eye on audience responses to determine the best moment to drop a punch line. Ali Baba is noted for his willingness to pause and let audience laughter subside before moving to the next joke, a technique used to manage the energy of the room.

### *Stage Presence*

One cannot but notice Ali Baba's presence on stage the way he carries himself. Even when on an empty space, he has an imposing presence. His carriage, use of space, movements and general disposition give a picture of him occupying the entire space. Ali Baba is so creative with the rendition of his joke that he ensures none of his audience is left behind and creates motivation for such distribution. He makes his audience see a dramatic moving picture on stage. His audience see him switching among various imaginary characters and moving around situations on stage. He dramatised an entire joke of President Obasanjo coming into an event that Ali Baba was an MC and Obasanjo using the opportunity to boo Ali Baba over his supposed outrageous honorarium. In that joke, Ali practically staged the scenario. He convincingly improvised a podium and gave a dramatic illustration of Obasanjo and other Heads of States walking into the event. One after the other, Ali switched between the characters he wanted to talk about. In that particular joke, he is seen combining the functions of a director, actor, stage manager and set designer. While playing on proscenium, he favours down-stage area which is an attempt to get closer to the audience and carry them along in all his activities, consciously breaking the fourth wall.

Ali Baba has a well-equipped library stocked with literatures on origins, development and global standards of Stand-up Comedy. He reads widely on techniques of stage acting, stage rendition and space management. He does not stop at that, he reads widely on audience psychology and audience theory. Thus, after presenting himself in a way that the high and mighty in the society can identify with him, he studies widely on how to perform his jokes on a channel he has chosen which is the stage. As such, while on stage, his presence is almost faultless, his line rendition impeccable and his speech rendered as a trained stage actor would. He uses the stage space appropriately, creating mind picture and composition so that when he is telling his jokes, the stage picture is not stagnant and can well appeal to the audience both as a public speaker and an actor. Hence, his act upgrades Stand-up Comedy to a dramatic realm. He creates imaginary stage props making use of stage geography like somebody from theatre/dramatic arts background. He uses plane, levels and areas of the stage effectively.

There is something we call audience dynamics. It is numbers, calibers, environment, timing and voice strength/voice travel, this can be taken care of by the mic, the sound system, etc. if not, then you are going to be projecting. The numbers will tell you, is it a 200-capacity people that you are talking to or is it a 2000 people? Then the calibers, ... Calibers of people is also like the status and class. If I enter a place and it is bank MDs that are there, the kind of jokes, I will tell will be upscale. But if I enter the place and it's a staff party, and there's going to be drivers, gardeners, office assistance, I will scale the performance down. Then the environment what kind of environment is it? am I performing to legislators, international gathering, will it be televised? Would I need to educate them before I drop a punch line? Then timing, the time they invited me to come up, is it that people have been bored or tired or something like that. (IDI, Male, 59 years Ali Baba, 2020)

The audience, as the final consumers of the product, must be well understood in order to please them. The audience's taste, class or status in the society, age bracket, education, religious and political leanings must be understood and taken into consideration while creating the content. The venue of the event is also a factor. The type of jokes that people in Ajegunle will identify with may not go down well with those who live in Victoria Island, VGC or Lekki. The diction that may excite Okokomaiko residents or undergraduates may be considered as offensive to the high and mighty in the society. This is also the case with different age brackets. It is worse with politics and religion. Political ideologies differ and so do religious doctrines. A Stand-up comedian who wants to conquer must diligently understand all these factors and take them in to cognisance while packaging and presenting his/her products. Ali Baba captures it succinctly:

Because when you are an artist and what you are selling is creativity then your creativity will have to be informed by what has built you up - education, awareness, experience and all of that - and that is what then form the product that you present to the market. Now where are you presenting this market i.e. the venue (location) where you are

selling the product. Are you selling it in Victoria Island? For you to take me to do comedy in Ajegunle, it will determine the kind of joke that I will tell. That is the product. This product also gets influenced by environment, tribe, nationality (because if I go to Ghana, the kind of jokes I will tell will be the kind of jokes that will make them feel good not the kind of jokes that will make them feel like “this Nigeria boy is too proud” except am trying to tell them a lot about Nigeria) and so the location also then influence the kind of product you give to them. (IDI, Male, 59 years, 2020)

### ***Timely Delivery***

It is pertinent to state that apart from credible presentation of jokes, timely delivery is highly crucial if a Stand-up comedian must succeed in his performance. Comedians are expected, while performing to keep eyes on audience response. This will facilitate and determine when best to drop specific lines of their joke’s narratives. Nwankwo (2014:39) reinstated the fact that “the semantic build-up of a joke requires a set-up and then the punch-line. In a Stand-up Comedy situation where series of jokes are told in one long narrative, comedians need to find ways of linking their tales and all these make up the plot of the entire performance”. It is difficult to distinguish timing and delivery in the performance of Stand-up Comedy. Therefore, it should be mentioned that a good line delivered poorly and untimely will not be able to produce its fullest potential of entertainment and vice versa. One finds that in Stand-up Comedy, timing and delivery are indistinguishable since when talking about one, it is very likely that the other will be mentioned. Timeliness is very essential to Stand-up performances because a good line delivered poorly will not be able to produce its fullest potential of mirth. In fact, a bad line delivered appropriately could do better than a good one presented badly.

A professional performer is expected, no matter the size of the audience, to give his best and perform as though the auditorium is filled to the brim. There is no gain saying the fact that it is human for the artiste to give his/her best in the presence of a large audience, but professionalism demands that the show must go on and the performer must give his best even if it is only one-person in the auditorium. The only time within the coverage of this research when Ali Baba’s audience was few, Ali Baba’s performance was adversely affected. This was the case at *Ali Baba in America*. This minus becomes noticeable when compared with Ali Baba performing to a large audience. It is noted that Ali Baba was always calm and in total control while performing to large audiences. This calmness and confidence can be attributed to his experience on the job, his fame/status and the fact that he is a mentor to most upcoming Stand-up comedians. However, he is, in some cases, at the mercy of his audience. It is like a situation where the road is the driver. The audience should look forward to the performer setting the pace. But in some noted cases of Ali Baba’s performances, after every hit joke, he kept quiet until the audience laughter subsided, before going to the next joke. This audience control technique is amateurish and time wasting as the audience assumes the liberty of an endless laughter. It gives the impression of the performer being at the mercy of his audience as in the case of “He who pays the piper dictates the tune”. Laughter is good, but unbridled laughter becomes excessive, time wasting and rowdy. When a Stand-up comedian deliberately pauses for long, the critic assumes he is buying time to process his next joke or create one extempore. In all cases, immoderate audience laughter gives a negative signal in a performance. This is more obvious in drama. Even though stand-up comedy is not a structured performance as in stage plays, it is nevertheless, a dramatic piece and effective audience control must be put in place. The use of unnecessary ad-lib also weakens the veracity of jokes and makes the performer look lost and unfocused. Ali Baba, as evident in the following jokes, “The Indian snake”, “Ali Baba in America” and so on, makes use of the phrase such as “you know” repeatedly thus creating monotony, redundancy and an inability to effectively transit from one joke to another effortlessly. Ali Baba’s act is not above improvement, as areas of improvement have been highlighted during discussion earlier in this chapter.

### **Conclusion**

The paper examines how audience interaction shapes stand-up comedy, using Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome, popularly known as Ali Baba, as a case study. It traces the evolution of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, arguing that it developed into a recognized industry in the early 1990s. The study emphasizes that stand-up comedy is fundamentally an interactive performance form characterized by direct engagement with the audience.

Methodologically, the literature review surveys various definitions and characteristics of stand-up comedy, noting its relative underrepresentation in scholarly research. Key concepts include the importance of spontaneity, laughter as a manifestation of audience engagement, and the breaking of the “fourth wall,” which facilitates dynamic interaction between performer and audience.

Notable techniques employed by Ali Baba include spontaneity and the physical involvement of audience members in his performances, alongside a conversational narrative style. The study further reveals that audience dynamics, stage configuration, and the timing of joke delivery are critical to effective comedic performance. Ali Baba’s artistry not only entertains but also educates, often incorporating moral reflections into his humor. His consistent use of audience engagement strategies underscores his influence on the Nigerian entertainment landscape as a pioneering and innovative comedian.

### Recommendations

This paper, through the analysis of Alibaba's works, reveals several specific recommendations and observations regarding effective audience interaction in contemporary stand-up comedy.

The first recommendation is on strategic staging and environmental design. Comedians are encouraged to use a semi-thrust or semi-runway stage or an immersive make shift performance space specifically designed to move the performer closer to the spectators and integrate them into the performance.

It is also a recommendable practice in stand-up comedy to "break the fourth wall". A lot of performance and cultural spaces are being democratized. A deliberate effort should be made to break the imaginary partition between the artist and the audience to foster a dialogue rather than a monologue, which helps to integrate and educate the audience.

It is recommended that performers equip themselves with both embodied and external techniques, such as impactful entrances and appearances, to grasp and sustain audience attention. Alibaba's success underlines a comedian's need to understand audience dynamics and cultural sensitivity. Performers must understand the caliber, status, class, and environment of their audience. For example, jokes should be "upscale" for bank executives but "scaled down" for a general staff party. Comedians should avail themselves of the nuances of different ethnic groups (such as Yoruba, Hausa, or Igbo) and use appropriate codes, dialects, or speech mannerisms to make the content relatable to specific groups.

Finally, this paper recommends further case studies of innovative stand-up comedians in Nigeria. Such endeavours will enrich the lineage of performance traditions in Nigeria and map out the best practices for stand-up comedy in the nation. Research works such as these will also improve the academic and formal training of stand-up comedians in Nigeria.

### References

- Ajaye, F. 2002. *Comic insights: the art of stand-up comedy*. Beverly Hills: Silman- James Press.
- Bergson, H. 1928. *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic*. New York City: Macmillan.
- Ian, B. (2008). Stand-up comedy as a genre of intimacy. *Journal of Ethnologies*, 30. 2: 153-180. <https://doi.org/10.7202/019950ar> Accessed 24 09 22. 18:23 PM
- Filani, I. 2015. Discourse types in stand-up comedy performance: an example of Nigerian stand-up comedy. *European Journal of Humuor Research*, 3. 1: 41-60. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2015.3.1.filani> Accessed 06 2022. 03:20 AM
- Jason, R. 1997. Stand-up comedy: performance and audience in comedy venues. PhD Thesis. University of Salford. United Kingdom. 154pp
- Lesley, H. 2011. Audienceship and (non) laughter in the Stand-up Comedy of Steve Martin. *Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*. 8. 2: 198-210.
- Mintz, L. 1985. Stand-up comedy as social and cultural mediation. *American Quaternary* 37. 1: 71-80
- Nwankwo, I. E. 2014. *Stand-up comedy as a new form of live theatre in Nigeria*. PhD. Thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan. 83pp
- Onyeriowu, E. 2010, May 16. stand-up comedy as a pop art. *Vanguard*. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/05/stand-up-comedy-as-a-pop-art/> Accessed 21 09 2022. 03:45PM