Live from the Web, It's Whenever You Want:
Exploring the Relationship Between User-Generated Content and Comedy Gatekeepers

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the comedy industry has been helmed by gatekeeper institutions; those generally over 25 years old, well known even among those who are not industry insiders, and with a proven record of propelling people towards success. By examining the impact that the rising popularity of digital user-generated comedy content (UGC) has had on existing industry structure, this study hopes to address how technology and the rise of UGC has affected one industry in particular: the world of comedy.

For this study, aspiring and practicing comedians, ranging in age from early 20s to mid 50s, were interviewed. Questions were drawn from three categories:
1) comedic aspirations of interviewees over time;
2) perspectives on industry gatekeepers and the democratizing power of the internet;
3) how these perspectives changed the way interviewees perceive a path to comedic success.

Findings suggest that validation from gatekeepers is still considered a feather in one's cap and a nod to one's talent, while taking classes at a prolific comedy theater is a common starting point for aspiring comedians. They also suggest that many comedians use digital content as a means to an end. Finally, they imply that social media and the rise of UGC comedy demonstrate that gatekeepers no longer hold the weight they used to in the industry.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

By examining the impact that the rising popularity of digital user-generated comedy content (UGC) has had on existing industry structure, this study addresses two research questions:

1) How has the rise of UGC affected comedy gatekeepers' power to shape aspiring comedians' content and careers?
2) Has digital media democratized comedy, or only created new areas and talent for gatekeepers to exploit?
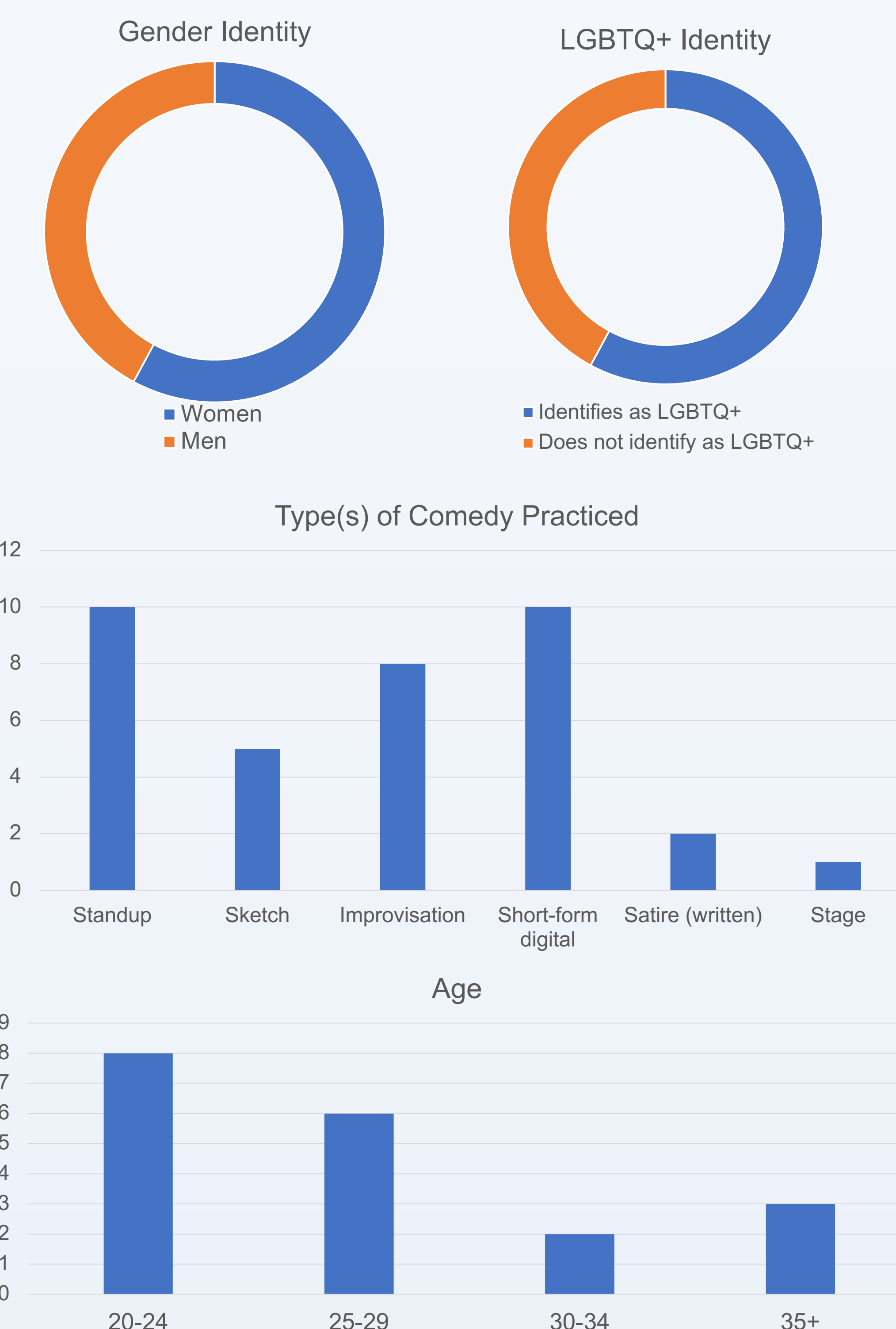
METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a series of 30 to 45-minute semi-structured interviews of adults at two different stages of their careers:
1) Those who are interested in or are in the very early stages of pursuing a career in comedy or entertainment.
2) Those who have established (to some degree) such a career.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom, both due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential distance between myself and the interviewees. Using Zoom allowed for recording of interviews if the interviewee permitted, although I also took notes during the interviews. Recordings were transcribed for analysis and coded for classification.

I received funding from CURF, which was used to pay any college student subjects $15 each for their participation in the interviews. Employed, non-student participants were not paid. Payment was in the form of Venmo.

SAMPLE

Gender Identity

LGBTQ+ Identity

- Women
- Men

- Identifies as LGBTQ+
- Does not identify as LGBTQ+

Type(s) of Comedy Practiced

Age

RESULTS

- Commonly identified gatekeepers included:
  - *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*
  - Big-name comedy theaters (Second City, UCB, iO, the Groundlings)
  - Comedy clubs
  - Agents and managers
  - Studios and networks
- *SNL* was a foundational part of many interviewees' humor development, but many hold less-than-rosy views of it.
  - The show's political toothlessness was one area highlighted by multiple interviewees.
  - Another common critique of *SNL* concerned its weekly format, and how much of the humor surrounding current events was covered on sites like Twitter before *SNL* covers it on Saturday nights.
- In an age of social media defined by COVID-19, many creators started using extra free time or a lack of live performance opportunities to start sharing their content online.
  - Some creators started online before COVID, however, using existing networks of comedically-minded friends to boost content on social media platforms.
- Multiple interviewees noted the important distinction between virality and fame, and between people who only strive to create content digitally and those who wish to use digital comedy as a springboard to a more traditional industry career.
  - Platforms like Tik Tok, Twitter, and Instagram were discussed at length: Tik Tok and Twitter were most cited as effective platforms for building a fanbase and going viral.
- There was a general consensus that industry barriers to entry are lower than they've ever been for UGC comedy, but lower for those with more privilege
  - Roadblocks include hard technical skills, lack of connections, racially biased algorithms, etc.
  - Those from marginalized backgrounds also face discrimination and other obstacles in gatekeeper institutions.
- Interviewees expressed that the viability of a comedy career also partly depends on one's level of privilege.
  - Work environments in gatekeeper institutions, whether writing or acting for television shows or taking classes, can be somewhat hostile to marginalized creators and it can be difficult for them to succeed.
  - These difficulties are somewhat circumvented by the proliferation of UGC comedy online, but not entirely.

DISCUSSION

- Social media as means to an end
  - Easier to go viral, harder to make money
  - Shows a comedian can build a base and attract fans
  - Traditional comedy careers still attractive

- Impact of COVID-19
  - Excess free time allowed for experimentation
  - Limitations of digital vs. live comedy
  - How will the comedy industry change post-COVID?

- Changing role of *SNL*
  - Current events discourse moves too fast for a weekly comedy show
  - Political content falling flat during Trump era
  - Should the show pull more from the alternative comedy scene?

- Limitations
  - Sample size of interviewees: convenience sample due to recruitment limitations as an undergraduate
  - Age range skewed younger: few interviewees over 40
  - Qualitative methods only: Survey could have been conducted with larger number of participants

- Strengths
  - First study of its kind to examine Tik Tok comedy in America (to the best of my knowledge)
  - Qualitative methods allowed for rich, nuanced detail

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- Larger qualitative study focusing on older interviewees, more POC creators

- Longitudinal study of UGC creators to determine changes in perceptions of industry success

- Further research into hybrid entities
  - Potentially interviewing executives involved with gatekeeper institutions

CONTACT INFORMATION

Please don't hesitate to reach out to me at jdbaum@sas.upenn.edu if you have any further questions!