

# ‘Probably the only way to teach Americans about sex’: audiences riff on stand-up comedy as sex education

**Kelly Stone**

University of Porto, Portugal  
[up202202044@edu.fpce.up.pt](mailto:up202202044@edu.fpce.up.pt)

## Abstract

*This research note presents preliminary findings from an exploratory study examining the pedagogical potential of stand-up comedy in the context of sex education. As a U.S.-born sex educator and stand-up comedian based in Portugal, I conducted qualitative audience surveys during comedy shows in central Texas in the summer of 2023 to explore perceptions of stand-up comedy’s role in teaching about sex and sexuality. Three prevalent themes emerged: (1) Comedy as non-threatening/more palatable sex education, (2) Comedy as conversation/stimulation for discourse, and (3) Comedy as sensitive/harmful terrain.*

*Keywords: sex education, stand-up comedy, sexuality, audience learning, public health.*

## 1. Introduction

In the United States, particularly in Texas, sex education is patchy, political, moralized or in most cases, non-existent. Texas consistently ranks among the highest in the U.S. for teen birth rates, chlamydia and gonorrhoea infections, and this state, with a population size similar to Switzerland, Greece, or Finland, hosts one of the highest maternal morbidity and mortality rates in the developed world (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). Studies describe a persistent “conspiracy of silence” around sex education in Texas public schools, and recent data show a growing number of districts opting to teach nothing at all regarding sex education (Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, 2017).

Born to a teenage mother in Texas in a low-income hospital named after a Confederate general, this shaped my path into public health, social justice, and sex education, particularly focused on the reduction of unintended teen pregnancy and sexual violence prevention. Along my professional and educational path, I began performing stand-up comedy, and quickly observed striking intersections between stand-up comedy and sex education. I observed that comedy, like curriculum, can educate, stimulate, disarm, or provoke.

The idea that comedy's job is both to entertain and to teach isn't new. In 1698, playwright William Congreve argued that the purpose of comedy was to "delight as well as instruct" (as cited in Stott, 2005, 6). There is a growing body of literature investigating comedy's role in shaping public attitudes toward sexuality and sexual health. This aligns with a broader body of research on comedy's social justice potentials. Borum Chattoo and Feldman (2020) highlight how contemporary stand-up comedy functions as both cultural critique and a vehicle for civic engagement, underscoring its 'serious role' in advancing dialogue on issues of inequality, race, gender, and sexuality.

Studies by Lockyer and Savigny (2019) and Pérez and Greene (2016) explore the mainstreaming of rape jokes and the framing of misogynistic comedy, while Bright (2015, p. 43) encourages educators to reflect on their positionalities and consider humour as a pedagogical tool. Bennett's (2012) work on spectatorship highlights comedy's performative power to engage audiences, and Moyer-Gusé and Chung's (2019) meta-analyses of entertainment-education reveal its efficacy in addressing sensitive social issues. Hemmasi, Graf, and Russ (1994) and Strain, Martens, and Saucier (2016) also delve into the complexities of humour and its relationship with rape culture. Even comedian Patton Oswalt (2013), penned a "closed" letter, calling for ethical consideration when performers are addressing difficult subjects through stand-up. This balance between entertainment and instruction is at the heart of what I've observed, and the impacts and outcomes of this "edutainment" stimulates my inquiry.

In communities like Texas, where formal sex education is increasingly restricted, heteronormative, or altogether absent, stand-up comedy potentially serves as an unsanctioned yet viable space for public health discourse and may represent one of the few remaining public spaces for open discourse about sex and sexuality. My research questions include: (1) How do audiences perceive and respond to the incorporation of sexual health topics in stand-up comedy performances? and (2) What are the intentions, motivations, rationale, or considerations of stand-up comedians when incorporating sexual topics into their performances? This research note investigates the first of these questions.

## **2. Methodology**

**Data Collection:** The preliminary study was initiated as an exploratory phase of a larger feminist autoethnographic inquiry into audience learning, performer's intentions and the potential of stand-up comedy to influence knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours toward sexual health. Through June and July 2023, I hosted a 6-week stand-up comedy series on Wednesday evenings in San Marcos, Texas, where I performed original material centred around themes of sex, gender, family, and my international PhD studies in Human Sexuality. Following these free performances, I distributed anonymous, open-ended surveys to audience members, soliciting insight and perspectives on whether comedy can teach lessons about sex and sexuality, and if so, inquiring what those lessons were.

Surveys were distributed only to audience members who indicated willingness to participate at the end of a performance. Across the six-week series, total attendance was approximately 100–150 individuals, though some attended multiple weeks. To avoid duplication, repeat attendees completed the survey only once. In total, 41 surveys were distributed and all were completed and returned, yielding a 100% response rate among consenting participants. When considered in relation to overall attendance, this represents participation from roughly 27–41% of audience members across the series.

The surveys were informal and completed in handwritten format using paper surveys. A brief, playful notice of informed consent explaining their connection to an in-progress PhD



Three prevalent themes emerged: (1) Comedy as non-threatening and more palatable sex education, (2) Comedy as a conversation starter, and (3) Comedy as a sensitive or potentially harmful terrain.

### **3.1. Comedy as non-threatening and more palatable sex education**

Many respondents framed comedy as a tool for distilling complex, uncomfortable, or stigmatized information into digestible, memorable, or engaging messages. Congruent with Benign Violation Theory — when something benign threatens one's sense of how the world "ought to be" (McGraw et al., 2010) — comedy was described by one respondent as a “gateway” for discussing taboo topics which could reach audiences who may lack access or be otherwise resistant to formal sexual health education.

*“The more digestible something's explained, the more likely it's going to stay implanted.”*

*“Comedy can be age appropriate—so can sex ed.”*

*“It is probably the only way to teach Americans about sex & sexuality.”*

### **3.2. Comedy as a conversation starter**

A second cluster of responses emphasized the role of comedy in initiating or sustaining open dialogue around sex and sexuality. Comedy was seen as a tool to break down communication barriers to overcome shame and stimulate discourse around socially restricted topics. Responses emphasized comedy's role in initiating these difficult conversations, through the unifying experience of shared laughter.

*“Comedy activates a conversation about sex (which is healthy of course), in a way that people all can relate to.”*

*“Talking/joking about sex is illuminating and takes tabooess off the table.”*

*“Yes! Comedy is our first response to uncomfortable situations. Comedy allows us to be vulnerable and take away some fear or stigma about sex.”*

### **3.3. Comedy as a sensitive or potentially harmful terrain**

While stand-up comedy often creates opportunity for connection, several respondents also acknowledged the damage it can inflict, particularly when it is used to punch down. These responses indirectly acknowledge Superiority Theory (Morreall, 1983; Gruner, 1997) and Disparagement Theory of humour (Zillmann et al., 1976), recognizing that this same medium that promotes laughter and liberation may also reinforce harmful stereotypes or desensitize audiences to serious issues. According to respondents, this educational power of comedy cuts both ways.

*“I've heard plenty of tasteless jokes around consent, pregnancy, birth control, LGBTQ+ issues. I've also heard some truly horrific, bigoted garbage.”*

*“It mostly reinforces negative stereotypes because comedy generally relates to societal norms. Unfortunately the most pervasive stereotypes in the US are negative.”*

These themes reflect the duality many participants perceive as stand-up comedy's impact on audience learning and its influence on attitudes toward sexuality and sexual health.

#### **4. Discussion**

These early findings support the hypothesis that comedy can serve as an informal pedagogical space for learning about sex and sexuality, especially in regions where formal sex education is limited, censored, or absent altogether. Audience responses suggest that stand-up comedy not only opens the door to dialogue but also helps legitimize and/or destigmatize topics often suppressed by institutional silence, shame, or avoidance.

Rooted in theories such as Social Learning, Entertainment-Education, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this research invites further exploration of how sexual health messages embedded in comedy may influence knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours. The prevalence of the word 'yes' and affirmative responses may be partially attributed to the survey framing, but its symbolic weight is notable: "Yes" is both a marker of audience affirmation and an anchor of sexual consent and, notably, the first rule of improvisational comedy.

Yet, as participants pointed out, comedy's pedagogical power is double-edged. Jokes can affirm or oppress. They can raise awareness or entrench harm. Respondents described both uplift and discomfort, suggesting that the impact of stand-up comedy depends not only on the performer's intent, but on the audience's context and prior knowledge. The findings here complement broader arguments that stand-up comedy plays a "serious role" in advancing or resisting social justice aims (Borum Chattoo et al., 2020). Participants' recognition of both empowerment and harm echoes this dual function, highlighting comedy's capacity to shift norms as well as reinforce them. This ambivalence speaks to the need for deeper, contextual inquiry into not just what is said but how it is received, particularly, from a health education perspective, how it influences or changes audience knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours.

Further study investigating performer's intentions and audience learning may help to expose the potential for stand-up comedy and its impact for public health messaging and informal sex education. With greater understanding, sex education curricula could be enhanced to incorporate humour in ways that are inclusive, effective, and supportive of healthier outcomes.

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