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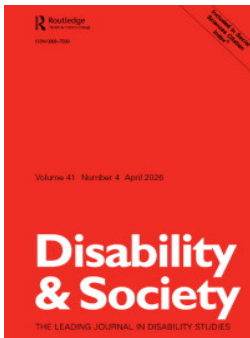
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When laughing at disablism meets barriers: the complex reality of disabled comedians in stand-up comedy

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ABSTRACT

Stand-up comedy has served as a platform for resistance among marginalised groups, yet disabled comedians remain understudied, reinforcing the expectation that disability should only be discussed in serious, sombre terms. This article examines how disabled stand-up comedians describe their aims, facilitators and barriers they encounter across the UK circuit and how these dynamics have shaped and can shape public perceptions. We conducted in-depth interviews with 21 UK-based disabled comedians across varied impairments and analysed data using reflexive thematic analysis. Participants' objectives ranged from pure entertainment to activism, challenging any notion of a single "disability agenda". Regardless of intent, performers reported that simply being on stage inevitably reframed expectations of disability. Yet the circuit's selective inclusivity—inaccessible venues, exclusionary gatekeeping and tokenistic booking—constrained opportunities and kept disability comedy marginalised. We argue for a shift from superficial diversity to authentic inclusivity that enables disabled comedians to participate fully and shape mainstream discourse.

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tokenism

Introduction

Stand-up comedy, a performance art rooted in oral storytelling and live traditions, has evolved from vaudeville and burlesque into a global, commercially successful industry (Double 2014; Limon 2000). Historically dominated by able-bodied, cisgender white men, the scene is currently diversifying, with marginalised voices increasingly visible (Weaver and Lockyer 2024). Comedians

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employ autobiographical performance as a means of interrogating and challenging dominant societal norms pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality (Gilbert 2004; Luckhurst 2020; Pérez 2013). Through this approach, comedy is framed as a significant instrument of social critique, cultural reflection, and ethical discourse (Mintz 1985; Smith 2018). By engaging with taboo subjects, it also facilitates the accessibility of complex societal issues while subverting entrenched power structures (Viña 2023).

Scholarship has explored how stand-up empowers marginalised identities by subverting dominant norms and asserting agency. Comedy can transform performance spaces into sites of radical dialogue and protest (Meier and Schmitt 2017), even as marginalised comedians face systemic barriers such as stereotyping, tokenism, and constrained career opportunities (Sedgwick 2024; Tomsett 2023). Yet, while there is growing attention to race, gender, and sexuality in comedy studies, disabled comedians remain comparatively underexplored (Lockyer 2015).

Scholars attribute the relative neglect of disability comedy to its fraught history (Malli 2024). This neglect is compounded by comedy's marginal position within arts hierarchies, which has discouraged serious engagement (Cheetham 2003; Kuppers 2014). Historically, mainstream humour sidelined disabled people, casting them as spectacle and reinforcing ableist norms (Hughes 2019). Reid, Stoughton, and Smith (2006) term this 'disabling humour'—comic representations that entrench negative stereotypes rather than foster empathy. Consequently, humour about disability is often perceived as inappropriate or offensive, regardless of intent (Sancho 2003). Even when a routine aims to challenge ableism or foreground lived experience rather than ridicule, audiences and gatekeepers often still read it as politically incorrect and culturally insensitive. This perception sustains the expectation that disability should be discussed only in serious, sombre terms (Mallett 2010; Milbrodt 2022) and, in turn, reinforces the medical model's individual-deficit framing (Oliver 1990).

Against this backdrop, the visibility and success of contemporary disabled comedians—such as Rosie Jones, Lee Ridley (*Lost Voice Guy*), and Fern Brady—have not been matched by scholarly attention. This gap limits our understanding of how comedy can enable disabled people's agency and serve as an advocacy tool (Anesi 2018). More broadly, comedy can humanise stigmatised groups, destabilise entrenched ideologies, and foster more inclusive understandings (Quirk 2015). From a psychological perspective, humour may reduce anxiety and cultivate empathy; as Bakhtin (1984, p. 20) observed, '[l]aughter demolishes fear and piety before an object... making of it an object of familiar contact'.

Although some scholarship examined how disabled comedians critique ableism and navigate industry constraints (Bingham and Green 2016a, 2016b; Lockyer 2015; Reid, Stoughton, and Smith 2006; Tan, Wijaya, and Setyaningsih

2022), comprehensive accounts of their creative aims and of how impairment and disabling barriers shape career trajectories remain scarce. This lacuna—especially stark beside the extensive literatures on race, gender, and sexuality—reproduces a hierarchy of justice concerns in which disability is marginal. Given the precarious and exclusionary labour conditions of stand-up (Butler and Stoyanova Russell 2018), further research is needed to map both the structural barriers and the enabling conditions that shape disabled comedians' participation and progression.

To address these gaps, the current study uses in-depth interviews to examine the creative objectives of disabled stand-up comedians and the barriers they encounter across the live comedy scene. Specifically, it asks: (i) how impairment and disabling barriers shape career progression; (ii) what challenges and opportunities arise; and (iii) whether comedians use their craft to challenge ableism and reshape public understandings of disability.

This study contributes by investigating an under-explored cohort, centring comedians' accounts and extending understanding of how disabled performers navigate—and sometimes transform—the cultural landscape. It also considers comedy as a subversive practice that can work alongside direct advocacy: disabled comedians can contest ableist narratives in engaging and nuanced ways, resisting the expectation that disability be addressed only in solemn terms. In doing so, the study foregrounds comedy's potential to support empowerment, pride, and resilience, and to offer a distinct mode of critique within cultural and performance contexts (Bingham and Green 2016a, 2016b).

The article proceeds with a detailed exploration of the methods, outlining the recruitment process and the use of in-depth interviews with disabled stand-up comedians, as well as the ethical considerations involved in the study. It also discusses the approach used to analyse the data. The findings section presents key themes, focusing on creative objectives and barriers within the industry. Finally, the discussion and conclusion reflect on these findings within the context of Disability Studies and respond to sector calls for inclusion (Elphick et al. 2025), providing practical recommendations across accessibility, commissioning, development, and gatekeeping.

Methods

This qualitative cross-sectional study employed in-depth, online interviews. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Kent Ethics Committee (Application Number: 1053) on 4 September 2024. We adopted an inclusive definition of disability, inviting individuals who identified as disabled comedians, aged 18 or over, to participate (Watson 2002). This encompassed physical impairments, neurodivergence, and chronic illnesses, recognising the diversity of disability experiences.

The final sample comprised 21 comedians (9 identified as women, 12 men; mean age = 40.1 years). Impairments were physical impairments ($n=7$; cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, hereditary spastic paraplegia, stroke-related impairments), chronic illnesses ($n=6$; myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome [ME/CFS], cystic fibrosis, fibromyalgia, chronic pain), and neurodivergence ($n=8$; autism, Tourette's syndrome). Several participants also held other marginalised identities (e.g., race, sexuality, immigration status) and reported mental-health conditions. Stand-up experience ranged from newcomers to professionals with over 20 years' tenure.

Recruitment took place between October–December 2024, using purposive, maximum-variation sampling (Coyne 1997). Advertisements were disseminated *via* social media posts (12 participants recruited), disability-focused comedy newsletters (5 participants), and targeted Facebook groups for disabled performers and comedians (4 participants), after obtaining administrator permission. Although more than 30 comedians expressed interest, scheduling was constrained by fluctuating health, employment, caring responsibilities, and performance commitments. In accordance with the approved ethics protocol, the first author sent up to two follow-up invitations; non-responders were not contacted further. Recruitment ceased when meaning saturation appeared sufficient—later interviews elaborated but did not extend the properties, boundaries, or interrelations of our themes—consistent with guidance on saturation in qualitative research (Hennink and Kaiser 2022), while acknowledging that within reflexive thematic analysis saturation is a contested, positivist-leaning concept (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2021).

Prospective participants contacted the lead researcher *via* email and were provided with an information sheet and consent form; written informed consent was obtained prior to scheduling. As part of the protocol—aligned with universal design and inclusive communication—an optional pre-interview briefing (by phone or video) was offered to all participants on an equal basis irrespective of impairment status; this briefing outlined study aims and procedures and allowed additional processing time where desired (Fletcher-Watson et al. 2021; Nicolaidis et al. 2019). At the outset of each interview, participants were reminded that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any point. Throughout, the interviewer monitored for signs of discomfort and used brief check-ins when sensitive topics arose. Following the recording, a short debrief invited reflections on the process and opportunities to propose amendments or clarifications. Participants were also reminded that they could subsequently withdraw their data or raise concerns and were signposted—*via* the information sheet—to relevant disability arts and peer-support organisations.

No participants withdrew, and no distress was reported or observed during data collection. Fifteen participants characterised the interview as cathartic or enjoyable, frequently noting that it offered a rare opportunity for structured

reflection. These affective responses were corroborated in the researcher's reflexive notes, which documented laughter, relief, and moments of rapport.

Interviews were conducted *via* secure videoconferencing at participant-selected times. Sessions lasted 60–120 min and were audio-recorded with prior consent. A semi-structured, active interviewing approach (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) was adopted: a literature-informed topic guide oriented the discussion while allowing flexible sequencing, participant-led elaboration, and exploration of emergent themes. This approach supported the co-construction of accounts, enabling participants to shape the trajectory of the interview while ensuring coverage of core domains.

Our team included three disability-studies scholars (two neurodivergent) and a stand-up practitioner–academic. This mix shaped access, rapport, and interpretation: industry knowledge aided recruitment and contextualised booking/green room gatekeeping, while our disability studies stance foregrounded structural readings. To temper over-identification and a tendency to read “charged humour” as resistance (Krefting 2014), we used reflexive memos, sought disconfirming cases, held insider–outsider dialogues and regular team peer-debriefs, repeatedly asking, “What if the joke simply entertains?”. Terminology (e.g., ‘disabled comedians’) followed participant preferences and a critical disability-studies framing (Shakespeare 2014).

Although rich and nuanced, this UK-only sample was not designed for statistical representativeness; claims are therefore limited to context-bound transferability. Moreover, our analysis centred performers' accounts and did not include audience-reception data; given humour's polysemy, ostensibly subversive jokes may be read in stereotype-affirming ways (Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Tsakona and Popa 2011). Without systematic audience measures, we cannot determine whether disability humour here shifts attitudes.

Data analysis

We conducted reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), an interpretive, iterative, and theoretically informed approach (Braun and Clarke 2012, 2019, 2021). The first and third authors independently coded three transcripts to initiate a provisional analytic framework, then met to compare interpretations, consolidate overlapping codes, and elaborate under-represented nuances. Analytic decisions and illustrative extracts were logged in reflexive memos to maintain a transparent analytic record. The lead author subsequently applied the evolving framework to the full data set in NVivo 14, concurrently memoing, developing theme maps, and tracing code-theme relations. To support reflexive sense-making, we collaboratively revisited ten transcripts to deepen reflexive sense-making; interpretive divergences were resolved through discussion focused on meaning, coherence, and conceptual fit. Three structured analytic debriefs between the first and third authors

interrogated candidate theme boundaries, negative cases, and naming. Themes were reviewed iteratively against coded extracts and the complete data set, then defined and labelled in clear, distinctive terms. Rigour was supported by sustained reflexivity, transparent documentation (analytic log, memos, evolving maps), and team-based interpretive dialogue, consistent with best practice in RTA.

Findings

This study identified two key themes: the varied objectives of disabled comedians in stand-up and the paradox of the industry's selective inclusivity. This article is structured around these two themes, which provide the framework for examining the creative strategies of disabled comedians and the barriers they encounter.

Some participants prioritised entertainment and broad appeal, intentionally avoiding disability politics, while others used humour as activism to challenge stereotypes and critique systemic injustices. Despite these differing approaches, both groups recognised the significant influence of comedy on public perceptions of disability. Although stand-up is often portrayed as meritocratic and diverse, participants described persistent structural, cultural, and attitudinal barriers: inaccessible venues, exclusionary networking, audience discomfort, and gatekeeping that polices disability narratives, even as some maintained that perseverance and talent are what secure success.

Entertainment and beyond: the multifaceted roles of stand-up comedy for disabled performers

More laughs, fewer lectures: comedy as pure entertainment

A minority of participants framed their comedic approach as primarily about laughter and escapism, steering clear of pedagogical or intellectually driven content. They saw their role as providing audiences with a break from daily stressors rather than engaging in complex sociopolitical discussions. By avoiding contentious themes, they aimed to create universally accessible material that fostered an enjoyable atmosphere. Rather than centring their impairments, they downplayed them, prioritising broad audience appeal.

For these comedians, prioritising a message over humour risked breaking the implicit contract between performer and audience. As one participant (P6) explained:

If I focus on making a point, I think that's disrespectful to the people who have paid money to laugh. I want them to leave thinking, 'That was really funny,' rather than 'That was thought-provoking.' I see comedy as an escape—people pay to forget about the world for a while.

This aligns with Friedman's (2014) concept of Low Cultural Capital (LCC), where mass appeal and immediate gratification take precedence over intellectual engagement. From this perspective, comedy is an entertainment-driven art form rather than a platform for activism or critique. This focus on laughter and enjoyment also reflects the principles of hedonic entertainment, which prioritises pleasure, fun, and positive affect over deeper intellectual or emotional engagement (Hofer and Rieger 2019). As another participant (P11) put it: *"If I wanted to teach, I'd do a TED Talk."*

Although these comedians avoided centring their impairment in their material, they acknowledged that simply being on stage served as a form of advocacy, challenging the dominant pity discourse around disability. Some briefly referenced their impairment early in their set to pre-empt audience discomfort (Nevárez Araújo 2019) before shifting to broader comedic topics. As one participant (P7) noted: *"I might mention my disability just to get it out of the way so it's not awkward, and then I talk about things that matter—Trump, China, Russia."*

This trajectory aligns with the final stage of disability humour (Haller and Ralph 2003), where disability is integrated into comedy, no longer the central theme. Earlier stages included objectifying disabled individuals, "sick jokes," and disabled performers reclaiming humour to subvert stereotypes. In this final stage, comedy moves beyond being a response to oppression and instead becomes a space of full creative autonomy, where disabled comedians engage with a wide range of topics, on their own terms. This shift reflects a move towards hedonic entertainment, focusing on enjoyment and broad appeal rather than solely challenging norms.

Punchline with a purpose

Most disabled comedians in this study rejected the view of their work as trivial or purely entertaining. They framed their performances as significant, integrating humour with critical engagement to provoke reflection and challenge stereotypes. Their comedy, in their view, served as a persuasive tool, reshaping public discourse on disability.

This aligns with eudaimonic entertainment, which promotes emotional and intellectual engagement rather than passive enjoyment. These comedians used humour to cultivate empathy, challenge societal attitudes, and exemplify the transformative potential of comedy for social change (De Ridder, Vandebosch, and Dhoest 2022).

Humour allowed comedians to subvert dominant representations of disability, replacing reductive stereotypes with lived experience. P20, for instance, critiqued the autistic savant trope through humour:

It is expected that autistic people are great at maths. And I go, 'No, I'm terrible at maths'. I went to the Edinburgh Fringe for the entire month expecting to leave with

a profit. That's how bad I am. My parents took me to a casino. We came out bankrupt. It's like it doesn't work.

By referencing *Rain Man* (1988), a film widely credited with popularising the 'autistic savant' stereotype, this joke deconstructed unrealistic media portrayals of autism, reclaiming agency over representation. This act of comedic subversion aligns with Judith Butler's concept of performativity, which suggests that identity is not a fixed essence, but a series of repeated acts shaped by societal norms (Butler 1990). Here, the comedian disrupts the performative script of autism as synonymous with genius, highlighting how cultural narratives are sustained through repetition but can also be parodied, reworked, and dismantled. This reinforces the idea that stand-up comedy is a performative space where identity is negotiated and redefined.

Participants also emphasised that stand-up comedy disrupts rigid, one-dimensional portrayals of disability in media and public discourse. Through personal storytelling, comedians articulated complex identities, encouraging audiences to engage with disability in a more nuanced and empathetic manner. As P11 explained: "*Autism's a massive range, and I can talk about my exact experiences.*"

By centring individual perspectives rather than reinforcing stereotypes, comedians fostered a multidimensional understanding of disability.

For some, stand-up comedy was more than an artistic pursuit—it was an act of defiance. This aligned with Krefting's (2014) concept of charged humour, where comedy served as a vehicle for political critique and amplified marginalised voices. Participants cast stand-up as activism by stealth—an approach they felt was necessary amid growing fears of state repercussions, including the potential loss of benefits for being too outspoken, as P13 observed.

In the 80s, they were out there advocating. But we don't do that no more because everyone's scared. One of my friends said, 'If they catch you, they'll take your PIP [Personal Independence Payment] off you now.' So, for me, doing comedy and my game show? I'm winning the war. But they [authorities] don't know I'm winning.

This reflection underscores disabled comedy's dual role—not only as entertainment but as resistance, education, and critique. Comedy also allowed participants to expose the dehumanising effects of bureaucratic policies. P14 illustrated this through a humorous yet poignant anecdote:

At the age of 42, someone came to my home for about an hour asking me things like how I go to the bathroom and a load of other stuff. I felt like saying, 'I'm in my 40s—it's not like I've been faking it for 40 years!'

This moment encapsulates the absurdity of disability assessments, reinforcing the "scrounger" narrative (Morrison 2019)—the suspicion that disabled individuals exaggerate impairment to obtain financial support. By satirising

these processes, comedians highlight the intrusive, dehumanising nature of disability assessments.

Beyond critiquing policy, participants suggested that comedy also challenges everyday discrimination, prompting audiences to examine unconscious biases. Rather than lecturing, comedians use humour to hold up a mirror to society, encouraging self-reflection. As P14 described: "*You can kind of hold up a mirror and say, 'Look at this ridiculousness.' And then... sometimes people think, 'I've had people come up to me saying, 'Oh my God, I never thought I'd do that'.*"

By encouraging audiences to reconsider benevolent stigma and internalised biases, comedy fosters self-awareness and challenges ingrained assumptions about disability (Hayes and Black 2003).

Several comedians highlighted how their performances helped alleviate societal anxiety around disability, which, as one participant noted, often evokes discomfort because many apprehend disability as personally proximate rather than categorically impossible—an awareness of non-immunity grounded in the precarity of embodiment.

This is a real fear for people. You're not going to wake up one day and be Black. You're not going to wake up and be Jewish. But you might walk down the street and have a psychotic break or a stroke. (P16)

By confronting these fears through humour, comedians can make disability more relatable and less intimidating.

Many comedians also noted that audiences fear saying the wrong thing or interacting awkwardly with disabled individuals. Participants suggested comedy provided a space to break down these anxieties, shifting focus from disability as a defining characteristic to the performer's individual identity. One comedian described how audiences often "see the wheelchair before they see me," reflecting the phenomenon of disability-first perception (Bogart and Dunn 2019), where disability overshadows other aspects of identity. However, through comedy, performers aimed to be valued for who they are, with their impairment—whether as a wheelchair user, autistic person, or blind person—accepted as part of their identity, rather than being overlooked or minimised.

This rehumanisation process aligns with embodied performance theory (Sandahl 2006), where disabled performers use their bodies as sites of meaning-making, challenging dominant disability narratives. By occupying the stage and drawing attention to their lived experiences, comedians reframe disability not as an object of pity or discomfort, but as an aspect of identity navigated with agency, humour, and self-definition.

The selective inclusivity of stand-up comedy

The self-proclaimed inclusive and benevolent industry

Some participants characterised stand-up comedy as both meritocratic and benevolent—an industry where success is primarily determined by individual

talent and effort, yet one that also offers targeted opportunities through diversity initiatives. While comedians are expected to succeed based on skill and perseverance, many acknowledged that promoters and industry figures increasingly prioritise inclusivity, sometimes fast-tracking disabled performers into high-profile gigs.

As one participant (P6) noted:

If anything, if you're good and disabled, you're going to tick an extra box because people want to put diversity on. Promoters want females to be on stage. They want disabled people on stage, but not at the cost of quality. Just be funny. If you're funny, you'll get the gigs. If you're shit, you won't. So I just think (disabled) people have got to just be good, just try harder... I don't think people try hard enough is my honest opinion.

Several comedians reported instances of *positive discrimination*, where their disability functioned as a form of institutional momentum (Ahmed 2012), accelerating access to industry opportunities. Some reflected on feeling at a relative advantage, as promoters actively sought to diversify their line-ups. P9's experience illustrated this phenomenon:

It was my 16th gig, and everyone else was on their like 400th... It was insane. I had just been doing open mic nights, and I turned up to this [major] gig, and suddenly I was in a green room where everyone was talking about their friend Jimmy Carr.

Beyond structural shifts, participants noted that the circuit's expectations had evolved, with personal storytelling—particularly narratives linked to disability, mental health, and identity—becoming highly marketable. What was once considered niche has now been absorbed into mainstream stand-up, positioning disabled comedians as increasingly relevant figures.

P7 humorously commented on this shift:

There's a glut. There's not even a rise. It's an absolute deluge. Everybody wants to tell their story. I feel sorry almost for neurotypical comedians who've got nothing to talk about... They're going to have to go and develop a drug addiction or something because they've got nothing else to talk about.

This remark reflects how identity-driven comedy has reshaped the industry, where performers with lived experience of disability and neurodivergence are now seen as offering distinctive, in-demand perspectives. At the same time, it highlights an underlying tension: while disabled comedians are increasingly welcomed, their presence is often contingent on fulfilling industry expectations for personal storytelling rather than being valued solely for their comedic craft.

Structural barriers in stand-up comedy

Although some participants perceived stand-up comedy as a meritocratic industry, many exposed deep-seated barriers that significantly impact

disabled comedians' ability to perform, progress, and sustain a career. These barriers—often unspoken yet deeply ingrained—function as an “invisible heckle,” -our term for ambient, non-verbal barriers that subtly undermine presence and progression..

Beyond the precarious labour conditions that affected all comedians (Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018), disabled performers encountered additional hurdles due to the widespread inaccessibility of performance spaces. Most participants reported that many venues, particularly those housed in older buildings such as pubs and clubs, lacked the infrastructure necessary to accommodate disabled performers. Stages were frequently raised without ramp access, green rooms were often located upstairs without lifts, and essential facilities such as accessible toilets or nearby parking were frequently unavailable. As one comedian expressed, “*They’re not purpose-built. Um, often it’s an old pub, um, which, you know, hasn’t got disability in mind*” (P10).

Accessibility barriers extended beyond the performance space to broader mobility and transport issues. Public transport systems, particularly in rural areas, were often not designed to accommodate disabled individuals, making travel to gigs disproportionately difficult. This created logistical and financial barriers, particularly for those without access to a private vehicle. As one participant explained:

Any—I would say most rural areas of the UK—are bad for accessibility. And it’s not maybe the venue that’s inaccessible. It’s getting there that’s inaccessible. Because if you don’t drive, which a lot of disabled people don’t, it’s train stations. It’s the whole infrastructure (P20).

Participants’ accounts aligned with sector-level evidence. The UK Live Comedy Sector Survey suggests that most live comedy in the UK takes place in small, informal venues—typically rooms of 51–250 capacity, often in pubs—rather than in purpose-built theatres (Elphick et al. 2025; Healy 2024). Despite legislative duties, access remained uneven in these settings. In Euan’s Guide’s 2023 Access Survey (published Feb 2024; approximately 6,000 respondents, 98% disabled), only 3% rated pubs/bars “excellent” for accessibility, 23% “good,” and 37% “average”; notably, 79% had experienced a disappointing trip or had to change plans because of poor access (Euan’s Guide 2024).

Large events showed similar patterns. At the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, investigative analysis in 2022 found almost 40% of venues hosted no accessible shows, while only 2% of shows included captioning, 0.5% audio description, and 1.9% BSL-signed performances; 63% of shows were wheelchair-accessible, yet many of those did not have accessible toilets, and just 35% of venue spaces were wheelchair-accessible according to Fringe Society figures (Livingston 2022). In addition, sector commentary noted mislabelling of accessible shows in the Fringe programme and online, leaving accessibility efforts inconsistent (Strickland 2022). Earlier reporting similarly

underscored structural barriers: only 56% of Fringe venues offered wheelchair access, and just 40% of spaces were fully accessible (Miller 2017), while first-person accounts described obstacles such as cobble streets, steps, and inadequate facilities (Pepper 2017). Collectively, these sources indicate systemic accessibility deficits and support calls from campaigners to embed accessibility into infrastructure and planning from the outset rather than treating it as an afterthought (Elphick et al. 2025; Livingston 2022).

Some participants also raised concerns about sensory accessibility. Lighting and sound systems were often set at levels that could be overwhelming for neurodivergent performers or audience members. For example, P21 described how a faulty, dimmed light during a neurodivergence comedy night unexpectedly created a more comfortable atmosphere for both performers and audiences, with performers expressing their enjoyment of the low-key lighting. As they explained, *“The first time we did the gig, we had some problems with the lights, and one of the lights was very dim... and after that, really all the performers told me they really enjoyed the lighting because it was very low key”*. These accounts indicate that sensory parameters (lighting, sound, cueing) should be institutionalised as routine accommodations rather than discretionary add-ons, with standard low-stimulus presets and pre-circulated technical briefs.

Cultural barriers in stand-up comedy

Cultural barriers within stand-up comedy operate on two interconnected fronts: within the industry itself—through networking norms, gatekeeping practices, and tokenistic diversity—and in the audience’s reception of disability, which is often shaped by discomfort, invisibility, or narrow expectations of what is “relatable.”

In stand-up comedy, according to participants, professional success was shaped not only by onstage performance but also by offstage networking. Relationships with promoters, venue managers, and fellow comedians were often forged in informal social spaces—pubs, green rooms, post-show gatherings—where much of the industry’s gatekeeping occurred. Several participants identified this culture of unstructured, often late-night socialising as a significant barrier, particularly for neurodivergent performers. Neurotypical expectations around networking—such as engaging in small talk, reading social cues, or maintaining frequent physical presence—were described as exhausting, alienating, or inaccessible. As P19 put it: *“You were booked because you were good, but you were also booked because I could see you brown-nosing the promoter.”*

P21 noted that even for those uncomfortable with such interactions, participation felt like a professional necessity: *“I don’t actually like socialising much, but I’ve realised I have to do it, because that’s where you get the gigs. If you don’t hang around after, you don’t get asked back.”*

These accounts echoed Reilly's ethnography of stand-up, which shows careers are built as much offstage as on stage; informal mentoring, endorsements, and the post-show "hang" (backstage and after-gig socialising) often govern progression, outstripping meritocratic ideals of simply "being funny" (Reilly 2016, 2017). Comparable dynamics recur across creative sectors, where hiring and advancement flow through informal networks and cultural capital—networking functioning as de facto gatekeeping (Lee 2011). Policy rhetoric about a 'creative workforce' has tended to normalise informal hiring and unpaid, network-dependent entry points, thereby reinforcing rather than removing barriers to access (Oakley 2011). For those unable to network as expected—due to access barriers, sensory overload, or misfit with neurotypical norms—the result was exclusion from the relationship-building that fuels careers. Participants described missing gig offers, remaining peripheral to key circles, and acquiring reputations as disinterested or "difficult"—labels that were hard to reverse once attached. As P7 put it: *"If you can't keep up with all of that, people just assume you're not reliable, or you're awkward to deal with."*

Cultural perceptions of disability within comedy audiences and industry gatekeepers also shaped opportunities in complex and uneven ways. These perceptions were not uniform across all impairments. Comedians with visible physical impairments often reported that audiences displayed initial awkwardness, sometimes even before a word was spoken, whereas those with less visible conditions—such as neurodivergence—sometimes encountered scepticism and misunderstanding, or found that audience members mistook their natural mannerisms as part of an invented stage character: *"People think it's just my comedy persona, but it's just how I am. They don't realise it's actually part of who I am offstage as well."* (P12)

While this could occasionally protect them from stigma, it also rendered their experiences of disability invisible, making it harder to address access needs without being seen as "breaking character."

For some performers with visible disabilities, the challenge lay not in outright hostility but in a subtle tension in the room—a collective hesitation that had to be addressed before the performance could proceed. As P5 described:

Like just as you're trying to dissipate the awkwardness that you feel from the audience, to feel that awkwardness in the first place is really harsh to feel. You know, you kind of feel everyone holding, holding their breath as you get up on stage and like, 'Oh my God, is she going to get up on stage?'

This reflects a broader societal unease that aligns with Quayson's (2007) concept of aesthetic nervousness, where audiences struggle to reconcile humour with lived experiences of impairment.

Disabled comedians described having to deploy additional emotional and cognitive labour to "win over" audiences—whether by easing into

disability-related material, using self-deprecating humour, or avoiding the subject entirely. This hidden work to make audiences comfortable (Scully 2010) extended beyond the stage, shaping how comedians wrote their material and navigated industry relationships.

Disabled comedians also reported facing direct resistance from industry gatekeepers, particularly promoters who perceived disability-related material as commercially unviable. Some comedians were explicitly advised to minimise or entirely omit references to their impairment to secure bookings. One participant recounted an early career experience:

I had a promoter when I first started, and he watched my ten-minute set and he said, 'Oh, I'd love to put you on my bigger clubs if you wouldn't talk about the [disability] so much.' So I did one of his bigger clubs, and I made sure to only do one minute about my disability and talked unrelated stuff. Um, and he came to me afterwards and said, 'Oh, yeah, still the whole [disability] thing. I don't know whether I can book you again. People can't relate to it'" (P6).

This imposed erasure of disability narratives reinforces the idea that disabled comedians must conform to mainstream expectations to succeed, limiting the diversity of voices within the industry. However, most participants highlighted that what is claimed as relatable often reflects the experiences of white, cisgender men rather than a truly universal perspective. As P17 noted:

So a lot of what gets taken as a universal experience actually isn't a universal experience... like Michael McIntyre or something. You know, lots of people really relate to that. That's one of the reasons why he's done so well. Um, but lots of people don't. I mean, I don't know what it's like to be a fairly well-off, um, white guy. Many people don't.

Disabled comedians were often pigeonholed into disability-centric material, perceived as "one-trick ponies" whose comedy revolves solely around their impairment. This narrow framing limited opportunities, as industry gatekeepers may have dismissed their work as niche or reliant on sympathy rather than comedic skill. As one comedian reflected: *"I've often not been booked for shows because they didn't feel my comedy fit with the others. I've also been overlooked because people assume I only get laughs out of sympathy."* (P1)

These assumptions were not only perceived to restrict career progression but also reinforced the expectation that disabled comedians must conform to a predetermined narrative—either making disability their defining theme or avoiding it entirely to gain broader acceptance.

While diversity initiatives have become more prevalent, most participants suggested that these efforts often amounted to tokenistic inclusion—where only one disabled performer was included per line-up to satisfy diversity expectations, rather than fostering genuine structural inclusion.

And sometimes I get very frustrated at the challenges, um, in that you will have a lot of promoters say, 'But I've got a disabled person on the bill,' and it's almost as if they've created that one space for diversity and then... that's it. (P8)

Such tokenism treated disabled comedians as interchangeable placeholders and left structural barriers intact, making inclusion symbolic rather than substantive.

The absence of formal regulations in the stand-up industry further exacerbated these challenges. Unlike many other creative sectors, stand-up comedy lacks mechanisms for enforcing accessibility or addressing discrimination. Without Human Resources (HR) departments or formal complaints procedures, disabled comedians have little recourse when they experience exclusion or unfair treatment. As one participant explained:

I think comedy is almost the last bastion, because there's no... it's an unregulated industry, so there's no comeback. We don't have an HR function. I've got no one to go to if I encounter that sort of thing... So if I was to have a poor experience at a comedy night, there's nowhere to appeal to. (P4)

This lack of oversight allows systemic inequalities to persist, reinforcing the status quo and leaving disabled comedians with limited power to advocate for change. Additionally, many comedians feared that requesting access adjustments would damage their professional relationships or mark them as difficult, reinforcing the perception that accommodations are an inconvenience rather than a necessity. As one comedian noted:

No, I don't want to be that wheelchair warrior who just kind of has a go at people. The thing is, if you're a business owner, there's so few people who have a disability, it's just not going to be a priority for the vast majority. And it's just the sad reality of it. (P10)

The intersection of gender and disability presents additional challenges for disabled female comedians, compounding accessibility barriers with gendered safety concerns, audience biases, and booking discrimination. This exemplifies Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) concept of intersectionality, illustrating how overlapping identities shape experiences of oppression and privilege. It also aligns with Gilbert's (2004) argument that stand-up comedy is not an "equal opportunity" space, as structural inequalities limit women's opportunities in the industry compared to men. Many described the added risks of navigating nightlife spaces, where they must carefully plan travel, and venue exits due to the heightened vulnerability of being both disabled and a woman. Onstage, they faced resistance when addressing disability, with audiences often perceiving them as "too angry" or "too serious" in ways that male comedians are not. As one participant observed: *"When you start talking about disability and you're angry and bitter, especially as a woman, audiences are quite awkward about it. In a way that they're not when you're angry and bitter about other topics."* (P18)

These intersecting barriers illustrate the ways in which stand-up comedy, while often perceived as an inclusive space, continues to reinforce structural inequalities that limit the opportunities available to disabled performers.

Some reflections on the data

This study aimed to examine the objectives that disabled stand-up comedians seek to achieve through their performances and whether the stand-up comedy industry facilitates or hinders their ability to realise these goals. Because humour shapes public opinion and engagement, understanding these dynamics is essential. By centring their lived experiences, this research provides insight into the structural, cultural, and attitudinal factors that shape their participation and success within the industry. This discussion is organised around the two themes identified in the findings—the varied objectives of disabled comedians in stand-up and the paradox of the industry’s selective inclusivity—providing a framework for examining both creative strategies and systemic barriers.

This study suggests that stand-up comedy does not follow a singular “disability agenda.” Some comedians briefly acknowledge their impairment to ease audience discomfort but prioritise humour over advocacy, reinforcing stand-up as entertainment. While disability humour can serve as social commentary, not all comedians view their work as political. Some focus on their comedic skill rather than their impairment to define their public persona (Zijderveld 1983). This diversity reflects the multifaceted nature of stand-up, where performers balance artistic expression with audience expectations. Simply being on stage challenges stereotypes, subtly reshaping perceptions of disability without making it the focal point.

For other comedians, however, stand-up functions as a deeply political act, aligning with broader traditions of disability art that extend beyond mainstream inclusion or personal storytelling. Like other forms of cultural production by marginalised groups, stand-up comedy by disabled performers serves as a collective practice that constructs shared meanings around disability, systemic oppression, and resistance (Barnes 2008; Sandahl 2006). By centring the social and political dimensions of disability, these comedians challenge dominant narratives of exclusion, expose entrenched discrimination, and foster a politicised disability identity. Simultaneously, they celebrate bodily diversity, reclaim disability as a site of pride, and create spaces for solidarity, reflection, and collective meaning-making. In doing so, their comedy functions as both an interrogation of systemic inequalities and a foundation for disability culture, offering an alternative site for identity formation, activism, and social critique (Decottignies 2016).

Like other comedians from marginalised backgrounds, disabled comedians who engage in political humour challenge stereotypes, critique structural barriers, and foster greater social awareness through their performances. Their work disrupts dominant cultural narratives, offering counter-discourses that resist ableist ideologies while simultaneously affirming disabled identities. Whether prioritising entertainment or activism, disabled comedians

navigate the tensions between comedy as a form of personal expression, professional craft, and political intervention, reflecting the diverse roles that stand-up can play in shaping disability representation and discourse.

The creative industries have cultivated an image of being progressive, egalitarian, and meritocratic, fostering the illusion that success is determined solely by talent and perseverance (Gill 2002; Littler 2017). Some participants internalised this perception, believing that hard work and comedic skill alone would dictate their career progression. However, within mainstream discourse and the broader comedy industry, stand-up comedy by disabled performers is frequently marginalised, framed as a niche endeavour, topical or of special interest (Krefting 2014) rather than an integral part of the comedic landscape. The industry remains structured around able-bodied norms, which constrain opportunities for disabled comedians to develop, gain recognition, and fully participate on equal terms. The barriers disabled comedians face in the comedy industry, however, reflect broader societal patterns of ableism in employment, public life, and media representation. Disabled individuals encounter discrimination in hiring, workplace accommodations, and career advancement (Shakespeare 2014). Public spaces and policies often fail to accommodate their needs, limiting participation in society (Collins et al. 2022). Similarly, media representation reinforces stereotypes, portraying disabled people as objects of pity (Morrison 2019). Thus, the comedy industry mirrors these issues, with disabled comedians facing inaccessible venues and being pigeonholed into disability-centric material (Hadley et al. 2024).

Industry stakeholders often justify marginalisation by claiming that mainstream audiences are unprepared for direct or unfiltered discussions of disability, dismissing such content as unrelatable. By positioning disability as a specialised or niche subject matter, the industry restricts its visibility within comic spaces, reinforcing its perceived lack of mainstream appeal. This creates a feedback loop: the absence of disability-related content in comedy spaces limits audience exposure to authentic disability narratives, which in turn sustains the perception that such topics are unrelatable, niche or undesirable. As a result, disabled comedians face significant constraints in shaping their own narratives, with their presence in mainstream comedy often conditioned on their ability to conform to industry norms and audience expectations.

This environment promotes a diluted representation of disability, prioritising “saleable. diversity” (Yu 2023) over genuine inclusivity. Industry decision-makers favour portrayals of disability that preserve audience comfort and minimise disruption to dominant norms, often flattening or erasing complex disabled identities. This selective inclusion ensures diversity remains palatable, non-threatening, and profitable, favouring disabled comedians who fit pre-existing industry standards. By accepting disability only when it aligns with commercial interests, the industry reinforces stereotypical narratives,

effectively sidelining diverse disabled experiences that do not conform to the mainstream ideal.

This “crip-washing” (Hadley et al. 2024) results in disability being included only when it aligns with commercial imperatives, perpetuating the status quo where disabled comedians must conform to marketable expectations. In these circumstances, disabled comedians are often tasked with presenting a curated version of disability that serves the interests of the wider industry, undermining the authenticity of their lived experiences. As a result, non-disabled audiences are rarely encouraged to engage with the real, nuanced experiences of disabled individuals, while disabled comedians are expected to navigate an industry designed around able-bodied norms, thus diminishing their capacity for full creative freedom.

Moreover, the stand-up comedy industry remains hierarchical, dominated by the experiences and perspectives of straight, white, cisgender men. This reinforces symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977) and limits opportunities for marginalised comedians. Disability representation is often constrained, reflecting broader systemic inequities, and diversity is embraced only when it fits within established industry standards. Consequently, stand-up comedy’s potential to challenge societal norms is undermined by barriers, reinforcing tokenistic inclusion rather than fostering meaningful change.

The industry’s lack of meaningful allyship further entrenches these barriers. Allyship is often framed as an individual moral stance rather than a structural necessity, leaving disabled comedians to navigate these barriers alone (Hadley et al. 2024). This absence of structural support exacerbates inequalities, as superficial gestures of inclusion fail to address the issues of accessibility, representation, and the exclusionary practices inherent within the industry. Without a concerted effort to support genuine inclusivity, the industry continues to favour performers who fit established norms, leaving disabled comedians on the periphery.

Achieving substantive inclusion in stand-up comedy requires reconstituting the field’s organising logics—how spaces are designed, narratives are valorised, and career pathways are resourced and governed. Rather than retrofitting access to existing arrangements, inclusion must be built in by default: universal design and predictable accommodations; evaluative criteria that do not equate “merit” with performance in late-night, high-stimulus venues or with capacity for informal networking; and transparent, enforceable mechanisms for booking, development, and remuneration (including ring-fenced access budgets and baseline standards for venues and festivals). In the absence of such shifts, the circuit reproduces able-bodied norms, sustaining micro- and macro-disablism and confining disabled comedians to conditional or tokenistic visibility. Structural transformation—redistributive (resources and access), recognitive (valuing diverse comedic aesthetics without compulsory self-disclosure), and representational (decision-making power

for disabled practitioners)—is therefore a necessary precondition for the full and equal participation of disabled comedians and for stand-up's capacity to function as a genuinely inclusive public culture.

As noted, our analysis centred on performers' accounts and did not test how audiences decode disability-related humour. Future work should pair performer data with reception measures—e.g., audience surveys/focus groups, pre-registered experimental vignette or video studies manipulating framing and performer identity, and digital-trace analyses of social media reactions—to identify when such material challenges versus reinforces stereotypes.

Conclusion

The study highlights the critical need to move beyond mere tolerance towards true cultural inclusion within the stand-up comedy industry. This shift requires the development of inclusive policies that create spaces where disabled voices are valued on their own terms. Such policies must focus on the key aspects of the Access, Participation, Representation, and Empowerment (APRE) model (Collins et al. 2022). First, access is essential, meaning that disabled comedians should have equal opportunities to perform and engage with industry spaces, ensuring that structural barriers are removed. Participation goes beyond access, ensuring that disabled comedians can engage in all aspects of the industry, from performing and creating content to contributing to decision-making processes that shape the comedy landscape. Representation is equally crucial, as it guarantees that disabled comedians are portrayed authentically, moving beyond harmful stereotypes to reflect the diversity of their lived experiences. Lastly, empowerment is necessary to ensure that disabled comedians have control over their narratives, enabling them to challenge ableism, reshape public perceptions, and advocate for themselves within the industry. Rather than reinforcing the perspectives of non-disabled people, inclusive policies should empower disabled comedians to shape their narratives, ensuring their experiences are represented authentically and that their work is seen as a valuable and integral part of the broader cultural conversation. By embracing the APRE model, the industry can transition from tolerance to genuine cultural inclusion, offering disabled comedians equal opportunities to thrive on their own terms.

To create a more inclusive and equitable stand-up comedy industry, structural changes must go beyond tokenistic diversity efforts and dismantle the barriers disabled comedians face. Comedy venues should prioritise accessibility by ensuring stage access, inclusive seating, and accessible backstage areas plus, sensory-friendly measures—predictable lighting and sound, a quiet room, and relaxed-performance options. Where modifications are not feasible, alternative accessible venues or reasonable adjustments should be prioritised. A directory of accessible comedy spaces could support promoters in making

informed choices. Industry gatekeepers, including promoters and bookers, must move beyond surface-level diversity efforts and actively support disabled comedians on their own terms. Rather than imposing expectations about what disability narratives should look like, they should recognise and value the full range of comedic voices disabled performers bring—whether or not disability is central to their material. Training and workshops on disability inclusion should be offered to comedy clubs, festival organisers, and media platforms to address unconscious biases and create a more welcoming industry culture. These could be offered by disability-led arts organisations, industry bodies, and disabled comedians through festival workshops, online modules, and in-person venue training. Funded by arts grants, corporate sponsors, and festival contributions, these initiatives could be embedded into existing comedy events and industry networks, ensuring accessibility for promoters, venues, and media platforms. Moreover, funding bodies should introduce dedicated grants and financial support for disabled comedians to mitigate the additional costs they face in travel, accommodation, and access needs. While the UK comedy industry lacks direct funding, financial assistance could come from disability arts grants (Arts Council England, Unlimited), corporate sponsorships (Netflix, Channel 4), and festival-backed access funds (Edinburgh Fringe Society). A hybrid funding model—combining arts grants, industry partnerships, and private sponsorship—would create a sustainable solution, ensuring disabled comedians are not excluded from professional opportunities due to financial barriers. A transparent industry complaints process should also be established, ensuring that disabled comedians can report discrimination and exclusion without fear of professional repercussions. A dedicated HR-style service for disabled comedians, modelled on Get Off (<https://getofflivecomedy.co.uk/>), could provide a confidential reporting system, support for discrimination cases, and an inclusion charter for venues. Hosted by industry bodies like Equity or the LCA (Live Comedy Association), this initiative would ensure that disabled comedians can speak up without fear of professional repercussions, helping to create a safer and more inclusive comedy industry. Additionally, mainstream media should integrate disabled comedians into a wider range of programming rather than limiting them to disability-themed content, helping to normalise their presence in the industry. Finally, fostering stronger allyship within comedy spaces—among fellow comedians, industry professionals, and audiences—will ensure that inclusion is not just a performance but an embedded and sustainable industry-wide shift. By moving beyond tolerance and embracing genuine inclusion, the industry can begin to dismantle the barriers that have historically marginalised disabled performers. This approach calls for a structural shift, where the diversity of lived experiences—especially those of disabled comedians—is not just accepted but celebrated, and where the creative landscape is reshaped to reflect the full range of human identities and

experiences. As P5 neatly summed up: “It [stand-up comedy] can normalise disability—in the sense of it’s not a taboo to talk about—but can also help us celebrate us [disabled people], if done in the right way”.

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