How Cultural and Linguistic Pluralism Shape Humor:
Social Construction of Singapore's Humor Industry

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This study views Singapore's humor industry through the theoretic lenses of social construction. It aims to examine the unique characteristics of Singapore humor and investigate how Singapore's *rojak* culture (Chua, 1998) and social actors (content creator, market/audience, and government/policy) have shaped the trajectory of the humor industry. Data were collected through interviews with TV comedy producers, stand-up comedians, and theatre practitioners, as well as through three-month-long observation of local comedy scenes. Thematic data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to analyze transcribed interviews, observational field notes, and second-hand documents.

The findings show Singapore humor is characterized by over-the-top visuals, frequent use of "Singlish" and Chinese dialects, satires of current affairs, and influences from western culture. The fear of failure, *mianzi* (Hwang, Francesco & Kessler, 2003), is Singapore's cultural trait that hinders the development of Singapore's humor industry. Its humor content creation relies on a formulaic approach, in order to cater for the perceived needs of mainstream audiences. Moreover, the content censorship, which serves as a crucial means to maintain order and harmony in this multicultural and multiracial society, still restricts creativity in humor creation and partially accounts for the lackadaisical Singapore humor industry.

Humor is an innately complicated social phenomenon which can be found universally in all cultures, and plays a central, necessary part in social life (Billig, 2005). It is generally connected with laughter, gaiety, mirth, and feelings of happiness (Berger, 1995). In psychology and sociology, humor has three paradoxical natures: universal yet particular, social yet anti-social, and mysterious yet understandable (Billig, 2005). Even though humor is usually treated as less serious by the society in general, it provides inconspicuous insights on human and societal existence (Davis, 1993).

Just as different societies have different cultures, each culture has its own set of rules, values, and norms of what is appropriate and acceptable in humor. Humor is context-dependent and is open to personal interpretation of situational meaning (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 1998). What is considered humorous depends on social situations and cultural influences (Nevo, Nevo, & Leong, 2001). Societal and cultural values also have a role to play in constructing and shaping the content, target, and style of humor that a society has (Hertzler, 1970).

Key social actors, including content creators/industry, audience/market, and government/policy, shape Singapore's comedy industry. It is interesting to explore how Singapore's multiracial and multicultural society has generated unique Singapore humor and

has affected the presentation of its humor products, including television comedy, stand-up comedy shows, and theatre performance. In this qualitative research, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with key players in Singapore's humor industry and observed the production of television comedy, theatre, and comedy shows. This study first examined the characteristics of Singapore humor and its relationships to Singapore's culture and society. It also investigated how Singapore's *rojak* culture (Chua, 1998) and key social actors (content creator, market/audience, and government/policy) have shaped the trajectory of the humor industry. This paper contributes to the understanding of Singaporean humor and its rarely-studied industry, as well as provides insights into the relationships between humor and a multicultural and multiracial society.

Literature Review

Humor can be found in all cultures, and it plays a central, necessary part in social life (Billig, 2005). Societal and cultural values have a role to play in constructing and influencing the creation of humor. The Oxford dictionary definition of humor refers to "a mood or state of mind," or "the quality of being amusing or comic." Berger (1995) concurs that humor has no standard definition, but humor is generally connected with laughter, gaiety, mirth, and feelings of happiness. Sociologists usually study how humor works in social and interpersonal settings—for example, the relationship between humor and social class, power relationships, and gender differences. The impression of one person can be formed or influenced by his choice and preference of humor (Collins & Wyer, 1992). The types of jokes a person enjoys reveal who he is and what kind of society he is situated in (Berger, 1995). Conversely, what a person does not laugh at indicates his vulnerabilities (Davis, 1993).

Humor, Society, and Culture

Comedy is usually highly context-specific, which makes it a form of cultural insider-knowledge available only to members of a specific society (Critchley, 2002). Critchley suggests a two-point theory on humor: firstly, understanding what is funny helps us acknowledge our world, or how things are for us within our culture; and secondly, the use of common humor helps us make sense of the non-rational elements of our lives and thus improve ourselves.

Humor is also used as an ideological construct to define societal norms. Jokes and the use of comedy in the social context are deemed to have the effect of social acceptance and perceptions of normalcy (Berger, 1995). The underlying function of telling a joke is to strengthen the teller's and listener's identity, and demonstrate that one is "normal" by laughing at those who are supposedly not normal and deviant in that society (Berger, 1995). Rather than being a reflex reaction, laughter can also be typically used to communicate with, and therefore construct meaning for, others (Billig, 2005).

In the social setting, having a common sense of humor is like sharing a secret code and providing exclusivity (Critchley, 2002). Humor is local, which is often identified by particular

social groups possessing a shared set of customs and characteristics, and it is difficult to be understood by outsiders. Examining comedy can reveal the kind of culture and society in which we are situated. By understanding the functions of humor, one can gain an in-depth understanding of the fabric of a society.

Socially-Constructed Humor

The concept of social construction means that when people interact in a social system over time, they understand the mental representations of each other's actions, and thus develop a habituated reciprocal role play in relation to each other (Berger, 1995). If the role play is made available for other members in the society to participate in, these reciprocal interactions and their embedded meanings have already been institutionalized (Berger, 1995). For instance, what people find humorous is one of the embedded meanings in the institutional fabric of a society (Berger, 1995). Thus, in relation to its unique culture, every society possesses a different understanding of what humor is, what humor means to people, and how they respond to it. Thus, humor is both culture- and context-specific and the humor industry in different contexts also differs.

Humor in Context: Multicultural, Multiracial, Censored Singapore

It is important to understand the social context of Singapore before we understand how humor works here. Strategically located in the heart of Asia, Singapore is truly the Asia melting pot that attracts people from around the world. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics in 2008, foreigners comprised approximately 25 percent of Singapore's population (Statistics Singapore, 2009). The city-state had a population of 4.68 million in 2008, including 1 million non-Singaporeans.

This former British colony gained autonomy in 1959, and subsequently joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. In 1965, Singapore again became a reluctant nation, with sudden political independence on their hands, when it was forced to leave Malaysia (Chua, 1998). The process of Singapore nation building has had to meet the needs of "ethnic and linguistic pluralism" while instilling an overall sense of nationhood in its citizens (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 2). It is necessary, therefore, to practice equality, accommodate various racial needs, and ultimately contribute to the construction of a national identity (Hill & Lian, 1995).

Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has been ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP), which imposes control on the development of the media. Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore and the PAP, once said that the freedom of press and freedom of speech must be "subordinate to the overriding needs of Singapore and the primacy of purpose of an elected government" (Singapore press-pedia, 2008). In the past, media sensationalism has contributed to racial riots and bloodshed (Ang & Nadarajan, 1995). The need for tight censorship in this multi-racial and multi-religious society has thus been deemed necessary as a means by which social order and harmony can be maintained.

Singapore humor has therefore developed within the context of a high level of censorship. The constant fear of saying the "wrong" things puts a limit on what can be said, and what people choose to say. Thus, the restrictions on freedom of expression may partially account for the lackadaisical Singapore humor industry.

Culture-Sensitive Humor: Hybrid Rojak Culture

There is no universal joke, as what is amusing to some may not be so to others (Nevo, Nevo, & Leong, 2001). The humor of a particular group often seems pointless or puzzling to outsiders who lack knowledge about local cultural nuances. Although humor appears everywhere, its content and presentations vary in different societal and cultural contexts (Nevo et al., 2001).

Singapore is predominantly Chinese, with Malays, Indians, and Eurasians forming significant minority groups. The co-existence and cross-influence of different customs and cultures in daily life is so common that it is referred to locally as *rojak* culture (Chua, 1998). The Malay word *rojak* refers to a wild mixture of ingredients as *rojak* is a dish that mixes disparate ingredients. This so-called *rojak* culture is the result of the convergence of multiple cultures. The impact of local languages on English has also created Singlish—a portmanteau for Singapore English which shares linguistic features with English, Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese, and Mandarin (Wee, 2009). This unique language is commonly used in Singaporean humor.

Furthermore, Chinese cultural practices, due to the predominantly Chinese population of Singapore, have also played a major role in shaping Singapore humor. Usually, humor in Chinese culture has been marginalized and unappreciated. *Yau muk* (or *Youmo*), meaning *humor*, did not exist in the Chinese language until the Chinese scholar Lin Yutang coined this term in 1924 (Qian, 2007; Waters, 1998). Lin's translation was considered as a cross-cultural adaptation to bridge cultural meaning between East and West (Qian, 2007). According to Waters (1998), Chinese humor that appeals to the majority is lowbrow, physical, and down to earth. As humor changes over time, many Chinese have become westernized, even in their sense of humor, as in the case of modern Singaporeans.

Singapore's Humor Industry

As residents of a small country with few or no natural resources, Singaporeans tend to focus on the need to remain strong and competitive to survive, resulting in low tolerance for failure (Nevo, Nevo, & Leong, 2001). Working in the volatile humor industry does not present a typical successful career, so only a few Singaporeans devote themselves to this profession.

Singapore's humor industry in this study encompasses television comedy, stand-up comedy, and theatre. The only broadcaster, MediaCorp, is the hand that shaped the growth of television comedy. Its production of sitcoms and comedy shows has fostered many local comedic entertainers who appealed to a mass audience. Stand-up comedy and theatre

performances are driven by a small group of local comedians, such as Kumar, Hossan Leong, and Irene Ang. Their charisma and talent have attracted a niche audience.

Although Singapore films are not included in the scope of this research, they are an important part of Singapore's humor industry. The origin of Singapore's humor industry can be traced to the start of the local films industry. In the 1950s, P. Ramlee produced some of the first comedic films, *Bujang Lapok* (meaning *Confirmed Bachelor*), which criticized the Malay society's weaknesses (Millet, 2006). Later comedic films re-surfaced in 1995, such as the black comedy *Mee Pok Man*, and the most successful local comedy of all time, *I Not Stupid* by the local director/actor Jack Neo. *Mee Pok Man* was the first local movie to win the Singapore International Film Festivals' Silver Screen Awards and became an inspiration for many local films (Millet, 2006). While the plots of these films may differ, it is clear that the directors focused on Singapore-related current affair issues, ranging from its education system and foreign worker issues, to loan sharks. The winning formula for local films is to address the issues or themes that arouse Singaporeans' interest at the present moment.

The resurgence of local comedy films came as a breath of fresh air for Singaporeans because filmmakers were willing to be their "megaphone on the issues of daily life" in a state where citizens had to watch what they say (Walsh, 2002). Local comedy films often make social commentaries on uniquely Singaporean phenomena. For instance, *I Not Stupid* discusses heartland problems faced by typical Singaporean students going through the discussion of primary education system. Another comedic film, *Money No Enough*, also directed by Jack Neo, was released in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. It became an immediate box-office hit and Singapore's all-time highest-grossing film, as the film's dialogue was an entertaining mishmash of Hokkien, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Singlish, and most importantly, it served as an effective satire of certain aspects of Singaporean culture during the late 1990s (Sanjuro, 2005). Hence, the success of comedic films depends largely on whether the audience can relate to the humorous plots shown on the screen. Usually, successful Singapore comedy films address relevant local issues and use Singlish and a mix of dialects that reflect the situation of the multicultural, multilingual, multiracial state country.

Television sitcoms and variety shows are influential humor products. Television comedy was kick-started by *Comedy Night*, a Chinese comedy variety show that ran from 1990 to 2000, which made it the most long-lasting show in Singapore's TV history. In 1994, *Under One Roof*, the first English sitcom, was produced and became a big success. It won numerous awards for Singapore and paved the way for local sitcoms in English. Both television shows share similarities in their use of slapstick, physical humor, and Singlish, which has evidently appealed to Singaporeans and received consistently high ratings. Before the advent of cable television, this was the heyday of locally-produced comedy shows broadcast by terrestrial television. Afterwards, locally produced comedy faced strong competition from Western sitcoms and comedy shows on cable television and pay channels.

In the past five years, lavishly-produced local comedy theatre has led the expansion of Singapore's humor market (Seah, 2008). The local market of comedy theatre plays is estimated to be worth about $3 million annually, according to Dr. Robert Liew. For instance, *Dim Sum Dollies*, with local actresses Selena Tan, Pamela Oei, and Emma Yong, has grown

from a five cabaret show to a 12-day fest at the Esplanade's 1,900-seat theater from 2002 and 2005, and stand-up comedians can earn up to $5,000 at a corporate dinner and dance (Ong, 2007). Singapore has three active venues for stand-up comedy: TakeOut Comedy hosts a weekly open mic event to help develop local comedians, while both Howl at the Moon and The Comedy Club Asia at DXO primarily feature international comics monthly. Kumar, a drag queen who has performed in Singapore for more than 17 years, is Singapore's leading stand-up comedian. Another famous homegrown comedian, Hossan Leong, who started his stand-up career performing "pro-bono" at theatre fundraisers, has now moved on to doing 20-minute slots at corporate events for a fee of $1,500 (Ong, 2007). This shows that the local humor industry has grown significantly over the years. Singapore also holds an annual International Comedy Festival with performances from cabarets and both stand-up and theatre shows.

Methodology

From August to October 2008, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with key players in Singapore's humor industry, including seven local comedy artists (stand-up comedians, theatre actors, and television comedians) and six producers and writers. Street interviews were conducted to obtain opinions from locals about their perceptions of Singapore humor. The details of the interviewees can be seen in Table 1.

From September 2008 to December 2008, we also observed and filmed the dynamics and interaction of local comedy scenes, including stand-up comedy shows, the rehearsal of comedic theatre production, and the filming of television programs for MediaCorp.

This qualitative research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of Singapore humor?
2. How is Singapore's comedy industry (television comedy, stand-up comedy, and comedy theatre) shaped and constructed by key social actors (content creators, audience, government, and society)?

The interview questions for the general public included the characteristics of Singapore humor, Singaporeans' preferred humor style, and views of the local comedy industry. The in-depth interviews with content creators dealt with how they created humor, what kinds of challenges they faced in terms of market and regulations, and the status and future of the humor industry. As for the month-long observations, the rich observational data in the production scenes were used to supplement and triangulate the interview content.

Table 1.
List of Interviewees

Interviewees	Designation/Occupation	Interview Time
Christian Chua	Motivational Speaker and Part-Time Stand-Up Comedian	October 13, 2008
Hossan Leong	Stand-up Comedian, TV, and Theatre Comedian	November 4, 2008
Irene Ang	CEO of Fly Entertainment and Stand-Up/TV Comedienne	May 19, 2008
Lim Kay Siu	TV and Theatre Actor/Comedian	November 27, 2008
Neo Swee Lin	TV and Theatre Actress/Comedian	November 27, 2008
Jonathan Lim	Local Comedy Stage/TV Actor on New Comedy Series, Wrinkles	November 27, 2008
Kerry Ball	CEO of Howl At The Moon, Singapore's only stand-up comedy club	September 18, 2008
Lee Thean-Jean	Writer, Director, and TV Producer	October 13, 2008
Moses Lim	TV Actor/Comedian	October 13, 2008
Ng Swee San	Theatre Producer	September 12, 2008
Marcus Goh	TV Comedy Writer	September 5, 2008
Wu Min Xiu	TV Comedy Director and Writer	September 5, 2008
Neil Humphreys	Ex-Humor Columnist Writer for The Straits Times (local paper)	July 5, 2008

With respect to data analysis, Miles and Huberman's (1994) thematic data analysis approach was adopted in analysing the audiovisual material, transcribed interviews, observational field notes, and second-hand documents, so as to find out characteristics of Singaporean humor, presentations of Singapore's humor forms, and social construction of Singapore's humor industry. After analyzing the interview and observation data, the researchers found recurrent themes and uncovered news perspectives of social actors toward Singapore's comedy industry, which will be discussed in the next section.

Findings

Characteristics of Singapore Humor

As mentioned earlier in the literature review, humor is culture-sensitive and context-specific. From the street interviews, the majority of Singaporeans thought Singaporeans had little sense of humor. One interviewee mentioned that Singapore humor was "lame," indicating a common perception that local comedians make weak, unfunny, or inadequate jokes. While locals tended not to have a positive take on the standard of local humor, content creators like Lee Thean-Jean, the executive producer of *Calefare*, a local television comedy, stressed that Singapore humor was one of a kind and reflected its society, culture, and people:

> I think the unique thing about Singapore humor is that it's from Singapore. Do we really need to say it's low-brow or high-brow, slapstick or it's intelligent? I think we have a full range of those…the unique thing about it (Singapore humor) is that it's our stories, our characters, our society. (T. J. Lee, personal communication, October 13, 2008)

Similarly, local comedienne Irene Ang agreed that Singaporean humor appeared in things happening in everyday life that hit audience's hearts (personal communication, May 19, 2008).

Part-time stand-up comedian Christian Chua thought that Singapore humor's uniqueness was based on its multi-dimensional cultural influences, which made it different from Western comedies:

> We are such a diverse culture…we could use our local terminology...and in fact we have more room to play with humour than perhaps the western world. I think honestly, the problem is that we do not capitalize on that advantage and we just dwell strongly on exaggeration. (C. Chua, personal communication October 13, 2008)

To date, the majority of Singaporeans appear to like slapstick (e.g., of the sort perpetuated by Gurmit Singh and Jack Neo) and physical comedy (e.g., bang-to-the-wall jokes) because that is what they are used to (I. Ang, personal communication, May 19, 2008; H. Leong, personal communication, November 4, 2008; K. S. Lim, personal communication,

November 27, 2008). However, audiences have increasingly begun to enjoy the "intelligent humor" (I. Ang, personal communication, May 19, 2008) that stimulates them to think before they burst into laughter. In order to touch people's hearts, Singaporean humor must look for topics that reflect current affairs and common mentality, like Kiasuism (the fear of losing out in society):

> To tickle people by pointing out a certain truth about our own people and our own society, we can make it a little naughty. Aren't people like this, a little kiasu, hoarding, a little selfish, money minded. Not do it bitterly. You just do it in a naughty funny way. It's a great service to our society. (K. S. Lim, personal communication, November 27, 2008)

Besides, the use of Singlish and multi-lingual dialects are also popular elements in humor content creation because such elements are readily understood by local audiences and enable them to feel an immediate connection to the content. The locals feel connected and related:

> Partly it's because we haven't been able to use dialect on TV. There's actually a ruling that says you can only use so much dialect. And in the earlier days we couldn't use it as well. So we miss it obviously as soon as we hear it in the context of TV we love it. It's very natural that in sort of a restrictive environment like this, comedy is a great relief to everybody in the society. (K. S. Lim, personal communication, November 27, 2008)

As Singapore comedy lives within the box of censorship, there is always the fear that speech related to racial or political subjects can stir up anarchy or violence. Hossan Leong (personal communication, November 4, 2008) criticized the paranoia that has led to timidity in speaking out and even self-censorship in the creation of humor:

> We live in a society of paranoia…couldn't say this because "oh, you don't know who's listening, and we're get put in prison".... I think that the society of paranoia has to be broken, we have to be brave about things. (H. Leong, personal communication, November 4, 2008)

This fear of saying the wrong things will be further elaborated under the government and policy section.

Social Construction of Singapore's Humor Industry

Humor is socially constructed in a specific context over time and the reciprocal interactions among the actors are gradually institutionalized (Berger, 1995). In this section, we took a social construction of humor approach to analyze how key social actors shape the
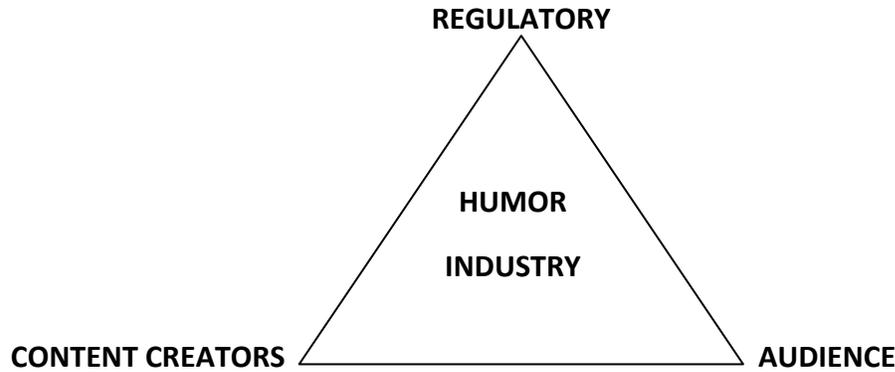
REGULATORY

HUMOR

INDUSTRY

CONTENT CREATORS   **AUDIENCE**

Figure 1. Social construction of humor industry

Singapore humor industry. We have identified three social actors that heavily intertwine with each other and shape the humor industry. They refer primarily to humor content creators/industry (TV comedy producers, professional comedians, scriptwriters), audience/market, and lastly the government/policy, like the Media Development Authority (MDA) and other relevant regulatory institutions.

Content Creator/Industry

Even though Singapore is developing into an entertainment hub, its brand of humor is increasingly derided for being too "cheesy" or "stale" (Seah, 2008). Comedies over-rely on stereotypical characters, hammy performances, and have a tendency to stick to family sitcoms, which are safe and familiar (Seah, 2008). Due to the small domestic market, Singapore only has a handful of comedians. Most local comedians do crossovers and shuttle between stand-up comedies, television comedies, and theatre. No matter what form their art takes, these artists recognize that the responsibility falls primarily on them to push the envelope in order to find out what makes people laugh.

Television Comedy

The strong foreign influence on Singapore's television comedies has shaped the production of local sitcoms in the past. Local television director, producer, and writer Lee said that Singaporean television producers typically imitate U.S. sitcom writers' styles when they produce local comedy shows:

I think when we did English comedies, in the early days, we were looking to U.S. sitcoms as a reference. So in those early days, you kind of have a lot of stories and

situations and characters. Even the beats and the timing were drawn from U.S.-based sitcoms. (T. J. Lee, personal communication, October 13, 2008)

The freelance theatre producer, Ng Swee San, thought that local sitcoms copied humorous sitcoms plots from U.S. or other western countries' television shows, which caused creativity to stagnate: "Singapore tries too hard to copy American humor…that's why it flopped. We should try to be real to ourselves and not copy other people" (S. S. Ng, personal communication, September 12, 2008).

Lee Thean-Jean (personal communication, October 13, 2008) emphasized the fact that copying western television comedy production practices made it hard to attract audiences here in Singapore, as these "clones" lacked cultural specifics and proximity:

> Perhaps what's missing down the line (in the process of copying elements from western sitcoms to Singaporean comedy) is an aspect of how this comedy reflects on certain issues where it concerns us, where it concerns Singapore and our society in general. (T. J. Lee, personal communication, October 13, 2008)

As Singapore's multicultural society becomes more and more internationalized, the boundaries between local and foreign influences on television comedy creation have become blurry. Since it is impossible and unnecessary to completely block out foreign influences, some content creators try to borrow foreign elements and blend them with local themes, traits, and motifs. This process can be regarded as the localization of content and presentation. For example, local comedies usually touch on Singapore's current affairs or topics of concern, like the high-pressure education system, inflexible bureaucracy, and some Singaporean cultural stereotypes. Local comedies also rely heavily on the use of Singlish and assorted Chinese dialects (mainly Hokkien and Cantonese). It is essential for television comedy producers to start exploring new local topics and novel methods of storytelling to attract and keep their audiences. Moreover, over-reliance on foreign stars has caused another problem in Singapore's television comedy creation, because it may threaten local comedy sitcoms and local entertainers (T. J. Lee, personal communication, October 13, 2008; S. S. Ng, personal communication, September 12, 2008) echoed this thought and used popular local sitcoms, like *Under One Roof* and *Phua Chu Kang,* as examples to show that entirely local casts have also made successful shows.

While content creators localize the western concepts and add cultural proximity (e.g., local topics, Singlish) in content presentation, they should also improve creativity in the scriptwriting and production. The stagnant humor industry, according to local comedians Christian Chua (personal communication, October 13, 2008) and Moses Lim (personal communication, October 13, 2008), was partly caused by a fixed formulaic approach to create "safe" television programs for the mainstream audience. The scriptwriters obey the rules to have certain proportions of lipstick jokes or numbers of jokes shown in a certain period of time. The mentality to meet the "perceived" needs of local audience has unfortunately led to

lower quality of the television comedy. Thus, more and more young people prefer to watch cable television comedies or surf online to view MediaCorp's local sitcoms.

Besides, according to local comedienne Irene Ang, writers nowadays are stretched more thinly than in the past. As Ang recalled, previously 10 writers worked on one episode of *Phua Chu Kang*, a very popular local sitcom; in contrast, television comedy now is not done by any "unified comedy writing team" (I. Ang, personal communication, May 19, 2008). That is, the television scriptwriters must do multitasks, including write comedies, commercials, corporate videos, and other genres. They may not specialize in writing humorous plots. Especially, Singapore's television production must serve multi-racial and multi-language needs. Inevitably, reducing the number of television comedy writers deteriorates the quality of television comedy content.

Stand-Up Comedy

As for Singapore's stand-up comedy, its challenges are the lack of performing opportunities and venues. Singapore's stand-up comedy was first introduced by an Australian's exploitation of an apparent "market gap." Kerry Ball, the CEO of Howl at The Moon, who launched the first local comedy club in Singapore, surprisingly found that nobody really did any form of stand-up comedy across Asia, although the comedy scene is rife in major western cities (K. Ball, personal communication, September 18, 2008). Ball's observations reflect the absent stand-up comedy scenes in Singapore and the difference of comedy culture between Singapore and other western metropolitan contexts in the past.

To date, there are three active venues for stand-up shows (i.e., TakeOut Comedy, Howl at The Moon, the Comedy Club Asia at DXO) and one annual comedy festival. A few local comedic entertainers, like Kumar and Hossan Leong, have become recognized by local audiences, showing the growth of local stand-up comedians over the years. "There's a big mixture of people out there and I really want to sort of push the envelope and really start bringing all sorts of different nationalities into comedy," K. Ball (personal communication, September 18, 2008) said, marking a growing shift in the nationality of the participants in the humor industry here. While more international comedic entertainers join in the performance, local artists like Irene Ang, Hossan Leong and Moses Lim still stress the importance of increasing local comedy venues, so as to attract more people to devote themselves to this profession and give them opportunities to practice and polish their comedic performance.

Another inhibitor to the growth of the local humor industry is the Singaporean's fear of failure or the *kiasu* mindset (Hwang, Francesco, & Kessler, 2003). Irene Ang (personal communication, May 19, 2008) pointed out that youths have been taught to strive for success and shun failure, which is strongly linked to Singaporeans' inclination towards success and strong sense of practicality. Without strong financial incentives to draw potential entertainers into the comedy industry, Leong complained: "This business is so volatile. One minute you're there, one minute you're not. One minute you can earn some money, the next minute you're waiting for your next paycheck. It's very hard" (H. Leong, personal communication, November 4, 2008). Moses Lim, a famous local comedian and the grandfather of local

comedy, used the metaphor of "a clown in a circus" to describe the duality of this comedian job; that is to say, everyone loves the clown but "when it comes to the actual show, people will not go for the clown" (M. Lim, personal communication, October 13, 2008). This statement reveals the fact that comedians have difficulty making a good living and thus this prospect hinders potential entertainers from entering this volatile industry. Worrying about the future of Singapore's humor industry, Leong said, "We need people who're younger, who're more in tune, in line with what's on the ground now to tell jokes about what's happening" (H. Leong, personal communication, November 4, 2008). Yet, the unstable nature of the comedian jobs poses a great challenge to recruiting new blood for Singapore's humor industry.

Government and Policy

In a conservative society like Singapore, censorship has been viewed as a necessary and important tool to protect national and social interests. The role of regulations for Singapore's entertainment industry is not just for safeguarding the national interest, but at the same time reflects various values and spirits of the current society (MDA, 2010). However, Singapore society's increasing choices for arts and cultures have upset the status quo.

Censorship in Singapore disallows content that harms public order and national interests. Sensitive issues, like religion, race, and promotion of alternative lifestyles (e.g., being homosexual) are regarded as creative taboos. While censorship is justified based on historical and socio-political grounds ("better be safe than sorry" mindset), it has been largely accepted and supported by Singaporeans, because they view it as a necessity for the society to function and to maintain peace and harmony (Ang, 1995). As for content regulation, the scripts of stand-up comedies, television comedies, and theatre shows must be submitted to the content regulatory body, the MDA, for approval. If the MDA finds any content too "cross-the-perimeters," it will slam it down or take the inappropriate parts out (H. Leong, personal communication, November 4, 2008). Usually, stand-up comedy and theatre shows have looser control in content censorship, compared to television comedy.

There has been a long debate that strict regulations and creativity are opposing forces, as censorship usually inhibits the development of creativity and social capital. Strict content regulation has been blamed for the lack of diversity and vibrancy in Singapore humor products. Hossan Leong (personal communication, November 4, 2008) opined that the government and content regulation have unavoidably affected the development of Singapore's humor industry, partly because the MDA attempted to insert some subliminal messages in the original scripts which may make the comedies preachy and reduce their entertainment value.

Hossan Leong (personal communication, November 4, 2008) also recalled that, due to the concern of causing an "international incident," the MDA requested him to remove a song related to Malaysia's ex-Prime Minister from his stand-up show, but he refused to do so:

> If I took the song out of my show, the routines would be…it wasn't…my artistic integrity will be in question, so I said 'No, I'll sing it.' And I continue, [and] then I got hold up. (H. Leong, personal communication, November 4, 2008)

During the interview, Leong stressed his apolitical attitude and questioned why his telling of life in Singapore might cause international problems and why Singaporeans were not allowed to laugh at themselves. This incident reflected the tip of the iceberg of the tension that censorship causes between the content creators and the regulatory body. Moreover, the restrictions which comedians face when dealing with sensitive subject matters might have a chilling effect on their creative efforts for humor products.

Lim Kay Siu and Neo Swee Lin, both comedians who have been involved in many television comedies and theatre performances, acknowledged the restrictions on humor creation and emphasized the necessity to loosen up the government control of the content:

> We are a country that has been aware of the power of television and we've had freedom of expression issues in this country because we're moving from third world to second world to first world…I mean we have a system now that says we have to think outside of the box so the authorities know we have to start changing but old habits die hard. (S. L. Neo, personal communication, November 27, 2008)

Lim Kay Siu (personal communication, November 27, 2008) mentioned that they used to have their scripts censored and altered in theatre plays, but now they have more freedom in performance and creativity.

An example of humor content creators who have walked on the borderline of content regulation and made fun of contentious social issues could be seen in the *3rd Extraordinary V Conference* in September 2009. The V conference series was produced by Fly Entertainment (a local entertainment group). As the show tackled controversial local issues, its advertisement described it as "politically incorrect, risqué, and hysterical madness." The content creators carefully hired a legal counsel to ensure that "touchy" topics were "handled with care," the references were not "too offensive," and the laughs would not "backfire." This could be regarded as a positive movement wherein the content creators made full expression of their creativity in a sarcastic and humorous way within the boundaries of the existing censorship box. It also indicated that content censorship has gradually shifted from government regulation to social responsibility.

Audience/Market.

The findings showed that the general public and humor content creators perceived Singaporeans as lacking a sense of humor. Lee Thean-Jean (personal communication, October 13, 2008) felt that Singaporeans did not dare to laugh at themselves. Wu Min Xiu (personal communication, September 5, 2008), a local television comedy writer and director, pointed out that "a lot of us get very offended, we're afraid to laugh at ourselves," which is a

notable common trait of the Asian culture, especially in Singapore. In contrast, only a few of those interviewed thought Singaporeans are able to laugh at themselves. Hossan Leong (personal communication, November 4, 2008) regarded it as a stereotype and misconception of less uptight Singaporeans. Neil Humphreys, a writer and columnist, stated recently in his book about life in Singapore that Singaporeans could laugh at themselves, but it is their politicians who could not (Humphreys, 2007).

Singapore is a multiracial and multicultural society. Humor must cater to the various needs of its heterogeneous audience. Despite differing tastes, Singaporeans generally prefer comedies which target Singaporeans' idiosyncrasies. Hossan Leong (personal communication, November 4, 2008) pointed out that the older Singaporeans prefer to watch the old-fashioned local comedy, *Phua Chu Kang*. In comparison, the younger generation prefers sophisticated western comedies rather than slapstick humor or local idiosyncrasies in television comedies. Local television production should regard its waning viewership as a warning and undertake efforts to improve its subjects, performance, and styles of its sitcoms or variety shows to appeal to the youth.

When observing a local comedy club, we found the majority of the comedians' audience was expatriates, not local Singaporeans. According to Kerry Ball (personal communication, September 18, 2008), Singaporeans who usually held a practical mindset would not pay for live comedian performance. Also, their face-conscious quality led to the small number of local stand-up comedians and their surrounding audience (K. Ball, personal communication, September 18, 2008). Christian Chua (personal communication, October 2008) mentioned candidly, "Unless people start paying comedians, there's no reason why talented people should go into comedy."

The analyses showed that the three identified social actors (content creator, audience/ market, government/policy) have dramatically shaped Singapore's humor industry: the government/censorship and market/audience were the forces that held back the development of Singapore's humor industry and the local content creators made efforts to create creative and localized content, and foster talented local entertainers and comedy venues. The main reasons for Singapore's stagnant humor industry include (a) Singaporeans' face-consciousness and practical mindsets, (b) the imitation (of the old and the West) in humor content creation, (c) the restrictions of censorship, and (d) the lack of local venues and market demand.

Discussion and Conclusion

Comedy, a reflection of social norms (Berger, 1995), is usually highly context-specific (Critchley, 2002). This study shows how the unique characteristics of Singapore humor are constructed by its multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-racial society by analyzing production of television comedy, stand-up comedy, and theatre plays. Exploring the comedy industry has revealed much about Singapore's societal values and cultural traits. Being a multi-racial society means that there is a constant need to maintain racial harmony, and as a preventive measure for possible racial riots (as seen in the past), Singaporeans tend to be very

careful with their words, especially when touching on racial issues. Having multiple cultures has given birth to a wide spectrum of possibilities to explore in Singapore humor. Comedians make use of what locals know best to strike a chord with them and to provide comic relief in a city-state that is governed by tight regulations.

From the findings, it is evident that there is tension between content regulation and humor content creation. There are restrictions and taboos in humor content creation, such as political innuendoes. The stand-up comedian Leong's case is a good example: he got into trouble with the MDA because his jokes were considered potentially dangerous. While politics and racial jokes in comedies are often used in the United States, they are rarely seen in Singapore's highly sensitive and conservative society (Peterson, 2001). On the one hand, it is crucial for humor entertainers to bear in mind that Singapore is still a conservative Asian society and this is strongly reflected in the way the locals produce and consume their local media and entertainment. No matter how cynical and sarcastic the content of humor products, they should respect Asian values and beliefs. On the other hand, the humor artists keep trying to think outside of the box and to make changes to the current system:

> We have a system now that says we have to think outside of the box so the authorities know we have to start changing but old habits die hard. So it's our responsibility as artists to push the envelope a little bit not so much that we get into jail. (M. Lim, personal communication, October 13, 2008)

While content regulation in Singapore has loosened up along the years, the local content creators and entertainers learn how to produce funny content within the creative box of content censorship. Clearly understanding the legal boundaries, comedians in the *2009 Extraordinary V Conference* challenged Singapore standards and mocked controversial issues, such as religious and homosexual subjects mentioned in the recent Aware saga, thereby attracting unrestrained laughter from the audience.

As a cosmopolitan state country, Singapore is highly susceptible to foreign influences in its culture and media. Content creators face fierce competition from foreign television comedies and stand-up comedians. The abundant choices of humorous shows on cable television dilute the audience for local television comedies shown on terrestrial television. Localized humor has elements of local language (Singlish and other dialects) and recognizable traits and culture of the locals (such as Kiasuism, the emphasis on education, etc.). Since it is not possible to stop foreign influences, such as U.S. sitcoms or western stand-up shows, and neither are these influences necessarily negative, local content creators must overcome the bottleneck of content creation by adapting certain characteristics of successful western comedies and integrate them into local shows and to create a brand of their own. And by doing so, Singapore's humor products can then subtly cross cultural boundaries and reach the audience's heart.

In general, the findings gathered from this study have shown the significant role that key social actors (content creators, audience, and institution) have played in shaping the development of the local humor industry since its early beginnings, in the types of comedy

content created and the many restrictions imposed on them. The current status quo of the humor industry is one of stagnation. The content creators showed their dissatisfaction with Singaporeans' practical mindsets, competitive but stiff market, and censorship restrictions, and the majority perceived Singaporeans as lacking a sense of humor. Despite these challenges, the content creators in this humor industry remain generally positive and hopeful towards their future.

As little research has been conducted on the humor industry in Singapore, this study has enhanced the understanding of how the multicultural, multiracial, multilingual society constructs and shapes its humor industry. It also provided insightful analyses regarding the interplay between culture, creativity, and censorship. As for its limitations, because the history and development of the Singapore humor industry have rarely been documented, it has been a challenge to write its trajectory shaped by the three aforementioned forces. Future research should expand on the oral histories of Singapore's humor industry for a better understanding of the issues addressed in this work. Such histories can also be informed by including Singapore's comedy films, which have not been included in this current study.

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