



Webinar

Brief 73:2021

COMEDY

as A Creative Industry



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Comedy as a *Creative Industry*



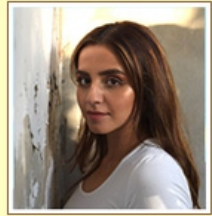
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Akbar Chaudry
Comedian & Musician



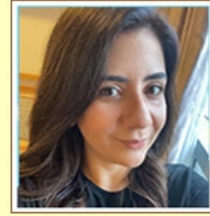
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Comedian & Writer



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Comedian, Actress,
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Fitnes Enthusiast



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Comedian, Sociologist
& Writer



Sehar Tariq
Comedian & Feminist



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Vice Chancellor,
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Development Economics



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Preamble

This webinar aims to initiate a discussion on the potential of comedy as a driver of joy, shaper of culture. And catalyst for socioeconomic prosperity and to debunk popular myths surrounding the topic. How can Pakistan facilitate its comedians, especially in a time of disruptive digital media technologies that are reshaping the artistic landscape around the globe?

Key Messages

Shehzad Ghias

- Comedy clubs can be counted on one hand in Pakistan: there is no comedy industry as such. Comedians need to appeal to audiences based on their brand rather than as part of an ongoing and frequent creative endeavor – which suits certain personality types and not others.
- It is unreasonable to expect comedians to 'pull themselves up by their bootstraps' - Azizi and Atif Aslam etc., are the exceptions to the rule. People whose livelihoods are dependent on their art cannot rely on the current state of the artistic landscape, which is characterized by a shortage of infrastructure and efficient monetization procedures.
- Televisions are an introductory case study: shows were duplicated once the initial ones got off the ground, bringing in other comedians and incentivizing channels to host more talk shows, etc., that reeled in audiences and created a market for that specific variant of comedy.
- The public isn't ill-informed. They have been made so through a plan: it is crucial to avoid 'punching down' and engaging in comedy that preserves the status quo and targets vulnerable groups by perpetuating stereotypes.
- Social media platforms such as TikTok are frequently banned in Pakistan despite their popularity, particularly among working-class communities that leveraged it as a means of spreading joy through short videos.
- Politics is an essential aspect of comedy: conservative voices are not just accepted but also promoted by the state, meaning there is a tradeoff for comedians between preserving their conscience and generating revenues. There is no such thing as apolitical comedy: anything said can be taken politically, so rather than compelling comedians to dilute their content, it ought to be left to audiences' discretion about what they choose to consume.
- Different definitions and ideas of vulgarity: which is ultimately a social construct because other groups differently perceive other things – therefore, the idea of trying to control content is always going to fail (whether that is culturally/socially or through the state apparatus)

Akbar Chaudry

- The comedy paradigm has shifted in recent years. Its standup variant barely existed in 2010 but is slowly beginning to gain traction. Audiences need to educate on new forms of comedy and be open to experiencing art that they may be initially unfamiliar with - we are seeing interest building up in that regard.
- Essential to explore new forms of comedy that go beyond television programs and rethink art forms, which are evolving all the time. Culture ought to develop alongside – and digital platforms such as social media may help leverage this.
- Comedians and other artists can tap into online sources for revenue streams as a starting point, which allows for enough earnings to support monthly expenses. Audiences may offer support through different avenues – whether that is through simple views (Google AdSense revenues) or purchasing tickets to comedy events.

Sehar Tariq

- A formal industry is not necessarily needed: many creatives in Pakistan pursue their art regardless, but the infrastructure is still lacking. Comedy needs to be seen as valuable in its own right rather than as an activity that generates economic growth because there is nothing more important than laughter in life. In other words, the commodification of everything must be resisted. There is a need to educate the public to perceive creativity as excellent and valuable.

- Competition exists on online platforms but making appearances on mainstream channels such as television is difficult due to the skewed nature of the industry, which is dominated by a select few individuals that curate the content as per the channel's larger corporate objectives. Online monetization requires audiences in the millions to be sustainable – which prompts smaller comedians to opt for other channels such as corporate collaborations.
- Venues lack basic infrastructure: sound system, lighting, stage, ticketing procedures, etc., are all lacking in makeshift spaces for performances such as restaurants, etc. which makes it challenging to execute events smoothly and generate revenues.
- A group such as Auratnaak is working hard to avoid appealing exclusively to elites. There has been a culture of comedy in the subcontinent since the Mughal era in courts, etc. Auratnaak looks to preserve that culture by communicating in local languages, etc., to adopt an inclusive approach that does not make ordinary people feel excluded/alienated.
- In Pakistan, a comedy that challenges power players will artists into trouble – thus defeating the point of wit and humor, which has historically served as a tool for resistance, defiance, questioning, satirizing, etc. There is a grave need to stop constantly banning social media due to hurt political/religious/cultural sensitivities. In the era of social media, consumers have the power to curate their feeds as per their preferences to allow the industry to cater to a variety of tastes. We need to let people enjoy things, derive joy and laughter from content they want, and enable them to make that decision for themselves.
- Conclusion: there needs to be greater certainty (in terms of infrastructure and censorship, etc.) so that comedians don't have to hesitate before performing constantly. So a general framework or set of incentive structures ought to be in place. Still, at the same time, it is important not to homogenize the industry and force artists to adopt a select few revenue streams to be successful. In other words, comedians need to be perceived as individuals with the freedom to choose their business model to cater to different types and levels of scale. The unstructured nature of the comedy landscape means income streams are unreliable for most, which also compels them to handle all aspects of the process independently.

Mavra Bari

- When artists aren't granted spaces, they need to take it, like Auratnaak. It is a troupe of female feminist comedians that express themselves through comedy and social commentary, creating space for females as part of the process.
- Comedians aren't sabotaging themselves in Pakistan: a lack of spaces means monetizing the art is always tricky - the only feasible option is to leverage technology through YouTube, Instagram, etc.
- For female comedians, there is always the threat of trolling, violence, harassment, etc., which compels them to think several times before saying something or performing somewhere. It is vital to avoid compelling comedians to avoid particular topics purely to feel safe. A crucial aspect of this is the need to go beyond the Islamization of the 1980s, which has functioned to equate the politics of that era to definitions of religion. In other words, we have to stop linking everything to Islam as a means of exerting power/control and stifling creatives.
- The problem with renting out auditoriums (especially government) is the excessive creative control over the content. Unless the government starts actively promoting free-flowing comedy, there can never be a conducive environment for artists. Comedy is a means for social commentary through satire etc., to challenge power structures. It should be incubated in a bottom-up democratic way (similar to Auratnaak) that isn't policed and controlled in terms of its content. Dependency on funders (and their creative preferences) is not feasible over the long run.

Sheherazade Noor

- A lack of comedy clubs and other venues means the art is more commodified because it compels comedians to work with brands that restrict their creative freedoms. It is the only alternative to live shows. Netflix specials are possible in the West because of repeated performances that allow comedians to enhance their craft through repeated iterations, experimentation, etc.

- The problem with performing at restaurants etc., is censorship: comedians can't talk freely about specific topics due to the constant threat of violence and harassment - plus, spatially, if a restaurant isn't structured for performances, it wouldn't engage audiences.
- The cost of production is high for video production, editing, marketing, etc. Ad revenues from YouTube etc., require you to be dedicated to the platform full time (such as Moore) – and this kind of specialization is not possible for most comedians who cannot afford media/logistics teams.
- Beyond investments in infrastructure, there is a need to invest in people that care about the industry and can be granted the autonomy to shape the landscape in an independent capacity: important to look at this broadly and take all stakeholders into account to foster a facilitative environment.
- Companies approach artists through PR companies that take double the amount that artists do. Also, corporations take too long to pay: up to 60 working days after delivering the content (why should artists be waiting that long to be paid?) Furthermore, the process is too arduous - corporations need to establish separate procedures for their collaborations with creatives. With corporations, the legal processes for changing/negotiating contracts, etc., are also always tricky/impossible for most comedians unfamiliar with what to look for.
- It is not feasible to have an agent unless one is an established celebrity in the commercial industry - this means comedians need to do everything from PR, videography/photography, legal procedures, marketing, social media, logistics, etc., which shouldn't be the job of an artist.
- Artists in Pakistan are compelled to operate in several different areas to support themselves (freelance writing, acting, comedy, corporate collaborations, etc.) – and this eats up their time and prevents them from focusing exclusively on their art.

Younis B. Azeem

- In New York, comedy clubs are found in every street corner: the ubiquity of venues creates a facilitating environment for comedians and other artists.
- Standup comedy has different dynamics than other forms of comedy: in Pakistan, the primary issue is a lack of venues that should be funded, subsidized, incentivized, etc. to create opportunities for artists in a manner that lays the foundations of a self-sustaining industry that benefits all stakeholders – the venue, the audience, and the comedians themselves.
- As a curator of comedy in Pakistan, other problems faced were censorship and difficulties in setting prices: for the latter, there is no established framework or rule of thumb, so the negotiation process is always immensely arduous.
- Big theaters have to be filled up to be profitable, and for smaller comedians, this is not feasible: therefore, specific spaces need to be built for particular purposes. It is not just about setting up stages in a generic sense, but those customized to standup comedy shows in terms of their spatial organization.
- Corporate funding involves a lot of policing and compels comedians to restrict the creative process rather than independent content producers. It may be feasible in the short run or as a means of making ends meet. It cannot be relied upon as a sustainable strategy.



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