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## Exploring the Role of Humour in Self-Help South African Digital Content: A Critical Analysis of the Babu Dokotela TV Show on YouTube

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**Abstract:** Scholarship on humour in the South African context has been dominated by a focus on stand-up comedy and its role in confronting dominant discourses of the time. There is a lacuna in the study of humour and its deployment in digital content focusing on self-help. This paper focused on the content of the Babu Dokotela TV Show that is housed on YouTube and that has 63,600 subscribers with over 1300 videos uploaded to date. The show is helmed by a traditional healer who uses humour to address sombre issues of contemporary South Africa such as pain, suffering, and poverty. Jokes are made to induce laughter when various critical issues are discussed, and the humour is also evident with the cameraman, who is always chuckling in the background. Humour in this case is subversive and a form of resistance as the messages that are conveyed speak extensively to the subject of self-help and of overcoming adversity. The article posed the following questions: 1) What production conventions are used in the *Babu Dokotela TV Show* and how do they relate to self-help and humour? 2) In what way is humour deployed to convey and simplify the complexities of themes such as poverty, pain and suffering in the *Babu Dokotela TV Show*? Bakhtin's carnivalesque theorisation was applied as a theoretical and conceptual framework. The carnivalesque is centred on the lived experiences of ordinary people in relation to power and the status quo. A multimodal discourse analysis was conducted on ten (10) purposively selected episodes of the Babu Dokotela TV Show. The analysis focused on narratives and visuals that use humour to convey the unequal power dynamics in the present epoch.

**Keywords:** carnivalesque; digital humour; humour; multimodal discourse analysis; self-help content; street talk

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### EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 30 May 2025

Revised: 04 October 2025

Accepted: 07 October 2025

Published: 25 November 2025

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v7i2.2951>

### Introduction

Technological disruptions manifested through social networks and video-sharing platforms have broadened the scope of humour, allowing novel forms and formats of jocularity to arise. These new forms are exemplified by succinct and witty clips on TikTok and Instagram Reels, as well as extensive segments on YouTube. Humour is essential to humanity, as it aids individuals in managing life's challenges. This is evidenced by the appearance of laughter even during challenging periods such as bereavements and pandemics (Mpofu, 2021). The Global South has encountered significant crises, including political

violence, economic instability leading to poverty, unemployment, corruption, and non-democratic practices by certain regimes, among others. As these challenges persist, humour in the form of jokes and satire remains prevalent, serving to alleviate and soothe individuals from life's adversities. Using digitalisation and its democratic essence, ordinary people now have access to tools that enable them to create content and express their own worldviews. In the context of humour, this signifies that comedy is not solely the domain of mainstream creators, who have transitioned from theatrical stages to digital platforms, but also new creatives offering fresh insights into the essence of comedy are included (Msimanga et al., 2021). Furthermore, mainstream media is subject to regulation with numerous checks and balances that may restrict the entry of amateur and alternative talent.

It is undeniable that the advent of social networks and video-sharing platforms has disrupted the hegemony of mainstream comedy whilst expanding the perimeters of the genre (Hurst & Donian, 2024; Msimanga et al., 2022). The *Babu Dokotela TV Show* is representative of the expansion or creeping in of the comedy genre into self-help content. The concept of self-help media in the context of this paper refers to any form of content that aims to offer guidance, advice or coping strategies, problem-solving or any interventions for improving one's life. The content can be in the form of articles, videos, podcasts and online courses. The critical concept is to help individuals become self-aware by understanding their strengths and weaknesses, ultimately for them to devise various strategies to cope with life's challenges (Rens, 2019; Rimke, 2000). This research exclusively examines isiZulu self-help material presented by Babu Dokotela (D.E. Zuma), who identifies himself as a traditional and professional doctor. As per his own introduction on the programme, he is a self-proclaimed practitioner of traditional medicine, as he has not completed formal high school education. The programme targets individuals seeking African spiritual guidance with the belief that it can ultimately lead to socio-economic wellbeing. The *Babu Dokotela Show* is primarily hosted on YouTube and has garnered a following of 63,600 subscribers, along with an archive exceeding 1,300 videos as of the current date.

The paper poses the following research questions: 1) What production conventions are used in the *Babu Dokotela TV Show* and how do they relate to self-help and humour? 2) In what way is humour deployed to convey and simplify the complexities of themes such as poverty, pain and suffering in the *Babu Dokotela TV Show*

### **Literature review: Humour and self-help media**

Humour and comedy hold significant importance in African societies, serving as mechanisms for social commentary, cultural expression, and community development (Agbamu, 2024; Mpofu, 2021). In the South African context, stand-up comedy has become an influential medium for addressing topics related to race, politics, and identity. Comedians frequently employ satire to critique contemporary socio-political issues, thereby establishing a forum for reflection and dialogue. Foundational scholarship in the domain of humour underscores the psychological and sociocultural functions of humour (Emmanuel-Olowonubi, 2025; Mensah et al., 2023; Obadare, 2010). Humour manifests in diverse forms of expression, ranging from its central role in stand-up comedy to its application in the serious content of self-help (Kenny & Bell, 2014).

Recent research on self-help media in South Africa addressed the millennial demographic, with a particular emphasis on individuals residing in Johannesburg, who engage with such media for psychosocial advantages, expedited problem-solving, and as tools for coping (Rens, 2023). Participants characterize self-help texts as resources facilitating self-management and social engagement. These investigations associate the utilization of self-help media with identity formation, as these texts assist users in comprehending their societal roles. Rens (2019) examines the transformation of self-help texts within African print media, transitioning from conventional advice columns to digital formats. The advent of the Internet and the escalation of digitalization have considerably transformed access to self-help media, with digital platforms providing immediate access to self-help resources. Users of these digital platforms encounter content that aligns with their personal needs and experiences (Rens, 2023). Nehring and Kerrigan (2020) categorize self-help media as a genre that enforces specific moral standards conducive to a productive lifestyle. Many studies on self-help media, including that of Rens (2023), concentrate on middle-class, technologically proficient millennials, thus neglecting the perspectives of individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with constrained internet access. Furthermore, research in the realm of self-media frequently employs Western-centric frameworks, which fail to adequately consider the cultural diversity present in the Global South (Mutsvauro et al., 2021; Willems, 2014; Sommer, 2014). The studies primarily focused on interview data from respondents regarding their experiences with self-help media, significantly overlooking the implementation of content analysis on the consumed texts (Rens, 2023; Nehring & Kerrigan, 2020). Such analysis can facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the texts'

influence and implications. Emphasizing content analysis of self-help media would permit a thorough exploration of the themes and narratives embedded within the texts.

The studies have illuminated the various forms of gratifications individuals derive from consuming self-help media. This paper concentrates on the phenomenon of integrating humour within the self-help genre, a hybrid genre that remains relatively unexplored in scholarly research globally. Humour is gradually being integrated into self-help media in the endeavour to engage audiences and communicate complex ideas in an accessible manner. Carpenter (2005) and Davidson (2001) concur on the concept that humour can collapse barriers resulting in self-help interventions being perceived as less intimidating and more relatable. The placement of humour in self-help texts facilitates the critiquing of superficial promises of self-help and it also grants an exposé on the ridiculousness of self-improvement narratives (Carpenter, 2005). Moreover, this is not just for entertainment, but it encourages critical reflection among audiences. Self-help media is primarily based on confronting societal norms and individual anxieties which makes it susceptible to humour. Davidson (2001) avers that humour in self-help media acts as a coping mechanism as it allows individuals to laugh at their struggles. Furthermore, humour advances resilience among users of self-help texts in group settings as they bond over shared experiences whilst forging a supportive environment. It is worth noting that most studies on humour in self-help media have not embarked on analysing how humour is integrated into various self-help formats. Additionally, most literature tends to focus on the value of self-help content without interrogating its comedic elements. Few studies have deployed a content analysis to evaluate the use of humour in self-help media with a strong focus on qualitative interviews or theoretical discussions rather than empirical content analysis that could provide insights into forms and techniques of humour in self-help materials (Nehring & Kerrigan, 2020; Rens, 2019; McHoul & Miller, 2002). There is also scarce research on humour in self-help media and its role in non-Western environments and this limits the understanding of cultural variations in humour and its receptions in different societies. The convergence of African humour traditions with self-help discourse in digital media represents a significant cultural phenomenon that merits continued scholarly attention.

### **Theoretical and conceptual framework**

This study employed Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque to analyse humour embedded within self-help digital texts. The theory is predicated on the concept of the carnival, which constituted prevalent cultural festivities in medieval Europe and subsequently in certain regions of the Caribbean (Msimanga et al., 2021). Through his examination of carnivals, Bakhtin subsequently established the theory of the carnivalesque, which as a concept, advocates for a rebellion against the status quo and its hierarchical authority (Ngoshi, 2013). The theory posits an approach to social interaction characterized by chaos, subversion, and the inversion of established order and norms. Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as disruptive, as it challenges the social order by facilitating the temporary suspension of hierarchies and conventions. The notion espouses a playful, bohemian ethos that encourages creativity and freedom of expression. Laughter is utilized as a robust instrument for critiquing the social order, confronting social constraints through humour, parody, and satire (Stevens, 2009). Traditional values and power dynamics are inverted to allow conditions for dialogue to transpire among various socio-political structures.

In the context of studying humour, the carnivalesque provides a schema to examine how satirical performances such as stand-up comedy, digital media or theatrical formats function as acts of resistance. Comedians deploy carnivalesque elements when they focus on social injustices, question dominating ideologies and by dissing political figures. The rebellion against the established order is not purely for entertainment but also to foster conditions whereby audiences reflect on their realities and inspire change (Mnatsakanyan, 2019). This is analogous to the role of self-help media as it too is created with the purpose of inspiring change in people. Bakhtin's theory stresses the transformative potential of humour as an instrument of challenging power dynamics and for understanding the complexities of the human experience. The framework aids significantly in the task of analysing humour in diverse contexts including African comedic forms of expression. African traditional healers are currently creating digital content as in the case of the *Babu Dokotela TV Show* to provide self-help advice to potential clientele. This is unprecedented and unconventional for African traditional healers who were previously known for their trade which was clandestine in nature. This is a disruption to the status quo as those who had for centuries been relegated to the periphery and frowned upon by modernity are divulging their secrets. In a carnivalesque setting, barriers are collapsed, and power inequalities are suspended which enables the unconventional forms of expression to assert their position (Stam, 1989). Papacharissi (2010, 151) attests that social media platforms produce "sarcasm, humour or satire which are equally important forms of political thought and expression". Drawing on the *Babu Dokotela TV Show*, the paper interrogates the insertion of humour into self-help content confronting poverty, pain and suffering in contemporary South Africa.

## Methodology

This qualitative study used video data drawn from the *Babu Dokotela TV Show* that is uploaded on YouTube. There are elements of cross-posting across other social media platforms, but the full videos are only available on YouTube hence this selection. Criterion-based purposive sampling was adopted to select ten (10) episodes with the highest number of views which attests to the popularity of the platform and its resonance with audiences. The selected cases have the potential to illuminate the research phenomenon. The high viewership represents cultural significant content that has received widespread attention and that is crucial for understanding dominant narratives. These episodes are critical as they captured public attention making them valuable for exploring since they achieved substantial social penetration. In terms of duration, the episodes range between 17 minutes and 50 minutes. Table 1 presents the unit of analysis.

**Table 1.** Titles, summaries of episodes and viewership numbers

<b>Title of the video</b>	<b>Number of views in thousands</b>
<p><b>1. <i>Iqiniso Ngoku Thwala (The truth about evil rituals used for wealth)</i></b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> In this thrilling episode, the host delves deep into the sinister realm of malevolent rituals, shedding light on the dark and dangerous pathways taken by those lured by the temptation of opulence and fortune. With chilling narration, the host uncovers the perilous consequences and ominous pitfalls that accompany this treacherous pursuit of material wealth, ensuring viewers are captivated by the daunting reality of these practices.</p>	159
<p><b>2. <i>Quality Biyela</i></b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> This captivating episode delves into the exhilarating world of micro-celebrity Quality Biyela, unraveling the fascinating journey of how he masterfully amassed a staggering number of devoted social media followers.</p>	105
<p><b>3. <i>Dr Kehlelezi Ungubani (Who is Dr Kehlelezi)</i></b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> This captivating episode delves into the intriguing world of Dr. Kehlelezi, a highly renowned and charismatic traditional healer whose reputation precedes him. As a shrewd businessman, Dr. Kehlelezi enjoys the spoils of a flamboyant lifestyle, marked by opulence and grandeur. His presence is both commanding and enigmatic, drawing the admiration and curiosity of those around him. The narrative intricately weaves the threads of his extraordinary life, painting a vivid picture of a man who is as much a mystery as he is a master of his craft.</p>	91
<p><b>4. <i>Imali enganayo (The money that one earns)</i></b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> The central dialogue revolves around individuals compelled to engage in time-honoured rituals with the aim of rectifying the ancestral oversights of their predecessors who failed to observe these sacred traditions with the necessary precision and reverence.</p>	63.5
<p><b>5. <i>Wenzi Zodwa Wabantu? (What have you done Zodwa Wabantu?)</i></b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> Despite centering around the charismatic and controversial Zodwa Wabantu, this episode casts a broader and more profound spotlight on the intricate and often tumultuous issues plaguing modern marriages. It delves deep into the intimate struggles of couples as they navigate the often heart-wrenching challenges of infertility, offering a raw and unfiltered exploration of the emotional and societal pressures that accompany these deeply personal yet universal dilemmas.</p>	63.5
<p><b>6. <i>Thabo Bester</i></b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> This episode dives into The chilling case of Thabo Bester. The convicted rapist and murderer who became South Africa's most notorious fugitive, brazenly outsmarting the justice system.</p>	59
<p><b>7. <i>Secret of Wealth</i></b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> Throughout this mesmerizing episode, the host boldly proclaims his extraordinary ability to bestow unimaginable wealth upon those who dare to believe. He passionately unveils the existence of an enigmatic magic potion, a concoction of mystical prowess, promising to empower individuals to triumph in casinos, winning million-dollar fortunes beyond their wildest dreams.</p>	48
<p><b>8. <i>Izinyanga Azivukelwa (Traditional healers are sexually impotent)</i></b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> This episode delves into the world of traditional healers who, while struggling with their own shortcomings, audaciously profess to wield the power to transform the lives of others. The host lays bare the façade, unmasking these individuals as nothing short of con artists, weaving a narrative of deception and illusion.</p>	45

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

Title of the video	Number of views in thousands
<p><b>9. Stop Alcohol</b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> The episode initially centres around providing essential guidance for those grappling with the devastating challenges of alcoholism, yet the host veers off course to delve into a myriad of other pressing issues, creating a dynamic and multifaceted discussion.</p>	44
<p><b>10. Uyafeba lomfazi (This woman is promiscuous)</b>  <b>Synopsis:</b> This episode passionately explores groundbreaking products designed to revolutionize women’s health, empowering them to take charge of their well-being with unprecedented vigour and vitality. It also delves deeply into celebrating the profound and indispensable role that women play in shaping and enriching society, highlighting their invaluable contributions and enduring influence.</p>	44

A multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) was applied to interrogate the content of the videos. Examining how multiple semiotic modes including visual imagery, embodied performance, linguistic choices, spatial arrangements, and audio elements work together to construct meaning (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010; Kress and Leeuwen 2006). This approach was particularly suited to analysing how humour operates across different communicative modes within the video segments. Drawing on social semiotics, MDA recognises that meaning making occurs through the interplay of various resources beyond language alone, including gestures, facial expressions, editing techniques, music, and on-screen text (Jewitt et al., 2016). The analysis involved close reading of the selected videos to retrieve multiple layers of meaning, extracting both surface-level content and deeper ideological patterns. This enhanced reading incorporated both verbal and non-verbal expressions, attending to what Norris (2004) terms “modal density”—the hierarchical relationships between different modes in constructing the message. Specifically, the analysis examined: (1) linguistic features such as word choice, tone, and comedic timing; (2) visual elements including framing, colour schemes, and composition; (3) embodied communication through gestures, posture, and facial expressions; (4) audio components including music, sound effects, and voice modulation; and (5) editing choices such as cuts, transitions, and pacing.

Thematic analysis was deployed as the primary analytical method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns across the selected video units. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), this study employed both semantic and latent approaches to thematic analysis. The semantic approach involved examining the explicit, surface-level meanings of the data, identifying overt instances of humour and their immediate referents within self-improvement discourse. However, recognizing that humour often operates through implication, subversion, and the unsaid, the analysis extended to a latent approach, which interrogates the underlying ideas, assumptions, ideologies, and conceptualizations embedded within the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This dual approach enabled exploration of how humour explicitly and implicitly constructs meaning about self-improvement, revealing tensions between aspirational messaging and satirical critique. The integration of multimodal discourse analysis with thematic analysis allowed for a systematic yet nuanced examination of how different semiotic resources work in concert to generate humorous effects and negotiate meanings around self-improvement culture. Themes were generated through iterative engagement with the data, attending to both individual modal contributions and their synergistic interactions in creating multimodal ensembles of meaning.

### Findings and discussion

A recurrent convention of the *Babu Dokotela Show* is the intentional use of episode titles that do not directly correspond to the episode’s primary content. Rather than organizing the discussion around the named figure or theme, the host frequently addresses unrelated issues for most of the episode, only briefly referencing the title subject if at all. This tactic is not incidental, but rather part of the programme’s comedic and strategic rationale. As Gamson (2023) contends, media often employ celebrity names or sensational hooks as mechanisms to capture attention, utilizing them more as means to draw audiences rather than as subjects of engagement. In digital media contexts, sensational or misleading titling also functions as a clickbait strategy that exploits anticipation and deferred gratification (Molyneux & Holton, 2015). Nonetheless, in the *Babu Dokotela Show*, this misdirection is not merely opportunistic; it serves as a source of humour. The discrepancy between expectation and delivery generates comedic tension, a form of bathos that is consistent with Double’s 2013 analysis of comedic interruption, where the disruption of narrative expectations induces laughter. The deferred or minimal engagement with the titular subject further embodies carnivalesque inversion in Bakhtin 1984 framework, where

hierarchical logics including the presumed significance of celebrity are ridiculed through playful irreverence. Consequently, the episode title functions less as a roadmap and more as an enticement, a jest, and a commentary on media sensationalism, enabling the show to subvert viewer expectations while maintaining engagement.

In the episode *Wenzi Zodwa Wabantu?* (“What have you done Zodwa Wabantu?”), which responds to the socialite’s recent robbery, the host (Babu Dokotela) and the cameraman open with a conversation about how the world mistreats her. This initial dialogue sets a tone of mock concern, but the visual field immediately complicates it. The studio’s props are not static; they are reshuffled according to the theme of each episode, making the set itself part of the performance. In front of the host, a wooden vase is deliberately positioned to remain visible on camera. While seemingly ornamental, it evokes containers traditionally used by healers to store potions or medicines. On the left of the screen, two figurines, a Buddha and a Native American chief stand alongside African artefacts: two amashoba (fly whisks) and an incantsi (grass mat). The combination of these objects draws together visual languages from Buddhism, Native American spirituality, and African cosmologies. Rather than signalling allegiance to any single tradition, the show constructs a spiritual patchwork that audiences can recognise across cultural boundaries.

Such staging is not neutral. This bricolage works rhetorically as it positions the show as ecumenical, drawing on recognisable spiritual symbols without committing to one doctrine. Also, it can be suggested that it exoticizes and commodifies spirituality, transforming serious cultural artefacts into entertainment props. This establishes a visual grammar of playful authority that the rest of the episode builds on through humour, dialogue, and mediation. As Rens (2019, 2023) argues, self-help media often operates as a genre of convenience, selectively drawing from diverse cultural repertoires, a logic clearly visible in the show’s spiritual bricolage. Also, this is consistent with Nehring and Kerrigan’s (2020) account of self-help media as a vehicle for perpetuating normative values of productivity and lifestyle optimisation albeit in this context it is also mediated through humorous parody. Additionally, humour provides the interpretative key. In line with Mpfu (2021) and Agbamu (2024), who show that African humour traditions have historically enabled social commentary and community critique, the show uses laughter as an interpretative key. The *Babu Dokotela Show* as a self-help medium is highly reliant on humour to frame witchcraft, poverty and ritual sacrifice and this extends this cultural logic into a hybrid genre of self-help comedy. The performance employs carnivalesque dynamics whereby the sacred is inverted into the profane, rituals of sacrifice are mocked, yet simultaneously they are presented as pathways to prosperity. This inversion destabilises the sanctity of tradition while making taboo topics accessible through laughter.

This carnivalesque humour does not just unfold through props and performance but it is also embedded in mediated conventions. One such device is the recurring use of phone calls as a comedic element. The calls function as mediated performances that exaggerate everyday social interactions and expose the absurdities of social norms and relationships. In African comedic traditions, ridicule has long been a rhetorical resource for calling out hypocrisy and contradictions in social life (Mpfu, 2021; Obadare, 2010). Through parodic exchanges, the show destabilises authority figures such as traditional healers, callers and even celebrities while at the same time reaffirming community bonds through shared laughter. The recurring trope of delayed exposure, where the hosts only address *Zodwa Wabantu* at the very end of an episode titled *Wenzi Zodwa Wabantu*, exemplifies this strategy of misdirection. By foregrounding other life challenges and only belatedly turning to *Zodwa*, the show satirises the sensationalism of media logics, where celebrity names are deployed as bait to attract attention (Couldry, 2005). The trivialisation of *Zodwa*’s ordeal through humour is not simply dismissal but a carnivalesque move that lowers the sacredness of the celebrity, treating her with the same irreverence as everyday struggles.

Comedic phone calls to other traditional healers further blur the lines between seriousness and parody. On the one hand, these conversations affirm the legitimacy of healing practices by giving them airtime; on the other hand, the humorous framing and playful exaggeration ridicule the solemnity of spiritual authority. This ridicule aligns with Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of the carnivalesque grotesque, where high culture and authority are mocked to create a temporary space of egalitarian laughter. At the same time, the use of mediated calls reflects the aesthetics of comic interruption (Double, 2013). A performance technique in stand-up and broadcast comedy that thrives on the unpredictability of interjections and the awkwardness of broken conversational norms.

By embedding ridicule and absurdity within the mediated format of the phone call, the show constructs humour not only from content but also from form, the mechanics of how information is staged, withheld, or disrupted. In this way, *the Babu Dokotela Show* exemplifies what Mensah et al. (2023) describe as the sociocultural function

of humour as a space where communal laughter at social incongruities becomes both critique and entertainment. Another overarching convention of the *Babu Dokotela Show* is its reliance on conversational partners, most notably the cameraman, who asks questions and introduces the topic of the day. This device cultivates intimacy and audience engagement, making the humour appear spontaneous and relational rather than staged. From a comedy studies perspective, this reflects the “straight man” dynamic in which a comedic foil maintains composure while the eccentric character (Babu Dokotela) delivers punchlines (Kaplan, 2015). The cameraman’s serious questions often resembling the life-woe prompts common in self-help genres function as sets that allow Babu Dokotela to respond with humorous or satirical rejoinders. In this way, the show fuses comedic timing with the conventions of advice-giving media. The cameraman’s presence is disembodied, his face never appears, only his voice and occasional chuckle are heard. This evokes what Gillespie et al. (2016) call the “laugh track effect”, where background laughter signals audiences to perceive content as humorous and increase engagement. Bore (2011) notes that in sitcoms, laughter not only signals when to laugh but also reinforces social norms around humour. However, in the *Babu Dokotela Show*, solitary laughter risks diminishing the sense of communal participation. Unlike traditional sitcoms where group laughter fosters collective enjoyment, here the lone chuckle can feel artificial or insufficient. However, this shortcoming is offset by the affordances of digital media: comment sections and interactive engagement act as alternative sites of communal humour, substituting the absence of a physical audience with a digital one.

The show also uses symbolism through food and clothing. Babu Dokotela frequently eats during segments, serving delicious food sourced from high-end supermarkets. Food here operates multimodally: visually as colourful cuisine, aurally through the sound of crunching, and symbolically as nourishment and self-care (Redondo & Bernal, 2020). Within self-help discourse, such imagery galvanises themes of comfort, aspiration, and lifestyle transformation. Viewers are simultaneously soothed (psychological comfort through vicarious eating) and invited to aspire to the host’s lifestyle choices, positioning food as both an affective and aspirational code of self-help. His clothing choices further subvert the stereotypes of traditional healers as austere or unfashionable. By dressing in modern and trendy clothing, Babu Dokotela destabilises expectations of spiritual authority, presenting himself instead as a relatable guide whose authority derives from humour and lifestyle performance rather than solemnity. The visible microphone reinforces this impression; while signifying professionalism and quality production (Bourdon, 2000), and it also fosters intimacy, signalling direct address, and emotional engagement with audiences. Taken together, these conventions, cameraman banter, laughter cues, food symbolism, fashion, and visible media apparatus constitute a carnivalesque reworking of self-help media. Instead of solemn authority, personal growth is reframed as playful, sensory, and accessible. Humour, mischief, and parody weaken the gravity of self-help conventions, creating a festive atmosphere where audiences can laugh, reflect, and find temporary escape from everyday struggles. In this hybrid form, *the Babu Dokotela Show* blurs the lines between satire, lifestyle guidance, and spiritual discourse, illustrating how digital African comedy reimagines self-help as both entertainment and empowerment.

### ***Street talk, humour and the occult***

Babu Dokotela adopts a bohemian stance in contrast to his peers in the institution of ubunyanga (traditional healing). Rather than conforming to the gravitas and solemnity often associated with healers, he deploys casual street language infused with tsotsitaal and isiZulu, positioning himself as part of the ingroup and accessible to urban and township audiences (Rudwick, 2005). This linguistic code-switching not only authenticates his performance but also collapses the distance between healer and layperson. Phrases such as “Ngiyilokishi” (“I am the township”), “Angiwusebentini” (“I’m not a fool”) and “Ungangifundi uMqondo” (“Don’t read my mind or steal my thoughts”) are not incidental but operate as Babu Dokotela’s signature expressions, frequently repeated across episodes. These phrases are used frequently in the following episodes “Imali enganayo”, “Stop Alcohol”, “Uyafeba lomfazi”, “Iqiniso Ngoku Thwala” and “Secret of Wealth”.

Their repetition creates a form of linguistic branding that distinguishes his persona from other healers and comedians, making them instantly recognisable to audiences. These catchphrases signal familiarity and shared belonging, embedding him firmly within township identity while cultivating a sense of continuity for viewers who return to the show. In this way, his distinctive use of tsotsitaal and isiZulu idioms functions as a marker of identity and authorship, reinforcing his bohemian stance in the institution of ubunyanga while fostering audience loyalty through repeated, relatable speech patterns. As Hurst (2009) observes, identity performance through language is a means of asserting agency and affirming solidarity in marginalised communities. The phrase “Uzogibela iQuantum”—literally “to ride a Toyota Quantum minibus” illustrates how tsotsitaal mediates taboo

discourse. Although ostensibly innocuous, within township registers it refers covertly to killing someone through black magic. By embedding witchcraft references in colloquial idioms, Babu Dokotela renders occult knowledge simultaneously visible and veiled. This duality prevents him from incriminating himself, while also transforming witchcraft from an unspeakable taboo into a normalised, even celebrated, option for addressing adversity. In this instance, tsotsitaal functions as a linguistic shield as it encodes dangerous content in humour-laden vernacular, accessible only to the ingroup.

The casual and humorous framing of such revelations has a therapeutic function. As Martin (2007) notes, humour provides psychological relief and coping mechanisms in the face of grave issues such as suffering and mortality. By cloaking witchcraft in wit and street idiom, the show allows viewers to engage with otherwise frightening content in a manageable way. At the same time, validation of street language affirms audience experiences, empowering them to see their voices and registers reflected in media spaces typically dominated by formal authority. This practice exemplifies Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque, where laughter and parody invert hierarchies of power. Using playful idioms of township culture, Babu Dokotela destabilises the solemn authority of traditional healers and repositions power within the everyday speech of ordinary people. In this carnival-like self-help setting, humour, street talk, and vernacular intimacy combine to create a sanctuary where audiences not only find relief from the taboo but also experience validation and agency in reimagining solutions to their struggles.

### ***Ridiculing peers and celebrities as self-help***

Just as street vernacular allows taboo material to be aired safely, ridicule becomes another key vehicle for humour and self-help. The act of dissing peers and celebrities operates as both a comedic strategy and a therapeutic discourse. Mockery elevates Babu Dokotela's status, presenting him as sensible and insightful compared to those he ridicules. This reflects what Kuipers (2015) calls the stratification of humour, where ridicule functions to construct hierarchies of taste and authority. Unlike peers and celebrities, Babu Dokotela positions himself as affluent, knowledgeable, and worthy of emulation. For viewers, such mockery can generate psychological effects, fostering a sense of superiority while also inviting the aspiration toward the host's perceived success. This aligns with Nehring and Kerrigan's (2020) observation that self-help media thrive on self-promotion, as speaker authority is continuously reinforced in contrast to less competent "others".

Mockery also improves engagement by creating a shared affective space. As Obadare (2010) and Mpfu (2021) note, African humour traditions often deploy ridicule to critique and build community. When audiences laugh alongside Babu Dokotela at celebrities or fellow healers, they participate in a collective coping mechanism, bonding over shared adversities or cultural frustrations. Importantly, ridicule is not merely destructive: as Emmanuel-Olowonubi (2025) points out, humour can facilitate reflection and moral learning. In this case, the audiences are invited to reconsider their own life choices by observing exaggerated failures in others. This dynamic is evident in Babu Dokotela's interactions with peers. Traditional healers frequently appear as guests, initially ridiculed, but ultimately offered the opportunity to redeem themselves by explaining their value to society. Episodes such as *Dr Kehlelezi Ungubani* exemplify this dual process: Kehlelezi, himself a charismatic and successful healer, is mocked as a rival but later rehumanised through dialogue. The episode deals with how clients can attain spiritual powers from Babu Dokotela to acquire lucrative government tenders. In the episode of *Izinyanga Azivukelwa*, male healers are ridiculed as sexually impotent, a jab rooted in the proverb "Inyanga ayizilaphi" (a traditional healer cannot heal himself). This episode extensively deals with the failures of some traditional healers to do what they claim to be qualified for.

By exposing such vulnerabilities, Babu Dokotela demystifies the role of the healer, humanising practitioners who have historically been cloaked in secrecy. This breaking of taboos resonates with Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnivalesque, where sacred institutions are exposed, parodied, and temporarily levelled through laughter. Ridicule also serves as a social critique of celebrity culture. Ouvrein et al. (2017) argue that humour directed at celebrities allows audiences to negotiate feelings of envy and resentment toward the hypervisibility of the famous. In episodes such as *Thabo Bester*, *Zodwa waBantu*, and *Quality Biyela*, Babu Dokotela satirises controversial figures by mocking their humble beginnings and speculating humorously about their reliance on umuthi (magical potions) for fame. By parodying both their past struggles and current excesses, he critiques the fragility of success while offering viewers a grounded, relatable perspective on prosperity. In this way, ridicule operates on multiple levels: it entertains, affirms communal disapproval of celebrity excess, and embeds self-help messages within comic storytelling. As Bore (2011) suggests, laughter does not merely accompany humour but

acts as a social signal, shaping norms and expectations. Thus, when viewers laugh at the mockery of celebrities or peers, they not only enjoy the entertainment, but also absorb subtle lessons on resilience, humility, and alternative pathways to success.

## Conclusion

This paper fills an important gap by examining the role of humour in African self-help digital media, thus contributing to scholarship on humour, popular culture, and African digital platforms. The analysis of the *Babu Dokotela Show* demonstrates how the embedding of humour within the sombre genre of self-help creates a hybrid form of self-help comedy that is both entertaining and instructive. When taboo subjects such as witchcraft, umuthi (magical potions), and traditional healing are addressed, humour recalibrates audience perceptions and enables open dialogue on topics that might otherwise remain cloaked in silence. Humour serves as more than a mere instrument of entertainment; it functions as a rhetorical strategy that diminishes the seriousness of self-help, making its messages more accessible and widespread. The use of colloquial language, satire, ridicule, and parody enhances relatability, fosters community cohesion, and empowers audiences to address personal challenges through amusement. Simultaneously, these comedic interventions align with Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, in which hierarchies are inverted, and revered institutions, conventional healing methods, celebrity culture, and even the authority of self-help are temporarily displaced through humour. This inversion engenders a participatory environment where audiences perceive themselves as validated and equal, thereby enabling reflection on personal life choices and potential for growth. The combination of humour and self-help also illustrates the commodification of personal growth in popular digital culture. Comedy operates as an attractor, capturing audience attention and generating community engagement, while self-help messaging is elevated and circulated through its entertaining wrapper. The rise of this hybrid genre underscores the growing entanglement of humour, commerce, and self-improvement in African digital media. Ultimately, self-help comedy emerges as a cultural form that not only entertains, but also disrupts, reimagines, and redistributes authority over how individuals and communities confront adversity and envision personal transformation.

## Declarations

**Interdisciplinary Scope:** This article makes a multidisciplinary contribution by bringing together three significant areas of scholarly inquiry: humour studies, self-help culture, and digital media research. By examining how humour operates within self-improvement content on digital platforms, this study bridges these disciplinary domains in ways that generate fresh insights unavailable through single-discipline approaches, making it particularly well-suited to this journal's interdisciplinary scope and mission.

**Author Contributions:** The article is sole authored.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Funding:** The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Availability of Data:** N/A

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