



# Stand-up documentary: An emerging narrative device in Yvonne Orji's comedy

Rowland Chukwuemeka Amaefula

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Stand-up documentary—the inclusion of video film footage in stand-up performances—is a growing trend in comedy specials. Gary Gulman in *The Great Depress* and Whitmer Thomas in *The Golden One* are some of the earliest comedians to employ documentary clips in creating portraits of their real-life circumstances on stage. More recently, Yvonne Orji's comedy special for Home Box Office (HBO) entitled *Momma, I Made It!* also utilizes documentary video films of the comedienne's experience in Nigeria to bring the Nigerian experience closer to her American audience. In this article I bring to the academic mainstream the understudied subject of stand-up documentary in humour studies. Through close reading and nuanced analyses of the gig, I examine stand-up documentary as a novel device of narration through which Orji introduces her audience to life in Nigeria through an exposition of her experiences growing up. Accentuating the differences between Nigerians and Americans and playing on Nigerian stereotypes, the comedienne deploys the clips as precise proofs transitioning her American audience into the alternate Nigerian contexts in *Momma, I Made It!* I conclude that stand-up documentary enhances the credibility of the performance, shapes perceptions of Nigerians, and facilitates audience understanding of cultural contexts that would otherwise remain unfamiliar to them. **Keywords:** Yvonne Orji, America, Nigeria, comedy, stand-up documentary, stand-up.

## Introduction

There exists a scholarly consensus that stand-up performance is a cult of one person (Karim 20; Harbidge 128). It is seen as an art form that “prioritizes the individual performer”, placing the entire burden of stage performance on him (Smith 70). Put differently, a stand-up comedian's art involves the presence of a live audience and urgency in creating hilarious situations; the comic is usually caught in the peril-applause apprehension during delivery. There is no fourth wall on the stand-up stage, “meaning that the comedian directly addresses the audience [...] The audience reactions are spontaneous, unpredictable” (Nedelea 95). A stand-up is saddled with the arduous tasks of giving backgrounds to and contextualizing joke narratives to enable spectators to identify with the punchlines while being cautious not to “offend” them (Zimbardo 4). The success of the stand-up performance, therefore, relies on shared sentiments and laughter between the performer and audience. To achieve this, the performer must adopt effective methods and devices of narration on stage. Strategies of unfurling stories—especially comic setup, in this context—and punching amongst other performance indices are about the most technical aspects of one's acts. Given that stand-up documentary is a theatre genre marked by immediacy and liveness, the use of different ways of rending jokes on stage shows the performer's creativity. Recent studies identify re-incorporation, alliteration, assonance, intonation, greeting/salutation, reporting and informing, and call-response as narrative devices available to stand-ups (Rutter 308; Sesan 10). However, contemporary performances show that artistes are increasingly adopting narrative devices that go beyond these widely recognised methods. This is because the art form under study is dynamic, responsive to societal changes, and thus subject to the creative agencies of artistes. For instance, the recent explosion of digital technology provides possibilities for stand-ups to upgrade the visual appeals of their productions as well as experiment with innovative narrative devices. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modern theatre began incorporating epic elements into theatre—“the stage began to narrate”. This is most

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exemplified in the theatre of Bertolt Brecht where static projection of slogans substantiated a character's speech or provided statistics or proof of happenings on stage (Brecht 22). Contemporary stand-up comedians mostly use video footage to bring their audience into the world of their lived experiences. In this regard, digital technologies influence humour staging elements, enabling possibilities for experimental multimedia performances. The distinguishing features of such stage acts range from simple video projections to "a new culture of scenography, supplementing the space of the stage with a variable, spatial composition, special effects [...]" (Tonkoshkura 35). This explains Orji's inclusion of video clips in *Momma, I Made It!* An autobiographical stand-up performance, *Momma, I Made It!* includes documentary footage that complements her narrative and takes the audience through her lived experiences while bringing her family and hometown in Nigeria onstage. The documentary video clips provide expository contexts or setups for the jokes she tells.

Stand-up documentary has become increasingly adopted as a narrative device in comedy specials in the last decade. However, its use has been reinforced since 2019 when comics began to use footage to create portraits of their real-life circumstances on stage such that the entire performance consists of a combination of video projections and the comic's narration throughout the show. Gary Gulman and Whitmer Thomas are the earliest comedians to employ footage in creating portraits of their personal stories on stage for their Home Box Office (HBO) shows. In *The Great Depresh*, Gulman effectively employs the docu-special device to relay to his audience information about his family and his past experiences of depression. In the show, which is described as "a mixture of confessional comedy special and mini-documentary" (Keller), we see Gulman struggling with depression as a child living with his mother as well as an adult. Thomas, for his part, employs this same narrative method in *The Golden One* to recount his mourning after his mother's death (The A. V. Club). Like Gulman's *The Great Depresh*, Thomas's *The Golden One* is also an autobiographical piece that reveals the traumatic experiences of the comic. The audience encounters his mother's twin sister who belonged to a band with his mother. They also encounter Thomas's father, cousins, and other family members and discover how they were all involved in his life. Overall, the special reveals how Thomas's life has been shaped by trauma. It is a heartbreaking performance of humour (The A. V. Club).

In her first-ever comedy special, *Stage Fright*, Jenny Slate adopts the part-stand-up, part-documentary strategy to create a portrait of her world for the audience. It includes funny stories about her adulthood and conversations with members of her family in her childhood home (Cinema). It is important to note that the deployment of documentaries in these performances demonstrates in detail the performers' journeys so far and exteriorises their internal narrative in ways that connect their audiences emotionally to the comic agonies of their stories.

Orji adopted the stand-up documentary device for her first televised comedy special for HBO entitled *Momma, I Made It!* in 2020 and in the 2022 HBO special entitled *Yvonne Orji: A Whole Me*. While the earlier mentioned stand-up documentaries mostly provide exposition about the funny and painful experiences of the performers, Orji's comedy is remarkably different for focusing on her humble beginnings and her path to success. She uses video footage of her real-life experiences to make Nigeria familiar to her audience at the venue of the show, Howard Theatre in the United States. Throughout the footage, her performance foregrounds her experiences as both Nigerian and American. Although Adenike Olanrewaju (1) has highlighted the potential of video clips to undermine the flow of the show, I view Orji's use of footage in the special as productive in that they function as a way of mobilising modern technology to represent Nigerian culture on the American stage.

Orji is a well-known actress, writer, and comedienne mostly celebrated for playing the role of Molly Carter in the TV series *Insecure* which earned her nominations for various awards. Born in Port Harcourt, Nigeria in 1983 to Nigerian parents, she moved to the US with her family in 1989 and eventually earned two degrees at George Washington University. Influenced by Wanda Skyes, Tiffany Haddish, and Lori Ann Rambough (professionally known as Sommore), all of whom were stand-ups and actresses, Orji began stand-up comedy as a contestant in the Miss Nigeria in America pageant in 2006. She describes herself in an interview with Fast Company Magazine as follows:

So before I was Molly on *Insecure*, I was this black girl trying to do comedy [since 2006]. HBO executives would come at different moments and see me perform. So it just became the right time. They are such a good network in that they give you the liberty to be your creative self. They don't like to impede on your vision. I high-key pitched them a documentary, music video, comedy show. Have you met me? I'm Nigerian—we're extra. When I came out [in the special], I did a whole one-and-a-half [hour] music video. (Ifeyanyi 1)

Despite being involved in stand-up comedy since 2006, Orji remains better known as an actress. No academic inquiry has been made on her stage performances, especially her use of footage for joke setups in the special *Momma, I Made It!* and, as such, in this article I attempt to fill this lacuna, focusing on her deployment of video footage to illustrate alternate contexts, accentuate truth-telling, and shape perceptions of Nigerians in stand-up comedy. The article is an effort to contribute to existing research on stand-up performances and other forms of cultural expressions produced by Africans in the diaspora.

### **Representing the real in Orji's *Momma, I Made It!***

A documentary is a visual and auditory representation of actual experiences and incidents. Coined by John Grierson in 1926 (Grierson 49), it is seen as a video film genre that focuses on “reality, real people” and incidents that happen in the “real world” (Nichols 201). A documentary entails “the creative treatment of actuality” (Smith and Rock 58). Creative treatment here suggests the fictionalisation of reality. Given that performances are largely political, documentaries involve the manipulation of space, character, time, and camera shots and angles as well as post-production practices to create specific perspectives or messages that serve the purposes of a filmmaker. Recent productions of documentaries increasingly blur their differences with feature films, leading to the conclusion that both docu-dramas and fictional video films are products of the same creative processes (Derrick 18). Documentaries adopt creative aesthetics to imagine real-life situations. The point here is that if an author of a documentary adopts creativity in producing footage, it would certainly revive the long-standing philosophical debates on ‘objective truth’. It will, therefore, be safe to view documentaries as a video film form that may not present the truth but shows events as the truth. This supports the view of Smith and Rock (62) that “the intent behind the communication” in a documentary defines its extent of actuality. Thus, a documentary involves the presentation of non-fiction as the truth. It usually employs and foregrounds “strategies and organizations other than those, such as plot and narration, that define narrative cinema” (Corrigan and White 272). In the context of stand-ups, the footage is integrated into the plot of gigs such that joke renditions by the comedian are interspersed with the documentaries. The video clips are arranged in such a way that they provide insights into a joke narrative and “engage and empower” spectators (Aufderheide and Nisbet 456). They also serve to enlighten the audience on alternative backgrounds for set-ups as well as enhance the laughter experience. In this article, I examine how Orji has deployed elements of the documentary genre in *Momma, I Made It!* to portray important aspects of her lived experiences. This analysis is divided into two parts. In the first part, I examine the depiction of her Nigerian background and in the second, her rise to success as a comedienne.

### **Localising Nigeria on the American stage: Footage on Orji's background**

In *Momma, I Made It!*, Orji uses seven documentary clips to introduce the audience to her family. She highlights the environment of her home in Ihiala, Anambra State in Southeast Nigeria and shows the tensions associated with parental expectations of children, the challenges of dating, and her personal experiences of success, all from the different points of view of a Nigerian and an American. Orji maintains a huge stage presence as a comedienne, both as a character in her jokes and as a character in the footage. In the show, she is shown in multiple identities: as a Nigerian haggling with a student loan company, a pedestrian asking passers-by for directions, or as a well-known comedienne in Nigeria, among others. In these ways, *Momma, I Made It!* relies on documentaries to achieve truth-telling about the stand-up and the entire Orji family.

The special begins with footage showing the Orjis in Ihiala in a setting that represents the roots of the comedienne and her narrative material. In a voiceover in the footage, she states the following:

I'm gonna bring you all here to my home to let you know all the parts that make me me. When you see my people, we always have joy. It is beautiful chaos. (indistinct sounds) There is no way I could do a special about my life without showing you my life. I think a lot of my jokes are very personal. They come from home and what home means to me. (“Momma, I Made It!”)

The mise-en-scene of this footage shows happy people trapped in an environment that is marked by squalor and neglect. It resonates with the view that Nigerians are “suffering and smiling” (Ali 246). The idea is that “[i]f happiness depends on health, financial security, power, electricity, good road [sic], and social amenities, then most Nigerians will not be happy” (Zombobah 334). Nigerians’ ability to live happily in the face of malevolent leadership and the consequent lack of basic infrastructure has arguably made them tough. The documentary

footage provides Orji's audience with firsthand knowledge of her family background—that is, where she comes from—and the struggles in between. Importantly also, the applause of audience members at the end of the documentary clip evokes nostalgic sensations for her mostly African American audience. They sing the theme song of the show with the comedienne who weathered many hurdles before making it at last. Clearly, the footage celebrates Orji's resilience and hard work and, by extension, extols African nationals in the audience who are working hard and thriving happily despite coming from countries that are starved of the necessities of life. Audience applause here proves the effectiveness of the footage in shaping perceptions of Nigerians as resilient amid lack—'beautiful chaos'. The excitement, ovation, and laughter that mark this scene tie in with the view that humour is vital in contesting and shaping the public domain (Obadare 244).

Building on her background, Orji pokes fun at her love for haggling and experiences when she goes shopping at local markets:

I love going back home. I feel, like, energized. I feel like, "Ah, my people, we are here." But my favourite thing to do when I go back home though is to go to the market. I feel like market experiences are essential for my life. 'Cause I love haggling. And I like haggling like how people like gambling. Like, you know what I'm sayin'? It's an addiction, right? I don't even need the stuff I'm haggling for. (audience laughter) I just like the opportunity to be like, "How much did you get that for? Ha. Me, I got it for half that price." Like, I just. (audience laughter) I like the bragging rights of winning, right? ("Momma")

Through this joke, she portrays Nigerians as people who haggle a lot and are very savvy with money. Elsewhere, she says that she bargains in the United States where prices are fixed and tries to negotiate her student loans. This sounds absurd and hilarious to her American audience. What triggers laughter here is the audience's foreknowledge of her haggling experiences as shown in the previous video clip; a conflation of the noisy, carefree haggling experience in the Nigerian market shown in the documentary with the organized American society where prices of everything, including student loans, are fixed draws mirth from the audience. Continuing, Orji states that whenever she is involved in haggling, her 'Nigerian accents' automatically become very clear. 'Accent' here is used to indicate her dual identities as Nigerian and American—the different ways of speaking highlight the differences between nationals of both countries. This relates to Patrick Chesi Lumasia's application of the transglossic framework in Kenya's *Churchill Show* "to show the differences in speech patterns of Kenya's social classes, reggae fans, and visitors from Seattle in the US" (110). Even though Orji might not have personally done all that she said in this joke, she owns the stories and tells them as hers. Telling them as "someone else's narrative would not have had the same experience" and effect "as when [they are] about her. So what matters is not the veracity of what is told but the fervency of honest narration surrounding the telling. This is what draws out mirth in audiences" (Amaefula, "Africa on the British Stage: Laughter-making Mechanics of Andi Osho and Daliso Chaponda" 223).

Making herself the butt of the joke does not only enhance hilarity; it also highlights her cultural background. Orji's habit of haggling and marketplace experiences can be associated with some Igbo cultural practices. The Igbo people of Nigeria are mainly known for their business expertise. Through Igba-boi, an apprenticeship system described as "the largest business incubator in the world" (Ekekwe), they achieve immense success in entrepreneurship (Iwara, Ekene Amaechi, and Netshandama 227). It is therefore not surprising that, in the documentary clip that provides receipts for Orji's love for haggling and market experiences, she haggles prices of goods with a twelve-year-old boy in a shop. She enquires, "Na your shop be this?" (is this your shop?) and he answers in the affirmative, leading to Orji's conclusion: "Okay, if you're not owning a shop at 12 years old, you're not doing nothing with your life" ("Momma"). Here, Orji contextualises the Nigerian setting more, introducing her American audience to Pidgin English, which is widely spoken in Nigeria (Agbo and Plag 352). Through her continuous switch between Nigerian and American accents throughout the gig, Orji shows the audience the linguistic aspect of Nigerian cultural life.

She also showcases her linguistic identity—the Igbo language. Identifying the pictures of her grandfather and his colleagues as "Ogbuefi" (an Igbo word for High Chief), she rejects her father's wish to take one dollar as her bride price thus: "Tufiakwa!" ("Momma"). "Tufiakwa!" is an Igbo exclamation showing complete disgust and rejection, prompting her father to explain that the bride price in the Igbo tradition is "symbolic", not the actual worth of the bride ("Momma"). The expression, in this context, clarifies how the Igbo culture places values over money in the traditional marriage processes. Through these means, the artiste enlightens her audience about



interesting aspects of Nigerian culture, which she describes as her strength and source of jokes (“Momma”). This section of the gig resists media representations of Africans in the diaspora as social liabilities (Aloh 149). While disclosing the rustic milieu of her community, Orji affirms her identity and cultural values, dislocating negative labels for Nigerians mostly built on unfounded stereotypes. The market setting also illustrates the industry of many young Nigerians, who, according to the comedienne, can begin trading as early as twelve years old. Although twelve-year-olds do not own shops in Nigeria, Orji says this to exaggerate the business acumen of Nigerians. She creatively treats the footage backgrounding this joke as the truth. Overall, the clip becomes proof of her earlier joke on bargaining in markets and influences public perceptions of Nigerians.

She further creates a situation where a seller offers her an outrageously high price for a handbag. Orji says that she immediately feigns dislike for the bag: “Here [the seller] go: (audience laughter. Pause) ‘Because it’s you [...] Ah, because it’s you, just give me [...] I don’t know, (audience laughter) give me 50,000’”. Orji says: “50,000? Me? A whole me? (audience laughter)” (“Momma”). Based on the way many people in the audience re-echo the line and react to it when she says it, one can deduce that it has become a popular line for them—“A whole me?” It gradually becomes a recurring line to which she returns in different joke narratives. For instance, she creates a situation where a Nigerian man rushing somewhere scuffs a black American man’s shoes and the latter accosts the former: “Homie was like, ‘Come on, man! Look what you did to my shoes! Man, watch where you going, you stupid motherfucker’”. Orji suddenly takes on the persona of the Nigerian man, shocked at this vulgarity: “(in Nigerian accent) A stupid mother what? Me? [...] Audience: ‘A whole me?’ (audience laughter and cheering)” (“Momma”). The audience does not wait for Orji to say the punchline; they instead repeat it aloud: “A whole me?” By so doing, Orji turns this punchline into a chorus. The popularisation of this phrase, which was hitherto unimportant to members of the audience, together with the footage includes some of the methods of narration that the comic uses to bring people close to her African background/culture. It is not surprising that, two years later, her comedy special is entitled *Yvonne Orji: A Whole Me*.

Orji’s routines are remarkable for turning everyday happenings into jokes. She demonstrates skills in creating mirth from the foibles of Nigerians that have long been normalized. For instance, she dramatizes the claim that Nigerians respond to questions with questions, creating a scene where people who ask for directions may get lost due to endless questions or vague descriptions:

But we’re also, we’re not good at a lot of things, either. Like, for instance, we’re not good at giving directions [...] If you ask a Nigerian for directions to the theatre tonight, it would be the most frustrating experience of your life. You would still be on your way here, okay? (audience laughter) ‘Cause you’d be like, “Excuse me. Can you please tell me how to get to the Howard Theatre?” Here they go (in Nigerian accent): “Howard Theatre [...]? (audience laughter) Howard Theatre?” (in American accent): “Also, what is this move?” (touching her lower abdomen) (audience laughter). “Is this your GPS?” (audience laughter) “What’s going on, sir?” (in Nigerian accent): “Howard Theatre. Mmm [...] What’s happening there?” (audience continues laughing) “No, no. Not the question I was asking.” He’s like (in Nigerian accent): “Oh, so you’re having a party?” (audience laughter) “And you did not invite me? (chuckle) Is that nice?” (audience laughter). “Sir, I am in a hurry”. (In Nigerian accent): “Slow down!” (audience laughter) “The race is not given to the swift” (audience laughter). (In American voice): “What are these proverbs? I don’t have time for this nonsense!” And they get mad at you (audience laughs more). (In Nigerian accent): “Okay, okay, okay, okay. Because you are in a rush (waving her hands and gazing into a distance). “Howard Theatre. Howard. Howard, Howard, Howard, Howard [...]”. (In American voice): “Are you [...] What is this?” (audience laughter increases). (In Nigerian accent): “Howard. I know the place. I know the place. I’m seeing it. Okay, okay, here’s what you want to do. You want to go all [...] the way down. Just go down. Down, down, down, down, down. Eh? (audience laughter continues) All the way to the end of the road. At the end of this street, you will see a stop sign. At that stop sign, stop”. (audience laughter intensifies) (“Momma”)

In informal contexts, some Nigerians often respond to a question by posing another question. This supposed shortcoming is the subject of this joke. Though taken for granted in Nigeria, Orji highlights how it could frustrate one who is in a hurry and needs people’s directions to get to a desired destination. Thus, when she shows documentary footage to background the narrative, different people in the clip give explanations that confuse her on how to reach her desired destination. Some of the ridiculous directions given to her in response to her question on how to get to Obalande include going through the road by her right hand and then stopping whenever she sees a bus stop. Two boys in particular, looking at her suspiciously, say, “[She] can use Google Maps [...] Just use Google Maps” (“Momma”). These responses do not help her to locate Obalande but rather trigger laughter. Stand-up comedians “explore and analyze the seemingly inconsequential normative qualities of culture” (Timler 59). They

bring to the fore the often-neglected aspects of people's daily lives and subject them to humorous interrogations. In tandem with this view, Orji brings the issue of giving vague directions and responding to a question with another to the performance space and then advances her personal opinions. Highlighting the frustrations that people suffer when others refuse to direct them or give vague directions, the comic negotiates and mediates the need to consciously guide people who seek directions to their destinations. This illustrates how African comics in the diaspora play on local stereotypes. Orji is not alone in this. Gina Yashere, a Nigerian-British woman stand-up, also dwells on exaggerated typecasts. In one of her sets, she declares that Nigerian police cannot investigate a murder case (Sydney Comedy Festival). Jokes of this nature do not necessarily demonise police officers in the country but ridicule their flaws and challenge them to perform better. Jokes of this nature not only serve as social critiques but also as a way Yashere and diasporic comedienne of her ilk stay in touch with their Nigerian roots (Nwoke 108). What is fascinating about Orji's version here is the video clip which serves as a visual representation of Nigerian daily experiences on the American stage.

In another joke narrative, Orji ridicules fraudsters. Breaking the fourth wall, she points at members of the audience and jokingly enquires if they are the senders of those e-mails:

What's happening? (audience laughter) Y'all are the ones sending those emails? Is that what's going on? (audience laughter) Y'all know the emails! Y'all probably got one in your inbox right now, don't you? They all start out the same. It's like (in Nigerian accent): "Good afternoon [...] sir or madam" (audience laughter) "My name is Umbellelo, and I have just inherited five hundred thousand billion dollars!" (audience laughter) "And I want to share it with you." It's like, no, you don't. You don't even know me (audience laughter). But don't think just because I'm Nigerian that I'm exempt from getting them though. I get them, but as an African, I feel obligated to respond (audience laughter). So, I write back (in Nigerian accent): "My brother [...] (audience laughter) I am one of you". They respond, "Hey, my sister, we are so sorry. Please, delete it". ("Momma")

Here, Orji mocks fraudsters' dearth of ingenuity in their e-mails; her use of a thick Nigerian accent to describe the sameness of their expressions and writing styles ridicules them and their victims' inability to detect deception. She stresses the "five hundred thousand billion dollars" and "And I want to share it with you" lines, indicating that this incredible sum of money and the decision to share it with a stranger should arouse a potential victim's suspicion. The idea of a stranger seeking to share such an outrageous amount of money with a random person should be a source of worry to recipients of such e-mails. While ridiculing fraudsters, she equally emphasises that there are always signals showing the duplicity of such e-mails. She concludes by recommending a hilarious response that proves to the fraudsters that they are dealing with the wrong person. While this joke rendition elicits much laughter from the audience, Orji interrogates a serious subject matter that has increasingly endangered cyberspace. On the surface, the line "My brother [...] I am one of you" could suggest that the Business E-mail Compromise is perpetrated by only her people. However, I read it here as an embodiment of critiques of Nigerians, eliciting from the audience critical laughter that, in turn, targets narrow perspectives absolving other parts of the world of fraud. The joke foregrounds the inanity of associating fraud with only black people even when Africans also fall victim to fraudulent activities perpetrated by non-Africans. The suggested response and the fictional fraudster's apology in the joke make a caricature of views (BBC) classifying Nigerians as a gang of fraudsters insulated from the harms resulting from scams.

### **Orji's comedy career: From frivolity to fame**

Orji also explores the challenges of surmounting the hurdles of a career choice as a Nigerian. Choosing a profession outside the so-called dignified professions often brings some children into direct conflict with their parents. This becomes even worse when the child opts for stand-up comedy which has been traditionally viewed as a frivolous "pastime" (Omoko 1). It is within this context that Orji, in another joke, interrogates parenting in Nigeria in relation to children's agency. She makes fun of Nigerians who are not genuinely happy with other people's achievements. Narrowing it down to a personal experience with her mother, she recounts as follows:

And it's hard for Nigerians to be, like, happy for other Nigerians when, like, you got something at home that's not all the way right. Like, you understand? [...] [A]nd so my mom would be like, "Huh, well (clicks tongue). You're doing something, I guess, with your life, but [...] in the meantime, did you hear? Nneka, ha, has gotten engaged" (audience laughter) (Orji laughing). And I'm like, "Oh yeah. Like, I saw it on Facebook". "So, you know" (audience laughter). I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah". "And how does that make you feel?" (audience laughter). I'm like, "Momma, I'm happy for her". "You're ha [...]" (audience laughter). "You're happy for her? Well, tell me, Yvonne. When can I be happy for you?" (applause, laughter). I'm like, "You're not? What is [...] What is happening?" (audience laughter). Like, "You're just happy. You're just happy for everybody, while you're struggling. Okay" (audience laughter). ("Momma")

Orji reveals the tensions that characterize parents' expectations of their children. In Nigeria, parenting is perceived to take different forms that aim to shape the child to become a responsible adult. As in other parts of the world, Nigerian parents raise their children to be competitive and success-oriented by holding them to high expectations. Often, when their children do not meet these expectations, they shame the youngsters by comparing them to their peers. In a study conducted on parenting in Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia, it was revealed that parents encourage as well as challenge their children to excel through a strange blend of kindness and embarrassment (Amos 67). Clearly, Orji's mother means to shame her for being unmarried: "You're doing something, I guess, with your life, but [...] in the meantime, did you hear? Nneka, ha, has gotten engaged" ("Momma"). Her reference to "You're doing something" is also a subtle mockery of her daughter's choice of making jokes for a living in defiance of her parents' desire to have her become a medical doctor. In the footage that follows, her parents rue that: "She was hard-working. She was smart. Very hard working. Her GPA [Grade Point Average] was always so high. That made us think that Yvonne was heading *somewhere*. She said she was getting ready for her MCAT. And we were very happy. (Soberly) But then [...] so she decided to start making jokes" ("Momma", emphasis added).

Her mother's tone here shows regret and resignation to fate. Obviously, she believes that stand-up comedy is not a dignified profession that could lead anybody to 'somewhere'; she would rather her daughter pursue a career for which she would use her master's degree in public health, a degree the comedienne said she had earned to please her parents before going into full-time stand-up comedy. Her mother's disdain for comedy coheres with Nigerians' earlier perception of comedians as "jesters" and never-do-wells before they began attaining fame and wealth (Amaefula, "No Longer a Laughing Matter: Women Comics and the Social Media Space" 139). Even after stand-ups began achieving fame and affluence, some Nigerians still do not hold much respect for them, causing Julius Agwu, an established and famous stand-up artiste in the country, to lament in a newspaper interview that "nobody takes [comedians] seriously" even when they are serious about an issue (Emedolibe 1). Further to the contemptuous description of comedy, Orji's mother embarrasses her in the earlier conversation by reminding her that her mates such as Nneka have been getting engaged and are set for marriage. Even though Orji refuses to be embarrassed and says she is happy about the news, her mother challenges her: "When can I be happy for you? [...] You're just happy. You're just happy for everybody, while you're struggling. Okay" ("Momma"). This punchline ridicules some Nigerians' parenting style which combines shame and compassion to encourage and challenge children to prioritise success. Although the comedienne understands that her mother means well in this joke, it also gestures towards the kind of parenting young Nigerians are given. Footage is deployed here to emphasise the training processes and local values in the country which stress diligence as a route to success. By so doing, the footage is used to influence the portrait of Nigerians positively, in contrast to the earlier joke on fraud.

In another clip that shows Orji as a star comedienne in Nigeria, her parents celebrate her for 'making' it at last. This explains the title of the special, *Momma, I Made It!* In the interview that follows the performance, she explains her long walk to success: "Cause I used to host this comedy show in New York. And I was broke. And I remember just saying, you know, all all of us want, who are chasing any dream, [...] is to be able to make that phone call home. Be like, 'Momma, I did it! Momma, I made it!'" ("Momma").

Although her parents continue to pray for Orji to get married as quickly as possible, they acknowledge that she has defied their emphasis on education. Nigerians generally believe that there are four options for a young person: to become a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, or a disappointment. Before Orji's success in comedy, her mother would always shame her for failing to practice medicine. In one clip, she narrates as follows:

My mom, she uses every opportunity to remind me that I wasn't a doctor. Like, I was helping her in the kitchen cook. I cut my finger. Just a tiny cut. I'm bleeding, and I'm like, "Mom, can you help me? You got anything? You got a Band-Aid?" "You bleeding". (clicks tongue) (audience laughter) "If you were a doctor, you'd be giving yourself stitches by now!" (audience laughter) "But you want to be a jester". Chee-chee! "Laugh and make yourself feel better!" (audience laughter) That's how you feel? Like, did you just call me a jester? I don't juggle balls. What are we doin'? (audience laughter) And my mom was the kind, like, she was the worst-case scenario kind of mom. Like, she had the worst-case scenario. I said, "Mom, I wanna do comedy". She heard, "So, you want to [...] prostitute yourself all over the world!" (audience laughter) "Is that what you want?" (audience laughter). ("Momma")

This joke narrative shows some Nigerian parents' earlier distaste for comedy and comedians. They believed that comediennees would end up as prostitutes and bring shame to their families. These gender-based inhibitions are not peculiar to Nigeria; they also exist in other parts of Africa, especially in Zimbabwe where women are increasingly disrupting the norms and speaking up (Källstig 57). However, Orji 'makes it' by trouncing these stereotypes and performing her experiences. Her autobiographical special is a source of encouragement for young Nigerians to persevere in chasing their dreams. Hence, the documentary footage serves as evidence of her success, a way of influencing perceptions of Nigerians and a healthy challenge to the "several young people who believe or assume that they have the natural gift [to do comedy]" (Fosudoll) and desire to become stand-up comics.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have paid to attention Orji's innovative adoption of video footage as a narrative device. Although reviewers have criticised the video clips as distractions to the flow of the show, I argue that they are vital to enhancing the image of Nigerians and Africans in the diaspora. Bringing to academic mainstream the understudied subject of stand-up documentary in humour studies, this research foregrounds the video clips as a veritable means of bringing visuals of the comedienne's Nigerian background and struggles closer to her audience in America. They facilitate the autobiographical perspective of the special and serve as precise proofs for setups in several joke renditions in the performance. More so, the footage is seen in this paper as mirror images of Nigerians which clearly distinguish them from Americans in ways that highlight stereotypes, sharpen incongruities, and accentuate the general laughter experience. Stand-up documentaries contextualise Orji's joke narratives and enlighten her audience on the alternate background that informs her acts. Thus, I conclude that documentary footage builds fidelity, heightens truth-telling, and welcomes the audience to cultures that would otherwise remain unfamiliar to them.

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