Article

The Power of Laughter: Emotional and Ideological Gratification in Media

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Abstract: This study examines the role of laughter in media content, focusing on traditional non-humorous entertainment talk shows with hosts, guests and a studio audience. The analysis, which documents over 20,000 instances of laughter in just 60 episodes (one laugh every 20 s), highlights the central role of laughter in this reality. The study concludes that: (1) hosts laughed more than guests and studio audiences; (2) in the programmes analysed, female hosts generated almost twice as much laughter as male hosts; (3) laughter followed a recognisable 'U-shaped' pattern, peaking at the beginning and end of the programme; (4) jokes with sexual connotations elicited the highest levels of laughter; (5) public service episodes had fewer instances of laughter; and (6) the programme with the host who laughed the most had the largest audience. In conclusion, laughter provides not only emotional, but also ideological gratification, based on the (post)modern concept of happiness.

Keywords: laughter; emotions; media; entertainment; talk shows; audience; postmodernity; happiness; gratifications

1. Introduction

Western catechesis, sustained in Plato and theorised later by Augustine of Hippo [1–4], promoted, for about two thousand years, the disuse of laughter in the social sphere [5–7]. This official 'non-laughter' also seems to have been the ideal dressing for the climate of melancholy brought about by the unfulfilled promises of 'modernity' during part of the 20th century [8,9]. However, things have changed. A regime of melancholy has given way to a regime of euphoria [10–14]. Moreover, with the 'heat' of this social climate, which many call 'post-modernity' [10], the Platonic ideal, without laughter, would seem out of fashion. A new model, supported by Darwin and announced by Nietzsche, would then become 'fashionable' [15–18].

According to this new perspective, in general, laughter and other emotional manifestations of pleasure would no longer be practically at the level of a sin [19–27], to become a symbol of the great offering of life [28–32]. With a favourable emotional and social climate and a role model able to associate laughter with power, success and self-gratification, the whole of society gradually began to laugh without being burdened with a guilty conscience [6,12,16,17,33]. If the first model, which exalted ideas, took hundreds of years to spread, the second, centred on emotions and with a very special place for laughter, with the help of the mass media, would spread much more rapidly [34]. It is evident that the reality of life does not fit the most diverse ideals; there is no doubt that these may be able to exert a very real influence on people's lives, as Bakhtin [5] and Elias [35], among others, make clear.

Regarding the journey of laughter in technology, we start with phonographs, one of the first 'laughter-making' machines. Although they caused a sense of strangeness at first, they became a success over time [36,37]. Cinema, although initially silent, also did not neglect to show (visible) laughter to the public [38]. But what about radio? It had to laugh more and better to evolve because, at a certain point, it saw its progress limited to its own

inability to laugh [39,40]. And, of course, we do not ignore in this journey the invention of television, which soon produced another invention, the 'Laff Box'[1] (controlled by the so-called 'Laff Boy' behind the scenes, who aimed to make the programmes more lively), the laughter-making machine or piano that preceded the still-audible laugh tracks [36,39,41,42]. Still in television, particularly in talk shows, Provine [43] directs our attention to what he calls "laughspeak", a hybrid discourse in which the host uses an emotional tone which mixes speech with laughter. This involves little giggles mixed with words, like pauses for breath, which we hear from many different hosts.

Laughter, as a social and human phenomenon, naturally extends its presence into the realm of technology and media in general. This study aims to explore the interaction between mechanical laughter and the 'mechanics of laughter' in our contemporary—increasingly technological and media-centric—society. In an atmosphere where emotional connections, facilitated or not by technology, are increasingly prioritised [14,44], this research seeks to understand the particular role of (quantitative) laughter in today's media. The study focuses on the analysis of three talk shows, first broadcast on traditional television in Portugal and later made available online. The full content is available on the official websites of the channels/shows. However, many short videos of a few seconds and countless isolated images are also posted on various social networks, directly or indirectly linked to the programme and the people who took part in it.

2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, involving qualitative and quantitative documentary analysis. Documentary analysis, for Moreira [45], "comprises the identification, verification and assessment of documents for a given purpose". According to Carmo & Ferreira [46], its purpose is to "select, treat and interpret existing raw information in stable media (...) in order to extract some meaning from it". We thus refer to a technique to collect information that is, in the view of Pardal & Lopes [47], "necessary in any research". In this particular study, the use of the Internet proved crucial in this documentary search, enabling access to episodes that would otherwise not be available. However, this analysis has in no way, and at no time, been carried out lightly. As Denscombe [48] mentioned, "the authorship, credibility and authenticity of Internet documents are relatively difficult to establish, and special care must be taken when using such documents for social science research". So, these aspects were taken into consideration. In this sense, to avoid any kind of adulteration, the talk shows were only collected from the official websites of their respective television channels. A summary of the analysis data is presented in 'Table 1'.

Table 1. General analysis data.

Number of talk shows	3
Number of episodes per talk show	20
Total number of episodes	60
Duration of each episode	2 h (approx.) *
Total duration of the analysis	120 h (approx.) *

* The (useful) length of the talk shows analysed varied, but it could be seen that the general benchmark was 2 h (120 min).

All the talk shows analysed came from generalist free-to-air television channels in Portugal, from Monday to Friday, and, in general, they all aired around the same time (between 10 am and 1 pm, a period that is interrupted several times for advertising). The analysis of the talk shows corresponds to the episodes of 7 January and 1 February 2019 (weekdays). In order to simplify the understanding of the general analysis carried out in this study, we opted in the course of the study not to mention the actual name of the talk shows (in Portuguese), but rather present a more general description in English of each of the talk shows (as described in 'Table 2').

Table 2. General summary of documentary analysis (The websites described were last accessed on 27 August 2024).

Channel	Talk Show	Financing	Source	Denomination	Hosts
RTP1	Praça da Alegria	Public	www.rtp.pt	Talk show 1	Host 5, host 3
SIC	O Programa da Cristina	Private	www.sic.pt	Talk show 2	Host 1 (only)
TVI	Você na TV!	Private	www.tvi.pt	Talk show 3	Host 2, host 4

2.1. Talk Shows

It is important to clarify the difference between a television debate or conversation and a talk show. Timberg [49] mentioned the following in this respect: "The television talk show, as opposed to television talk, is the television show that is entirely structured around the act of conversation itself". Based on this, it is then understood that, in talk shows, conversation, instead of being just one more ingredient in the middle of many others, is always the main element because the whole talk show revolves around the very act of talking.

According to Charaudeau and Ghiglione [50], several aspects distinguish and, at the same time, characterise the talk show. According to the authors, four of these essential aspects are highlighted below [50]: (1) It makes public and socialises the opinions and emotions of each of the participants. (2) It is discourse of the moment, without origin, without memory. (3) It makes heard and displays the opinion of an 'I' that, in fact, wants and aims to signify a 'we'—as wide as possible. (4) It is a spectacle of the word, where, although, in theory, they are usually distinguished by themes, in practice, we often see that themes are mixed.

Thus, it is prudent to mention that a talk show is much more than mere 'small talk' since it is more than just talking about a theme, it is a show (of words) of this theme. So, for this show to remain alive, it has to include numerous and varied ingredients, including emotions, as this study will analyse. We will now analyse one of these emotional expressions in particular: laughter. But first, we will analyse its particular delimitation in this study.

2.2. Laughter

It is true that for a long time in the past, as the historian Goff [51] explained, smiling, or rather *subrisus*, was understood as a discreet laugh, a "secret laughter". However, in the present study, laughter and smiling are seen as distinct phenomena. Among other possible examples to be highlighted, let us see what Magalhães [52] said in this respect: "Unlike smiling, laughter is not seen immediately after birth (...). The appearance of laughter only occurs between four and six months, as a response to purely external stimuli".

Laughability (or the stimulus of laughter) has also at no point been counted as laughter because not all stimuli aimed at laughter succeed in provoking laughter, and not all laughter is born from something planned to arouse laughter. Although sometimes laughter, humour and the comic, even in scientific writings, are all in the same category, as if being just nuances of the same 'ingredient', they represent different realities. Although they live close to each other, they have well-demarcated borders and their own lives, separate from each other. As Dewey [53] explained, "The laugh is by no means to be viewed from the standpoint of humour; its connection with humour is secondary". The author mentions that laughter "marks the ending (that is, the attainment of a unity) of a period of suspense, or expectation, an ending which is sharp and sudden".

Before and during the western medieval period, the main 'official theorists' often equated laughter with a sin, something that was generally forbidden or discouraged [19,21,24–26]. Therefore, its definition was secondary and generally seen as unnecessary [54]. For hundreds of years, laughter was seen as a defect, a deformation of the soul, stemming from the Platonic

conception [19,21], which lasted until the medieval period, when laughter even meant being possessed by demons [20].

However, in the post-medieval period, and especially with Enlightenment thinking, it became dissociated from questions of the soul and associated only with human thought [54–57]. Laughter and its explanations, as a rule, have become dissociated from the belief in the immortal soul, even in the most social explanations [58,59]. Moreover, the 'modern definition' flourished from this basis, obviously underpinned by new knowledge about human beings and their emotions [28,60–64]. It came to refer only to that which, under the basis of 'modern knowledge', is generally seen and accepted as a kind of 'short circuit of ideas' that happens in our brain and which causes a very visible discharge of energy in the body [33,43,65–68]. A visible and audible phenomenon that, as described by Propp [69], can be seen from many angles, as benign, bitter, cynical, joyful, ritual, carnival, and much more: sad, kind, irate, clever, silly, proud, warm-hearted, indulgent, fawning, contemptuous, scared, offensive—the list goes on.

Thus, to simplify laughter as a unit of measurement, and as mentioned in the initial part of this topic, it was only considered as laughter when it was audibly perceived. Its facial expression had to be combined with a sound demonstration.

2.3. Analysis

Bauer, Gaskell and Allum [70] mentioned that "quantitative research deals with numbers, uses statistical models to explain data, and is considered hard research (. . .). In contrast, qualitative research avoids numbers, deals with interpretations of social realities, and is considered soft research". Although traditionally distant and somewhat different, mixed data collection techniques are by no means incompatible. According to Pardal and Lopes [47], "as demonstrated by numerous studies (. . .) the relationship between quantitative and qualitative research can indeed occur to the benefit of research in a variety of forms". The aim of this study was, of course, to analyse the quantitative data. However, although this information served, at a first level, to demonstrate and validate the relevance of the theme by exposing, among other aspects, the large number of laughs in talk shows, later, we worked to convert this content into reflective matter [71–74].

Thus, statistical analysis was a necessary technique, as it allowed not only for the structured collection of numerical information but also for its processing in order to obtain a 'picture' of the analysed reality [71,72], which was then presented in various ways, such as in the averages of laughter. In addition, in part inspired by traditional researchers' diaries, we took daily notes on the contexts in which the laughter arose each day [75,76]. This decision was crucial during the analysis process. For instance, these records allowed us to understand the contexts in which the highest levels of laughter occurred within the programmes, as will be seen later in this study.

2.3.1. The (Unusual) Laughter Count

The laughter of the talk shows' hosts and other participants/guests was counted at each new individual action. This is because, quite often, when various people are gathered together and given a stimulus, some laugh, and others do not. This means, for example, that if five people were gathered together (two hosts and three guests, for example) and for some reason only two laughed, the number of laughs recorded would only be two—regardless of the duration of those laughs.

However, when, for example, still during a laugh, one of the participants, by something they said or did, originated a new stimulus and 'forced' some of them to start another one as soon as they finished their first laugh, then those two actions were counted differently, that is, as two different laughs. Firstly, because it belonged to a new breath and then because it originated from a new stimulus. This decision, inevitably, ended up excluding another, primarily tested, which aimed to count the total time of laughter and not the number of times of its execution.

However, since the laughter from the studio audience is usually presented collectively and contributes to the talk show as a group, each of their many laughs, presented in unison, was counted together, in other words, as only one laugh at a time—regardless of how many people laughed. In short, each time the studio audience laughed, their laughter was counted as only one (for example, two laughs from the entire studio audience = only two laughs counted). However, the laughter of the other members, with individual highlights, was counted individually (for example, two laughs from two separate guests = four laughs counted).

2.3.2. The Analysis Model

Microsoft Excel software was used to count and analyse the laughter. Initially, each episode was divided into 10-min segments (except in some cases before the breaks and at the end of the talk show, where this was impossible). This resulted in 60 separate files (considering the 20 broadcasts of each of the three channels). Then, all this information was compiled in a single file, in which all the talk shows and the information collected from each one were juxtaposed, segment by segment.

For simple calculations, such as determining the total number of laughs in each talk show over the four weeks, the formula =*SUM* (=*SOMA*) was used. For sums involving a variable, such as to determine the number of laughs on each day considering each talk show, the formula =*SUMIF* (=*SOMASE*) was used. For more complex calculations, like discerning the number of laughs from each host for each day, the formula =*SUMIFS* (=*SOMASES*) was used. Finally, to determine averages with multiple variables, dividing all the talk shows, the formula =*AVERAGEIFS* (=*MÉDIASES*) was used.

3. The Laughter of

3.1. The Hosts

The most prestigious visible faces on talk shows are usually the hosts. However, as the analysed talk shows were filled with a high frequency of positive emotions, it became clear that not only the regular presence of these faces was crucial to the shows, but so was the laughter on their faces. This is particularly evident when looking separately at 'Figure 1' for the 9259 laughs from hosts in the four weeks of analysis (weekdays).
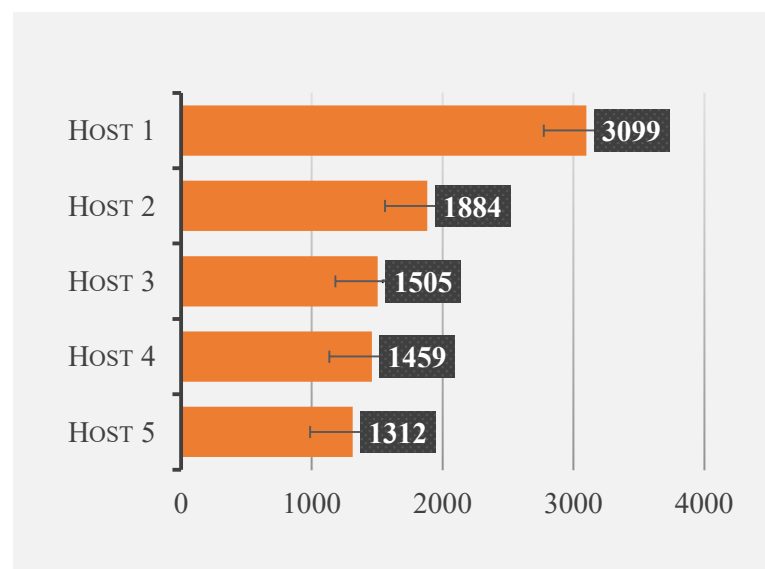

Figure 1. The laughter of the hosts.

Given the amount of laughter in these talk shows, it is likely that, in some cases, certain viewers who are socially or geographically isolated for several reasons will spend more time watching some of the hosts' faces—and their laughter—than the faces and laughter of some of their neighbours, friends or even family members.

Assuming that this may actually happen and based on the various numbers of laughs in 'Figure 1', it seems reasonable to suggest that, for some people, the host of this type of talk show can be a great visual source of positive emotions. Thus, forming a special affinity with such media characters seems to be just a matter of time for certain viewers. In fact, for many, this may well be the most regular, lively and empathetic human face they have (visually) available in their lives. This automatically leads us to Horton and Wohl's [77] consideration of this phenomenon. The authors talk about the illusory relationship of closeness between the public and media figures and the sense of intimacy that mimics real social interactions, but without real reciprocity. This interaction provides comfort and a sense of companionship, especially for socially isolated individuals. In this case, it is a comfort found in laughter, in the faces of laughter.

Before moving on to the observation of 'Figure 2', it is worth mentioning that although two of the three talk shows analysed have a pair of hosts (a female and a male host), the third one is hosted by a female host alone. Obviously, this contributed to the fact that the laughter accounted for by the female hosts was much higher (during the analysis period). However, another relevant aspect cannot be overlooked here: when these talk shows were on generalist free-to-air television (when there was no significant alternative), female laughter was the most visible and the most shown to the viewers. Thus, it can be said that female laughter was undoubtedly the most seen in the talk shows analysed (i.e., by the Portuguese population at that time).
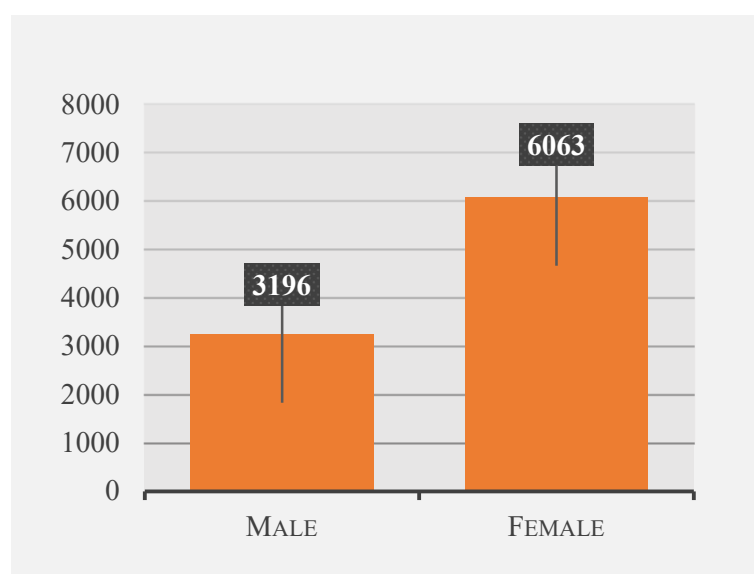

Figure 2. The laughter of the hosts.

3.2. The Participants

As generally tends to be the case with talk shows worldwide, those included in this analysis featured the intervention of participants other than the hosts and the studio audience (usually one or two hosts, an audience and guests). And it is obvious that, depending on the themes discussed and other factors, some were more willing to laugh (and make people laugh) than others. Still, 7645 laughs were counted from other participants/guests over four weeks in the three main talk shows analysed. Undoubtedly, a significant number; even more so, considering that these talk shows, in general, in front of their guests, do not call themselves comical or humorous but simply general talk shows.

In the complementary observation of the talk shows, it became clear that in the private television talk shows (talk shows 2 and 3) there was a greater predisposition to emotional manifestations other than laughter (such as crying, anger, shame, disgust, surprise, etc.). Thus, it seems reasonable to state that, in the private talk shows analysed, the abundant laughter of the guests was constantly tempered with a few pinches of tears

and other emotions often considered negative. In general, it was not easy to find reasonably long periods without any emotional manifestation, something very different from what happened in the public service talk show.

An important point to highlight is evident in 'Figure 3'. Unlike the two private television talk shows analysed (talk shows 2 and 3), the distribution of laughter in the public service talk show (talk show 1) remained consistent throughout the show (on average). While the laughter from other participants/guests did not seem to reach the levels of the private talk shows analysed, it showed a much more even distribution (green line, 'Figure 3').
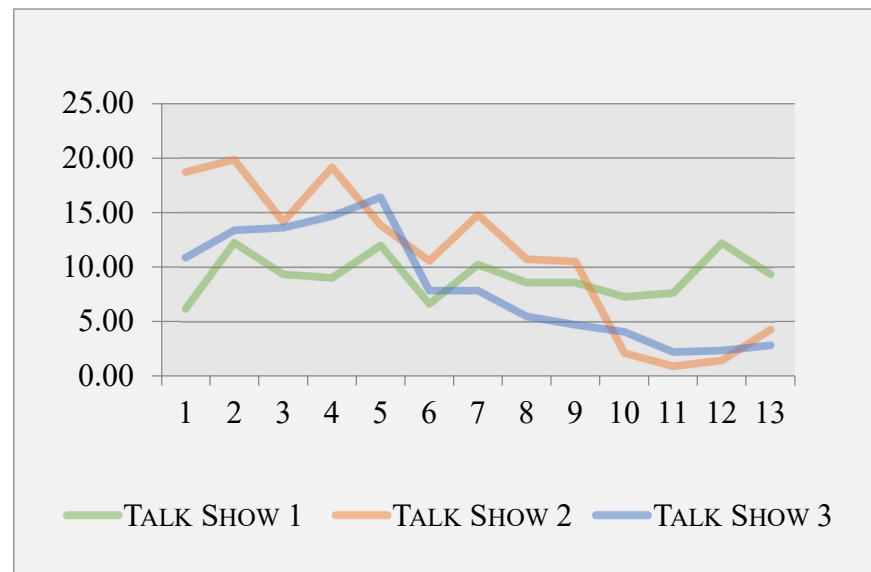

Figure 3. Overall average—participants' laughter.

3.3. The Studio Audience

As shown in 'Figure 4', the number of laughs from the studio audience counted in the three talk shows within this category (3272) was significantly lower than the number of laughs registered by the hosts (9259) and by the other participants/guests (7645). This means that, of the three main sources of laughter highlighted in this study from the talk shows analysed, this one appeared to be, within the period of analysis and, considering the research parameters, the least influential.
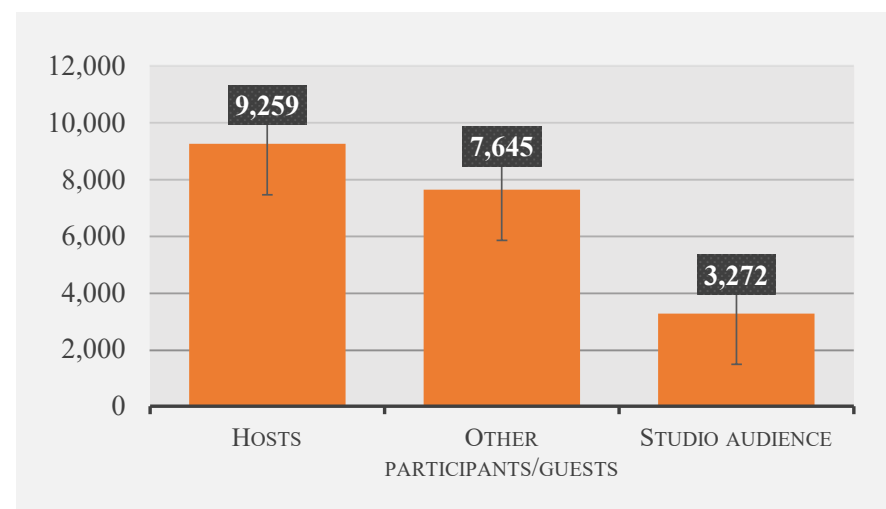

Figure 4. The different categories of laughter.

In some cases, it was possible to see a reasonable degree of complicity between the studio audience, the hosts, and other participants/guests. In these cases, the studio audience had more freedom and was more at ease with the dynamics of the talk show, where talk shows 1 and 3 stood out. It was evident to the researchers that in these cases, the 'whole' of the talk show seemed to work better, and the laughter seemed more natural, less mechanised and ancillary.

In talk show 2, the studio audience faced the host (behind the film cameras). It is, therefore, not unreasonable to assume that much of the laughter from this studio audience, often imperceptible to viewers, was to create an environment that emphasised the host's visible and audible laughter. It should be noted that the studio audience was behind the cameras only in talk show 2. However, it is also important to note that in this study, the host with the highest number of laughs was from this talk show (host 1). So, it can be said that the visibility of the audience in these shows gives them a double performance obligation. To show their laughter to the audience and to the host(s). One affects the host(s) more, the other the audience in their homes. But both affect the audience more or less directly.

3.4. The Talk Shows

The 20,176 laughs counted in the four weeks of the analysis (weekdays) indicate several noteworthy aspects ('Figure 5'). Among many others, at least three seem evident. First, the exposure of laughter seems, in a more or less direct way, to be part of the planning of these talk shows, even though they are not presented or seen as humorous or comical. Second, a consequence of the first is that, even so, laughter seems to fill a significant part of those talk shows (an approximate average of 170 laughs per hour, 3 laughs per minute, 1 laugh every 20 s). Third, a consequence of both is that, as such, viewing laughter is part of the daily lives of millions of people who have been watching these talk shows regularly for several years.
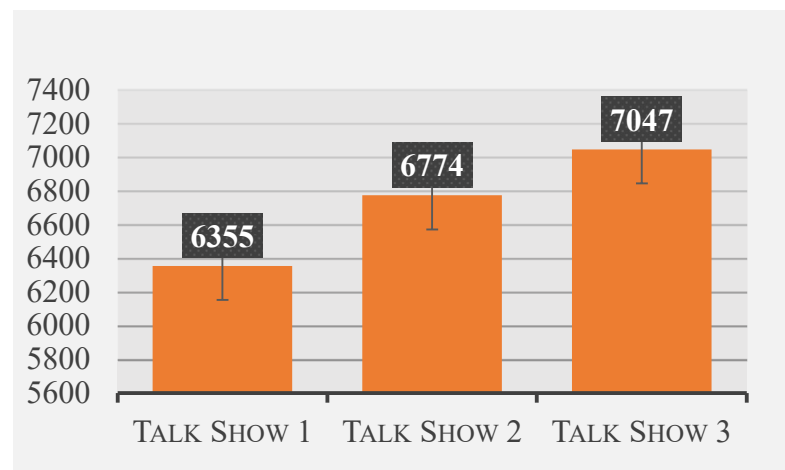

Figure 5. The laughter of talk shows.

The public television talk show had the lowest number of laughs during the analysis (talk show 1, shown in 'Figure 5'). But unlike this show, which had moments of little enthusiasm, those from private television (talk shows 2 and 3) generally presented themselves more energetically during the analysis, with more constant emotional rhetoric. The interval between open laughter and a sad (and even crying) face was often very short (a few seconds). The two private television talk shows showed a much more active emotional rhetoric in this study. One might even say hyperactive.

'Figure 6' (based on part of talk show 2) shows that the host followed the laughter of the other participants/guests (or vice versa). This pattern is visible in the other talk shows analysed. 'Figure 6' also shows that the laughter assumes a 'U' shape during the talk show:

the show starts and ends with a fairly significant average of laughter, which drops a little in the middle (a fact that is less obvious in talk show 1, from the public service channel).
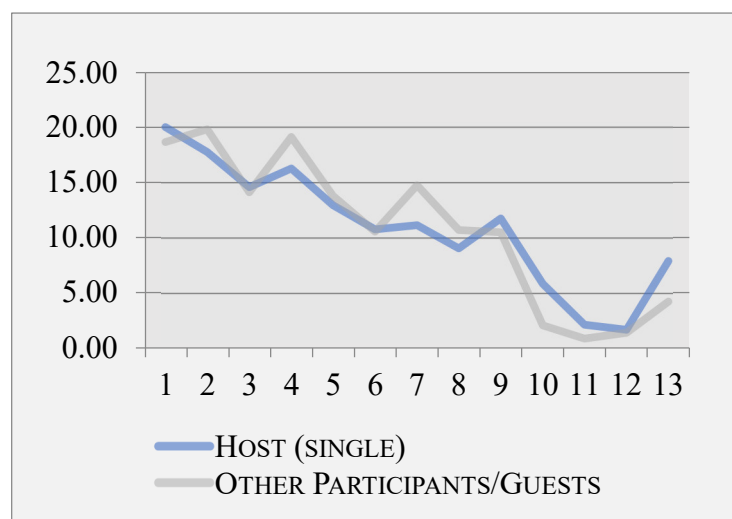

Figure 6. The average laugh (talk show 2).

4. Discussion

According to this study, particularly based on 'Figure 4', the laughter of talk shows is mainly from the hosts. Their laughter outnumbered the laughter of the other participants/guests and especially the laughter of the studio audience. The number of laughs accounted for by the hosts was almost three times that of the studio audience. It should also be noted that of this main category (the hosts), as evident in 'Figure 2', there was almost twice as much female as male laughter during the analysis period.

At one time in the past, laughter was brought to some women who were deprived of laughter, and laughter reached them mainly through the media, which helped democratise the act of laughing because until then (in some environments, between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries) it had been widely believed that laughter was bad and even deadly for women [38]. So, this effect of light laughter as a demolisher of reductive cultural beliefs that distance a woman from her own human nature may still be doing its job: helping to bring laughter—or more laughter—to those who are generally deprived of it, whether for a variety of cultural or personal reasons.

This shift reflects what Horton and Wohl [77] describe as para-social interaction, where media figures create a sense of intimacy and direct engagement with their audiences. In this particular case, however, it is a relationship based primarily on laughter—empathetic laughter, as will be seen below.

The distribution of laughter, as shown by the U-shaped pattern in 'Figure 6', indicates a preference for increased laughter during the opening and closing segments of the talk shows. In the context of (post)modern interpretation, it is important to mention that laughter often plays the main role of a visual representation of the true and only possible happiness of our time, evaluated according to visual and quantitative parameters. A general and popular ideological interpretation of our time that directly influences all other lesser or more specific interpretations, whether of a scientific, political, religious or professional nature [6,11,12,14,16,17,29,30,44,78–81]. In its initial moments, designed to capture the viewer's interest, and in its final moments, designed to guarantee the viewer's return, this laughter seems to function as gratification. However, it is not only the gratification of positive emotions, but also something deeper, in terms of ideological gratification: the sharing or encounter of true happiness.

In 'Figure 7' two peaks of laughter stand out: one in talk show 2 and another in talk show 3 (both from private channels). In the peak of laughter in talk show 3 (18 January 2019), more than 700 laughs were counted. This means that, on average, there were about

six laughs per minute in this talk show, one every 10 s. It is worth noting that we are talking about non-humorous talk shows that get laughs in the middle of cooking, life stories, gossip and the like. Following the complementary analysis of the episodes (using the 'diary notes'), it was observed that the atmosphere behind these distinct moments of laughter was identical. In general, the basis of the laughter clusters seemed to be the approach to light-hearted topics and, consequently, a more relaxed atmosphere for the participants involved. For example, in the episode with the most laughs (18 January 2019), part of the laughter was due to a dialogue about 'sex toys'. When their use was explained, the laughter multiplied.
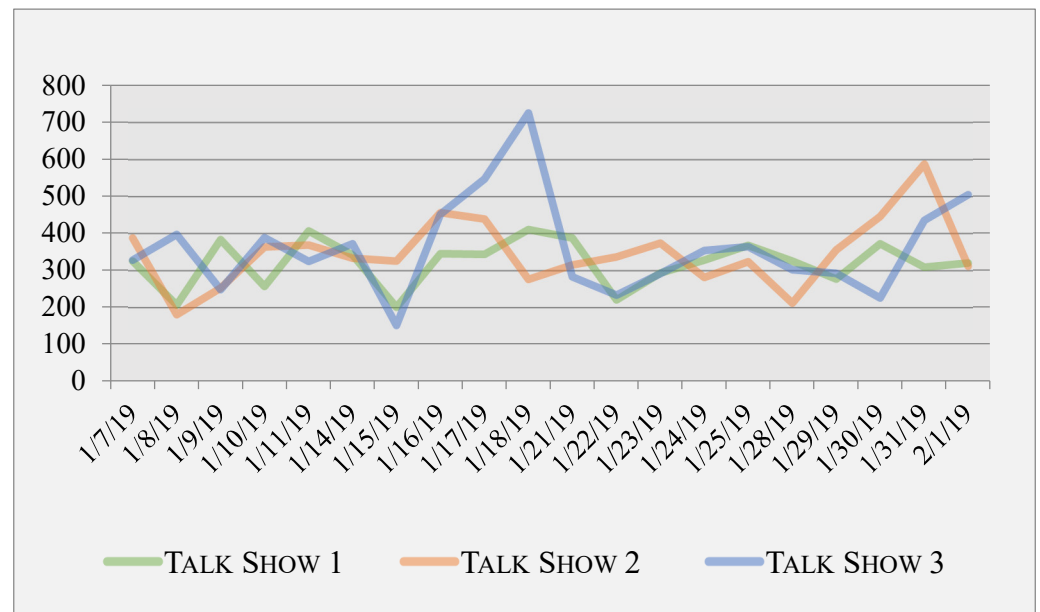

Figure 7. Total laughs per talk show and episode.

It is undoubtedly a laughter like the one Elias [35] emphasised, which exists to cover up a taboo, or shame, and which reminds us not only that we are machines of habits and taboos but that it is with habits and taboos that we 'punish' others with laughter as well [35,58]. A laughter very different from that used, for example, in the Renaissance, to 'fight' for a cause [5,6,82].

In these talk shows under analysis, which generally seem to mirror so many others, laughter is usually aroused by the falling object, the stumbling host, the sentence with multiple meanings, etc. In general, viewers are also not offered complex ingredients to intellectually construct their own laughter without seeing it in the main actors. With rare exceptions, the laughable is already wrapped in clearly visible and audible laughter. It is an easy laugh. Easy to understand and digest. In a nutshell, laughter germinated more intensely when dealing with light themes and, consequently, when experiencing a more relaxed atmosphere. Then, the same was more obviously visible in the two talk shows on private television. Again, especially in these two talk shows, laughter was most often observed in the opening and closing minutes.

It is also noticeable in this study that, during the period of analysis, the total number of laughs in the public service talk show (talk show 1) was significantly lower than in the two private television talk shows ('Figure 5'). This seems to indicate, albeit indirectly, that laughter was not as important for this public service talk show as it was for those on the private channels. However, this is not necessarily negative. It is important to remember that it is up to the public media to be an alternative at different levels and in different ways [83–85]. Thus, it can be said that in this specific area (the amount of laughter) the public talk show was also a real alternative to the other existing shows: it provided viewers with less laughter.

Laughter alone, in quantitative terms, based on the data collected, does not appear to influence audiences. The talk show in which, in the present study, the most laughs were counted ('Figure 5') was not the same one that had, in the short, medium and long term, the best performance in terms of audiences, according to data collected by the authors from the company responsible for measuring television audiences in Portugal, from January to April [86]. However, it is curious to note that the talk show with the host who laughed the most ('Figure 1') was indeed the leader in the short, medium and long-term audiences [86].

Before proceeding with this consideration, let us keep in mind a small but curious consideration supported by Burton [87]. This theorist addressed some 'ingredients' that feed a reflection on two fundamental types of laughter: laughter that participates in something and laughter that repels something. The distinction lies in the difference between saying, laughing, "We're drunk!" or saying, also laughing, "You're drunk!". It is the disparity between participatory, complicit and empathetic laughter and one that is superior, distant and apathetic. They are then two laughs but diametrically opposed. One participates in a 'madness', and the other is its opponent [88,89]. With this analogy as a basis and looking at the phenomenon as broadly as possible (even beyond the broadcasts selected in this study), let us reflect on what, indirectly and symbolically, may be sustaining the laughter of some of the hosts of the main talk shows highlighted here.

One of the hosts of talk show 3 repeatedly mentioned that he owned a large property. Similarly, one of the hosts of talk show 1 was not shy to repeatedly share his passion for golf. However, something similar does not appear to have happened in the regular speech of the host of talk show 2 (who laughed the most). In fact, in general, her communication seemed more focused on something else: her weaknesses (her difficulties with English, her fears for her son, the bills she has to pay, etc.). Thus, while the hosts of talk shows 1 and 3, in their public appearances, seem not to shy away from highlighting what makes them stand out from most people while still being quite likeable, the host of talk show 2 (host 1) seemed to prefer highlighting what makes her seem equal—or even inferior—to most people. Thus, this host showed continuous sympathy towards them and an attempt to show constant and deep empathy. If we take Burton's [87] above-highlighted thought as a basis, it is then possible to state that while the hosts of talk show 1 and 3 appeared at times, symbolically but not only with some aspects of their speech, to laugh indirectly 'at' their audience, the host in talk show 2 seemed only engaged in laughing directly 'with' their audience. In other words, she laughed (only) at the things that make this same audience laugh. We are therefore faced with a kind of social praise of empathic emotions, in which they are placed as the main ingredient [90,91].

Therefore, on the basis of the present study, it is possible to affirm that there is a type of laughter that comes from a unique face that is capable of attracting and increasing the audience. It is not only a quantitative laugh, but also an empathic laugh that the host cultivates in time and space.

5. Conclusions

Six points are highlighted in conclusion: (1) It was evident that of the three categories analysed (hosts, guests and studio audience), the laughter was most likely to come from the hosts, and the category that contributed the least to the amount of visible laughter was the studio audience. (2) The highest number of laughs observed during the analysis of the hosts came from women, almost twice as many as from men. (3) In general, the behaviour of laughter seems to work in a 'U' shape during the course of the programmes (it starts with great impact, decreases during the course and returns with force at the end). (4) Laughter usually occurs in 'normal situations' (unforeseen events, mistakes, jokes, etc.), but peaks of laughter were registered in double-meaning jokes with sexual connotations. (5) The public talk show generated the least laughter, presenting itself as an alternative in the respective media scenario. (6) There seems to be a relationship between laughter and audience: the host who laughed the most had the largest audience. On this last point, it was concluded that the laughter that positively influenced the audience was not

only quantitative but also qualitative (unlike the others, it was sustained by a constant empathetic and self-deprecating rhetoric).

The now-obsolete 'Laff Boxes', piano-like devices that produced different types of laughter, were initially sophisticated but prone to error. Controlled by invisible third parties, these machines could laugh excessively or in unintended places due to jammed keys and mistakes made by the 'Laff Boy' who operated them. Initially accepted by audiences, increasing exposure to artificial laughter led to growing criticism and dissatisfaction over time. As audiences demanded more sophisticated inventions, the traditional 'Laff Box' lost its appeal. Surprisingly, a few decades ago it was machines laughing like humans, not the other way around. While mechanised laughter has largely disappeared in the 21st century, this study suggests that its logic persists. Metaphorically speaking, the old 'Laff Box' did not die, it improved its appearance and now looks a lot like a human being, or is no longer interpreted in external machines, but in the human body itself.

This phenomenon fits seamlessly into the long-standing debate on the concept of happiness, especially in its (post)modern interpretation—linked to visual and quantitative dimensions and also closely linked to the act of laughing. Once an image of superficial and hollow joy, laughter now seems to enter a realm once thought unimaginable: the embodiment of authentic happiness. And this is not a minor interpretation, but a general and popular ideological interpretation of our time, which influences all other interpretations, be they scientific, political, religious or professional. When someone laughs in the media, it is more than just laughter; it is also an authentic (post)modern interpretation of happiness—true happiness. Therefore, laughter in the media today seems to be more than just an emotional gratification, but something deeper; a gratification that is also ideological: the sharing or finding of the true and only possible happiness.

Note

[1] The name seems to have originated from an error (a misspelling of the word 'laugh').

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