


Chapter 3


Laughter Across Walls: How Digital Humor Connects African Immigrant Mothers

Iye Ogbe

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8226-8500>

Kennesaw State University, USA

Nadia Nartey

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2132-0519>

Kennesaw State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Drawing from a year-long digital ethnographic observation, narrative inquiry, and using conceptual frameworks founded on intersectionality and resilience theories, this chapter illustrates how digital humor empowers African immigrant mothers to counter isolation through community, maintain traditions that are central to their identities, navigate cultural dissonance, and construct collective identities. Key themes from discourse framing, case studies, and analyses of digital artifacts include the intersectional challenges these mothers face and the resilience they demonstrate by transcending beyond these challenges to engage with informal networks of solidarity in digital spaces. The chapter has significant implications for practitioners, policymakers, and community organizations working to support immigrant inclusion initiatives, offering practical insights for supporting immigrant families through culturally responsive digital initiatives.

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Humor serves as a powerful tool for transforming social tensions and building bridges between communities. It facilitates the creation of spaces where people can engage, defuse tensions, and build lasting bonds through shared connections (Nagler, 2014). This transformative power of humor takes on new dimensions in today's digital landscape, where marginalized groups such as immigrant communities leverage online platforms to maintain connections and forge new relationships across geographical boundaries (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018). Among these immigrant communities, African immigrant mothers have developed impactful ways of using humor to create virtual support systems that echo the communal caregiving networks common in many African societies.

This chapter examines and conceptualizes how African immigrant mothers leverage digital spaces to build community and define their identities, particularly through humor. It shows how they use humor as a way to cope with challenges related to their overlapping identities as African immigrants and mothers. It draws from a year-long digital ethnographic study of online digital communities and narrative inquiry. We illuminate how the use of humor in these digital spaces represents a resilient manifestation of community-building and identity negotiation in the diaspora. The strategic use of humor within these digital spaces reflects both traditional African communal practices and contemporary adaptive strategies for navigating life in the diaspora (Vertovec, 2020).

The journey of motherhood, while universal in many aspects, takes on additional layers of complexity for African immigrant mothers in Western countries. These women often find themselves navigating multiple transitions simultaneously: the adjustment to motherhood, adaptation to a new cultural context, and reconstruction of support networks in unfamiliar terrain (Erel, Reynolds, & Kaptani, 2018). Traditional support systems—the extended family and community networks that typically assist in child-rearing—are most likely physically distant. Research shows that immigrant mothers often experience heightened isolation and stress due to the displacement of traditional support systems (Lee, Nguyen & Tsui, 2019).

Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of digital spaces in immigrant inclusion and community-building, but less attention has been paid to the specific ways humor functions in these contexts, especially for African immigrant mothers (Marino, 2019). The significance of this chapter extends beyond academic discourse. Understanding how African immigrant mothers use digital humor to collectively build resilience for community-building and identity negotiation has important implications for practitioners, policymakers, and organizations working in immigrant inclusion and family support. These insights can inform more culturally responsive

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