

MANIPULATING PLAY FRAMES: THE YO MOMMA JOKE CYCLE ON YOUTUBE

STEVE STANZAK

Despite their prevalence on school playgrounds, the Internet, and mass media, modern forms of the Dozens have garnered surprisingly little notice from folklorists. This lacuna is particularly unfortunate considering the important role played by folklorists such as Roger Abrahams in bringing this verbal dueling tradition to the attention of the scholarly community. Abrahams's seminal 1962 study, based on his fieldwork in a Philadelphia ghetto, examined the Dozens as performed in urban African American communities. When "playing the Dozens," Abrahams tells us, participants direct ritual insults at their opponents' family, most often their mothers. These insults are often highly stylized, contain sexual or obscene themes, and are sometimes rhymed, as in this Dozen collected by Abrahams:

I f---d your mother in a horse and wagon,
She said, "Scuse me, mister, my p---y's draggin'"¹ (1962, 216).

Other Dozens are less stylized and more likely to be recognizable to a modern audience, as in the Dozen below, recorded in the 1960s.

Your mother's so skinny, about that skinny, she can get in a Cheerioat
and say, "Hula hoop hula hoop!" (Labov 1972, 133).

Although a version of the above Dozen is still told among children today, there are still significant disconnects in both content and performance between the Dozens that were observed by Abrahams and those of contemporary children and adolescents. Little ethnographic or analytical work on the Dozens tradition has been conducted in the past several decades, despite their continuing presence in the social life of children and adolescents. My goal here is to demonstrate that not only have the Dozens survived and done well, but they have also adapted to changing social and technological contexts. This goal will be accomplished by examining one particular subgenre of the Dozens that remains exceedingly popular among children and adolescents: the Yo Momma joke. First, I will identify both the connections and disjunctions between the Dozens described by earlier scholars and one iteration of the Dozens—the Yo Momma joke cycle—so that a tentative formal and functional definition of the Yo Momma joke can be offered. Second, I will analyze Yo Momma jokes on the video social networking website YouTube, which has emerged as a key site for their performance. While the content of Yo Momma jokes is usually traditional, YouTube offers innovative new ways for participants not only to manipulate jokes' performance contexts, but also to create new contexts entirely. Many Yo Momma jokes on YouTube are no longer functional ritual insults; instead, they have been embedded into virtual folk dramas

in which performers act out hypothetical verbal duels. These mock-duels engage with the Yo Momma joke's traditional form and content in ways that interrogate notions of play and seriousness.

Method

The most attention to Yo Momma jokes comes in the form of published joke collections and amateur websites. However, the jokes in these collections remove the performance elements of their original joking sessions and thus lack the contextual data necessary for this study. My research of Yo Momma jokes on YouTube takes into account those performance contexts absent from these collections. YouTube is a website that provides a digital space for Internet users to view, share, and comment on videos uploaded by anyone with access to a web connection and a device capable of recording video. Most users of YouTube only use the website for watching videos, but others create an account with the site in order to post their own videos, comment on existing videos, or "subscribe" to their favorite video producers. For active users, YouTube provides an arena for extended interaction with a diverse range of social groups.

One of the most persistent problems I encountered while collecting data for this project was the transient nature of the materials. Too frequently in the early stages of my research did I return to a video I had recently viewed, only to find it removed by the user. I can only speculate on the reasons why users remove their videos or even delete their accounts entirely, but I suspect that it has to do with how children constantly refashion their identities on the Internet. A video that inspired pride or amusement at age eleven might be seen as embarrassing at age thirteen. On the other hand, many of the videos I surveyed for this project have been on YouTube for several years. Still, after several frustrated experiences with removed videos, I began transcribing those videos I used for my research. As will be seen in several instances below, these transcripts have been useful in cases in which videos have since been removed.

For my data collection, I informally surveyed several hundred videos that their creators had identified as containing Yo Momma jokes.² This method had some inherent limitations, as I could only find videos that were correctly labeled with this information. Patricia Lange, who has extensively studied social networks on YouTube, describes how video producers on YouTube manipulate tags and titles to control access to their videos (2007). In my searches, I was only able to find videos that were publicly identified as containing Yo Momma jokes. My search still revealed several thousand videos containing the search term "yo momma" or one of its variant spellings. The sample I use here was not arrived at randomly; it was limited by my choice of keywords and biased by the order videos were displayed by the YouTube website—I was much more likely to view videos that showed up in the first few pages of my search results than videos buried in the thirtieth page of search results. From these videos I found in my keyword searches, I sought out those that presented actual people performing Yo Momma jokes. I excluded a number of videos that were commercially produced (either from commercials, television shows, or movies) and videos that were simply Yo Momma jokes written

in text on the screen, often accompanied by background music. Also excluded were a number of videos that dubbed Yo Momma jokes told by professional comedians, usually George Carlin, over some other scene.³

The use of Internet data raises ethical questions that have been insufficiently addressed by folklorists. In my own research, I have treated YouTube videos as broadcasted, published materials. The site itself promotes this view; comparisons to television are contained in both its logo and its name, as well as the site's slogan "broadcast yourself." Although the Internet is by and large a public venue, there is still a range of privacy expectations held by Internet users (Lange 2007). Users have means by which to limit access to their videos, and many seem to have either removed or limited the audience of their videos between the research period and publication. However, all videos examined for this project were available to public viewing at one point and accessible to search engines through creators' use of appropriate tags and titles. Where possible, I have identified participants by first name. When real names are not identifiable, I use the username if it can be safely assumed that the performer is the same person as the video producer; otherwise I use descriptive identifiers. I have included user name and web addresses for all videos still online at the time of publication.

Arriving at a Definition of Contemporary Yo Momma Jokes

I will attempt to distinguish Yo Momma jokes from the Dozens based on my tentative observations, but an exact classification is difficult. The Dozens are a genre of ritual insults that encompasses a wide range of diverse forms, including the form now called the Yo Momma joke.⁴ These jokes are marked by a particular structure that has remained relatively stable over time. Despite this formal conservatism, contemporary Yo Momma jokes often differ significantly from those collected in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, arriving at an updated definition of the Yo Momma joke must entail a reckoning with its history and a disentangling from the larger Dozens tradition. One notable discrepancy between the Dozens as collected and analyzed by earlier scholars and those Yo Momma jokes performed by youth today is the identity of their performers. Although some scholars acknowledge that the Dozens were also performed among white adolescents (Ayoub and Barnett 1965; Labov 1972, 140-41), most analyses of the Dozens emphasize their function in the social and psychological lives of urban African American communities. John Dollard suggests that the insults act as a pressure valve to relieve some of the psychological anxiety felt by African Americans. He theorizes that this anxiety is displaced from the actual target of hostility onto the safer target of the peer group, where it is framed as play and made safe (1939, 20-21). Roger Abrahams partially rejects this hypothesis and offers two others. The first hypothesis centers on the typical family structure observed by Abrahams in South Philadelphia in the 1960s, which he classifies as a matriarchy. In this type of family structure, African American boys must struggle to form a masculine identity and in doing so are rejected by the family. Abrahams argues that forming this identity requires a violent shift from feminine to masculine values. This transformation is enacted through playing the

Dozens, which not only attacks the feminine as embodied in the mother but also affirms the participants' masculinity (Abrahams 1962, 213).

Abrahams also touches upon a social function of the Dozens, theorizing that they contribute to the development of verbal skill essential to the successful social life of adult African Americans. Later scholarship on the Dozens emphasizes this social function rather than the psychological model favored by Dollard and Abrahams. Harry Lefever proposes that the Dozens act as a nonviolent means for social control, in which African American men learn how to control their temper while under verbal assault (1981, 76). Lefever argues that performing the Dozens among peers hardens African American men to obscene and vulgar insults that might have been directed at them by antagonistic whites. Ayoub and Barnett, examining instances of verbal insults in a white high school, suggest that playing the Dozens is important in establishing one's identity within a peer group because the insults emphasize that peer group bonds are more important than protecting one's mother from verbal attack (1965, 341).

Many of these functions theorized by scholars of the Dozens must be reevaluated, as they largely posit race as the primary factor in their telling. Yo Momma jokes have been common among non-blacks for decades,⁵ and although race still plays a role in contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube, it is a much diminished one.⁶ Most of the Yo Momma joking sessions on YouTube were performed by white adolescent males, although African American, Latino American, and Asian American performers were also represented, as well as women, younger children, and young adults. The performance of Yo Momma jokes today must be disassociated on some level with research done by previous scholars working within completely different contexts, and new functional explanations should be investigated.

The function closest to the surface seems to be the entertainment value of the jokes themselves. Although the Dozens were certainly performed for entertainment, their competitive, dueling function seems to have been foregrounded. Performers of contemporary Yo Momma jokes, however, have reversed this emphasis, instead highlighting the role of Yo Momma jokes in providing amusement to both participants and audience. Yo Momma jokes on YouTube are often a performative event in which participants collaborate rather than compete.⁷ In all cases, these performances offer participants an opportunity to showcase not only their verbal skills, but also their ability to create a framework for performance. Most videos I observed were not candid recordings of spontaneous Yo Momma joke sessions, but rather framed as planned performances for a particular viewing audience. Several participants emphasized their role in constructing these Yo Momma joke sessions:

- Mike: "Peace up."
 Sean: "Wooooord."
 Sean: "Alright. Today, we're going to do some mama jokes."

 Sean: "Um, so basically, we're gonna go now. Hope you enjoyed the video and we'll see you later."

- Mike: "Peace out to all my YouTubers, MySpacers."
 Sean: "Oh yeah!"
 Mike: "Let's go"
 Sean: "Let's go MySpace!" (scpafc 2007)

Teenage Girl: OK people, we're going to teach you some good your momma jokes."⁸

These performances are set apart from ordinary discourse by the very fact of their medium: the participants intentionally chose to record their joking sessions and post them on YouTube with titles and tags referencing Yo Momma jokes. In addition, participants frame these events as joking sessions through announcements of their intentions and their intended audience. In both examples, it is obvious that the joking session is planned rather than spontaneous, even though what happens within the joking session may be less scripted.

Although entertainment and performance concerns lie at the forefront of contemporary Yo Momma jokes, scholars have also proposed other functions. A cognitive function is intimated by Benjamin Bergen and Kim Binsted, who theorize that such jokes provide children with an introduction to verbal play and assist in the formation of conceptual relations between objects and people (2003). With Yo Momma jokes, the mind must work to grasp the relationships between the different constituent elements of the joke and in doing so grapple with linguistic devices such as hyperbole, understatement, imagery, and metaphor. In addition, these jokes are formulaic, built on structural models of varying complexity. Although linguistically simple to repeat, they are difficult to successfully create.⁹

A socialization function has also been suggested. As noted above, Ayoub and Barnett hypothesize that playing the Dozens emphasizes peer bonds over familial ones. Similarly, Yo Momma jokes emphasize friendship bonds that are tested and stretched through the creation of a play framework. Labov and Lefever both claim that the Dozens are told largely among members of the same in-group, and my own research on contemporary Yo Momma jokes reinforces this assertion.¹⁰ Children may play Yo Momma jokes because it is a social activity that may be done among friends and even, counter to expectations, among family members. These performances acknowledge the shared social framework of the participants.

In addition, children may find this joking form fascinating because of the referential content of the jokes themselves. Numerous scholars have pointed out the prevalence of obscenity and subversion in children's folklore (for an overview of this scholarship, see McMahan and Sutton-Smith 1999, 300-08), and Yo Momma jokes certainly possess both features. The obscenity in these jokes not only challenges adult conceptions of taste but is often attributed to the mother herself, disrupting her stereotypical role as defender against the obscene.

- Simon: "Well listen, yo mama's so fat when she's on toilet she need a map to find her asshole" (Halfcastkid 2008).
 Alex B.: "Yo mama's so manly her balls are bigger than yours!" (bbumps123 2008)

Obscenity is not the only subversive feature of Yo Momma jokes. A joke from four-year old Aaron shows how Yo Momma jokes can subvert traditional family power structures:

Your mama's so fat that
 she went and threw the fish tank in the car that
 she broke the, the like, she broke the shade with the part and said
 she said, "Mom, Dad, I broke my shade part" and then
 she went to the living room and changed again, had to stay home
 (thecomputernerd01 2007).

The mother here is presented as the very embodiment of excess, hardly discernable from the four-year-old child who tells the joke. The mother of the joke has no control over her body, emotions, or environment. She throws a fish tank in the car, which causes her own parents to punish her. By effectively transforming the mother into a child, Aaron creates through his joke a world turned upside-down, one in which he is in control through his verbal skill and his mother is the one who is unrestrained and punished for it.

The Structure of Yo Momma Jokes

In regard to form, Yo Momma jokes are distinct, stable, and easily identifiable. Attempts to define Yo Momma jokes on the basis of form have been recently undertaken by Bergen and Binsted, who classify Yo Momma jokes under the category of "scalar humor." Briefly, scalar humor is defined as a subset of humor that manipulates ambiguous conceptual relations of scale in order to highlight incongruous relationships between objects or ideas (Bergen and Binsted 2003). Bergen and Binsted formulate a linguistic blueprint for scalar humor that follows the construction: "X IS SO Y THAT Z." Although Yo Momma jokes utilize this formula, it is also used by non-humorous expressions, as in this example: "It was so cold in the arctic circle that we found frost on the lettuce" (2003, 6). Here, the relationship between the first clause and the second is sensible. The first clause sets up a scenario ("it was so cold in the arctic circle") that is fulfilled in the second ("that we found frost on the lettuce"). This statement is not funny because the relationship between the two clauses is logical and expected. For this construction to be considered humorous, the implied relationship between the first clause and the second must fail to be fulfilled. This is accomplished by a number of rhetorical devices that manipulate or distort the implied relationship, such as hyperbole, understatement, polysemy, metaphor, or imagery. Consider the scalar joke "Yo' mama's so fat, when she was diagnosed with a flesh eating disease, the doctor gave her 5 years to live" (Bergen and Binsted 2003, 7). Like the previous example of the lettuce, this joke also uses the "X IS SO Y" construction. However, unlike the last example, this one is humorous because the second clause disrupts the logical relationship of scale implied by the first clause: the doctor's prognosis is nonsensical except in the world of humor, where mothers of extraordinary weight reside. Humor results from the "X IS SO Y" construction when there is a "mismatch

between the hearer's expectations about the utterance and its actual realization" (Bergen and Binsted 2003, 3).

Although Bergen and Binsted offer a thorough examination of scalar humor based on linguistic analysis, they do not take performance contexts into account. Here, I wish here to make several modifications to their structural framework based on my own observations of Yo Momma jokes in performance. I propose four key constituent elements that contribute to the structure of Yo Momma jokes. The first and most characteristic element of these jokes I label the *introductory formula*. This element contains the formulaic opening that gives the joke cycle its name: "Yo Momma so," containing both the subject of the insult as well as the required intensifier "so." The introductory formula is the primary framing device for the joke; it signals to participants that a framework for play is being constructed and that the discourse within the frame is not to be taken seriously. The following failed start of a Yo Momma joke told by Alejandro¹¹ illustrates several key features of the introductory formula:

Yo Momma's so fat she—
 your momma's so ugly—
 [*Alejandro's mother walks into the room*]
 Sorry sorry sorry.
 This is a momma joke. Don't—
 Run away.
 If you're a mom, please run away.¹²

As can be seen from this example, Alejandro constructs a play frame using the introductory formula that gives him license to tell a Yo Momma joke. However, Alejandro has several concerns about the effectiveness of the frame. Either he doubts that this licensing given by the frame is adequate enough to allow telling of the joke in front of the actual insult target (a mother), or he is unsure that adults hearing the joke will understand the play framework that he constructs. In either event, Alejandro makes the play frame explicit to his audience, emphasizing that that what he's saying "is a momma joke." The presence of this overt declaration is perhaps due to Alejandro's young age and his insecurity with the joke form; it is doubtful that older children would have found such distancing maneuvers necessary in this context. Although Alejandro firmly establishes this framework through the introductory formula and an unambiguous explanation, Alejandro still warns all mothers listening to "run away" while he tells his joke. The introductory formula as a framing element is crucial to successful performances.

Variations upon this formula are possible, but were rarely found in the videos observed. The intensifier "so" is critical to the effectiveness of the joke because it sets up the incongruity between scalar relationships that must be resolved by the audience. Therefore, the intensifier must always be present in the opening formula for a Yo Momma joke to be told successfully. The insult subject, however, is variable. A change in the insult subject to father or grandmother is found in some of the Dozens collected by Labov, but mothers were by far the most popular

target. This was also the trend in my examination of contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube.¹³

Some notable exceptions appeared in my research, particularly in the jokes told by four-year old Aaron, who tells Yo Momma jokes to an older relative behind the camera. Aaron struggled with the joke structure, but firmly grasped the introductory element. Not only does the introductory formula define the Yo Momma joke cycle, but it is also formulaic, concise, and rarely variable—in other words simple and memorable enough for young children to learn easily. Although Aaron comprehended that this element was crucial for the reproduction of this joke type, he had considerably less competence in the other structural parts of the joke.

When your momma's so fat that
 Spider-Man was so fat that
 Spider-Man comes down his web
 And he was scared that he was fat
 And then he said "What happened to me?"
 And then he was fat on my shirt
 So he popped out of my shirt (thecomputerner01 2007).

Although this joke demonstrates a limited competence of the Yo Momma joke, it suggests a developing understanding of form. The introductory formula is present, but the statements that follow do not relate to this formula. Once Aaron has established a play framework with the introductory formula, he changes the insult subject from a mother to Spider-Man. The point of the introductory formula here is not to logically connect to the rest of the joke, but rather to signal the presence of a play framework. Aaron's joke is much more dynamic than typical Yo Momma jokes, which are largely conservative and formulaic. Lost in this transcription are the environmental cues that Aaron draws upon in his own joke creation: Aaron is wearing a shirt bearing a depiction of Spider-Man. Although Aaron has not yet developed a repertoire of conventional Yo Momma jokes, he improvises using stimuli immediately present. Although he is not successful in his attempts to tell a Yo Momma joke, his attempts show a beginning understanding of form.

The second structural component in the Yo Momma joke cycle is what I label the *modifying element*, that term which limits and clarifies the excessiveness of the subject denoted by the "so" intensifier in the introductory formula. The most common modifier in Yo Momma joke cycle is "fat," but others are possible, such as "poor," "ugly," "black," "dirty," "old," and even "short." The main function of the modifying element is to define the type of scalar relationship that will be presented in the next section of the joke. In engaging with the joke structure, Aaron attempts to change the common modifying element "fat" to "ugly," but is unsure how to do so effectively. The following example demonstrates a change in the modifying element that is immediately followed by a retreat back to the original "fat." The insult subject is also modified, as above.

Your momma's so fat that
she ride a horse and the horse is so ugly,
that the horse was so fat.

The first line is consistent with the standard introductory formula and modifying element. However, in the second line Aaron introduces a horse to the joke that quickly becomes the subject of the joke, which is first called "ugly" and then goes back to the original "fat."

The next two elements operate together in a cause-and-effect relationship that is informed by the modifying element. The *causal component* introduces a normative and neutral scenario to the joke that has not yet been influenced by the modifying element or intensifier of the introductory formula. As such, the causal component acts as a bridge between the first part of the joke ("yo momma's so fat") and its punchline.

Simon: "Your momma's so fat she need a boomerang to put on her belt" (Halfcastkid 2008).

The elements of this joke do not quite match the structure I outline here, but can easily be standardized:

"Your momma's so fat that when she put on her belt, she needed a boomerang."

The causal component here is the mother putting on a belt, which is presented as a neutral scenario that should be easily possible. However, Yo Momma jokes are characterized by exaggeration and absurdity. Thus, the mother presented here is so excessively fat that she defies normalcy and the plausible scenario presented in the causal component is negated by the introductory formula and modifying element.

The last structural element to be considered here is the *consequential component*: the punch line of the Yo Momma joke that synthesizes the other joke elements. The consequential component is the result of applying the excessively modified mother subject to the normative scenario depicted in the causal component to produce an image of the mother in which she is unable to operate within the world, effectively reversing the causal component. Her inability to function in this world renders the subject foolish, obscene, and even deviant. This example, collected from Sean and Mike, exemplifies this phenomenon.

Sean: "Your momma's so poor that when I ring the doorbell she says *ding*."
Mike: "Sean."
Sean: "I shouldn't have said that. Sorry."
Mike: "Sean. Sean, yesterday I came to your house, and that's what you did."
Sean: "I didn't do it."

- Mike: "Yeah."
 Sean: "I can't afford a doorbell."
 Mike: "How you gonna make fun of my mom if you do it too?"
 Sean: "You're horrible."
 Mike: "Get out of here" (scpace 2007).

The scenario set up in the above joke is one in which a doorbell is rung and, due to the presentation of the mother subject as being excessively poor, a situation emerges which lies outside the range of logical possibilities and is seen as ridiculous. This particular joke is a well-known example of the genre and thus not particularly original. However, the participants here carry the humor of the joke beyond the scenario presented by the joke's structure through verbal maneuvers that position them further within the joking framework. Both boys play off each other, deliberately misinterpreting the joke as truth, despite its absurdity, and opening up an arena for verbal play that is at once part of the joke and yet outside it.

Genre and Play Frames

Like the Dozens, contemporary Yo Momma jokes reside where jokes and verbal duels intersect. Despite this similarity, contemporary Yo Momma jokes still inhabit a distinct subgenre separable from the Dozens in particular and verbal duels in general. My observations have shown that contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube, unlike the Dozens, emphasize the joking framework much more than the dueling framework. Although it is not uncommon for Yo Momma jokes on YouTube to take the form of a verbal duel between two participants,¹⁴ it is just as common for a video to feature just one person reciting a Yo Momma joke to the camera,¹⁵ or even just to display jokes in the form of written text on the screen. Even when a dueling framework between two or more participants is present, this framework is often radically different than those created in traditional verbal duels. Often, the duels are staged rather than spontaneous, and the number and identity of participants are manipulated by skillful digital editing.

As a form of verbal duels, contemporary Yo Momma jokes share many features with the Dozens. John McDowell defines verbal duels as "the competitive use of language within the confines of a game structure with rules that are codified and available to participants" (1985, 203). The content of verbal duels is often framed in formulaic patterns with a definite structure and generic content. Although some of the Yo Momma jokes I observed were obviously improvised, especially those told by younger children, most of the jokes were traditional. The same jokes were often heard in different joking sessions, performed by different participants. Even the jokes that were apparently improvised aligned themselves to the structural patterns defined above. Hence, these joking sessions can then be seen as highly ritualized and engaging with a generic pattern of verbal exchange.

A principle crucial to verbal dueling and to the examination of Yo Momma jokes considered here is what McDowell terms the "conservation principle." Briefly, the conservation principle recognizes that verbal dueling is a discursive

process in which participants pattern their responses based on previous utterances. Yo Momma joking sessions on YouTube often follow this conservation principle, allowing for a constant give-and-take between participants, or, as I also observed, between a single participant interacting with objects in his environment. An example from two adolescent brothers illustrates the conservation principle.

Brother 1: “Your momma’s so fat people jog around her for exercise!”

Brother 2: “Your mom’s so fat that when I jog around her for exercise she went ‘Stop it, you’re making me dizzy, yah.’”¹⁶

Two jokes told by the youngest informant, four-year-old Aaron, demonstrate the conservation principle as enacted between the solo participant and his environment. This first joke was told in the beginning of the session:

Your mama’s so fat that she looked into the mirror
and she saw it and the mirror cracked
and then it went into the living room,
but it slide, it slide into the living room (thecomputernerd01 2007).

The following joke was told closer to the end of the session, when his cousin Amanda entered the room where he was conducting the joking session.

Your mama’s so—
No Amanda, don’t come in.
Your mama’s so fat that
She saw a mirror was blue and orange
And pink so Amanda was in the mirror.

Considering these two jokes as a progression within the same joking session, we see that Aaron conserved elements of the first joke (the mirror) and incorporated that element into a later joke that also incorporated Amanda, who encroached on his play space. Although this move is not as dialogic as the first example of the two brothers, it does indicate a move towards the direction of conservation between participant turns that allows for effective dueling.

Although Yo Momma jokes share certain features with verbal duels, the form of such duels in the Dozens and contemporary Yo Momma jokes differs in several important respects, particularly in how each constructs frameworks for play that structure the discourse that occurs within it. These frames free the joke teller from responsibility for the content of the joke and signal to the audience that what is to be said is not to be taken seriously, that the performer is “just joking.” This frame is central to most human cognitive and behavioral processes, but manifest in contemporary Yo Momma jokes in particular ways.

Erving Goffman describes frames as devices that organize and represent experience (1974). Frames accomplish this task by arranging discourse into

demarcated spaces set off from other discourses through framing devices. Play is marked by particular framing behaviors, identified by Gregory Bateson as “interactive sequence[s] of which the unit actions or signals [are] similar to but not the same as those of combat” (1972, 179).¹⁷ Play is signaled through metacommunicative messages that indicate to participants aware of such messages that the next actions are not to be interpreted and evaluated as they normally would outside the frame. Goffman makes a similar observation: “playfulness and other keying may be involved which sharply reduce personal responsibility; that often what the individual presents is not himself but a story containing a protagonist who may happen also to be himself” (Goffman 1974, 541).

All communicative acts involve a certain level of framing and are subject to interpretation by the receiver of the message. The Dozens and other verbal duel forms are framed in a number of ways that establish and maintain the play frame. Labov writes: “Since responses to sounds [i.e., Dozens] are so automatic and deep-seated, we must pre-suppose a well-formed competence on the part of members to distinguish ritual insults from personal insults” (1972, 153). The formulaic character and the high stylization of the Dozens serve to remove the insults from the context of normative speech acts and instead place them into the category of ritual speech. In addition to the formal structure of the Dozens, their referential content also frames them as play. Abrahams recognizes that the rules formulated for playing the Dozens seem to say “You can insult my family, but don’t exceed the rules because we are dealing with something perilously close to real life” (1962, 211). Labov echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that the situations in which insults move from the ritual to the personal occur when the insults approach too closely to actual life. To create Dozens that are safe, therefore, requires a move from the probable to the “bizarre and unlikely” (1972, 157). This strategy also holds true for contemporary Yo Momma jokes, although performers on YouTube often exploit the ambiguous distinction between personal and ritual insults.

The participants involved are also an important consideration for understanding the framing of verbal duels. Dozens are often told among peer-group members who occupy the same in-group. This performative context allows for metacommunicative actions signaling the play frame to be understood by all participants as well as providing a safe verbal battleground for the Dozens to be played. Playing the Dozens requires participants to make themselves vulnerable to a certain amount of verbal abuse. This voluntary exposure to attack is a risk taken in all gaming activities and involves an assumption that all participants will play by the rules and that ritual insults will not give way to personal insults. However, there are situations in which this play frame breaks down. Labov notes that “with strangers it is considerably harder to say what is a safe sound, and there are any number of taboos that can be broken with serious results” (1972, 158). As a result, playing the Dozens is most often done between in-group members, and outside of this group this activity is usually intended to provoke a fight. Lefever notes a similar occurrence: “Fighting is associated more with the Dozens when it is played between exclusive out-group members, when it is played in regimented and restrictive settings and when it is played by adults” (1981, 80). In these breakdowns, a failure or an unwillingness to recognize the play frame results

in a literal interpretation of the insult. For playing the Dozens to be successful, participants must operate within the same metacommunicative framework and be able to recognize the verbal acts that signal the play event.

As verbal duels, contemporary Yo Momma joke performances on YouTube look much different than the Dozens collected in past decades. Although humor and play were certainly part of the Dozens, contemporary Yo Momma jokes emphasize the play and joking aspects to a much greater extent. I have classified Yo Momma jokes as “jokes,” and they are popularly referred to as such, but this generic distinction presents some inherent problems. As jokes, contemporary Yo Momma jokes do contain humor at their core and attempt, whether successfully or not, to provoke a laughter response. This attempt may be accomplished in a variety of ways, but Yo Momma jokes most often accomplish this by word play, absurd imagery, or the reversal of societal norms or expectations. These rhetorical maneuvers have been discussed above, and are most often inherent in the content of the jokes themselves. However, my observation of Yo Momma jokes on YouTube shows that participants are finding dynamic ways to revitalize jokes that are often seen by audiences as boring and clichéd.¹⁸ Performers on YouTube accomplish this through innovative framing techniques, such that the source of humor is less in the joke content itself than in the framework in which the joke is performed.

I have identified three techniques utilized by performers of contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube to innovate this traditional joke form: obscuring participant identities, taking seriousness playfully, and taking play seriously.

Obscuring Participant Identities

Framing necessarily requires a different interpretation of events. In play frameworks, relationships that are not central to the play may be temporarily obscured so that the participants may engage in a joking session that would otherwise be unable to occur. Often, the relationships that are obscured are familial ones. In the following example taken from two adolescent brothers, their familial relationship is ignored for the sake of the play:

- Brother 1: [*interrupting*] “Your mom’s so fat she goes into a restaurant, looks at the menu—”
 Brother 2: “*Hey.*”
 Brother 1: “—and says ok!”
 Brother 2: “Your mom’s so fat, no wait, dude. Your mom’s my mom.”
 Brother 1: “Oh shit.”¹⁹

This exchange closes the joking session and ends the video. The relationship between the brothers has been temporarily suspended so that they can tell Yo Momma jokes to each other; once reinstated, such jokes can no longer be told effectively. Several joking sessions between siblings follow this basic formula, with the main humor of the video deriving from the family relationship that is revealed at the end of the video.

One video that uses this technique (perhaps unintentionally) sets up the joking framework in the typical manner:

- Jimmy: "Yo mama fight!"
 Alex: "Your mom's so poor I saw her kicking a can down the street and I said 'hey, whatcha doing?' She said, 'moving.'"
 Jimmy: "Yo mama's so fat that she brought a little tiny spoon to the Super Bowl!" (bbumps123 2008).

Whereas the previous examples relied on the revelation of familial relationships to provide the video's humor, such a device within the video itself is unnecessary here because the two participants are identical twins.²⁰ The humor here results from the obvious irony of the framework; the act of watching identical twins insult each other's mother approaches the surreal. The identities of the participants cannot be obscured, only temporarily ignored by the audience. Still, the very constructedness of this joking framework is emphasized in several places. One commenter seems to either miss the point or is making an ironic joke of her own: "hello retards u have the same mama so u cant make a joke about ur mama."²¹ The relationship between the twins is further identified by the video's title, "when brothers fight 3" and metacommentary at the end of the video:

hope you enjoyed
 sadly this is our last video with violent
 stuff because our dad said no more but please
 comment and we will show our dad
 thank you and comedy ideas by
 jimmy and alex m

As demonstrated by these examples, Jimmy and Alex M. do not require a grand revelation at the end of their video to point out the presence of a play frame and the obscuring of participant identities that resulted. These twins are able to both obscure and reveal their identities at the same time through the use of intersecting and contradictory frameworks.

Another video that plays with the idea of obscured familial relationships presents two siblings acting out a Yo Momma battle. It begins with the two sitting at a table. The older sister is playing a handheld video game when she is interrupted by her younger brother:

- Brother: "Yo momma's so stupid that she thinks one plus one equals *elephant*."²²

At this point, music appropriate to verbal dueling begins playing in the background as the sister turns off her game and menacingly stands up from the table:

- Sister: "Let's handle this the *mature* way."

What follows are typical Yo Momma jokes told back and forth between the participants in dueling fashion. Despite the silly content of their jokes (e.g. “[your momma’s] so ugly she looked in the mirror and thought it was a picture of Michael Jackson”), the siblings adopt an appearance of seriousness that complements the dramatic music. The trope of taking these jokes seriously appears again and again in these videos, which serves to highlight their very playfulness. For these two participants, the video’s production implies, the Yo Momma battle has high stakes.

The revelation of their obscured familial relationship occurs at the end of their video, after the sister levies an insult that causes her younger brother to cry:

Sister: “Yo momma’s so ugly that the storeowner uses her picture to keep the *rats* away.”

After this insult, the sister approaches her little brother and puts her arms on his shoulders in a manner meant to suggest consolation. However, this action too is pretense:

Sister: “Um, little dude. Uh, your mom is still ugly.”

At this point, the sister runs away as the camera pans to an older woman, presumably their mother, coming out of a doorway. In a raised voice, she begins: “what the f—.” Here, the video conveniently ends, letting the audience’s imagination supply the rest of her outburst. From the video’s editing, it is obvious that the mother’s arrival is part of the performance, but it still serves to break the play framework these siblings have constructed by foregrounding the familial relationship between all the participants. Her invective at the end is a reply not only to her children’s fighting, but also to her place at the center of their duel as the target of their jokes.

Family relationships are not the only ones obscured by contemporary Yo Momma joke sessions. In several videos observed, the selfhood of the participant(s) is also concealed. Through video editing, some participants stage a joking session between themselves. In many, but not all, instances, this fact is obvious. User Spectator24 posted a video featuring his favorite Yo Momma jokes because he was “feelin’ real funny today.” Although Spectator24 is the only participant in the video, he still decides to frame it as a verbal duel between two participants. He accomplishes this through video editing, cutting back and forth to himself in different poses. One “participant” faces right to his assumed opponent, who faces left. No other attempts are made to disguise the self-identity of the participant(s). His imitation of an actual dual, however, is effective—there is even evidence of the conservation principle:

Spectator24 (facing right): “Yo momma got one toe and one knee and they call her Tony, heh heh heh heh heh.”

Spectator24 (facing left): “Dude, that’s not funny, that’s a serious problem. She can’t even wear sandals, you asshole” (Spectator24 2007).

Some videos use more advanced video editing techniques and costuming to disguise the fact that there is only one participant. One particularly skillful example is a video by user *azaelive* (2009). Many of *azaelive*’s videos feature his alter-ego persona, an outrageously crude woman named Monikka who sports long black hair and wears an excessive amount of black lipstick on her lips, under her eyes, and in her eyebrows. *Azaelive*’s Yo Momma video pits Monikka against “the other guy,” both played by *azaelive*. The jokes they tell are largely traditional, but what is innovative here is how *azaelive* edits the video so that both participants occupy the shot at the same time. Both participants are edited to be sitting next to each other on the same couch, giving the impression of an actual dual in real-time.

Taking Seriousness Playfully

A number of YouTube videos portray Yo Momma jokes inserted in the course of normal conversation, where a joking framework is not present. Instead, the performers pretend that their play is real life. Of course, this absence of a play frame is a fiction, as the video itself is a staged performance. These videos often offer an evaluation and commentary of the Yo Momma joke format, highlighting their simplicity.

One video by user *LuLu615* plays out another instance where seriousness is taken playfully when one girl uses an insult that is too true to life:

Natalie: “You know, speaking of big-ass mommas, you know how I know yo’ momma’s fat? Because she *irons her drawers on the driveway*.”
 Alex: “Well, yo’ momma’s so fat when her beeper goes off people think she’s backin’ it up.”
 Natalie: “You know how I know yo’ momma’s so fat? Because people *jog around her for exercise*.”
 Alex: “Well, yo’ momma’s so fat she weighs 800 pounds”
[mournful violin music begins in the background] “she got a clogged artery, had a triple bypass surgery, she *died*.”
 Natalie: *[slaps Alex across the face]* “Not cool.”²³

The two girls here have created a play framework that allows for the telling of Yo Momma jokes, but Alex’s last joke clearly breaks that framework by using serious events for the content of a joke. Of course, as is usually the case in Yo Momma jokes on YouTube, this seriousness is actually part of the joke; Natalie’s mother presumably does not suffer from the afflictions alleged by Alex. This video indulges in a “what if” scenario that details what might happen “when simple jokes go wrong,” which is the video’s description. By acting out the breakdown of

a play framework, Alex and Natalie's video draws attention to those features that are integral to its construction.

A video titled "SO IS YO MOMMA!" by user AlexDH92 emphasizes the fact that Yo Momma jokes can be easily inserted into the course of everyday conversation. Like azaelive's video discussed above, this video consists of only one performer who plays two parts. The entirety of the video consists of one character (whom I've labeled Alex 1) making a statement, followed by a mother insult spoken by another character (Alex 2).

- Alex 1: *[looking into a mirror]* "God, I'm so ugly."
 Alex 2: "Well so is your momma!"
 Alex 1: "This T.V. is so big!"
 Alex 2: "And so yo' momma's boobies!"
 Alex 1: "This show is so stupid."
 Alex 2: "Well, so is yo' momma!"
 Alex 1: *[holding up a piece of paper]* "I've got testicular torsion!"
 Alex 2: "Well, so does yo' momma!"
 Alex 1: *[playing a video game]* "You're a s- *[bleeping noises]* little
 f- *[bleeping noises]*!"
 Alex 2: "Well, so is yo' momma!"²⁴

The insults spoken here are highly abbreviated and unsophisticated when compared to standard Yo Momma jokes. The jokes here are left to the audience to parse and reconstruct. The first joke in the above transcript could be expanded to fit the structure:

"Yo momma's so ugly that she's as ugly as you."²⁵

This clumsy joke is neither complex nor original, but that is precisely the point of the video. Alex's performance highlights the simplicity of the Yo Momma joke structure by demonstrating how easily the joke can be constructed in almost any speaking context. Even the joke about testicular torsion works on some level despite its impossibility due to both its humorous incongruity as well as its insinuation of masculinity.

The video ends by testing the limits of the Yo Momma joke's applicability to non-play frameworks.

- Alex 1: *[talking on a cell phone]* "What, she's dead?"
 Alex 2: "And so is yo' momma!"
 Alex 1: "No, no, not now, my mum's just died in a horrible car
 crash."
 Alex 2: "Ooo, that's awkward."
 Alex 1: "Not as awkward as yo' momma!"

This humorous turn reverses the roles played by the two participants throughout the video. Here, Alex 1 sets up a serious scenario that resists the imposition of a

play frame by his double; Alex 2 recognizes that he has transgressed the boundary for appropriate play. However, in this instance the situation that establishes this boundary is imaginary, part of a play framework designed by Alex 1. Alex 2's response "ooo, that's awkward" denotes his disengagement from play. It is at this moment that the participants' roles are reversed; it is now Alex 1 who turns seriousness into play.

A video by user ZKSbrothers also exploits the simplicity and wide applicability of Yo Momma jokes, but employs a more dramatic method of conveying this commentary. The description for this video summarizes the main plot:

After watching "Yo Mamma" jokes for many hours, Stephen becomes obsessed, and can't stop making his own jokes (ZKSbrothers 2007).

The video includes a cast of five older teenage boys and is comprised of a number of scenes in which Stephen goes to extreme lengths to interrupt normal, non-play speech and activities, including sleeping, getting dressed, talking on the phone, and fishing. Throughout, Stephen hides nearby, waiting for the appropriate opportunities to interject. In one scene, Stephen runs to a group of three boys in order to tell them, "that's what your mother said last night." The last thing said in the video was "see you later," but Stephen was too far away to possibly hear this, implying either that Stephen has preternatural hearing or commenting on the applicability of this insult to a wide variety of contexts.

In another scene, Stephen hides himself on the roof of a house and listens in on a conversation between two of the boys.

Boy in Brown Shirt: "Sorry I was late coming over here. I, uh, was driving and there was this crazy kid that came out and he was screaming Yo Mamma jokes and it was really weird."
 Chris: "Yeah, that was probably Stephen. He stayed up all night on the Internet watching those stupid Yo Mamma jokes and now he can't stop."
 Stephen: "Your mother can stop...last night!" [*laughs*]
 Chris: "Where is he? Where is he? What now?"
 Stephen: [*Jumps off the roof*]
 Chris: "Oh my God! Oh my God! Are you all right?"
 Stephen: "Ah, yeah, I'm fine. *But your mom wasn't!*" [*laughs*]

The video contains several other scenes that follow this general pattern. In each, Stephen disrupts seriousness with play and irritates his companions. The video ends when the other boys, provoked by Stephen's antics, beat him up (during the beating, Stephen shouts, "your mom was this aggressive!").

The jokes in the above two videos are incredibly simplistic, even by Yo Momma joke standards, but this simplicity is evaluated and manipulated by the videos' creators. As seen in these examples, serious actions are quite easily

appropriated for play activity by these abbreviated Yo Momma jokes. Although these videos rely on these simplified Yo Momma jokes to drive the action, the creators are actually rejecting them as a legitimate source of humor. The humor in these videos comes not from the jokes themselves but rather from their performance contexts, the stuff that happens around the jokes. By devising the intricate framing techniques used in these videos, the creators add complexity to the traditional joke form and showcase their talents as innovators of play.

Taking Play Seriously

Another technique used to create humor in Yo Momma jokes on YouTube is to deliberately ignore the play framework necessitated by joking. Of course, this disregard of frames is feigned by participants; no actual people were offended in the making of these jokes. By pretending to ignore these play frames, participants actually draw attention to them, highlighting the act of performance rather than the jokes' actual content. This maneuver was used in a large number of the videos studied.

One extended example from Sean and Mike takes the referential content of the jokes themselves as being real events:

- Mike: "Man. Man, I've got to tell you something. Your momma's so fat her senior picture, was taken aerial view. Aerial? You know. That that that's fat."
- Sean: "That's where I was, that's where my senior picture was taken. Yeah."
- Mike: "You're pretty fat. Whew. Man, your momma's so fat, so so so fat she used a sock—. [*laughing*]. I'm joking, I'm joking. Your momma's so fat, she used a pillowcase as a sock."
- Sean: "Oh shit, I think that's what I have on. Oh yea, that's what I have. Uh oh."
- Mike: "Fatness. Whew. [*inaudible*]. It's ok, it's ok. It's alright, it's alright. Man, your momma's so fat that the doctor went to cut her leg open and gravy started flowing out, just flowin' like a volcano."
- Sean: "That happened to me two weeks ago."
- Mike: "Are you serious?"
- Sean: "Yeah."
- Mike: "You are pretty damn fat."
-
- Sean: "Your momma's so fat [*whispering*] that we're in her right now. Shhh, don't wake, don't wanna wake up Her Fatness."
- Mike: "What, what's that stuff covering you?"
- Sean: "Poop? Poopie poopie poopie" (scpafc 2007).

These jokes are not original (several commenters even accuse them of reading the jokes off a screen),²⁶ but the metacommentary surrounding the jokes is. These two performers attempt to increase the humor of the jokes' content by emphasizing their absurdity and insisting on their reality. These jokes move back and forth between play and seriousness. This movement is largely done through the self-identification of one participant with his mother, who is being insulted by the other. The pretense of ignoring the play framework allows these two boys to gain extra mileage from traditional Yo Momma jokes by imagining their excessive effects as present in the real world.

Although other videos show performers ignoring the presence of a play framework, most take a much different course than the one above. One video that utilized this technique is a direct parody of the MTV television show *Yo Momma*. This program, which ran in 2006 and 2007, brought together the best verbal duelers from different urban neighborhoods to face off in verbal battles facilitated by celebrity host Wilmer Valderama. In a cyclical process typical of many folklore genres, the *Yo Momma* television show drew from folkloric dueling traditions, but was then re-appropriated by folk culture as in the parody video below. The Yo Momma battle in this video begins as expected:

Zero Degrees Kelvin: "Yo. Yo momma is like a brick. She's dirty, she's flat on both sides, *and* she always get laid by Mexicans.
[*crowd cheers*]
Lil' Mufasa: "What'd you say about my momma?"
(LutopianSociety 2008).

At this point, however, Lil' Mufasa pulls out a gun and shoots Zero Degrees Kelvin, killing him. Lil' Mufasa has misinterpreted the joke as a real insult, but the audience then interprets his action as a legitimate response to the first joke. The crowd responds with the typical noises that follow an insult, and then the performer playing Wilmer Valderama consults with the judges and returns with a decision:

Wilmer Valderama: "Alright, so, I had a tough decision to make. Uh, you both were good, but, um, I did feel that one of you stepped up the most and that one of you was dead-on with your jokes. So, now, we decided, and the winner is...Zero Degrees Kelvin."

Wilmer then speaks to the dead Kelvin and presents him with his thousand-dollar prize. The video begins with an instance of play taken seriously but ends with seriousness taken playfully. Not only does the video toy with the differences between play and seriousness, but also with those between life and death; the participants are unable to distinguish between both conceptual categories.

The last video I wish to consider is sophisticated in terms of both performance and editing. Like the previous video, “Gaelen and Paul’s First Fight” also hinges on a joke that is taken seriously by another participant. It begins with the two performers conversing while playing video games together:

- Paul: “Hey, hey. Dude. I got a joke. I thought about this earlier today. Yo momma is *so fat*—”
- Gaelen: “What’d you say about my momma?”
- Paul: “Come on man, it’s just a joke.” [*lightly shoves Paul*]
- Gaelen: “What? Did you just exercise physical contact in my bubble?”
- Paul: “What?”
- Gaelen: “*Did you just touch me?*”
- Paul: [*stands up*] “What does it matter, Mr. Sensitive?”
- Gaelen: “I’m packing heat.”
- Paul: “Me too, bub.”
- Gaelen: “Tomorrow. Downtown. High noon.”
- Paul: “No, no, I can’t do it then. I’m going downtown to see a movie with Joseph.”
- Gaelen: “Wait, why didn’t you invite me?”
- Paul: “I don’t know, you’ve been kind of annoying lately. The whole bean thing.”²⁷
- Gaelen: “*You gave me those!* You, you know what? Ten minutes, front yard!”
[*long pause*]
- Paul: “Man, we’ve got ten minutes to burn”²⁸

The two resume playing video games together, and thirty minutes later (indicated by an on-screen message) they meet outside. In an imitation of a classic Western-movie dueling scene, Gaelen and Paul stand back-to-back before pacing off in opposite directions. Both the background music and close-up shots of each participant’s eyes also bring to mind other Western-movie genre conventions. The music suddenly changes to epic choral music as the two draw their guns and shoot. Both of them are hit, shown by spurts of blood that are digitally edited into the shot. Gaelen comes out on top, however. The scene ends with Gaelen standing over Paul, his gun pressed against Paul’s head. He speaks, “I never liked comments about my momma.”

This video is particularly sophisticated in the ways it draws upon Western genre conventions to play with the idea of retribution, in this case for a joke taken seriously. However, at the same time that these performers are employing these conventions, they are also subverting them through parody and play. The end of the video reveals the playfulness of this Western-style gunfight explicitly, while at the same time imposing an additional play framework upon the entire video. After the end of the last scene, when Gaelen is just about to shoot Paul, the scene abruptly changes to show the two in a bedroom, looking over pages of paper, presumably a script:

- Paul: "And that's it! Wouldn't this be the most awesome movie idea you've *ever* read?"
- Gaelen: "This is good stuff!"
- Paul: "Hey, hey. Your momma's so fat—"
- Gaelen: [*menacingly, in slow motion*] "What?"

Even in this scene, in which the viewer assumes that the play framework is not operating, is shown to be subsumed in yet another framework, as a Yo Momma joke is again taken seriously. This entire video contains several nested play frameworks that consistently interact with and interpenetrate each other. The viewer can never be quite sure in what framework the participants are operating at any time and this ambiguity is exploited by the two participants.

Conclusion

Although original ethnographic work on the Dozens has declined in the last three decades since Labov's treatment, this gap in the scholarly literature is not indicative of a decline in its performance. The Dozens have undergone significant changes since Abrahams and Labov conducted their fieldwork, but there are also telling similarities that demonstrate a continuity of form and content across generations of children and adolescents. A strictly textual study comparing the Dozens collected in the 1960s and 70s with those collected today might emphasize such continuity as evidence for the power of tradition. Analysis of performance contexts, however, shows that although the jokes remain the same, the message has not.

I have identified here one key site where Yo Momma jokes continue to be told among peers to an audience that evaluates their performance. My survey of contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube shows that this form of the Dozens is still vital among youth who have adapted this traditional joke genre to changed social and technological contexts. Here, digital video technology has provided contemporary youth with means by which to innovate and reinvent a somewhat stale joke form, and Internet sites like YouTube have facilitated the communication of these creations with a wider audience.

However, this study is far from conclusive. The videos here are only a sampling of those available on YouTube, and YouTube is only one website where such jokes are shared, reinvented, and performed. I have identified three techniques by which performers innovate Yo Momma jokes, but further research of a wider sample of jokes would undoubtedly uncover a wider range of maneuvers. Ethnographic work on Yo Momma jokes told offline would go far in identifying ways that Internet performance contexts shape the content, structure, and execution of jokes. This study points to the rich and vital possibilities of Internet folklore, but much work remains to be done by folklorists in the realm of vernacular culture on the Internet.

NOTES

1. This text is censored in the original article.
2. Alternately spelled yo momma, yo mama, yo mamma, and yo moma. In video transcriptions, I have used the spelling “yo momma” unless other spellings are specified in the video’s tags or title, in which case I use that spelling. I use the grammatically incorrect “yo momma” rather than “yo’ momma” as an emic classification; no YouTube videos surveyed for this project used the contracted form in their tags or titles.
3. One video dubbed a skit by Weird Al Yankovic over the children’s cartoon “Naruto” (a video that has since been taken down due to a copyright violation) and another dubbed Yo Momma jokes from the Blue Collar Comedy Tour over a World of Warcraft video (krooltee 2008).
4. Labov identifies ten different forms the Dozens can take, based on form. See Labov 1972, 128-42.
5. In 1972, Labov briefly discussed Dozens performed among white peer groups. Notably, he observed that performances of the Dozens by white peer groups were largely restricted to a limited set of insult routines. One of these is what Labov calls the “You are so X that Y type,” which includes Yo Momma jokes (140-42).
6. One consistent connection to urban black culture that finds its way into Yo Momma jokes on YouTube consists of those videos inspired by the MTV television show *Yo Momma*, which ran for three seasons between 2006 and 2007. This show took place in large cities (Los Angeles, New York, and Atlanta), emphasized urban culture, and pitted two people against each other in a verbal battle. The winner received a cash prize and advanced in the competition. The structure and content of these battles differed significantly from their vernacular counterparts, but it is obvious that some YouTube videos observed took inspiration from the television show.
7. However, sometimes the pretense of competition is maintained, although it is obvious to viewers that such competition is scripted. This is particularly true of those videos that take inspiration from the *Yo Momma* television show, which maintains a strong competitive element. I will touch on such staging later in this paper.
8. This video has since been removed by the user.
9. Although Bergen and Binsted use traditional Yo Momma jokes that are fully formed and divorced from performance contexts, my own ethnographic work with Yo Momma jokes on YouTube supports their cognitive function. As will soon be seen, young children are capable of grasping the structure of Yo Momma jokes, but often struggle with providing content that successfully manipulates scalar relationships.
10. Indeed, I could find no Yo Momma joking sessions performed between participants who did not know each other. This is not particularly surprising, as most of the sessions I observed on YouTube were videotaped and hence self-selected for participants that knew each other. However, there are many other videos on YouTube that are recordings of spontaneous rather than scripted events

observed by the recorder, and my survey did not turn up any recording of an impromptu Yo Momma joking session between strangers. Scholarship on the Dozens also largely upholds this trend, and I speculate that further ethnographic evidence on Yo Momma jokes in particular would uphold this claim. One notable exception is in the mass media. The *Yo Momma* television show on MTV pits participants from different neighborhoods against each other, but these battles are planned by producers for a mass media market.

11. Although I could not identify Alejandro's exact age, he appears to be between five and eight years of age.

12. This video has since been removed by the user.

13. Of course, this trend is partly the result of the search terms I used in this study. However, a brief search for phrases such as "yo daddy," "yo sister," and "yo brother" returns videos that feature mostly Yo Momma jokes. Jokes with targets other than a mother are comparatively rare, and usually told at the same time as Yo Momma jokes.

14. As will be seen later, however, sometimes this duel framework is artificially created. For example, several videos constructed a dueling relationship through clever editing, thus pitting the participant against himself. This phenomenon will be explored later in the paper.

15. In some cases, the participant clearly intends for his audience to be the target of these jokes and invites video responses and comments as replies to his verbal attacks. One notable example of this type of video by YouTube celebrity Shane Dawson garnered several hundred video responses and more than 100,000 comments as of September 2012, four years after the original video was posted (ShaneDawsonTV 2008).

16. This video has since been removed by the user.

17. The idea of play as faked combat is especially pertinent to verbal duel forms, as much of the tension inherent in such duels revolves around maintaining this distinction.

18. Remarks on the unoriginality of the jokes themselves is one of the more frequent responses to Yo Momma joke videos on YouTube. Users often critique the video for using videos taken from somewhere else, although others often respond that Yo Momma jokes by their nature are unoriginal.

19. This video has since been removed by the user.

20. The conclusion of this joking session ends logically enough with simulated violence when one brother takes offense to a joke, which is another technique employed by performers of contemporary Yo Momma jokes to increase the humor.

21. Comment by user [ilovejustin2525](#), found on the page for the video [when brothers fight 3](#).

22. This video has since been removed by the user.

23. This video has since been removed by the user.

24. This video has since been removed by the user.

25. This kind of reconstructive work is modeled on Labov, who also looked at the structure of these abbreviated Dozens of the "X is so Y" type. For examples of how Labov reconstructed these abbreviated Dozens, see Labov 1972, 154.

26. The comment by user astalavista123321 is indicative of the general tone and language of other such comments: “ok that was so gay that gay people laugh at you for being gayi mean,wtf dude,the yo momma’s so fat, she fell in love and broke it and i think there was one more that was actualy funny, ok, but why the hell must you act like that? and the kid on the right side of the screen was fucking retarded..i mean,he kept forcing himself to laugh.and as many others have said,i even found the site were you were reading the jokes from, so bloody come up with one and take credit for it.”

27. This refers to another video by the two posted a month earlier, in which Gaelen eats some beans. His ensuing flatulence causes an explosion. The purpose of the video, other than entertainment, was for the pair to experiment with software that creates special effects. This video has since been removed by the user.

28. This video has since been removed by the user.

WORKS CITED

- Abrahams, Roger D. 1962. Playing the Dozens. *The Journal of American Folklore* 75 (297):209–20.
- Ayoub, Millicent R., and Stephen A. Barnett. 1965. Ritualized Verbal Insult in White High School Culture. *The Journal of American Folklore* 78 (310):337–44.
- azaelive. 2009. Yo mama jokes! Battle. *YouTube*, 2 min., 16 sec.; video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKOs-bFEKpM>.
- Bateson, Gregory. 1972. A Theory of Play and Fantasy. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 177–93. New York: Ballentine.
- bbumps123. 2008. when brothers fight 3. *YouTube*, 1 min., 47 sec.; video. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-V_tKSe8D7I.
- Bergen, Benjamin, and Kim Binsted. 2003. The Cognitive Linguistics of Scalar Humor. In *Language, Culture, and Mind*, ed. M. Archard and S. Kemmer, 1–13. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Dollard, John. 1939. The Dozens: Dialect of Insult. *The American Imago* 1 (November):3–25.
- Goffman, Erving. 1974. The Frame Analysis of Talk. In *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, 496–559. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Halfcastkid. 2008. Extreme Funny YO MAMA JOKES. *YouTube*, 1 min., 30 sec.; video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCJfWwp9F4E>.
- krooltee. 2008. World of Warcraft Yo mama fight, Horde vs Alliance. *YouTube*, 2 min., 38 sec.; video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zs98lY2pkIY>.
- Labov, William. 1972. Rules for Ritual Insults. In *Studies in Social Interaction*, ed. D. Sudnow, 120–69. New York: The Free Press.
- Lange, Patricia G. 2007. Publicly Private and Privately Public: Social Networking on YouTube. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (1). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/lange.html>.
- Lefever, Harry G. 1981. “Playing the Dozens”—A Mechanism for Social-Control. *Phylon* 42 (1):73–85.

- LutopianSociety. 2008. Yo Momma (Final Cut). *YouTube*; 3 min., 58 sec.; video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6n2nysi4syM>.
- McDowell, John H. 1985. Verbal Dueling. In *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. T. A. van Dijk, 203-11. London: Academic Press.
- McMahon, Felicia R., and Brian Sutton-Smith. 1999. The Past in the Present: Theoretical Directions for Children's Folklore. In *Children's Folklore: A Source Book*, ed. B. Sutton-Smith, J. Mechling, T. W. Johnson and F. R. McMahon, 293-308. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- scpafc. 2007. Funny Yo Mama Jokes. *YouTube*; 4 min., 22 sec.; video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reXD1k5AoGo>.
- ShaneDawsonTV. 2008. YO MOMMA YOUTUBE BATTLE! *YouTube*; 4 min., 59 sec.; video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsukwnTEb8k>.
- Spectator24. 2007. My Top Yo Momma Jokes!!! *YouTube*; 4 min., 28 sec.; video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrN7MpdBU>.
- thecomputerner01. 2007. Yo Mama Jokes (((4 Year Old Edition))) . *YouTube*; 3 min., 19 sec.; video. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syriAKa_OxA.
- ZKSbrothers. 2007. ZKS Brothers: Yo Momma! *YouTube*; 8 min., 48 sec.; video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wf8-eaPiceQ>.