

Laughing when the Lights Go Out: Humour and the Electricity Crisis in South Africa

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Abstract

As a dire consequence of complex problems, the centralised, state-owned power utility in South Africa, Eskom, has implemented so-called “loadshedding.” This is the name for a regime of scheduled power-cuts that has persisted since 2007, causing significant economic and psychological damage among South Africans. Nevertheless, despite the severity of the Eskom debacle, South Africans have produced an unending stream of social media humour in response to it. In this article, we ask what such humour might tell us about the nature of the collective South African psycho-social mindset. We collected 380 humorous items relating to the portrayal of Eskom in South African popular culture. These took the form of comic strips, comical memes, and satirical reels from various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube. The humorous responses, primarily in English as South Africa’s *lingua franca*, were produced by a range of content creators—from celebrities like Trevor Noah and other regular content creators to unknown beneficiaries of virality—representing a diversity of cultures, humour styles, contexts and audiences. We created a comprehensive list of all the humorous items that readily lent themselves to interpretive analysis in terms of an anthropomorphic portrayal of Eskom as the abuser in an ongoing abusive relationship with the South African citizenry suffering from a victim mentality. The main aim of the article is to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this portrayal, the significance of which lies in its capacity to open up avenues for further philosophical reflection and sociological research.

Keywords: humour; Eskom; South Africans; abusive relationship; victim mentality

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Introduction

Eskom is a giant, centralised and state-owned power utility in South Africa, responsible for generating, distributing and selling electricity. As multiple news reports indicate, it is beset with a complex tangle of dire funding, planning, procurement, and maintenance problems, which have laid bare extensive criminality tied to state capture during the Zuma years¹ and ongoing fraud and corruption involving government employees at all levels (see, e.g., Erasmus 2023; Mahlaka 2023; Suttner 2023). The stakes are high, leading to the alleged cyanide poisoning of a (since resigned) Eskom CEO, André de Ruyter, and a poor outlook for institutional integrity in the immediate future (Yelland 2023). A sorely felt consequence of Eskom's inability to sufficiently power the nation has, since the beginning of 2007, taken the form of what is called "loadshedding": nationwide, scheduled, rotational power-cuts which, at best, leave areas without electricity for about two hours a few times a day. Annoyance over domestic discomforts pales in the face of long-term economic and social consequences as industry stalls and small businesses close their doors (Ting and Byrne 2020). Also, Eskom is dependent on coal, which is environmentally catastrophic, driving a rush towards renewables and independence amongst the economically powerful, which, in turn, diminishes municipal income derived in large part from the sale of Eskom electricity. In turn, Eskom's financial difficulties are exacerbated by corrupt municipalities failing to pay for the electricity supplied to them (Ting and Byrne 2020). It is the general public, and mostly the poor, who suffer the brunt of these increasing inequalities and losses. There is anger bubbling in the South African public, and since wealth and power remain largely divided along racial lines, there are potential eruptions of racialised conflict (Stoddard 2021).

A Facebook meme reflects: "We would love to tell you an Eskom joke, but we just don't have the energy."² The source of humour is the performative contradiction: we actually tell a joke in the very articulation of the words "we cannot tell a joke." This, in turn, suggests that the energy for an Eskom joke remains alive and well in a population in equal measure disrupted, depressed, appalled and angered by the Eskom debacle. Indeed, despite its severity, South Africans have produced an endless stream of humour in response to it.

Much of the academic research on the work that humour does vis-à-vis a crisis goes into reflections on the question of how humour works and what humour does for us. Why do we laugh in certain situations? In what ways might humour exacerbate or ameliorate

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- 1 The Zuma years, which span from 2009 to 2018, relate to Jacob Zuma's Presidency of South Africa, which was a period of significant political upheaval in the country. For instance, between 2008 and 2015 there was a series of xenophobic attacks—closely linked to socioeconomic inequality. Grand-scale corruption was also a notable feature of this era. Furthermore, the Zuma years were marked by political controversies, such as the Public Protector finding that Zuma had improperly benefited from state expenditure on upgrades to his Nkandla homestead in 2014, and in 2016, the Constitutional Court ruled that he had failed to uphold the Constitution, sparking calls for his resignation and a failed impeachment attempt in the National Assembly (Makhanya 2019).
 - 2 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2046588672208047>

racial conflict? Is it a coping mechanism? Is it a defence mechanism? Is it a way of talking truth to power? In this article, however, we approach the question of the work that humour does somewhat differently. We assume that one of the best ways to gain some sense of a collective psycho-social mindset is to analyse the humorous items that inevitably circulate in response to striking events or situations that capture our collective imagination. We ask what the stream of humorous items in response to the Eskom debacle might tell us about the nature of the collective South African psycho-social mindset.

We began our research by collecting as many examples of Eskom-related humour as we could find from 2006, the year before “loadshedding” began, until the end of 2022, when we started exploring and analysing these responses. In our exploration of approximately 380 humorous items in the form of comic strips, comical memes and satirical reels from Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube, we took a cue from a Tweet, originally from @Trevornoah: “Eskom is like an abusive husband—acts nice when visitors are around, then when they leave, back to old ways.” We hypothesised that the anthropomorphic portrayal of Eskom in an ongoing abusive relationship with the South African citizenry as its victim was pervasive (albeit not always so explicit as Noah’s Tweet) amongst social media humourists.

We used the following working definition: An ongoing abusive relationship involves one partner with a certain profile of traits, who habitually uses a pattern of abusive and coercive behaviours to maintain power and control over another partner, who has developed a “victim mentality.”³ By victim mentality, we mean a mindset whereby people tend to portray themselves as the victim of the negative actions of others (French 2023). Consulting texts from several theorists and researchers, we drew up a list of common traits and behaviours associated with both abusive and victimised partners. We then sorted the humorous items, firstly according to whether they explicitly or implicitly portrayed an abusive relationship, or an abusive or victim mentality, and secondly according to which characteristic they most explicitly portrayed. Notably, however, our categorisations are not exact since they rely to a greater or lesser extent on interpretation, as many of the items are multifaceted. Further, to portray Eskom as abusive in some way, is necessarily implicitly to portray the South African electricity consumer as abused (and vice versa). However, we did not categorise any item twice. These humorous responses enabled us to extrapolate from the individual to make inferences about the collective.

In total, 243 items out of 380 (64%) in some way portrayed aspects of the abuser-victim relationship, suggesting that the subtext of abuser and victim is quite ingrained in the South African collective imagination.

3 <https://stoprelationshipabuse.org/educated/what-is-relationship-abuse/>

In sum, we considered a fairly large collection of humorous items (from when loadshedding started to the point of writing), and we found that an interesting theme of an abuser-victim relationship was repeated regularly over the entire period, across a wide diversity of items (which are themselves repeatedly shared over the years), and across cultural diversity in producers and consumers of this content. We believe that a similar message about the power relations between the South African state and its citizens across a diversity of content producers, contexts and audiences enables us to make a relatively strong, generalised, psycho-social claim; namely that the abuser-abused relationship is a habitual and shared way of thinking about ourselves as South African citizens in relation to the state. There may well be interesting other things to glean about South African identity by tracking in more detail the specific profiles of who produced the content and who consumed it, and the potential differences between them, but this would be the subject of a different kind of study.

Further, the period from the beginning of loadshedding to the time of writing was, relatively speaking, very short, and despite fast-moving political changes, periodising the collection and using it, perhaps, to track changes in our communal self-perception over time does not seem feasible to us for this particular theme. The value of periodising is diminished further by the repetitive nature of how items are shared and re-shared across the years on social media. Finally, to accurately track changes in people's humorous response to loadshedding in relation to its levels of severity was also neither feasible, because the severity of load-shedding is so irregular, nor necessary. While this may be the topic of interesting research of a different kind, it is far outside the scope of our project, which was to trace a regularly repeated theme across different contexts. The number of humorous items increased when loadshedding was more severe, but the theme that we uncovered remained constant across the severity of the loadshedding stages.

In the first part of the article, we discuss examples of the humorous items in our collection that repeatedly portray Eskom as exhibiting some trait or behaviour of an abusive partner. In the second part, we discuss examples of items that portray the victim mentality among South Africans. We selected examples for these discussions that offered particularly clear, striking and precise illustrations of the various aspects of this theme. While an indication of an affirmative audience reaction would further support our argument, for some items, such as newspaper cartoons, audience response is impossible to gauge. While our focus, therefore, remains on thematic analysis of the produced content, where possible, we have incorporated an indication of audience response. We have provided links to all examples should readers wish to view images. The main aim of the article, to reiterate, is to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the portrayal of state-owned Eskom as abusive and the South African electricity consumer as abused, which we believe opens up avenues for deeper psycho-social research.

The Portrayal of Eskom as an Abuser

Bancroft (2002, 21) applies the term “abuser” to anyone who “has recurring problems with disrespecting, controlling, insulting or devaluing” a partner, whether or not this is also accompanied by verbal, physical or sexual aggression.⁴ Multiple humorous items portray Eskom as having traits or displaying behaviours of an abuser in this sense.

While one partner’s power to control the other is not in itself sufficient to call a relationship abusive, most theorists stress that having and maintaining the power to control is central to a relationship that has become abusive (Bancroft 2002, 157–162). This is reflected in humorous responses to the Eskom crisis where the main theme is a portrayal of Eskom as an overwhelmingly powerful agent (even more powerful than God) with decisive jurisdiction over our minutest activities. For example, a 2022 Instagram Reel, uploaded by *og2scoopscomedy* with 377 likes,⁵ explaining “loadshedding” from stages 6–15, portrays Eskom not only as all-powerful and controlling, but also as an abuser whose infinitely swelling desire to control all light sources has one purpose: harming South Africans. At stages 6, 7 and 8, Eskom is occupied with controlling everyday sources of light; house, car and cell phone. At stage 9, controls become increasingly excessive—Eskom reduces oxygen so we cannot see by firelight—and by stage 14, Eskom destroys the stars, including our sun. At stage 15, even as in death we face the light at the end of the tunnel; Eskom switches it off. Eskom is finally portrayed as powerful enough to stop God from shedding light on what just happened. These themes are regularly repeated in multiple posts, such as the following posted on Twitter by Musa Zuma (@mgzee, 2010): “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light, but then Eskom said he would have to wait until Thursday to be connected.”⁶ In a 2019 meme (posted on Twitter by @Aras_aras, and reposted 543 times, with 1 400 likes and 56 comments) a coal truck on a highway is cleverly photographed as it passes by the setting sun, creating the impression that the sun is being carried away in its cargo bed. The by-line is “#LoadSheddingStage7: The truck is taking the sun away bathing.”⁷

Correlative to the power to control, it is common for abusers, as Bancroft (2002, 37) notes, to tell victims what to think and to make them unsure of their own perceptions and beliefs. In other words, they operate to make their victims feel powerless. This is reflected in items that depict Eskom as a force against which South Africans are rendered powerless. The well-known cartoonist, Zapiro (2015), depicts a diminutive South African figure as Sisyphus rolling the rock called Eskom up the hill, only, as we

4 While Bancroft’s research focuses on men specifically, it can be applied to research on abusive relationships regardless of gender, by providing insights into the dynamics of abuse, patterns of behaviour, and power imbalances.

5 https://www.instagram.com/p/CbINU_ijzUV/

6 The words are attributed to Spike Milligan by Kim Heller in an article in *The African*: <https://theafrican.co.za/featured/eskom-crisis-ill-equipped-leadership-a-glaring-reality-791131a4-3628-4cce-8c64-94cedee4683/>

7 https://twitter.com/Aras_aras_/status/1108280482750439426

know from the myth, to have it roll down again and again.⁸ Even more pointedly, a 2022 image from *Creamer Media's Engineering News* shows a boxing ring, where the villain, labelled “loadshedding,” delivers a knee-weakening punch in the face to a puny weakling, an ordinary South African representing and labelled “SA Business,” who is already “punch drunk” and defenceless from various blows.⁹

Bancroft (2002, 157–164) notes that abusers share a deep sense of entitlement regarding their power. He claims that the problem with abuse continues because of the abuser’s strong belief that controlling or abusing a partner is entirely justifiable (Bancroft 2002, 120). Further, this power is used by abusers to give preference to their own agendas (Bancroft 2002, 76). Eskom’s sense of entitlement to serve its own agenda is epitomised in an ironic 2011 tweet from @Trevornoah, which was re-posted 42 times, with 7 comments and 5 likes: “Eskom says they don’t have money, and nothing proves this more than giving some employees a 500% raise!”¹⁰ This thought is repeated in a 2023 cartoon by Zapiro in the *Daily Maverick* newspaper, which juxtaposes an aged, crumbling, and badly patched Eskom infrastructure with a sleek high-rise, fronted with one-way glass which conceals “godfathers, bribes, kickbacks, money laundering, sabotage and assassins.” The two sets of architecture are joined by a chute via which Eskom is pumping money into the high-rise. A diminutive South African figure, a small lighted candle in one hand, the other gesturing toward the high-rise, wonders, “how they keep THAT half running so efficiently!”¹¹

In Bancroft’s (2002, 187–188; 450) words: “The abuser tends to see his partner as less intelligent, less competent, less logical, and even less sensitive than he is ... He often has difficulty conceiving of her as a human being. This tendency in abusers is known as *objectification* or *depersonalisation*.” A TikTok video by Galectik¹² (92 200 likes, 603 comments, 1 679 shares) deftly portrays Eskom as depersonalising ordinary South Africans by treating us as mere annoyances whose needs, experiences and feelings need not be taken into account. In the video, an Eskom employee (representing the company) gets home from work to face a family (ordinary South Africans) that is very disgruntled by the effects of loadshedding. He thinks he should try to fix this, and his response to a telephonic request to return to work to fill in for a colleague is negative, but only until he is reminded to look at the loadshedding schedule for his area. Seeing that he will be affected, he quickly changes his mind: “They want me back at work.” His angry wife’s

8 Zapiro, “The Effect of Eskom’s Load-shedding and the South African Economy,” published in *The Times* on February 6, 2015

<https://www.zapiro.com/component/zoo/advanced-search/608?Itemid=464&page=6>

9 <https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/punch-drunken-2022-10-28>

10 https://twitter.com/search?q=Eskom%20says%20they%20don%27t%20have%20money%20and%20nothing%20proves%20this%20more%20than%20giving%20some%20employees%20a%20500%25%20raise&src=typed_query

11 Zapiro, “Power Lines,” published in the *Daily Maverick* on March 2, 2023.

<https://www.zapiro.com/component/zoo/advanced-search/608?Itemid=464>

12 https://www.tiktok.com/@galectik/video/7210382626455031046?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7283799946020619782

retort translates as, “Go! Offswitch man!” He responds with a universal gesture of indifference to her needs—a finger to the cheek pulling down the lower eyelid, to indicate that it is empty of tears.

Abusers do not just objectify their victims by ignoring needs, experiences and feelings; they sometimes explicitly aim to make victims uncomfortable or cause them pain, and then the abuser takes delight in it. Bancroft (2002, 120) cites the example of an abuser he interviewed who would hide his partner’s car keys until the search for them made her frantic. Then, he would slip the keys back out somewhere, in plain view, and tell her that they had been there all along. In a similar vein, a 2009 Tweet from @brucediesel remarks: “Eskom and the Post Office have ganged together to see if they can cause me an apoplepsy [sic] !!!!!”¹³ Also from @Donsech (2012) Lmao RT @Brooklyn_Boo: Hahahahaha RT @Eskom_RSA: “Will you be watching Generations, Isidingo or Idols tonight? WE don’t think so!” [lmao (laughing my ass off). RT = “Retweet” and “Real Talk”].¹⁴ You naively think you will be enjoying yourself tonight, and you are trying to choose which TV programme to watch, but (let’s get real, we are going to tell you the truth here), “we at Eskom are not going to let that happen.” The mocking style and tone in the message portray Eskom as experiencing vindictive delight in its power to deprive South Africans of something they enjoy. In a popular meme, the Eskom board (during loadshedding) is depicted anthropomorphically as a racoon.¹⁵ Its eyes, set in a black mask-like band, seem narrowed; its little grin reveals sharp incisors; and it appears to be rubbing its “hands” together in gleeful delight.

Bancroft (2002, 80–84) adds that it is important in the understanding of an abusive mentality to recognise that abusers seldom simply lose control. Instead, they explicitly engage in erratic, arbitrary or contradictory behaviour in an effort to destabilise and confound their victims. In his words:

I came to realise, through my experience with over two thousand abusers, that the abusive man wants to be a mystery. To get away with his behavior and to avoid having to face his problem, he needs to convince everyone around him—and himself— that his behavior makes no sense. He needs his partner to focus on everything except the real causes of his behavior ... To see the abuser as he really is, it is necessary to strip away layer after layer of confusion, mixed messages, and deception. Like anyone with a serious problem, abusers work hard to keep their true selves hidden.

13 https://twitter.com/search?q=Eskom%20and%20the%20Post%20Office%20have%20ganged%20together%20to%20see%20if%20they%20can%20cause%20me%20an%20apoplepsy%20&src=typed_query

14 https://twitter.com/search?q=Hahahahaha%20RT%20%40Eskom_RSA%3A%20Will%20you%20be%20watching%20Generations%2C%20Isidingo%20or%20Idols%20tonight%3F%20WE%20don't%20think%20so&src=typed_query&f=top

15 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=754015434679959&set=a.754012504680252>

The abuser creates confusion because he has to. He can't control and intimidate you, he can't recruit people around him to take his side, he can't keep escaping the consequences of his actions, unless he can throw everyone off the track. (Bancroft 2002, 84)

The YouTube skit by Panther Punch, “ESKOM UNCOVERED: The TRUTH behind the loadshedding schedule” (1 300 likes, 56 comments)¹⁶ is typical of the humorous items that portray Eskom as engaging in erratic, arbitrary or contradictory behaviour that confounds ordinary South Africans. Parodying *Carte Blanche*, a South African TV series specialising in investigative journalism, the clip shows a “Cart Branch” [sic] journalist investigating one of Eskom’s offsite facilities. Emerging from a cloud of dagga smoke, it turns out that those responsible for Eskom’s loadshedding schedule in the Western Cape are a pair of extremely stoned “weed boys” who link stages with areas by drawing lines on a wallchart after a crazy ritual of blindfolding and spinning around.

When counsellors (who had been tasked with enacting an abusive incident) requested feedback on their skit from a group of abusive men, Bancroft (2002, 122) describes being struck by the abuser’s sharp awareness of the different manipulative tactics they used and the purposes these served. As he puts it: “In the excitement of giving feedback on the skit, the men let down their facade as ‘out-of-control abuser who doesn’t realise what he’s doing’” (Bancroft 2002, 122). Instead, they revealed themselves as blatant liars, who lied often, easily, and without compunction to manipulate their victims. The portrayal of Eskom as such is typified in a 2019 YouTube song and video by Shakir ChuQy tagged #southafricanloadsheddingsong #imleavingsatafrika #funnysouthafricanvideos.¹⁷ The video begins with the image and words of then-president Jacob Zuma declaring that: “There will never, never, ever be loadshedding again!” The song details the return of loadshedding with its myriad everyday inconveniences, interspersed with the refrain: “You lied to me, all those times you said we must trust you, you lied to me, yes I cry, yes I cry, you lied to me, even though you knew I depend on you, you lied to me.”

Bancroft (2002, 33) insists on always hearing from his client’s victims. He remarks that these accounts “have taught us that abusive men present their own stories with tremendous denial, minimisation, and distortion of the history of their behaviours.” The portrayal of Eskom as a cynical denier who minimises the seriousness of the abuse, is typified in a 2023 cartoon from Zapiro in the *Daily Maverick*, which depicts Gwede Mantashe, Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy, “in the ANC coal mine” (a reference to a dark, obscured, and secretive hole).¹⁸ In the depths of this hole, Mantashe holds up a bird cage (labelled “economy”) housing a dead canary, overcome by the toxic fumes of loadshedding. Mantashe is retorting irascibly over his shoulder, “WHAT crisis? I’ve GOT this!” Such a denier tends to erect a façade of pretended decency for

16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7mskYoarNw>

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0klgRizYX7A>

18 Zapiro. Alert, published in *Daily Maverick* on 20 January 2023. <https://www.zapiro.com/component/zoo/advanced-search/608?Itemid=464>

outsiders to see. This is reflected in the tweet, cited earlier, by @Trevornoah, “Eskom is like an abusive husband—acts nice when visitors are around, then when they leave, back to old ways.” Correlatively, abusers refuse to acknowledge responsibility when things obviously go wrong. Abusers, as Bancroft (2002, 206) puts it, “are masters of excuse-making. In this respect, they are like substance abusers, who believe that everyone and everything except them is responsible for their actions. When they aren’t blaming their partners, they blame stress, alcohol, their childhood, their children, their bosses, or their insecurities.” A 2023 cartoon from Zapiro in the *Daily Maverick* depicts President Ramaphosa, followed by Jacob Zuma and Thabo Mbeki, sauntering down a road, hands in pockets, “kicking the can down the two-decade road.” The can is labelled “Eskom mismanagement.” Instead of acknowledging responsibility for the Eskom debacle (in the form of mismanagement), the line-up of South African presidents choruses a selection of the many excuses South Africans have heard over two decades: “... wet coal! ... leaky boilers! ... sabotage! ...” The ellipses before and after the current excuses suggest that the list of excuses stretches back into the past and is likely to stretch into the future, too.

Abusers are usually reluctant to face up to the damage their abusive behaviour causes and, as Bancroft (2002, 34) notes, they are masters in the art of “victim blaming.” They use a double strategy. Firstly, they twist their partners’ grievances around, so that whatever partners feel upset about becomes their own fault (Bancroft 2002, 57). Secondly, as Bancroft (2002, 81) notes: “Part of how the abuser escapes confronting himself is by convincing you that you are the cause of his behaviour, or that you at least share the blame.” In this way, abusers reshape their own cruelty and violence as justifiable retaliation for harm done to them (Bancroft 2002, 57). Humorous items typically portray Eskom as engaged in victim-blaming by insisting that the electricity usage among ordinary South Africans is too high, making loadshedding their fault. A good example comes from South Africa’s well-known comic strip *Madam and Eve* by cartoonists Stephen Francis and Rico Schacherl. The strip depicts Mother Anderson¹⁹ about to plug in an electric heater, when from behind her, there is a bellow: “Freeze!! Eskom Police!! Put down that plug and step away from that old defective heater!! Do it *now*!!” Hands in the air, she addresses the two badge-wielding men: “You’re from Eskom?” They respond: “We’ve tracked the source of all the power outages!! It all comes down to you!!” “Me?!” “Yes! You’re the one that keeps pushing Eskom’s power grid over the edge!! Now step back from that faulty appliance—*slowly*!” In this reversal, Eskom not only positions ordinary South African as the criminal perpetrator whose reckless consumption does serious harm, but positions itself as the victim of this harm, now justifiably “fighting back.”

A “victim blaming” strategy, in other words, is correlated with the abuser posing as the real victim. Bancroft (2002, 105, 147) notes that abusers regularly “play the role of

19 Mother Anderson is the mother of Madam, also known as Gwen Anderson, and is known for her snarky, witty, and sarcastic comments. Additionally, she engages in amusing interactions with other characters in the comic strip, adding a comedic element to the storyline.

victim,” presenting themselves as wounded by ex-partners, parents or others, hoping to play on compassion in order to escape responsibility and avoid dealing with problems. Eskom’s posture as the real victim is reflected in the very choice of the word “loadshedding” rather than “power-cuts” to describe the scheduled power outages that South Africans routinely face. In this rhetoric, Eskom aims to capitalise on the associated passivity and servitude of a being who bears the load, which is sharply contrasted with the activity and agency of a being who cuts the power.

The Eskom website²⁰ carries a carefully worded description of loadshedding, which reflects many of the traits and manipulative strategies of an abuser. Entirely mindful of its position of power and control, Eskom positions itself as a responsible pillar of society, whose mandate speaks of security and service to “the South African economy and society.” Next, while claiming jurisdiction over “the entire country” (emphasising its power to control), municipalities are mentioned as middlemen (already implicitly setting up a potential scapegoat onto which to shift responsibility for problems). It is announced that: “At all times, there must be sufficient supply to meet demand.” Then comes the implicit victim blaming. The problem lies with demand; that is, with the customers. Customers create peak periods of high demand, and the number of customers requiring electricity services keeps growing. This creates a risky situation. As a responsible pillar of society, Eskom must manage this risky situation diligently and prudently, but has to do this under challenging circumstances. “Eskom faces the challenge of a constrained power system that will affect us until substantial new power capacity is available.” This statement subtly sheds responsibility by implying that the responsibility for providing new power capacity for Eskom to use does not reside with (state-owned) Eskom itself, but with some outside entity like the state (ironically). In the meantime, the website text continues, Eskom is doing its best to manage with old power stations and infrastructure through carefully scheduled maintenance and other efforts to “reduce the incidence of localised outages when the power trips because of overload in local areas such as suburbs.” The selection of “suburbs” as the example, subtly reiterates that the blame for overload rests with the domestic consumer—the ordinary South African. Augmenting Eskom’s positioning as the real victim, it is then noted that: “Outages can also occur when electricity equipment has been tampered with due to theft of cables or when there is an overload of the local system because of irregular high usage, caused by electricity theft or normal faults.”

Then, the text moves on to loadshedding. “Blackouts occur when there is too much electricity demand and too little supply, bringing the power system into an imbalance and consequently tripping the power system in its entirety.” From the above, we already know that demand is the problem and that too little supply is someone else’s responsibility. But Eskom, victim of a double challenge, must soldier on “to protect the electricity power system from a total blackout.” Emphasising the extent of the threat, “Many countries and cities in other parts of the world have experienced complete

20 <https://loadshedding.eskom.co.za/LoadShedding/Description>

blackouts.” But while they can tap into a power system from a neighbouring city or country to re-start, “in South Africa we have to rely on ourselves to start the system from scratch.” This would have a severe impact on our country. “This is why we use loadshedding to manage our power system and protect it from such an event.”

However, the wealth of humorous items made in response to the Eskom debacle indicates that South Africans reject this positioning of Eskom as the victim. Instead, as we have seen, Eskom is distinctly portrayed as a victim-blaming abuser. This is perhaps best articulated in a meme posted on *The Citizen News* website in 2021 that blames South Africans for the crisis in a stern warning: “JUST IN: Eskom needs you to stop using power, or face more loadshedding.” Directly below this cautionary notice is an image of the supervillain Thanos from Marvel’s 2019 superhero film *Avengers: Endgame*, which reads: “Many loadsheddings later ... I used the electricity to destroy the electricity.” The quote parodies the line the villain uttered in the film: “I used the stones to destroy the stones.” Eskom is identified as an abuser whose destructive behaviour (corrupt mismanagement of the power utility) will ultimately be self-destructive. Correlatively, multiple humorous items in response to loadshedding repeatedly portray the South African citizenry as suffering from a “victim mentality.”

South Africans as Eskom’s Victims

A victim mentality, sometimes called “victim syndrome” or a “victim complex,” arises out of repeated, ongoing negative situations that leave people feeling trapped, helpless, passive, worthless, and lacking agency in their lives (Cuncic 2023). Holistic therapist Julia M. Chamberlain contends that this mindset “relates to the way an individual perceives their relationship with the world and circumstances,” whereby they believe “they have no control over their circumstances” (Morin 2022). We use this term to refer to the general mindset among contemporary South African citizens, represented in their media and public opinions, who perceive themselves (or the national citizenry) to be victimised by Eskom.

One of the most common characteristics of a victim mentality is feeling powerlessly trapped within one’s circumstances (Polka and Litchka 2008, 1). The most lucid of the humorous items that portray South Africans in this way is a 2022 comment to a song, “There’s no Electricity,” uploaded 15 years ago: “This aged like fine wine in 2022. See you all in 2030.” A number of Tweets also support this portrayal, many of which speak to the well-known expression “no light at the end of the tunnel.” For instance: “I thought I saw the light at the end of the tunnel, but then Eskom cut the power” (2009) or “Due to recent budget cuts, corruption and power sharing, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off” (2012). Such rejoinders facilitate the idea that there seems to be no hope or resolution (of the situation) in sight. Another example includes a meme depicting a teacher in an English class giving lessons on “tense.” The teacher (evidently frustrated) says, whilst gripping a schoolboy by his hair: “One day, our country’ll be LOAD-SHEDDING free. Which tense is it???” The boy, crying his eyes out, responds: “Future Impossible Tense.” The implication from all of the above “texts” is that the

electricity crisis is only expected to worsen in the future, and there is no foreseeable hope out of this situation.

In addition to feeling trapped, the dynamic of power imbalances in abusive relationships often results in the implicit portrayal of victims as children. Bancroft (2002, 161), for example, argues that two of the four tenets abusers operate on are: 1) “I know what is best for you and for our relationship. If you continue disagreeing with me after I’ve made it clear which path is the right one, you’re acting stupid.” 2) “If my control and authority seemed to be slipping, I have the right to take steps to reestablish the rule of my will, including abuse if necessary.” In other words, the abuser “sees himself as a reasonably permissive parent—toward his adult partner—and he does not want to meet with a lot of resistance on the occasions when he believes that he needs to put his foot down” (Bancroft 2002, 162–163). A victim mentality involves accepting, often unconsciously, a juvenile role in the relationship.

There is a small group of humorous items that portray South African citizens as infantilised in relation to Eskom. The most salient of these is Nikki Horn’s 2015 song titled “Ag Please Eskom: The Joys of Loadshedding.”²¹ Necessary in understanding the song’s relationship to juvenility is the fact that it is a play on Jeremy Taylor’s much-earlier song “Ag Pleez Deddy” (1962)—which is well-known throughout the country and is often still broadcast on local radio stations. Taylor’s song is predominantly English, but with sprinklings of Afrikaans words and phrases. It follows a simple, upbeat tune, and is considered a folk and children’s song. The first four verses feature a boy pestering his father to take him and his friends to the drive-in theatre, the funfair, a wrestling match, and finally to a beach in Durban. The chorus chants, “Popcorn, chewing gum, peanuts, an’ bubblegum; ice-cream, candy floss an’ Eskimo Pie; Ag Deddy how we miss; N**ger balls an’ liquorice; Pepsi Cola, ginger beer; and Canada Dry.” The father remains silent throughout the song until the fifth verse, when he vehemently retorts, “Voetsek!” (get lost!). “Ag Please Eskom” plays along to the same jovial music, but the lyrics portray South Africans as irritating, beseeching children “nagging” Eskom to leave our lights on. What we apparently desire is merely the juvenile entertainments of popular programmes on TV, suggesting that we have nothing better to occupy our minds than “1980s reruns on SABC.” Further, without the distraction of TV, our minds can only stretch as far as having sex, with its obvious consequences. While Taylor’s chorus lists the small culinary delights missed by the children, “Ag Please Eskom,” still keying us to the children in Taylor’s song, reverses the situation and lists the small discomforts that we will not miss: “Torches, candlelight, cooking on a skottel braai,”²² along with erratic internet and cold water.

Eskom is depicted as the explosive father who we expect to respond with an enraged “Voetsek!” (get lost!). However, the song is not able to finish, and we do not even receive a response from Eskom because the electricity appears to go out. Instead, we

21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykDHIBHCdc>

22 A skottel braai is equivalent to a South African grill and wok, used for outdoor cooking.

are left feeling ignored, disregarded, and infuriated—exclaiming, “O Poep!” The exclamation is an Afrikaans euphemism for the much harsher “Oh sh*t!”, which further reinforces the notion of infantilisation. The title of the song has since become a common expression in South Africa as we continue to express our frustration and despair within the ongoing crisis. In the telling final stanza of Taylor’s song, the disappointed children, getting nothing but an annoyed response from their father, insisting that there is nothing left for them to do but go on out and “moer” (fight with) the children next door. Several humorous items similarly suggest in-fighting amongst those who are victimised. A 2013 Tweet from @smadixit, for example, remarks that “all members in loadshedding groups are equal. But some are more equal than others!” In a similar vein, a WhatsApp image depicting three extremely haughty “noblemen” is labelled “People with Solar,” representing the economic divide in South Africa, and portraying obnoxious self-satisfaction on the part of the “haves” and envy on the part of the “have-nots.”

Correlative to feeling trapped and exhibiting childish behaviour, some of the humorous items see us as confounded by the abuser. They also portray us as never knowing where we stand, and left with choices that are no choice at all. Such a psychological coercion tactic aligns with abusive relationships whereby abusers create a “surreal” social environment that destabilises the victims’ reality, making them appear or feel “crazy” or like they are losing their minds (Sweet 2019, 854). As victims, our sense of self and everyday life is distorted to the point that we are inclined to accept the abuser’s imposed reality in place of our own, and thus remain under the abuser’s control (Sweet 2019, 851). There are multiple examples of our confusion. For instance, consider the following Tweet: “Eskom must be the only advertiser that encourages you not to use their product” (2010). An advertisement from a local newspaper in Port Elizabeth, *The Herald* (10 December 2014), further depicts a suave gentleman with an unidentified alcoholic beverage in front of him with the following caption: “We don’t always supply you with electricity ... but when we do, we ask you not to use it” (2014). In both cases, we have a reversal of expectations, which not only serves to provide humour but, more importantly perhaps, functions to comment on Eskom’s tactic to confuse us, and thus maintain its control. The feeling that we do not know where we stand is captured neatly by a Tweet from @SamridM, who commented, “Eskom is playin’ games with my power! No notices, now you see me, now you see only my teeth!” Another tweet announces the following in white letters on a black background: “suspicious amount of electricity lately.”

Furthermore, while we are led to believe that we, in fact, have choices or agency, within this situation, this turns out to be false as the following Tweet suggests: “Our customers have choices. Tonight you can sit in the dark at home or you can sit in the dark in a restaurant. You decide” (2012). Finally, the multiple items that portray the reality created by Eskom’s loadshedding schedule as deliberately confusing also portray everyday life in South Africa as a befuddling scramble to “work the system.” A 2022

TikTok video by Themba-Robin²³ is typical of these. The video portrays an ordinary South African going to extraordinary mathematical lengths on a whiteboard to work out from the loadshedding schedule when his power will be cut. But South African viewers know that even if his exertions prove fruitful and he works it all out, by then, the schedule will have changed, and he will be caught short anyway. As expected, as the lightbulb in his mind flickers on, the screen goes black. One of the comments to the video strongly confirms this portrayal of the abusive-victim mentality: “At this point, I am going full conspiracy. I believe they’re exhausting us mentally to control us better.” To this, Themba-Robin responds: “And you know what, it’s damn well working!”

Individuals with a victim mentality also often exhibit aggression and anger (Johnston 2021). They are often under the impression that this behaviour or these emotions accomplish something when, in fact, it only makes the situation more difficult (Johnston 2021). Multiple humorous items portray us as incensed and riled, and our humourists also show how utterly impotent this anger is. Typical is the “Funniest Eskom Complaint Ever!”²⁴ uploaded to YouTube 15 years ago in 2008. The audio-only track features a cover image of the ID card belonging to an Eskom employee that reads “Reactor Maintenance” and “Head of Maintenance” for the Koeberg Nuclear Power Plant. The photo ID is none other than that of Homer J. Simpson from the widely popular animated sitcom, “The Simpsons.” In the sitcom, Homer plays a safety inspector at the fictional Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, where he is often portrayed as lazy, negligent, dim-witted, and above all else, incompetent. The suggestion here, of course, is that Eskom employees are as useless as Homer Simpson. As an aside, Homer’s job at the power plant is often portrayed as unstable, with frequent layoffs and management restructuring, which is comparable to Eskom’s struggles with financial difficulties and management issues in recent years. For instance, Eskom’s debt remains unsustainably high at over R400 billion due to corruption, as well as operational and governance issues (Wasserman 2023). Subsequently, Eskom has undergone several changes in management in recent years, including the departure of former CEO Andre de Ruyter, who claimed that Eskom was functioning as a “feeding trough” for the ANC, and the establishment of a new board of directors (Harding 2023).

Returning to the YouTube clip, a farmer lodges a telephonic complaint because Eskom is taking so long to repair the power lines. Ironically, he threatens to break the power lines down with his tractor if they are not repaired by that evening. The irony is not the main source of the humour it elicits. The farmer, pushed to the edge of sanity, rages blindly down the phone to the “call centre” woman. He seems like a violent force, but this big bellowing man is utterly impotent against a completely unwitting, softly spoken “adversary” at the other end of the phone. There is no way for him to address the nebulous all-powerful force called Eskom, no way in, no agents within who care. This

23 <https://www.tiktok.com/@thembarobin/video/7120532575130504453>

24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nEUK2mQSbLI>

makes him ridiculous. Some of us laugh, perhaps, because we have also experienced this ineffectual rage at the absurd juncture between comedy and tragedy.

At this stage, it might be interesting to compare this clip with Trevor Noah's skit about the same situation, "Classic Trevor Noah on loadshedding! #Eskom" uploaded to Facebook in 2019.²⁵ Noah acts out a scene where he is calling City Power for assistance to gain access to his house as there is currently no electricity, and his electric gate will not work. While Noah is polite (to the extreme—even constantly referring to the operator by name, Doris), upbeat, and speaking at a normal pace, the call centre agent is less than enthusiastic, slow to speak (one might even call it slurring), and evidently slow to act. Noah's desperate appeals for assistance are met with long pauses, followed by absolute silence (*sans* the laughing audience), followed by ridiculous (ironic) suggestions by the call operator. Such recommendations include going onto a computer to check the loadshedding schedule. Of course, Noah has no electricity, so he can't. Instead, he asks Doris (the call operator) to check the schedule on her side, and after some time, she responds, in her monotone voice, "Noooo"—she cannot check it because the system is down. Noah, growing increasingly frustrated, then questions what she means by saying, "the system is down," and the operator exclaims, "It means it isn't up, sir!" Moreover, the system has been down for over a week, making Noah's two-hour phone call pointless from the start. The skit continues to highlight the futility of any attempts to address Eskom—to absurdly comical lengths. The purpose of the comparison between the farmer's complaint and Noah's skit about the same situation suggests that whether we confront Eskom (and, by extension, its employees) with anger and frustration or in a polite and friendly manner, the outcome is the same—there is no help—no resolution.

As a result of feeling utterly helpless in effecting any meaningful change in the Eskom debacle, multiple humourists portray us as resigned to normalise the abusive situation (Sweet 2019, 866) and obligated to "learn to live with" the abuse. This is tellingly captured in an Instagram video from March 2023, which shows three South Africans chattering away in the dark with the caption "POV: u in a South African household."²⁶ All of a sudden, the lights come on and all individuals leap away from one another in fright, with one of them quickly diving under a blanket. While we used to expect this kind of behaviour when the lights go out, the response in the video suggests that the reverse (a situation of loadshedding) has become the norm.

The result of ongoing cycles of abuse—in which there exists the intermittent reinforcement of good and bad treatment, or reward and punishment—creates powerful emotional bonds ("trauma bonds") between abusers and victims (Laub 2022). Consequently, victims often normalise, legitimise, rationalise or minimise the abuse (Laub 2022). Our acceptance of Eskom's abuse is typified by a comment that bemoans the fate of South Africans: "Ag Pleez Eskom": "Ja well no fine ... shit! What it's like

25 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=564141294419533>

26 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CpOv0FOoWTU/>

to live in a country where we are expected to pay our taxes and ‘shut up and appreciate’ life on the ‘other side of sanity’!” In other words, we resign ourselves to “life on the other side of sanity”—the situation of abuse/loadshedding. This becomes the normal life, and happiness, ecstasy and joy are the elevated states that occur when the abuse stops (i.e., when loadshedding ends), which we are now supposed to appreciate gratefully. Such is the insinuation highlighted by the following Tweet: “There are few moments as glorious in a South African’s life, as the moment when the power comes back on. Thank you, Eskom!” (2009). However, the end of loadshedding should be our normal life, and we should expect to find an elevated joyful state in something “finer” than this.

In addition to normalising an abusive situation, there is even a general tendency to idealise it, as indicated by the following Tweets: “This winter is going to be all about romance ... lots and lots of candles (thanks Eskom)” (2010); or “Eskom brings out the romance in people. My textbooks and I are enjoying this candlelight [heart emoji]” (2013). There is also the notion that Eskom incentivises love: Such as the meme “South Africa has been voted the most romantic country in the world, they eat dinner by candlelight every night” (2014; or the Tweet, “The ESKOM guys are clearly romantics. Incentivising Valentine’s babies.” These responses speak to the “trauma bonding” referred to above, where we move beyond anger and frustration to “appreciating” Eskom for the abuse, even going so far as to embrace the opportunities it affords us to spend quality time with our loved ones.

Correlative to victim-blaming strategies on the part of the abuser, victims accept at some level that the situation is their own fault, or that they are partially at fault for the abuse committed against them (Cramer et al. 2013, 3; O’Neill and Kerig 2000, 1037). This is a common psychological coercion technique that actively shifts focus away from holding the abuser accountable (SACE 2023). Many humourists show how South Africans accept victim blaming in various ways. The acceptance of blame for loadshedding on the part of South Africans is captured in a TikTok video posted by Dillan Oliphant in 2021, captioned “How to deal with loadshedding.” The comedian complains that he has experienced loadshedding seven weekends in a row. His solution: to make the most out of his electricity usage during the week, which amounts to “steaming hot baths six times a day ... switching on the oven, stove, the microwave, the TV ... [and] leav[ing] them running the whole week.”

In the Trevor Noah skit discussed earlier, “Classic Trevor Noah on loadshedding! #Eskom,” it is telling that Noah ends with words that mock us for just this tendency: “I blame myself, I do, Because *I* complained.” Further, in an overt form of victim blaming, many items portray us as caught short because *we* forgot to check the loadshedding schedule. One meme depicts two down-and-out men sitting on a wall conversing. The first asks, “How did you end up in poverty? Gamble? Drugs?” The other responds: “I left the light on.”

There are also multiple items that mockingly imply that South Africans tend to accept that the abuse is for our own good. We feel we deserve it as a remedy for bad living habits. In some items we are portrayed as accepting that we have lost something of what it means to live well by becoming too dependent on electronic technology. In this case, we deserve loadshedding as a way of saving us from bad TV habits and helping us with ecology, wellness, sexuality and so on. All of this is captured in a nutshell in the following Tweet: “Watching TV is my drug, DSTV is my dealer and Eskom the police” (2011). Another advises: “As loadshedding season begins, thank Eskom from saving you from bad television” (2012). On the other hand, Themba Robin’s YouTube video “My Approach to Loadshedding 2”²⁷ is typical of humorous items that mock South Africans for accepting loadshedding as a demonstration that we have lost something of what it means to live well. Themba Robin’s parody cheekily mocks us for portraying loadshedding in an all too positive light as good for us since it encourages us to focus on the simple things in life. Set to a jaunty little tune and ironic imagery, Robin remarks: “I’ve been keeping a positive mindset by doing some relaxing things. Getting in touch with nature will make you realise how tense you actually are. Try it out, take off your clothes and hang out in the breeze. My veggie garden is starting to pay off ... I’ve got some new running ‘takkies’ ... Washing your car is always a good idea to pass the time ... Word puzzles are always a good one, keeps your brain on point and healthy ... you can always go back to entertain yourself in the garden, aka. mother nature’s playground.” Part of a victim-mentality is the tendency to rationalise or minimise the abuse (Laub 2022) for various reasons, such as shame or fear of what others might think (Bancroft 2002, 39).

Self-deprecating humour, or self-ridicule, while used as a defence mechanism to minimise (or deny) the significance and impact of abuse, also implies that victims tacitly accept the blame for it (Kubie 1971). In an Instagram video posted in February 2023, for example, a young man sits in a brightly lit kitchen at 18:00, with his face brushed white and a large red smile painted across his mouth—resembling that of the Joker from the movie franchise. The caption reads: “Me thinking the power won’t go off because it’s already been 7 minutes.” The video then transitions to the lights going off with the caption “18:08” as the man, candle now lit, looks directly at the camera with a mocking expression. The self-deprecating message portrays him as the fool who persists with his idiotic hope that the abuse/loadshedding will not happen this time.

Further items mock South Africans for our ingrained belief that we have the ability and the responsibility to empower ourselves in the face of the abuse (loadshedding) with artful solutions, getting off the grid, and becoming independent via solar and generators. This idea that South Africans could actually prevent the electricity crisis by changing their behaviour once again implies an acceptance that we are partially to blame for it. The following Tweets are typical: “If you have no electric 2 dry ur hair and need 2 go 2 work, the car aircon is just brilliant ;) Tx Eskom, I discovered that this morn” (2009).

27 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8L5Ye330ddU>

Another Tweet depicts a phone, connected to a charger, plugged into a lit candle with the caption “Loadshedding? WTF is that?” (2013). Further, a WhatsApp image that circulated in 2023, depicts a live chicken being carried in a reused plastic bag with a hole made in it for the head to stick out. The original label, sporting a cartoon chicken, indicates that the bag originally contained frozen chicken portions. The image is accompanied by the caption: “Nuwe loadshedding verpakking. So bly jou hoender altyd vars!” (New loadshedding packaging. This way, your chicken always stays fresh!). This idea that we could prevent the electricity crisis by innovative changes to our behaviour is further highlighted in the following Tweet: “lol ... at least you can help Eskom out by using the sun to make your steamed veggies!” (2009). This spirit of self-parody is amusingly captured in the YouTube video, “How to Make a Loadshedding Survival Kit” by SuzelleDIY.²⁸ While the video begins as painting tips and tricks, a sudden blackout brings a change of topic to Suzelle’s “creative tips and tricks for making the ultimate loadshedding survival kit.” A glance at the comments to this video shows an overwhelmingly positive response, particularly to the idea of a homemade matchbox phone charger, suggesting that our South African belief in our ability and responsibility to empower ourselves with artful solutions is alive and well.

Conclusion

What is clear from the above is that humorous media depictions of the Eskom crisis operate around the abuser-victim binary pairing. But why does the victim stay? Why do South Africans keep putting up with this? We contend that humour within the victim discourse operates as both a coping and defence mechanism. Numerous scholars have argued that humour offers relief from stressful emotions or situations (Freud 1928; Lefcourt and Martin 1986). Additionally, humour, as a coping mechanism, functions to increase one’s sense of shared humanity, by recognising the incongruity of believing that you are the only person suffering from misfortune (Kahn 1989). Humour can also function as a defence mechanism by enabling people to perceive the comical or funny aspects of highly challenging situations (Freud 1960). It does so by allowing individuals to detach from suffering and psychic pain provoked by reality, internal or external (Freud 1928). In this sense, humour is to be considered a creative adaptation, or mature defence, that allows us to functionally handle conflicts (Vaillant 1977). While, for the most part, such humour can thus be considered a positive approach to life, there are some negative implications, especially when considered as representative of a collective (victim) mindset. As Bar-Tal et al. note, a collective sense of victimhood often “serves as a factor that feeds the continuation of the conflict and as an inhibitor of peace-making” (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 230). Thus, when humour becomes the prevalent means of relating to public discourse regarding the Eskom crisis in South Africa, it enables citizens to “consume” outrage passively and thus abstain from more active forms of resistance (be it through riots, strikes, etc.). Without citizens holding Eskom accountable for its abuse, the utility (abuser) is able to continue functioning as is—a corrupt, narcissistic enterprise. In other words, if we do not move beyond isolated laughs in safe

28 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUSmR7vZ_2I

settings to a collective consciousness in real geographical spaces that challenge the abuser, there will be no end to the crisis. Moreover, the “funniness” of the humorous items might undercut the seriousness of the abuser-victim discourse to such a degree that one arrives at total indifference. Also, the ubiquitous presence of humorous items regarding the electricity crisis in South Africa could desensitise us to the situation, weakening the impact of resistance even further.

This ultimately leads us to the significance of our demonstration that the portrayal of Eskom and South Africans as part of an abusive relationship is pervasive among social media humourists who represent the bulk of ordinary South Africans. We believe that the significance of this demonstration lies in its capacity to open up an avenue for further philosophical reflection and sociological research, especially concerning the question of how to motivate South Africans to play a more active role in social transformation.

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