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Subverting Social Norms through American Stand-Up Comedy: Re-Evaluating the Impact of Feminist Humor in the Me Too Era

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Candidate:

Lina KAMEL

Board of Examiners

Mr. Aboubakr HAMOUDI	University of M'sila	Chairperson
Mr. Youcef BENNAA	University of M'sila	Supervisor
Mr. Aberraq GHAFSI	University of M'sila	Examiner

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Declaration of Originality

I, **Lina KAMEL**, do hereby solemnly declare that the work and ideas I present in this thesis are my own, and have not been submitted before to any other institution or University for a degree.

I assert that all information in this thesis has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic conventions and ethical conduct. I also assert that I have fully cited and acknowledged all materials that are not original to this work. Besides, this work is conducted and completed at the University of M'sila, Algeria.

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lina KAMEL', written in a cursive style.

Dedication

This dedication is a tribute to the memory of my father. I also dedicate this work to my mother, my family, and my friends.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, all my heartfelt gratitude goes to Allah the Almighty for His guidance and blessings.

I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to my supervisor, Mr. BENNAA, for his sincere efforts, extensive knowledge, and invaluable support.

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Abstract

The role of stand-up comedy has evolved to go beyond mere amusement, as stand-up comedians mastered the role of being comic spokespersons, mediators, and articulators of cultures. Feminist comics and scholars were to use this form of art to articulate their marginal position in society and in the industry. They noted a disparity in the industry of stand-up comedy as well as humor's theoretical structures and offered an alternative philosophy to humor within the lens of intersectionality. Therefore, this research aims to re-evaluate the potential power of feminist humor, within the context of American stand-up comedy, in challenging cultural norms and gender inequality, as well as addressing issues of harassment in the Me Too era. To achieve this aim, this research draws upon Incongruity and Relief theories as subversive theories of humor to assess the Intersectionality theory of humor. Additionally, this research offers an examination of the comedic performances of feminist stand-up comedians through content analysis of feminist stand-up jokes. It addresses whether their comedic attempts can be effective in subverting norms and hierarchies or ineffective in instilling social change. This research contended that feminist humor is effective in raising awareness about such matters but is rather ineffective in bringing about change as it risks further reinforcing the prevailing norms and structures.

Keywords: humor, feminism, stand-up comedy, intersectionality, subversive humor.

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General Introduction

With humor, the equation is tragedy plus time equals comedy. I
am just at tragedy right now.

—Tig Notaro, 2012

As the old comedic formula suggests, tragedy plus time equals comedy. Meaning that with the passing of enough time to process, the misfortunes of the day could be ridiculed and laughed at. Humorists, unlike ordinary people, have a unique ability to transform tragic events into comedic content and make evoke laughter in the strangest areas, even at people's expense. The comedian's job is to take people to uncomfortable places where they are forced face their flaws, insecurities, and traumas and make them laugh there. Therefore; comedy can act as a coping mechanisms, it releases tension, provides momentary relief as well as a long lasting vitality. By finding amusement in what was once tragic, people are able to detach themselves from such stressful events.

While comedic performances have existed for centuries, stand-up comedy as a distinct form of entertainment, came to prominence in the mid- twentieth century and evolved over time to gained popularity as the unique art form that we know today. Stand-up comedy features a single comedian in the stage to perform in order to make the audience laugh. This platform attracted many marginalized groups to discuss politics, social issues, and personal experiences from the perspective of their marginal experiences.

One particular group that claimed to not have time by their side to overcome life's tragedies is feminists. They highlighted many systemic flaws within the stand-up comedy industry as well as the theoretical structures of humor. In addressing the systemic flaws of the stand-up industry, they emphasized that this industry is heavily dominated by men, and that women are underrepresented and have limited opportunities to perform, receive recognition,

and advance their careers. They argued that the only time women are heavily participating in the comedy scene is when they are the targets of such humor. In their philosophical quest to remodel humor theories, they aimed for an inclusive humor where women can participate as agents rather than objects, and where the dominant group is the only group worth being the targets.

Statement of the problem

What is apparent is that feminist comedians are either mocked and ridiculed by the mainstream media and the majority of their male counterparts in the stand up industry, or highly and blindly praised by other feminist scholars or comedians. In addition, many discussions of such matter do not tackle the context of the Me Too movement as it occurred lately. Therefore; there is a need for a comprehensive examination of the subversive nature of such humor in the context of such movement. To address this significant gap in the existing literature, this research aims to evaluate the content and strategies of such humorists to offer a deeper understanding of its potential to challenge, transform, or unintentionally maintain existing power structures in the pursuit of gender equality.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following main question: can feminist humor in the context of stand-up comedy be effective in subverting social norms and exerting social change in the Me Too era? This question will be answered by introducing these sub-questions: Can feminist humor effectively raise awareness and stimulate dialogue regarding issues of sexual misconduct and gender disparities? To what extent have attempts to regulate the freedom of comedy, based on intersectionality theory, been successful in bringing about meaningful change?

Aims and Objectives

In this regard, this research aims to critically examine the potential power of feminist humor, especially within the context of American stand-up comedy, to challenge cultural norms and gender inequality, as well as addressing issues of harassment in the Me Too era. This research conducts an analysis of feminist stand-up comedy performances and their comedic techniques, and highlights the social and cultural impact of the Me Too movement. This study attempts to shed light on the ways in which feminist comedians pair humor with activism, and whether their comedic expressions can be subversive acts of resistance that bring social change. This research demonstrates that feminist humor, although very effective in raising awareness to these issues, might be ineffective as it reinforces the power dynamics it tries to subvert.

Motivation and Significance

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of feminist stand-up comedy in literature as a means of understanding its role as a vehicle for subversion and social change in the Me Too era. This research contributes to this growing body of literature by undertaking an analysis of feminist stand-up comedians, this research aims to shed light on how it can challenge prevailing narratives, address gender disparities, and raise awareness about issues of sexual harassment and misconduct.

Literature Review

One of the notable moments that stirred much controversy in the industry of humor is when Christopher Hitchens (2007) when he tried to provide explanations to why women are less funny than men, if they are ever funny. In his article titled *Why Women Aren't Funny* in *Vanity Fair*, he backed his argument with a Stanford medical study that explained the gap in

humor competence between the two genders. He argued that Mother Nature made it hard for men, because it forced them to impress the other gender, not the other way around. Men need to appeal to women but women, as Hitchens claimed “Have no corresponding need to appeal to men in this way, they already appeal” (Hitchens, 2007, Para. 3).

Feminist scholars combated the original trend of women comics as self-deprecatory figures. They claimed that it confirmed rather than challenged stereotypes about women. Joan Rivers is one historical example of the 1980’s negative persona (Mintz, 1985). Rivers formed herself into a negative comic persona. People laugh at her because she presents herself as an out of order or a messy woman. This characterization is due to her unattractiveness, lack of decent female traits, unpopularity, rejection by family and surroundings, and her lack of domestic skills such as cooking and housekeeping. Yet throughout the years, she was able to feel proud about her own insecurities (Mintz, 1985).

In questioning the legitimacy of humor, feminists doubted the use of self-deprecation, as one of humor's fundamental tools. They considered it to be destructive rather than constructive. Danielle Russell (2002) targeted this matter in her article titled *Self-deprecatory Humor and the Female Comic: Self Destruction or Comedic Construction?* She argued that gender built barriers between female comedians and their audiences, and the use of self-deprecation as a comedic tool strengthened it, resulting in a dissimilar audience reaction than that of the male comedians. And because stand-up comedy is still the domain of men; traditional definitions of feminine attitudes make it inappropriate for women to claim the superiority of Stand-up comedy (Russell, 2002). According to her, for women to practice humor, they have to undo the feminine norms and the submissive role given by society, because to stand on a stage and to make people laugh requires to be aggressive and to impose power and control, Contrary to what self-deprecation suggests.

Many feminists had issues embracing humor's culture which made them question its legitimacy. Philip Auslander (1997) touched on this subject in his article titled *Brought to you by Fem-Rage: Stand-up comedy and the politics of Gender*. He aimed to position the woman comic culturally and to offer an analysis of a specific cultural text, Roseanne Barr's 1987 television special and which shows interplay of humor and anger. He argued that female comedians are in a society that represses their humor, hinders their comedic attempts, and even deprive them the right to sound funny. He mentioned the reasons that keep women behind in comedy which include traditional theories of humor, norms that consider joke making unfeminine, as well as the restricted cultural expression in a patriarchal culture. Thus, women are not expected nor trained to be funny when in groups. And if they even try to do so, they would be considered aggressive.

Other feminist scholars, like the two sisters Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett (2019), questioned the philosophical foundation of humor in their book titled *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth*. They aimed to remodel humor's major theories that for too long have shaped the meaning and source of laughter. To achieve their goals, they called to embrace women and other marginalized groups to be participating as performers of comedy rather than being its targeted objects. In addition, they tried to distance these groups from experiencing punches from male comedians and the emotions caused by such punches. Instead, they called to only punch up at the dominant group in hold of power, which to their claims, includes men. They revisited the four dominant traditional theories of humor which are: The Superiority Theory, Relief, Incongruity, and Play Theory. They offered a new theory deriving from the intersectionality theory, which suggests that multiple biological and social identities of an individual such as race, gender, and religion might overlap and intersect and lead to dynamics of domination and oppression (Basset & Miller, 2020).

Yet one of the most often missed points in this large conversation is the impact of such humor on challenging social norms, particularly in the context of the Me Too movement. This study seeks to bridge this gap by critically examining the role of feminist humor in subverting societal expectations and addressing issues of sexual harassment and misconduct. By re-evaluating the impact of feminist humor, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of its potential as a catalyst for social change and reshaping cultural narratives.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach to examine the theoretical framework of subversive comedy and its intersection with feminist humor. The study draws upon scholarly literature and critical analysis to explore the cultural context of subversion in comedy, the unique characteristics of feminist humor, and the broader consequences of the Me Too movement on such humor.

A sample of feminist stand-up comedians' performances will be selected for analysis. The selection will be based on the comedians' prominence in the field and their incorporation of feminist themes in their routines. The sample will aim to encompass a diverse range of comedians to ensure representation of various perspectives and approaches to feminist humor.

The primary source of data will be video recordings of comedic performances by the selected feminist stand-up comedians. These recordings will be obtained from YouTube and the streaming platform Netflix. Additionally, secondary sources, including interviews and blog posts will be utilized to provide contextual information about the comedians and their work.

As for the data Analysis, cultural content analysis will be employed to analyze the sample of jokes performed by the feminist comedians. The analysis will involve identifying recurring themes, joke techniques, and implicit messages conveyed in their comedic routines.

Through careful examination of the content, patterns in addressing issues of gender inequality and sexual harassment will be explored.

Plan of the Research

The thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter is entitled “Subverting Social Norms through Stand-Up Comedy: Re-evaluating the Impact of Feminist Humor in the Me Too Era”. This chapter will explore the use of stand-up comedy as a subversive tool and specifically focused on its use within feminist humor. The chapter will start by establishing stand-up comedy as a subversive form of expression. It will further lay the theoretical framework of subversion in comedy, drawing on relevant literature and theories of subversion in humor, which are Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory, as well as the new feminist Theory derived from the intersectionality lens. The chapter then will discuss the origins and scope of the Me Too movement, providing a contextual backdrop for understanding its influence on the stand-up comedy scene.

The second chapter is entitled “Standing Up for the Power of Stand-up: Analyzing Feminist Stand-Up Comedy in the Me Too Era”. It will present a comprehensive analysis of famous feminist stand-up comedians, examining their comedic styles and techniques. The chapter will provide analysis of the comedy of Jen Kirkman, Ali Wong, Jena Friedman, and Hannah Gadsby. Lastly, the chapter will include a discussion of the limitations and challenges of feminist humor, considering the potential backlash, reinforcement of stereotypes, and the fine line between comedy and activism.

CHAPTER ONE

Subversive Comedy: Exploring Stand-Up, Feminist Humor, and the Me Too Movement

1. Introduction

If reason as a persuasive tool is at best only indirectly effective, a weak tool on its own, might not the sting of ridicule or the contagion of joyous laughter prove to be more effective weapons for social change? Or to turn the question around, what devices are more explosive in the social sphere, more discomfiting to our conventional modes of thought, more invasive of our quasiprivate store of associations, than the well-placed joke, the display of wit, or the well-honed use of ridiculing irony?

- Willett & Willett, 2019, p. 12

Humor has proved to be a powerful tool for social commentary, due to its unique ability to both mirror and challenge social norms and power structures. In recent years, female stand-up comedians have been using humor to share their perspectives in order to expose and disrupt the prevailing traditional gender norms and social conventions.

This chapter will explore the use of stand-up comedy as a subversive tool and specifically focused on its use within feminist humor. The chapter will start by establishing stand-up comedy as a subversive form of expression. It will further lay the theoretical framework of subversion in comedy, drawing on relevant literature and theories of subversion in humor, which are Incongruity and Relief theories, as well as the new feminist theory derived from the intersectionality lens. The chapter then will discuss the origins and scope of the Me Too movement, providing a contextual backdrop for understanding its influence on the stand-up comedy scene.

2. Stand-up Comedy as a Subversive Art Form

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, subversion was defined as: “a systematic attempt to overthrow or undermine a government or political system by persons working secretly from within”(“Subversion”, 2023). The main word from this definition is the word “overthrow,” therefore a key component of subversion is how marginalized individuals or groups can react to change the systematic oppression and disrupt the norms of an unjust

dominant culture. Another definition was provided by Chris A. Kramer, a philosophy professor, who wrote extensively on topics such as humor and subversive arts. He defined subversion as “a form of protest or resistance to systemic structures of oppression or an unjust status quo” (Kramer, 2020, p.154). He noted that humor can be used as a tool to critique power dynamics in oppressive societies by exposing injustices, providing empowerment, and instilling a sense of collective solidarity.

Among the best ways to staying attuned to and aware of culture’s constant changes is art. All art “worthy of the name, is subversive, subversive of civil society, of civilization” (Diamond, 1982, p.854). Not only art is able to preserve the human social and individual mental experiences as they happened in the exact time and place, but also able to create new ones (Phillip, 2000). One variation of subversive art is comedy. The reason is that it constitutes the edge of what people are prepared to tackle, what they have yet to denaturalize or normalize and what they cannot see yet. Meaning that comedy challenges people’s assumptions about what is normal, natural and what is not as well as the changeability of certain social and cultural aspects (Miller, 2018)

Derek Miller, a crime novelist who writes tragedy as well as comedy, wrote an article titled *Why Comedy is the Most Subversive Art*. Miller (2018) noted that writing comedy is a complex task because while tragedy is found to be at the familiar center of people’s consciousness and unites them together in the shared human experience, comedy is found at the unexpected edges of what people are not ready yet to see. He argues that while tragedy is aimed to be recognized, comedy is invisible, until it is suddenly revealed, in an unexpected manner. He added “The groan, the boo, the nervous laughter; this is where we find the edge. Only by going too far can we know if we’ve gone far enough.”(Para.12). this explained the way humor works in subverting certain established conventions, which is by drawing to mind expectations that reflect the norms and accepted beliefs of a certain culture, and then violating

them, leaving us in an unfamiliar place, which Miller refers to as the “edge”. The edge is where a society faces the gaps of its structures.

Subversive humor relies on similar assumptions and preconceived beliefs as well as challenges them, usually by uncovering certain cultural stereotypes (Kramer, 2015). Kramer argued that it approaches difficult matters in a joyous way that cultivates creative and critical thinking, and fosters an ability to recognize incongruities between our established ideals and a reality that is uncharacteristic of those ideals. He further noted that successful subversive humorists create scenarios that are either fictional or real life situations to draw attention to such moral incongruities, but like philosophical thinking experiments, they reveal moral facts about the real world.

Many perspectives on power and knowledge, especially those influenced by Michel Foucault, oftentimes reveal that facts or logical argumentation cannot be sufficient to achieve philosophical persuasion, because reason can be the problem itself as it can be the solution. Reason is affected by the social norms that a certain culture enforces (Willett & Willett, 2019). Social norms “shape cognitive habits, the unraveling and disrupting of sexist norms through ridicule might free our thinking as well” (p. 22). In this sense, the use of humor challenges sexist norms by unraveling cognitive habits.

Comedy can be implemented to attack or humiliate, whereas subversive comedy can challenge negative stereotypes (Kramer, 2015). Comedians may exaggerate stereotypes in their performances to criticize dominant and prevailing ideologies. The assumptions made by the audience usually reflect the traditional beliefs and norms of the cultural upbringing that they were raised in. These assumptions reveal a lot concerning the internalized ideologies that audience members have long been exposed to in their respective environments. Therefore, all jokes are characterized by subversive features, and the goal for the comic to violate audience expectations with a surprising twist. One way to do so by creating in minds an expectation,

which mirrors, for example, the accepted patterns and structures of an oppressive culture, and then provide a punch line which is seemingly unrelated to the first expectations (Kramer, 2015).

Such humor provides chances for border crossing where the audience is able to recognize the perspectives of “marginalized people who, because they inhabit ambiguous spaces in between the dominant and subordinate spheres, are in an epistemically privileged position with respect to matters of oppression” (Kramer, 2015, Abstract). The term "marginalized people" refers to groups who have been socially, politically, or economically deprived and faced oppression and discrimination. The quote suggested that because marginalized individuals navigate these ambiguous spaces, between the dominant and subordinate, have a unique perspective due to their experiences. This epistemic privilege allowed them to get access to knowledge and understanding of oppression. Thus, Subversive comedians allow the audience to live the experiences of other people, to unmask the absurdities of oppression, and to evoke the need and necessity for truth and justice (Kramer, 2015).

Kramer (2015) further contended that humor can be effective in creating collective efforts between humorists from the margins. It can be useful in challenging one-dimensional perspectives of others, as it offers a wider, open-ended, and more accurate description of them. Humor allows us to appropriately distance ourselves from such matters to view them properly. He argued that while traditional political protest and logical argument are important components of resistance to oppression, they have not been shown to be effective in addressing the kinds of damages that implicit biases cause. Implicit biases are deeply rooted attitudes and perspectives that individuals hold unconsciously. They can affect judgments and processes for making decisions, unintentionally. These biases can lead to discrimination against marginalized groups.

A particular form of comedy this research is going to focus on is a raw, solitary performance of comedic expression. It is far simpler to evaluate than spontaneous examples of comedy, widely available, and presented in an understandable context. This description is referring to the art of Stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy involves a single comic standing in front of an audience, with the purpose of making them laugh.

In the United States the concept of stand-up comedy gained popularity during the mid-twentieth century as “a uniquely oratorical form of entertainment that has been both captivating and provocative” (Meier & Schmidt, 2016, p. xxii). This quote is quite accurate in describing stand-up comedy as an art form. It is a mode of entertainment that depends on effective public speaking, the comedian is employing speaking, timing, and delivery techniques to make the audience laugh and connect with their content. As such it can be viewed as an oratorical form of art. Meanwhile, stand-up comedy is also considered to be thought-provoking, challenging societal norms and pushing boundaries to their ultimate downfall in an entertaining way. This combination of entertainment and provocation is what makes stand-up comedy such a strong and compelling art form.

Since its early beginning, stand-up comedy has played a significant role in American popular culture. Variety humor was included into popular theater as an addition to the primary narrative. In the early years of these plays, circus clowns performed verbal stand-up comedy in the manner of fools, jesters, clowns, and comics, which is a tradition traced back to the middle Ages, as well as other comedic segments throughout the actual broadcast. Numerous popular humorists, Mark Twain being the most famous one, were sponsored by the lecture circuit in the nineteenth century. Medicine shows, tent shows, and other traveling variety acts all featured stand-up comedy as a key component. It has also contributed to all of the mass media in America, from the silent films through radio, to the record industry and, of course, to television.

The impact of stand-up comedy in subversion and social affirmation lies in the acceptance of the comic's traditional permission for deviate attitude (Mintz, 1985). This deviate expression derives from mocking physical and mental weaknesses. The comedian is faulty in some kind of way, but his natural flaws cause sympathy, and thus exclusion from the expectation of ordinary attitude. Therefore; he is displayed to the people in the audience as minor or marginal. Because he is unable of decent physical or mental action, people sympathize with him, forgive him, and even bless his flaws. His marginal position turns absurdity into enjoyment. In this sense, his role as a negative example evokes laughter, and this laughter mirrors people's superiority, their relief that his weaknesses are bigger than theirs (Mintz, 1985).

Mintz (1985) continued to address the comedian's role as a spokesperson, he noted that the audience will identify with the comedian as a negative example, this leads to secretly recognizing him as mirroring normal and culturally approved behavior in human activity. This process of publically affirming certain deviate behavior stems from the excuse of it being *mere comedy* or that *it is just a joke*. In this matter, the role of stand-up comedy lies in "uniting us in a celebration of a community of shared culture, of homogenous understanding and expectation."(p.74). in this sense, the stand-up comedian becomes a representative for our culture, an intermediary between different perspectives, and a modern anthropologist (Mintz, 1985).

This role of the comedian as social commentator has a long history. Shakespeare, in particular, used of the fool and the jester in his plays , such as King Lear, to provide social commentary under the veil of innocence and foolishness, while sharply stating universal truths that were considered political taboos (Mintz, 1985). The fool's seemingly foolish manner provided him impunity, allowing him to challenge authority and expose cultural problems without facing problems.

3. Feminist Humor as a Subversive Tool for Social Change

Feminist humor is a distinct category of humor that first emerged as a rhetorical response by second wave feminists and the generations after them. They emerged as a reaction to mainstream ridiculing of women, and for feminists particularly for lacking a sense of humor (White, 1988). The 1960s and 1970s saw the beginnings of the new feminist movement, two groups of women came together regardless of the different political agendas they are driven by. Women's-rights advocates were focusing on the political establishment to effect change, trying to renew laws and public policy in the attempts to establish equal rights, whereas the women's liberationists were concerned with altering societal ideologies concerning women's ways of thinking and behaving that hinders women's growth, in order to keep their subordination to men (Walker, 1988).

Feminist humor is any form of humor that employs a feminist lens in tackling comic subjects, mainly focuses on circumstances or events that women go through. The methods through which they elicit laughter are different by approach (Walker, 1988). Walker contended that a comedian employing feminist humor considers the material for the topic as well as the joke structure, which consists of the traditional structure: the setup and the punch line. They constantly focus on the environmental culture in order to promote equality, and are intentionally inclusive by creating an accepting space for diverse audience members. The goal of feminist humor lies in highlighting and making obvious the absurd expectations and unrealistic views of the dominant culture (Walker, 1988).

Nancy Walker noted in *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* that, "Feminist humor does not laugh at the mission itself, for to do so would trivialize it. Instead, it laughs at the very idea of gender inequality in an attempt to render such inequality absurd and powerless" (1988, p.145). In this quote, Walker highlighted the ridiculousness of gender inequality as well as the cultural conventions that support it through

the use humor. Therefore, feminist comedy aims to question as well as undermine these standards in order to weaken them and expose their faults.

Lisa Merrill (1988) paralleled Walker's tone in the same year in her work *Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming* when she said "...the point-of-view represented in feminist comedy is one that affirms women's experience, rather than denigrating it" and that "Oppressive contexts and restrictive values would be ridiculed, rather than the characters who are struggling against such restrictions" (p.275). The researcher focused on the importance of punching up towards the dominant group rather than punching down. According to feminists, the dominant group consists of men and, and the punching up means ridiculing them in order to bring them to their ultimate fall.

In addressing the same notion, Mary Crawford (2003) in her essay titled "Gender and Humor" stated that "feminist humor frequently acknowledges men's ability to define reality in ways that meet their needs. Yet, in making that acknowledgement public, it subverts men's reality by exposing its social construction" (p.1426). In this quote, she indicated that these conventions are challenged and scrutinized by feminist comedians, who will utilize comedy to help break down preconceptions and assumptions that underpin traditional gender roles, making room for more inclusive viewpoints and wide perspectives.

Feminist comics are not able to expect what the reaction of the audience about their jokes might be despite their intentions. One example is when Aditi Mittal started a joke by stating the setup, "I am 30, I am single, and I am an Indian woman, and I realized that being 30 and single and Indian woman," (2017). She made the audience members who are 30, or single, Indian, and/or a woman feel relatable and eager to wait and hear the rest of the joke. Mittal then delivered her punch line "is like being that Tupperware container at the back of the fridge, there like, is this still good?"

This punch line highlighted how she feels acknowledging her position in society. Those in the audience who do not get the joke because they do not relate to her, which means they are not 30, single, and/or Indian may consider her funny due to the resemblance that she made about her and leftovers, meanwhile those from the audience members who do understand the joke, or who relate to her experience of having characteristics similar to hers, would understand the absurdity in such norms that deem her and those like her less valuable (Votruba, 2018).

In his essay, *Encoding/Decoding*, Stuart Hall (1973) an expert of cultural studies, presented the three ways audiences can interpret cultural messages; the dominant reading, the negotiated reading and the oppositional reading. The dominant reading means understanding a cultural work to correspond with the dominant social ideology. The negotiated reading entails the ability distinguish the authority of the dominant power as well as including other perspectives. The oppositional reading means acknowledging the dominant code but shortly after, refusing and opposing it. Consequently, audience members will have different understandings due to their diverse social and unique cultural backgrounds (Hall, 1973).

4. Laying Down the Framework: Theories of Subversive Humor

Two prominent theories that shed light on the subversive nature of humor are Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory. These theories offer valuable insights into the mechanisms of subversive humor by highlighting how it challenges established norms and expectations. Additionally, feminist scholars have introduced the lens of intersectionality, which explores the ways in which forms of social identity and oppression intersect. This new theory of humor takes into account the experiences of marginalized groups in order to offer perspective on humor as a tool for social critique and empowerment.

4.1. Incongruity Theory of Humor

Two new accounts of laughter in the 18th century further weakened the primacy of the Superiority Theory. One of them is the Incongruity Theory. Incongruity Theory came as the second account of humor, challenging the first account of humor which is the Superiority Theory. While the superiority indicated that the cause of laughter is due to feelings of superiority, the Incongruity Theory stated that it is the act of perceiving something incongruous that violates and challenges our mental patterns and expected thoughts, which elicits a sense of surprise and unexpectedness (Morreall, 2020).

Many philosophers and psychologists chose to take incongruity as an account of humor and refined it. James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard and many other early thinkers have expanded on that core concept to include various nuances to define this theory. Aristotle thought that incongruity forms a foundation to establish humor, or at least some of it, Even though he did not directly use the term incongruity. In the *Rhetoric*, the ancient Greek philosopher mentioned that creating an expectation in the minds of listeners and then violating it is one way to provoke laughter (as cited in Morreall, 2020). Cicero, the roman teacher, shared a similar view point. In *On the Orator*, he considered laughter to be arising from getting disappointed from our own expectations which had not been met, he said that “The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh” (as cited in Morreall, 2020).

The first philosopher that used the term *incongruous* in analyzing humor was James Beattie (1779). He contended that laughter derives from “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the

mind takes notice of them” (p.320, as cited in Morreall, 2020). Explaining his words, laughter occurs when we encounter elements that do not consistent with each other together in an expected manner. The mind recognizes the peculiar relationship between these elements, and this recognition results in laughter.

The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1790), had an explanation of laughing at jokes that requires incongruity. Kant’s philosophically significant conceptualization of incongruous humor is apparent in this explanation:

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. (sec. 54, cited in Morreall, 2020)

In his quote, Kant highlighted the origin of humor and laughter as deriving from an emotional reaction to situations that are unexpected and absurd. He revealed that eliciting laughter is caused by the sudden subversion of our expectations, which leads to a sensation of enjoyment and a release of stress and tension.

Another philosopher that considered humor as based on incongruity and as philosophically significant was the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer (1818), humor emerges when the incongruity between a concept and a perception are apparent and noticed all of a sudden, making them uneven after they were supposed to be of the same thing. He wrote:

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have

been thought through it in some relation and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity.... All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox.... This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous (section 13, as cited in Morreall, 2020).

Kierkegaard (1846) positioned the core of humor, which he referred to as “the comical”, in a discrepancy between one’s expectations and one’s experiences. He referred to incongruity as a contradiction. “Errors are comical, and are all to be explained by the contradiction involved.” (p, 459, as cited in Morreall, 2020) He cited the story of some baker who told the begging woman, “No, mother, I cannot give you anything. There was another here recently whom I had to send away without giving anything, too: we cannot give to everybody.”

John Morreall is a doctor and professor of religious studies, the creator of the international society for human studies, as well as a widely acknowledged expert of humor. Morreall (2020) noted that this account of humor resembles the techniques used by stand-up comedians these days; they talk about the set-up and the punch line. The set-up, being the first part of the joke, creates the expectation. The following and last part which is the punch line violates that expectation. Thus an unexpected connection is created between the two parts of the joke which are seemingly unrelated. Using the linguistic terms of the Incongruity Theory, the beginning and the ending of the joke are incongruous with each other (Morreall, 2020).

4.2. Relief Theory of Humor

Another account of laughter that further diminished the hegemony of The Superiority Theory in the 18th century was a new theory of laughter called the Relief Theory. It draws back to Lord Shaftsbury in the eighteenth century, Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century, and Freud in the twentieth century. Relief Theory argued that “a comic venting of emotions

through a hearty laugh offers a physical release of tensions” (Willett & Willett, 2019, p.5). This humorist flow of feelings occurs when someone laughs. This laughter is viewed as a physical process that not only gives little more than a pleasant experience but that also “alters physiology” (p.12) and provides a greater sense of life and long lasting vitality.

Relief happens when the hoax or joke is exposed. When the absurd is invaded, it is dissolved to be not real. People then can laugh and step from this strangely menacing world into the safe secure reality. This realization that the threat is no longer threatening or even real promotes feelings of relief. Therefore; humor is about discovering that the threat is not true or factual, which leads to relief when returning to the reality that went temporarily under threat (Westwood, 2004).

According to research on the neurological mechanisms of humor (McCrone, 2000) brain activity differs in location as well as intensity throughout the different parts of the joke. During the set up, the intensity is located in a specific manner. Later as the build up phase is over and the punch line is released, the intensity is widely spread in a different manner than the first phase. McCrone (2000) contended that the parts of the brain responsible for information evaluation and the feelings and emotions associated with the evaluation are used by the brain. The patterns that were familiar and habitual during the set up phase are now expelled to make a path for new patterns to evolve, consequently, a reposition of meaning and order occurs and resolution takes place to provide for the enjoyable experience (McCrone, 2000).

4.3. Intersectionality theory: Towards a New Theory of Humor

Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett are two professors of philosophy and of history. The two sisters both came together to write a book titled *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other*

Subversive Comics Speak Truth (2019). They tackled topics such as gender, politics, humor, and race. They address the four major fundamental theories of humor which are superiority, relief, incongruity, and social play through a feminist lens, as well as attempt to revamp and re-conceptualize these theories and provide a new understanding of humor as a power that can form social movements that are politically progressive.

The sisters argued that the bias against women and marginalized groups in general is due to their instinctual nature:

Women and others who are socially disempowered are viewed as closer to animals and ruled by emotion, they have been perceived as less capable of true humor and relegated to mockery's natural targets. Their laughter, unlike that of the assumed more logical mind, has been thought to display unseemly emotions and a body out of control (p.2)

This view disempowers women and confines them in just being the targets of comedy. The consequently; not only it deprives them the ability of genuine laughter, but also eliminates them from "status of the comic".

By taking a radical approach to address humor, the sisters channeled their anger to discuss three main heated issues which are patriarchy, Islamophobia, and mass incarceration. They used an intersectional lens to tackle these three issues, which is derived from the intersectionality theory which explains how multiple biological and social identities of an individual such as race, gender, and religion might overlap and intersect and lead to dynamics of domination and oppression (Bassett & Miller, 2020).

They introduced remodeling of humor's four theories. The ones my research is interested in is the Incongruity Theory and the Relief Theory. Concerning the Incongruity Theory, they argued that humor is not found in "the incongruities of mental or existential puzzles" but rather in the "everyday absurdities that call us to action" (p.14). These

absurdities create a feeling of shared experiences to shed light on important issues in order to challenge cultural norms and power dynamics to call for action.

In terms of comic relief, they argued that it's an illusion to be distracted from the true issues and disguised as a physical process, and as "mere venting that offers little more than a feel-good moment" (p.12). Their remodeling suggested the name catharsis rather than relief, where laughter can change physiology and provides a feeling of enthusiasm and long life energy. To them "comic catharsis, more than just physical relief, invokes ancient social practices of working through emotions and altering social identities, When relief theorists treat catharsis as merely synonymous with getting something off your chest, they hardly do it justice" (p.12).

5. The Origins and Evolution of the #MeToo Movement in Addressing Sexual Harassment and Assault

Many activists and scholars tried to frame the origins and history behind the Me Too movement. One of them is social sciences scholar Camille Gibson (2019), which developed an interesting insight for #MeToo as a historical and cultural phenomenon. She traced it back to Tarana Burke's original 'Me Too' activism on the website MySpace back in 2006, which assured for the privacy and protection of victims to share their stories.

After more than a decade, on October 15th, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted her story of experiencing sexual violence and asked her twitter followers to comment 'me too' or to re-tweet using the "hashtag" '#MeToo', if they relate to her experience (Rodino-Colocino, 2018). "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status," Milano tweeted, "we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" (Milano, 2017). Media following Milano's viral #MeToo tweet credited the actress with launching sexual assault into the Twitter community,

According to CBS News (2017), within forty eight hours of Milano's tweet, there were 53,000 comments and one million tweets using the hashtag #MeToo, as well as twelve million 'Me Too' Facebook posts, comments and reactions from 4.7 million users. After nearly a year, the hashtag got used more than nineteen million times (Pew Research Center, 2019). Moreover, a survey done by GQ (2018) concluded that 59% of American men aged between 18 and 55, nearly 75 million, were informed about the movement by the year 2018. Unlike the other previous movements, this movement was able to reach the attention of mainstream media and received critical responses.

Gibson et al. (2019) noted that the reason this movement got popular and reached mainstream media attention beyond social media audience was the celebrity allegations. Powerful men with high positions, within different cultural industries such as Hollywood, faced sexual harassment and assault accusations by various women. Some examples that made scandalous news were Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein as over eighty women came to accuse him of sexual harassment, assault, and rape. Other scandalous news of a public figure was Donald Trump's sexual assault accusation amid his presidency, after leaking a tape of him claiming to "grab" women by their private parts. Another accusation was against Bill Cosby, as he was the first to be sentenced to jail after the movement, he was accused by over sixty women of assault over the past five decades (Dray, 2018). The fall of these high profile and public figure men resulted in purging an already intense situation that urged this community of women to seek justice online.

Humanities researcher Michelle Rodino-Colocino (2018) offered another perspective to further dissect the reasons behind the Me Too movement popular rise. She contended that it is due to opposing cruelty and giving people a voice through the shared empathy. She argued that implementing social media in movements like #MeToo was effective in giving the movement popularity because of the nature of platforms in providing safety and security.

Digital networks are safe spaces that facilitate practicing empathy, listening and self-reflection (Rodino-Colocino, 2018).

The Me Too, as a movement basing on the core idea of “empowerment through empathy” attempts to help survivors attain power to feel as a whole or complete. The second mission of the movement is to become an advocate for exposing systems of privilege and oppression where sexual harassment and assault are not cause and effect. Burke, who was the first to create the Me Too back in 2006 to describe this movement, was encouraged by the hashtag's emergence to keep the discussion on power and privilege (Rodino-Colocino, 2018).

6. The Impact of the Me Too Movement on the Stand-up Comedy Scene

After the Allegations of popular and powerful mainstream male figures, that veil of impunity that protected them seemed to be gone. These powerful male individuals, across multiple industries such as Hollywood, have been fired, suspended, or imprisoned, as consequences to such harassment and assault accusations. It was a significant moment for women to speak up and get their voices heard. And the stand up industry was no exception.

One of the notable moments in stand-up comedy, which predates the outbreak of the movement, was the stand up comedian's Daniel Tosh's joke about rape. Tosh started his joke by making a statement that declared rape jokes as always being funny “how can a rape joke not be funny, rape is hilarious” (Tosh, 2012). Then one of the female audience members felt provoked because she opposed his view and thought that rape joke are harmful and let alone joking about how hilarious they are. The woman then yelled out saying that rape jokes are never funny. Tosh paused for a while. Then proceeded say “Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like 5 guys right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her” (Martin, 2012).

According to *The Daily Beast* (2012), the comedian faced heavy backlash after the incident. Afterward, Tosh said he was joking and that Comedians make jokes concerning rape on a daily basis. The reason why his joke in particular was getting so much backlash is because he was not “just kidding”, he was angry. The joke he delivered was reaction to the women who called him out in front of everyone in the audience. Thus, He used humor to lower her down, to remind her of her own weakness as an audience member and that the only one having control in the room is him as at comedian (*The Daily Beast*, 2012).

In addressing the atmosphere of the movement in the comedy industry, Lynne Parker, a CEO of an organization called Funny Women that aims to support female comedy from the very beginnings of the careers, stated that the climate of the Me Too movement was consistently present at every organized event (Hazarika, 2018). Ayesha Hazarika, a feminist stand-up comedian, mentioned that many female comics, including her, wanted to talk about the issue of harassment and their stories experiencing it on stage, regardless whether it might make them or the audience uncomfortable or not. This gave them an unlikely opportunity that did not exist before the movement (Hazarika, 2018).

Comedian Louis C.K., known for his audacious and controversial kind of humor, was among the first comedians whose behavior surfaced the news during the Me Too movement. He was accused of sexual misconduct that dates back to 2010 (Moreau, 2020). The comedian admitted to accusations and then came back with an unplanned stand-up special as he got back to comedy clubs in 2018 with new content. In his new special titled *Sincerely Louis C.K*, He joked about his misconduct and the bad reputation he managed to get. He immediately tackled the controversy revolving around him by saying “How was your last couple of years? How was 2018 and 2019 for you guys? Anybody else got in global amounts of trouble?” he asked the audience. His special contained many jokes tackling controversial subjects such as pedophilia, terrorism, people with disabilities, the Holocaust (Moreau, 2020).

One of the incidents that further show the effects of the movement on feminist comedians' courage is when Kelly Bachman, a twenty seven years old stand-up comedian, confronted Harvey Weinstein while he was present at one of her performances. The Hollywood figure was accused of sexually abusing or harassing more than 80 women. According to the Washington post (2018), once the comedian noticed his present she said "It's our job to name the elephant in the room. Do we know what that is?" few people knew what she meant and nodded, but the others froze and kept being silent. She continued. "It's a Freddy Krueger in the room, if you will," referring to the famous fictional character that haunts and terrorizes teenagers. She continued "I didn't know we had to bring our own mace and rape whistles" (Bachman, 2018). She mentioned mace and rape whistles, which are protective tools against rape.

Afterwards, a few people from the back of the room made the boo sound, One even yelled, "Shut up!" Bachman told The Washington Post "In my mind, I had failed," Bachman told The Post. "I don't usually get booed. I don't usually get silence. I just meant to go a lot harder. I wanted to keep talking about it and not care whether they're uncomfortable or not" (Bachman, 2018). Being a comedian means you hold and exert power, just as Tosh did six years prior when he confronted the woman in the audience and joked about five guys raping her, Bachman did the same in confronting an assault attempter.

Bachman told The Washington Post in an interview "We have to make a choice whether to be implicit or not, I want nothing to do with anyone that celebrates a monster. That doesn't feel like it should be a very controversial opinion. That's not a gray area." As a result, a representative for Weinstein accused the comic "This scene was uncalled for, downright rude and an example of how due process today is being squashed by the public, trying to take it away in the courtroom too," the spokesperson said in a statement to the Hollywood Reporter. "Accusations are, in fact, not convictions." (2018). Weinstein appeared publicly

only a few times in the two years since accusations against him paved the way of the Me Too movement.

Dave Chapelle is an intelligent and sharp comedian who received both immense praise and backlash for his unfiltered style of comedy. The comedian addressed the stance of comedians in the light of the Me too movement, in an interview with PBS NewsHour he discussed such matter “I don't think people pay money to see a guy speak precisely and carefully or worried about the repercussions of what they say” the comedian added “they just want to see someone try to get at something honest and relatable” he highlighted the matter of restricting freedom of speech of comedians as being artists. In an era where political correctness is being pushed to all spheres of society, he said “I think that we're painfully desensitized, because we're bombarded by so much information. There is a lot to be mad at, especially when you know so much. So I think it's a challenging time.” He continued “in a time like that, I, for one, find solace in the arts. I don't have to agree with all the art I consume, but it helps me understand how I actually feel about it” (Chappelle, 2018).

Chappelle (2018) considered this post Me Too era a “huge collective moment” where comedians, audiences, accusers and perpetrators are all figuring it out and navigating it at the same time. Being a comedian, he thought that it is impossible to feel indifferent and not tackle these issues. Chappelle joked about finding out his favorite comedian Bill Cosby, who was imprisoned and accused by over fifty women of sexual assault, guilty. He said “My God, you can't imagine it. It would be as if you heard that chocolate ice cream itself had raped 54 people, you would say to yourself, oh, but I like chocolate ice cream. I don't want it to rape ” (2018).

Chappelle (2018) further argued that the comedy stage must be a place where “prevailing standards of correctness don't apply” because to him the comedian has the right to discuss any matter because he is protected by the standard phrase that it is just a joke or I am

only joking. He continued “We live in censorious times; people can be quick to take offence and over-eager to silence opposing voices. (...) comedy needs a leeway not always afforded elsewhere in the public sphere. As it wrangles with reality and tries to see things in new ways, it needs to be able to risk being wrong, or indeed hurtful.”

7. Conclusion

The chapter started by establishing stand-up comedy as a form of expression that holds the power to challenge societal norms. By examining relevant literature and theories, including Incongruity Theory and Relief theories, it laid the theoretical foundation for understanding the subversive nature of comedy. Additionally, the chapter introduced the lens of intersectionality, which provided a new feminist perspective on humor and its potential for social critique. Moreover, the chapter provided an exploration of the Me Too movement, offering a contextual backdrop to comprehend its impact on the stand-up comedy landscape. By combining these key elements, this chapter has set the stage for the next chapter to analyze the comedic performances of feminist comedians within the Me Too era.

CHAPTER TWO:

Standing Up for the Power of

Stand-up: Analyzing Feminist Stand-Up

Comedy in the Me Too Era

1. Introduction

humor from below can serve as a source of empowerment, a strategy for outrage and truth telling, a counter to fear, a source of joy and friendship, a cathartic treatment against unmerited shame, and even a means of empathetic connection and alliance.

-Willett & Willett, 2019, p.2

The female comedians that will be examined in this section are Jen Kirkman, Ali Wong, Jena Friedman, and Hannah Gatsby. The jokes analyzed are from their stand-up comedy specials performances. A contextual and cultural analysis of the jokes will be provided. Each comedian's style, aims, and feminist position differ from one another. As comedians, their initial and main goal is to evoke laughter from the audience. But also they use their comedic platforms to achieve their secondary goal which is challenging norms and ideas about gender. Lastly, a discussion will take over about the limitation and challenges feminist humor faces, as well as its unsolicited effects on the movement itself and on the society and the comedy industry as a whole.

The first subversive step of successful women comics is their mere presence in an entertainment industry heavily dominated by men, also known as the boys club. Only 34 of the 205 comedy specials available at Netflix, as of 2018, are of females (Votruba, 2018). Thus, their existence alone as female comedians disrupts the dominant social norms. Even though the number of female comedians starring at Netflix comedy specials compared to men is relatively low, it is considered a significant amount. "Women's visibility in humor production marks a contribution and a disruption, indeed reminds audiences of exclusionary constructions of citizenship" (Krefting, 2014, p.124) Krefting agrees that by giving women a platform and a voice, their visibility in the comedy landscape contributes to more engaging and dynamic cultural conversations.

2. The Satirical Comedy of Jen Kirkman

In her special, *Just Keep Livin'*, Kirkman talks about that one time she planned to go to Italy alone. People got concerned about her safety and immediately discouraged her to travel alone:

I was excited for this trip before people started putting a damper on it. My dad was saying, 'Aren't you afraid of ISIS? ISIS is everywhere. Be afraid of ISIS.' I was like, 'Who... I'm a woman. I don't have time to be afraid of ISIS. I'm just busy being afraid of plain old men. Are you kidding me? You ever walked by a bar at 1 a.m. when dudes in baseball hats are getting out? ISIS are adorable. ISIS have costumes and beards, look like bartenders. ISIS... I'm not afraid of them at all.' (2017).

Kirkman is trying to twist the script about the terrorist group, ISIS to note that they are nothing to worry about in when compared to men in general. She takes the idea of ISIS, an extremist located in the Middle East, and criticizes her father for expecting that she has any less reason to fear men. ISIS has raped hundreds of women and girls, executed prisoners of war, and kept minorities as slaves (Votruba, 2018). Kirkman uses the reputation of such group to explain to her dad the degree of worry women deal with concerning men, and that she is absolutely right to have the same fear of ISIS towards men.

Once the punch line is delivered in "I'm just busy being afraid of plain old men" the subversion occurs. She is employing ISIS as an exaggerated example to illustrate the severity of danger of men. She emphasizes the idea that while men might fear terrorist groups that control big territories, women are afraid of men in general, due to their experiences, even a group of them leaving the bar.

This critique helps to bring to light some problems that US women experience on a daily basis, Issues that usually men don't pay attention to. While clearly not all men are generalized to be like ISIS, but still, sexual assault statistics in the US support the concerns of Kirkman. Statistics show that every 98 seconds, approximately, 570 times a day, someone in the US is sexually assaulted, in which 90 percent of them are female adults. Sexual harassment is normalized in the US, allowing 99 percent of attempters of sexual violence to walk free (Vagianos, 2017)

Kirkman is subverting the idea of fearing a terrorist group by normalizing them and directing the lens towards men based on her experience as a woman. Kirkman is not only courageous to go to Italy alone; she is courageous for going anywhere else alone. It does not matter if she is in a far away foreign country because widely condemned actions occur just as frequently in the United States.

3. Gender Roles, Parenting, and Motherhood in the Comedy of Ali Wong

Ali Wong is an American stand-up comedian, writer and actress. She comes from Chinese and Vietnamese descents. Her breakout Netflix special Baby Cobra premiered on Mother's Day weekend 2016 and received wide appraisal from critics. Since then she has thrown out the first pitch at a Giants game, become a very popular Halloween costume, and released her second Netflix special Hard Knock Wife. In the two specials, it was apparent that she was in the very late stages as she performed. In 2019, she became the first performer to sell out 13 bits at the Wilton Theater in Los Angeles (Wong, n.d).

In her Netflix special Baby Cobra (2016), Wong frankly talked about her experience as a pregnant woman and a mom. She said:

It's very rare and unusual to see a female comic perform pregnant, because female comics...don't get pregnant. Just try to think of one. I dare you. There's— None of them. Once they do get pregnant, they generally disappear. That's not the case with male comics. Once they have a baby, they'll get up on stage a week afterwards and they'll be like, "Guys, I just had this baby. That baby's so annoying and boring." And all these other dads in the audience are, like, "That's hilarious. I identify." And their fame just swells because they become this relatable family funny man all of a sudden. (2016)

In the set up, Wong noted the possible consequences people face after becoming a parent. Men and women have opposite fates after having babies. Pregnant women and new mothers usually tend to slow their careers if not end it. She then continued to detail how new fathers are able to keep their careers just as the same and are supported culturally in doing so. This leads to discuss the situation of maternity leave in the United States and how "new mothers are entitled to less than three weeks off at an average full wage rate under Donald Trump's family leave plan" (England, 2017,para.1) which makes the US take the bottom of the chart of 14 countries altogether together (England, 2017).

Wong told The New Yorker, when she was asked about her opinion about stopping her career after becoming a mother "A couple of female stand-up comics I know refer to their kids as their Little Career Killers, I really do not want to feel that way. It sounds crazy, but if it wasn't for my daughter and doing that special when I was pregnant with her I could see how very easily I would have slowed down, and stopped."(Levy, 2016, para.13) She acknowledged why new mothers are forced to slow down their careers and that it I not only due to societal expectations, but also motherly instincts.

After having a child, Wong mentioned that people were surprised to know that she is coming back to stand up. She gets phrases like “how do you balance family and career” (Wong, 2016). She adds that people do not ask these questions to fathers and continues saying “because they neglect the child for 90% of the day and it’s socially acceptable.” The idea she wanted to highlight is how men get away with the responsibility of their children and it’s all socially acceptable yet for women they are considered to be bad and neglecting mothers.

She then continued by “saying people ask me, if you work then who watches the baby?” she pauses and lets the audience form an expectation about who is watching the baby, is it the father? , is it the nanny? And then she violated this expectation by saying “of course the TV watches the baby” (Wong, 2016). This punch line noted the pressure mothers face in order to be considered good mothers. She exaggerated when mentioning leaving her baby unsupervised to get her message more effectively. Wong employed sarcastic strategies to emphasize the “bad mother” labels put by society especially o new mothers.

In het bit, she continued to joke by mentioning when she was reading a feminist book that pushes women to strive for equal rights and have a seat at the table, she said:

Feminism is the worst thing that ever happened to women, our job used to be no job, we had it so good, we could have done the smart thing, which would have been to continue playing dumb for the next century and be like, we're dumb women, and we don't know how to do anything. So I guess we better just stay at home all day and eat snacks and watch Ellen, because we're too stupid to have any real responsibility. And then all these women had to show off and be like, we could do anything. Shut up! Don't tell them the secret. They ruined it for us and now we're expected to work. When I hear the phrase double income household, I want to throw up. (2016)

Wong was complaining about how far feminism ruined women lives when it is considered to be leveling them up. She tried to subvert the idea that having a career is compulsory for all women, and that they are expected to contribute to the house income along with their significant others.

She continued joking about this same matter of housewives by saying:

A lot of my friends, when we walk around together, will get very judgmental about housewives that we'll see on the street. And they'll be like, look at that housewife not doing anything. Look at that housewife; just walking around all day getting massages in her Lulu lemon pants. And I'm like, that woman is a genius. She's not a housewife; she's retired (2016).

In this joke, Wong highlighted the social perception that housewives are miserable, unproductive and have meaningless contributions to society. She tried to undermine this perception and rather confirmed that it's the ideal lifestyle according to her, where women are able to both be productive in the household and to enjoy getting massages and wear comfortable clothing.

Moreover, she continued by narrating how she came to choose her husband and settle down and get a marriage:

I think that what happened was, at the time, my future in comedy was looking very uncertain. I was really struggling and I panicked. I was like, 'I don't know if I can make it in this world on my own. So I better trap this man who graduated from Harvard Business School so that I don't end up homeless... I have been packing his lunch every day for five years; I did that so he would become dependent on me,

because he graduated from Harvard Business School. And I don't want to work anymore (2016).

Wong emphasized her desires to not be a working wife from the earliest stages of her relationship with her now husband. She even mentioned that his family made her sign a prenuptial agreement before the marriage, meaning that if they ever got to divorce at any time, she would take none of his income or assets. Only to find herself later on, after her comedy career boomed, paying for his 70k dollars debt and for their house (Liu, 2019).

4. The Dark Satirical Comedy of Jena Friedman

Jena Friedman is an American female stand-up comic, screen writer, and producer. She is known for her dark humor with ulterior social commentaries. She worked as a producer on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart during his three years tenure and on The Late Show with David Letterman (Friedman, 2022). Her style of comedy is known to be calm yet provocative. She employs dark humor and satire in her social commentaries, which is usually uncharacteristic of female comedians. Her use of dark humor allowed her to be a prominent comedian in the #MeToo, because it pointed out the absurdities concerning such heated climate.

Friedman (2023) shared her experience as a woman in the industry of Stand-Up comedy and comedy in general:

If I had a dollar for every time a journalist asked me, "Is it hard being a woman in comedy?" I'd probably make as much as a man in comedy. The truth is, being a woman in comedy is fine, and sometimes it's really great. It comes with the same indignities as being

a woman in almost every other industry in America, but at least we have a microphone! (Para. 1)

She noted that the most frequently asked question she gets asked is about the difficulties she faces as a female comedian, if there are any. While acknowledging the fact that they don't get paid as much as male comedians like any other industry, yet she thought it's a privilege that female comics get to stand on a stage, hold a microphone, and exert authority, even for a little while.

In connecting gender disparities with assault crimes, she joked on one of her Netflix specials *American* (2016):

I was talking to a male comedian recently, He said I feel so bad for women it seems so hard to be you guys, you guys will just drop everything. If you meet someone you love, you'll just drop your careers for love. He's not entirely wrong, I have female friends who have put their careers on pause to start a family, because in America we don't have paid leave, but men aren't that different. You guys might not drop your career for love, but you'll screw it for an assault crime ((Friedman, 2016).

In the set up, the comedian agreed with her comedian counterpart in acknowledging the sacrifices women are faced with in a committed relationship. Unlike men, women are obliged to slow down their careers or end them in order to take care of the house and children. One of the reasons contributing to this is the lack of paid maternity leave in The United States, as mentioned in the first chapter, The United States is one of the worst countries in the World for paid maternity leave, new mothers are given less than three weeks off on an average salary under the family leave plan during Donald Trump's tenure (England, 2017).

In the punch line “but men aren't that different. You guys might not drop your career for love, but you'll screw it for an assault crime”, she stated that men face this need to withdraw their careers too, but not for the reasons women do, which is to take care of their family, but for attempting assault crimes. This satirical comparison between the different factors that affect careers between men and women highlighted the seriousness of engaging in assault crimes.

In addressing some concerns of men in the heated climate of the movement, Friedman (2018) in her stand-up performance, starring at CONAN on TBS, titled *Treat Nazis Like You Treat Women*, satirically joked:

A lot of my male friends are really nervous in this whole me too moment, so they're asking me for advice and I tell them if you're around a woman and she makes you feel nervous, just picture her clothed, think of her as your daughter, or better yet a person. Treat her as an equal. I know it sounds crazy but then maybe she won't blog about you on a website no one's ever heard of (Friedman, 2018).

In analyzing the joke, it is apparent that the comedian employed satire to respond to the anxiety of men in the light of this movement. Her punchline revealed the absurdity of the simpler basic demands of women being respected, which should be the bare minimum that men do to women by treating them as humans. The comedian invited men to reevaluate their behaviors towards their counterparts. She noted that through the sense of empathy and treating others as equals, individuals can live in a safer environment.

Moreover, the comedian is known for combining different social matters in her comedic routines. In the next joke she combined politics, race and gender to offer a social commentary on these matters:

Here's my advice if you see a Nazi on the street don't punch him, but maybe lightly harass him, cat call him, tell him to smile. If any Nazis work for you, pay them less, take credit for their ideas, except that one. You guys see where this is going, if we in America treat Nazis the way that we treat women at the very least they will never become president (Friedman, 2018).

In the joke, the comedian tackled the emergence of an American political group called the Nazis. American Nazi is a radical right political party that advocate for white supremacy and the hatred for other racial minorities. She was concerned about the widespread of this group and their ideas in the society. In this line "Here's my advice if you see a Nazi on the street, don't punch him but maybe lightly harass him, cat call him, tell him to smile." The comedian suggested an alternative treatment to Nazis on the street, this treatment includes harassment, objectifying comments, and cat calling, which are verbal comments is given to a stranger on the street. The comedian used satire to show the ways women get treated on the streets and suggested a more worthy group of such practices.

Next is this line "If any Nazis work for you, pay them less, take credit for their ideas, except that one". Friedman was suggesting another treatment for Nazis in the workplace which is to offer them a lesser pay, and to take credit for their own creative ideas. The joke revealed the treatment women receive in the workplace which includes not getting a fair pay and not given recognition or credit for their contributions. The exception the comedian made about taking credit of Nazis ideas is surely their political idea of white supremacy. In the next line "If we in America treat Nazis the way that we treat women, at the very least they will never become president." The comedian provided one of the outcomes of mistreating women which is not achieving high positions of authority, and suggested that if Nazis are treated the same; it would discourage their ability and rise to such positions.

In her Stand-Up performance starring in Conan titled *Women Don't Watch True Crime, We Study It*, she (2019) joked about women being victims of serial killers, and she started her bit by saying:

The news is pretty depressing lately, so to lighten the mood I've started watching true crime. I feel bad for the amount of true crime that I consume, but, to be fair, women, we don't watch true crime, technically, we study it to make sure....we don't end up on it. And true crime is kind of feminist. It's the only time the entertainment industry will take a chance on an unknown female lead (Friedman, 2019).

In the setup, Friedman acknowledged the severity of current dark events that are circulating in the media and offered herself a much lighter alternative to escape to, which is, watching true crime documentaries. And then she revealed why women attempt to watch these which is to be cautious and study them in order not to protect their safety and not fall victims to such practices. In her punch line, which is “true crime is kind of feminist. It's the only time the entertainment industry will take a chance on an unknown female lead” she satirically challenged the idea of women underrepresentation in mainstream entertainment industry. This means, they are not given chances to play lead roles. True crime industry is one of the few areas which offer them this opportunity.

She continued:

You've all seen "Making a Murderer." If you haven't, it's a documentary about how a woman's death made so much money for Netflix. And then the podcasts, there's "Serial," "My Favorite Murder," (...) and "This American Death," it doesn't exist yet but that's going to be my retirement plan, because true crime makes so much money. It's a great business model. For one, you don't have to

pay residuals. And also, dead women are way less difficult on set.

Have any of you ever worked with a live woman? Oh my God, So entitled (Friedman, 2019).

She started to mention a widely known true crime series and how profitable it was. She hinted that the covering of such tragic events, resulted in a huge financial gain for Netflix. This genre became lucrative in the entertainment industry. Afterwards she mentioned another documentary title that she was planning to direct for her retirement plan, since it's a profitable trend and a great business model. Then she revealed the benefits of producing a true crime documentary which included not having to "pay residuals", a residual is a sum of money paid to an actor or performer each time the show repeatedly airs (Cambridge University Press, n.d.) and the other benefit was that "dead women are way less difficult on set", she satirically revealed the stereotype that notes that women are demanding and hard to work with, in a dark comedic and exaggerated manner.

She continued to discuss the obsessive concentration on capitalizing dead women:

True crime is quickly becoming one of America's leading exports in late stage capitalism. All the manufacturing jobs are going overseas, but dead women, dead women are the one thing we still make in America! I didn't realize how obsessed America was with dead white women in particular, until it occurred to me that Ted Bundy has two Netflix specials (Friedman, 2018).

The comedian contrasted the decrease of the manufacturing sector and the continuous making of true crime about dead women. She used satire to highlight this obsession with stories about deceased women as an essential trait of American entertainment. She mentioned Ted Bundy, a serial killer who raped and murdered numerous women in the 1970's. By highlighting the

significant attention he received in the form of multiple Netflix documentaries, she criticized the focus on certain cases and the disregard for victims' stories.

Afterwards, she continued to address the presentation of Ted Bundy in the mainstream media by saying:

I don't know if you've seen "The Ted Bundy Tapes." Something about the graphic design is just so '70s, so retro, it's almost, it's like they want to make you nostalgic for an era when men could just murder women and get away with it, because there was no Google Earth. And then the scripted movie on Netflix, written and directed by men, where they made the craziest person in that movie Carole Ann Boone, the woman who dated Ted Bundy while he was in prison (Friedman, 2018).

In analyzing the joke, it can be observed that the comedian highlighted the visual representation in the series and the act of romanticizing a dark period of time, which elicits a nostalgic feeling for when violence against women was more widespread and normalized and when perpetrators could escape detection. The mentioning of Google Earth was to note the inability for perpetrators nowadays to avoid being captured due to technology. Moreover, she highlighted the representation of Carole Ann Boone in the movie *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile (2019)* as well as the gender dynamics involved in the script and the way of telling the story. She criticized the portrayal of Carole Ann Boone as the most unbalanced and unstable person of the movie's characters. The mention of the movie being written and directed by men added to the commentary on the gender dynamics and the perspective of men's storytelling.

She continued:

They made Carole look so much crazier than a man who murdered 30 people. And I was watching that thinking, Carole Ann is not crazy. She's just a woman dating in her 30s. Carole Ann's crazy, really? What does that say about all the men outside of prison she would have dated, but Ted Bundy was nicer to her?(Friedman, 2018).

In this part, the comedian further focused on the serial killer's former girlfriend to highlight women's behavior and choices in relationships. In the part "She's just a woman dating in her 30s", she noted the reality of women over the age of 30 and how their choices get restricted in the dating scene. This societal stereotype considers women in their thirties less valuable in the dating scene. Older men are probably taken and men their age gravitate towards younger women, so they are left with fewer choices and which makes them settle for less.

Further focusing on the strange fascination with true crime stories, the comedian continued to joke about the attention Ted Bundy gets:

If Ted Bundy were alive today, he'd be on his third Netflix special. It would be his apology tour. And he'd be traveling around the country, being like, "When my friends and I realized it was wrong to kill women" "we felt so bad about it!" (Friedman, 2018).

The comedian focused on the attention and sympathy shown to mainstream controversial figures, even after they commit notorious acts. She employed irony to criticize the fact that they're given such platforms to be able to self reflect their past deeds. In this part "It would be his apology tour" Friedman ironically suggested that Bundy's Netflix special would be made as an apology tour. This was to make fun of the public figures going on apology tours in order to seek forgiveness and would later get away with it easily. "When my friends and I realized it

was wrong to kill women,' 'we felt so bad about it!'"'. In this line, she also used sarcasm to highlight the absurdity of a person as criminally brutal as Bundy to easily claim to have a change of heart about the act of killing women.

Friedman further provided an intersection between comedy and systemic racism in a social commentary about how these issues overlap with one another:

I didn't appreciate how the cops painted Ted Bundy as a criminal mastermind. He wasn't a criminal mastermind, he was just white. And they weren't looking for him. I'm not saying cops are racist. Just that maybe cops are as racist as comedians are funny. Not all comedians are funny, but if someone's like, "I'm a comedian," you're like, "Oh, you're probably pretty funny." It's the same thing with cops (Friedman, 2018).

In the line "I didn't appreciate how the cops painted Ted Bundy as a criminal mastermind. He wasn't a criminal mastermind, he was just white." The comedian suggested that the portrayal of ted Bundy as a criminal mastermind is due to him being white. His actions were overlooked by law enforcement due to his race. For instance if he wasn't a white person, he would be called a dangerous criminal, which is an ethnic stereotype about black people. Or he would be called a terrorist, if he was an Arab. Because he was white, his ethnicity is not brought up to the table whereas black or Arab people, for instance, would be generalized to their ethnic stereotype.

In the next line "And they weren't looking for him." Friedman noted that despite Bundy being guilty, the police at first did not consider him a suspect and didn't look for him, which highlighted the idea that his white privilege might have played a role in protecting him from suspicion. "I'm not saying cops are racist. Just that maybe cops are as racist as

comedians are funny." Here, the comedian satirically compared racism and comedy. This comparison suggests that just as not all comedians are funny, not all cops are racist, but all comedians are assumed at first to be funny, and so are cops assumed to have certain racial bias against people of color.

Moreover, the comedian continued to joke by providing a social and political commentary combining comedy, gender and politics:

And he was not an evil genius. Here's how I know Ted Bundy wasn't that smart. He was a republican politician in Utah as he started murdering women, and if he were really ahead of the curve, he would've just stayed the course of politics, risen to the top, and then killed so many more women . . . with his policies (Friedman, 2018).

In this joke, Friedman satirically targeted republican politicians. She suggested that if he were truly smart as the media depicts him, he would have stayed a conservative politician in Utah, a south western state with a conservative majority of inhabitants. Republicans have certain strict rules and traditional beliefs regarding certain matters, those which the comedian was claiming to be harming women. The most known of their policies is their advocacy for banning abortion through their *pro-life* policies. The comedian here was juxtaposing the killing of women as a literal act and the killing of women through policies as a figurative form.

5. The Uproarious Comedy of Hannah Gadsby

Another feminist female comedian whose comedy was prominent in to #MeToo movement is Hannah Gadsby. She won major comedy awards in 2017 because of her Netflix stand-up show *Nanette* (2018). Her show preceded the #MeToo movement but was the perfect

fit narrative concerning story-telling about sexism, abuse and power. Her humor is not like the traditional comedy that diffuses tension and provides long lasting relief from trauma, but hers is a one that forces the audience to feel tense and feel her pain (Hazarika, 2018).

Although much of her comedy is powered by anger and rage, she admits that it does not serve a sustained effect like the traditional comedy does, and that she has to channel anger to get her story heard. She said in her stand up show *Nanette (2018)*:

The only way I can tell my truth and put tension in the room is with anger. (...) I believe I've got every right to be angry! But what I don't have a right to do is to spread anger. I don't. Because anger, much like laughter, can connect a room full of strangers like nothing else. But anger, even if it's connected to laughter, will not relieve tension, because anger is a tension. It is a toxic, infectious tension. And it knows no other purpose than to spread blind hatred and just because I can position myself as a victim, does not make my anger constructive.

In analyzing this statement, it is apparent that the comedian asserted the recognition of the power of anger and rage when employing it to share personal experiences. She acknowledged the validity of sharing each other's emotions, but also recognized the responsibility that freedom of speech comes with. She highlighted the special ability of anger, very much alike to laughter, to create a shared sensibility among people of all walks of life. However, she noted that anger, even when joined with humor, does not decrease stress but instead fuels it. Anger is described as having a toxic and infectious power that fosters blind hatred.

In her Netflix special, Gadsby offered a provocative and angry type of comedy, which targeted male comedians directly:

It's not my place to be angry on a comedy stage. I'm meant to be doing... self-deprecating humor. People feel safer when men do the angry comedy. They're the kings of the genre. When I do it, I'm a miserable, ruining all the fun and the banter. When men do it, heroes of free speech. I love... angry white man comedy. It's so funny, it's hilarious. They're adorable. Why are they angry? (...) They're like the canaries in the mine, aren't they? If they're having a tough time... the rest of us are goners.

In this joke, she started it with the line "It's not my place to be angry on a comedy stage. I'm meant to be doing... self-deprecating humor." This statement mirrored the perception that marginalized comedians, especially women, are expected to be confined to a certain comedic norm. The comedian revealed that expressing rage or anger on stage is not suitable for them; instead they are expected to engage in self-deprecating humor, which is a humor that engages the comedian in poking fun at himself or herself and their flaws to make people laugh.

In the next line "People feel safer when men do the angry comedy. They're the kings of the genre. When I do it, I'm a miserable ruining all the fun and the banter. When men do it, heroes of free speech" She revealed a norm prevailing in the comedic industry of expressing anger. It is more acceptable when male comedians express anger in their comedic routines because they are already assertive and powerful, and they are even praised to do so. Unlike women or people of the margins, when they do it, it is less fun and they are ruining the atmosphere. "They're like the canaries in the mine, aren't they? If they're having a tough time... the rest of us are goners." In this part she compared male comedians to the canaries in the mine. A canary in the mine is an idiomatic expression, in the past, coal miners used to bring cages of canaries whenever they had to work in coal mines because canaries sense dangerous carbons way earlier than humans do, so if a canary starts acting strange, the miners

know that it is dangerous and they have to go. So when canaries are in danger, so will everyone else. This is how male comedians are like canaries in the mine according to Gatsby, if male comedians are having a *tough time*, so will everyone else

The comedian continues, but this not in a jokey tone but rather an upfront uproarious one:

See, I don't even believe that women are better than men. I believe women are just as corruptible by power as men, because you don't have a monopoly on the human condition. But the story is as you have told it. Power belongs to you. And if you can't handle criticism, take a joke, or deal with your own tension without violence, you have to wonder if you are up to the task of being in charge.

The comedian is confronting directly rather than joking in this part, she is channeling her anger towards the men in hold of power in general and within the industry of stand-up comedy in specific.

In addressing famous men in hold power, Gadsby (2018) criticized the famous artist Pablo Picasso, who despite being a forty two married man, was with an underage girl aged seventeen. But according to him, "it was perfect, I was in my prime, she was in her prime" she continued quoting Picasso when he said" each time I leave a woman, I should burn her. Destroy the woman, you destroy the past she represents" she continued "cool guy, let's make art great again!"(2018). She attempted to expose a famous and highly praised artist to show the absurdities of his view about men and women, and the "prime" age difference between men and women.

In addressing the tragedies of her life, Gadsby further reveals the terror she feels being around men "I'm not a man-hater. But I'm afraid of men I wonder how a man would feel if

they'd lived my life, because it was a man who sexually abused me when I was a child. It was a man who beat me when I was 17, my prime". She used Picasso's argument, that underage girls are in their prime to note the severity of her experience.

6. Discussion of the Limitation and Unsolicited Effects of Feminist Humor

Subversive feminist comedy, for a long amount of time, proved to be a tool for women to challenge cultural expectations and societal norms, and to shed light on issues such as sexism and gender inequality to bring about change. However, the Me Too era has brought to light the topics and issues of assault and sexual harassment; this has led to an elevated level of sensitivity around topics regarding gender and power. Consequently, feminist comedy faces some limitations and challenges in this new social landscape.

One of the main challenges of feminist humor is finding the fine line between humor and potentially irritating or offensive content. In the emergence of the Me Too movement, audiences are more aware of problems of consent, trauma, objectification, and victimization, and might not take jokes that seem to undervalue these issues. Comedians are now challenged to be careful of their content and the impact their comedy might have.

One of the matters that feminist humor scholars must consider if they insist on achieving subversive effects is the issue of being taken too seriously, or not seriously at all. When it is taken seriously, some audiences may feel sensitive and perceive some jokes as harmful. This issue might restrict comedians' freedom to joke about certain topics, and expose them to politically *correct* and socially *just* groups. When humor is not taken seriously, it risks being dismissing the matters joked about. John Morreall (1983) better detailed this matter when he said "The person with a sense of humor . . . will live with the awareness that

nothing is important in an absolute way” (p.125). This takes away the seriousness of humor and its presumed power.

Rosalind Gill (2007) in her article titled *Post feminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility*. commented that “most significantly in feminist media culture, irony has become a way of ‘having it both ways’, of expressing sexist, homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ionized form, whilst claiming this was not actually ‘meant’.” (p.159, qtd in Tomsett, 2017). Irony can express negativity, such as sexism or racism, while claiming that such jokes were not meant to be taken seriously. This can be seen as an act of manipulation, where the comedian is immune from any backlash because it’s a *joke* after all.

The audience might not recognize the ironic and sarcastic tone of the joke, when a feminist comedian is talking about a specific negative stereotype or situation faced by women, for instance Ali Wong’s joke, which is mentioned previously, when she said “we’re dumb women, and we don’t know how to do anything” she tries, in an ironic way, to show the image enforced by society that women are not worthy opponents to men. The audience members might take it seriously that she is acknowledging this negative stereotype to be true.

Janet Bing was another feminist humor scholar noted the concern about taking comedy seriously, as well as its ability to validate the existing problem discussed. She thought that jokes about experiences of rape from females might validate the experience of women being victims. These feminist jokes can satirically support ideas revolving around women’s fantasizing about being victims of rape, which is counterproductive to the Me Too movement.

Various attempts of comedians proved to reaffirms the hierarchy and split between men and women in order to keep men active and women passive. Lindsey German, in *Material Girls: Women, Men and Work* (2007), considered this reaffirmation of the divide between females and males by analyzing women’s calls for inclusion in the paid working industry. She explained how the rising number of women in the workplace, has historically

enraged men into reestablishing their masculine identities. This inclusion of women into this male dominated industry has paved the way for the crisis of male identity and maintenance of traditional masculine behavior (Tomsett, 2017).

In discussing the disciplinary functions of humor that aims to be rebellious, Michael Billig (2005) established the fine line between the psychological aspect of humor and its cultural results:

Those who laugh might imagine that they are daringly challenging the status quo or are transgressing stuffy codes of behavior. [. . .] However, the consequences of such humor might be conformist rather than radical, disciplinary not rebellious. [. . .] In such cases, the momentary release takes meaning from the enduring power of constraint. The joke simultaneously teaches the conventions and takes innocuous revenge against them. [. . .] Far from subverting the serious world of power, the humor can strengthen it.

(p.211, qtd in Abedinifard, 2015)

The quote highlighted that in many cases, comedy serves to reinforce cultural norms and conventions instead of challenging them. The amusement that subversive humor produces is seen as momentary rather than enduring. This momentary liberation is derived from the lasting influence of societal powers. Essentially, feminist humor might unintentionally reinforce the power structures it tries to critique.

Additionally, in her book, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, when analyzing stand-up comedy, Gilbert concluded that there is no such thing as feminist humor because humor in general “renders its audience passive” and “disarms through amusing. Although it sends a double message, if it is successful, humor produces

laughter. And laughter does not constitute a radical politics” (Gilbert, p.172). This means that individuals may receive and internalize the content of humor without analyzing it thoroughly, because after all, all they are seeking when coming to a comedy show is having a good time and a good laugh.

Mary Crawford admitted that “power relations can be inverted in the humor mode without lasting consequences” (p. 1420). She noted that punching up towards those in power, whether politicians, wealthy people, or famous figures, may vent emotions and question the legitimacy of the hierarchy, but is usually ineffective in changing the power hierarchy.

Another counterarguments that feminist humor scholars must consider if they insist on feminist humor subversive effects is that feminist jokes, which tackle gender roles, cause what Raewyn Connell calls *character dichotomy*, which is the belief that men and women are meant to have different kinds of behavior. This idea does not cause any change of attitude in men, resulting in reinforcing the status quo (Gender in World Perspective, p. 60 as cited in Abedinifard, 2015).

Bing (2004) made a distinction between *divisive* and *inclusive* feminist humor. Divisive jokes target persons such as males, inclusive jokes attack patriarchal systems. Therefore, most divisive jokes include male-bashing jokes as well as jokes which Shifman and Lemish categorize as Mars and Venus type of humor. As a funny version of John Gray’s internationally well known book titled *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* which further reinforces the split between men and women as are assumed to be from to diverse physical and behavioral categories (Abedinifard, 2015).

Furthermore, the very basic idea of intersectionality can lead to victimization. This victimization is for getting special treatment. This idea leads to feelings of self centeredness and more division with other who do not identify with the same label as them. This label put forward by feminism for example, will teach its people how they are oppressed and what they

should think or say. This creates bubbles or echo chambers of similar people based on their marginal position. Which is not only harmful socially, but also harmful to the group itself.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of feminist stand-up comedians in this chapter provided interesting insight into the unique ways in which comedy can be used as a tool for expression and social commentary. Through their unique comedic styles and subject matter, Jen Kirkman, Ali Wong, Jena Friedman, and Hannah Gadsby contributed to the continuous conversation of feminism and activism by the use of humor, in the heart of the comic as well as the tragic.

Throughout the analysis, it became apparent that feminist humor, while being a powerful tool for addressing gender disparities and assault, also faces limitations, challenges, and unsolicited effects. The discussion of these challenges highlighted the complexity of navigating humor within the context of feminism and activism. It highlighted the importance of navigating a balance between comedy and social criticism while considering diverse perspectives and the potential impact on different audiences.

General Conclusion

This research aimed to establish the role of subversive humor in American stand-up comedy as a powerful tool in instilling social activism and raising awareness. Additionally, it critically examined the potential power of feminist humor in challenging cultural norms and gender inequality, as well as addressing issues of harassment in the Me Too era. Moreover, this work conducted an analysis of feminist stand-up comedians' performances and their comedic techniques, and highlighted the social and cultural impact of the Me Too movement on such industry. This study attempted to shed light on the ways in which feminist comedians pair humor with activism to tackle controversial topics, and attempted to answer whether their comedic expressions can be subversive acts of resistance that bring about social change.

The first part of this work offered some insights of the use of stand-up comedy as a subversive tool and specifically focused on its use within feminist humor. The chapter established stand-up comedy as a subversive form of expression. Moreover; it laid down the theoretical framework of subversion in comedy, drawing on Incongruity and Relief theories of humor as well as Intersectionality theory. The chapter then discussed the origins and scope of the Me Too movement, providing a contextual backdrop for understanding its influence on the stand-up comedy scene.

The second chapter provided an analysis of famous feminist stand-up comedians, by examining their comedic styles and techniques. The chapter presented analysis of the comedy of Jen Kirkman, Ali Wong, Jena Friedman, and Hannah Gadsby. Lastly, it included a discussion of the limitations and challenges of feminist humor, considering the potential backlash, reinforcement of stereotypes, and the fine line between comedy and activism.

Therefore, this study concluded that feminist scholars call for an inclusive humor using the lens of intersectionality theory is effective in raising awareness about marginalized people's experiences. It also acknowledged the vital role of feminist comedians in challenging the culture of silence in the light of the Me Too movement. This call fostered empathy and encouraged solidarity among women. But what feminist humor also achieved is more division between the two genders, because it confined women in bubbles or echo chambers, where they are imprisoned by feelings of victimization. This teaches individuals how to establish identification and commonality through shared labels and criteria for understanding oppression. Therefore, although being effective in exposing the absurdities and fostering empathy, it is not effective in instilling social change and subverting the existing order, which in contrary; it risks enforcing it.

This research faced many limitations. Firstly, it did not delve into the live reaction of the audience when watching such comedic performances, meaning some members might

laugh at jokes and not laugh at others, some might consider the comedian funny and other might not do so. Some might agree with the comedian view about the matter discussed, other might not. Therefore; one cannot fully measure if the joke is funny or subversive to the audience.

This research is also limited in the matter of the true intentions of the comedians. They might be pushing a feminist agenda or trying to achieve personal goals rather than collective ones. The comedians selected I did not interview these comics nor the audience members. My research is also limited because of the lack of feedback to such comedy specials. While YouTube offers the feature to see views and comments, most of my specials are extracted from Netflix.

In addition, this research faced limitations in the process of joke selection. Some jokes were not appropriate, because stand-up comedy is known to be a vulgar art, in the language used or in the topics discussed. Few changes to the inappropriate language were done.

Future research might consider exploring the role of social media in popular culture television. As the Me Too movement begun by posting tweets on Twitter, and many jokes contained the use of social media. It might trace audience reception to such comedy acts, as well as, some individuals may hold resistant views towards feminist ideas, and whether they change them or not.

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