

Positives and negatives: reclaiming the female body and self-deprecation in stand-up comedy

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Abstract

Drawing on existing research into feminist humour, this article argues that many of the functions of self-deprecation within comic performance that have been identified and explored in relation to the American context of the late 90s and early 2000s are still evident on the current UK circuit. Self-deprecation in stand-up comedy by women continues to be understood as both positive (as part of the rise of popular feminisms) and negative (as reinforcing patriarchal norms). These contradictory understandings of self-deprecation in stand-up comedy are always inextricably linked to the identities of the audiences for such humour.

I consider how emergent female stand-up performers may rationalise and understand the role self-deprecation plays within their own work in the current British context. I then discuss the work of stand-up comedian Luisa Omielan as an example of the rejection of self-deprecatory address.

I make the argument that self-deprecation cannot function simply as positive or negative in the current UK context, but must always be considered (for both audiences and performers) as challenging and reinforcing restrictive patriarchal attitudes towards women simultaneously.

Keywords:

Stand-up comedy, feminism, post-feminism, self-deprecation, body-positivity, popular performance.

Biographic note:

Ellie is a PhD candidate and Associate Lecturer with Sheffield Hallam University. Her research explores the live UK comedy circuit and how female voices are both integrated and marginalised within the current industry. Her research has involved working alongside the UK Women in Comedy Festival as a researcher in residence to capture qualitative information from promoters, performers and audiences. In 2017 Ellie co-founded Mixed Bill, a comedy and gender research network, with colleagues researching in related areas.

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Self-deprecation is one of the most enduring aspects of comedy and, as American actor and comedian Kristen Schaal articulates in the form of a well-observed joke, it is a more complex property of comedy than it may at first appear: 'I always thought self-deprecation put those around me at ease. But now I know it makes people uncomfortable. So dumb!' (Kristen Schaal, Twitter, 2014). When comedians target themselves in their jokes, disparaging and depreciating their perceived cultural value, they are self-deprecating. Self-deprecation in comic interaction is inherently reliant upon the identities of both the performers and their audiences. It is multifaceted and often defies clear categorisation due to the way it can take many visual and verbal forms. Although self-deprecatory humour is evidenced in performances by comedians of all genders, when those identifying as female self-deprecate it is in the context of having historically been disproportionately the object of male humour. In the years since the alternative comedy movement of the 1980s and 90s, women in the UK have had increased opportunity to present themselves and their experiences through comedy, taking control of their own comic representation. The objectified 'her indoors' so prevalent in the stand-up comedy of the Working Men's Club era of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, slowly became a much more vocal and present 'her onstage'.

Danielle Russell, in her 2002 article 'Self-deprecatory Humour and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?', comments that self-deprecation occurs when 'satire is directed towards the self rather than confronting external targets. In a sense it is a form of accommodation – accommodating the perceptions of others' (Russell 2002). In the years since Russell's article, and her articulation of this definition, it is reasonable to expect that the perceptions being accommodated by women self-deprecating in live comic performance will have changed. Therefore, it is the twenty-first century UK specific 'accommodation' that this article will consider. Drawing upon current feminist debate and findings from qualitative interviews with female comics, I consider how self-deprecatory jokes operate within the current cultural context. Often, in critical considerations of humour, self-deprecation is lauded as an emancipatory tool or criticised as its exact opposite, a way of reinforcing out-dated gender norms. Within the current environment, women's experiences are many, varied and, in post-feminist western societies, as comprehensively articulated in the work of McRobbie (2004, 2009) and Gill (2003, 2007, 2011 with Schraff), contradictory. Self-deprecation as a mode of address and articulation of women's experience is itself paradoxical. Women are marginalised and oppressed differently as a result of the ways their identity characteristics – including their racial, class and sexual identities – intersect, as considered initially by Crenshaw (1991), and then later by McCall (2005) and Ahmed (2017). It is impossible to universalise the female experience. Therefore, it is essential to explore both how self-deprecatory humour provides a potential strategy for liberation from out-dated stereotypical or negative attitudes towards women, and how it can simultaneously reinforce restrictive attitudes. I argue that any self-deprecatory utterance is always both of these things simultaneously.

Although self-deprecation has the potential to be used to highlight any flaws of character to which the speaker may wish to draw attention, it is often focused around the visually evident failings of a body to conform to what is culturally considered

attractive. Stand-up comedy, to draw upon cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu's (1986, 82) terminology, is an embodied rather than objectified cultural form, where the art form exists within the body of the performer (as with dance and song) rather than external to it as an object (as with painting and sculpture). Invariably this requires the body of the performer, and thus the performer's gender identity, to be on display in front of an audience. Double comments as part of his definition of stand-up comedy that 'it puts a person on display in front of an audience, whether that person is an exaggerated comic character or a version of the performer's own self' (2014, 19). Especially when comics perform as a 'version of themselves' it results in the performance being intrinsically linked to the identity and body of the performer.

In contrast to visually evident identity characteristics, a performer can choose whether she wishes to disclose information about her self-perceived failures as a mother, wife, daughter or other socially assumed, and historically traditional, role of women. With self-deprecation that addresses character or personality traits, these are self-perceived in the literal sense, in that the performer identifies a trait within themselves and shares this knowledge of their own behaviour. The audience do not necessarily witness the personality trait under discussion during the performance. The use of the term 'self-perceived' here is fundamental. It is important to acknowledge that the imperfections or weaknesses being discussed as part of self-deprecatory joking are not necessarily anything more than subjective critiques of a person's own body. With bodily self-deprecation, however, it is possible, and arguably more likely, that this failure to conform, or visually evident flaw, has been pointed out or verbalised by others, both in the comedian's own lived experience and conceivably by audience members whilst performing. Many comedians openly discuss within routines the way others have highlighted body issues to them, both in the form of heckles whilst performing, but also as they go about their daily lives.ⁱ

Popular feminist author Naomi Wolf's writing on the 'beauty myth' becomes relevant when considering how the norms against which women's bodies are currently measured came into being. Writing about the new sexual freedoms of the 1970s and the impact this had on the cultural proliferation of images of women's bodies, Wolf notes that 'The "ideal" female body was stripped down and on display all over. That gave a woman, for the first time in history, the graphic details of perfection against which to measure herself' (1991, 134). Over four decades later, and in the light of the rise of the Internet and the phenomenon of 'photoshopping', the majority of women on stage performing comedy are those who have grown up with this graphic imagery of perfection all around them. Therefore, it is unsurprising that their measuring of themselves against this cultural ideal is discussed on stage.ⁱⁱ It is also important to note here that this imagery continues to marginalise women of colour in additional ways, by not only holding them to gendered beauty standards but also continuing to 'other' their bodies as an extension of racist stereotypes around expressions of anger and sexuality.ⁱⁱⁱ

The current UK cultural backdrop against which stand-up performances occur is a place where the language and imagery of empowerment is commonplace, even if in many instances these terms have just been co-opted to sell women things. Products designed to tame the unruly nature of the female body (razors, sanitary products, deodorants etc.) routinely align the purchase of their product in their advertising to some kind of feminist act. This situation potentially makes self-deprecation in stand-

up comedy more noticeable as it goes against the prevailing tide of progressive yet depoliticized messages about women. As part of her critique of contemporary feminisms within capitalist society, Nina Power argues that ‘The perky, upbeat message of self-fulfilment and consumer emancipation masks a deep inability to come to terms with serious transformations in the nature of work and culture’ (2009, 69). Power’s argument here is that often the messages of positivity women encounter in post-feminist society simply mask the more complex aspects of enduring inequalities, especially in relation to the labour exchange (issues such as the wage gap and unstable contracts). Arguably, the UK comedy industry is itself still yet fully to deal with these enduring inequalities in relation to questions of labour.^{iv} It is within the social context of these ‘perky upbeat messages’ that the instances of self-deprecatory comedy by female performers are now situated.

There is no consensus within existing considerations of women and comedy about the merits of using self-deprecation. Regina Barreca (2013) argues that by using self-deprecation, in both social situations and performed comedy, women are only appeasing the dominant social group. She contends that ‘If we tell these jokes about ourselves, we’ll make the straight, white, patriarchal man our pal, because he finds these jokes funny too’ (25). However, I would suggest that self-deprecation is not only about placating and engaging the majority group but also about reaching out and reassuring the minority. To argue that self-deprecation only has one function in any given occurrence within the current cultural context would be an oversimplification.

Indeed, Joanne Gilbert in her work *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique* (2004) argues that self-deprecation is often used as a way of critiquing existing gender stereotypes. In a chapter entitled ‘Problems with Studies in “Feminist Humor”’, Gilbert suggests that self-deprecation ‘calls cultural values into question by lampooning them’ and that self-deprecation can positively challenge gender norms surrounding the body (141). Gilbert states that existing considerations of self-deprecatory humour are often ‘subject to oversimplified, even myopic analysis’ (138). In addition to the inherent lampooning of gender stereotypes present in many self-deprecatory jokes as identified and explored by Gilbert, undoubtedly one of the functions of self-deprecation is reassurance.

The reassurance that self-deprecatory jokes can provide is significant, even if this is achieved for the marginalised audience members, in this instance women, at the expense of placating other members of the audience who identify with the dominant social group. Women’s experiences continue to be marginalised and side-lined in wider society and so in comedy an exploration of how the pressures of body orthodoxy, the failure to conform to body norms or gender stereotypes through self-deprecation can be read as acknowledgement and validation that these issues and feelings of inadequacy exist. An example of this positive and empowering aspect of reassurance is evidenced within Sarah Millican’s appearance on the BBC’s *Live at the Apollo* (Series 10, episode 1) in 2014. Millican is currently one of the UK’s most well-known comedians, and in this routine she articulates the following about her decision to stop buying women’s magazines: ‘Why would I buy anything where the only time I ever see anybody who looks a bit like me is underneath the word “Before”?’ Millican acknowledges within this joke that her body does not meet the societal norms evidenced in, and imposed by, magazines, and this could be seen as a form of self-deprecation.^v This seems like a throwaway comment, a well-observed

'one-liner' and it is important not to rely solely on content analysis of performed comedy, which often problematically extracts joking from its context. However, her phrasing of the comment as a question, rather than a statement, encourages the audience also to ask the question – why would you engage with, or even pay money to engage with, something that 'others' you? This style of self-deprecation could be read as validating. Millican is using her own body as a vehicle to acknowledge and highlight a discrepancy between what most women look like and the media's idealised version of womanhood. In self-deprecatory instances such as this, the person taking control of the performance situation, the person making others laugh, is the person who also embodies the qualities that society seeks to demean. The publicly highlighted ownership of these qualities (in this case a body that does not conform to a narrow spectrum of acceptable body types) could potentially embolden others to think differently about their own bodies and see the pressures placed on them to meet societal standards as ridiculous.

Andy Medhurst, in his study of comedy and English national identity, comments that:

Comedy is a brief embrace in a threatening world, a moment of unity in a lifetime of fissures, a haven against insecurity, a refuge from dissolution, a point of wholeness in a maelstrom of fragmentation, a chance to affirm that you exist and that you matter. (2007, 19)

For some audience members, a discussion about aspects of the female body that are normally taboo, even if placed within self-deprecatory routines, may be one of the few ways in which they can affirm that they exist and are validated. Audience members who share the experience upon which the jokes are based find that they are not alone in their feelings of inadequacy or conflict; their experience is in fact shared with other women too. Millican's work therefore provides an incisive example of a comedian using self-deprecation to create a sense of collective identity amongst an audience, and to challenge, rather than simply reinforce, restrictions placed on that identity.

However, just as it is not possible to confine self-deprecation to negative readings, so too it is important not to confine it simply to a positive reading either. Any self-deprecatory utterance in live comedy performance will always simultaneously both reinforce and challenge hegemonic views of women and their bodies. This is due to the fact that the audience's own identities and their experiences of the dominant ideology being presented and ridiculed play a significant role in the way joking of this kind is received and understood.

A central part of my work has been to consider my own positioning within my current area of enquiry in line with feminist research methodologies, such as those outlined in the work of Ackerly and True (2010). Thus, it is important to acknowledge and consider how my own personal response to the material I have observed as part of this research is informed by my own identity and any internalised bias. Feminist approaches to research highlight the position of the researcher in relation to the topic of enquiry, emphasizing that there is no neutral position to hold in relation to any material, even though white male heterosexual perspectives have often been disguised as such. This concept of positioning is especially relevant when studying comedy, which is a highly subjective art form. I have always been particularly interested in

self-deprecatory humour, as within both live performance and recorded forms of comedy it provokes a specific reaction from me, a reaction that does not seem to be in line with those with whom I attend comedy events or watch recorded comedy. I am not a performer, but as an audience member I personally find it very difficult to listen to self-deprecation, as it makes me feel uncomfortable and disconnected from other audience members. This is due to the fact that in many instances I do not share the attitude or the premise the humour is based on, especially when it relates to conforming to gender stereotypes or controlling an unruly female body.

I am aware that my own reaction to self-deprecatory humour is not an experience shared by everyone. However, this highlights a key part of my argument: that every audience member responds to comedy in a different way, so claims about audiences should always be employed cautiously. Self-deprecation could certainly be read as a way of creating a sense of group identity, as explored above in relation to reassurance. However, in my experience as an audience member, when someone identifying as female self-deprecates on stage I am conflicted. This is due to the way I both identify as the same gender as the performer and yet am being cast as an outsider, due to my lack of association with the premise. It will never be possible categorically to say that self-deprecation is wholly empowering or conversely solely appeasing dominant perspectives, as responses to humour are essentially linked to audience members' own identities.

As part of my current research, I discussed my experiences of the current stand-up comedy circuit, and my particular response to self-deprecation with Kiri Pritchard McLean. McLean is one quarter of acclaimed sketch troupe *Gein's Family Giftshop* and a seasoned compère and stand-up comedian. When I interviewed her, she was starting to develop her solo show *Hysterical Woman*, which she performed during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2016. Her show specifically addressed gender and racial stereotypes and drew on research she had undertaken into how people develop schemas that can help maintain assumptions and stereotypes about people from a variety of identities.^{vi} Within this show, McLean was directly confronting the way women are treated on the comedy circuit and how, whilst she does not agree with the double standards and stereotypes around gender, she acknowledged that she could identify some of her own internalised biases. When discussing self-deprecation with me, she commented in the following way:

You find a lot of women, [self-deprecate] about the way they look, but there's a perfect logic to that because your dress and the way you look is the only thing you have in common when you walk on stage with an audience. It's the room and the way you look, that's all they know about you, that we are having a shared experience. And then you going 'oh I'm shit, me' is you going 'it's ok to laugh at me'.^{vii}

So McLean proposed that self-deprecation may be a shorthand way to make a connection, building a rapport with an audience immediately based on a shared awareness of the way a performer looks. The age-old 'I know what you're thinking' comment, or a variant of this, immediately makes the performer's body or the way they appear the first joke, making it clear that they can take a joke.

During our conversation, McLean went on to propose that the gender identity of the audience will possibly make a difference to the way they respond to any uses of self-deprecation. She suggested the following:

Men will be like ‘oh she’s up for a laugh’ and women will be like ‘oh she’s not trying to sleep with my guy, so I feel alright with her now’, you know she’s [points indicating the audience member] acknowledged that I’m less attractive than her.

This clearly echoes Russell’s understanding that ‘[s]elf-deprecation can function as a means of defusing a potentially aggressive act or confrontational situation’ (2002). Here, however, McLean is also highlighting that using self-deprecation has the potential to deflect a gendered threat (or aggressive act). She was clear that this could not be made into a broad generalisation but was what she herself had experienced. McLean understands that potentially self-deprecation, especially at the very start of a routine, can work in multiple ways for her audience to decrease the threat presented in her taking control of the situation, or to allow her to have power over the audience. So she sees self-deprecation as a way of deflecting the threat to male power (or the patriarchal norms of male power) and also deflecting the threat to female erotic power over male partners. Whilst the obviously heteronormative nature of this idea makes it impossible to generalise, this is what McLean had experienced.^{viii}

McLean and I also discussed the possible downfalls of not addressing this power issue. The historical, and still unresolved, gendered power imbalance means that, in all aspects of society, there are fewer instances where women are in control of a situation or are called upon to express opinions than are afforded to their male equivalents. Even though the UK currently has a female Prime Minister, overall women still hold fewer positions of power than men. Although the need to placate the dominant group is undesirable, it is important to acknowledge what this small concession to those in privileged positions may enable. Not using self-deprecation or not addressing this power imbalance may result in the audience not connecting with the content or being offended by women taking charge of the space:

Because it’s a different game, when a guy goes on he’s like “I’m the funniest one” whereas a woman has to be like “is it alright if I’m the funniest one for a bit?”. [...] I suppose you still have to [...] take the lowest status otherwise you offend some guys, you can just see it. Like they decide that they don’t want to like you, and then if you have a great one, they get more and more affronted.

I should be clear here that we were talking about how McLean’s experiences of stand-up have brought her to these conclusions, and she then went on to discuss specific examples of this observed behaviour (which she felt was especially evident when developing material for *Hysterical Woman*). It is important not to universalise one woman’s experience, as performance contexts and performer identity will always impact; however, descriptions of this kind of behaviour from male audiences (a kind of gendered resistance to being amused by women) came up repeatedly across my research.

Having explored some of the possible reasons for making use of self-deprecation, it is worth considering the problems this style of humour can pose for comedians who

identify as feminists. The problematic reconciliation of feminist ideas of the body and self-deprecation are particularly evident when considering what society would deem a fat female body. Rhetorician Lisa Merrill (1988), discussing the development of live stand-up comedy performance, contemplates aspects of traditional, predominately male, humour that uses female stereotypes as the butt of the joke. The examples she explores include jokes about wives and girlfriends and often refer to female bodies in terms of transgression of cultural norms. Merrill argues that in these instances in order 'to be amused she [the female audience member] must discount and devalue her own experience', which resonates with my own experience as discussed above (279). Merrill contends that women have historically had to devalue their own experiences to access male humour that takes them as the figure of ridicule. In relation to the use of self-deprecation by female comedians, I would argue that potentially this is an extension or continuation of such devaluing. Female audience members are arguably being asked to adopt a more negative position or attitude to their own body than they actually hold, in order to access the humour.

An additional consideration here is whether the form of stand-up also requires female comedians themselves to set aside their own experiences as part of self-deprecatory utterances. In order to incorporate self-deprecation into a routine do feminist comedians have to adopt a character or persona that is perhaps at odds with some of their own personal views? The consistent references to placating or diffusing challenge to others, both within the literature and within the interview data collected as part of my current research activity, may suggest this to be the case. This concept becomes relevant when reflecting on the comments of Dotty Winters, a comedian who, within her first year of performing comedy, was a finalist for the 2013 *Funny Women* competition.

I had witnessed Winters use self-deprecation within her act, specifically relating to her body size, and then start to do this less and less. As such, I was interested to discuss her rationale for dropping this style of humour from her work. I explained to Winters how I struggled to laugh at women self-deprecating. She articulated her response to my comments and a question about her thoughts on self-deprecation as follows:

I completely hate it, I hate self-deprecation on stage from women and I don't much like it from men. But I think that comes from a particular perspective, so what I would say is that most of the time when it is being done, what you are doing is, it feels like you are making yourself relatable but what you are doing is putting up barriers. [...] So you are attacking before you are attacked and you don't need to, and it will make some audiences feel uncomfortable. And I think for me why I dropped it was exactly what you were saying there, is that by saying "I'm not OK with me", you're saying to a certain segment of the audience "I'm also not OK with you, this isn't OK" and I don't believe that and it is not who I am. It was entirely me arming myself against heckles that never came, so it just went.^{ix}

Here, Winters verbalises that she thought self-deprecation would create a sense of connection with her audience, and maybe in some instances it achieved the desired effect; however, it alienated some people too. She also makes plain that she had fears that her body-size would be a weapon used against her by hecklers.

Whilst Winters clearly finds self-deprecation problematic and, similarly to my own experience as an audience member, challenging to listen to, she is able to express why she feels it is used so frequently within stand-up. By making an embodied characteristic the butt of the joke, a performer may think they are preventing others from co-opting that characteristic to use against them. Therefore, it is possible to develop further Merrill's argument that women have to devalue their own experiences in order to laugh at jokes that target them. Arguably, female comedians also have to devalue their own experiences in order to tell these jokes in the first place. Potentially, even when comedians know that on some level they are uncomfortable with making a self-deprecatory joke, due to the problematic content, they do so anyway, in the knowledge that the function the joke plays in their routine, that of affording them some protection from a perceived threat or diminishing their perceived threat to others, is a crucial part of building a rapport with their audiences. So from the performers' perspective, especially when they also identify as feminist (as both McLean and Winters do openly in their routines), comedians can still find it very difficult to break with this self-deprecatory approach. Both performers had considered the potentially alienating qualities this aspect of humour can have on audiences, whilst also acknowledging the vital functions it can play in a routine.

On the other side of this coin, there exists overt body positivity within comedy performed by women on the current circuit. As comedy does not exist in a vacuum, and as popular and celebrity feminisms become increasingly visible, it is clear that comedians are also finding themselves addressing notions of empowerment (especially in relation to the female body) within their work. Recent examples of comedians actively using comedy to explore readings of their own bodies, and more widely control of women's bodies include:

- Bridget Christie, whose work over the past few years has explored (amongst other topics) female genital mutilation, the effects of sexualised imagery of women in the national press and taxation of sanitary products (the tampon tax).
- Gráinne Maguire, who took to tweeting Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny detailed information about her menstrual cycle in order to make a point about state control of abortion. Her actions formed part of her public support for the *Repeal the Eighth* campaign and were explored in her 2016 solo show *Great People Making Great Choices*.^x
- Lolly Adefope, whose show *Lolly 2* (2016) directly responded to the way critics of her first solo show disproportionately focused on her identity as a Black woman (criticized for not making use of her identity and simultaneously aware she would be criticized if she did focus on this in her work). Many of the sketches in this show directly considered the reactions of people to her body and highlighted the continued marginalisation specific to the way race and gender (amongst other characteristics) intersect.^{xi}

Comedians, such as those briefly mentioned above, have used various approaches to challenge patriarchal control and negative attitudes to women's bodies. A particularly

fruitful example of such an approach in action, and one worthy of further consideration, is the work of comedian Luisa Omielan.

Omielan is a stand-up comic whose work provides an example of a comedian using her body in a way to reclaim the reading of her physical presence in the room in a positive way, rejecting self-deprecatory address. Her solo show *What Would Beyoncé Do?* (2013 – 2017) which was recently recorded for BBC3, and follow up *Am I Right Ladies?* (2015/16), as well as numerous comedy club sets, provide pertinent examples of someone refusing existing readings of their body. Although Omielan's overall approach can be considered post-feminist in tone and content as I have argued elsewhere (Tomsett, 2017), due to the way it heavily references celebrity feminisms and often reinforces a binary gender division, she completely rejects the body standards of the mainstream media as a shortcut to humour, and instead embraces her body shape.

Her short set for the TV gala at Melbourne Comedy Festival in 2015, which is often referred to as her 'thigh gap routine' and has had over three million views on YouTube, provides an illuminating example of her approach:

When I'm about to sit down and enjoy my food, now is not the time to tell me how many calories are on my plate or how long you went running for that day. I don't give a what bitch, it's called a Happy Meal for a reason. Stop raining on my parade! [grabs stomach] What makes you think I don't like this? I love this oh I love this. [repeatedly pulls stomach up and down] I love this, I love this. Do you know what this means? This means I go out to dinner with friends. That's what this means. That's what this means. This is my present to myself.^{xii}

Omielan's routine challenges people to see her body as a symbol of the life she leads in a positive and celebratory way – not a negative one. Often in mainstream media, the stomach region of a woman's body is a symbol of laziness, of not going to the gym, not exercising self-care, and so on. But Omielan insists that the audience should see it as symbolic of her desire to have fun, to live her life, and not to be held down by others' expectations of her. Her use of the phrase 'what makes you think that I don't like this?' is crucial, as this is very much the default setting of how society sees women's bodies. Often, there is an assumption that women who do not conform to a very narrow spectrum of body types must hate their bodies. This results in very little room (visually and aurally) for those women who are happy with their physical shape.

This example amply demonstrates how Omielan directly rejects the meaning imposed on her stomach by others and is able to assert a more positive identity-affirming meaning through comedy. Throughout her routines, both in comedy club sets and her solo shows, she repeatedly returns to issues of equality, challenging the control of women's sexuality (and media representations of this) as well as the pressures body image and being a 'single woman' can have on women's mental health. She also directly considers the problems with self-deprecation (within joking contained in the same short routine), highlighting that when complimented in social settings women have a tendency immediately to self-deprecate. Omielan advises that everyone should do the opposite – telling the audience to 'upgrade yourselves bitches'.^{xiii}

It is hard to ascertain where on the spectrum of reinforcing or challenging norms any particular self-deprecatory joke will land with an audience. Some attempts may appear too conciliatory to the dominant group and thus alienate the marginalised, or alternatively come across as too self-pitying to engage the dominant group, who will put up barriers against what they see as an attack. Both these outcomes have the potential to defuse the humour. Gilbert outlines how the ‘Madonna question’ is relevant to the way in which feminist scholars often talk about self-deprecation, stating with a somewhat sarcastic tone that ‘power - obtained by whatever means necessary – is desirable, yet self-objectification as a means of obtaining power (whether through the self-deprecatory humor of Diller or the explicit photo opportunities of Madonna) is unacceptable’ (2004, 139). The key difference between the time of Gilbert’s writing and the current context of my own research is the overwhelming number of ‘Madonnas’ in the cultural sphere and the impact this subsequently has on others using self-objectification as a way of achieving power. One only needs to refer to the various journalistic discussions of Miley Cyrus, Nicki Minaj and Rihanna to appreciate that the Madonna question could easily be renamed in favour of a newer example.^{xiv} The somewhat unavoidable nature of the body for stand-up comedy means that material that addresses its presence within performance understandably will continue. The way in which white, cis-gendered, heterosexual and able-bodied men remain the default setting for our society means that although they too may choose to use their bodies for humour, or even self-deprecate, there remains a disproportionate scrutiny of any bodies deviating from these perceived norms. Self-objectification in comedy by women has tended to be self-deprecatory. Omielan however, can be seen as someone self-objectifying in a way that moves beyond self-deprecation.

In conclusion, a key question is: can self-deprecation be truly empowering? For some audiences it can make the demands placed on women’s bodies ridiculous, and make them feel validated by hearing their experience is a shared one. However, in the current cultural context, comedy can not only push beyond identifying the constraints placed upon women, but it can also be used to encourage the rejection of these constraints and to assert a new meaning and self-control over women’s bodies.

In 1988, Merrill contended that ‘comedy that recognized the value of female experience may be an important step in developing a culture that allows women to self-critically question the stereotypes that have governed our lives’ (279). Whether self-deprecation, rather than overt body positivity, has a place as part of Merrill’s ‘important step’, will always be a subjective viewpoint. The desire of female stand-up comedians to use self-deprecation to get laughs may well diminish in line with the rise of popular feminisms. However, until society undergoes significant change in relation to gender inequality, it may be necessary to continue to make use of self-deprecatory humour due to the vital role it continues to play in navigating gendered performer-audience power dynamics.

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ⁱ Comedian Sophie Hagen provides a useful example of this. Her 2014 club set contained a description of overhearing others expressing revulsion at her body size. Initially these women thought their words would not be understood due to a language barrier (they assumed as they were in the UK that she could not speak Danish, which is in fact her first language). Even if this section is not based on a real-life experience (which is how the event is presented to the audience within the set) and only performed as such, it still highlights how regularly women whose bodies do not conform to mainstream ideals have their size policed by others they meet. Performance seen live at Group Therapy Comedy Club, Gorilla, Manchester 22/2/14

ⁱⁱ The work of Jessica Ringrose (2010) in relation to the construction of female sexual identity in the digital age is relevant here.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Audre Lorde's essay 'Uses of Anger' included in *Sister Outside: Essays and Speeches* (1984).

^{iv} The 2014 *State of Play: Comedy UK* report comments on the high-profile success of Miranda Hart and Sarah Millican. However, all the data upon which the report is based has been collected via the Ticketmaster database, which facilitates ticket buying for large scale, often arena-based comedy events. Thus it fails to address the fact that women disproportionately exist in the low level shows that take place in pubs and smaller comedy clubs that would not be ticketed in this way (or indeed ticketed at all). The scarcity of women in this report, the use of a small pink female-shaped icons to highlight any instances of their inclusion, and the consistent use of the term comedienne, provide evidence that there is still a long way to go in terms of achieving equality, especially in relation to the business side of comedy.

^v Millican's dissatisfaction with women's magazines, especially the way in which they police body norms, was one of the factors that motivated her in 2014 to set up the online magazine *Standard Issue*. The magazine (which evolved away from written text into a podcast in 2017) was written and edited by women, a significant number of whom are comedians or comedy writers. <http://standardissuemagazine.com> (accessed 5/1/17)

^{vi} For more information on Kiri Pritchard-McLean and *Hysterical Woman* see <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/apr/28/hysterical-woman-standup-sexism-in-comedy-kiri-pritchard-mclean> (accessed 20/5/17)

^{vii} All quotations from Kiri Pritchard-McLean originate in transcribed conversations from an in-person interview, Manchester 21/10/14.

^{viii} The topic of gendered power dynamics within audiences was also considered as part of Daniel Kitson's 2017 show *Something Other Than Everything*. During the performance Kitson commented on how he dislikes seeing men place their arms around their female partners during his shows. Kitson articulated that he reads this as a gesture of possessiveness or ownership over the women. Thus it is clear that comedians are acutely aware of how gender politics may play out through body language during their shows, as well as the gendered threat they may present to some members of their audience. Performance seen live at Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre 8/9/17

^{ix} All quotations from Dotty Winters originate in transcribed conversations from an in-person interview, Manchester 22/10/15.

^x Seen 9/8/2016 at Pleasance Courtyard Edinburgh. For further information see <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/08/tweet-taoiseach-periods-enda-kenny-abortion-law> (accessed 20/5/17)

^{xi} Seen 8/8/2016 at Pleasance Courtyard Edinburgh. For a review of the show see <https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/83958-lolly-2/> (accessed 20/5/17)

^{xii} Luisa Omielan's Melbourne Comedy festival performance can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2MskQOinwE> (accessed 20/5/17)

^{xiii} What is particularly interesting is how Omielan's recent increase in profile has provided an excellent example of why women still need to reject meaning imposed by others. Omielan was approached to be one of the many presenters for the 2017 Comic Relief broadcast. She co-presented various links throughout the night, with the programme culminated in presenter Graham Norton interviewing a huge number of guests on an extra-long sofa as part of a world record attempt. Omielan was the last guest to take up a place on this sofa and due to time constraints each guest had only around a minute talking with the host. With Omielan Norton only talked about what she was wearing (she had changed outfit from earlier in the night) and spent the whole time telling her to cover herself up.

This exchange was subsequently reported in the reviews of the show in a similar ‘cover yourself up love’ tone, with Ally Ross writing the following for *The Sun* on 23/3/17:

‘It came to an ugly head during the [Graham Norton chat show](#)/celebrity circle jerk thing, which featured 33 famous people and someone called Luisa Omielan who felt the lash of the host’s tongue for dressing like an Albanian stripper.’
<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3192390/ally-ross-red-nose-day-fails-to-deliver-for-comic-relief/> (accessed 21/5/17)

Norton didn’t use that particular description of Omielan’s dress, even though he had focused solely on her appearance. This incident provides a fascinating example of how even when a comedian takes ownership of their sexuality and body, others are quick to control and denigrate them.

^{xiv} See here for just one of the discussions around the complexities of the pop icon Miley Cyrus. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/sep/10/miley-cyrus-wrecking-ball> (accessed 11/1/17)