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**Reflections on UK Comedy's Glass Ceiling:
Stand-up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms**

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Abstract

This thesis considers the ways in which the current UK stand-up comedy industry both accommodates and simultaneously marginalises female voices. This research concerns itself with three key areas of enquiry:

Firstly, I examine how the development of stand-up comedy, alongside gender stereotypes, has resulted in additional barriers to women's participation in live comedy, and how these barriers are maintained in a digital era. Stand-up comedy as an art form has emerged from, and been developed within, male dominated spaces. This has impacted upon the style and content of the comedy produced in the live arena, as well as broadcast comedy. This research considers how the origins of stand-up comedy still impact on current live comedy production and how this is intrinsically linked to wider societal stereotypes about the capabilities of women.

Secondly, I consider the work being undertaken in the current context to address the continuing gender inequality on the UK circuit, and what these initiatives mean to performers and audiences. My original contribution to knowledge is to synthesise the results of immersive research with the UK Women in Comedy Festival in Manchester, which investigated practical initiatives seeking to make the industry more inclusive to women, with the results of qualitative and mixed-methods research into the perspectives of performers, promoters and audiences on the importance of these initiatives. As a result I offer both an overview of the current scene and suggestions for the future.

Lastly, I analyse examples of stand-up comedy performed by women in the current context and how these performances relate to conceptions of feminist and postfeminist humour, as well as notions of backlash against contemporary feminisms. This research focuses on live comedy that is explicitly feminist in its presentation and content to consider how social attitudes to women, the increasing visibility of female labour outside the home, and the emergence of multiple (occasionally contradictory) feminisms has influenced the comedy produced by female comedians in 21st century Britain.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction

The motivation for this research is to expose and interrogate the ways in which female comic voices are both integrated and marginalised within the UK comedy industry, specifically within the live stand-up comedy environment. Existing research into comedy created and performed by women has focused overwhelmingly on American examples. The significant differences in the cultural, industrial and performance contexts between the US and UK comedy industries has been problematically overlooked. Furthermore, comedy research more widely has tended to foreground analysis of the content and performance style of comedy, at the expense of a full consideration of the *contexts* within which comedy is created by comedians and received by audiences. It is this lack of consideration that I will address through studying the current UK live comedy circuit in relation to the contexts that impact upon the creative output of female comedians, their career paths, and potential readings of their work by audiences.

I commenced this research in 2013, a year during which several explicitly feminist comedy shows won prestigious Edinburgh Festival prizes. Although the very act of standing on a stage and expressing your opinions as a woman could be considered a feminist act, the winning shows of 2013 went further, covering complex issues and deconstructing fixed gender roles. Although previously there had been many comedians engaging with feminism, this peak in acclaim for feminist comedy in 2013 was also a high point in media consideration of modern feminisms. The public exposure of feminist initiatives such as Everyday Sexism, No More Page 3 and Vagenda Magazine, coupled with Caroline Criado-Perez's high-profile campaign for women to appear on banknotes, resulted in widespread press interest in the exclusion of women's achievements from public recognition.[1] This wider feminist context in Britain coincided with the success of a new generation of female-led comedy in America (made accessible to UK audiences via the increased use of digital platforms). The critical attention gained by HBO's *Girls* (2012-2017) provoked TV executives and journalists to ask where the UK's Lena Dunham-esque 'voice of a generation of women' would come from?[2] The continued success of Tina Fey, Amy Poehler and the

rising star of Amy Schumer contributed to a perceived disparity between the success of funny women in America and the UK.

The public interest in contemporary feminist campaigns and the journalistic discussion about the UK's top female comedy talent meant that an academic exploration of these areas was timely. This research was conducted over the course of five years, a period of great change for female-identifying stand-up comics in the UK. As part of this project, and as an underlying part of the feminist research methodology, I became the first and only researcher in residence at the UK Women in Comedy Festival. The thesis resulting from this research identifies various structural and ideological barriers facing female comedians when attempting to break through the comedy industry's glass ceiling.

Following a thorough review of the existing literature in Chapter 1 and articulation of the research methodology in Chapter 2, this thesis presents findings in topical chapters. Chapters 3 to 6 are unified in their inclusion of a consideration of the gendered experiences and gendered contexts of performers working on the current UK circuit. Chapter 3 examines the evolution of stand-up comedy in the UK and the way gendered spaces and stereotypes have informed the perception of comedy as an inherently masculine pursuit. Chapter 4 considers the role that women-only comedy nights and festivals play in increasing the visibility of female comedians within the UK comedy industry. This chapter will draw on qualitative interview data to discuss the specific challenges faced by female performers. Further to this, Chapter 4 also includes an analysis of data collected through audience research to discuss the motivations of audiences to attend women-only comedy events. Chapter 5 explores the roles that digital spaces, specifically the social media platform Twitter, play in providing new opportunities and also in replicating old barriers, for female comedians. These chapters are concerned with the development of stand-up comedy, the current state of the stand-up comedy industry and the integration of female comedians, as well as the wider digital context of live comic performances by women.

The remaining chapters focuses in on specific themes and performances encountered in the current UK comedy context. Chapter 6 discusses the role that self-deprecation

continues to play within comedy performances by women and how the current postfeminist context of performances impacts on this form of humour. Chapter 7 contains two in-depth case studies of specific performers, Bridget Christie and Luisa Omielan, in relation to the concept of feminist and postfeminist comedy. Chapter 8 considers the difficulty feminist comedy has in accessing a wider audience through televised formats as well as the backlash towards feminism that is currently unfolding within comedy by male performers.

This thesis concludes with a discussion chapter (Chapter 9) which pulls together conclusions from the preceding topical chapters and considers the original contribution to knowledge made by this research. Finally, the concluding chapter considers how the developments within and surrounding the UK comedy industry over the last five years have impacted on comedy performed by women. The conclusion also further reflects on very recent initiatives to diversify comedy, such as those evidenced within the work of the BBC, and how these may (or, indeed, may not) address the gendered challenges faced by my research participants.

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[1] More information on these projects can be found using the following links. See http://everydaysexism.com , http://nomorepage3.org , http://vagendamagazine.com (accessed 28/2/16)

[2] See Cook's (2014) consideration of this discussion in *The Guardian*: http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/may/30/where-is-britains-lena-dunham (accessed 4/3/16)

<center>**Chapter One**</center>

<center>**Review of Existing Literature**</center>

The literature review for this research is divided into several subsections in order to consider the diverse fields upon which this study draws: humour theory and analyses of stand-up comedy, research with comedy audiences, research into gender and humour, current feminist debates and discussions of comedy contexts. As this research is addressing a gap at the intersection of these multiple areas of concern, the following chapter will outline the key texts associated with each area and indicate how these works have informed my own interdisciplinary approach. The specific gaps identified will be summarised at the end of this chapter.

Humour theory and analyses of stand-up comedy

Comedy studies, although a relatively new academic discipline, with the first ever *Comedy Studies* journal being published as recently as 2010, is rooted in historical considerations of the role of humour. Many considerations of the art of comedy, such as Stott (2005), make use of humour theory as a starting point for analysis, drawing on the work of humour scholars such as Morreall (1986) and Critchley (2002). The three central themes of humour theory across a variety of disciplines, have come to be commonly categorised, as exemplified in with the work of Morreall (1986), as the superiority, incongruity and relief theories of humour. These broad categories encompass a wide variety of different approaches that have developed over hundreds of years of philosophical consideration of the role of humour in society.

Superiority theories as they have come to be known, propose that we laugh at others from a point of view of superiority over the subject of a joke. Approaches that fall into this category propose that humour contains an inherent aggression towards the subject of a joke, and that inevitably by belittling the subject of a joke the teller and audience experience a sense of distance from, and superiority over the subject. This particular approach to understanding the purpose of humour has often been used when analysing humour directed at marginal groups, and to explain the role of humour in maintaining societal structures.

<center>4</center>

An example of a study that explores humour from a superiority perspective is the 1972 research undertaken by Dolf Zillmann and Joanne Cantor. Their work, which asked participants to rate the humour in cartoons, established that 'individuals with primarily subordinate experiences' e.g those in positions of inferiority in a binary power relationship such as teacher/student, parent/child or employer/employee, 'exhibited greater appreciation for humorous communications' that show a subordinate temporarily dominating a superior than for those in which the superior dominates the subordinate' (Zillmann and Cantor: 1972, 191).

This finding was also evident in the opposite direction, where participants occupying a superior position were more appreciative of humour that punched down at those occupying a subordinate position. This research was undertaken to establish how transitory dominance (i.e. temporary power relations being subverted within joking) impacted on appreciation for humour based on an individual's own power in relation to the power dynamic depicted. Zillmann and Cantor's study set out to understand how 'specific cognitive dispositions' (192) related to social power roles connected to humour appreciation. This work could therefore be used as a framework to understand why people who share social positions may appreciate the same kind of humour. In the current social context however, power does not simply operate across a binary male and female divide (as was understood in the 1970s), there are multiple indices of identity that impact on social power positions, therefore the findings of Zillmann and Cantor's argument cannot be directly applied without interrogation to gendered power relations in a modern context. Ken Willis, in his Chapter 'Merry Hell: Humour Competence and Social Incompetence' (2005) makes this very point, stating that 'as humour is such a fleeting and complex phenomenon, which can involve a combination of cognitive, affective, cultural, social, political and personal elements, much can be overlooked if it is depicted with brushstrokes too broad' (Willis, 2005: 126). Willis seeks to argue, using the term 'humour competence' developed by Viktor Raskin (1985) that social power impacts on 'differing humour competence' resulting in 'differing interpretations' (Willis, 2005: 127) of joking.

The second key theme to emerge from within humour research, incongruity theories, contend that humour is produced 'by the experience of a felt incongruity between

what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place' (Critchley, 2002: 3). We expect one thing and then receive something that confounds our expectations, resulting in laughter. Incongruity theories propose that the premise of humour is on a shared notion of what would be normal (or congruous) in the situation described in the joke.

Lastly, the approach taken by the relief theories is linked most significantly to the work of Sigmund Freud (1905), who developed previous work by philosopher Herbert Spencer. Freud was interested in humour in relation to his understanding of the human psyche, and relief theory provides the most historically recent attempt to formulate a definitive theory of humour. Central to relief theory is the notion that society places restrictions on what is appropriate to say or do in any situation. Freud, referencing his work on repression and the unconscious mind, contends these societal restrictions on behaviour result in energy being spent to contain our inappropriate thoughts or actions. Humour releases or alleviates the tension that builds up. Through humour, evidenced by laughter, we are relieved of a burst of energy that would otherwise be spent keeping these thoughts in check. Freud also linked his work on humour, and specifically his writing on double entendre, to his understanding of sexual difference and the role of humour releasing sexual tension. This particular concept has been relevant to subsequent considerations of women and humour.

Also linked with the concept of humour as relief is the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose influential text *Rabelais and His World* (1984) considers the way in which carnival can operate, in the words of Stott, as 'a vehicle of an authentic proletarian voice answering the ascetic oppressions of the ruling classes' (Stott, 2005: 33). The notion that the dominant order can be challenged and subverted during the carnival period, has been used to reinforce arguments that focus on the subversive role of humour within modern society. Often within comedy social orders and traditions are reversed or ridiculed. This can be used to challenge existing hierarchies and give voices that are suppressed in other cultural forms the chance to be heard. The notion of carnival can be seen as a complementary idea to that of relief theories as the period of carnival can provide relief from societal rather than individual tensions. Modern comic performance operates in a similar way to that of carnival, where subversions and

inversions of power are tolerated and appreciated for a specific temporary period of time in a specific cultural space.

Complementing these overarching arguments about humour, there have been many attempts to categorise the role of the stand-up comedians in relation to functions of comedy or social roles, many of which can be related to Bakhtin's ideas of carnival. A significant amount of this work originates within sociology disciplines and dates back to the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Lawrence Mintz in his article 'Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation' (1985) describes humour as 'a vitally important social and cultural phenomenon' (Mintz, 1985: 71) and argues that stand-up comedy, whilst being an 'undervalued genre' (1985: 71) reveals a huge amount about society. In line with Bakhtin, Mintz contends that the social role of comedy is a continuation of much older rites and rituals including 'the tradition of fools, jesters, clowns […] which can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages' (1985:72). Mintz draws on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas (1978) to highlight that not only does comedy provide an opportunity for 'public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and […] a re-examination of these beliefs' (Mintz, 1985:73) but that these 'affirmations foster community and foster a sense of mutual support for common belief and behaviour' (73). This is relevant to my own work in that spaces for comedy exclusively by women (not for women) may provide opportunities for the sharing of more marginalised beliefs, specifically in relation to feminist thought. Mintz argues that a key aspect of stand-up comedy is the way in which the comedian (in the specific licenced space of performance), provides a 'negative exemplar' for an audience. This is because the comic 'represents conduct to be ridiculed and rejected, and our laughter reflects our superiority, our relief that his weaknesses are greater than our own' (Mintz, 1985:74). Whilst this may sound like a convincing explanation for the pleasure derived from comedy, and I am sure there are many instances where this may be the most obvious reading of a comic performance, I wish to look beyond arguments that presuppose a unified reaction or understanding from an audience.

Stephanie Koziski, writing at a similar time to Mintz, considers a correlation between the role of stand-up comedians and anthropologists in that they position themselves as observers of culture in order to interpret and explain cultural phenomena to audiences. Koziski contends that hidden behaviours can be explored by the comedian from their unique cultural position in that 'the comedian may investigate with an audience tacit areas of behaviour not easily discussed, especially this realm of sexual behavior' (1984: 60). The comedian can use comedy to present behaviour which goes unquestioned as new and worthy of scrutiny, affording the audience a different perspective on the topic. This concept is relevant to comedy performed by women, as whilst their perspective is not new or different (to themselves or other women) as such, comedy provides a space for alternate or less easily accepted perspectives to be explored. Extending Koziski's line of argument Stebbings, in his article 'Social Roles of the Stand-up Comic' (1993), contends that stand-up comics are spokespeople for particular social groups and they have 'developed an intimate understanding of the everyday world of "their people"' (Stebbings, 1993:5). He provides several examples of Canadian performers of early 1990s that he feels 'are entertaining by being spokespersons for the minorities' (1993: 5) and includes sex, race and religion in the specified categories. Stebbings' writing does not account for anyone who may be from more than one minority position.

George Paton's work in the late 1980s also considers the role of the stand-up comedian in relation to wider social attitudes about morality and moral behaviours. His work reflects upon the way comic personae and joking material fall into either conservative or radical categories 'dependent upon whether he [the comedian] is respectively articulating or ventilating either an existing/traditional morality or a new/emergent morality' (Paton, 1988: 209). The argument within Paton's work is that comedians operate in relation to upholding or challenging social norms in their material. Tellingly, throughout the chapter Paton refers consistently to professional comedians as 'he' and talks uniformly of 'his role'. Even when we consider the fact Paton was writing in the late 1980s, this use of language betrays either a lack of awareness of female comedians (Joan Rivers was well known by this time in the US, as were Marti Caine and Victoria Wood in the UK) or an intentional reassertion of masculine dominance of this field. Either way when looking back on this work now it is

hard to take seriously discussion about morality in comedy (especially the new morality of the alternative comedians which included a fight back against sexism) when there is a total disavowal of the female sex in the language of the text.

In a further consideration of the form of stand-up comedy, John Limon's work *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America* (2000) considers the form in relation to the success of Jewish heterosexual male stand-up comedians of the 1960s and the adoption of similar approaches by American comedians of all backgrounds following this era. Limon argues that 'Stand-up makes vertical (or ventral) what should be horizontal (or dorsal)' (2000: 4) in that it explores and critiques abjection, 'the alienable which keeps not being alienated' (2000: 5). In this respect Limon's work draws on Julia Kristeva's understanding of the abject, which argues that there are aspects of the self that are unavoidable and exist in a liminal space between subject and object. Limon considers the performances of Lenny Bruce, David Letterman, Richard Pryor, Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone as part of a comprehensive consideration of American comedy from 1960 to 2000.

Limon's approach to analysis refers directly to Freud's work on humour, arguing that the joke work found within stand-up comedy has three defining qualities. Firstly that 'stand-up is uniquely audience-dependent for its value' (Limon, 2000: 12) in that it requires an audience for its very existence. Secondly that a joke is 'funny if and only if you laugh at it' as 'a joke at which the audience laughs is a good joke in proportion to its laughter' (2000: 12). Lastly that laughter provides the 'single end of stand-up' distinguishing it from 'all other particular and formal settings of humor' (2000: 13). This, according to Limon is because 'stand-up comedy does not require plot, closure or point. Jokes may be as short as ingenuity allows, and there may not be anything but jokes' (2000: 13). The fundamental inclusion of jokes (of all forms, verbal, visual etc.) in stand-up comedy, above all other aspects of performance or structure, may account for the focus scholars have placed on the jokes themselves or the joke work within comedy. This has meant that for many scholars the contexts of jokes, and the impact that context has on the audiences understanding of what they are participating in, has taken a less central position.

Bringing discussion into a contemporary British context, Daniel Smith explores the work of Russell Kane as an example of what he terms 'comedic sociology'. This is a form of stand-up comedy typified by Kane that enables exploration of 'social and biographical narratives intersection with wider socio-historical transformations' (Smith, 2015: 561). Smith focuses on Kane as an example of a comedian whose work provides 'an interpretive framework for understanding the meaningful realities of the social' (Smith, 2015: 563) in line with 'interpretive sociology' (Smith, 2015: 563). Smith's article 'Self-Heckle: Russell Kane's stand-up comedy as an example of "comedic sociology"' argues that certain comedians undertake this role of comic sociologist when producing material that is informed by their own 'sociological imagination' (563), which articulates their own experiences in relation to wider socio-cultural realities. This, Smith argues, takes place within Kane's work in the way he draws attention to his comic persona through a variety of 'self-heckles' that foreground the construction of his comic material and his role as performer. These moments enable an audience to see 'that life "could be otherwise"' (Smith, 2015: 565) in that by drawing attention to perceived social classifications Kane highlights the stereotypes and categories at play when interacting with an audience (or indeed interacting with society more broadly).

What is notable about Smith's arguments regarding Kane is the way in which narrative plays a central role in his work. For Kane, narrative and the construction of a story is the best way to convey his comic point to the audience, as 'narrative is at the heart of the comic's ability to deliver an argument, theme and series of unofficial truths beyond the official reality' (Smith, 2015: 569). As much of the official reality that society clings to in an attempt to make sense of itself is male-centric, it is clear that female comics, whose experiences are often dismissed and underexplored in other art forms, may undertake this comic sociologist role to reveal hidden (or purposely obscured) truths for women.

A very recent discussion about the form and function of stand-up comedy can be found within Matthew Meier and Casey Schmitt's edited collection *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change (*2017). Their work brings together a collection of scholars who have taken a rhetorical approach to the analysis of stand-up comedy. The volume discusses the range of arguments made

within stand-up comedy and the ways this may both reflect and impact upon social change in America (post-World War 2). The decision to take a rhetorical approach to analysis is outlined in the introduction where the editors state that, as opposed to the comedians of the early 20th century, those entering the form in 1960s America, approached their social role differently. In this way:

> Stand-up comedians were not merely comic actors as were their predecessors – they were comic rhetors [...]. Theirs was rhetoric more than performance, and as such, their comedy was not only entertaining, it was also persuasive (Meier and Schmitt, 2017: xxii).

This definition is explored in each chapter of the book in relation to different comedians (including Margaret Cho, Moms Mabley, Bill Hicks and Lenny Bruce) and the social commentary they undertake within their work. This is complemented by chapters within the edited collection that focus on certain kinds of comic argument or positions, for example Christopher Medjesky's (2017) chapter on the limits of rape jokes and Mary Stuckey's (2017) consideration of the politics of the comic audience.

The overall argument of the edited collection is that stand-up comedy as a form 'is at once uniquely rhetorical and capable of engaging discourses of social change by calling into question dominant cultural practices and assumptions' (Meier and Schmitt, 2017: xxiv). The authors feel that stand-up comedy has the potential, in line with explicitly political public rhetoric, to have a tangible impact on audiences in relation to wider cultural issues. My work sets out to explore stand-up comedy by women in a similar way through identifying emerging practices within feminist and postfeminist comedy and considering, through textual analysis the positions taken within these differencing approaches. However, I do not make claims for the effectiveness of the arguments contained within the routines of women under consideration in this thesis. As this collection focuses overwhelmingly on American comedians, whilst the considerations in this book are worthy of note there is nothing within it that considers female comedians arising from or working within a UK context. The authors comment that '"speaking out" is frequently paired with "breaking silence"'(Meier and Schmitt, 2017; xxvi) and this is not only the case for the comedians speaking themselves, but the academic discourse that surrounds figures such as activists and performers. In this way

I hope my work can contribute to breaking the silence around the experience of British female comedians, who have been considerably overlooked in existing literature on UK comedy in favour of male performers.

When considering analysis of the work of individual comedians, the emphasis has predominantly been placed on men. However, in extensive monographs analysing women and comedy (as with the work of Horowitz [1997] and more recently Mizejewski [2014]) the predominant focus has been American stand-up and television comic performers. In terms of analysis of sets by female stand-up comedians, a significant amount of attention has been focused on the work of Joan Rivers (see Mock [2011], Lockyer [2011] and Mills [2011]) in a Joan Rivers special edition of *Comedy Studies*.

It should be noted that unlike the work reviewed above this thesis is not an attempt to propose a universal theory of comedy: it is concerned with specific comedians (women) working in specific contexts (live comedy nights and women-only spaces) and the impact the wider social context (contemporary Britain) has on what is produced and how it may be understood.

Comedy audiences

The relationship described in much philosophical humour theory between joke teller, audience and subject in a social situation, is not easily applied to performed comedy contexts. Due to the increase in the potential audience for the humour present in performed comedy, via the development of recording, broadcast and digital technologies, there is greater opportunity for multiple interpretations or (mis)understandings of the same joke than there is in a social interaction. However, although there are key differences between the analysis of social uses of humour and comedy performance, it is with reference to the three elements of humour theory discussed above, that many discussions of comedy originate. An example here would be the work by Brett Mills, whose book *The Sitcom* (2009) considers each aspect of the three key areas of humour theory before proposing a new way of considering humour within the specific genre of television situation comedy. He terms his contemporary

approach 'cue theory' and it builds upon the initial foundations of humour theory to create a concept specific to the needs of broadcast comedy. His work provides an example of how many of the existing theories of humour require amendment to accommodate the specifics of newer media such as television and film.

Much of the more recent work on studying humour, especially those that consider the way audiences understand comic material, has in fact taken screen comedy as its starting point. The work of sociologist Giselinde Kuipers (2006) provides an example of research into audiences for various forms of television comedy and how this links to taste cultures. The central question of Kuipers' research is whether television audiences for comedy construct taste hierarchies about high and lowbrow comedy, and how this may be linked to the age and education of the individuals. Her research concluded that those with more education had more general knowledge of television comedy and therefore felt they were in a position to offer a taste judgement, in instances where many participants with less education did not. It was found that highbrow comedy (one of four categorisations Kuipers used within her research, which also included 'lowbrow', 'celebrities' and 'old-timers' comedy categories) was mostly unknown to less educated participants. This means that rather than having a negative attitude towards highbrow comedy these participants were simply indifferent due to lack of awareness.

Critically Kuipers comments that in order for tastes to be forged into taste cultures firstly an awareness of the forms under discussion must be present. 'Knowledge always precedes appreciation: you have to be aware of something in order to like, hate or be indifferent to it' (Kuipers, 2006: 360). Whilst this research will not position comedy by women as a specific taste (as comedy performed by women comes from a variety of comedy genres) this point is relevant. Audiences for creative content in any form (theatre, television, film) are built, they do not just occur spontaneously. This links to the question this thesis will pose about the role television and new media may play in providing this basic knowledge or awareness as part of building an audience for comedy performed by women.

Writing at the same time as Kuipers, Chitnis et. al. (2006) completed a comparative

study to assess American and Indian audiences' responses to the US TV show *Friends*. This research was completed to establish whether comprehension of the narrative meanings differed between these two audiences and whether *Friends* as a text could have different (local and global) cultural meanings projected upon it (in line with Olsen's [1999] narrative transparency theory). The article notes the dominance of Hollywood made media across the world, whilst recognising the importance of local media within differing reception contexts. Thus 'culturally diverse audiences interpret the different attributes within a media text by bringing their own values and beliefs' (Chitnis et. al., 2006: 142) as part of interpretation. This study highlights the role that cultural background plays in interpretation of the text (in this case sitcoms) and that with mediated comic texts the control of the social context of the audience is lost. This type of research, which includes conducting focus groups with people of differing ethnicities, has also been undertaken by others. Park et. at. (2006) made use of a similar approach to consider the way racial differences can in fact be naturalised through screen comedy as the genre's conventions 'help validate racial differences through humor, thus rendering them natural and unchallengeable' (Park et. al., 2006: 173). This is an argument that could also be considered in relation to gender identity.

Amy Carrell's 1997 study considers audiences in relation to the concept of humour communities for verbal humour. Her work makes use of the specific example of the 1990s audiences for the rebroadcast/ syndicated American sitcoms of the 1950s to 70s. Developing the argument made by Killingworth (1992) regarding local and global discourse communities, Carrell contends that a 'humor community [...] is an abstract system comprised of many different yet similar audiences, audiences who share something' (Carrell, 1997: 14). Carrell explores this in relation to the way syndicated sitcoms from previous eras attract both repeat viewing from the original audiences as well as new viewers who were not alive during the period of original broadcast. Carrell argues that whilst this audience may be diverse in terms of age (for example) they share their interest in the humour of the specific shows. In this way a humour community is a wider concept than an individual audience, and attendance or physical presence at an event may not be the only way to be part of a humour community. Even though Carrell's arguments relate to televised comedy, this concept is interesting to consider in relation to the study of women-only comedy events. This is because we

may be tempted to assume that engagement with specific comic text (or live performance) may mean someone is part of a humour community (i.e. that if they are in the audience they are also by default in the humour community). When this is applied to televised contexts, where individuals have the option at home as to whether to watch a show or turn it off, this may well be reasonable. However, this does not necessarily translate to a live comedy context. Often audience members are brought along to performances by friends and may not therefore be part of the wider humour community, simply part of the audience. Therefore, it is important to consider the specifics of audiences for live performance.

In terms of understanding the motivations of audiences to attend live comedy events, in the light of the continued proliferation of recorded versions of stand-up performance on television (e.g. *Live at the Apollo* [2004-], *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow* [2009-2011]) Lockyer and Myers' mixed-methods study provides valuable insight. '"It's About Expecting the Unexpected": Live Stand-up Comedy from the Audience's Perspective' (Lockyer & Myers, 2011) highlighted the interactional aspects of the form as key factors in motivating audiences to see live comedy. Their study used a two-stage approach. Firstly, an online questionnaire about comedy attendance was used, and completed by 277 people, to ascertain information about how regularly people go out to see live comedy, as well as capturing a variety of participant-characteristics data. Subsequently follow-up interviews with 11 participants were conducted to further explore attitudes and opinions expressed during the first stage. This provided important quantitative and qualitative information about audience experiences of live comedy. The findings of their research noted that respect for the stand-up comedian's skill in performing live, the unexpected and interactional nature of stand-up performance, the intimacy of the event and the sharing of a collective experience with others, were all key motivations to attend live comedy.

As much of my work will investigate women-only comedy nights, Lockyer and Myers' approach will inform that aspect of my thesis which explores the motivations of audiences to attend women-only nights and the opinions about female stand-ups held by audiences for these events. This will be outlined in detail in the following methodology chapter.

Interestingly, in relation to the interactional motivation to attend live comedy, Joanne Gilbert (2017) acknowledges the shifts in the America comedy context due to increased engagement with comedy on the Internet. With this is mind she argues that stand-up comedy:

> 'is a fundamentally different experience, one that involves membership of a community of laughers. Because the genre of stand-up comedy is inherently interactive, and because humor is the only discourse that requires an audience to be legitimized through laughter (Gilbert, 2004), this community is vital to the very existence of live comedy, a unique medium that continues to be a viable and popular form of entertainment, interaction, and thus, social engagement and reflection' (Gilbert, 2017: 65).

Therefore, even within a contemporary context where audiences have ample access to a variety of comic forms stand-up comedy continues to hold a unique position and therefore is worthy of further study.

Gender and Humour

The most relevant literature to my own research resides in the area of humour and comedy studies that directly addresses and confronts the role gender plays in the social and performance-based interactions between joke-tellers and audiences. In 1994 Frances Gray undertook the task of analysing classical humour theory in relation to feminism in her work *Women and Laughter.* Gray's writing provides a vital touchstone for discussion of comedy and feminism. Her consideration of sitcom and the stand-up comedy scene in both America and Britain demonstrates clearly how the work of early 1990s comedians evidenced a shift in feminist engagement with humour and performed comedy. By discussing the ways in which historically society has disenfranchised women of their humour, shutting them out of the comic arena by dismissing female humour whenever it has been undeniable, Gray manages to open a complex debate around women and laughter. Subsequent to her writing, as women have become further involved in producing comedy, her initial exploration of this area has become of increasing use to comedy researchers. Frustratingly, many of her observations regarding the suppression of women's humour are still accurate, over

twenty years later.

Writing at a time when there was far less literature to draw upon, the wide scope of Gray's work results in a huge range of sitcoms and comedians being considered without the opportunity for the different forms to be rigorously interrogated. In terms of live comedy, focus was placed mainly on Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers and Whoopi Goldberg, whilst Gray's British examples are Victoria Wood, Jo Brand, Josie Lawrence and Linda Smith. The significance of the alternative comedy movement in the UK had not been fully realized at the time of Gray's writing, and as such the way in which this break with traditional comedy styles and venues provided opportunities for women to infiltrate the industry remained under explored in this section of her work.

Furthermore, the whole concept of feminism has undergone further evolution since the time of Gray's consideration; the rise of 'choice feminism' and the continual commodification or co-opting of feminism for capitalist purposes, has resulted in more complex relationships between humour and feminism. Although the effects of postfeminist media culture have been addressed by subsequent theorists in relation to American live and recorded comedy, for example Shawna Feldmar's discussion of Sarah Silverman (2009) or Eleanor Patterson's analysis of the work of Tina Fey (2012), there is a lack of consideration of their British contemporaries.

Writing at the same time as Gray, Jerry Palmer's *Taking Humour Seriously* (1994) also considers the role humour has played in society from a cultural and theatre studies perspective. In his work Palmer sets out to consider research questions such as: when and why do people find things funny? What makes people interpret something as funny, and what might prevent people from interpreting something as funny? (Palmer, 1994: 5). Relevantly to my own study, Palmer provides an overview of existing studies into gender and humour and discusses how scientists have attempted (illogically) to study the functions of humour under laboratory conditions, without recourse to the social context of humour.[1]

In his chapter specifically on gender and humour within this volume, Palmer does however seem to frame women's humour as a separate category from men's humour,

commenting that none of the existing studies he cites (including Cantor [1976] and Zillman and Stocking [1976]):

> examines the possibility that women's humour may be less oriented towards jokes and isolated pieces of humour and more towards humour which emerges as part of conversations and other everyday situations (Palmer, 1994: 70).

Whilst the intention here is arguably to highlight how previous studies have overlooked gender as a factor, this argument that women's comedy is separate category, is a now a well-worn stereotype. The argument that women tend toward narrative storytelling humour is easily problematised in relation to stand-up comedy in the current UK context, in that there are numerous narrative based comedians of all genders (Russell Kane as discussed by Smith [2015] and Daniel Kitson provide pertinent examples of those known for narrative stand-up comedy). I will not be attempting to continue this argument in my work as I believe that comedy produced by women can come in a diverse array of forms, as diverse as their male contemporaries. I therefore, do not wish to contribute to this debate or continue the academic tradition that seeks to divorce women's comedy from men's comedy (known only, of course, as 'comedy').

Stereotypes continue to play a significant role in the perception of women's capabilities as comedians and humourists. Stereotypes are often referenced in superiority theories of humour as a key component of humour's ability to reinforce social hierarchies. Consideration of stereotypes and their origins in relation to women and humour has been undertaken by Regina Barreca, who recently published a new edition of her important exploration of the subject, *They Used To Call Me Snow White… But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (2013). The first edition of the book was published in 1991, and although the updated introduction does include discussion of the advances made by women into the world of performed comedy, including brief discussions of *Girls* (2012-2017) and *30 Rock* (2006-2013), the examples and references within the text remain exclusively American.

However, in terms of humour rather than comedy, Barreca's work is insightful and relevant to my own work. She discusses how society has historically expected women to placate men by laughing at jokes that victimise them, to avoid male discomfort,

equating faking laughter to faking an orgasm. Rather than make the teller aware of the failure of their humour, women have simply complied with their role as receiver/responder and provided a faked response - better that than be labelled the humourless prude. Related to this observation, Jennifer Hay's article 'The pragmatics of humor support' (2001) discusses the way laughter is just one of the ways audiences for humour provide support for jokes within social discourse. Hay's research focus is on the various 'support strategies' (Hay, 2001: 56) available to audiences for social humour to encourage and facilitate humour within interpersonal interactions. Hay argues that 'contributing more to the humour' (2001: 60) for example building on and elaborating on a joke, overlapping participation in the conversation or 'heightened involvement in the conversation' (2001: 65), or to offer up 'follow-up humor' (2001: 65) negates the need for laughter to be the support strategy employed by audiences in social humour. The presence of these other strategies mean that the person telling the joke does not need a laughter response to indicate that their speech act has been read as humorous. Hay also highlights that for self-deprecatory humour, laughter may well be an inappropriate response and so in these instances seeming to agree with the premise of the humour (the self-deprecatory element), which laughter invariably indicates, needs to be avoided. This is often achieved by an offer of sympathy or contradiction.

Whilst Hay's work does remind us that laughter is not the only response to humour, as her work focuses on social interaction it is not directly applicable to a live performed comedy environment. Laughter is the reaction that live comedy demands, without it the audience cannot indicate their response to the comedian effectively (the comedian does not have the ability, or time, to see the expressions or body language of individual members of the audience or hear quieter individualized responses). The level and tone of the laughter of the audience directly impacts on the building of the performance. So, whilst Hay is correct in identifying a raft of support strategies for social humour, many are not applicable to performed comedy.

Further to the idea of required responses to humour Lisa Merrill, writing in the late 1980s (at roughly the same time as Barreca's first edition), comments that historically mainstream male humour has alienated women by forcing any female audience

member to 'devalue her own experience' (1988: 279). It is easy to see in the light of so many criticisms of feminists as devoid of a sense of humour, how previously women may have chosen the easier route, to laugh along, rather than challenge sexist jokes and confirm the humourless feminist stereotype.

Barreca not only critiques the role of women as audiences for humour but also highlights the difficulty for women when producing their own jokes, citing how using self-deprecation can be problematic for progressive female humour. Her discussion of self-deprecation is central to her arguments surrounding humour as a tool for negotiating gendered power structures in social interactions. The role of self-deprecation in stand-up performances by women will be an area of concern for this thesis as it continues to be an enduring aspect of female performance.

Significant considerations of the female body within comic performance have often engaged with Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the grotesque. An example here is the work of Kathleen Rowe (1995) who discusses the unruly woman in comedy and considers self-deprecation. The complex (and arguably problematic) inclusion of self-deprecation within performances by comedians that promote their work and themselves as feminist will be considered in detail. This aspect of my research will draw on Danielle Russell's article 'Self-deprecatory Humour and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?' (2002).

In relation to the prevailing stereotype that women's humour is less sexual than male humour, Janet Bing's work on sexual joking in all-female groups highlights that 'because academic humor theorists have historically been predominantly male, the sexual jokes collected, published and analysed have generally been those told in all-male groups' (Bing, 2007:338). Bing sets about considering the work on sexual humour patterns undertaken by Victor Raskin (1985) whose semantic approach to humour proposes that sexual jokes rely on the incongruous switch from a non-sexual script, or set-up, to a sexual conclusion. Bing concludes that sexual jokes delivered by and for women are more prevalent than at first thought. Liberated women's humour according to Bing's analysis switches between the two scripts in a different way (from sexual to non-sexual) in contrast to mainstream male humour (which changes from

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non-sexual to sexual).

Although Bing advocates the positive features of sexual humour for and by women, which she identifies as predominantly existing in all-female groups, she is also keenly aware of the potential negative impacts of jokes that rely on sexual knowledge. Bing's work highlights the impact engagement with sexual joking has on women's perception as promiscuous or sexually available. This concept is relevant to my discussion of female-only comedy line-ups and women-only spaces, and the potential for these to provide more liberating contexts for sexual and lesbian joking (which Bing also considers in collaboration with Heller in 2003). Bing's work also provides a reminder of the potential pitfalls of studies of joking collated exclusively by male academics.

Bing's consideration of the impact gendered spaces has on humour links in some ways to Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris' (2015) *A Good Night Out For The Girls: Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* which theorises the increased inclusion of feminisms into mainstream, commercially successful and 'unmistakably women-centred shows' (Aston and Harris, 2015: 2). Their work resonates with my own discussion of women-only line-ups and the implications the positioning of a comic performance as 'for women' has on the audience.

The potential for humour and performed comedy to have a feminist impact has been explored by Willett, Willett and Sherman (2012) in their article 'The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter'. They highlight how the tools of humour have long been established as a way of maintaining gender divides and patriarchal control and that by 'turning the master's tool (so to speak) against him' (2012: 222) humour can be reclaimed by women to promote equality and critique injustice. It is this concept, that comedy can challenge and subvert existing dominant ideologies that will be central to my own analysis of my case studies, comedians Bridget Christie and Luisa Omielan.

Building on the work of previous theories of gender and humour, the most recent meaningful intervention into the area of gender and performed comedy has come again from America in the form of Linda Mizejewski's *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (2014). Mizejewski's work seeks to discuss, in the light of

increased awareness of high profile American female comedians, the issue of the perceived binary between 'prettiness' and 'funniness' for female comedians. Her work focuses on Tina Fey, Kathy Griffin, Margaret Cho, Ellen DeGeneres, Sarah Silverman and Wanda Sykes, all of whom achieved popularity through the medium of television between 2000 and 2010. Although *Pretty/Funny* provides helpful insights into the work of these comedians in relation to femininity, it also contains several examples of problematic phrasing which demonstrate the potential difficulties for those writing in this area.

Mizejewski makes the salient point that historically when theorists and journalists alike have discussed funny women (her examples here include Lucille Ball, Meg Ryan and Debra Messing) they have often conflated those that are comedians and those who 'weren't known for their own wit but their performances of witty comic scripts' (Mizejewski, 2014:1) but this is unhelpful. One of the central arguments of her book is that those comedy actors have to be attractive, or pretty to use her term, in order to be cast, and their own personal ability to create humour is irrelevant. This is in contrast to those who write and perform their own work, and who therefore create their own opportunities irrespective of their 'prettiness'.

This concept is relevant to my own work as the experiences audiences have of stand-up performers on television does not foreground the fact they may be performing lines or jokes written by others. For example, the inclusion of stand-up comedians on panel shows here in the UK does not tend to overtly highlight that panellists collaborate with, or are given lines by, writers or professional comedians to deliver as part of the show. This masks the fact that there is often a discrepancy between a comic's material on television and their live comedy work, over which they have greater control. In addition to this there seems to be a specific kind of female comic that overcomes the last hurdle to get onto TV in the UK, and this could arguably be seen as a factor relating to the aesthetic appeal or sexual attractiveness of the individual.

Whilst overall Mizejewski's work is insightful and pushes forward arguments in relation to current American comedy, her work also highlights the complexity of using highly subjective terms (funny and pretty) without explicitly stating the subjective nature of

the concepts under examination. When reading *Pretty/Funny*, I felt very much like the question of pretty and funny *to whom* had been overlooked. Reading this introductory section left me asking 'considered pretty and/or funny by other women, their audiences or by the wider mainstream media?'. Pretty and funny are not easily definable concepts. Therefore, in my view, both terms needed to be introduced with more concern for the complications of their use. Contemporary body norms and notions of attractiveness are relevant to my analysis of my case studies and discussion of self-deprecatory humour. Therefore, within these sections of the thesis I have considered the need to problematise these terms to avoid any potential misreading of my argument as reductive. Hannah Ballou's 'Pretty Funny: Manifesting a Normatively Sexy Female Comic Body' (2013) and Kathleen Rowe's *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995), the latter of which Mizejewski draws heavily on, also provide secondary source material in relation to this argument.

The work of the theorists outlined in this section of my literature review provide tangible links between humour theory and the body of feminist literature I will be drawing upon. The work of these theorists, many of whom were writing in previous eras when stand-up comedy by female performers was less widely known in the UK, will inform my exploration of the impact the current feminist context has had on comedy.

Feminist literature

A key aspect of my research is to consider how current comedy performances from women, and the reception of these performances by audiences, operate within the wider feminist (or postfeminist) social context as this is a significant blind-spot within existing comedy research. As will be considered in the forthcoming section of this literature review, comedy studies as a whole requires a shift of focus away from content analysis towards consideration of contexts of production and reception. Contemporary feminist thought and understandings of gender politics contribute significantly to the social and industrial contexts from which my case studies, and more broadly the comedy under discussion in this thesis, originate. Feminism(s) as a concept is directly relevant to all research that considers female comedians, as historically a

combination of factors have prevented women from entering the comedy industry. This will be examined in Chapter 3.

Lindsey German's work on the historical segregation of women within the UK labour force provides key conceptual tools for considering how women are included in the comedy industry, and how their inclusion may be considered in terms of the continual marginalisation of women on a larger scale. German's book *Material Girls: Women, Men and Work* (2007) provides a rigorous discussion of the challenges facing women attempting to integrate into historically male dominated industries. The gendering of work as male or female has contributed to a labour market in the UK where women are channelled into certain professions, often those that are lowest paid, least respected and most insecure.

The continued lack of resolution to the gender pay gap perpetuates a culture of inequality and German makes the distinction between the different ways the labour market segregates women. She argues that:

> One of the major reasons why women's pay has not advanced further is the occupational segregation of men and women. This operates both at the level of all women or mainly women's industries and occupations ("horizontal" segregation) and through women being clustered in the lowest grades and on the bottom rungs of mixed occupations ("vertical" segregation) (German, 2007: 92).

One of the central areas of consideration in this thesis is whether these concepts regarding women and the workplace can be applied to the comedy industry and if so what is being done to prevent or challenge these attempts to segregate women. Comedy is undeniably a very popular and profitable industry for the UK and so consideration of the work of female comics within this arena will require feminist industrial critique. When examining the role of women-only nights I will consider whether this approach reinforces the segregation in the industry or helps to challenge it.

Angela McRobbie, writing from the perspective of sociological cultural studies, addresses how postfeminist culture simultaneously invokes feminism, whilst replacing

it with the idea that equality has been achieved and that the treatment of men and women as equals is now the norm. McRobbie terms these conflicting messages prevalent in current culture a 'double entanglement' (McRobbie, 2009: 6) and states that 'in popular culture there is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without' (2009: 8). A major factor in this era of conflicting messages is the way in which the achievements of feminism as a political movement are buried under a focus on the individual freedoms of women. This 'double entanglement' can be seen within the content and style of many comic performances by women.

Advertising, which is of particular interest to cultural theorists, provides a clear example of how the terminology associated historically with the women's liberation movement has been co-opted in order to sell products to women. Nina Power contends that this co-option, or commercialisation of feminism, results in a confusing message to women about what constitutes empowerment. In the introduction of her 2009 book *One Dimensional Woman*, which discusses the feminisation of the UK labour force and the role of women under capitalism, Power highlights how the overwhelming portrayal of women is inherently focused on ownership: 'If the contemporary portrayal of womankind were to be believed, contemporary female achievement would culminate in the ownership of expensive handbags, a vibrator, a job, a flat and a man – probably in that order' (Power, 2009: 1). The rights of women to consume, take control of their sexuality and be financially independent have become the main focus of media portrayals of women - from television and film, to advertising and the content of women's magazines.

Feminism in the current context as a political movement lacks a coherent group identity resulting in a multitude of, sometimes conflicting, feminisms. In the void left by this lack of positive group identity, and arguments between different factions of feminist thought, a new 'celebrity feminism' has come to the fore. Beyoncé provides an interesting example of the process of 'coming-out' as a feminist, recently shifting her public position to fully embracing the term feminist (or her particular understanding of it). For celebrity studies scholars, such as Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs, media culture plays an increasingly important role in feminist debate. She notes that:

> Discursive struggles over the meanings of feminism are now, and perhaps more than ever, largely staged in and through media culture. And, […] celebrity interventions into on-going debates over feminism have recently intensified. (Fairclough-Isaacs, 2015a: 286)

McRobbie writing in 2009 discussed how there was an overwhelming hatred of feminism present in the culture at the time. It will be important to consider how this may have changed in relation to the rise of celebrity feminisms and the role social media has in women's understanding of the term. Arguably the overwhelming hatred of feminism from several years ago, that McRobbie discusses in depth, has been counteracted by a reclamation and subversion of the meaning of feminism, and the repackaging of it into a more commercially palatable version by high profile celebrities as discussed by Fairclough-Isaacs (2015), Hammad and Taylor (2015) and Keller and Ringrose (2015). This reclamation of the term 'feminism' is of particular relevance to the analysis of my case studies and the examples of female comedians used throughout this thesis, as several could indeed be considered 'celebrity feminists' themselves.

As with commercial/choice feminisms this reclaiming of the terminology of feminism often reduces the concept to an individualised commercially focused version of womanhood. I agree with Power when she notes that arguably in these instances 'what looks like emancipation is nothing but the tightening of the shackles' (Power, 2009: 2). In the current cultural environment, it can be very difficult to tell the difference between genuine female empowerment and exploitation. I will be engaging with these concepts in relation to the increase in overtly feminist and postfeminist content on the current stand-up circuit and how comedy as an industry could be seen to contribute to the commercialisation of female empowerment.

Expanding on the notion of a double entanglement McRobbie also contends that the backlash against feminism has undergone a 'complexification' (2009: 11). By appropriating irony as a mode of address, problematic or sexist messages about the role of women are often difficult to delineate from humour. Rosalind Gill discusses the use of irony in advertising (as does McRobbie), citing the *Wonderbra 'Hello Boys'*

campaign of 1994 as just one example. As Gill comments 'The humorous tone that characterised early examples of this shift […] should not imply that this shift is not, in fact, profoundly serious and problematic' (Gill, 2007: 152). In this and other adverts of this kind, feminist criticism is both invoked (the makers know it will provoke feminist scorn) and diffused by wrapping this sexism in the form of a joke or ironic self-knowingness. This ensures that any criticism is seen as a lack of humour and ignorance of ironic intention, rather than a genuine challenge to the images of women it promotes. This concept is highly applicable to the current comedy output perpetuated within the mainstream comedy industry, the work of the infamous Dapper Laughs provides just one, particularly high profile, example of this in action which will be explored in Chapter 8.

Critically this discussion of advertising alongside backlash within the content of mainstream comedy, is relevant to my own work as the UK comedy industry makes use of this type of advertising. One of the main comedy channels in the UK is called *Dave* and the tag line for the channel is 'the home of witty banter'. The rationale behind naming the channel thus was that everybody knows a Dave.[2] The choice of a very popular shortened version of a male name helped the channel create an identity analogous with a 'lad's night out'. Reinforcing this identity, the use of gendered language such as 'banter' (it is very rare that this word is used in relation to women's humour) perpetuates a notion of a male environment. It is my contention that this is just one example of how the current context helps to maintain a masculine focus within comedy and has the potential to alienate female viewers (the fact the channel also plays a huge number of repeats of car programme *Top Gear*, also a stereotypically masculine show, helps to situate it thus). This discussion will be undertaken in regards to Cordelia Fine's (2010) consideration of neurosexism in her book *Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Between Sex Differences* in the first chapter of this thesis.

Alongside the wider cultural critique provided by feminist theorists there has been significant consideration of women's bodies under capitalism. These works, including Laurie Penny's short book *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism* (2010), Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005) and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990), consider the control, commodification and

sexualization of women's bodies by Western capitalist societies. The arguments made by Penny, Levy and Wolf, feed into my discussion of the role of self-deprecation within comedy and how this may challenge patriarchal body norms, or promote conformity to them. Emma Rees' (2013) *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* also provides useful secondary source material in relation to notions of the taboo.

A central concept to my own analysis within this research is intersectional feminism. This is a form of feminism that acknowledges the wide-ranging multiplicity of oppression faced by women of colour and more broadly by groups that differ in multiple ways from the dominant social group (white, able bodied, heterosexual males). My research draws on the work of Sara Ahmed (2010, 2017), Dayna Chatman (2015), Susan Watkins (2018) and Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017) in this regard.

A key finding from reviewing the literature in this area is that the feminist discussion of humour has tended to focus on the negative uses of humour in keeping women and feminism in its place through mockery and ridicule. This focus is understandable when we consider that historically this has been the most evident use of humour, as platforms for expression of humour were accessed by dominant groups long before women and other minority groups gained that opportunity. Several works from comedy and performance studies have argued for the emancipatory aspects of comedy by women, such as the work of Barreca (2013), Gray (1994) and Gilbert (2004). The feminist literature however, focuses predominantly on the problems and complexities of humour *about* women and the way it can be used to control women's position within society. The idea that comedy is still being used as a tool of oppression will be relevant to my consideration of the backlash against feminist comedy in Chapter 8.

Comedy contexts

Generally the study of comedy and humour suffers from an overreliance on content-only studies. The work of Case and Lippard (2009) and Shifman and Lemish (2010, 2011) provide examples of studies where various forms of jokes have been reduced down to written form in order for content analysis to occur. Both these studies

collated jokes from multiple sources (including televised comedy, internet humour, jokes told socially and written humour) and analysed them in a written form, focusing on the wording and concepts within them. This is a problematic approach, as for comedy, context (both in terms of performance context and societal context) is a hugely important factor in whether a joke succeeds or fails. Therefore, a content-only approach would not be a useful methodology to my specific area of investigation. Irrespective of the problematic methodology however, within the work of Shifman and Lemish (2010) their categorisation of feminist, postfeminist and sexist humour will be relevant to my own analysis of comedians working today. As I have argued elsewhere (Tomsett, 2017 and 2018), both feminist and postfeminist comedy exist on the current UK circuit, and I will be drawing on and interrogating the definitions used within Shifman and Lemish's study 'Between Feminism and Fun(ny)mism: Analysing Humor in Popular Internet Humor' (2010) in Chapter 7.

In order to consider the changes in terms of the inclusion of women into the comedy circuit it is necessary to comprehend the way in which the British stand-up comedy scene has emerged from its origins in music hall and variety performance, through the working men's clubs of the 1960/70s and the alternative comedy scene of the late 1980s, to arrive at today's incarnation. An awareness of the industrial and performance contexts of current comedy performed by women is a vital part of this research. The works of Oliver Double (2014), David Huxley (1998), Ben Thompson (2004), Sam Friedman (2014) and Sophie Quirk (2011) articulate critical approaches that consider wider industrial and performance contexts of comedy production and reception. These works evidence the wealth of information overlooked or ignored by text-only comedy analysis approaches and have informed my own approach.

In *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy. 2nd Edition* (2014) Oliver Double not only sets out a useful timeline for the development of the UK comedy circuit and its evolution through various phases, but also uses his experience as a stand-up comedian to explore the art of stand-up performance itself. Importantly for my own research Double outlines a definition of stand-up comedy which has provided a useful starting point for my research. Double argues that stand-up comedy includes firstly '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). This is then coupled with both direct communication with an audience, 'with energy flowing back and forth between stage and auditorium' (2014:19) and the way in which stand-up performance occurs in the present tense where the performer 'acknowledges the performance situation' (2014: 20). This definition highlights the similarities and important differences between stand-up comedy and other modes of performance and it is with this definition that my own work on stand-up comedy will concern itself.

Double also puts forward the idea of the personality spectrum. This concept addresses the way that a stand-up comic's persona is constructed as either close to their off-stage persona or residing within the area of character comedy. This idea is key to not over simplifying, or creating a binary between people 'just being themselves' and those who perform behind the guise of a character. Double argues that comic personas are not fixed and there may be different performances where comics oscillate up or down this spectrum. Furthermore he contends that these changes or fluctuations in relation to their off-stage self can occur *within* individual performances. This concept will be relevant to my discussion of the work of several female comics within this thesis, not least Bridget Christie who will be the focus of a case study as part of this work.

Sam Friedman's research, culminating in his monograph *Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour* (2014), discusses the cultural capital associated with the current UK comedy circuit. His work provides a useful discussion of the changes to the UK comedy circuit in the book's second chapter 'From music hall to the Alternative Boom: The changing field of British Comedy'. Additionally, Friedman makes use of Bourdieu's work *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) to discuss the low and high cultural characteristics of current UK comedy. He argues that both 'high cultural production where financial profit is rejected and "art for art's sake" constitutes the dominant ideology' (Friedman, 2014; 11) and lower or mass cultural production that is produced 'to reach the largest possible audience for maximum economic profit' (2014; 12), exist within the British comedy context simultaneously. Friedman's significant experience as a comedy critic means that he has also given adequate consideration to the complexity of labelling something as funny. Often,

acknowledgement that 'funny' is subjective and that 'there is no such thing as "universally funny"' (2014: 2) is overlooked or insufficiently considered. His work provides a stark reminder of the importance of making this point within all writing on comedy, journalistic or academic.

Significantly for my work, Friedman also analyses the role of the 'tastemakers', those that operate as gatekeepers within the industry and decide who makes the jump from the world of the comedy clubs to mainstream TV success. His work involved a variety of qualitative interviews with people who occupy these positions of power (talent scouts, commissioners, agents etc.) and he analyses the role these people have in deciding who gains access to mainstream audiences. This will be particularly relevant to my discussion about the potential gender imbalance that comes to light as part of this gatekeeping process, as it is clear that it is not merit alone that propels people into the wider world of celebrity, but also opportunity. Friedman's work in this area is useful to my own research in that it clearly highlights the ways in which the UK comedy industry's gatekeepers (in the form of critics and producers) limit opportunities for minority groups. His work provides a foundation from which I can consider the implications his findings have for female comics specifically.

Furthering the consideration of the specific performance contexts for stand-up comedy, Sophie Quirk's discussion of the physical spaces used for comic performance in her article 'Containing the Audience: The 'Room' in Stand-up Comedy' (2011) provides insight into an essential aspect of live performance; the space of the performance itself and the audiences' relationship to that space. This is something specific to live comic performance and her research helps to bridge the gap between the current body of theory on gender and humour and my own work that will be situated within the live comedy arena. The research of Quirk, alongside Double and Friedman clearly sets out the key changes to the stand-up scene in terms of diversity of performers, shifting ideology, the arrival of dedicated venues and the impact this had upon audiences for live comedy.

Further to understanding the context of stand-up performance Jason Rutter (2000) completed a pioneering study into the role and functions of comedy introduction

sequences by compères. The vital function compères have in managing the expectations of the audience in terms of the gender of the performer, means that Rutter's work will inevitably inform my discussion. The work of Inger Lise Kalviknes Bore (2017), Matthew MacKeague (2018) and Jillian Belanger (2015) provides highly relevant material for the consideration of online comedy forms (including user-generated content and social media). This thesis will draw on this work to frame qualitative interview data in order to consider the impact social media has on live comedy spaces for women.

Joanne Gilbert, in her work *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique* (2004), has been more successful than others when uniting analysis of the context and content of stand-up comedy by women. Gilbert identifies several comic postures present in the work of female stand-ups and outlines their specific signifiers. Unlike the majority of analysis of stand-up comedy, which focuses predominantly on male performers, Gilbert's work focuses on how comedy provides an opportunity for women to explore, discuss and even capitalise on their marginal position. Her experience as a stand-up comedian in the 1980s imbues her work with an element of auto-ethnography as she can draw on her own experiences of working as a comedian to reinforce the points she is making.

Gilbert's work is focused on performances by US female comedians and the role they play in articulating the marginalised perspectives of women in patriarchal America. Gilbert makes the point that women are forced to adapt and comply with the perceived (if not numeric) majority by quoting from Sherry B. Ortner and drawing on the terminology found in her work *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (1996):

> Originating in ethnic and minority studies, the term "borderlands" describes "the construction" of the complex hybridized identities of those who must live within, yet are excluded from the dominant cultural order (Ortner, 1996:181).

It is with these hybridized identities that Gilbert concerns herself. Gilbert draws on Ortner's terminology to argue that women operate under these complex conditions and that comedy by women is an opportunity for them to articulate their marginality

within a dominant phallocentric (in her case American) culture. She makes a clear case for why the consideration of comedy performed by women can shed light on areas of women's experience that are all too often dismissed or silenced by mainstream culture. In this way Gilbert's work provides a key approach for theorising comedy as empowering for women, rather than only as a tool to be used by dominant groups to oppress them.

The discussion of intersectional feminist perspectives throughout Gilbert's work, which reiterates the ways in which people are marginalised based on many interlinked criteria such as (but not exclusively) ethnicity, class, gender, ability and sexuality, also provides a link to current feminist thought. The distinct lack of female voices from homosexual, non-white, transgendered and differently-abled backgrounds being heard in all aspects of our society, (including comedy and academia), is something this research will concern itself with.

In her chapter entitled 'Talking the Talk' Gilbert explores the topics that she believes unites the work of female comics, topics through which the social marginality of female performers is articulated to an audience. Although the topics identified in this section are indeed relevant subjects for the performers I have watched as part of this research (sex, relationships, weight/body image, fashion etc.) I find the listing of certain characteristics or performance modes problematic as it does in effect define women's comedy as a genre. This argument could also be made in relation to Mizejewski's work. Contending that female comics cover specific topics, or perform in a limited number of ways arguably reinforces binary notions of differences between men and women. Comedy performed by men is never discussed as a genre, nor would any attempt be made to identify a finite number of approaches taken by male comics. Perhaps the intervening years between Gilbert's analysis and my own have impacted on the way in which comedians of all genders cover the topics discussed in her chapter? Arguably in the period she was exploring, these topics genuinely were more ghettoised within the work of female comics. However, I certainly have found the topics she discusses in this section to be covered by the male comedians I have seen in recent years (such as David O'Doherty, Daniel Kitson and Tez Ilyas) and not exclusive to female performers.

In addition to making a strong case for more critical consideration of comedy by women, and foregrounding the complex space in society that women occupy, Gilbert also proposes a framework for the analysis of modes of address or 'postures' within female stand-up performance. Although it is always worth remembering that a definitive list of characteristics can be limiting to an analysis of any art form, the terms Gilbert uses certainly have relevance to the performances of female comics in a UK context. She identifies five different postures that female comics move between as part of their stand-up performances. Just as Double comments that the persona of the performer in relation to the personality spectrum should be seen as a mobile and changeable, so too Gilbert makes the case that these postures are moved between within individual performances. Again, I do not wish to use Gilbert's work as a way of arguing that comedy by women is a genre in itself but will use her proposed postures as a starting point for analysis of my case studies. The identified categories are termed the kid, the bawd, the bitch, the whiner and the reporter (Gilbert, 2004:96).

I will draw upon Gilbert's terminology in my own analysis and seek to challenge her definitions in line with the change in performance and societal context from US to UK. Gilbert's work has been particularly formative for my own approach as she foregrounds the live stand-up comedy context of the performances she is discussing. Crucially Gilbert tackles head on the idea of comedy as an industry and the pros and cons associated with monetising or capitalising on a marginal perspective. She notes that 'perhaps it is the commodification of marginality that makes it subversive' (2004:165). This will be a key point to consider when discussing the industrial nature of the UK comedy circuit and the way female comedians sit within this structure.

Overall conclusions from the literature review

1) Overwhelming focus on comedy content

Overall the body of literature is very content focused. There is not enough discussion of the context of comedy (or how audiences may understand these contexts) which I believe is a central aspect of a productive analysis of performance. Although some

content analysis will be employed this will always be alongside consideration of the performance mode and context.

2) Industrial context

The existing literature on comedy (and more specifically comedy by women) is very focused on American examples overall. There are fundamental differences between the industrial contexts of the US and UK comedy industries in terms of inclusion of women which this thesis will explore. A clear example in terms of the live circuit is the American traditions of 'improv' performance, which has no significant equivalent in Britain.

3) Performance context

Within the existing research on female comedians often works conflate stand-up comedians and comedy actors. This is unhelpful due to the different skills required for each of these roles and conventions in terms of direct engagement with an audience. Although there is a place for discussion of star texts across performative modes (as with Mizejewski [2014], Patterson's work on Tina Fey [2012] and Feldmar [2009], Shouse and Oppliger's [2012] work on Sarah Silverman) it is important when discussing performers working across multiple disciplines (acting, sketch, stand-up, TV appearances etc.) the different contexts (especially in relation to the role of the audience in co-construction of the performance) are given adequate attention. Therefore, this research will be focusing on the specific skills required for live stand-up comedy performance. Discussion of appearances or performances in other media forms will be used only as additional context for the live performances and contexts under discussion.

4) Cultural context

The feminist consideration of stand-up comedy needs to be brought up to date and made relevant to a so-called postfeminist context prevalent in an increasingly media-based culture. This will be especially relevant to discussion of comedians openly

identifying as feminist and how these performers sit within the wider concepts of celebrity feminisms and intersectionality.

My research will be conducted using an approach inspired by Joanne Gilbert's (2004) performance contexts and content analysis, with engagement with comedy audiences informed by the work of Lockyer and Myers (2011). This interdisciplinary approach, explained in detail in the following chapter, will enable a deeper understanding of current comedy performed by women than could be achieved through content analysis alone. In this way this thesis will make a unique and original contribution to existing knowledge in the field of comedy studies.

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[1] This work provides a reminder as to why building on recent research is important. In the chapter entitled 'Function and Functionalism' the discussion commences with the now provably false claim that humans are the only species that laugh. 'Why should it be that we (alone) should have this capacity?' (Palmer, 1994: 57). The work of neuroscientists such as Jaak Panksepp and Jeff Bergdorf (2003 and 2006) and the well-publicised work of Sophie Scott (2013), amongst others, have conclusively proved laughter is not unique to human interaction, having found rats capable of laughter. Whilst this may seem beside the point, it reminds us that the study of laughter across traditional sciences may impact on some of the broader social science claims about functions of humour.

[2] See Holmwood (2007) in *The Guardian*: http://www.theguardian.com/media/2007/sep/20/television (accessed 24/7/15)

Chapter Two

Methodology

The methodology of this research, as outlined in this chapter, was designed to counter the existing bias within the literature towards reductive content analysis and overwhelming focus on male comedians. The methodology of this research re-centres the discussion on women's experiences in order to include opportunities for contextual consideration in relation to industrial, performance and social contexts. This move away from isolated content or textual analysis is justified because it is only through a thorough analysis of these contexts that a real understanding of the challenges and achievements defining women's experience in the UK comedy industry can be fully understood. My work considers the industrial structures and organisations of the UK comedy industry and is neither limited to a consideration of the comedy produced (the texts) nor the individual witness testimonies or audience data (the people), but exists to unify these isolated aspects into a cohesive argument.

Research questions

The methodology was selected to enable me to thoroughly address the following research questions.

1) In what ways has British stand-up comedy as a form and industry historically been shaped in a gendered way?

2) What are the current conditions of the UK comedy industry as they relate to women?

3) What contribution do women-only comedy nights make to the UK comedy industry for both performers and audiences?

4) How do career opportunities for female comics working on the live circuit relate to wider media developments (e.g. TV comedy, Internet streaming services and increased uptake of social media etc.)

5) How are feminist and postfeminist approaches to comedy present within performances by female comedians in the current context?

All questions relate to the industrial, performance and social contexts of stand-up comedy produced by women in the current UK context and the texts that arise from these contexts. All questions were developed following on from a review of existing critical literature on women and comedy and the questions structure the discussion contained within this thesis.

Research ethos:

The ethos of my research was underpinned by a feminist approach to enquiry in line with discussions found within the work of Roberts (1981), Harding (1987), Stanley (1990), Hughes (2002), Letherby (2003), Ackerly and True (2010) and Gunaratnam and Hamilton (2017). Feminist research remains an evolving and contested area due to the fact that, as Harding highlights, the specific methods used by feminist researchers, for example 'listening to (or interrogating) informants, observing behaviour or examining historical traces and records' (1987:2) are not unique to this approach to enquiry. However, how feminist researchers 'carry out these methods of evidence gathering is often strikingly different' (Harding, 1987:2) from traditional approaches. It is the way in which the deployment of generic research methods by feminist researchers starts 'with the political commitment to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women's lives through social and individual change' (Letherby, 2003: 4) that sets feminist research apart.

Whilst comedy as a topic of study may seem an odd place to claim to undertake research with the aim of social change, the work of Harding reminds us that 'every issue is a feminist issue' (1987: 7) and as such my work aligns with this ethos. My aim, when conducting this research, was in part to shed light on the connections between

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women's experiences of the structures of the comedy industry and wider social inequalities relating to gender.

Epistemological concerns:

Interviews form a significant part of this thesis, thus in line with intersectional feminist perspectives, each woman's experience has been acknowledged as individual and was valued as providing unique insights into their lived experiences. Harding stresses that for feminist researchers an awareness that 'women come only in different classes, races and cultures: there is no "woman" and no "woman's experience"' (1987: 7) is vital. My research therefore, does not attempt to position any of the qualitative information gathered as objective. Rather, it seeks to collate a narrative of various subjective experiences, my own included, without universalising. The impact that ethnicity, ability and sexuality amongst other factors, have upon lived experience and levels of marginality have also be considered. In relation to this I have reflected upon the tension between what Letherby describes as '*authorized knowledge*', that which is considered legitimate (or legitimated) by institutions, and '*experiential knowledge*' which is developed through lived experience (2003: 22). This distinction is significant for my research in several ways, firstly in that comedy as an area of academic study itself is very easy to dismiss due to its subjective nature. The understanding that something is comic is rooted in experiential knowledge (what one person claims to be comedy, another may not experience as such) and thus it has been easy to disparage studies of comedy as being subjective to the point of meaninglessness. Arguably to study stand-up comedy effectively requires an awareness of multiple perspectives and interpretations that inherently resist being turned into authorized knowledge. In addition to this issue of subjectivity and what can be known about comedy, history has predominantly been filtered through male perspectives and articulated through the words of men, and 'as women were excluded from organized religion, law and politics and from entering educational institutions for many centuries, *authorized knowledge* has historically meant masculinized knowledge' (Letherby, 2003: 22). Consequently, even when comedy as a subject of study has gained traction within academia, in order to legitimise the field researchers have often relied upon connections to more authorised approaches or theoretical frameworks, which have overwhelmingly been

male. I have lost count of the times people have suggested or assumed that my work must relate in a significant way to Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud or Pierre Bourdieu. The underlying implication here is (or seems to be) that to articulate these connections to well-known male scholarship would legitimise or justify my research's status as an academically suitable topic of study. I reject this idea that situates authorised (predominantly male) knowledge as above the experiential. Therefore, in addition to the gendered bias in what is considered legitimate knowledge, this research has been conducted with (or motivated by) an awareness that the historical recording and analysis of artistic endeavour has often omitted, obscured, or failed to take seriously, female contributions (See Paton's [1988] work for example that exclusively uses 'he' and 'his' to refer to professional stand-up comedians). Wherever possible I have sought to engage with the existing work of female scholars and attempted, in line with the work of Sara Ahmed (2013), to practise feminist citation. Ahmed comments that academic citation is 'a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies' (Ahmed, 2013). Comedy studies as a discipline arguably has fallen into this trap as part of an attempt to gain traction within the academy. It is my intention to disrupt this by engaging with the work of female scholars (such as Gray [1994], Russell [2002] and Gilbert [2004]) in relation to key concepts wherever this is possible. This is to ensure their work is not overlooked in favour of works by male scholars (in many instances about comedy produced solely by men) which have benefitted by proximity to existing understandings of authorized knowledge.

My research is to a certain extent concerned with experiential knowledge and therefore, collaboration with participants, of all genders, in order to enable them to articulate their own experience, in their own words, was a significant consideration when deciding upon the approach I would take. Ackerly and True (2010) articulate a feminist research ethic in the following way:

> Feminist-informed research […] is self-reflective, critical, political, and versed in multiple theoretical frameworks in order to enable the researcher to 'see' those people and processes lost in gaps, silences, margins and peripheries (2010:22).

By making use of multiple approaches to explore my research questions I have attempted to explore these margins and gaps.

Positioning within research design:

As feminist research includes the 'incorporation of the researcher's personal feelings and experiences into the research process' (Neuman, 2014: 118) it is important to consider my own position in relation to the topic of study, as feminist researchers 'self-consciously reflect on their unique cultural position' (Neuman, 2014: 59). In broad terms this means that it was important, as a white, able-bodied, heterosexual female researcher, that I remained aware of my positioning in relation to the subject at hand whilst conducting this study. More specifically in relation to the context of my research I have been an audience member for comedy for the best part of 20 years and whilst the vast majority of those experiences were for enjoyment only, rather than research purposes, this gave me a foundation of knowledge upon which to build my argument. I had already seen several of my participants and case studies perform numerous times before commencing this project and therefore I already possessed an understanding of their development as performers and their careers to date. This enabled me to contribute in many unique ways to the research that someone entering the field 'cold' (or with less experience) would not have been capable of doing.

In addition to my relation to comedy, it is important to highlight that my personal understanding of feminism is an intersectional and trans inclusive one. This research was conducted from my position, as will become clear during the following chapters, however I maintained an awareness that in the current cultural context there are multiple feminist perspectives and that the very word feminism may be interpreted differently by participants of all genders. My use of the term *feminisms* throughout this thesis corresponds with this awareness. Therefore, whilst conducting this research it was necessary to recognise my own privilege within feminism, in that my voice (as a western white woman within academia) is better represented than other marginal perspectives. This was especially relevant when interviewing participants, as an awareness of the multifaceted power relations at play when conducting research was

necessary to put participants at ease. This will be discussed later in more detail in this chapter when considering interview processes.

A significant factor in outlining my position is the relationship I had with the Women in Comedy Festival as part of this research. I will now outline this position and explain my role as a participant-observer, a term interrogated within the work of Johnson et. al. (2006). As Neuman observes 'feminist researchers are not objective or detached: they interact and collaborate with the people they study' (2014: 119). This was true of my approach to this research in that in October 2013 I approached the director of the Women in Comedy Festival with the suggestion that I volunteer with them as part of my research. I clearly set out the purpose of my research, which was at the very early evolutionary stages at this point (I commenced my PhD programme in October 2013). I also made clear during this first correspondence that I was keen to ensure our relationship was reciprocal. I set out the kind of things I might be able to help with, suggesting that as I had previously done the design work for a small organisation that this might be something I could assist with. Initially I was invited along to a volunteer meeting in January 2014 (the purpose of which was to reflect on the first iteration of the festival which I engaged with from an audience perspective). In this meeting I explained my area of study to all present and was invited following that to attend all meetings with all other volunteers (many of which took place in the back room of The King's Arms in Salford and Gulliver's Bar in Manchester's Northern Quarter). The director of the festival, Hazel O'Keefe, who prior to this interaction I had not met, suggested a few months in that it would be easier if I had a specific title for this project and I was thereafter referred to as the festival's 'Researcher in Residence'. It was made clear to all that my role was not to study the other volunteers but to engage with the process of the festival and interview performers about their experiences of performing in spaces such as the context provided by the festival.

Participant observation is inherently linked to ethnographic practices. When describing feminist ethnography Skeggs comments that:

> It usually combines certain features in specific ways: fieldwork that will be conducted over a *prolonged period of time*; utilizing different research

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techniques; conducted *within the settings* of the participants, with an understanding of how the context informs the action; *involving the researcher in participation* and observation (Skeggs, 2001: 427).

I am not claiming that my approach was ethnographic as such, although the term remains contested and porous to new ways of approaching social research. As I am situated within a humanities discipline, had information existed on the settings and performers I was discussing in my work I would not have felt compelled (or necessarily believed I was the right person) to capture this information myself. However, it is clear that in relation to engaging with the volunteer group there are aspects of similarity to feminist ethnography as I worked alongside this group of people for a significant time period and participated in their work. As Letherby notes 'the research process is a complex endeavour, and the researcher's status as "insider" and "outsider" is subject to constant negotiation between all parties' (2003:133). As previously highlighted I was never studying the volunteers themselves, simply engaging with the festival as a way of understanding the wider industry better, the festival's role within that industry and to access performers and audiences with their assistance to enact aspects of my methodology. My focus was on capturing information from people who passed through this context either as a performer or as an audience member. Therefore, my status on the spectrum of participant (volunteer for the festival) and observer (as a researcher) was in constant flux.

Additionally, it became clear to me when undertaking a review of existing literature and my thinking evolved, that to conduct some work directly with audiences for the festival may be useful, both to my study, but also to the festival too in terms of understanding their audiences. This is because data on these kinds of women-only events did not already exist and most research with audiences for comedy focus on responses to humour (as outlined in the proceeding chapter). Therefore, engagement with audiences provided an additional and important perspective on my research question regarding the contribution of women-only nights to the UK industry.

This was agreed by O'Keefe as something she was keen to engage with. The audience study aspect of my work as presented within this thesis, was never at any point in the process my primary objective. Over the period of early 2014 to late 2017 I attended

and contributed to regular meetings, observed the decision making undertaken in these meetings, provided design support (including working on the festival's logos, posters, banners and brochure) and generally helped out wherever possible (see Appendix 5). This ensured that the research relationship remained (as much as is possible) non-hierarchical as in many ways I was simply volunteering my skills in the same way as other volunteers were.[1] I was contributing to the festival by providing information about audience motivations and the festival's team supported me by introducing me to relevant experts in their field (comedians and promoters), and being open to my observations. I am still at time of writing, participating in the festival in various ways and hope to continue to do so in future.

Outline and justification of methods:

Feminist researchers have 'flexibility in choosing research techniques and crossing boundaries between academic fields' (Neuman, 2014:118). My own background is that of a humanities scholar (specifically theatre, film and television) with experience of textual and contextual analysis. This piece of research has required me to become much more participatory and creative with my methods than I have previously been. Whilst some of the methods deployed may originate within the disciplines of social sciences, the research presented within the following chapters of this thesis will remain squarely within the discursive tradition of the humanities, as I remain fundamentally a performance scholar. My discussion is supplemented by interviews with participants and audience data. In this way my research can be considered multi-method as it is interdisciplinary and involved the 'mixing of methods by combining two or more qualitative methods in a single study (such as in-depth interviews and participant observation)' (Hesse-Biber, 2010: 3). In addition to this my work with audiences, as will become apparent, can also be termed mixed-methods as it 'uses both qualitative and quantitative data to answer a particular question or set of questions' (Hesse-Biber, 2010: 3). I will now outline and justify each aspect of my methodology in detail.

Semi-structured interviews with performers and promoters

I decided that in order to gain a wider understanding of the context under discussion in my work (wider than my existing experience as a comedy audience member), it would be necessary for me to speak to women with varying connections to and experiences of the social, performance and industrial context being considered. I decided to undertake qualitative semi-structured life world interviews with comedians and promoters in order to establish if there were any themes that united individual experiences from the perspective of those working within the field. Brinkmann and Kvale define semi-structured life world interviewing as 'an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena' (2015: 6). My interviews were not conducted solely to access 'data' in the form of these descriptions of lived experiences, but in order to broadly inform my own awareness and approach when constructing the discursive content of my thesis.

Each comedian or promoter included in this aspect of the research was approached as an expert in their field and selected because of their experience within the context under consideration by the research. It was made explicitly clear to my performer and promoter participants that they would not be anonymised as the strength of their input required the reader to comprehend their experience of the industry being considered (see Appendix 2). Quotations from the transcribed interviews have been integrated into my argument across the thesis in order to provide illustrative examples of performers' experiences of the context under consideration. This is in line with the approach taken by other humanities-based researchers of comic performance such as Oliver Double (2014) and Sophie Quirk (2015 and 2018).

Participants were selected because of their relevance to the area of enquiry and in order to get a wide range of participants with varying amounts of experience of the circuit. Some participants were new to working within comedy, whereas others had been working in the industry for decades. The sampling process was opportunistic in that it was led by the willingness of the participant to contribute and their availability. The Women in Comedy Festival helped to facilitate contact with the participants and

my role as participant-observer (as outlined above) undoubtedly provided a level of validity and trust in the research process that having approached comedians individually would not have achieved. A full list of those consulted as part of this research can be found in Appendix 6. The selected participants all have experience of the live UK comedy circuit but perform across a range of comic genres including traditional stand-up, sketch comedy, character comedy and political satire. This enabled me to consider how different comic styles may also impact on experiences of the context under consideration.

As Ann Oakley observes when discussing the poor fit between traditional positivist models of interviewing and feminist research, issues arise when 'the interviewer must pretend not to have opinions (or to be possessed of information the interviewee wants) […] because behaving otherwise might 'bias' the interview' (Oakley, 1981: 360). Contrary to forms of interviewing that emphasise 'its status as a mechanical instrument of data-collection […], its function as a specialised form of conversation in which one person asks the question and another gives the answers' (Oakley, 1981: 37) my own approach sought to create a more holistic and less one-way space for discussion. I agree with Oakley that:

> Finding out about people is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship (Oakley, 1981: 41).

My approach was not to 'mine' data from my interview participants in line with a 'methodological positivist conception of knowledge as given facts to be quantified' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 21). I sought to enter into a conversation where participants could enlighten me about their experiences and discuss with me observations I had made from a position outside the industry (but as a participant-observer of the Women in Comedy Festival).

When planning for my interviews I started by mind-mapping areas of concern that I felt were relevant to my research questions (e.g. the current industry, the impact of social media, developments in TV comedy etc.). My primary objective was to establish the experience my participants had of women-only comedy nights and whether they

felt these were different from mainstream comedy contexts from their perspective as a performer. I felt that considering why performers may participate in these gendered nights, and what they felt it achieved for them in relation to their career would provide original insight into the industry enabling me to provide nuanced answers to my research questions. Additionally, questions about how participants had arrived at their own style and content were included as well as general questions about how they started out in comedy; the latter questions were used to build a rapport and enable the participants to become comfortable talking about themselves. Questions about the recent announcements about TV comedy and press attention relating to the appearance of female comedians, as will be considered in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, were included as relevant to the wider public debates around the industry.

I purposely did not create a list of questions as such as I felt this would create both an artificial structure and a sense of not being really present in the moment with the participant (evident through non-verbal communication such as not looking at the person when they were speaking). I felt this would reassert a hierarchy between myself and the participants and potentially lead them to assume I wanted specific things from our conversation (when, apart from a few specific things I wanted to discuss in relation to my research questions, I was open to their own articulation of their own experiences and any topics they felt relevant). I wrote a series of topics on a piece of paper and occasionally glanced at it to ensure I covered things I felt were important. I left myself open to exploring conversational topics led by the participants and contributed my own thoughts and opinions when necessary in order to have an engaged conversation. The process was iterative, in that as I transcribed the interviews as I went along, I added topics considered relevant by participants to my notes to discuss in future interviews. At several points within the interviews I also provided a sense of my wider work to participants as, when relevant, I would allude to comments made in previous interviews with other comedians. I believe this helped me create a sense of collective endeavour from colleagues on the circuit, rather than the participant feeling they were there to speak on behalf of all female comics (an issue discussed at length in Chapter 4). There is no doubt that 'the skills of interviewing are learned through the practice of interviewing' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015 :21) and therefore as I became more experienced with the process, my technique evolved.

Whilst participants were aware of my status as a researcher from an institution (which was clearly explained on my consent forms), my role within the Women in Comedy Festival provided me with a position from which to engage in these conversations in a reciprocal way. Whilst this did not always work as envisioned, each participant related to me in a different way with different levels of engagement in the conversation, the approach was successful and is evident in the transcripts of my interviews. I was often asked questions by my participants about my wider work and I framed questions in relation to my own understandings and experiences (a good example of this is in relation to comic performances that both myself and the participants had seen, and discussion of self-deprecatory humour). The interviews were conducted in public spaces such as coffee shops or in bars of comedy clubs before shows started. This ensured that my participants would feel safe and in a space they felt comfortable. I chose to undertake all the interviews in-person, apart from one with David Schneider which was impossible to arrange in person- and which I therefore conducted over Skype. I wanted to complete the interviews in-person as I believe that the subtle social cues and micro-expressions experienced in a live encounter enable a better rapport between participants in a conversation. I believe conducting the interviews in-person was commensurate with my understanding that 'the process of knowing through conversations is intersubjective and social, involving interviewer and interviewee as co-constructors of knowledge' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 22).

Following on from each interview, all of which occurred one to one (rather than in a focus group style) and were recorded on a dictaphone, the conversations were transcribed and sent to the interviewees with 'information about the natural difference between oral and written language styles' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 214), to counter the slightly odd experience of seeing a conversation in print, and reiteration of the intended use of the transcript. This enabled each participant to review what they had said and request removal of anything they thought too sensitive for inclusion. This was an important ethical consideration as all my performer and promoter participants still work within the context being explored in this research. Participants were also, as a result of this technique, able to provide clarification of any points they made if they felt it necessary. All participants therefore, had the

opportunity to withdraw once they had seen the transcription ensuring their consent was sought both before and after the interview took place. None of the participants, having read the transcription, opted to withdraw. Transcripts were created in line with David Buckingham's (1993: x) proposed transcription methods which provides indication of changes in tone and pauses.[2] A version of Buckingham's methods used to create transcription is included in Appendix 6 for clarity.

While I am aware that all transcriptions which turn oral communication into written communication are fundamentally a process of abstraction, a further argument for conducting interviews in-person is that it arguably leaves less room for misinterpretation (which easily occurs when interviews are conducted over the phone where only audio is collected). Whilst I chose not to video record the conversations, for fear of putting the participant on edge or provoking them to feel that they needed to provide a more pronounced performance, I did note key non-verbal cues when transcribing.

Coding process:

Once my transcriptions of performer and promoter interviews were complete I coded my data thematically using Nvivo coding software. My overall approach to the data collected during the interviews fell in line with what Terry et. al. refer to as an experiential orientation, as:

> Experiential orientations focus on what participants think, feel and do, and are underpinned by the theoretical assumption that language reflects reality, ([…] the perspectival reality of a particular participant) (Terry et. al., 2017: 17).

I therefore coded my data thematically in order to see where connections or deviations between participants' thoughts, emotions and actions existed. My approach to the analysis of the interview data was to interpret meaning, whilst appreciating that multiple interpretations were possible. As Brinkmann and Kvale observe 'meaning interpretation is prevalent in the humanities […]. The interpreter goes beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meanings not immediately apparent in the text' (2015: 235). My coding and analysis could be considered

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hermeneutic in that this approach 'does not involve any step-by-step method but is an explication of general principles found useful in a long tradition of interpreting texts' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 239). These traditions include a 'back-and-forth process between parts and the whole, which follows from the hermeneutical circle' (2015: 238), an awareness that 'the interpreter cannot "jump outside" the tradition of understanding he or she lives in' (2015: 239) and that 'the interpretation goes beyond the immediately given and enriches understanding by bringing forth new differentiations and interrelations in the text, extending its meaning' (2015: 239).

By considering specific 'parts' or instances within interview data, and their relationship to the whole (such as the whole interview with each individual, all my interview data as a whole, and the whole argument of my thesis) I sought through analysis to reach both a 'critical common-sense understanding' and 'theoretical understanding' of meaning (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 243). Critical common-sense understandings of meaning go beyond 'what the subject themselves may understand to be the meanings of their statements' (2015: 242) and includes a 'wider frame of understanding than that of the subjects themselves, may be critical of what is said, and may focus on either the content of the statement or on the person making it' (2015: 243). In addition, as I was cohering this information within theoretical frameworks provided by existing literature, I was also arriving at theoretical meaning beyond common-sense understanding. The wider frame of understanding I brought to the process and applied to the data during the analysis stage is a contextual awareness that can be categorised as follows:

- Awareness of how data that originated in individual 'life world interviews' connects to other interviews conducted as part of this research
- Awareness of arguments made within the existing literature on women and comedy and feminisms
- My own experiences as a participant-observer of the Women in Comedy Festival
- My own experiences as an audience member for comedy in the context under discussion in this thesis.

These understandings informed my process of coding my data and also how I integrated that data into the main body of my argument as, as Richards comments 'strong understanding is built just like a spider's web, not from individual threads but from the linked nets' (Richards, 2009: 82).

The process I undertook when coding my data was both deductive, in that I had asked participants to talk about several relevant themes related to my research questions, and so sought out that information in the data, but also inductive in that it was 'based on familiarity with the data' (Terry et. al. 2017: 19). The codes I identified initially were arrived at as a result of the kinds of questions I had asked, for example all the interviews commenced with some kind of introductory questions about starting out as a comedian, and so this was one of the first codes I created. Once this initial process was complete I also managed to identify specific codes that had arisen in an unexpected way from the data and include these in my analysis (a clear example of this was discussion about unequal pay practices which I had not anticipated when commencing the research). The fact that I transcribed all my interviews myself meant that before commencing coding I was already very familiar with what was contained within the transcripts, and had already started to identify connections across interviews. As Brinkmann and Kvale identify:

> Researchers who transcribe their own interviews will learn much about their own interviewing style; to some extent they will have the social and emotional aspects of the interview situation present or reawakened during transcription and will already have started analysing the meaning of what was said (2015: 207).

The discussions I had with comedians when undertaking the interview process helped to cohere my own opinions and informed my discussion of the topics I consider in my thesis. I have made use of quotations from the interviews to highlight where specific points have been evidenced within the data. This aspect of my research was not about simply documenting under-explored individual experiences of the industry; however my interviews certainly provide this function. This part of my research was conducted to access information about the ways comedians articulate their own life experiences

through language, and to participate in collaborative discussion to enable me to make an informed argument about the industry within my work.

In-situ performance analysis and case studies

To discuss the content and performance modes of current female comedians it was clear that a significant amount of observation of live comedy would be necessary. I was careful to watch comedy in a variety of spaces and venues to account for varied performances and audiences. I observed 170 separate performances by comedians identifying as female, attending the Edinburgh Festival and various comedy environments in Manchester, Sheffield, Salford and London. The majority of my observations occurred in Manchester as part of the Women in Comedy Festival. A full list of live performances observed in-person as part of this research can be found in Appendix 1. Performances were selected based on my availability and whether or not I had seen the performer before.[3] When visiting the Edinburgh Festival as part of this project, I specifically worked to ensure that I actively sought out performers I had not seen before and those who were unlikely to tour to Manchester. The purpose of attending so many performances was to ensure my own experience of the wider circuit was current and my wider contextual understanding evolved alongside the project.

I was not conducting a full analysis of every performance I observed, simply experiencing the industrial and performance contexts under discussion and also sampling examples of routines that illustrated points within the thesis. I made notes on my mobile phone in intervals that related to the material the comedians covered, their performance style and any other general observations I felt relevant. I also made a note of where these comedians provided a good example of something being considered in my thesis (for example whether their work could be considered postfeminist in tone and content and if so how).

I selected to analyse in detail the work of two female comics to provide examples of my argument in relation to feminist and postfeminist comedy. I selected Bridget Christie as an example of a comedian performing feminist comedy and Luisa Omielan

as an example of a comedian performing postfeminist comedy (see Chapter 7). I felt concrete examples which were analysed in detail would be necessary for readers who were less familiar with current stand-up comedy by women. The integration of specific examples is in line with long-established humanities traditions of textual analysis within Film and Performance studies which combine a critical discourse of industry contexts with analysis of the content produced within these contexts. In these instances, the context is of interest primarily due to the content produced within it. This approach recognises that the content under discussion in any textual analysis arises within structures which influence, facilitate, inspire and limit content production. Inclusion of case studies also enables academic discussion about female performers to be developed further, to counterbalance the overwhelmingly male-focused documentation of comic performance currently in existence.[4] Whilst I could have facilitated the opportunity to interview both the performers I explore in depth (Bridget Christie and Luisa Omielan) I decided not to do so. This meant that there was a clear division between those who engaged with the research as participants in interviews, whose performances I observed but did not analyse in detail, and those whose comic content and style I explored in depth. This enabled my case-study analysis to be my own, and to not be overly influenced or shaped by an awareness of the intent of the performer. Both performers have written their own books on their careers and so this information was also already in the public domain.

I selected Christie and Omielan as my case studies as they had (or were in the process of achieving) a similar level of critical and commercial success concurrent to each other. Focusing on specific case studies was the most appropriate way to illustrate the arguments made about the context under discussion in this thesis. It would not have been possible to answer my fifth research question without interrogating specific examples that arose from within the context of my study. At the time the selection of my case studies took place (in 2013) Christie had just become the third woman to ever win the Edinburgh Festival Foster's Comedy Award for Best Comedy Show (in its then 32-year history), and Omielan, whilst still a relative newcomer, was finding significant commercial success in mainstream spaces with a show specifically about 'female empowerment'. To put these achievements in a historical context, the first woman to win the Edinburgh Festival Best Comedy Show Prize (formerly known as The Perrier

Award) was Jenny Éclair in 1995 for *Prozac and Tantrums*, followed a full ten years later by the second, Laura Solon with *Kopfraper's Syndrome*, in 2005. Subsequent to Christie's win in 2013 (and during the period of this research), Australian Hannah Gadsby shared the prize with John Robins in 2017 for her show *Nanette*, and New Zealander Rose Matafeo won the prize in 2018 for *Horndog*. I of course could have chosen other performers to focus on (there are many female comedians who have received no critical academic attention to date), but these two performers were the best fit for the 'successful, relatively well-known, yet academically under-considered' criteria. Both comics represent a move away from what has traditionally been considered as a feminine mode of comedy in masculine spaces, i.e. self-deprecation (which I discuss in detail Chapter 6). In line with their feminist and postfeminist positions, Christie and Omielan represent different approaches to challenging this mode, specifically body-positive humour and overtly political feminist content. My existing awareness of the style and content of both comedians' comedy across their careers strongly indicated that they were actively addressing the constraints of male dominated mainstream venues and masculine discourses (stereotypes), which I identify in chapters 3 and 6 respectively. The inclusion of these case studies allows us to see how comics respond to the very conditions and debates I identify in this research and how their approaches may provide a template for others attempting to negotiate the gendered complexities of similar discourses and performance spaces.

I was aware that the content and tone of Christie and Omielan's work was at the time markedly divergent from others on the circuit and from each other. This difference was particularly apparent in relation to notions of feminism and empowerment which I was keen to explore in my research. I felt that the selection of these two performers due to their obviously different approaches to their contemporary careers, would enable me to discuss specific high-profile examples arising from the context of study. Although both comics were relatively new to public attention, Christie had been performing for much longer than Omielan when she came to wider prominence. In this way their careers differ. Christie worked over a prolonged period of time in the live sector without making use of social media, the traditional method of grafting away building an audience slowly over time (as discussed in Chapter 4). Contrastingly Omielan exploited various social media tools to progress much more quickly into wider

public awareness (as discussed in Chapter 5). I felt their selection would enable me to consider how success in a live environment, and use of the internet and social media may impact on career trajectory, therefore demonstrating some of the changing contexts and practices in British comedy two important areas that this thesis explores.

At the time of selection there had also been no academic consideration of either of these performers, which I felt needed to be addressed. My own published work on Christie, 'Twenty-first century fumerist: Bridget Christie and the backlash against feminist comedy' (2017) was the first academic article specifically on her work. As one of the motivations for this research was a feminist intent to document and explore the creative practice and labour of women (knowing many had been overlooked) I believe the justification is clear. To select performers who had already been discussed in academic considerations of comedy would have undermined the political impetus of the research.

I observed live performances by my case studies numerous times (often watching their shows several times at various stages of development, including as works in progress) and made detailed notes in relation to the style and content of their performances in relation to feminism. I did not predetermine or limit my theoretical perspective before seeing these performances and my thought processes evolved as I engaged with the relevant literature (outlined in the previous chapter) whilst observing these performers. Put simply, I watched the performances, made wide-ranging notes on the performances and then synthesised these notes into critical discussion in relation to the approaches taken in the relevant literature. Through observation and notetaking I was conducting a thematic and textual analysis (analysis of the performance as a text conveying cultural meaning) of these performers and their performances as part of my discussion of contemporary stand-up comedy by women. This was complimented by textual analysis of the writing each comedian had completed where they discuss their own work. The analysis of my case studies, which forms the basis of Chapter 7, draws on Gilbert's (2004) terminology in relation to performance postures adopted by female comics, as well as the definitions of Shifman and Lemish (2010) in relation to the feminist positioning of material. These analytical approaches were selected to facilitate the consideration of both the content of the comic material, the style and

method of delivery, and the wider social, spatial and political contexts that the performances contribute to and are situated within. As Gilbert (2004) has been particularly successful in her analysis of stand-up comedy content, whilst not diminishing the importance of context, her work provided the closest model to follow. The way in which each performer's work manifested a different (and in some ways contradictory) approach to feminism(s) was a key part of the rationale for selecting them and was the focus of much of the analysis. A full list of all performances engaged with, including all performances I observed by my case studies, can be found in Appendix 1.

In order to provide wider context for these live performances, and to underpin discussion of television comedy, I watched a broad range of recorded comedy by female performers both on traditional channels such as the BBC and ITV, but also on streaming services such as Netflix. Whilst my main focus was on live performance when discussing the comedy industry it was important to consider mediated forms too, as these have a direct impact on the live circuit, and vice versa. Television can be seen as both a desired career destination for comedians starting out in the comedy industry, and as a way of providing exposure (to be exploited on the live circuit) for certain stand-up comics through the broadcast of recorded live routines or inclusion on panel shows. The televised performances and shows discussed in this thesis have been textually analysed. My approach to textual analysis acknowledges that there are multiple interpretations possible and my own analysis, which is informed by my awareness of aesthetic criteria as a film and television researcher, is not objective (and in line with a feminist research ethos, nor should it be presented as such). McKee argues that when conducting textual analysis it is important to bear in mind context in relation to '1) other texts in the series, 2) the genre itself, 3) intertexts about the text itself and 4) the wider public context within which the text is circulated' (McKee, 2003:73). I have included these vital contextual aspects of textual analysis when considering televised performances of my case studies. This occurs both in relation to the broader context of television and live comedy (the industrial and performance contexts), and also the evolving inclusion of women into public and professional spaces (social context).

Online and social media research:

My engagement with online social media as part of this project can be seen as an extension of my role as participant-observer with the Women in Comedy Festival. Having joined the social networking platform Twitter in order to access information about female comedians (practical information such as tour dates and venues), I became increasingly aware that the online environment was a fundamental component of the context within which female comics were already working. Therefore, as part of this project I was able, through the use of social media, to observe the online behaviours of comedians I had seen in a live arena. I currently engage with Twitter on a daily basis as I maintain Twitter profiles for courses that I teach and research networks I am engaged with. Therefore, during the period of this research this enabled me to observe comments made online by relevant comedians, comedy organisations and broadcasters, interactions between comedians and comedy organisations (including those considered in this thesis), read reviews of work by critics and generally consider how comedians make use of social media as to interact with audiences. This approach enabled me to address my research question about the impact of wider social media use on the career opportunities for women within the comedy industry.

My approach to considering the online context for female comics is broadly in line with what Kozinets (2015) describes as netnography. Netnography is a form of online ethnography that interprets interpersonal interactions online using the frameworks associated with existing ethnographic practice. Across various research disciplines netnography 'has been found immensely useful to reveal interaction styles, personal narratives, communal exchanges, […] innovative forms of collaboration and organization, and manifestations of creativity' (Kozinets, 2015: 3).

The approach I took could be considered a digital netnography, in that my approach is distinct from 'colder and more calculating methods' (Kozinets, 2015: 198) such as social network analysis which seeks to map and quantify online interactions. With digital netnography 'interpretation can be personal, introspective and focused on subjectivities and subjective positions' (2015: 198) and therefore I felt this

complemented the feminist research ethos of my work. This aspect of my research evolved alongside the project as I followed comedians on the site as and when they came to my attention. I started by following all comedians associated with or playing the 2014 Women in Comedy Festival and continued to build upon this during the period of the research.

Whilst the importance of ethical use of data remained at the forefront of my mind, in this instance I was not using social media to engage with people as human subjects (e.g. interviewing them over social media or directly communicating with them). Therefore, as Kozinets states:

> where the Internet has been used to give members of the public, in essence, their own 'megaphone' as Ed McQuarrie and his co-authors (2013) cleverly term it, as when they publish their own zine, blog […] public Twitter feed, public Facebook and LinkedIn profiles, photos and status updates […] then we can think about this type of publication as a public document (Kozinets, 2015: 136).

Following this reasoning, as all of the information relating to social media that I refer to within this thesis originates in the public domain it has been handled as a public document. This is an ethically sound decision in that Ahmed et al. notes that 'by agreeing to Twitter's terms of service agreement, users will consent for their information to be collected and used by third parties' (2017: 7). I did not undertake data harvesting, or make use of data scraping softwares or applications to collect mass amounts of data (which understandably has wider ethical implications). I engaged and participated in these platforms as an individual under my own name in line with a digital ethnographic approach. Ahmed et al. also make the astute point that 'It is also important to note that Twitter profiles and tweets are by default set to public visibility and, consequently, Twitter could be considered more of a public space compared to Facebook' (2017: 6). Whilst I make broad observations about comedians use of both social media platforms the specific examples discussed all originate from Twitter.

It is also relevant to consider that the specific tweets included as screengrabs within this thesis originate from the accounts of verified individuals (public figures,

comedians) who have blue ticks on their profiles. These blue ticks indicate that they have been verified by Twitter's administrators as the genuine celebrity/persona named in the profile (rather than a fan or parody account). Verification is an arduous process and having undergone this to achieve 'blue tick' status, an individual has indicated an awareness that they are speaking in the public domain, as well as a desire to do so. Furthermore, many of the tweets referenced make use of hashtags which are used to make tweets and responses searchable. As Townsend and Wallace (2016) observe, 'if a tweet contains a hashtag, then the user tweeting this has intended their tweet to be visible to a broader audience' (Ahmed et al., 2017: 4). Therefore, my handling of comments made publicly online by high profile comedians is in line with the way my performer and promoter participants are considered experts in their field (and are thus named, rather than granted anonymity for ethical reasons).

The primary objective of this portion of my research project was to consider the wider industrial context of comedy in the UK, to inform my discussion of women-only spaces and performances by women on the current circuit. Thus, this approach is mostly relevant to Chapter 5 which deals directly with social media, however the broader understanding gleaned from this online engagement informed my overall comprehension of the industrial context, and therefore my argument throughout this thesis.

Mixed-methods audience research with audiences for the 2014 Women in Comedy Festival.

With a unique level of access to a new women-only comedy event, the opportunity to ask audiences about their motivations for attending these kinds of performances or spaces provided potential for new information. Having identified a lack of consideration of contexts when undertaking a review of existing literature, and finding nothing that looked specifically at women-only spaces, I was aware how much potential this research had to shine light on an unexplored area. A significant amount of audience studies relating to comedy have been conducted. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, many consider audiences for different media forms such as screen comedy e.g. the work of Chitnis et. al (2006), Kuipers (2006) and Kalviknes Bore

(2017), or seek to make an argument about the functions or appreciation of stand-up comedy such as Zillmann and Cantor (1972), Mintz (1985) and Stebbings (1993). It was not my intention to attempt to make claims about *all* audiences' understandings or reasons for appreciating comedy performed by women, or to try and categorise the purpose or functions of comedy by women.

The purpose of this aspect of the research was to collect data so that both the appeal of women-only live comedy for audiences, and motivations for attending women-only live comedy events could be considered. The opportunity to capture this data organically arose as a result of my role as participant-observer with the Women in Comedy Festival and was not an originally intended part of my research project. I was also aware that the festival itself as a small volunteer-led operation could benefit from understanding more about the audiences' motivations for attending the event and had the potential to contribute to the success of the venture. As the festival had no core funding, and the continuation of the project from year to year was always tenuous, I captured this data early on in my research. In October 2014 I conducted research with audiences for the second UK Women in Comedy Festival.

While the experiences of female comedians, and the barriers to or opportunities for inclusion, remained the primary focus of this research (as evidenced by the number of research questions that directly relate to that focus), such access to audiences for women-only comedy was an opportunity to consider both sides of the performer/audience relationship in this current context. This aspect of my research directly addresses my research question regarding the contribution women-only comedy nights make to the comedy industry. As the research question being addressed concentrated on contexts rather than texts, the focus of the questions related to contexts and experiences rather than attempting to capture data about responses to, or appreciation of, specific comic performances. The opportunity to gain an understanding of the perception audiences had of gendered comedy experiences enabled me to consider how stereotypes may link into these perceptions to create barriers for audiences as much as performers.

The methodology of this audience research paralleled that of Lockyer and Myers' (2011) study '"It's About Expecting the Unexpected": Live Stand-up Comedy from the Audience's Perspective', which considered the motivations of audiences to attend live comedy. This was to enable comparison of the collected data with their findings relating to the motivations of audiences to attend live comedy in general (as discussed in the previous chapter). The focus of this aspect of my research was the context of these comic experiences, rather than the content of the performances or audience's understandings of them. My efforts were concerned with capturing the general attitudes of the audience about female comedians and women-only performance spaces in order to inform my understanding of why they attend women-only comedy nights and how they understood and made sense of these spaces.

I wanted to establish whether attendance at the event had something to do with audience perceptions about what may be encountered within these gendered spaces, and whether audiences felt these encounters would be different to mainstream or mixed gendered nights. This aspect of my research was conducted to enable me to address my research question about the contribution made by women-only comedy nights to the industry by considering how audiences perceived these events. Without an understanding of why audiences attend the events it is impossible to understand whether these events have the potential to make changes to the industry. Research that engages solely with audiences for women-only comedy nights on the UK live circuit has not been undertaken previously. Thus the most comparable approach to what I was attempting to achieve was that of Lockyer and Myers, who similarly were focused on motivations and experiences rather than responses to specific performances.

The audience-study element of my overall thesis can be described as a mixed-methods piece of research as it involved the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The research was conducted with the understanding that each individual's experience of live comedy is different and that there are a range of variables affecting attendance to live comedy, many of which may not relate to the gender of the performers. The research methods were designed to attempt to delineate between motivations to attend live comedy *in general* and motivations to attend *women-only comedy*

specifically. My findings provide a snapshot of a specific moment for the UK comedy sector, and provides insight into underexplored aspects of the industry.

The audience research was undertaken in two stages. The first stage involved the use of a survey, which was then followed-up with qualitative semi-structured interviews with participants who volunteered to engage with the second phase of the study. The deployment of the surveys was achieved with the support of the festival organisers. Participants for both elements of this mixed-methods research were from audiences for the festival. The study therefore targeted individuals with at least one experience of women-only live comedy. As I was able to facilitate the survey in-person, in that I attended a number of performances across the festival and physically gave out and collected the surveys from respondents, there was a good level of uptake for the questionnaire and volunteers for the interview stage.

Sheffield Hallam University granted ethical clearance for this research and permission was given by festival organisers for me to attend the festival with the purpose of collecting data from audiences. In addition to this the festival organisers supported the research by making an online version of the questionnaire available on the Women in Comedy website (www.womenincomedy.co.uk) and by sending out the link via the audience mailing list which consists of people who have purchased tickets for the festival and other women-only comedy events. A total of 82 comedy shows by female comedians occurred as part of the 2014 festival and the hope was to reach a significant number of the audience for the festival. In total 336 people completed the survey, 334 in-person and 2 online. I then conducted 14 follow up interviews with participants, sampled to reflect the make-up of my overall cohort. These interviews resulted in 43,530 words of transcribed qualitative data. The survey form can be found in Appendix 4, a breakdown of answers to each question in Appendix 8. The findings from this aspect of my research will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Strategies of Enquiry

This audience-focused part of my research used a sequential explanatory strategy, where information gathered during qualitative interviews was used to explain or

further elaborate on the responses given during the survey stage (which for the most part were quantitative). The surveys contained questions that addressed both quantitative elements (specifically around audience demographics e.g. gender, age, religion, sexuality and number of visits to see comedy per year) and qualitative elements (around attitudes to female comedy in the use of attitude statements). Mixed-methods approaches to data collection, which this aspect of my research aligns to, have developed from recognition that irrespective of the approach there will always be limitations to data collection in the form of biases or errors of measurement. As Creswell comments in relation to mixed-methods approaches 'all methods have limitations, researchers felt that biases inherent in any single method could neutralize or cancel the biases of the other methods' (2003: 15). Conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with willing respondents from the survey stage of this research, provided an opportunity to gain further detail on attitudes and behaviours in relation to the research topic.

A full list of the delimitations, limitations, methods of survey deployment, as well as detail regarding the question module mapping of this study can be found in Appendix 3. The survey form itself can be found in Appendix 4.

Sampling and interviewing process:

The participants approached to complete the survey were sampled using 'criterion sampling', as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), in that they met the criteria of having experienced at least one event at the Women in Comedy Festival.

Participants interviewed during the second stage of the research were sampled using 'opportunistic sampling' from the group of respondents to the questionnaire. As the respondents had already met the criterion used to sample participants for the first stage of the research, any respondent willing to be interviewed was considered for interview. The cohort for interview stage was selected in order to be representative, as much as possible, of the wider respondents' characteristics (along demography lines such as age, gender and sexuality). The overall approach to interviewing these participants was consistent with the approach outlined previously in relation to semi-

structured interviews with performers and promoters. A noted exception however was in the amount of my own knowledge I invested in these conversations. Dissimilarly to the conversations with the performers, who had much more knowledge of the comedy industry than me, the audience participants (from the general public) could reasonably be assumed to have less knowledge of the comedy industry than me, certainly in relation to comedy theory. Therefore, it was important that I gave the audience participants the opportunity to express their own opinions without fear of 'getting it wrong' or being concerned they were contradicting me as the perceived expert. There were several instances where the participant expressed views that are contrary to my own which I did not challenge. At the time of the interview I pressed as much as possible for clarification from the participant on their views, without explaining to them or indicating to them why their views may be problematic in terms of the wider study. I did not want to overwhelm my audience participants with the specifics of my research, therefore in these interviews I kept my contributions or observations broad and ensured there was space for them to disagree with me.

Analysis of data:

Likert-style scales were used for all questions assessing attitudes. The decision to use a Likert scale was taken so that not only the opinion of 'for' or 'against' could be registered for each respondent, but that the respondents' *level* of agreement or disagreement towards the statement was also registered. The data collected was able to provide adequate information about the respondents' opinions and feelings about women and comedy. The survey responses therefore formed the basis for further exploration of the issues raised during second-stage interviews. The Likert scales were combined with open questions to ensure respondents had the opportunity to describe their own experiences and behaviours, in order to 'obtain their ideas in their own language' (Oppenheim, 1992: 113). Data regarding the respondent characteristics and any other closed multiple-choice question are presented within this research as percentages. Information from questions such as these are presented within this thesis using a descriptive statistics approach.

Qualitative data collected as part of the interview process has been thematically coded, again using the same process as outlined previously. Nowell et. al., drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004), argue that thematic analysis 'is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes found within a data set' (Nowell et.al., 2017: 2). It is a useful approach that enables the 'summarizing of key themes from a large data set' (Nowell et. al., 2017:2). In this case the huge number of words generated through interviewing performers, promoters and audiences. Thematic analysis was undertaken to discover similarities and differences in participants' experiences, behaviours and attitudes towards women and comedy. In a similar process to that undertaken when interviewing performers for this research, the transcript of each interview was sent back to the participant to ensure that what was recorded was an adequate reflection of their views and comments. This gave each participant the opportunity to elaborate further on any area they felt they had more to add, and ensured they were happy to give informed consent for the anonymised version of their interview to be used within this research. I started coding by grouping together reactions to questions I had asked explicitly both on the questionnaire and during the interview stage (for example about inclusion of female comedians into panel show formats on TV). I then followed this, when I was more familiar with the data, by coding themes that had arisen more organically from participant responses (for example the overt negativity towards mainstream spaces).

The full discussion of the audience-study aspect of my research is contained within Chapter 4 of this thesis, although as this aspect of the research was completed early on an awareness of the audience responses informed my broader awareness of the context when writing the overall argument of my thesis.

Presentation of findings:

The following chapters of this thesis draw on data collected using the multiple methods outlined above to form a narrative regarding the current UK comedy circuit. In this way my work contributes to humanities discourse around the topic of performance analysis and feminist performance and is presented using a topic-based structure typical to humanities scholarship, as theorised by Swales (2004). This

narrative draws on the experiences and thoughts of those working on the current UK comedy circuit, the attitudes of audiences for women-only comedy spaces, as well as my own experiences as a participant-observer and analysis of performances witnessed as part of this research. It is hoped that by moving beyond a straightforward discussion of comedy content to a more nuanced approach, a more comprehensive understanding can be reached regarding the challenges and opportunities facing female comedians at this time. My work should not be read as a straightforward presentation of data and findings. I set out to articulate an argument in order to contribute to discourse within my discipline of performance studies. Therefore, all uses and references to data collected through primary research are done in order that I can make my argument from an informed position, and can incorporate the experiences of others in their own words (rather than speak for them). The quotations included within this research are presented verbatim and only altered using punctuation for clarity of meaning. Thus, the inclusion of quotations from interviews should be considered as evidence that my position is indeed an informed one, not that my work is primarily concerned with data collection or analysis.

Conclusion:

In summary my methodology involved becoming a participant-observer of the cultural phenomenon discussed in this thesis and included netnography, qualitative interviews, deployment of surveys as well as textual and in-situ performance analysis. By combining a variety of qualitative research methods existing gaps in the literature will be directly addressed. The mixed-methods audience research should be considered a discrete aspect of the overall project and will be discussed in Chapter 4, whereas the information gathered from performers and promoter interviews and my own experiences live performances underpins and is integrated into the arguments made across the thesis as a whole. My methodology, in line with my feminist research ethos, is a thorough and creative approach to humanities research.

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[1] My specific contributions included creating the festival's logos (in 2014 as part of a branding exercise after year one had been put together hastily) as well as all publicity materials (posters and flyers) and designing the printed brochure for all four festivals (See Appendix 5). In addition to this I performed

front of house functions, stacked chairs, cleared glasses and, after a miscalculation in the number of hotel rooms, in 2014 provided accommodation to a performer from the *Short and Girlie* Show.

[2] I was already familiar with Buckingham's approach to transcription and felt confident using this method. This approach was also covered as an example on the MRes module I observed as part of preparing for this research.

[3] My availability to watch these performances varied greatly across the period of this research as I worked 4 concurrent jobs whilst conducting this study. Sometimes it just wasn't possible to attend relevant performances.

[4] My work within this thesis which focuses on Bridget Christie has been published and is the first academic consideration of her work. See Tomsett (2017). Similarly, my arguments relating to Luisa Omielan's work have been published and contribute to a refocusing within comedy studies scholarship on the work of performers of all genders. See Tomsett (2018).

Chapter Three

Where are we now?

The evolution of the British comedy circuit and

stereotypes regarding women and comedy

The opening chapter of this thesis will outline the evolution of the UK comedy industry in relation to the way the industry's structures and spaces, as well as the content of comic material, reflects and is inherently linked to gender stereotypes. The area of concern for this research is the contemporary UK comedy industry. However, it is vital to consider how the industry evolved to its current state, and what each stage of this evolution meant for inclusion. This chapter will set out how the British comedy industry arrived at its current form and how the industry is both impacted by, and reinforces, stereotypes about women's ability to be comic. This chapter will discuss the evolution of stand-up comedy, enduring gender stereotypes that relate to comedy, and the ways in which the current comedy circuit maintains gender divisions. This chapter expands upon existing UK comedy-history research by providing original insight into the role women-only comedy organisations have played in the development of stand-up since the 1990s. The key arguments set out in this chapter underpin the analysis of contemporary spaces and performances in the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Historically women have always been a minority group within the British comedy industry, as explored by Gray (1994), Porter (1998), and Small (1998). This is true even before we consider the ways that age, race or ability intersects with gender to create different forms of exclusion. Many of the techniques and subversive strategies that women have developed in order to be included within the industry have their roots in the historical spaces and approaches to live comedy. As post-colonial theorist Edward Saïd notes in his work *Culture and Imperialism* (1993):

> Just as none of us are beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings (6).

The early struggle to be included within the spaces of comic performance has had a direct impact on the way the industry currently operates, and on the images and imaginings found in comic performance of all kinds. The following overview of the UK comedy circuit is organised in chronological order and briefly outlines the early stages of the form's development. A more detailed consideration of the contexts emerging from the 1980s onwards is then undertaken, as this was when the overwhelming majority of inclusive practices originated. Additionally, recollections of the 1980s form part of the living memory of many performers still working on the comedy circuit today and thus is pertinent to the qualitative data collected as part of this research.

The evolution of stand-up comedy:

Comic performance can be considered a sub-category of theatre. When reflecting back on broader theatrical history it is clear that the traditions and structures of the performance industries have often excluded women, as noted by Shapiro (1996) and Stott (2005). Any changes to the exclusion of women from public performance, of all kinds, are inextricably linked to, and reflective of, the cultural role of women in wider society at the time. When we reflect upon the long-term development of the performing arts, what has been considered 'appropriate' for women to participate in, in terms of on-stage performance, has changed slowly but significantly. These changes have been in line with the progression of rights for women and women's inclusion in the labour market outside of the home.[1]

Performed comedy played a role in early civilisations, such as Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire (as explored by Fontaine and Scafuro, 2014). The language used to describe the comparatively new form of stand-up comedy performance however is startlingly recent. Oliver Double argues that whilst the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), and American humour academic John Limon, citing the OED, date the term 'stand-up comedy' to 1966, it is clear that the term must have been around before this first recorded usage. Double highlights that Lenny Bruce (1925- 1966) must have been described in this way, as Bruce was a pioneer of modern-day stand-up form. Double's work makes the case for the term 'stand-up' (in relation to how we would understand the term in the present day) originating in the late 1940s, stating that:

What does become clear is that the term *stand-up* being used to define a style of comic performance seems to be of American origin. After its first occurrence in 1948, it was common in the American trade press throughout the 1950s. By contrast, it did not appear in the British trade press until the following decade. Before this point, what we would call stand-up comedians were known as *front cloth comics*, referring to the staging in variety theatres, in which performers like Max Miller would do their turns in front of the stage cloth hung closest to the front of the stage (Double, 2017: 107) [original italics].[2]

The period of comic performance that preceded the time when 'stand-up comedy' became known as a distinct (and named) form differs in the UK from the American context. In America stand-up comedy grew out of vaudeville, a type of theatre-based entertainment that 'took the form of a mixed bill of acts, which might include singers, dancers, speciality acts and comedy quartets' (Double, 2014: 23). Performers who communicated straight to the audience without recourse to a fourth wall were called monologists. Concurrently in the British context the music hall tradition, which marginally pre-dates vaudeville, had provided a space for a similar comic form to evolve. Key events that led from this period to the alternative movement in the 1980s can be summarised as follows.

- With the Theatres Act of 1843 comedy in Britain 'began to resemble a distinct field of cultural production' (Friedman, 2014: 15). During the music hall period, which followed the Theatres Act, public entertainment moved into dedicated performance venues from taverns. The performers, who were mainly singers and musicians were still 'performing to male-dominated, largely working-class audiences who drank and ate as they watched' (Double: 2014: 35). At the start of the twentieth century the bills/ line-ups became shorter and were repeated several times a night, becoming popularly known as variety rather than music hall.

- Variety survived as a form of popular entertainment until the late 1950s and contrary to popular depictions of this time, some women were included as comedic performers throughout this period, as explored by Huxley and James (2012). The manner in which comedy developed in these formative settings is significant to consider in terms of the way comedy has been framed as a male-

dominated industry. The involvement of women with musicianship and singing has historically been socially acceptable. Music provided a way in to the music hall spaces of early comic performance enabling women to move from music to comic songs and then increasingly engage in direct address with the audience and comic patter. The work of performer Marie Lloyd during this period provides an example here.

- In the early 1960s due to the decline of variety in specialist theatrical and music hall venues, entertainment of all kinds, but most significantly for this research stand-up comedy, moved into the working men's clubs. This was concurrent to the satire boom in radio, television and theatrical environments, as discussed in the work of Wagg (2002). The working men's clubs, whilst owned and run locally were 'governed by the Club and Institute Union' (Friedman, 2014:17). It is of course relevant to note that 'the clubs were set up specifically by and for men' (Gray, 1994: 134), or more precisely white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied men. Thus, it is the 1960s and working men's club comedy spaces where a very clear interconnection of class, race and gender in the policing of space comes to the fore. It is during this period of stand-up comedy's evolution that the physical spaces of performances clearly create barriers to inclusion and impact upon, or prevent the development of, the content of stand-up comedy. The space of the working men's club was heavily gendered, a significant number of clubs would only allow male members and so any women in the audience had to be the guest of a man. It wasn't until 2007, and long after the heyday of the venues, that women were granted the same rights as men to these spaces.[3]

- It is during the 1960s that we can most clearly see comedians maintaining hegemonic notions of gender, race and class through the jokes being told on stage and the emergence of 'a new genre of comedy known as traditional or trad stand-up' (Friedman, 2014: 17). This traditional stand-up comedy was performed with very little alternative position or opposition, as those who would be able to offer a different perspective or approach were unwelcome in the spaces of performance. As Frances Gray argues when considering the

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content of comic performance from this time 'The point was not to radically change the audience's perceptions but to get a reflex response' (1994: 135). In order to achieve this reflexive response originality of material was unimportant. Gray comments that 'the best way to do this was to be aggressive. Misogyny, along with racism and homophobia, was an easy way' (1994: 135). It was a complex negotiation process for people who identified as one of the popular targets for humour, to make a transition from the object or butt of the joke, to the performers themselves.

- In the 1960s variety also became a fixture of broadcast television. This meant that many of the comics from this circuit managed to reach a broader audience, having their voices heard outside the confines of the clubs too. Several high-profile club comics, including Bernard Manning and Frank Carson featured on Granada Television's series *The Comedians* (1971-1993) in the early 1970s (Double, 2014). In this way jokes based on gender stereotypes of women became prevalent outside of the live comic environment too.

- The televising of stand-up performances in the 1960s and 70s was complemented by narrative television comedy and the continued rise of the situational comedy, or sitcom.[4] These different forms of television comedy worked together to reinforce stereotypes about women, presenting as they did, an unchallenged and united front. Women within comedy had little opportunity to define themselves and were represented either as the masculinized, desexualised monster or the sex-crazed object within mainstream comedy shows, written overwhelmingly by men. As Larraine Porter observes 'What unites the narrow spectrum of female types in the traditional modes of popular British comedy of this period is their *a priori* definition by physicality and sexuality' (Porter, 1998: 70). Therefore, in the 1960s and 70s when not being described as wives, mother-in-laws, dumb blondes or spinsters in the punchlines of jokes, or even visually represented by male comics 'dragging up' as old women by stand-up comics on television, female actresses could be seen playing these roles themselves in sitcoms, furthering these gender stereotypes.[5] The mother-in-law, her-indoors and dumb blonde jokes

typified by the likes of Bernard Manning have become synonymous with this era of the UK comedy industry and traditional stand-up form.

We can see that physical barriers (the spaces themselves) prevented women from equal access to stand-up comedy, especially during the working men's club era. This is in many respects comparable to the way contemporary comedy spaces are often physically inaccessible to those with disabilities, as thoroughly explored in the work of sociologist Sharon Lockyer (2015).[6] It was in reaction to the traditional stand-up scene's style and content, prevalent during the working men's club era, that the alternative comedy scene was established.

In 1979, in the wake of America (where the LA Comedy Store opened in 1972), Britain finally got its first dedicated comedy club in the form of The Comedy Store in Dean Street, Soho, London. The shift between traditional stand-up taking place in working men's clubs to comedy specific venues, as part of the alternative movement across the 1980s, cannot be underestimated in terms of inclusion. From the start, the politics of the alternative comedy scene was distinctly anti-establishment, defining itself in opposition to the kind of comedy produced by the club comics. Arriving at a time of national tension, when Britain was governed by the divisive Thatcher-led Conservative government (Vinen, 2013), the alternative comedy scene rebelled against the sexist, racist and homophobic aspects of the working men's club era. The comedy club became a space to blow off steam and rebel against the Tory government, a space to be critical and political, to be entertained but also challenged, rather than only to drown one's sorrows or socialize. The physical and ideological barriers to women's participation in the traditional spaces meant that the opportunity to perform in a more inclusive environment, such as The Comedy Store, literally and metaphorically opened many doors for women.

It was at this stage of the development of stand-up comedy in the UK, that a broader range of voices started to be included. Comedians who were central to the comedy scene of this period include Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, Rik Mayall, Adrian Edmonson, Ben Elton, Alexei Sayle and Jo Brand (who initially performed under the name 'The Seamonster'). As Sam Friedman notes, they offered much more variation in

performance style and content than had been the case with traditional stand-up. Despite this variation the comics 'were united by an experimental approach to comedy that self-consciously attempted to push beyond the "low brow" styles that had previously dominated the field' (Friedman, 2014: 19). It is at this stage in British comedy history that women's voices start to be included in a more meaningful way, as they are finally able to get onto stage more easily, providing women an opportunity for self-definition through comedy.

However, it is worth considering here the Soho context of The Comedy Store. When looking back on this era academic discourse has tended to focus on the increased inclusion of women during this period, which is understandable as this moment was incredibly important in that regard. However, the opening of The Comedy Store in Soho, a district of London synonymous with sex work, porn theatres and gentlemen's clubs should not be overlooked.[7] Whilst women were included on stage at The Comedy Store from the very start, when leaving the club they were still presented with a very stereotypical and sexualised version of women. Soho at this time would not have been a gender-neutral space (if it is possible for any city space to be gender neutral, or indeed work beyond the binary, as explored in the work of Doan, 2010). The industry Soho has become known for, and that was booming in the 80s, is reliant upon the marketization and objectification of women's bodies. Having worked (in the film education sector) in Soho myself during the late 2000s I find this specific geographic context highly relevant to this period in UK comedy history. Stepping out of the confines of my office onto Berwick Street, a few yards away from the famous former Raymond's Revue Bar, the environment I encountered provided a constant reminder about the way society objectifies and commodifies women's bodies. Thus, over twenty years earlier than my own experiences of Soho, whilst the space of comic performance itself became more inclusive and welcoming, the wider geographic context of that space was still starkly gendered and sexualised. When comedy was performed in working men's clubs, women were rarely onstage, and if they did perform, were mostly there to be objectified sexually. This objectification may well have started to make its way off the stage during the alternative comedy movement of the 1980s, but society still saw women as sexual commodities. Perhaps the radical new comedy of the alternative scene, seeking a non-mainstream environment from which

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to challenge norms, could only initially exist in this marginalised space of sex-work? Isolated within a very specific part of London, the opportunities for this new comedy to infiltrate industrial regions of the UK, where many of the working men's clubs existed, was limited.

Britain in the 1990s saw comedy become known as the 'new rock and roll' with the rise of a new group of superstar comedians. Wider fan bases, facilitated by television and radio, meant that comedy tours moved up from small venues and regional theatres to arenas. Those comics who had found success in broadcast mediums now toured with their material, normally incorporating both a live rendition of televised material (to keep the fans happy) with small sections of new material. These tours started to take place in larger and larger venues, eventually reaching sports stadiums and arenas capable of seating thousands. This was a new, and in every respect much bigger, experience for comedy audiences. In 1993, the famously fractious comic double act of David Baddiel and Rob Newman sold out the 12,000 seat Wembley stadium with their tour, becoming the first act to ever do so (Thompson, 2004: 73-74). For those who could not attend these huge live shows, recordings were made and sold on VHS, and latterly DVD, so that performances could be kept and enjoyed for future. This moved the commodification of comedy from being objectified as vinyl records and radio audio recordings to a much more visual artefact.

Arena comedy arrived at the start of what would come to be known as the 'Cool Britannia' period of the mid 1990s. This cultural moment was cemented by a change in government, from the 'grey man' (John Major) led Conservatives, to New Labour in 1997. The optimism of a cool, British, international-facing future was epitomised by the young Tony Blair, who saw, and exploited, the value of Britain's cultural industries in shaping awareness of the UK's identity on the international stage. It was also a time when the increasing inclusion of women in politics was part of mainstream discourse. The Labour majority government was formed with just over 100 female MPs and this was seen as a victory for women's inclusion in society, (even though the press at the time undermined this by regularly referring to the elected MPs as 'Blair's Babes').[8]

The concept of comedy as the new rock and roll is actually a very apt way to capture this moment in comedy history, as many of the gendered assumptions about popular music easily translate to comedy. The term originated in the late 1980s when comedian and writer Dave Cohen included the phrase within a review, citing a throwaway comment made by a comedian on stage. This phrase was subsequently picked up by Janet Street Porter who used it on television, popularising the expression (Cohen, 2013). The exceptionalism used when discussing women in bands, especially female musicians, is comparable to the way women in comedy are discussed. This is possibly due to the way both performing music and comedy are embodied art forms, where the physical person who holds the creative talent or skill performs in front of the audience (unlike say, fine art or sculpture). This means that the gender of the performer is often noted and assessed in some way as part of their skills (as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6). Carrie Brownstein, an American musician and comedian, has experienced both of these industries, albeit in a US context, and was part of the 1990s alternative rock scene. When reflecting back on the evolution of the 'Riot Grrrl' movement and her role as guitarist in band Sleater-Kinney, before co-creating television comedy *Portlandia* (2011-2018) with Fred Armisen and Jonathan Krisel, she comments:

> What does it feel like to be a woman in a band? I realize that those questions – that talking about the experience – had become part of the experience itself. More than anything, I feel that this meta-discourse, talking about the talk, is part of how it feels to be a "woman in music" (or a "woman in anything" for that matter – politics, business, comedy, power) (Brownstein, 2015: 111).

Brownstein, who has achieved a uniquely significant level of success in *both* rock and comedy, articulates here that the way in which performers who identify as female are handled by the media is in keeping with the way society maintains wider gender difference. Part of being a rock musician and a woman is to be considered a minority, to be discussed as if the music created is a genre in and of itself, as something different to music produced by men and thereby categorised as the norm. It is clear that these stereotypes are not only an issue that relates to comedy, as will be discussed in detail further on in this chapter.

Alongside the arena developments of the live comedy scene, British television comedy, especially that produced by the BBC and Channel 4 during this era, was booming. Many comedians enjoyed both a live presence on the circuit as well as television work on sketch and panel shows. In terms of a female presence on screen during this boom in television comedy, Channel 4 produced *Smack the Pony* (1999-2003), written by and starring Doon Mackichan, Sally Phillips and Fiona Allen. The significance of *Smack the Pony*, in terms of the queering of gender roles has been explored extensively in the work of White (2018). *Spaced* (1998-2000), a sitcom that has now achieved cult status, was co-written by Simon Pegg and Jessica Hynes and offered women a new comic role model in the form of the awkward Daisy Steiner, defying the sexual stereotypes outlined by Porter (1998). In 1998 a significant impact was made in terms of racial diversity in televised comedy, with the South Asian British sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2001) created by Sanjeev Bhaskar, Meera Syal and Anil Gupta broadcast by BBC2 following a successful run on BBC Radio 4.[9]

This minimal inclusion of women and minority perspectives from mainstream comedy did not go unnoticed and, around this time, the UK saw the establishment of two separate high-profile organisations created to address gender inequality on the live circuit. Both Funny Women and Laughing Cows were established to champion parity for women in live comedy. Interventions into the live circuit during this period were seen as a way to make changes higher up in the industry, but this particular aspect of comedy history is not well-documented.[10] Therefore I seek, through the presentation of original qualitative testimony, to expand upon the current history of the UK comedy industry here.

Laughing Cows was founded by promoter Hazel O'Keefe who started to produce all female-line ups in 1998. When discussing how the organisation came into being and the attitudes on the circuit at the time, O'Keefe said the following:

> I started asking questions of certain promoters, you know 'Why are you not booking this person, why are you not doing that? Why do you only at the most ever have one female on the line-up?' and it was just a common response, and this was back in 1998, that promoters would not take the risk of booking more than one female. As a feminist, […] running a lesbian bar I was just thinking, 'this is ridiculous'. For me, for my market an all-female line-up would work

perfectly. So yeah that's how Laughing Cows started quite simply […] it was me and Karen Cockfield that started it at The Vesper Lounge in November 1998. (Appendix 6b)

The motivation for the establishment of Laughing Cows was a reaction to the idea that having more than one woman on a bill would be a risk. Additionally, O'Keefe had identified a ready-made and under-served audience for female comedy in the context of a lesbian environment. Much of the male dominated comedy, which, as a hangover from the origins of stand-up, still contained casual homophobia and fixed ideas of gender roles, would not have been appropriate for that setting and so O'Keefe sought to find acts that were a better fit for her audiences.

At around the same time Lynne Parker, director of the organisation Funny Women, had started to think about comedy in a similar way. Funny Women is an organisation that runs competitions, live events and provides training to up-and-coming female comedians. Parker had been working in public relations for a group trying to establish a new comedy club in central London. She reflects on Funny Women's origin story as follows:

> [T]owards the end of the 1990s, so about '97, '98, I was working for a comedy promoter who was launching a club in London and they were a very well-known brand from America called The Improv. […] So, I was spending two or three nights a week in a comedy club environment, which I was fairly familiar with […] it was all going really well and we talked about the fact that they never booked any women, and I was told by the other partner that was because there weren't any. And I thought well this is a bit odd because there are women out there doing stand up, I know there are. I think it was also at the time, we're talking about fifteen […] years ago, and people like Jo Brand and Jenny Eclair were all probably in the middle of bringing up their kids and there was a wee bit of a lull. I think it's true to say that there weren't perhaps as a many visible women gigging on the circuit. And I just said I think it'd be really good for the club if we could do something to promote women, hence Funny Women was born effectively. No sooner had we got the whole idea up and running, and we were going to have a charity night, and were looking at some of the other clients that I had in the fashion industry and that to sponsor it, the partner, the guy who came over from LA, fell out with the guy here and he hightailed it back to America never to be seen again. […] The one thing I had that I felt really passionate about was this idea of doing something under the banner of Funny Women, so I decided I would do it myself. So, I […] protected it as much as I could and then spent two years nearly to get the whole thing off the ground. Its first manifestation was a big charity comedy night in September 2002. (Appendix 6a)

It is clear that with Funny Women the opportunity to go ahead with a women-only line-up needed more planning and consideration, as at this early stage in the organisation's development they did not have a specific venue in which they could experiment. In 2003, having successfully run one charity night, Funny Women also started to run the Funny Women Awards, an annual event, (still running today), that seeks to highlight and promote the work of stand-up comedians who identify as female. The awards started out with a single category and has now developed into an annual event that runs heats across the country and rewards writing, performing and filmmaking talent. Former winners of the Funny Women Awards include Zoe Lyons (2004), Debra Jane Appleby (2005), Andi Osho (2007), Katherine Ryan (2008), Jayde Adams (2014), Desiree Burch (2015) and Thanyia Moore (2017). The runners-up list read like a *Who's Who* of the current comedy circuit, and includes amongst many others Bridget Christie, Susan Calman, Diane Morgan, Sara Pascoe, Sindhu Vee and Sofie Hagan.[11]

In this way the late 1990s was incredibly significant in terms of the evolution of comedy in the UK, in that we see at this point significant proactive attempts to address the lack of representation for women in comedy, through the establishment of women-only line-ups. Women audiences were now seen as an untapped demographic, as observed by Aston and Harris (2015). These interventions in the live comedy circuit by and for women occurred in the context of the first few female-led screen comedies being televised, such as the aforementioned *Smack The Pony*. Mills, writing in 2009, comments that 'The dominance of masculine comedy can be seen by the tiny proportion of sitcoms which have women as the leading roles, and a minority of sitcom writers, producers and performers are female' (Mills, 2009: 21). The slow inclusion of women into television comedy during this period, in a way that was not reductive, arguably drew attention to the lack of exposure for women on the live circuit, provoking women like O'Keefe and Parker into action.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s dedicated comedy venues had sprung up across the UK. The Comedy Store opened a new venue in Manchester in 2000 and Jongleurs, which initially started out in London in 1993, expanded rapidly to have eight venues across the country by the millennium. After Jongleurs was bought out in 2000 by the

Regent's Inn organisation, which then collapsed, it underwent a complex series of buy-outs and rebranding. Finally, the company went into administration in 2017.[12] The Glee Club, established in Birmingham in 1994, had a less mainstream feel to it in the earlier days, but now also runs venues in Oxford, Cardiff and Nottingham.

It was this expansion of big comedy brands and their re-focus on the commercial nature of the form, that resulted in the dedicated venues, which were so vital in the establishment of the alternative comedy scene, slowly *becoming* the mainstream. The targeting of 'stag and hen' parties, the group discounts and drinks offers meant that, again, the balance had shifted from a concentration on the performance occurring on stage, back to a 'good night out' facilitated by alcohol. In many ways this refocus on comedy as a backdrop to socialising is reminiscent of the working men's club era.

Alongside the comedy clubs' subsummation into a populist mainstream in the mid 2000s, a 'new alternative', or 'DIY' comedy started to emerge. Double characterises DIY comedy as 'loose, quirky, folksy, homemade, autobiographical, politically liberal and full of geeky pop culture references' (2014: 59). The DIY or new alternative approach is best seen in the comedy of Pappy's Fun Club, Josie Long, Robin Ince, David O'Doherty and more recently comics such as Mae Martin, Ivo Graham, Alison Spittle, Claudia O'Doherty, Simon Amstell and James Acaster. Double argues that these acts were inspired by comedians such as Stewart Lee and Daniel Kitson, both of whom eschewed the mainstream circuit and fostered a cult audience by repeatedly touring live material to develop more personalised relationships with audiences (Double, 2014: 58). Lee recalls the mood of the early to mid 2000s in his book *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-up Comedian* as follows:

> If the phrase hadn't lost its meaning once already, you could almost say we were witnessing the birth of a new Alternative Comedy, in opposition to the crowd-pleasing composite that the old Alternative Comedy had become. […] [T]he ubiquity of these big chains meant that in every city that had a Franchised Laff Retail Outlet™, at least one alternative venue seemed to be thriving in opposition to it, such as XS Malarkey in Manchester, The Glee Club in Birmingham, or The Comedy Box in Bristol, none of which had much crossover with the franchises in terms of acts or audiences (Lee, 2010: 36).

It is clear that during the 2000s a more obvious division was emerging on the live circuit, a split that is still evident in the contemporary industry. For an audience

member for comedy in Manchester in the present context, there is a distinct difference between certain venues. Comedy at The Comedy Store or The Frog and Bucket (a mid-sized comedy club) on Thursday, Friday or Saturday nights is very commercially focused and frequented by stag and hen parties. XS Malarkey which runs on Tuesday nights in The Bread Shed pub's back room, or the irregular Group Therapy nights at the Gorilla club strike a more non-mainstream tone. The latter nights both define themselves in opposition to the big clubs, cultivate a personal relationship with their audiences through mailing lists and social media, and intentionally programme a more alternative selection of comedians than the more mainstream circuit.

In the 2000s comedy nights were nothing new. However, the way that the comedy clubs were marketing themselves to appeal to a wide commercial audience meant that often these smaller nights became the only place for voices that did not chime with the commercial ethos that the clubs now fostered. The more challenging, political or niche comedy found its way into smaller nights and regional arts centres rather than existing comedy club venues, and this is a division still in evidence on the UK circuit now. A pertinent and high-profile example of the new alternative circuit in action would be the work of The Invisible Dot (often referred to as The Dot). The organisation was initially founded in 2009 as a production company and worked with comedians who were attempting something outside the mainstream approach. The ultimate example of The Dot's approach was their work with comedian Tim Key who, during this time, was developing his hallmark misanthropic performance poetry. The Invisible Dot later went on to produce shows from, amongst others, Natasia Demetriou, Claudia O'Doherty, Liam Williams, Ellie White, and sketch troupe Daphne. [13] In 2013 it opened a small, seventy-five seat, minimally decorated, venue in Kings Cross. In this venue the organisation staged comedy nights, provided a space for work-in-progress shows and championed a diverse range of comic voices from a non-mainstream, alternative perspective. The tickets were priced very competitively enabling those with lower incomes to enjoy alternative comedy when they had been priced-out of the more mainstream clubs. In 2016 however, The Invisible Dot closed after going into voluntary liquidation, having failed to become commercially viable in the long term. Many at the time, including the company's founder Simon Pearce, likened The Dot to Factory Records, the famous Manchester record label and operators of The Haçienda

nightclub. Factory Records also sought to achieve something creatively outside the commercial mainstream, but never quite managed to operate successfully as an enterprise, as outlined extensively and entertainingly in Peter Hook's book *The Haçienda: How Not To Run a Club* (2009).

It is important to note that even when an individual comic, comedy club or comedy night defines in opposition to the mainstream, economic viability remains essential. As Friedman comments regarding the current circuit:

> While the field retains a strong 'alternative' arm devoted to more autonomous production, there is no public funding for comedy and even those operating in the restricted domain must generate enough money to earn a living. Thus in comedy, all actors straddle the divide between culture and economy in some way. (2014:146)

The current context has now developed beyond this mid 2000s split between mainstream and new alternative. The arrival of more digital, mediated options for engaging with and developing an audience has provided additional spaces for non-mainstream voices to be heard. The impact that the Internet and streaming services have had on the current circuit is significant in that it provides access to an audience irrespective of geography, or the need to engage with a physical performance context. It has also enabled more of a cross-over directly between DIY/ new alternative live comedy to screen comedy via streaming services. This has enabled those who wish to adopt a more alternative approach or tone to eschew the big comedy clubs or mainstream spaces and present their work online through recordings for online services or by posting their own User Generated Content (UGC) on sites such as YouTube and Vimeo. Comedian James Acaster provides a relevant example of someone who has attained a good level of success through numerous nominations for Edinburgh Festival Comedy Awards and has then developed an international audience and profile through recording his alternative comedy shows for Netflix. The digital landscape and what this means for female comics will be considered further in Chapter 5.

It is clear from this brief history of British comedy that there has been inclusion of some women at all points, and their achievements cannot be forgotten or dismissed.

However, whilst the current industry includes a much more diverse range of comics than ever before, white male comics have been the norm for a significant part of the industry's history and continue to dominate, especially in the commercial circuit.

Gender Stereotypes

Just as the comedy industry itself, in terms of venues, forms and ideological content of jokes has developed over time, so too has the wider cultural understanding of women and humour. These understandings have shifted significantly during the rise of stand-up comedy as a form. In terms of the stereotypes about women that may be limiting participation in stand-up comedy, we can see two central thought patterns in operation; conceptions regarding what women are capable of (or incapable of) due to their biological sex, and what is considered culturally appropriate behaviour and knowledge for women to demonstrate or possess per se.

It is clear that even when a more diverse array of comedians take to the stage, as had started to occur in the 1980s with the alternative movement, audiences and promoters cannot just switch off any internalised biases they have developed. Stereotypes about gender are culturally ingrained and, as Cordelia Fine discusses in her work *Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Between Sex Differences* (2010):

> Even if you, personally, don't subscribe to these stereotypes, there is a part of your mind that isn't so prissy. Social psychologists are finding that what we can consciously report about ourselves does not tell the whole story (2010: 4).

Thus, even when, as individuals, we may think we hold progressive views about gender, race or sexuality, and even actively work towards equality in our speech and conscious behaviours, our unconscious minds will still refer back to the stereotypical views we were exposed to when growing up, and the views that are reinforced in our day-to-day experiences. There is a well-worn stereotype that women are incapable of being funny. The notion that somehow the ability to be humorous is inherently a male trait continues to be popular. This idea impacts not only on those working within the industry (including industry gatekeepers who will be discussed later in this chapter) but on audiences too.

As part of this research I discussed this issue with comedian Sophie Willan, who had also been considering the way these stereotypes impact on her work:

> I wrote a poem about this, years ago […]. It's something like 'Every time she speaks, her femininity does but reek, the stagnant perfume of the past.' because it does! Because every time she [a comic identifying as female] speaks you go [makes shocked face] 'woman!'. [...] And all that backlog that you've got, all the file, the Google file in your brain of all those debates about 'are women funny?' is going through your head, you're gripping your couch, or you're gripping your chair, thinking 'can she do it?'. So already that's not funny is it? You know, already she is set up to fail (Appendix 6n).

As Willian touches on, often the debate about humour is articulated in terms of gendered characteristics or the biological determinism of male or female brains. This stereotype regarding humour has been pervasive for many years and has been of central concern for many academic studies across numerous social-scientific fields including the work of Gray (1994), Franzini (1996), Gilbert (2002), Kotthoff (2006), Barreca (2014) and Mizejewski (2014). The idea that women cannot be funny *because* of their gender (or their biological sex) is only one small step away from more troubling assertions about the capabilities of women, such as their suitability to work in certain industries or hold positions of power. Fine, whose work seeks to challenge this reductive use of the currently available science on male and female brains, warns that:

> The neuroscientific discoveries we read about in magazines, newspaper articles, books and sometimes even journals tell a tale of two different brains – essentially different – that create timeless and immutable psychological differences between the sexes. It's a compelling story that offers a neat, satisfying explanation, and justification, of the gender status-quo (Fine, 2010: xxii).

The science then, packaged as popular rhetoric or sound-bites, helps to reinforce stereotypes, without the limitations of any research findings or data being fully explained or made clear to the casual reader. The work of scientists Simon Baron-Cohen (2003) and Louann Brizendine (2007, 2010) provide examples of 'male or female brain' related research that is regularly watered down or rehashed to support outdated gender norms in the popular press. Both Brizendine and Baron-Cohen's focus is on studying the in-utero testosterone levels in human foetuses, a crucial factor in

the determination of biological sex, resulting in a 'male' or 'female' brain.[14] Much of

their work is critiqued by Fine as insufficient, in that the methods used to measure

these testosterone levels are unreliable, and also the animal subjects used to prove an

equivalence across mammals, such as rats, have numerous other behavioural

differences that have not been accounted for in the findings (Fine, 2010: 99-118). The

reductive uses of information taken from these scientific studies feeds into the

collective subconscious and becomes part of our cultural memory, building up

unconscious biases and contributing (to use Willan's term) to the 'Google files' in our

brains. As Fine highlights:

> The principle behind learning in associative memory is simple: as its name
> suggests, what is picked up are associations in the environment. Place a woman
> behind almost every vacuum cleaner being pushed around a carpet and, by
> Jove, associative memory will pick up this pattern (2010:5).

The level of exposure we have to these restrictive notions of (binary) gender does not

go unnoticed by our unconscious minds; we start to form associations. Put a white

man behind every microphone on a comedy club stage and an association of a

comedian *as* a white male is formed in our collective memory as a result. These

limiting attitudes regarding women's capabilities, or 'natural' qualities, create barriers

for women across all industries, not only creative ones. Attitudes about women being

overly-emotional and naturally submissive (and therefore poor leaders) influence,

consciously or unconsciously, decisions that prevent women directing big budget films,

participating in competitive sport, achieving equal representation in boardrooms, or

gaining political power.[15] Even though progress is being made in challenging gender

stereotypes, and British society is slowly coming around to a more nuanced

understanding beyond a gender binary, these attitudes, which now may no longer be

articulated verbally for fear of reproach, are still shockingly prevalent.

Reflecting back on the evolution of the stand-up comedy industry, the exclusion of

women (as well as people of colour, LGBTQ* performers and those with differing

abilities) from participating in earlier iterations of the form has created a gap which is

now slowly being addressed. This gap is not specific to comedy, but is potentially made

more acute for stand-up due to the way the form itself interacts with other

stereotypes about women. Comedy as an *industry* labours under the weight of these stereotypes, but so too does the very *comedic material* being produced by comedians. What is particularly notable about the previous exclusion of women from comedy (in both live and broadcast environments) is that this lack of exposure in performed comedy is central to reinforcing the wider social stereotype that impacts on all women. When discussing the way women were historically excluded from education, Fine comments that '[d]espite such – to our modern eyes – obvious impediments to women's intellectual development, they were widely assumed to be naturally inferior by many' (Fine, 2010: xxii). This is comparable to the way women within the comedy industry are often viewed in a contemporary context. In the past there have been fewer female comics than male comics and this is often produced as *evidence* that women are not funny (or are less funny than men). This line of argument completely eradicates the fact that women were excluded from participation in this form, and in many cases from the physical spaces of performance, for the majority of stand-up comedy's development.

In addition to the biological determinism, or neurosexism, of the 'women aren't funny' debates, the inherent linking of comedy to sexual promiscuity and sexualised behaviour has also resulted in the idea that comedy is unsuitable for women. This is arguably the case because comedy is seen to encourage or enable women to publicly display knowledge of sexuality that women should simply not have. When reflecting on her childhood in 1970s America Barreca comments that to be capable of producing humour was also to impinge on an active masculine behaviour, as '[t]his relationship to joking put girls in a position similar to the sexual dilemma that proposed we be attractive but unavailable, caught between being cheap and being prudish' (2013: 7). This is an especially pertinent observation when we consider a concurrent time in the UK, as sexual joking or double entendre formed a significant amount of the comedy of the working men's club era. Janet Bing's 2007 research 'Liberated Jokes: Sexual Humor in All-Female Groups', explored the way sexual joking may operate differently in women-only spaces. In addressing this difficulty for women in possessing sexual knowledge, or more accurately publicly *demonstrating* possession of sexual knowledge by laughing at a joke that requires this awareness, she comments that:

> As in many other situations, women are in a double bind. If they don't tell or laugh at sexual jokes, even those directed against them, they have no sense of humor. If they do, they are available. Most males do not operate under such restrictions (343).

Female ownership and enjoyment of sexuality continues to be taboo, or at the very least less socially acceptable than male equivalents.

Due to the way the debates and stereotypes about women and comedy draw on sexist stereotypes, women's ability, or licence, to be the creators of humour, is inextricably linked to feminism and the women's rights movement. As Gray contends '[m]ost feminist activity has been centrally concerned with silence, and with its breaking' (1994: 13). It is this breaking of the silence imposed through a suppression of comedy by women that is of concern to this research, as feminists labour under additional stereotypes that relate to humour. Feminists have famously been satirized as humourless and unable to take a joke, as '[t]o object to a specific joke, in a specific context, is to be perceived as an enemy of laughter in general' (Gray, 1994: 4). The character of Millie Tant created for adult comic *Viz* (1979-), which was particularly popular in the UK in the 1990s, provides an obvious touchstone for the ridiculing of feminist activism in British cultural traditions. As David Huxley observes when discussing representations of gender and class in *Viz*, Millie's narratives:

> [N]ormally involve arranging protests against non-existent or redundant threats (such as phallic pillar boxes) and misinterpreting innocent remarks. The results [...] almost inevitably some type of swift retribution in the form of humiliation or physical violence or both (Huxley, 1998: 287).

Millie is an amalgamation of a variety of feminist stereotypes used to discredit both individual women and the collective action of the women's movement. In Millie's physical depiction (as large, butch and braless), humourless attitude, and aggressive behaviour we can find a perpetuation through comedy of negative assumptions about feminists. The way comedy has been used to ridicule the feminist position as an overreaction maintains stereotypes about women and more specifically feminists not being able to 'take a joke'. This has been integrated into popular culture in the UK for a long time. It is the way in which women's sexual identities and women's abilities as

comedians have been combined (and silenced) which makes stand-up comedy such a rewarding and important area to consider through a feminist lens.

In the late 1990s, when *Viz* remained popular, British popular culture saw the explosion of 'Cool Britannia', as outlined previously, at a time where Britain's cultural exports, such as music and fashion, were seen as the benchmark of cool in the Western world. Significantly this moment facilitated the rise of the 'ladette'. As Angela Smith observes 'the term "ladette" is commonly thought to have been coined by the men's magazine *FHM* in 1994 to describe young women who adopt "laddish" behaviour in terms of boisterous assertiveness, heavy drinking session and sexual promiscuity' (2013: 139). During this time it became normalised, fashionable even, for women to replicate behaviour more commonly associated with working class men. This behaviour was arguably an attempt to demonstrate that equality had been achieved and that women could now do everything to the same standard as their male counterparts. The poster girls of this (overwhelmingly white) cultural movement included many high-profile models, musicians, presenter and DJs of the time, such as Denise Van Outen, Sara Cox, Zoë Ball and Sarah Cawood (Nally and Smith, 2013). In general the 1990s saw a shift away from the collective feminist campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Greenham Common protests, to a position within pop culture that focused on women's individual freedoms. As Angela McRobbie comments when writing in the early 2000s:

> Post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force (2004: 254).

'Ladette' culture typified this, as the individual women enjoyed some of the freedoms afforded them by the progression of women's rights (for example body autonomy, control of their own money, property, reproductive choices), turning a blind eye to continuing systemic injustices by maintaining that further fighting for rights was unnecessary. During this period the focus was very much on the individual choices afforded women, rather than institutional or collective gains as a group (Gill, 2007a).

Women could now drink men under the table but still found it hard to get a seat at one in boardrooms.

The journalism during this time united both the stereotypes of women being incapable of being funny, and the position that somehow comedy was inappropriate for women due to its link with sexual knowledge. With these new social freedoms, women might now drink like men and be promiscuous like men, but could they tell a joke? There was clearly a disparity between allowing women to conduct masculine behaviour (that arguably made them more available as sexual objects for men) and verbalising challenging attitudes that needed to be silenced. Christopher Hitchens' *Vanity Fair* article 'Why Women Aren't Funny' (2007), set about explaining, or 'mansplaining' (before the term came to prominence via the work of Rebecca Solnit [2014]), the limits of female comic capability. This article provides a high-water mark for the problematic attitudes of the time. In his article, Hitchens argues that men have evolved to be funny in order to attract a sexual partner, whereas women have no need to do anything other than exist in order to be found attractive by men.

The article is drenched in heteronormativity and male privilege and is unrelenting in its homogenising of 'men' and 'women' into unquestioned and binary positions. Women, explains Hitchens, do not need to be funny to be attractive to men (phrased throughout as their unquestioned life purpose), and so they simply are not funny. Those women who have had to develop a sense of humour have done so as their bodies are fundamentally unattractive to men, and thus they must adapt to find other ways to attract a mate, or they are lesbians, in which case men are irrelevant. Here we can see Hitchens drawing on the evolutionary neurosexist approaches prevalent at the time. This argument is, in many ways, resonant with stereotypes historically levelled at the feminist movement - the rationale seemingly being if you're not physically attractive to men, turn to women's rights, lesbianism or comedy. As Linda Mizejewski comments in the opening of her consideration of women in comedy in America, 'this bias "pretty" versus "funny" is a rough but fairly accurate way to sum up the history of women in comedy' (Mizejewski, 2014: 1). Hitchens' article provoked significant feminist retaliation, his intention, as can be surmised by the sheer level of provocation on offer within the article. His writing paved the way for numerous articles that sought

to redress the balance by discussing the many funny women he had overlooked. Most significantly, at the time, Alessandra Stanley wrote a direct response to Hitchens in her 2008 *Vanity Fair* article 'Who Says Women Aren't Funny?', in which she interviewed, amongst others Tina Fey, Amy Poehler and Sarah Silverman to highlight the obvious flaws in his argument.[16] This attitude and public airing of debates around the topic of 'women aren't funny', epitomised by Hitchens was very much at its peak in the late 2000s.

The current state of the 'women aren't funny' debate

It is clear that these stereotypes have been around a long time and have been facilitated and perpetuated by comic material and joking. What is of particular pertinence to this research is the current discussion around women and comedy, following on from this period of blatant sexism ten years ago. Awareness of this attitude and its impact on audiences was regularly discussed with my interviewees as part of this research and the sexism still evident on the circuit will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. In my discussion with Hazel O'Keefe, she notes that it was relatively recently (around 2012/13) that the focus of debate shifted away from this essentialist argument:

> [T]he debates have moved. [...] That's [the women aren't funny debate] not a debate, that's not a question anymore. If you ask that question you're quite frankly a knob-head. It's that simple. [laughs][...] If you asked, 'are black people funny?' you know it would be completely challenged, so why say that about females? So, I think because the debate has moved on, it has stepped things up a little bit (Appendix 6b).

We appear to have moved from a cultural moment of 'women aren't funny' to a position where this attitude is seen as manifestly sexist. Rebuttals of this comment are often articulated in a way that equates the assumptions at the heart of the statement to the problematic assumptions of racism. However, although I share O'Keefe's optimism regarding increased awareness about the unacceptable nature of the debate, I would argue that society has moved to an equally challenging position. The first of these new attitudes can be summed up as 'women are funny, but maybe only to other women'. This has then arguably further developed (especially for some who

work within the industry and identify as women) to 'women are funny, and we shouldn't talk about this topic anymore'.

Post-Hitchens, when journalists or comedians, or those who operate in both roles such as Bridget Christie, contend that 'The "Are Women Funny?" debate is as dead as Christopher Hitchens' (2013), what needs to be considered is whether his attitude, displayed so openly in 2007, is still present in the public unconscious.[17] When it is no longer appropriate to express sexist or racist ideas publicly, does this mean that these attitudes have disappeared overnight? Does something have to be spoken about publicly to exist and therefore impact on the opportunities for women? The answer to both of these questions is, surely, 'no'. It is, therefore too soon to celebrate the eradication of the stereotypes, even if the 'debate' as such has abated.

Many of the articles written post-Hitchens sought, admirably, to highlight the work of the many female comics on both sides of the Atlantic who had been very successful within comedy.[18] However, much of the tone of these articles fed into an attitude that women's comedy was a genre in and of itself and that somehow the gender of the performer would directly affect whether something could be found amusing by others. The idea that women create comedy only for other women is deeply frustrating and belittles the wealth of talent present on the current circuit. There is no male equivalent of this attitude as society considers white, cisgendered heterosexual male perspectives to form a basic universally understandable baseline from which everything else conforms or deviates.

The comedians on the current circuit who identify as female perform various genres of comedy such as sketch, absurdist, character, observational, political or musical comedy. As part of this research I interviewed comedians who perform many different styles of live comedy in an attempt to reflect this range. Often the journalistic (and occasionally academic) writing around female performers throws together a variety of genres of performance, with a total erasure of the differences between live and recorded forms, seemingly asserting that these performers have more in common with each other as women than they do with their contemporaries across the gender spectrum in their particular fields. This research, which has been conducted from an

intersectional feminist perspective, categorically rejects this idea. It is more problematic to push together and attempt to make a single cohesive narrative for these performers that does not account for other aspects of their identities or the differences between their comic approaches. As an example, the comedy of Janice Connolly, who performs the character Barbara Nice, has more in common with Al Murray's Pub Landlord character or Steve Delaney's Count Arthur Strong, than she does with, say, Kate Smurthwaite, whose comedy is political satire.

In recent years, where women can be funny and achieve success within the industry, a defensive attitude about discussing 'being a woman in comedy' has also developed. Comics are now unwilling to discuss their gender in relation to their material as they feel that by doing so they are perpetuating stereotypes. I can appreciate why this topic might be annoying for comedians to discuss, and an additional burden to carry when people are simply 'humans in comedy' irrespective of their gender.[19] However, I would argue that this attitude displays a postfeminist complacency about the context. A comic who has vociferously drawn attention to the negative impact of discussions of 'women in comedy' in a contemporary UK context is Sara Pascoe. Pascoe is a conventionally attractive, young, white woman who has achieved a clear and admirable level of success within the current industry. She started out in comedy in 2007 and has written a popular book, *Animal*: *The Autobiography of a Female Body* (2016), which explores gender difference from a scientific and sociological stand-point.[20] She enjoys a significant amount of TV exposure of her work on a regular basis. This is achieved both through her participation in panel shows such as Channel 4's *8 Out of 10 Cats Does Countdown* (2012-) and also acting roles in BBC comedy shows *Twenty Twelve* (2011-2012), *W1A* (2014-2017) and *The Thick of It* (2005-2012). In 2016, a year Pascoe did not perform a comedy show at the Edinburgh Festival, she tweeted her response to the coverage of female comedians in the mainstream press (see figures 1-4).

Figure 1 Tweet from @sarapascoe
https://twitter.com/sarapascoe/status/761
898640906547200 6/8/2016
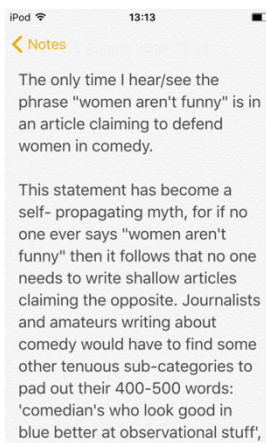
Figure 2 Attachment A from
tweet from @sarapascoe
https://twitter.com/sarapascoe/
status/761898640906547200
6/8/2016
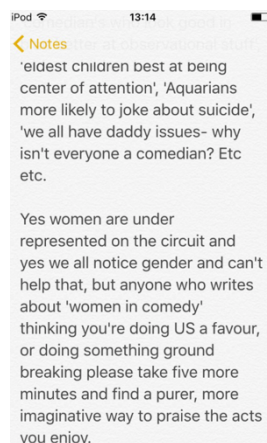
Figure 3 Attachment B from
tweet from @sarapascoe
https://twitter.com/sarapascoe/
status/761898640906547200
6/8/2016
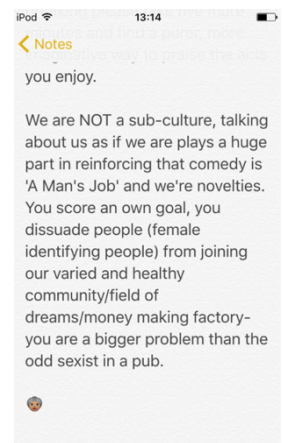
Figure 4 Attachment C from
tweet from @sarapascoe
https://twitter.com/sarapascoe
/status/761898640906547200
6/8/2016

In these tweets Pascoe argued that those writing about women in comedy were themselves now an issue or 'problem' for comics who identify as female. This from Pascoe is arguably indicative of a postfeminist attitude that sees the very discussion of the problem as the problem in and of itself. Even though Pascoe may no longer experience sexism directly, having reached a level of fame where she is not short of work and is regularly approached to be on television, her argument has the potential to silence those who still do experience it. Perhaps her experiences with 'the odd sexist in a pub' are now few and far between, in a way not enjoyed by new entrants to the industry. In her book *Animal* she writes 'My boobs don't get in the way or make

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me fall off the stage or anything, yet "female" pre-empts my "comedian"' (2016: 9). Although I can appreciate that the tone of this kind of reductive journalism must be frustrating for those working within the industry, the argument that discussing gender is more problematic than sexism itself, in any industry, must be understood to be deeply flawed. This approach throws out constructive discussion that may help progress the industry, alongside the more reductive exasperating aspects of it too. This kind of rhetoric has the potential to create an environment that makes those who do feel the need to speak out about gendered or sexist experiences feel like they, rather than the behaviour they encounter, are the problem. Sexism has not gone away, even if 'no one ever says' problematic things out loud (which is patently not the case in some environments). Therefore, advocating that people should not talk about gender is a counter-productive approach. Most of the performers interviewed as part of this research could easily recall sexist interactions with audiences, comedians or promoters that linked with the 'women aren't funny debate'. Even if those exact words were not said aloud, the behaviour women still encounter betrays the long-term influence this has had on the way they are received within the industry (as will be discussed in Chapter 4). Feminist and anti-racist scholar Sara Ahmed, who writes extensively on the double bind of those who highlight a problem (namely racism, sexism or homophobia) becoming the problem, comments that:

> When you name something as sexist or as racist you are making that thing more tangible so that it can be more easily communicated to others. But for those who do not have a sense of the racism or sexism you are talking about, to bring them up is to bring them into existence. **When you expose a problem you pose a problem** (2017: 37) [original emphasis].

With this contemporary attitude, typified by Pascoe, we seem to have now moved to a position where talking about gendered challenges or sexism is more of a problem, for those working at the top of the comedy industry at least, than the sexism itself.[21] To my mind Pascoe's writing here plays into the silencing of those who still experience resistance to their inclusion in the industry across multiple intersections of prejudice, including gender. I would argue that this attitude of 'shut up and put up' (although Pascoe implies there is little to 'put up' with) is just as unhelpful as the sexism female comedians encounter, or the badly phrased journalism. Silence enables inequality to

continue and although I accept that this tweet may simply be poorly phrased by Pascoe, and that other aspects of her work may be positive for inclusion, the defensive attitude it displays certainly exists on the circuit. This attitude is evidence of what McRobbie (2004) refers to as 'double entanglement': a process by which current postfeminist media cultures both reference feminism and conversely dismiss it simultaneously. Pascoe is known as a feminist; she openly identifies as such in her material, and has written about the dangers of gender stereotyping. Therefore, it is contradictory for her to be so dismissive of this debate and others' rights to discuss openly the challenges they may face. This is indicative of celebrity feminism, which arguably, finds an example in Pascoe.

Acknowledging Pascoe's writing here as problematic, I do agree with her that the tone and content of these reductive binary articles is unhelpful. Gender is not a genre. Comedy performed by women is not 'women's comedy', just as music created and performed by women is not 'women's music'. As explored in the methodology section, this research seeks to bring together the voices of many women operating on the current circuit to find themes across their experiences. The qualitative interviews were conducted to provide a non-reductive space for these experiences to be discussed in order to find commonalities. This does not mean that there are not nuances or differences in those shared experiences, or that this is the only way of interpreting the current field. However, this research is an attempt to develop a more comprehensive picture of the current performance context of the stand-up comedy industry. The reductive discourse around the industry evidenced in journalism, reviews and think-pieces, has impacted on my own awareness as a researcher as to why people may be resistant or weary of discussing these topics.[22]

It has been important to set out in detail the stereotypes surrounding women in comedy early on in this research, as they form a significant part of the cultural context of the performers and performances under discussion. These stereotypes still matter, even if it is no longer acceptable to articulate them aloud in certain contexts, because they form a key part of the cultural landscape which influences the unconscious biases of audience members. These stereotypes also have the potential to impact on any women performing comedy. Awareness of stereotypes also influences behaviour, as

individual understanding of the self can be impacted upon by what we think others believe about us. This is often referred to as 'stereotype threat' and is the focus of the work of Schmader (2001), Schmader, Johns and Forbes (2008) and Wheeler and Petty (2001). Activating awareness of a stereotype to an individual, before asking them to perform a task related to that stereotype, can impact on how well they perform. For example, Schmader's work focuses on the way women perform worse in mathematics tests if the stereotype that 'women can't do maths' is activated before they take the test. This effect is not specific to gender; similar studies, including those conducted by Steele and Aronson (1995) and Croziet and Claire (1998), have considered the impact racial and class stereotypes have on participants' performance of related tasks. Whilst no studies yet exist that explore stereotype threat for women in a comedy club environment, the concept clearly has a relevance to this context. If a comedian identifying as female goes on stage after a comedian or compère (of any gender) has used gendered stereotypes in their routine, then the stereotypes have been activated. In this circumstance these female comedians then start their set at a disadvantage. Sophie Willan articulated this when she argued that often women in comedy are 'set up to fail'. As Fine argues 'the boundary of the self-concept is permeable to other people's conceptions of you (or, somewhat more accurately, your perceptions of their perceptions of you)' (2010: 10). So, with an awareness of the stereotypes at play in the comedy club environment in relation to gender, both in the minds of the audience and often other comedians, female performers may well feel additional pressure not to conform to these stereotypes or inadvertently confirm anyone's bias. This is not a pressure exerted on male identifying comedians who operate without these additional expectations.

Maintaining the current state of the comedy industry

A final consideration for this chapter is the ways in which the current state of the UK comedy industry is maintained and perpetuates stereotypes. I will now consider the role of gatekeepers in deciding the fate of many new performers, and how the processes enacted may still disadvantage women.

Sam Friedman's 2014 book *Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour* explored the role of comedy scouts, critics and producers in the maintaining of the current comedy industry's practices. His work focused on the annual Edinburgh Fringe Festival and how this event provides an entry point to wider comic success for performers. Friedman's critical approach analysed who is involved in deciding what 'good' comedy looks like, and what role these gatekeepers and tastemakers play in the success of comedians attempting to attain mainstream success. Friedman's findings indicate specific challenges for female comedians on the current circuit.

Friedman's focus was on analysing the field, drawing on the work of Bourdieu, to consider the way comedy can operate with varying degrees of cultural capital. His research found that critics of comedy have become increasingly important, concluding that:

> Despite previous research indicating that comedy critics possess little cultural influence, the results […] demonstrate that the legitimacy of such influencers has grown considerably in recent years (141).

The British press, as part of arts coverage, still produce reviews of comedy and often pull together annual articles about 'hot picks' for the Fringe. Alongside this there are organisations with online platforms that operate year-round such as Chortle and The British Comedy Guide.[23] These sites are dedicated specifically to comedy and host reviews alongside interviews, articles and tour announcements. They have become a well-known source of information for the comedy-going public. Alongside the bigger online operators exist sites that started out as fan-run ventures. The Velvet Onion (TVO) for instance, refers to itself as 'a central hub for an interconnected alternative comedy family'.[24] The site focuses on comedians who take a less mainstream approach to comedy.[25] During the Edinburgh Festival numerous other reviewing sites become live and contribute to the reviews of performing acts including, significantly, *Fest* magazine, which was established in 2002 (where Friedman, alongside his work as an academic at London School of Economics, still continues his role as publisher).

Friedman found that in reading his research findings, collected via a method of surveys and follow-up interviews, it was impossible to link the reading of reviews to behaviour:

> While these findings certainly indicate that comedy criticism is important to consumers, it doesn't explain the influence of criticism on audience judgement. It couldn't elucidate the impact of comedy reviews (2014: 130).

Friedman discovered then that audiences find the information helpful, but they may not act on that information. This is possibly due to the way comedy is such a subjective art form and many of the most critically and commercially successful comics may well not appeal to certain senses of humour.

In addition to his consideration of the role of critics, Friedman shadowed comedy scouts, who he refers to as 'hidden tastemakers' during the 2012 Edinburgh Festival. This is the most significant link to my own work, in that he was investigating the way the current industry decides who breaks through to wider audiences. Friedman attended performances with comedy scouts to observe their behaviour, before then conducting interviews about their role in finding the next breakthrough acts. Friedman identified that during the month of August at the Edinburgh Festival many people, who are occupied in other professions for the rest of the year, perform this temporary function for venues, broadcasters and agents.

Whilst Friedman's participants were gender balanced, strikingly they all had similar backgrounds and experiences:

> In line with cultural intermediaries in other fields (Negus, 1999; Kuipers, 2012), eight of my nine respondents were from privileged backgrounds, with at least one parent who was, or had been, in a professional or managerial employment. All nine scouts were also graduates, with six holding humanities degrees in aesthetic subjects such as English literature, theatre studies, history of art and film studies. And eight of the nine lived in London (2014:148).

It is unsurprising to find that there is a certain type of person afforded this role as a tastemaker, or a 'homogenous class habitus of comedy scouts' (Friedman, 2014:160). It is clear that simply having more female comedy scouts will not solve the issue of why

women do not break through into the mainstream. Those who identify as female are just as capable of upholding a patriarchal system due to internalised gender bias or misogyny, and so simply swapping men with women still potentially replicates racial and class biases. This is especially likely if all other identity traits, other than gender, remain the same. The ethnicity of the particular scouts Friedman followed is not explicitly mentioned in the text of the research, but it is currently evident (and as would have been the case when Friedman was writing) that in Britain, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people disproportionately exist in lower socio-economic categories that would be defined as working class, as outlined in the Runnymede Trust's *Minority Report: Race and Class in Post-Brexit Britain* (Khan and Shaheen, 2017). Those identifying as BME are less likely to be 'privileged' in the way Friedman describes his cohort of participating scouts due to structural barriers. This homogenous pool of scouts is an impediment to inclusion as Friedman, drawing on the work of Kuipers (2012) identified that much of the brokering selections were 'based on "imagined audiences", on "gut" instinct about the fit between types of culture and types of audiences (Kuipers, 2012)' (Friedman, 2014: 146). Therefore, we can see a very clear link between the identities of those performing this scouting function and the maintaining of ideas about what audiences want to see.[26]

Without any concrete understanding about audience tastes, a key question is whose gut instinct decides which female comedians make it? Notably scouts working in the sub-field of mass comedy (as opposed to those scouting specifically for an alternative comedy setting):

> [W]ere guided not by aesthetic preferences but by an instrumental occupational imperative to reduce economic uncertainty. This compelled them towards the safe and inoffensive, the 'T-shirt comic', who fits into existing markets or repeats a successful formula (Friedman, 2014: 159).

Friedman defines the T-Shirt comic as one that fits the description of a 'young, white, attractive male' (2014: 152) and the comedy industry continues to overwhelmingly reflect this both in the live and broadcast environments.

As part of my discussions with my interviewees the subject of reviews and the impact they may have on performers was considered. Allyson June Smith, a Canadian comedian who has been performing since 2000 and living and working in the UK since 2011, discussed with me how performing as a 'version of herself' on stage, as opposed to in role, may impact on the way reviews are received by a performer. She recalled the following example in relation to her own work:

> Stand-up is really personal, again if it's done from that traditional, not character place. Because it is you. It is you. It wasn't until I actually came to the UK that I actually had a review done on me because in Canada, we have no celebrity system […]. Nobody really reviews comics [..] it's not like here. Where you go to Edinburgh and everyone gives you reviews. And I received like my very first review here and it was awful. It was very nasty […] he was not a fan of mine, we'll say that. […] So it can be personal. […] I only read it once […] because I was just like there's no point dwelling in the negativity. But the vibe generally was just […] [they] thought I was a shrill, brash North American woman, who was crude. […] A lot of it came down to I think this person decided they didn't like the type of comic that I was. And I feel had a pretty early decision about how they were going to watch the actual jokes and the material (Appendix 6e).[27]

It is clear that reviews can very easily be interpreted as a personal attack, especially for comedy performed without the 'buffer' of a character, as the comic persona is based on the identity of the performer. Recently there has been increased pressure from feminist performers and campaigners on reviewers across all art forms to consider their tone when reviewing women. There have been several high-profile instances of the reviewing of women's bodies rather than their performances which have been widely reported.[28] Sophie Willan recalled the following about reviews she received for her first solo show, *Novice Detective* which she performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 2014:

> I don't know if I'm just being 'oh it's sexist' or whatever but I definitely felt as a female comic, going up to Edinburgh saying this is a comedy show, doesn't matter that audiences have booked it out, I sell it out or that I'm getting rounds of applause throughout, the critics were not up for me. Or they were giving me a really, really, really hard time actually. It was quite interesting I had mixed reviews. I mean one man started by saying 'she's a lot smarter than she first appears', I don't actually know what that means, how do I first appear? Is it the Bolton accent? What is it that first appears stupid to you? Because there's nothing in the show where I say 'oh I'm a bit daft' or I don't play a character

who's ditsy or anything, so it was interesting (Appendix 6n).[29]

Here Sophie identified that one of her reviews that year included a comment that referenced class and possibly gender-based assumptions about her. Irrespective of the initial mixed reviews of her early work she has gone on to great success, being nominated in 2017 for the Best Show Award for her solo show *Branded* (2017) and winning a nomination in 2018 for the *The South Bank Sky Arts Awards* in the Breakthrough category. It is evident that performers bump up against these stereotypes about women and comedy in the reviews of their work too.

From Friedman's findings it is apparent that gatekeepers play a significant role in maintaining the current comedy industry and the white male dominance within it. This has not gone unnoticed by large broadcasters who have in recent years attempted to address their lack of diversity in several key ways. I will focus here on the BBC as the UK's public broadcaster and the biggest commissioner of radio and television comedy in the UK. The issue of gender parity on panel shows will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 8, but the BBC's recent announcements and public agendas around diversity on TV comedy form a key part of the current context. It was with the following BBC public agendas and initiatives in mind that I spoke to those interviewed as part of this research.

In early 2014 the BBC Trust publicly acknowledged the need to increase gender parity across the corporation's comedy output, especially panel shows.[30] The then Director of Television Danny Cohen responded to publicity surrounding the Trust's comment, pledging to ensure at least one woman on every panel show.[31] Although the thought behind increasing women's presence on panel shows was broadly welcomed, the decision to make such an announcement public met with equal amounts of praise and scorn.[32] It also resulted in much discussion of the complexities of such a generic announcement. Questions such as 'How many women on a comedy line-up is too many?' and 'Does tokenism help or hinder the progress of women in comedy?' were widely discussed online and in newspapers. On the 10th February 2014, BBC current affairs programme *Newsnight* (1980 -) brought together an all-female panel to discuss women in comedy. The panel, made up of stand-up comedian Lucy Porter, comic impressionist Jan Ravens, and actress Maureen Lipman, spoke to Jeremy Paxman

about the recent announcement by Cohen. Paxman patronizingly introduced his guests as an 'entirely testicle-free panel'. This panel on its flagship current affairs programme evidences an attempt by the BBC to demonstrate that it takes issues of diversity seriously (though not seriously enough to consider other aspects of intersectional identity such as race or class, as they chose to form the panel of three middle-class white women). Various radio producers came forward to highlight that radio comedy continued to have better gender parity than the televised equivalents. Ed Morrish, producer of BBC Radio 4 comedy panel show *Dilemma* (2011-2015), hosted by Sue Perkins, responded directly to the announcement in a blogpost squarely aimed at television producers. Within his post, which was subsequently re-printed in the *New Statesman*, Morrish highlighted how there were many female comics he had managed to find and book and could vouch for.[33] He argues that he has always attempted to have more than one woman on each of his radio shows (he produced *The News Quiz* [1977 -] for several years) as this enables a wider range of perspectives to contribute to debate, resulting in a better show. This article highlighted just how little effort had gone in to diversifying television comedy panellists, especially in terms of gender, prior to this point, as radio seemed to be a lot more open to involving a variety of voices.

The way in which this new, more inclusive, programming policy was handled unsurprisingly came up repeatedly in my interviews. Lynne Parker, who has extensive experience in PR, did not think that the corporation had managed it well:

> I think they should have done it but not make a big hoo-ha about it. I think they should have just done it. I don't know who, which stupid person in their PR department, said 'Oh I know what we'll do, I'll put a press release out about it!'. And that was where it's wrong. I think it's good, I think quotas are always a good thing, I hate to say it, I know people disagree with me, but you know, I think particularly in terms of politics and that and public life we do have to have quotas. However, I don't think that means you just put any old woman on the panel or whatever, they've got to hold their own. But I think what it's done, it's made the BBC actually think about, instead of just putting token women on, you now, soap stars or what have you [...] they've got to look, they've got to put Zoe Lyons on, or Katherine Ryan, or Kerry Godliman, or Holly Walsh or Ellie Taylor, or you know, we could go through a list of women who are doing really well on panel shows, who were always going to do well on the panel shows. But now they have to book them, so that's a good thing, you know. But they were always there (Appendix 6a).

It is interesting, that subsequent to interviewing Parker, all of the comedians she mentioned have indeed had increased presence on BBC content. However, they continue to often work in isolation on panel shows. Allyson June Smith has also picked up on the fact that panel shows had tended to field female panellists who were not from comic backgrounds:

> [T]hat's my biggest thing lately, panel shows, they're like 'oh we are going to have more women on panel shows'. But you know who they are putting on, models and presenters. They're not putting female comedians on. You might get a few, you get a few, a Katherine Ryan, a Holly Walsh, yes you get female comedians, but there is a hell of a lot of us out there, that you know don't. But yet we have presenters being the female comedic voice on a panel show (Appendix 6e).

Smith, echoing Morrish's argument, identifies that variety is key, not only across gendered lines but in every possible combination due to the variety of comic tastes and possible audiences for televised comedy. The inclusion of women on panel shows who are not equipped to contribute to the humour of the show (models, presenters) reinforces the idea that women are less funny than men or are incapable of being funny. It is programming decisions like these, which are influenced by scouts as tastemakers, that help perpetuate the stereotypes about comedy being naturally associated with men.

The phrasing of the BBC's policy also came under scrutiny from many, as Sophie Willan commented, when comparing live comedy line-ups to television panel shows:

> [I]t's the same with panel shows, which are trying to balance out now. But I find it annoying now that they have been saying 'you should have at least one woman on a panel show' because it's still the same problem. Because at the end of the day, […] if she's the only female there then you can't help but physically notice. So instead of just being aware of her as a human being, because there's three women and three men, and it's an equal, balanced bill or panel show or whatever, all you're thinking is 'oh god, woman' (Appendix 6n).

Thus, even when bookers do book female comedians, rather than simply any women who can fill the space up there is additional pressure to represent the whole of their

gender. The added pressure placed on a single comedian that identifies as female, among a line-up of men is something that will be considered further in the following chapter. What is essential to consider here, however, is the BBC's reductive language that does not acknowledge the intersectional aspects of identity. Many of the female comedians who now do make it onto panel shows, possibly as a direct result of this policy, are still from privileged backgrounds. Replacing white men with white women does not achieve enough in terms of unpicking the structures that continue oppression. Often the programming decisions mean that white, attractive and often young women (note how similar this description is to the T-Shirt comic of Friedman's findings) are now the go-to guests. There are still very few women of colour making it on to these shows.

This brief overview of the evolution of the comedy circuit in the UK may well lead us to believe that things have changed for women, and that we should appreciate the distance we have travelled in terms of inclusion. However, I reject the idea that simply because things have improved for minority groups within the comedy industry, people should stop pushing for equality. It is clear that even when women do start to integrate into such industries that the voices of middle-class white women are the first to be allowed into the space. The focus of this research is not to argue that nothing has changed or that progress has not been made regarding gender equality in comedy. Rather it is an opportunity to reflect on specific issues faced by those who identify as female on the current circuit, to consider where there is still progress to be made, and how this might be achieved. Since the 1980s alternative comedy scene we can see an increasing number of female comics entering the industry. The following sections of this thesis will consider how the current industry has adapted to include more women, what is being done to make the sector more reflective of the society it serves, and whether these approaches are working or simply continuing practices that marginalise.

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[1] It is worth noting that in recent years there has been an unearthing of historical records, highlighting the role of women in theatrical performance much earlier than the general public have been led to believe. Pamela Allen-Brown and Peter Parolin's edited collection, *Women Players in England 1500-1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage* (2005), is an example of a text engaging with the overlooked contribution of women to theatrical performance more broadly during this period.

[2] Double (2017) has also found use of the term 'stand up' (without hyphenation) in a 1911 edition of *The Stage*. However in this instance it was unclear whether the term was used to denote the literal 'standing

up' of a performer singing comic songs. Either way it certainly indicates an earlier usage of the term than originally believed.

[3] See Condron (2007) writing in *The Telegraph*: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1547345/Women-win-equality-at-working-mens-clubs.html (accessed 20/5/18)

[4] In the 1960s Britain still only had three television channels. ITV only started broadcasting in 1955 and BBC2 was launched in 1964 which meant that viewing figures were significantly higher for these programmes than comparable shows in today's context.

[5] Les Dawson and Roy Barraclough's 'Cissie and Ada' sketches provide an example of the upholding of gender stereotypes through comic cross-dressing during this period.

[6] During much of the 1960s homosexuality was still illegal in the UK, so the inclusion of openly LGBT* performers at this time would have been totally impossible. The Sexual Offenses Act came into force in England and Wales in 1967 partially decriminalizing homosexual activity, specifically, activity between men over the age of 21 in private settings. The LGBT* community still faced overwhelming vilification and prejudice during this era and thus sexuality would not have been openly discussed in public, let alone on stage in front of a working men's club crowd. Public expression of sexuality during this time was often obscured behind coded language such as Polari as explored by Baker (2002).

[7] For more on the context and evolution of Soho as synonymous with the sex industries see Frank Mort's (2007) 'Striptease: The Erotic Female Body and Live Sexual Entertainment in the Mid-Twentieth-Century'.

[8] In 2017 Labour MP Harriet Harman reflected back on this time in UK politics and considered what this moment achieved for gender equality in politics in the following 20 years. See: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/10/labour-1997-victory-women-101-female-mps (accessed 13/6/18).

For a discussion of Blair's Babes, see Moore (1997) writing in *The Independent*: https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/welcome-to-blairs-babes-but-the-struggle-goes-on-1260491.html (accessed 13/6/18)

[9] Ben Thompson's *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy From Vic Reeves to The Office* (2004) includes a humorous 'chronological timeline' of this period which certainly highlights just how male (and white) UK comedy was at the time. Within the book, which is just over four hundred and fifty pages, there are only twenty-five female comedians and performers listed in the index, only one referencing a woman of colour, Meera Syal.

[10] See http://funnywomen.com and http://www.dulcetsounds.co.uk/live/laughingcowscomedy (both accessed 27/6/18)

[11] A full list of winners and runners up from the Funny Women Awards can be found here: http://funnywomen.com/2012/10/01/funny-women-awards-all-the-winners-and-finalists-ever/ (accessed 12/6/18)

[12] There was widespread public criticism of the Jongleurs chain in 2013 when it came to light that comics were not being paid (or received very late payment) for their work for the clubs. See the following editorial on the Chortle website: http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2013/12/24/19328/jongleurs%3A_we_will_pay_our_comics (accessed 12/6/18)

[13] For information about The Invisible Dot at the height of its powers, see Jones (2013) writing in *The Independent*: https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/features/the-invisible-dot-how-has-one-of-the-countrys-smallest-comedy-venues-become-an-industry-powerhouse-8652766.html (accessed 19/5/18)

[14] Baron-Cohen, who is the cousin of comedian Sacha Baron-Cohen, researches mainly in relation to autism and whether testosterone in-utero impacts on this.

[15] Republican Donald Trump's American election campaign against Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton in 2016 provides a telling case in point. Irrespective of any individual political position, stereotypes about women's capabilities still impact their opportunities to take up positions of power. The journalism surrounding Clinton's ability to hold a position of power before the election often targeted stereotypically female characteristics. For further commentary on how these stereotypes impacted on the election result see Robins (2017):
https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/03/opinions/hillary-clinton-interview-sexism-robbins/index.html
(accessed 14/6/18)

[16] See Stanley (2008) writing in *Vanity Fair*:
https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804 (accessed 9/6/18)

[17] See Christie (2013) in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/01/are-women-funny-lee-mack (accessed 9/6/18)

[18] It is important to note that Hitchens never moved his position in the light of the responses of others, including the work of Alessandra Stanley. He wrote a follow up article the snappily entitled, (in both senses of the word 'entitled'), 'Why women still don't get it' (2008). See:
https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2008/04/hitchens200804 (accessed 9/6/18)

[19] See Izade (2016) writing in *The Independent*: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/tina-fey-kristen-wiig-and-mindy-kaling-answer-the-dumbest-questions-about-female-comedians-a6862481.html
(accessed 9/6/18)

[20] The arguments outlined in *Animal*, although humorous, in many ways feed into the populist neurosexism under critique in Fine's work (for example Pascoe includes Baron-Cohen and Brizendine in the suggested reading section). Pascoe's writing also does not consider the way in which discussions about brain size and type is a way colonising forces have historically justified the enslavement of people of colour. The sudden repackaging of genetic difference studies as humour does not take into account the way evolutionary science has long been a tool used to oppress people.

[21] This is also an issue that American screen comics have addressed. See Evans (2015) article regarding Kristen Wiig's decision to avoid the 'women in comedy question':
https://www.thecut.com/2015/10/kristen-wiig-no-more-women-in-comedy-questions.html (accessed 27/6/18)

[22] I am grateful to all who participated in contributing to this project and hope that the forthcoming analysis reflects a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of their experiences than can be found in the superficial journalism on the topic.

[23] See: https://www.comedy.co.uk and http://www.chortle.co.uk (accessed 27/6/18)

[24] See: https://thevelvetonion.com (accessed 27/6/18)

[25] In 2018 The Velvet Onion became engaged in a debate with comedians on Twitter who felt they were being excluded from the site, even though they had worked alongside the sites 'core comedians' several times. This was felt especially acutely by comedians of colour who noted that both the core group of comedians being focused on, TVO's writing team, and the comedians TVO had 'added to the family' over the years were overwhelmingly white. As a result, the decision was taken by TVO to go on a break to assess their options. Paul Holmes, the editor in chief, posted an explanation of the evolution of the site as part of announcing a hiatus. See the following editorial:
https://thevelvetonion.com/2018/05/18/running-out-of-layers-why-the-velvet-onion-is-going-on-hiatus/ (accessed 21/6/18)

[26] Friedman also identifies that scouts relied heavily on informal networks and the judgments of people they know and trust to advise them. We can see that when these informal networks are at play, across

many art forms, class and gender privilege is involved and maintains a barrier to those attempting to engage. This is evidenced further in the *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Cultural Industries* report published in 2018 by Brook, O'Brien and Taylor. For the full report see: http://createlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf (accessed 26/5/18)

[27] This is the review which Smith appears to be referring to: http://www.chortle.co.uk/review/2013/08/02/29247/canadians_of_comedy (accessed 20/7/18)

We can see here that Bennett spends much of the word count (40%) being critical of Smith. He also uses the term 'spouting' which arguably plays into the stereotype of women being incessant talkers. Where he describes Smith's material as unimaginative and bland he then goes on to describe her male colleagues observational material as 'none of the material is classic, but it's funny enough'. This reads very much like the bar is lower for the male comic than Smith.

[28] Actor Nicola Coughlan's fight back against The British Theatre Guide provides an example here that was widely reported in the press. See Siddique in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jun/15/derry-girls-actor-nicola-coughlan-apology-overweight-girl-review (accessed 21/6/18)

[29] For the review Sophie is recalling from her 2014 run see Cox (2014): http://www.acrossthearts.co.uk/news/artsblog/across-the-festival-7--zoo--pleasance/ (accessed 21/6/18)

[30] In December 2013 there was widespread reporting of the BBC Trust's awareness that the BBC's programming was not sufficiently diverse or reflective of its audience. One of the key areas which the corporation were seeking to improve was the lack of inclusion of women on panel shows. See Kanter and Delgado writing in *Broadcast* (2013). http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/bbc-comedy-panel-shows-should-include-women/5064733.article (accessed 20/8/15)

[31] Cohen made the statement '[w]e're not going to have panel shows on any more with no women on them. You can't do that. It's not acceptable.' In an interview with Rachel Cook for *The Observer*. http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/feb/08/danny-cohen-bbc-director-television-tv-panel-shows (accessed 20/8/15)

[32] Many other high profile comedians, such as Jason Manford, made the point that by making the announcement public it 'undermined' women on panel shows. See Plunkett's interview with Manford in *The Guardian*. http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/mar/10/bbc-should-not-have-announced-ban-on-all-male-panels-says-jason-manford (accessed 20/8/15)

[33] For Morrish's article see: https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/02/its-great-have-one-woman-tv-panel-show-you-need-more (accessed 20/6/18). Note that even in this list the overwhelming whiteness is apparent.

Chapter Four
Women-only Comedy Spaces:
Addressing inequality on the comedy circuit.

This chapter interrogates the role of women-only comedy spaces on the current UK circuit. Having illustrated how the form of stand-up has evolved and how this relates to gendered spaces, stereotypes and structural barriers, I will now turn my attention to the organisations attempting to address this inequality through creating alternative performance spaces, challenging stereotypes and attempting to break down structural barriers. This chapter will address three key topics that directly consider the contexts of comic performances by women. Firstly, I will discuss the themes identified across the performer and promoter interviews to provide evidence about the current conditions for women in the comedy industry. This section will consider the role of women-only comedy spaces from the perspective of performers and promoters. Secondly this chapter will consider the structural issues within the UK comedy industry that necessitate the continual use of women-only comedy line-ups as a tool to address inequality. Lastly, this chapter will analyse data collected from audiences for the 2014 UK Women in Comedy Festival, in order to consider women-only comedy nights from the perspective of audiences. This will include discussion of audience motivations to attend women-only comedy nights in the current social context.

Specific challenges for women:

When interviewing promoters and performers as part of this research I was keen to capture individual understandings about whether the industry has improved for women. The issues raised during the interviews form useful contextual information about why women-only nights still exist. The interviewees had worked within the industry for varying lengths of time, and so their perspectives on this topic varied. Some had been promoting comedy nights since the 1990s and others had commenced performing as stand-up comics in the last few years. Nonetheless the overwhelming consensus was that, although things are getting better in terms of gender parity on the comedy circuit, sexism still exists. Lynne Parker, director of Funny Women, commented that:

I think it still exists and I think you are always going to get a level of sexism in something that is predominantly a bit of […] a boy's club. But I think we just become a bit more, immune's the wrong word, we've learnt to deal with it a bit better. […] We get less upset by it. Because there is more publicity about it and you know you've got organisations like Everyday Sexism and people waving the flag for women generally, so I think we, as women feel empowered and a bit stronger. So, we are less affected by sexism. That's my opinion. […] And I just think there's just more of us out there championing women in comedy (Appendix 6a).

Parker believes that although the attitudes and behaviours women encounter may not have changed significantly since the early 2000s, the way women deal with these attitudes and behaviours has changed. Parker's comment is pertinent to this research in that it attributes the changes to the circuit to women (the minority group trying to infiltrate the sector), rather than those in existing positions of power.

Hazel O'Keefe of Laughing Cows and the Women in Comedy Festival responded in a similar way when asked if things had changed for women on the comedy circuit:

Yeah, I think it's definitely changed. […] I do still think we live in a misogynistic world and we haven't got true equality yet, but things have got a lot, lot better. […] I think things still need to be improved upon but we are certainly getting there. People are paving the way and producing comedy nights that do embrace diversity, whether it be gender or race or age or ability, people are actually valuing that a lot more nowadays (Appendix 6b).

Here O'Keefe comments on the way that genuine diversity of the circuit relies on more than just gender, and this was a central part of her conversation with me. She believes that there is more of a value placed on diverse voices within comedy nights than there has been in the past. As Parker and O'Keefe both run women-centred comedy organisations it is worth considering the way comedians, who work across multiple nights, venues and festivals feel about the current circuit. Throughout my conversations with comedians several key issues affecting performers who identify as female were discussed. We also discussed many positive aspects of the circuit, so this should not be seen as a list to put women off participating, but simply a realistic look at current barriers. The themes can be summarised as: Being understood to represent all women, sexist audience reactions, poor introductions, sexism from industry

professionals, badly advertised women-only nights, economic disparities and aesthetic pressures.

1) Understood as representing 'all women'

The way in which female comics exist in the minority on mixed-gender line-ups means that, by default, they are positioned as providing the female perspective on behalf of all women. It is impossible for one woman to represent all women. However, audiences are provided with only one female perspective. Therefore, that comedian preforms the role of 'the woman'. Allyson June Smith, who has experience of working on both the Canadian circuit and in the UK, commented that:

> I challenge anyone to look at the listings of comedy clubs and you see the numbers. And you tell me that women are fairly represented in this industry. It's changing, but so slow. And I would say even coming over here [to the UK] I felt it even more. Even more than I did over there [Canada] (Appendix 6e).

On the current UK circuit women still disproportionately work in isolation on mixed-gendered line ups, very rarely having the opportunity to work with other women. Lara A. King, an experienced performer who often works in both mainstream and alternative spaces across Britain, responded in the following way when asked about her experiences of what would be termed an average or typical comedy night:

> When you say you're obviously used to working with men and women on an average comedy night, on an average comedy night I wouldn't be working with men and women, I'd be working with men. Because I'd be the woman (Appendix 6l).

This sentiment was echoed by feminist comedian and activist Kate Smurthwaite:

> Like the average comedy night, people talk about one woman on the bill, but the reality is the average number of women on the bill is less than one. The average number of women on the bill is there aren't any (Appendix 6j).

It is clear that, for many performers, the progress being made to build a more inclusive industry is painfully slow. Comedian Kiri Pritchard-McLean observed how freeing the

experience of working with other women can be, as it can release female performers from feeling the pressure of having to be the 'voice of all women':

> We're still a novelty act, which is why I prefer it when there is a female compère, because when you come on you're just another comedian then. Especially if they are good, I mean if they're bad they're a bit like 'is she's going to be shit as well?'. But they would never think that with a male comic. It's never like, if a male comic's shit, it's 'cause he's shit, but if a female comic is shit, it's because female comics are shit. But yeah if [you're working with] a female comic and she's good when you come on it's brilliant, it's so liberating because they are like 'oh what have you got to say?' and you're like 'oh wow this is what it's like to be a guy'! And it's a really nice feeling. Lucky fuckers (Appendix 6f).

Pritchard-McLean's point here is of particular relevance when we consider the way that stand-up comedy as a form has been defined. Double argues that:

> Stand-up comedy is an individual talking to a community. A lot of it is about defining who the individual is, who the community is and how one relates to the other (2014:239).

This definition may well be true for white male comedians where there is no assumption that they are there representing a unified community. However, numerous female comics I spoke to as part of this research commented on the way that women are often read by audiences as there to represent a whole gender. Therefore, the way in which many of my participants discussed working in isolation as a woman results in the perception that *a community* is talking to *a community*. As faulty as this thinking is, since women are not a homogenous group, there is very little room in stand-up comedy for notions of the individual or nuance without more than one female identifying performer on a line-up.

2) Sexist audience reactions

All my interviewees were acutely aware that their own experiences could not necessarily represent the experiences of all women (as noted), nevertheless almost all

had experienced a negative reaction from audiences to their inclusion in a line-up. Many comedians had stories that involved potentially well-meaning audience members approaching them after a gig to say how much they had enjoyed their performance, despite the performer being a woman. Soula Notos discussed the reactions she had received when starting out in Holland, where she established comedy night Comedy Kitchen, in order to address the under-representation of women in the industry:

> When I started out people came up to me and were like 'I usually don't like female comedy or comedians but I kind of liked you' so I'm like 'Gee wiz thank you for the compliment I think?'. Like even women said that. Like you don't like your own gender? So, you're actually saying you don't have a sense of humour yourself? (Appendix 6o).

This is a very popular anecdote, with most of my interviewees having experienced this kind of poorly-phrased audience interaction. Pritchard-McLean highlighted the way that female performers can often sense a subtle negative reaction from the audience when they arrive on stage.

> [S]ome rooms you can just feel the air change when you go on stage. Other than Laughing Cows, [a women-only night] when they know what they are in for. Generally, The Frog [The Frog and Bucket Manchester], I love it and it's been very supportive of me […] as an individual, [but] something about the room or the people that come or whatever it is […] there's literally a change in the air (Appendix 6f).

Pritchard-McLean continued to explain how she had arrived at this conclusion:

> I thought it was in my head for ages, but then once when I was doing a Thursday there [The Frog and Bucket], […] because you always just think, oh this stuff is in my head. […] Then I came off stage and someone I know was watching, a comic, and he said 'I can't believe that'[…]. And he'd heard two people go 'oh bloody hell it's a woman'. And I was just like, that's all the stuff we don't hear as well. So, like you think it's in your head and you never want to say it out loud because it feels like you are making an excuse (Appendix 6f).

What I find particularly pertinent in this response is that even though the performer's instincts were consistently telling her that the reaction she received was gendered, she doubted herself. It was not until a male friend informed her she was right, providing tangible evidence of her feared responses, that Pritchard-McLean had any confidence in her own experience. Women are often, in all industries, made to doubt their own experiences of sexism and racism, gaslighted into thinking that they are over-reacting or imagining things. Pritchard-McLean's experience of being concerned that to acknowledge the issue would make her seem weak, or as if she was making excuses, is one that will no doubt resonate with women in other industries too.[1]

3) Poor introductions

Reactions from audiences for comedy are heavily guided by the compère. Jason Rutter in his research into the role of comedy compères outlines their role in the following way:

> Compères are more than just announcers who bring on the act. They provide continuity between acts who often have varying reputations, divergent styles and or different performance skills; perform routines between acts using their own material; pass comment on the performers; share details of the evening's itinerary (2000: 464).

Compères function as a vital glue that binds the individual performances from comedians into a coherent event. They achieve this through encouraging and controlling audience participation in the form of clapping, cheering and general welcoming of comedians to the stage. Rutter identifies the following recurring elements found within compère introductions: contextualisation, framing of response (attempting to instil a specific attitude in the audience e.g. excitement, intrigue etc.), evaluation of the comedian, request for action (e.g. 'put your hands together') and an introduction in the form of the comic's name (2000: 465). It is through the contextualisation, evaluation and introduction aspects of this role that compères can make a huge difference to how female comedians are received by their audiences. Poor introductions, or introductions that foreground the gender or appearance of the comic have been commonplace for female comics. O'Keefe gave a particularly striking

example, whilst acknowledging that as a promoter she has not been on the receiving end of these kinds of introductions.

> [as a promoter] I don't know what it's like to be introduced by an MC in an inappropriate manner, which happens all the time. 'And now we have a woman, let's hope she doesn't get her flange out' was how Maureen Younger got introduced once, which is frankly disgusting (Appendix 6b).

Overt sexism in introductions, as with the example above, is now increasingly objected to and frowned upon. However, there are more subtle behaviours at play that feed into the continued 'othering' of female comedians, for example, the use of gendered language. Comedian Kerry Leigh, who performs the role of compère for the Laughing Cows nights in Manchester, understands her role in framing audience reactions to comedians on stage. When discussing how compères operate on mixed-gender line-ups she commented that:

> I've heard lots of horror stories, of [puts on voice] 'it's a woman'. I've never had anyone introduce me in a really awful way but there's just little things like they'll refer to your looks when introducing you. Whereas that doesn't really happen I don't think when men are introduced. So, 'the gorgeous Kerry Leigh' or whatever. It isn't a massive issue. [...] I think in recent times I've had nice introductions by respectful people who just say 'she's on next, she's fabulous' (Appendix 6k).

Leigh's response highlights, through her example of 'she's on next', that even when the word 'woman' is not used by a compère as part of an introduction, the use of the pronoun 'she' is potentially equally as challenging. The use of 'she' will ensure awareness of the gender of the performer before they make it to the microphone. This clearly links back to the discussion of stereotype threat in the previous chapter where both the audience and performer are acutely aware of gender stereotypes before the start of a set. As a result of the awareness that a poor introduction can have negative consequences, many comedians have strategies to avoid this. As part of our conversation Allyson June Smith highlighted her own approach to handling this situation:

Sometimes I'll tell a compère, if it's the first time I'm working with them and I feel like brave enough to actually bring it up to them. I say 'when you are getting ready to introduce me, please use words like, 'this next comic', 'your next performer', save my name to the very last minute. Because if you say 'you're gonna love this next lady', 'I've worked with her', 'she is', it gives them that thirty more seconds to already choose whether or not they are gonna zone in. So that to me is a sign of a very good compère, someone who makes it totally irrelevant the gender of the next performer (Appendix 6e).

Communicating directly with the compère, so as to ensure that gender is obscured until the last possible opportunity is not something that male comedians, operating from society's default position, need to concern themselves with. Rutter's comprehensive research did include consideration of a female comic, he mentions observing the introduction to comedian Lucy Porter. However, the impact that the female pronoun has on the success of all other aspects of the compère's role is not foregrounded in Rutter's research. It is my contention that the second that the gender of the performer is articulated, the control the compère has over the response the incoming comic will receive from the audience is significantly undermined.

4) Sexism from industry professionals

In addition to the complex relationship between comedians and compères, there were several examples, explored during the interviews, of female comics being undermined publicly by other comics, promoters or journalists. As part of our conversation Sophie Willan discussed a recent awkward moment she had experienced on stage. I had been in the audience for this particular comedy night and also noticed the reaction from the audience that she observed.[2] She recalled:

> I do also feel sometimes that there's this macho thing between the male comic world, that I really don't connect to. I mean I'm quite a competitive person, but I don't have that. […] There was a male comedian, where I was hosting a gig recently, quite a big gig. This male comic came on after me and said 'yeah alright yeah, you've had your moment'. […] And I thought that was a real. I mean I thought it was funny and it was fine, but it wasn't funny actually because a few people in the audience went 'oooo', and he completely undermined me as the host. […] Because I'm more 'new' you know, he came on stage and he just completely undermined me with my audience. And I've got to carry them for the night. So I thought that was an interesting move for him […] As far as he saw it this is a new and female, girl getting up flouncing about the

stage, with loads of people, 'having my moment' as he called it [...], he wasn't working with me was he? (Appendix 6n).

When the male comedian made the aforementioned quip when arriving on stage it broke the concept of unity. As Rutter observed, the role of the compère is to create an event out of smaller performances, to facilitate a cohesive narrative across disparate approaches. In this moment the male comic attempted to increase his status by making Willan the butt of a joke.

To make clear that it is not always men, or indeed comedians, that help maintain barriers for women entering the live comedy circuit the following example is pertinent. When asked about negative on-stage experiences, Kiri Pritchard-Mclean drew upon an experience she had when starting out in 2010:

> I did a new act competition when I was about a year in [to my career], the final of which was judged by and I will name them [leans in and enunciates directly into audio recorder] Greg Cook [comedian] and Marissa Burgess [journalist] and someone else from The Lass [The Lass O'Gowrie pub in Manchester]. There were like ten of us in the final and I went up, and the judges gave you feedback after your set. [...] And then [...] I went on and didn't have a great one, I didn't die but didn't do brilliantly. [...] In the feedback afterwards he just said 'great tits'. And then Marissa Burgess, he kind of went 'Marissa?' and she went 'Yeah great tits'. And I was like thanks sister! And I have never been so humiliated in all my life. Just stood there after having not a great gig and have professional comics [say that], when you are new as well, and a room full of people just talk about your tits, and that was all that he said. [...] They stood there and humiliated me for their own laugh. And it was a man who did it and then a woman who laughed along with him that did it. (Appendix 6f).

What strikes me about this recollection is that such sentences would not seem out of place in a description of the 1960s working men's club hostility towards women. To have encountered this level of sexism, facilitated by both panellists and so recently, would be shocking to many. This instance, experienced as part of entering a new act competition, could easily have put Pritchard-McLean off continuing in comedy. It is clear that hostility towards women, in sexist comments or micro-aggressions from those within the industry, are not as few and far between as most would like to think.

5) Badly advertised women-only nights

A key part of the discussions with all my participants was the role women-only comedy nights and events play in the wider circuit. Many highlighted to me how women-only nights were seen, by promoters and other comedians, as somehow less challenging than mixed-gendered nights. Pritchard-McLean highlighted that the general feeling towards them, on the mainstream circuit, is overwhelmingly negative:

> I hate that […] people call them 'oh they are like the Paralympics of comedy nights', that's what they get called in the industry. Yeah like 'why do you get to gig at The Frog just because you've got a fanny?', because there are plenty of places I don't get gigs because I've got a fanny'. […] It's weird because […] the zeitgeist at the moment, it's definitely going to go back, and it already is. Everybody wants to be seen to be addressing [it] and be engaged in the idea of gender equality. Yet stand-up is one of the last places where you can go 'oh no ladies can't do this job, because they are ladies' and it's weird that they are allowed to say that out loud [laughs]. Because you can't and wouldn't say that about anything else, like 'I'm not having a female lawyer, because what if she's on her period when the trial's on, there'll be no talking to her?' and 'Can you really educate a woman? Is that a thing that can happen?' (Appendix 6f).

Here Pritchard-McLean is referencing the way Laughing Cows' nights run at the Frog and Bucket, a club that has an element of prestige, since it has been a starting point for many of the North West's most successful comics. It seems that comedians who are not able to get a spot on a night in this venue are promoting the idea that women who take the opportunity to perform as part of women-only nights do not deserve their spot on the stage. It is the same thought process that occurs around quotas in all industries, and across multiple aspects of identity. The implication is that if you achieve success through affirmative action then it is undeserved in some way. This of course obscures the way that white male privilege is undeserved and has been enjoyed by men for most of human history.

The comedians I interviewed had all participated in women-only line-ups and overwhelmingly thought they were a useful and necessary part of the current industry. Kate Smurthwaite, whose comment is indicative of the overall feelings of my participants argued that:

> I think that female-only comedy nights are necessary and vital because the rest of the comedy circuit is for the most part male-only (Appendix 6j).

Even though the consensus was positive, the participants picked up on a developing trend in badly advertised women-only comedy nights. These nights reframe this positive space for female performers as something that reinforces outdated gender stereotypes. Daphna Baram, a London-based Israeli-born comic and journalist, highlighted how a badly marketed gig can hinder female performers, and the public perception of comedy by women:

> [R]ecently I was at a night […] a little festival in Margate in Kent and the guy who was running it, really with all the good intentions, was running this female night, a female line-up. And he said to me, he titled it 'Something for the Ladies' and I said I'm not doing this night unless you are changing it to 'Something from the Ladies'. So at least it will be clear that it is a female line-up but this is not just for ladies (Appendix 6p).

The title of an event, the colour choices for publicity (pink), and the use of specific wording on a flyer can help to build up the idea that comedy by women is automatically *for* women. Smurthwaite also observed a postfeminist reinforcing of gender binary in some poorly conceived nights:

> [Y]ou do also sometimes do this horrible thing of marketing a female comedy night, and I mean Laughing Cows would never do it, but marketing an all-- female comedy night like it's sort of [puts on a voice] 'ladies night'. And you get like half-price Lambrusco, and it's sort of like they'll put on the big match on the big-screen in the back room for the lads. […] Or I've done one where, they're on like military bases while the boys are away in Afghanistan or whatever and you're like 'this is quite odd' (Appendix 6j).

The phrase 'ladies night' was roundly dismissed as being negative. The Women in Comedy Festival, a detailed consideration of which will form the remainder of this chapter, purposely stayed away from colours or terminology that might alienate anyone (be they male-identifying, LGBTQ* or BAME), and its focus was always on integration, not segregation. Nights, or even comedy solo shows, that are publicised in this postfeminist or retro-sexist way are damaging the progress made by women who wish to be seen as equal to their male contemporaries. My interviewees saw women-

only nights as a means to an end, and as a tool for achieving equality, through equalizing the opportunities to perform, and not the end-game in and of itself. O'Keefe also referenced the way in which Laughing Cows was evolving and how, in the long term, she looked forward to putting on mixed-gendered nights that reflected the diversity of the industry across multiple identity characteristics. O'Keefe's focus seems to remain very much on making change in the wider industry, rather than simply creating a market for comedy by women in specific spaces.

6) Economic disparities

A further theme identified from the interviews was the economic disparities enacted on the circuit and how these disadvantaged women. I initially asked O'Keefe about barriers to women entering the industry when she established Laughing Cows in 1998:

> At the time those venues [bigger comedy clubs] weren't valuing that some females would bring those people in [large enough audience numbers] and would justify the costs. And even when you did have females they generally weren't headliner or opening, they were in the middle, probably on unpaid open spots, or even if they were on paid spots it was ten, fifteen, twenty quid, it was pennies. So how can a woman then actually make a true career out of comedy, because you can't justify it, you can't justify the cost of it. You're going to a gig and you're losing money even with your underground fare. You know you're just not getting anything back for it. So, I just think […] at that time, it was certainly a bit more difficult for females (Appendix 6b).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, women rarely headlined gigs on the mainstream comedy circuit. Often women operated in the opening or middle spots on a line-up where the pay (if there was any) was not as good, women would also be offered unpaid spots as an opportunity to develop their skills. Unpaid spots, as with all forms of unpaid labour (such as internships), are certainly barriers to the participation of anyone who is not economically secure. A counter argument would be that all comics have to start somewhere, and unpaid spots can be an invaluable way of finding a voice and developing craft. However, when women developed enough skills and confidence to perform a paid set, the opportunities to do so were few and far between. This, combined with women often only being booked on their own (as the only woman on a line-up) meant that there were simply numerically fewer opportunities to advance.

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Whilst bookers are getting better at not only booking one woman it is clear that some of these practices are still present on the current circuit. As O'Keefe observed regarding the inclusion of female comedians on the circuit today:

> I don't think all of a sudden promoters started thinking 'Oh I know I can make money out of female comics'. I see that happening now though and that irritates the hell out of me. It really really does. I think women worked ten times as hard, as they do in all careers, in most careers, I think women worked harder and I think people pioneered showcases and pioneered ways of working that other people then looked at, and decided to take elements of, or decided to completely copy and embrace. Or I think people were challenged. [...] If you're challenged then you have no choice but to then start booking in a fairer way and then you go 'oh actually!', your eyes are opened, your blinkers are taken off and so you start going 'actually that woman's fantastic and this really added something to the showcase, and actually having that kind of comedy, and that kind of comedy, and this person and that person, it changes the energy in the room and I much preferred it'. And then if you get a better product, you get financial benefits surely. I think there's also a risk as well, (the cynic in me), that people are booking females for a cheap option. That's even more disgusting than not booking women, it's more of an insult. You know yeah 'I'll throw in a token woman here, I'll offer people 5-minute open spots and I won't pay them a penny' it's worse! Just don't give them the gig, do you know what I mean? Let them go to actual clubs that value them and actually pay them to have proper slots. [...] I think that's something that is not being raised in the comedy circuit. [..] But to actually book a male and pay a male more, than you would pay a female is illegal. Not just discrimination, and that needs to be challenged, well I suppose through legislation. It needs to be enforced, that's the issue, because how do you enforce it, how do you prove it? But that's the reality of what's going on now (Appendix 6b).

O'Keefe believes that there were two motivating factors that affected the industry during this time in terms of inclusion. Firstly, showcases and comedy nights that were women-only proved to be successful and demonstrated to other promoters and producers that a market did exist. These pioneering organisations evidenced that an opportunity was available, and that the needs of a specific audience were not met elsewhere. This then inspired other promoters to adopt similar approaches to capitalise on a market they did very little to help develop. Secondly, people were openly challenging the booking practices that did not include women. Organisations like Laughing Cows and Funny Women have spent a significant amount of time advocating for changes to booking practices and highlighting the range of untapped female talent that exists in the UK. Organisations are better placed to challenge

questionable practices than individual comedians. Comics have to be at a certain stage in their careers in order to challenge booking practices and unethical decision-making, as making a stand comes with an element of risk (such as no longer being booked, getting a bad reputation etc. which can be career-ending for an up-and-coming comedian). Over the last ten years, and in the contemporary context, a number of female comics have managed to build successful careers in comedy. This means that there are now more people than ever in a position to make a stand and challenge gender inequality on the circuit without fear of repercussions. I will return to this development in Chapter 8 in relation to Jo Brand.

In terms of O'Keefe's final point, (regarding women being routinely paid less for performing), she was not the only person to highlight this concern. Pritchard-McLean made a similar point:

> [A]lso speaking candidly the pay is a lot worse on female comedy bills. So it feels like another thing 'oh we get paid less for doing this? I get it' and Hazel's pretty good […], but some others they take the 'we are so supportive of women and comedy' but just not willing to pay you the going rate (Appendix 6f).

Here Pritchard-Mclean is highlighting that even women-only nights can enact unequal practices around pay. If women are not being booked as regularly as male comics (evidenced by women still being in the minority on mixed-gendered line-ups), and so have to travel further to access spots and opportunities and even then are still paid less (either on mixed or women-only bills), it is a wonder how any women manage to achieve a sustainable or viable career in the industry.

7) Aesthetic pressures

In addition to the practical and economic issues, Janice Connolly who performs as the character Barbara Nice and runs the organisation Women and Theatre, expressed concerns about the current circuit in the following way:

> Now there's more female comedy about, [there is this] kind of movement where if a young woman's good looking, sexy, whatever that means, in a

mainstream kind of way, then they're really pushed by the agencies, so they're like little bred ponies really. And the kind of more unusual, like a Jo Brand kind of character, I don't see much evidence of them higher up. They have to be kind of quite good looking to progress now. Whereas Jo kind of came in back when that didn't kind of matter. I think there's kind of a beauty pageant thing going on around female comedians now, in terms of mainstream comedy, not, you know, not grassroots comedy (Appendix 6g).

Some felt this pressure more than others and age will, of course, be a factor since the broadcast industries tend not to take women over the age of forty seriously, often erasing them from our screens. Dana Alexander, a Canadian comedian who has been working in the UK since 2011, completely rejected the idea that she was pressured to look a specific way:

I stay away from generalisations, they're not helping any of us. I dress pretty boring. I'm in sneakers and a mismatched outfit. It's all different some guys dress to the nines you know, some girls dress down because they feel that they'll be objectified, so they'll actually you know, dress down on purpose. It's so individual. It depends on where you are, what club you're in, what country you're in. […] I don't read my reviews. I don't care. […] I have bills to pay. […] Yeah nobody really bugs me about my clothes (Appendix 6h).

Being clear that this is not something that she has ever personally felt the need to consider, Alexander does acknowledge that other women may well be aware of experiencing objectification and so dress accordingly. Connolly also felt this pressure to look a specific way impacted on male comics too:

I think that's true of the boys as well actually. […] When you think about the kind of classic, skinny jeaned, floppy haired boy that's going on, and actually traditionally comics were all shapes and sizes and odd-looking people often. […] Proper comedians in my opinion were kind of funny looking buggers actually, and now they've all got to be fanciable, sexy rather than funny. And I think funny is the best thing about comedy really, I think we often forget to be funny, we try to be clever or smart, I think we've maybe forgotten what funny is (Appendix 6g).

Here Connolly is clearly describing the 'T-Shirt comic' discussed in Chapter 3. It is apparent that in the current mediatized context, irrespective of gender identity, the need to look a specific way has increased in importance since the alternative

movement of the 1980s. This imperative impacts on everyone participating in television comedy (be that a recording of a live set or a panel show), but may result in specific challenges for women who are held to a different level of beauty standards than their male colleagues.

The structure of the industry

It is patently clear that the comedy industry can be analysed in relation to the inclusion of women into the wider labour market. The ways in which the current comedy industry contains structures that exclude or marginalise women is worthy of further investigation.

A crucial point of consideration is that Arts Council England (ACE), which is the main source of funding for high-culture arts such as opera and ballet, does not currently fund comedy. It may fund comic plays but stand-up comedy is not a fundable activity as ACE believes that comedy should be a self-sustaining industry. In ACE's ten-year strategic framework *Great Art and Culture For Everyone* they outline that the organisation's 'remit for 'the arts' includes a wide range of visual and performing arts forms, music, dance, theatre and literature' (Arts Council England, 2013: 13). Even though they have been challenged on their exclusion of comedy several times by performers, promoters and producers, ACE maintain a line that, by implication, states that comedy is not an art.[3] This attitude is arguably linked to comedy's populist origins as a mass working-class form. Therefore, comedy continues to be considered a part of popular culture rather than high art. ACE's attitude to comedy is entirely problematic, but so too is industry data collected about the current comedy industry. This data is often used, inaccurately, to present a more inclusive picture of the comedy industry than is accurate, and potentially plays in to ACE's understanding of comedy as a self-sustaining form.

In 2014 Ticketmaster, a large event ticketing company, conducted research into the UK comedy industry, creating the *State of Play* report. This report was authored by three Ticketmaster employees, Tina Mermiri, director of research and analytics, research analyst Sophia Rawcliffe and business intelligence analyst Thomas Rea. The report also

included an introduction by Bruce Dessau, an influential and well-known comedy critic who runs comedy website *Beyond a Joke*.[4] This research was widely reported in the media, used as a sign that things were economically healthy for the circuit, and that women were on the rise across the industry. This argument was made by a wide range of media outlets including various BBC online and broadcast formats, the *Radio Times* and *The Independent* newspaper.[5] However, there are several key flaws in this data in terms of considering gender equality on the circuit. These can be summarised as follows:

1) **The data set:** The transactional data used to form the basis of the report is flawed in that it originates with Ticketmaster and TicketWeb, and so is exclusively from events that they ticketed. There is nothing categorically wrong about the origins of the data, but claims that this data is representative of a whole industry is problematic when the data comes from a specific source. As a result the report does not capture any information about events that other organisations ticketed, or indeed for any comedy events that were *not formally ticketed at all*.

2) **Recruitment of participants:** The report does not make clear in its interpretation of the data where respondents originated (e.g. was the survey promoted to only Ticketmaster customers or more widely?). It does however indicate that the survey was designed, set-up and facilitated in-house.

3) **Participant selection criteria:** In order to qualify as a member of the comedy-going public, and thus be able to complete the online survey, participants had to have attended at least one comedy event in the last three years. This is an incredibly low bar for inclusion in the survey. This raises questions about why those conducting the survey allowed such a long timeframe and how reliable the responses are.

4) **Need to source additional data:** Data from TicketWeb was sourced by Ticketmaster to provide information for smaller venues and 'female comedy events' (2014:35). The methodology and the fact that this additional sourcing

of information was necessary is only mentioned in the appendices (the final page of the report). It is not highlighted within the text. This results in a misleading picture of greater inclusion than is the case. If Ticketmaster, the largest of the comedy ticketing companies, had to take additional steps to include data of female comics, then that in itself is worthy of note. The report diminishes this fact by obscuring it in a footnote.

In addition to the flaws in communicating the methodology, the report's presentation is a masterclass in the postfeminist reinstatement of a gender binary.

5) **Use of language:** The text of the report makes repeated reference to the way in which female artists are breaking through (Sarah Millican and Miranda Hart are used as examples). It uses the terms 'comedienne' and 'female comedian' throughout the text, both of which prioritise the gender of the performers above all else.

6) **Presentation style:** Whenever a female comic is mentioned, or gender is an index of measurement on a graph, the information is accompanied by a small pink 'women' sign. The symbol was presumably envisioned as a way of flagging up to the reader how inclusive the sector has become. As McRobbie comments in relation to education, law and big business, 'high profile and newsworthy achievements of women and girls in these sectors show the institutions to be modern and abreast with social change' (McRobbie, 2004: 257). However, the use of the symbol achieves the effect of highlighting just how un-inclusive the industry is. Thus, the gatekeepers and beneficiaries of the comedy industry when making use of the report, make grotesquely misleading public announcements about how inclusive the industry is becoming, whilst simultaneously reasserting a gender binary that foregrounds women's gender and others them.[6]

Further to these issues, the ethnicity of the survey respondents is not made clear as part of the data (although gender and age is foregrounded) so no conclusions or information about the ethnicity of the comedy-going public have been shared.

Depressingly, of the fifteen named comics within the report only two are women and every single one is white.[7] Where the text attempts to frame steps towards inclusion as positive, the actual data (and the way it is presented) when scrutinized paints a more pessimistic picture.

The industry in its current form continues to marginalise the voices of women. Marxist feminist activist Lindsey German proposes that the inclusion of women in the labour market outside the home has resulted in the development of structures that keep women in specific feminized fields, or in the lowest paid roles within mixed-gendered industries (German, 2007: 91-102). We can see that this is true for the UK comedy industry in that firstly it enacts vertical segregation of women. Vertical segregation occurs when women infiltrate male dominated careers only to find that practices within those settings keep them on the lowest rungs of the ladder. When women work alongside men on live comedy line-ups they are disproportionately operating lower down the bill, in opening or middle spots which attract less pay. It continues to be incredibly rare for women to headline over male comics and when they do so they are held up as an exception to the rule, a break through artist, a one-off.

Secondly, in addition to the barriers women encounter when attempting to integrate into the mainstream comedy industry, women are also horizontally segregated. The term horizontal segregation refers to the way in which certain kinds of labour are categorised as feminine and then disproportionately employ women, upholding a binary. Women have tended to be funnelled into jobs outside the home that replicate, or capitalise on, their historical roles as wives and mothers. As German states:

> The lowest paid occupations include many female dominated jobs – retail checkout workers, educational assistants and other childcare workers, hairdressers, counter-hands and catering (German, 2007: 93).

A key point here is that not only do the industries that replicate domestic, traditionally female labour pay less, but they also tend to be uniformly less respected by society at large. This can be seen in relation to the comedy industry where women are (potentially) pushed into women-only comedy spaces due to lack of opportunity for inclusion elsewhere. Just as other female dominated professions are dismissed and

disrespected, we can see through the testimony of my interviewees that there is a negative attitude towards these women-only spaces from the wider industry (Pritchard-McLean's observation about 'Paralympic comedy nights', for example). This is not to say that these spaces are not useful and completely necessary (as was articulated repeatedly by the performers I spoke with), but that these events and line-ups have the potential to absolve venues from making changes to inclusion on the mainstream circuit.[8] Women-only line-ups potentially enable venues to look inclusive without making any significant changes to the mainstream nights they provide.[9]

The *State of Play* report makes the vertical segregation of the industry clear, but does little to explore or expose what occurs in the horizontally segregated sub-sectors of the comedy industry. The report fails to account for any shows that are not in ticketed venues and this is where women overwhelmingly exist on the current circuit. The part of the industry that has done the least to develop equality (the top echelons) is now presenting data as a way of managing its image as inclusive, when the reality female comics experience is very different.

The report presents, therefore, a misleading and reductive view of the comedy industry, for the public-relations benefits of its commissioner, either knowingly or through the poor presentation of the data by the authors. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with creating a report about what happens at the top end of the mainstream comedy industry. However, when that data is framed in a way that makes claims about the inclusion of women, without accessing or acknowledging data from spaces where women predominantly operate, it creates and perpetuates a falsehood about progress that is yet to be fully realised. In summary, change is being made and provoked at the grassroots and un-ticketed ends of the industry and this report only considers the industry above the highly apparent glass ceiling. The final part of this chapter will consider this grassroots end of the industry.

The Women in Comedy Festival

To understand more about the purpose and role of women-only comedy nights I undertook research with attendees to the 2014 Women in Comedy Festival in

Manchester, where I was researcher in residence annually until 2017. By happy coincidence my audience research was conducted the same year the *State of Play* report was published. Whilst I am aware of other female-only comedy organisations, (Funny Women (UK wide) and What the Frock (Bristol) are two obvious examples), my research was conducted with the support of Laughing Cows and the Women in Comedy Festival in Manchester.

The UK Women in Comedy Festival ran its first event in October 2013 (which I attended). It was put together at short notice when Hazel O'Keefe, who had by this point been running Laughing Cows for 15 years, decided that she wanted to build a bigger platform for female comedians trying to gain exposure. O'Keefe set the festival up to try and create a space that addressed some of the problems explored above. The Edinburgh Festival that year had highlighted the potential of female comics to make it to the top of their field, but getting booked on mixed-gendered line-ups remained difficult for many. O'Keefe felt that the festival would showcase the range of talent on offer to audiences and also, by inviting promoters and bookers to attend for free, potentially give female performers the boost they needed to get into mainstream spaces. The festival, in all five of its iterations so far, has never had core funding of any kind. The team that makes the festival possible is made up of volunteers. As O'Keefe comments:

> [Y]ou have communities that grow, the Women in Comedy Festival Crew is a perfect example of that. […] I think we have got about thirty people, in and out, and I think out of that crew anybody would do anything to help and it's very, very genuine. And that was evident in year one when, you know, I'd created this massive project, I'd just created chaos basically, and the crew just came in and picked it all up and just filled in all the little gaps and dotted all the i's and the t's. And that's from a genuine desire for progression and equality (Appendix 6b).

The volunteers across the years have come from a wide range of backgrounds, including bank managers, students, IT specialists, teachers and social workers. All the volunteers are brought together through a shared passion for comedy and a desire to see more diversity across the form. The spirit of the venture is feminist in its truest sense (working collectively for equality for all), but this does not mean that all

volunteers share the same idea of the meaning of feminism. The volunteer team, of which I have been a part as a participant-observer since early 2014, are from across the gender spectrum and contribute in a range of ways. From liaising with artists to book and programme the festival, marketing, front of house work, technical assistance (including lighting and sound for some performers), the volunteer team have been involved at all stages of the process, overseen by O'Keefe as the festival's director.

As a participant observer I sat in on, and contributed to, a significant number of meetings across a four-year period which enabled me to understand how decisions were made and the rationale behind them. It was clear from the start that inclusion was front and centre of all that the festival was trying to achieve. Although the event's focus was on gender equality, this focus was never positioned in opposition to marginalised characteristics such as ethnicity or sexuality. The festival's team, led by O'Keefe, had a nuanced understanding of how women from certain ethnic groups, or with differing abilities, may experience additional barriers to inclusion within live comedy. The festival made clear in all materials (print and online) that it was trans inclusive and wanted to engage with all women. It was felt it was especially important to assert this (that the festival understood trans women were women), as at the time there was an increase in the levels of publicity around Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs).[10] The festival also wanted to set itself apart from other poorly publicised events (as touched upon earlier in this chapter), to ensure it avoided reinforcing stereotypes. The website and publicity intentionally stayed away from stereotypical imagery or colours. Pink was featured but did not dominate as the environment the team wanted to create needed to be inclusive of, and appeal to, women with varying connections to stereotypical femininity. The festival was always an LGBTQ* inclusive space and many high-profile comedians who identify as LGBTQ*, such as Zoe Lyons, Jen Brister, Suzi Ruffell, Bethany Black, Kate McCabe, Susan Calman and The Short and Girlie Show were quick to support the venture. O'Keefe is a well-known and influential figure in the LGBTQ* community in Manchester and the festival was supported by friends and volunteers she met through this scene too.

The remaining part of this chapter will consider my findings from research conducted with audiences during the 2014 festival. As outlined extensively in Chapter 2 this

mixed-methods research has a survey and interview stage. In total 336 people completed the survey, 334 in-person and 2 online. 14 follow up interviews with participants were conducted, with participants sampled to reflect the make-up of my overall cohort. The survey form can be found in Appendix 4, a breakdown of answers to each question in Appendix 8, and the identity characteristics of my full cohort of surveyed participants are illustrated in Fig1.

Fig1: Identity characteristics of audience survey respondents.

Note: N/R refers to no response. A response was considered void (VOID) when participants selected more than one answer that cancelled out a clear response.

Q12	(n=336)
Male	24.70%
Female	72.92%
Prefer not to say	0.60%
Other	0.30%
N/R	1.49%
Total	100.00%

Q13	(n=336)
Yes LGBT	39.58%
No LGBT	55.06%
Prefer not to say	2.98%
N/R	2.38%
Total	100.00%

Q14	(n=336)
16-20years	5.95%
21-30years	27.98%
31-40years	20.54%
41-50years	28.87%
51-60years	10.71%
61-70years	2.98%
Over 70	0.60%
Prefer not to say	0.60%
N/R	1.79%
Total	100.00%

Q15	(n=336)
Yes Disability	4.17%
No Disability	91.96%
Prefer not to say	2.98%
N/R	0.60%
VOID	0.30%
Total	100.00%

Q16	(n=336)
Black British	0.89%
White British	83.33%
White Irish	2.68%
White European	4.46%
Asian British	0.30%
Indian	0.00%
Black African	0.00%
Black Caribbean	0.30%
White and Black African	0.00%
White and Black Caribbean	0.60%
White and Asian	0.00%
Chinese	0.30%
Other	3.57%
Prefer not to say	1.79%
No Response	0.89%
VOID	0.89%
Total	100.00%

Q17	(n=336)
Student	11.90%
Homemaker	1.19%
Construction	1.19%
Science	1.79%
Education	8.04%
Civil Servant	3.87%
Healthcare	12.80%
Finance	2.98%
Retail	7.74%
Arts	4.17%
Charity	5.06%
Hotel/Food	2.68%
I.T	5.95%
Legal Services	1.79%
Retired	1.79%
Unemployed	2.38%
Other	18.15%
Prefer not to say	1.49%
N/R	1.79%
VOID	3.27%
Total	100.00%

Throughout the remainder of this chapter percentages will be rounded up or down to whole numbers.

- Of the 336 respondents 73% (n= 245) identified as female.

This is broadly reflective of the gender breakdown of many of the audiences for the shows, which tended to have more female than male audience members (although no exact figures for the festival's audiences exist due to the un-ticketed and ad hoc nature of some of the performances).

- Nearly 40% (n= 134) of the respondents identified as LGBTQ*.

This can be interpreted in relation to a number of factors, for example Manchester's significant LGBTQ* population, general LGBTQ* openness (several performances took place in venues in, or near, the Gay Village), O'Keefe's connection to the LGBTQ* community and the programming of several high-profile lesbian comics on the bill.[11]

- The majority of audiences, 92% (n=309) did not identify as having a disability and the age range of participants was spread across all the age categories. An

overwhelming number of my respondents were white, with 88% (n=296) identifying as either white British or white European.

In comparison to Lockyer and Myers respondents the ages of my respondents overall was higher, with 29% falling in the 41-50 category (as opposed to Lockyer and Myers' 14%). This could be due to the online format of Lockyer and Myers' study, which may have attracted a younger demographic of participants.

- 11% (n= 37) of the respondents were students.

This reflects Manchester's large student population (with four universities very close to the venues, Manchester University, Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Salford and Royal Northern College of Music).

- The average number of times respondents attended live comedy was 4 times a year.

In line with Lockyer and Myers' findings, my respondents predominantly attended with other people: 49% (n=165) with friends and 30% (n=101) with their partners.

- The average number of women-only comedy events/nights respondent attended in a year was 2.

A high number of my respondents, 57% in total, attended very little women-only comedy. 19% (n=64) of my respondents said that they see no women-only comedy nights a year, and 38% (n= 128) indicated 1. As the purpose of the festival was to enable comedians to reach new audiences with their work, this is encouraging, as a significant number of respondents were not regular attendees of women-only line-ups.

- 54% (n=183) normally saw live comedy in small comedy clubs.
- 46% (n=155) normally saw live comedy in small arenas/ theatres.
- 44% (n=148) normally saw live comedy in small rooms in pubs. (note that respondents were able to select multiple responses)

When asked about preferred venues for comedy the responses for these top three venues remained consistently in their first, second and third position. This differs slightly from Lockyer and Myers' findings in that their study found small arenas/ theatres to be the most popular venue, with small comedy clubs in second place, and small rooms in pubs the least visited venue.

- Large arenas were the least visited venue for comedy, at 16% (n=53) and when asked about preferred venues to see live comedy, large arenas dropped even further to 6% (n= 21).

This may reflect the tastes of the particular audience for my study and the fact that I was facilitating the survey in person at an event which took place predominantly in small venues (whereas Lockyer and Myers conducted their survey online). Women-only line-ups take place more often in small venues (Laughing Cows' monthly women-only comedy nights occur in The Frog and Bucket which could be considered a small comedy club) and female performers are disproportionately found on bills in these venues. Therefore, if the audiences were motivated to attend the festival to see female comics it is not a surprise that their other comedy going experiences occur in smaller venues where they are more likely to see female performers across the year.

- A majority of respondents, 65% (n=218), stated that the gender of the performer was not a factor when deciding to see live comedy in general (agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement).

However, 279 of the respondents then completed the free text box when asked about their motivations to attend a women-only comedy event and 44% (n=122) of responses explicitly foregrounded gender. Comments in this section unequivocally mentioned respondents' support of female acts, a positive decision to seek out female comics and a desire to engage with a sense of humour they could connect to. So, whilst gender may not play a part when attending mainstream events, it is, somewhat unsurprisingly, a key motivator for women-only event attendance.
Comments that fell into this category included statements such as:

'To support women comedians. I also relate to their humour.'

'I am a feminist and I like to laugh.'

'Enjoy watching female comedy and socialising with other women.'

'I can relate to the humour of women-only comedy.'

'I love listening to and talking about women.'

'Because most line ups never have a female act. If there wasn't any women-only shows I'd never see a female performance.'

'Because women are funny, but I can't see that on my TV.'

For the people responding in this way it was clear that the gender of the performer was relevant and a motivating factor to attend the festival. This was articulated in the free text response box either in terms of participants wanting to support women to develop further in the industry, or that they wanted to hear a kind of comedy they related to more.

In contrast to those who stated that gender was a motivating factor to attend women-only comedy, 9% (n=25) of respondents, used this text box to reiterate the point that the gender of the comedian is irrelevant to their choice of comedy night. Comments included the following:

'I don't particularly attend women only comedy nights - it would usually be because someone I like is part of the show or because of the theme - I view all comedians as equal and watch them on their own merit how funny I find them.'

'I don't! I don't selectively attend women-only comedy - I watch what I want and judge by the quality not the gender.'

'No particular reason. If I like comedy the performers gender [sic] bears no issue.'

'Don't make a choice based on gender, just quality.'

These comments are reflective of wider attitudes to inclusion and diversity, in that they tended to foreground terms such as 'quality' or 'merit' over the gender of the performer. These are, arguably, evidence of how, in the wider social context, initiatives such as positive action to address racial or gender disparities, or quotas, are undermined, as explored by Eddo-Lodge (2017). The assumption is often made that addressing an inequality will result in a lowering of standards and that quality alone is how (white) male identifying comics (businessmen, politicians etc.) attained their success, rather than a result of structural barriers to wider inclusion. Whilst we cannot assume this was the motivation for all the comments in this survey, acknowledgement of these attitudes provides contextual information about the society in which the data was captured.

In contrast to those who stated gender was not a factor, the comments in this section also evidenced a perception that the comedy that respondents would encounter in this environment would be qualitatively different in some way to mainstream comedy. 8% (n=21) of the comments highlighted the participants' desire to avoid certain aspects of previous mainstream comedy experiences. Comments included:

'Less risk of sexism/ general awfulness.'

'No sexist rubbish.'

'Less dick jokes.'

'Because I'm sick of hearing shit comedians telling shit jokes about their mums and their girlfriends' vaginas. Oh??!! Women are nuts? Get a life you sad case! Also poo, there are more topics than poo.'

'I'm a feminist and appreciate comedy that's less likely to be sexist/ discriminatory.'

'To avoid misogyny, sexism, stereotypes. Hate "cock jokes" and "blokey" sense of humour.'

'I can feel intimidated and uncomfortable in a mixed setting even though the material is just as 'raunchy'. I feel safer.'

'Because most comedy is male-dominated and unfortunately much of it is misogynist.'

In a similar way that the alternative comedy of the 1980s was framed as a reaction against the working men's club environment of the 1960s, for some audience members at least, women-only spaces are providing an alternative experience to that encountered in contemporary live mainstream, and televised, comedy.

Interview stage:

Following on from the survey I selected participants for follow-up interviews. 98 people volunteered to participate in the interview stage and I selected participants based on their identity characteristics so as to be representative, as much as possible, of the wider pool of survey respondents. Due to the overwhelming number of white attendees it was not possible to select along ethnicity lines. All interview participants were white British or white European. The identity characteristics of those interviewed can be seen in Figure 2. The interviews conducted were semi-structured conversations where participants' responses to the survey, and their experiences of comedy and motivations for attending a women-only event were discussed. In the conversations I also explored with participants some of my own views about the topic, when relevant. This was to ensure the interaction was collaborative and mutually beneficial, rather than a one-way 'data-mining' exercise. The conversational tone of the interviews was to put participants at ease, and whilst my attitudes were occasionally discussed,

questions were designed to not lead the participants to specific conclusions.

The interviews enabled me to explore further some of the attitudes tested as part of the survey. The survey contained a Likert scale section that enabled respondents to decide whether they agreed or disagreed with certain statements. These statements related to attitudes about comedy performed by women and women-only comedy spaces (see Appendix 8).

Fig 2. Sampled participants (exact ages, when provided, are included). The final column states whether they intentionally attended the Women in Comedy Festival. Yes (Y), No (N) or taken along by a friend (F).

No.	Date	Form	Age	Gender	LGBTQ*	Occupation	Intentional
309	29/01/2015	PHONE	(41-50)	F	L	IT	Y
318	16/01/2015	IN PERSON	53	F	L	Charity	F
266	13/01/2015	SKYPE	(21-30)	M	PNTS	Finance	F
247	14/01/2015	SKYPE	18	M	S	Student	F
31	25/01/2015	PHONE	34	F	L	Education (HE)	F
71	01/02/2015	PHONE	(21-30)	F	L	Education	Y
201	08/02/2015	PHONE	39	M	S	Healthcare	Y
81	07/02/2015	PHONE	58	F	S	Other	Y
155	10/02/2015	PHONE	42	F	L	Healthcare	Y
250	09/02/2015	PHONE	19	F	B	Student	F
237	10/02/2015	PHONE	41	F	S	Arts	Y
296	13/02/2015	IN PERSON	30	F	S	Media (TV)	N
295	23/02/2015	IN PERSON	31	M	G	Media (TV)	N
46	16/03/2015	SKYPE	31	F	S	Education (HE)	Y

Attitudes regarding female comics:

76% (n= 255) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that there are fewer female comedians than male comedians. Even though those surveyed were physically at a women-only comedy event when completing the survey, 10% (n=34) of respondents thought that all female comics talk about the same topics and 9% (n=30) believed those topics to only be relevant to other women. During the interviews several participants hypothesised why this attitude might still exist: Participant 46 (straight female, early 30s) stated the following:

> [I]f you watch TV or you watch panel shows and stuff it's always one female comedian and I suppose people see 'the' female comedian and kind of think that they are all the same. But if you go to an event like that [a women-only comedy event] there is absolutely no way that you could ever say that they are all the same. [...] I thought that that was one of the really good things about the event really (Appendix 7b).

When asked whether female comedians were better at representing respondents' experiences, opinions on politics and opinions on relationships, the most popular selected response (an average of 44% across the three questions) indicated that they neither agreed or disagreed with these statements. This highlights how gender alone cannot be the only point of connection between the performer and the audience but that other aspects of identity are also at play. Participant 31 (lesbian female, mid-30s) noted that the sexual identity, along with the gender of the performer made a difference to how much they could relate to the material. She articulated how other identity characteristics make a difference to how audiences relate to performers:

> I kind of felt more of an affinity with some of the comedians who [...] outed themselves and they talked about being in a same sex relationship that kind of thing. So, I felt more strongly affirmed with those comedians but there were some of the kind of things, issues that the women were talking about generally [...] where it kind of relates. [...] So, it might be like class, or rather than gender, it might be class or ethnicity or something like that. They might kind of feel drawn to a comedian. So, I think it's more individual and possibly based on prior experiences and the way people identify things that are important to them. But their identity will be important in shaping how they relate to a comedian (Appendix 7a).

The sexuality of the comedian may play a role in forming a connection with lesbian audience members; this could also be said about other identity characteristics. This was a sentiment replicated in discussion with participants 71 and 155 too. It is important not to be reductive but, for the LGBTQ* members of the audience, exploration within stand-up comedy of the sexuality of the performer may provide an opportunity to have their identities validated, in ways other arts forms do not achieve.

The interview with Participant 296 (Straight female, early 30s) evidenced by far the most conservative and stereotypical views regarding women and comedy. What is

particularly interesting about this interview is that this participant works for a major television broadcaster, which she referenced throughout our discussion. She did not intentionally attend a women-only comedy event but was simply given a flyer whilst in a bar with a friend and decided give it a go. When asked what she expected from a women-only comedy night, she commented:

> There's going to be a few lesbian jokes in there definitely. There's probably going to be a bit of men-hating, which there was, I think, if I can remember correctly (Appendix 7l).

The phrasing here is reminiscent of criticisms levelled at the feminist movement and women-only spaces in general. When asked about whether the sexuality of a comedian would impact on her ability to relate to them, she commented:

> No, because they'll end up just talking about a relationship and if they are talking about relationships, they'll talk about how a couple are. And I think most couples are quite similar in the sense of what they are going to be arguing or laughing about, so no, not really (Appendix 7l).

Whilst of course comedy that explores relationships between individuals will contain material that can be understood by all who have engaged in relationships with others, there are aspects of lesbian identity that are specific (not least the lack of representation and othering that lesbians encounter in mainstream media, and homophobia). Sexuality may well not impact on heterosexual audience members' ability to connect but for lesbian women, who encounter representations of themselves less frequently, live comedy is an important form for exploring sexual identities. The heterosexual perspective is framed as the norm from which everything else deviates, whether articulated by a male or female performer, and so straight identity can easily find validation elsewhere.

Perceptions of women-only comedy spaces:

During the interviews I was able to ask what participants thought they would get from attending a women-only comedy event. Many respondents stated that it would be

different from the mainstream circuit, both in terms of content and atmosphere. Participant 46 (straight female, early 30s), when asked what she expected from a women-only comedy night, commented that:

> [W]hen I was an undergrad I'd been to a few nights at The Comedy Store and stuff, and they were quite laddy […] not intimidating but laddy and it was mostly men in the audience and like girlfriends [laughs] of the men, and it was mostly men on stage. […] I kind of just thought it'd [the women-only comedy night] be different, that the vibe would be a bit different than that. Like not necessarily that it would be any less raucous or any less people having a good time. […] But I suppose I just thought it might be a bit more chilled and a bit more sort of just, I don't know I want to say inclusive but I don't know, I don't think I really mean that […] just less sort of laddy [laughs]. I know that's an obvious thing to say but um / I don't know how else to describe it. […] I really do think that the festival was absolutely brilliant, because as I've said for someone who had been to the Comedy Store and thought well yeah it was great and everything, but perhaps I felt it wasn't really my thing, to then go and see something where I felt it really was my thing (Appendix 7b).

This sentiment was echoed by a comment made by Participant 71 (lesbian female, 21-30 age bracket):

> I've been to a lot of women-only spaces, and I know the audience was mixed, so my expectation was that it would be really inclusive, it would be almost a different type of comedy to kind of like your mainstream kind of white male things that they talk about. So, for example my expectation of a women's comedy night would be along the lines of the subject matter they talk about and the attitudes and values which they show through their set. So, for example when I listen to male stand-ups the way they talk about women, it may not be sexist or derogatory per se, I think it's the gender roles things and the stereotypes that inadvertently male stand-ups still have within their set (Appendix 7c).

In addition to the kind of comedy found in these environments the idea that the audiences may contribute to creating a different atmosphere was commented upon. Participant 309 (lesbian female, 40s age bracket) regularly attended women-only comedy nights and stated that:

> The heckling is always less aggressive. […] And less sexual. I find a lot of when there's men the whole sort of sexual aggressiveness it disturbs me, even if it's

kind of meant to be in fun. Because I can't quite tell sometimes, when [there are] those levels of sexual aggressiveness between strangers. As in [when] somebody on stage and somebody in the audience is actually meant to be a joke. It feels threatening to me (Appendix 7m).

I include these statements here not to make the case that women-only nights are some kind of utopia of inclusion, but that several of my participants as audience members for comedy sought out an experience that was different from the mainstream. The sexism still found in mainstream male dominated clubs clearly impacts on some audiences' decisions to seek out an alternative experience.

As part of the attitude statements section, respondents were asked whether they agreed that all comedy nights *should* have equal numbers of men and women. This statement was designed to assess attitudes towards the implementation of quotas. 40% (n=134) of respondents stated that they did agree that this should be the case. 24% (n=81) of respondents did not agree with, and the remaining 36% (n=121) did not indicate an attitude either way. During the interview stage participants felt that whilst line-ups should be more representative of the population, quotas would not be productive.

Participant 81 (straight female, late 50s) made a point similar to the general attitudes picked up in the free text boxes of the wider survey:

I'll go to wherever the person makes me laugh and their gender or their sexual orientation is kind of, well is totally irrelevant if they are funny (Appendix 7d).

Hence we arrive back at this idea that, if comedians are funny then participants would go and see them and that gender was irrelevant. It was clear that in these instances respondents did not realise that their access to the work of comedians is influenced by industry decision-making. This seeming lack of recognition that quality does not guarantee exposure is a key finding and evidences why engagement with audiences should play an increasingly significant role in comedy research.[12]

Further to this, in the interviews participants shed light on their attendance habits and how these are often formed by wider exposure to comedians on TV. Participant 295 (gay male, early 30s) also worked in television and commented that the way he selects shows to go and see is based on knowledge of at least one of the line-up.

> [I]t's knowing, that for example I've seen Barbara Nice before and I know that if she's on the billing then there's an element of familiarity and I'm more likely to go and try other new comedians too. Or if it's so and so who's a familiar comedian or knowing that it's someone who has performed in a show that I like before, again I'm more likely to go and see that person and then inevitably other people through seeing that person (Appendix 7k).

Participant 201's (straight male, late 30s) attendance habits were notably similar:

> So yeah, I don't have too many blind, blind comedic nights that I can think of. I might have the odd one but most of them I'd know at least one of the line–up (Appendix 7f).

These comments illustrate perfectly the double bind facing female performers. How do you know a female comedian is funny until you have been exposed to their work? If audiences only go to see people they are aware of already, they will mostly be seeing men who have dominated the wider platforms. Knowing at least one of the line-up may be an important part of motivating people to attend live comedy. This foregrounds the need for women to be included in mixed-gendered line-ups as well as women-only spaces. This is because well-known comics have historically been male, due to their monopoly on television and recorded forms, and so using their status to expose audiences to a more diverse range of comedy is a key way to make long-term change to the industry. Crucially for the festival 59% (n=198) of respondents agreed that they were more likely to see female comedians again now they had seen them perform live. This is a very positive statistic as the focus of the festival was to develop an audience for comedy, both in general but more specifically by performers who identify as female.

Unsurprisingly, due to the news coverage at the time, 75% (n=252) of respondents agreed with the statement that there were not enough women on TV panel shows.

Regarding the question about why participants thought there were fewer female than male comedians, many referenced television as the key factor in how they had arrived at this conclusion.

Participant 247 (straight male, late teens) highlighted that what he sees on TV has led him to believe there are fewer women in comedy than men.

> I think it's the sort of media I'm exposed to because as I'm a teen, a young adult, I watch shows like *Mock the Week* and *Live at the Apollo* and you see from those shows there are very very few female comedians who perform and the ones who do are always the big-name comedians. So, there's Jo Caulfield will always be on *Mock the Week*, Sarah Millican will be on *Live at the Apollo*. So I think it's the way I formulated the belief; my belief that there are fewer female comics is because they get less exposure (Appendix 7h).

Many of the participants were aware of the wider context surrounding inclusion on panel shows. Participant 250 (bisexual female, late teens) commented that:

> I am aware that the BBC have now made it mandatory to have at least one woman on every panel show, which I agree with because it's linked to what I said before about representation, it's important. But also, I think that it's slightly bizarre that all we ever do seem to see on some programmes is men and the women that you do see are the same women every week. It's Miranda Hart for example or Shappi Khorsandi and it's not really necessarily the most diverse group of people, whereas you know the number of male comedians that seem to get the chance to go on these panel shows and to get themselves a better reputation and things like that. [...] For me it's not really about say tokenism for example but it's about the idea that in order to perhaps to push more people to do something, they need role models. So, if you know you're a little girl and you're interested in comedy, but you never see any women being funny, you might think women aren't funny. I think it's important that live events try to be as diverse as possible and have as many voices as possible speak because, again partially for representational purposes but also because I think you are more likely to get diverse, different kinds of humour, from diverse kinds of people (Appendix 7i).

Whereas the youngest interview participants (250 and 247) were aware of wider debates around representation and the media, what stood out from the interview with Participant 296, a woman who works within the television industry, was the openly hostile attitude towards positive action. When discussing how they had arrived at the

understanding that there were fewer female comedians than male comedians they said:

> I'd say yeah there are fewer women, is that because they are less funny? I don't know, that's a question I'm asking myself. And then I try and think well actually they are [there], I mean there is always generally at least one on a show. I just I don't know, I'm not fussed by that. It just doesn't bother me that there's less women (Appendix 7l).

This participant was clearly not that concerned that women were in the minority within the content of television comedy. When I followed up by asking whether the current system was a meritocracy, and that comedians were simply booked because they were the funniest, she replied:

> Because they are the funniest, not because they are male or female. I can't stand positive discrimination (Appendix 7l).

She also evidenced a postfeminist attitude in response to further questions. An attitude that implied that somehow women have gone too far, and now men are in the position of being oppressed in some way. She made the argument that male comics now have a harder job of poking fun at the opposite sex, in a way that women do not experience.

> I think if you've got a woman saying a funny joke about a man she could say anything really small and we'd be like 'oh yeah, so true' but if men start saying just little things about women, I personally think women start getting uppity about it. Whereas if you've got to go so much further and take it much further. Women comedians can take it really, really far about men. I think men it's a very hard line that they have to sometimes tread to be able to go that far to make the same sort of jokes that we are talking about (Appendix 7l).

The attitude displayed in this particular interview is indicative of the attitude (explored in the previous chapter) that women, especially those who subscribe to a feminist ideology, are killjoys. This evidences that this attitude is still very much alive and well (and in the case of this respondent, working within the television industry). The lack of women and feminist comedy in recorded forms will be explored in more detail in Chapter 8.

Overall both the performers I consulted and the audience members who participated in this mixed methods research believed the Women in Comedy Festival and women-only comedy events to be positive for inclusion. Audiences spoke of these spaces both in terms of the meeting of specific audience needs (women-only spaces have often provided safe spaces for lesbian and feminist groups for example) but also as a means to an end, to engage with an event that makes an impact on the representation across the wider comedy circuit.

The organisation of the Women in Comedy Festival clearly adheres to Sara Ahmed's description of feminist organising. Ahmed writes of the discipline of women's studies, and the desire within this field to transform the academy in the following way:

> [The discipline of women's studies] is to build in an environment that needs to be transformed by women's studies; the point is to transform the very ground on which we build. We want to shatter the foundations. It is not surprising that if we try to shatter the foundations upon which we build something, what we build is fragile (2017: 176).

This description rings true of the way the Women in Comedy Festival has been put together. It is an event that will only be thought of as truly successful when it is no longer necessary, something of which O'Keefe is acutely aware. It is an event created by the force of will of likeminded people, without core funding, beholden to no-one, and without profit for the organisers.[13] In the four years I have been researcher in residence it has never been possible for the group to submit a bid for Arts Council England (ACE) funding, regardless of the fact that such a bid would be unlikely to be accepted, due to ACE's attitude towards comedy. This has been due to volunteers having insufficient time to apply for funding. The events themselves take place in the very spaces where male-dominated comedy also occurs. Thus, as with women's studies, it attempts fundamentally to alter the system within which it builds itself. This way of working of course results in instability, or fragility to use Ahmed's term, as is the way of all feminist organising. O'Keefe is an industry professional but all the volunteers, upon which the event relies, are not. Arguably the Women in Comedy Festival illustrates that a feminism of another era is still alive and well, having more in common with the consciousness raising initiatives of the late 1960s and 1970s than

current binary-reasserting postfeminist organisations. The LGBTQ* inclusiveness at the very heart of the organisation, led by O'Keefe (a self-described butch lesbian), has enabled the festival to present a huge range of images of women and womanhood rather than attempting to align itself with a contemporary ideal of femininity.

This identifiably feminist organising practice is an observation that could not be said of Funny Women, an organisation that has always managed to achieve a good level of sponsorship, possibly because of the way it reasserted a male/female binary as part of its publicity. Parker, Funny Women's founder, talks of the organisation as a brand, it is a professional outfit, and it has been a very successful one clearly contributing significantly to the progression of many contemporary comedians. However, previous sponsors of Funny Women include cosmetics brand Benefit, skincare brand Nivea and alcoholic drink brand Babysham, all of which are aligned with a certain kind of female experience and femininity. The use of pink in Funny Women's branding combined with slogans such as 'laughter is the best cosmetic', present a postfeminist reassertion of women's difference. There is nothing inherently wrong in this approach. Parker is an experienced public-relations professional who knows the benefit of financial backing, and it has enabled her to lead the organisation into a well-known position in the industry. However, the observation that I wish to make here is that the structure of these two organisations is very different. This is evidence of the way widely divergent approaches to feminism, and to tackling ongoing inequality on the circuit, currently exist side by side. The following chapter will consider how, now that women have infiltrated these physical comedy spaces, and often with the help of the aforementioned organisations, social media may facilitate or hinder this process.

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[1] For further information on the societal gaslighting of women see Kate Abramson's (2014) 'Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting'.

[2] Whilst I know the name of the male comedian Willan is referring to (as I was at the event in question), it was her decision during the interview not to name him directly. I will therefore respect her wishes and remain consistent with her use of the term 'male comedian'.

[3] For more information on various attempts to get The Arts Council to take comedy seriously see the following performing arts and comedy industry websites.

See Snow (2015): https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2015/arts-council-defends-decision-not-fund-comedy/ (accessed 20/5/18)

See Mulholland (2017):
http://www.chortle.co.uk/correspondents/2017/08/16/37528/the_working_class_has_been_forced_out_of_comedy (accessed 20/5/18)

[4] See: https://www.beyondthejoke.co.uk/ (accessed 7/7/18)

[5] See the following articles, all of which use the data of the *State of Play* (2014) report to make the case for improved gender equality in comedy:

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-29430909 (accessed 30/6/18)

See Daly (2014): https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2014-10-01/sarah-millican-tops-list-of-best-selling-female-stand-up-comedians-as-ticket-sales-boom/ (accessed 30/6/18)

See Sherwin (2014): https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/news/miranda-hart-and-sarah-millican-lead-female-comedy-breakthrough-9765423.html (accessed 30/6/18)

[6] Ibid.

[7] The comedians named in the report are: Michael McIntyre, Peter Kay, Lee Evans, Miranda Hart, Sarah Millican, John Bishop, Jimmy Carr, Billy Connolly, Russell Howard, Kevin Bridges, Jack Dee, Frankie Boyle, Ken Dodd, Alan Carr and Harry Hill.

[8] As an example, for the month of February 2014 The Frog and Bucket in Manchester, which hosts Laughing Cows on a monthly basis had just one female comedian on the bill external to those performing on the women-only line up. Laura Machin performed on 20th February as part of a mixed-gendered bill and the only other women to appear on that stage did so as part of the Laughing Cows night. The thirty-three other available spots went to male comedians. Machin performed as part of a Big Value Thursday show (a show that normally plays again with the same line-up on the Friday and Saturday nights minus one of the Thursday line-up). In this instance, the female comic was the one dropped from that line-up and the other three men performed a further 2 times as part of this show. In the same month the Comedy Store had a total of forty-six available spots and none went to women, as a comparable example. XS Malarkey, which positions itself as a more alternative option, and runs a weekly night had seventeen spots to fill. It programmed one woman on each of the nights, so three spots went to women. This was indicative of the booking processes enacted in Manchester's three biggest comedy venues across this period.

[9] It is worth noting that in recent years Jessica Toomey, director of The Frog and Bucket and has made some impact in ensuring a more inclusive line up. Toomey was supportive of the Women in Comedy Festival from the start in 2013. This has involved not only booking more female acts and compères but also changing the photos of comedians up on the walls of the club to reflect a more diverse array of talent.

[10] Germaine Greer provides an example of a high-profile feminist who refuses to accept trans women as women and has been described as a TERF. Whilst Greer's current views are now well known, and there have been numerous public discussions and instances of no-platforming, in 2012 Greer was glitter bombed (a kind of protest against homophobia and transphobia) when at a book signing in New Zealand. Therefore, the transphobia inherent in certain kinds of feminism was already in the media at the time the festival was established, and as a result an explicit distancing from that kind of feminism felt necessary. For information on the glitter bombing of Greer see: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10792049 (accessed 30/6/18)

[11] Public Health England's 2017 report highlights Manchester, along with London and Brighton and Hove, as having a particularly significant self-identified LGB population. See: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/585349/PHE_Final_report_FINAL_DRAFT_14.12.2016NB230117v2.pdf (accessed 5/7/18)

[12] Interestingly this lack of awareness of power structures was also evidenced by BBC Comedy Executive Steve Canny on a discussion panel at Mixed Bill's Comedy and Power Conference at Sheffield Hallam

University in November 2018. Canny repeatedly denied the existence of structural barriers to inclusion within UK broadcast comedy. He repeatedly stated that 'the power' to get comedy made and exposed to wider audience rested solely with the performer, much to the evident incredulity of the audience and other panel members.

[13] O'Keefe does not turn a profit on the work she does for the festival as it means that she cannot take on other paid work during the time it runs. The volunteers have the opportunity to undertake training in skills such as audio and lighting desk management and are invited to give as much or as little time as they can to the project. Some volunteers participate in planning the festival across the year, whereas others engage with the festival only when it runs, providing front of house assistance, technical support, flyering the public or generally helping out.

Chapter Five

Online to IRL - The impact of social media on stand-up comedy

The key focus of this thesis is live stand-up comedy and the spaces within which these performances occur. However, it is impossible to ignore the impact that both the Internet and, more precisely, social media has had upon these physical performance spaces. The stand-up comedy performed by women under consideration in this research occurs in a highly mediatized context where technology has profoundly influenced and altered relationships between people. This chapter considers the way that online environments, specifically social media platforms, both maintain and challenge the current barriers facing women within the UK comedy industry.

The Internet plays a vital role in circulating information about contemporary comedians (for example extracts of their work, reviews of their shows, information about their career, and when they have attained a certain level of success, gossip about their personal relationships), and social media furthers and embeds this role by creating an environment of unprecedented interaction between a comic and their live audiences. In this chapter I will argue that social media, focusing on the Twitter platform, plays a meaningful role in changing the relationship between stand-up comics and their live audience. In particular, I will consider the impact this evolving digital landscape has on comedians who identify as female. Comedy (and comic personas) developed and perpetuated online in digital spaces has direct and significant implications for the current context of live comedy performance and is therefore pertinent to this research.

A key aspect of the current digital context is the availability and access to American comedy facilitated by the Internet. This is true of both American stand-up shows (recorded 'specials' or clips of live performances) and televised comedy, such as sitcom and sketch genres, for example *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) (1975-). Extracts of longer form broadcast comedy can easily be repackaged and edited into short social media friendly clips for circulation on YouTube. Furthermore, streaming services have provided new opportunities for stand-up comics on both sides of the Atlantic (i.e. those working in the English language), to record and distribute their live shows across

online, rather than televised, platforms too.[1]

The distinctions between US and UK television have been eroded as a result of streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu. The process of watching comedy content from America has become almost indistinguishable from the process of watching UK television, possibly differing only in the use of different services or sites which hold the rights to the content. Due to this heightened awareness of both the products and discourse of the American comedy industry it is often apparent that the UK lags behind in gender and racial diversity in relation to comedy output.[2] There is a sense that 'the grass is greener' in the US due to the increased profile of female writers and performers on US television comedy. The access we now have to comedy content via the online environment, and the way this has impacted on fan cultures has provoked increased interest from academia. Examples here include Symons' (2017) consideration of 'podcast comedy' and outsider status, Belanger's (2015) exploration of the impact new media has on stand-up production, and Krefting and Baruc's (2015) insightful discussion of social media and American comedy, all of which focus on US contexts. Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore's book *Screen Comedy and Online Audiences* (2017) considers these fan cultures and the ways in which audiences judge and debate comedy content across Tumblr, Twitter, Reddit and the wider Internet. Kalviknes Bore's work discusses US, UK and transnational screen comedy and foregrounds the access audiences now have to a wide range of this comedy content.

The proliferation of sketch comedy on American network television offers a pathway between live stand-up or sketch performance, and moving into narrative television formats such as sitcom (as was the case with Amy Poehler and Tina Fey, *SNL*'s first female head writer) or Hollywood comedy films (evidenced by Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph and Kate McKinnon). Whilst this format has been significant for performers of all genders, the reach and scale of *SNL* is such that it has been key to launching the careers of a substantial number of female comedians, at a time when a comparable UK equivalent format does not exist. Alongside the circulation of content from broadcast formats, clips of female comics presenting or hosting events often circulate on Twitter. Examples of this include Amy Poehler and Tina Fey's speeches when hosting the Golden Globe Awards (2013-2015) and more recently comedian Michelle Wolf's turn

as 'Roastmaster' for the 2018 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner (which attracted huge amounts of gendered criticism), both of which were circulated across the world within hours of broadcast.[3]

In tandem with Britain's wider access to American comedy we are also seeing increased amounts of user generated content (UGC) online both from established comedians, those with ambitions to become comedians, and the wider general public. Comic short films and sketches are created for online platforms such as YouTube and then circulated on Facebook and Twitter to gain a wider audience, occasionally going viral and attracting thousands of viewers. As Burgess and Green observe 'YouTube is not actually in the video business […] YouTube is in the reach business as understood in traditional media business models' (2009: 4). The Youtube platform is reliant upon the content generated and uploaded by its users. In 'Is Vlogging The New Stand-up Comedy? A Compare/ Contrast of Traditional and Online Models of Comedic Content Distribution' Matthew McKeague (2018) considers the differences and similarities between creating online comedy content and that of live stand-up comedy form. He summarises his findings in relation to the following four areas: 'starting one's career, dealing with opposition, honing the craft and landing the big break that drastically increases popularity' (85).[4] Whilst McKeague's focus is the American context, and arguably overlooks nuances such as gender due to an overwhelmingly male-heavy set of examples, it is clear that, in terms of starting a career, online content creation provides a new opportunity for those wanting to break into the comedy industry. This can be said both of those whose long-term goal is to move into screen comedy and those wishing to perform comedy in a live environment. Due to the rise in mediated forms of comic expression, recent developments in academic considerations of comedy have tended to focus on screen comedy and the audience's experiences of these forms, rather than the way the online environment is used by and impacts very substantially upon the work of stand-up comedians working in a live environment. Even when this has been undertaken it has concentrated on the US environment. The way social media operates with regards to the UK live comedy industry is the focus of my argument in this chapter.

Alongside the use of social media and the Internet for the dissemination of comic content, we are also living at a time where these online tools are used in an unprecedented manner for political means. A significant amount of political commentary, debate and opinion is delivered to the public via social media channels. These channels may be facilitated by individual politicians, political parties (the official Conservative Party and Labour Party social media sites for example) or the online presence of broadcast news or the national press (*Channel Four News* or *Huffington Post* for example). American President Donald Trump's continued controversial use of Twitter as a way of speaking (uncensored) directly to the public, both those whom he governs and the wider world, as well as the world's political leaders, exemplifies a wider awareness and use of tools such as Twitter in recent years. There has been widespread reporting of Trump's various Twitter furores in the mainstream news. In addition to Trump's approach (which is perhaps terrifying rather than comic) we also have politicians making use of humour to convey serious points. Kate Fox (2017) highlights that we have entered a new political climate, arguably aided by the changes to the digital landscape, that combines comedy and seriousness. Fox posits the term 'humitas' to describe 'discourse which enjoys incongruity and paradox and doesn't draw a clear line between satire and sincerity' (Fox, 2017). [5] Social media provides a particularly effective space for this kind of comic political discourse.

Twitter operates as a public facing tool. This is dissimilar to Facebook which functions, in line with the platform's original objectives, in relation to existing interpersonal relationships. It is interesting to note the gendered origins of Facebook however, as it provides insight into the way social media spaces and platforms are developed with recourse to gender stereotypes. Susan Watkins reminds us that 'culture has been transformed by a means of communication premised on an Ivy League "hot or not" game' (Watkins, 2018: 8) and thus it is hardly surprising that so many digital spaces reflect existing gender disparities. Facebook's initial emphasis was the ability to connect with people you know, have historically known, or wish to get to know better in real life, so as to keep up with their activities and maintain interpersonal connections. Twitter, however, places more emphasis on the ability to 'follow' those high-profile individuals whose work or opinions may be of interest.[6] It is therefore Twitter that will form the focus of this chapter, and the ways that this particular digital

context impacts on stand-up comics, their content and, crucially, their relationship to their audiences.

Impact on comic practice

Since this phenomenon is a central part of my research I discussed the online context of contemporary comedy, social media use and the impact that all this has had on the comedy industry with comedian David Schneider. Schneider, a comedy writer, performer and director, also founded digital media company *That Lot*. Therefore his wide ranging and long-running career, as well as his social media expertise, makes him an ideal person with whom to critically discuss the changes observed in the industry since starting his career in the 1980s.[7] Schneider has (at time of writing) 361,400 Twitter followers and is well known online for his left-leaning satirical humour.

Schneider acknowledged immediately that his engagement with Twitter had both positive and negative impacts on his own comic practice:

> It's been transformational for me in many ways. […] It's given me the ability to, err, polish my tool [laughs]. You can't quote that [laughs]. To polish my tools, to sharpen up. I've got better and better at writing one-liners. That wasn't necessarily a forte of mine beforehand, so it's helped me be more confident, it's helped me get better as a writer. It's had negative effects on my longer form writing, in as much that it is so obsessive and addictive (Appendix 6c).

Twitter is seen by Schneider as having both positive and negative effects. It has provided him with a place to hone a craft (in line with McKeague's (2018) findings), specifically short one-line jokes. Schneider went on to suggest that the use of Twitter will depend upon the stage people are at in their careers, and for those who have already been working professionally as comedians, social media can be a useful part of experimenting with new material:

> People who are already professional comedians it's allowed them to have a promotional tool and to also hone their techniques. To see maybe if this joke will work, maybe that joke, has it got several retweets, has it got lots of retweets, so it's a testing ground (Appendix 6c).

Not only can Twitter help to develop a skill, it can also prompt some degree of formative feedback from a potential audience: this allows for a testing of the water for a specific joke construction or theme for further writing. In addition to being used to explore comic wording or joke construction, Twitter can also be used by comedians as a promotional tool, to give potential bookers, producers and audiences access to and a flavor of the style of comedy one may get in a live environment or find evident in their written work.

Space for development

Schneider also drew on his awareness of up-and-coming comics to consider how Twitter may assist them in establishing a presence in the industry;

> I think it also has given confidence to a lot of people who would have never have tried stand up to try it. A lot of people who feel 'I'm not a comedian', 'Am I a comedian?', and might want to be a comedian, they can test out whether their jokes are funny which allows a bridge between that thing you have in your head, 'I think I might be funny', and standing up and saying jokes in front of people, which is a terrifying thing to do for the first time, or anytime. So social media allows a sort of confidence bridge, a bridge made out of confidence that helps people get to that step of actually standing up and doing live work (Appendix 6c).

In this way social media provides a space between having a potentially funny idea and getting up on stage for the first time. Whilst this process cannot replace the improvement of performance or delivery skills (such as comic-timing), which can only be developed in a live environment, the process can give new performers a degree of confidence in their material. Clearly there is a difference between being labelled the funniest person in a social group, where the creation of humour may well be contingent on existing social relationships or knowledge of the joke-teller, and tweeting out a joke which enables access to a new audience with no social or affiliative stake in finding the joke funny. Nevertheless, due to the limited responses available to people on Twitter (such as 'favouriting' a tweet or re-tweeting, with or without further comment) it may be hard to tell exactly what kind of response people are indicating. A one-liner compressed into Twitter's 140 (or, more recently, 280) characters may well

receive the same response (the same number of 'favourites', re-tweets etc.) as a political comment, personal insult or call to action. While the analytic information may indicate a quantitative interest from an audience, the appeal of tweets that go viral, or have a high number of re-tweets, could also be read as comprehension of the basis of the joke and indicate a fruitful topic for comic material. However, it is very rare for someone to re-tweet or reply to a humorous tweet simply by saying 'I found this funny', thus providing qualitative information to the joke-teller and, even if they did, it would still be hard to ascertain exactly how or why amusement was arrived at. If jokes do provoke a response via the reply function it often turns into an act of participatory humour, where respondents attempt to add or further the joke in some way, although this again may indicate that a concept is ripe for further exploration. Irrespective of the multiple ways one could interpret online engagement with a one-line tweet, the interaction other Twitter users have with the tweet is providing basic information to a potential comedian before they arrive in another environment, be that a writing room or a performance space. As Schneider suggests, this relatively new online space may be a step towards getting on stage and may broaden the pool of those who have the confidence to get up and try live comedy in the first place, possibly removing for women the stereotype threat, outlined in Chapter 3, that exists in a live environment.

Schneider states that he personally knows several people who had started to perform live and acquired roles as writers after successfully establishing a following for their humour on Twitter or social media sites. When I spoke with Schneider he had recently worked with Jenny Bede, a former musical-theatre performer. Bede is now known for her comedy work on BBC3, but at the time of my discussion with Schneider, was very new to the comedy industry having built up a following on YouTube by posting parody music videos and sketches.[8] With a performance background, Bede was no stranger to the live environment, but YouTube provided a space to experiment with comedy and to build up a following for her material. Musical and sketch comedy seem to be particularly effective forms for this movement between YouTube and other recorded comedy. Perhaps this is due to the way short musical comedy videos exploit the specifics of the recorded forms themselves, satirizing the form and content of other screen media (such as music video formats, vlogging's direct address to camera or technologies such as Vines).[9] The way in which short comedy videos are also

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integrated seamlessly into the existing content of the online platforms means that they sit alongside unironic music videos and this contextualises the well-observed parody. Online, geographic barriers are broken down by the use of the Internet and so a niche audience can be found more easily and nurtured in order to create a potential audience for live work. This may be more significant for the UK context due to the way America is a larger geographic area and so in the US online awareness may not as easily translate into attendance at a live event.

Accessing information about comic labour

Twitter also creates a space that potentially enables users to understand the mechanics behind the comedy they encounter. A significant number of producers, writers and directors of screen comedy also have a Twitter presence and so it provides a source of information about the labour that goes into broadcast comedy. Similarly live comedy promoters and comedy nights also create a presence for themselves on social media and this sheds light on the process of bringing something to the stage. An example of this is the Twitter presence of Kiri Pritchard-Mclean, which gives followers a wider understanding of the range of work she undertakes as a comic. She not only performs as a stand-up comedian but writes for and directs sketch troupe *Gein's Family Giftshop*, runs comedy nights Suspiciously Cheap Comedy and Amusical (with Jayde Adams and Dave Cribb) and co-hosts a podcast *All Filla No Killa* (2014 -) with Rachel Fairburn. Her Twitter feed explores all these differencing comic roles and provides a wider understanding of the labour that goes in to producing and promoting a live night, researching and creating a podcast or writing for radio or broadcast television.

Silencing women online

Online spaces, particularly those facilitated by social media which encourages responses and interaction between users, hold particular challenges for women. The abuse and trolling (online behaviour designed to provoke a negative or emotional response) that women receive when expressing opinions online was a key concern whilst conducting interviews as part of this research. Just as the physical spaces for

comedy and public oratory have historically been resistant to the inclusion of female voices, so too is the digital space of social media. Across the Internet in general, but especially on Twitter, we can see widespread attempts at a systematic silencing of women in positions of power through trolling and abuse. This is played out in a context where insufficient safeguards are in place to prevent or tackle rape threats, calls to violence, or sexist, racist, homophobic and transphobic insults.

Comedian Kate Smurthwaite, who has herself been the victim of such threats, put forward her thoughts on this matter in the following way:

> I actually in a weird way don't think it's bad that we get all this abuse on the Internet. I mean obviously it's horrible that it happens. But however long it was ago, several decades ago Germaine Greer said, 'women have very little idea how much men hate them.' Well guess what, the Internet, thank you for letting us know. [...] Now we all know (Appendix 6j).

There are almost too many high-profile examples of women experiencing online abuse to consider this in detail here. However, three examples have particular resonance with this research.

Firstly, the Twitter trolling of classicist Professor Mary Beard provides a clear example of attempted silencing. Beard, who regularly appears on British TV and Radio to provide expert information about historical civilisations, was targeted following an appearance on BBC *Question Time* (1979 -) on 17th January 2013. Beard is in a position of power, both within the academy and in the sense that she is able to express opinions on her specialism to the wider public. This seems to have been interpreted by many as an opportunity, an invitation almost, to publicly criticise her.[10] The abuse faced by Beard predominantly focused, across intersectional lines, around her gender and age. As Beard notes, regarding online abuse, in her 2017 work *Women and Power: A Manifesto*:

> It's not what you say that prompts it, it's simply the fact that you're saying it. And that matches the detail of the threats themselves. They include a fairly predictable menu of rape, bombing, murder and so forth [...]. But a significant subsection is directed at silencing the women. 'Shut up you bitch' is a fairly

common refrain. […] In its crude, aggressive way, this is about keeping, or getting, women out of man's talk (37).

Whilst Beard was more than qualified to express her opinions in public, the mere fact she was a woman, and one who did not adhere to feminised ideas of beauty, and was intervening into the traditionally male sphere of public oratory, was enough to enrage some users of Twitter into a campaign against her. It is Beard's use of the term 'predictable' which is particularly depressing as we are now in a situation where many who write or speak publicly expect, or at least are not surprised to encounter, abusive reactions online. Comedy, as with all public oratory, has historically been considered 'man's talk'. Beard's experience provides an example obviously laden with misogyny, the abuse arriving seemingly with the motivation to use fear to prevent her from speaking out further. Many of the comedians I spoke to as part of my research were aware of Beard's Twitter ordeal.[11]

A second example can be found in the trolling of feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez, who in 2013 spearheaded a campaign for Jane Austen to appear on banknotes. In this instance Criado-Perez was calling for the public to back a petition to persuade the Bank of England to include Austen on the new £10 note. The campaign was started when the production of the new £5 note involved the removal of social reformer Elizabeth Fry, the only women, other than the Queen, to have ever featured on UK legal tender. Criado-Perez, who is also the co-founder of the *Women's Room Project* which campaigns for women to be better represented in the media, used her knowledge of the 2010 Equalities Act to highlight that the Bank was failing in regard to its statutory obligations. Having successfully persuaded the Bank to include Jane Austen on the new bank notes, Criado-Perez continued to receive online abuse. This came to a head on the day of the banknote's issue, when she received around 50 death and rape threats an hour over a 24-hour period.[12] In this instance not only was Criado-Perez expressing an opinion publicly, as was the case with Beard's television appearances, but she was also advocating for tangible change and requesting engagement from the public to assist in this process. Therefore, the trolling was not only an attempt at silencing an opinion but additionally an attempt to prevent the changes occurring to the imagery on banknotes. Online abuse therefore attempts not

only to prevent women from expressing opinion but can also be focused on preventing women making tangible societal change. This reflects in many ways the abuse women receive in real world environments. As Laurie Penny observed in an article for *The Independent* newspaper in 2011 'an opinion, it seems, is the short skirt of the Internet' (Penny, 2011a).[13]

Lastly, a more recent and comedy-specific example of the hostile online environment faced by women is the backlash encountered by African-American stand-up comic and actor Leslie Jones. Jones was targeted when appearing in the 2016 re-boot of the *Ghostbusters* franchise, directed by Paul Feig. Similar to Beard's argument about an online backlash being provoked to keep women out of men's business, in this instance the male-dominated fanbase of the original film appeared to see the female re-boot as a threat to the very core of their existence and identities. The online commentary around a female *Ghostbusters* repeatedly reflected on how a new version would ruin the childhood memories of men who loved the original film, whilst simultaneously dismissing the childhood memories of the young audiences (perhaps specifically girls) who would see the 2016 version and also be inspired or empowered by it. As Kalviknes Bore identified when discussing the Twitter response to the director's announcement of a female-led *Ghostbusters*, 'the aggression in some of these responses suggested a greater anxiety about what Feig's film might mean for fans' gendered identities' (2017: 45).

The abuse aimed at Jones, which was both sexist and racist, escalated due to the involvement of other online personalities with alt-right agendas to push. Angela Nagel summarises the targeting of Jones when discussing the American alt-right's use of 'Harambe memes'.[14] The memes, that drew upon the public shooting in 2016 of Harambe the gorilla at Cincinnati Zoo

> [A]llowed cover for genuinely sinister things to hide amid the maze of irony. For example, Harambe was referenced by harassers in the hate campaign led against *Ghostbusters* star Leslie Jones, with largely anonymous threats and comparisons of her to the gorilla. This barrage of abuse came her way after Milo Yiannopoulos, the English gay conservative turned alt-light celebrity, tweeted a series of insults at her and said, among other things, that she looked

like 'a black dude'. The harassment campaign […] led to, among other things, her website being hacked and nude photos of her being circulated online (Nagel, 2017: 6).

This example highlights the way that trolling on Twitter is now often a gateway to more widespread and aggressive forms of online abuse, such as hacking and pictorial retaliation in the style of revenge porn. There also exists an online culture where groups collectively act to target those they want silenced.[15] The racist misogyny Jones encountered for being in a comedy film was a wake-up call to many who naively thought that society was becoming more inclusive or accepting of more diverse depictions of women of colour on screen.

The abuse received by the women discussed above related to opinions expressed in written or televised forms, or their inclusion within screen comedy. Therefore arguably, the hostility faced by women online mitigates against some of the identified positives (for example the chance to develop a following or fanbase). The opposition encountered by women on social media is an additional barrier to those trying to develop a following online when starting a comedy career. For example, stand-up comedian Dotty Winters discussed with me her own experience of writing for online magazine *Standard Issue* and the level of criticism and abuse she received as a result for this.

> I'm not sure people understand what happens in the online arena. […] There are lots of things that are the same for all people, but there is something different that happens to women, in all jobs, but in comedy it's quite acute, if you are female and you express opinions publicly. And I don't know any male comics who regularly get death threats or rape threats on Twitter but that is standard practice if you are a female comedian expressing an opinion. I write for a magazine, as you know, […] and there would be no point in writing articles and not expressing your opinion that would be a really bad article, but even knowing what was coming I am sometimes surprised by the response […] that that gets. And particularly the direct messages that you get on Twitter that are just vile and even though […] you know where that's coming from and you know logically not to worry about it, it does affect you. Part of me just thinks […] I don't think my male colleagues are sitting thinking 'shall I open my messages today on Twitter or do I just not want to deal with that shit because I've got other stuff to do and that's going to bring my day down? (Appendix 6i).

Whilst Winters is clearly not claiming that online abuse is unique to women, in her own experience she feels that male comics do not receive the aggressive response that women expressing comic viewpoints in public encounter. For every potential female comic thinking of making use of social media to develop a following or a profile, the awareness of the gendered abuse experienced by many on Twitter will impact on whether they feel confident to express ideas online. Arguably women sharing comedy publicly still requires confidence, perhaps just a different type when compared to stand-up in a live environment. At least in the live environment hecklers do not have anonymity and are (for the most part) held accountable for their behaviour.

Kate Smurthwaite makes the counter argument that this online abuse, of which she has also regularly been the target, highlights the attitudes about women that often social structures keep hidden. She makes the case that just because we have not heard these attitudes articulated so bluntly previously does not mean they were not there bubbling away. Maybe, she argues, we just were not as aware of them before, as there was no anonymous way of sharing those views with the world.

> Like these attitudes didn't not exist before the Internet? These attitudes were out there and we sensed that they existed because you know, we noticed that we didn't get jobs and we noticed that policies seemed to discriminate against us, and when we were applying for things we weren't listened to, and when we were asking for stuff we were ignored, and our needs were prioritised last, and the things that women did were not valid in the way that the things that men did were and dot dot dot. And now like, there is no, 'oooh no one's quite sure what's going on', it's really obvious, I can print it out and show it to you like, I've got folders full of it at home. […] So I think that Internet trolling is a very useful way of telling us […] what attitudes are really out there. And not to say that everybody feels that way but you know those attitudes haven't just emerged all of a sudden they've been there all along (Appendix 6j).

It is certainly true that, as with relief theories of humour that foreground the comic arena as an opportunity for exploring taboos, the relative anonymity of the online environment makes people feel they can say and express views that would otherwise be repressed. Therefore, as Smurthwaite argues, we could read in these views expressed online the historically hidden aspects of toxic masculinity.[16]

Interestingly Schneider, as the only male consulted as part of this research, was also aware of the backlash towards women on Twitter. Schneider commented, in line with Smurthwaite, that:

> [T]he reason why there is a massive backlash against women on Twitter is because there is a massive 'forelash' [laughs] because it gives them that massive democratic opportunity to go 'I'm a woman and here is my voice', and 'here is my wit and here's my intelligence' and there are other women coming together and some people just can't stand that (Appendix 6c).

For Schneider the attitudes and resistance met by women in the digital space are a continuation of behaviour historically displayed in real spaces and interactions. So, whilst the digital space can be democratizing for comedy, it is also clear that some aspects of this space are openly hostile to those who identify as female.

Building a following and highlighting connections

Following a comedian's Twitter timeline can provide basic insight into the kind of material they produce and their style of humour before seeing them in a live environment. This change may be especially relevant to female comics as, as discussed in the introductory chapters of this thesis, it is harder for them to infiltrate live comedy line-ups with the same regularity as their male contemporaries, and this makes it hard to build up a following of people familiar with their style. Additionally, the challenges women have faced when trying to progress from live into broadcast forms (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8) mean that it is unlikely that potential audiences will see them showcase their talent on television either. In this way, public facing social media platforms such as Twitter can be seen as bridging a gap and enabling potential audiences access to information about what they may see in a live environment.

Comedians also regularly tweet about where they are playing, who they will be working alongside, and new material or shows they have developed. Access to this logistical information was, as a comedy fan, my initial motivation for joining Twitter. If I had just turned up at my local comedy clubs each week hoping to see female comics, this research would have taken significantly longer. Information shared via social

media has made it easier for comedy fans to access the work of comics of interest. Historically with mixed bill line-ups or open mic nights, it was difficult or even impossible to know who would be on stage in advance. This information also often arrives with a useful element of contextual additional information. As Twitter functions as a social network it is easy to see connections between comedians who regularly promote the work of their collaborators and friends. If you enjoy the work of, for example, David O'Doherty, you will often be informed about the work of fellow comedians working on the Irish circuit, such as Aisling Bea or Alison Spittle. This tendency creates an Amazon-style recommendation system where connections exist between comics with similar senses of humour (e.g. if you like X, why not try Y?). This results in well-known comedians taking on the role of social influencers, to some extent replacing or complementing the work done by traditional gatekeepers (such as the critics, talent scouts or producers explored in Chapter 3). By following those mentioned in tweets by comedians of interest, a Twitter user can expand their reach and broaden their awareness of new comedians. Thus, endorsements from comedians themselves, alongside reviews of shows, undertaken both by professionals, bloggers or simply enthusiastic members of the public, assist in building up a picture of the performers' work for the comedy fan before attending a live show, in a way that was simply not achievable before mainstream uptake of social media.

Participatory online humour

The connections between comedians becomes particularly obvious when large public events occur that provoke a comic reaction. Whilst some comics are very forthcoming about their political positions on Twitter, others are more interested in using it to showcase their sense of humour, rewarding their fanbase for following them. Schneider proposed the example of the collaborative response to *The Eurovision Song Contest*:

> It definitely, obviously gives access to comics. It's that classic thing of watching *Eurovision* on Twitter is just sublime, because all the comics and all of the funny people just know that here's the time to be funny, and we didn't have that 10 years ago. It's a whole different performance thing […] there's a performance on *Eurovision* night, you know you book your ticket for Twitter. That's what you want to see (Appendix 6c).

The Eurovision Song Contest (1956 -) provides an example of collaboration between comedians, comedy writers and producers, as well as members of the public. The following examples are from the #Eurovision2018 feed:

Figure 1 Mrchrisaddison (12/5/2018) [Tweet] Retrieved from https://twitter.com/mrchrisaddison/status/995376987270205441

Figure 2 Davidschneider (12/5/2018) [Tweet] Retrieved from https://twitter.com/davidschneider/status/995434896192663552

Figure 3 WeeMissBea (12/5/18) [Tweet] Retrieved from https://twitter.com/WeeMissBea/status/995422628599955457

In instances such as this, Twitter users are responding humorously to a social or cultural occurrence. One comic may start a joke that another picks up, builds on, or takes in another direction. This is evidenced in Fig. 1 where comedian and writer Chris Addison inspires other Twitter users to build upon his comic observation. The shared

understanding required for humour to occur is based upon something all users are engaging with (be that something of national importance, like *Eurovision*, or the EU referendum campaigns, a Royal wedding, or something more local or niche such as a sports game or lesser known TV shows).[17] Often the more successful jokes merge together several topics of national importance, as can be seen in Fig. 2 when Schneider combines, through his choice of imagery, both the Brexit campaign and *Eurovision*. This is also apparent in Fig. 3 where Irish comedian Aisling Bea draws on cultural stereotypes of Ireland to make humour out of Ireland's achievements in the song contest.

Twitter enables real-time feedback between users, and re-tweeted content can spread far beyond an initial group of followers. The labelling of tweets with a hashtag (e.g. #Eurovision2018) enables those following that topic to see content from every Twitter user labelled in this way and therefore is a very effective way of becoming exposed to new comedians and their comic approach. Twitter can provide advanced knowledge of a comic's humour, their performance schedule and an awareness of their context within the industry, and this empowers audiences. Now, more than ever, audiences have the opportunity to make informed choices about who they see live and this may well benefit female comedians who lack exposure through other forms.

Interaction with comedians

The opportunity to interact with comics through social networking sites is one of the most significant changes to the comedy landscape. The experience of watching a comic perform live was historically a time-limited experience, which may contain an element of audience interaction. However, on social media, the opportunities for interpersonal communication are a key part of following a comic on Twitter. This interaction may well occur before seeing a performer live, either through the participation in a collective expression of humour (as with the above examples) or through direct questions in the forms of tweets to a particular performer (achieved by adding their Twitter handle to the post). For example, questions regarding the content of the shows and appropriate age levels can be asked in advance. Occasionally logistical information is requested from a performer too (e.g. 'when will the show finish so I can book a

train?' Or 'will there be any tickets sold on the door?'). These questions may appear on the surface very mundane. However, for the first time, the existence of the comedian external to the space and time of a performance is really present in the mind of an audience member before attending a show.

Not only can these interactions precede live performances, but they can also form a crucial part of the relationship between performer and audience.[18] After seeing a performance the audience now have a way to communicate their thoughts directly to a performer. This can be positive, in the sense that those who have enjoyed the performance can express their enjoyment and encourage others to see the shows too via social media. Alternatively, this communication may be negative, with criticism being levelled at a comic for being offensive, using bad language or expressing specific opinions. The opportunity to voice judgements about a comedian's show, directly to the comedian, can occasionally form part of the hostile environment discussed in relation to women's online presence. Whereas any disruptive or threatening audience members may be ejected from the comedy club by security (silencing them), the online space is not as tightly policed, and occasionally audience members use this platform to retaliate when they feel slighted. Irrespective of the reaction evoked by the performance Twitter gives the performer access to some of the audience's responses to their material, and for the audience Twitter humanises the performer highlighting the difference between their onstage and offstage personas.

This opportunity for interaction can be used by comedians to nurture a sense of community in their fanbase or audiences. Luisa Omielan, a comic discussed in detail in Chapters 7 and 8, provides a useful example of a comedian creating a sense of cohesion between her fans using Facebook and Twitter. Omielan's sharing of personal information and interactions with her fans creates a sense of shared values and interests around topics and experiences such as heartbreak, being single, and bereavement.

In this way we can see Omielan managing her online profile as a kind of brand, developing what Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017) outline as a micro-celebrity status. In contrast to comics taking control of their own online presence, there are some

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comedians who have completely eschewed this kind of interaction. Bridget Christie, Stewart Lee and Daniel Kitson are examples of high-profile comics refusing to engage with this kind of online profile building. Each nurtures their fanbase by using mailing lists for those who have signed up - a much more one-way approach to communication. It is telling to note, however, that these three comedians have been present within the industry for a significant period of time, pre-dating the mainstream use of social media. They have each built up a fanbase by performing live for a long time, or showcasing their skills in broadcast forms (as was the case with Lee's TV work in the 1990s). Perhaps therefore, these comedians have had the option to not engage with social media in a way newer up and upcoming comedians do not.[19] Schneider also commented on how a presence on Twitter may now form part of the audiences' expectations of a comedian and pose a problem for certain performers;

> [T]hat old fashioned thing of 'here's the performance' then 'I am a shy person and I want to go away', that's harder now. It is much harder to do as a performer (Appendix 6c).

The ability to walk away from a performance and conduct your own analysis of it is now replaced by access to audience feedback and opinion on an unprecedented scale. Schneider also considered how exposing the process or personality behind a comic performance may challenge audience perceptions of performers:

> Sometimes Twitter can be, you know, 'pay no attention to the man behind the curtain'. We want to see the Wizard of Oz, we don't want to see the man sort of doing all the levers, the old geezer. So, some of the magic in that way has sort of gone, but that's all about, you know, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages because there's the proximity to the performer (Appendix 6c).

Therefore, whilst audiences may have gained a 'proximity to the performer' as Schneider terms it, audiences may also encounter information about the background to a performance that we may not want to see, or it could, in fact, actively detract from the collective enjoyment of the performance. Arguably managing a social media profile is a different kind of performance, and this may be labour that some are unwilling to do, or do not have the time to engage in.[20] To consider Schneider's

'Wizard of Oz' comment further, the management of a social media presence may be different for those who perform as a more pronounced character on stage (rather than a heightened version of themselves). Those comics who perform character comedy acts may not wish to draw attention to the illusory or performed elements of their on-stage persona (although, as will be discussed in Chapter 8, sometimes this awareness is vital to understanding a performance).

A shift in performer/ audience relationships

To conclude this line of argument, it is clear that a fundamental shift has occurred in relation to the possible interactions between stand-up comedians and their audiences in very recent years and that this has specific implications for female performers. Social media sites give audiences an unprecedented level of access to, and awareness of, a comedian's work and career. This information has the capacity to impact on whether audiences make the effort to see a performer live, and also whether they choose to interact with a performer after an event. The information about a performer, accessible through social media, is contextualised within an awareness of what other comedians and audiences think about the comic, and indications about their political leanings and comedy collaborators. Consequently, the information which is gleaned from this discourse is more powerful and convincing than simply informative text or imagery on a website. Comedians can make use of the tools of social media to refine their short-form joke writing skills, test new material, engage in showcasing their topical humour through collaborative activities, and foster a sense of connection with their current and potential audiences. For women starting out in comedy the digital space of social media provides opportunities to develop comic material and personas on a scale currently unmatched by those found on the live circuit.

Whilst we can see many of the applications of social media as positive for performers and audiences it is important to highlight that this digital space is often reflective of the wider societal context and thus contains specific gendered hostility towards women. This hostility can be seen as a reflection of that found within the physical environments of comic performance. In the following chapter therefore, I will turn to a

consideration of how the current social context, facilitated by digital and online culture, impacts on the presentation of women's bodies within stand-up comedy performances by women in the live environment.

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[1] Netflix, who promote 'stand-up specials', provides an outlet for the solo shows of many British and American female comics. The shows available online include Bridget Christie's *Stand-up For Her* (2017), Katherine Ryan's *In Trouble* (2017), Maria Bamford's *Old Baby* (2017), Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra* (2016), Chelsea Peretti's *One of the Greats* (2014). It is important to remember however, that the decision to release a recording of a full show means that the particular comic material cannot be delivered in a live environment again. Therefore, this opportunity to showcase full shows is more relevant to established comics who have already significantly toured with the material before recording it.

[2] This claim can also be made of the increased racial diversity across all American television when compared to Britain. Black British comedian Gina Yashere discussed her decision to move to America to pursue her career in an interview with Arwa Mahdawi for *The Guardian* newspaper in 2017. See: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/11/the-daily-show-gina-yashere-in-england-id-still-be-the-token-black-face-on-mock-the-week (accessed 11/5/18)

[3] See Smith (2018): https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/29/white-house-correspondents-dinner-michelle-wolf-stuns-media-with-sarah-sanders-attack (11/5/18)

[4] Whilst McKeague's research mainly focuses on those identifying as male and is somewhat problematically created from literature reviews and quotes from interviews conducted by others, he does include considerations of a female married couple's online comic content and the work of stand-up Maria Bamford in relation to 'dealing with opposition'. However, at no point in this analysis does McKeague mention the obvious gendered nature of the online and live spaces and how opposition encountered by those belonging to groups considered minorities is different to general heckling. This results in a somewhat limited analysis of the online and live comedy under discussion in his work.

[5] For an introduction to Fox's term Humitas, see: https://theconversation.com/humitas-a-new-word-for-when-humour-and-seriousness-combine-82556 (accessed 29/4/18)

[6] This echoes my own use of these social media sites; on Facebook I choose to engage with people I already know and share information within that network, whereas on Twitter in the majority of cases I follow the feeds of people I do not know personally but am familiar with through the media.

[7] Schneider's career, developed from his live comedy work in the 1980s as a student at Oxford University, has seen him perform as part of the cast of *The Day Today* (1994) and *I'm Alan Partridge* (1997), direct BBC3 sitcom *Josh* (2014-17) and co-write the feature film *The Death of Stalin* (2017) alongside long-term collaborator Armando Iannucci.

[8] To view Jenny Bede's YouTube videos, see: https://www.youtube.com/user/bedey100/videos (accessed 29/4/18)

[9] The comedy of Dapper Laughs provides an example of someone making short comedy clips with Vine technology and releasing these on YouTube. Dapper's work and career will be interrogated in Chapter 8.

[10] For a discussion of the trolling Beard faced after an appearance on BBC *Question Time* in 2013 see Dowell (2013): https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jan/21/mary-beard-suffers-twitter-abuse (accessed 29/4/18)

[11] Beard's more recent uses of social media have however fallen into the trap of white feminism displaying a lack of awareness of the issues facing women of colour when trying to get their voices heard. An overview of the exchange between Beard and her detractors, and the predominantly constructive and respectful tone of the exchange, can be found here within the writing of Ramaswamy:

https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/19/mary-beard-oxfam-tweet-genteel-racism (accessed 29/4/18)

[12] For more on Criado-Perez's experience see Philipson (2013) writing in *The Telegraph*: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/10207231/Woman-who-campaigned-for-Jane-Austen-bank-note-receives-Twitter-death-threats.html (accessed 29/4/18)

[13] See Penny (2011a): https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/laurie-penny-a-womans-opinion-is-the-mini-skirt-of-the-internet-6256946.html (accessed 27/5/18)

[14] For an explanation of memes and consideration of why the Harambe meme became such a wide spread phenomenon see Barnett (2017) writing in *The Independent*: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/harambe-memes-gorilla-one-year-on-cincinnati-zoo-ohio-shot-dead-a7756991.html (accessed 29/4/18)

[15] This can also relate to the more extreme ideology proliferated in the sites under discussion in Nagel's work. This includes the idea that men are now being denied sexual intercourse by women and as such have become 'involuntarily celibate' (which has been contracted to the term 'incels'). This kind of misogyny is much more prevalent online than has been widely known. The term has only become part of public debate due to a recent Canadian shooting by a man who professed to hold these beliefs. See Tait's (2018) discussion in *The New Statesman*: https://www.newstatesman.com/2018/05/we-must-try-understand-how-unwanted-virginity-leads-self-hating-incels-murder (accessed 11/5/18)

[16] For more on to toxic masculinity see Salter and Blodgett (2017).

[17] The online reaction to the recently televised BBC documentary *Bros: When The Screaming Stops* (2018) provides an example here.

[18] Certain comedians use Twitter to highlight the (often not so glamorous) mechanics of being a stand-up, affording their followers a look behind the scenes of life on tour. For example, Al Murray (@almurray) when touring engages in a long-running game of 'sink vs kettle' where he posts images to his followers of the complex and occasionally impossible tea-making facilities some hotel rooms present him with. When on tour Sarah Millican (@sarahmillican75) posts images on her Twitter feed of the snacks she consumes during the interval. These tweets show the audience some of the context of the performances.

[19] Symons' (2017) discussion of outsider comedians in an American context provides examples of those who make use of social media and online platforms to maintain their 'outsider' status.

[20] Management of an online presence is time consuming work. Whilst self-presentation strategies affect the way all social media users present themselves online across multiple platforms, the work of Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) provides some insight into how impression management plays out in an online dating context. This kind of impression management is also relevant to the way comedians manage their online presence to attract potential audiences, rather than romantic or sexual partners. See https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00020.x (accessed 11/5/18)

"I know what you're thinking": Self-deprecation and body positivity

> I always thought self-deprecation put those around me at ease. But now I know it makes people uncomfortable. So dumb! (KristenSchaaled 24/1/14 [tweet] retrieved from https://twitter.com/kristenschaaled/status/426806855357042689)

Self-deprecation is one of the most enduring aspects of comedy and, as American comedian Kristen Schaal humorously notes above, it is a more complex property of comedy than it may at first appear. This chapter will initially consider why women's bodies are the focus of much self-deprecatory comedy and why this approach may continue to endure. The chapter will then move on to discuss how this links to cultural contexts relating to the policing of women's bodies, culminating in an exploration of both the positive and negative effects of self-deprecation within stand-up comedy performed by women.

Self-deprecation is a form of satirical humour that, as the term implies, targets the speaker or writer. 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). Self-deprecation can depreciate the perceived cultural value of the performer/author by lowering their status in relation to their audience.

Russell's work is an important starting point for this chapter as, in addition to reflecting on how we can define self-deprecation in comedy, her research explored Joan B. Levine's 1976 study of male and female comedians' material through content analysis. Levine concluded that self-satire was unique or 'niche' to comic routines by women, and Russell's study, over two decades later, undertook to establish whether this claim remained accurate. For the basis of her study Russell reviewed one hundred and fifty recordings of American comedians, selecting the performances at random from television and video recordings from (what she vaguely terms) the previous three decades.[1] She included stand-up routines by both male and female comedians in the

material under analysis. Although out of the one hundred and fifty comic performances considered, only thirty-seven were from female performers (insightful in itself when considering the kind of platforms afforded both male and female comedians during this period), her results demonstrated that self-deprecation could no longer be considered unique to female performers. Russell did find however that a higher percentage of the female comedians included in her sample made use of self-deprecation than their male equivalents. Her findings indicated that:

> [S]elf-deprecatory humour is neither restricted to, nor the staple of, female comics. It is however, more prevalent in their stand-up routines than in those of their male counterparts (Russell, 2002).

I broadly agree with Russell's conclusion, that self-deprecation, although an enduring feature of comedy performances by women is not exclusive to them, having observed first-hand as part of my own research this comic approach being deployed in performances by both men and women. However, in the sixteen years since Russell's article, and her articulation of her definition, it is reasonable to expect that the perceptions being 'accommodated' by those self-deprecating in comic performance will have changed. Therefore, it is the functions of self-deprecation within current comic performance, and the 21st century UK-specific 'accommodation' that this chapter will explore.

In the years since the alternative comedy movement of the 1980s, as explored in the opening chapter of this thesis, women in the UK have had increased opportunity to present themselves through comedy, taking control of their own comic representation. So where does self-deprecation fit within a post-alternative movement, female-inclusive comedy industry? As Joanne Gilbert comments when considering the American comedy circuit 'humor created and performed by women is a public, societally sanctioned discussion of women's experience – an experience all too often relegated to the margins of society' (2004: vxii).

Women's experiences are many, varied and, in postfeminist western societies, contradictory. Self-deprecation as a mode of address and articulation of women's experience is itself paradoxical yet continues to endure as part of comic performance. The approach of using self-deprecation can be seen as both liberating and also as

undercutting the power afforded women when taking control of a comic situation. Self-deprecation certainly still performs a function within comedy by women. Russell highlights that self-deprecation is often seen as a key aspect of female stand-up performance, as the need to 'recognize (and neutralize) audience resistance to her mere presence further complicates the issue of building a quick and positive rapport with her listeners' (Russell, 2002). It is vital to explore both how self-deprecatory humour provides a potential strategy for rebellion against out-dated stereotypical or negative attitudes towards women, and how simultaneously it can reinforce these attitudes too.

In this chapter I will refer to self-deprecation as an approach to comedy, as it is one of many methods comedians can draw upon to provoke laughter. Self-deprecation can be evidenced in a single joke or within longer narrative routines. Often self-deprecatory humour engages with topics that could be handled differently or in a more positive light, therefore the term 'approach' is the most apt to describe how it functions within performances. When self-deprecation is used within comic routines it is done so knowingly, and with an awareness that it will have an impact on an audience. Although, as Schaal notes above, it is easy for comics to misjudge the impact it may have.

As a researcher, I am acting as a prism through which the performances considered in this thesis are presented. Therefore, 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. 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 often does not seem to be comparable to the reactions of others. I am not a performer, but a long-standing audience member for comic performance, and I have seen and enjoyed stand-up from a wide range of performers over the course of many years. I am also someone who identifies as a feminist and as such my perspective on the performances I have been observing and enjoying has been informed by an awareness of the problematic aspects of self-deprecation by women in wider cultural and social situations. I personally find it very difficult to listen to self-deprecation as an audience

member, as it makes me feel uncomfortable and disconnected from other audience members. In many instances I do not share the attitude or the premise that the self-deprecatory joke is based on, for example that a woman's body should somehow conform to the gender stereotypes of femininity or control. This problematises my ability to appreciate the humour when self-deprecation is used.

Andy Medhurst comments that comedy 'allows those inside any given identity category to shore up their sense of self by enabling them to use laughter 'to leave out, to render "outside", abject' those perceived as occupying contrasting or challenging identities' (2007: 19). In my own experience as an audience member, when someone identifying as female self-deprecates I am conflicted, as I both identify as the same gender and yet am being cast as 'other' due to my lack of association with the premise. I find it frustrating that it would be assumed that as a woman I would, or should, be able to understand particular problematic stereotypes or cultural norms and have also internalised these feelings of (arguably) self-hatred. For example, when comedian Hayley Ellis self-deprecates by joking about how pole-dancing kits are not built for a woman of her body shape (she is an average sized woman), I find it difficult to laugh along. This is nothing to do with the skill of Ellis as a comedian, which is not in doubt, but due to the fact that I disagree that her body is something to be ashamed of or embarrassed by, or that she should be excluded from participating in any activity as a result of her size. The idea that a woman whose body does not conform to certain socially agreed standards has no place being sexual (or engaging in activities that self-objectify them as a sexual being) and that any attempt to do so would be laughable is not something I find funny.

Broadening this beyond my own experience, when considering the social role of humour for women, Barreca contends that women have tended to laugh along with humour that demeans them rather than challenge this form of joking. This is due to the cultural programming of women to produce correct responses, even against our own interests. Self-deprecation therefore provides a way for women to assume, or collude with, the demeaning and submissive position within which they are placed by wider society. Barreca furthers this argument by arguing that faking a laugh is the same as faking an orgasm and that 'laughing at something that isn't funny is just

another version of "putting out". You're concerned with appearing to produce the right response' (2013: 117). I can certainly see that in my own experiences as an audience member for comedy I have fallen into this trap. Other audience members seem to be having the time of their lives and thus irrespective of how I feel about the premise of, say, a sexist joke, I'll at least smile along to avoid confrontation with the performer or audience members based on why I didn't 'get it'.

Sara Ahmed writes extensively in her work *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) about the concept of feminist killjoys. Her observations resonate in relation to how not laughing or accommodating others is read as a transgression of a social contract. She comments that:

> To create awkwardness is to be read as being awkward. Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies "go along with it". To refuse to go along with it, to refuse the place in which you are placed, is to be seen as trouble, as causing discomfort for others (2010: 69).

Here Ahmed is discussing the experiences of Black women who felt the need to prevent awkwardness by the presence of their bodies, their very presence being read as a disruption to the comfort of (white) others. Ahmed's comments have far reaching implications for understanding pleasure responses in women. As an audience member for self-deprecatory humour, even as a woman from a position of privilege, I can see that I moderate my behaviour to prevent awkwardness in others too.

This culturally instilled need for women to avoid creating awkwardness clearly links to what Ahmed describes as 'the rather uneasy dynamics of conditional happiness' (2010:57). Women, Ahmed argues, are socially conditioned to derive pleasure from other people's happiness, irrespective of whether the object of the other's pleasure harms women in some way. She articulates the dilemma thus, 'I am made happy by your happiness, but I am not made happy by what makes you happy' (2010: 57). So, in my case in relation to self-deprecatory comedy I am happy that the other audience members are enjoying the performance, especially if I have brought others along to the performance as part of a social outing, where one might feel a special responsibility for their enjoyment. However, that does not mean that I am enjoying the content of the comedy myself. This makes clear that we cannot assume that women

signalling pleasure through laughter or smiling is anything other than accommodating the needs or happiness of others.

With this in mind how can we know that the laughter produced as a result of self-deprecation is not merely a continuation of the 'putting out' that Barreca describes or a result of the conditional happiness that Ahmed articulates? Are audiences laughing *at the idea* of the body norms under critique in self-deprecatory jokes, or simply laughing *at the comic* for the discrepancy between their body and those cultural norms? Furthermore, are they laughing to cover up their disagreement or displeasure with a premise or concept being made fun of? Just as with satire through character comedy it is very hard to tell if people are laughing because they understand the satire (the lampooning of the stereotype) or are just laughing along in agreement with the stereotype itself. Self-deprecation can be read on multiple levels and as such is a complicated approach to deploy from the comic arsenal, one that cannot simply be relegated to either a positive (challenging norms) or negative (reinforcing norms) reading, as will be explored later in this chapter.

I appreciate that my own personal response may not be indicative of the response of others, however, it does highlight that every audience member is responding to comedy in a different way, and therefore any claims about audiences should always be cautiously employed. We cannot assume the reason for laughter as a response to a joke. There are many reasons why someone may produce laughter as a response, even when their identity, or themselves individually, are the butt of the joke. To not acknowledge my own personal response would have made the conversations I had with performers about this topic artificial and being clear about my own experience enabled me to have some very thought-provoking conversations with comedians about their own practice.

It is worth remembering that what may liberate a performer, reassure some audience members, and challenge norms for some will be, conversely, making others uncomfortable or feel attacked. It is with this level of complexity in mind that this chapter sets out to investigate how self-deprecation may be understood as part of comedy by women in the current context.

Focus on the body

Before exploring the ways in which self-deprecation may be read and understood by an audience it is necessary to consider both the common topics that self-deprecation by women may touch upon, and the cultural contexts in which the performances analysed in this thesis take place.

Self-deprecation has the potential to be used to highlight any flaws of character to which the speaker may wish to draw attention. However, as observed within performances analysed in-situ as part of this research, it is often focused around the visually evident failings of a body to conform to what is culturally considered attractive. It is easier to suppress self-perceived flaws of character than it is of the body, which are harder to conceal when appearing on stage in front of an audience. Stand-up comedy is an embodied rather that objectified cultural form. The art form on display is embodied on stage by the performer as it is with live musical and theatrical performance. This invariably requires the body of the performer, and thus the performer's gender identity, to be on display in front of an audience. Traditional stand-up comedy positions the performer on stage as a 'version of themselves' and results in the performance being inherently linked to the identity and body of the performer in ways that differ from other forms of live performance. Acting for example is an embodied art form, however, the body is used to become or evoke a character within a play which has a fourth wall between the diegesis and the audience. Part of the skill of stand-up comedy is to make the audience believe in an element of improvisation and the performative aspects are somewhat disguised behind use of the present tense and direct address.

In contrast to certain 'failings of the body', a performer can choose whether she wishes to disclose information about her perceived personality flaws or failures as a mother, wife, daughter or other socially assumed, and historically traditional, roles for women. For example, when Ellie Taylor, in her 2016 show *Infidelity*, discusses her clumsiness and thoughts of an extra-marital affair, she is sharing with us aspects of her life and personality which are not evident on stage. It is very difficult, although

arguably possible, to completely hide a physical body from the audience when performing stand-up comedy, and as such it is easy to see why the body might disproportionately be the subject of self-deprecatory humour in the live environment.

It is vital 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 this chapter I am not attempting to establish a division between those who conform to body norms and those that do not, but to illuminate through consideration of the role of self-deprecation, that a woman's experience and understanding of her own body will be subjective and possibly contradict others' perceptions of her. Dependent upon the cultural context of the woman (and the performance) as well as the way an individual's womanhood intersects with other aspects of their identity, what is considered a shortcoming or flaw, ripe for exploration in comedy, will change. Awareness of these cultural norms may mean that comedians who self-deprecate may simply be exploiting collectively understood anxieties about their body.

Additionally, 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 chooses to share this knowledge of their own behaviour. 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 possibly by audience members whilst performing. Many comedians openly discuss in their routines the way others have highlighted body issues to them, both through heckles at gigs and also as they go about their daily lives. Comedian Sofie Hagen in her 2014 club set described overhearing others expressing revulsion at her body size.[2] Initially the women Hagen overheard 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 we accept that this section of Hagen's routine may not be based on a real-life experience (which is how the event is relayed to the audience) 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.

It is easy to see why performers may address any visual ways in which they differ from the dominant group (e.g. ethnicity, gender identity, aspects of ability that differ from the white, male, able-bodied heterosexual dominant group of UK society). When a comic is targeting themselves with their comedy they are (arguably) reassuring the audience that it is ok to laugh at them. Women are acutely aware of the way they appear to others, having been trained by society to consider their appearance in relation to how others will see them. As art critic John Berger comments in his influential work *Ways Of Seeing*, in relation to the traditions of visual culture and art history:

> Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of most women to themselves. The surveyor of a woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – most particularly an object of vision: a sight (Berger, 1972:47).

In a modern society with a more nuanced awareness of gender and sexuality this use of binary terminology may not hold true. The crux of the argument however, is that women are taught to consider themselves in relation to others, to see themselves as others will. It is understandable then why women in the current comic environment, explored in this thesis, may seek to render the perception of themselves and their bodies humorous in order to prevent sexualisation by others.

Contrastingly an alternate approach would be to cover up or downplay the difference they have from the dominant group, especially in relation their gender identity and sexuality. Some female performers actively attempt this in order to avoid having to deal with the specific conditions or sexualisation of women's bodies. Self-deprecation within comedy often focuses on the body and therefore comedians' costume choices often facilitate these self-deprecatory utterances.

I interviewed comedian and compère for Manchester's Laughing Cows Comedy nights, Kerry Leigh, who highlighted that the performer's choice of clothing can make a big difference to the way they feel on stage.

> When I first started out those first few years, it would always be jeans and a t-shirt or jeans and a top. I don't really know why that was, I didn't analyse it. But I remember thinking I would feel uncomfortable doing this in a dress. Vulnerable I think is probably the right word. I do remember thinking that, and then as I have grown more confident and got into my persona, I really like playing with what I am wearing on stage [...] I want to be eye-catching now, whereas I used to be 'I don't want anyone to think about what I am wearing', because that used to worry me (Appendix 6k).

I followed up by asking Leigh why she had chosen the word vulnerable to describe her early experiences of selecting costumes. She commented in the following way:

> I think it was because, and I don't want to make something up here because I can't really remember, but I do remember having that feeling. And this is where you are doing open mic gigs where there is more opportunity for people to heckle, and I have you know gone on to a wolf whistle before. I've had a guy shout out, this is years ago, you know 'get your tits out' or 'take your pants off' was one of them, which was quite funny. So I think I just felt safer if there wasn't the opportunity for them to see like leg or [gestures at her chest] breasts. Yeah I didn't want anyone checking me out I suppose, I wanted it to be more about the comedy, but I don't care now. That's because I'm comfortable (Appendix 6k).

We can see how Gilbert's articulation of 'The Kid' performance posture becomes relevant here. 'The kid is mischievous but imminently likable. Most of all, devoid of any sexuality, the kid is safe' (Gilbert, 2004: 99). Leigh acknowledges that as she has evolved as a more confident performer throughout her career, her attitude has changed. However, Leigh still performs predominantly in this posture, making use of child-like gestures and comic physicality to win the audience over (which is a key part of her success as a compère which requires the swift building of a rapport with an audience).

When outlining the different postures that female comedians incorporate in their routines, Gilbert argues that each individual is consciously or unconsciously

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considering how much of their marginal identity, in relation to the dominant group, they want to share with the audience. We can see that Leigh clearly remembers when starting out feeling that being overtly feminine onstage might be problematic and somehow detract from her material.

The thought process behind Leigh's decisions, for her early performances, highlights how the responsibility in this specific situation is placed on the comedian to make changes to their appearance, to self-police their appearance, in order to defuse a potentially confrontational situation. This responsibility is not placed on the comedy clubs or nights themselves to better educate or police their audience to stop them objectifying, insulting or disrespecting the comedian. The heckles Leigh recounts, which in the context of this research I have found to be far from unique, are popular catcalls or heckles women receive on the streets. Even the costume choices of a female performer can relate directly to wider cultural attitudes towards women. Leigh does not explicitly make this connection herself but remembers a feeling of vulnerability born of an expectation that she would be objectified. This thought process, and Leigh's explanation of feeling vulnerable, is arguably symptomatic of a society that still places responsibility on the victims of misogyny and sexism. Often, in cases of sexual violence and rape, the victim's clothing is discussed as if in some way a woman's clothing invites, or somehow excuses, acts of violence against her as she was 'asking for it'. [3]

This is not to say that every comedian who identifies as female will evidence this thought process, or have been through this evolution in approach to their on stage costume. It is fair to say however, as the comic environment does not exist in a vacuum and as such reflects wider society's sexual objectification of women, the problematic aspects of being sexually objectified whilst performing disproportionately affect female performers. Self-deprecation has the potential to shift focus away from 'woman as sexual being', lowering the sexual power of the woman and diffusing the potential for negative reactions from audience members. Costume choice, therefore, can play a key part of the 'neutralising' process that Russell identifies, as it can facilitate the self-deprecatory jokes that are used to build rapport with audiences early on in a routine.

Taboo femaleness and grotesque bodies

With the inevitable presence of a physical body in stand-up comedy in mind, how do the cultural taboos around the female body (such as overt female sexuality and any divergence from 'feminine' behaviour) impact on the inclusion of self-deprecatory humour? Male performers, whilst still performing in a society that places value on body conformity, operate with fewer parameters in this regard. This may go some way towards explaining why Russell, back in the early 2000s, observed a higher percentage of women self-satirising than men in her sample. Subsequent to Russell's writing, with the increased access to visual culture via new technologies and the Internet, women arguably have an even higher number of criteria that they can fail against, compared to their male contemporaries. This may explain why, although self-deprecation is not unique to female comic performance, it endures as an approach, especially within the live comedy arena.

As already touched upon, decisions made about how much of their bodies female comedians display as part of their on-stage persona impacts on audiences' response to them and their 'femaleness'. Although in the majority of instances comedians perform in some kind of costume that covers their sexual organs (breasts and genitals) certain performers have chosen to explore audience reactions to comedy whilst performing in various states of nakedness. The work of Adrienne Truscott will be discussed as an example of this in the following chapter. Direct exposure of the female body on stage, especially the genitals, is not the majority position in stand-up performed by women and all other performances referenced by this thesis are from comedians who were clothed whilst performing. It is worth considering however, how the seen and unseen parts of a comedian's body are referenced within the content of the material delivered. If a comedian is not performing naked, parts of the body relevant to the material but hidden under clothing must be invoked through language.

The topic of male genitalia is mentioned with startling regularity in comic routines by male performers, with very little shock value for audiences. The taboo around the vagina however, remains significant and is steeped in problematic language. As Emma

Rees notes in her insightful work *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (2013) women are alienated from their own bodies through this gap in language:

> The lack of vocabulary deemed 'appropriate' for polite conversation – or even for the doctor's surgery – is distinct. 'Cunt' becomes spectral, haunting our lips as we try to speak of our *lips*. We might talk of our 'pudenda' but the OED's etymology tells us that means 'that which we one ought to be ashamed'. Is my body shameful? Is my body taboo? Is my body dangerous? Is my body able to maim? Essentialist arguments aside, if I *am* my body, rather than just *occupying* my body, the absence of a language silences me. A radical split is forced on me by a culture which does not speak my name (2013: 27).

Comic performance can be seen as an opportunity to engage with and ridicule these societal taboos around the female body and provides a fruitful opportunity to explore female experience using language that is otherwise dismissed as explicit rather than, as Rees argues, much more accurate than the more acceptable alternatives. Comedy can be used to exploit this disconnection between the physically apparent female body in a live performance (the presence of a literal vagina) and the language used to evoke it. Often this exploration is achieved through self-deprecation. The gap within language is regularly explored through humour with comedians making use of double entendre and creating new humorous names for their vaginas.

The freedom to discuss the vagina within comedy, however, is a poisoned chalice as often the fact that comedy remains one of the few places to discuss gynocentric experience results in the attitude from some audiences, and more problematically promoters, that the topic is somewhat clichéd and that it will *always* be a topic of comedy for female performers, as discussed in Chapter 4.

The sense that all female comedy performers will inevitably talk about their vaginas is reductive and does not acknowledge the diverse range of topics and styles evidenced on the circuit.[4] However, it is hardly surprising that women take advantage of the opportunity to discuss a key feature of their existence, their physical self, when so few other (non-sexualised/ commoditised) options are available. Unlike those who identify as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs), I am not arguing that the presence of a vagina is the only valid or inevitable aspect of identifying as a woman. Nor do I accept

the male or female binary aspect of gender identity. However, perhaps if other cultural forms engaged with and discussed these embodied qualities of female existence there would be less need for these subjects to be isolated in comic performance? This would avoid reinforcing the stereotype that female comics talking about vaginas is in some ways hackneyed or out-dated.[5]

The exploration of the female body that is evidenced on the current stand-up circuit in the UK goes beyond just the complexities of gendered language, to directly explore aspects of female experience that are kept hidden and silenced. Mikhail Bakhtin's influential discussion of the female grotesque in his work *Rabelais and His World* (1984) remains a touchstone for those discussing the female body in comedy. Central to Bakhtin's argument is that the grotesque figure in comedy is fundamentally linked to nature and the world around it.

> [T]he grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit: it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world (1984: 26).

For Bakhtin a grotesque figure marks and protrudes into the world and therefore grotesque depictions focus on the aspects of the body that enable this, including 'the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose' (1984: 26). The unavoidable way in which the female body engages with the world can be considered grotesque. Very clearly through the lens of Bakhtin we can see that the vagina is both the way the world enters the body and also a literal conduit for people entering the world. With this in mind there are many ways female bodies secrete into and mark the world unlike their male counterparts: menstruation and lactation provide female-specific examples. When performers discuss these topics within their comedy, often it is within the parameters of a self-deprecatory joke or narrative.

For example, within her 2014 solo show Shappi Khorsandi described undergoing a smear test. The test itself is described, the insertion of a speculum into her vagina and so on. The humour is not only derived from the casualness with which Khorsandi evokes the imagery of the scene, one that is rarely discussed so openly and graphically,

and the awkwardness of the situation, but through the self-deprecatory punchline of the joke – that the doctor got further with her than her ex-boyfriend did (evidence of her romantic dysfunction).

Whilst acknowledging Bakhtin's undeniable contribution to the understanding of the grotesque body, Rowe argues, in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995), that his analysis was focused on class rather than gender.

> He does not depart significantly from traditional representations of the feminine. His idealization of the women as the "incarnation" of the "lower bodily stratum" falls into one of the most enduring and misogynist of philosophical traditions, that of relegating the feminine to matter and the masculine to spirit, and then privileging the latter (1995: 34).

Rowe sets about exploring what she terms 'the unruly woman' which has links to Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque but moves beyond it to interrogate how women use laughter to break out of social conventions. Rowe moves beyond the silent and embodied aspects of comic monstrosity, to consider the way the comic female body also facilitates a challenge to the conceptions and conventions of femaleness through speech acts. Women for Rowe are never just about matter and the body. She argues that:

> [A]s women we cannot simply reject these conventions and invent new "untainted" ones in their place, we must learn the languages we inherit, with their inescapable contradictions, before transforming and redirecting them towards our own ends (1995:4).

Female comedians have inherited the language of their male predecessors in terms of comic performance, as well as the language (verbal and visual) used to describe their own bodies. Therefore, for Rowe it is imperative that female comedians must acknowledge how these languages are used as part of their oppression in order to subvert them through comedy for their own ends. Self-deprecation in relation to the body could be read as one of these subversions, as these jokes draw upon the existing conventions which place women as the butt of the joke or object of humour, but has the potential to carry with it a critique of the stereotypes it draws upon. This can be seen in the way comedian Jo Brand initially performed on the live circuit under the

name The Sea Monster. By using this self-deprecatory name Brand, before even saying a word, is foregrounding her cultural value or status in relation to cultural norms of femininity. Her decision to self-define as a 'monster', highlighting her potential to be read as a grotesque figure, provided her with an outsider position from which to challenge taboos around female sexuality and body image.

The link between self-deprecation and contexts

In relation to considering self-deprecation in the current context, I identified several key areas of concern in relation to Russell's findings from the early 2000s. The most significant issue is the lack of consideration of the historical context of performances under analysis. The selection of the comic recordings under analysis were sourced from a broad historical period. This is especially problematic as the late 1970s to early 2000s, which is the period from which the comedy under consideration by Russell originates, was a time when there were many changes for women in US society. During the 1970s the public awareness of the second wave feminist movement in America rose, there were calls for increased participation by women in work outside the home in a broader range of workplaces, and women's sexual freedoms increased with the legalisation of the contraceptive pill and, after long fought battles to control their own bodies, abortion rights.[6] Without knowing the specific historical moments of the performances she identifies as being self-deprecatory, it is difficult to push beyond simply identifying inclusion of self-deprecation into more fruitful territory.

Without a fuller consideration of the historical context it is impossible to completely comprehend what the functions of this kind of humour may have been in the performances considered in Russell's study, and how this material would be understood by both the live and televised audience of the period of the humour's production. I can appreciate that this was not the focus of Russell's work, with this aspect of her research clearly seeking to engage with the previous findings of Levine, but the wide time frame makes claims about the enduring nature of self-deprecation problematic. Questions remain, such as whether all the instances identified as self-deprecatory were from a wide range of years across the selected timeframe, or did they fall together at a similar point?

A further problematic aspect of Russell's approach, as highlighted in my review of the existing literature, is the use of recorded performances as the foundation of the analysis. There is no doubt that self-deprecation by women is evidenced in a wide range of comic forms; written, performed and televised comedies all provide ample examples of this kind of humour in action. Helen Fielding's cultural phenomenon of a character, Bridget Jones, and the work of comedian Miranda Hart provide specific examples across multiple forms. Yet, the area of concern for this thesis is how does the use of this particular comic tool, when deployed by women, operate within the unique conditions of stand-up comedy, a medium designed to be experienced live?

Russell herself briefly acknowledges the difference between live and recorded stand-up performances, commenting that 'dissenting laughter or the refusal to laugh at (and/or quietly accept) sexist or negative comments do not get airtime' (2002). Recordings of live comedy focus on showing people enjoying the performance rather than any people who may not be responding positively, or positively enough, to the content or style of the material. Experiencing comic routines in a live environment makes it easier to identify when a joke is not received in the way intended by a performer. It is much clearer when audience members are not laughing, although as previously explored, laughter can be produced for many reasons, not simply enjoyment. The performance context of comedy (especially self-deprecatory comedy) matters and is not adequately considered in Russell's research.

With the live context, more so than recorded comic forms, performances require the co-operation and willingness of audiences to accept the premise of any self-satire. The joking contract between performer, audience and target of the joke is made more complex when all the parties performing these crucial joking functions are present. When the person who is the butt or target of the joke is physically present before an audience this will have an impact on the responses. When we consider self-deprecation, the element of spatial and possibly emotional detachment from the subject of a joke, experienced when watching a recorded form of comedy, is not comparable to the live environment. In a live-comedy context the person you are *laughing at* can see and hear your response. This inevitably impacts on the way live audiences will respond to self-satire and will differ from that of the home audience.

The live audience's reaction is heard, and due to the lack of fourth wall, acknowledged by the performer. The reaction to self-satire as part of live stand-up comedy helps construct the performance, audiences that laugh along are collaborating in the development of that particular performance.

Furthermore, Russell's use of recorded sources means that it can be very unclear who the audience *are*. This underplays the significance of the ways in which the demographic of an audience impacts on which jokes succeed in provoking laughter. When considering self-deprecation the audience's own identity will play a central role in the way this kind of humour is received – both in terms of being able to relate to the self-deprecatory attitude, or conversely being frustrated or offended by the attitude on display. Irrespective of the apparent flaws in Russell's approach, it does not diminish the importance of considering the role self-deprecation plays in comic performances by women and how this continues to endure as a mode of comic address even now.

With these issues relating to Russell's work in mind, when discussing live performances of any kind we must of course consider the current societal context of these performances. Thus, in order to understand the functions of self-deprecation in modern/ current stand-up performance, we must consider this wider framing of the content of the performances. To avoid a reductive analysis, it is crucial to consider this before examining more closely the potential functions a self-deprecatory approach may play within a performance.

Feminist author Naomi Wolf's writing on the beauty myth becomes relevant when we consider 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). Four decades later the majority of women on stage performing comedy are those who have grown up with this graphic imagery of perfection all

around them, and so it is unsurprising that their measuring of themselves to this cultural ideal is discussed on stage.

The current UK cultural backdrop against which the performances considered by this thesis occur is a place where the language and imagery of empowerment is commonplace, even if we accept that in many instances these terms have just been co-opted to sell women things (lifestyles, diets, deodorant and so on). Social norms for women have changed since Wolf and Russell's writing, so too have understandings of the concept of feminism. This current 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. These messages can be found most obviously in advertising. Manufacturers of razors, sanitary products, deodorants and other products designed to tame the unruly nature of the female body, as discussed above, continue to make use of empowering language in their campaigns, aligning the purchase of their product to some kind of feminist act.

Many of the products that adopt this form of advertising strategy, one that enables women to access their own femininity through the consumption or purchase of consumer products, directly relate to the increasingly specific conditions placed upon women's bodies (and therefore on self-deprecatory comedy). Whilst several measures of control of women's bodies have endured since the days of waist training corsets, such as the physical size women should be, the complete taming or removal of body hair, and at the more extreme end of the spectrum, the trimming of labial tissue and banishment of any trace of facial expression lines are a relatively new set of constraints placed upon women. Within 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 postfeminist societies 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). It is within the social context of these 'perky upbeat messages' that the instances of self-deprecatory comedy by female performers are now situated. To fully

appreciate the current cultural context of comedy performed by women, I will now consider several examples of advertisements that demonstrate these messages in relation to women's bodies and experiences.

Menstrual product company Always's 'Our Epic Battle/ Like A Girl' campaign has produced adverts that make use of feminist sentiment to sell their products. This particular campaign focused on the way in which women are often dissuaded from achieving in sports, as their efforts are regularly dismissed as substandard when compared to their male equivalents. The campaign was an attempt to reclaim the phrase 'like a girl' and to repurpose it as having positive rather than negative connotations. Part of this reclamation rested on the idea that, contrary to popular belief, playing (the sport of choice) 'like a girl' was to be resilient in the face of adversity and to overcome negative resistance from others.[7] The empowering message is foregrounded within these advertisements, rather than the product placement or sponsorship of the idea, which requires a more detailed reading. It is a clear example of female empowerment being co-opted for capitalist gain.

These advertisements were shown in the UK around the time that protests were occurring over 'period poverty' and the way in which the UK government classified sanitary wear as a 'luxury item' (this itself became ripe territory for joking in comic performances during this time). Bridget Christie wrote for *The Guardian* on the subject of the Tampon Tax and discussion of this subject formed a significant part of her live show *An Ungrateful Woman* (2014).[8] Within the show she incited members of the audience to send their bloodied underwear through the post to George Osborne, the UK's chancellor at the time.

Even though the political context around menstruation and the rights of women was highly relevant, the Always campaign shied away from direct political engagement and focused on a pro-sport message – again proving that the ability or willingness to genuinely provoke change for women is not at the heart of marketing agendas. The message is still only for individual women (empower thyself) and doesn't seek to form a collective politicised group of women that would be capable of demanding changes on a wider scale.

Wider knowledge about companies such as Always somewhat diminishes the feminist overtones of the product's advertisements. Even a small amount of awareness of the commercial nature of the brand makes the use of de-politicised forms of positive messages for women seem like a very obvious marketing ploy. As Penny argues, contrary to the messages many of these adverts espouse;

> We cannot shop our way to freedom. Even if we eventually manage to buy enough shoes, enough makeup and enough confidence boosting surgical butchery to justify our place in the labour exchange of female beauty, we find ourselves marginalised by the very process of physical transformation that promised to liberate us (2011: 64).

In addition to the imagery found in straightforward advertisements for the products of multinational companies we can also find similar techniques being deployed as part of behavioural change campaigns which are UK specific. Sport England's 'This Girl Can' promotions which seek to increase women's participation in sporting and fitness activities use a similar tone to that of the Always example. On the surface this campaign seems to have a very clear and admirable agenda – to get women to engage in sport and forget what they look like whilst doing it. However, the way in which this goal has been worked towards is a telling example of the conflicting messages that campaigns such as this send out to women. The advertisements themselves (deployed across social media, television and in print) are relatively simple: a picture of a woman or women doing some kind of sport with a white text slogan across the image and the 'This Girl Can' logo featured (see Fig 1.).[9]
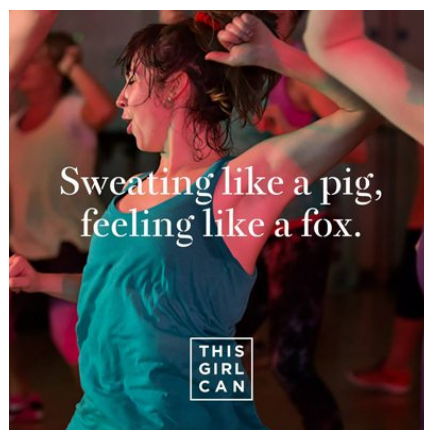
Figure 1: Image from This Girl Can campaign.
Retrieved from http://www.thisgirlcan.co.uk

The complexity of the campaign's relationship to empowerment presents itself when we consider the kinds of slogans used as part of the advertisements. 'Sweating like a pig. Feeling like a fox' is wording that in many ways still alludes to the need for women to be validated by how they look, the more common colloquial use of the word fox or foxy still being linked to the way a person looks sexually attractive. If relating to the way a person feels, foxy is more often connected to a predatory sexual appetite or sexual availability. Irrespective of the sexual politics of the slogan, the use of the phrase 'like a pig' also reinforces the idea that sport is inevitably an activity during which people look unattractive. This, to my mind, misses the point, which should be focused on the value engagement with physical activity has for women's well-being, rather than their image. As it is, the slogan reads as a thinly veiled argument that a small amount of looking unattractive is necessary in order to achieve the greater cause of looking attractive for the rest of the time. This avoids the wider and more political arguments: why do women need to look attractive at all? Who are women being asked to be attractive for? Why, in 2018, is this function of being sexually attractive still disproportionately framed as a role of women? The woman in the image is still being framed as a sexual subject, engaging with societal body norms in order to be attractive to (predominantly) the male gaze.

This problem is compounded by other slogans in the campaign, which includes 'Damn right I look hot'.[10] In one way these images attempt to encourage women to ignore what they look like during exercise, but contradict that message by using the kind of language through which mainstream media helps police body norms. Laurie Penny makes the point that 'If we want to re-enfranchise ourselves, we must collectively refuse to submit to capitalist body orthodoxy' (2011: 65). These advertisements do not allow for this refusal, but simply suggest taking a brief break from worrying about meeting the specific requirements placed on the female body, before returning to conformity, replenished, and better able to meet these requirements. This complex presentation of the empowerment of women found within advertising is not only a vital part of the context of current comic performance by women, but is in itself similar to self-deprecatory joking. Both articulate messages which challenge existing power structures whilst undercutting the challenge simultaneously.

Alongside, and inherently interlinked with this advertising trend, celebrity feminisms have risen in popularity and this contributes to a commodification of this language of empowerment. A prime example of a celebrity engaging in contradictory ways with the language of feminism and empowerment is singer, businesswoman and global icon Beyoncé. Beyoncé's complex relationship to feminism (her initial rejection and then embracing of the term after the birth of her first child) provides insight into the current feminist context, where multiple understandings and applications of the same term unfold in the public sphere. Dayna Chatman's work on Beyoncé situates the singer as a postfeminist subject, highlighting the contradiction of current messages of empowerment that are framed through celebrity feminisms.

> Although discourses about women's empowerment are valuable, when opportunities are framed as limitless and without impediment there is an erasure of the inherent social context in which these opportunities are made available or closed off (Chatman, 2015: 927).

In many cases, celebrities and those in the public eye who identify as feminists (including Beyoncé, Taylor Swift and Katy Perry whom Chatman directly considers, but also to provide a UK specific example, former Prime Minster Theresa May) foreground the 'neoliberal discourse of meritocracy, which asserts that hard work is a universal equalizer' (Chatman, 2015: 930). This then makes a failure to meet expectations of womanhood the individual's failure alone. When Theresa May is photographed wearing a 'This is What a Feminist Looks like' T-shirt [11], yet upon taking office as the UK's second female Conservative Prime Minister continually fails to address the political aspects of gender inequality, such as the gender pay gap and workplace bullying within her own cabinet, it is clear to see that the corruption of the term 'feminist' has taken place.[12] Chatman adds that 'Such discourses thrive because of the depoliticized rhetoric of post-feminism' (2015: 927). Such discourses in the current UK context proliferate through not only media discussion, but also in the work and rhetoric of those governing the state.

In many instances we can see celebrity feminisms as symptomatic of a postfeminist culture, which denies or disowns feminism as a political and social movement attempting to address and challenge systematic social inequalities in favour of a more

individual approach.[13] Pushing an 'anyone can achieve anything' agenda and labelling it as feminism is reductive and does not adequately consider the barriers that clearly exist for women of different backgrounds and in different areas of their lives. Additionally, attempts by public figures to evoke a feminist angle to their commercial output (be that the selling of records or the selling of policy reform) often results in the homogenising of the discrimination faced in different ways by those of differing identities (women of colour, differently abled women, trans women, gay women and so on). It places the onus back on the individual to improve themselves to make themselves worthy of success, without considering the structural inequalities at play when women attempt to infiltrate new areas of work outside the home. Given that many of the uses of empowering language, the word feminism, and seemingly pro-women imagery, are nothing more than a marketing strategy, it is vital to remember that it is against this backdrop that self-deprecation in comedy is now taking place. When so many apparently positive messages about women abound, the self-deprecatory utterances standout even more than they have done in previous social/ historical contexts as they run contrary to the discourses of empowerment. As these discourses of empowerment in many instances *reinforce* the pressures placed on women, as explored above, perhaps self-deprecation provides a necessary space for critique of these pressures. Self-deprecation by women is inherently linked to wider gender politics, contemporary feminisms and cultural body norms.

Reinforcing stereotypes

Having considered why self-deprecation might continue to be deployed within comedy performed by women, and why it may be so obvious in the current social context, the next step is to consider the potential different readings of self-deprecation. In current stand-up performances by women how are audiences directed to read female bodies and self-deprecatory utterances in both positive/identity-affirming and negative/stereotype-reinforcing ways? Self-deprecation is not only about integrating into 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 is an oversimplification, as I have discussed elsewhere (Tomsett, 2018).

To start by considering the negative readings, self-deprecatory humour has often been characterised as having little positive merit in terms of progressing a feminist agenda. Regina Barreca 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' (Barreca, 2013: 25).[14] Self-deprecation, according to Barreca, simply enables women to affiliate themselves with those in positions of power.

If we consider how on the comedy circuit in the UK many of the opportunities for female comics to perform are alongside almost exclusively male performers, as discussed in Chapter 4, we may come across one of the potential explanations for self-deprecation's enduring inclusion in stand-up comedy by women. By diminishing the threat to existing power structures, female stand-up comics are potentially ensuring that their performances sit comfortably next to the performances of the other comics they will work with (who will predominantly be men). Therefore, joking about themselves, rendering their gender a point of humour, could help female comics integrate into a system that was not initially designed for their inclusion. By using self-deprecation Barreca argues, women 'get to make fun of ourselves before, and better than, anyone else. We beat the others to the punch line and render ourselves the victim. This makes people in positions of power comfortable' (2013: 25). Arguably then self-deprecation enables female comics to assimilate into an industry that potentially will expose them to jokes at their gender's expense, or even in certain circumstances, jokes at their own individual expense, in the course of their work. Potentially their performances will be seen alongside or in-between performances by others that are at odds with their own ideological stand-point. Many stand-up performers may be brought on to the stage by the night's compère in a way that undermines their power or control of their space and, therefore, self-deprecation may help to put the audience at ease by making it clear that they do not mind being made fun of (even if inside they really do, as was evidenced by the various testimonies of my interviewees explored in Chapter 4).

So when women do take control of the production of humour, the fact that women are still often the butt of the joke can be seen as a continuation of the historically male-dominated industry, especially in relation to women's bodies. To assume all women who infiltrate an industry will use their new-found power to challenge stereotypes that prevent other women from achieving their goals would be naïve (one only need to look at the legacy that Thatcher's time as Prime Minister left for women as an example). People from oppressed or marginal groups routinely collaborate with those who maintain the societal division of power and, arguably, self-deprecation is a very easy way to fall in to doing this. With this in mind Barreca warns that:

> [i]f women make fun of themselves in such a way that we devalue our own experiences, then we are harming ourselves – subtly and insidiously – in ways that may come back to haunt us (2013: 67).

For a significant number of scholars focusing on gender and humour, self-deprecation simply normalises attitudes rather than challenges them and operates as a kind of self-harm.

On a very basic level we can see that in order for humour and joking to be successful, in any medium, a shared understanding of the topics or concepts interrogated by the joke is necessary. As Medhurst and Tuck argue in relation to sitcom's use of stereotypes:

> Sitcoms cannot function without stereotypes. In a space as brief as a thirty-minute sitcom, immediacy is imperative, and to find a character immediately funny that character must be a representative embodiment of a set of ideas or manifestation of a cliché (1982: 43).

This need for a quick understanding of the concepts being played with is also relevant to the stand-up industry, where short sets require an instant connection with an audience. There is little time to establish ideas that do not at least start from a place of common understanding or shared values. This is especially relevant to observational comedy, which requires the audience to have some experience of the situation being described in order to acknowledge and agree that the common behaviour/ set-up

exists. The tendency for any narrative-based jokes to be set in familiar locations (supermarkets, hotels, doctors' surgeries) again highlights that the time taken to establish a more specific location or situation (for those who may not have had the same experience or visited a similar place) often can prevent the inclusion of more specific or challenging material in a short set, as discussed in Double (2014).

It is safe to assume that irrespective of the audience's own identity, they will be aware of the body norms to which women are compared, as the images of perfection used as a template for the ideal women beams at us from billboards, screens, magazines and national newspapers. Therefore, it is not necessarily possible for female comedians to simply avoid or ignore existing stereotypes, either in relation to their own gender or other identity characteristics. On one level, engaging with stereotypes as part of self-deprecation helps to normalise the ideas stereotypes are based on, highlighting how social attitudes are internalised as women self-police cultural norms.

Although Medhurst and Tuck were analysing comedy up to the 1980s, self-deprecation that relates to stereotypes is still very much a mainstay of the live circuit. In many instances it still relates to the female body as outlined previously. This approach can feature as short introductory comments at the start of the routine. Examples here include Annette Fagon's comments when reaching the microphone that the dress she is wearing used to be a lot less tight in her routine in 2013/14, or Lara A. King saying that she is getting in shape, and the shape she has chosen is round, in her 2015 club set. Alternatively, self-deprecation can form the foundation for whole sequences, such as Angela Barnes' set in 2016, where she discussed having a knee injury and being sent to a sports physiotherapist, only to find her body shape was not consistent with the other people in the waiting room. The resolution for this joking narrative was that others may have assumed her to be a darts player (darts players traditionally being very large bodied men who drank beer as they played, as opposed to their fitter comparators in other sports). Irrespective of how self-deprecation is included, the point remains that it is still very much a part of live comic performance and as such the approach requires detailed consideration.

In the 1980s, when Barreca's first edition of *I Used To Be Snow White But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* was published, she made the following observation: 'In other words, it's okay to be funny if you're a woman as long as the only things you're laughing at is yourself – or other women.' (2013: 24). Unquestionably we can see from the output of the current comedy circuit that the inclusion of humour that originates from outside Barreca's narrow spectrum both exists and thrives. However, I agree that on some level whenever self-deprecation is included in stand-up performance, inherently a performer is doing both of the things Barreca identifies – joking at the expense of themselves and other women. By using their own person as the butt of the joke, female comedians are by extension reinforcing the notion that the behaviour or physical attribute being discussed is inappropriate for women, or something that should be derided in both themselves and others. We can see in discussions covered in Chapter 4 that female performers are acutely aware that when they are on stage they are, unfairly, seen to be representing the whole of womankind. This is an unacceptable level of responsibility for women to carry, and one that male contemporaries do not contend with. However, this means that the use of self-deprecation, as an approach that potentially contributes to attitudes that harm women, should be carefully considered by performers who include this within their material.

Russell reasons that 'Stand-up comedy is an aggressive act; to elicit laughter is to exert control, even power. […] to reject the submissive, passive role determined for women by North American social conventions.' (2002). However, when using self-deprecation within stand-up comedy routines, to summarise Barreca's position, we can see female comedians claim power and control, only to then use that power to undermine their own status and by extension that of others who share their social identity.

Challenging stereotypes and providing reassurance

Now that I have outlined the negative understandings of self-deprecation, addressing the potentially affirmative roles that this type of humour can play in comic performances by women is necessary.

Self-deprecation is often used as a way of critiquing existing gender stereotypes. Joanne Gilbert argues, as part of her study of marginality and comedy, in a chapter entitled 'Problems with Studies in "Feminist Humor"' that self-deprecation 'calls cultural values into question by lampooning them' (2004: 141) and that self-deprecation can positively challenge gender norms surrounding the body. Gilbert states that two key things are overlooked by those theorists who seek to state that self-deprecation is 'the antithesis of feminism' (139) and that existing considerations of self-deprecatory humour are often 'subject to oversimplified, even myopic analysis' (138).

Firstly, Gilbert makes the point that many theorists use of Nancy Walker's 1988 study as a starting point. Walker's work contends that

> [s]elf-deprecation is ingratiating rather than aggressive; it acknowledges the opinion of the dominant culture – even *appears* to confirm it – and allows the speaker or writer to participate in the humorous process without alienating members of the majority (Walker in Gilbert, 2004; 141).

Gilbert italicises the word 'appears' in her quotation of Walker's work, commenting that many seem to dismiss or take a purely negative view of self-deprecation without seeing beyond the surface appearance of such utterances. She contends that those who cast self-deprecation as a purely negative aspect of comic performance are 'apparently unaware of its subversive potential' (141).

Secondly, she reminds readers that too often with stand-up performance we assume knowledge of the identity of the performer, who may well be performing with a level of characterisation unknowable to the audience. This is inherently linked to the way in which the nature of stand-up comedy foregrounds the performance as confessional and improvised (even when this is not indeed the case). She comments that 'self-deprecatory humour may be constructed as cultural critique, and that comics who use self-deprecatory material do not necessarily believe themselves to be the personas they project on stage' (Gilbert, 2004: 140).

I agree with Gilbert, despite my personal reaction to self-deprecation, that the critical consideration of this approach has indeed focused mainly on the negative impact it can have on the perpetuation of existing gender stereotypes, and that self-deprecation has the potential to critique. In her reading of Walker's work, Gilbert argues that the overlooked feature here is that even when self-deprecation appears to confirm stereotypes or dominant social norms it can in fact actively be critical of them. Self-deprecation is throwing light onto the ridiculous and often-contradictory messages (explored above in relation to advertising) that society sends to women about their role in that society and their own bodies. Through ridicule of these constraints the norms under scrutiny momentarily lose their power, as their problematic and contradictory nature is laid bare to the audience. However, Gilbert's argument can still be critiqued from various angles, as I will go on to demonstrate.

Gilbert also 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 in the current context 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 considerations of Miley Cyrus, Nicki Minaj and Rihanna to appreciate that the Madonna question could easily be renamed in favour of a newer example.[15] I am not convinced that this aspect of Gilbert's argument has stood the test of time. As in the current Western cultural context, arguably it is assumed that every woman *should* achieve power through self-objectification (be it comic or sexual)?[16] What happens when women do not want to achieve power only in this way? Surely it is problematic that self-objectification is the most well-trodden route to the top?

Another aspect to consider in relation to Gilbert's engagement with Walker, and her subsequent argument about character comedy, is the question of 'appears to whom?'. Gilbert argues that self-deprecation may only appear to be reinforcing dominant culture - but who draws this conclusion? The dominant group as represented in the audience or the marginalised group, in this case the potential female audience? The performer and the myriad audience members will have different and possibly contradictory understandings of what is being said. Women exist on many different levels of the spectrum of marginality and some women (predominantly Western, white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied women) are afforded much more of a privileged position within the dominant culture than their contemporaries. Therefore, it is very difficult to pinpoint which members of an audience will see the subversion of a self-deprecatory joke and which members will see it as confirming existing structures of oppression.

I would also argue that another of Gilbert's points, 'that comics who use self-deprecatory material do not necessarily believe themselves to be the personas they project on stage' (2004: 140) is somewhat moot. Irrespective of whether the performer views themselves as performing in character or not (or as a different persona to her off-stage self), the direct address required by stand-up comedy means that the audience will always be unclear as to how much of the self-deprecation is merely character-based. Double's discussion of the personality spectrum reminds us to be wary of oversimplification:

> It's tempting to see stand-ups as falling into two categories – character comedians and those who perform as themselves. In fact there is not so much of a clear dividing line between the two as a continuous spectrum of approaches, each example subtly shading into the next (2014: 124).

Audiences can never precisely pinpoint the level at which the performer is performing as themselves, or in character, and this may indeed change across an individual performance as well as across a career. Some characters may be more overt and obvious than others, but to place any significance on the internalised belief of a performer seems like a flawed perspective.

This section of Gilbert's argument reads as if she is pointing out that when comedians are talking negatively about themselves through self-deprecatory humour, they might not truly believe this, and that it only would be problematic if they did believe it. Surely in terms of the feminist critique that Gilbert is contributing to, it is less relevant what the performer believes about the persona they inhabit on stage, but more significantly how the audience understands the character on stage – what the audience believes. [17]

With this in mind, in addition to the inherent lampooning of gender stereotypes present in many self-deprecatory jokes, undoubtedly one of the functions of self-deprecation is reassurance for women. The reassurance these jokes 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 are 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.

Let us consider the positive aspects of reassurance in relation to one high profile example. As part of an appearance on *Live at the Apollo* (Series 10) in 2014, Sarah Millican, one of the UK's most well-known comedians, articulated the following about her decision to stop buying women's magazines. Millican asks her audience:

> Why would I buy anything where the only time I ever see anybody who looks a bit like me is underneath the word "Before"?

This seems like a throwaway comment, a well-observed 'one-liner'. However, the sentiment expressed clearly resonates with audiences (the joke having been selected as one of the tried and tested jokes to appear as part of Millican's short televised performance) as the thought process is one they may themselves have undergone. Millican acknowledges that her body does not meet the societal norms evidenced in, and imposed by, magazines and this joke could be seen as a form of self-deprecation.[18] 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 seen as validating. Millican is using her own body as a vehicle to acknowledge and highlight a discrepancy between most women 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. Millican provides a fruitful example of a comedian using self-deprecation to create a sense of a collective identity amongst an audience, and to challenge restrictions placed on that identity.

Andy Medhurst, in his study of comedy and English national identity, comments that comedy is 'a moment of unity in a lifetime of fissures, […] a chance to affirm that you exist and that you matter' (2007: 19). In this instance Medhurst is talking about a sense of national rather than gendered identity. However, if we accept the premise of his argument then we have to also accept that for some audience members a discussion of aspects of the female body that are normally taboo, even if within self-deprecatory routines, may be one of the few ways in which they can affirm that they exist and are validated. Audience members that share the experience that the jokes are based on are not alone in their feelings of inadequacy or conflict; their experience is in fact shared with other women too. Self-deprecatory humour in this instance has the potential to shift the perceptions of bodies that do not conform, that normally loom silently up from the pages of women's magazines (under the word 'before' as Millican puts it) into a confidently vocal, opinionated and vitally more positive light.

Moreover, self-deprecation can be seen as a positive part of comic performance in the way in which it gives the female performer control over the way an audience reacts to her body. In her exploration of the work of comedian Dawn French, 'Performing identity: Dawn French and the funny fat female body' (2010), Anne Hole makes the following point about the empowering nature of the fat female body and how through destabilizing notions of gender it can challenge stereotypes.

> The fat female body, then, is a figure embodying gender ambiguity and instability. Its threshold position and refusal/inability to perform a consistent gender identity makes it a representation of female mobility and mutability, of the move away from traditional feminine pursuits, expectations, and behaviours and into the male-structured world (Hole, 2010: 319).

So for Hole the fat female body in comedy is playing with the 'threshold position' it occupies, exploring aspects of female identity and femininity that are not societal norms. Female comedians can be revolutionary then when embodying these characteristics, breaking down expectations about both gender and body norms through ridiculing society's attempts to control their bodies. Dawn French openly discusses the way in which she used comedy to control the responses of others to her body on her 28 December 2012 episode of *Desert Island Discs* (1942 -).[19] French articulates a key part of her comedy as being the opportunity to self-define, and self-deprecate. Beating others to the punch line about her body shape, gave her a level of control that she could not experience external to a performance context.

The performers' perspectives

In several of the conversations I had with comedians as part of this research, self-deprecation was discussed. In addition to considering how this popular comic approach may be evident within their own work, a few participants also discussed the complexities around self-deprecation, how they felt about being in the audience for self-deprecatory comedy and what impact they felt this may have more widely on the stereotypes these jokes draw upon.

When I talked with Kiri Pritchard-McLean she was developing her solo show *Hysterical Woman,* which she performed during the Edinburgh Festival in 2016. This show specifically addressed gender and racial stereotypes and drew on research she had undertaken into how people develop schemas which can help maintain assumptions and stereotypes about people from a variety of identities. Within this show Pritchard-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 certainly had internalised some stereotypes herself.

As part of our conversation we discussed some of the potential reasons female comics may make use of self-deprecation. Pritchard-McLean gave her opinion as a stand-up, and we considered what this kind of humour may be contributing to a performance in terms of connecting with the audience. When discussing self-deprecation, 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' (Appendix 6f).

So, Pritchard-McLean proposes that self-deprecation may be a shorthand way to make a connection. This clearly evidences Russell's comment that '[s]elf-deprecation can function as a means of defusing a potentially aggressive act or confrontational situation' (2002), is still highly relevant to current stand-up performance.

Zoe Lyons argued that this kind of aggressive rejection of a woman taking control of a situation happens in many arenas, and not just in comedy. She proposed that this is a common experience amongst performers.

> I think a lot of female comedians experience this, just blokes that absolutely refuse to engage with you in any way, shape or form, just almost to, to talk to would somehow make them effeminate. Or to engage or to be seen laughing at you would emasculate them in some way, shape, or form. You see these people [...]. When I first walk on stage and I've had guys just crossing their arms, looking away, talking. [...] Like I say there are stupid people everywhere (Appendix 6d).

Lyons is not talking here about use of self-deprecation. However, it is potentially an awareness of situations such as this, and the difficulty of getting *everyone* in the audience (stupid people included, to use Lyons' term) on board, which may make

comedians feel that self-deprecation has a place in diffusing power imbalances. We can also clearly see that comedians who are considered attractive by mainstream standards also make use of self-deprecation, even when they evidently have a body shape that conforms to cultural norms.[20] Thus it might be the tendency to want to avoid situations such as the one described by Lyons, rather than a genuinely held negative attitude towards one's own body, that provokes comedians to deploy self-deprecation.

Pritchard-McLean's comment regarding arrival onto the stage, also evidences how the need for a swift connection with an audience informs the way comedians approach these first few seconds on stage. Therefore, self-deprecating might be a way of building a rapport immediately based on a shared awareness of the way a performer looks. This is demonstrated in performances by comedians of all genders, and in many performances self-deprecation forms part of the opening of a routine, as demonstrated in the now clichéd opening line "I know what you're thinking".

During our conversation Pritchard-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 (Appendix 6f).

So here Pritchard-McLean is also highlighting that using self-deprecation has the potential to deflect a gendered threat. I need to highlight here that she also pointed out that this could not be made into a broad heteronormative generalisation but was what she herself had experienced.

Pritchard-Mclean understands that potentially self-deprecation, especially at the very start of a routine, is working 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. In the current cultural context female competition is actively encouraged by pop culture and mainstream media (and possibly culturally ingrained in female comics too), as a result it is no surprise that it is often a complex challenge to negotiate relationships between groups of women.

Pritchard-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 as a country the UK has had two female Prime Ministers, overall women still hold fewer positions of power than men. Although the need to placate the dominant group is undesirable, at a time when women allegedly have achieved some semblance of equality with men, 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?'. So it's, I suppose you still have to be like, you 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 (Appendix 6f).

I should be clear here that we were talking about how her experiences of stand-up had made her come to these conclusions and this was not an attempt to generalise.

Building on 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 we consider what society would deem a fat female body.

Lisa Merrill, 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. Merrill argues that in these instances in order 'to be amused she [the female audience member] must discount and devalue her own experience' (Merrill, 1988: 279). Merrill is making the point that women have historically had to degrade their own experiences to access male humour that takes them as the figure of ridicule. With the use of self-deprecation by female comedians, I would argue that potentially this is an extension or continuation of this devaluing or degrading. Female audience members are potentially being asked to adopt a more negative position or view point to their own body than they actually hold, in order to access the humour.

Building on this argument in relation to audiences, a point of consideration here is also whether the very form of stand-up also requires female comedians to set aside their own experiences as part of self-deprecation. 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 this research, may suggest this to be the case.

This concept becomes relevant when we consider the comments of comedian Dotty Winters who was also consulted as part of this research. Winters is a comedian who, within her first year of performing comedy, was a finalist for the 2013 Funny Women competition, and someone I have seen perform numerous times. In advance of our conversation I had witnessed her use self-deprecation within her act, specifically relating to her body size, and then start to do less and less of this. I explained to her how I struggled to laugh at women self-deprecating and she responded in the following way:

> 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. […] 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 (Appendix 6i).

Whilst Winters clearly finds self-deprecation problematic and, similarly to my own experience as an audience member, difficult 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, we can see here how when Merrill discusses how women are devaluing their own experiences in order to laugh at a joke that targets them, arguably female comedians also have to devalue their own experiences in order to tell these jokes in the first place. Potentially then there is a trade-off between the content and function of self-deprecatory joking. Even when comedians know that on some level they are uncomfortable with making a self-deprecatory joke, due to problematic content, they do so anyway, in the knowledge that the function the joke provides in their routine, that of affording them some protection from a perceived threat from the audience, is a critical part of building a rapport with their audiences.

So, from the performers' perspective, especially when they too identify as feminist (as both Pritchard-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 potential alienating qualities this style of humour can have on audiences, whilst also acknowledging the vital functions it can play in a routine.

Clearly comedy can be quite a difficult path to walk and potentially self-deprecation serves a function (defusing a gendered threat or providing self-protection) that in the current context is still necessary. By using self-deprecation at once a female comic can be shattering the 'women aren't funny' stereotype by creating a well-observed joke, and simultaneously propping up a host of other gendered stereotypes. By targeting oneself as part of comic performance the threat to the power of others is diminished. To conclude, any self-deprecatory utterance in live comedy performance will always be

received in both hegemony-reinforcing and hegemony-challenging ways, based on numerous factors such as the audience's own identity and their experiences of the dominant ideology being presented and ridiculed. It is hard to ascertain (for both theorists and performers) where on the spectrum of reinforcing or challenging 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. Both outcomes have the potential to defuse the humour.

In 1988 Lisa Merrill commented that the development of 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 (1988: 279). Whether self-deprecation has a place as part of this important step will be a subjective viewpoint.

In addition to the continuation of self-deprecatory approaches there are also now a significant number of female performers rejecting this approach. It is this refusal to use self-deprecation, and the adoption of a more positive approach that the following chapter will consider.

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[1] Russell provides us with only half the information required to enable this wider analysis, by giving video references for performances she quotes directly from, rather than all those considered in her study. Of these additional sources she says that:

'Routines that are cited in this study are indicated in "Video References", all other performances were on the following: "HBO Comedy Showcase", "Caroline's Comedy Hour", "A & E Improv", "Comics", "Young Comedians Show", "Just For Laughs", "Comedy at Club 54", and the "Late Show with Letterman"' (Russell, 2002) For which she provides no dates.

The dates that she provides for the quoted sources range from, confusingly considering her use of the term 'last three decades', 1986 to 2002.

[2] Sofie Hagen's set was seen as part of *Group Therapy* comedy night 22/2/14

[3] Kerry's onstage persona also evolved in line with her own understanding of her sexuality. Initially when starting out as a stand-up Kerry identified as a heterosexual woman, only later in her career coming out on stage as a lesbian. It is reasonable to see how her confidence to be herself on stage, to publicly acknowledge her own sexual identity in this way will have had some impact on her confidence in relation to her costume choices.

[4] See comedian Ava Vidal's (2014) discussion in the Telegraph, of this tendency to assume all women discuss the same things in their routines. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10689510/Sex-vaginas-and-periods-Why-comedy-clubs-are-afraid-of-booking-too-many-women.html (accessed 2/4/17)

[5] We can see televised comedy slowly engaging with the previously taboo topic of the vagina, evidenced both on US and UK television and through streaming platforms such as Netflix. *Girls* (2012 – 2017), *Broad City* (2014 -2019), *Fleabag* (2016), *Raised By Wolves* (2015 - 2016) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019) are all shows written by women which all engage with the vagina in various ways.

[6] Information about the context and impact of the important Roe Vs Wade ruling of 1973 in the US can be found here https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade (accessed 11/1/17)

[7] More information on the campaign can be found here http://www.dandad.org/en/d-ad-always-like-a-girl-campaign-case-study-insights/ (accessed 5/1/17)

[8] See Christie (2015a) writing in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/31/bridget-christie-corbyn-tampon-tax (accessed 3/1/17)

[9] Various images from the campaign can be found on their website http://www.thisgirlcan.co.uk (accessed 5/1/17)

[10] The image can be found here https://www.sportengland.org/media/1450/damn-right-i-look-hot-spin.jpg (accessed 3/1/17).

[11] For an image of Theresa May wearing the Fawcett Society's T-Shirt see Sanghani's (2016) article in *The Telegraph*: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/is-theresa-may-the-most-feminist-prime-minister-ever/ (accessed 5/1/17)

[12] For further on the gendered bullying occurring within Theresa May's term as Prime Minister see Moore's (2017) discussion in *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/13/women-bullied-public-life-diane-abbott-sexist-racist-abuse (accessed 2/4/17)

[13] More recently Beyoncé has embraced the term feminism and produced more political work. This includes her 2016 visual album *Lemonade*.

[14] This idea was explored thoroughly in Hannah Gadsby's 2017 comedy solo show *Nanette*.

[15] See Hann (2013) 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)

[16] See Catherine Hakim's book *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital* (2011) for an example of this argument.

[17] We can see the importance of remembering a discrepancy exists between what the performer intends and what an audience may read in a comedy performance when we consider the controversial rise and subsequent fall of Dapper Laughs. His work will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

[18] In 2014 Millican set up the online magazine *Standard Issue* due to her dissatisfaction with women's magazines, especially the way in which they police body norms. http://standardissuemagazine.com (accessed 5/1/17)

[19] This episode can be played from the BBC's radio archive here http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pf6dx (accessed 5/1/17)

[20] For example, Ellie Taylor conforms to conventional notions of attractiveness yet still uses self-deprecation, albeit in relation to her personality rather than her body.

Chapter Seven
Beyond Self-deprecation: Feminisms on the current circuit.

This chapter will examine the work of specific female comedians working on the current UK circuit in relation to contemporary feminisms. The chapter initially provides several examples of body-positive comedy originating in the current context before focusing in detail on the work of stand-up comedians Bridget Christie and Luisa Omielan. This thesis has thus far extensively explored the industrial, social and political context facing female comedians. Christie and Omielan's bodies of work and career-paths provide specific examples that exist within this context. The analysis contained within this chapter seeks to elucidate on the link between current comic performance by women and changing conceptions of femininity and feminism.

In direct contrast to the self-deprecatory humour explored in the previous chapter, a move towards overt body positivity is evident in comedy performed by women on the current circuit. Many comedians are finding themselves explicitly addressing notions of empowerment (especially in relation to the female body) within their work. I will briefly outline several examples of comedians actively using stand-up comedy to explore readings of their own bodies, and to challenge societal control of women's bodies more widely.

Adrienne Truscott

The work of Adrienne Truscott provides us with a clear example of this strategy in action. Truscott is an American performer and comedian and one half of the New York based cabaret and burlesque duo *The Wau Wau Sisters*.[1] Her solo show *Adrienne Truscott's Asking For It: A one-lady rape about comedy, starring her pussy and little else* had a very successful run at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, winning the Foster's Comedy Award Panel Prize. [2] The show can be considered body-positive due to its clear examination of women's right to reclaim ownership of their bodies and to fight back against the way female bodies, and violations against them such as rape, are presented in comedy (by predominantly comedians identifying as male).

Truscott's show merged audio clips, music, character-based direct address and circus-style performance to explore the topic of rape jokes. Throughout the show she performed naked from the waist down and frequently moved amongst the audience, shattering any opportunity to disassociate her exposed body from her words. The character she presented was playful but ditzy, commenting early on in the performance that 'I've been brushing up on the rules of rape and comedy, because I'm new to comedy'. The contrived naivety of the character provided a vehicle for Truscott to make some highly political and challenging statements whilst keeping the tone of the show light and humorous. She reminded her audience, through an artfully constructed understatement, that irrespective of their political leanings, social background or gender identity, 'if there is one thing across the board that we can agree on it is that rape is rude'.

On stage Truscott drank cans of beer and handed out a rape-whistle to the audience, reminding them that they were free to leave at any time, with the caveat that the rest of the audience would think them a rapist for doing so. Her rationale for this last statement was that only rapists should find her material offensive, as it is them that she is targeting. By making this comment early on in the performance she made clear that whilst acknowledging that the material could indeed be triggering for survivors of rape and sexual violence, and that she had previously had people walk out during performances, she was not making light of rape itself, only those inconsiderate enough to take it as the basis for a joke.

The premise of the show was, as Truscott's website outlines, to ask 'Can you make jokes about rape? She plans to, all night long. Even if you tell her to stop'.[3] The way in which the content and presentation of her material would make her audience uncomfortable was part of the experience of understanding violation, coercion and vulnerability. Although performance art has always included and explored the naked female form and the limitations of the body, often containing extreme examples of self-objectification and body modification (such as piercing and cutting), comedy, where the desired outcome is laugher, has drawn less on these techniques.[4] In no way was *Asking For It* a traditional comedy solo show.

The majority of the performance was delivered through direct communication with the audience where she explored victim-blaming practices and the patriarchy's instinctive defence of accused men, for example 'I know you guys are still like "not Bill Cosby" and I'm like "yes Bill Cosby" – it's normally someone you know and trust'.'

In-between the direct address to the audience Truscott would repeatedly perform a headstand on a chair and project a face on her upturned body whilst playing audio of male comedians making rape jokes.[5] The implication was that her vagina provided the vehicle through which the words of these men arrived in the performance space.

At no point was the tone self-deprecatory: Truscott's body was used to make a political rather than solely personal point. The show and Truscott's use of her body challenged assumptions about the vulnerability of the female body and exposed stereotypes around victim blaming. It is in this way that Truscott's work can be considered body and sex-positive. This show presents women as multidimensional sexual subjects and seeks to challenge systems and instances of negativity directed at female bodies, including objectification as a gateway to violence against women. By putting herself in a vulnerable position, by exposing her body in front of an audience, Truscott was able to adopt a politically critical position from which to examine the way society perpetuates the idea that 'women make themselves vulnerable' through their choices. This enabled her to invert this notion of vulnerability and exposure, as she had the power in this situation and the fully clothed audience members were rendered vulnerable and exposed through her actions.

Throughout *Asking For It* the point repeatedly returned to, and being constantly made by the presence of Truscott's body in the space (reinforced by the title of the show itself), was that irrespective of how few clothes a woman is wearing, no matter how much she drinks and swears or moves completely naked amongst others, her body is hers, and rape is a fundamental violation of body autonomy. Even when she (in this case Truscott) is moving totally naked amongst strangers a woman is never 'asking for it'. Truscott's nakedness clearly made the audience uncomfortable, with many not knowing where to look during the performance I witnessed. This state of discomfort

with Truscott's nakedness was compounded by the content of the show, which was cleverly manipulated to continually de-stabilize the audience.

In many ways the show's subtitle, 'a one-lady rape about comedy', was an appropriate metaphor, as the jokes and performance style were used to violate the audiences' space, make audiences uncomfortable and provoke a complex reaction that went beyond straightforward humour. By linking the more traditionally comic moments of direct communication to verbatim quotations from American lawmakers and judicial system professionals, as well as male comics from the US and UK, Truscott managed to contextualise how rape jokes could be seen as part of the wider system of rape culture in Western society.

It is interesting to note that one of Truscott's examples within the show was Louis C.K., at the time a highly respected stand-up comic, producer and writer at the top of his powers. C.K. had attracted criticism for seemingly attempting to reconcile his version of feminism with his use of rape jokes within his routines. In 2017 in the wake of the high profile sexual assault scandals across the entertainment industries in both the US and UK, initiated by rape allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, revelations about C.K.'s abuses of power came out. This was of little surprise to many within the industry.[6] The accusations from female comedians were subsequently publicly confirmed by C.K. as true in a 'Trumpian' statement of apology (where emphasis was placed on the respect these women had for his talent, rather than the harm he had caused them).[7]

These events highlight again how power and status within any industry is what helps maintain silence around rape and sexual violence towards women. These issues exist within the comedy industry and so it is interesting to see how comedy can also be used as a tool to challenge and call out this behaviour too. Whilst not all comedians who make rape-jokes are rapists, the inability (of some comedians) to see rape jokes as offensive arguably stems from the same inability to see why sexualised behaviour towards women without their consent may also be seen as offensive. The attempt to argue both rape jokes themselves and problematic sexual behaviour towards women is done 'in fun' and that women are 'over-reacting' is without doubt a key part of what

maintains the silence of women within rape-culture. The way often the perpetrators of abuse have power and a voice where their accusers do not is arguably echoed in the relationship between comics on stage making rape jokes and any offended audience members.

Reviews of the show compared Truscott's approach to that of feminist activist group Femen, who also use the naked female body as part of protests to convey political points about the control of women.[8] Femen advocate for 'sextremism' as a way of disrupting patriarchal control through the use of female bodies to disrupt public spaces and events. On the organisation's website they argue that to overthrow existing norms women must turn their bodies 'against this injustice, mobilizing every body's cell to struggle against the patriarchy and humiliation'. We can certainly see how Truscott is using similar approaches to challenging existing patriarchal norms in her own work.[9]

Even though Truscott is an American comedian, with the content of her show heavily referencing American culture and celebrities, the success of her show in Edinburgh, and its subsequent run at Soho Theatre in London, highlights the relevance of her work to UK audiences too. Several of the high-profile US examples that Truscott touched upon had been reported in the UK media, re-igniting debates about rape jokes. Daniel Tosh's use of a rape threat to silence a female audience member who had challenged his proclamation that "rape is always funny" provides an example of something widely reported in the UK press. [10] As the UK's own politicians and legal systems have also been found to hold problematic and discriminatory attitudes towards female rape victims, the examples used were close enough to be recognisable to a British audience.[11] Truscott's achievements in the UK evidences that in 2013/14, live performances by women who adopted a more body-positive and political tone were both critically and commercially successful.[12]

Gráinne Maguire

Irish comedian Gráinne Maguire's recent work can also be seen as a comparable example of someone developing comic material to challenge state control of women's bodies.

> I'm one of those immigrants you've been hearing so much about on the news. […] I'm a proud Irish woman I didn't come all the way over from Dublin to steal your benefits. I specifically came here to scrounge your abortion rights.
> Maguire, G. (2016) [video] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DF6v6ED7SSU (accessed 12/11/17)

In the wake of the successes for female comics in 2013/14, Maguire, who has always dealt in political material, likewise explored issues relating to the control of female bodies by those in positions of power. In Maguire's case the focus was women's right to choose to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Maguire's handling of this topic can be considered body positive in the sense that it rejects state and religious interference (in both cases predominantly male interference) in women's right to make decisions about their own bodies. These rights are something that in the UK we often take for granted, forgetting the long feminist struggle and agitation for autonomy which resulted in the 1967 Abortion Act and abortion being made available via the National Health Service (NHS). However, this ability to access abortion easily and safely was (until a referendum in 2018) not the case in Ireland. In 2015 Maguire made use of her social media profile on Twitter to send Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny detailed information about her menstrual cycle. She did this in order to make a political point about state control of abortion: the graphic descriptions of her menstrual cycle were framed in a comic way so as to make the point that the State should not have control of women's bodies. Calling for others to follow her lead and tweet their cycles to the government, Maguire made full use of Twitter's hashtag function to encourage others to highlight the intrusiveness of Ireland's laws relating to female bodies.

Maguire's actions formed part of her public support for *Repeal the Eighth* (#repealtthe8th) a pro-choice campaign which politically agitated for abortion rights in Ireland before and during the referendum on the topic in 2018. She engaged with this

topic within the content of her live material too, including her 2016 solo show *Great People Making Great Choices*.[13] Menstrual or 'period' humour has traditionally made use of a self-deprecatory tone, being one of the many taboos surrounding women's bodies and appropriate behaviour in public (as explored in the previous chapter). Maguire dragged the traditionally private information about women's menstrual cycles into the public to highlight both the restrictiveness of the laws around abortion, and the ridiculous wider societal squeamishness regarding periods. To summarise her comic argument, if the State wants to control women's reproductive systems it has to deal with all the bloody detail.

In Maguire's instance period humour was not self-deprecatory; she did not make her body into the subject of ridicule or make herself into a grotesque figure. Rather she turned the functions of her own body into a tool for political change (in line with the embodied politics of third wave feminism). Maguire used the unifying effect that humour can have in order to galvanise a response to a pro-choice campaign, with her comedy thus containing a call to action. Her humour on this topic, evidenced both online and in her live work, focused on behaviour change, firstly asking women to join in with tweeting the Taoiseach and secondly to follow up this action by both protesting against state control of abortion and voting to overturn the law. The jokes went beyond simply highlighting the problem, by demonstrating a way to challenge the norms at play too. Even though this was a law specific to Ireland (although Northern Ireland continues to have a complex relationship with pro-choice laws), there was a very strong link to the material for UK audiences, as often the women of Ireland who wanted to terminate a pregnancy flew to mainland Britain to undergo the procedure.[14] Maguire's comedy around this subject evidences how period humour has evolved to be more political, rather than self-deprecatory in this current context. Body positivity in current comedy output can take many forms. Maguire's work demonstrates that information about the biological functions of one's own body can be used not only for comic effect (which has been a long-standing application of bodily functions) but to be reframed as a shared experience to provoke political thought and change.

Lolly Adefope

A third example of comedy from the current circuit that operates from a more self-assured position is the work of comedian and actress Lolly Adefope. Adefope's show *Lolly 2* (2016) directly responded to the way critics of her first solo show disproportionately focused on her identity as a Black woman, criticizing her in reviews for not discussing her race. *Lolly 2* explores how Adefope was acutely aware that she would conversely be criticized for drawing too much attention to her identity had she chosen in her debut show to do so.[15] Adefope performs sketch-comedy and switches between many different characters during her performances, showcasing her skill for capturing characters with accents and gestures.

In *Lolly 2* Adefope successfully highlighted the double-bind that Black women experience in relation to having to acknowledge and explore their intersectional differences from the majority group (white males), whilst also having to try to not make their work 'about' their identity: a Catch 22 scenario.[16] When existing in a marginalised position within the comedy industry, there is arguably an *expectation* that this difference will be addressed in some way by the material. Although many comedians create work explicitly exploring their racial identity (Shazia Mirza and Shappi Khorsandi provide examples here) this expectation results in a situation where the comic can be both criticised for being too political (by making comedy about their marginalised position), and also concurrently criticised for not addressing their unique view point too. As Gilbert comments:

> Marginalized individuals are often afforded a freedom unique to their insider/outsider position; in the context of stand-up comedy, women who perform their marginality may offer a potentially subversive critique of hegemonic culture while simultaneously eliciting laughter and earning a living (2004: 3).

However, there is arguably a problematic societal *expectation* that women, and Black women especially, will use the freedom of comedy to explore their political and social position in relation to their gender and racial identities. Arguably then, this freedom to assume an outside position is not in fact a freedom at all, but just another form of

constraint. If you include women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ* performers or differently abled people into the comedy industry, but only on the condition that they discuss their marginality or difference from the societal norm, another form of control exerts itself. This expectation reinforces notions of difference rather than affording performers in marginal identity positions a genuine choice of material (the choice available to white male comedians). Is not this expectation just another form of discrimination that again reinforces a white male universality against which all must be positioned? This is what Adefope's show artfully considered, whilst also provoking laughter.

In terms of exploring and, in some ways neutralising, visually evident differences from the majority group we find that, as explored above, self-deprecation has often served a precise purpose. However, Adefope's show is unapologetically political rather than self-deprecatory. By referring to and projecting reviews of her first show on a screen behind her whilst performing her sketch comedy Adefope is able to critique the uncomfortable relationship society has with race and gender. The show displayed her character comedy skills whilst making the broader point about the expectations placed on Black women to somehow speak on behalf of an identity (an additional expectation to the gender stereotype explored in Chapter 4). Several cultural reference points were used, including discussion of the casting of a Black actor (Norma Dumezweni) to play, as Adefope terms it, 'Black Hermione' in the stage show *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, and the high profile publicity around the racial inequality of the Academy Awards system.[17] Many of the sketches in *Lolly 2* directly considered the reactions of people to the presence of Black female bodies and highlighted the continued marginalisation specific to the ways race and gender (amongst other characteristics) intersect. [18] As Reni Eddo-Lodge comments in her work *Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race*:

> Whiteness positions itself as the norm. It refuses to recognise itself for what it is. Its so-called 'objectivity' and 'reason' is its most potent and insidious tool for maintaining power (2017: 169).

Whilst it is crucial to understand that women of colour experience distinct forms of oppression to those benefitting from a system of white privilege, and thus the

perspective they articulate in their comedy will be different, so too is it important not to force women of colour to take responsibility for the educating of white people on racism. Criticism of Adefope's debut show can be considered an example of this racial and gendered expectation placed on Black women. *Lolly 2* rejects this responsibility, reasserting that Adefope's comedy is above all else comedy, whilst not denying her unique view point and managing to highlight many of the ways structural racism still plays out in Western society.

Each of these examples highlight how concurrent to comedy that uses self-deprecation to critique or lampoon gender stereotypes, female comics are also choosing to tackle the stereotypes head on, abandoning the self-deprecatory approach in favour of a more self-assured and body/ sex-positive position. There are evidently a wide range of approaches to body positivity within the performances discussed above. Truscott's use of her naked body within the performance space provides a critique of rape-culture that simultaneously demonstrates positive attitudes towards her own body through her refusal to be policed. Truscott politicises her body by exposing herself in direct defiance of victim blaming practices, which seek to negatively cast women as provoking sexual aggression from men. Maguire discloses information about her own body, specifically her menstrual cycle, a subject that society still sees as taboo. Her comedy challenges women to see their bodies as positive tools for change, speaking up for women's rights through highlighting the similarities in our experiences and the way shame is often used to keep us all silent. Lastly Adefope's work directly addresses the additional silencing and discrimination faced by women of colour by laying bare racialised criticism of her work. She uses her body to reaffirm her identify and her refusal to be made responsible for educating others of her experience as a Black woman. Her work subverts criticism into positivity by proclaiming her right to self-define and be creative in any way she sees fit. To summarise, Truscott uses her naked body within the space of the performance, Maguire discloses graphic historically taboo information about her body to her audience and Adefope addresses criticism of the use of her body as a Black woman, with each comedian promoting positive self-determination rather than self-critique.

Further to this brief overview of the body-positive material evidenced on the current circuit, I will now focus in detail on the work of Bridget Christie and Luisa Omielan. My case studies demonstrate, furthering the arguments outlined in the previous chapters of this thesis, how as women these comedians face gendered challenges to making work, developing an audience and progressing to the higher levels of the industry. The analysis of Christie and Omielan's comic material and performances also explores how body-positivity is evident in both feminist and postfeminist comedy in the current UK context, and is a direct rejection of previous tendencies towards self-deprecation.

Feminist comedy case study: Bridget Christie

I will firstly explore the work of Bridget Christie, arguing that her work, unlike the majority of her fellow comedians, operates from an overtly feminist stand-point.[19] At a time when there is an increased presence of those identifying as female on the circuit, a key question to initially address is how Bridget Christie, who started performing stand-up in 2004, and who had created comedy in various different guises, including dressed as deceased male monarchs and an ant, found herself the popular media's figurehead for British feminism and comedy? How did Christie break through from relative obscurity despite performing material on such a political topic?

It is relevant to note at this point that Christie is a comedian, rather than a 'female comedian' or a 'feminist comedian'. Although I am here considering her work in relation to feminism, and will reference her gender identity, her right to define as a comic without further caveat is an important foundational consideration. The right to be considered a comedian (rather than a female-comedian) is central to current debates around women and comedy and this point is always worth restating. Gender should not be considered a genre (as outlined extensively in the introductory section to this thesis).

The arresting thing about Christie's work, when compared to her contemporaries, is the explicitly feminist content of her material and the critical success that she has achieved. Barreca, writing about the strategic use of female humour, points out that 'The writer Kate Clinton has come up with a compact word for feminist humourists –

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'Fumerist' - because it captures being funny and wanting to burn the house down all at once' (2013: 178). Christie conforms to this idea in the way her comedy deals both with feminist issues and also clearly displays her anger at the injustices and inequalities experienced by women. As Willett, Willett and Sherman observe 'Just as ridicule and humor provide an arsenal of tools that can reinforce these norms and practices, so too this arsenal can tear those conventions down' (2012: 230). Christie sets about this tearing down with relish.

Christie performed an Edinburgh Festival solo show every year between 2006 and 2016. Her approach, especially that of her earlier performances, displays a discernible influence from the alternative comedy scene of the early 1980s - significantly in the more surreal and absurd aspects of her earlier character comedy. Even though it is Christie's most recent work that has resulted in her popularly being termed a 'feminist comedian' the clearest example of how her approach has evolved, whilst maintaining a focus on feminist issues, is to be found in the comparison of her 2010 show *A.Ant* and her current style as evident in *A Bic for Her* (2013), *An Ungrateful Woman* (2014), *A Book For Her* (2015), *Because You Demanded It* (2016), and most recently *What Now?* (2018). Both her earlier and more recent shows articulate feminist positions, albeit in very different ways.

> I read some reviews of female comedians and noticed they were full of irrelevant information about their looks and clothes, cooking skills, how well they could throw a ball, their fertility capabilities, how many previous boyfriends they'd had […] There wasn't too much about their actual material. It really annoyed me, so I started talking about it on stage (Christie, 2015: 54).

Christie's show *A.Ant* dealt with the complexities of being a woman on the live comedy circuit. Rather than tackle this issue head on however, Christie concocted the premise of being an ant, dressing in a homemade costume and angrily demanding equality for ant comics working on the circuit. A.Ant (the character) was livid at the compère for introducing them to the stage as an 'ant' comedian, complaining that this, as well as playing music by Adam Ant as they took to the stage, simply gave the audience a chance to recall and process all their preconceptions about ants not being funny. To quote A.Ant: 'It's hard for us, okay? Even before an ant has got to the microphone you've already made assumptions' (Christie, 2015: 71). The character went on to make the point that there are lots of ants working on the circuit, performing many different genres of comedy, and that the endless debate about whether ants could be funny, or comments about how all ants say the same things, for example '"Oh no, not another ant, talking about jam and the division of labour"'(Christie, 2015: 71), was simple 'ant-ism'. Such arguments certainly ring true for the treatment and context many human female comedians face on the current circuit. Thus, the humour of this routine was reliant upon both familiarity with the key arguments about women and comedy (in the spirit of the infamous Christopher Hitchens' article of 2007) but also in the incongruity of these arguments being applied in the context of an insect comedian.

The content of the *A. Ant* performances played directly with the stereotype that female comics produce material that is only ever about 'being a woman' and therefore will only be accessible to other women. As Christie comments in her published work *A Book For Her* (2015):

> I'd read out lots of ant jokes from a small red notebook, which were rubbish and just a play on the word 'ant'. This bit often went down much better than the actual routine, especially with audiences who hadn't quite understood the metaphor, which is perfectly understandable (2015: 72).

This section of the routine (the reading of ant jokes from a book) again highlighted the way a male universality is applied in the comic arena. Comedy produced by those identifying as male is often seen and discussed as accessible to all, whereas those positioned as 'other' (along gendered, or in terms of this routine, species lines) are

expected to only ever perform jokes about their identity, thus rendering their comedy less universally understandable.

Through the character of A.Ant, Christie managed to tackle provocative and political points about female comedians, including the preconceptions of an audience, the seemingly relentless 'are women funny' debate, and the sexism still rife on the circuit. The feminism underlying this performance was not formally made explicit as all points were made through the premise of an ant comedian, and at no point did she break character and deconstruct her argument. By removing the gender stereotypes and replacing them with insects, she enabled the prejudice described to be laid bare and ridiculed by all present, irrespective of the audiences' own gender identity. Thus, humour provided a way to challenge the gender stereotypes at play in relation to performed comedy.

There is also an argument to be made here that by removing the gendered aspect of the critique within the performance, or at least masking it (literally and metaphorically) behind the face of an ant, Christie was less likely to come up against overt resistance from those who disagreed with her identification of sexism on the circuit. This could apply to both resistance from male audience members and those booking Christie to play at their clubs or events. This performance was an effective way to challenge some of the stereotypes at play in a comedy club environment - a tricky thing to attempt, let alone achieve, without falling into a 'bites the hand that feeds you' scenario.

In the case of the character of A.Ant however, the more surreal nature of the delivery potentially obscured the message and prevented it from being accessible to wider audiences. Christie was also aware that the context of these performances impacted on the way audiences understood and connected with her act. She comments that:

> My ant act went well if I did it in a proper venue with a decent sized audience, in front of a comedy-savvy crowd, for example at the Soho Theatre for one of Alexei Sayle's curated gigs, or as part of a really good bill, but it always bombed at new-material and open mic nights (2015: 72).

I first saw Christie perform as A.Ant as part of Robin Ince's *School for Gifted Children* at Bloomsbury Theatre, London on 29th March 2010 and was so willing to accept the premise of the performance, the concept of an ant comedian, that I almost missed the underlying critique of gender stereotypes completely. I would argue that this demonstrates the complexity of the approach Christie was taking during this period of her work. She had to navigate a path between contexts where the suspension of disbelief may not be sufficient to enable access to the humour (more mainstream comic environments) and also where, if anything, an audience would be too willing to accept the premise unquestioningly (traditionally theatrical spaces), again resulting in the humour (and indeed the feminist message) being missed. This is a complex line to walk when your name as a comic is less familiar to an audience (as Christie's certainly would have been at this point in her career). Audience members may enter the performance space without any awareness of the style or approach to comedy that they are about to witness.

Christie's move away from more surreal strategies coincided with her increased presence on BBC Radio 4 comedy shows, culminating in her own radio series *Bridget Christie Minds the Gap*, the first series of which was broadcast in April 2013. Arguably the constraints of radio prompted the opportunity to explore some less visual ways of conveying comic meaning to an audience. The topic of her radio show, which was re-commissioned for a second series then broadcast in 2015, was gender equality and this formed the foundation of her subsequent live work.

Christie's more recent work and the shows that have garnered the most critical acclaim, and subsequently reached her biggest audience, have been delivered without costume or characterisation. Christie performs as an exaggerated version of herself, leaving, as Double articulates in his broader discussion of the stand-up personality spectrum, 'the dividing line between performer and persona unclear' (2014: 126). With this revised approach there is no chance of misinterpreting or missing the message.

The tone and style used for 2013's *A Bic For Her* and all Christie's subsequent shows, is much more akin to mainstream stand-up in in terms of delivery. The material is presented as Christie's own attitudes and opinions and delivered by a performed

version of 'Bridget Christie'. The performed nature of her identity is acknowledged at the start of *A Bic For Her* when she introduces herself to the audience as a comedian, wife, mother and so on, commenting that she means different things to different people, and highlighting her awareness of the cultural connotations of these traditional female roles.

Although the content of these shows is overtly feminist, in tackling complex emotive subjects such as rape and domestic violence, the trick Christie has mastered is to make these unlikely topics humorous. She routinely comments that she would rather be talking about something else, but she has been provoked into focusing on these issues by society. A quotation from *A Book For Her* highlights this point: '[T]he problem is that misogyny, like those girl's shiny leggings, has made an unexpected comeback' (Christie, 2015: 90). It is through adopting this tone of self-aware 'comic reluctance' that she manages to ensure the show does not feel like a lecture whilst at the same time does not belittle or lessen the severity of the subjects being discussed.

We can make use of Gilbert's identified comic postures as a way to frame Christie's performances, although we have to accept that there are always limitations to any approach that suggest a finite number of options. In her live comic performances we can see Christie operate across the 'reporter', 'kid' and 'bitch' postures outlined by Gilbert. Christie's performance is founded above all else in the relatively androgynous posture of the 'reporter': 'The reporter persona is clearly opinionated, but because she offers socio-cultural - and occasionally political - critique through an observational lens, she does not appear threatening' (Gilbert, 2004: 124). In my own experience of Christie's performance, I would be inclined to agree with Gilbert's argument that this posture is unthreatening, and the rest of the description of this posture certainly describes her comic approach. However, just because I do not find the content of her performances threatening, as I believe I hold many similar values to those advocated in Christie's performances, this does not mean it would be unthreatening to everyone. When discussing comedy with David Schneider as part of this research he also commented on the way Christie's *A Bic For Her* evidenced an anger that had not really been as explicitly apparent on the circuit for some time.

> Bridget Christie's show last year was a real revelation to me […] as an old man I thought oh my god there's politics. And the politics is really rooted in feminism but it is still young women at the vanguard of saying 'this has got to change' because, you know, because it is vaguely left wing, because feminism is lefty and I'm sort of aligned to it […]. Her show was so, it was funny, but it was angry and motivated and political and directed and funny. […] I've not felt that surge watching comedy for a long, long time. Not since the early days of the nineties (Appendix 6c).

Christie is clearly angry about the injustices she is exploring in her work and thus her comedy could be perceived as challenging to some who are less aligned to left-wing or feminist ideologies.

It is key to note that Christie's notoriety subsequent to the success of *A Bic For Her* will possibly change the make-up of her audience. As Christie herself observes 'they've come to hear what the "feminist" comedian has to say for herself, on behalf of all the women in the world' (Christie, 2015: 248). Her increased public profile means that potentially audiences already know a bit more about the content of her shows than they once did, and this could mean that her performances attract audiences who already hold similar values to those espoused in her comedy.

Gilbert comments in relation to the reporter posture, 'This persona also muses, often telling humorous anecdotes as a way to voice mild irritation, frustration, or incredulity' (2004: 124). This posture is demonstrated when Christie describes taking her young children to the supermarket and her horror that 'lads' mags' have been put alongside the children's comics. In this, and many other such anecdotes, she utilises a personal story in order to make a bigger political point, in line with Gilbert's observations.

As well as her use of the reporter posture we can also consider Christie's current performance style in terms of the 'kid'. 'The kid posture is based on ingratiation. Kids want to be liked and the playfulness they exhibit endears them to others' (Gilbert, 2004: 128). Christie exudes a kind of playfulness even when dealing with quite challenging topics. Her casual and relatively androgynous costume choices and her integration of physical comedy (as showcased extensively in her earlier work) can be

seen as aspects of the kid posture. For a significant part of her current routines she operates from a de-sexualised position.

Further to this we can see that Christie has not completely rejected her old approach, still using her expressive physicality and ability to conjure up characters so as to demonstrate her points. For example, this technique can be seen in a section of *A Bic For Her* describing the Brontë sisters' struggles to use a 'man's pen'. The sisters lament the lack of gender-specific writing tools (satirising the notion that stationary company Bic thought that creating a pen specifically for women would be a good idea). Christie inhabits the roles of the three Brontë sisters and their brother Branwell, with voices and mime. Her continued physicality and clowning style are also equally evident in the same show when graphically acting out Sir Stirling Moss's imagined funeral.

In all the instances that I have observed Christie as part of this research she has been dressed in jeans, T-Shirt/ shirt and trainers, which facilitates the more physical aspects of her routine. In the Stirling Moss sequence she falls to the floor several times, moves around the space of the stage and extends her arms and legs fully to demonstrate various people and objects in the imaginary scenario. Thus, her clothing choices must enable the unimpeded movement of her body during these sequences.

In addition to these two principal postures, due to the way Christie's performances can be seen as more argumentative than that of the 'reporter', we can also see aspects of the 'bitch' persona evidenced, as 'the bitch is the angriest female comic persona' (Gilbert, 2004: 108). Although Christie does not make use of the 'put-down humor' central to the 'bitch' posture, which was epitomised by the late Joan Rivers, who was the most notable comic who made use of this approach (both in terms of the public awareness of her work and academic consideration), Christie is certainly angrier than other 'reporter' comics. I would argue that, for myself as an audience member, her anger actually makes her more, rather than less, likeable, complementing the kid-like ingratiation her physical comedy provokes. As an audience member I am angry at the same things as Christie and thus can identify with the material.

What elevates Christie's performance style above the somewhat formulaic comedy that simply combining these comic postures might create is that she is dealing explicitly with political and feminist material. Aspects of Gilbert's critique seem an uneasy fit for analysing Christie and this is possibly because Christie is a product of a time and cultural context different from early 2000s America, which was Gilbert's focus in her writing. Christie has adapted aspects of the bitch persona for the modern context, creating a posture that does not hide her anger whilst, at the same time, does not rely upon either putting down or critiquing other women or indeed using herself as the butt of her jokes.

Gilbert comments that:

> Certainly both the kid and the reporter comics seem to deny or at least ignore any gender boundaries in the world of comedy. By downplaying their gender, these comics simply follow the rules and present non-controversial material and personas (2004: 131).

But this is simply not true of Christie. Although she may be operating in a way that is likeable, and non-threatening, this does not make the content of her material any less controversial (for example very few comedians would attempt to deal with such a complex or serious matter as female genital mutilation in their material), nor does she at any point attempt to deny or obscure her gender identity. Although she does not present herself as overtly sexual or feminine, she is not negating or downplaying her gender as her routine is explicitly about being a woman. The fact that she presents as an average woman (one not overtly foregrounding their gender) is seemingly what makes her more likable and relatable to her audiences and thus gives her room to explore these more challenging topics. De-sexualised is not the same as de-gendered. To visually downplay gender to avoid sexual-objectification does not have to result in a complete disavowal of the performer's female identity, as Christie's material amply demonstrates.

In Christie's recent work, despite the critique of gender stereotyping now being much clearer than in previous shows, she does not underestimate the audience's abilities to still make connections themselves. An indicative example of this comes in her use of

audience interaction to get a point across. As part of *A Bic For Her*, after outlining her issues with the depictions of sexualised female nudity on both page three of national newspaper *The Sun* and in "lad's mags", and also putting forward the idea that these images of women should require opting-in rather than opting-out, Christie asks the male audience members "which magazine has the best women?". By this stage in the show the audience are wise to the problematic nature of these magazines and so Christie makes it clear that there is a prize to be won and the male audience members will not get in trouble for answering.

Rather than challenge the men responding, she does indeed reward them. This is done with an acute awareness that their very presence in the room this far into the show means that potentially they already agree with her message. The prize is revealed as a direct debit donation form for Refuge (a charity that works with women in need of assistance as a result of domestic violence). She presents this in a stamped addressed return envelope. The audience is left to make the link: that the dehumanising effects of depicting women as sex objects potentially contributes to a culture of abuse and domestic violence. Enabling the audience to participate individually and draw their own conclusions makes the moment all the more powerful.

At a time when increasing numbers of female comics are entering the industry, and in the context of multiple and sometimes contradictory notions of feminism, the question that cannot be avoided is what makes Christie's comedy feminist rather than postfeminist in tone and content?

Her choice of subjects is a good place to start. Christie covers a huge amount of ground in her more recent shows, focusing on female genital mutilation (FGM), the No More Page 3 campaign and stationery-based pervasive sexism in *A Bic For Her.* As part of a critique of vaginaplasty Christie implored her audience during her tour of *An Ungrateful Woman* to never consider altering the natural state of their vaginas through surgery as each one is unique. Christie rendered this idea comic through creating the delightfully constructed metaphor, 'they are like snowflakes made of gammon'. Subsequent to this she moved on to criticising the tampon tax and sexist advertising in *A Book for Her* and *Because You Demanded It*.

Even when Christie makes use of personal anecdotes as a way of initiating the topic, (her story about encountering a flatulent bookstore employee seamlessly enabling her to bring up the importance of early feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf), these narratives always have an underlying political message. The topics do not relate to only Christie as an individual. She makes the connections between her own embodied experiences and the wider context for women. She discusses the need for a collective reaction to the policing of female bodies. Christie is not an FGM survivor but that does not mean that she cannot understand, and encourage others to understand, how much of a violation this procedure must be. Her approach across all her recent shows has been predicated on the necessary unification of women against societal controls, rather than against each other in a competitive way. Her message is that we must collectively protest the sexist Tampon Tax, we must collectively hide or destroy copies of *The Sun* to prevent this sexist imagery continually pervading our culture, describing how our small acts of rebellion as individuals can contribute to wider campaigns for change to our society.

A particularly significant part of *A Bic For Her* is when Christie reminds us how we can respect women's achievements and empowerment without having to claim those achievements for feminism. She elaborates this idea with a discussion of Margaret Thatcher, whose historical position as a powerful woman is undeniable, despite her vehement public opposition of feminism, which she famously described as 'poison'.[20] Therefore we can acknowledge that having a woman in a position of power can be useful in terms of representation, the need for women to see these achievements as attainable is crucial. However, not every woman in power will be working towards equality for others. Christie is addressing women and men in her work and calling for collective action to relieve both genders of the burden of stereotypical notions of difference. Christie does not deal in the personal 'self-improvement' narrative focused on in modern postfeminist media and evidenced in the work of her contemporaries, including Luisa Omielan whose work I will go on to explore in more detail below.

Christie's discussion of how we can respect women's achievements without claiming them for the feminist cause becomes relevant in terms of the comedy industry. Just as we can admire the achievements of female comedians working across the circuit today

for their success within a male dominated industry, it is clear that they are not necessarily using their comedy to promote feminist issues or challenge existing stereotypes about women. This is what makes Christie a true fumerist for the 21st century. Not only can we respect her achievement within her sector but we can also see how she is using her anger and humour to challenge structures and ideas that impact all women and men negatively, and to advocate vociferously for equality.

Postfeminist case study: Luisa Omielan

As Shifman and Lemish argue in their analysis of internet humour, it is vital to distinguish not only between sexist and feminist humour but also between feminist and postfeminist humour, as this is another aspect of the ways in which comedy, in the current context, engages with notions of gender difference. This is especially relevant to the current UK circuit where the number of women in the industry has significantly increased in recent years. Shifman and Lemish comment that:

> The analysis of humour on gender, along the axis running from conservative/sexist to subversive/feminist is important and fundamental. However, we believe that in order to properly assess contemporary humour, a third construct – postfeminist humour – must be conceptualized and assessed (2010: 872).

The attributes of postfeminist humour outlined by Shifman and Lemish (2010: 875), which are in line with the analysis of postfeminist media cultures, can be summarized as follows:

- A renewed focus on gender differences.
- The targeting of both men and women rather than just one gender.
- The de- politicisation of feminist concepts - the 'context of postfeminist humour is the world of leisure and consumption rather than politics or work'.
- Focus on the individual, the female body and 'sexuality as a means of empowerment and goal achievement'.

Although it is possible for comedians of any gender identity to be sexist in their material, the comedy on the current circuit, performed by women, operates predominantly at the postfeminist end of this proposed axis. Alongside the overtly feminist and political humour evidenced by Christie, we also have a large number of female comedians dealing in what could be termed postfeminist humour, in line with Shifman and Lemish's insightful and evolving definition.

Cultural theorist Angela McRobbie comments that 'in popular culture there is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without' (McRobbie, 2009: 8). Whilst McRobbie was writing this critique in 2009, aspects of this mind-set are still evident in our culture, even though they are now situated alongside multiple reclamations of the word feminist and versions of feminisms, including celebrity feminisms. Arguably female comedians working on the circuit operate, in the majority, from a postfeminist standpoint where gender equality is seen, as McRobbie articulates, as common sense. The live work of many successful comics, including Katherine Ryan and Sara Pascoe, provide evidence of this 'common sense' or de-politicised stance, where collective political action is by implication positioned as unnecessary in favour of an individual neoliberal self-actualisation.[21]

As an example here, Sara Pascoe's discussion of the Page 3 campaign in her solo show *Sara Pascoe Vs History* (2014) provides a good counterpoint to feminist comedy on similar subjects (as outlined above in the case of Christie). As part of Pascoe's routine she advocates for all women's mandatory participation in modelling for Page 3 of *The Sun*. Whilst there is definitely humour in this concept, and it provoked much laughter during the live performance I observed, it reiterates a focus on the individual rather than the structures at play here. Instead of critiquing the effects of this imagery on societal understanding of the role of women, Pascoe simply asks us to accept the existence of this practice and somehow render it less sexually objectifying by each taking a turn. Her rationale seems to be that by adopting this mandatory approach a wider variety of bodies would be on display, broadening understandings of the female form beyond the perfected and airbrushed. However, in line with much postfeminist comedy to my mind this joke misses the wider political point of *why* should women's

bodies be objectified *at all*. Widening the pool of those objectified isn't a very productive move away from this objectifying practice, and Pascoe's position seems to also assume that anyone protesting against Page 3 is simply against the nakedness in a puritanical way which I find rather reductive too. The avocation for simply accepting existing cultural practices, even when they clearly contribute to the objectification of women is symptomatic of a postfeminist position.

Whilst Pascoe's work provides a pertinent example in this regard it is Luisa Omielan's work that will provide the focus for considering postfeminist comedy on the current circuit.

Omielan initially undertook a performance degree at the University of Salford, motivated almost solely by the understanding that in the third year there would be a whole module dedicated to stand-up comedy. After waiting patiently to get into this class (which, she recalls, was made up of two male and eight female students), Omielan describes how the first session was revelatory for her:

> Here in this classroom, a room with no windows, a broken television in the corner, a room in the middle of Salford, with paint stripping off the walls, I felt like I had finally showcased my voice, that out of my whole life, this one day meant something (Omielan, 2016: 49).

In her book *What Would Beyoncé Do?!* (2016) Omielan states that she felt she had found her medium immediately and a few years after graduation moved briefly out to Chicago to undertake training in improvisation techniques with the prestigious Second City, Comedy Sportz Theatre and iO groups. Omielan's comedy heroes are almost exclusively American (she cites Whoopi Goldberg as her inspiration), and so to immerse herself in the US improv scene felt like a logical next step. Upon her return to the UK she put this training into use by gigging as much as possible to build up her confidence on stage. Her ability to respond to the audience in the moment, to engage with them without the fear that they will 'throw her off' whilst evocatively bringing to life characters on stage, evidences how this training influenced her current style.

Omielan outlines in her book that, after several years of gigging on the UK live circuit, and performing her critically and commercially successful solo show *What Would Beyoncé Do?!* (first performed in 2013) she found it difficult to make the leap to televised forms. Inspired by her hero, pop-icon Beyoncé, Omielan decided to do things her own way rather than compromise her style and worked hard to make her own opportunities. She managed to crowdfund the money to enable her to record her second solo show *Am I Right Ladies?!* which she filmed in front of a live audience at The Bloomsbury Theatre in London in 2015.

In 2017 Omielan started to reach a wider audience via broadcast television. She was invited to record *What Would Beyoncé Do?!* for BBC3, having successfully toured the show nationally and internationally for 4 years. The recording of the show was released online on St Valentine's Day (and subsequently repeated on BBC One later that year). A significant part of the publicity for the show's release (as well as the decision to release it on the most 'commercially' romantic day of the year) was linked to the notion of Luisa being the 'voice' of single, millennial women. Shane Allen, BBC comedy commissioner, commented that 'Luisa spins a time of personal rejection into a riotous, uplifting comedy banshee cry. It's for anyone who has ever had their heart broken.'[22] Setting aside the clearly gendered language at play in this quotation (the term Banshee referring to a shrieking Irish mythological spirit and often used pejoratively to refer to women 'making a scene'), we can see that foregrounding the romantic comedy themes of Omielan's show formed a central part of the marketing strategy. This again demonstrates a postfeminist approach to the marketing of Omielan and a reassertion that plays into existing stereotypes about comedy performed by women, that her comedy is *for* women.

This is further evidenced in the way a series of clips were used as part of BBC3's social media campaign around the release of the show. These were comprised of short sections of Omielan's performance (each around 1 minute in length), which were titled with feminized names such as 'Bootylicious' and 'Independent woman' in line with the songs of Beyoncé. These clips were used as trailers on Twitter to encourage viewers to stream the show from iPlayer and later on to watch the repeat on BBC One. The exposure she achieved via her BBC3 special enabled her to reach a wider audience

than previously with her live work and brought her to the attention of other comedians, including Dawn French, who enthusiastically championed Omielan's work over social media. [23] Omielan was subsequently invited by the BBC to be one of the hosts for the 2017 Comic Relief TV special, alongside a raft of other BBC associated talent.

Omielan is highly aware of the way in which her comedy could easily be pigeonholed for being commercial and speaking to a specific, female, demographic. *What Would Beyoncé Do?!* and *Am I Right Ladies?* created a hen-party-like atmosphere with loud pop music, dancing, glitter and riotous interaction between performer and audience. The hyper-feminized space created by Omielan for these performances could be easy to dismiss as frivolous. Omielan however has challenged people criticising the commercial nature of her shows, pointing out that men aren't criticised for wanting to be successful, but that often the desire to succeed is used against powerful women to keep them in a place of submission.

The opening section of *Am I Right Ladies?* provides an example of how Omielan uses the language of pop culture and women's magazine style empowerment to set up joking that cuts through the language with blunt sexually explicit punch lines which assert a heterosexual norm.

> It seems to me right no matter how well things are going, or however long it takes you to achieve something, once you finally get to a place where things are going all right there is always something to get in the way isn't there. There's always some reason to feel not quite completely good enough. And it's weird because in my life I've learnt my happiness is so important I realise what's important to me and what I need in my life for fulfilment and actually it's so simple, it's so obvious, all I need to be happy, all I really want in life to be happy [shout] is I just want a penis. Right? I just want a penis, I have got lots of willies but they are in the drawer I want a penis with a man on the end. That's what I want bitches (Omielan, Luisa. (2015) [video] *Am I Right Ladies?*).

This quotation is indicative of the tone of Omielan's comedy. This section of her show evidences the way her work both advocates for sexual experience and desire without shame (is body and sex-positive), whilst simultaneously situating heteronormative sexual and emotional relationships as a central part of her ambitions (focused on

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individual goal achievement).

She is highly active on social media and uses both Twitter and Facebook to create a community out of her fan-base, sharing very personal moments of her life with her audience.[24] Omielan makes use of these available technologies (such as live streaming video over Facebook and sharing images via Instagram) to enable engagement with her audiences outside of the performance context which, as explored in Chapter 5, impacts on her audience's expectations when they do decide to see her on stage.

Her obvious appeal to younger demographics (due to her social media presence and the proliferation of pop-culture references in her work) has not gone unnoticed. In early 2016 Omielan was commissioned to create a (non-broadcast) pilot sketch show for ITV2. As this channel actively targets a younger audience than its main channel ITV1, by broadcasting a mixture of lifestyle and reality shows, it is easy to see why working with Omielan was explored.[25] In 2018 Omielan started to develop material for her BBC3 commission *Politics For Bitches* and she performed several live shows to develop the idea before preforming an Edinburgh Festival run in 2018. This show was much more political in focus than her previous work. *Politics For Bitches* responded to the traumatic death of Omielan's mother the previous year and the systemic failures of the NHS under the current government.

Apart from her undeniable, self-driven success, 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.[26] Both her solo shows and her numerous comedy club sets provide fruitful examples of someone refusing existing readings of their body. Her performance can also be read through the lens of Gilbert's comic postures. We can see Omielan perform in both bawd and bitch postures due to the way in which she is aware of, and manipulates, her sexuality. Her command of the performance space can be seen in terms of Gilbert's description:

> Clearly aggressive, often angry, the bitch comic critiques male sexual technique and apparatus as well as male inadequacies in intimacy and communication. Whereas the bawd may seduce and titillate male audience members, the bitch

seems unconcerned about being liked by them (Gilbert, 2004:129).

Omielan makes use of these postures throughout her routines. Because she discusses the intimate details of her sexual experiences and the trouble she has attracting partners, her material is often explicit and scatological. Whilst it is not really the case of her trying to titillate the audience as such (although she does go amongst the crowd and grind on the laps of audience members) she demonstrates her techniques for attracting potential partners, therefore draws attention to herself as an emancipated sexual being. There is also undoubtedly an air of intimidation at play here.

> A comic who is obviously in control of her sexuality may appear to be in control, period. Because the bawd is often conflated with the bitch posture, it is not surprising that the bitch is based on intimidation (Gilbert, 2004: 129).

This links back to the hen-party feel of the spaces she creates for her performances, and the way in which she creates a group identity by repeatedly referring to all audience members as her 'bitches'. The way Omielan moves amongst the crowd, invading their personal space and being overtly sexual towards them, means that whilst she comes across as extremely personable, audience members may also get the sense that she is aggressively forcing herself into people's space to make a point. She is empowered, and should you be the person selected for interaction, you will experience this by being over-powered by the way she interacts with you. Often her expression of sexual power towards male audience members would make the recipients of the interaction appear uncomfortable (as was the case when I first saw her live, when the person attending with me was treated to a kind of lap-dance and laughed uncomfortably throughout, avoiding eye-contact). Her material makes it very clear that she is more than a sexual object and so performing these physical gestures to/with the audience often highlights how repressed or disempowered they are sexually, as they are clearly much less confident expressing their (hetero)sexuality when faced so starkly with hers. This disparity is rendered comic through the excess with which she expresses her sexual power in the performance space and amongst the audience.

Omielan's overall approach can be considered postfeminist in tone and content, in relation to Shifman and Lemish's definitions as noted above. The way in which her material heavily references celebrity feminisms and often reinforces a binary gender division is a key aspect of this;

> Whereas in sexist humour the hierarchy between the feminine and masculine features is clear, postfeminist humour will tend to obliterate the hierarchical component and focus only on differences (Shifman and Lemish, 2010: 875).

The intermingling of feminist positions, evidenced in Omielan's empowered 'girl power' stance, with non-feminist positions, as her comic material is often maintaining a gender binary and a heteronormative goal of 'finding a man', is part of the complexity of our postfeminist comedy context. Her use of 'Mars and Venus humour' (Shifman and Lemish, 2011) is evident throughout her material. As a specific example of this, she often laments the way that lack of personal hygiene in males, especially in relation to their genital areas, can make certain sex acts less than enjoyable for women. Not only does Omielan's humour reinforce a binary system, it also targets both men and women in order to do so. Unlike the work of Bridget Christie, which unifies the audience in a political way against an ideology, Omielan's work focuses on unifying men and women as separate groups with the notion that, whilst equal, we are unavoidably different from each other.

The problematic aspects of her postfeminist approach aside, we can see certain sections of her work as undeniably empowering for audiences. 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. In this routine we can see that rather than using the body standards of the mainstream media as a tool to find humour in her physical shape, she contradicts this expectation by embracing it.

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 [27] (Omielan, Luisa (2015) [video] Thigh Gap Routine. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2MskQOinwE (accessed 12/8/18).

Omielan's routine challenges people to see her body as a symbol of the life she leads in a positive way – not negative one. Often in mainstream media the stomach region of a woman's body is a symbol of laziness, not going to the gym, not exercising self-care and so on. But Omielan insists that we should see it as symbolic of her desire to have fun, to live her life, and not 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 we see women's bodies. Society assumes that women who don't conform to a very narrow spectrum of body types must hate their bodies (the many 'circle of shame' images, where women's perceived imperfections are highlighted and ridiculed in women's magazines, are indicative of this attitude). There is very little room (visually and aurally) for those of us who are 'fine as we are, thanks very much'.

This example amply demonstrates how Omielan directly rejects the meaning imposed on that part of her body by others and is able to assert a more positive 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 cited above) highlighting that when complimented in social settings

women have a tendency to immediately self-deprecate, and as we can see Omielan advises that we do the opposite – telling everyone to 'upgrade yourselves, bitches'.

The unavoidable nature of the body for stand-up comedy means that material that addresses its presence within performance will continue to be written and performed. 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.

It is important here to note that I am not in any way opposed to postfeminist styles of comedy, having found Omielan's shows humorous and inspiring, but one can observe a reductionist focus on the individual in relation to bigger issues such as body image. We can see this also evidenced in Katherine Ryan's *Glam Role Model* (2014), which culminated in the story of her ex-partner cheating with a glamour model, and also operates from a self-improvement and empowerment perspective. The focus on the personal rather than political is one of the defining characteristics of postfeminist sensibilities, as Rosalind Gill notes:

> One of the most striking aspects of postfeminist media culture is its obsessive preoccupation with the body. In a shift from earlier representational practices, it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one (2007: 149).

Although the body as a site of protest has long been an area of feminist concern, it is the de-politicisation of the body as a tool of collective resistance to gender norms that is evident in these shows. Omielan regularly eludes to a 'natural' difference between men and women, often with reference to behaviour in relationships. Likewise, Ryan focuses on the impact that glamour modelling and revenge porn has had directly on her own life rather than the wider issues around objectification of women, which is the definitive focus of Christie's work.[28] Arguably the context that these comedians are operating in leads them to this complicated relationship with feminism, as comedy both references and reflects the cultural attitudes of the time.

The differences between the feminist and postfeminist approaches in my given examples is epitomised in the way in which both comedians handle, at some stage in their shows, the topic of popular singer Beyoncé. Omielan (and in fact Katherine Ryan in a similar way) focus on Beyoncé's empowerment through the use of her body, referencing both the "Crazy in Love" (2003) dancing style and the "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" (2008) hand gesture – without any deconstruction of the gesture or the wider cultural connotations around marriage and 'ownership' of women.[29] Christie however relates Beyoncé back to her discussion on Margaret Thatcher, reiterating that not all successful women are feminists (these jokes were made before Beyoncé's more political stance demonstrated in her visual album *Lemonade* [2016]).[30]

Irrespective of whether the show is explicitly politically engaged with feminism, as evidenced by the work of Christie, or simply reflecting a postfeminist normalising of a perceived (if not genuine) gender equality, as is the case with Omielan's earlier shows, we can see women performing in the current context have moved towards a less self-deprecatory tone.

The work of Christie and Omielan was selected for consideration as they are indicative of wider trends on the current circuit and have been particularly successful at capturing and reflecting current themes in contemporary feminisms. It is clear that the situation is more nuanced than a simple 'more women in comedy equals more feminist comedy' argument. The women currently on the circuit have been raised within a patriarchal society and so it is hardly surprising (even when we consider the age differences) that some comedy by women may simply reinforce cultural norms. Neither is it possible to reduce self-deprecation to a purely destructive role within comedy and place postfeminist body-positive comedy as constructive. There needs to be further consideration not only regarding who gets to enter and be successful within the comedy industry but whether the material being produced normalises or challenges the status quo of gender stereotypes as comedy clearly has the ability to do both. Self-deprecation or self-objectification in the hands of one comic may produce a completely different effect to another's use of similar techniques due to the myriad of other factors that come into play when creating comedy.

This chapter is not about women competing against one another either: in the current cultural context feminism is often used as a tool with which to berate others. There is often a reductive approach to contemporary feminism that attempts to pit different factions against each other rather than to push for collective action. Whilst of course being mindful to not get stuck with white feminism's reductive narrative or shutting myself off from learning from the experience of others, I acknowledge that many women, comics included, are simply doing their best from their own position. Therefore, I am not attempting to place a value judgement on the work of any comic identifying as female who chooses not to deal explicitly with gendered issues in their routine. The comedy industry has space for the multiplicity of perspectives articulated by male comics and the same range of voices should be heard from women too. However, in terms of progressing an inclusive feminist agenda through comedy, simply being a comic and identifying as female is not enough.

The focus of those seeking to create a more diverse and inclusive comedy industry in the UK should be squarely on the backlash against female and feminist comics entering the industry, rather than attempting to create a sense of competition between them. It is this backlash that the following chapter will consider.

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[1] For more information on *The Wau Wau Sisters*, a troupe where Truscott showcases her circus and physical performance skills see: https://wauwausisters.com/the-legend/ (accessed 26/11/17)

[2] This year was a particularly significant moment for comedy by women as discussed in the introductory section of this thesis, as the Best Show prize that year went to Bridget Christie, whose work will be explored in more detail shortly.

[3] See http://www.adriennetruscott.com/asking-for-it/ for reviews and description of the show (accessed 23/7/17)

[4] Performance artists whose work includes these extreme uses of their own body include Yugoslav-born Marina Abramović and French artist ORLAN.

[5] On stage throughout the performance sat a collection of framed photos of male comedians famed for telling rape jokes. One of Britain's most popular comedians Jimmy Carr's photograph sat amongst them. For further information on Carr's inclusion of rape jokes into his material see Gold (2012): https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/17/heard-one-about-rape-funny-now (accessed 11/8/17)

[6] Initially the revelations were outlined in an article in the New York Times, resulting in the cancellation of the premier of C.K.'s film *I Love you, Daddy* (2017) which contained a character displaying remarkably similar sexual behavior to that outlined by C.K.'s accusers. See Ryzik, Buckley and Kantor (2017):

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/arts/television/louis-ck-sexual-misconduct.html (accessed 26/11/17)

[7] To read Louis C.K.'s statement accounting for his actions see:
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/television/louis-ck-statement.html (accessed 26/11/17)

[8] For a review of *Adrienne Truscott's Asking For It* see Merritt (2014):
https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jun/08/adrienne-truscotts-asking-for-it-review-feminist-standup-pants-down (accessed 6/8/17)

[9] For more information on Femen see https://femen.org/about-us/ (accessed 2/1/18)

[10] Daniel Tosh's rape-joke incident in 2012 was reported widely in the UK media at the time, see Holpuch (2012): https://www.theguardian.com/culture/us-news-blog/2012/jul/11/daniel-tosh-apologises-rape-joke (accessed 11/8/17)

[11] One high profile UK example of legal issues around rape, at the time of Truscott's performance, was the suicide of Frances Andrade following her extremely distressing cross-examination during the trial of her rapist. See Gentleman (2013): https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/apr/13/rape-sexual-assault-frances-andrade-court (accessed 23/7/17)

[12] Following the success of *Asking For It* in the UK, in 2017 Truscott teamed up with Ursula Martinez and Zoe Coombs-Marr to create *Wild Bore* a comedy show examining the role of critics in deciding what contains artistic merit. Within this show the group explored the reviews they had received (predominantly from baffled male critics) and asked questions about who it is that gets to decide what has value in our society. This show also involved the use of the performers bodies to make a statement – displaying their bare behinds to make the point that just as with many critics of their work 'they too are not afraid to talk out of their arses'. http://www.sohotheatre.com/whats-on/wild-bore/ (accessed 26/11/17)

For a review of *Wild Bore* see Logan and Gardner (2017) in *The Guardian*.
https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/aug/10/wild-bore-review-traverse-edinburgh-festival (accessed 26/11/17)

[13] Seen 9/8/2016 at Pleasance Courtyard Edinburgh. For further information see Maguire (2015) in *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/08/tweet-taoiseach-periods-enda-kenny-abortion-law (accessed 20/5/17)

[14] Abortion continues to be politically complex international issue, especially in the wake of the 2016 American election, and as part of a generally regressive attitude to women's rights in political debate in the US. In addition to this the 2017 UK general election saw the Northern Irish abortion laws under scrutiny when the narrowly elected Conservative Party formed a majority government with the ultra-conservative (and anti-abortion) Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

[15] For a review of *Lolly 2* see Jones (2016): https://inews.co.uk/essentials/edinburgh-fringe-review-lolly-adefope-finds-voice/ (Accessed 12/8/17)

[16] This complexity for Black women is thoroughly explored in the preface of Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race* (2017), which contains a transcript of her blog post of the same name from 2014.

[17] For information on #Oscarssowhite see Cox (2016):
https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/25/oscarssowhite-right-and-wrong-academy-awards-audience (accessed 29/7/17)

[18] Seen 8/8/2016 at Pleasance Courtyard Edinburgh. For a review of the show see Sulaiman (2016):
https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/83958-lolly-2/ (accessed 20/5/17)

[19] A previous version of this analysis of Christie is the focus of my published article. See Tomsett, E. (2017).

[20] See Lewis (2013): http://www.newstatesman.com/archive/2013/04/margaret-thatcher-feminist-icon (accessed 3/3/16)

[21] In many ways Pascoe's work takes postfeminist comedy to another level, as it is not only implying a gender difference but attempting to persuade (using evolutionary science, as discussed in Chapter 3), an audience that a differences exists.

[22] See http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2017/what-would-beyonce-do (accessed 17/08/17)

[23] See https://twitter.com/Dawn_French/status/834442408767127552 (accessed 18/8/17)

[24] In summer 2017 Omielan's mother Helena became critically ill and subsequently died of stomach cancer. Helena had often been featured in Luisa's online videos and posts and looms large in her live comedy too (with Luisa often kind-heartedly mimicking her Polish accent and occasional odd English phrasing). As a result Helena was a well-known figure to many of Luisa's online fans. During this difficult time Omielan often wrote about the stress her family were under and posted several very emotional videos sharing her struggle with the public. In order to nurse, and then grieve, for her mother Omielan took time off from performing, cancelling performances of her new show *Politics For Bitches,* which she had initially scheduled to tour across spring and summer 2017.

[25] See http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2016/01/27/24047/luisa_omielan_pilots_itv2_show (accessed 18/8/17)

[26] Omielan (2015) discusses the rationale behind her clothing choices for *Am I Right Ladies* here https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/feb/12/luisa-omielan-strip-off-standup-comedy-show-am-i-right-ladies (accessed 4/1/18)

[27] Luisa Omielan's Melbourne Comedy festival performance can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2MskQOinwE (accessed 20/5/17)

[28] For a discussion of revenge porn see Stroud (2014).

[29] Miranda Hart also made use of the cultural phenomenon of Beyoncé in her *My, What I Call, Live Show* in 2014. Hart ended her show, which I saw at the Manchester Arena on March 14th 2014, by deriving humour from her physical differences from Beyoncé. Hart dressed and danced in Beyoncé's style to "Crazy in Love". Again, the focus was on the individual, in this case the discrepancy between the "average" woman (Hart) and the idealized body and confidence of this modern-day icon (Beyoncé).

[30] Christie adapted material on Beyoncé within subsequent performances of *A Bic For Her* in order to accommodate the changes in Beyoncé's publicly expressed opinions on the subject.

Chapter Eight
An (un)equal and opposite reaction:
The backlash and barriers facing feminist comedy

Just as quickly as fumerists such as Christie, and to a certain extent her postfeminist contemporaries such as Omielan, are challenging and confronting gender stereotypes, other comedians, in this instance male ones, are busy rebuilding and reinforcing them (often with the support of large media organisations). This chapter will explore how feminist comedy struggles to find a space within more mainstream outlets for comedy, focusing specifically on UK television. Both Christie and Omielan, despite their critical and commercial success in the live arena, have faced challenges when trying to get their voices heard more widely through mass media forms.

The increased profile of feminist public rhetoric and feminist comedy has, as with every step forward for women into male dominated areas, engendered a backlash. The existing progress that women in Western society have achieved with regards to gender equality remains under constant threat. In relation to this study, arguably these threats form part of a much wider cultural nostalgia for traditional and uncomplicated Britishness. As Anita Superson and Anne E. Cudd explain in their book *Theorizing Backlash: Philosophical Reflections on the Resistance to Feminism*, which considers the various negative reactions to feminist thought within academia, 'In its normative use, "backlash" connotes something to be avoided, something that is excessive in its zeal and reactionary in aim' (Superson and Cudd, 2002: 5). It is this definition of backlash that will underpin the analysis contained within this chapter.

The reaction to the increasing visibility and power of (some) women within Western society is evidenced by the vicious online trolling of female political and public figures as discussed in Chapter 5. The current political climate forms the backdrop for this behaviour. Emboldened public displays of retro-sexism and racism in the wake of the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency, the continued rise of the Alt-right, as explored in the work of Nagle (2017), and the impact UK government austerity has had on services and support for women, all contribute to perpetuating gendered inequalities. It is very difficult to divorce the ongoing turmoil of America from the UK

context under consideration in this study. In our highly mediated culture, awareness and contact with US politics is inevitable. Whilst this chapter, indeed this thesis, is concerned with UK comedy, UK culture is heavily influenced by America and, as such, recent international political developments are worthy of consideration.

Live comedy has historically been male dominated, as outlined in Chapter 3, and although women have made significant inroads into the live circuit and televised comedy in the UK, both continue to be overwhelmingly male. Outside of performed comedy the cultural association between men and humour, or 'banter', continues to hold strong, and the caveats of 'just joking' or 'a bit of fun' are still regularly deployed as a defence for problematic sexist comments in a range of social and political situations. Rosalind Gill comments that:

> Most significantly […] in postfeminist media culture irony has become a way of "having it both ways", of expressing sexist, homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, whilst claiming this was not actually "meant" (Gill, 2007: 159).

This use of irony is a key feature of the context within which the female comics discussed in this thesis work.

We can consider this resistance to gender equality and restatement of traditional masculinities through irony from an industrial perspective. Lindsey German, in *Material Girls: Women, Men and Work* (2007), analysed women's struggle for inclusion within the paid labour sector and work outside the home. German describes how the increased participation of women in the workplace, across all industries, has historically provoked men to reassess their identities and the concept of masculinity.

> So we see the reassertion of traditional male values, at least amongst a layer of men: lap dancing clubs, lad magazines, an insidious campaign against the notion of "date rape", a resurgence of sexist language, and continuing high levels of violence against individual women (German, 2007: 115).

This position holds true for the British comedy industry which has historically been a male industry operating within a male space (most public spaces being male dominated but specifically working men's clubs and more recently macho mainstream

comedy clubs), making it doubly difficult for women to infiltrate. This situation bears many similarities to academia, which evidences some of the same contextual traits and rhetorical defences to feminism. Superson and Cudd in their consideration of academia comment that

> Physical violence is the most obvious but not the only sort of reaction to progress. In the academy, where physical violence is rare (but not unheard of), backlash usually comes in the form of institutionally sanctioned, or at least unprevented, abuses of power (Superson and Cudd, 2002: 4).

Even in professions such as academia, that appear on the surface enlightened by the inclusion of women, where women may indeed be more visually present than ever before, and where there have not been significant changes to the kind of labour being performed (as is the case with say, manufacturing industries) we still see resistance and backlash play out. These arguments hold true for the industries of both academia and stand-up comedy. We can take this comparison further by considering how both professions have historically been male-only and continue to be male dominated (especially at the top of the hierarchies). Additionally, women work alone within physical spaces where once they were excluded precisely because of their gender (within older institutions); they stand up in front of crowds publicly voicing their own opinions and are often hired on the basis of people's awareness of their work as an individual. It is also interesting that we are now seeing the uncovering of more physical ways of controlling women within these industries come to light too. [1]

The inclusion of women into the competitive and predominantly male comedy industry has resulted in a crisis of male identity and an insistence on traditional masculinity, now being played out through reactionary humour. To elucidate upon this point I will now consider several examples of this backlash in action.

In contrast to Christie's work, which through comedy vocalises the problems faced by women and attempts to engage all genders as equals, several comedians have taken an approach that re-establishes the binary divide between men and women and attempts to reassert a hierarchy of active males and passive females. A male comic who demonstrates this backlash is comedian Andrew Lawrence whose work evidences

a right-wing sensibility. Alongside working on the mainstream club circuit since the early 2000s, Lawrence has been regularly broadcast on BBC Radio 4 where he has written and performed several comedy shows. Within his work, as well as via his online presence, we can see a direct retaliation against what he terms 'political correctness', and what others would mostly describe as respect for other human beings, irrespective of their gender or racial identity.

Lawrence publicly shared Facebook posts in October 2014 that highlighted his attitude towards the diversification of the comedy circuit. Comedy website Chortle reported that:

> Lawrence – who makes much of his bitter disillusionment with the comedy industry in his act – also berated "moronic, liberal back-slapping on panel shows like *Mock The Week* where aging, balding, fat men, ethnic comedians and women-posing-as-comedians, sit congratulating themselves on how enlightened they are about the fact that UKIP are ridiculous and pathetic" (Chortle, http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2014/10/26/21186/what_a_rant Accessed 6/1/18).

Lawrence was widely condemned by other comedians for his comments, especially in relation to the way he othered both 'ethnic' comics and women (who in the initial post are cast as not really comedians at all – simply pretenders to the throne). However, his public comments are certainly indicative of some of the attitudes explored in the interviewing process of this research, both in terms of hostile audience responses to material from comics identifying as female and feminist, and in the way it reasserts the stereotype that women are not funny. Lawrence's comedy seeks to normalise attitudes that see white men (especially those who would fall into the politically contentious white working-class demographic) as somehow 'under threat' and as a universal norm against which everyone else should be measured.[2]

In a post-Brexit-referendum UK we can see the xenophobic aspects of Lawrence's work as indicative of the isolationism and backward-looking nationalism played upon during the referendum campaigns. To provide a more recent example of Lawrence's humour, the following quotation provides an update to his material in the light of high-profile

sexual-assault scandals and acts of terrorism. In a Facebook post from 1st November 2017 he muses that '[I] need some press coverage to promote the tour, just got to decide whether to sexually harass a bunch of people or drive a truck into them'.[3] This again evidences a humour that is based on shock factor and controversy. This is nothing new, and much of his work can be read in relation to superiority perspectives, however it is clear how Lawrence's humour goes about re-establishing a white male norm in response to the current political climate, especially as fears of terrorism were played upon by the Leave campaign as part of the 'taking back control' narrative.

Lawrence reacts to what it appears he perceives to be a threat to his own survival as a comic within an increasingly diverse comedy industry. Alongside this defensiveness we can also see the continued trivialisation of violence against women in the comedy content of Lawrence and several others operating in the current context.[4]

The 2014 controversies surrounding comedian Dapper Laughs affords us the ultimate example of this kind of humour that objectifies women and trivialises violence against them. Dapper's work provides an almost polar opposite to the work of Bridget Christie, so much so that he could arguably be referred to as the Anti-Christie. Having attracted thousands of followers by vlogging online before transferring to what would be a brief stint on ITV2 (September to November 2014), Dapper's work was allegedly presented as a satirical take on modern "lad culture" with the above-mentioned 'just joking' caveats. However, much of his work was indistinguishable from straightforward sexism. Telling comparisons were made to real-life pick up artists being covered in the media of the time. Pick up artists, such as the much talked about Julien Blanc, make a living by instructing men how to attract women, and often advocate sexually aggressive behaviours. These comparisons only served to highlight that the distance between the real behaviour and the 'satirical, exaggerated behaviour' displayed by Dapper was simply too close to call or indeed non-existent. [5]

Whilst receiving heavy criticism, and in reaction to an online petition from other comics and members of the public for ITV2 to remove him from broadcast, statements were often released by the broadcaster and Dapper himself, (real name Daniel O'Reilly), in line with the 'not actually meant' argument Gill articulates in her analysis

of postfeminist media culture. Although character-based satire is a very successful and familiar tradition within the British stand-up scene, one can only assume that there was insufficient consideration by the broadcaster as to whether the irony (if they believed it to be irony) would be clear to the television audience, or whether the humour would be received or understood on a less sophisticated level.

Al Murray's Pub Landlord character provides a useful counterpoint to Dapper. Murray has faced similar criticism in the past in relation to the ways his performances can be read on multiple levels.[6] Both performers are playing with stereotypes, but whereas Dapper's work seemed to advocate that others act in a similar way to his character, the Pub Landlord does not seem to be advocating specific behaviour to his audience (beyond, maybe, just enforcing the consumption of wine and beer along gendered lines). Murray is clearly provoking his audience to ridicule the Pub Landlord's out-dated views, and there is sufficient distance between Al Murray the comic, and this performed character for him to achieve this, and so no caveat is therefore necessary. For Dapper's comedy the women targeted by his pick-up lines or 'antics' were the butt of the jokes rather than Dapper himself. Further complexity arose as the audience were unaware of any discrepancy between the comic, Daniel O'Reilly, and the character of Dapper Laughs.[7] The distance between performer and character, and the way in which Murray's act does not incite others to behave in a similar way, are crucial factors in understanding Murray's work. Murray's comedy as The Pub Landlord has been regularly televised and is more clearly read by an audience as satire because the double meaning is detectable.

Dapper Laughs: On The Pull (2014) involved Dapper giving members of the public dating advice and demonstrating behaviours (often in line with out-dated gendered stereotypes) that they could adopt to attract partners. Murray's work has been a longstanding fixture on the UK circuit, winning the Edinburgh Comedy Award for Best Comedy Show back in 1999, and can be understood as part of the challenge to patriarchal norms through ridicule present in much post-alternative movement humour. In contrast, Dapper's work, arriving in the context of 2014, highlights a more aggressive insistence of old school macho humour. The double meaning necessary for an audience to read a performance as irony was very difficult to observe, so difficult

that one wonders if it is irony at all. This amply demonstrates German's point that traditional masculinity seeks to reassert itself in the wake of increased gender diversity in workforces, in this instance specifically through humour and in reaction to the increasing inclusivity of the British comedy circuit.

Due to a public outcry regarding a video clip of Dapper addressing the media criticism of his TV work in one of his live shows, and his comment to a female audience member that she was 'gagging for a rape', ITV finally bowed to pressure and dropped the ITV2 show. Whilst his comments in his live shows were considered by ITV as part of the decision to drop the show, they still maintained that the content of *Dapper Laughs: On The Pull*, his television show, was 'carefully considered and compiled'. [8]

However, if we reflect on the statement made by ITV (and the production companies Hungry Bear Media and Big Minded) initially announcing the commissioning of this series, it is clear they were well aware of the problematic aspects of his act. In the statement Kate Maddigan, the commissioning editor from ITV, commented 'I'm excited to bring him and his risqué brand of humour to ITV2'. [9] Additionally both producers from Hungry Bear and Big Minded articulate their excitement in the statement at having been given the opportunity to share Dapper's work with a wider audience. The press release signs off with the following statement 'Dapper Laughs said, "I can't wait to bring my brand of comedy to the ITV2 viewers, [*sic*] who says you can't sleep your way to the top."'

During the aftermath of this scandal Daniel O'Reilly repeatedly said he would put the character to bed (if audiences could still believe there was a character at all). This most memorably occurred when he appeared without characterisation (or, arguably, performing a different characterisation) on BBC *Newsnight* on 11th November 2014, when in an interview with presenter Emily Maitlis, O'Reilly clearly stated 'Dapper Laughs is gone'. Throughout this interview O'Reilly repeatedly reiterated the difference between himself as a 'real person' and Dapper. This was visually indicated to viewers through his decision to dress in a sombre black polo neck jumper, as if attending the character's funeral. At one point he asked Maitlis in an incredulous tone if she really thought him capable of the actions depicted in the online videos of Dapper (specifically in relation to a clip shown at the start of the show where he demonstrates

how to get a woman's bra off quickly, by holding up a knife and saying 'take your fucking top off'). When arguing that in many ways this character had ruined his life O'Reilly artfully avoided labelling himself a victim by replying to Maitlis' question 'so you feel like a bit of a victim now?' with 'a victim of my own mistakes maybe'.

Despite this clear mea-culpa, in early 2015 Dapper headed out on tour again, recording his *Res-erection* show and releasing it as a DVD. Disconcertingly, considering his clear assertion that Dapper Laughs was a character and that critics should credit the audience with a bit more intelligence than assuming they would take the act at face value, here again we see O'Reilly blurring these boundaries, and being deliberately provocative and offensive. This is especially evident in the section where he recalls being interviewed on *Newsnight* (doubly confusing when allegedly it was O'Reilly rather than Dapper who was interviewed) commenting that the whole time he was looking at Maitlis thinking 'You fucking want it, don't ya?'.[10] This directly contradicts the idea that the character and the person are different entities.

At the start of 2018 O'Reilly (although again constantly interchangeably referred to as Dapper Laughs in the press) was also invited to enter the *Celebrity Big Brother* (2001-2018) house. This particular series of the show had been initially advertised as completely female in celebration of the 100-year anniversary since the voting franchise was extended to some women. This is an obvious example of the commodification of feminism by Channel 5. O'Reilly's inclusion within a show designed to (somehow) honour women's suffrage is intentionally provocative and offensive given his clear disregard for women's rights. His participation in such a high-profile show forces us to consider exactly what this comic would have to say before he was denied any further platform. It seems that formats and channels are quick to find a way to accommodate this kind of sexist humour in a way not afforded to feminist comedy, which one can only surmise is still disappointingly considered a 'minority perspective'.

The inclusion of Bridget Christie's humour in mainstream formats has been much trickier to achieve than that of her male equivalents, as epitomised by the example of her problematic inclusion into panel shows. On 2nd of May 2014 Christie was a panellist on the long running BBC satirical panel show, *Have I Got News For You?*. This was her

first appearance on the show. In a poignant echo of the complaints made by the character A.Ant about poor introductions affecting audiences' pre-conceptions, Christie's position was undermined before she had even said a word. Christie's introduction welcoming her onto the show was delivered by the guest host that week comedian Jack Dee, and was as follows:

> On Ian's team tonight is a comedian who collected the Foster's Comedy Award wearing a T-Shirt saying No More Page 3,[11] and she got an extra round of applause when she took it off. Please welcome Bridget Christie.

Christie protested this introduction at the time and has been quoted in an interview with *The Guardian* as saying she will never return to the show, asking 'Have they ever introduced a male comedian with a joke about his cock?'.[12] This comment at the start of the show immediately cast Christie as an outsider, and focused on her difference, her gender and her feminism, rather than her status as a comedian. The joke not only undermined Christie as an individual but also made light of a campaign with serious objectives.

The rest of this episode effectively illustrated how Christie's position on rights for women has the potential to make it difficult for her to contribute to shows dealing with politics and the media. This is not a fault of Christie's, but because so much of this broadcast culture is still, we can reasonably conclude, from an 'old school' patriarchal perspective. For example, at the time of the recording and broadcast of the particular episode of *Have I Got News For You?* under discussion, the trial of PR guru Max Clifford for sexual assault, and Operation Yewtree concerning historical paedophile networks, were in the news and therefore were covered as part of the show.[13] Christie's live comedy is diametrically opposed to humour that makes light of the impact of sexual harassment or assault and therefore it would understandably have been difficult to participate in this kind of humour without compromising her views or comic persona.[14] To evidence that Christie's experience of patriarchal humour in this environment is not an isolated incident it is important that we consider the show as a whole rather than only the episode where she appeared. Several pertinent examples present themselves. In 2017 *Have I Got News For You?* found itself at the centre of debate about the

reporting of revelations of sexual assault being made on both sides of the Atlantic. In an episode broadcast on BBC1 on 3rd November 2017 the guest host, comedian Jo Brand, corrected team captain Ian Hislop when he dismissed aspects of harassment as trivial. When discussing the media reports of a serving MP taking his personal trainer to the cinema, and how this contributed to a culture of harassment he quipped that 'Some of this is not high-level crime, is it, compared to Putin or Trump?'. Brand, with an air of reluctant fatigue (having no doubt, like many women, had to explain the impact of harassment to those who choose to live in ignorance) responded by saying:

> If I can just say – as the only representative of the female gender here today – I know it's not high-level, but it doesn't have to be high-level for women to feel under siege in somewhere like the House of Commons.[15]

This was met by facial expressions of shock from the male panelists (possibly at being publicly corrected rather than the content of Brand's polite and concise rebuttal) and loud cheers from the audience for the recording. Whilst of course the programme has been edited together (we switch between shots of Brand, Hislop and other team captain Paul Merton in quick succession) it seems clear this is not a scripted or 'approved' joke and that Brand is reacting in the moment with little regard to the embarrassment of the team captains or to making her point humorous. It is notable that it made it into the edit of the show at all.

Whilst the content of Brand's response is of course praise-worthy, for me the real importance of this moment was that it revealed the unquestioned patriarchal humour that often passes without comment and goes unnoticed by the audience. Comments and actions that belittle or 'other' women are rife on this show (with many other panel shows equally problematic in this regard). Within the same episode guest panelist Quentin Letts described commentator Julia Hartley-Brewer as a 'girl', which was also picked up upon and corrected to 'woman' by Brand.

A further example of this 'othering' of women in action can be found in the decision by *Have I Got News For You?* producers on 16th December 2016 to replace Conservative MP Nicky Morgan with a designer handbag when she cancelled close to the day of

recording. The handbag was not a randomly chosen object, it directly related to the argument between Morgan and the then Prime Minister Theresa May over the message high-cost fashion sends out to struggling austerity-burdened constituents. This choice however, resulted in no female presence on that episode of the show.[16] The decision taken by producers to field a handbag rather than one of the numerous capable female comedians who would have loved a shot at that programme is, for me, one of the most telling signs that these shows have failed to change. [17] When producers only book one woman in the first place (and a politician who, since she is not a comedian, will invariably disproportionately be the butt of the jokes anyway) this means they are solely responsible for diversifying a line-up. To then decide that rather than try to replace a female guest an inanimate object would be just as good is, to my mind, indicative of an attitude of complacency, not innovation.[18] I can appreciate that this replacement was supposed to be read as a joke and was a callback to the episode on 4th June 1993 when MP Roy Hattersley (who had repeatedly cancelled his appearance) was replaced by a tub of lard. However, the decision to use a gendered object such as a handbag yet again reinforced the disparity between the handling of male and (when included) female guests on the show. It was a very literal objectification of women – the handbag could be the object of humour just as well as a female panelist.

The 'Jo Brand incident' highlighted again how little awareness those who hold powerful positions within the comedy industry, such as the team captains of panel shows whose work is televised on a weekly basis, really think about or understand gender inequality and the role that everyone plays, comedians included, in upholding the structure that makes this possible. Just as Brand's comment highlighted the way small instances of harassment and sexism build up, so too do the small throw-away comments and jokes in televised comedy. These also build up to create an environment hostile to any humour that seeks to challenge the patriarchal norms that much mainstream televised humour perpetuates.[19]

In a response to the complaints received about the Brand and Hislop harassment exchange on the show, the BBC commented that the show 'doesn't deliberately set out to offend viewers' and that they 'accept that tastes vary enormously'.[20] This, to my

mind, demonstrates how the BBC has yet again failed to fully understand the reaction to this incident. The response to this small part of the show was not about taste or the assumption that Hislop was attempting to be intentionally offensive, but the way the show is still overwhelmingly articulated from a male perspective, and Brand's inclusion highlighted why representation on this show is so important.

Another key point in relation to Brand's work here is the way her long-standing career enables her to be in a position to challenge these views. It is hardly surprising that many of the instances of the belittlement of women or the downplaying of harassment that occurs on panel shows goes unchallenged by the very few female panellists who are present. In 2016 data scientist Stuart Lowe of the Open Data Institute conducted and then published rigorous analysis of the gender split across TV and Radio panel shows, both in terms of regular and guest appearances. The data, which clearly breaks down the gap between male and female participants, makes for depressing, if not surprising, reading.[21]

Panel shows are very hard to get on to in the first place, and so anyone wanting to subvert or challenge the existing humour being perpetuated would already need to be at a certain stage in their career to be confident doing so without jeopardising future employment. It is in moments such as her appearance on *Have I Got News For You?* that we can truly see the significance of Jo Brand as a comedian in the current comedy context. She has survived a changing industry and built a career that enables her to be as vocal and challenging to the patriarchy as she first was when performing live as part of the alternative comedy scene. Whilst she has certainly undergone a process of change in the style of her comedy in order to be accommodated by television formats, (understandable considering the political nature of her material), she uses her position within the industry to challenge and provoke change with awareness that she has attained power and has the chance to use it to benefit others, as evidenced in this example.

It is not only panel shows that pose problems for the inclusion of those with a more feminist or postfeminist comic approach. We can also see how Omielan's recent increase in profile provides a pertinent example of the difficulties of transitioning from

live comedy to TV, and why women still need to reject meaning imposed by others on their bodies in these televised spaces. As outlined in the previous chapter, 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 culminating 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 entire short duration 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 day for *The Sun* that:

> 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.[22]

Norton did not use that particular description of Omielan's dress, even though he had focused solely on her appearance. This incident provides a further example of how even when a comedian takes ownership of their sexuality and body, (and even when they are in fact *renowned* for it), others are quick to control and denigrate them.

This continuation of societally ingrained objectification of women can be seen as indicative of a wider 'lad culture' perpetuated through humour, which is particularly prevalent online, as discussed in Chapter 5. Norton's comments about and sole focus on Omielan's clothing is echoed in more recent scandals surrounding male political and public figures. Journalist and free school lobbyist Toby Young was briefly appointed as chair of the government's new Office for Students in 2018, before various questionable misogynistic, ableist and classist comments he had made online surfaced, making his position untenable.[23] Young resigned due to a public outcry over a series of tweets that objectified female politicians and actors. Several high-profile Conservatives, including the current Prime Minister (then Foreign Secretary) Boris

Johnson (someone regularly prone to displaying problematic views wrapped up in humour and buffoonery, who has presented *Have I Got News For You?* on several occasions) argued that these comments were simply evidence of Young's 'caustic wit' and that the backlash occasioned by his appointment was ridiculous.[24] Comments such as those made by Norton and Young are based on the understanding that any woman placing herself in a public space is opening herself up for objectification. This has been recently compounded on an international level with the election of Donald Trump whose famous 'locker room talk' highlights an ingrained lack of respect for, and objectification of, women. [25] Gendered and sexist criticism of female bodies continues on public service broadcasting and within politics where this kind of critique is poorly disguised as humour. Despite evidence of misogynistic comments, disguised as or retrospectively claimed to be 'joking', we can see that the 'just having a laugh' excuse is incredibly effective: Dapper Laughs can still be seen on UK TV screens, and Donald Trump occupies the most powerful political office in America, arguably the world.

To consider a counter-argument, it could be said that the form of comedy evidenced by Dapper Laughs or even Andrew Lawrence is simply articulating a differing, perhaps more distinctly 'young white male' sense of humour. However, this position runs into problems when we consider the vehicles afforded Christie and Dapper's humour and the inequality between them. It is not just the case that a male comic was afforded a wider opportunity than a female contemporary, although this is of course worthy of note. The backlash, which goes beyond simple inequality, originates within the content of the comedy afforded this wider platform. Christie is an award-winning comic with years of experience, yet her non-live work has so far been confined to those areas sometimes referred to as 'niche feminism' - the pages of *The Guardian* (for which she has previously written several columns), and BBC Radio 4 for example.[26] The televising of Dapper's work, however briefly, created the impression of mainstream endorsement, and enabled a comic renowned for sexism and promoting sexually aggressive behaviours access to a much wider audience. This opportunity is not currently afforded to feminist humour.

The importance of accessing wider audiences through televised work is clear. As Willett, Willett and Sherman note, 'Given that social norms shape cognitive habits, the

unravelling and disrupting of conventional norms through ridicule might free our thinking as well' (2012, 218). Sexism it seems is still very much a part of mainstream comedy which continues to normalise problematic attitudes. In many cases the sexism is blatant, as is the case for Dapper Laughs (whose work fails the test for irony, in that it does not convey multiple meanings effectively). Whilst feminist comedy remains excluded there is little opportunity to challenge these norms across the board.

It is clear then that current televised output in the UK, which remains the dominant route to accessing a wider audience, remains resistant to the inclusion of feminist humour. Whilst new technologies such as streaming services and social media platforms provide new routes for women entering the industry these are often challenging spaces to infiltrate too, as discussed in Chapter 5. Even when female comedians are successful both commercially and critically in a live environment, it does not guarantee them an automatic, or indeed comparable, transition to a wider audience, especially when trying to integrate into existing or long running shows.

It is important to challenge the default position of male-dominant televised comedy programming because the representations of women in this environment both compound gender stereotypes and help normalise patriarchal attitudes to women. Whilst both my examples here have been white women, it is clear that women of colour and those with disabilities are also underrepresented in the television comedy arena and face discrimination across multiple indices of difference from the white male norm.

It is these norms which are in need of disruption, in order for feminism to have a wider voice within comedy programming. It is not just a matter of formats, although we can see how these often place restrictions on who can be included, it is crucially the predominantly white male sense of humour these shows perpetuate. Shows that normalise public space (televised space) as male and white must be challenged to be more inclusive and reflective of wider society. Black intersectional feminist Reni Eddo-Lodge, in an interview with Channel 4 news presenter Krishnan Guru-Murphy for the *Ways to Change the World* podcast series, comments that:

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I don't believe that middle-aged white men are the most talented in society. But if I looked around at people who are in positions of power that would be the conclusion that I would draw. But I don't believe it (Eddo-Lodge, 2018. [podcast] https://www.channel4.com/news/ways-to-change-the-world-a-new-channel-4-news-podcast-reni-eddo-lodge (accessed 12/8/18)).

Whilst Eddo-Lodge is talking more broadly about politics and cultural institutions we can certainly apply this critique to television comedy. The current representation of women, the working classes and people of colour on UK comedy programming falls woefully short of reflecting the wealth of comedy talent available on the live circuit. It is this lack of diversity that maintains hegemonic notions about the comic capabilities of anyone who does not fit a very specific mould and prevents feminist comedy from reaching a comparable audience to that of the humour of retro-sexist lad culture.

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[1] Sexual harassment within the comedy industry was discussed in Chapter 4. However, at the time of writing there is also widespread campaigning to highlight the issues of sexual harassment within UK academia (See #TimesUpAcademia). So, whilst Superson and Cudd writing in 2002 comment that violence is 'not unheard of' within academia the physical policing of women within this male dominated space is becoming increasingly heard of. Sara Ahmed who publicly quit her institution in May 2016 due to its poor handling of sexual harassment continues to raise awareness of this issue. For Ahmed's comments on her resignation see: https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/05/30/resignation/ (accessed 20/4/18)

[2] The intensely problematic aspects of the 'white working-class' debate is unpicked at length in the work of Reni Eddo-Lodge who highlights the way in which this kind of rhetoric both feeds into far-right ideology and maintains that class and race are two 'separate disadvantages' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017: 202).

[3] Lawrence's full post and the responses to it can be found on his public Facebook page. Posted 1st November 2017. See https://www.facebook.com/andrewlawrencecomedy (accessed 6/1/18)

[4] Interestingly in 2018 Lawrence performed his hour-long Edinburgh show *Clean* without profanity. Towards the end of the show Lawrence extemporized about how a comment on social media could quickly become taken out of context and interpreted as hate speech. His decision to perform a clean set was and odd one, as it appeared to imply that people had previously objected to his use of profanity, rather than the content of his comments.

[5] See Li (2014): http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/julien-blanc-is-a-racist-sexual-predator-teaching-men-to-prey-on-women-like-me-he-must-be-stopped-9843939.html (accessed 2/1/16)

[6] See Oliver Double's discussion of the character comedy personality spectrum and how Al Murray's character relates to this in Double (2014) Pp 124-126 and 276-279.

[7] In November 2014 O'Reilly appeared on BBC *Newsnight* to address the controversy of his ITV2 shows cancellation. A contrite O'Reilly can be seen in action attempting to defend his work in the following clip

from the BBC *Newsnight* YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lBt3fr5viAE (accessed 6/1/18)

[8] See Burrell (2014): http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/dapper-laughs-itv-under-fire-over-dating-show-vloggers-rape-comedy-routine-9852224.html, (accessed 2/1/16)

[9] See http://www.itv.com/presscentre/press-releases/dapper-laughs-pull
(accessed 2/1/16)

[10] For discussion of the reformation of Dapper Laughs and a review of the DVD of *Res'erection* see Logan (2015): https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/nov/23/dapper-laughs-daniel-o-reilly-lads-comic-dvd
(accessed 6/ 1/18)

[11] The No More Page Three campaign challenges the use of sexualized images of topless female models on page three of national newspaper *The Sun*. See https://nomorepage3.wordpress.com/faqs/
(accessed 28/2/16)

[12] See Lawson (2014): http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/aug/29/bridget-christie-trickery-hiding-serious-bits-comic-framework (accessed 2/1/16)

[13] For more information on how the British entertainment industry has historically failed to protect the vulnerable or take allegations of sexual harassment and abuses of power seriously the BBC's internal investigation, overseen by Dame Janet Smith, into the Jimmy Savile and Stewart Hall years thoroughly examines the failings of the institution to keep people safe. See
http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/dame_janet_smith (accessed 20/4/18)

[14] Christie was nominated for the British Comedy Awards Best Female TV Comic for her one appearance on television in 2014 (on *Have I Got News for You?*). This could be read in relation to the way in which the wider industry wishes to be understood as inclusive whilst actively reinforcing a gender divide. Achieved by othering women when they do appear on TV panel shows, both in terms of the introductions they receive, which mark them out as different from the established male panellists, and in their gender-specific categorisation for the Comedy Awards.

[15] For a clip of the episode of *Have I Got News For You?* and a round up of some of the Twitter reactions to the show see Agerholm (2017): http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/jo-brand-have-i-got-news-for-you-hignify-video-sexual-harassment-ian-hislop-quentin-letts-a8037276.html
(accessed 7/1/18)

[16] See Bulman (2016): http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nicky-morgan-have-i-got-news-for-you-handbag-cancellation-education-theresa-may-a7481601.html (accessed 7/1/18)

[17] This episode was directed by Paul Wheeler with the writing credits attributed to five men. Even when we consider that there were several female assistant producers for this episode we can see the creative directorial decisions and writing were uniformly the concern of male crew members. For full crew list see https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6142242/fullcredits?ref_=tt_ov_wr#writers/ (accessed 19/4/18)

[18] In April 2018, as part of promoting the new series of *Have I Got News for You?*, hosts Ian Hislop and Paul Merton provoked the ire of many by suggesting that female MPs and comedians were regularly asked to appear but simply chose not to. Hislop, revealing some of his deeper held and possibly unconscious biases, concluded that this was because men are simply more willing to 'have a go' at something where as women are more naturally modest. Merton compounded this by stating that in his opinion the show has actually had a lot of female hosts, demonstrating a questionable grasp of basic maths. See Davies (2018):
https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/apr/03/host-have-i-got-news-for-you-hislop-merton-women-presenters (accessed 13/4/18)

[19] See Ruddick (2017): https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/nov/16/have-i-got-news-for-you-where-jo-brand-rebuked-all-male-panel-tops-complaints (accessed 6/1/18)

[20] Ibid.

[21] To access Lowe's panel show data, which was last updated December 2017, see http://strudel.org.uk/panelshows/index.html (accessed 13/4/18)

[22] See Ross (2017): https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3192390/ally-ross-red-nose-day-fails-to-deliver-for-comic-relief/ (accessed 21/5/17)

[23] For more on Young's problematic tweets see Rawlinson (2018): https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/07/toby-young-faces-fresh-calls-for-his-sacking-in-misogyny-row (accessed 13/4/18)

[24] More recently in August 2018 Johnson, having resigned from his post as Foreign Secretary, made several controversial comments about Muslim women's decisions to wear burkas. This was followed up with the predictable 'it's just a joke' defence from Johnson and sympathisers, including comic actor Rowan Atkinson. See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45139084 (accessed 12/8/18)

[25] An outline of the comments made by Trump in a recording from 2005 can be found transcribed, along with Trump's response to the footage, within an article by David Fahrenthold in the *Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eeed4_story.html?utm_term=.c5557983628c (accessed 13/4/18)

[26] We can also see that these niche feminist outlets could also be termed 'white feminism' as discussed in the opening section of this thesis. These niche feminist creative outlets tend to articulate the concerns of white women and amplify the best heard of all the collective voices of women, that of the white heterosexual middle-classes.

Chapter nine: Discussion of findings

The purpose of this research was to interrogate the current UK comedy circuit in relation to the increasing inclusion of female comedians and explicitly feminist comedy. This was undertaken in relation to the specific research questions outlined in the methodology chapter. In this discussion chapter I will consolidate an argument about the current state of the UK comedy industry as it relates to women. Each research question, with reference to the relevant material uncovered in my interviews and audience study (which evidence my claims), will be considered in turn. Additionally, emergent areas of concern that require further consideration will be identified.

In what ways has British stand-up comedy as a form and industry historically been shaped in a gendered way?

This research considered the ways in which stand-up comedy form in the UK has evolved (and the ways that this differs from an American context, upon which the majority of studies of stand-up comedy's development have focused). It is clear through reviewing relevant literature regarding the UK comedy circuit, and consideration of the wider political climate in relation to gender, that the *spaces* of comic performance influenced, or arguably dictated, the *content* of material of stand-up comedy. This is particularly noticeable from the mid 1950s onwards when comedy developed in the spaces of working-men's clubs. The exclusion of certain groups from performing in these spaces not only prevented women and minority groups from becoming comedians, but also inhibited the kind of material developed during this period (see Chapter 3). Put simply, the 'where' of stand-up comedy influenced 'who' became performers and thus the content of 'what' was covered. Thus this period of live comedy played a significant role in reinforcing the wider notion that comedy is fundamentally a male pursuit. The proliferation of humour within these spaces that targeted women as the butt of the jokes, or those contingent on gender stereotypes, were no doubt influenced by the male dominance of the performance and industrial context of the time. In this way, the form of stand-up comedy in the UK has grown out of a markedly gendered environment and differs from America. Whilst there can be no

doubt that gendered issues on the American circuit exist (as recently explored in the work of Olbrys Gencarella [2017]) the explicit 'maleness' of the UK's formative comic spaces is distinct to Britain and this gendered evolution of the form is something that many studies of comedy overlook (through continued conflation of US and UK comedy).

Jokes from the UK's 'traditional' stand-up era were developed for performance within male dominated spaces, which then through wider exposure on television went on to normalise this male dominance. Stand-up comedy therefore both contributed to and was influenced by gender stereotypes from the wider social context during the development of 'traditional' approaches. Following on from these formative spaces, stand-up comedy continues to be uniquely susceptible to gender stereotypes due to the way comic material relies on shared cultural knowledge, to ensure audiences can access humour. This is exacerbated as comic performance also provides an arena for taboos to be explored and thus tends to engage with more controversial topics, topics that cannot be accommodated as easily in other non-comic forms.

Even in the contemporary context, the spatial injustice evidenced during stand-up comedy's development is yet to be fully addressed, and the effects of the gendered evolution of the form are still evident. This claim was substantiated repeatedly in the interviews I undertook with contemporary performers, who highlighted that they often perform alone amongst men on the mainstream circuit (as men continue to dominate the space of comic performance). Whilst the alternative movement of the 1980s made progress towards changing the content of stand-up comedy away from explicitly racist and sexist comedy, it arguably did little to address the spatial injustice felt by women in the comedy industry outside London or in mainstream/commercial performance spaces. It was the fact that the post-alternative comedy circuit continued existing male dominance that resulted in women taking this into their own hands in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

This research highlights that the development of women-only spaces for comedy was a direct reaction to male-dominance and industry sexism on the UK circuit. The action taken by the people and organisations consulted as part of this research (Lynne Parker

of Funny Women and Hazel O'Keefe of Laughing Cows Comedy and The Women in Comedy Festival) to develop women-only nights and events has, in this thesis, been documented to an academic standard for the first time. The contributions of these pioneering women have been contextualised as part of the diversification of the form of stand-up comedy and the spatial and industrial changes within British comedy. This research, therefore, provides new information and discursive contextualisation regarding women-only comedy spaces in the UK, the motivations for their establishment, and foregrounds the achievements of the women behind these initiatives. The research addresses both the under-consideration of UK stand-up comedy (and its differences from America) as well as the under-documentation of creative work and labour by women, and thus contributes new insights to the existing academic discussion of the UK comedy industry as found in Double (2014), Quirke (2011, 2015, 2018), Friedman (2014) and Gray (1994).

What are the current conditions of the UK comedy industry as they relate to women?

The industrial structure of the current, live-comedy industry continues to include gendered spaces (at grassroots level), as the gendered issues these nights were established (in the late 1990s) to address, continue to be a problem for those trying to enter the industry. This research explicitly engaged with a feminist critique of the current conditions of the industry by considering the responses of performers and promoters originating in qualitative interviews (see Chapter 4). The current comedy industry in the UK has made some steps towards the inclusion of women and minority voices. However, even subsequent to key periods of progress such as the alternative movement of the 1980s and establishment of female focused comedy organisations in the 1990s/2000s, the specific challenges remain and work as barriers to the inclusion of women. It was clear through the thematic coding of interview data, and observations made as part of my role as participant observer at the Women in Comedy Festival, that there are still several gendered challenges to engagement with the comedy industry. These can be summarised in relation to the following headings: Individuals being understood (or perceived to be understood) by the public to represent all women, sexist audience reactions, poor introductions, sexism from

industry professionals, badly advertised women-only nights, economic disparities, and aesthetic pressures. These seven issues (discussed fully in Chapter 4) relate to the observed behaviours of industry professionals, comedy critics and journalists as well as the general public, and perpetuate past injustices by upholding a male norm from which women are cast as deviating. This does not mean that the current industry has not started to consider the issue of inclusion, but that there is still some way to go to make the industry fully accessible to all who wish to participate.

In addition to the themes identified above, a general hostility towards women-only comedy nights was discussed during interviews with performers. I also experienced and observed first-hand this general hostility both online and in person. This research argues that this hostility stems from a wider societal resistance to quotas and affirmative action. When commencing this research, I had suspected that women-only nights would meet with general dismissal (or disrespect) in line with most labour performed by women more generally, and attitudes towards sectors that employ mostly women. However, several performers highlighted how women-only nights were seen as less of a challenge for performers by the wider industry and also as something distinct from (and of less value than) mainstream spaces in terms of experience and audience. This attitude from the wider industry (perceived by those working professionally in the context under discussion) is reflective of the wider social context, and is an experience unique to female performers.

This experience is combined with the way that often comedy performed by women is referred to explicitly or by implication as 'women's comedy' where gender automatically becomes a genre. This is frustrating for female performers and unique to them, as they are working in an industry, and a wider social context, that still labours under the assumption that comedy by women is in some way *for* women. This is not comparable to say BAME male performers, whose experiences, which also undoubtedly originate from their minority position, would still be considered understandable to the dominant group (white men) irrespective of ethnicity. Comedy by black performers is far less regularly actively positioned as only for black audiences through criticism or advertisement. This continual foregrounding of gender was apparent many times when conducting my digital ethnographic work as female comics

regularly reported being told by (sometimes well-meaning) audiences that they were 'funny, for a woman'. The comment that came up repeatedly in interviews was that this behaviour would not be tolerated if someone told a comedian they were 'funny, for a black person'. It is clear that sexism continues to be socially acceptable in relation to comic performance in a way that racism is not. Scottish comedians Janey Godley and Fern Brady provide examples of performers who have relayed experiences of these interactions in the last year on Twitter. Sexist attitudes from audiences are not a thing of the past. Popular feminisms have resulted in a rise in popular misogyny, as explored extensively in the recent work by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), and discussed in Chapter 8 of this thesis. Therefore, women working in this current context still labour under the shadow of the entrenched stereotypes around gender and humour, even if these attitudes are not as explicitly articulated as they once were. While most performers were aware that these attitudes about women-only nights exist, they maintained a belief in the necessary function of women-only nights and this was foregrounded many times within interviews.

When considering the success of female comedians within the current comedy industry it is clear, through extensive observation of live, online and television comedy, that some women are breaking through to play a more active role at the top of the industry. However, it is also clear that the majority of these women are white, able-bodied and middle-class, thus replicating for producers the 'T-Shirt comic' ingredients that, as Friedman (2014) identifies, have been so successful for their male contemporaries. In addition to the kinds of women who manage to make this final leap into inclusion on TV (so accessing a wider audience) the dominant material found within these televised spaces tends to be postfeminist comedy (as discussed in Chapters 7 and 8). In the current context we therefore see a lot of appearances from specific women (Sara Pascoe, Katherine Ryan, Holly Walsh, Kerry Godliman, Cariad Lloyd) and more needs to be done to ensure the field is widened to be more inclusive in general and also specifically for women of colour and women with disabilities. Steps are being made toward this although, as the conclusion of this thesis will outline, there is still some way to go. This research argues that postfeminist comedy is easier to include within existing formats as it does not challenge the patriarchal assumptions

that underpin much of the comedy already found in these spaces (as discussed in Chapter 8).

The current circuit operates in a way that both horizontally and vertically segregates women. This is achieved by forcing women into a position where, in order to build up sufficient stage time, they first have to work in women-only spaces (which continue to be less respected than mainstream spaces). This occurs simultaneously with the industry's reproduction of barriers to female inclusion at the top end of the mixed-gendered live comedy circuit and television industry. This horizontal and vertical segregation plays out concurrently with the industry's attempt (as a whole, but also as individual organisations and broadcasters) to present itself as more inclusive (as discussed in Chapter 4). When the data used to make these claims is interrogated, as in *The State of Play Report* (2014), the picture is different to that which the commercially-focused industry presents. In the current industrial context, organisations on the surface may appear changed by their diversity initiatives. This appearance is often achieved however without any structural change (as will be highlighted as part of my conclusion). It is relatively easy for a comedy club to host a women-only comedy night (either regularly or as a one-off) but it is harder to ensure inclusion is considered and achieved across the whole of a venue's programme. Television comedy can be considered through a similar lens. This research highlights that comedy produced by women is often lauded as part of publicising increased diversity on screen, only to then be axed or fail to be recommissioned after the kudos of including women has been accrued. Unsurprisingly, broadcasters are less keen to shout about the comedy shows produced by women that they are axing, often after significant critical success.

It should be noted that not all comics wish to participate in the television comedy industry or see it as a destination (or progression) of their live careers. However, in terms of increasing audiences for live shows, participation in television comedy continues to be important for careers, as evidenced in my audience study. Of my 336 surveyed participants, 88% also watched television comedy (double the 44% figure for radio comedy). This relates to Kuiper's understanding that 'knowledge always precedes appreciation: you have to be aware of something in order to like, hate or be

indifferent to it' (Kuipers, 2006: 360). Television comedy plays an important role in relation to awareness.

This research presents, for the first time, an in-depth consideration of the UK comedy circuit's inclusion of women, and the industrial conditions experienced subsequent to the development of women-only nights in the 1990s. In this way, this research furthers the existing arguments made about the current industrial conditions of live comedy, and provides unique insight into an under-researched area. This research provides new information about the current comedy circuit and the barriers experienced by women working within it. As such, this research, which encompasses the perspectives of many participants, moves the narrative about barriers to inclusion beyond simply one woman's experience, (which is easy to dismiss as anomalous), to an industrial critique of gendered barriers that impact on all working within the industry. This work also exposes the flaws in existing narratives about increased inclusion within UK comedy, and how use of misleading top-level data can mask continued issues.

What contribution do women-only comedy nights make to the UK comedy industry for both performers and audiences?

Women-only comedy nights play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of some of the identified barriers to the inclusion of women in the comedy industry. Overall it was felt by performers, promoters and audiences consulted during this research that these events make a positive contribution to the UK circuit. A crucial role that female-focused organisations such as Funny Women and the Women in Comedy Festival play is that of advocacy for inclusion. Organisations have a unique opportunity to challenge unethical or discriminatory processes (which individuals may not be in a position to undertake) and to collaborate with the wider industry to showcase female performers. For example, Funny Women continue to work with high profile organisations (such as Women in Film and TV and ITV) to create and promote initiatives to address under-representation across all areas of comedy. The link between the Women in Comedy Festival and Manchester venue The Frog and Bucket has certainly impacted on further integration of women across all events at the venue. Jessica Toomey, who manages The Frog and Bucket, has now become an official partner and co-director for the 2019

festival and has made significant progress in including women across all mixed-bill nights at the venue. Women-only comedy nights and events provide space for female talent to develop the stage-time required to progress in their careers - stage-time they may not be able to accrue as easily on the mainstream circuit due to a continued reluctance by promoters to book multiple women on the same bill.

Performer perspectives

To summarise the contribution made by these nights from the perspective of comedians it is clear that well managed women-only comedy nights address some of the identified barriers or unique issues that impact on women. These nights tackle the following issues identified in this research:

- Women working alone on mixed-bills are frequently understood to represent all women. When women work together on women-only line-ups this issue is mitigated, and no one person is forced into this position.

- Women-only comedy nights may also impact on sexist audience reactions. This is because the gender of the comedians is made clear to the audience in advance and therefore the reactions that some performers identified (a kind of unease or resistance when learning the next act is a woman) are less likely to occur. This does not mean that audiences for these women-only comedy nights are not capable of sexism, (this is not my point here), but that the conditions of the performance context challenge these assumptions. A popular argument about the women-only nights is that they 'preach to the converted', in that audience members who hold these sexist attitudes will probably not attend the events in the first place. The findings of my audience study demonstrate otherwise. Whilst my research was not concerned with the impact of feminist comedy on attitudes to women (or comedy by women), some participants for both the survey and interview stage did indeed hold stereotypical attitudes towards female comics, and so the *potential* for impact does exist. It is clear these events do still attract audiences that contain individuals who are not already fully aligned with a contemporary feminist mind-set, as the data

revealed unconscious bias in responses. This included several comments that framed humour from women that targeted men as being part of 'man-hating' behaviour, this was notably evident in the responses from a participant who worked within the television industry. Therefore, the dismissal of women-only events as potentially ineffective due to the make-up of their audience is reductive.

- The poor introductions that some performers identified in mainstream spaces are also challenged in a women-only environment as the gender of the comedians is known in advance to the audience. Therefore, it can be reasoned that the gender of the performer is of less relevance during the verbal introduction of a comic to the stage (if it is indeed ever relevant) than on a mixed-gendered line-up.

The above observations should not be read as a plea for separatism, but indications of how these environments are tangibly different from mainstream spaces.

A further contribution that these spaces make to the current industry is through the ways in which they provide an opportunity for female comedians to work with each other and share experiences. This is a significant contribution, as many female comedians still perform in isolation amongst men on mixed-gendered bills (although this is slowly changing), and there are specific gendered challenges that face women in the industry. Not only is working with other women significant in terms of being able to see and be inspired by the work of others (along 'see it to be it' lines), but this arrangement has implications for the industrial conditions that women face. By providing a space for women to work together, and share experiences, the opportunities for collective action or challenges to existing conditions increase. When women (in any industry) work in isolation they are more vulnerable to exploitation and it is easier for employers to dismiss instances of sexism or discrimination as a 'one-off' if the complaint is raised by one person. An obvious example here, and something that came out unexpectedly within the interview data, would be the silence that exists around women's pay (both in a wider sense but also, in relation to this thesis, within the live comedy industry). The way women rarely work together in the mainstream

comedy industry means that there is little awareness of the rates people get for their work (or whether they are being paid at all, when offered spots so they can 'gain experience'). This can mean that it is hard to know when people are being under-remunerated for their labour. By creating spaces where women can come together, an opportunity to discover these issues exists, and this is the first step towards addressing the issues.

Creating spaces for women to meet and discuss the working conditions and issues they have experienced is a hugely important part of transforming an industry into one that is more inclusive to incoming female talent. This was something I observed as part of my participant-observer role at the Women in Comedy Festival. The event brought people together and informal discussions were had (as part of the social aspect of the event) about career paths and experiences in a space where grievances could be aired without jeopardising future employment.

While there are clear positives for women working together, there was still a concern that some audiences or industry professionals may see these nights as ghettoising women and, by implication, suggesting that 'women's comedy' is a genre in and of itself. This is not helped, and sometimes actively perpetuated, when certain women-only nights cash in on a reductive binary to create 'ladies nights'. These kinds of nights were uniformly dismissed within the interviews with performers as unhelpful to inclusion due to their retro-sexist tone and approach (see Chapter 4). For many, these badly thought-through nights simply reinforced the perception that women's comedy is a genre. It would be wrong to fully dismiss commercial gain as a motivation for the founding of women-only comedy organisations or nights; the chance to build a market, or capitalise on an unaddressed market is, of course, relevant. However, if the commercial gain motivation is coupled with a general lack of awareness about gender stereotypes, or a lack of care when assembling the event, as with poorly executed journalism about female comics, 'ladies night' comedy nights clearly have the potential to do more harm than good in terms of the perception of comedy performed by women.

Audience perspectives

When attending women-only comedy events and nights audiences are afforded the opportunity to see a significantly wider range of female talent than would be possible in mainstream spaces. As identified previously, women are still in the minority in mixed-gendered spaces and so to see a range of women perform a range of comedy would take a significantly longer amount of time in the more mainstream spaces. One of the stereotypes that female comics often face is the assumption that they will all talk about the same topics. As my audience participants highlighted in their responses, anyone attending a women-only event can very quickly see how different each performer is, and so this stereotype is very swiftly deconstructed. This is one of the key contributions that women-only comedy events make for audiences. They provide a space within which to see a huge number and range of female performers (which is a rare opportunity in the wider industrial context). Until the rest of the industry becomes more inclusive, these spaces alone provide this necessary function.

A clear finding from the audience interviews was that these women-only events contribute an enjoyable and necessary alternative space, and experience, for audiences. Many respondents discussed the way they had had negative experiences of mainstream spaces (sometimes years before) and therefore felt that they wanted an alternative to this experience. Mainstream comedy spaces, where white male comedians still dominate, are clearly still not perceived as inviting or inclusive to everyone. Women-only spaces therefore contribute an alternative space for audiences who may feel more included in these environments.

It is clear that audiences feel they took away something positive and different from these spaces, although it is worth noting that these feelings may also be contingent on stereotypes (e.g. the idea that women's spaces are more inviting or less aggressive, which is not always the case and is arguably based on stereotypical views of femininity). When audiences were asked if there should be a Women in Comedy Festival, all interviewed participants agreed that the event should continue and the contribution was positive. This research contributes additional information to existing audience studies (such as that conducted by Lockyer and Myers [2011]) about

motivations to attend women-only comedy nights and how these events may be interpreted as an alternative to mainstream experiences. This research presents new information about the role of women-only comedy nights from the perspective of those working within the comedy industry, from my own observations as a participant observer, and from audiences for women-only comedy events. This is the first academic engagement with comedy audience to consider these specific women-only spaces.

How do career opportunities for female comics working on the live circuit relate to wider media developments (e.g. TV comedy, Internet streaming services and increased uptake of social media etc.)?

The continued adoption of social media has had a huge impact on the UK comedy industry. Many of these changes have been positive in relation to the evolution of who takes on gatekeeping functions for the wider industry. Information about new comedians has never been more accessible and platforms such as Twitter provide an unprecedented opportunity for self-presentation as well as interaction with audiences outside of the space of performance. This has a direct impact on the live comedy industry. This research contributes to the existing literature in the field by developing arguments made by Sam Friedman (2014) about the role of gatekeepers, considering how this may be altered by the online environment and what this may mean for women.

This research considered the findings of digital netnography to discuss how social media and streaming services impact on female comedians specifically (see Chapter 5). The conclusion was reached that while the online environment, specifically the Twitter platform, may have benefits for female comics seeking to enter the industry (such as building a following, testing material and gaining confidence), the digital environment in many ways replicates the gendered policing of space and public speech found in existing physical spaces. The barriers women face to speaking up, having an opinion or engaging in public discourse are replicated online through aggressive behaviours such as trolling. This was evidenced within the interviews conducted with comedians and through observation of the way comedians and audiences make use of the Twitter

platform. This research contributes new information concerning the specific barriers to inclusion within comedy, which have originated in live environments, and are echoed in digital environments too. These findings therefore develop and challenge arguments made by MacKeague (2018) who highlights broader positive claims about stand-up comedy and digital media, without significant consideration of gender as a factor. The resistance and aggression women face online should not be overlooked in future discussion of online comedy.

In addition, this research also considered the barriers some comedians meet when moving on from live comedy into broadcast forms such as television-comedy formats (see Chapter 8). Within the audience study several participants observed that knowledge of at least one person on a line-up makes a difference to whether they would attend an event. Therefore, TV comedy, which continues to be widely accessible in general and within this research 88% of participants engaged with, is a key way of ensuring public awareness of performers and performance styles. Awareness of American comedy by women is also impacted by new technology as easily sharable clips and memes circulate online, and this highlights the discrepancy between the success of women in comedy in the US and in the UK.

Despite a rise, over the period of this research, in the number of women featured in television comedy, it remains a male-dominated space and one that is not accessed as easily by female comics with the same degree of experience as their male contemporaries. Women are therefore often developing their own paths to enter the industry, and many of these paths are directly facilitated by new technology. There are three indicative examples of this. Firstly, there has been a rise in the crowdfunding of projects using online donation sites such as Kickstarter or Go Fund Me (promoting the initiative through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter). Luisa Omielan undertook this process to record and release a DVD of *Am I Right Ladies?. Secondly, there has been increased engagement by female comedians with the new opportunities presented by streaming services such as Netflix or Amazon who record live shows as 'specials' to be featured on their sites. Bridget Christie recorded her own stand-up special for Netflix and comedian Jayde Adams has recently announced she will be recording one later in 2019 for Amazon Prime. And lastly, there has been an increase in female comics

developing self-produced work that embraces the possibilities and freedoms of audio production. This is achieved through podcasting and developing an audience for future broadcast work. Both the work of Sofie Hagen and Kiri Pritchard-McLean exemplify this practice. When women do make it into the long-running spaces of broadcast comedy, such as high-profile panel shows, *it is possible* for hegemonic norms around gender roles to be challenged (as discussed in relation to Jo Brand in Chapter 8). However, as resistance or refusal to engage with the patriarchal nature of these spaces (as discussed in relation to Bridget Christie) can prevent further employment in these arenas, very few women are currently in a position in their careers to provoke this change. This research provides new insights into the interconnections between opportunities and barriers for inclusion presented and facilitated by the online environment and digital technologies.

How are feminist and postfeminist approaches to comedy present within performances by female comedians in the current context?

This research considered the kinds of comic performance that emerge from the industrial, performance and social contexts under scrutiny in this research (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8). Specific attention was paid to the content of performances by female comics in relation to self-deprecation, an approach to comedy that has long been integrated into performance by women and marginal groups (see Chapter 6). This research concludes that self-deprecation continues to be a feature of comedy by women but may now have a specific connotation in the current environment. The connotations (and implications) of self-deprecatory comedy have changed over the last decade due to the dominance of 'empowerment' narratives to which Western societies now overwhelmingly subscribe, as evidenced through celebrity feminisms. This research evidences that even when some female performers (specifically those who self-identify as feminist in their work) do not want to make self-deprecatory jokes they still do so. This is because of the placatory function self-deprecation can serve in addressing gendered power imbalances in performance situations.

Contemporaneous to the use of self-deprecation and in line with current feminisms several comics, including those explicitly discussed in this thesis, adopt an approach

that focuses on body positivity, rejecting humour that makes their bodies (and by extension the similar bodies of those in the audience) the butt of the jokes. Comedy that takes a more body positive approach has the potential to be feminist or postfeminist in line with the definitions provided by Shifman and Leamish (2010) and this research evidences that both kinds of comedy are evident on the current UK circuit. The hallmarks of feminism or postfeminism can be apparent in many ways within performances by female comics, such as the use of imagery to promote solo-shows, the choice of costume, use of the performers body, as well as the content of the jokes contained within the acts.

Bridget Christie and Luisa Omielan's work and careers have been discussed in depth in this research. These performers were selected as they had achieved commercial and critical success on the live comedy circuit while providing a clear example of how there are nuances between feminist and postfeminist comedy relating to broader empowerment agendas. This research argues that not only have these two performers achieved a similar level of success, they have also met with similar levels of resistance to their inclusion into traditionally male (or male-dominated) spaces on television.

There is a huge range of comedy approaches and styles performed by women evident on the current UK live comedy circuit. This conclusion was arrived at as a result of extensive observation of female comics over the 5-year period of this research, observations which emphatically evidenced a diversity of talent. However, the diversity of this talent, (both in terms of the diversity of the performers themselves, and the content of the material) is not currently reflected within broadcast comedy, especially on television. Postfeminist comedy that continues to uphold a binary between men and women, where the focus is on non-political topics and themes, is much easier to incorporate into existing comedy formats. This kind of comedy is reflective of a process which Angela McRobbie (2009) refers to as double entanglement and includes humour which invokes a kind of feminist collective action, while simultaneously implying an irrelevance of (or lack of need for) the action, as an approximation of equality has now been reached. As a result, often when women are included in these spaces, they perform comedy that does not challenge gender norms

or make gender political-points to ensure a seamless fit with the material provided by the men who occupy these spaces regularly (e.g. hosts and team captains).

In addition to the presence of feminist and postfeminist comedy on the UK circuit performed by female comedians, there is also evidence of direct resistance to increased inclusion of women and minority groups in the comedy industry found within the content of comedy by male performers (as discussed in Chapter 8). This can be seen as evidence of what Angela McRobbie (2009) refers to as the complexification of a backlash to feminism. Comedy as a form is very open to content that takes an ironic, or 'political-correctness-gone-mad', approach to gender inclusion and some comedians are utilising the freedom of comic licence to reassert a male dominance through gender stereotypes. It is well documented that all industries that include labour performed outside the home, especially labour that does not conform or connect to traditional feminised gender roles (such as caring, cleaning and teaching), have been initially resistant to including women. It is therefore worth restating, irrespective of the creativity of the artform, that comedy is an industry. Thus it is not surprising that a rise in the number of women attempting to 'infiltrate' the industry has met with resistance.

This aspect of my research provides new and UK context-specific information about under-researched female comedy performers, their work and careers. This research re-energises arguments made by Gray (1994), Russell (2002), Gilbert (2004) and Barreca (2013) and brings feminist comedy criticism up to date for a social context where multiple contradictory feminisms exist. Additionally, this research provides new case studies and brings in new voices to the debate, and thus expands the field of comedy studies in relation to considerations of gender.

Research questions: Overall summary

While some of the identified issues relating to inclusion in comedy are wider than gender identity and relate to marginalised groups such as BAME performers, women do meet specific gendered barriers. This is because gender stereotypes are deeply entrenched within the language of comedy. By this I mean firstly the literal language,

English, with gendered words such as 'feisty' and 'comedienne' highlighting gender difference and being regularly deployed in criticism and introductions by compères. But secondly, gender is highly pertinent to the formal language structures of comedy itself, such as joke structures which require incongruous and shocking punchlines, or self-deprecatory jokes which are used to addresses power imbalances in performance situations. Similar to the argument that Laura Mulvey (1979) articulated regarding the language of film as an artform, it is important to note that men have invented these languages of comedy and also dominated and restricted their uses. For comedy this is true both socially and as part of performance.

Industrial and societal conditions for female comics continue to be difficult on the live circuit, and while progress is being made towards inclusion, the issues deriving from former years have not been fully addressed. In this regard, women-only comedy spaces are a vital part of the evolving circuit and their contribution has been overlooked historically and continues to be underappreciated, or actively dismissed, by the industry.

It is clear that televised spaces are more open to the inclusion of comedy that does not challenge hegemonic notions of gender. As postfeminist comedy assumes that an existing agreement that equality has to some extent been achieved, and refocuses attention on the individual rather than collective differences, it is easy to blend in with the comedy that is dominant in mainstream spaces both live and televised.

In the past 5 years there has been a significant rise in the number of women organising their own mixed-gendered comedy nights. Many of these new live comedy nights, such as Kiri Pritchard-McLean's *Suspiciously Cheap Comedy*, nights ran by *The LOL Word* a queer comedy collective ran by Jodie Mitchell, Chloe Petts, Chloe Green and Shelf, as well as Sophie Duker's *Wacky Racists* have an overt inclusion agenda and provide a space for a diverse range of acts from across the gender spectrum. Thus, while women-only comedy spaces provide a useful and formative space for women to develop careers, they are now not the only spaces to be prioritising diversity in performers and comic material. The nights and events found at the grassroots end of the industry evidence a much more thoughtful and nuanced commitment to diversity

than many of the much bigger (and commercially or publicly funded) organisations can.

Summary of thesis findings:

This research has explored comedy performed by women and women-only comedy spaces and the complex and ambiguous ways in which content and context combine. A starting point for this thesis was to examine the ways in which historical performance contexts have created barriers to the inclusion of women, and how the very form of stand-up comedy has been shaped by this male dominance. This research then considered how women within the comedy industry, as producers and performers, have responded to the male dominated spaces, discourses and industry structures (identified in Chapter 3) that have grown out of the gendered origins of the form. The two key approaches to challenging this dominance that I have identified during the course of this research are the development of women-only comedy spaces (Chapter 4) and the continued use of self-deprecation as a way of negotiating the power dynamics present in mainstream comic spaces (Chapter 5), where masculine structures and discourses are still commonplace.

Women-only comedy nights and events are an important part of the history of UK comedy as they have been instrumental in providing a platform for new and established female comics, and in advocating for wider diversity across the industry. While acknowledging the importance of these women-only spaces, it is also vital to highlight the complexities and nuances of such approaches.

A key positive finding from research with audiences has shown that women-only comedy nights are perceived as 'safe' by some attendees, especially those who have had negative experiences of mainstream club spaces. Therefore, these nights can be seen as providing a vital function on the current circuit in meeting the audience demand for more inclusive spaces and content. Many audience members noted that they were motivated to attend the Women in Comedy Festival to support up-and-coming female talent. As a result, arguably a safer space for new material to be trialled is created, with audiences potentially being more receptive to those with less

performance experience. This notion (of a 'safer' space) is somewhat problematic however, as it also potentially plays into the current and pervasive stereotype (explored in Chapter 4) that women-only comedy nights are easier for performers than mainstream gigs. The belittling of these nights, and the performers who gain experience this way by industry figures and the public, is detrimental and plays into wider patriarchal assumptions about women (or any minority group) requiring the provision of an 'easier' experience in order to succeed. The equating of 'different to the mainstream' to 'easier than the mainstream' is not the intention of this research and the complexities of every unique performance situation (women-only context or otherwise) should not be diminished. It is evident that, at times, the very structures women-only comedy nights and events attempt to undermine, and the prejudices they respond to, can be (and are) turned against them. In this way we can see that potentially segregating line-ups by gender contributes to the continued ghettoising of comedy by women into specific spaces, and in maintaining a perception that comedy by women is 'women's comedy'.

The performers with whom I engaged as part of this research did note a difference between performing on women-only line-ups and mainstream spaces but did not impose a value judgement on the relative 'ease' of such nights. Performers foregrounded the idea that on such women-only line-ups they get to work with other women, have more opportunities to perform than they would on the mainstream circuit alone, and off-stage can share their experiences of the wider circuit with each other. Furthermore, I have identified through extensive observation that these nights also provide a place where the self-deprecatory modes traditionally used by female comedians to negotiate mixed-gendered comedy line-ups are arguably less necessary. This is because the audiences for women-only nights (who have a variety of gender identities) are aware of the gender of the performers in advance. Therefore, there is less need for performers to address a gendered power imbalance at the start of the routine, or to do the additional work to recover from poorly worded (and often gendered) introductions from a compère. This does not mean that self-deprecation is never deployed in women-only spaces, or that power imbalances do not occur in this context, since power relations are always more complex than gender alone. Arguably however, the male-dominance of mainstream performance spaces make it more

necessary to deploy tactics such as self-deprecation. Women-only comedy nights therefore can be seen to help further the actual content of comedy performed by women, as the nights are providing the contexts where approaches such as overtly political and/or body positive comedy can be developed over time, without the power-related techniques necessary in more mainstream spaces.

As women-only comedy nights and events occur at the grassroots end of the industry structure it can be hard to see a tangible link to challenging the exclusion at the top of the industry, beyond the advocacy function of the producers and organisations discussed in this thesis. Those comedians working steadily across live and mediated forms (TV and radio), and reaping the financial rewards of this, are currently held up as the measure of success to which all others are compared. These higher-profile female comics are more likely to be working in mainstream spaces due to their perceived marketability and ability to fit into existing structures (and this is arguably a key part of their success – the ability to succeed within these mixed-gendered spaces). What is clear however, from looking back at the lists of performers who have engaged with women-only comedy nights and events (such as the list of Funny Women Award finalists), is that many who have engaged with these spaces have gone on to be successful higher up in the industry. It is not possible to make claims for the impact these nights have on the success of individual careers. That said, to be successful in comedy you have to spend a long time developing your craft in front of an audience, and so having numerically more opportunities to hone these skills is a good thing. Women-only comedy nights and events still often provide more opportunities for female performers than are available in mainstream spaces, where the inclusion of women remains mostly limited to one per line-up. Whilst the influence of women-only line-ups at the top of the industry may be ambiguous, this should not be equated with no influence at all. This is because everyone, despite how successful they may go on to become, starts at this grassroots end of the industry (even when we take account of various forms of privilege which make it easier for some to succeed than others).

The structures identified at the start of this research (explored in Chapter 3) can still be seen in evidence at the end of this study (Chapter 8). The narrative of structural inequity and prejudice within the comedy industry in the UK, and how women respond

to and negotiate these, as well as how the structures and discourse then re-asserts itself, is reflected in the structure of this thesis. This is due to the way that when gendered power structures are challenged (by initiatives such as those explored in this thesis) a backlash occurs which attempts to reassert, often more forcefully, the underlying stereotypes being challenged. We can see this very clearly playing out in the backlash to gender and racial diversity and inclusion initiatives through the pejorative appropriation of the term 'wokeness'.

Alongside the development of women-only line-ups, the rise of the Internet and social media also helps to mitigate against the importance of mainstream spaces (which continue to be male-dominated) and traditional gatekeepers, as women are finding new ways to build audiences, test material and showcase their skills online. The wider technological context is of particular benefit to comics from minority groups, especially women, who do not fit the marketable 'T-Shirt comic' mould identified by Freidman (2014). Notably, social media also provides a space where women can share experiences of working on the comedy circuit in a way that is not mediated by others (in that it is self-published). This clearly links to the wider cultural shifts in awareness of women's lived experience during what has been termed fourth wave feminism. The use of hashtags on Twitter to collate information on women's individual experiences in order to evidence wider structural inequalities, for example using #EverydaySexism or #MeToo, can be of benefit to the comedy circuit. This is because these online tools can help to identify and name problems in order to bring them to wider attention. It is vital to acknowledge, however, that in this digital space, women are also disproportionately impacted by online misogyny and 'trolling'. Therefore, the positives of this technological development are undercut by the challenges of being a woman online, with opinions and a public profile. Here, again, we can see that the matter is more complex than simply saying new spaces, real or digital, can completely solve inequality on the comedy circuit.

At the centre of the narrative of this thesis are two strategies adopted by women. Firstly, self-deprecation, which enables performers to assimilate into mixed-gendered line-ups; and, secondly, the development of women-only nights and events, which

enables female performers and producers to make and enjoy comedy on their own terms. Neither of these strategies provides the whole solution to the underlying problems. This thesis uncovers a story of individual frustrations, barriers and gendered experiences in both real and online environments. These experiences have been exposed in this research, alongside the use of inaccurate statistics and misogynist backlash as ways of maintaining a status-quo. Neither strategy (one of which relates to comedy content, and the other to comedy contexts) is able to fully resolve problems which are at once structural to the comedy industry, and also embedded in cultural prejudices. This inability to comprehensively tackle gendered issues is due to the complexity of the way comedy as a form is intrinsically linked to cultural stereotypes and so is often discussed within masculine discourses both inside and outside of comedy. These wider masculinist 'evidenced based' discourses (discussed in Chapter 2 as part of my methodology) point to statistics and cling to the examples of the few women who have made it to the top of the industry in order to deny that the problem is structural. This is classic 'whataboutery' - e.g. 'What about Sarah Millican?', 'What about Miranda Hart?'. This strategy (deployed in this context) seeks to make the case that because a handful of women have negotiated an unfair or biased system, the system can be neither unfair nor biased: this is a logical fallacy. It is a distraction technique to divert attention away from the problem, and it is very effective. The use of the rhetorical strategy of 'where's the evidence?' denies women's experiences, dismissing them as unfounded, biased or overreactions to situations perceived as minor. It is used as justification for refusing to see outside of a blinkered patriarchal perspective. This thesis has approached this topic in radical opposition to this dismissal of experiential knowledge, foregrounding the experiences of women as valid and as experts on their own experiences.

My thesis therefore reveals the trajectory of women trying to make changes to the comedy industry and the ways this is achieved, and resisted. I identify the problems women face in the comedy industry and some of the routes women have taken to address these. These routes are about both comedy content (self-deprecation, body positivity, overtly feminist polemic) and comedy context (women-only spaces). What this thesis highlights is that these two routes can help and influence each other – the

contexts enable new content; the content demonstrates a market, opening up potential new contexts.

While the battle is very clearly not won (as my findings demonstrate), as women-only comedy nights and events provide opportunities for women to gain more experience on the comedy circuit, we can see these nights as offering some interim solutions to the existing and entrenched structural inequity of the industry. This thesis, while not providing or evidencing a full solution, does set out the problems and solutions *so far*. In a postfeminist era often the problems of sexism across society as a whole are dismissed, or purposefully obscured as problems of the past. This is reflected in relation to the UK comedy circuit where there has consistently been attempts to disregard the problems of gender inequality as not really existing, or not existing any more *now* following the alternative comedy movement of the 1980s. This thesis has made clear that this blanket contention is evidently not the case, and the findings are valuable in that the research captures the hidden labour of women in attempting to address these issues and enact structural change. In addition, this thesis highlights the individual victories that have been achieved on the road to equality. It is very easy to be fatalist in pronouncing that a problem is complicated, and thus remains unsolved. Yes, the problems do still exist, but that does not mean that some achievements (individual and collective) should not be held up and celebrated. The sheer breadth of female comedy talent seen and discussed as part of this research is significant, as are the responses of the audiences who value the women-only contexts under discussion.

My case studies evidence that progress away from existing gendered structures is possible (through the content of stand-up comedy and a rejection of traditional self-deprecatory modes, as well as through avoidance of industry gatekeepers by crowdfunding work). Both Christie and Omielan demonstrate two very different approaches to responding to the continued problems of the comedy industry and how these might be tackled in a twenty-first century context. Both these examples also establish how comedy content can be marshalled as a means of pushing back against wider patriarchal assumptions, and that vitally critical and commercial success is also possible at the same time. The joke-telling techniques used against women and minority groups throughout the development of stand-up as a form can be repurposed

to shift the debate about gender stereotypes. Comedy remains a space where incongruity and inappropriateness are expected and this can, in the right contexts, be deployed as a way to push back against entrenched discourses.

Thorough research arguably creates as many new questions as it answers, and this is the case here. The structural problems that this research engaged with are complex and continually evolving. As a result, the current solutions remain ambiguous.

Emergent lines of enquiry:

It is clear that more work with audiences is necessary to be able to establish nuanced information about decision-making processes around live comedy attendance, (specifically mixed-bills which include women), in order to identify further opportunities for inclusion. The resistance of certain comedy promoters to include women was still something of concern to female performers consulted as part of this study. Therefore, further audience research could form a key part of challenging these assumptions made about what audiences want, by providing evidence about currently assumed attitudes and preferences. This is beyond the scope of this current research and something that would require significant resources to undertake. A key finding from my engagement with audiences was that knowledge of performers in advance was helpful as part of decision making to attend an event. Therefore, further research in this area may uncover information about how those who already have power within the industry can leverage their influence to diversify line-ups. Questions such as what practical measures can those within the industry undertake to be more inclusive in their programming, and how much power do existing high-profile performers (of all genders) have in decision-making processes, need to be asked in more detail.

The interviews undertaken for this research revealed a wide range of topics which could, in and of themselves, be of direct relevance to future studies in their own right. Any one of the seven themes that emerged from the interviews with performers and promoters could inspire further research projects. A clear example would be the way that economic disparities between male and female comics (and also between mixed-gendered and women-only nights) was unexpectedly discussed by participants in my

study and this is not something that has been previously considered in academic research into comedy. While, understandably this would be a sensitive topic to research, and would require significant consideration of anonymity (to avoid jeopardising further employment prospects) such research could lead on to more comprehension of pay practices. This is a currently little understood area and without a fuller understanding of the problem (a gender pay gap in the live comedy sector) it becomes difficult to explore options to address this.

This research has highlighted how there are many links between the historical evolution of the UK comedy circuit and the current industrial and performance practices evident today. A key future step, to ensure the inclusion of women within the UK comedy industry is to further demonstrate these connections through recovering material from archives in order to evidence and reclaim the contribution women have made the UK comedy circuit. Often roles undertaken by women (including those featured in this research) have gone unnoticed or undocumented and therefore, research that seeks to explore and connect those working on the current circuit to those who experienced similar issues in previous generations, is now required.

Now that I have set out in detail responses to the set research questions in relation to the collected data, the following conclusion chapter will mount using these findings a wider critique of the UK comedy industry's organisations and practices. Whereas this chapter has looked back at my findings, the following chapter will consider the implications these findings have for future comic practice in the UK.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the current context of female stand-up comic performance, as well as the content of feminist and postfeminist stand-up comedy. By outlining the development of the UK comedy industry, since the working men's club era, I have sought to situate the new knowledge, developed through primary research, within wider comedy history. Through discussions with those working within the industry this research has managed to shed light on the continued challenges women face when performing in spaces, contexts and formats designed and denominated by men. As comedian Daphna Baram notes, the glass ceiling created by structural barriers to women's inclusion within comedy, is well known and widely discussed.

> There is not even an argument about the glass ceiling of women in comedy, it's not really made of glass everybody can see it. It's basically the glass of the television screen [laughs] (Appendix 6p).

As I have demonstrated throughout this research, the increased awareness of structural barriers preventing inclusion in comedy does not mean that the common gendered issues are being dealt with effectively. This disparity, between awareness of barriers and action leading to resolution of the inequality experienced by women, was evident in interviews with performers, audiences and through analysis of selected case studies.

The societal pressures placed on female comedians on stage, and the more specific issues that feminist performers encounter, demonstrate the complex and continually evolving state of the comedy industry. Whilst the focus of this research has been on the experiences, from both a performer and audience position, of the live circuit, the impact televised and digital comic forms has on opportunities for women have also been considered.

Changes to the comedy industry and feminisms during the research period

This research has been conducted at a time of significant flux for women's rights. The rise of celebrity feminism has provoked a reclamation of a word few would lay claim to in the previous decade. Former feminist heroes such as Germaine Greer have failed to keep up with the evolution of society towards more nuanced and non-binary understandings of gender. The feminist heroes of yesterday are being replaced by those who foreground intersectional approaches that are (or attempt to be) inclusive to LGBTQ* communities and people of colour, such as Reni Eddo-Lodge and Sara Ahmed. This upswing in public rhetoric about feminism is coupled with a surge in right-wing politics both in the US, UK and across Europe that harks back to a mythical golden era of uncomplicated patriotism and old-fashioned gender politics.

In 2013, when proposing the topic of my research, feminist comedy was at its peak in the live circuit. In the context of 2018, as I write my conclusion, the idea of female comedians identifying as feminist or talking about women's rights on stage (in the live comedy environment) has almost become clichéd. What would have been strikingly bold in 2013 has now become part of the comedy scene. This was apparent to me as I watched performances by female comics at the 2018 Edinburgh Festival where almost uniformly gender was addressed by those I watched perform.[1] The international #MeToo campaign and the various iterations of this in sectors beyond the entertainment industries (including academia) has brought sexual harassment in workplaces to mainstream attention. The recent death of Australian comedian Euridice Dixon, killed on her way home from work after performing in Melbourne, was widely reported internationally and served as a reminder of the vulnerability of women in performing industries.[2] This inspired UK comedians Angela Barnes, Sameena Zehra and Pauline Eyre to establish the Home Safe Collective, an initiative to help get women and non-binary comedy performers home safely after late-night gigs. This initiative won the Edinburgh Festival Panel Prize in 2018.[3]

Whilst there has continued to be wide journalistic consideration of gender across performance industries, it is clearly very difficult for individual women to speak out against sexist and gendered practices in the comedy industry. This is due to the way

that work on the circuit is always precarious and, in many instances, administered in an informal manner. In 2017 at Mixed Bill's Women and Comedy symposium at University of Salford, Sameena Zehra made the point that it is not enough for women to boycott sexist promoters or shows. This boycotting results in women shouldering the burden (economic and emotional) of changing the industry, whereas a more inclusive industry is better for everyone irrespective of their gender identity. Zehra called on male comics to show solidarity with their female and non-binary contemporaries, to act collectively to take a stand and make a change. Just as Zehra advocates for collective action, it is my hope that this research can be used to demonstrate that gendered challenges and experiences are not as individual as we are led to believe. Experiences of sexism are still common and by collecting the thoughts and testimonies of a wide range of performers I hope the point is amplified. This research is evidence that experiences of sexism, whilst slowly becoming less frequent, are not in any sense exceptional.

Flawed diversity initiatives

Whilst I have been conducting this research, the comedy industry has slowly started to openly talk about diversity across all aspects of identity. However, much of this diversity work continues to be tokenistic or (even worse) reliant upon stereotypes. To provide an example of the current position, I will briefly outline a representative instance of the BBC's attitude towards diversity by relating an exchange I had with the corporation in 2017.

The launch of The Caroline Aherne Bursary for Funny Northern Women took place at Media City, Salford, in July 2017. I attended, with a colleague, in the hope that this was the first step in the BBC's acknowledgement that their gender representation in comic output is insufficient. This was a full three years after the panel show announcement by Danny Cohen and the bursary was for one lucky woman to receive a radio commission with the BBC. What struck me immediately was the lack of diversity on the panel. The panel was made up of five cis-gendered white women: Director of BBC Children's and BBC North Alice Webb (who performed the role of host), Alex Moody BBC Comedy commissioning editor, comedy producer Rebecca Papworth and comedy

writer-performers Gemma Arrowsmith and Frog Stone. Of the two performers on this panel one had attended drama school and the other had been a member of the Cambridge Footlights. Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong about these routes into the industry, it is not the majority experience of comedians on the current circuit. During the launch, video clips of the panel's female comedy heroes were played; and these again were uniformly white.

The event started with Webb welcoming the audience, commenting that 'It's nice to see a few brave men in the audience'. This comment could be dismissed as minor, however as this thesis has evidenced, there is a continued positioning of comedy by women as *for* women and comments like this play into the assumption that men should take no interest in diversifying the industry. This was compounded by one of the panel repeatedly using the term 'comedienne' throughout the event. This again reasserted a difference between male and female comics.

The event launching the bursary was conducted without any seeming awareness of *why* it might be necessary to diversify comic output or include more women in comedy, specifically northern women at that. As such the bursary was positioned very much like a 'one in one out' scenario, in that UK comedy has sadly lost Aherne and she must be replaced. This event took place just two weeks after the high-profile discussions of the BBC's racial and gender pay gap, with various BBC presenters banding together to protest against this inequality.[4] To not acknowledge or even mention this political context may be understandable (those few 'brave men' in the audience undoubtedly worked at the BBC). To field an all-white panel however, was shocking and indicative of complacency.

Therefore, having sat through the launch politely, hoping that someone might bring up the obvious lack of consideration for people of colour and incredible retro-sexist binary discussion, in the spirit of constructive criticism I wrote to the BBC's diversity department after the event. In the email I outlined both my thoughts on the make-up of the panel and extremely reductive content of the discussion. Whilst my email was acknowledged after three weeks, it took the organisation, which is publicly funded and has a diversity department, a full eleven weeks to respond fully.[5]

The response, when it did arrive, chose not to tackle my comments on the content of the panel but simply corrected my reading of the panel as all-white and privileged. The response contained the line that whilst 'ostensibly the panel may have appeared quite uniform it did include women from different backgrounds, (two women from the North) and a panel member who is a lesbian.' (Nicola Crowther, 2017, 'BBC Writersroom Women in Comedy Panel – Feedback' [private email correspondence], 11/10/2017). It concluded that whilst diversity was a priority for the BBC when assembling the panel, the final line-up was down to a need to have a variety of expertise and their availability on the date.[6]

As Sara Ahmed writes in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) in relation to academic institutions, often: 'Diversity becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations.' (105). This panel was about changing perceptions of maleness, without recourse to other aspects of intersectional identity. Here we can see that the perception of the BBC being more diverse in their decision making, is clearly more important than making structural or significant change. The BBC decided to launch a bursary to add more women into a system that has been proved to be discriminatory against them based on gender and race. Ahmed continues:

> [W]e can see a key difficulty here: even if diversity is an attempt to transform the institution, it too can become a technique for keeping things in place. The very appearance of a transformation (a new more colourful face for the organisation) is what stops something from happening (2017:105).

If we were to consider the inclusion of Bridget Christie and Luisa Omielan into television comedy output we can see that in terms of ticking a box on a spreadsheet, their inclusion on TV shows will (on paper) make these shows more diverse, as will the inclusion of a select few female comedians on panel shows. However, it is the way female comedians are treated by those who already occupy this space, and the structures at play within them, as I have demonstrated in this research, that often reassert notions of difference. This maintains the norms of women as 'other'. These industry decisions, both in terms of launching a bursary and including specific women

on panel shows, undermines the BBC's commitment to diversifying voices. We have to ask ourselves, if the BBC cares so much about diversifying voices, why do we keep hearing so much from the same people? This is relevant because the BBC remains the biggest commissioner of comedy content across both television, online and radio in the UK.

Recommendations for Arts Council England

In addition to large media corporations considering diversity in a structural and significant way, a key conclusion of my work is that Arts Council England (ACE) has to readjust its attitude to comedy in order to ensure diversity is possible in comedy. ACE has recently put diversity at the heart of its objectives by reiterating its commitment to what it terms the 'Creative Case for Diversity'.[7] The Creative Case sets out an argument for arts organisations to embrace diversity to benefit their creative work. The crux of this argument is that without embracing diversity, society is missing out on the creative voices of many with something to say, or a talent to share. However, there is a still a narrow, biased and discriminatory approach that prevents ACE from considering comedy as an art form. In order to diversify comedy, investment into organisations and events that seek to challenge the white male norms of the form is crucial. Diversity across the arts cannot merely be about broadening participation in existing, high-culture forms such as dance and opera. It is necessary for ACE to consider *how* the conclusion that comedy is a self-funding industry has been reached (as this is repeatedly their justification for not funding comedy, rather than any wording that would make the organisation seem biased against such a 'low' cultural form). As it stands the argument that comedy can self-sustain is only applicable to a narrow kind of comedy (the top strata of mainstream comedy – that existing above the glass ceiling). As this research has demonstrated, there exists numerous gendered barriers preventing women from participating at this top level of the mainstream industry.

My research has demonstrated that women continue to face structural barriers to wider success in comedy and investment into the live sector, at grassroots level, has the potential to make a significant impact. If ACE are serious about inclusion and access to the arts for all (both as audiences and artists) this has to include funding

comedy going forward. Otherwise they remain complicit in the silencing of women (as well as working-class people and people of colour) in this art form.

Limitations and future opportunities for use of this research

It is challenging to draw firm conclusions regarding an industry that is continually evolving. Any attempt to definitively state a conclusion risks reasserting a gender binary position that ignores the contributions of groups this study has not been able to engage with (the additional barriers transgender performers may face for example). In terms of the limitations of this study, Ahmed reminds us that 'Feminism requires fronting up to who has been left behind' (Ahmed, 2017: 208). A weakness of this research has been the range of comedians engaged with. The qualitative interview process did not manage to engage with enough women of colour to be able to identify specific barriers that those who are discriminated against due to race face in addition to the gendered challenges I have evidenced. Comedy as a topic is highly subjective and so to not acknowledge the limitations of my own perspective would not serve the topic very well. In addition to this, my position as a white woman of privilege has also meant that the questions I have asked my participants may not have enabled them to reflect on racial challenges. I am acutely aware that my position as a middle-class, white woman is the dominant one, and remains the most commonly heard voice within feminism. This thesis, had it been written from the perspective of a woman of colour, might well have come to different conclusions. There is certainly more to be done in order to ensure women of colour have equal access to the industry. The fact that in 2019 comedian London Hughes became the first black woman to ever be nominated for the Best Comedy Show Award at the Edinburgh Festival makes this clear.[8] It is my hope that in order to prevent this research being seen as another act of white feminism, silencing minority groups, my work can be used as a springboard by other researchers to consider multiple indices of marginalisation in UK comedy.

This thesis does not provide a universal statement about the status of 'women in comedy' at this current time, as a key finding of my research is that it is not possible to do so (for the comedy industry, or indeed any industry). To make such wide-ranging statements would also go against the fundamental intersectional methodological

underpinning of this research, which sought to highlight the pitfalls of simply unifying individuals based on gender alone. The research has revealed that there are many differing and conflicting aspects of the industry and every woman's experience of this industry is different based on a variety of factors (such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, genre of comedy performance, geography and so on). Whilst themes emerged from my research which impact on all women, these have varying positive and negative outcomes for individuals. Therefore, any singular statement that fails to acknowledge the extreme complexity of the UK comedy industry, its many levels, the impact of technology and the differences between performance contexts will do the women I have engaged with as part of this research a disservice. A key finding of the research is that to present women's experiences of the industry as uncomplicated and unified in the current context is actively unhelpful, distorts understanding of the way the industry operates and helps perpetuate gendered barriers.

What can be said in order to conclude however, is that my work is a vital step in moving beyond sweeping uncomplicated statements about women in contemporary UK comedy that are reductive and problematic. Listening further to those who work within the comedy industry is central in order to unite theoretical writing on comedy and practice, as well as to hopefully make tangible changes to the industry for minority groups.

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[1] A list of all performances watched across the duration of this research can be found in Appendix 1.

[2] The rape and murder of Australian comedian Euridice Dixon, who was attacked walking home late at night after a comedy gig, brought into focus for many just how dangerous the comedy industry (which involves performing late at night) can be. See Alcorn (2018): https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jun/19/eurydice-dixon-death-male-rage-australia-women-men-attitudes (accessed 13/8/18)

Dixon's memorial was also vandalised shortly after her death, by another Australian comedian. This is a poignant reminder (despite it being an Australian example) of how comedy (or acts performed in the name of comedy) often demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to violence against women. See: https://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2018/07/04/40394/comedian_charged_with_vandalising_tribute_to_murdered_eurydice_dixon (accessed 13/8/19)

[3] For information on Home Safe Collective winning the panel prize see Masso (2018): https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2018/free-taxi-scheme-edinburgh-fringe-wins-edinburgh-comedy-awards/ (accessed 1/9/18)

[4] See McIntyre, Marés and Robinson (2017) in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jul/19/bbc-salary-data-shows-huge-pay-gap-between-

white-and-bme-stars (accessed 3/8/18)

[5] I know that positioning is an issue here. Many of those asked to speak about the topic of women and comedy publicly have done very well out of the existing system, or rely upon it for their livelihood. I'm not a performer and I don't rely on many of the institutions I am critiquing within this thesis for work. Therefore, I am relatively free to be critical and that is a position of privilege. However, the current situation, evidence by this panel, results in those who have been successful, within a highly faulty system, not being in a position to articulate criticisms about that faulty system in order to improve it.

[6] The eventual winner of the bursary was Sophie Willan, who, whilst absolutely a deserving recipient, had already been on television before applying. This does beg the question how much of a 'new' voice Willan was at this point.

[7] See http://www.creativecase.org.uk/domains/disabilityarts.org/local/media/audio/Final_What_is_the_Creative_Case_for_Diversity.pdf for more information on The Creative Case. (accessed 12/1/19)

[8] Hughes, when interviewed for *The I Newspaper,* discussed the difficulties she has experienced trying to break into the white male dominated comedy industry. See Jones (2019) https://inews.co.uk/culture/london-hughes-edinburgh-2019-interview-podcast/ (accessed 24/9/19)

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Wild Bore. (2017). [live show].Written and performed by Adrienne Truscott, Ursula Martinez and Zoe Coombs-Marr.

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Appendix 1 – Shows observed as part of research

Solo Shows			
Name of Performer	**Venue**	**Name of Show**	**DATE**
Bridget Christie	Soho Theatre (LDN)	A Bic For Her	05/11/2013
Luisa Omielan	Lowry Studio (SLFD)	What Would Beyoncé Do?	14/11/2013
Bryony Kimmings	Contact Theatre (MCR)	Credible Likable Superstar Role Model	30/11/2013
Josie Long	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Solo Show	31/01/2014
Miranda Hart	Arena (MCR)	My What I Call Live Show	14/03/2014
Shappi Khorsandi	Lowry QT (SLFD)	Solo Show	15/03/2014
Sarah Millican	Apollo (MCR)	Home Bird	01/05/2014
Adrienne Truscott	Soho Theatre (LDN)	Adrienne Trucott's Asking For It	12/05/2014
Bridget Christie	Studio Theatre (SHF)	A Bic For Her and Ungrateful Woman	26/09/2014
Jo Caulfield	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Solo Show	12/10/2014
Zoe Lyons	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Solo Show	12/10/2014
Sophie Willan	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Novice Detective	16/10/2014
O'Shea and O'Gaukroger	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Sketch Show	16/10/2014
Hayley Ellis	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	We Need to Talk About Kevin	17/10/2014
Chella Quint	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	It's Not You I Just Need Space	17/10/2014
Lara A King	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Solo Show	18/10/2014
Hannah Brackenbury	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Solo Show	18/10/2014
The Short and Girlie Show	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Sketch Show	18/10/2014
Jo Enright	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Solo Show	19/10/2014
Barbara Nice	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Squirrel Proof	19/10/2014
Kerry Leigh	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Wants to Marry Her Brother	19/10/2014
Comedy Sportz Manchester	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Sketch Show	20/10/2014
Hawkeye and Windy	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Inappropriate	24/10/2014
The Birthday Girls	Gullivers (MCR)	Party Vibes	25/10/2014
Jenny Ross	Gullivers (MCR)	Solo Show	25/10/2014
Katherine Ryan	Lowry QT (SLFD)	Glam Role Model	01/11/2014
Jana Kennedy	Lowry Studio (SLFD)	Jana and Heidi	08/11/2014
Bridget Christie	Soho Theatre (LDN)	Ungrateful Woman	10/11/2014
Sara Pascoe	Lowry Studio (SLFD)	Sara Pascoe Vs History	10/01/2015
Susan Calman	Lowry QT (SLFD)	Ladylike	22/02/2015
Jessie Cave	Udderbelly (EdFest)	I Loved Her	20/08/2015

Mae Martin	City Café (EdFest)	Us	20/08/2015
Bryony Kimmings	Traverse theatre (EdFest)	Fake It Till You Make It	21/08/2015
Jess Fortekew	Voodoo Rooms (EdFest)	Imaginary Colin	21/08/2015
Beth Vyse	Heroes @ Hive (Edfest)	As Funny As Cancer	21/08/2015
Bridget Christie	The Stand 1 (EdFest)	A Book For Her	22/08/2015
Danielle Ward	Voodoo Rooms (EdFest)	Dani Frankenstein	22/08/2015
Lara A King	Castle Hotel (MCR)	Solo Show	16/10/2015
Jo Coffey	Castle Hotel (MCR)	Curiously Caffinated	16/10/2015
Amy Vreeke	Castle Hotel (MCR)	Solo Show	16/10/2015
Daphna Baram	Nexus Arts Café (MCR)	Something to Declare	17/10/2015
Flick and Julie	Nexus Arts Café (MCR)	Pop Up Penny Pinchers	17/10/2015
Kerry Leigh	Gullivers (MCR)	Wants to Marry Her Brother	20/10/2015
Soula Notos	Gullivers (MCR)	Straight From Holland	20/10/2015
The Birthday Girls	Gullivers (MCR)	New material	24/10/2015
The Short and Girlie Show	Gullivers (MCR)	Sketch Show	24/10/2015
Bridget Christie	City Hall (SHF)	A Book For Her	13/04/2016
Penny Arcade	Contact Theatre (MCR)	Longing Lasts Longer	26/05/2016
Sophie Willan	Lowry Studio (SLFD)	On Record	11/06/2016
Lolly Adefope	Pleasance Besides (EdFest)	Lolly 2	08/08/2016
Gráinne Maguire	Pleasance Besides (EdFest)	Great People Making Great Choices	09/08/2016
Ellie Taylor	The Tron (EdFest)	Infidelity	10/08/2016
Viv Groskop	The Stand 4 (EdFest)	Be More Margo	10/08/2016
Tessa Waters	The Counting House (EdFest)	Promises	10/08/2016
Bridget Christie	The Stand 1 (EdFest)	Mortal (renamed Because You Demanded It)	11/08/2016
Amy Schumer	02 Apollo (MCR)	UK Tour	03/09/2016
Meredith Tittle (Kasey Wilson)	Gullivers (MCR)	Meredith Tittle's #Singleladies	21/10/2016
Jackie Hagan	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Some People Have Too Many Legs	23/10/2016
Notflix (sketch musical)	Castle Hotel (MCR)	The Improvised Musical	23/10/2016
Kiri Pritchard-McLean	Castle Hotel (MCR)	Hysterical Woman	26/10/2016
Bridget Christie	The Lowry Quays Theatre (SLFD)	Because You Demanded It	06/05/2017
Bridget Christie	The Lowry Quays Theatre (SLFD)	What Now?	05/05/2018
Luisa Omielan	Gilded Balloon Teviot (EdFest)	Politics for Bitches	04/08/2018
Lauren Pattison	Pleasance Courtard Attic (EdFest)	Peachy	04/08/2018
Sindhu Vee	Pleasance Courtyard Attic (EdFest)	Sandhog	04/08/2018
Eleanor Tiernan	Banshee Labyrinth (EdFest)	Success without a sex tape	05/08/2018
Athena Kugbelnu	Underbelly Clover (EdFest)	Follow The Leader	05/08/2018

Evelyn Mok	Pleasance Courtyard Bunker Two (EdFest)	Bubble Butt	06/08/2018
Lou Conran	Just the Tonic at The Caves (EdFest)	At Least I'm Not Dog Poo Darren	06/08/2018
Jen Brister	Monkey Barrell (EdFest)	Meaningless	06/08/2018
Tamar Boradbent	Underbelly Belly Laughs (EdFest)	Best Life	07/08/2018
Eleanor Morton	The Stand 4 (EdFest)	Great Title, Glamorous Photo	07/08/2018

Solo Shows (work in progress)			
Name of Performer	**Venue**	**Name of Show**	**DATE**
Bridget Christie	Invisible Dot Studio (LDN)	In Progress Ungrateful Woman	26/03/2014
Harriet Dyer	Bangkok Bar (MCR)	In Progress My Name Is Harriet	22/10/2014
Lou Conran	Bangkok Bar (MCR)	In progress Subject Matter	22/10/2014
Kiri Pritchard-McLean	Castle Hotel (MCR)	In Progress Hysterical Woman	23/10/2015
Kiri Pritchard McLean	Tribeca Bar (MCR)	Non-Offending Comedian	21/10/2017
Luisa Omielan	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Politics For Bitches	24/10/2017

On Mixed Gendered Line-ups			
Name of Performer	**Venue**	**Name of Show**	**DATE**
Hayley Ellis	Lowry Studio (SLFD)	MC for The Comedy Network	15/09/2013
Lucy Beaumont	Lowry Studio (SLFD)	The Comedy Network	15/09/2013
Ellie White	Dancehouse Theatre (MCR)	Mixed Bill Invisible Dot New Wave Tour	22/11/2013
Mae Martin	Dancehouse Theatre (MCR)	Mixed Bill Invisible Dot New Wave Tour	22/11/2013
Sofie Hagen	Gorilla (MCR)	Group Therapy Comedy night	22/02/2014
Sara Pascoe	Bloomsbury Theatre (LDN)	Arts Emergency Fundraiser	19/06/2014
Jo Neary	Bloomsbury Theatre (LDN)	Arts Emergency Fundraiser	19/06/2014
Harriet Dyer	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	As part of BBC Showcase	01/07/2014
Barbara Nice	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	As part of BBC Showcase	01/07/2014
Sophie Willan	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	As part of BBC Showcase (M/C)	01/07/2014
Kiri Pritchard-McLean	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	MC For Gein's Family Giftshop	01/09/2014
Kate Smurthwaite	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Panel Show	12/10/2014
Josie Long	Pub/Zoo (MCR)	XS Malarkey	11/11/2014
Gráinne Maguire	Gulbenkian Theatre (CANT)	Mixed Bill	16/01/2015
Tory Gillespie	Gulbenkian Theatre (CANT)	Mixed Bill	16/01/2015
Kate Fox	Gulbenkian Theatre (CANT)	Mixed Bill	16/01/2015
Lou Saunders	Pleasance Courtyard (EdFest)	Everybody's Talking at Tom Allen	20/08/2015
Sarah Franken*	Pleasance Courtyard (EdFest)	Everybody's Talking at Tom Allen	20/08/2015

Tessa Waters (As Womanz)	Pleasance Courtyard (EdFest)	Everybody's Talking at Tom Allen	20/08/2015
Elf Lyons	The Stand 3 (EdFest)	Alternative Comedy Memorial Society	08/08/2016
Alison Spittle	The Stand 3 (EdFest)	Alternative Comedy Memorial Society	08/08/2016
Amy Gledhill	The Bread Shed (MCR)	XS Malarkey	24/07/2018
Sofie Hagen	Union Theatre (MCR)	Group Therapy Comedy night	06/10/2018
Harriet Kemsley	Union Theatre (MCR)	Group Therapy Comedy night	06/10/2018
Sophie Duker	Union Theatre (MCR)	Group Therapy Comedy night	06/10/2018

*Note that Sarah Franken returned to identifying as male (Will Franken) shortly after this performance.

On Women-Only Line-ups					
Name of Performer	**Venue**	**Name of Show**	**DATE 1**	**DATE 2**	**DATE 3**
Janey Godley	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows plus MC for festival opening	01/10/2013	11/10/2014	
Allyson June Smith	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows comedy nights	01/10/2013	27/01/2014	25/10/2015
Annette Fagon	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows Closing night of WIC 2014	01/10/2013	11/10/2014	15/10/2015
Hayley Ellis	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	09/10/2013	30/03/2014	
Zoe Lyons	Bangkok Bar (MCR)	Laughing Cows, Opening Night of WIC 2014	09/10/2013	11/10/2013	
Dotty Winters	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Funny Women regional heat	09/10/2013		
Lesley Kershaw	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Several times Laughing Cows	16/10/2013	24/06/2014	
Tanya Lee Davis	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	16/10/2013		
Caz n Britney	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	16/10/2013		
Debra Jane Appleby	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	16/10/2013		
Sonia Aste (Queen of Flamenco)	Carlton Club (MCR)	WIC fundraiser	14/12/2013		
Jana Kennedy	Carlton Club (MCR)	WIC fundraiser	14/12/2013		
Kiri Pritchard McLean	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	27/01/2014	01/09/2014	
Aisling Bea	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	30/03/2014		
Barbara Nice	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Several times Laughing Cows	27/04/2014		
Penella Mellor	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	27/04/2014		
Hayley-Jane Standing	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Funny Women regional heat	06/06/2014		
Hawkeye and Windy	Kings Arms Theatre (SLFD)	Funny Women regional heat	06/06/2014		

Name	Venue	Name of Show	Date 1	Date 2	Date 3
Suzi Ruffell	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	24/06/2014	25/10/2015	20/10/2016
Tiffany Stephenson	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	27/07/2014		
Mel Medford	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	31/08/2014		
Kate McCabe	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows and Comedy Sportz	01/09/2014	20/10/2014	
Jo Neary	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Closing night of WIC 2014	11/10/2014		
Lara A King	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	14/10/2014		
Dana Alexander	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	14/10/2014		
Harriet Dyer	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	24/10/2014		
Felicity Ward	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	24/10/2014		
Luisa Omielan	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Closing night of WIC 2014	25/10/2014		
Rose Johnson	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Closing night of WIC 2014	25/10/2014		
Amy Vreeke	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows	18/11/2014		
Bethany Black	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Laughing Cows and Comedy Sportz	22/02/2015	20/10/2014	
Kate Smurthwaite	Bangkok Bar (MCR)	Opening Night of WIC 2014	11/10/2015		
Susan Calman	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Opening night of WIC 2015	15/10/2015		
Sophie Willan	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Opening night of WIC 2015/ 2017	15/10/2015	19/10/2017	
Jo Enright	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Opening night of WIC 2015	15/10/2015		
Kerry Leigh	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Opening night of WIC 2015	15/10/2015		
Soula Notos	Whiskey Jar (MCR)	Open mic showcase WIC 2015	18/10/2015		
Eleanor Conway	Whiskey Jar (MCR)	Open mic showcase WIC 2015	18/10/2015		
Jen Carss	Castle Hotel (MCR)	Open mic showcase WIC 2015	23/10/2015		
Anny Knight	Castle Hotel (MCR)	Open mic showcase WIC 2015	23/10/2015		

Open-Mic Nights			
Name of Performer	**Venue**	**Name of Show**	**DATE**
Nathalie Kerrio	Frog and Bucket (MCR)	Open Spot Laughing Cows	27/01/2014
Charlotte Tibbs	Kings Arms Studio (SLFD)	Open Mic	20/10/2014
Jill Bell	Kings Arms Studio (SLFD)	Open Mic	21/10/2014
Theresa Fallow	Kings Arms Studio (SLFD)	Open Mic	21/10/2014

Relevant other performances, talks and workshops			
Name of Performer	**Venue**	**Name of event**	**DATE**
Funny Women Workshop	Lowry Studio (SLFD)	Funny Women workshop	24/10/2013
Nina Conti Talking Comedy	Assembly Rooms (EdFest)	Discussing her work with Olly Double	21/08/2015
Andrew Lawrence	Assembly Rooms Studio 3 (EdFest)	Clean - solo show	06/08/2018

Total number of shows / line-ups observed = 124

Total number of individual performances observed = 170

Total number of female performers observed = 107

Appendix 2

Performer and Promoter information sheet and consent form:

Provisional Title – The Funny Face of Feminism:
Women and Comedy in 21st Century Britain
Eleanor Tomsett Sheffield Hallam University

Information about the project:

This research project is conducting an analysis of the current state of the British stand-up comedy industry in relation to the increasing inclusion of female and feminist comedians. The research will gather new evidence regarding the experiences of female comedians currently working on the
live circuit by interviewing performers and promoters from across the industry.

In addition the research will include original close analysis of the work of several British female comics, currently working in stand-up comedy. The new information gathered as part of this project will be used to draw conclusions about the collective experience of British female comics working today and the impact of women-specific comedy organisations.

Selection of participants:

It is believed your experiences, as a performer, will be highly relevant to the themes being discussed as part of this academic research. The plan is to interview between 10 and 20 female comedians currently working on the circuit so that multiple perspectives and experiences are taken into account when drawing conclusions.

The interview:

If you are willing to take part you will be interviewed regarding your experiences and thoughts about the topics outlined above. The interview, which will be in the form of a conversation between you and the researcher, will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. This interview will take approximately 30 - 45 minutes.

After the interview:

After the conversation has been transcribed you will be sent a copy of the transcription so that you can confirm you are happy with it. It will also present an opportunity for you to raise any further questions or concerns, make alterations or withdraw your consent.

Intended use of the information:

Initially the research findings will be used as part of a PhD thesis being submitted to Sheffield Hallam University where the researcher is registered within the Department of Humanities. Research findings and writings will subsequently used to underpin academic articles.

Overall length of the study:

Having commenced this investigation in October 2013 as a part-time student the latest end date for submission for the PhD is 2019.

Anonymity and confidentiality:

As all participants still work within the live comedy industry they may feel conflicted about discussing specific venues, promoter or other comics' attitudes to women. Transcripts of interviews WILL NOT be anonymised and therefore, all questions will be phrased to leave scope for interviewees to answer without reference to anyone or anywhere specific. Participants are also welcome to choose not to answer any questions they do not wish to respond to or they feel compromises their work in any way in light of the fact that their responses will not be anonymised. This will be reiterated verbally before the start of the interview.

If you choose to participate a transcript of the interview will be sent to you after the interview so that you may withdraw consent for all or part of the transcript or ask for amendments to be made to any sections. You may ask for the names of those mentioned within the interview to be changed to pseudonyms or removed once you have had chance to reflect upon the interview. This will only be done if specifically requested.

Participation and consent:

Participation is completely voluntary and you are able to withdraw your consent at any of the following points during the process (before, during or up to 14 days after participating in the interview). This will be reiterated verbally before the interview starts. You will be asked to sign a consent form (which you will be given a copy of for your own records) before the start of the interview. The form will make clear that you can withdraw your consent up to 14 days after participation in the interview should you change your mind.

If you choose to participate a transcript of the interview will be sent to you after the interview so that you may withdraw consent for all or part of the transcript or ask for amendments to be made to any sections.

Data handling:

Eleanor Tomsett is the only researcher working on this project and therefore will be the only person with access to the raw data collected as part of this project. No one else will be given access to this information or any personal details about participants and this information will be destroyed upon completion of the project.

After this point the researcher will keep only completed transcripts of conversations. As you are being interviewed as an expert within your field the transcription of the interview will not be anonymised.

Further questions:

Having read the above if you have any further questions please use the following contact details. (Either before or after the interview)

Eleanor Tomsett
TEL: 0114 225 5555
EMAIL: Eleanor.L.Tomsett@student.shu.ac.uk
DIRECTOR OF STUDIES: Dr Chi-Yun Shin

Interview Consent Form (PERFORMERS/ PROMOTERS)

Title of the study: The Funny Face of Feminism: Women and Comedy in 21st Century Britain. *Please confirm your agreement to participate by circling your responses to the following questions.*

Have you read and understood the information sheet about this study?	YES	NO
Have you been able to ask questions about this study?	YES	NO
Have you received enough information about this study?	YES	NO
Do you understand that your name WILL be used and your answers WILL NOT be anonymised. Any names mentioned within the interview will also not be anonymised.	YES	NO
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study? Up to 14 days after participating in the interview? Without giving a reason for your withdrawal?	YES YES	NO NO
Do you agree to take part in this study?	YES	NO

PLEASE NOTE: As all participants still work within the live comedy industry they may feel conflicted about discussing specific venues, promoter or other comics' attitudes to women. Transcripts of interviews WILL NOT be anonymised and therefore, all questions will be phrased to leave scope for interviewees to answer without reference to anyone or anywhere specific. Participants are also welcome to choose not to answer any questions they do not wish to respond to or they feel compromises their work in any way in light of the fact that their responses WILL NOT be anonymised. Upon reviewing the transcript you may ask for the names of those mentioned within the interview to be changed to pseudonyms or removed once you have had chance to reflect upon the interview. This will only be done if specifically requested.

Your signature will certify that you have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study having read and understood the information in the sheet for participants. It will also certify that you have had adequate opportunity to discuss the study with an investigator and that all questions have been answered to your satisfaction.

Signature of participant:.. Date:............................

Name (block letters):...

Signature of investigator:.. Date:............................

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Audience study information sheet and consent form:

Provisional Title – The Funny Face of Feminism:
Women and Comedy in 21st Century Britain
Eleanor Tomsett Sheffield Hallam University

Information about the project:

This research project is conducting an analysis of the current state of the British stand-up comedy industry in relation to the increasing inclusion of female and feminist comedians. The research will gather new evidence regarding the experiences of female comedians currently working on the
live circuit by interviewing performers and promoters from across the industry.

In addition the research will involve interviewing audiences for female-only comedy events (Including the Women in Comedy Festival) about their motivations for attending these events and their experiences of live comedy.

Selection of participants:

It is believed your experiences, as an audience member for The Women in Comedy Festival 2014, will be highly relevant to the themes being discussed as part of this academic research. The plan is to interview 20 members of the audience who completed the survey during the festival, and expressed interest in taking part, so that multiple perspectives and experiences are taken into account when drawing conclusions.

The interview:

If you are willing to take part you will be interviewed via telephone or Skype or in-person regarding your experiences and thoughts about the topics outlined above. The interview, which will be in the form of a conversation between you and the researcher, will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. This interview will take approximately 15-20 minutes.

After the interview:

After the conversation has been transcribed you will be sent a copy of the transcription so that you can confirm you are happy with it. It will also present an opportunity for you to raise any further questions or concerns, make alterations or withdraw your consent.

Intended use of the information:

Initially the research findings will be used as part of a PhD thesis being submitted to Sheffield Hallam University where the researcher is registered within the Department of Humanities. Research findings and writings will subsequently used to underpin academic articles.

Overall length of the study:
Having commenced this investigation in October 2013 as a part-time student the latest end date for submission for the PhD is 2019.

Participation and consent:
Participation is completely voluntary and you are able to withdraw your consent at any of the following points during the process (before, during or up to 14 days after participating in the interview). This will be reiterated verbally before the interview starts. You will be asked to sign a consent form (which you will be given a copy of for your own records) before the start of the interview. The form will make clear that you can withdraw your consent, or ask for alterations to be made to your answers, up to 14 days after participation in the interview should you change your mind.

If you choose to participate a transcript of the interview will be sent to you after the interview so that you may withdraw consent for all or part of the transcript or ask for amendments to be made to any sections.

Data handling:
Eleanor Tomsett is the only researcher working on this project and therefore will be the only person with access to the raw data collected as part of this project. Overall information about the number of attendees, age ranges, genders etc. will be collated based upon responses to the survey and shared with the Women in Comedy festival team so that they can use this information to inform their future work on the festival and report information about audiences back to funders.

All interviews will be anonymised for use in this research. Once interviews have been made into transcripts and anonymised, relevant comments will be shared with the Women in Comedy Festival team to inform their development of future events and for reports back to funders about audiences experiences of the festival.

No one else will be given access to any personal details about participants and this information will be destroyed upon completion of the project. After this point the researcher will keep only completed anonymised transcripts of conversations.

Further questions:
Having read the above if you have any further questions please use the following contact details. (Either before or after the interview)
Eleanor Tomsett
TEL: 07985729211
EMAIL: Eleanor.L.Tomsett@student.shu.ac.uk
DIRECTOR OF STUDIES: Dr Chi-Yun Shin

Interview Consent Form (AUDIENCE)

Provisional title of the study: The Funny Face of Feminism: Women and Comedy in 21st Century Britain

Please confirm your agreement to participate by circling your responses to the following questions.

Have you read and understood the information sheet about this study?	YES	NO
Have you been able to ask questions about this study?	YES	NO
Have you received enough information about this study?	YES	NO
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study? Up to 14 days after participating in the interview?	YES	NO
Without giving a reason for your withdrawal?	YES	NO
<mark>Your responses will be anonymised before they are analysed.</mark> Do you give permission for members of the Women and Comedy Festival team to be given specific aspects of the anonymised transcripts for their own evaluation reports?	YES	NO
Do you agree to take part in this study?	YES	NO

Your signature will certify that you have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study having read and understood the information in the sheet for participants. It will also certify that you have had adequate opportunity to discuss the study with an investigator and that all questions have been answered to your satisfaction. If you are completing this over email please type your name below. The receipt of the form via email will be kept as evidence of the form being received and will be returned to you with the researchers e-signature and a date for your own records.

Signature of participant:.. Date:...........................

Name (block letters):..

Signature of investigator:... Date:...........................

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Appendix 3

Mixed Methods Audience Research

Delimitations:

- The survey will be deployed in person to audience members for women-only comedy events.

- The survey will be deployed in person across the two weeks of the Women in Comedy Festival from Saturday 11th October to Sunday 26th October 2014.

- In addition to the survey's deployed in person, an online version of the questionnaire will be sent to the festivals mailing list of customers, which contains everyone who has purchased a ticket for the festival. This will be available online until the end of October.

- The survey's will be used for audience members only as other research methods will be capturing data from performers.

- The majority of respondents will be over 18 years of age due to the restrictions placed upon attendance to events in bars/ pubs serving alcohol. Several events during the festival take place during the day time and are advertised as 'family friendly' and in these instances the ages of participants will be requested before asking them to complete a questionnaire. Only those over 16 will be allowed to participate.

Limitations:

- The questionnaire will be reliant upon experience of women-only live comedy and therefore many of the questions will not be relevant to general comedy audiences. This will therefore limit the use of the questionnaire to people who are physically at an event (where questionnaires are deployed in person) or to people who we can reasonably assume have experience of a women-only

comedy event (people approached over email who have bought tickets to the festival). The online survey will have an additional question, which asks if the respondent attended a show as part of the festival to ensure online respondents have met the baseline criterion.

- The survey will be used across a relatively short period of time and therefore can only be used to make claims about the attitudes and behaviours of comedy audiences at a specific moment in time. The findings will provide a snapshot of attitudes towards women-only comedy events and will not be evidence of hard and fast rules or facts about attitudes or behaviours in relation to the topic of the research. It will simply be used to provide further understanding into an under-researched area with a view to discovering themes in experiences between respondents.

- The survey will be deployed at the Women in Comedy Festival, which runs across Greater Manchester, and therefore data will be from a specific geographical location.

- Manchester has a large gay and lesbian population, and this may result in a higher percentage of LGBTQ* attendees to events, which may not be applicable to other areas of the UK. Sexuality will be a variable within the respondent characteristics section to ensure this is considered when analysing data. This should enable any future studies into audiences for women-only events to investigate if the number of lesbian audience members for female-only comedy is the same or different in other areas of the UK.

Methods:

This research will use self-administered surveys, which will include a variety of questions aimed at collecting data regarding attitude, behaviour and experience of respondents. There will be a mixture of open, closed and attitude statement style questions to give respondents the chance to answer the range of questions required in sufficient depth. In line with the findings of Oppenheim (1992) questions regarding the

characteristics of the respondents will be positioned at the end of the questionnaire due to awareness that it can deter people from completing the questionnaire by asking personal question early in the process.

In line with the suggestions of Oppenheim (1992), to ensure a maximum number of responses to the self-administered questionnaire the following will be put in place:

1) Advance warning/ Publicity: A newsletter will be sent to all who have purchased tickets in advance of the festival explaining that this research is taking place with a link to the online survey. In addition to this at the launch night and at other events where the survey is being deployed the MCs will mention this to the audience as part of their introduction.

2) Explaining their selection: It will be made clear both on the questionnaire and verbally by the researcher that the reason for asking participants to complete the questionnaire is because they are attending an event as part of the festival. Anyone who meets this baseline criterion will be approached to request their participation and no other criteria for participation is required.

3) Clear explanation of sponsorship of the research: The questionnaires will be labelled with the home institutions (Sheffield Hallam) and the Women in Comedy Festival logo to highlight the background of the research and the sponsorship of the University and festivals organisers. This should make plain to participants that the research is legitimate and is being conducted in line with ethical procedures and best practice.

4) Anonymity: It will be made clear that respondents will remain anonymous and that even if they surrender contact details, either as a way of putting themselves forward for follow up interviews or to be add to the festivals mailing list, their name will not be used in the research report as all responses will be anonymised.

5) <u>Appearance:</u> The appearance of the questionnaire should be straightforward and clear to avoid putting people off completing the form. Requests for respondent characteristics information will be placed at the end of the questionnaire as it has been suggested that this also can deter people from completing a questionnaire if confronted with personal questions immediately.

6) <u>Length:</u> Due to the time and setting where the questionnaire will be deployed (evenings in clubs, pubs, theatres) the lengths of the questionnaire should be appropriate to the length of time respondents will have as part of their evening to complete it and how long it is reasonable to intrude upon their evening. Most comedy events will have multiple intervals and so it is hoped that with gentle reminding from the MCs respondents will find the time to complete the questionnaire fully at some point during the evening.

7) <u>Rapport:</u> The ability to deploy the questionnaires in-person should impact on the response rate as questions about the purpose of the research and general information can be shared in-person. Although it would be easier to only do this questionnaire online as the data would already exist in digital form (as was the case with Lockyer and Myers study) the ability to ask people in-person to complete the questionnaire should hopefully provoke a high response rate.

List of variables being tested (in order of importance)

1) Reasoning behind decision to attend women–only live comedy
2) Awareness of and attitude towards women comedians.
3) Attitude towards women-only comedy nights.
4) Behavioural pattern of attendance to live comedy (both gendered and otherwise)
5) Behavioural pattern of attendance to women-only live comedy.
6) Behavioural pattern of consumption of other forms of stand-up comedy (non-live) (both gendered and otherwise)
7) Attitude towards other forms of non-live stand-up comedy
8) Behaviour pattern in relation to venues for live comedy.

9) Audience demographic of the Women in Comedy Festival.

Question modules:

The idea behind structuring the questionnaire this way is that the complexity and importance of responses builds up so that respondents have time to think about their general attitudes before being asked to be more specific or detailed. Question modules A and B should provide background information about respondents live-comedy experience in general which can then contextualise their experience of women-only comedy. The term women-only will be clearly defined at the start of the questions concerning this to ensure there is no confusion about the women-only description applying to performers not audience.

A) **Basic questions about attendance to live comedy and women-only live comedy. (Regularity, venues, attendance with others).**

B) **Questions about consumption of other forms of stand-up (non live)**

C) **Questions about motivations to see women-only comedy**

D) **Basic questions about attendance to the Women in Comedy Festival.**

E) **Respondent characteristics**

The different variables have been mapped on to the different question modules to ensure all are covered in an appropriate depth, dependent upon their importance to the study. See Appendix 4 for the full survey form.

Question Module	Number of variables being tested.	Approach to testing variables in this module.
A	8,4	Multiple choice closed questions.
B	6, 7	Multiple choice closed questions (with multiple answers permitted) and attitude statements
C	1,2,3,5	Multiple choice closed questions, open questions and attitude statements.
D	3,5	Open questions and multiple choice closed questions.
E	9	Multiple choice closed questions.

This research is being conducted as part of a PhD project supervised by Sheffield Hallam University. The aim of the research is to better understand the attitudes and behaviours of people attending live comedy. For the purposes of this research all answers will be anonymous. Please return this form to a member of the Women in Comedy Festival crew once you have finished.

Please note that the term "Women-only comedy" refers to comedy nights where the performers are all female but where the audience is made up of men and women.

SECTION A

Q1) **How many times a year do you go and see live comedy?**
(Please circle ONE response.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	Other please state ………………………			

Q2) **Who do you usually go to see live comedy with?**
(Please circle ONE response)

Friends	Partner/Wife/ Husband	Family Members	No one (I go alone)
Work Colleagues	Housemates	Carer	Other comics

Q3) Where do you usually see live stand-up comedy?
(Please circle ALL that apply)

Small Arenas/ Theatres	Medium-sized Comedy Clubs	Small Comedy Clubs
Small Rooms In Pubs	Large Arenas	Other

Q4) Where do you prefer to see live stand-up comedy?
(Please circle ALL that apply)

Small Arenas/ Theatres	Medium-sized Comedy Clubs	Small Comedy Clubs
Small Rooms In Pubs	Large Arenas	Other

Q5) Which forms of stand-up comedy (Excluding live stand-up comedy)
do you watch/listen to/ read? (Please circle ALL that apply)

Television	Internet	DVD	
Newspaper Columns/ Articles	Books	Radio	Other

SECTION B

Q6) How many times a year do you go to see women-only live comedy?
(Please circle ONE response)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	Other please state ………………………			

Q7) **Which of the following kinds of women-only live comedy do you attend? (Please circle ALL that apply)**

Comedy nights (Showcasing more than one performer)	Solo Shows (A longer show by one comedian)	Sketch comedy	Improvisational Comedy ('Improv')

Q8) **In your own words, why do you attend women-only comedy nights? (Please write in the available space)**

………

………

………

……

Q9)   Please read the following statements and indicate your opinion on the scale by drawing an X in the relevant box. (Select ONE response per statement.)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A) In my opinion there are fewer female comics than male comics.					
B) In my opinion all female comics talk about the same topics.					
C) Female comics only talk about topics that are relevant to women.					
D) Female comics better represent my own experiences than male comics.					
E) Female comics better represent my opinions about political issues than male comics.					
F) Female comics better represent my opinions about relationships than male comics.					
G) The gender of the performers is not a factor when I decide to see live comedy.					
H) All live comedy nights should have equal amounts of men and women.					

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I) I prefer to attend mixed-gendered live comedy than women-only comedy.					
J) Having seen female comics perform live I am more likely to go and see more female comedians in future.					
K) There are not enough women on TV comedy panel shows (e.g. *Have I Got News For You?, 8 out of 10 Cats, Mock the Week* etc.)					
L) I prefer to go to live comedy when I know who will be performing in advance.					
M) I mostly select who I see perform live comedy based on the comics I see and like and TV.					
N) I think female comics are less aggressive than male comics.					
O) Female comics use less 'bad language' than male comics.					
P) Female comics put themselves down more than male comics.					
Q) Hearing female comics put themselves down makes me feel awkward.					
R) Women enjoy female comedy more than men do.					
S) I enjoy live comedy by female comics equally as much as I enjoy live comedy by male comics.**					

Q10) ****If you disagreed with the last statement (Statement S) Please indicate which gender of comedian you enjoy watching more and why.**

……………………………………………………………………………………………….

………………………………………………………………………………………………

Q11) **How did you hear about the Women in Comedy Festival?**
(Please circle ALL that apply)

Poster or Flyer	Attended Last year	Online via Facebook/Twitter	I am performing as part of the festival
Local Newspaper	Word of Mouth	Online via the website	Other (Please State) …………………………

SECTION C

The following questions relate to your own characteristics and help to put the answers you have provided into context. All data will be anonymised and this is a vital part of the research. The answers will help the festival ensure that future events reflect the needs of the audience and as such we hope that you can complete the following sections as thoroughly as possible.

For the following please circle your answers. (One response per question)

Q12) Please select the category that best describes your gender.

Female	Male	Other Please state ……………………………..	Prefer not to say.

Q13) Do you identify as LGBT* (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender)?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say.

Q14) Please select the category that indicates your age.

16-20yrs	21-30yrs	31-40yrs	41-50yrs
51-60yrs	61-70yrs	Over 70yrs	Prefer not to say

Q15) Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say.

Q16) Please select the category that best describes your ethnicity.

Black British	White British	White Irish	White European	Asian British	Indian	Prefer not to say
Black African	Black Caribbean	White and Black African	White and Black Caribbean	White and Asian	Chinese	Other ………………..

Q17) Please select the category that best describes the sector you work in.

Student	Homemaker	Construction	Science	Education	Civil Servant
Healthcare	Finance	Retail	Arts	Charity	Hotel/Food
I.T	Legal Services	Retired	Unemployed	Other …………………. .	Prefer not to say

Q18) Would you be willing to take part in a brief telephone/Skype or in-person interview about your experiences of live comedy? These interviews are being conducted as part of this research project and will take the form of a conversation with the researcher. Participants will be anonymised. (Please circle your response)

YES	NO

If yes, please provide your name, email address and contact number……………………………………………………………………………………………………

If you wish to be added to the festival's mailing list for other upcoming events please put your email address below.

……

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire, your help is greatly appreciated.

Figure 1: 2013 poster

Figure 2: 2016 online publicity image

Figure 3: Example pages from 2015 brochure (patron page and venue information page)

Figure 4: Poster series produced as part of the 2017 festival publicity.

Appendix 6

Performer and promoter interview transcripts.

All transcriptions created for this thesis were transcribed personally and were completed in line with the following method. This method is based on the method used by David Buckingham and outlined in the appendices of the following book: Buckingham, David. (1993) *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy*. The Falmer Press. London.

Transcription conventions:

=	Contributions follow on without a break
/	Pause of less than two seconds
//	Pause of more than two seconds
CAPITALS	Emphatic speech
[...]	Omitted text and stage directions (e.g. [laughs])

Please see electronic submission for the full transcripts.

q. Lynne Parker transcript
a. Hazel O'Keefe transcript
b. David Schneider transcript
c. Zoe Lyons transcript
d. Allyson June Smith transcript
e. Kiri Pritchard-McLean transcript
f. Janice Connolly (Mrs Barbara Nice) transcript
g. Dana Alexander transcript
h. Dotty Winters transcript
i. Kate Smurthwaite transcript
j. Kerry Leigh transcript
k. Lara A. King transcript
l. Ali Hendry-Ballard transcript
m. Sophie Willan transcript
n. Soula Notos transcript
o. Daphna Baram transcript

Appendix 7

Audience study interview transcripts.

All transcriptions created for this thesis were transcribed personally and were completed in line with the method outlined in Appendix 6.

Please see electronic submission for the full transcripts.

      a. Participant 31
      b. Participant 46
      c. Participant 71
      d. Participant 81
      e. Participant 155
      f. Participant 201
      g. Participant 237
      h. Participant 247
      i. Participant 250
      j. Participant 266
      k. Participant 295
      l. Participant 296
      m. Participant 309
      n. Participant 318

Appendix 8

Audience survey responses.

This document sets out (in relation to each of the questions) qualitative information about the responses to the audience survey.

Please see electronic submission for this document.