

Raising the Bar, Lowering the Stool:

How Comedians in the 21st Century are Reshaping Stand-Up Standards

Word count: 10,380

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A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics and Literature, English

Academic year: 2023 – 2024

FOREWORD

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Andrew B. Bricker. Your constant availability, expertise, and professionalism are beyond appreciated. Your constructive criticism has guided me throughout the writing process and enhanced my understanding of academic writing, which I hope is reflected in this essay.

I am also deeply thankful to my mother, my unwavering source of moral support. This paper, my education, and all my successes in life are all thanks to you. Additionally, I want to thank my dear friends Sofie and Tessa, who spent countless hours with me in the library, assisting with minor issues and proofreading various paragraphs. I must also thank my dogs, Odette, Nanou, and Stella, for moral support. You are the embodiments of good doggos.

The topic of this essay came to me as I browsed through the list of BA topics and supervisors. When I saw the topic of women's relationship to comedy on Professor Bricker's list, I was reminded of my favourite podcast, *The Guilty Feminist*, which features comedy hosts and sparked my interest in comedy. Given my prior knowledge, I was excited to delve into this subject. After the initial sessions with Professor Bricker, we refined the topic to its current form.

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INTRODUCTION

From the 1980s onwards, with the first comedy boom in the USA, stand-up comedy has been dominated by cis male performers. Women have been noticeably excluded from all sorts of commercialised forms of comedy ever since the genre emerged and gained popularity. In Britain, an alternative comedy scene appeared around the same time as the boom in the States, where female, transgender, genderqueer... performers responded to the mainstream stand-up culture. The current culture alienated audiences from them (Noé 51) and pushed them into a box of “alternative” or “feminist,” as noted by Stephanie Brown. Since the beginning of stand-up comedy, non-cis male performers have frequently faced criticism for being “inauthentic”. Straight white male gatekeepers who resist comedy that diverges from their own experiences often use phrases like “trying too hard” to dismiss these performers (Brown 14).

These facts demonstrate that comedy is viewed as an embodied art form, leading to the exclusion of marginalised individuals. This pattern of exclusion in the field of comedy is evident in markers of industry recognition today. Examples include the predominantly male recipients of prestigious awards like “The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor,” the Grammy for “Best Comedy Album,” and the IMDb list of “Most Popular Stand-Up Performances”. Even recent statistics, such as the first-quarter report of 2024 on “The Most Popular Comedians in the UK,” reveal a stark gender disparity, with only seven non-cis male comedians among its top 50 performers.

Men have historically dominated the stand-up comedy genre, resulting in biased audience expectations. Helga Kotthoff, in “Gender and humor: The state of the art,” confirms that there is a general expectation for comedic styles traditionally associated with men (6). In what follows, I aim to outline these so-called rules and expectations for

stand-up comedy based on existing research and the viewpoint of influential male comedians.

Luisse Charlotte Noé and Stephanie Brown have delved into the notion of “authenticity” in comedians. These scholars offer insight into how the audience view comedians as naturally funny rather than forced. Both researchers note that markers of authenticity are often aligned with traits traditionally associated with masculinity. Luisse Charlotte Noé sums it up:

The reason it is so hard for female stand-ups is that the mainstream style of stand-up, as it is laid out in the guidebooks of those who found mainstream success ... , requires women to assume a position that is inherently counter to the one they are supposed to assume within society. (67)

Non-cis male comedians are then expected to use self-deprecating humour, making them appear authentic by reinforcing their perceived lower status in society. But what are these “authentic traits,” and what does the audience expect from a comedian, both content and style-wise?

Many humour scholars highlight the aggressive and sexual elements inherent to comedy. Sümeyra Tosun et al. conducted a cross-national study to discover the characteristics of an ideal sense of humour embodied in a known individual. According to their findings, American participants expect comedy to be hostile more than anything else. Sabrina Fuchs Abrams and Rebecca Krefting point out the double standards in using anger in comedy. Abrams notes that humour theories have traditionally considered the aggressive and sexual aspects of humour to be predominantly “masculine” and thus inaccessible to women (2). Krefting highlights that when women use humour for social critique, it is often dismissed as “angry” and “humourless,”

implying that men's anger is accepted as humour, whereas women's humour is seen as mere anger (100).

In the earlier quote by Abrams, she also refers to the “masculine” characteristics of sexual humour. Although sexual humour is generally more associated with men, it is a prevalent topic among comedians of all kinds. Kristen Hoerl and Casey Kelly describe non-cis male comedians' use of sex as a means to “write themselves back into the symbolic order,” challenging traditional norms that frown upon women discussing and joking openly about sex. Hoerl and Kelly posit that their use of sex humour serves to subvert male standards in comedy. This illustrates how the content of comedy is not gendered, it is the comedians' intersecting identity that influences their comedic style and approach to certain topics.

The notions mentioned above of authenticity, aggression, and sexual topics shed light on the norms and expectations shaping stand-up comedy today. What follows clarifies certain styles and approaches to comedy. Examples of styles are observational, raunchy, deadpan, and dystopian comedy. One of the most popular comedic styles is social commentary. The adaptation of this style is very individualised, as each comedian, shaped by their intersecting identities, perceives and is perceived by society differently. In what follows, I describe two ideas often related to social commentary: subversive humour as a framework and satire as a technique.

Andrés R. Riquelme et al. examine the reception of subversive versus sexist humour. They define subversive comedy as a tool to highlight inequality and challenge societal norms. Riquelme et al. assert that feminist humour, focusing on the use by non-cis male comedians, is inherently subversive. At first glance, this seems self-evident, as feminism strives for gender equality and thus challenges current disparities. However, subversive humour can be ambiguous. Riquelme et al. point out that since subversive

humour is presented as a social satire, it can be perceived as disparaging sexism instead of criticising it, and therefore has more similarities with sexist humour. Sabrina Fuchs Abrams argues that American women writers have developed a unique type of humour that is inherently subversive (1), with social criticism often masked within this humour as a fundamental aspect (3). Abrams seems to suggest that women's humour can still be subversive even if it lacks a feminist agenda, as it challenges gender stereotypes through their performance on stage (9). Therefore, Abrams seems to propose that all women's comedy is inherently subversive. These ideas underscore the complex politics of comedy as a medium to produce social commentary.

One of the most common techniques for social commentary is satire, and in this study, I detect irony as a technique within satire. Rebecca Krefting defines satire as:

Any type of humor ... meant to elicit laughter but that also sheds light on perceived societal wrongs; it is characterized by an attack—on wrongs and wrongdoers—and issues a clear judgment on the offending party. (96)

Lisa Colletta discusses the gendered uses of political satire, noting how women's satire has evolved from targeting patriarchal values to a broader, more subversive critique of societal norms. Krefting examines how marginalised groups use satire to challenge the genre itself. She highlights how individuals with marginalised identities often struggle to achieve the same success and ease in performing satirical comedy as those in more privileged positions (93). This sheds light on the limits of satire and how far comedy and especially the style of social commentary can go.

Looking at highly influential cis male comedians such as Ricky Gervais, Dave Chappelle, Jerry Seinfeld, and Jimmy Carr, all seem to advocate for the fact that there is no limit to satire and one can joke about everything. Carr says in an interview with Jordan B. Peterson:

We're taking something that's too horrific to acknowledge and we're making it okay ... we're taking things that are violations in our culture, ... and we're making them benign by laughing, by taking away the power. (25:25-25:45)

In a *SmartLess* podcast episode, Gervais discusses the ironic nature of comedy and how he gets to be the one who says the wrong thing, regardless of societal norms. Similarly, in an interview with Susan Morrison from *The New Yorker*, Seinfeld emphasises the importance of aggression, suggesting that a certain level of anger is crucial for comedy. It seems that comedians in more privileged positions are unaware of the level of “danger” in satire and are oblivious to their privilege in the use of it. Therefore, their insistence on using it indiscriminately and without consequences might be evaluated as arrogant.

In conclusion, general expectations for stand-up comedy are biased in favour of cis male performers, who dominate the most prestigious comedy awards today. Consequently, audiences expect comedic styles and topics typically associated with men, such as aggressive and sexual humour. Since these topics are perceived as most authentic when used by cis male performers, other comedians often resort to self-deprecating humour to gain respect from the broader audience. While the content of jokes is not inherently gendered, the approach and reception of certain styles heavily depend on the comedians' identity. Comedians of all kinds make use of subversive humour and satire, but their usage and impact vary based on the individual's identity. Popular male comedians today benefit from privilege in using social commentary, as they are seen as authentic and can express anger and satire more freely than other performers. This highlights the prevailing expectations of 21st-century stand-up comedy based on existing research and commentary by the biggest voices in mainstream comedy today.

However, the comedy landscape is rapidly evolving, and there is notable tension upon these ground rules. The recurrent criticism of Chapelle's persistent trans jokes, Gervais' repeated focus on the same minorities, and the backlash on Matt Rife's domestic violence joke are examples that illustrate how stand-up comedy is continually evolving. People today are more vocal than ever about certain topics in jokes deemed unacceptable. There is pressure on the idea that a comedian can joke about anything and comedians from all backgrounds speak out about the often toxic nature of comedy. Despite these changes, recurring themes and techniques still shape the genre today, with comedians incorporating them into their shows in unique ways. New approaches that reshape stand-up comedy are under-researched, and this study aims to address that gap. It explores the specific strategies used by contemporary comedians to either conform to or subvert traditional cis male comedic styles. I argue that by applying their unique approaches to established comedic styles, contemporary comedians challenge the conventional standards of stand-up comedy.

I conducted case studies on three contemporary comedians: Hannah Gadsby, Michelle Wolf, and Michelle Buteau. Each has a unique comedic approach. Gadsby and Wolf employ social commentary, though their styles differ significantly, while Buteau's comedy is characterised by its kind-hearted and observational nature. I describe their approaches in greater detail in the case studies. To illustrate how comedians can operate within the current norms of stand-up comedy, it is crucial to study three diverse comedians to highlight various strategies to navigate and reshape the genre.

This study opts for an intersectional lens, which considers all aspects of an individual's identity collectively rather than in isolation (Ebtesam and Asmaa 35). For example, when examining Hannah Gadsby, a 46-year-old, genderqueer, lesbian from Tasmania, I will account for all facets of their identity that influence their perception

and reception in the world. These aspects can lead to both oppression and privilege. The intersectional lens in this study asserts that all elements of a comedian's identity shape their comedic expression.

The primary materials are stand-up shows available on online platforms Netflix and Spotify. Hannah Gadsby and Michelle Buteau both wrote memoirs, which provide background information about the motivation for their comedy. The same goes for interviews and podcasts for Michelle Wolf. Additionally, I will engage with academic sources. For Hannah Gadsby specifically, several scholars have written about their controversial special *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*.

This study operates in the framework of genre studies. "Genre" goes further than mere text types, it describes action, driven by circumstance and intent. Human actions gain meaning only within their situational context, as noted by Carolyn Miller, who calls upon the fact that genre is a social construct. Furthermore, B.J. Woodstein suggests that genre can both generate and embody its essence, functioning as a creative force, a re-creative tool, and a constraining framework simultaneously. Genre thus creates a framework of expectations, and genre studies look at how a creator operates within that genre. I aim to research how contemporary stand-up comedians use the techniques and navigate the expectations of the genre.

Through an intersectional lens and in the framework of genre studies, this paper contains three case studies. First Gadsby, then Wolf, and lastly Buteau. The order is unintentional and the case studies can be read in any sequence. However, references to other case studies appear in the analyses of Wolf and Buteau, but these do not impede the full understanding of each individual study. The case studies are relatively similar in structure, first, an introduction explaining who the comedian is and which subgenres, styles, or techniques are discussed. The body of each case study is a close reading of

their stand-up performances, where I will look at how their comedy navigates the expectations of the genre. The case study of Gadsby is perhaps the most complex as they are known for their meta-commentary, “comedy about comedy”. In that case study I will specifically focus on meta-commentary and their unique use of the “tools” of comedy. In the other two case studies, I introduce two subgenres common to each comedian and through a close reading, I show how they apply that genre and how this subverts or conforms to stand-up standards. The conclusion incorporates the main takeaways from the case studies and describes parallels in a thorough comparison.

By conducting case studies of three diverse, contemporary comedians in the framework of genre studies, I aim to paint the picture of how these comedians play with the rules of stand-up comedy.

ANALYSIS

Hannah Gadsby: *Wide Awake Killjoy*, *Angrily Pushing through the Punches*

Introduction. Hannah Gadsby is a Tasmanian actor, author, honorary doctor, and stand-up performance artist. Gadsby describes their job in their own terms, preferring “performance artist” over “comedian” due to their complex relationship with stand-up comedy, as described in their book *Ten Steps to Nanette: A Memoir Situation*. In the book, Gadsby reports on the road to their most notorious stand-up show released in 2018, *Nanette*. The show won multiple awards, such as a “Primetime Emmy,” a “Peabody Award,” and “Comedy Special of the Year” at the Just for Laughs Comedy Festival (IMDb.com). *Nanette* is one of the most discussed stand-up shows of the 21st

century (Berman), and several scholars have written about Hannah Gadsby's approach to comedy.

Olu Jenzen, in "A queer tension: The Difficult Comedy of Hannah Gadsby: *Nanette*," points out how *Nanette* propelled feminist stand-up comedy into the mainstream and questions the traditionally masculine nature of stand-up comedy. *Nanette*, according to Jenzen, broke "new ground by making space for the feminist killjoy in comedy" (7). Rebecca Krefting, in "Hannah Gadsby: On the Limits of Satire," describes Gadsby's critique of satire or stand-up comedy as an art form. Krefting highlights Gadsby's observations on the gendered nature of satire, on the fact that it is more acceptable for white cisgender men to use it than others. On stage, Gadsby explicitly comments on how men have more leeway in comedy, and in *Ten Steps to Nanette*, they address Americans directly, saying that their comedy gods are not Gadsby's (18). Gadsby used to feel compelled to use self-deprecating humour to gain audience respect but now rejects these norms and expectations, declaring they "won't rest until comedy is dead" (21). They needed to completely break down comedy to reinvent and reshape it, which resulted in "comedy catharsis" in *Nanette* (22). Gadsby writes, "I did not write a speech and then call it comedy. I took everything I knew about comedy, then I pulled it apart and built a monster out of its corpse" (22). In their TED talk in 2020, Gadsby explains how they broke comedy:

Many people have argued that *Nanette* is not a comedy show. And while I can agree that *Nanette* is definitely not a comedy show, those people are still wrong [audience laughs], because they have framed their argument as a way of saying I failed to do comedy. I did not fail to do comedy, I took everything I knew about comedy, the tricks, the tools, the know-how. I took all that, and with it, I broke comedy. You cannot break comedy with comedy if you fail at comedy ... The

point was to break comedy so I could rebuild it and reshape it. Reform it into something that could better hold everything I needed to share. And that is what I meant when I said I quit comedy. (14:10-15:15)

In 2020, Gadsby released a new special named *Hannah Gadsby: Douglas*. If *Nanette* intended to deconstruct and redefine comedy, then, I take it, *Douglas* represents the outcome of that redefinition and is a product of Gadsby's comedic evolution. In this case study, I will focus on the techniques used in both specials to subvert traditional stand-up standards. I will argue that Gadsby's comedy challenges the rules of stand-up comedy through meta-commentary and the unique use, or lack thereof, of stand-up tools such as punchlines and anger. The primary materials are *Nanette* and *Douglas* via Netflix. Secondary materials are the book *Ten Steps to Nanette: A Memoir Situation*, an interview with Leigh Sales from ABC News In-Depth, and Gadsby's TED talk.

Meta-Commentary. Gadsby's comedy is known to be presented in a coherent show with returning jokes and underlying messages, which contributes to Gadsby's purpose of comedy, as noted in *Ten Steps to Nanette*: "to make a room full of strangers think and feel differently" (24-25). In both *Nanette* and *Douglas*, Gadsby applies meta-commentary to explain to the audience how their show and comedy works: comedy about comedy. The purpose is not solely joke after joke and laughter after laughter, the audience needs to think along. In *Douglas*, Gadsby uses the first fourteen minutes to completely lay out the structure of their stand-up show, setting the audience's expectations.

That's how I'm going to meet your expectations, by adjusting them for you now [audience laughs]. So they are exactly what you're gonna get and then I'll meet them and you'll go, 'She's very good.' And yes, I am, but I cheat [audience

laughs]. So that's what's gonna happen before the show even begins, right? I'm going to give you a very detailed, blow-by-blow description of exactly how the show is going to unfold. Now this setting of expectations does go on a bit, I've had to cut the actual show in order to fit it in, but [audience laughs] I believe it's worth it, you know, like, to be able to meet your expectations, it's my job. (2:55-3:40)

This appears to be a direct response to the criticism *Nanette* received, where audiences were surprised by the level of trauma discussed, leading some to claim it was not comedy. Gadsby points out that the initial expectations were incorrect, thus the need to “adjust” them. Later in this analysis, I will show that Gadsby does not only assert that comedy audiences’ expectations are incorrect, but they are also problematic. Gadsby’s comment on meeting audience expectations as their job, especially post-*Nanette*, could be seen as ironic since humour often thrives on the unexpected. This might address critics who dismissed the show’s unexpected twists. Whether Gadsby, in this bit of *Douglas*, refers to general expectations of mainstream comedy or specifically to Gadsby’s comedy is debatable. I argue the former, as Gadsby proceeds to use ironic statements to demonstrate how traditional stand-up comedy is flawed and problematic:

Then what I'm going to do is I'm gonna move into the joke section, which is, jokes, right [audience laughs]. ... If in that bit you find yourself offended by anything I say in the joke section. Please just remember they are just jokes. Even if you find yourself surrounded by people who are laughing at something you find objectionable, just remember the golden rule of comedy, which is ‘if you’re in a minority, you do not matter’ [audience laughs] and don’t blame me, I didn’t write the rules of comedy, men did, blame them, I do, it’s cathartic. [audience laughs]. (*Douglas* 6:50-8:00)

This is still from the first part, where Gadsby sets the expectations for the audience and refers to the “joke part” of the show. Typically, a comedy show is expected to be filled with jokes throughout, but in Gadsby’s performance, they claim it is just one part. This highlights the purpose of Gadsby’s comedy, for the audience to leave with a range of emotions, not just laughter. After watching the show, I can say that there are also jokes beyond the “joke section,” in fact, there are jokes throughout. Perhaps Gadsby tries to emphasise that if you want to go to a show solely for jokes on top of jokes, this is not the place. Through meta-commentary here, Gadsby explains to their audience what their comedy is about and that it is different from what they are used to.

Gadsby’s comedy also warns the audience that laughter can be harmful and dangerous. With ironic phrases: “It’s just jokes.”, and “If you’re in a minority, you do not matter.”, Gadsby critiques how traditional comedy often excludes minorities and specifically targets men for “writing the rules of comedy”. Gadsby talks about the dangers of comedy and specifically satire in an interview with ABC News In-Depth on YouTube. They explain how laughter and anger can connect people and it can make a whole group of people laugh at the most horrific things without realising how problematic that is. Through, often ironic, meta-commentary, Gadsby’s comedy exposes the problematic nature of traditional stand-up comedy. In what follows, I will explain how Gadsby plays with the punchline as a comedic tool and their significant use of anger.

Through the Punchlines. Referring back to the TED talk from the introduction of this case study, Gadsby reported on how they took the tools of comedy and used them to break comedy. One of those tools they were referring to is punchlines. In *Nanette*, Gadsby explains what a joke is supposed to look like:

Let me explain to you what a joke is. And when you strip it back to its bare essential ... components, like, its bare minimum, a joke is simply two things, it needs two things to work. A setup and a punchline. And it is essentially a question with a surprise answer. Right, but in this context, what a joke is, is a question that I have artificially inseminated. (29:53-30:18)

Gadsby explains that their use of jokes in *Nanette* differs from traditional comedy. In *Nanette*, there is no surprise answer or punchline to relieve tension. Instead, the setup is “artificially inseminated,” which could mean that the jokes are meticulously and purposefully crafted to provoke thought and emotion rather than laughter. This contrasts with Gadsby’s counterparts, who do provide a proper setup and punchlines, however this format, as Gadsby’s comedy asserts, can be problematic. Gadsby highlights a flaw in traditional comedy: jokes with punchlines often gloss over the true, often traumatic, stories. To tell these stories authentically, Gadsby states that comedy’s typical structure is inadequate and gender-biased. In *Nanette*, Gadsby uses meta-commentary to explain why jokes fall short in conveying their true narrative. They use the idea of punchlines and decide not to stop at the punchline. In their TED talk, Gadsby explains how they did that:

I wrote a comedy that did not respect the punchline. That line where comedians are expected and trusted to pull their punches and turn them into tickles. I did not stop, I punched through that line into the metaphorical guts of my audience. I did not want to make them laugh, I wanted to take their breath away, to shock them so they could listen to my story and hold my pain as individuals. (13:28-13:55)

Gadsby subverts comedy by using its tools against it, they broke comedy with comedy.

Another tool is anger. Anger is a big part of comedy, and, as laid out in the introduction of this paper, its perception differs significantly depending on the identity of the comedian. Gadsby describes in *Ten Steps to Nanette* how the style “angry archetypal man having a monologue,” is what many would call “pure comedy,” (22) and the phrasing shows Gadsby’s disapproval. Gadsby is angry at Western art and its artists, hence the disapproval of classical art in both *Nanette* and *Douglas*, where they seem to express a parallel with contemporary stand-up comedy. Therefore, Gadsby needed to break comedy in order to then rebuild it and reshape it to a better form, better applicable to their story.

It’s not my place to be angry on a comedy stage, I’m supposed to be doing self-deprecating humour. People feel safer when the men do the angry comedy, they’re the kings of the genre. When I do it, I’m a miserable lesbian ruining all the fun and the banter. When men do, ‘heroes of free speech.’ [audience laughs] I love angry white man comedy, so funny, it’s hilarious. they’re adorable, why are they angry? [audience laughs]. (*Nanette* 58:00-58:36)

Gadsby acknowledges that their anger is less accepted on stage, yet they persist, indifferent to audience preferences. They use anger to criticise the creators of comedy, mocking them with the phrase “I love angry white man comedy, so funny, it’s hilarious,” and then question what these men have to be angry about. Gadsby’s comedy highlights the unfairness that men can express anger in comedy without consequence, while Gadsby, who has legitimate reasons for anger due to societal treatment, faces criticism.

Conclusion. Gadsby is perhaps the most straightforward comedian to challenge the benchmark to which we judge the genre of stand-up comedy today. This case study,

titled “Wide Awake Killjoy, Angrily Pushing through the Punches,” encapsulates Gadsby’s style. Gadsby’s primary goal is to make the audience feel deeply and think differently. They use meta-commentary to critique comedy itself, embodying the feminist killjoy by prioritising emotional impact over laughter, as seen in their show *Nanette*. Gadsby’s “wide awake” approach reflects their “woke” awareness of societal flaws and rejection of political incorrectness.

Gadsby’s comedy subverts genre norms by playing with comedy tools, such as punchlines, which they openly disregard. Instead, they use these moments to deliver emotional punches and create a visceral impact. Their display of anger serves as a defiance against traditional comedy rules, challenging audience expectations. Gadsby’s approach utilises irony, anger, and meta-commentary to critique and reshape the genre, making their comedy inherently subversive. By rejecting traditional conventions, Gadsby broadens the possibilities of stand-up, creating a new space for diverse expressions within the genre.

Michelle Wolf: Shopping in the Men’s Section

Introduction. Michelle Wolf is an American comedian, producer, and actress. She gained recognition as a comedian with her special *Michelle Wolf: Nice Lady* in 2017, which gained her a “Primetime Emmy” nomination in 2018 (IMDb.com). She recently released her third special, *Michelle Wolf: It’s Great to Be Here*, in three parts on Netflix. Known for her bold and raunchy style, she gained particular attention for her controversial, “scorched-earth” (Itzkoff) comedy at the 2018 “White House Correspondent’s Dinner”. In what follows, I explore how Wolf tackles stand-up comedy norms through her approach to comedy.

For this case study, I focus on two subgenres of stand-up central to Wolf's comedy. The first is social commentary, which Wolf, in the podcast *ExpediTiiously*, claims is "the most fun genre," and "the one that gets you into the most trouble" (17:30 – 17:20). In *Critics at Large*, a podcast by The New Yorker, in an episode named "What is the Comic For?", the comic is described as the taboo breaker, the one who gets to look at the faultiness of society, and "step on it". This hints at the most common techniques within social commentary; irony and satire, known to point out the contradictions and hypocrisies of modern society.

The second subgenre is "abject feminist comedy," a concept brought forward by Kristen Hoerl and Casey Kelly. They describe it as comedy that addresses taboo subjects surrounding women's bodies, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and sexual desire. This style of comedy is explicit with vivid depictions of women's embodied experiences (Hoerl and Kelly 124). Abject feminist comedy refers to a form of subversive and feminist action where abjection, or the state of being repulsed or disgusted, is utilised against a symbolic system that restricts the so-called messy aspects of women's bodies (Hoerl and Kelly 124). Irony is a common technique within this subgenre, and in the case of Michelle Wolf, I also discuss absurdity and exaggeration, which could de facto be placed under the common denominator of irony.

Michelle Wolf employs social commentary and abject feminist comedy and uses techniques of satire, irony, absurdity, and exaggeration. In my analysis, I argue that her comedy both challenges norms and aligns with traditional stand-up standards, which is why I titled this case study "Shopping in the Men's Section". I argue that Wolf adopts techniques and topics typically associated with her cis male counterparts, essentially picking up their tools of the trade. However, by choosing to shop in the metaphorical "men's section," she seizes agency over these tools and reshapes them in her own

unique way. In doing so, she redefines how they are used, which in part deviates from the audience's expectations.

To support my argument, I focus on the specials *Michelle Wolf: Nice Lady*, which I accessed through an album on Spotify, *Michelle Wolf: Joke Show* on Netflix, and her most recent three-part special, *Michelle Wolf: It's Great to be Here*. All three are Wolf, solo on stage in front of a live audience. Additionally, I will engage with Hoerl and Kelly's research on abject feminism.

Social Commentary. In *Michelle Wolf: Nice Lady*, Wolf claims that there is a prevalent misconception that society is more innovative than it truly is. She hones in on women's experiences, emphasising that things have not necessarily improved as much as we like to believe:

Sports Illustrated will put a plus-sized model on their swimsuit issue and a lot of women will be like, '[in a slightly demeaning tone] Bravo Sports Illustrated [audience laughs], you're so innovative'. [yells] That's not innovative, they just realised that men will also masturbate to fat women! You want to be innovative, put a completely clothed woman in there, and just talk about her personality. Like, 'This is Rhonda, she loves quilting, let's get into the details!' [audience laughs]. Even women would be like 'I don't want to read that' [Wolf and the audience laugh]. ("Please Like and Subscribe" 0:10- 0:45)

In this excerpt, irony and exaggeration serve as tools for social commentary. The presence of a plus-sized model in a sports magazine is ironically portrayed as a sign of progress for women, but the underlying reason is cynically depicted as catering to the desire of men. The demeaning voice used when saying "Bravo Sports Illustrated, you're so innovative," highlights the naivety of women. The joke exaggerates the stereotypes

of the horny man and the naïve woman. The notion of quilting Rhonda further underscores society's narrow focus on sexualised images rather than genuine female personalities. Through exaggeration and irony, Wolf's comedy critiques both the objectification perpetuated by men and the ignorant perception of society by women. The hypocrisy lies in the idea that nobody wants to be innovative, even women would not be interested in reading about quilting Rhonda. Thus, this example can be interpreted as both subversive for highlighting societal flaws and as conforming to broader stereotypes that fat women are not featured in sports magazines for valid reasons and that women with ordinary hobbies are boring.

In this next segment from the same show, Michelle discusses how men often employ excuses that seem to benefit women, portraying themselves as good people, when in reality, it serves their own interests:

Stop using 'we're protecting women' as your excuse for getting things done. It's bullshit and it's insulting. I've never, ever been scared of trans people, the only people that have consistently scared me are straight men [audience cheers], you guys have a terrible track record! [audience cheers and claps] ... I was on a date, a guy offered to walk me to my door, he was like, 'I just wanna make sure you get home safe.' [yells] That's bullshit! That's not why you're walking me to my door, that's your last ditch effort to touch a boob [audience laughs]. At that point in the night, the most dangerous thing at my door is you [audience laughs]!

("You're The Problem" 00:00-01:32)

The irony lies in the assertion that men, being the primary "predators" in society themselves, express concern for women's safety. Wolf, both in this segment and the one before, pokes fun at men through ironic and exaggerated statements.

In her latest comedy special, *Michelle Wolf: It's Great to Be Here*, Wolf shifts focus from men to the contradictions surrounding the attitudes of white women. She acknowledges the historical oppression faced by white women but characterises it as a relatively comfortable, “air-conditioned” oppression. By juxtaposing it with the more severe struggles endured by black individuals, Wolf highlights the comparatively trivial nature of the challenges faced by white women:

I think women, white women, I think at some point in your life, you should be in a serious relationship with a black man ... just so you can hear how stupid all of your complaints actually sound [audience laughs]. Like if you both get home from a hard day and you're like, '[demeaning voice] I literally had the worst day', and he's like, 'yeah, I had a bad day too', and she's like, 'well, what happened to you?', 'another Black man was shot in the back by the police, and it was a guy from my neighbourhood, and he wasn't even running away, he was walking away and this stuff just keeps happening, and it's never going to change, and I've lost, like, all hope, and I'm just so angry'. 'But what happened to you?' [audience laughs], 'uhhh [audience laughs], no it's not important' [audience laughs]. 'No baby, in this house, we share, what happens to you happens to me,' 'uhm well, today at work this guy called me a girl, and I'm a woman' [audience laughs]. (“All Struggles Matter + Me Too” 15:00 – 16:50)

The comedy employs satire by juxtaposing the triviality of the complaints of white women, such as being called “girl” instead of “woman” at work, with the profound and systemic issues faced by black people, like police brutality. By doing so, she exposes the absurdity and self-centeredness of some white women's problems in comparison to the, here expressed by Wolf, far more significant, challenges endured by black individuals. The laughter from the audience underscores the absurdity of the situation.

Wolf performs social commentary, targeting men and white women by pointing out their contradictory and hypocritical behaviour through irony and exaggeration.

Abject Feminist Comedy. Michelle Wolf is notorious for her explicit language and ability to tackle just about any subject with a direct and harsh approach. Hoerl and Kelly describe how abject themes are often used to “critique gendered forms of hypocrisy” (123) and “make fun of confounding sexual double standards” (124). They conclude that embodied abject play is a subversive reapplication of abjection aimed at challenging a symbolic system that excludes the complex realities of women’s bodies (124). In what follows, I aim to show how abject themes are prominent in Wolf’s comedy and are used to point out the often absurd reality of women’s embodied experiences in society.

In *Michelle Wolf: Joke Show*, Wolf points out how women have to be more outspoken in naming their periods.

Gotta stop being cute! Same thing with periods, too cute about those. ‘Periods’ that’s not even the right name for it, all the names for periods suck, ‘period’, ‘time of the month’, ‘aunt Flo’, they all suck [audience laughs]. You know what we should call a period? A period should be called ‘bloody tissue falling out of a hole’ [audience laughs]. If you went into work and you were like hey I got bloody tissue falling out of a hole [audience laughs], they’d be like, ‘Yeah take the week!’ [audience laughs and cheers]. I know, I talk about periods a lot, and, I know, men, I know they’re gross, women know they’re gross. We get it. There’s never a time when we wake up and we’re like, ‘Oh I’m so excited to clean up a crime scene’ [audience laughs]. (11:45 – 12:50)

The idea that someone would come into work and describe their period as “bloody tissue falling out of a hole” is so absurd that it invokes laughter in the audience, yet this way, according to the statement, they would give women a week off. The absurdity highlights how we are not used to picturing periods as what they are, and if we were, then it would be taken seriously.

This statement directly addresses men: “Men, I know they’re gross!”, in *Michelle Wolf: Joke Show*, Wolf says that she talks about periods to make men more comfortable (12:30). The way she then goes on to describe periods reveals the potential irony of that statement, she intends to address men, but by exaggerating the topic, the comedy might inadvertently drive them away. Perhaps analysing this statement as “exaggeration” is not correct, as it aims to present an accurate description of the female body with the goal of being treated with more fairness. This statement is subversive as it challenges the current conception of women’s bodies. In addition, it aims to normalise the period, calling it as it is, this is a way to make “women’s embodied experiences [more] representable within the symbolic order,” as described by Hoerl and Kelly (124).

At the end of *Joke Show*, Wolf advocates for the fact that women are much grosser than men.

Men try to be gross, like, it’s almost adorable. You know, they’ll say things like, ‘Oh skid marks!’, yeah, okay [audience laughs], sometimes I look down in my underwear and I’m like ‘Did I put toothpaste down there? Three years ago?’. Oh and also skid marks, I got a butt, too! [audience laughs], so yeah if you wanna call me vulgar, go ahead, I’m a vulgar disgusting bitch [audience laughs and cheers]. (58:00 – 58:30)

One could argue that calling herself a “vulgar disgusting bitch,” aligns with male standards of humour that embrace crudeness, yet it can also be interpreted as a

deliberate exaggeration to challenge those very standards. This statement seems to embrace and exaggerate aspects typically associated with male humour, such as discussing bodily functions and flaws in an unapologetic manner, to assert the equality of women within the genre of stand-up. In doing so, she effectively “writes herself back” into the symbolic order, reclaiming agency and challenging the notion that only men can engage in such forms of comedy. This statement thus violates the norms of stand-up by questioning what is considered taboo and crossing the boundaries that distinguish the space of stand-up from the world beyond it (Hoerl and Kelly 135-136).

Furthermore, Wolf also describes the “gross” bodies of men. In *Michelle Wolf: Nice Lady*, she names the scrotum “wrinkly, dangly bags of crap” (“Look At Me” 2:30). The comedy implies that all bodies are gross, and everyone should be fully clothed all the time, “I think we should all be ashamed of our bodies, every single one of us, that’s why we wear clothes.” (“Look At Me” 3:00). This emphasises the call for an equal view of all bodies, and by exaggerating the “grossness” of her body, she places herself on the same level as men.

Conclusion. The title of this case study is “Shopping in the Men’s Section,” which refers to Wolf’s use of traditional male comedic tools and repurposing them for her own comedic intentions. I illustrated how Wolf’s comedy makes use of social commentary to mock the often hypocritical stance of cis men and white women through irony and exaggeration. Wolf’s comedy can be read in multiple ways, certain statements can be read as reinforcing current stereotypes, which are essentially the tools I am talking about, as a binary view of “women do this” and “men do that” is very common among traditional stand-up comedy.

In addition, Wolf employs abject feminist comedy to critique gender norms and confront double standards. Wolf talks about the “grossness” of periods which normalises women’s embodied experiences and places them on an equal level to everyone in society. Wolf’s comedy challenges stand-up standards as it takes the tools known within the art form to assert her own position in society with a particular emphasis on mocking humanity as a whole, though she places a special focus on cis men.

Michelle Buteau: Shopping in the women’s section

Introduction. Michelle Buteau is an American actress, TV- and podcast host, author, and stand-up comedian. She won a “Critics Choice Award” for her hour-long special *Welcome to Buteaupia* in 2021 (IMDb.com) and is currently touring her new special *Full Heart, Tight Jeans*. She is known to be very energetic and full of charisma on stage (*Rotten Tomatoes*) and just wants the audience to have a good time (Buteau, in an interview with Cortney Wills for theGrio). A big difference between Buteau and Gadsby and Wolf is Buteau’s optimism and caring stance towards her audience. Instead of employing an angry or satirical tone, she chooses to radiate positivity with themes such as motherhood, marriage, and cultural differences across the world. In this case study, I will explore how Buteau navigates the genre of stand-up comedy through her approach to comedy.

I will focus on two subgenres prevalent in Buteau’s comedy, namely sexual- and “caring” comedy. Buteau’s sexual humour is connected to the abject feminist comedy discussed in the analysis of Michelle Wolf. However, where Wolf’s abject comedy emphasises the importance of equality across genders, Buteau’s focus lies on agency

over her own sexuality as a big black woman. There is a different nuance, however, both approaches aim to regain power. I will engage with the source “Black Women Comics: Sensuality and Intersectionality” by Ebtesam M. El-Shokrofy and Asmaa Awad Ahmed. They talk about how, historically, “black women have been stereotyped as being less beautiful and over-sexed” (37) and that black women use vulgar humour “to release their inner anger and feeling of discomfort in a society recognising them as different and unequal” (51). This, I argue, sets Buteau apart from other comedians in that her comedy expresses pride and joy with no inner anger and discomfort with society. I do not claim that there is no political content in her comedy at all, but it is not central.

The second subgenre related to Buteau is “caring” comedy. In an article by The New Yorker, Hilton Als describes how, in *Full Heart, Tight Jeans*, Buteau disapproves of Dave Chappelle’s jokes about trans people. She expresses a preference for jokes without demeaning others and creates an environment where people feel safe and happy. There is a difference between being a caring person and actual “caring comedy.” I define caring comedy as comedy that shows empathy. It is meant to make people happy, not to belittle, provoke, or ridicule. Techniques are giving compliments, confirmation, and involving the audience in the comedy routine.

Helga Kotthoff describes how traditionally, women were expected to be modest and ladylike, while comedy and satire involve being aggressive and “not being nice,” while support and caring generally play a role in the performance of femininity (14). I argue that Buteau chooses to play into the “ladylike” stereotype, being supportive and caring towards her audience, talking to them like a friend in a conversation. She is, however, not modest at all, hence her use of often explicit sexual humour. This mixture

of styles deviates from stand-up standards as significantly “new” to comedy, which responds to the aggression and satiric approach audiences are used to.

Buteau notes in *Survival of the Thickest: Essays*, her memoir, how she was never really inspired by performers in comedy clubs:

I would go to comedy shows from time to time and check it out. It was very male dominated in a way that wasn’t inspiring, meaning I never saw a male comedian and thought, Wow, I love this stuff so much that I also thought, Wow, could you not be so sad? They were all sad, broke, jerking off into some dark rooms, avoiding phone calls or any type of connection because god forbid you had a connection. (91)

Buteau was thus never really inspired by her male counterparts, hence the title “Shopping in the Women’s Section.” I argue that Michelle Buteau uses sexual and caring humour to contribute to 21st-century stand-up comedy as a new and evolving art form. For my analysis, I will focus on the specials *Welcome to Buteaupia* from 2020, accessed through Netflix, and *Shut Up*, her debut album from 2015 on Spotify. As mentioned before, I will engage with the academic research by Ebtesam M. El-Shokrofy and Asmaa Awad Ahmed.

Sexual Humour. In “Black Women Comics: Sensuality and Intersectionality,” Ebtesam M. El-Shokrofy and Asmaa Awad Ahmed describe how black women comedians make sexual jokes about people in positions of power, which gains them power in return. In *Welcome to Buteaupia*, Buteau jokes about having sex with Prince Harry, a former member of the British Royal Family:

I’d make The Crown so edgy. I want a sex scene with Harry. I want a sex scene with Harry, I would suck his ginger dick, I would suck his ginger dick, now, I

would! You'd suck it too, bitch. Don't act like you wouldn't! I would suck that ginger dick. The episode would be called 'Ginger Snaps', I thought about it, she thought about it [audience laughs and cheers]. Come on you already know I'm down for the foreskin, I am for the skin, man. (34:50-35:10)

The rhetoric in this statement is very determined and confident with complete power over the situation. She yells the phrases "I want a sex scene with Harry" and "I would suck his ginger dick" repeatedly. She takes great pride in being edgy and sexual. Here, the caring comedy shows too, as Buteau connects with her audience by saying: "You'd suck it too, bitch." She addresses her audience as friends, acknowledging their shared sexuality and encouraging pride in it. Buteau does not make sexual jokes about Prince Harry to take power away from him or ridicule people in power. The comedy here functions as a medium to establish and celebrate Buteau as a sexual being. She does gain power through agency over her body, yet she does not do it by robbing Prince Harry of his.

The two following examples are from *Shut Up*. In the first example, Buteau compares the act of oral sex to having breakfast, and in the second, she talks about the number of sex partners someone should have.

Stop asking what you do with foreskin, you peel it back like a banana and have breakfast! [audience laughs] [Buteau imitates eating noises] Delicious, who's not eating the ... skin off fried chicken [audience laughs]. You guys look horrified, it's my journey, it's my life, it's my dick [audience laughs]. ("White Gold is Forever & Dutch Accents" 1:55- 2:24)

I met him and he got me drunk and I sat on his dick and we fell in love [audience laughs and cheers]. Thank you, thank you! You can't put that shit on your wedding vows, people are very judgy [audience laughs]. But my advice to you is

if you're single, just fuck as many people as you want, fuck your way to the right one, okay, seriously it's a numbers game, nobody plays the lotto once [audience laughs]. But wear condoms 'cause you guys are too cute for bacteria. [audience 'Oh nooo'] [Buteau imitates audience] 'oh nooo' [Buteau laughs] too late? You didn't use the condom. ("The Truth About Marriage" 2:35- 3:05)

In both sexual acts, Buteau is in a position with control over the situation. The control is double-layered, the first is over the person she has sex with, and the second is her stance to the audience, almost giving a tutorial on how to do it. At the end of this example, this power is phrased literally when she says "It's my dick". Buteau's comedy advocates for women to take control, which can be read as subversive because it challenges stereotypes of submissive women and dominant men. However, I read this as primarily celebrating herself as a sexual being rather than asserting dominance over men.

In the second example, she engages with the audience like friends again when she gives them the advice to embrace their sexual impulses; "fuck as many people as you can." She encourages her audience to do the same as her, as she claims in *Welcome to Buteaupia*, to having "fucked the whole zodiac calendar" (5:10). Her caring nature comes out when she says "but wear a condom 'cause you guys are too cute for bacteria." She makes a sexual joke while complementing her audience, which is textbook Buteau comedy.

Caring Comedy. The first example of Buteau's caring comedy is from the opening of *Welcome to Beautopia*, where she comes into the venue, dances her way through the people up to the stage, and opens the show like this:

Oh my God! [audience cheers and claps] [Buteau gets on her knees on stage]

New York! New York City! Oh! Oh! Oh! [Buteau sings] I am here for you, I am

here for you, I am here for you [Buteau dances to the beat, audience chants along 'Hey! Hey! Hey!'] Yes! Everybody looking like a snack! Oh! [audience cheers] Don't do it, don't do it, don't you dare do it. Don't turn me into Octavia Spencer in every movie [audience laughs, Buteau laughs]. But [imitates Octavia Spencer] you is special, you is kind, thank you for coming [audience laughs]. (1:20-2:13)

The opening of *Welcome to Buteaupia* shows what Buteau is all about. She is loud when she yells "Oh my god" and "New York" and immediately establishes that she is there for the audience. She dances to the rhythm of their chants "Hey! Hey! Hey!" and proceeds to compliment the audience; "Everybody looking like a snack!". Her use of words is clever, saying that they look pretty or good is not the same as "snack", it creates character and establishes a bond of trust and friendship. This intro portrays a comedian who cares about the relationship with her audience. In *Shut Up*, Michelle uses humour to involve her audience, the following example is her reaction to her audience's reaction after she tells them that she dated an illiterate man: "Yes, I love that some of you are like 'Aw', and the other half are like 'Come again?' [Michelle laughs, the audience laughs] ("Wannabe Gangsta Bitch & First Loves" 4:25-4:35).

Earlier in *Shut Up*, she asserts that the audience is like her "Oprah's book club", as they are very engaging and vocal with her comedy. In *Welcome to Buteaupia*, she addresses the woke white girls in the audience:

Thank you white girls be snappin', I love woke white people. Yes, this is my town hall, thank you so much [audience applauds]. Yes, let's get to the issues at hand [snaps fingers] I love her cute little white girl in the back, yes sister, yes, speak on it sis [audience laughs]. (15:20- 15:46)

This can be read as poking fun at woke white girls, but the kind-hearted tone and the physical comedy where Buteau joins in on the snapping illustrate the light-hearted spirit

of the joke. In the same show, she talks to the single people in the audience and asks them what their type is.

I love hooking people up, but I feel like my single friends never know what they want. Who is single here? Who is single? So many of yall! Okay, you boo-boo what's your type? 'I like somebody that I can really converse with' Buteau: 'You like somebody you can really converse with, that's cute [nod of approval, audience laughs] and he said 'converse', so you know he reads a magazine [audience laughs] ... What's your type boo-boo? 'smart, funny, tall'. Buteau: 'Smart, funny and tall [Buteau laughs], okay [audience laughs]. No, you got a list, I like it. I always feel bad when people say tall though, cause I'm like, short guys are great. [audience cheers] Yes! See all those short men clappin' [audience laughs] They amazing, they don't reach everything but they don't have to, they reach the things they supposed to. (28:20-29:35)

This example illustrates how caring humour is embodied, as Buteau's personality establishes the comedy. She gives nicknames "boo-boo" and advocates for the shorter men in the audience. She discusses setting up her friends and then asks the audience about their preferences as if she is going to matchmake for the singles present. She engages with them and shows concern and interest while making jokes about their types.

Conclusion. Michelle Buteau openly talks about how she does not resonate with the traditional angry, demeaning tone of comedy. Instead, she wants her audience to feel safe and welcome. She does not conform to stand-up standards as she goes her own way using sexual humour to highlight her agency and caring humour which includes the audience in the stand-up routine. This case study is called "Shopping in the Women's

Section,” as caring is traditionally associated with women and she uses sexual humour to highlight her pride in being a sexual woman.

Unlike Gadsby and Wolf, Buteau does not offer societal critique, rather she emphasises her experience with the world as a kind-hearted, light-spirited individual. Buteau’s comedy is innovative in a way that it challenges the rules of comedy because it does not use the known tools to produce the funny, yet it resonates with a big audience.

CONCLUSION

This paper was conducted within the framework of genre studies. A genre is a framework of expectations. In the context of stand-up comedy, this means that people have certain ideas about what to expect when they watch comedy. Genre studies engage with the subgenres and techniques within the genre to see what the possibilities are and how they can be subverted or conformed to. This study aimed to illustrate three specific cases of performing in the genre of stand-up comedy and see how they handle these so-called expectations within the genre.

First, I gave an overview of the academic research that engages with expectations in comedy. Scholars such as Rebecca Krefting, Sabrina Fuchs Abrams, and Stephanie Brown have written relevant sources on how comedy is measured and certain biases related to both gender and other intersecting identities. Here I highlighted the measures of authenticity, the angry and sexual impulses inherent to comedy, and how subversive and satirical comedy functions within the genre. The body of this essay is three case studies of comedians operating in the field today. In the order of their appearance in this essay, they are Hannah Gadsby, Michelle Wolf, and Michelle Buteau. I discussed the subgenres and styles of said comedians and placed them towards the background of the rules of the genre to see how they navigate the established norms of

stand-up comedy. In my analysis, I argued that, through their unique approaches to comedy, contemporary comedians challenge the genre of stand-up comedy as we know it.

In the first case study, I analysed Hannah Gadsby's comedy. I believe Gadsby could be viewed as the archetype of a comedian who challenges the genre of stand-up comedy. I described how Gadsby's comedy consists of meta-commentary to address the flawed nature of the genre and by not respecting the punchlines, it breaks the rules of comedy. This is a direct subversion of the expectations of the genre with a hard hand, as Gadsby's rhetoric is brought with apparent anger. The anger mostly lies in the limits of the genre, as it does not have the format to tell true stories. This comedy exposes the punchline as a restrictive tool. Gadsby's comedy is very meta and exposes the faultiness of society and society's conceptions of stand-up comedy.

Secondly, I discussed Michelle Wolf. I focused on two subgenres within her comedy, namely social commentary and abject feminist comedy. Looking back at it, one could say that the two are not mutually exclusive, as the application of abject themes also comments on social injustices and hypocrisies. Wolf's comedy is raunchy and exaggerates certain topics to point out the absurdity of today's society. The comedy is also ironic, used to subtly, yet not-so-subtly put just as much everybody on the spot. Through irony and exaggeration, Wolf's comedy critiques society very harshly not budging from anybody or anything. The abject feminist comedy functions to claim Wolf's position as an equal, advocating for the fact that women are just as gross as men.

Michelle Buteau as the last case study differs significantly from the previous two. Instead of rough, direct comments on today's flawed society, Buteau's comedy is loud, proud, and caring. The comedy radiates positive vibes only and engages with the audience. Her enthusiasm is infectious and her quirky comments on her sexual

adventures and that of her audience do not only create laughter but additionally create a bond between her and the audience. Her likeability, thus her character is perhaps the most essential component of her comedy. In addition to the caring nature, I discussed the use of sexual topics in her comedy. Her explicit language when talking about sex shows her pride in being a sexual woman and thus subverts any traditional views that women are to be modest.

This leaves me to discuss some parallels between these three cases. The first parallel is between Hannah Gadsby and Michelle Wolf. Both comedies directly point the finger at cis men, ironically describing them as “adorable,” in which the irony reveals their demeaning nature. Gadsby names them adorable when they are angry, as they point out that these men do not have many reasons to be angry. Gadsby’s show *Nanette* expresses anger to exactly that, and how Gadsby does have a right to be angry at society for their treatment. Wolf names men adorable when they think that they are more gross than women. Wolf goes on with vivid descriptions of how women’s bodies are just as disgusting, and even more so than men’s. Both Gadsby and Wolf use irony to poke fun at cis men, pointing out the often hypocritical nature of their anger and description of their bodies.

The second parallel is between Michelle Wolf and Michelle Buteau. Both comedic styles make use of explicit sexual language. Wolf’s sexual humour directly comments on contradictions and seems to strive for equality in pointing out the equally disgusting nature of all bodies across identities. Whereas Buteau’s sexual humour establishes Buteau as a sexual being with agency over her own sexuality, not so much striving for any type of equality or critiquing established norms. However, both approaches to sexual humour claim authority and agency.

In addition, both Wolf and Buteau make jokes that target white women. Wolf puts white women on the spot through irony and ridicules their minor problems. Buteau's comedy is light-hearted and joins in with the white women in her audience and calls them 'sis'. The comparison of these case studies demonstrates how, even in similar topics, the approach can differ significantly.

The parallel between Gadsby and Buteau is in the purpose or message of their comedy. This enters into the debate of whether to separate the artist from the art. As established in their case study, Gadsby expresses the need to make the audience feel something and think differently. Looking solely at the comedy, this purpose seems to be fulfilled, as they brought on that trauma by not respecting the punchlines. Gadsby essentially broke the barrier between the artist and the art, as they do not distinguish where Gadsby's personal trauma ends and the comedy begins, they work together. Buteau's purpose, also expressed by Buteau herself, lies in creating a safe, happy space for the audience. Buteau, just like Gadsby, is a difficult comedian to set apart from her art, as it is her quirky character that establishes this experience for the audience. Both comedies have a significant impact on the audience, however, the types of impact are very divergent, anger and pain versus relief and happiness.

As established in the introduction of this paper, influential male comedians advocate for separating the artist from the art. They express the need to say the wrong thing and the ability to joke about anything without consequence. These case studies challenge this notion. Wolf seems to align most with this traditional idea, but Gadsby and Buteau are very difficult to separate from their art. Taking into account intersectionality, it is difficult to do so, the comedy reflects the comedians' experience of the world, which is biased through their viewpoint. Comedy as an art form can thus be viewed as embodied in a known individual. This aligns with the notion of

authenticity I touched upon before. Certain rhetoric and thus certain approaches to comedy are better fitted for certain people in society. This can be illustrated if you try to picture Buteau's comedy if performed by a cis white man, the comedic effect would be different and perhaps the comedic element, thus what makes it funny, would get lost. Especially the case studies of Gadsby and Buteau thus challenge the relationship between the comic and the art. Which contributes to a deeper understanding of the genre itself. Overall, these case studies illustrate the evolving nature of stand-up comedy as a genre. They shed light on how contemporary comedians challenge the genre to fit better to their liking. However, this analysis is not up for generalisation.

This study does not paint the whole picture of how comedians tackle the genre today. The scope of three comedians and the fact that comedy is very individualistic cannot possibly paint a complete picture. However, this study is still relevant, as it provides a detailed description, and paints a qualitative picture of how comedy can be shaped within the genre. These comedians exemplify a new strain of comedy that challenges our initial and still dominant views on comedy. This is particularly relevant in an age with a heightened sensitivity to gender identity and comedy as one of the most accepted and accessible ways to comment on society. Additionally, this study adds to the broader understanding of how identity shapes artistic expression.

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