

# **Stand-up Comedy and the Clash of Gendered Cultural Norms**

The Honors Program

Honors Thesis

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April 2019

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the use of gender roles and norms in stand-up comedy, specifically in Western culture. Western culture has constructed social norms and ideas about gender through a binary way of thinking. Culturally constructed gender norms influence stereotypes and expectations for how people should act, think, or appear. Many within this culture become uncomfortable when those expectations are not met in either of the two binaries. Comedians have plenty of material to turn into humor when they focus on the ironies created when behavior, institutions, or ideas do not fit neatly into a binary. This will be exemplified through three comedians, Iliza Shlesinger, Ali Wong, and Chris D'Elia, who use material about gender in their stand-up performances. Iliza Shlesinger and Ali Wong use charged humor when delivering jokes that discuss gender roles. Chris D'Elia on the other hand uses self-labeled "silly humor" when discussing topics that relate to gender roles. The cultural context of the stand-up performances shows how the comedians either reinscribe or challenge stereotypes. In conclusion, this study shows that comedy is a platform where ideas about gender can be reaffirmed, contested, or rethought. Of the three comedians Ali Wong and Iliza Shlesinger use humor to consciously challenge gender norms and create an overall message that contests the social expectations about the gender binaries. Chris D'Elia reinforces gendered cultural norms in his style of comedy.

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**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**COMEDY THEORY LITERATURE REVIEW**

Henri Bergson's "Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" was written in 1911. This piece explores the construction and perception of laughter. Although this piece is dated, it is still considered a foundational work in comedy theory. Bergson examines humor created by ridiculing marginalized groups. He notes laughter elicited by those types of jokes justify the idea that the marginalized groups are considered outsiders. This causes a desire within the marginalized group to adapt to the life of the popular group to better assimilate into the norm. This research was one of the primary studies to connect humor and psychology.

Comedy is a natural aspect of all societies. Bakhtin studies medieval carnival and its connection to laughter and satire in "Rabelais and His World." Bakhtin expands upon the works of Rabelais and his studies of the carnival. Carnival creates comedy by inverting hierarchal systems through a public spectacle with colorful insults and written parody. Carnival entertainment is inclusive because all subjects are the topic of jokes and it is laughter for all. Carnivals acted as a social critique and playful resistance to the political hierarchies of the Middle Ages. Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism is the exaggerated focus on the body, as an important aspect of carnival humor. Grotesque realism seen in carnival humor also acts as a leveling device. It allowed all classes to be described in a bodily way. The carnival served a cultural function because it allowed for social restrictions and norms to be temporarily ignored. The medieval times had clear class structures, while the carnival allowed for a space where those social barriers were temporarily lifted.

Bingham and Hernandez create a parallel between the comedic eye and a sociological perspective in their work "Laughing Matters: The Comedian as Social Observer, Teacher, and

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Conduct of the Sociological Perspective.” They state that the “comedic arena is a space of free inquiry where no subject is taboo and the rules of political correctness can be temporarily suspended” (Bingham and Hernandez 339). Comedy evolved from carnival spectacles in the middle ages to a form of pop culture that still embodies the space for social criticism.

Murray Davis in his book *What's So Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society* makes a similar parallel between comedy and sociology. He describes nine similarities between a comic and a sociologist. Both “(1) take the contemporary and ever changing world as their subject matter (2) deconstruct, unmask, and debunk status quo social expectations, organizations, rules, and people (3) reorder and reserve the audience’s perspective (4) compare social ideas to reality (5) play off typically expected patterns (6) compare and contrast groups (7) challenge hypocrisy (8) examine the presentation of self in the everyday life (9) point out the fluidity of social life” (Davis). Comedy as a discourse takes on all aspects of life. It continues to expand limitations in society.

Peter McGraw writes about the Benign-Violation theory in comedy that looks at the psychology of humor. McGraw explains how humans have subconscious requirements that illicit the natural reaction of laughter. He uses his findings to construct his theory of humor as “A situation must be appraised as a violation, a situation must be appraised as benign, and these two appraisals must occur simultaneously” (McGraw 2). McGraw goes on to define violations by saying “As humans evolved, the situations that elicited humor likely expanded from apparent physical threats to a wider range of violations, including violations of personal dignity (e.g., slapstick, physical deformities), linguistic norms (e.g., unusual accents, malapropisms), social norms (e.g., eating from a sterile bedpan, strange behaviors), and even moral norms (e.g., bestiality, disrespectful behaviors). The benign-violation hypothesis

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suggests that anything that is threatening to one's sense of how the world "ought to be" will be humorous, as long as the threatening situation also seems benign" (McGraw 2). To summarize the last point, humans laugh at a discrepancy from what they expected to happen and what actually happens. Comedians can achieve this through an array of styles, delivery, and other comedic tools. According to McGraw there are three things that can make a violation benign: if "(a) a salient norm suggests that something is wrong but another salient norm suggests that it is acceptable, (b) one is only weakly committed to the violated norm, or (c) the violation is psychologically distant" (McGraw 2). When a violation is considered benign it essentially makes the violation socially acceptable. The three classifications are ways that certain violations are subconsciously written off as acceptable. Humor requires a violation alongside other characteristics that make it benign. Not all comedians are consciously crafting humor in order to create benign violations. Comedians use their experience of crowd reactions to alter their jokes. This hypothesis explains the psychology of the audience and not the strategy of comedians.

Comedy that critiques all aspects of life is not automatically progressing society's cultural views. Thompson argues that comedy which takes aim at everyone, or is an "equal opportunity offender" is stagnant in its cultural progressiveness in his article "Good Demo, Bad Taste." Thompson uses South Park to exemplify his point because South Park is a satire known to poke fun at both sides of the political sphere. South Park is an equal opportunity offender of modern day society, like Carnival was for the Middle Ages. No subject or group is off limits from satire, and this is evident in both South Park and the Carnival that is discussed by Bakhtin. Thompson states that comedy that takes a neutral stance loses its power to socially criticize in an influential way.

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Recent works about comedy theory elaborate on the connection between comedy and identity. In *All Joking Aside*, Rebecca Krefting coined the term charged humor. She looks at the history of charged humor and focuses on how comedians today are using it. Krefting defines charged humor as “challenging the myths we sustain about how fair and democratic our society is, and the behaviors and practices we enact every day to maintain that fiction” (Krefting 2).

Krefting critiques long-standing assumptions and popular writing that assumes a difference in humor between the sexes. Similarly, Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant state in *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy* that “humor is also a key political weapon, so there are political implications to the myth that women are less funny: it discourages women from making use of wit and satire to point out injustices and often marginalizes them when they do” (Mizejewski and Sturtevant 4). *All Joking Aside* and *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy* exemplify how myths have kept women out of the comedy industry. These books showcase women comedians whose careers support the argument women can be as funny as men. *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* sets out to disprove the popular cultural assumption that men are funnier than women. This book uses accounts from individual female comedians to create a narrative about how women have been and are currently treated in the comedy industry.

*Hysterical! Women in American Comedy* connects psychology and philosophy to comedy, combining modern day events with comedy theory. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant infer what Sigmund Freud, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Henri Bergson would think of the comedy acts performed by popular female comedians today if they were still around. The scholars “were post-Victorian white men who would have been stumped by Whoopi

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Goldberg, shocked by Lena Dunham, and bewildered by Tina Fey – not just because they were offended by these women's language or topics, but because they didn't imagine women and minorities as powerful subjects of their own comedy" (Mizejewski and Sturtevant 10-13). However, they note that it is important to acknowledge that these scholars have influential work and their theories showcase the complexities within comedy.

Comedy has been used both to challenge social norms and reinforce norms. Perez and Greene outline this paradox in their work "Debating Rape Jokes vs. Rape Culture: Framing and Counter Framing Misogynistic Comedy." The authors analyze the effects of jokes. They argue that rape jokes desensitize people to the severity of rape. The rape jokes are reinforcing ideas of a patriarchal society and normalizes the behavior associated with it. They argue that people who are exposed to rape jokes are less likely to understand the trauma of rape.

Rape Culture and the comedy surrounding it are important topics for analysis. Amber Day and Viveca Greene explore comedy and rape culture and satire through the works of Samantha Bee, Amy Schumer, and Lena Weissbrot in their piece "Asking For It: Rape Myths, Satire, and Feminist Lacunae." The authors note the importance of satire as a societal force saying "satire is a strategy for shifting public conversation: changing the terms we use to conceptualize an issue or by publishing otherwise niche issues into the mainstream. In other words, feminist jokes about rape can work to critique rape culture, rather than reinforce it. However, the way that those issues are framed is important" (Greene and Day 27). The article mainly highlights white feminists and they note that white feminists are better received and less criticized than feminists of color when they speak out about rape and power struggles. Jane Ward also notes the hierarchy in oppressed groups in her piece "Not All Differences Are Created Equal." Through Jane's observations of AIDS clinics, she discovers that the support



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these groups are designed to give are not distributed equally to everyone. The AIDS community is subject to sexism and racism. White males are the controlling power within the community. Jane Ward observed that a black woman did not receive equal care or attention, and felt excluded in the community.

Certain comedians who frequently challenge social norms become known for that style of comedy. Amy Schumer has been labeled as a feminist due to the subjects she explores in all her channels of comedy, such as stand-up, a comedy central show, and other appearances. Her reputation has attracted analysis from the field of gender studies. Taylor Nygaard examines Amy Schumer in chapter three of the book *Emergent Feminists*. Nygaard notices that although Schumer is intentionally challenging norms about women in today's society the purpose of the jokes might go unnoticed by the audience, or the audience can misinterpret their purpose and it can reinforce the gender norms. Amy Schumer has a successful show on the Comedy Central network. The target audience for the channel is largely young heterosexual white men. The political content of her comedy offers the possibility for the specific Comedy Central audience to become aware of the stereotypes presented. However, the audience may not be able to decipher if the content Amy is presenting is challenging or reinforcing gender ideals. Amy Schumer gets critiqued that her comedy "falls on deaf ears" (Nygaard 61).

## **GENDER THEORY LITERATURE REVIEW**

One aspect of Gender Studies is the analysis of the social construction of gender, and the hierarchy of power that is embedded in its ideology. *Masculinity/Femininity: Basic Perspectives* examines the fact that culture presents things as two basic packages. Western

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culture assumes there are two forms of life: masculine and feminine. Humans within this society are trained to classify actions, people, and ideas into gender binaries: masculine or feminine. The book explores the extent biological influence and experience has on divergent behavior of masculinity and femininity. The author concludes that influences that have an effect on people's ideas of masculinity and femininity are circular. Allgeier concludes with "circular processes of influence and counterinfluence unfold over time; throughout childhood, individuals are engaged in active construction of their own version of the acceptably masculine and feminine behavior patterns" (Allgeier 566). "Barbie and G.I. Joe Making Bodies Masculine and Feminine" by Judith Lorber and Lisa Moore adds validity to the argument that cultural identity is developed as one lives and interacts within the society. The authors state "just as children are biologically reproduced as humans, they are socially reproduced as properly feminine girls and masculine boys" (Lorber & Moore 61). The authors focus on how the physical attributes of children are affected by the way cultural norms of masculinity and femininity are embodied. They define embodiment as "the physical manifestation and enactment of cultural and social norms, specifically those that make bodies and body practices of feminine and masculine, is a global phenomenon" (Lorber & Moore 62). The piece focuses on G.I. Joe and Barbie and how these produce culturally gendered children in Western society. The physical attributes of each toy is an example for how children view characteristics of the two gendered binaries, masculinity and femininity. These ideas become ingrained into society's unconscious. When individuals do not fit in the gendered binary, other members of society react towards those individuals. These reactions are social sanctions that punish individuals who do not fit into a gender binary. The example Lorber and Moore use is of a young girl who was made fun of because her physical physique

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appeared as masculine. The other children reacted negatively towards a young girl when her appearance was different than one of a girl who fits into the feminine gender binary.

Masculinity and femininity are the two opposing factors in a binary world view. Our society uses the dualist viewpoint on much more than two gender binaries. In Nancy Fischer's work "Purity and Pollution: Sex as a Moral Discourse" she states "dualistic cultures conceptualize the world through mutually exclusive, opposing values: right and wrong; black and white; male and female; good and bad; sacred and profane" (Fischer 53). Traditionally sex is understood through a moral framework of purity and pollution. Sexual actions speak to a person's character in a dualistic environment. An individual's sexual behavior becomes linked to their social identity and social worth. In this learned ideology sex and identity cannot be separated. Sex has been viewed as a pollution but "drawing lines between who is considered sexually pure and impure is not a simple matter of culture going through some 'natural' process of determining its own particular norms and sorting out who follows the rules and who break them, but is one more way that a dominant groups demonstrate their power against minorities (Fischer 56)". The social sanctions are created by the dominant group, white heterosexual males, to suppress a subordinate group by classifying them as polluted, and this maintains their power and social dominance. For example, white heterosexual males suppress black people by broadcasting ideas that they are hypersexual and animalistic, thus sexually polluted. White heterosexual males do this with women by classifying them as polluted if they have sex before marriage. The word "slut" is used as social punishment for women who are classified as sexually polluted. White, heterosexual males maintain their power by asserting their status as sexually pure.

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Adrienne Rich also studies lesbian existence alongside compulsory heterosexuality in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience”. Compulsory heterosexuality is the idea that heterosexuality is the assumed default sexuality and is enforced by the dominant powers of a patriarchal society. Since heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm, lesbians are critiqued for “choosing an alternative lifestyle.” This assumes that the only and correct lifestyle that is culturally acceptable is heterosexuality. Adrienne discusses eight forms of male power because theories about lesbianism create a challenge and resistance against the power held by men over women in the cultural context. The eight forms include “to deny women [female] sexuality”, “to force it [male sexuality] upon them”, “to command or exploit their labor to control their produce,” “to control or rob them of their children,” “to confine them physically and prevent their movement,” “to use them as objects in male transactions,” “to cramp their creativeness,” and finally “to withhold them from large areas of society knowledge and cultural attainments” (Rich 638-640). She ends the work by acknowledging that the definition of lesbian is limiting in a patriarchal environment. She believes that the definition should not be singular but a continuum that embodies physical, emotional, and psychic components.

Gayle Rubin discusses the definition of women in the context of a political economy in her chapter three “The Traffic of Women” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Rubin wants to look at social relations that further women’s oppression. She argues that capitalism is not the sole factor that leads to women’s oppression. Rubin analyzes how kinship and reproductive systems connect to women’s oppression. She argues that kinship systems exchange more than just women, they exchange sexual access, genealogical statutes, dynasty, rights, men, and children.

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Masculinity is assumed to be the opposite of femininity. This has fueled the existence of toxic masculinity which is defined as “a masculinity that is threatened by anything associated with femininity” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner 2) in Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner’s article titled “#MasculinitySoFragile: Culture, Structure, and Networked Misogyny.” They explore how online harassment or violence is in response to a perceived threat towards masculinity. Anonymity on the internet has fueled the increase and severity of the harassment of outspoken or unapologetically feminist women online. This type of harassment is systematic discrimination against women. The behavior contributes to a culture “where rape culture is normative, violent threats against women are validated, and rights of the body for women are either under threat or being formally retracted” (Banet- Weiser & Miltner 3). A cultural ideal that has developed as a form of pushback against feminism is the assumption that if women gain more, they are stealing from men, and this fuels the reasoning behind toxic masculinity. Those displaying what Banet Weiser and Miltner would consider toxic masculinity view feminism as a threat to the social hierarchy which is currently controlled by white heterosexual males.

A byproduct of toxic masculinity is Gendertrolling, a term coined by Karla Mantilla in her book *Gendertrolling: How Misogyny Went Viral*. Gendertrolling typically includes but is not limited to “graphic sexualized and gender based insults to demean women as sexual objects and to insult them for being women” (Mantilla 4). Mantilla relates the modern misogynist behaviors of gendertrolling to the history of misogyny and women’s oppression by saying “gendertrolling follows in a long-standing historical traditional of misogyny, in which women’s voices and opinions have been barred from full participation in cultural, social, and political discourse, while women have simultaneously been shut out of professional

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opportunities. Gendertrolling is not only embedded in historical tradition of misogyny; it is a new face to widespread misogynistic cultural patterns, values, and behaviors that underline other more contemporary kinds of attacks on women” (Mantilla 149). She advocates for the naming and identifying of these acts as the first step towards cultural awareness and legislative actions. Systematic discrimination cannot be confronted until there is a way to identify the problem. Mantilla is naming and defining the problem to initiate the ability to confront these behaviors.

*Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* written by Jane Ward examines men’s role in a heterosexual environment. Ward explores how men leverage their masculinity and white privilege to reassure their heterosexuality and the social benefits that go along with it. Fraternities, biker gangs, internet ads and other societal circumstances are used as examples of how homosexual fluidity is disguised as masculinity. These examples exemplify where actions, ideas, and people are acting outside of the male gendered binary but using their masculine privilege to avoid the social consequences. The book examines evidence of white heterosexual males partaking in homosexual sex but using their social privilege to maintain their heterosexual status. For example, a chapter of the book explores Craigslist advertisements posted by males seeking homosexual acts. The males portray the advertisements with masculine identities which overshadows the divergence outside the binary. Sexual identities have less to do with sexual actions and a closer relation to social hierarchy and the dominance of power. Some of the material that Jane Ward discusses, Chris D’Elia also uses in his comedy. For example, Chris D’Elia has a segment on his podcast *Congratulations* titled “Missed Connections” in which he reads Craigslist ads and uses them to make jokes.

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#### **GENDERED CULTURAL NORMS**

Western culture puts ideas, actions, and people into two binaries: male and female. Each binary has cultural expectations and characteristics. These cultural norms evolve gradually overtime. As Fischer states “Dualistic cultures conceptualize the world through mutually exclusive, opposing values: right and wrong; black and white; male and female; good and bad; sacred and profane” (Fischer 53). Conceptually segregating ideas, people, and actions into two binaries is simple, but the way it plays out in reality is extremely complicated. For the purposes of this paper, when an idea, action, or person does not perfectly fit into a gendered binary it will be defined as antinormative behavior. Antinormative behavior differs from cultural expectations. Antinormative behavior comes with consequences that, often reinforce a hierarchy of power in Western culture. Historically and currently Western culture has been governed by white, heterosexual males. Socially dominant groups set the cultural norms and standards and socially enforce them. This study will see examples of antinormative behavior from both males and females. Comedians often seek to highlight irony – when the reality of a situation does not match up to expectations or intent. This antinormative behavior creates irony because cultural assumptions differ from experienced reality.

#### **COMEDY THEORY BACKGROUND**

Stand-up comedy has been an entertainment form since the early 19th century in America. In its early stages it was a short monologue delivered with the intention to make the audience laugh. It has slowly developed overtime alongside the rest of American culture. Stand-up comedy has always been known as a “boys club.” The popular performers were white heterosexual males. As other institutions in American culture evolved and adapted to

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changing times, comedy did as well. Comedy today has more opportunities for comedians of all races, sexualities, and gender. For the purpose of this paper gender and sexuality is the focus. It is important to note that all types of institutions progress conservatively overtime. Stand-up comedy as an institution has seen small incremental changes overtime that has developed itself into what it is known for today. Stand-up comedy allows for more progressive behavior within the industry. For example, in stand-up ideas about gender roles, specifically women can be challenged, yet it took around a century for women comedians to be a somewhat common occurrence. This is similar to the integration of women employees of other institutions. CNN looks at the history of comedy from the 1920s to now in their mini-series called *The History of Comedy*. The program uses comedic milestones to show how the industry has changed overtime. One of the comedic milestones the show featured was during the 70s and 80s in American history the laws governing broadcasting media were very strict. The heavy censorship frustrated artists including comedian George Carlin. He created the "seven words" bit for his stand-up performances. Carlin would start every stand-up special with the seven words you cannot say on television. Carlin was one of many artists and activists taking part in a movement to remove censorship in the media.

The benign-violation theory uses psychology to analyze why humans laugh at certain things. Antinormative behavior is embedded into comedy because the human brain always laughs at things that defy it's expectations. Benign-violation states that humor naturally is found in the overlap of a violation that is classified as benign. It is important to note that comedians subconsciously have discovered this way of creating humor. Comedians learn like children; they act and they receive either praise or disapproval. If they gets praise, the comedian repeats and if they receive disapproval they retry in a different manner. The



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comedians use the audience's reactions to gauge if their comedy is considered funny and receives laughter. The benign-violation theory helps comedians instinctively construct their humor by using the audience's reactions. The audience is naturally responding to the humor based on the discoveries found by Peter McGraw.

Within comedy there is opportunities for comedians to challenge or reinforce cultural norms. Krefting states "[jokes] challenge the myths we sustain about how fair and democratic our society is and its behaviors and practices we enact every day to maintain that function" (Krefting 2). Krefting focuses on jokes that challenge cultural norms by saying "Jokesters unmask inequality by identifying the legal arrangements and cultural attitudes and beliefs contributing to their subordinated status-joking about it, challenging that which has become normalized and compulsory, and offering new solutions and strategies" (Krefting 2). Krefting also notes "All humor locates itself in social and political contexts, but not all humor does so self-consciously or with specific intentions to promote unity and equality or to create a safe and accepting space for people from all walks of life" (Krefting 2). On the contrary, there is comedic material that reinforces gender norms. Perez and Greene discussed the reinforcement of rape culture in their piece "Debating Rape Joke vs. Rape Culture: Framing and Counter-Framing Misogynistic Comedy." They argue that "the rhetorical function of patriarchal rape jokes is ostensibly convincing the audience of the idea that rape, a brutal and violent act, can be funny, entertaining, and unserious" (Perez and Greene 266). They go further and explain "rape jokes reinforce patriarchal and free market ideologies and denies the real world implications of misogynic humor" (Perez and Greene 266). For the purpose of this study I chose comedians who use charged humor as well as comedians who do not use charged

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humor. This allows for a connection to be made about intent and its effect on the integration of gendered cultural norms.

### **COMEDIANS**

Ali Wong, Iliza Shlesinger and Chris D'Elia are the three comedians explored in this study. I contextually and culturally analyzed the jokes seen in the stand-up specials available on Netflix. Each comedian has a different style and different goals. The amount of material between specials and comedians allowed me to draw connections between style and context across all the specials.

Ali Wong is known for discussing gender roles and norms in her performances, specifically her take on marriage and motherhood. *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018) are the stand-up performances I examined in this study. Before getting her own Netflix special she was employed as a writer for *Fresh of the Boat*, and had a variety of acting roles. Wong appeared on shows starring more popular comedians such as Chelsea Lately and Amy Schumer. Her first special was intentionally released on mother's day in 2016. Due to the minimal name recognition Wong had before her first special, she filled the stadium by selling tickets on Groupon. In *Baby Cobra* she was seven months pregnant and coined her aggressive, bodily style of stand-up. This special discussed Wong's sexuality, life before marriage, and the beginning years of marriage with her husband. *Baby Cobra* established Wong's name in the comedy industry and earned her popularity. Wong strategically released her next special, *Hard Knock Wife*, on mother's day two years later. Once again, she performed her special seven months pregnant. *Hard Knock Wife* focused on the birth of her first child and the time after childbirth as well as her continued commentary on her marriage.

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Wong has become famous for performing visibly very pregnant. Wong's style of comedy is very graphic and explicit about her experiences with sex and motherhood. In a *New Yorker* article titled "Ali Wong's Radical Raunch," Ariel Levy states that Wong made a conscious choice to unconventionally talk about her body as a woman. Wong purposefully takes risks to challenge comedic standards. A *New York Times* article written by Jason Zinoman titled "The Strategic Mind of Ali Wong" describes how Wong is determined to continue to be funny, and nothing, not even pregnancy or motherhood, will stop her. Ali Wong uses charged humor. Wong is intentional about the jokes she crafts. As a comedian her primary goal is to make the audience laugh. She uses her comedic platform to accomplish her secondary goal which challenges ideas about gender, especially around motherhood and marriage.

The next comedian in this study is Iliza Shlesinger. Shlesinger made a name for herself by winning season six of *Last Comic Standing* in 2008. Shlesinger is the only woman to win *Last Comic Standing* over its nine season run. Shlesinger's style has evolved over her stand-up career. *War Paint* (2013) and *Freezing Hot* (2015) have a similar style. In her book *Girl Logic* she discusses the epiphany she had after the release of those specials and how she shifted her style of comedy. Shlesinger was constantly brought down and ostracized within the comedy community by her male peers. Before winning the show, her male opponents acted as her close friends. Once the finale came and Shlesinger came out victorious, they all turned on her and made her career difficult. *The Last Comic Standing* involved a tour with the top six contestants. Shlesinger was living on a tour bus with five other males who used to be her friends, but after losing to her they made her life hell. After being ashamed of her identity as a woman in comedy for a couple of years, she found her self-worth. She then wanted to use her performances to contest the social limitation of being a woman, after experiencing them in

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her industry. In Shlesinger's early specials she creates a basic dumb blond persona.

Shlesinger's physical appearance is that of a stereotypically attractive young female; she is tall, skinny, and has blue eyes and blond hair. She used this to create her original stage persona of a ditz. After being in a male dominated industry for just under a decade she realized she "was good enough to run with the guys," (Shlesinger 78) and significantly shifted her focus to tackle gender inequity. Shlesinger, embracing her identity as a woman in the content of her jokes, explains "Part of why my comedy is so girl-centric is because I get what it is like to feel left out: my shows are my way of inviting everyone to sit with me"

(Shlesinger 79). After her epiphany Shlesinger released *Confirmed Kills* in 2016, and continued a similar style in her newest special *Elder Millennial* in 2018. While setting up jokes Shlesinger focuses on addressing the psychology of men and women. She does this so that the whole audience can identify with her stories and get the most out of the joke.

Shlesinger spends time before the punch line to create inclusive comedy at which everyone can laugh. For example, she prefaces a joke with "men are not equal to women." Then she goes on with the rest of the set up. This way the audience can get ready for material that will have to do with the issue of men and women's equality. In addition, this style of being blunt in the beginning of the joke makes the message of her material very clear to the audience. She is explicit about her logic in order to create an ideological progression of her jokes so her humor will land well with the audience. While she is explaining jokes about women, or her insecurities, for example, she takes the audience through the progression of thoughts in her mind. This way the audience can see the way she thinks and will understand the jokes better because they clearly saw her thought process. Shlesinger incorporates characters and is very animated on stage. Her most frequent character is the "she dragon." Charged humor is used in

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*Confirmed Kills* and *Elder Millennial*, her two most recent specials. *Freezing Hot* (2015) is used in this study as a bench mark for her changes of comedic style over her career.

Shlesinger in her book *Girl Logic* explains that she wants to challenge stereotypes about men and women. This study will examine how she does this through her three specials, but especially *Confirmed Kills* and *Elder Millennial* because they were performed after her career shift.

Chris D'Elia is the final comedian in this study. D'Elia has been performing stand-up since 2006. D'Elia's first Netflix special was released in 2015 titled *Incorrigible*. This was his first large stand-up tour. Two years later he released his second special on Netflix titled *Man on Fire* in 2017. In 2017 D'Elia started a comedy podcast titled *Congratulations* that has developed a cult like following. D'Elia calls his podcast fan base "The Babies." The success of the two specials and the growing "babies" population has led to his increased stardom as a comic. He was featured as one of the comedians in the *Comedians of the World* series on Netflix. D'Elia is featured on Episode Two and the content was filmed during his "Follow the Leader" Tour that took place during 2018. D'Elia has also done some television acting, including in shows such as *Glory Daze*, *Whitney*, and *Undateable*. D'Elia defines his style of comedy as "silly humor." He has stated this several times in his podcast when he talks about his stand-up comedy. In his specials he advertises that there is not a main theme or message to his work. D'Elia ended his special *Incorrigible* with a joke about how his message is no message. On his podcast, *Congratulations*, he mentions that he crafts his comedy by taking events or aspects of his life and turning them into comedy. For the purpose of this study, D'Elia does not describe himself as the stereotypical tough guy. His jokes and podcast content present a different identity than the stereotypical male. In his stand-up he explains that he is

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not “masculine.” For example, in one he states that he cannot be a father because he is not masculine enough. He would not be the ideal tough father figure for his child. D’Elia says whatever is on his mind and makes a joke out of it. He was chosen for this study because he does not necessarily intend to challenge stereotypes. Looking at his comedy, the findings will show that even comedians who lack the intent to challenge stereotypes and cultural norms are still partaking in the discussion.

### **STEREOTYPES**

Within the different stand-up specials many gendered stereotypes came up. This section will identify and describe the various stereotypes that came up in the performances. The first one featured most prominently in Wong’s specials is motherhood. The stereotypical mother is reserved, put together, stay at home, and selfless. This mother protects her children at all costs and does what she can in the best interest for the development of the child. The stereotypical mother is conceptualized as keeping her children happy and healthy. If the child is not, the mother is at fault. Stereotypical mothers have a do-it-all attitude and never complain about their role. This leads into the housewife/spouse stereotypes that comes up in all three comedians’ specials. The stereotypical housewife has overlapping qualities of the mother. The housewife always presents herself flawlessly, provides for her husband, stays at home, and is selfless. The housewife acts similarly to the mother but instead of putting a child first she puts her husband as the main priority. Fischer states in “Purity and Pollution: Sex as a Moral Discourse” “sex between married partners was to be viewed by wives as a necessary evil, or a part of one’s ‘wifely duties,’ and was not necessarily something to be enjoyed. This lack of sexual desire helped define mothers as innocent and made them the pinnacles of

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morality in Victorian society” (Fischer 56). The mother and housewife are socially expected to be submissive of their husband and do things that please them. The housewife is required to have dinner ready for her husband when he returns from work. She cannot have a job because she needs the time to take care of the household duties and her husband.

The next stereotype is the successful working woman within a relationship. This is seen in Wong and Shlesinger’s specials. When a woman is successful in a career or monetarily it is frequently seen as threatening to males. The independent woman who does not require a male’s financial support will hinder men’s masculinity. If the woman is in a relationship the male partner will feel like less of a man because his social need to provide for his partner is taken away from him. If the successful woman is single she potentially scares away men because they are afraid of having their masculinity hindered. Fischer states in “Purity and Pollution: Sex as a Moral Discourse” “The working class women who had to work for her living- either in the factory or on the street- was at the bottom of the moral hierarchy and was often characterized as a ‘fallen women’” (Fischer 56). Men who create the social control have incentives to socially punish women that do not rely on men.

The idea of trapping a significant other is seen in all three specials. This relates back to the creation of marriage as an institution. Marriage was created in order to distribute power through a society. Men had all the power and women historically could not fully integrate into society without the authority of a husband or father. Adrienne Rich in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” states “Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women because coming out of ‘abnormal’ childhoods they have wanted to

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feel 'normal,' and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment" (Rich 654). Women now have more cultural privileges so they are told they need to trap/trick a man into the idea of marriage. This benefits the dominant power of white heterosexual males because it keeps their power. This relates to the next stereotype of the single woman. Since married women have more perks and value in society, the single woman is looked down upon. It is assumed that something is wrong with her that she is unable to get a spouse or boyfriend.

Women are referred to and depicted as crazy in pop culture. This cultural definition of crazy involves acting irrationally, being overly emotional, and hysterical. This was a longstanding cultural understanding of how women acted and it justified why society believed they were not as capable as men. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant explores the notion that women are "hysterical" in their book *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy*. They look back at the medical diagnosis of hysteria that was given to women for centuries. It blamed women's behavior on the uterus, creating a false association with women's behavior in society and biology. They state "Hysteria gave medical sanction to the idea that women's bodies predisposed them to emotional or irrational behavior. No need to ask why she might be angry, frustrated, listless, tearful, interested in sex, or not interested in sex. The womb provided a ready answer" (Mizejewski and Sturtevant 1). This belief fuels the cultural ideology that women need men. If they are incapable they have to become reliant on a male to handle things and provide for them. The cultural fantasy that a prince is going to save a princess has plagued society. Women are brought up with this ideology and internalize the idea that they are incapable.



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Women are involved in a cultural double standard of sexual purity. Fischer explains in “Purity and Pollution: Sex as a Moral Discourse” that slut is used on girls to create power structure out of sexual criteria on the purity and pollution scale. Women with multiple partners are sluts but men who do the same things do not receive multiple labels. These criteria within groups is used to separate groups based on power (Fischer). This ideology fuels the idea that women are not driven by their sexual urges, while men presumably are. Since women are believed to not have this natural sexual drive, they are expected to act sexually pure and subordinate to men. If women sleep around more than is socially acceptable they are referred to as sluts or other derogatory labels.

Males are subjected to a plethora of stereotypes as well. First, men are culturally expected to be providers for their wife and children. Because men are expected to work away from the home to be able to support the family. It is socially acceptable for the father to have limited time with his family. Men are not expected to balance family life because of their obligation to be the breadwinner. The stereotypical breadwinner is the decision maker in the family. Men are culturally dominant in all aspects of life including the home.

Men also fall into the stereotype that they have to trick a significant other into marriage. Stereotypical power dynamics in a marriage force the men into the financially providing role and women into a service providing role. Men stereotypically have to trick a woman into wanting to take care of him. Culturally, women should have all the housework done, and a meal ready for the husband and children every night. A man believes he has to trick a woman into voluntarily filling that role for him.

Stereotypical men are opposite in the double standard described earlier. Men are culturally assumed to be motivated by sex. This assumption justifies the bachelor status men

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receive in society. If men sleep around they are praised in society because they are assumed to be fueled by sex. Men are stereotypically praised for being bachelors. Because men are typically the financial providers they do not need a partner, so society accepts their choice to remain single. Men are also the dominating power so they set the standard. In "Purity and Pollution: Sex as a Moral Discourse" Fischer states "sexual morality is about trying to control other's sex lives" (Fischer 52). Men benefit from the double standard because they get to mess around and it keeps the women pure. They have reasons for continuing to control sexual morality as the dominant power.

Lastly men stereotypically are not vulnerable. They are socially not allowed to show emotion or weakness. This stereotype is the macho man that is tough. The G.I. Joe action figure embodies this stereotype and culturally reproduces it. In "Barbie and G.I. Joe Making Bodies Masculine and Feminine" Lorber and Moore state "G.I. Joe actions figures have also had a long run as a favorite toy for boys, but the figures have undergone changes to keep up with the newer ideal of a more muscled male body" (Lorber and Moore 63). Young boys conceptualize what the male ideal is and expect all men to look and act like the figures they grew up with.

These stereotypes show up in the comedic material of the eight stand-up specials in this study. The comedians construct their humor in ways that debate the validity of the stereotypes, as well as sometimes reinforce them. Iliza Shlesinger and Ali Wong use charged humor to debate the stereotypes and challenge how society thinks of them. Chris D'Elia reinforces stereotypes in his comedy by anticipating the audience's perception of the stereotypes he uses in his comedy. Gender is a complex and messy topic. For example, in attempt to challenge a stereotype a comedian might implicitly reinforce another. Many jokes

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are elaborate and involve multiple punch lines. Comedian's start with one topic and string as much humor as they can into the logical progression of the joke. The jokes examined in this study are sections of longer jokes that involve multiple stereotypes. For the purpose of isolating moments within the comedy, the longer jokes are looked at in sections based on the stereotypes and gender norms discussed.

### **STAND-UP SPECIALS/TYPES OF JOKES**

#### **ROLE REVERSAL**

The role reversal joke happens when a male or female comedian puts themselves in the shoes of the opposite sex within a certain scenario. The role reversal jokes seen in the acts of these selected comedians describes how they would act under the same circumstances as the stereotypical behavior of the opposite sex. The comedians depict scenes in which they would do the same action when in the opposite sex's position. This reinforces the stereotypical behavior of the opposite gender because it justifies the behavior. At the same time, it also equalizes the behavior because both genders are acting on the intuition. This shows that no sex is naturally better than the other in certain circumstances. This adds to the argument of equality for men and women.

Wong talks about having a nanny to watch her child because she and her husband both work. The joke starts off by Wong saying she will never hire a nanny under the age of 62. The joke creates the stereotypical image of the hot female nanny that tempts the husband to cheat. She then describes a hypothetical scene if her household were to hire a young sexy male nanny. She furthers the joke by saying she would equally be tempted to cheat with the male nanny on her husband. When she describes the role reversal she admits that she is

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theoretically at fault for the same behaviors as the stereotypical male in the stereotypical hot nanny scenario. This joke reinforces men's socially expected sexual behavior and motives. The role reversal gives the lie to the notion that women don't have sex drives; it shows that women, like men, might be interested in sex for reasons other than reproducing or pleasing men. This joke equalizes the behavior of both sexes because it highlights that sexual motives and instincts are natural for both sexes. Men and women are at fault to the sexual pressures and would act in the same way.

D'Elia talks about an epiphany he had as he got older. He understands why women are crazy. D'Elia uses crazy to depict the stereotype described earlier that women are hysterical and do not have control over their emotions. This is reinforcing the stereotype of women being irrational. He justifies the stereotypical behavior because males "go inside" females, meanwhile straight males stereotypically do not let anyone "go inside." He states that if he were a female he would act just as crazily. He explains that we would guard his sexuality and not want to sleep with any men. This reinforces the stereotypes that women are sexually pure and that they act in an irrational manner. When he is performing the joke he is dancing around stage keeping his legs squeezed tightly together and using his hands to guard his sexual parts. This also justifies the behavior that females are crazy because he admits if he were a female living with the same cultural pressures, he would act the same way. This creates confirmation of the cultural assumptions about how females are expected to act in Western society. This joke also reinforces men's sexualized behavior. Although he claims he would act in the same manner as a "crazy woman" these claims reinforce rape culture and naturalize men's out of control sex drive. This joke ultimately benefits him because it justifies men's behaviors in society.

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#### **SARCASAM**

Sarcasm is one of the most common forms of comedy used in everyday life. The comedians say something and use a sarcastic tone of voice to indicate that they do not agree with the textual meaning of the words that were said. Sarcasm uses irony for a comparison of the textual meaning and the intended meaning. This type of comedy used specifically to discuss gender roles challenges the gender norms in the stand-up routines examined for this study. The comedians say what is culturally expected but the sarcastic tone alludes to the audience that they do not agree with the literal meaning of what was said.

Wong uses sarcasm to talk about feminism. She starts her joke with a book she read called *Lean In* by the COO of Facebook. The book is a call to action to women to demand a seat at the table and equal opportunities. She then sarcastically states “our job used to be no job, we had it so good,”...“we could have done the smart thing which would have been playing dumb for the next century.” She is using sarcasm to push back at the cultural assumptions that being a housewife is easy. Females are stereotyped as being dumb and incapable. She makes fun of the idea that women have it easy while they are suppressed, while they have some of the largest responsibilities of being a mother and caretaker. Wong says “we’re dumb women we don’t know how to do anything, so we better stay at home and eat snacks all day and watch Ellen.” She continues the argument with addressing what the audience must be thinking. Wong engages in a dialog with herself by commenting “but Ali, women have more options now” with “oh really you don’t think you had options when your day was unscheduled, unsupervised, and most importantly sponsored?” She is being sarcastic because she wants to question the assumptions that women had it easy. When she makes the sarcastic comments out loud it makes the cultural assumptions sound ridiculous. Rubin in

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“The Traffic of Women” states “A thorough going feminist revolution would liberate more than women. It would liberate forms of sexual oppression, and it would liberate human personality from the straightjacket of gender” (Rubin 52). It is clear in Ali Wong is being sarcastic that feminism is the worst thing to happen to women. It will help eliminate the social oppression of women in all aspects of life.

Wong describes how people are shocked that she decided to come back to stand-up after having a child. She mentions that she is swamped with the question “how do you balance family and career” but comments that fathers never get that question. She responds to her own comment by saying “because they neglect the child for 90% of the day and its socially acceptable.” She is being sarcastic because she wants to emphasize that it is unfair to mothers that they are judged harshly when they decide to work while fathers are socially excused from the same expectation.

Shlesinger talks about the cultural norm that males are expected to hit on females. She pokes fun at a common backlash against the feminist movements to create the joke. It has been argued that females should be expected to hit on males because they are fighting for equality. If women want to be equal to men, people argue that they should be responsible for hitting on men and not expect men to hit on them. The goal of this backlash is to highlight a social “luxury” that women will have to give up if they are fighting for equality. She explains her thought process of a fight for equality in regards to males and females. She prefaces the joke by saying because women are not equal to men, it is uncomfortable to hit on men. She starts the joke by introducing the idea of a utopia where both genders are equal. Next she responds with a sarcastic statement saying that women have fought for equality for centuries

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so that “our great grand girls can hit on men, yes our great granddaughter will know the thrill of hitting on a half in the bag Guido outside a taco truck at 2am. Tis but a dream.” She is using sarcasm to dismiss the backlash that the feminist movement gets. It is obvious in her joke that centuries of fighting were not motivated so women can hit on men. The idea that women can hit on men is not the equality the feminist movement is aiming to address. When she says it sarcastically it allows the audience to question the validity of the backlash. The irony allows for the sarcastic comment to carry humor. She challenges the feminist stereotypes which often gets a bad rep in stand-up performances. Backlash of the feminist movement is rooted in toxic masculinity. There is a cultural misconception that the feminist movement is demanding more power than men. The feminist movement is not trying to overtake men as a dominant social group, it is fighting for equal privileges to the dominant social group. She sets up the joke with giving her views on feminism to allow the audience to understand the views she is trying to challenge. This is done so the joke can land for all audience members who have a clear understanding of her position. There are many cultural conceptions of what feminism is and what a feminist might look like. Shlesinger had to paint the picture of her idea as a feminist so the audience could see the irony. This joke is tackling a power battle that roots back centuries in a light humored way.

#### **CULTURAL COMPARISON: EXPECTATION VERSUS REALITY**

Cultural norms and ideas shape people’s expectations. These expectations are not always rooted in reality. Comedians can use the audience’s cultural expectations against an experience that they share. This is to show case the discrepancies from the cultural expectations to reality when cultural assumptions are applied to everyday life. The larger the

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discrepancy the funnier the joke can become. The comedian alludes to a cultural expectation but challenges the idea with an everyday life example of behavior that deviates from the norm and challenges the validity of the stereotype. The comedian discussing these discrepancies gives the audience a chance to question their cultural hegemonic assumptions. The gender binaries are important for this joke because the comedian needs to pinpoint how the audience construct an assumption based on their hegemonic assumptions about gender. When the comedians experience antinormative behavior in their life they can construct humor from the discrepancies between cultural assumptions and everyday experience.

Wong in her second special is returning to stand-up after the birth of her first child. The experiences she had during her time raising her newborn provided material for her stand-up. Wong jokes that breast feeding is supposed to be the “beautiful bonding harmony” between a mother and her child. She then goes on to explain it had been “chronic physical torture” and a “savage ritual that reminds [her] that [her] body is a cafeteria.” She describes the unspoken toll that breast feeding takes on her body and her wallet. As the joke continues she gets more descriptive, by explaining how her ducts clog frequently and the elaborate and expensive steps she takes take to get them unclogged. She ends the joke with a cry for paid maternity leave. This challenges the idea that motherhood is natural and instinctual. She describes the difficulties of motherhood during the child’s earliest years. Western culture looks down on mothers when they are having a difficult time, but there are minimal outlets for these struggles to be discussed. The lack of information mothers have is a handicap when a female is to go through those crucial milestones. This joke brings to the surface the struggle of mothers in America, in particular, the only developed nation that lacks universal and paid maternity leave. Women are valued in society to fulfill roles that are not monetarily valued



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but necessary for a capitalist society. Adrienne Rich discusses the need for patriarchy in a capitalist society in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” She uses the healthcare industry as an example of how society reflects the needs of capitalism. “The advice given to American women by male health professionals, patriarchy in the areas of marital sex, maternity, and child care, has echoed the dictates of the economic marketplace and the role of capitalism has needed women to play in production and/ or reproduction” (Rich 633). White straight males are the dominant powers of society and they force women to fill reproductive roles that are needed for the survival of the capitalist system. Under this system, women are valued for roles that are not compensated monetarily. Wong in her joke touches upon the assumptions that women do not have to work hard because they are not out in the workforce making money. Jokes like these bring up the raw experiences of people that our society turns a blind eye to. Wong discussing these aspects in a comedic way allows the information to be digested more easily. Western society has shown resistance to the acceptance of breastfeeding. Mothers in America are shamed while breastfeeding in public. The humor in this joke allows the audience to laugh about bodily aspects of breastfeeding, despite western society’s conflicted views on breastfeeding. Shining light on aspects of motherhood that are not included in the stereotypical image of a perfect mother challenges the cultural assumptions about motherhood.

Shlesinger describes how males and females answer the question of how a couple met. She provides different stories of the same event so the different perspectives exemplify how males and females act. When females answer the question they give an entire fairy-tale like narrative. Males’ answers are short and similar to one another. Shlesinger jokes that no matter who you ask, a guy’s answer will sound similar to the one she describes on stage. Every male

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describes that he saw her across the room somewhere but says it in a tone which implies that he can still “fuck” if he wanted too. The way she describes the female’s response expresses a tone of fate or destiny, playing from the cultural aspiration of fairytale stories. Adrienne Rich addresses the desire for marriage by saying “heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment” (Rich 654). This allusion reinforces the stereotype that women need men to save them, and that women forfeit their agency to be with a man. On the contrary, the way she describes the males’ answer expresses the independence and lack of social need to be in a relationship. This ultimately symbolizes that females socially need men, but men socially do not need women. Although the explanation of how a couple met is simple, Shlesinger continues the joke to elaborate on what actually goes into the scenario. Women have to doll themselves up to be picked by a man in the crowd. Females lie and say they are not even trying but secretly they want to be noticed. Females also analyze all the males in the room way before the male will even notice her. This joke challenges the cultural desire to live in a fairytale, but this joke also reinforces the stereotypes about social power dynamics of men and women in relationships.

D’Elia often jokes that he is not masculine or does not fall into the masculine stereotype. He states he cannot become a father because he is not masculine enough to set an example for his son. He exemplifies this by discussing how he cries at the end of the movie *Kazaam*. He then paints a picture of what it is supposed to look like when men cry. He states that men are only allowed to cry while on their knees in slow motion, holding their dying friend while choppers fly overhead in a heroic military scene. In D’Elia’s reality he ended up tearing up and making a “bitch” sound while the little boy in the movie tells Shaquille O’Neal that he considers him a friend. He is reinforcing the stereotype of the tough guy who is not

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allowed to show feeling or vulnerability. However, he is also questioning the stereotype because D'Elia uses his own example to challenge the idea because he does not live up to the masculine ideal. The joke uses the stereotypical tough guy to point out that not every male can act like that, suggesting that there is room for males like him who do not embody those characteristics.

### **STORYTELLING**

Story telling is a broad classification of a joke that involves an array of smaller components, but for the purpose of this type of joke, it will showcase how comedians portray the opposite sex. Often times in stories the comedian describes events that involve themselves as well as other characters. In order to portray the story, comedians have to act out all of the characters, which can be of any gender. When comedians act out characters of the opposite sex they take on an acting side to their stand-up performance by enhancing body language and impressions. This type of acting leads to reinforcing stereotypes. The clearer the comedian can portray the picture the funnier the joke will be and the better it will land with the audience. In order to create the clearest picture for the audience, comedians act the genders in stereotypical fashion because that is how the audience members expect a male or female to be portrayed. The comedians embody the characteristics that shape the stereotype. When a woman comedian has to act like a male in a story, she will typically broaden her shoulders, deepen her voice and or walk wide-legged like she has a penis between her legs. When men act out a woman they typically make their voice higher, fake twirl their hair, or walk on their tippy toes like they are wearing high heels. All these actions feed into the stereotypical image of the male and female binary. Storytelling could also encompass others of the joke styles, but

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for this joke style segmentation I am using it to analyze how the comedians act out the other sex.

In her special *Freezing Hot* Shlesinger talks about how females hate deciding what to eat and when. She mentions how her friends repeatedly have problems deciding where to eat because it becomes a standoff. No one from the group wants to be the first person to say they are hungry because no one wants to admit that they are hungry. The females are trying to make suggestions of something that a group of women can agree on. They debate over a flat bread or tapas. While Shlesinger is acting out the story she is portraying herself as even more stereotypical to portray her and her friends. Shlesinger's identity resembles the stereotypical attractive white female. She embodies that identity and heightens it to act out the social interaction. Her voice gets higher, she gets indecisive, and makes annoying superficial comments. She is reinforcing the stereotypical valley girl characteristics. Even acting out her own gender and other females in it she uses the stereotypes to portray the story in an explicit manner. She is joking that all the females are not eating or eating air because of the physical expectations that women should be skinny and the extremes that females will go to in order to achieve that expectation. The story also highlights the stereotypical female as indecisive but hard to please. The girls in the story act like they do not care about the decision but make passive aggressive comments about the ideas in a negative manner. This special was performed before Shlesinger started to shift the content of her comedy. Shlesinger portrays women in this heightened stereotypical manner for almost the entirety of the special. These jokes are a benchmark example to understand how Iliza Shlesinger changed her comedic style over her career because this study focuses on the most recent specials, *Elder Millennial* and *Confirmed Kills*.

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D'Elia recalls a time that he ran into his ex-girlfriend and her mom. He first mentions how he distinctly remembers wearing his favorite orange shirt and he explicitly reassured the audience that it was in fact orange. He explains that his ex-girlfriend's first reaction was questioning why he was wearing a pink shirt because he never wore pink while they were dating. He expresses his reactions to the audience but held them in during the actual interaction. The ex-girlfriend was accompanied by her mother who D'Elia had never met before, so the ex-girlfriend then said "Chris, this is my mom." D'Elia responded with "hello mom" due to his lack of information about her mother. The girlfriend got annoyed and snarled back "not your mom, MY mom." D'Elia embodies the stereotypical female in his impressions of her dialog during his performance of the stand-up. He goes on a rant about how ridiculous it would be if he actually thought that was his mom and he was meeting her for the first time. Throughout the whole joke he is impersonating his ex-girlfriend, implying that she is stupid, annoying, and irrational. He bit his tongue throughout the whole interaction because he wanted to get out of it as quickly as possible, but he lets out all the thoughts he was holding in on stage. This reinforced the negative stereotypes of woman being naggy, and argumentative. Later on in the set he alludes to the fact that every girl he has dated loves to argue and it is most likely his fault because he is the common factor in all of the examples. He brushes that thought away quickly with "we are not going to talk about this now." He is reasonable to acknowledge that is not the female's fault, but the way the joke is structured, it implied the opposite. He spends the majority of the bit emphasizing the ex-girlfriend's behavior and devotes one sentence to his behavior. The joke is able to solicit a laugh because of his accurate impression of a stereotypical female. After witnessing his version of the story and his

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acting, the audience can interpret it as reality and those stereotypes are solidified in their perception.

#### **SHOCK VALUE**

Shock value humor pushes the audience to have a reaction of surprise. The goal is to do or say something unexpected. Shock value uses discomfort to create humor. This discomfort allows for progress of cultural ideology. The comedians describe or do something that the audience was not anticipating or is not used to seeing. Overtime this exposure to shocking, antinormative behavior destigmatizes the stereotypes used in the joke. This comedy along with social progression in other institutions advances ideas about gendered cultural norms. Shock value humor allows the audience to reflect and question why they were shocked or surprised. This reflection also allows the assumptions the audience had about gendered cultural norms to be questioned.

Wong shares her birthing story and then compares it to that of her friend. She jokes that a C-section is the emergency exit of childbirth so she questions why anyone would want to go through all that labor pain if that is an option. Wong ended up in labor but eventually had a C-section. She compares it to her friend who previously was the kindest and sweetest person she knew. After being in labor for 72 hours she had to have an emergency C-section. Wong visited her friend after her child was born. Wong's friend opened the door and immediately pulled up her dress showing her vagina to not only Wong but the entire cul-de-sac. Then Wong describes the gruesome remains of her friend's vagina after 72 hours of labor. On stage during her performance, Wong mimics her friend and lifts up her dress, revealing her underwear on stage and impersonating all of the interactions Wong shared with

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her friend. This holds shock value in two ways. The first is Wong friend's reactions and actions after child birth. The second shock value comes from Wong's impersonations of it on stage. The audience wouldn't have expected the outcomes of her friend's birthing story or Wong's actions of lifting up her dress on stage. The audience is picturing the stereotypical mother who is caring, reserved, compassionate, and dainty. Wong is portraying a loud, vulgar, bitter woman. The audience's shock in Wong's story challenges the cultural image of what a mother looks and acts like. A mother showing her vagina to others and describing the grotesque remains of her vagina after 72 hours of labor challenges the assumptions that mothers are reserved and polite. The audience is exposed to an image of a mother that is ideologically antinormative from the audience's expectations. This progresses the cultural image of a mother in Western society by challenging the idea that all mothers fit into one image.

Shlesinger out of nowhere disses penises. She says that they are the ugliest thing on earth. She then describes in detail the visual image of male genitalia along with some humorous comparisons. She started the joke off talking about women's insecurities. She states in response to addressing women's insecurities "whatever you do have as a woman, whatever your body looks like, girls however bad you think it is pales in comparison to the look of 100% of scrotums." She then with a shocked look on her face is screaming "wtf is that" acting as if she is looking at a scrotum. She compares the look of a scrotum to two dead baby birds hanging. She continues her description by stating that they hang so low they hit the toilet water. With her detailed descriptions the audience is all able to picture what she is describing and the joke lands well. Similar to Wong's joke, it has shock value in two ways. The first is the descriptive depiction of male genitalia. In the media or pop culture, penises are rarely

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described but when they are discussed they are depicted in a simplistic manner, with two circles for the balls and a cylinder for the shaft. Therefore, the detailed manner of her joke was surprising to the audience. The second was the fact that it was a woman describing it. It is not socially acceptable for women to be vulgar. Shlesinger uses her identity as a woman on stage and challenges the assumption that women are not vulgar. Identity and cultural meaning are inseparable in comedy. The identity of the comic plays a role in their ability to challenge or reinforce cultural norms.

#### **FEMININE MASCULINE METAPHOR**

Ideologically “feminine” and “masculine” are separated into binaries that are assumed to be opposite. In reality, masculinity and femininity have a more complicated relationship. Comedians can use these characteristics to create an ironic metaphor. For example, a joke can include an assumed masculine action or idea in a feminine way or vice versa. This creates humor because it challenges the audience’s initial subconscious reactions about the particular action or idea the comedian is describing. This brings to the surface the unconscious ideas of masculinity and femininity and forces the audience to think of their interpretations of the actions and ideas.

Wong describes her ideal future as a housewife. Wong’s ideas and perceptions change and progress overtime. Before Wong has a child her perceptions about motherhood and marriage were slightly different. The perspective shift is evident in her second special when she reflects on her actual experiences of motherhood and marriage based on her perceptions before. The cultural assumption of a housewife is a dependent, delicate, female who stays at home to care for her husband and children. Wong’s dream description of being a housewife



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did not include any of those characteristics. She complains that at work she has to use a public restroom when she needs to shit. She wants to be a housewife because she can shit in the comfort of her own bathroom. She is describing the perks of staying home due to the gross masculine type aspects rather than the expected feminine characters of being a housewife. This pushed back the perfect image of a housewife as a dainty, pure caregiver. Wong is looking at the other appeals of being a housewife people would assume are masculine.

The she-dragon is a character that Shlesinger has used in the past and continually elaborates the character through her stand-up. The she-dragon embodies the grosser side of females that is hidden from public eyes. She challenges the men in the room to look out for it the next time his significant other's she-dragon comes out. She uses the example of a boyfriend coming over to her apartment for the first time to express her she-dragon. The boyfriend lingers the next morning when the she dragon is trying to come out because Shlesinger is exhausted, hungry and tired. The boyfriend assumes that she stays put together after he leaves but that is when the she-dragon comes out. The she-dragon is waiting to take a "Jurassic shit" once he leaves. Shlesinger is acting out the persona of an actual dragon and flies into the kitchen to get a sleeve of Oreos and toast them with fire breath and eat them in one bite. Although the actual dragon is a persona, the character embodies the hidden side of females that hold in farts and shits while around their partners. The she-dragon also exemplifies the hangry side of females that goes unnoticed. Shlesinger uses the dragon to symbolize the not so "feminine" parts of a female.

In D'Elia's special *Incorrigible* he describes men in sports in an emasculating way. D'Elia paints scenes of grown males who are sports fanatics painting their faces and

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screaming at other grown males. D'Elia states "take yourself outside of society and realize what a bitch move that is." He is describing sports that is culturally seen as a masculine activity and describing it as "bitch," which is a word that has feminine assumptions. By calling it "bitch" it is emasculating the idea by associating it with femininity. He acknowledges that males' behaviors in sports is socially masculine but without the context of culture the actions are emasculating. D'Elia hates that men wear sports jerseys. D'Elia then proposes a "new rule" in sports. If a grown man is wearing a sports jersey with another man's name on the back, that athlete has the right to fuck the man wearing it. He jokes about Wayne Gretzky running into someone with a jersey of his. This joke questions masculinity in sports. Males' behaviors in sports is culturally normative. D'Elia is using the assumed masculinity of sports and describes it as feminine and subordinate. This comparison allows the audience to question the actions of either themselves or others and the seeming arbitrariness of what is deemed manly or girly. However, this joke also reinforces rape culture. The dominant power in the scenario is an athlete; they get "rights" to fuck the subordinate which is the man who is cheering the athlete on by wearing a jersey. This associates masculine as the dominant power which has rights to fuck and feminine as the subordinate power which get fucked.

### **EXAGGERATION OF THE EXTREMELY TRUE OR EXTREMELY FALSE**

Exaggeration of the extremely true and extremely false describe scenarios that either are very relatable to the audience or so off the audience could not have expected it. When the joke is extremely true the audience feels as if the comedian is reading their mind. This reinforces norms because it requires the comedian to act on the audience's cultural expectations of normative behavior. When the joke is extremely false it takes the audience by

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surprise. When the joke is extremely false it forces the audience to question their assumptions, but because the ideas are so bogus it reinforces their original assumptions or normative behavior by making them seem realistic and logical. The comedian strings the audience along so that they are starting to anticipate the punch line. Once the comedian has the audience's expectations right where he/she wants them, the comedian gives a punch line that is so distorted from the audience's expectation it is humorous. The joke lands well when the comedian can direct the audience's assumption so that they can later manipulate them.

Wong talks about how her and her husband got engaged. She knew she wanted to get married so she passively alluded to a proposal at times in her relationship. Her boyfriend at the time was not getting the subtle hints, so she started to act aggressively towards him. She jokes that she would threaten to leave if he didn't propose. She explained that was an empty threat because she is too old to start the "manipulation cycle" with someone else. The manipulation cycle reinforces the idea that a woman needs to trap a man into marriage. Then when her husband proposes she acts overly surprised. This is the stereotypical proposal scene that is broadcasted in society. Females always want to be surprised by the romantic proposal but most couples talk about marriage before the male proposes. This elicits laughter because the audience has had some sort of exposure to this scenario in their life. And the more descriptive and accurate Wong gets the funnier it is because it seems as if she is reading the audience's mind. This reinforces the idea of a fairy tale relationship and all the aspects, one being the proposal, that society pressures us to have. These ideas and norms are fed into the minds of society through images, movies, stories, and pop culture. When the exact fairy tale story doesn't happen, couples have to embellish the story to make it look like it happened. Wong had to threaten her husband to propose but when he did she had to act shocked because

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people expect proposals to be like that. This challenges the cultural assumption that the ideal fairytale wedding is the norm. Females send their boyfriends pictures of engagement rings they want and then are “surprised” when they know the exact one to get for them. It’s irony is used to create humor. The stereotypes of the male and female in the fairytale wedding are getting reconsidered in this scenario that audiences can relate to. The female is not typically depicted as assertive, while the male is not depicted as passive, but in Wong’s relatable, recognizable story, we see that the stereotypical characteristics are in fact reversed.

Shlesinger discusses how males and females handle rejection differently. She jokes that males are better at sexual rejection than females. She sarcastically rattles off a list of ways in which females are better at dealing with rejection when it comes to “governing our own bodies, having our own thoughts, getting paid less for the same job a man does.” She then mentions that all men know that hitting on women is about the “at bats;” if he swings for 20 and hits one, it does not matter because he hit one. By the reaction of the men in the crowd they affirmed her joke. Then she explains that males are better at rejection because males are not allowed to show feelings, so they are forced to brush it off. Females hold onto the pain of rejection and use that for baggage in their next relationship. From the reaction of the women in the audience, they also affirmed this behavior. She finishes the joke with a more transparent answer into the psychology of a female’s brain for why rejection is more hurtful as a female. She states that deep down women hold onto the feelings of rejection because they know deep down that he is not rejecting them for their shoes or their top, he is rejecting them because of their eggs. This confirms both male and female stereotypes. Shlesinger’s description that men are interested in the quantity of women they hit on confirms the stereotype that men are

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sexual beings. Females are expected to be emotional and vulnerable so the inability to handle rejection also confirms this stereotype.

D'Elia elaborates on a previous joke and claims how it is easy to be gay. In Western culture it is known that being gay is not an "easy" lifestyle. Homosexuals are denied social acceptance, and sometimes even rights. They are prone to prejudice and social oppression from the dominant social power which is white heterosexual males. Patriarchal society does not favor homosexuality. This statement alone is extremely false. He states that "you do not need a special skill set to be gay." He goes further and states that's you can have sex with a guy without being gay. He finished it with it is so easy to be gay you can have sex with another male by mistake. The scenario that he describes is so obscure and is very improbable of happening. His joke pretends that it can happen which is an example of something that is so extremely false that it becomes funny. D'Elia paints the scene starting off with one male who happens to be bent over with no pants on in a room. The next male walks in the room who is also not wearing pants and happens to be aroused. The male who just walked into the room slipped and accidentally entered the other male. This scene has too many rare factors that it seems extreme to say that is easy for this to happen by mistake. This reinforces Jane Ward's research. In Jane Ward's book *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* she explains the scenarios when homosexual behavior is looked over and passed off as heterosexual in society. D'Elia reinforces that having sex with the same sex does not make one a homosexual; rather it is other characteristics or actions that do. This scenario shows how sexuality can be determined without any sexual actions. The improbability of the abstract story D'Elia describes amuses the crowd.

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#### **TRAPPING THE SIGNIFICANT OTHER**

A common theme throughout the routines of all three comedians is the idea that one has to trap their significant other. This is not a joke style because of its comedic structure but the material of the jokes is seen throughout all of the stand-up specials. Our culture encourages the institution of marriage. People in society have a fear of being alone which is fueled by the societal pressures to marry. Both sexes compensate for this by trying to trap someone into that long-term relationship of marriage. Shlesinger relates how females attract men to the behavior of wild animals. She starts off the joke by explaining that men do not like strong opinionated women. She explains that a lion is going to go after the gazelle with the broken hoof rather than the gazelle that is not torn down by self-esteem issues and has a home and a PhD. She finishes off the joke saying that it is called "a damsel in distress, not an overly opinionated dyke who needs a hand man." This is pushing against the cultural idea that females need to be saved. This idea stems from the princess stories and teaches girls at a young age that they need to wait for a male to come save them. She is being sarcastic when she says these comments because she wants to question the mentality behind it. She wants to challenge the idea that females have to act vulnerable or change themselves to attract a male just so they can get married. She discusses her own marriage and how her husband asked her not to wear basketball shorts to bed, because he wasn't sexually attracted to her in them. She responds to him - yeah that's the point "thanks for the ring." Wong discusses a similar point of her marriage once she was engaged.

Wong discusses trapping her husband throughout most of the jokes she makes. Her husband went to Harvard and when she first met him she immediately thought he was out of her league. She discusses in *Baby Cobra* how she acted when they were dating in order to trap

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his earning potential. She furthers this idea in *Hard Knock Wife*. She discusses how her husband is fully trapped now because they have a child and a mortgage so it is not easy to get out of that. Because the husband is trapped with a mortgage and a child Wong does not have to sexually please him anymore. The child was the sexual out for her because she is no longer afraid he will leave. Wong ironically has to sign a prenuptial agreement when she got married to her husband because her husband's family was skeptical of her. In *Hard Knock Wife*, she discusses how in the end he trapped her because she paid off all his Harvard loans with her comedy money and she is the breadwinner.

D'Elia discusses the idea of trapping a female from a male's perspective. He discusses how all males want to have sex all of the time. He mentions his friends who become friends with girls who want to only remain friends. D'Elia questions their mentality to stay because he compares it to going to the store to get contact solution. If the store doesn't have contact solution, why would you wait around until maybe one day they have contact solution. But he then goes onto explain that men want to have sex with all of the women out there all of the time, while women want to have sex with maybe one or two guys some of the time. D'Elia's friends wait out a friendship with girls until maybe one day they will want to sleep with them. They are holding out this friendship so that one day men can trap the women into a relationship so the men can have sex frequently. This reinforces the male stereotype that they are sexual beings, as well as reinforcing that women are pure and hold onto their sexual purity. In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and The Lesbian Experience" Adrienne Rich explains that one of the ways men control women is by forcing male sexuality on them. She states "the socialization of women to feel that male sexual drive amounts to a right" (Rich 638).

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#### **FINDINGS**

Stand-up comedy is a platform that hosts a discussion about cultural norms and ideas. Stand-up provides the opportunity to either challenge or reinforce stereotypes and cultural norms. In this study I examined three comedians who challenge and reinforce gendered cultural norms. Since gender is a complicated topic there are many aspects to gendered cultural norms that can be challenged or reinforced. Western culture puts ideas, actions, and people into two binaries: male and female. Each binary has cultural expectations and characteristics. These cultural norms evolve incrementally overtime.

The overlap of Benign-Violation theory requires a violation to create humor. Antinormative behavior happens on a daily basis. This behavior allows for material for comedians to use as a violation. The comedians use gendered antinormative violations and make them benign to craft their jokes. This overlap of theories exemplifies why stereotypes are reinforced or challenged, whether or not the comedian's intention is to challenge or reinforce them. Comedians who are conscious of their comedic decisions and use charged humor challenge norms and stereotypes. Ali Wong and Iliza Shlesinger use their comedy to intentionally challenge gendered cultural norms. Their stand-up specials have a consistent theme with almost every joke involving gendered stereotypes and gendered cultural norms. Chris D'Elia, on the other hand, challenges cultural norms about gender, but not as much as Wong and Shlesinger do. D'Elia's specials include a plethora of other topics and he admits he has no intention of including a theme. His only goal is to make the audience laugh. He uses different styles discussed in the paper. His comedy, as exemplified earlier, both challenges and reinforces gendered cultural norms. Since he does not use charged humor, the reinforcement or challenge of gendered cultural norms is a byproduct of certain joke styles.



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Wong and Shlesinger's primary goal is to make the audience laugh but their secondary goal is to challenge gendered cultural norms.

All comedians reinforce and challenge cultural norms through charged humor or subconscious humor. Gender is a complicated, intricate, and messy topic in its nature. It is next to impossible to use only charged humor in a stand-up special. There will always be subconscious reinforcement of the gendered cultural norms mixed into a set. When there is no explicit message that challenge norms are stereotypes, traditional gender ideology is reinforced. In stand-up comedy, then, using no message is still reinforcing the gendered cultural norms. Since gender is complicated there is a push and pull of ideas. In stand-up there is challenging and reinforcing both happening within the set, but the proportions of each are different based on the comedian's identity, style, and intention. Comedians who use charged humor have more content that challenges the gendered stereotypes. This study shows the different comedic style of jokes that consistently lead to challenging gender stereotypes. These types include sarcasm, shock value, and feminine and masculine metaphor. Comedians who use charged humor lean towards these styles because they can clearly dispute the stereotype to the audience. Comedians who are not using charged humor but incorporate these styles are challenging norms and stereotypes in a subconscious way.

Comedians also reinforce gender norms in a subconscious way. The comedians themselves are products of society and they are susceptible to the same thought processes that Western society ingrains in its members. In other words, like all of us, comedians think about gender in ways that the media and other cultural "educators" teach. Charged humor has a message that is clearer than subconscious humor because the comedians make sure the message is clear to the audience. Subconscious humor that does not have an obvious message

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is passed off as a neutral exchange, but this reinforces the norms presented. The joke styles such as, role reversal, expectation vs reality, storytelling, extremely true or extremely false tend to reinforce gender norms. The reinforcement of the stereotypes presented are a byproduct of the style of joke. These jokes have more layers and require larger set up times so they involve aspects that challenge and reinforce in one joke. Not every joke can be charged because it would start to lose its humor and become preachy. It is important to always remember that humor is the primary goal and other goals come secondary. Subconscious humor fills in the gaps of charged humor in comedians' specials if they use charged humor. Comedians who subconsciously challenge or reinforce norms, like Chris D'Elia, have one primary goal to make the audience laugh and consume their comedy. When comedians who do not use charged humor use jokes styles that include sarcasm, shock value, and feminine masculine metaphor, they subconsciously challenge gender norms.

## **CONCLUSION**

Comedy is surely more than entertainment. Stand-up comedy hosts a discussion about cultural norms and ideals. Although the audience is expecting to be entertained, it is not the only thing happening onstage. As I mentioned before, the comedian's primary goals are to make money by making people laugh and consume their comedy, but some comedians have secondary goals. Comedians also partake in cultural debates, sometimes subconsciously. Society needs a place to have a discussion about cultural norms and the status quo. Just as the

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carnival provided a necessary cultural outlet during a society of serfdom, stand-up comedy allows for the questioning of cultural norms in modern day Western society. Comedy makes discussing cultural norms more palatable. Audiences are less hesitant to discuss a topic if it is presented as a joke. This allows for comedy to raise topics that people are afraid of engaging in discussion. Audience can enjoyably handle conversations about topics that may be controversial or uncomfortable in stand-up comedy because humor allows for the topics to “go down easy.” Controversial topics need to be discussed and hashed out so that they can evolve into new norms. Talking about these topics is like taking medicine; it is unpleasant but necessary. Comedy acts as a spoon full of sugar that helps those conversations take place. Stand-up comedy is a real-time debate. Spectators can watch comedy and understand the viewpoints of members in society about cultural norms at any given time. This study focused on recent stand-up specials in order to get a glimpse into the cultural debate today. Looking back at stand-up comedy from the past shows reveals gender norms of a different era. It can be used to analyze history and the cultural norms and stereotypes of that time. It allows for time travel into the minds of the audience. Comedians have to use their social understanding of the audience’s expectations. Knowing the audience’s expectations at a certain point in time assists people’s understanding of that time period. When stand-up comedy was first integrated into American pop culture, the norms and stereotypes were completely different. The cultural progression of norms can be seen through the history of comedy. Going forward, stand-up comedy, especially charged humor, continues to allow for the audience’s mind to progress and norms to change. Stand-up comedy, alongside the greater popular media, can work together and progress the ideas the society has as a whole.

**GOING FORWARD**

This study focused on gendered cultural norms. This methodology can be applied to other topics in a future study such as race, class, and political views. The connection between joke styles and intention could yield similar results about these other topics. This study can open stand-up audience's eyes to the cultural debate going on. The hegemonic nature of people minds can be awakened after understanding this study's results. In addition, comedians could use this information to further hone their use of charged humor, ensuring that their jokes carry the meaning that they intend.

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