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Intersectionality and the Construction of Humour in Contemporary Stand-up Comedy

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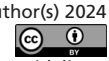

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Abstract

As an autobiographical mode of performance, stand-up comedy is interlinked with debates on identity, inequality and social justice. While much of the existing stand-up comedy and identity literature has prioritised the analysis of a single axis of identity, this study significantly extends existing analysis to examine intersectionality in stand-up comedy. Taking an innovative interdisciplinary theoretical approach derived from humour studies and cultural studies, we explore how intersectionality is involved in the construction of humour in contemporary stand-up comedy. Via a rigorous thematic analysis, we analyse the comedic material of three contemporary stand-up comedians on Netflix – Jimmy Carr, Dave Chappelle and Hannah Gadsby. We examine the intersections of their identities in terms of the representation of inequalities, privilege, discrimination and prejudice. Analysis reveals three key themes demonstrated by Carr, Chappelle and Gadsby that illuminate an original understanding of the relationship between identity, intersectionality and humour. These themes concern: 1) intersecting race, gender and sexuality; 2) depicting gendered violence; and 3) intersectional differences in the uses of disclaimers through which comedy is defended.

Keywords

Jimmy Carr, Dave Chappelle, Hannah Gadsby, gender, humour, intersectionality, Netflix, race, sexuality, stand-up comedy

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Introduction

Stand-up comedy has a long and complex relationship with identity construction, reconstruction and resistance. From Gilbert's (1997) examination of the socio-political potentials of self-deprecating comedy by women comedians to Weaver's (2010, 2011) analysis of reverse discourse in Black and Asian stand-up comedy as rhetoric and resistance, debates about how stand-up comedians negotiate and renegotiate the self and 'others' identity and contribute to understandings of identity, inequality and social justice have captured critical attention. As Gilbert reminds us, '[t]here is no "equal opportunity" humor. Some individual, group or institution is always the target of humor, especially marginal humor' (1997: 322). Much of the existing critical attention focuses on stand-up comedy and identity via analysis of a single axis of identity, such as race (Weaver, 2011; Pérez, 2022), gender (Abedinifard, 2016; Lockyer, 2011; Pérez and Greene, 2016), social class (Friedman, 2014) or disability (Lockyer, 2015; Reid et al., 2006). While there is some intersectional analysis of stand-up comedy (e.g., Blackburn, 2018; Huc-Hepher, 2021; Pickette, 2022), when compared to analysis of a single axis of identity, the intersectional dynamics of stand-up comedy performances are yet to receive sustained attention. This is perhaps surprising given recent shifts in stand-up comedy where marginalised identities are gaining prominence in Anglosphere stand-up comedy and where there is increased awareness of the complexities of identity politics. For example, since 2018 London-based FOC IT UP Comedy Club (Femmes of Colo(u)r Comedy Club) has showcased 'women, gender noncomforming, non-binary and trans-masculine performers of colo(u)r' (FOC IT UP, 2023). Bennett refers to these shifts as a 'millennial comic vernacular' (2023: 140) where stand-up comedy comments on 'oppression and non-dominant experiences' (2023: 139).

It is within this context that we explore intersectionality in contemporary stand-up comedy performances to significantly develop understandings of stand-up comedy, identity, inequality and social justice. We adopt an interdisciplinary approach that innovatively weaves together stand-up comedy theory, theoretical perspectives on the ethics of comedy and theories of intersectionality. Through centring intersectionality as the analytical lens, we examine how the structure, content, techniques, tropes and disclaimers used in stand-up comedy facilitate representation and evaluation of inequalities, privilege, discrimination and prejudice. Through thematic analysis we examine three Netflix stand-up comedy specials released over a three-year period – Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* (2018), Jimmy Carr's *His Dark Material* (2021) and Dave Chappelle's *The Closer* (2021). We identify three original themes that drive the enaction and critique of intersectionality in the stand-up comedy specials: 1) intersecting race, gender and sexuality; 2) depicting gendered violence; and 3) intersectional differences in the uses of disclaimers through which comedy is defended. Our analysis reveals how in the contemporary conjuncture, intersectionality is an issue that some stand-up comedians are deliberately constructing, critiquing and/or deconstructing in multiple and complex ways that can both support and challenge existing social hierarchies, hegemonic relations and social inequalities.

We illustrate how stand-up comedy specifically contributes to understandings of intersectionality in unique ways due to the importance of self-definition in comic

performance (Lockyer, 2015; Lockyer and De Benedictis, 2023) and the ways in which incongruity, polysemy and interpretive diversity are central to comedy (Weaver, 2011). This is important because these can work to simultaneously support and undermine discourses of intersectionality. Our analysis significantly extends literature on identity, representation and social inequalities which has often focussed on a single axis of analysis and prioritised audience reception to the detriment of considering cultural and media production (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020). We begin by contextualising stand-up comedy and identity politics through critical consideration of stand-up comedy and its relation to identity, inequality and intersectionality, and ethics and inequality. We then move on to consider our methodological framework before analysing three themes that span the Netflix stand-up comedy specials analysed and critically reflecting on their socio-political potentials.

Contextualising Stand-up Comedy and Identity, Inequality and Intersectionality

Stand-up Comedy and Identity

Stand-up comedy and identity are closely interconnected, as illustrated when we consider the features of stand-up comedy. Double identifies three defining features of stand-up comedy. In addition to being funny, stand-up comedy is characterised by 'personality', 'direct communication' and 'present tense' (2014: 19). 'Personality' highlights the importance of identity as stand-up comedy 'puts a person on display in front of an audience, whether that person is an exaggerated comic character or a version of the performer's own self' (2014: 19). Identity is also central to the roles fulfilled by stand-up comedians. Mintz argues that 'the oldest' and 'most basic' role of stand-up comedians is to be a 'negative exemplar' (1985: 75). Negative exemplars centre identity as they enact character traits (e.g., physical, emotional, psychological, political, social and cultural) that are 'socially unacceptable' and are 'enacted by the comedian to be ridiculed, laughed at, repudiated [. . .] and symbolically "punished"' (1985: 75). Mintz's second role of stand-up comedians also links to identity. This views the stand-up comedian as a 'comic spokesperson, as a mediator, an ''articulator'' of our culture, and as our *contemporary anthropologist*' (1985: 75; original emphasis). This draws attention to how comedians may speak on behalf of individuals, groups and societies, for example, to articulate how they may be treated unequally, experience discrimination and oppression, and how they may critique and resist dominant stereotypical perceptions. As Pickette (2022: 179) observes, comedy's 'power as a performative medium [is] built around the exploration of the boundaries of identity'.

Examining the politics of 'performing marginality' through stand-up comedy by women comedians, Gilbert argues that stand-up comedy is an 'autobiographical performance' that is 'unique in its simultaneous construction of personal identity and cultural critique' (1997: 317). Exploring the stand-up comedy of American women comedians, Gilbert observes that 'marginal humor' questions cultural values, norms and ideologies by ridiculing them. Autobiographical performance and cultural critique are closely interconnected: stand-up comedy 'allows the performer to perform both self and culture – to

embody the interconnections and contradictions that such autobiographical performance necessarily entails. Stand-up comedy employs autobiography almost exclusively in the service of social critique' (Gilbert, 1997: 328). This aligns with Krefting's (2014: 2) concept of 'charged humor', where comedians 'intentionally produce humor challenging social inequality and cultural exclusion'. Similarly, in her analysis of the ideological motives and intensions of disabled stand-up comedians, and their lived experiences as disabled stand-up comedians, Lockyer (2015) observes how some disabled stand-up comedians are drawn to stand-up comedy as it offers opportunities for 'comedy management and control' and for 'affirming disability through comedy', demonstrating simultaneous performance of the 'self and culture' (Gilbert, 1997: 328).

Stand-up Comedy, Inequality and Intersectionality

Critiquing interconnected oppressions and discriminations was central to the work on the social inequalities of class and race by pioneering cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1980). However, it was not until the end of the 1980s that the specific concept of intersectionality was evident in academic debates, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) created the concept to explain Black female inequalities in the US. Intersectionality allows for a consideration of the multiple parts of identity that create and contribute to inequalities. Crenshaw argued that 'Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains' (1991: 1242). To date, a parallel exists in humour studies and comedy studies, where most critiques have focused on individual aspects of identity and social structure when considering the inequalities reproduced in comedy. This is the case in relation to race, gender, class, age and disability. Highlighting the relevance of a discussion of humour and intersectionality, Crenshaw actually points to racist and sexist humour by Black men as one example of an intersectional power relationship:

> The claim that a representation is meant simply as a joke may be true, but the joke functions as humor within a specific social context in which it frequently reinforces patterns of social power. Though racial humor may sometimes be intended to ridicule racism, the close relationship between the stereotypes and the prevailing images of marginalized people complicates this strategy. And certainly, the humorist's positioning vis-a-vis a targeted group colors how the group interprets a potentially derisive stereotype or gesture (1991: 1293).

Intersectionality is a concept connected with an analysis of power, and when applied to humour, requires a consideration of the polysemy of humour alongside the intersections provoked by the joke teller, joke target and receptive and unreceptive audience. Crenshaw's early work on intersectionality is centred on power relations as complex: 'Efforts to think more clearly about when Black women are dominated as *women* and when they are dominated as *Black women* are directly related to the question of when power is *male* and when it is *white male*' (1989: 157, original emphasis). Theorisation of intersectionality is directly concerned with the different ways in which power

manifests through identities to create inequality. Crenshaw is specifically concerned with how power is 'clustered around certain categories' (1991: 1297), which is explored further in relation to the identity categories used in the construction of comedy that presents intersectionality as joke content. As Crenshaw (1991) acknowledges, considering intersectionality can develop our understanding of the inequalities enacted by comedy. Intersectionality theory works to understand inequality in its complexity, through a consideration of how the multiple aspects of identities and social structure create inequality. Multiple aspects of identity are relevant to comedians constructing comedy, their audiences and joke targets, as personality, negative exemplars and marginality interact in multiple and complex ways to create symbolic punishments. Connected to this, there is a need to investigate the differentiated experiences of comedy because the intersections of identity mean that symbolic punishments are distributed unevenly, thus creating inequalities, but also that the reading of such symbolic impacts can be interpreted differently through various intersections. This supports Gilbert's argument, noted above, that '[t]here is no "equal opportunity" humor' (1997: 322) but with the caveat that unpacking how and where humor creates symbolic harm is a multifaceted task. Furthermore, Crenshaw makes an important point on unintentionality and intersectionality that resonates with comedy theory:

> Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequences of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment (1991: 1249).

Intentionality is not needed for humour and comedy to produce polysemy, and comedy often produces unexpected or ambiguous readings (Weaver, 2011). Many comedians are known for their lack of explicit intention that helps create multiple meanings for different audience groups. Intersectionality has not been engaged with extensively in comedy, although those that do focus on a discussion of power and inequality. In relation to discursive power, Huc-Hepher (2021) employs intersectionality in a discussion of how everyday humour conveys xenophobic micro-aggressions directed at French people living in London before the EU Referendum of 2016. Other studies have focused on how there is an awareness of intersectionality in the comedy industry. Blackburn (2018) details an increased acknowledgement of intersectionality by comedians that perform socially activist comedy, both in their own identities and in others. Similarly, Pickette (2022) explores the potentials of stand-up comedy to create multi-layered understanding of Jewish identity in America through analysis of the stand-up comedy special *Black Mitzvah* by Black Jewish female comedian Tiffany Haddish. Building on these examples, we apply the concept of intersectionality to analyse three stand-up comedy Netflix specials through developing the idea that the structures of comedy interact with the intersections of identity to produce both laughter and unlaughter (Billig 2005). Following Crenshaw (1991), we focus on identity politics, inter- and intra-group differences and gendered violence, examining the comedy techniques, tropes and disclaimers that embed symbolic inequalities into the comedy performance.

Intersectionality and the Ethical Critique of Stand-Up Comedy

A consideration of the ways in which stand-up comedy can create or articulate inequality in relation to the intersections of identity is enhanced through framing this activity as an ethical engagement with or critique of comedy. There are a number of concepts that are useful for the ethical criticism of comedy. In developing this engagement in our analysis, we employ a critical humour studies approach that addresses:

> The relations between comic and other forms of discourse and rhetoric but also focuses on what is specific to jokes and joking relationships and what makes humour and comic genres distinctive as modes of communication and representation. More importantly, [it] . . . recognises the centrality of comic media in contemporary Western cultures and, on this basis, investigates the interface between humour and ethics (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008: 818).

This approach engages with comedy as more than 'just a joke' to examine how comedy structures, content, performance techniques and interconnecting discourse create meanings and representations that contribute to the discursive practices of inequality (for example, through the racist or sexist joke as a rhetorical device, microaggression or symbolic violence that can actively impact on the lived experience of intersectional identity). In our analysis, we specifically examine how the intersections of the comedian's identity work for and against discourses of inequality through comedy, thus demonstrating how comedy can be critiqued as ethically problematic or not. An approach to comedy that considers ethics is one that sees comedy as a potential form of ridicule (Billig, 2005) while also acknowledging that comedy is produced with, and produces, ambiguity. This accepts that comedy can offer more than one meaning, and that different readings may have different ethical implications. It is often said that ethical comedy should not 'punch down' or aim ridicule at those in a lower social or cultural position. Both the ambiguities of comedy and intersectionality complicate ethical readings of comedy. Indeed, the cleavages between identity categories can produce discussion and argument over what constitutes 'punching down', where a group is positioned in social structure, and how comedy contributes to social inequalities or not. Thus, there can be ambiguity over what constitutes 'charged humor' (Krefting, 2014). This is acknowledged in our analysis in order to work towards a position where critique can be rendered at ambiguous comic discourse through its mapping. The idea of the stand-up comedian as a negative exemplar (Mintz, 1985), while also reflecting autobiography (Gilbert, 1997) and personality (Double, 2014), complicate further the ethical readings of comedy as aspects of identity and intersections receive negative treatment that may not be literally read as having a specific implication, but may connote the reproduction of structural inequalities. A critical humour studies approach is cognisant to the complexities of readings in addition to the coherence and intentionality of the comedian's language because the analysis is able to unpack the connotations of comic discourse and meaningfully connect them with problematic social discourse.

Methodology

To explore how intersectionality is enacted and critiqued in contemporary stand-up comedy we examine the performative dynamics of three stand-up comedians who have released stand-up comedy specials in the period 2018 to 2021. Stand-up comedy specials were chosen for analysis due to their increasing cultural significance. Boardman describes stand-up comedy specials as 'an increasingly important artifact' with 'growing cultural significance' as stand-up comedy specials have become the most popular way for audiences to engage with stand-up comedy (2020: 57). More specifically, we chose stand-up comedy specials available on the streaming service Netflix. These were chosen for analysis due to the service's large potential audience reach – in the fourth quarter of 2022 Netflix had 'nearly 231 million paid subscribers worldwide' (Stoll, 2023). Furthermore, unlike work-in-progress shows, stand-up comedy specials include the comedian's 'best material' and are 'selected for their rarified presentation' (Boardman, 2020: 58). This suggests that stand-up comedy specials are useful to explore stand-up comedians' carefully crafted, and honed, presentation of the self, other and society. Netflix stand-up comedy specials are beginning to garner critical academic attention in relation to questions surrounding identity re/construction (for example, see Lockyer and De Benedictis, 2023; Pickette, 2022; Pierce, 2022).

We employed purposive sampling (see Seale, 2018) to select Netflix stand-up comedy specials that had received widespread attention due to the ways in which they enacted and critiqued identity, or due to the content of the jokes included in the Netflix stand-up comedy special that linked to identity. Such attention could be positive, negative or neutral. Purposive sampling provides a robust method of data selection due to its usefulness in providing reflexive engagement with exemplary case studies (Weaver, 2022). Such analysis would not be achievable through a random sample of comedy material. However, we acknowledge that a different sampling technique – such as random sampling – may have provided different intersections and different insights. Purposive sampling identified three Netflix stand-up comedy specials – Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* (2018), Jimmy Carr's *His Dark Material* (2021) and Dave Chappelle's *The Closer* (2021). The three stand-up comedy specials were included in the sample because they created discussion and controversy, which we argue is created from and displays the intersectional identities of the comedians, joke targets and audiences. Gadsby's *Nanette* (2018) received critical acclaim and criticism for its content, which includes the topics of comedy and trauma, homophobia, misogyny and violence against women, in a discussion of the ethics of stand-up comedy. Gadsby offers a performance that subverts some of the norms of stand-up comedy performance because of their perceived impact on marginal identities. Since the filming of *Nanette*, Gadsby has changed their pronouns from she/her to they/them. There are quotes reproduced from *Nanette* where Gadsby refers to their identity as a lesbian women. For accuracy, we have used Gadsby's current pronouns (they/them) while quoting the original text. Jimmy Carr's *His Dark Material* (2021) contains numerous jokes that focus on gender, sexuality, sexual violence against women, and race, ethnicity and racism. The show was discussed extensively on social and other forms of media in early 2022, principally in relation to offensiveness and racism, because of the circulation on social media of a clip of a joke about the murder of Roma people in Nazi

concentration camps. Other parts of the show were not heavily discussed. Dave Chappelle, in *The Closer* (2021), received criticism and claims of offence for jokes that focused on the LGBTQ+ community. In *The Closer*, Chappelle continues with themes that appear in his other stand-up comedy specials such as *Sticks & Stones* (2019), which draw comparisons between the Black community and LGBTQ+ community in the US in relation to whiteness and civil rights. Examples from the three stand-up comedy specials are purposively selected for their focus on intersectionality.

Via qualitative analysis of the verbal and visual aspects of the *Netflix* stand-up comedy specials, we examine intersectionality in terms of the representation of inequalities, privilege, discrimination and prejudice. The three stand-up comedy specials were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Similar to existing analysis of recorded stand-up comedy performances (such as Paul, 2017), our analysis involved the authors independently analysing the stand-up comedy specials by watching and rewatching each of them and examining the verbal and visual aspects of the performance including content, tone, techniques, styles, gestures and tropes, taking notes on these aspects of the performances and generating themes. Following each of the authors conducting analysis independently, the authors collectively scrutinised the stand-up comedy specials and agreed on themes based on initial independent analysis. In our analysis, although it is acknowledged that comedy is polysemic, we do provide readings of the comedy that offer a clear unpacking of the intersections and inequalities evoked by the comedy. The existence of polysemy implies that our analysis cannot be 'final', that chains of signification continue 'indefinitely' and that various audiences may read comedy differently, especially in a live context. Therefore, the process of critique should always be ongoing and open to the potential for counter-critique, revision or expansion. It is to the analysis that we now turn.

The Dynamics of Intertextuality in Netflix Stand-up Comedy Specials

Our analysis reveals three themes. These are: 1) intersecting race, gender and sexuality; 2) depicting gendered violence; and 3) intersectional differences in the uses of disclaimers through which comedy is defended. Through thematic analysis, we unpick the intersections and inequalities, and therefore reveal the flow of discursive power through the stand-up comedy texts.

Intersecting Race, Gender and Sexuality

In their Netflix specials, Carr, Chappelle and Gadsby create comedy that draws on their intersections of race, gender and sexuality. The intersection of race, gender and sexuality in the identity of the comedians and joke targets, alongside those of audiences viewing the material, creates the polysemy through which the comedy is interpreted and contributes to the debates that construct identity politics.

In *His Dark Material*, Carr directly refers to himself as a 'straight, white man', pointing to these three parts of identity as they intersect for him and others, alongside a discussion of offence and 'cancellation':

> I've come to terms with the fact. I get cancelled in the next couple of years, right? [cheering] Yeah, chances are . . . I used to worry about telling a joke so offensive I would never work again, but that was just me thinking like a gender-fluid snowflake [cheering and laughter]. No, you pay good money to see an edgy comedian, right? [cheering] . . . And I believe passionately in freedom of speech, but I do my best not to offend any ethnic minorities, gender-neutral groups, or fat disabled lesbian nonces [laughter]. That said, this next five minutes is going to be closer to the bone than a fat girl eating KFC [laughter] . . . Right, career-enders. When I give my opinion on gender or race issues, people say "it's easy for you to say as a straight white man". But when I give my opinion as a gay Chinese lady [laughter], they don't like the accent I do [laughter].

Carr deals with a number of themes in this extract that construct his comic persona as one where he is an 'edgy' comedian who demonstrates freedom of speech and does not fear being 'cancelled'. The signifiers of identity are used as joke targets and signpost identity politics or 'culture wars' themes (freedom of speech and 'cancellation') as joke content. This is achieved in the discourse through direct reference to other identities and intersections as specifically ridiculous and the offended other of Carr's comedy. Thus, the comedy is constructed through positioning other intersected identities as both creating the 'threat' of cancellation and being the ridiculous joke target for the 'edgy' or offensive comedian. The connotation relied on is of Carr's specific intersections as culturally superior. Carr's stand-up comedy plays with his personality (Double, 2014) or identity as a negative exemplar (Mintz, 1985) through ridiculing the other in terms that focus on gender, obesity, sexuality, race and nationality. These themes situate the 'straight white male' as both less ridiculous and more comically adept, in having a more developed sense of humour than the othered identity. It is thus a depiction of superiority through comedy (Aristotle, 1997). Although there is polysemy for such jokes because a spectrum of reactions that range from appreciation through to offence exists, it is notable that there is little potential for a reading of ridicule directed at 'straight, white men'.

Dave Chappelle in *The Closer* draws on the intersections of race, gender and sexuality in the construction of stand-up comedy that presents Chappelle as a negative exemplar while providing a site for the ridicule of other identities and their intersections. Chappelle depicts an altercation between himself and a 'white, gay man':

> I call everybody a bitch-ass nigga. You know what I mean? [laughter] But that is not a right thing to do if they're gay [laughter]. And now I was in trouble and not only that, the motherfucker was huge . . . And he started barking on me, but I stood my ground, I wasn't scared. How could I be scared? This motherfucker's shirt was tied up in a knot like this [laughter] . . . I thought we were going to come to blows. I was ready and then right when you think we would fight, guess what he did? He picked up his phone and he called the police [laughter]. And this, this thing I am describing is a major issue that I have with that community. Gay people are minorities, until they need to be white again [laughter].

Throughout the show, Chappelle builds a comic discourse that situates the LGBTQ+ community as the ridiculous joke target. Chappelle's identity and its intersection (Black, straight man) are presented as a negative exemplar while also connoting superiority towards joke targets. This discourse relies on the concept of African-Americans and the

LGBTQ+ community as being different types of minorities with both different experiences of prejudice and positions in US society. Simply put, the comedy relies on the idea that the LGBTQ+ community are more fortunate than African-Americans. The ridicule of the gay, white male is achieved through comments on appearance and dress which are presented to juxtapose the connotation of hegemonic masculine symbolism. What is significant in the positioning of this intersection is that it enacts an erasure of another intersection (necessary for Chappelle's comedic discussion of the LGBTQ+ community), which is that gay people are constructed as white and Chappelle ignores the existence of LGBTQ+ people of colour. Although Black gay people are mentioned by Chappelle, it is the presentation of an intersected gay, white identity alongside a straight, Black identity that is central to the comic narrative of *The Closer*.

Hannah Gadsby, in *Nanette*, constructs comedy through the intersections of identity, specifically in comic ridicule directed towards the intersections of 'straight, white men':

> I don't think it's an easy time for you fellas, I do feel for you. Very difficult, very confusing time. Because – And you're not coping. Because, for the first time ever, you're suddenly a subcategory of human [laughter]. Right? "No, we invented the categories. We're not supposed to play! [laughter] We're human-neutral". Not anymore [laughter]. I've always been judged by what I am. Always been a fat, ugly dyke. I'm dead inside. I can cope [laughter]. But you fellas . . . bit soft in the belly? [laughter] You hear "straight white man," you're like, "No. No, that's reverse sexism". No, it's not. You wrote the rules. Read them [laughter, cheering, and applause]. Just jokes. Banter. Don't feel intimidated [laughter]. It's just locker room talk [laughter, cheering, whistling and applause].

The extract describes the 'invisibility' of hegemonic identity characteristics that is a component of rendering some identities 'normal'. The 'straight white man' is described as losing the position of 'human neutral' in a situation where minority groups are gaining recognition. This reversal is articulated through the 'just jokes' rhetorical device that is frequently used to defend against claims of offensiveness in stand-up comedy and elsewhere (Tannen, 1992). There is a ridicule of hegemonic intersections that relies on the acceptance that comedy is not constructed through jokes as 'just jokes' but that it has the symbolic potential to impact on identities. The negative exemplar is constructed here as Gadsby is willing to inflict ridicule to highlight the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1992) that is possible in comedy through an articulation of the intersection of identities. The comedy here relies on the erasure of a shared whiteness with the joke target and the different intersections of 'straight white male' identities.

Depicting Gendered Violence

Comedy often mediates discourses of gender that serve to reinforce, critique or renegotiate gender hegemony (Weaver, Mora and Morgan, 2016). Gender relations, especially gendered violence, and their constructions and reconstructions are central to the three Netflix stand-up comedy specials. Gendered violence is presented in multiple ways – where the stand-up comedian is either the perpetrator or survivor of verbal, psychological, physical or sexual gendered violence – which serves to highlight how

all three performances engage in concerns around gender hegemony and resistance from the comedian's intersectional position.

Ridiculing gender relations and gendered violence is a comic discourse that is present in Carr's *His Dark Material*. Carr makes frequent jokes at women's expense whether joking about cheating on his younger girlfriend, aging women, women's bodies and raping women. Many of Carr's jokes about women adopt a patronising tone that serve to intimidate and infantilise women and to position men as superior to maintain hegemonic gender power relations. In one example, Carr explains what mansplaining is while simultaneously – and ironically – mansplaining himself: 'Mansplaining, if you're not aware, it's when a man tries to explain what you already know in a patronising manner [laughter]' as he looks and points at a woman in the audience, thus illustrating Double's (2014) 'direct communication' and 'present tense' aspects of stand-up comedy. Continuing to look at the woman, Carr points to himself and slowly explains, 'It's when a man, that's me [laughter], tries to put clever-clever thoughts in your pretty little brain [points to the woman] [laughter]. Do you understand that? [laughter]' Carr then bends down and adopts a voice and tone that a parent may use to talk to a baby and continues, 'Yes, you do [laughter]. You're such a clever girl [laughter]. You're so clever. That's a meta joke. Can you say, "meta joke"? [laughter]' The woman says, 'meta joke', and Carr retorts, 'I can't believe you said it [laughter]' as he stands upright, claps his hands and laughs. Carr's older male intersectional persona is comedically constructed as informed, intelligent and superior and in juxtaposition to younger women, whose subordinated intersectionality is the joke's target. Carr further infantilises the woman as she is ridiculed and criticised for misunderstanding when a question is rhetorical, which again suggests intellectual subordination of younger women to older men. As Quirk (2018: 37) argues, much of Carr's comedy is 'undoubtedly punching down'.

Gender relations and gendered violence receives comic treatment in Chappelle's *The Closer*. Chappelle recounts an incident in a nightclub where the girlfriend of a woman Chappelle is talking to steps into the conversation, who he mistakes as a man:

> She said, "Stop calling me a man, motherfucker [laughter]. I am a woman". I said, "What?" [laughter] . . . This is too much for me to even wrap my mind around, but I tell you what, I un-balled my fist immediately and I softened my posture so that she would know, she is in no danger. I even changed the tone of my voice [laughter]. I said softly, sweetly, like a pimp might say [laughter], "Bitch, I'm 'bout to slap the shit out of you" [laughter and applause] . . . Her shoulders were angled correctly, her head movement was good, I said "Oh, no! [laughter] this bitch boxes for real" [laughter]. . . I let that jab go . . . I tenderized them titties like chicken cutlets [laughter and applause]. I whooped the toxic masculinity out of that bitch [laughter].

The ways in which the intersectionality of the lesbian woman disrupts Chappelle's understanding of gender and sexual relations seems to justify Chappelle's symbolic and physical violence enacted on the woman. Chappelle's surprise exclamation 'What?', the explanation that 'This is too much for me to even wrap my mind around' and his comment 'Oh, no! this bitch boxes for real' seems to suggest he is unable to comprehend gender and sexual identities that are incongruous with dominant normative heterofemininity. Bennett (2022) refers to this as the 'most crass routine' in *The Closer* because of

the way Chappelle 'justifies himself because she looked a bit like a bloke'. Chappelle's use of the word 'bitch', the comment 'I tenderized those titties like chicken cutlets' and his explanation that he 'whooped the toxic masculinity out of that bitch' serve to stigmatise (Schippers, 2007), objectify and dehumanise the intersectional position of the lesbian woman. In doing so, Chappelle is comedically positioning lesbian women as physically and symbolically subordinate to heterosexual men. Lesbian women's intersectionality is constructed as deserving of physical and symbolic punishment due to their perceived disruption of hegemonic social relations. This may be Chappelle's attempt to reposition the woman as less threatening or disruptive to his normative understanding of gender relations, and symbolically and physically punish and exclude the woman who, for Chappelle, has violated the social and gender orders. Recounting the nightclub incident in this way supports the observation that 'daily interactions play a central role in the construction of hierarchic modes of femininity and masculinity' (Abedinifard, 2016: 235). Furthermore, it illustrates how humour functions to reinforce social norms and wield social control (Martin, 2007) regarding the intersections of gender and sexuality.

In Gadsby's *Nanette*, we witness a different relationship to gendered violence to that presented by Carr and Chappelle. Gadsby explains being the target of violent acts due to their intersectionality as a lesbian woman. The views that underpin Chappelle's violent treatment of lesbian women perpetuate the exact gendered violence experienced by Gadsby which is critiqued. In the first half of *Nanette*, Gadsby shares details of an incident involving a young man who is almost physically violent towards Gadsby. Later in the performance, Gadsby reveals that the incident resulted in the man being verbally and physically violent towards Gadsby, but that they could not tell the story as it happened during the stand-up comedy performance due to the way in which stand-up comedy requires a specific relationship between tension and release:

> To balance the tension in the room with that story, I couldn't tell that story as it actually happened. Because I couldn't tell the part of that story where that man realized his mistake. And he came back. And he said "Oh, no, I get it. You're a lady faggot. I'm allowed to beat the shit out of you", and he did. He beat the shit out of me, and nobody stopped him . . . And that was not homophobia, pure and simple, people. That was gendered. If I'd been feminine, that would not have happened. I am incorrectly female. I am incorrect, and this is a punishable offense.

Gadsby is clear about why they experience such violence from men. As a lesbian woman who embodies a non-hegemonic femininity and a non-normative body she is perceived by mainstream culture as 'incorrect' or 'not woman enough', or as the man describes Gadsby – 'a lady faggot'. Thus, Gadsby epitomises Mintz's (1985) 'negative exemplar'. Gadsby embodies the 'wrong' kind of femininity as they resist gender hegemony, and it is precisely such resistance that leads some men to believe that this gives them licence to social sanction such femininity with violence because, as Gadsby argues, being 'incorrect' is a 'punishable offense'. As Abedinifard argues in his discussion of marginalised and subordinated femininities, '*resistant/protest/pariah* femininities are repelled as they, unlike *emphasized femininities*, refuse to recognize the cathexis – that is, the desires – of a dominant masculinity' (2016: 238, original emphasis). The examples from Gadsby and Chappelle above suggests that this license is extended if lesbian women embody an

incongruous gender identity. The examples from Gadsby and Chappelle, while different in terms of who is experiencing or perpetrating the gendered violence, are similar as they pivot on the initial misinterpreting of the gender and sexual identity of lesbian women by heterosexual men as their gender and sexuality are constructed as ambiguous. Gadsby notes how the man 'realizes his mistake' of initially misidentifying Gadsby as a man and says 'Oh, no, I get it. You're a lady faggot'. Similarly, Chappelle's surprise explanation 'What' in response to women requesting 'Stop calling me a man, motherfucker. I am a woman' suggests initial misgendering by Chappelle. Lesbian women are presented here as disrupters of, and threats to, hegemonic understandings of gender. In this example, Gadsby breaks stand-up comedy rules by creating tension instead of releasing it. In doing so, Gadsby becomes a 'comic spokesperson' (Mintz, 1985) for lesbian women, by centring and articulating lesbian women's experiences that have, until now, remained camouflaged by comedy's convention of tension relief. Gadsby also counters the trend identified by Bhargava and Chilana (2023) in their analysis of stand-up comedians punching up, of comedians lacking reflexivity and the ability of directing their comic gaze inward.

Intersectional Differences in the Uses of Disclaimers through which Comedy is Defended

Disclaimers are used extensively in stand-up comedy as rhetorical devices that impact on the encoding of comedy and direct audiences towards the preferred reading of jokes. They also serve to heighten the complexity of critiquing offensive comedy. Each of the Netflix specials contain a use and discussion of disclaimers that connects the intersections of the comedians' identity. Some of the disclaimers act as a form of prolepsis, as an anticipation and response to criticism (Lockyer and Pickering, 2001).

The idea of humour as constructed through jokes as 'just jokes' has been described as a rhetorical method to defend against criticism (Tannen, 1992), and as a means of defending problematic discourse (Pérez, 2022). The disclaimer is used extensively in stand-up comedy performance. In *His Dark Material*, Carr's opening joke – a rape joke – describes jokes as 'just jokes':

> Tonight's show contains jokes about terrible things. Terrible things that may have affected you and the people you love. But these are just jokes. They're not the terrible things [laughter]. There's a huge difference about doing a joke about a rape [laughter] and doing a rape [laughter]. I fucking hope [laughter]. Or I'm going to jail forever [laughter].

Carr uses 'just jokes' to render acceptable his rape jokes. This is a metonymic condensing of the potential readings of the joke that serves to trivialise the topic through humour, while denying the performativity of language in general (Austin, 1996), and framing rape jokes as specifically not producing negative affect (Pérez and Greene, 2016). We saw previously that Gadsby parodies such responses in a critique of hegemonic gender relations. These examples hinge on the intersections of identity displayed by the comedians, and so the use of disclaimers gains relevance based on the relationship between the identity of the comedian, hegemonic intersections, and the ridiculed other.

The central disclaimer in Chappelle's *The Closer* is one that relies directly on intersectionality and the LGBTQ+ community. Here, Chappelle claims that his jokes about LGBTQ+ people are in fact jokes about white people:

> Any of you, who have ever watched me know that I've never had a problem with transgender people. If you listen to what I'm saying, clearly my problem has always been with white people [laughter]. I've been arguing with the whites my entire career. Just when I thought I had you guys on the ropes you changed all the rules. "Oh yeah?" – Yeah, motherfucker! – "Well. I am a girl now [laughter]. . .".

This is an attempt to not direct jokes at a minority group but in fact to direct comedy at a hegemonic group. This is prolepsis through a form of metonym that asserts the comedy as a more noble endeavour than critics would suggest. A similar device exists in Carr's performance. Carr presents a show made up of 'career-ending jokes' alongside disclaimers that create an incongruity that builds tension in the performance. It is not the case that the disclaimers used in a stand-up comedy show need to cohere with one another. Carr offers a joke in *His Dark Material* that received widespread media coverage and debate on social media. The joke describes the murder of Roma people in the Nazi concentration camps and the disclaimer centres on the joke not being 'just a joke' but on it having an educative quality. Carr's joke about the Roma people follows:

> This should be a career-ender . . . When people talk about the Holocaust [laughter], they talk about the tragedy and horror of 6 million Jewish lives being lost to the Nazi war machine but they never mention the thousands of Gypsies that were killed by the Nazis, no one ever wants to talk about that because no one ever wants to talk about the positives [laughter and applause]. That's a very good joke for the following three reasons. Firstly, fucking funny. Well done me [laughter]. Edgy, edgy as all hell. It's a joke about the worst thing that's ever happened in human history. And people say never forget, and this is how I remember. I keep bringing it up [laughter]. Third reason that's a good joke is that there is an educational quality . . . A lot of people don't know, because it's not really taught in our schools, that the Nazis also killed, in their thousands Gypsies, homosexuals, disabled people, and Jehovah's Witnesses [cheering].

The idea of the joke as justifiable because it is 'funny' aligns with the claim of jokes as 'just jokes'. The justification also brings up the idea of 'edgy' comedy as justification. Perhaps the dominant disclaimer is the idea of the joke as 'educative'. The joke therefore demonstrates that stand-up comedy can be presented with different disclaimers at various points in a performance, or after a single joke, and thus there can be a polysemy of intent and impact created by the comedian that mitigates the material being judged as socially problematic. This joke is not presented as 'just a joke' as assertively as others because to do so would be to simply ridicule the historical suffering and murder of ethnic minority groups. An edited clip of the joke circulated on social media in 2022 and was debated in press coverage. Importantly, this edited recording included only the joke and not the disclaimers. The joke received heavy criticism from the charity The Traveller Movement who said it was 'truly disturbing and goes way beyond humour' and started a petition calling for Carr to remove this part of the show (Waddell, 2022). Politicians criticised the joke and then 'Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries said the comments were

"abhorrent and they just shouldn't be on television"' (BBC, 2022). In terms of the intersections of Carr's identity, it is clear the joke with the disclaimer renders criticism of the material on the basis of racism, ethnic discrimination or ridicule of the other more difficult to achieve. This reinforces Quirk's (2018) observation that Carr uses offence in a careful manner.

One further disclaimer offered by Carr in contrast to the 'just jokes' disclaimer sees the comedy justified as a coping mechanism or releaser of tension (Morreall, 1998). To close the show, he explains that '. . . actually we've got the best sense of humour. It's best to have a very dark sense of humour, right? [cheering] Because at least when our life is shit we can laugh about it [laughter]'. Here, the jokes have a stated purpose. As a closing comment, the statement may act as a resolution to the ridicule that has been presented throughout the performance. Gadsby's *Nanette* provides a meta-discussion and critique of disclaimers rather than a literal usage of them. On coping through humour, Gadsby says 'Laughter's the best medicine, they say. I don't. I reckon penicillin might give it the nudge [laughter]'. This forms a part of the discussion of tension and comedy that was analysed previously in relation to gender violence.

Conclusion

Recent structural, performative and thematic shifts in contemporary stand-up have encouraged some contemporary comedians to embrace the autobiographical nature of stand-up comedy to enact and critique intersectionality. Combining stand-up comedy theory, theoretical approaches to the ethics of comedy and theories of equality and intersectionality, we reveal the ways stand-up comedians discuss, negotiate and renegotiate inequalities, privilege, discrimination and prejudice through an intersectional lens. Our analysis highlights three themes that characterise the ways in which stand-up comedy specials on Netflix by Carr, Chappelle and Gadsby present intersectionality: 1) intersecting race, gender and sexuality; 2) depicting gendered violence; and 3) intersectional differences in the uses of disclaimers through which comedy is defended. These themes illustrate the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ways that intersectionality is used by stand-up comedians to justify and explain their superiority, to construct and substantiate joke targets and those to whom the stand-up comedian is symbolically, verbally and/or physically violent, to articulate ideas on cancel culture and to reinforce or resist hegemonic identities. Our analysis supports Pickette's observation that comedy that centres intersectionality highlights comedy's role 'as a tool for identity negotiation', but problematises Pickette's argument that it can also serve as a 'catalyst for shifting cultural paradigms' (2022: 167). Intersectionality in mainstream stand-up comedy can support existing cultural paradigms rather than challenge them, depending on how intersectionality is enacted and critiqued by individual stand-up comedians. Our analysis reveals how, in comedy's contemporary conjuncture, different intersectional positions and experiences of stand-up comedians are deliberately and self-consciously drawn on in dynamic and diverse ways to simultaneously construct, critique and reconstruct popular understandings of intersectionality and its socio-political impacts, possibilities and limits.

Although stand-up comedy that uses intersectionality as a lens can challenge hegemonic relations, resistance may be tempered when considering the broader industrial context of

Netflix comedy specials. Some of the criticism directed at *The Closer* referred to the jokes about the LGBTQ+ community. Ted Sarandos, Netflix co-Chief Executive Officer, defended *The Closer* by referring to positive LGBTQ+ content available on Netflix, citing Gadsby's work as examples (Cobb, 2021). Gadsby responded on Instagram:

> Now I have to deal with even more of the hate and anger that Dave Chappelle's fans like to unleash on me every time Dave gets 20 million dollars to process his emotionally stunted partial world view. You didn't pay me nearly enough to deal with the real world consequences of the hate speech dog whistling you refuse to acknowledge, Ted.

This debate highlights the limits to industrial decisions that seem to convey the appearance of advocating for inclusion and valuing intersectionality, in terms of who is given a voice in Netflix stand-up comedy specials, when defences about content on Netflix prioritise, and fall back on, a single axis of identity which serve to reinforce gender and sexual hegemonic relations.

Our analysis reveals the ways in which intersectionality is manifest in contemporary stand-up comedy specials in terms of gender, sexuality, race, body, physical appearance and age, but excludes other intersections such as class, disability, caste, religion and nationality. Considering these intersectionalities, along with other stand-up comedy formats, such as live stand-up comedy or stand-up comedy on digital platforms, could provide fuller understandings and appreciation of how intersectionality is presented in comedy, and the wider socio-political implications for performers and audiences.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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