**Standing Up For Women In Comedy: An Analysis On Women In Standup Comedy**

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**Introduction**

Comedy is a societal staple. Without comedy, we are left with the reality of the world with no escape in sight. “Standup strips away everything but what is funny. Life strips away everything but what is real” (MacGibbon 2017, 406). Comedy has played a significant role in my life for as long as I can remember. I grew up in a family full of unprofessional comedians and I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

As life can, and so often does, bring along hardships, the single most consistent coping mechanism I’ve leaned on for so long is humor. “Humor defines us as humans. Humor is who we are” (Abramis 1992, 144). Taking everything one day at a time, keeping myself optimistic, and definitely not taking anything too seriously. There’s a reason why my comfort shows -- *The Mindy Project*, *The Office*, and *How I Met Your Mother* -- are all comedy-centric. I grew up in a household that’s main channel was not ABC or CNN, rather TBS and Comedy Central. I would come home to reruns and see Michael Scott accidentally starting a fire in the office break room or Barney Stinson creating an elaborate play to get a girl to go home with him.

I’m not saying laughter is equivalent to Zoloft but it is still the best holistic medicine on the market. “Humor has the power to teach people how to cope with difficult life situations and improve symptoms of various mental health difficulties” (Eccleston, 2021, 36-37). This study also looked at mental health difficulties including depression, anxiety, grief following the death of a loved one, and loneliness. “Standup is a metaphor for life. It’s tough, thrilling, often painful, often fun, always rewarding. You learn by trial and error how to think on your feet, making the best choices you can under pressure. And when, not if, you fail, you get back up on stage as soon as possible, knowing that the process will ultimately bring you success” (MacGibbon 2017, 406). Taking an approach like this to life when going through times of strife has made me into a more optimistic person. Having a sense of humor has made me into a more approachable person. It has also crafted me into a better social being. “Using humor also elicits feelings of closeness among strangers and is attractive to potential mates” (Greengross, Martin, & Miller 2012).

I’ve noticed some of my favorite comfort shows are dominated by male actors. For example, Josh Radnor as Ted Moseby and Neil Patrick Harris as Barney Stinson on *How I Met Your Mother*; Steve Carrell as Michael Scott, John Krasinski as Jim Halpert, and Rainn Wilson as Dwight Schrute on *The Office*; and of course Ron Swanson on *Parks and Recreation*. I also consume Netflix standup comedy specials for leisure and entertainment. But I’ve also realized that a lot of the comedy specials I watch are starring some of comedy’s biggest names, the majority of which are male. I stick with what I know and whose comedy I can guarantee I will get a laugh out of and enjoy. My favorite standup comedians are Bill Burr, Tom Segura, John Mulaney, and Dave Chapelle.

Knowing this about myself made me internally beg the question: I’m a 21 year old woman who identifies as a feminist, why am I not consuming content written by female comedians? This is not to say I don’t watch shows like *30 Rock, The Mindy Project* or even old *Saturday Night Live* reruns with Amy Poehler, Maya Rudolph, and Tina Fey. Because I really do. I love these women and their genius, comedic minds.

But I was disappointed in myself for not realizing nor giving credit to the amazing new generation of talent in the comedy industry. Names like Ali Wong, Fortune Feimster, Iliza Shlesinger, and Maraget Cho were just names I would scroll past when perusing my Netflix queue. Noticing this in myself made me wonder, why was there this internal bias? Sure I was sticking to comedians I already knew, but why would I not bother expanding my horizons in the industry that gives me the most comfort? This question stuck with me.

After leaning into this question I came to the conclusion that in a gendered industry where the majority of the most successful and known comedians are men, female comedians have a list of unfair disadvantages stacked against them from the start of their careers. They’re expected to fulfill society’s beauty expectations since they’re women in the entertainment industry. Female comedians are first scrutinized for how they look, then for what they say. When they joke about their sex life and dating history, they’re labeled raunchy and hypersexual. They’re also not given as many opportunities to showcase their comedic talent because of the outdated stereotype that women aren’t funny.

In my literature review, I discuss the concept of comedy and humor theories.

I then define standup comedy as a male-dominated industry. Following this, I analyze the history behind the first comedy nightclub, The Comedy Store. After this I discuss the history of the top two ranked comedy clubs in the U.S, The Hollywood Improv and The Comedy Cellar. My next section discusses the four women that would pioneer success and progression in the standup comedy industry for generations to come. This section leads into my analysis of the double standard between men and women in the standup comedy industry. Following this, I deep dive into the sexism and sexual violence that is perpetuated by comedy clubs, owners, and bookers. Stemming from this topic is the community idea of how comedians trauma bond with other performers. Next I quickly touch on the gender pay gap and its effects that are perpetuated by big streaming services, such as Netflix. Lastly I conclude my literature review with my methods and conclusion sections.

**Defining Comedy**

Merriam Webster defines comedy as: the genre of dramatic literature dealing with the comic or with the serious in a light or satirical manner (Comedy Definition & Meaning, Merriam-Webster). Standup comedians are known to have a mix of humor styles they pull from when writing their sets. Standup comedians also use what Greengross Martin & Miller describe as “aggressive humor.” This type of humor comes in the form of sexual and ethnic humor. I’ve found this to be one of the most common forms of comedy that standup comedians pull from because they are able to involve their own identities and poke jest at the intersectionality hardships that follow. However, there are three main theories of humor that are practiced in modern day comedy: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and lastly, Relief Theory.

Superiority Theory “simply put, is our laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves” (Morreall, 2020). We laugh because we feel superior to the person at fault. This theory goes to show that it’s hard not to laugh at the failures of others; our own past failures, once we’ve overcome them; and at surprising personal successes. The popular mode of self-deprecating comedy is also an example of superiority theory.

Incongruity Theory can be described as expecting one kind of punchline and hearing another we never would have expected. It’s the mere surprise and shock value that interrupts our social norms that gets us laughing when someone appeals to the Incongruity Theory. This is the most common type of joke. The joke is set up and delivered with an unexpected answer, catching us off guard, ending with our own disappointment making us laugh (Morreall, 2020).

The last theory, the Relief Theory “is [a] hydraulic explanation in which laughter does in the nervous system what a pressure-relief valve does in a steam boiler” (Morreall, 2020). Here, the audience member laughs because of a sort of buildup of nervous energy or feelings of anxiety. This sort of laugh can act as a form of catharsis from the uncomfort or ambivalent-heavy feelings that a joke or scenario has presented. This theory explains the recurring bit on *Modern Family* where Claire Dunphy smiles creepily every time someone dies. Another prime example of this would be *The Mary Tyler Moore Show’s* famous episode about Chuckles the Clown.

**Comedy Club: Headliners, Club Owners, and Bookers**

According to Vulture’s 2016 article, “The 15 Best Comedy Clubs in North America” the top two are The Hollywood Improv (1) and The Comedy Cellar (2). I will be going through the rich, perplexing, and layered history that is the beginning of these standup comedy clubs (Wenzel, 2016). I will also highlight #5, The Comedy Store in Los Angeles since this was the blueprint for comedy clubs in the U.S. It was the first all stand-up comedy nightclub in the world (The Comedy Store, 2019).

The year was 1972 and the Sunset Strip had just added The Comedy Store to its history-filled and intimidating line of businesses. The Store had three co-founders, husband and wife, Sammy and Mitzi Shore, and comedy writer, Rudy DeLuca. The inspiration came when Sammy Shore realized he needed a place to work out his performances when he wasn’t on the road as Elvis Pressley’s opening act (The Comedy Store, 2019).

One could describe The Comedy Store as an industry plant. With a comedy writer and live performer as two thirds of the founders, this comedy club didn’t struggle to book performers. The Store quickly became a hot spot where famous comedian friends of Shore and Deluca could work out their new sets before heading on national tours. The Comedy Store was built for success because of its foundational history. Before the Shore’s and DeLuca opened the comedy club, the building was previously known as Ciro’s supper club. Ciro’s was the hangout for movie people and was one of “the” places to be seen during the 1940's and 50's (The Comedy Store, 2019).

The Comedy Store acted as a feeder of content and fresh blood for *The Tonight Show* host, Johnny Carson, who often chose young comedians who performed there, like Jay Leno and David Letterman, to be guests on his show. Coincidentally the same month that The Comedy Store came to be, Johnny Carson moved *The Tonight Show* from New York to Los Angeles. Many eager-to-get-on-the-scene comedians followed Carson out West, hoping to get their shot on his show. This validates the claim that the door to more opportunities, gigs, and fame for many stand-up comedians is really opened once they get a TV credit. I speak more about the idea of a TV credential in my podcast interviews with Brandie Posey and Anna Valenzuela.

Amidst the spiking success that was happening at The Comedy Store, Mitzi and Sandy’s relationship was ending. The founding couple divorced in 1974, giving Mitzi full custody over The Comedy Store. She was the true talent scout who also advocated for her comedians’ success, although she went through a phase where she didn’t pay her talent. For the remainder of this section, every time I mention Shore, I’m referring to Mitzi. Shore determined that the showroom walls should be all black so once the stage was properly lit, the audience had no choice but to focus on the singular performer on stage. It was Shore who labeled The Comedy Store as more than just a comedy night club, rather an “artist’s colony.” This colony was meant to be a family-like environment where comedians could practice their craft and then mentor the next generation of standups (The Comedy Store, 2019).

The Comedy Store peaked in the 1970’s becoming a hot commodity in the L.A comedy scene. A big draw in for the next generation of comics was Richard Pryor. He worked out material for his comedy album, *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip* every night. All the while, Shore was selecting and vetting the next generation of stand-up comedians to perform at The Comedy Store. This group of future stars included Robin Williams, David Letterman, Jay Leno, Garry Shandling, Andy Kaufman, Michael Keaton, and more (The Comedy Store, 2019).

The Comedy Store on Sunset went on to expand to multiple locations including: Westwood in 1974, Pacific Beach in 1976, La Jolla in 1977 and in 1984 to the Dunes Hotel main showroom in Las Vegas. By the end of 1976, The Comedy Store was well established as the “Mecca of Comedy” (The Comedy Store, 2019).

The Comedy Store continued to act as a breeding ground for the next generation of all-star comedians throughout the 80’s and 90’s. The Store was the platform for famous names such as: Howie Mandel, Louie Anderson, Jim Carey, Arsenio Hall, Sam Kinson, Sandra Bernhard, Bill Hicks, Roseanne and Whoopie (The Comedy Store, 2019).

Moving into the 2000’s, the next generation of The Store’s voices included big names such as Joe Rogan, Joey Diaz, Bobby Lee, Steve Ranazzisi, Sebastian Maniscalco, John Caparulo, Whitney Cummings and the disgraced Chris D’Elia. D’Elia fell from grace during the #MeToo movement where he received several allegations of sexual misconduct with underage women (The Comedy Store, 2019).

Shore selected performers based on their personality and star quality. These performers eventually became known as The Store’s paid regulars. A stamp of approval from Shore meant that comedian’s name would be enshrined on the exterior of The Comedy Store’s for all of the Sunset Strip to see. It wasn’t polished material that Mitzi looked for. She looked for the honesty and genuinity that one would expect in a comedian (The Comedy Store, 2019). The 2019 website adds that the current paid regulars at the time included Dave Chappelle, Louis C.K, Ali Wong, Yakov Smirnoff, Bobby Lee, Jeff Ross, Iliza Schlesinger, Bill Burr, Theo Von, and Marc Maron. They describe themselves as modern philosophers, a comparison I seem to see every time comedians describe their job description.

Following Shore’s Parkinson's disease-related death in April of 2018, several publications highlighted the comedy club’s founding lady. *The New York Times* best characterized her in the following line. “She was a critic, confidante and caretaker for many of the comedians who drifted through the Store. In time she bought the building that housed it and created several performance spaces, one of which, an upstairs stage called the Belly Room, was reserved for female comics in the mid-1970’s” (Slotnik, 2018).

What truly sets The Comedy Store apart from its fellow competitors is its founding on the Sunset Strip and Shore’s reign as one of the first women comedy club owners. Rick Newman, founder of the Catch a Rising Star comedy clubs, said in an interview that new comedy clubs usually struggle to cover expenses and also pay comics for at least a few years. “Ms. Shore,” he said, “looked at the Store as “a comedy university” that helped young comics during their formative years” (Slotnik, 2018).

The Hollywood Improv was ranked #1 in the aforementioned Vulture article (Wenzel, 2016). Founded in 1963, by Broadway producer Budd Friedman who was looking to open a place for Broadway actors to hang out and have coffee. It wasn’t until a year after the Improv was open that the first stand up set took place. Dave Astor was the pioneer for this. After his lucky night at the Improv, the nightly dynamic soon switched from a lineup consisting of mostly singers to improvisational comedians. The Improv’s website lists the following comedians as having made appearances on their stage over the next few decades, Richard Pryor, Billy Crystal, Lily Tomlin, Freddie Prinze, Andy Kaufman, Eddie Murphy, Jerry Seinfeld, Tim Allen, Jay Leno, Chris Rock, Dane Cook, Ellen DeGeneres, Jamie Foxx, Adam Sandler, Jeff Dunham, and Dave Chappelle (“History of The Improv”).  
 Once the 1980’s hit and the need for standup comedy spiked, Friedman and his new co-owner Mark Lonow went national. Thus began the Improv’s expansion. The Improv opened locations in San Diego, San Francisco, Brea, Irvine, Tempe, Washington D.C., Dallas, Addison, Cleveland, Miami, Las Vegas, Reno and London, England (“History of The Improv”).

Ranked at #2 on Vulture’s top comedy club list is New York City’s The Comedy Cellar. With the last two comedy clubs, The Hollywood Improv and The Comedy Store, I was able to gather historical background information about the clubs through their main website. The Cellar, however, doesn’t offer this much as easily. The Comedy Cellar’s founding is no different than the previous histories of the last two comedy clubs I named, except maybe even less glamorous (Tucker, 2021).

The Cellar was founded in the 1980’s by Bill Grundfest and the late Manny Dworman. However, the gatekeeper for The Cellar was not these men nor was it their male successor. The booker was and still is an Israeli woman, Estee Adoram. She’s been at this gig for over thirty six years. She stands as one of the most powerful women in the comedy world. Sarah Silverman shared in a Vanity Fair article highlighting Adoram, that she’s still highly intimidated by her. “I remember the terror of bombing in front of Estee. She doesn’t give a shit about anyone’s credits or what TV shows they’ve been on. She just likes who she likes and that’s that. To this day if she comes downstairs and checks out my set, I get nervous” (Pilot & McGlynn, 2016). She holds the New York comedy scene in the palm of her hand still to this day. Her grip is vice-like and her word is biblical.

After interviewing standup comedian Mona Shaikh, I now understand the power Adoram has. No comedian is allowed entry to The Cellar, until they are invited in by another comedian who has already received the Cellar’s stamp of approval. It’s a secret society and to get a slot in their nighttime lineup or at their open mics is borderline impossible. Adoram is known to recycle the same regulars over and over. She favors male comedians, regardless of their stance in the limelight. For example, in recent weeks she’s invited and booked disgraced comedian, Louis C.K back at the venue night after night. C.K was exposed during the #MeToo movement amidst several allegations of him non-consentually exposing himself and masterbating in front of women. I discuss recent visits to the Cellar more in my podcast episode with Shaikh.

Adoram does not identify as a feminist. In her interview with Lena Dunham, Adoram appears distant and removed.

\*\*LD:\*\* So many people, especially women, talk about feeling like they have to work past so much disrespect in the comedy world, push past so much misogyny and male expectation. So it’s fascinating to hear you say, “No, I feel like I can interact with these men on a straightforward level.”

\*\*EA:\*\* I do. It’s not that I’m living in a fantasy world. I’m not. The reality is, most people that I come in contact with give me my dues.

\*\*LD:\*\* As they should.

\*\*EA:\*\* Yeah. Well, yeah. Could I make more money? Sure. Now, there’s the big thing in show business. Equal pay for women and whatever. It probably is an issue. To me it’s not. Yeah, I would like to make more money, of course. At the end of the day, for me, what matters is the satisfaction with what I do, my relationship with people, whether it’s comics, coworkers, friends, people I meet. I feel happy. As long as I have enough to live for what I want to do, I’m good. I don’t know if it’s words of wisdom, but that’s what kept me happy (Grillo, 2018).

She admits to not feeling intimidated by the men and misogyny of the business. The way she addresses this topic is anything but empathetic. As she comes from a place of power, being able to control airtime and stage time, it’s no wonder that all the comedians bow down to her. Yet she fears no intimidation towards any of them, even the men. This is a big concept I cover during my podcast episodes. The idea of comedy clubs gatekeeping talent, not looking out for the safety of their talent, looking the other way in the face of controversy and disgraced comedians, and perpetuating a system that abuses power and silences women (Grillo, 2018).

**Queens of Standup**

Veteran standup comic Judy Gold perfectly verbalizes the early days of standup for women who were still expected to stay home, take care of their husband, and their children.“Women would get on stage, acknowledge that they were pieces of shit [for being away from the home]. Then go, okay here are my jokes'' (*Hysterical*, 2021). Women in comedy during this time had to acknowledge their other priorities before performing. They had to say they knew they were supposed to be at home with their husband and kids before the general public could shame them for breaking the nuclear household mold.

It’s ironic yet beautiful that the women who are considered the pioneers for women in comedy all act as a source of inspiration for the next generation. Moms Mabley inspired Phyllis Diller. Phyllis Diller motivated Joan Rivers to get into comedy instead of acting. Joan Rivers took it upon herself to mentor Kathy Griffin. The FX documentary, *Hysterical*, describes this phenomenon as women looking after other women. Each established female comic understands the struggle it took to get to their level of success and fame. These women are taking it upon themselves to inspire a younger generation of aspiring comedians and act as a maternal mentor to them. Standup comic, Fortune Feimster says “It really does just take one person in a position of power. Once they anoint you in this business it helps tremendously,” (*Hysterical*, 2021). *Hysterical* describes Amy Schumer as a prime example of a mentor for the next generation of women in comedy. The documentary also goes on to show the current generation of female comics on the rise are looking out for one another; truly taking after what Rivers did for Griffin so long ago.

Mabley was ranked #39 on the *Rolling Stone*’s “50 Best Stand-Up Comics of All Time” (Love, 2019). Born in 1894, Mabley is considered to be the “Original Queen of Comedy” (“Moms Mabley” Encyclopædia Britannica). Her on-stage personality was modeled after a grandmother who was a former slave. As the people’s grandmother, she was trusted by society and she used this to her advantage.

In order for her to really get out there, tell her truth, and have it be palatable to an audience she had to dress like an old woman. Mabley was outspoken and a true political commentator. However, she played the game right and took her political stance while performing. Comedian Sherri Shepherd details Mabley’s loophole to success without riling up the public. Moms commented on society’s youth and racism, but “In order for them [the audience] to accept what she had to say, she [knew] she had to be [dressed as] an old woman (*Hysterical*, 2021). Mabley’s identity became a sort of shield to the public because she thought who could argue or say no to a wise, funny grandmother full of life experience?

Mabley got her start on the comedy scene in the Chitlin’ Circuit in Cleveland. Following this she was recruited into the New York city vaudeville scene, eventually making her way to performing standup on TV shows like *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and *The Ed Sullivan Show* (“Moms Mabley” Encyclopædia Britannica). Mabley was a clever woman who was able to bridge the gap between the vaudeville scene she got her start in and the rising standup industry.

Diller was ranked #42 on the *Rolling Stone*’s “50 Best Stand-Up Comics of All Time” (Love, 2019). Known best for her Vegas-inspired glitzy outfits, wild hair, and New York rapid-fire one-liners, Diller left her mark on the comedy industry. First performing standup comedy about the woes of suburban living, then eventually moving on to write jokes about her appearance, children, husband, mother-in-law, and her desire for plastic surgery. She joked once before that she was the Cinderella to all of her suburban housewives living at home because she was able to escape the kitchen (*Hysterical*, 2021). “The first female household name on the list, she convinced legions of early standup audiences that women comics were not a novelty but a force to be reckoned with”; she too went on to television and starred in her own show, The Pruitts of Southampton (“Phyllis Diller” Encyclopædia Britannica).

Rivers unsurprisingly was ranked #5 on the list. At the start of her comedy career she was a wild force. Her comedy was described as “shocking” for a woman to be performing. After making the cheeky comment, “I’m Joan Rivers and I put out,” actor Jack Lambert left her show saying that the line was disgusting. Rivers never shied away from a topic no matter how taboo it was for the time period. She even made abortion jokes during an era when no one else would ever dare.

Rivers was insecure about her looks. In her 2010 documentary, *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, she admitted that no man had ever told her she was beautiful. Up until her last years of life, she would get her makeup done first thing every morning. “All standups are innately insecure” (Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work, 2010). Rivers described being insecure but also a performer in the entertainment industry as “the nature of the beast” (Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work, 2010).

Griffin was not ranked on the 2017 *Rolling Stone* list however, this could be due to the fact that she was blackballed from the entertainment industry in 2016 for posting a photo of her holding a mask of a bloody beheaded Donald Trump. Born in 1960, she began her comedy career in the late 1970’s as a member of The Groundlings comedy troupe. Later moving to standup, and eventually guest starring on TV shows such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *ER*, Griffin eventually secured her spot on the TV show *Suddenly Susan*, later to be granted her own reality TV show. In addition to her long list of television gigs and accomplishments, she was also awarded the Guinness World Records title for most televised standup specials following the premiere of her 20th show (“Kathy Griffin'' Encyclopædia Britannica).

Griffin was a pioneer in the comedy scene for her new mode of telling jokes. She “ditched one-liners in favor of a free form confessional style” (“Kathy Griffin'' Encyclopædia Britannica). Her comedy bits included stories of her rising yet unglamorous success in the comedy industry, but she was also known for her comedy segments that commented on celebrities and the superficiality of the culture.

The common thread among these four women is that they knew their target audience was women working at home. Knowing your audience is a life lesson for everyone, but especially women in standup. These women knew that they were going to be the butt of their own comedy sets. “We laugh at….sex-role inadequacy of Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller” (Mintz 1985, 75). By publicly announcing their own self-deprecation in a comedic way, they were able to confront their own narrative before the public could write it. “Early comedy acts were tailored to not only what men would find funny, but also what men would find non-threatening” (Eccleston, 2021). When you’re the punchline to your own joke, there’s no room for anyone else to feel threatened. Mabley, Diller, Rivers, and Griffin gave future generations of women in comedy the option to not be the butt of their own jokes.

**The Double Standard**

There are certain roles placed on women in a gendered society. Women are expected to be pretty, but not fake. Motivated, but not ambitious enough to take up space. Smart, but complacent so you don’t make any man feel like he’s inferior. Nice, but not a pushover because if you stand for nothing you’ll fall for anything. Confident, but not too confident because then you’re just arrogant. Skinny, but not too skinny or else people will think you don’t eat. Have some skin on your bones, but not too much because then people will think you’re fat. Plus the camera adds ten pounds. Sexual, but not too much because then you’re a slut. Reserved, but don’t be a prude, no one likes a tease.

In the male dominated field of comedy, women are constantly being reminded of their flaws by the public to the point where it seems everything they do is wrong. Gold was told she was too tall, too gay, and too tomboyish. Shepherd was told she was too black and too different. Standup comedian Bonnie McFarlane was told she was too strange and too ambitious. Standup comedian Nikki Glaser was told she wasn’t pretty enough. Marina Franklin was told she was too black (*Hysterical*, 2021). After having their identities dissected these women are expected to just smile, get on stage, perform, and keep their mouths shut. These women are told they shouldn’t get mad or else they embody the stereotypical scorned woman. And no one likes a mad woman.

On the other hand, male comedians are often praised when they show expressions of rage on stage. Their spouts of anger evoke feelings of community hype and hysteria among their crowd. Bill Burr, Chris Rock, Sam Kinson, and Bill Hicks are all prime examples of men who are known for their performance anger (*Hysterical*, 2021). No one questions this anger when it’s done by these men. But when a woman breaks down on stage, articles are published about her (Sager, 2017). Or when a woman pushes the envelope for the sake of personal safety she’s ridiculed by the audience (Bachman, YouTube, 2019). Gold breaks down the phenomenon of sexism in the comedy industry within one quote. “It’s not about talking like men or talking about the stuff they talk about. It’s about our experience and that is as valid as theirs” (*Hysterical*, 2021).

**Sexism, Comedy Clubs, and Sexual Violence**

Not only do female comedians have to endure the public dissection put upon them as entertainers. They also are faced with a system that perpetuates sexism and doesn’t prioritize their safety. “I’ve never understood sexism until I got into the comedy scene,” Franklin says (*Hysterical*, 2021). Comedy clubs are notoriously sexist against women. Emcees or hosts often will introduce female comics as one of the following benevolent sexist pleasantries: pixie, little lady, young lady, gorgeous girl, and good girl. These demeaning nicknames reduce women down to little girls who want to perform at a talent show, rather than give them credit for their creativity and work ethic (*Hysterical*, 2021).

Comedy club hosts in this day and age still find it hard to have two women perform back to back (*Hysterical*, 2021). They’d rather put a man in as a buffer between the two women comics. Assuming that the crowd will be displeased with the two female comics performing sequentially aids to the stereotype that women aren’t funny. This mode of operation prioritizes male stage time over female stage time. Thus perpetuating an inequity of opportunity.

In order to hone in on their craft, comedians have to constantly be generating new material and audiences to practice on. “Professional comedians in the U.S. also have a demanding lifestyle that requires many skills beyond comedy. They typically work alone; travel much of the year to comedy clubs in different cities; have no job security, union, or job benefits; and work in relative obscurity for much (if not all) of their career (Greengross & Miller 2009, 74). In order to hone in on their craft, comedians have to constantly be generating new material and audiences to practice on. This means that they need stage time to test out their sets and gauge an audience’s feedback. If you’re lucky enough to get a time slot in the show, then you’re guaranteed no more than 10-15 minutes. Shepherd describes the inequity among genders for stage time. “It was never an even playing field. It was so hard to get stage time” (*Hysterical*, 2021). This is why so many comedians are eager to get on the road and be a feature act for a major headliner. A 10-15 minute weekly segment at a local comedy club doubles to a half hour of stage time when comedians are on tour (*Hysterical*, 2021).

Some comedy clubs on the road have condominiums where their talent can stay. While the offer seems to be made in good-faith, it actually is quite sketchy. *Hysterical* shows a scene with Glaser from 2010 at the Tampa Improv comedy club’s condominium. The condominiums are normally a few blocks away from the club, in dangerous nearby neighborhoods. The idea of this scene is to show that women who are or have been placed in comedy condos while on the road are not prioritized. In an industry where men outnumber and outrank women, placing an individual woman in a condo with three other men is not only daunting, but heedless to the woman’s safety. Feimster said in a dejected yet realistic moment of thought, “The dues you have to pay to get to where you want to go. But it’s so sad. You just think, 'what if this is my life’” (*Hysterical*, 2021).

In a *Refinery29* review on the documentary, *Hysterical*, the topic of comedy condos was revisited. The article added in an incriminating anecdote by Franklin.

Franklin said they [comedy condos] still exist for some comedy club chains. “I had a club that stopped booking me because I did not want to stay in their comedy condo,” Franklin wrote in an email to Refinery29. “They used an excuse, ‘We have to wait until it is a better tax year before we can find better accommodations.’ And this was after I offered to pay for my own lodging. They never worked with me at their comedy chain ever again (Carlin, 2021).

It all comes down to a different set of priorities for men versus women. Women prioritize personal safety, while men don’t have to factor this into their travel plans. And the comedy clubs behind it all, well, they don’t care (Carlin, 2021).

Women are primed from a young age to understand that it’s possible for them to be promoted or upgraded not because of their talent, but rather because they’re a woman. This comes in the diversity form when companies are trying to progress and diversify their staff with a token woman. But also in the even more disturbing sense, that the boss may be trying to advance the woman’s career in hopes for sexual favors. This idea is no different in the standup comedy industry. When women in the industry are asked to join a bigger comedian on the road, they also run the risk that the man who has asked them to come on tour doesn't have pure intentions. Standup comedian, Rachel Feinstein put it best, “It’s tricky,” Feinstein said. “Because when somebody asks you out on the road you don’t know why. Does this guy really respect my act or is he going to be strange and gross and lascivious all weekend” (*Hysterical*, 2021).

There were a series of moments in *Hysterical* where some of the comedians come forward and share their truths regarding the sexual violence inflicted upon them by other comedians. Cho recounted the time a male comic followed her into her dressing room, locked her inside, and then attempted to rape her. Shepherd tearfully relived the time she was assaulted by a male comic years prior. Another woman from the documentary revealed her memory of being followed into the bathroom at a comedy club by a male comic and shoved up against a stall. Fellow standup comedian, Iliza Shlesinger describes this unspoken truth about being a woman in the entertainment industry. “They [men] don’t know the feeling, they don’t know what it’s like to physically not be as big as someone. And know that no matter how much smarter and funnier you are at the end of the day if that person wants to hurt you they can” (*Hysterical*, 2021).

**Trauma Bonding In Comedy**

Standup comedy is the people’s form of modern art and entertainment. It’s a language that almost everyone speaks, but few are brave enough to perform. It’s an art form that lends itself to storytelling, psychoanalysis, sociology, and rhetoric. Standup comedians are mediums, liaisons to the higher power of humor as they compel our attention with their words. They are “complex, ambiguous, and to some extent even paradoxical” (Mintz 1985,72). Standups are also the masters of a full circle moment and a multi-dimensional story. Through voice inflection, delivery speed and sound, and body language standups are the captors of the moment. Shlesinger describes standups as “modern day philosophers and whistleblowers” (*Hysterical*, 2021).

One could argue that psychologically speaking, standup comedians are in their field because of their desire for praise, glory, and just simply attention. After interviewing three women in standup, I now understand that this is accurate. Comedians are storytellers yet control freaks. They want to capture the room with their voice, hold their attention, and then land them back down safely at the end of their sets. Feimster’s earnest response in *Hysterical* to why she did standup comedy proved this point. “There’s probably a little piece of a lot of us that are filling a void” (*Hysterical*, 2021). A void brought on by being overlooked as a child and as a woman. Women in comedy have to prove themselves on stage early in their career by conveying that they have something significant to say that will hold the crowd’s attention. Standup comedians often open up to their audiences on stage about their past traumas and act as a “mirror holder” (*Hysterical*, 2021). They hold up a mirror to acknowledge their own personal struggles so the audience is able to feel solidarity within their testimonies. Whether this is Bachman or Cho sharing their truth as rape survivors or Franklin sharing her breast cancer diagnosis with the audience, comedians are seeking out the support and love they always desired (*Hysterical*, 2021).

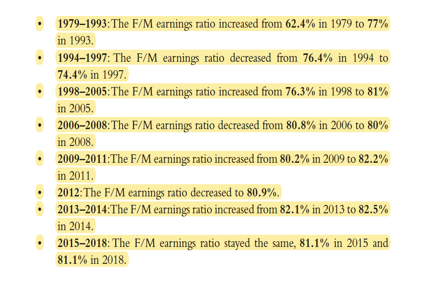
As society’s mirror holders, they hope that with their authenticity, self-deprecating humor, and pure effort that at least one person in the audience will be able to resonate with them. Standup comedian, Jessica Kirson validated this truth after she told her audience about her childhood binge eating habits and self-infliction. “No matter how much you [the audience] clap, it'll never fill the hole. Like we’re just trying to fill this hole and get the attention we’ve always wanted but we can’t get. I think it really goes back to childhood and just always wanting to be seen and heard but not being acknowledged” (*Hysterical*, 2021).

**Quick Background on the Gender Pay Gap**

The first time I heard about the gender pay gap was amidst the #MeToo Movement in 2018. I never knew why men made more money than women. I think a lot of people still share that same thought. Why do men make more money than women? The answer is simple. It’s because the job market believes the value of a man’s work is greater than the value of a woman’s: approximately, 18.4% greater than a woman’s work value. The pay gap by definition is “the difference in earnings between men and women usually expressed as a percentage or in a dollar amount. It can be expressed through two points of view: as the ratio of female to male earnings or as the gap of how much less women are earning compared to men” (Abdel-Raouf, Fatma, Buhler 2020).

This is not to say there are more men with higher education degrees than women. 57% of Bachelor’s degrees earned during the 2015-2016 academic year were by women. An even greater jump shows that 59% of Master’s degrees earned during the 2015-2016 academic year were received by women. Taking a look at the grand scheme of things, the U.S Census Bureau reported that 47% of women were in the labor force and all employed workers in the year 2017. Moreover, women almost make up half of the workforce in the U.S (Abdel-Raouf, Fatma, Buhler 2020).

The pay gap, however, has been around since the women joined the workforce. There has been a major increase in achieving equity amidst the pay gap since 1961 -- where the female to male earnings ratio was 59.2% (Abdel-Raouf, Fatma, Buhler 2020). However the biggest spike in rate of change didn’t begin until 1979 when the female to male earnings ratio increased from 62% to 77% in 1993. Since 2005, the slowly fluctuating percentage has begun to increase at a decreasing rate. Meaning -- in the image presented below, the female to male earnings ratio increases by a smaller amount than the previous decade.



The timeline above, taken from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that from 2005 through 2018 there has hardly been any movement nor improvement in achieving equity in the gender pay gap.

Netflix is the gatekeeper to a multitude of successful comedian’s comedy specials. These specials are typically an hour long or so. They also have mini-series with one episode standup performances by rising comedians called *The Standups*. Each of these episodes is around 25-35 minutes long. While not everyone who performs on the mini-series The Standups may be a household name, those who have solo hour-long Netflix specials usually are. Jerry Seinfield, Dave Chapelle, Chris Rock, and Ricky Gervais are just a few of the men who are making more than double their female competitors. Chris Rock was paid $40 million for his *Tambourine* special. Amy Schumer was paid $11 million for *The Leather Special* then after protesting the inequality Netflix upped her paycheck to $13 million. Dave Chapelle was paid $60 million for *The Bird Revelation*, while Tiffany Haddish was only paid $800,000 for her special, *She Ready*. Ricky Gervais was paid $40 million for his special, *Humanity* while Ellen Degeneres special, *Relatable* made her a $20-25 million paycheck. Lastly, Netflix paid Jerry Seinfield $60 million for his *Jerry Before Seinfeld* special (Clark, 2020).

**Methods**

For my creative project, I’ve created a mini-podcast series to document the interviews I’ve conducted for this project. I chose to interview three women in standup and three scholarly experts on the gender dynamics in the standup comedy industry. I chose to alternate the episodes starting with a comedian interview so the next interview would be with an expert. I decided on this order so the consumer can reflect and compare the personal perspective with the intellectual perspective.

The order I went about with my interview process does not coincide with my episode order. My first two interviews were with Brandie Posey and Anna Valenzuela. In these episodes, we talk about their childhood backgrounds, journey to standup, and their experiences with comedy clubs as women. My next two episodes were with media studies experts. I had the opportunity to interview Dr. John D. Connor from the University of Southern California and Professor Robert J. King from Columbia University. My next interview was with gender studies expert, Dr. Jared Champion from Mercer University. In my individual conversations with Dr. Connor, Professor King, and Dr. Champion, we discussed the gendered history of standup comedy and how it’s evolved in a post #MeToo society. My final interview was with Mona Shaikh. We discussed the horrors of her experience with men in comedy. I learned that it isn’t just the male comedians inflicting the damage and dangers upon these women. It’s talent managers, bookers, club owners, and comedians – male or female. The issue is systematic and requires a cultural shift and legal action. To access my podcast please click the SoundCloud link: **https://soundcloud.com/jess-macaulay-587285215**

**Conclusion**

I hope that with my creative project people will stop doing what I used to do -- scroll past female comedians just to go and watch the same Dave Chapelle comedy special for the ninth time. I want people to not only acknowledge and engage with female standup comedy specials. I want people to understand the additional struggles it takes to make it in this business as a woman. I hope that with this new understanding we can shift people’s mindsets so they can acknowledge and abolish their implicit biases too.

For women in standup, there are already disadvantages set against them right from the start of their career. With my project, people will understand the balancing act that comes with the struggles of being a woman in standup. They’re comedians but they’re also independent contractors. They are their own bosses until they’re successful enough to have an agent, talent manager, publicist, lawyer, etc. There’s also no Human Resources Department to file complaints to when a coworker or in this case, performer acts out of line. These are all extra burdens women have to take on while trying to be successful. I also want people to understand the dangers and fear that women are plagued with in general. However, take that fear and multiply it by fifty. When you’re up on a stage telling jokes about past sexual experiences and relationships, the dangerous situations you’re then placed in are amplified. These women are looked at as sexual objects because they sometimes make sexual jokes. The dangers and crimes that are then inflicted upon them because of this are detrimental to both their mental and physical health. I deep dive into these topics more in my podcast episodes, especially in my episode with Mona Shaikh and my final episode.

Upon reflecting on my research and the past eight months I’ve spent with this topic and medium it’s only natural I share the roadblocks I encountered. I think there’s a lot of fear, even as a journalism major, to approach someone and ask them to go on the record. Regardless of the topic at hand, many people are scared their words will be twisted or their stories manipulated. I found that while editing my podcast episodes there were a handful of times where my subjects would say casual remarks like, “Don’t quote me on that.” Or “That sounded wrong, I don’t mean that. I actually mean…” I find that anytime someone tries to justify what they’re saying, you lose a little bit of their authentic answer. I also now know that when people justify their claims and give long-drawn-out replies it can be harder during the editing process. This was something I wasn’t used to in journalism. As a student with a focus on broadcast, I’ve been trained to seek out short, snappy sound bites. But in my print classes, I open up conversations with my subjects and hope they give me long, detail-oriented answers. This way I can accurately paint a picture. There are two separate styles when it comes to broadcast and print. After completing and editing my episodes, I now know that podcasting is a combination of the two styles, broadcast, and print. Personally, I’m a huge podcast consumer. The majority of the podcasts I tune into are comedy-based, hence my choice of subject and medium. I’ve also learned through my broadcast capstone that many people aren’t comfortable being on camera. A recording of someone’s voice, however, is just non-threatening enough that people feel comfortable and open to sharing all types of personal stories and experiences.

I detail this in my interview with Mona Shaikh, but I found her in a Hollywood Reporter article while I was doing some quick research before my interview with Dr. J.D Connor. I knew after reading her story in the article that she would be the perfect interviewee. I found her online and messaged her on Instagram that afternoon. By nightfall, we had exchanged numbers and arranged a time to talk about my project the next day. Shaikh asked me multiple times who would hear this interview, whether it was to be public or private. She feared the backlash her candor would raise. I insisted that I would protect her name by setting any episode that included her voice on a privacy setting that SoundCloud offered. She consented to this.

Shaikh is an established comedian who is working 24/7. As a journalist and an empathetic human, I know to be flexible with people when it comes to getting an interview time down in the books. After our first phone call on Friday, March 5, we scheduled an interview for Wednesday, March 16. The week in between our call and interview she was working on a Carnival cruise line doing shows twice a night. After her return from sea, she pushed our interview back from Wednesday at 3:00 p.m to Friday at 3:00 p.m. She was also in the Pacific Timezone. My project was officially due Friday evening and I had just agreed to move our interview for the sake of having her as a source. I knew this was a risky last-minute move, but I just had a feeling it would pay off. I was right. It really did pay off. I had the delight to speak to so many intellectuals and they were all amazing. However, I would say Shaikh’s episode was my favorite of them all. She provided so many anecdotes, experiences, and verbalized her findings of the standup industry’s faults so well.

Aside from last-minute interviews and the tediousness of audio editing, I would say I realized my own personal flaws. I look back and find it a bit unsettling how I consistently phrased my subject as “females in comedy.” Reducing a person down to their sex whether they identify as a female or not feels like I’m reinforcing a binary. That was never my intention. I tried to be as inclusive as possible with my wording but I think I should have just stuck to women in comedy. Another realization, I take exceptionally long pauses when I hesitate and use the words “really,” “like,” and “ah” so often. After editing seven recordings featuring my voice, I’m now making a concentrated effort to reduce my filler words.

My project adds new faces and testimonies to the next generation of the standup comedy industry. I want to be the one to be able to vouch for these voices. Comedy is so significant in my life. Laughter enhances any situation. We’re all humans with pasts, trauma, and struggle. And while we can’t always relate our struggles to others, there is something that alleviates all people united. It’s the pressure of laughter leaving our chests. It’s the tears that fly from our eyes as we laugh harder than we thought possible.

On the same token, it’s the way standup comedians make a career out of bettering our lives and giving us an escape. Comedians put their personal lives and traumas on blast to make their audience laugh. If they’re constantly sharing deeply personal information with their audiences and willing to do anything for a validating laugh, why aren’t we giving them credit where credit is so clearly due? The general population may not know the inherent struggles and glass ceilings female comedians are constantly having to break through. I’m here to illuminate this truth.

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