

JOKE'S ON YOU: AN EXPLORATION OF AMERICA'S COMEDY LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

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The creative thesis, “Joke’s on You: An Exploration of America’s Comedy Landscape” is a foray into the American comedic field, with a particular focus on stand-up comedy. The thesis is two-fold, consisting of a creative component and an academic component.

The creative component consists of 15 minutes worth of material, ranging across a myriad of topics from Asian stereotypes to family quirks to personal upbringing. The humor used is a combination of observational and self-deprecating humor. Finally, the creative component is broken up into four sets: one filmed in front of friends, one filmed in front of an organization, one filmed at an audition for The University of Texas at Austin’s largest talent show, Texas Revue, and one at an open mic.

Conversely, the academic component details and develops the history of comedy and types of humor before delving into challenges faced during the personal journey and writing of the creative component. The academic treatise concludes with an analysis of the landscape at large.

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Finally, I want to express my admiration and gratitude to all the comedians who are working to provide social commentary and entertainment not only in the United States but across the world. Writing jokes and performing stand-up has been the most difficult challenge I have ever put myself through and I cannot appreciate the cultural impact comedians, writers, and the creative industry has on our society enough.

Thank you for all the laughs.

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Creative Component: Transcript

Video 1 (Audience of Friends)

Hey, hello, hello, how is everybody doing?

Nice! Wow, all this validation and attention. I can tell my parents aren't here.

I'm just kidding. Thank you so much for supporting and coming to listen to live comedy. What a great way to spend Good Friday.

I didn't grow up particularly religious but living in a super Catholic town, I always thought it was kind of weird that we call the day Jesus died Good Friday. Catholics can be so vicious, if a crucifixion can be a good Friday, I guess a world-ending apocalypse is an average Saturday.

So as background, I'm currently a senior in college, looking for a job. You can tell how well that's going because I'm doing comedy, the most financially stable of all professions. Yeah, so I'm trying to find a job but can we talk about how frustrating it is applying to these damn things? These job applications will ask for some easy things we all have (or we can at least lie about). Team player? Check? Self-motivated? Yes. Proficiency in Microsoft Excel? Ehhhh....yeah, why not?

Yeah, but it's when job applications move past the easy stuff that it really screws you up. The other week I was applying to this entry-level job that had 4+ years of experience in the field preferred. 4+ years? Bitch, I've been in college for 4 years to get your 4 years of experience.

To be fair and stop ragging on any potential recruiters, it is nice when companies take the time and send you a personal copy and paste rejection email. Because at least I know I didn't get it, I don't have to spend any more time pursuing that lead. But in all of this, you know what the true waste of time is?

When you're filling out the application and they ask you to upload your resume. Because in the moment, you're like yeah, yeah, I can do that. I got you. What do you need? PDF, Word Doc, high-resolution JPEG, Yeah, yeah I got you.

And once you upload it and press next, bam 5000 empty fields asking for every detail of what was just on your resume. Like, bitch, I just gave you my resume! That shit is all going to be the same. Not much has changed since you last saw me on the previous webpage.

On the subject of being frustrated, my therapist told me I really need to work on my perspective on life, you know the way I see things. I mean I'm trying to be more positive, working on my perspective on things. Because after all, isn't that what life is all about? Perspective? Like my therapist was telling me, people aren't addicted to their work, they're passionate about their careers. Like you're not addicted to weed, you're passionate about life. And I'm not addicted to applying to jobs, I'm passionate about not being poor.

Video 2 (Organization Audience)

Hey, how is everyone doing?

So, I started dating a new guy and like any other girl, I immediately checked our horoscope compatibility. I don't think it's going to work out because he's an Aries and I'm a bitch. So much for that relationship. I mean the only sign I'm compatible with anyway is the dollar sign.

My grandma just had a birthday last week and she's at that age where she's starting to look like something not a lot of Asian people look like: old.

Like seriously, I don't know what it is about Asian genetics but Asian people, from when they're 12 to 26 to 39 to 55, they look exactly the same age.

I think the funny thing is that even though this looks the same, aging is still happening. We, Asian people, just repress it all on the inside. One day you may be going to sleep looking like an Asian baby and then bam, next morning, Mr. Miyagi. You could throw on a robe, walk with a staff, and are wise as hell.

On the topic of growing up, I've been trying to be more positive in the way that I look at things. I mean, that's what life is all about right? Perspective? Like my therapist told me, it's about framing the situation. So like people are not addicted to their work, they're passionate about careers. Or like college seniors aren't passionate about applying to jobs, they're passionate about not being poor. Or like I'm not addicted to telling bad jokes, I'm passionate about passing my thesis.

Video 3 (Texas Revue Audition)

Hi! My name is Bianca and I'm a senior here and hopefully will be making you laugh this morning. I'm doing my senior thesis on stand-up comedy and had a really frustrating conversation with my supervisor the other day. My supervisor has been bothering me about my thesis but I'm not that worried since I have an A on it. Now if I could get a couple more letters on the page as well, I'll have my first full sentence.

Like I said, I'm writing my thesis on stand-up comedy. A lot of people make fun of me for my major but I took a lot of interesting classes so my professors told us that our thesis should reflect our 4 years here but they didn't appreciate me calling my degree a joke.

I've loved living in Austin but I miss my hometown. I'm from El Paso, from the border. El Paso is a beautiful place because you can experience a lot of cool things without ever leaving. Beto is from there, Khalid is from there, and the 8th wonder of the world is currently being built there. For example, I can see the wall from my backyard.

One of my favorite things about living on the border is learning to speak different languages. I speak Spanish, English, and Chinese. My parents really pushed it on me and my siblings to teach us about a strong work ethic. Like if at first, you don't succeed, don't bother coming home.

I think the lesson has paid off for my little brother and sister. For example, my brother just won the Spanish spelling bee at his school. My parents were so smug too when he won because it just

proved that anything you put your mind to, it wouldn't matter because there is a little Asian kid out there that will beat you at it. including speaking Spanish.

As happy as I am for my siblings, I think it's a little unfair that they get to experience all this success but all I get to experience is anxiety in 3 languages. My siblings will be ambassadors and diplomats and I'll be poor.

I went through some stuff recently and have started going to therapy. I've been having a great time but my health insurance is not as thrilled. They'll call me, go over my list of charges and say, "Ms. Hsieh, for the 20th time, retail therapy is not in your insurance plan. For that, you're going to have to switch to our PPO plan."

I realized I've been shopping a little too much when a sales clerk asked me if he could help me find anything today and I immediately said emotionally available men and these shoes in a size 6.

I've been doing some online dating to help me move on. Are y'all online dating? Online dating is kind of like shopping on Craigslist. You see something interesting and hope to God that it looks the same in person.

I realized that online dating may not be for me considering how type A I get. Like I was that annoying kid on the playground that was like, Oh yeah? Prove it. So whenever guys say they're an athlete, I'm like oh yeah? What's your max bench press? Or if they're really into food. What's

your restaurant that's not just a bunch of fusion. or if they're Asian, where's your medical degree?
Just kidding, Asians can also be lawyers.

Video 4 (Open Mic at Spokesman)

Hey, hello, hello, how is everybody doing?

Wow, I love when half of the audience doesn't understand English. It's like talking to my parents.

Yeah, so my name is Bianca. I don't really know if I look like a Bianca? A couple of weeks ago, someone came up to me and told me that I didn't really look like a Bianca. That I look more like a Jade or Kiki or Lotus Flower.

I was like "Oh I'm sorry dude, what did you say? I couldn't hear you over your lowkey racism."

So I have a little brother and he and I have a pretty big age difference. I remember when my mom was pregnant with him and my parents were trying to come up with names for him. Since I'm insecure about my name, I told my parents they should name my brother something that really represented our roots, where we were from...so out of all the Asian names they could have gone with, they went with Carlos. Jr. Put that together. Carlos. Jr.

The only things my parents are honoring are the fact that Mexico is our Southern neighbor...and America's love for shitty fast food.

Any native Austinites in the crowd? At this point, I don't know what there's more of: people living in Austin who are not actually from here or scooters.

I mean what's the difference? They both just take up real estate.

I have to confess something, something I want to get off my chest. Growing up, I realized that my family has a history of drinking from the bottle. I know. Sad. My family only bought and only drank for plastic bottled water. I know. I know.

But when I moved to Austin, I realized how bad plastic bottles could be for the environment. And then I got introduced to the amazing Brita filters.

Anyway, I'm on this trend of drinking from my reusable water bottle when suddenly Austin pulls a 180 on me and introduces something called kombucha. Have y'all heard of it? It's fermented tea. That's right. So you take regular tea using Brita cleaned water...and add the bacteria right back into it.

The thing that pisses me off about drinking kombucha is that not only are we out here drinking some dirty ass water, but we also pay a premium for it. We filtered out all the generic bacteria and added some gentrified bacteria right back into it.

Anyway, I'm going to leave you guys with this one last one. I started seeing someone new pretty recently and like a good girl, I jumped on the internet to see if our horoscopes matched up. I'm

bummed out because I don't think we're going to work out. We're not super compatible because he's an Aries...and I'm a bitch.

Academic Treatise: Introduction

The following treatise will describe the methodologies and experiences I used and had during my year of exploring the realm of stand-up comedy. I was first inspired to start my thesis after taking a creative writing class. After a difficult semester, I made it a goal to laugh more and often watched stand-up clips and romantic comedy sitcoms to help me process. Consequently, I developed an interest in comedy and aimed to not only examine it academically but try my hand at it and find my comedic voice as a straight, Asian woman.

Purpose of Comedy

Comedy writing has spanned centuries and is one of the oldest forms of drama in the world. Beyond its entertainment factor, scientists have debated why people are drawn to it. An article from *The New Yorker* hypothesizes that laughter evolved as a technique designed to alert others whether a threat is trivial or not (Friend). However, alternating hypotheses suggest other purposes (Smuts). For example, the superiority theory suggests that audiences enjoy humor because it gives them a sense of superiority, the incongruity theory states that people enjoy a discrepancy in what they expect and what occurs, and the release theory explains that there is a pleasure to be found in the unconscious. Furthermore, laughing comes with health benefits. Frequent laughter has been proven to improve psychological health and decrease pain. Regardless, comedy has long brought people together to take a step back and laugh at the idiosyncrasies of life.

Given its longstanding popularity as a form of entertainment, comedy is often dissected and broken down to determine what makes something funny. Numerous comedy classes and schools will offer and teach certain techniques that are designed to optimize the times and duration of audience laughter such as the rule of threes, pacing, timing, callback, etc.

The deconstruction of comedy into humor-infused formulaic setups challenges whether humor is something innate or can truly be explained via a series of formulas. Predictably, there are arguments for both sides. Dr. Richard Wiseman, a psychologist from the University of Hertfordshire, conducted the LaughLab experiment which aimed to find the world's funniest jokes and attempt to understand the larger nuances of humor (von Radowitz). The experiment received 40,000 jokes and 2 million ratings. The winning joke is as follow:

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps: "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator says: "Calm down, I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says: "OK, now what?"

The winning joke appealed to a universal audience spanning different ages, genders, and countries. Dr. Wiseman further offered that "we find jokes funny for lots of different reasons. They sometimes make us feel superior to others, reduce the emotional impact of anxiety-provoking situations or surprise us because of some kind of incongruity. The hunters joke contained all three elements."

Conversely, there are other journals that argue that after all, it is a *sense* of humor. However, even in the argument that humor is innate, there are nuances. Research conducted by Dr. Rod Martin, a psychologist at the University of Western Ontario finds that different types of comedy may be funny for different reasons (Anitei). 2,000 pairs of British twins and 500 pairs of American twins participated in the study and researchers concluded that British humor was much more cutting in comparison to American humor. The study found that British audiences were much more receptive to negative humor which includes a wide range of topics from racist teasing to sexist jokes whereas both American and British audiences enjoyed positive humor

which is uplifting and looks “at the bright side of life.” From this observation, researchers were able to conclude that black humor is learned whereas positive humor is innate.

Comedic Landscape

To further understand comedy, it is important to flesh out the landscape.

Types of Comedy

Comedy can be categorized into different genres and take on different forms (i.e. sketch, improvisational, stand-up) with new combinations constantly emerging. However, as a general overview, comedic genres can be classified and summarized into the following:

Genre	Description
Slapstick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined by how physical it is (consists of gestures, movements, and signals) • One of the simpler, sillier comedy forms • Often employed by sketch comedy shows and comedians such as Charlie Chaplin
Deadpan/Dry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined by delivery of joke rather than content (lack of noticeable change in emotion)
Self-Deprecating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belittling and poking fun at oneself
Potty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low brow humor • Designed to force the audience to cringe
Topical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on content rather than delivery • Often utilized by late night shows
Satire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposes stupidity and shortcomings of people and life at large • Defined largely by irony, exaggeration, caricatures, sarcasm, and ridicule • Requires insightful commentary
Parody	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imitation through sarcasm and irony • Designed to poke fun at something

Black/dark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on morbid topics • Presents alternative outlooks on situations • Overlaps with shock value
Surreal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characterized by the bizarre and ridiculous

An Analysis of Comedic American Cities

Within the United States, humor emerged soon after the American Revolution and has taken on various forms that history established as popular at the time. Comedic writings first appeared as literature before evolving into cartoons and eventually taking on the spoken form via radio, television, and film.

Though comedy has continued evolving across different forms and mediums, the 1970s were a defining time in introducing a “new comic” (Bromley). Strongly influenced by the counterculture of the 1960s, comedy in the 1970s aimed to be a faster, looser, and sharper commentary on socio-political issues. This was a departure from the traditional, set-up that jokes often were defined by in previous decades. By the end of the 1980s, comedy was at its peak. There were a plethora of comedy clubs across the country as well as a steady supply of comedians. However, as the market saturated, the quality of comedy began to deteriorate and the comedy bubble burst. Though comedy clubs closed, comedy continued to live on through the 1990s on Comedy Central and sketch TV shows. As creators congregated in shared spaces for creativity, cities that became hubs for comedy were established and to this day, continue to shape the direction of humor in the United States.

New York City, New York

Given that New York is the traditional capital of live theater and performance, it was no surprise that comedy flourished in the Big Apple. Comedy clubs were opening on both coasts of the United States to give a platform to the emerging comics of the 1970s. Notable clubs in New York City such as The Improv, which has been opened since 1963, and Catch A Rising Star, which opened in 1972, featured established and upcoming comics, often serving as the starts for numerous comics who would achieve notable fame later on in their careers such as Richard Lewis, Jerry Seinfeld, and Larry David. Furthermore, though Chicago is the ultimate destination for improv, New York is home to live stand-up. New York is also home to various comedy landmarks including various late night television shows such *Saturday Night Live*, famous comedy schools such as Upright Citizens Brigade, and acclaimed comedy clubs such as the Comedy Cellar, Gotham Comedy Club, and Caroline's on Broadway. Given the saturation of the comedy market and the fierce competitiveness characteristic of the city, comedy is often honed to its top potential in New York.

Los Angeles, California

On the other coast, The Comedy Store, which opened in 1972 in West Hollywood, and a West Coast branch of The Improv, which opened in 1975, served comedians such as Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Robin Williams. Additionally, the West Coast has its share of comedy schools including The Groundlings and iO West. However, given the proximity to Hollywood, comedians that found success in Los Angeles quickly parlayed their talents to selling out amphitheaters and stadiums as well as performing on television and producing albums. A large concentration of talk shows are found here, inspiring comedy to be more performative and fame oriented.

Chicago, Illinois

As stated previously, Chicago is home to improvisational comedy. Though comedy has long had a home in theater, dating all the way back to Ancient Greece, improv was honed in Chicago via clubs such as The Second City and the iO. Modern improv began in 1955 at the University of Chicago when the Compass Players was formed by Paul Sills and David Shepherd (Marklew). The troupe developed improv games and techniques and regularly performed plays. When the Compass Players disbanded, several remaining members formed The Second City, a joke pulled from an article in the *New Yorker* about Chicago. Sills continued the techniques and methods honed by the Compass Players which led to the formation of the Players Workshop, the first official improv school, as well as many other Second City entities. Del Close, another notable figure associated with the Compass Players, founded the ImprovOlympic (iO) which focused on long-form improvisational structures. Both clubs have served as training grounds for numerous famous comedians such as Joan Rivers, John Belushi, Bill Murray, Chris Farley, Stephen Colbert, and Tina Fey and continue shaping the improv scene.

Austin, Texas

Although Austin's comedy scene is not as widely established nor prolific as the comedy scenes in the aforementioned cities, it is one of many top growing comedy scenes around the country, along with Denver, Colorado, and was included given the context of this thesis. Local comedians often describe Austin's comedy community as being more writing-oriented rather than performance-oriented. However, festivals that garner national (and international) attention such as the South by Southwest Conference and the Moontower Comedy Festival continue to keep Austin on the national comedy map.

Challenges in Comedy

Within comedy, there are countless social obstacles that make the landscape more difficult for comedians of certain identities to navigate than others. Though this thesis will not and cannot cover every factor (i.e. socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability, mental illnesses, etc.) that comedians face, two factors that the thesis will elaborate on are gender and race and how they have impacted my personal creative writing process.

Gender

Comedy has long been referred to as a boy's club, a stark observation and truth which has manifested itself in various ways from late night talk show hosts vastly being straight, white males to stand-up comedy lineups composed of mainly the same demographic. As a consequence, this landscape has altered the comedic experience for women, namely in terms of how people react.

When researching and watching interviews of established comedians giving advice to new aspiring comics, there is an illuminating contrast between a general audience and an audience that is composed of women. Numerous online resources, as well as in-person interviews, have suggested women ought to dress in baggy clothes and minimal makeup, all efforts designed to draw attention away from their femininity. This is done so that audiences will see a woman not as a "woman comic", but simply as a comic. The same logical inconsistencies are applicable to fat shaming as well. Women have to be conscious, always, of how they define their bodies. Heavy women feel pressure to feel ashamed of their bodies and if not, then that becomes their shtick, a frustration that Amy Schumer has cited numerous times and attempts to address through her work. Furthermore, testimonies from female comics often discuss the line they must tread between

disarming and shutting down unwanted sexual attention and advances but still being liked in the scene.

However, one of the most illuminating success stories in comedy revolves around Phyllis Diller. Beginning her comedy career at the age of 37, Diller and her comedic persona were characterized by baggy dresses, over-the-top hair, a cigarette holder, and her iconic cackle (Donnelly). In the male-dominated comedic landscape where traces of femininity were used against women, Diller trashed her looks, her cooking, and her husband, all markers of the traditional housewife. Understanding the landscape, Diller balanced the line between following the rules of stand-up and putting her own flair on things: being a “failure” of a woman. This self-deprecation launched her on to the national stage when, in 1959, her television appearance exposed her comedy to the rest of the country. Her career was punctuated by film work and countless television appearances, including her own *The Phyllis Diller Show*. Frequently lauded as the comic that paved the way for other icons such as Joan Rivers, Roseanne Barr, and Lily Tomlin, Phyllis Diller successfully turned her feminine “weaknesses” into strengths in her comedy. Though Diller’s own stage persona may have made fun of the stereotypical housewife, her act did not aim to lower the audience’s opinions of women. Rather, Diller not only critiqued the social expectations of women but convinced an audience to be on her side when the predisposition was not to be.

Despite the success of Diller, it is important to note that there are still challenges in the comedic landscape that are unique to women. Reaction to and treatment of women in comedy has been largely defined by discomfort which is representative of how women are treated in the world at large. For example, when women laugh too loudly or intensely, they are portrayed as hysterical. Though comedy can be positive and lighthearted, comedy can also be violent, graphic, and crude.

Ms. Magazine, an American liberal feminist publication, argues that “women have always had a marginal position in physical violence because audiences are uncomfortable laughing at violence against women.” (Hennefeld) Though reactions to women aren’t always this extreme, there is a discrepancy worthy of discussion. The claim that people react differently to men comics than they do women comics has spurred the generalization that “Women aren’t funny”, a prejudice I had to be constantly self-evaluating of during my thesis process. At one of the first comedy shows I attended in Austin, the lineup was made up of three men and two women. The genders alternated with a man performing first. At the conclusion of each performance, the men were met with much more enthusiastic applause than the women. During the show, I weighed the possibility that the two female comics objectively did not give funny performances and that the audience’s lack of enthusiasm merely reflected poor comedic timing rather than gender. As I was leaving, I heard several audience members comment on the difficulty they had connecting with the female comics. Though several of the comics referenced their sex lives, it was true that one of the female comics took it beyond the bedroom and performed a comedic bit about pregnancy. However, within the same show, one of the male comics made repeated jokes describing his genitalia but the same complaints of difficulty connecting with the male comics were not heard.

Across the numerous shows I have gone to, self-deprecating humor is one of the most popular forms of comedy but even so, there is a discrepancy when men are self-deprecating in comparison to when women are self-deprecating which is evidenced by audience reaction. Men usually get louder laughs whereas women get laughs that are quieter and are pitying, an observation also shared in a personal blog post of a female comic (Feldman). Of course, true talent will be rewarded regardless of gender but in the landscape, it is important to be aware of audience perception. The idea that people are more comfortable laughing at men than at women may be

rooted in an admirable empathy to treat women more kindly. However, ultimately, unequal treatment, be it through empathy for women or discomfort “making fun” of women, stifles laughter and alters the playing field.

On a more comforting note, comedy has always been a tool for comedians to work through and comment on difficult personal situations or larger issues in society. For example, Ms. Magazine argues that “Humor can make feminism more palatable and steer it away from simply being a bunch of ‘man-haters’” and female slapstick comedy has aided in progressing feminist activism. Phyllis Diller, through her comedy, challenged what it meant to be a woman, even if she had to convey said message through subtext. The usage of comedy to comment on social issues without being isolating has continued into the contemporary landscape. American comics Tina Fey and Amy Poehler performed a now-viral sketch on *Saturday Night Live* mocking the female rivalry between Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin (Saturday Night Live). Though the media often pits women against each other to feed into a narrative and sensationalize headlines, the sketch spurred a wider discussion and realization of these media tactics. Additionally, the comedy duo continued forth and hosted the Golden Globe Awards for multiple years where the two famously pointed out the discrepancy between George and Amal Clooney and how the media often minimized the accomplishments of Amal Clooney, an accomplished international and human rights lawyer, to merely George Clooney’s wife (Guardian staff).

Race

With changing population demographics in the United States, race is another sensitive topic comedians have tackled and offered commentary. Race-based comedy is unique in that it requires comics to be intelligent and well-informed or else risk the joke (and the comedian themselves) coming off as racist.

However, beyond the implications of being labeled a racist and the impact that would have on a comedian's career, a new concern has emerged for comics crafting their material: being socially responsible (or irresponsible). In an interview with Oprah, Dave Chapelle recounted when he, in 2005, disappeared for two weeks to South Africa after signing a contract to continue *Chappelle's Show*. After returning from the trip, he began feeling uneasy about his show as several sketches perpetuated negative stereotypes about people of African descent, the most notorious in which Chapelle appeared in blackface as a pixie ("Chappelle's Story"). Since then, Chapelle has discussed the moral dilemma he has struggled with to ensure that the laughter in response to his work is with him and not at him and others like him.

Given the climate of political correctness that has become synonymous with the current generation, I felt a dilemma between wanting to tell and share experiences that are true to my identity (a straight, Asian female) and not wanting to perpetuate harmful stereotypes of the Asian race. To further understand Asian Americans and their navigation of the comedy scene, YouTube channel ISAtv sought to explore whether Asian can be funny through a new series called, *Asians, That's Funny* (ISAtv). The multiple episode series explored whether Asian Americans are funny as stated before, what international Asians find funny, if Asian women are funny, and if generational and cultural gaps prove a hindrance in what parents and their kids find funny. In the first episode which featured an interview with Asian comedian and YouTuber Anna Akana, Sierra Katow, the host of the show and another Asian comic, shared the viewpoint that Asian comics are expected to make Asian jokes whereas other races do not have the same expectations of them. Anna Akana (and several other interviewees) agreed with the premise given their experiences but emphasized that when she tells Asian jokes, she ensures that she doesn't end up the butt of the joke. Rather, Akana focuses on turning the joke back on the audience. For example, in a bit where

Akana talks about how Asian stereotypes work in her favor, she says “All my friends think I’m bad at driving. No one ever asks me to take them to the airport. And if they do, I drive so recklessly, they never ask me again.” The joke touches on the stereotype that Asians are bad drivers. However, Akana reclaims agency by joking she purposefully feeds into the stereotype to achieve her own agenda (not having to drive her friends to the airport).

Ultimately, there is a responsibility on the comic to be educated enough to speak about stereotypes and be conscious of implications but perhaps, there is also a responsibility on the audience members to not take a point of view and have that fuel their perceptions of other races.

Recap

One of the most unique characteristics of comedy is how low the barriers to entry are. In order to pursue comedy, all that is required is a willing audience, the ability to speak/act/convey, and creativity. Despite this low barrier to entry, social inequities disrupt and unlevel the playing field for those in the game.

The challenges in comedy and life posed by gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, etc. (or an intersection) are not a new story. However, the exploration and realization of using a supposed weakness to leverage into comedic strengths underscore the value of comedy to not only connect with audiences but be utilized as a platform to speak to larger issues. Modern comedy exemplifies this practice, from comedian Iliza Shlesinger joking with (but also educating) her audience on feminism to the *Late Night with Seth Meyer*’s segment, “Jokes Seth Can’t Tell”, where Jenny Hagel, a lesbian, Puerto Rican woman and Amber Ruffin, a Black woman, tell jokes that punch up and to the side to their identities.

Whether in the midst of Ancient Greece to the post-American revolution era, comedy has always served as a social critique meant to inspire people to view life from a different lens. As Ms. Magazine stated earlier, humor makes even the most challenging of subjects palatable and spurs larger, more productive conversations. Countless success stories, from Phyllis Diller to Dave Chapelle to Hasan Minhaj to Ali Wong, have encountered social obstacles in their comedic careers. However, it's their ability to be truly and genuinely funny that allows them to persevere.

Personal Journey

When embarking on and beginning my own personal journey as a stand-up comic, there were various factors that I debated and researched when attempting to find and define my own brand and voice.

Style and Content

When beginning my thesis research, the easiest way to watch stand-up comedy was on streaming services. As a result, the polished nature, slick timing, and smart humor that often defined the top and best in the comedic game largely established what I wanted my own personal style to eventually be. Though effortless in comedic timing and content seems obvious, the contrast between what I would see on screens and what I would see at local, live stand-up was stark. At many of the local shows I would go see, comedians often tended to use low brow humor that almost seemed to exclusively discuss sex, weed, and race. Even among comedians that were established within Austin and were beginning to leverage their fame to start performing in other regions, their humor would often revolve around the same crude topics though admittedly, their timing and delivery truly were more polished and refined. However, even so, I struggled with a long time of ever finding a middle ground between the low brow humor I would hear locally and

the top quality humor that I would see on television. Though I understood that everyone hopes to eventually achieve professional level comedy, it frustrated me that the quality of comedy seemed to exist at two extremes.

Profanity is interesting within comedy as comedians balance the incorporation of their own personal speech patterns and the usage of cuss words for shock value. Avoiding profanity is an attractive and perhaps a bit more lucrative option, especially as network shows and corporations are much more receptive to clean comedy. There are comedians who have established careers and are able to differentiate their humor beyond shock value such as Jim Gaffigan. However, as I am someone who does curse in her daily speech patterns, the consideration of when and how to effectively use profanity comes up numerous times which in turn raises issues of how raunchy I am willing to be, what the thesis will allow, and issues of censorship overall. Addressing the topic of raunchiness, there are my own personal comfort levels to consider but how the public will react is a factor as well. *Variety's* television critic, Brian Lowry, wrote an article titled "Sarah Silverman's Bad Career Move: Being as Dirty as The Guys" (Lowry) back in 2013. The article, in turn, was met with condemnation but speaks largely to the double standards that constrict what women can and cannot do, especially compared to men.

Under personal style, the kind of tone and volume I wanted to have when delivering jokes is another sector I explored. Beyond the challenge of merely finding what tone and volume are most in line with my personality and that I would be comfortable with, I became conscious and self-aware of whether my stylistic choices would reinforce certain stereotypes that are commonly associated with my identities. For example, I didn't want to be quiet and reserved on stage as that would perpetuate certain correlations between Asian women and timidness/submissiveness but at the same time, it was difficult trying to bring a large and brash personality on stage as women who

“behave” in this way, are also commonly criticized. For example, Whitney Cummings, a largely established and successful comic, often has a barrage of YouTube comments criticizing her for yelling her jokes in a “too loud” or “too-high” fashion whereas a male comic of equal fame and talent such as Chris D’Elia primarily receive praise in his videos even if he is delivering jokes with the same fervor and volume.

Finally, under content, figuring out what was funny to me and reconciling it with audience expectations is something I have explored and am currently still in the process of. What audiences find funny will vary from region to region as does what is considered acceptable to say. Coupled with the clubs and venues that have their own distinct personalities, a comedic localism emerges. In an interview with Justin Hicks, an Austin-based comic, he mentioned that Austin, Texas and San Francisco, California tended to have much more politically correct audiences whereas comics can get away with a lot more in New York and Los Angeles. To reinforce this, in a study conducted by the University of Colorado-Boulder that was published by the Huffington Post, Peter McGraw, an associate professor of marketing and psychology found humor to have a local flavor and as a result, what will get laughs in one city won’t necessarily get laughs in another (Bellware). Furthermore, when writing content, I found it difficult to differentiate when I was reverting to race humor versus when I was merely speaking to my experiences as an Asian woman, a distinction I still struggle with and have not made clear.

Comedic Influences

Though throughout my journey I have seen so many talented comedians that I admire and whose performances I want to take bits and pieces from to incorporate into my own delivery that are too extensive to list, I wanted to highlight a couple of comics that embody certain attributes I tried to keep in mind when preparing my own jokes:

- Hasan Minhaj – The content of his comedy has a purpose to it which is evident in his Netflix special, *Homecoming King*, and his show, *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*. Minhaj uses his platform to speak on bigger issues but will insert humor to enhance his point.
- *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* – A late-night show, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* markets itself as a production-oriented around fake news. Similarly to the appeal of Hasan Minhaj, the show and its correspondents challenge social issues but are able to put a humorous twist on the subject matter. The show ultimately is not only entertaining, but the social critiques it offers have a greater purpose in illuminating the shortcomings of society.
- Emily Heller – Emily Heller recently made her TV debut on *The Late Late Show with James Corden* but I admired her style as it was straightforward and conversational. Her performance did not require shock value or other tools to be interesting as her content spoke for itself.
- Conan O'Brien – As one of the top voices in the comedy game, I appreciated Conan O'Brien's ability to take intellectual topics and condense and package them into something that is easy to understand and laugh at. During a show in Austin, O'Brien shared a story of how he and Arnold Schwarzenegger were caught together at a coffee shop and couldn't leave. Within the same story, he explained its parallels to Stephen Hawking's infinite parallel universes. The ability to take a highly complex topic such as infinite parallel universes and apply it to a seemingly unrelated situation speaks highly of his talent.

Conclusion: The Current State

Distribution

The state of comedy continues to evolve which is demonstrated in the current comedic landscape as streaming services have disrupted the traditional modes of entertainment distribution. Comedic shows and channels such as the *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, *Late Late Show with James Corden*, *Conan*, *the Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *Saturday Night Live*, HBO, and Comedy Central remain and largely define comedy in the United States but given the rise of Netflix and other streaming services, old and new shows are seeing a new light including the revival of *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* hosted by Jerry Seinfeld and the introduction of the socio-political web television show, *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*.

Furthermore, the transition to streaming services impacts the different forms of comedy. Sketch and improv comedy have continued to live on as shows focused on the two such as *Saturday Night Live* and *Whose Line is it Anyway?* are moved onto Netflix and Hulu but it is stand-up comedy that has seen the greatest life breathed into it by these streaming giants. As streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon clamor for original content, stand-up comedy has quickly been identified as an easy way to generate just that. From comedy specials to comedy shows designed to feature new and upcoming voices, streaming services have invested a significant amount to flesh out the stand-up comedy genre. For example, Netflix is expected to spend \$12 billion on original content this year and has “streamed scores of stand-up specials, including comedians who speak Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and German. The strategy is to tap emerging comics and headliners, such as Bill Burr and Dave Chappelle, and push its brand to distant capitals. It is launching a comedy radio channel with SiriusXM and is planning a TV series

next year featuring 47 comedians from 13 regions, including Africa and the Middle East.”
(Fleishman)

The tremendous impact streaming services have on stand-up comedy is undeniable as streaming services have made comedy easy for audiences to watch and much more accessible for less established comedians to reach said audiences. However, the onslaught of new specials and shows isn't without its criticisms. There are concerns that the hyper-expansion of stand-up comedy will lead to oversaturation of the market, similar to what happened in the 1980s and 1990s. As the competition becomes fiercer, it becomes more and more challenging for new voices to build a strong following given how splintered the space will be for audience attention. Interestingly enough, on a related vein, there are concerns as to whether live stand-up will die, especially if it is easier to watch content on a phone/smart device as opposed to traveling outside to a comedy club and watching a show. However, it is worthy of noting that the survival of live performances has always been a concern throughout history, dating all the way back to vaudeville. The survival and well-being of comedy, especially that of stand-up, is yet to be seen in the new age of streaming.

Content

The demographics in the United States are shifting as the American population grows older and immigrants continue to be a strong force in the American makeup. Furthermore, as minorities continue to grow (whites will no longer make up the majority by 2050), the tastes and preferences of America's new generation are shifting as well. In an interview George Lopez did with the Smithsonian, he cited that changing demographics, both racially, and technologically, will impact the way that comedy is experienced (Muñoz). Within the interview, he explained that comedy will become more diverse and political in content and that what will be considered acceptable and

unacceptable to say will change, much the way the acceptability of blackface and racist jokes at large has changed.

As younger generations embrace activism, there has been a trend in which art, including comedy, is becoming more socially conscious and “woke”. This trend is in line with the performative nature comedy in Los Angeles (and the world) is moving towards. Hasan Minhaj’s *Patriot Act*, though comedic, is a show that discusses heavy social and political topics accompanied by eye-catching visuals and graphics foremost. Specials such as *Nanette* by Hannah Gadsby have garnered international attention not only for its comedic value but for its social commentary on LGBTQ issues. Relatively new and upcoming comedic talents such as Jaboukie Young-White have been able to leverage a comedic reputation that is tinged with political awareness and activism from Twitter into more established comedy platforms such as *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* where Young-White is a correspondent.

Though being politically aware is becoming more popular, being politically incorrect is not. No comedian, no matter how established, is immune, a fact that has already impacted some of the largest names in comedy. Roseanne Barr, after tweeting racist and disparaging insults about Valerie Jarrett, a senior advisor to President Barack Obama, saw her ABC show *Roseanne* canceled. Kathy Griffin saw her career grind to a standstill after her controversial photo of a decapitated Donald Trump head was released and circulated. Kevin Hart, after homophobic tweets surfaced, lost his Oscars duties as a host.

Comedy has long been a game in which comedians toe the line between pushing it and not wanting to cross it. As younger generations become more aware and social lines between what is acceptable and what is not are more defined, the line will continue to move and as a result, shape

the entertainment that is created. However, in the definition of what is politically acceptable and correct, the careers of comedians will be made (or broken).

Purpose of Comedy

The purpose of comedy holds true today as it did thousands of years ago. Comedy and humor will continue to be a good release and bonding exercise to share a laugh with other people but given the social consciousness and awareness happening within society, comedy has largely become a tool that can be utilized to illustrate problems in a more receptive manner. Comedy has always been a reflection of real life, poised and ready to jeer, poke fun at, and call out idiosyncrasies. As the world at large continues to evolve, the comedic landscape of the United States and the world will reflect just that.

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Biography

Bianca J. Hsieh was born in Vancouver, British Columbia on September 22, 1996, and moved with her family to El Paso, Texas in 1999. She enrolled in the Plan II Honors program and the Canfield Business Honors program in 2015 and studied abroad at The University of Edinburgh after her freshman year before adding on a marketing major her junior year. In college, Ms. Hsieh was a member of the Senate of College Council, Chi Kappa Phi Service Society, and Texas Spirits, served as editor-in-chief of the *Texas Undergraduate Law Review*, founded the Texas Business Law Association, and led the Texas Orange Jackets. After graduation, Ms. Hsieh will work as a Business Analyst at HEB Grocery Company in San Antonio, Texas and hopefully pursue her dreams of becoming a comedy writer.