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Laughter, Discomfort, and the Mechanics of Subversion: How Amy Schumer Uses Comedy and Performance to Change the Way We Think About Women a Thematic Analysis of Amy Schumer

Stephanie Rosauri

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LAUGHTER, DISCOMFORT, AND THE MECHANICS OF SUBVERSION: HOW AMY
SCHUMER USES COMEDY AND PERFORMANCE TO
CHANGE THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT WOMEN
A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF AMY SCHUMER

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Bachelor of Arts - Psychology
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Masters of Arts - Journalism and Media Studies

Hank Greenspun School of Journalism and Media Studies
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs
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ABSTRACT

LAUGHTER, DISCOMFORT, AND THE MECHANICS OF SUBVERSION: HOW AMY SCHUMER USES COMEDY AND PERFORMANCE TO CHANGE THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT WOMEN

A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF AMY SCHUMER

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Amy Schumer earned a spot as the first woman ever on Forbes Top Ten Highest Paid Comedians List. This was a huge accomplishment but it begs the question why Schumer is the first. Past research on female comedians like Lucille Ball and Lily Tomlin illuminates how comedy can be used as a rhetorical device and highlights the importance of women in comedy. Through an in-depth thematic analysis of Schumer's movies *Trainwreck* (2015), *Snatched* (2017), and *I Feel Pretty* (2018), this thesis examines how Schumer uses different comedic techniques and how that compares to the way other women used comedy in the past. The results reveal that Schumer employs comedic tactics to subvert and builds off of tactics used by previous female comedians. All of these tactics are used to comment on gender issues and break down gender stereotypes that are often harmful to society. Schumer's ability to subvert many of these structures that limited her predecessors are what have made her so successful and will allow future females to succeed in comedy.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Thematic Statement

Amy Schumer, a very popular comedian, recently became the first female listed on Forbes' Top Ten Highest Paid Comedians list. She wrote and starred in three comedic films: *Trainwreck* (2015), *Snatched* (2017), *I Feel Pretty* (2018). She released three stand up specials in addition to a joint special with Rachel Feinstein, Marina Franklin, and Nikki Glaser. She hosted Saturday Night Live twice and has countless other media accolades. In those appearances she often discusses gender issues. She is able to reach a large audience with her comedy. This study attempts to analyze Amy Schumer's portrayals of gender through the themes in her comedy films.

Significance of the Study

In 2016 Amy Schumer became the first woman to ever make it on Forbes' Top Ten Highest Paid Comedians list. This seems surprising because, from Sarah Silverman to Whoopi Goldberg, there have been so many funny female comedians that came before Amy Schumer. This brings up a critical question: what is Amy Schumer doing that got her on this list? Is she doing something different than the comedians that came before her or does she just benefit from the progress that those comedians helped to create? It is probably a mix of the two. Amy Schumer's presence on the list has much broader implications than just a comedian's pay. What does it take for a woman to make it in a "man's world?" The phrase "to make it" is colloquially regarded as to be successful, usually in a career. How does a female stand up comedian get into the "boy's club" that comedy is commonly regarded as?

According to the 2017 Theme Report published by the Motion Picture Association of America, women make up about 50 percent of people that go to the movies however, that

percentage does not equal the amount of women working on those films. The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film reports in the top 100 grossing films of 2018, women comprised 4% of directors, 15% of writers, 3% of cinematographers, 18% of producers, 18% of executive producers, 14% of editors. Why does this type of gendered inequality exist in Hollywood?

A common phrase and popular song suggests “It is a man’s world.” Does this mean a woman must act like a man and portray stereotypically masculine behaviors to “make it?” If so it would be very interesting if it is shown that a woman who “made it” did so by portraying gender in a different way than her male peers. At Glamour’s 2015 Women of the Year Awards, the talented Reese Witherspoon won an award for creating more movies with female leads. After accepting her award Witherspoon spoke about how people told her that her production company would not work if she created movies with female leads because there was not an audience for it. She proved them wrong when she created two of the most successful movies of the year *Wild* (2014) and *Gone Girl* (2014), both high grossing films she had produced courageously despite, as she recounts, being told by many industry executives that it would not work. She even used her own hard-earned money to produce the films; a practice that is completely unheard of in the film industry. Most movies executives find other people to take on the financial burden of the films, sometimes it takes doing things differently to shake up the status quo and make a group more visible thus empowering the group via visibility.

The visibility of a group is important, whether it is a viral twitter trend #oscarssowhite or the Black Lives Matter movement. Recently, visibility has become a core vehicle for motion pictures that can spark true change. Even #metoo speaks volumes about the visibility of women who are sexually assaulted. Many groups are not as visible as they should be and are not visible

in ways that are productive for the advancement of the group. One of those underrepresented groups is women. Women are not treated equally in a society where they make up slightly more than half of the population.

Many issues plague women, one issue of significance is the glass ceiling.

“Since the term glass ceiling was first coined, women have made great progress in achieving leadership equality with men in the workplace. Despite this, women are still underrepresented in the upper echelons of organizations. [...] Subtle barriers to women's advancement to and success in leadership positions are a major focus; for example, women are regularly recruited for upper-level positions that are associated with a high risk of failure, and female managers are stereotyped as either competent or warm--but not both. Other obstacles associated with encountering or breaking through the glass ceiling include more nuanced forms of gender stereotyping, tokenism, and sexual harassment.” (Barreto 2009, p 1).

Amy Schumer is breaking through a glass ceiling by being the first woman on Forbes' Top Ten Highest Paid Comedians list.

It is important to break through the glass ceiling to lead the way for other women. Once women break through the glass ceiling by advancing into more male dominated fields they become more visible. This has been theorized to lead to the end of things like stereotyping, tokenism, and sexual harassment.

“It is not accidental that sexual harassment concerns are concomitant with the glass ceiling. [...] there are also] underlying causes and correlates of the glass ceiling such as gender stereotypes, family-related barriers, and other structural impediments that differentially affect women, such as women being assigned to particularly risky situations that set them up for failure” (Barreto 2009, p 5).

Sexual harassment has been in the news a lot lately with the metoo as many women are coming forward with allegations of sexual harassment. One of the men being accused is Louis CK, a famous comedian. Sexual harassment is very common in the stand up comedy world, especially for touring comedians. More women in higher positions can help to prevent rampant sexual

harassment. Women who were harassed years or even decades ago are only now coming forward with their stories. Carpenter (2017) synthesises several ideas about why women are now coming forward. She quotes:

“the advent of social media, and the way women now turn to it to share their own stories, on their own terms, has created "a critical mass" of testimonials, Knake says. "Suddenly, when you have more people speaking, that always creates a tipping point," Thomas says. Former critics realize, "'They can't all be overly sensitive. They can't all be lying,'" she added.” (Carpenter 2017, p 14).

This also comes back to an issue of visibility. With more women in the media using their voices, women become more visible and thus able to bring light to issues that affect women such as sexual harassment. Women are not very visible in comedy films as well as on the standup scene. Comedy is a big avenue in both representation and rhetorical argument for women to miss out on. According to the statistics website Statista, from 1995 to 2017 comedy movies were the second highest grossing genre in the box office. Comedy’s whopping \$42.66 billion came second to only adventure’s \$45.67 billion. Both genres were far ahead of the rest of the list with third place belonging to the revenue of action at \$37.08 billion and the list only dwindles from there. Plus, that amount is only representative of comedy movies released in the box office. That does not even include revenue generated from ticket sales at comedy shows, comedy television, or comedy movies that were released straight to DVD/on demand or released for streaming on Netflix or Hulu.

Women’s representation in comedy is a very important subject that does not get enough attention. There are not many studies that have addressed gender portrayals across multiple films let alone gender portrayals across comedy films, which are a large part of contemporary American media. Additionally, many studies that do look at gender portrayals across multiple films look at children’s animated movies, which while helpful does not show a complete picture.

The more that this subject is studied and spoken about, the more solutions can be found. Amy Schumer is such a divisive comedian that she also begs for further study on why people cannot agree on why she is funny. Comedy itself can be divisive, which is probably due to its great ability to subvert. Many viewers and performers of comedy alike think that comedy is not as proper for study as other great works of tragedy are, whereas tragedy is a conflict portrayed, comedy is that exact same conflict portrayed with humor cues. Shakespeare, for example, wrote both tragedies and comedies. In both types of plays many of the same themes would play out: a fall from grace, mistaken identity, a romance. When watching a Shakespearean play the audience can tell the difference simply by the ending. If the play is a tragedy it will end with a death. If the play is a comedy it will end with a marriage.

Amy Schumer uses comedy in her films to make arguments about gender and feminism to subvert the dominant ideals. She draws on similar tactics of subversion and comedy that have been used by female comedians in the past and by her contemporaries. This brings up three main questions that this thesis will attempt to answer. What are the Mechanics of Subversion and how does Amy Schumer Leverage them? How does Amy Schumer play into or resist gender roles/expectations? How does she draw on past successful examples of women comedians and what does she add?

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

A Historical Precedent of Women in the Media: Lucille Ball

What is acceptable on television changed a lot from the 1950s to today. Lucille Ball, the star of the hit television series *I Love Lucy*, made strides for female comedians during her time in a similar way to how Amy Schumer is making strides for female comedians nowadays. Noted for her hit television show *I Love Lucy*, Lucille Ball aided in the representation of both females and Latinos in the media. Ball fought for a television show that displayed her interracial relationship with Desi Arnaz: something that many television executives fought against. Her television show set standards for shows to come and persists in prominence even today. Ball's onscreen pregnancy caused many involved to wonder how to deal with it. They ended up dancing around the subject and did not even say the word "pregnant" for the entire duration of her pregnancy. Lucille Ball's *I Love Lucy* was the highest ranked show of its time. It reached a massive audience and turned Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz into millionaires. Lucille Ball showed that women could be funny and make a lot of money doing it.

I Love Lucy was not always known as *I Love Lucy*. Originally, Ball wanted to call it the *Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz Hour* but producers did not want Arnaz's name to be in the title. Eventually Ball agreed to *I Love Lucy* because the "Lucy" was her and the "I" was Arnaz. The title was not the only thing that Arnaz struggled with for the show. "Ball's sponsors resisted casting Desi Arnaz as her television husband because they did not think audiences would accept the idea of an American woman married to a Cuban" (Horowitz 1997 3).

Racism was not the only form of discrimination holding them back. A woman was and still is considered to have a certain role. Women have been and continue to be stereotyped as "not funny" by both the general audience and the executives making and financing the films.

Women who are funny are often said to lack sex appeal and femininity (Horowitz 1997). Amy Schumer fights against the idea that women who are funny lack femininity and sex appeal. Lucille Ball's contemporary, Joan Rivers, tried very hard to maintain her femininity. Rivers did not think of herself as a funny woman and stated that she did not like funny women. Rivers thought of herself as simply witty. Even a widely popular comedian like Rivers tried to distance herself from the idea of a "funny woman."

Lucille Ball was a woman who could be funny while maintaining her femininity (Horowitz 1997) even though the stereotype of a funny woman was that she was not feminine. Stereotypically, funny women are thought as having masculine traits. This could have to do with what Lily Tomlin, another one of Ball's hilarious contemporaries, had to say about being funny. Lily Tomlin said that funny is threatening because when people laugh they become vulnerable (Horowitz 1997). Vulnerability is a stereotypically feminine trait and the causing of vulnerability is a stereotypically masculine trait. Lucille Ball transcended this stereotype of humor as masculine because she maintained her femininity. Perhaps it was because Lucille Ball was originally a model because she was so tall and beautiful. Later she acted in comedic parts of movies and vaudeville that many other women would not. This would include things such as running around or getting chased, and Ball's willingness to act like that eventually led to the formation of the character that everyone loves, Lucy (Horowitz 1997).

One thing that Lucille Ball's fans appreciated about her was that she was beautiful in a way that she could perform many zany stunts and not lose her femininity (Horowitz 1997). In any situation that Lucy was involved in, she never got injured and any sexual advance she made were only playful and toward her husband. This helped to portray her as an innocent, feminine person (Horowitz 1997). This helped to pave the way for many things that Amy Schumer does

now in her comedy and films. Her characters are often getting themselves into zany situations and stunts, but they are often not innocent and are highly sexualized.

Other comedians worked in different ways, for example, Phyllis Diller's comedy consisted of self-deprecation for her lack of sex appeal. Diller "is not only inept as a sex object, she is hopeless as a housewife" (Horowitz 1997). Many comedians pull things from their lives, especially in stand up comedy, but it usually gets weaved into a work of fiction. Lucy and Ricky in *I Love Lucy* continued to struggle with the same financial problems throughout the show that their viewers can relate to long after the real life Lucille and Desi became millionaires (Horowitz 1997).

"Today's female comics are often sexually bolder than Diller, but rarely as raw as an Eddie Murphy or Andrew Dice Clay. The reasons are a mixture of nature and nurture. Males are generally more aggressive by nature; and they are given more societal permission to act out their aggression and sexuality. When women tell aggressively dirty jokes, particularly in mixed company, they are often perceived as unfeminine and usurping the male role" (Horowitz 1997 p. 55-56).

While I disagree that men are more aggressive by nature, there are societal and cultural stigmas that allow them/expect them to act more aggressive than women. This area of women telling aggressively dirty jokes, being perceived as unfeminine and usurping the male role is where Amy Schumer lies. This is where a lot of her critics come from probably because they feel attacked that she is challenging gender constructs. It is interesting because Schumer tells very sexually aggressive jokes, which sometimes makes her perceived as masculine, but she always has a feminine air about her.

Unlike a stand up comedian, Lucille Ball acts out what is happening instead of verbally describing a situation. In *I Love Lucy* she acts out a crazy situation, but it still falls within the realm of possibility. For example, one particular episode follows Lucy and Ricky trying to save

money on baggage fees, which leads to Lucy pretending that her big block of cheese is a baby. This ridiculous situation that could theoretically happen leads to the hilarity the show is known for (Horowitz 1997). These zany situations usually rely on the not thought-through plans and ideas of Lucy. “Many comics ingratiate themselves with an audience by presenting themselves as insecure and get a lot of laughs based on their supposed comic inferiority to the audience. Even more than comic roles, traditional sex roles demand that women be dumber and weaker than men” (Horowitz 1997 84). Amy Schumer’s characters are all different with some appearing more dim witted than others. Amy Schumer’s movies also work because they are crazy situations that fall in the realm of possibility. For example, in her movie *Snatched* (2017), Amy Schumer’s character gets kidnapped with her mother while on vacation and has to outrun gangsters. This is a ridiculous situation, but plays out in a way the audience can believe would happen in real life.

I Love Lucy set many precedents for future television. The network wanted them to shoot and broadcast their show as everyone else did, shooting live in New York in Kinescope for the East Coast and then rebroadcast to the West Coast in Kinescope live filmed from a television screen, which would have made the show low quality. However, instead of doing the norm, Arnaz suggested that they make the show high quality by staying in California and shooting on film. To make all this happen, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz had to take a salary cut because of the higher production costs, but it led to what most situational comedy shows use today: “the three-camera setup, central living room (or workplace), studio audience, frontal staging, and a laugh track” (Horowitz 1997 27). *I Love Lucy* “became the first television program to be seen in ten million homes-out of a total of only fifteen million sets in operation at the time” (Horowitz 1997 29). It was the top program in the nation, ranking first in almost every city, and seen by about one fifth of the nation’s population. The show and its cast also received plenty of nominations

and wins for Emmys (Horowitz 1997). Forty-four million people watched the episode, “Lucy goes to the Hospital,” in which she gives birth in contrast to the paltry 29 million that watched Eisenhower get sworn in (Horowitz 1997). That means 15 million more people loved Lucy than cared about the President when it is the president that directly affects their lives. Lucille Ball’s baby was on the cover of the first ever national issue of TV Guide, which soon became the most popular periodical in the country (Land of Television).

"Looking at the viewership numbers garnered by Ball’s onscreen pregnancy, it appears Lucy’s condition was only a moral concern in the eyes of squirrely executives; audiences clearly loved it—or at least the sanitized version that was deemed appropriate for television. Make no mistake, groundbreaking, or not, ‘Lucy Is Enceinte’ is very, very tame, even by the standards of *I Love Lucy*" (Dyess-Nugent 2013).

It is also criticized for not being as progressive as people make it out to be since it portrays a housewife who constantly messes things up that eventually get resolved, usually by her husband. “Executives from CBS, Biow Advertising Agency, and Philip Morris Cigarettes (*I Love Lucy*’s sponsor at the time) initially opposed the idea, reportedly calling for a priest, a minister, and a rabbi to approve each of the “Lucy Is Enceinte” scripts before they would concede" (Harnick 2013). One of the advertisers even told Desi Arnaz to his face that you just cannot show a pregnant woman on television (Tucker 1994). This type of controversy and give and take was not new to *I Love Lucy*. The executives and advertisers were constantly afraid that something was too controversial in the show, from the interracial relationship, to the expensive way it was shot on a 35 mm instead of live kinescope (Dyess-Nugent 2013).

I Love Lucy pushed the envelope in the television world that was and in some ways still is very conservative. Yes, there are television shows like “Will & Grace,” “Glee,” and “This Is Us” but statistically the majority of the characters portrayed on television are straight white Christian

type men. “A Variety investigation into new scripted shows for the 2016-17 season reveals that 90% of showrunners are white, and almost 80% are male” (Ryan 2016). When producing a product, the most important part is whether or not it will sell. Will people watch the movie or show? “The network and marketing model is “better safe than sorry,” and by golly if it’s never been done before, it’s probably because America won’t stand for it” (Dyess-Nugent). *I Love Lucy* was not only the first television show to portray a woman, but it portrayed a woman that did not act demure as was thought to be how women should act at the time (Bitette 2016).

Since the show could not say the word pregnant they used many euphemisms, one of which was the word expecting, which Desi Arnaz pronounced as “spectin” (Kovalchik 2017). Arnaz mispronouncing words or using the wrong word was very common in *I Love Lucy*. In fact, it is very common in a lot of comedy. Malapropisms are the misuse of words and “American audiences live to laugh at malapropisms of foreigners” (Horowitz 1997 112). This could be a subtle way that they tried to make it okay that Arnaz was Cuban, because he was someone to laugh at. This is something that Amy Schumer employs in her movies as well. It is most seen in *Snatched*, which has many jokes based on the malapropisms of Latin Americans. Her use of malapropisms ignited outrage in some people who said Schumer was racist and the plot of *Snatched* had racist undertones.

Other Groundbreaking Female Comedians Throughout the Years

Joan Rivers rose to fame at around the same time as Lucille Ball. Lucille Ball’s legacy sometimes gets diminished. All of her accomplishments are not recognized in mainstream discussions about her. Even the official Emmy page notes her the episode where she gives birth in “I Love Lucy,” which diminishes her huge accomplishments. However, Joan Rivers is left out

of a lot of discussions and diminished even posthumously. She is seldom remembered as the first female late night comedy show host.

Comedians like Ball as the character Lucy and Rivers as a late night host are important. “Female comedians on television are important because it is ‘safe’ to laugh at their jokes from the comfort and privacy of your own home. This is why Lucille ball increased comedic opportunities for women tenfold” (Summergrad 2016 p. 15-16).

Rivers started in stand up. In her stand-up act, she used comedy cleverly and interestingly. Instead of the regular set up punchline, Rivers had many “check-ins” as jokes like “you know” to cue the audience laughter. This made it seem less like a comic and more like gossip around a kitchen table leading many to call her a “kitchen table comic” (Summergrad 2016 p. 26). This gossip included gossip about herself, she was very self-deprecating in her routine. “Rivers was able to use self-deprecation to make herself seem non-threatening despite her sometimes outlandish routines while also delivering sharp social commentary.” (Summergrad 2016 p. 30). This ability to empathize and seem non-threatening is very important when delivering social commentary because it allows the audience to accept it more. Self-deprecation and the way women use comedy will be further discussed later. However, a good synthesis is:

“Self-deprecation can be interpreted in many different ways. In his groundbreaking essay, “Encoding/Decoding,” cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall argues that there are three ways that audiences decode cultural messages. A dominant reading means audiences read cultural texts in accordance with the dominant social ideology. A negotiated reading means that audiences acknowledge and privilege the legitimacy of the dominant code but include other viewpoints in their readings. Those who perform an oppositional reading decode the dominant code but then push back against it and ultimately oppose it. In effect, every audience member could have a different reading, and there could be any number of different decoded meanings based on viewers’ diverse and individual socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Since self-deprecation

operates on multiple levels – explicit and implicit ones – viewers indeed may decode these messages in different ways. By using this mode of performance, Rivers appears safe because she seems to default to the dominant code by making herself the fool for not fitting in, rather than overtly critiquing society’s unrealistic standards for women.” (Summergrad 2016 p. 32)

As her career expanded, Rivers worked with Johnny Carson on NBC’s *Tonight Show*. She worked with him, a common thing for funny females at the time to be paired with a man, but she also did stand up on her own, an uncommon thing for women at the time. Carson admitted to not liking funny women, but Rivers’ self-deprecating style, femininity, and looks were disarming. Rivers’ good looks were able to lead to a heavy flirting banter on the show. Carson liked to flirt and joke with her on air because she was such a good looking person. Their relationship was so close that Carson was thought of as her work husband and she thanked him in her first book. Over time she began to not only be Carson’s common guest but she guest hosted the *Tonight Show* on many occasions. Rivers was so funny and popular that she was offered her own late night show on rival network Fox. This, unfortunately, led to a breakdown of Rivers and Carson’s relationship and Carson to try to subtly sabotage her show. At Fox, River’s late night show was one of the first shows developed by Fox and set the precedent for many other shows but it is rarely mentioned as such (Summergrad 2016).

It took 30 more years for a woman to host a late night show. Since Rivers, there has only been Chelsea Handler and Samantha Bee as female late night hosts. Neither of them are on broadcast networks (Summergrad 2016). Recently, it has been announced that popular YouTuber Lilly Singh will be taking over Carson Daly’s NBC late night show (Hibberd 2019). This will make her the first women since Rivers to host late night on a broadcast network. She is the first women of color to ever host any late night show.

In addition to erasing her legacy as a late night host, her comedic influence is not properly remembered. During her time as host she moved the victim of her joke from herself to celebrities and while still being funny made her come off as bitchy (Summergrad 2016 p. 60). This change in her humor led to her doing more celebrity insult comedy later in her life. Because of that, “Most of the academic work that references her focuses on celebrities and the culture of plastic surgery or the process of aging in Hollywood especially for women. It is also notable that feminist media scholars often do not study Rivers’ late night visibility because many consider her to operate within the anti-feminist modes of self-deprecation and ‘catty’ attacks on other women” (Summergrad 2016 p. 62-63).

At the same time, Totie Fields was a famous stand up comic. Fields worked as a comedian from the 1960s until her death in 1978. Fields was similar to Rivers and Ball in that she was self deprecating but the difference between them was that she lacked their looks. Fields was a hefty woman and used that in her comedy. Fields was part of “the era where female stand-ups needed to present themselves as ugly—or at least not stereotypically female—in order to do stand-up comedy” (Osborne-Thompson 2017 p. 58). Many women still try to present themselves as ugly by doing things like dressing in drab clothing so that their looks do not detract from what is coming out of their mouths. Even though it is common now, it was more common in the 60s and 70s where some female comics would even wear fat suits.

Fields is a prime example of an unruly woman. She is not only loud and vocal via her comedy but her comedy itself focuses on her hefty body. She made many fat jokes about herself including penning a satirical dieting book whose cover compared her weight to that of an elephant. Fields subverted the dialogue about weight. She reached a mainstream audience and

“force[d] audiences to engage with the ‘humor-challenging social inequality and exclusion’ that she experiences in a thin culture” (Osborne-Thompson 2017 p. 61).

The next star to lead on the scene was Goldie Hawn. Goldie Hawn is a famous comedic woman. Hawn first rose to fame performing in *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In* from 1968-1970. After *Laugh-In* she continued on to star in many famous movies like *Private Benjamin* (1980), *Overboard* (1987), and *The First Wives Club* (1996). She never practiced stand up but her comedy films have been massive “hits that have come out grossing millions of dollars” (Thomson 1982 p. 49). She is a smart woman who worked very hard in film. She not only acted in but produced films.

Many times when Hawn’s hard work was mentioned, her motherhood would also be mentioned. In the article “Goldie Gets Serious” by David Thomson she is complemented as a hardworking woman with an office and mentioned as being a caring mother in the same paragraph. The writer also muses that she is popular because she moved from “Burbank airhead” to “the epitome of mature cuteness” (Thomson 1982 p. 49). In the article, she is also criticized for movies that gloss over “emotions and problems” and just “make the audience feel good” (Thomson 1982 p. 50). These are examples of how the writer uses to gendered language to criticize her and comedy. The idea of a “Burbank airhead” is one of a dumb blonde girl. Most men doing similar films or any type of comedy are not criticized as dumb or cute for doing comedy movies. It is also questionable that the author judges her movies for glossing over emotions and problems and only exist for making the audience feel good. This both delegitimizes her and comedy as an art form and means of expression.

This criticism is valid in regards to this article. The article was written in 1982 and feminist issues are not unknown to this author. This is apparent when the writer is describing

Hawn's film *Private Benjamin* as "[...] feminist enough for an audience frightened of that troublesome idea, and fearful of being seen rejecting it" (Thomson 1982 p. 50). Many moviegoers still feel the same way about feminist ideas.

It should be admitted that the argument her movies are not comedic masterpieces has some merit. Many of the characters she portrayed were not written to be very witty. In the interview, Hawn herself talks about wanting to make funny witty movies but no one seems able to make them (Thomson 1982 p. 50). This shows how delegitimizing women performing comedy as an art form and means of expression can be both good and harmful. It is good to legitimately criticize Hawn and other female comedians for not producing good complex work that is worthy of criticism and perhaps even subversive. This type of criticism of women comics is harmful when it leads people to question whether women are funny. The stigma of women not being funny can close doors for their expression.

Hawn is, in fact, an actor who takes the character, the script, and the film very seriously. In an interview, Hawn talks about how she values the character in comedy and not the gag. She is funny because she follows the funny script and breathes truth into a character. In the interview, she talks like a serious actor but the interviewer continuously jumps between pressing her on sometimes interesting questions and mostly frivolous questions about her hair and her many fans. At one point they mention Lucille Ball in regards to her amazing, comedic television career. Goldie says Lucy was great on television but she likes film because she can play around more with her character. This helps to illustrate how seriously Goldie Hawn takes acting as an art form.

Hawn's motherhood is brought up again and again. This helps to illustrate how successful women are often thought to not be able to have it all. Their career must also be mentioned in the

same breathe as their ability to be a mother. This was seen in the previously mentioned article and is exemplified in the article “Goldie Hawn’s Heartbreak Choice: Marriage or Career” from the January of 1982 issue of Ladies’ Home Journal. The title itself calls to attention the stereotype that a woman must choose between a career and family life. This article talks about how Goldie has to choose between her career and her children because she got a divorce. However, her ex husband Bill Hudson that shares their two kids is not mentioned as having to choose between his career or his children.

Hawn is painted as a “little woman” type with one subtitle boldly pointing out that she is looked at as “something vulnerable.” She is described as being overwhelmed by not only fame but pretty much everything going on in her life. The article does acknowledge her hard work as she was producing *Private Benjamin* (1980) while still filming another movie. Despite saying she is a hard worker, the article ends by describing that once she decides what direction she is going in, she could “have it all.” This is a common gendered phrase. A woman has to strive to “have it all” if she is a woman with a career. The idea of “having it all” is not referenced in the same way with a man who, like Bill Hudson, is not expected to choose between having a career and a family.

Hawn reentered the acting field after fifteen years to star in *Snatched* (2017) with Amy Schumer who is a modern-day Goldie Hawn. In *Snatched* Hawn demonstrates that she not only still possesses her acting chops but she is also still funny.

Lily Tomlin who was on *Laugh-In* with Goldie Hawn is another famously funny woman. Tomlin acted as well as performed stand up comedy. Throughout her career, Tomlin has used her voice to empower women and spread feminist ideals. In the late 1970s, Lily Tomlin created the one women show “Appearing Nitely.” The show appealed to mainstream audiences and used that

appeal to expose those mainstream audiences to feminist ideals. Through Tomlin's portrayal of many different types of women, she showed the differences between women "assuming what much of second-wave feminism was trying to establish at the time: that women are people too." (Reed 2004, p. 438). Tomlin "is seen as a cultural oxymoron: a feminist with a sense of humor - and more than that, a sense of empathy" (Reed 2004, p. 439). This ability to make her audience empathize and laugh with her allowed her to spread feminist ideals. When a comedian gets the audience to laugh and empathize they can easily subvert an issue and make their audience consider a new perspective.

In "Appearing Nitely," Tomlin moves around and takes up space, which is a feminist thing to do. It was very subversive for a woman to get on stage and take up the entire stage physically. She uses the show to critique many things from men to the moon landing and Vietnam to people too caught up with themselves to notice their class and privilege to get any real activism done. She makes fun of everything leading to anyone being able to interpret and enjoy her work. The content is "bold and accessible," which is again very important when trying to get mainstream audiences to accept nonmainstream ideals (Reed 2004).

The 1970s and 80s saw a "rapid expansion of opportunities for women in the comedy field," however, it is still shown at this time that "both men and women showed enhanced appreciation for comedians of their own gender" (Sheppard 1985 p. 179). Humor is very important to Americans (Sheppard 1985 p. 180). Even with its cultural importance, gender opportunities have not been equal. "For the twentieth century, about fifteen percent of famous comedians have been women" (Sheppard 1985 p. 180). This gap comes from the idea that "for a woman to be funny in the 1950s and early 1960s was viewed as basically unfeminine, and girls

with comedic talent were typically ‘tough, fat, or cutups.’ an idea exemplified by the type of female comedians that were successful” (Sheppard 1985 p. 182).

As will be further explained, the way women use comedy differs from how men use comedy. This is exemplified by the women comedians of the 70s and 80s. Sheppard (1985) examined how women and men use comedy and “reported that women used self-deprecating humor 63 percent of the time, compared to 12 percent for men. Totie Fields, Moms Mabley, Phyllis Diller, and Lily Tomlin comprised her female sample [used in the study]” (Sheppard 1985 p 182). When analyzing the male and females comedians routines “study subjects listened to and ranked comedians. On top five ranked funniest only female was Lily Tomlin” (Sheppard 1985 p 185). This demonstrates how effective Tomlin is at connecting with mainstream audiences even when discussing ideas that lie on the fringe.

The women’s liberation movement played a big part in the expansion of opportunities for women in the 70s. This is because the movement’s values “have been accepted, such that female assertiveness, male emotional expressiveness, and equal pay have become social and political ideals. Moreover, comedians of both genders may have lost some of the ‘shock value,’ which once resulted from perceived role reversals. Nevertheless, female comedians as a group are rather nontraditional [...]” (Sheppard 1985 p. 188-189).

Women comics are not completely accepted even though they are more accepted than they used to be. “A number of factors may have shaped cultural attitudes and women's abilities. Several of the basic ones include: 1) women's lack of interest in performing comedy, 2) an incompatibility between ‘funny’ and ‘feminine,’ 3) women's failure to learn the skills necessary for effective humor, and 4) social bias in the perception of women comics” (Sheppard 1985 p.

189). Further examination would be interesting on if it is more a women's perceived lack of interest in performing comedy rather than an actual lack of interest.

More Recent Commediannes

The next groundbreaking funny female that broke through many cultural barriers was Margaret Cho. Margaret Cho is a funny lady who became a prominent figure on the comic scene in 1990s. She currently acts in comedies and tours as a stand up comedian. She is a very popular comedian that has subverted stereotypes about women, asians, bisexuals, and female asian bisexuals.

“Cho is known to reproduce racial discourses on stage, for instance, her impersonation of her mother by using a mock-Asian accent. She argues that saying stereotyping things about people of color when you are a person of color turns what you are saying into a challenge of the racist image. ‘You are criticizing the existence of it, and utilizing the existence of it. I think it’s a really freeing thing. This idea that women of color are really empowered to do things that other people can’t’ (interview, 1/12/12). Linguist Elaine Chun agrees that Cho’s use of mock-Asian in her performances “necessarily reproduce[s] mainstream American racializing discourses about Asians,” but argues (in agreement with Cho) that her use ‘simultaneously decontextualize[s] and deconstruct[s] these very discourses’ (2004:263)” (Antoine 2015 p. 219).

Other funny ladies have emerged in movies. Many new types of comedy movies are being created. Female driven comedies about unruly women, women who do not act like the stereotypical leading lady, are becoming more and more common. The scholars that discuss unruly women seem to agree that they are women that go against the stereotypical feminine attributes like being a demure, reserved, thin and blonde. Unruly women can talk freely about gross aspects of womanhood, drugs, and attraction. Being an “unruly woman” is a category that is best explained by the women inside it. Unruly women are seen in many movies like *What’s Your Number* (2011), *Bridesmaids* (2011), *Bad Teacher* (2011), *Trainwreck* (2015), and various others. In these more recent comedy movies the female leads act “slackerish and

unapologetically cynical in the exact way that audiences loved seeing Bill Murray” (Friend 2017).

Anna Faris has starred as a funny and unruly woman multiple times including *The House Bunny* (2008) and *What’s Your Number* (2011). When asked about Faris, Jody Hill, who wrote and directed *What’s Your Number*, said “All the other women are more ‘Dick Van Dyke Show,’ more light and sweet, like Sandra Bullock. Anna’s more Lucille Ball—she’s funny like a guy would be funny” (Friend 2017). Even with her funny accolades Faris had a lot of trouble trying to push for *What’s Your Number* to be made. “Female-driven movies aren’t usually blockbusters, and studio heads don’t see them as repeatable (Friend 2017). Even after the movie was green lit there were logistic issues. Some executives thought twenty might be too high of a number of people for Faris’ character to sleep with. Certain lines were deemed too vulgar. They also made Faris, who was supposed to be portraying a schlubby character, to wear prada shoes and lose 5 pounds (Friend 2017).

Amy Pascal, who as Sony’s cochairman put four of the above films into production, points out, “You’re talking about a dozen or so female-driven comedies that got made over a dozen years, a period when hundreds of male-driven comedies got made. And every one of those female-driven comedies was written or directed or produced by a woman. It’s a numbers game—it’s about there being enough women writers and enough women with the power to get movies made.” A recent study of Hollywood movies found that women constituted only seventeen per cent of their writers, directors, and producers. (The study excluded R-rated films, which are even more of a boys’ club.) (Friend 2017).

Even after these women are able to write, direct, produce, or act, they still have life get in the way. Some women choose to have a family, which may include birthing children. This is a unique experience that men do not have to go through. Many women, especially women actors, question what becoming pregnant would mean for them. Faris wondered if she should tell people

she was thinking about starting a family or if that would jeopardize her career. Even so, the roles women are offered after motherhood and even after a certain age are mostly a mother or aunt as opposed to the young ingenue (Friend 2017). This is a well known issue that happens to women in Hollywood. The article “Celine Dion commits radically feminist act,” talked about how Celine Dion posed nude and looks amazing. The picture, posted by Vogue, had a caption that talked about how she looks good for her age, which is radical. This is because other famous actresses like Goldie Hawn are always talked about how they “look good for their age.” Dion also doesn’t apologize for her nudity or have an explanation for it like promoting PETA or something similar (Teitel 2017).

A Vanity Fair article in 2007 talks about why women are not funny saying they do not need to be, only men need to be and women comics are usually “hefty or dykey or Jewish” (Hitchens 2007). Sexism is commonplace in comedy, especially in stand up. It is seen that “sexism in stand-up comedy is largely treated as unremarkable. Comics who tell racist jokes, by contrast, often make comments that demonstrate their awareness of this. Comedians who offer a critique on race issues are a smaller pool within the sea of comics who tell plain racist jokes. Compared to that small pool, however, comedians who call out sexism and heteronormativity are like drops in the ocean.” (Antoine 2015 p. 10). The reason most comics do not call out sexism is probably because it does not affect most comics. “Stand-up comedy is a heavily male-dominated industry. Approximately 80-85 percent of the comedians on LA’s stages are men.” (Antoine 2015 p. 61) The women who perform in those venues are made to feel their oddness as well. “Male hosts often single out a woman in the lineup as woman in some way when they introduce her: Are you ready for a female? Normative whiteness and male privilege, then, ‘angle the room,’ in Sara Ahmed’s terms, in different ways for all comics. For men of color and women this

particular angling marks them as not ‘regular’ because of their race and gender.” (Antoine 2015 p. 65).

This treatment extends further in the stand up world. Not only are women made to feel othered in lineups with men but also in female lineups. “Women, additionally, are grouped into all-women shows with names like ‘Ladies’ Night,’ ‘Funny Females,’ or ‘Pretty, Funny Women,’ further suggesting that women as women are so different from the male standard as to constitute a theme, regardless of what they actually talk about on stage” (Antoine 2015 p. 67). Not that what they discuss onstage always seems to matter. “Among many men and women in the entertainment industry, women are categorically dismissed as not funny” (Antoine 2015 p. 72). This is in part because they are thought of as unrelatable. Additionally, even being attractive can be harmful to a comic in a way similar to the Totie Fields era. Current comedian Aida Rodriguez “faced chastisement for her attire in a very public way when she wore a short bright yellow dress as a top-ten finalist of Last Comic Standing (Season 8). One of the judges, a veteran Black comic, told her she needed to tone down her sex-appeal as it might distract from the comedy.” (Antoine 2015 p. 83).

Male comedians not only comment on female comics when they are bringing them onstage or while they are onstage but they also comment on them afterwards. Many male comedians will comment on a female comic that perform before them in a crude manner. “The denigration comes from show announcers, from male comics addressing audience members, through joke content (of both male and female comics), and from male comics introducing female comedians or commenting after they leave the stage” (Antoine 2015 93).

This treatment is noticed not only by female comics but males as well. “Comedian Tony Baker recently tweeted some much-needed advice to other male comics who host shows. ‘Dear

Hosts. U Don't have to always bring a female comedian to the stage by saying 'sexy' or 'beautiful' just say 'funny'. That's what matters' ” (Antoine 2015 p. 100). Funny should be all that matters but sometimes it is not. This type of treatment of women can not only hamper their careers but put them in potentially dangerous situations. “The very nature of touring [...] presents particular challenges and risks for women, including an increased risk for sexual violence.” (Antoine 2015 p. 101-102). Many female comedians share similar stories of not only male comedians putting them in danger, but also managers and bookers. Some recount stories of banging on their hotel doors in the middle of the night (Antoine 2015).

Comedian and SNL cast member Leslie Jones also embodies the ideals of an unruly women. She is widely funny and a tall woman. When she takes her place on stage she commands the audience with a confidence that many find unnerving or intimidating. This could be why she has been met with a lot of “haters” or detractors. Some have tried to mock Jones or criticize her for feeding into stereotypes in her comedy. “Jones enacts and embodies an excluded image of Black womanhood. In stand-up comedy, critiquing and subverting racial discourses often means reproducing them to some extent.” (Antoine 2015 p. 165). Jones is not only funny, but she works subverting both sexist and racist narratives in her comedy.

Comics can use their craft to create very subversive acts. Comics can use different types of material to subvert. For example, “in pushing the edges of mainstream images of racialized masculinities, comics loosen the hold of those authenticating images in the public imagination. When comics make it clear that they don't fit the image, or make fun of it in ways that highlight its non-applicability, they loosen its grip.” (Antoine 2015 p. 213-214). This type of subversion that is typical of stand up comedians' performances in general is amplified when it comes to female comedians. This is because female comedians' “[...] very presence on stage, night after

night, in itself pushes the edge. While not all female comics do [subversive] work in their comedic material, they are all on stage in spite of the forces that mobilize against them [...]" (Antoine 2015 p. 215).

Comedy is the best medium to perform subversive works. "Through gaps, frictions, and tensions; unexpected discursive turns and presentations of self; as well as disidentifications, comics push the edges of what constitutes the normal order of things to mainstream America" (Antoine 2015 p. 222). All of the previously mentioned female comedians were subversive and challenged what it means to be a female and a female comedian in some way, from Lucille Ball to Margaret Cho to Amy Schumer.

Amy Schumer uses a lot of her personal history in her comedy. She grew up in Long Island. Her parents got divorced when she was young and her father has MS, both facts were plot points in her first movie *Trainwreck*. After college, she moved to New York City where she pursued comedy. She describes in "Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo" how hard she worked to make a name for herself. In addition to writing her own material she worked various waitressing jobs to support herself and had to hand out flyers just to get spots in shows.

She landed a spot in *Last Comic Standing* and went far in the competition because of her wits and jokes she wrote while she was in New York. In her book she also describes going on tour with *Last Comic Standing*. That is where she "cut her teeth." Afterwards, she found success as writer and star of the sketch show *Inside Amy Schumer*. She tackled many topical issues in each sketch. Many issues were gender related. As she gained popularity she launched into her successful movie career. She is the star and writer for three blockbusters, *Trainwreck*, *Snatched*, and *I Feel Pretty*. She also hosted *Saturday Night Live* and has four Netflix comedy specials. In

her latest Netflix special, “Growing,” she describes how she got arrested protesting the Kavanaugh hearings. She discusses many feminist issues in all of her work.

The Rhetoric of Comedy

Many different devices are employed in comedy. “Constance Rourke says humor ‘is a lawless element full of surprises’” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 1). She might be right about that. Comedy is used in many different arenas and is a genre constantly criticized for crossing the line. Where does satire end and offense begin? Rourke discusses comedy in early frontier life. “Rourke also says humor of the early frontier was ‘a means of negotiating with the unknown and unpredictable’” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 1). Comedy is used in this way nowadays where comedians still use comedy to negotiate with the unknown and unpredictable. This is most seen in political satire where an idea can be taken far out into the absurd. It should be noted that when an idea is being taken out into the absurd it is still important for there to be some truth in it so that the audience stays with the joke. Amy Schumer uses comedy to negotiate and explore many ideas including sexuality and ideas about the female body type.

One definition of comedy or humor cannot be used because humor “eludes attempts to define or domesticate it” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 1). It is undefinable because of its “use of multiple meanings, of indirection and implication, its play with language and convention - in a word, its shiftiness - seems to confound every attempt to contain humor with clear categories, definitions, or theories” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 1). The shiftiness is common in both the comedy and the comedian. Amy Schumer resists being defined just as much as comedy does. Schumer has gone through many different phases of her career and just when she seems definable she shifts into another gear. For example, her first movie, *Trainwreck* (2015), was about a pretty-but-incompetent girl in a romantic relationship, which is very different than she portrays herself in

her latest movie, *I Feel Pretty*, where her character is unapologetic through most of the movie. All three of her movies send different messages to their audience using comedy to guide those messages.

Humor works and can be employed as “a performative strategy on everyday discourse, as an assertion of intentionality and a force for individual and collective action” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 3). Amy Schumer uses comedy in this way. She constantly questions everyday discourse in her comedy. She also uses her voice through her comedy and in interviews to advocate for individual and collective action. In her newest movie, *I Feel Pretty* (2018), she advocates for both each individual to cut themselves a break to live in their own skin and for collective action to stop judging women harshly on their dress sizes.

In comedy “neither the meaning nor the serious intent of an utterance conveyed through humor is necessarily undercut by that humor, and that humor can be used as an indirect speech act to attempt the full range of serious (in the sense of purposeful and sincere) performatives” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 3). Amy Schumer also uses these purposeful and sincere performatives within her larger body of comedy work. There are several poignant moments in all of her movies including in *I Feel Pretty* (2018) where Schumer makes a speech about her newly found confidence.

A lot of the rhetoric in comedy depends on “ ‘the context in which [utterances] are made, the intentions, attitudes, and expectations of the participants, the relationships existing between participants, and generally, the unspoken rules and conventions that are understood to be in play when an utterance is made and received’ ” (Pratt 86). This is why the way an audience perceives a joke really matters in comedy. Amy Schumer, as well as every other comedian, must tow specific lines. Comedian Lisa Lampanelli is known as an insult comic so when the audience

watches her they should know to expect jokes about every kind of person. Amy Schumer has been labeled by some as ‘a sex comic’ and although she disagrees her audience knows to expect raunchy jokes from her.

How Women Use Comedy

Women use comedy in mostly the same way as men do. Still, some claim that women are not funny. If a woman is funny then they are called exceptions. Amy Schumer states that she has heard similar comments to what other female comics are told. They are told they are ‘funny for a women’ or something similar. Those statements are detrimental because “restrictions on women’s use of performative humor are restrictions on women’s knowledge and women’s acts, on their recognition and use of a critical, socially re/constructive epistemology” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 4). This is because comedy can be used as a tool. “Regina Barreca says ‘Comedy is dangerous. Humor is a weapon. Laughter is refusal and triumph... and because it refuses to stop at the point where comedy loses its integrative function. This comedy by women is about de-centering, de-locating and de-stabilizing the world’” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 5). Meaning that women can use comedy as a rhetorical device to make their audiences laugh, become destabilized, and subvert the status quo.

For women and other groups comedy can act as “a social corrective [containing] epistemological insights - the sudden clarity that humor can provide” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 5). For example, if a comedian jokes about how women are taxed and pay a significant amount for napkins and tampons then the audience may laugh but also gain sudden clarity that maybe women are overcharged and taxed for those items. That is why audience uptake is so important.. “Audience uptake plays a crucial role in determining whether humor triumphs over anything” (Zwagerman 6). If the audience does not laugh than they are not going to gain epistemological

insights or have that sudden clarity. “According to Freud, ‘To laugh over the same witticisms is a proof of absolute psychic agreement’” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 32). If people do not laugh then the audience is not on the side of the comic so the audience will not agree with the comic’s argument.

Women in humor will often use the term ‘I’m only joking’ to get the audience on their side. This phrase is usually employed when a woman is being serious about a subject but says ‘I’m only joking’ as to not come across harshly to her audience. Freud argued that there is no such thing as “only joking” because all wit has a purpose.

“[...] there is nothing ‘only’ about humor’ according to Freud. Freud states that all wit is purposeful and no one is ever only joking. ‘Like joking, ‘I’m only joking’ is itself a performative, a ‘saying something’ that is also a ‘doing something’ : it is an attempt by a speaker to the audience as tendency wit, an attempt to erase an undesired or unintended perlocutionary effect or to declare oneself blameless in the caution of the perlocution. We could also say that ‘I’m only joking’ is an attempt (a conventional one in fact) to declare a normal, conventional, serious speech act parasitic and nonserious.” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 35)

Joke tellers say they are only joking when “ motivated by many different types of ‘indirect performatives’”(Zwagerman 2010 p. 35). These indirect performatives can include both trying to get the audience on your side as well as trying to get the audience to gain epistemological insights.

Comedy can seem very conversational. In stand up comedy, when a comic constructs their act they write out all of the jokes but when on stage a good comic can seem as if they are just witty and coming up with the material on the fly. “What the bricoleur does with tools and found objects, the humorist does with words, reclaiming, adapting, altering, de- and recontextualizing them to serve new expressive, rhetorical, and performative goals.” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 41). This is not always known or seen by the audience because it seems so natural.

In comedy, “for things to be funny you have to know the ‘socially constructed reality’” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 76). This is important for both the comedian and the audience. As mentioned earlier an audience should know what they are walking into when they walk into a stand up show or a movie but the comedian must also have their audience in mind when writing jokes. The certain audiences will not laugh at certain jokes. “Humor is thus not only rhetorical but heuristic” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 77).

Many comics play on their different statuses. A minority may joke about their ethnicity, but most of the time the joke can still be funny to others not part of that group, which lends comedy a unique way to bring people across boundaries together. “Woman cut across racial and ethnic lines, affecting the black Zora Neale Hurston and the half-Jewish Dorothy Parker-not on the specific grounds of their blackness or Jewishness, but because humor [defies] ladylike behavior” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 114). This kind of justification of jokes is seen more in Amy Schumer’s earlier work than in her recent work. In her first special, “Mostly Sex Stuff,” she justifies some of her racier jokes.

In addition to justifying their joke with ‘I’m only joking’ “sometimes women ask a question when they are really giving information” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 81). Going back to a previous example, a woman might say ‘have you ever realized how expensive tampons are and then they are taxed on top of it?’ The woman is not really asking a question but rather giving the information about the topic that she wants the audience to know. In comedy the most important elements are “locution, intention, and context” (Zwagerman 2010 p. 97). That locution, intention, and context can be seen when looking at historical examples like in war.

Comedy and its rhetorical powers have been deployed in wars as propaganda all over the world. Various studies have found that “irony and black humour characterized this safety valve,

which allowed modified expression of people's worst fears, helping them to endure through present pain and in contemplation of unpredictable post-war future” and can be used as a morale booster for both the troops and the citizens at home (Willis 2002 p. 81). Another study looked at political cartoons that “were a popular feature of the Daily Mail, often juxtaposed with the closely related serious headline news. Their prominence, size in a time of paper shortage and the fact that young, fit cartoonists were granted special dispensations from military service indicated their perceived value to the war effort. Cartoons could make a quick impact, echoing the editorial or government line and giving it an immediacy for readers, including those not strong on literacy” (Willis 2002 p. 82). All of those different examples highlight not only the importance of comedy but the strong capabilities of comedy used as a rhetorical device to make an argument.

Types of Jokes

There are different types of humor and qualities of humor. In his teachings, comedian Jason Outlaw says that within the joke, the set up and punchline, there are different elements to watch out for: the T-E-A-S-E-R. The teaser elements are Target, Emotion, Antagonism, Surprise, Exaggeration, and Realism. This plays into the defined types of jokes: double entendres, reverse, triples, incongruity, simple truths, superiority, paired phrases, slapstick, recognition aka observational comedy, compare and contrast, comedic irony, benign retaliation, and ambivalence. Triples is the type of comedy referenced the most by people like the expression ‘comedy comes in threes.’ These types can create many jokes that can reach different audiences.

Jason Outlaw always reminds his students that in comedy you should always attack up, which means that someone in a lesser position than the joke teller should not be the butt of the joke. For example, it could be considered a faux pas for an able-bodied person to make a person in a wheelchair the butt of a joke; however, if the able-bodied person themselves is made out to be

a monster, then the joke may be considered as attacking up. The best example of attacking up is an employee making fun of their boss (i.e., someone making fun of a person with more power than them—not less). However, sometimes comedians and people in general do not attack up. There are many different forms of this but one is disparagement humor.

Parody, Disparagement, and Self Deprecation

Disparagement humor is humor that attacks a specific group and is usually racist or sexist. The general public disapproves of disparagement humor because they and humor theorists think it creates, reinforces, and perpetuates stereotypes and prejudice. “Martineau (1972), for instance, suggested that the initiation of disparagement humor serves a divisive function: it creates and reinforces hostility toward the targeted group” (Ford 79 2015). Disparagement humor is thought to be harmful to more than just the couple people standing around making jokes.

By reinforcing negative stereotypes and prejudice at the individual level, disparagement humor is thought to maintain cultural or societal prejudice at the macrosociological level. Husband (1977), for instance, proposed that racist humor depicted on television reinforces stereotypes and prejudice among racist people and thus functions to perpetuate a racist society. Similarly, Sev'er and Ungar (1997) suggested that disparagement humor functions as a means of social control, allowing members of the dominant group in society to maintain their privileged position. Specifically, they asserted that sexist humor perpetuates power imbalances between men and women. (Ford 2015 p. 80).

Ford (2015) argues that disparagement humor works so well for several different reasons. The first being that when people are listening to a joke they

“switch from the usual serious mindset to a nonserious humor mindset for interpreting the message [...then] the humor recipient tacitly consents to an implicit normative standard communicated by the humor that, in this context, one

need not be critical of discrimination against the targeted group [...] creating greater personal tolerance of discrimination” (Ford, 2015 p. 81).

Disparagement humor also demonstrates the importance of audience uptake in comedy. For someone to laugh at a joke they must be interpreting the comedy in a “nonserious humor mindset” or else it would not be deemed as funny and might even be taken offensively. This nonserious humor mindset can be shown in different situations. For example, violence can be found to be funny if it is accompanied by humor cues as shown by Zillmann and Bryant as cited by Ford (2015), “as participants switched to a nonserious humor mindset to interpret the blunder, they suspended the usual serious (critical) ways of responding to it. Participants approved of the conversational rule to make light of the blunder” (Ford 2015 p. 83). This nonserious mindset when thinking about comedy allows for different messages to come across. For example Ford (2015) said disparagement humor makes “light the expression prejudice” and thusly “communicates an implicit meta-message,” which supports another hypothesis they cite. “Bill and Naus (1992) found that male participants considered incidents of sex discrimination harmless and acceptable when they perceived the incidents as humorous” (Ford 2015 p. 83). This could be harmful especially when so many stereotypes and beliefs are held such as “boys will be boys,” a thought usually accompanied with a chortle.

Another study showed how disparagement humor may be interpreted differently based on the already formed perceptions of the viewer. The character Archie Bunker in the show *All in the Family* was a character with prejudiced ideals. Although the character was meant as a parody, some viewers did not realize that when watching the show. Viewers who also held those racist ideals laughed at the character because they thought he was telling a joke that would fall under “simple truth,” whereas other viewers who did not hold that belief laughed because they thought it was a satire of people who actually hold those beliefs (Vidmar et al. 1974). This shows how

the message of disparagement humor is ambiguous. Archie Bunker could also be popular because he attacked many different groups. As shown in the documentary “*Can We Take a Joke?*” many comedians cannot fathom why people take jokes so seriously and get offended. Many comedians like Lisa Lampanelli, who refers to herself as an insult comic, makes fun of every different group she could imagine. Lampanelli asserts that when you make fun of everyone including yourself it should not be taken offensively. The comedians in the documentary argue that sometimes a joke is just a joke and should not be taken seriously.

This idea the comedians are expressing is shown in research by Gutman and Priest (1967) who found that “social perception plays an important role in humor,” meaning that the audience uptake of the joke will depend on what they think the joke teller’s intentions are. If the audience thinks the comedian is trying to be mean, they probably will not think the joke is funny. The way things are interpreted and audience uptake really depends on the audience itself and what views they have about the joke subject and the joke itself.

What seems to be the opposite of disparagement humor is self-deprecating humor. Many comedians use self-deprecating humor in their acts. Janes and Olsen (2015) demonstrated that self-deprecating humor can act as a social lubricant in social situations and that after viewing self-deprecating humor people were more creative in tasks compared to people viewing disparaging humor. This has various implications for study. The same joke told by different people could have different implications to audiences. A joke about a stereotype about women told by a man could be viewed as disparaging and perhaps unacceptable to audiences, whereas that same joke told by a woman might be found as not only acceptable but hilarious. In this vein, Abrams et al. (2015) examined jokes and in group identification finding that women rated

disparagement jokes about men as funnier than jokes about women. This could be because they identify in the group of women where the outgroup is men.

Group identification is important when looking at disparagement jokes. A study found that “sexist humour functions to a) enhance male ingroup cohesion (sexist humour as a predictor) b) serves as a form of sexual harassment (sexist humour as an outcome) and c) amplifies self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame (sexist humour as a moderator)” (Thomae, Manuela and Pina, Afroditi 2015 p. 3). The study also stated that if a male had any prior sexist beliefs whether malevolent or benevolent they were more likely to victim blame.

It was also found that when exposed to sexist/disparaging jokes women became more self-conscious, worried more about their bodies, and even self-objectified themselves. This is probably because many sexist jokes themselves are reductive and objectify women (Ford, Woodzicka, Petit, Richardson, Lappi 2015). However, it is again important to note that this seems to change depending on the person telling the joke and whether they seem to be a part of the group.

“When a woman tells a sexist joke, people might infer that she intended the joke to be taken as playful, benign amusement. In contrast, people might view the same joke told by a man as an overt expression of hostility toward women. Consequently, people might be more likely to interpret the woman’s sexist joke in a lighthearted humor mind-set, and the man’s in a more serious, critical mind-set (Romero-Sanchez et al. 2016, p 954).

Romero-Sanchez et al (2015) also found that when exposed to sexist humor men had a higher proclivity for acquaintance rape, not stranger rape. They also found that benevolent and malevolent sexism were correlated. Benevolent sexism is sexism like a man thinking that they have to always open a door for a woman. It is a nice thought but it is inherently sexist because it assumes that women are weak and need to be taken care of. Another common example of

benevolent sexism is when men make an argument to defend women because they are wives, daughters, and mothers. This is nice but it positions the women in relation to men. Malevolent sexism is the sexism that more people recognize as sexism in the day to day.

It is not only rape proclivities sexist jokes influence. Ford (2008) found that being exposed to sexist jokes versus nonsexist jokes or even unhumorous sexist statements predicted how much money people would donate to women's charities or even how much money people would cut from women's organizations. When exposed to sexist humor they donated less money to women's organizations. This study alone demonstrates how influential humor is as a rhetorical device. Sexism communicated through humor is more effective than when it is not communicated through humor. The power of humor could be harnessed to make so many arguments that could benefit or hinder groups of people.

Others have looked at the usefulness of humor as a way to change perceptions and do good. There has been a lot of research looking at humor at the psychological level. Freud even wrote extensively about humor. An important aspect to note about humor is that it "provides relief" (Lothane 2008 p. 233), which is valuable in many scenarios and to many different people's psyches. Freud wrote that when dealing with patients when he provided them with a diagnosis or a bit of clarity, they would laugh. He wrote that this laugh would come even though they have nothing to laugh at so it was more of a laugh of recognition than of a particular piece of wit. If the patient laughed and they were met with sympathy, Freud found that they would accept their diagnosis much sooner than patients who did not (Lothane 2008). As we know now, recognition and observational comedy is a large part of comedy. Jokes that are appropriate have been found to be a helpful tool in psychotherapy. Psychotherapists have found that "analyzing jokes and telling jokes is one of the auxiliary techniques of the psychoanalytic method: it helps to

lift repressions, take hold of unconscious emotions and fantasies, and enhance interpretation” (Lothane 2008 p. 238).

This relief and different way of processing information presented in a comedic fashion is very helpful for a rhetorical argument. Greenbaum (1999) performed an ethnographic study on comedians in Florida and found the comedian’s “comic narratives are consistently rhetorical, designed to persuade audience members to adopt certain ideological positions,” which is done by using many common rhetorical devices such as pathos (emotion), Kairos (adopting their argument to their audience), talent, and many more.

Greenbaum also found that comedy as a discourse is inherently subversive and confrontational. The subversive and confrontational nature of comedy is why it is so useful for female comedians in both the standup scene and in more narrative forms of entertainment like television or movies.

Stereotypes perpetuated by comics, the audience, and producers exist about how women are not funny, or at least, that they are just not as funny as men. This is a very detrimental stereotype because it works to deny women a way to subvert those very stereotypes working against them. Bore (2010) conducted a series of focus groups that brought to light conflicting views of femininity and comedy that made certain people devalue female comics and think that funny women would not appeal to men, which has been shown to not be true. In fact, Amy Schumer has succeeded for years on the network Comedy Central whose audience is mostly male. Most of the focus group participants believed in the stereotype that men are funnier than women and women as comedians appeal to only a niche market. Again, this has been shown to be false with the rising number and popularity of funny females. Bore speculates that these stereotypes could arise from gender constructs. Joking around and being the class clown does not

fit with the female stereotype to sit still and be pretty. Bore even points out that feminism itself relies on talking about things that women have been socialized not to talk about like profane subjects. Additionally, women in general are thought to not be very funny or good joke tellers because it is commonly believed that they forget the punchline or the meander around never reaching it. It is such a commonly held belief that women are bad storytellers that male comics frequently use that in jokes. This has been seen in many jokes from famous comedians about how their girlfriends or wives cannot get to the end of a story.

While studying gender and humor, Kotthoff (2006) pointed out that gender can come out in a joke overtly or covertly especially because “stereotypes in joke content can bring gender issues to the foreground of attention – in an affirmative or in a subversive way.” She also showed that context is very important to the joke, which can tell us a lot about things like social order. Kotthoff (2006) also pointed out that it is becoming more common place for women to joke about sex, which happens in all cultures, and for women to make disparaging jokes and comments about men.

Some seem to think that women’s humor is different than men’s in that “women's humor was more internally focused on relationships, emotions, politics as it relates to feminism, and body image, while male humor concerned itself with external issues of performance, current events, popular culture, and professional achievement” (Greenbaum 1997 p. 117-118). However, this does not ring true all of the time. Comedians in popular culture utilize different methods of comedy. After studying comedians Greenbaum (1997) concluded:

“Female comedians have the dual burden of overcoming societal prohibitions against women speaking in public, let alone, performing, and to establish a persona which uses the rhetorical, assertive, masculine mechanisms of stand-up, while at the same time subverting the genre by using feminine topics; their comic voices craft a distinctly feminine narrative, addressing political, social, and cultural expectations of women's identity” (p. 137).

Amy Schumer subverts the genre too, which is partially shown by her listing as the first female on the Forbes top ten highest paid comedians list. Schumer has done a lot already in her career through multiple forms of media including standup, her sketch television show, her books, and her movies. When discussing her sketch television show

“Willa Patkinson at Slate, who called the show ‘sneakily feminist,’ has one theory: ‘Schumer, the writer, tackles her objectification, while Schumer, the character, takes comfort in it...By wrapping her ideas in a ditzy, sexy, slutty, self-hating shtick, her message goes down easy—and only then, like the alien, sticks its opinionated teeth into you.’ ” (Dockterman 2014).

It would be interesting to study if this is the only way comedy or a comedian can be successful; to mask its feminist message. Her movies act as the perfect media to question a focus group about because most people watch and enjoy comedy movies. Additionally, her movies have reached a very wide audience. Together, her three movies have brought in \$290,529,871 in the worldwide box office.

Comedy can be used to subvert. Comedy movies can subvert gender norms — not just for women but for anyone. The increasingly popular bromance movie depicts a relationship between the two main male characters who are usually not shown to be stereotypically masculine and have an almost homosexual relationship throughout the movie. These male characters act so off the grain in these movies that an often done trope is for them to be mistaken for a serial killer. These movies are very popular and work very well in marketing because they appeal to multiple audiences: the romantic movie audience and the buddy movie audience. Judd Apatow who popularized bromance movies puts a lot of both homophilic and homophobic themes (Alberti 2013). Judd Apatow worked with Amy Schumer on her movie *Trainwreck* (2015). *Trainwreck*

plays with a lot of the themes that is typical of Apatow such as gender norms and homophilia/homophobia but it has a female lead.

Comedy movies with a female lead can be very empowering. Hersey (2007) studied different comedy movies with female leads to see where the female lead comedy movie was heading. She found many common themes such as the makeover, which acts as a confidence builder, the gay stylist, the motif of becoming liberated by embracing your femininity, white women being contrasted with a black friend, and of course the final speech that balances their “romantic desirability and professional success” without “subordinating them to male desires.”

This lack of subordination of women to men is shown throughout the movies Hersey studied. The men in the movies seem disposable and some are, as they are swapped out for other male actors with charming smiles for the sequels. The woman is no longer only interested in getting the kiss but rather in achieving some sort of professional or personal growth. “film continues the shift from ‘romantic comedy’ to comedy about women fighting to achieve their educational and professional goals, who fall in love as part of the story” (Hersey 158). This is very important to mention because it is not getting rid of romance altogether, as some fearfully accuse over the internet, but instead saying that while it is still there it is just a side story to the main plot about professional or personal growth. It is seen in many movies such as *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *Legally Blonde* (2001), and the Amy Schumer movies *Snatched* and *I Feel Pretty*.

Martineau as cited in Thomae et al (2015) divides the parts of humor as “the individual or group initiating the humour (the actor), the audience or recipient of the humour, the target of the humour, the judgement of the humour (esteeming or disparaging) and the cultural context and the social positions of the involved parties.” This is a very helpful conceptualization of humor.

Namely I want to focus on how Amy Schumer's humor is received by the audience, which depends on who she is targeting with her humor, what kind of joke it is, and all of the cultural contexts surrounding Schumer and the joke. No person or joke lives in a vacuum.

Amy Schumer's Comedy

Amy Schumer and her brand of comedy seem to bring up many different ideas with the biggest being that of the unruly woman. In her article, "*Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Don't Rape*": *Subverting Postfeminist Logics on Inside Amy Schumer*. Meg Tully says that Amy Schumer embodies what it means to be an unruly woman. Unruly women are women who do not act in the manner women should stereotypically act, they are loud, brash, and talk about inappropriate things such as bodily functions and sex.

Unruly women also do not have the stereotypical Hollywood body. An interesting thing about Amy Schumer is that she is known as being chubby or fat but after being labeled "plus size" by *Glamour* magazine she shot back that she fluctuates between a size 6 and a size 8, which is nowhere near a size 16, the number generally considered plus size (Yahr 2016). If Amy Schumer is a size 6 or a size 8 and the average woman in America is a size 12 than does that question her status as an unruly woman? Does merely the fact of not being a size zero make someone an unruly woman even if they are not actually even representative of the average size?

Unruly is not a specific number like dress size but it is a category. A category of woman that "sums up the disruptive qualities 'too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious'" (Gerigk 2011, p. 1). Amy Schumer does seem to fit some of these categories. Schumer seems to be considered too fat by the media but not by any regular standard. Schumer is also "too funny," as she has found a lot of success in her stand up, show on Comedy Central, and in her movies. She also seems to be "too noisy". Schumer speaks up for herself when she thinks things are not

right like in the instance with *Glamour* Magazine that I mentioned previously. Schumer is not 18 years old, so she may be “too old” when compared to other Hollywood leading ladies but again she is not by any regular standard. Schumer does seem to be “too rebellious” in the way she acts, talks, and dresses. In her most recent comedy special “The Leather Special” she wore a leather outfit, which is not something that many plus sized people wear but considering that Schumer is not plus sized is her choice of clothing that rebellious?

Amy Schumer is considered by many to be an unruly woman because of her power to disrupt, which seems to be the greatest strength of the unruly woman. Schumer makes a spectacle of herself by putting herself on television and film in such a comedic manner, which alone seems to make her an unruly woman (Roche, 2015). How important is it for Amy Schumer to embody what it means to be an unruly woman? An unruly woman in the post-feminist era should not be hard to come by, but a lot of feminist scholars seem to have trouble pinpointing them. Another famous comedian, Tina Fey, is also a self-proclaimed feminist but has been described by scholars as being only half of what an unruly woman is based on her character in her famous television show *30 Rock* (Gerigk 2011). Even though Tina Fey has not been dubbed a full unruly woman she has definitely inspired many women and has helped pave the way for other female comedians.

This idea of the unruly woman stems from backlash to this post-feminist era. The unruly woman does not agree with and fights against the stereotypes that have been put on women during the post-feminist era. Amy Schumer navigates post-feminism by poking it with a stick. Post-feminism is depicted in the media primarily as women who are very happy with their career but who have accomplished that by having to give up things in their romantic and family life. “Postfeminist culture expresses the idea that feminist goals of social equality have generally been

achieved, but that pleasures of conventional femininity have been lost in the process.”

(Middleton 2017, p. 123).

Amy Schumer in her comedy pokes fun at that notion that women need a relationship to truly be happy. This is seen in a lot of her work but the biggest example is the movie *I Feel Pretty*, which ends with Schumer’s character, Renee, having confidence, a dream job, and a relationship. The emphasis is put on her confidence, her growth as a person and then on the job with the least amount of emphasis put on the relationship. In the movie, Renee chooses herself over the attractive man accentuating the movie’s message that holding your own self worth in high regard is more important than having an attractive man by your side.

In her paper, “A Rather Crude Feminism”, Middleton (2017) looks at Amy Schumer’s movie *Trainwreck* and how it portrays feminism in a post-feminist culture. Middleton argues that Schumer’s movie has a lot of themes in it that are conventionally used in male driven comedies directed by Judd Apatow. Namely, she argues that it “reproduces th[e] conventional Apatovian device of a protagonist stalled outside of normative adulthood, as well an individualistic solution to this problem” of having to figure out how to become a “normal” functioning adult in the world. Through narrowing down this to an individual’s struggle Schumer is able to show that women should not be “consenting participants in postfeminism,” which Schumer is able to show because of the very nature of a comedy film, especially an Apatovian one, is to show how an outsider character eventually gets integrated into society (Middleton 2017, p. 133).

Many agree that Schumer’s “biting satire [...] pairs with Schumer’s offstage activism to debunk the justifying myth of postfeminist culture: that feminism is no longer needed” (Tully 2017, p. 339). Schumer herself is a self-proclaimed feminist, which is clear to see when watching her television show, which has been praised for examining things like age and sexuality in

Hollywood and by using comedy to exaggerate the patriarchy Schumer shines a light and opens up a discussion about post-feminist culture (Tully 2017).

Comedy is an interesting subject because it reaches a wide population to introduce different ideas to them without offending them because, after all, it is “only a joke.” “Theories of comedy postulate that laughter can subvert, disrupt, and critique the prevailing social order, revealing pressure points in the collective consciousness” (Ravits 2000, p. 29). These theories correspond with a lot of Amy Schumer’s feminist comedy that “mimic[s] postfeminist discourses, invert[s] the grotesque, and juxtapose[s] serious feminist issues with parodies of frivolous pop culture texts” (Tully 2017, p. 340).

Amy Schumer is also helping to make the word feminist not have such a bad connotation. Many people do not want to state that they are a feminist because there are many stereotypes that comes with being a feminist. Celebrities that have said they do not want to be labeled a feminist include Kelly Clarkson and Evangeline Lily, the strong female lead in *Ant-Man and The Wasp* (she’s the wasp), among others. These stereotypes come from the 1990s feminist backlash. “Today, people are seeing the effects of this unfortunate backlash, and activists, politicians and entertainers are returning their attention to issues of equality” (Roche 2015, p. v). If no one tried to change the ideas that came out of this ‘90s backlash, then change would never be made. The stereotypical post-feminist woman is portrayed as being “lost and highly damaged” (Roche 2015, p. 4), these women are unhappy career women and they threaten the progress that has been made for women. There are many examples of this including *The Proposal* (2009) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) in which Anne Hathaway’s character must give up her job in order to get her boyfriend. This trope is so common it is poked fun of in the hit television show “Crazy Ex

Girlfriend” when the main character quits her big time New York job to chase down her ex boyfriend.

Schumer’s characters have different jobs. In both *I Feel Pretty* and *Trainwreck* Schumer succeeds in interesting careers. Not only is it important to see that women are not only housewives while men are scientists but it is important to see that the image of the working woman is not the stereotypical post-feminist unhappy career woman.

Women are underrepresented in not only comedy but all around Hollywood. “First, it is clear that women are under-represented across a range of media and settings. Second, when women are portrayed, it is often in a circumscribed and negative manner. [...for example] when women are present they are typically scantily dressed and relegated to stereotypical roles (Collins 2011, p. 290). Does Amy Schumer have women characters that are stereotypical? Do the characters in her movies seem to not be circumscribed and do they hold up under scrutiny? It is important to not only see if Amy Schumer has female characters that are not stereotypes but it is also if she has female characters that are portrayed positively. When looking at multiple papers that did a content analysis of gender in media it was observed that “there was little discussion in any of the papers regarding content that might depict women particularly positively” (Collins 2011, p. 297). Examining this does get muddled because it is comedy. A character acting like a stereotype could be doing so to get a laugh but theoretically there should at least be a similar amount of stereotypes shown within comedy, which is why it seems fair to compare comedy movies against other comedy movies.

Although she has received backlash from some viewers, Schumer’s comedy has been shown to be popular with male and female viewers. Amy Schumer was able to have a successful show on a network that had a largely male viewership base. The second season of *Inside Amy*

Schumer premiered as the most-watched series premiere for Comedy Central in 2013. The first season had a 50/50 male/female viewership and beat The Kroll Show “by 12 percent in the male ages 18-34 demographic” showing that their base male audience “will watch comedies with a feminist message” (Dockterman 2014). The premiere got a “1.1 rating with adults 18-49. Among the cable net's targeted male demographics, Inside Amy Schumer bested non-sports across TV with a 2.4 rating among men 18-34 and a 2.8 rating with men 18-24” (Connell 2013). This shows me that men liked Amy Schumer but it also brought in women to the network. The third season got a smaller opening, “An average of 1.006 million caught the season starter of Schumer’s critically adored comedy series; 449,000 aged 18-34, 745,000 18-49-year-olds, and 625,000 aged 25-54” (Moraes 2015). Her appeal to both men and women is important because it lends to her ability to be able to subvert.

Research Questions:

What are the Mechanics of Subversion and how does Amy Schumer Leverage them?

How does Amy Schumer play into or resist gender roles/expectations?

How does she draw on past successful examples of women comedians and what does she add?

Chapter Three: Methods

After a thorough examination of Amy Schumer's movies and literature regarding her, comedy, and women in comedy, the aforementioned research questions were created. Like many other qualitative studies, this study starting with several key sensitizing concepts. Why is Amy Schumer the first female comedian on the list? What is going on with women in comedy? From those sensitizing concepts, I researched women in comedy and Amy Schumer, which led to the specific research questions.

It was then determined the best way to answer those questions would be to perform a thematic analysis. This is because to fully comprehend how Schumer uses her comedy and how that relates to other female comedians it is important to look at the themes found in her movies. Via thematic analysis three main themes were found.

Thematic Analysis of Amy Schumer Movies

I studied this topic using thematic analysis. It is a flexible and widely used “method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun Clark 2006, 79). A theme is “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun Clark 2006, 82). The themes do not emerge from the data but are chosen based on the data and previous theoretical lenses that inform the work (Braun, Clark, 2006). The data was coded first inductively, finding broad themes in the data, and then deductively, finding more key clues in the data (e.g., Patterson Spencer, 2017).

First, it was determined that the study would focus on specifically the three Amy Schumer comedy movies. These popular movies would hopefully shed light on how Schumer uses comedy and how that could differ from how other female comedians use comedy. After

preliminary research was done on comedy, women in comedy, and Schumer herself, the movies were watched several times. I had seen *Trainwreck* and *Snatched* previously in the theaters but never *I Feel Pretty*. I had a preliminary watching of all three to remind myself what happened in each movie. During the viewings, I took notes about what potential themes may be. I then referred back to the research and started the circular process of watching and research. I continuously noted themes in the movies and how those themes relate to themes found in the research. After I determined the themes I wanted to talk about I rewatched the movies again to choose specific scenes that showed those themes. It is important to note that the specific scenes I chose to dive into are not the only scenes where these themes are found but rather I felt they best exemplify the themes.

Identifying Instances and Determining Themes

Amy Schumer's three movies, *Trainwreck* (2015), *Snatched* (2017), and *I Feel Pretty* (2018), have many themes and many scenes from which to pull those themes. These specific themes were found in the data but also focused on for the purpose of this project because they answer the research questions. The scenes chosen to explore in detail in the following section best exemplify the themes found in the movies. The themes can be found throughout the movies, not only in these scenes. The movies were watched with the research questions in mind. Three themes were pulled out for their relation to the questions. The following scenes will demonstrate each of the themes in the movies.

1. Gender Issues: Expectations and Roles
2. Self Deprecating/disparagement Humor
3. Not So Sneaky Feminism

These general themes help to answer the research questions. The first theme, gender issues: expectations and roles, sheds light on all three research questions. Schumer uses subversive techniques when portraying gender issues. The gender issues she portrays shows how she plays into and resists gender roles and expectations. Many successful female comedians of the past have also discussed gender issues in their comedy.

The second theme of looking at self deprecating versus disparagement humor helps to answer research questions one and two. Self deprecating humor is a mechanic of subversion that is often employed in comedy. The way Schumer uses these types of jokes displays how she talks about gender roles and expectations. The third theme of feminist ideals sheds light on the second research question. These feminist themes in her movies demonstrate how she resists gender roles and expectations.

Chapter Four: Results and Interpretation

Gender Issues: Expectations and Roles

The theme of gender expectations and roles in Schumer's movies helps to answer all of the research questions. For research question 1, gender issues are something that she works to subvert in her comedy so exploring how she portrays gender helps to examine how she subverts it. For Research Question 2, this theme directly demonstrates how she plays into and resists gender roles/expectations. For Research Question 3, many of the comedians that came before her played with issues of gender she just adds her own humor to the mix. Amy Schumer in her comedy movies, television show, and stand up performances discusses gender issues. In all three of her movies, gender expectations and roles are both discussed, called to attention, and even challenged.

Before jumping too far into how Schumer challenges gender expectations and roles, gender constructs and stereotypes must first be laid out. People first learn about their gender roles from their families where their parents model and instruct how they should behave. People also learn from society. There are many societal constructs that shape people's opinions and way they act. Gender constructs applied to men include don't be female, be successful, be aggressive, be sexual, and be self-reliant. Female gender constructs includes the thought that caring about your appearance, being sensitive and caring, understanding that negative treatment by others is common, and needing to be superwoman to have it all (Wood 2007). Amy Schumer has dedicated most of her career to upending these gender constructs.

These ideals get further portrayed by the media. "Media Programming reflects three themes related to gender. First, women and minorities are underrepresented. Second, men and women are portrayed primarily in stereotypical ways that reflect and reproduce conventional

views of gender. Third, relationships between men and women are usually portrayed as consistent with traditional gender roles and power relations” (Wood 2007 p. 258). Portrayals of gender in the media changes as societal standards change. Interestingly, there was a growing fondness for the portrayal of the “metrosexual man” recently in the early 2000s but recently there has been a backlash and resurgence of the “macho man” (Wood 2007).

These constructs have lead to many stereotypes common in western culture that will be sprinkled across the analysis. Some common stereotypes include boys are messier than girls, girls are natural caretakers, and only girls can wear dresses. “The biggest myth perpetuated about gender, researchers found, is that once girls hit puberty, they are vulnerable and in need of protection to preserve their sexual and reproductive health, while boys are seen as strong and independent” (Dastagir 2017).

Trainwreck is almost entirely about gender issues. The plot centers around the main character falling for someone even though she acts more like a stereotypical “bachelor.” It has all the classic elements of a romantic comedy, but the two main characters seem almost to switch gender roles. When discussing *Trainwreck*, it must also be taken into consideration that it is an Apatowian picture: it not only tackles Schumer style gender issues but also homophobic/homophilic themes commonplace in Apatowian movies. This is shown in several scenes including “Sports? I Love Them,” which takes place as follows: Amy, played by Amy Schumer, is interviewing Doctor Aaron Connors, played by Bill Hader, in his office. LeBron James enters the office and picks up a pair of sunglasses. Dr Aaron Connors questions if he really drove “forty minutes back here just to look for your sunglasses?” To which LeBron James replies that he was not “gonna give Sunglass Hut another thirty dollars for these? Are you crazy?” Aaron calls him out for being both rich and cheap. LeBron asks if he and Aaron are still going to

watch “Downton Abbey” later, when Aaron says he might not be able to LeBron tells him, “Listen, I’m watching it tonight because I’m not gonna go to practice in the morning and all the guys are talking about it and I’m left out.” After LeBron leaves Amy remarks that he is tall and Aaron asks her if she knows “who that was?” Amy answers, “The basketball player.” to which Aaron comments, “That’s LeBron James, he’s kind of like THE basketball player.”

Aaron then calls Amy out for not knowing about basketball by asking her what her favorite team is. Amy responds by making up fictitious basketball teams like the “ Long Island Mediums, the Acorn Pinecones [...] The Fire Island Penguins, the Cincinnati Thunder Wizards, the Orlando Blooms.” She is then forced to admit that she does not follow sports. Aaron then confesses that he did not follow sports either until her started working in sports medicine. The scene continues with Amy continuing to put her foot in her mouth and treading a thin racist line with Aaron.

This scene breaks common gender stereotypes. First LeBron James comes back into the office for his sunglasses and asks Aaron if they will watch “Downton Abbey” later. This show is a period drama, which are stereotypically popular with females, so when thinking of two friends getting together to view the show, the stereotype is flipped on its head and called attention to when those two friends are male. The stereotype is further flipped on its head when LeBron complains that he has to watch it tonight or else his teammates will be talking about it and leave him out. This flips that stereotype further because it shows that Aaron and LeBron are not just two outlier friends who enjoy this show. Rather, it implies there are many other males on LeBron’s team that not only watch the show and enjoy it, but will bring it up as a topic of interest in the conversation. An additional layer to this flipping of the stereotype is that LeBron James is a very famous and widely known basketball player. LeBron, as Amy’s character brings up, is very

tall like most basketball players. The idea of a bunch of very tall men talking about this period drama may induce laughter because it evokes the “fish out of water” type of comedy. However, audiences may laugh then question why it seems so “fish out of water” for men to enjoy “Downton Abbey.”

After Lebron leaves the office, it becomes apparent through Amy and Aaron’s conversation that Amy does not follow sports. This does fit with the gender stereotype that women do not follow sports, however, even that stereotype gets a bit flipped when Aaron admits that before he got his job as a sports doctor he also did not follow sports. The stereotype that women do not follow sports comes from multiple societal beliefs. Women are expected not to roughhouse because they are supposed to act calmly, gently, and vulnerably. Girls are also discouraged from sports at a young age by the common phrase “you throw like a girl” (Reynolds 2017).

Another scene that illustrates the gender issues in *Trainwreck* is “You Butt Dialed me.” This scene begins with Amy telling her friend Nikki, played by Vanessa Bayer, that she slept at Aaron’s apartment the previous night. Nikki asks if it was because Amy was “blackout drunk” but Amy replies that she was “dead sober” after what she admits was four drinks and spent the night “on purpose.” Nikki reacts incredulously to this admission of both the four drinks as a low amount of alcohol and for Amy spending the night with Aaron. Amy then gets a phone call from Aaron. Amy and Nikki freak out because they do not understand why Aaron would be calling her because they “just had sex.” Nikki tells Amy that he must have just butt dialed her. Amy answers the phone and asks Aaron if he butt dialed her. When Aaron says that he called Amy on purpose Nikki tells her to hang up the phone because “he’s obviously like sick or something.” It escalates when Aaron asks to see her again and Nikki worriedly says she is “going to call the

police.” After Amy agrees to discuss another date with Aaron at their next interview they hang up. Aaron and LeBron are at a restaurant and when Aaron hangs up with Amy, LeBron is excited that she agreed to another date. LeBron asks Aaron if the previous night they “made love.” When Aaron responds in the affirmative LeBron excitedly shouts, “woohoo! My boy got intimate! Sexual Intercourse! Woo!”

This scene demonstrates a complete gender role reversal. Amy and Nikki act like the stereotypical male characters, especially the male characters typical of Apatow films. These male stereotypes drink heavily and do not want to get into relationships usually because of commitment issues. The commitment issues are commonly referenced to receiving from their fathers who loved them but were emotionally stunted and unable to show their affection thus stunting their sons emotionally and continuing the cycle of emotionally unavailable fathers and sons. The character Amy’s commitment issues are set up in the first scene of the movie, which shows her as a young girl being told by her father that he is divorcing her mother and that “monogamy isn’t realistic.” This is set up as a defining part of Amy’s life and tries to explain her commitment issues. In the movie, she is dating Steven, played by John Cena. Steven and Amy eventually break up because he wants her to commit but she does/can not. Both Amy and Nikki act like male stereotypes in the “You Butt Dialed Me” scene as shown through their thoughts about drinking, most would not think of 4 drinks as not a lot, and their thoughts on sex and relationships, seen in the way they respond to Aaron’s call.

On the Flip side, Aaron and LeBron act like the more stereotypically female characters. Aaron calls Amy with LeBron next to him almost as moral support. In romantic comedies, the female character will often call the male romantic interest with her friend for both support and to talk about how well it went afterward, which LeBron and Aaron do. LeBron also refers to Aaron

and Amy “making love,” which is in direct contrast to Amy and Nikki who say “sex,” which may come across as more crass. Using crude language, especially in comedy, is thought to be a more male than female act. Just this act of flipping the language that the male vs female friends use to discuss sex is subversive because it calls extra attention to it. If Schumer were to have only Amy the character use crude language it would carry some subversion. However, Schumer contrasts Amy’s use of crude language with Lebron’s use of a less risqué innuendo, which, while being funny, helps to underline Schumer’s comment on gendered language and argument that women can be crass and men do not have to be.

Also from *Trainwreck*, the scene “We Should be a Couple” demonstrates an odd gendering and seems almost out of place in the movie. The scene begins with Aaron performing surgery on a knee while listening to “Uptown Girl” by Billy Joel while Amy watches and vomits. Afterwards, Amy asks him “Why Billy Joel?” To which Aaron replies that he “loves that song” and proceeds to ask Amy out on a date. Amy responds that she is “his writer” and they should “keep it professional.” Aaron agrees but then continues to press stating that he “think they really like each other” and “should start dating.” Amy awkwardly responds “No, no” while trying to come up with excuses for him. Amy then gets a call from her father’s assisted living facility stating that he fell. Aaron comes with her to the facility and stitches up her father while telling him that he just starting dating Amy. Amy refutes this claim. Aaron and her father bond over a mutual enjoyment of Billy Joel and the Mets.

In their interaction in this scene it seems as though Aaron is behaving in a creepy and almost predatory way toward Amy. Even after Amy asks to keep it professional and seems uncomfortable Aaron continues to press her to date. Aaron throughout the movie seems sweet and harmless but in this scene exhibits borderline predatory behavior. When first watching the

scene it seems like Aaron is excused for his behavior seemingly because he is the male protagonist, which is destined to be with the female protagonist. However, when thinking more critically about the scene and how it fits in with other romantic comedies it appears that Schumer is commenting on how women are excused for their predatory behavior in romantic comedies. After all, Aaron pressing Amy to date him even after she repeatedly rebuffs his moves is nothing when compared with beloved Legally Blonde heroine Elle Woods who stalked her ex to law school solely to convince him to dump his fiance to be with her. When looked at with this lens it becomes apparent that the scene is subversive. Schumer is calling to attention the predatory behavior that is dismissed from women because they are women and dismissed as completely harmless.

Snatched also contains the breaking of gender norms. *Snatched* (2017) tells the story of a mother and daughter who do not get along but go on vacation together to Ecuador. While in Ecuador they get kidnapped and experience zany mishaps while trying to escape. The scene “Welcome” demonstrates how Schumer plays with gender norms. In the scene, Emily, played by Amy Schumer, and Linda her mother, played by Goldie Hawn enter their resort in Ecuador. As Emily enters the lobby a man walks up to her with a tray of drinks and says “welcome” in a thick accent. Emily picks up one of the glasses containing a white substance, thanks him, points, and asks if that is check-in. The man replies “welcome” and it becomes apparent that he does not understand much if not any English. Emily walks up to the check-in counter speaking broken Spanish while Linda follows after refusing to let a bellhop take her bags. At the check-in counter, the man carrying the white drinks gives one to Linda. As she takes a sip of the drink she asks, “what is this?” To which the man responds “welcome” again in his thick accent. Linda turns and spits the drink all over Emily’s face asking, “Whale what?” Emily

explains that he said “welcome” and “they are not serving whale semen.” As Emily wipes the drink off of her face, the man checking her in tells her he has her marked down for a king. When she explains that she called and switched it to two queens the man says they are booked and he cannot switch her. The man suggests they sleep “head to toe,” which Emily sarcastically responds “great like we are sixty-nining.” Emily and Linda walk away from the check-in counter and Linda tells Emily, “I know what that means you know, sixty-nining.”

This scene demonstrates the comedy of the movie, which defies gender norms. The two biggest comedic moments in this scene are both crude sexual jokes made by women. As shown previously in the literature review, women making crude sexual jokes is subversive. These subversive funny women are often referred to as “unruly women.” Not only are both of these jokes crude and sexual both “punchlines” are given to Linda. Linda is the older mother character and this scene shows that not only is Goldie Hawn still funny but she is still an “unruly woman” just like Amy Schumer. In a lot of comedy shows and movies the female characters may set up the joke but the punchline is given to the male characters. This scene shows that not only are women funny and can tell crude jokes but even older women are capable to say funny crude jokes.

I Feel Pretty (2018) contains many scenes with a flipping of gender norms and subsequent breaking of gender stereotypes similar to *Trainwreck*. In the scene “Aren’t you glad we’re doing this,” which comes at about 45 minutes into the movie, Renee, played by Amy Schumer, and Ethan, played by Rory Scovel, have their first date at a boardwalk. Renee asks Ethan what he does for a living, which leads him to explain that he works in operations for CNN but wants to be a cameraman, a switch that he finds difficult because of the “boys club” at work. Renee laughs at him and says that only women complain about the “boys club” when Ethan says

it is a different type of boys club because they are all macho. They then enter a bar and Renee decides to enter a bikini contest.

This scene is similar to the scene “Were you at Zumba?” which comes only thirteen minutes later in the movie. In the scene, Renee meets Ethan on a city corner. She questions what he was just doing because he is sweaty. When he admits he was working out she asks if he was just at Zumba. At first, he denies Zumba when Renee says it is “like a female workout” but Ethan says he goes to Zumba because he does not like the machismo at the gym. When Renee asks if it is really because he tries to pick up girls at the gym he responds that he is too shy for that and is more the type of guy that would “sit next to you for four years in high school and wants to ask you out” but “chicken[s] out” and “monitor[s] your status for ten years hoping that you’ll be single for the reunion.”

The gender norm of a strong masculine lead is flipped in *I Feel Pretty* as demonstrated by the above scenes. In *I Feel Pretty*, Ethan’s character is juxtaposed by Grant who is a very attractive, muscular, rich, charming man. Renee chooses Ethan over Grant in the end. While this is not the first movie where the regular guy gets the girl over the handsome stud, it is noteworthy that this movie directly calls into mention struggles that men face within male constructs. Ethan outwardly laments both the “boys club” and “machismo” as struggles in his life.

Both scenes demonstrate the effeminate male lead who questions gender roles in a more forward and out in the open way than in *Trainwreck*. In *Trainwreck* the audience was left to laugh and make the connection about the comedy and gender roles themselves but here the characters openly discuss gender issues. There is something to be said about allowing the audience to think about gender roles themselves without the movie explicitly saying anything. If the movie does not explicitly point out the gender roles then audience members may be more

susceptible to subversive ideas because their ideals are not being directly called out.

Consequently, with comedies the viewer may interpret a joke that is meant subversively as a joke agreeing with the stereotype.

Similarly to *Trainwreck*, this harmless male lead mentions some problematic behavior. Ethan recalls to Renee his crush on a girl from high school that he internet stalked. “Internet stalking” is a relatively common phrase and may not seem weird to general audience but is still stalking.

Schumer purposefully challenges these gender constructs in her movies to subvert them. Her jokes are becoming increasingly straight forward in their challenging of gender roles and expectations. This may be a reflection of flipping the gender script on its head becoming more acceptable to society. It may also be a reflection of Schumer’s fame and position allowing her more freedom within her work to put jokes that are very outwardly challenging and subversive.

Self deprecating and disparagement humor

The theme of self deprecating and disparagement humor works to answer both research question one and two. To demonstrate the mechanics of subversion and how she leverages them it is important to remember what was previously written. As discussed earlier in the literature review, a joke can be viewed as self-deprecating, which can be subversive when it calls out a stereotype or any other dominate idea the comic wants to subvert. On the flip side, a joke viewed as disparaging can not only continue a stereotype but also make the stereotype more acceptable in the eyes of the audience. She uses these self deprecating jokes as a way to help her play with gender roles and expectations.

Trainwreck has self-deprecating and disparagement humor in it, but no more or less than other romantic comedies or Apatowian films and so seems unremarkable in this regard. This is

probably because it is technically a Apatowian film. Judd Apatow directed and produced the film but it does appear that Schumer had a lot of creative control over the picture because she wrote and starred in it.

Snatched, however, has this kind of humor in a noteworthy way. This is best demonstrated by the scene “Poofy Face.” In this scene, Renee and Linda, after running from their kidnappers, come across a man at an outdoor bar. They approach him and ask him in both English and what cannot even pass as broken Spanish when the next bus leaves. The man tells them that the bus does not leave for another 36 hours. This is disheartening news because they cannot afford to wait that long with their kidnappers chasing them. When the man says he knows a man that can take care of them, Linda does not want his help because “this is how sex slavery starts.” The man replies that they do not have to worry about being sex trafficked because they only want young pretty girls implying that Linda is old. When Renee tells him off for disrespecting her mother she asks if she should go hide while her mother meets his friend for help. The barman tells Renee that she is also safe because her “poofy face will protect [her].”

This scene demonstrates a disparaging comment made by a male character towards a female character. However, this movie was first written by female comedian Kate Dippold and then rewritten by Schumer and her sister. It is hard to pinpoint who wrote this joke but it causes a debate: is the joke disparaging because a man says it to a woman or if it is self-deprecating because the words themselves were written by a woman? Most likely Schumer writing about herself. I would argue that even if the audience does not think this in-depth about the joke it is still self-deprecating because no matter what kind of messed up, flawed character Schumer portrays, she always seems in on the joke. No matter if she is running through the jungle, accidentally killing kidnappers, getting a tapeworm, she is the character we root for and she

exudes a type of confidence that is typical of a stand up who can get up in front of hundreds of people to try and make them laugh.

I Feel Pretty is a movie that is one big self-deprecating joke. At times it may seem disparaging as Schumer points out all her problem areas in a mirror or as she discusses her flaws with a model but just like in *Snatched* she is always in on the joke. This is shown by not the confidence she exudes when she thinks she is pretty but the confidence she keeps at the end when she realized she always looked the same. The title even boldly claims *I Feel Pretty* where the I is Amy Schumer's character. The movie is not called "The Ugly Duckling." This title makes it seem like she is in on the joke as she confidently claims that she feels pretty.

Feminist Themes

The feminist themes in her movies help to answer research question number two. To show the feminist themes Schumer plays into and resists common ideas about women. She accomplishes this in a very relatable way, which also helps promote the feminist themes further. While viewing the movies, feminist themes were thought to be both themes of feminism discussed in the literature and themes mainstream feminists speak about. These themes include but are not limited to women's job opportunities, objectification, and the male gaze. *I Feel Pretty* is relatable because unlike in *Snatched* where not everyone can relate to being kidnapped, everyone can relate to feeling insecure sometimes. Most women have experienced at least one of the things that happen to Renee in the opening scene. It is important to be relatable because women will watch those scenes and see themselves projected back at them. This will make them more likely to accept the message of the movie. All three of her movies contain feminist themes. The most feminist of the three is *I Feel Pretty*.

I Feel Pretty's opening scene is a montage of short clips filled to the brim with feminist messages about the female body. In the scene, we meet Renee an unconfident girl who enters a Soul Cycle with a bunch of skinny and physically fit girls. She explains to the woman at the front desk that she needs shoes that are 9 1/2 double wide; big for a woman. She takes the shoes and meets Mallory, played by famous model Emily Ratajkowski, who is also taking her first Soul Cycle class. Before the class even starts, Renee rips her pants on the stationary bike. As she limps past a pretty girl on a bike, the man next to the pretty girl asks if she is okay. The scene cuts to a wish board Renee has that contains magazine cut outs about Lily LeClaire. Next, Renee is shown trying to follow a YouTube tutorial about styling her hair but she fails to create the hairstyle. Afterwards, we follow Renee to a clothing store where she is confronted by a sales representative that tells her that "sizing is a little limited in the store" but she could "probably find her size online." Cut to Renee in line to check out at the grocery store. In front of her is a mother carrying her infant on her back. Renee smiles at the baby causing him to cry. Renee then goes to a bar and cannot get the attention of the bartender. When Renee arrives back home she looks in the mirror and examines herself. She takes her clothes off and frowns at herself in her underwear and Spanx.

This scene is not particularly funny. The scene draws on the humor the joke types of recognition and embarrassment. Many viewers will recognize and relate to the situations and they will laugh at her embarrassment. The joke in the scene that is sure to get the biggest laugh is when she is getting her shoes double wide "like the trailer." Other than that the audience will not be left in the first five minutes clutching their guts from laughing so hard. However, it really gets the message of the movie across. The scene sets up some of the societal constructs and

experiences that can make a girl lose confidence. Later, during Renee's closing speech she will attempt to knock down these constructs.

The opening sequence has little dialogue but shows a lot of things women who have a larger dress size and no self-esteem go through. These things include seeing the pretty girls at the gym, trying to follow a youtube video and failing, and not being able to get the bartender's attention. This scene tries to get the audience to sympathize with her situation and also tries to let them laugh at it.

Renee makes two speeches, which contrast each other and show Renee's growth in the movie. During the "Undeniably Pretty" speech scene Renee sees Mallory at a Target. A man approaches Mallory while they are talking and tries to hit on her while referring to Renee as a man. Mallory rebuffs the man. Renee is amazed by Mallory and tells her she has "always wondered what it feels to just undeniably pretty" and "just have all those parts of life open up to you that you only get to experience when you look like [Mallory]." She laments that none of her makeup would ever let her look that pretty and all she could do was "pray for a miracle" to be that pretty.

In the "Final Speech" scene, Renee interrupts her boss' presentation about the new makeup diffusion line. Renee enters the stage and shows two pictures of herself, one from before she hurt her head and one after she hurt her head when she saw herself as beautiful. She tries to explain that even though the pictures look nothing alike both are her. The audience gives her confused looks. Renee turns around and realizes she looks the same in both pictures, "there was no magic, that's me, they're both me, that's me, I did all this as me," she states. She talks about how when women are little girls they have confidence and self-esteem. As they grow up, little moments get to them and makes them lose their self-esteem. She says that women should be

proud of being who they are and should take back their self-esteem. The crowd cheers. Renee continues to talk about how they are strong women with the ability to change their own lives and believe in themselves while pictures of everyday women are shown behind her. Renee is cheered by the audience, leaves the stage, and is told she could keep her job. In the next scene, she visits Ethan and tries to win him back. Ethan says he thinks she is the most beautiful woman in the world. They get back together and kiss.

These speeches demonstrate the common modern post-feminism female lead comedy movie trope of a speech that emphasizes professional goals/personal growth over romantic love. This romantic love is still in the movie, but acts as a secondary plot.

This journalist, Dockterman, at Time puts a different spin on the growing number of feminist themes in comedy. “Networks are learning that if you write funny comedies then people will watch them. It’s not that the writers are disguising their feminism; they are just prioritizing comedy first” going as far to say that “we have learned from *Inside Amy Schumer* and *Broad City* is if the female characters are funny, guys will tune in” (Dockterman 2014).

Fitting and Resisting Historical Precedents

Amy Schumer fits into a lot of categories and precedents that the women comics before her did. This sections will explore what attributes she shares with certain previously discussed female comedians of the past and present.

Schumer has a lot of similarities with Lucille Ball. Ball performed many zany and physical stunts. Each episode of *I Love Lucy* usually revolved around some sort of stunt that Ball performed whether it was chasing Ricky around the bedroom or stomping grapes in Italy. Schumer also uses a lot of that physical humor in her comedy. In her book, “The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo,” Schumer talks about performing a sketch while hosting Saturday Night

Live. In the sketch, she had to throw herself out of a (pretend) plane. She goes on to talk about how she wanted to make that moment so funny that she ended up hurting herself by flinging herself so violently out of the plane door. Schumer's ability to put herself in physically zany situations is similar to that of Ball's ability. I could imagine if things had gone differently with Lucy and that cheese then she too might have jumped out of a plane.

Additionally, in the same way that Lucille Ball is able to perform those stunts and maintain her femininity, so can Amy Schumer. This is especially seen towards the end of *Trainwreck* where Schumer's character Amy performs a dance routine with actual dancers for Aaron. She comically messes up many times throughout the dance by not performing the right movements. She comments on how she is sweating "more than she is proud of" during the dance. The dance culminates in her trying to jump off of a trampoline to dunk a basketball. Before she is able to shoot the ball she falls on her face. Throughout all of those physical mishaps, she maintains her femininity. She is able to maintain her femininity and attractiveness, which is communicated to the audience by the consistent cut backs to Aaron smiling and looking at her adoringly.

Schumer also pushes the edge of what people are comfortable with hearing about on television. She is constantly talking about controversial topics. Lucille Ball started that trend when she with "Lucy Is Enceinte." Schumer has taken it further than Lucille Ball would have, but what is deemed controversial has been greatly changed. Schumer makes many jokes in her stand up and movies that are about different issues, usually women's issues. In *Trainwreck* she even makes an extended joke about a tampon. More than just in her type of comedy, Schumer uses and benefits from the precedents that Ball set in *I Love Lucy*.

Amy Schumer uses a lot of the same tactics as Joan Rivers used. They both have not only said witty/self deprecating comments in their routines, but they have also used those routines to make social commentary. Rivers and Schumer have also made fun of their looks even though they are both very pretty ladies. A lot of the media and public has written their looks off but they are both beautiful in traditional senses. Additionally, Rivers and Schumer were both very good with audiences. When either of them play off of or interact with an audience they have both done so in a charming and fun way. Rivers demonstrated this talent mostly as her time as a late night host and filling in for Carson. Rivers was charming and able to make audiences laugh with her and feel intimate with her. This is part of the reason she was called a “kitchen table comic” because people felt as though they were sitting at a kitchen table with her. Schumer also entertains and puts her audience at ease during her performances. This ease is important because it allows the audience to hear her social commentary as opposed to if they were tense they might get defensive from feeling attacked in some way.

Totie Fields and Schumer are similar in the topics they brought up. Both discussed women’s bodies on stage, which was topical during each of their routines. Fields talked about not only her weight but the pressures that she went through living in a society that put so much pressure on her to try to slim down and try every new fad diet. Many women related to Fields. Schumer also discusses the pressures she feels about her own body, which is very relatable. In *I Feel Pretty*, the entire movie is a commentary about body positivity. This is especially seen in the opening scene where Schumer’s character is uncomfortable in the gym, the store and the bar, which is very relatable for many women. Schumer’s use of her voice and her large audience to speak about these issues is very similar to how Fields used her voice and appearances to speak

about similar issues. Although, Schumer's audience and reach is on a much larger scale than Fields was during her career.

Goldie Hawn played Schumer's mother in *Snatched*. They had great chemistry. I would be inclined to say that Schumer is like today's version of Hawn but Anna Faris already seems to have a claim on that market. Faris has Hawn's doe-eyed, blonde persona down. They both have similar portions of eye to face ratio, which helps the persona. Faris starred in the remake of Hawn's film *Overboard*, which saw the main characters' genders switched. The aloof rich person was the man and the hardworking single parent was the mother in contrast to the original starring Hawn as a pompous heiress turned housewife.

This comparison between Hawn and Faris is interesting but Hawn and Schumer and Faris and Schumer also tells a lot about how comedy has and has not changed. All three are beautiful blonde white women. All three attempt in their comedy to make observations and subversions against preconceived notions about women and how they should act and what they should look like. Sometimes these messages have been misconstrued by their audiences. Hawn's portrayal of a dumb blonde caricature in *Laugh-In* made some viewers think of her as that kind of dumb blonde character. Most importantly, it can be gleaned when they speak about their craft, all three respect the words they say and the characters they portray. They take their tasks of portraying these characters in such a serious manner that it shows through their work. Is this what has allowed these women to be so successful? Hard work, determination, and respect for the craft lends to talent that not only draws audiences in but does not give executives the ability to pass on their projects.

Lily Tomlin compares to Amy Schumer in much the same way. Should that land as a surprise? Tomlin and Schumer both use their voices to make social commentary. Tomlin talks

about many important issues like war and social class. It may not be the first thing that crosses the audience's mind but Schumer also tackles hot topics. She has not only talked about the metoo movement but she has also been a strong advocate for stricter gun regulations. This topic became close to Schumer, as she discusses in her book, when a showing of *Trainwreck* was attacked by an armed gunman. Two women, Mayci Breaux and Jillian Johnson, were killed during the incident. Schumer has since spoken out against gun violence and has advocated for stricter gun laws alongside her cousin, Senator Chuck Schumer. She talks about the need for stricter gun laws in her book, her sketch television show, and her stand up. She uses humor in her sketch television show and stand up to point out how ridiculous America's gun laws are. Furthermore, Schumer and Tomlin both have used their ability to appeal to large audiences to be able to spread their commentary to those mainstream audiences. To be subversive, it is important to be able to reach mainstream audiences.

That is what she adds. Schumer stands, as all people do, on the shoulders of giants. Through her hard work, natural born talent of humor, determination, and crafting her work she has been able to reach mainstream audiences and stand out as the first woman on Forbes Top Ten Highest Paid Comedians list.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Discussion

Comedy is a widely popular artform whose power can be harnessed to subvert. The power to subvert in comedy is inherent in the artform as seen in the power dynamics of comedy (audience:joke teller) and the way people think and talk about comedy (a joke can kill). Many female comedians have used their comedy to subvert gender norms. One of the first major female star comedians, Lucille Ball, used her comedy show to subvert dialogue about not only women but race and interracial couples as well. Since Ball there have been many female comedians who use their comedic voices to challenge gender norms including Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller, Margaret Cho, and many more.

Recently, Amy Schumer became a very popular comedian. She is the first woman to ever be on Forbes Top Ten Highest Paid Comedians List. She has accomplished all of this by being funny and building upon the female comedians that came before her. In her comedy she uses many themes about gender and feminism to subvert.

Women are still fighting for and to keep certain rights. For example, many American states have loopholes that allow marital rape. Rape in the case of mistaken or false identity is also still legal. Women in some states also struggle to get basic gynecological care. Even when they do some have to fight against crowds of people screaming at them, calling them murderers when all they want to do is walk into a planned parenthood to receive a pap smear to make sure they do not have cervical cancer. When men are checked for prostate cancer no one screams at them.

Societal opinions about gender seem to be changing. Maybe now more than ever we need comedy to break down new gender stereotypes for not only women and men but also non binary individuals. Women of color also need more representation.

Amy Schumer allows for other women to succeed because she has not only gotten through the glass ceiling but she has lowered the ladder for others to climb up behind her. She does this in several ways. First is by challenging gender stereotypes. The second is by showing that she is not funny for a woman. She is just plain funny. Comedians like Schumer help to show that women are funny. Schumer also collaborates with other female comedians thus offering more opportunities for women.

Women will be able to find more opportunities once the gender stereotypes are broken down. In comedy, the stereotype that must be broken down is that women are not funny. In an article written for Forbes lamenting the lack of women on the years highest paid comedians list, before Schumer was on it, just that is argued. "Show-going audiences have been split evenly between men and women for decades, but comedian and "Queen of Mean" Lisa Lampanelli says female comics still have a hard time winning over new male crowds and finding acceptance in spaces full of male performers -- though that's finally turning around" (Feeney 2013). The writer continues to explain that no matter how funny a female comic is, if she cannot sell out large 4,000+ venues then she will not catch up to the men who can. To sell out those venues it is important to appeal to as many people as possible. Schumer showing people that she is funny as a person, not just a woman, helps not only her career but other women who want to appeal to big audiences. The internet also helps for comedians to get their work to larger audiences. Kathy Griffin, for example, is currently very active on YouTube where she can interact with and

introduce herself to new and old fans. Sarah Silverman has a popular show on Hulu, which displays how hilarious she is to people who subscribe to the platform.

Suggestions for Further Research

It does not seem as though Schumer will stop being a comedian any time soon. It would be interesting to study what she does in the future. All three of her movies have shown her as the young ingenue. She is currently pregnant. Will this new transition into motherhood change not only the roles she is given but the roles she writes for herself?

Additionally, further research on the audience would be helpful to understand how these methods of subversion come across to them. Do the opinions of the audience members shift in any way after viewing her comedy? Do some jokes come across as disparaging or self deprecating? This would be helpful to know because it would add to the literature on how effective comedy is as a rhetorical device.

Conclusion

This thematic analysis of Amy Schumer's movies supported evidence that Schumer employs comedic tactics and draws on the previous tactics used by female comedians to comment on gender issues. The analysis reveals how Schumer employs comedic tactics and draws on the previous tactics used by female comedians to comment on gender issues. Schumer expertly weaves in sneaky ways to subvert gender constructs.

Comedians like Lucille Ball and Margaret Cho used subversive techniques to help to break down gender constructs. They broke down normative structures of comedy and society that said women had to act a certain way. These comedians were able to be zany or not stereotypically beautiful. Audiences respond better to sneaky subversive techniques because of fear of changing the status quo. Thanks to those sneaky subversive techniques used by famous

comedians of the past, current female comedians can use more literal messages in their movies, like Amy Schumer's 'not so sneaky feminism' in her movies. Amy Schumer would not be where she is without those women of the past. She builds on them and adds new material and techniques to the profession. Schumer is able to make her audience laugh and break down many normative structures of comedy and society.

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