



universität
wien

DIPLOMARBEIT / DIPLOMA THESIS

Titel der Diplomarbeit / Title of the Diploma Thesis

“Convincing Humor – Engagement as Persuasion in
Political Comedy”

verfasst von / submitted by

Dominik Padrta

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Magister der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2020 / Vienna, 2020

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 190 344 313

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Lehramtsstudium UF Englisch UF Geschichte, Sozialkunde und
Politische Bildung

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Mag. Dr. Julia Lajta-Novak, M.A.

Statement against Plagiarism

I hereby confirm that this thesis is my own work and that all sources used in it were acknowledged. This thesis is further based on my own analysis and research and has not plagiarized from unmentioned works. All sources used for research on this thesis have been listed in the bibliography, be they books, articles, studies or other forms of academic text. Furthermore, any ideas that are not my own have been quoted according to academic norm and cited or paraphrased appropriately.

Signed:

Dominik Padrta

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Julia Lajta-Novak, MA, whose supervision of this thesis was essential. Without her guidance, support, and insight, it would have been impossible for me to write this thesis. Her aid in this matter is deeply appreciated and has enabled me to investigate a topic that was of both, personal interest to me and academic potential. For this reason, I wish to acknowledge her role as supervisor and the appreciation I have for the understanding she provided throughout this process.

Likewise, I would also like to thank Tamara Paier, Nina Wenzl, and Erik Pekny. You have supported me not only with your friendship, but without your interest and aid through proofreading, editing and moral support, writing this thesis would have been an arduous task. Your assistance in this endeavor too has been of great importance to me.

While the content of this thesis is largely possible due to the findings of the academic community, I am also grateful beyond compare for the people who were a part of this experience.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Humor and Persuasion.....	3
2.1. Counterarguing and Humor Relatedness	5
2.1.1. Audience Involvement	7
2.2. Discounting.....	8
2.3. Sleeper effect of comedy.....	11
2.4. The Entertainment-education and Elaboration Likelihood Model	13
2.5. Absorption	16
2.6. Audience Engagement	18
3. Methods of Performance Analysis.....	26
3.1. Performance analysis in theater studies.....	27
3.2. Performance analysis in live poetry	31
3.2.1. Body communication.....	31
3.2.2. Paralinguistic communication.....	35
4. Analysis of four video-recorded comedy performances.....	37
4.1. Lewis Black	40
4.2. Ali Wong.....	51
4.3. James Acaster	59
4.4. Guz Khan	66
5. Conclusion and Limitations.....	72
6. Bibliography.....	76
6.1. Primary sources	76
6.2. Secondary sources	76
7. Table of Figures.....	78
8. Zusammenfassung – Abstract.....	81

1. Introduction

Comedy has long been perceived as marked by humor that exclusively serves the purpose of entertainment. One form of comedic entertainment is stand-up comedy, which is a pleasant and prolific form of amusement today still. Therefore, it should not be surprising that comedy – and by extension humor itself – has become a subject of academic discourse. Often, researchers have focused on how pleasure can be derived from comedy or how humor works (see Martin 2007). However, more recently, humor has also been studied in its relationship to persuasion. This is true in particular for stand-up comedy. Prior research has identified comedy as a tool for social change (Chattoo 499) and how it raises awareness of sociopolitical issues of its day (Aarons and Mierowsky 159). Thus, there is an increasing interest within the field of humor research to investigate the persuasive impact humor has.

This thesis aims to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding the connection between humor and persuasion. In order to address this topic, this study poses the question how stand-up comedians whose work projects sociopolitical criticism engage their audience in order to persuade them. For the purpose of this thesis, political comedy is shorthand to refer to forms of comedy that deal with socio-politically charged topics, such as discrimination, inequality or political activities. This category, while broad, is meant to include comedic performances which represent the idea of comedy as a form of social critique.

In order to address the research question, this paper is divided into two parts. First, previous literature on humor, persuasion and audience engagement will be discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 additionally considers concepts from the field of performance analysis to provide the methodological framework for the subsequent analyses. By summarizing these essential insights into humor research, this thesis seeks to first establish a theoretical groundwork for the close analyses of political comedy performances, which will take place in the second part of this thesis

The aim of this thesis is to investigate which strategies stand-up comedians employ to successfully engage the audience and how this influences the persuasive process.

By further demystifying the relationship between persuasion and humor, this thesis aims to contribute to a theoretical framework for analyzing persuasion and humor.

2. Humor and Persuasion

The understanding that humor can be persuasive is widely accepted among the academic community analyzing comedy. A wide spectrum of research has been conducted in the field of humor research in the past, such as the works by Elise DeCamp (2015), Caty Borum Chattoo (2018) or Jennings, Bramlett, and Warner (2019) to list just a few. However, previous research so far has been fragmented and inconclusive concerning the extent of persuasiveness that humor, and by extension comedy, has to offer. Chattoo, for example, remarks that scholarly research is not unified, as various academic disciplines conduct studies that constitute humor research (499). Thus, humor research is multidisciplinary. For this reason, Chattoo advocates for the establishment of a common framework that would seek to combine insights from different fields. One attempt to consolidate the findings of several studies is a meta-study of research dedicated to the effect humor has on persuasion, which found a weak but significant correlation between these two elements (Walter et al. 343). This study by Nathan Walter, Michael J. Cody, Larry Zhiming Xu and Sheila T. Murphy found a statistical significance between humor and persuasion. However, the same meta-analysis discovered that individual studies that were investigated had conflicting results. While some studies supported the notion that humor strengthens persuasion, others contradicted this idea (Walter et al. 344). These inconsistent findings between studies indicate that the relationship between humor and persuasion is highly complex. The question arises then how researchers can work towards a consistent understanding of humor's impact on persuasion.

Walter et al. argue that any claim regarding the validity of observations for the entire spectrum of humor is simply too broad and that any attempt to generalize such observations is destined to produce inconsistent results (344). This argument rings true, as academic research often benefits from examining specific issues more closely and accounting for differences in context. Further, Walter et al. also found that researchers rarely made a distinction between the different genres of humor

(350). In combination, these two observations show that previous research was seemingly too broad in its extent to define the relationship between humor and persuasion. By focusing on individual genres, such as satire or political stand-up comedy, the apparent complexity of this relationship might receive more attention. If prior studies could not produce consistent results, the persuasiveness of humor might be dependent on the context of its application.

Another explanation why research so far was unable to reach a satisfiable conclusion is arguably the lack of an overarching framework (Walter et al. 345). In order to address this issue, researchers have attempted to connect insights gained about the nature of humor to its effect on persuasion. In order to analyze comedic performances for their persuasive impact, it is vital to first consider the commonly accepted concepts which are often brought up in humor research.

The claim that the primary purpose of stand-up comedy and arguably humor in general is entertainment should be neither controversial nor innovative. However, the interest within the academic community to analyze humor in terms of persuasion suggests a commonly perceived connection of those two. Prior research has often discussed the persuasive force of comedy in the context of social critique (Aarons and Mierowsky 159) or political participation (Lawrason 279). The reason for this is that comedians “give voice to shared usually tacit, social observations” (DeCamp 451). In short, the interest in humor research stems from the idea that humor can be used to persuade recipients of the validity of their political message to either reflect upon social issues or motivate audiences to involve themselves in political discussions. When scholars discuss humor that addresses social problems with the intent of changing the audience’s perception about them, they often refer to the term *charged humor* (Aarons and Mierowsky 160).

Rebecca Krefting, who coined the term, characterizes charged humor by how it challenges social inequality and cultural exclusion (2). In challenging these issues through humor, charged humor seeks to persuade audiences to change their attitude in regard to those issues, or to convince them of the importance of positive change. While Krefting’s definition suggests a progressive standpoint on behalf of the comedian, charged humor could arguably also be employed to persuade audiences

of conservative views. It is in the context of social change that many researches have analyzed the capacity of comedy to persuade its audience of social and civil issues (Chattoo 504). Krefting connects charged humor with expectations of social responsibility and cultural citizenship. In her own words, “[c]harged humor illumines flaws and disparities between the promises of citizenship and the fulfillment of those promises” (Krefting 18). What this means is that humor can be used to criticize how individuals are (mis)treated by a society to which they belong. In this manner, humor allows social criticism and draws attention to social issues, such as racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. While this theme is also present in the literature analyzing the potential that comedy has for positive, social change, there is a lack of evidence that this goal is also achieved (Chattoo 500). Thus, while there are several articles and studies investigating how humor can be used to result in social change, prior research seems limited in its capability to confirm or disprove actual impact. Instead, research is centered around the *potential* for social change, which in itself is based on humor’s potential for persuasion. However, while the question how beneficial humor can be to persuasion still evades a conclusive answer, there are several theories that suggest a correlation between humor and persuasion. In the following sections, theoretical models and concepts that support this view will be elaborated.

2.1. Counterarguing and Humor Relatedness

While charged humor as a concept explains how comedy can deal with sociopolitical issues, it does not clarify why humor would be more persuasive than traditional forms of rhetoric, such as political debates or advertising campaigns. Some scholars [Nabi et al. 2007; Young 2008] have posed that the persuasive capability of humor is founded in its ability to distract the audience from critically questioning the persuasive content of a humorous message. This hypothesis suggests that audience members would be so focused on following the narrative structure of a joke that they would not dedicate as much of their attention to the critical analysis of its meaning.

This effect becomes even more relevant when the message with which the speaker wants to persuade is not aligned with the personal beliefs and values of the recipient.

Generally, incongruencies between the individual's opinion and the message is what scholars have come to refer to as *counterarguing* (Boukes et al. 725). Usually, counterarguing thwarts persuasion, as the recipient of the message is able to respond to the attempt by producing an opposing argument. For example, if a person attempts to persuade another that climate change is one of the most pressing issues of the 21st century and the other person disagrees with this view, they are more likely to respond to the attempted persuasion by formulating counterarguments, such as listing other issues they believe to be more important. In this way, the recipient of the message rejects the attempted persuasion by counterarguing. The idea that comedy helps overcome counterarguing is well-supported within humor research literature. Researchers Robin L. Nabi, Emily Moyer-Gusé and Sahara Byrne confirm that counterargument disruption was one of the effects evidenced by their studies (50). Similarly, another study found that attempts made by the audience to comprehend a humorous message resulted in a reduction of cognitive resources, which would then be unavailable for closer examination of the validity of the social criticism presented, resulting in a higher chance of successful persuasion (Boukes et al. 727-728). However, as with many other aspects of humor research, it appears that the full ramifications of this subject have yet to be assessed. A different study, for example, concluded that counterarguing was primarily reduced by *humor relatedness* (Walter et al. 347). This finding suggests that humor needs to be related to the argument of which the comedian intends to persuade the audience, else comedy confuses or distracts the audience from the persuasive content. Humor relatedness means both, the humor of the joke and the assertion, must be about the same topic. For example, a joke that deals with the topic of climate change could make fun of climate change denial for it to enhance persuasiveness. In this example, the comedian creates humor by undermining the opposing viewpoint. More importantly, counterarguing is even stronger in highly involved individuals if humor relatedness is low, which is counterproductive to the persuasive intent (Walter et al. 348). This means that people who are personally affected by or involved with the topic presented in the humorous message are more likely to counterargue unless the humor deals with the topic directly. In contrast, highly related humor was proven to be more persuasive for involved individuals (Walter et al. 343).

2.1.1. Audience Involvement

An important variable for humor relatedness is audience involvement. Walter et al. briefly define audience involvement as “the perceived relevancy and importance of the issue” (347-348). The idea is that an individual who is personally invested in a topic is more likely to pay attention when it is discussed and also more likely to have a prior opinion on the subject. This greatly influences how an audience member then perceives the criticism in the form of a humorous message and how likely it is that they will be invested in the persuasive argument behind it. If an audience’s involvement is low, research has shown that humor relatedness is less significant (Walter et al. 348). Thus, humor relatedness is more important for engaging an involved audience while it will not enhance engagement for individuals with low involvement. For example, humor that deals with gender inequality will be more effective at engaging individuals who are affected by it.

However, if audience involvement is high, humor can have different effects. As another study has shown, individuals without background knowledge responded in a similar manner to each other to questions about the humorousness of satirical content, whereas those with prior information would assess it based on personal beliefs, thus their answers would differ (Boukes et al. 739). Since audience involvement is most likely linked to preexisting background knowledge, it makes sense to assume that highly involved people are more susceptible to humor if the message is in line with their previously established beliefs. Conversely, what these findings also seem to suggest is that humorous messages can elicit counterarguing if the audience is highly involved and opposed to the comedian’s message. Research has further shown that the perceived appropriateness of criticism is another element that influences how audiences respond to it (Boukes et al 740). Perceived appropriateness means that the audience must accept the criticism as appropriate. This is case when comedians transgress social taboos in their performance, such as death and sexuality (Boukes et al. 740). Simply put, if the criticism is more offensive than the criticized behavior, audiences are less likely to find the message humorous or persuasive, even if the criticism would otherwise be in line with their previously held beliefs. A possible explanation for this correlation might be that inappropriate criticism is seen as unrelated. This is supported by the findings of Walter et al., who

argue that humor relatedness is more significant than audience involvement, due to the influence relatedness has on counterarguing (362). An example might help to illustrate how these aspects relate to each other. As was mentioned in the previous Chapter on humor relatedness (2.1.), a joke about climate change that derives humor from ridiculing climate change denial would be an example of related humor as the humor is in line with the intention to persuade the audience of the reality of climate change. A lowly-involved audience member, who is not interested in the topic of climate change in general, might find appeal merely in the humorous way the topic is presented. Highly involved individuals in this example could be climate activists or climate change deniers. The joke would engage climate activists, whose previous attitude towards the topic is in line with the underlying message of the joke, while it would likely fail to engage climate change deniers. However, even the audience members who share the attitude towards climate change that the joke promotes could find the joke inappropriate if the comedian transgresses social boundaries through the use of offensive language and reject the message. Despite the fact humor relatedness reduces counterarguing, the inappropriateness of the joke offsets that effect.

2.2. Discounting

As was stated before, the significance humor has for successful persuasion has been disputed among scholars. While the effects humor can have on message processing by the audience suggest that humor enhances persuasion, this conclusion is not fully supported within the literature (Nabi et al 33). While there have been different explanations for the disagreement among scholars, one of the more promising explanations that has arisen from this discussion is the concept of discounting. Simply put, (message) discounting describes the act of disregarding a message in a humorous setting by the audience. Discounting occurs because audience members identify the presented information as part of a joke and thus do not consider it a valuable argument in their opinion formation process (Nabi et al. 33). This concept is supported in a study conducted by Boukes et al., who argue that the discounting mechanism occurs because information presented as part of a humorous message is not perceived as informational and credible as if it were presented in a non-humorous

context (725). Therefore, the concept of discounting thus provides a valuable asset for analyzing the processing of humorous messages and, by extension, the persuasiveness of arguments made by comedians.

Not only does a deeper understanding of this mechanism provide new insight into the nature of humor and its effect on persuasion, it can also help make sense of some of the contradictory findings made by prior studies. In particular, the results of the meta-analysis conducted by Walter et al., which found a weak significance of humor for persuasion, can be seen in a new light. By taking into consideration that humor not only amplifies but simultaneously discounts any attempt to persuade, it becomes clear that the correlation between humor and persuasiveness cannot be easily represented statistically. Instead, the impact humor has on information processing and attitude formation must be analyzed with respect to several aspects, in order to encompass the conflicting effects humor has on message processing. For this reason, Nabi et al., whose research into the effects of humor have coined the term message discounting, identify the following three areas as most significant to explain how humor can benefit or hinder persuasion:

- 1) Processing motivation
 - 2) Counterargument disruption
 - 3) Message discounting
- (Nabi et al. 30).

While the concepts of counterarguing and discounting have already been defined above, processing motivation requires some more definition. The term processing motivation is used to refer to the audience's motivation to receive the message. Since humor is entertaining, audiences will be more likely to pay attention to humorous messages as they hope to be entertained by them. For this reason, humor is said to create interest and retain the audience's concentration.

The term counterargument disruption that is used here describes humor's ability to prevent counterarguing. Since humor motivates the audience to pay attention to the joke and follow its delivery, it disrupts potential counterarguments.

As regards message discounting, it cannot be overstated how significant the acknowledgement of the discounting mechanism is for humor research. Not only does the concept of discounting and its effects on persuasion in comedy provide further areas of investigation for future researchers but, due to its negative effect on persuasion, it is at least partially the reason why the precise relationship between humor and persuasion has eluded scholars in the past. Humor does not only enhance persuasion; it also presents an obstacle for persuasive arguments to be seriously considered by the audience (Nabi et al. 30).

Thus, discounting hints at a core issue that comedians who intend to convey a persuasive argument must face: The funnier a message is, the more likely it is to be discounted by the audience. This view is supported by the research as well. The study by Nabi et al., for example, has shown that while humor correlates with greater processing depth and a decrease in counterarguing, it is also associated with higher discounting (40). Likewise, another study found that lighter forms of comedy might be perceived as funnier than more serious approaches, but that their persuasiveness suffers more from discounting as well (Boukes et al. 725). For this reason, political comedians must find a balance between the seriousness of their arguments and the entertainment their comedy performances provide to the audience. Politicians seem to face a similar issue, as political messages that made use of humor resulted in an increase in counterarguing due to discounting of the humorous element (Boukes et al. 725). Thus, discounting must be seen as a critical element of the discourse surrounding the persuasiveness of humor, as it can have a detrimental effect on the persuasiveness of the message and lead to greater counterarguing.

The question then becomes how comedians can counteract message discounting in the presentation of their messages. Research suggests that humor's effect on message processing and counterargument disruption must be weighed against the effect message discounting has (Nabi et al. 50). Boukes et al. come to a similar conclusion: "To be effective, satirists should [...] not provide too many discounting cues but make clear that though they bring their message in the form of a joke, they are serious about the content" (Boukes et al. 739). While Boukes et al. specifically refer to satirists, the same advice should be heeded by any comedian who wishes to

not only entertain but also persuade their audience. Therefore, awareness of the concept of discounting is also valuable for those participating in political comedy, even more so if their intention is to contribute to long-lasting attitude change among their audience.

However, there is one more important feature of the discounting mechanism that prior research has discovered. Most notably, discounting appears to mainly affect the *immediate* persuasive effect of a humorous message (Nabi et al. 50). This means that the discounting process occurs at the moment the message is presented to the recipient, i.e. during a comedic performance. Yet, the same study conducted by Nabi et al. also observed a significant change in attitude after a short amount of time (49). This speaks to the assumption that discounting may be more prominent immediately at the moment of exposure to the message but decreases in prominence as time progresses. One hypothesis suggests that the reason for this development is the dissociation between the persuasive content of the message and the origin of the information (Nabi et al. 42). Thus, humor can be said to have an increase in its persuasiveness over time that is linked to the recipients separating the message from the humorous context. Since greater processing motivation makes humorous messages more memorable, humor encourages recipients to revisit the message again over time, thus increasing the persuasive effect (Nabi et al. 49). This effect has been commented on before in the literature on humor research and has been dubbed the *sleeper effect*.

2.3. Sleeper effect of comedy

This thesis would be incomplete without acknowledging the debate surrounding a potential sleeper effect of comedy. Its basic concept appears to be straightforward at first glance. To put it simply, sleeper effect theory hypothesizes that comedic messages are persuasive over time, rather than immediately. The reason for this assumption has been laid out in the previous paragraph, which deals with the conditions under which humor seems to become more persuasive over time due to its memorable nature. Nabi et al. speculate that this process may not depend on dissociation of the source of a message after all but could also be a sign of

continuous reflection over the message's informational content (49). While this premise sounds fruitful for academic research, once again, the literature on humor does not seem to be conclusive about its actuality. While the aforementioned study by Nabi et al. offers a convincing argument about how humor can affect message processing, other researches seem to have been unable to confirm it. In particular, the meta-analysis conducted by Walter et al. has not been able to confirm the hypothesis that humorous messages would appear more effective when analyzing the significance time had in relation test subject attitude (343). However, the same study noted that "[r]egretfully, all the studies that measured the effects of humor on behavioral intent only measured it at immediate posttest [...]" (Walter et al. 343). While the study was thus unable to confirm the sleeper effect of comedy, it appears that this result might be linked to the way prior studies on humor and persuasion have been conducted. Arguably, it needs more studies such as those conducted by Nabi et al., which test the change in attitude test subjects display not only immediately after being exposed to the humorous message, but also after some time has passed. In this manner, other researchers could confirm the statement that "if attitude change is not evidenced immediately, conditions are ripe for humorous messages to evidence a sleeper effect" (Nabi et al. 41).

The sleeper effect describes the phenomenon when a persuasive message is received and processed by the audience but not considered useful information for serious discourse due to the discounting mechanism. Under these circumstances, the sleeper effect occurs as discounting diminishes over time, either through reflection on the part of the message recipient, or because of dissociation of the persuasive message from the discounting cue. However, it is important to note that these observations about a potential sleeper effect are based on a very limited amount of research. As inconclusive as the general literature on the persuasiveness of humor appears to be, there seems to be support for further research of the sleeper effect specifically (see Chattoo 514; Nabi et al 49).

2.4. The Entertainment-education and Elaboration Likelihood Model

The assumption that comedy functions as mechanism that helps overcome counterarguing is linked to the findings of entertainment-education theory. Michael Slater and Donna Rouner, whose work in this field is highly influential, suggest that “the processing of narratives, to a great extent, precludes cognitive resistance or counterarguing to persuasive content in the narratives” (174). This statement lies at the foundation of the entertainment-education and elaboration likelihood model (EELM). This model is based on the older elaboration likelihood model, which proved to be too limited for the purposes of entertainment education research (Slater and Rouner 174). The purpose of these models is to help researchers understand how entertaining and educating messages are processed by recipients. Whereas the original model offered insight into how people processed persuasive information, the EELM expands this model by taking into consideration how a narrative with persuasive content might be processed differently from a traditionally persuasive message (Slater and Rouner 175). In the context of humor research, the EELM offers a conceptual model that helps understand how comedy can decrease counterarguing and thus shows potential for persuasion that a political message otherwise would not have. For this reason, entertainment-education theory has been referred to in prior research on the persuasiveness of humor (cf. Nabi et al. 33). For humor research, it makes sense to consider jokes as narratives in their own right. Jokes have a persuasive message and these messages are often part of a larger narrative which the comedian tells their audience in order to setup the punchline.

Humor affects how the audience processes the information presented to it in the form of a joke. Entertainment-education theory helps understand how these messages are received by an audience that may hold views incompatible with them (Slater and Rouner 174). The theory asserts that audience members are more likely to pay attention to a comedic performance since they are most likely invested in the story the comedian is telling. By focusing on the narrative, the audience opens itself to the persuasive content of a humorous message. This increased attention to the message by the audience leads to an increase in processing motivation, resulting in deeper processing (Nabi et al. 49; Slater and Rouner 175). Therefore, humor is capable of attracting the audience’s attention and keeping it invested in the message the

comedian tries to convey. However, this is not the only effect humor can have on how a persuasive message is received by the audience. In reference to the findings of their study, Nabi et al. state that:

“ it appears that humor has numerous implications for message processing: enhancing source liking (and credibility) and argument strength, increasing processing motivation and minimizing bias, and also increasing discounting the message as simply a joke.” (Nabi et al. 49)

Thus, while humor engages the audience in a way that encourages deeper processing of the persuasive message, this impact is offset by an increase in discounting, which – as was mentioned before – may very well be the main detrimental effect humor has on persuasion.

Increasing likability and subsequently credibility through humor can also affect a narrative's success of persuasion. Slater and Rouner suggest that the audience may be more likely to accept a temporary change of values that stands in conflict with previously held beliefs, as long as the audience is sympathetic to the development of the character in the narrative (177). In a comedy context, this seems to suggest that audience members may be more susceptible to having their beliefs challenged if they can sympathize with the main character of a joke's narrative. Since anything can be the subject of a joke, there is not necessarily a main character in the same sense as in other narratives. Instead, the person whose perspective the audience shares is the comedian. For this reason, sympathy for the comedian might have the same effect on the audience as sympathy for the character in a narrative has. While this hypothesis requires further research that investigates the response of audience members with opposing views to the comic, it appears likely when considering the effect humor has on likeability and credibility (cf. Nabi et al. 42; Walter et al. 344). These findings indicate that humor helps establish the comedian as a trusted source of information, which further impacts the persuasiveness of comedy. It is possible that this too supports the perception of the comedian as sympathetic since likeability and credibility are also mutually supportive if not reinforcing each other (Nabi et al. 32).

However, there is also another aspect for both comedians and scholars in the field of humor research to consider. Since the argument of entertainment-education theory is that the persuasive content of a humorous message is hidden behind the narrative of the joke, it is important that the comedian is not too overt in their presentation of that message. The effect would be that the audience becomes aware of and resists the attempt of persuasion. This reaction stems from the perception of the comedian as moralizing, which stands in contrast to the audience's expectation to be entertained (DeCamp 462). Thus, in order to incorporate a persuasive message into a humorous one, the narrative needs to be in the foreground of the experience. This is supported by entertainment-education literature- Slater and Rouner concisely state that "[i]f the persuasive content and intent is so obvious as to become more salient during processing than the narrative itself, the narrative may fail and so should the persuasive effort" (175). That is not to say that the audience needs to be completely oblivious to the attempted persuasion, but merely that the narrative should be the center of attention (Slater and Rouner 175). This foregrounding of the narrative might be why the primary effect of comedy must be to entertain, else the persuasive message becomes too apparent and fails.

Deep message processing has not only been linked to more attention and the effect it has on memorability, but also to critical examination of the received information (Nabi et al. 32). Despite the fact that counterarguing is also increased by deeper processing of the message, it appears that the audience's desire to follow the narrative takes center stage and disrupts critical examination (Nabi et al. 33). This can be linked to the idea that humor helps disrupt counterarguing, as well as the notion that humor distracts the audience from critical evaluation, as outlined in the section above. Thus, entertainment-education literature provides valuable insight into how humor generates more attention among the audience yet makes the message less susceptible to counterarguing (Nabi et al. 40).

Finally, entertainment-education theory also sheds a light on an area that so far has been scarcely investigated by the academic community – audience values and motivation. Since audience members are not only the target of persuasion but also willing participants in comedic events, it is important that their presence must be

reflected by the research as well. In this regard, entertainment-education research seems to be the most promising field for further inquiry (Slater and Rouner 177). Audience values and motivation are important to consider due to how they affect persuasion. As this section outlined, audiences respond differently to political messages based on their views. Thus, the results of research into humor's effect on persuasion will vary based on audience values. For this reason, interviews with audience members can provide researchers with further insight into why humor may be more effective in some scenarios than in others. Unfortunately, this thesis offers no alternative in this regard since it investigates video-recordings of comedy performances, which offer less insight into the beliefs of audiences.

2.5. Absorption

One aspect that is relevant for persuasion is engagement. Without gaining the attention of the target audience, it is hardly possible for the comedian successfully persuade it. As the theories in the previous Chapters of this thesis suggest, humor is perhaps uniquely qualified in attracting attention and engaging the audience in this manner. In the literature on entertainment-education, this quality is often referred to as *absorption*. Absorption has been defined as "intensity of involvement" (Slater and Rouner 179). What Slater and Rouner refer to as involvement here is not the same audience involvement discussed in Chapter 2.1.1. of this thesis. The term audience involvement describes the personal relevancy of the discussed topic for the individual audience member. Absorption, in contrast, is the involvement of the audience in the performance. In the context of comedy, absorption means that the audience is focusing on the performance and processes the message of the comedian. Thus, when investigating how political comedy engages the audience, the question is how political comedy enables its audience to be absorbed in the narrative. This interchangeability between the terms 'engagement' and 'absorption' is also reflected in entertainment-education theory (Slater and Rouner 179).

The most important quality that absorption adds to the discussion around persuasion is how it relates to counterarguing. When absorbed in a narrative, people are less motivated to produce counterarguments, which in turn makes them amenable to differing opinions (Boukes et al. 727). Slater and Rouner even go so far as to argue

that “absorption and counterarguing are fundamentally incompatible” (180). Thus, an audience that is absorbed in the narrative cannot, at the same time, argue against the persuasive message. This links back to the observation made in entertainment-education research that audience members tend to focus on the narrative, rather than examining the arguments presented within it more closely. In this sense, absorption fulfills a similar function as suspension of disbelief does in literature (Slater and Rouner 179-180). Due to the audience’s motivation to be entertained, absorption overcomes the obstacle presented by counterarguing. Hence, through absorption, comedy is able to potentially persuade an individual who would otherwise be opposed to the persuasive message based on prior attitude and beliefs (Slater and Rouner 180).

Another aspect of absorption is how it relates to identification. Identification is defined as a sense of similarity with a character within a narrative and is dependent on absorption (Slater and Rouner 178). If absorption, as entertainment-education researchers suggest, can lead to identification with a character, there is a likelihood that it can have a similar effect in a comedy context. Since comedians often act as storytellers who apparently give an account of by their own experience, it is not unreasonable to believe that this allows the audience to develop a sense of similarity with the comedian.¹ This is particularly important in the context of comics who are part of a marginalized group. Assuming that absorption can lead to identification in this manner, comedy offers the possibility to generate understanding and empathy between people from different social groups. At the very least, absorption is accepted to have a positive effect on humorous messages, especially since it motivates people to focus on messages they perceive as funny (Boukes et al. 726). Identification and absorption help shed light on the question how humor benefits persuasion. By creating a narrative, comedians can engage the audience in a way that reduces counterarguing and supports their persuasive message. In this manner, they should have a persuasive effect on the audience (Slater and Rouner 180).

¹ Regardless of how authentic a comedy performance may be, comedians always inhabit an on-stage persona during their performances. P. David Marshall and Kim Barbour describe the modern concept of persona as “a reinforced form of performativity that can produce a professional identity, a political identity, or an entertaining identity for various individuals to inhabit” (5). Thus, a comedian’s persona is a construction of identity for the comedic performance which is distinct from the comedian’s private self.

An example of how absorption influences attitude among the audience can be found in a study investigating the persuasive effect of satire (Boukes et al. 2015). In this study, the two main processes which affected attitude in opposite ways were perceived funniness and absorption (Boukes et al. 739). Perceived funniness led to an increase in counterarguing due to discounting, while absorption reduced counterarguing. The study found that attitude towards the satirized target was affected by counterarguing because through close examination of the satire “less negative and more positive thoughts towards the *message target* are evoked” (Boukes et al. 739; original emphasis). A study by Mark Boukes, Hajo G. Boomgaarden, Marjolein Moorman and Claes H. de Vreese further found that not every person was affected equally by these two processes due to background knowledge and personal preferences of the audience (739).

The finding that humor affects audience attitude differently based on individual preferences and knowledge, as well as the fact that this study specifically only investigated satire as a form of humor, shows a need for further research in this area. While the role of mechanisms such as absorption has been theorized by the literature on entertainment-education and humor research, there are still gaps in the research regarding the conditions under which they help comedians successfully persuade audiences (Boukes et al. 740). Boukes et al. conclude with a remark on how these opposing processes can help make sense of the contradictory findings of different studies (741).

2.6. Audience Engagement

As the previous segment of this thesis has established, there are some theoretical arguments within humor research literature that support the view that humor can have a beneficial impact on persuasion. This is particularly of interest when this persuasive message is then used to evoke and criticize societal issues. As the research shows, an essential argument for humor’s effect on persuasion is its narrative function, which enables the audience to be absorbed. The question arises which techniques comedians employ to engage the audience in such a manner that

absorption takes place. Unfortunately, while the theory surrounding humor is quite extensive, this key area of research appears to have been largely neglected by prior scholars. Thus, analyzing a comedy performance requires additional tools which so far have not been established within this field.

A noteworthy exception to this is a study conducted by Elise DeCamp, which focuses on performance strategies deployed by comedians who dealt with racially charged humor (449-450). Unlike other studies which have focused on theories and the response of test subjects in a testing environment, this study provides significant insight into the techniques deployed by the observed comedians. DeCamp's analysis further reinforces the position that humor is extraordinary in its persuasive effect. She finds that [...] [t]he analysis of these data reveals how the subtlety and art of stand-up performance strategies combine with the pleasurable medium of humor to lay the foundation for advancing social critiques" (DeCamp 449). Thus, this research approaches humor in its role as a medium of social change. Furthermore, DeCamp's study provides a solid academic methodology of how comedy performances can be analyzed. By using laughter as an indicator of audience response and performing interviews with both, comedians and audience members, this study draws attention to the effectiveness and nature of the strategies observed (DeCamp 450). Thus, this research offers not just an approach to analyzing comedic performances in general, but its results also help categorize the techniques employed by comedians.

One of the most important findings of DeCamp pertains to the significance of likability and relatability of comedians (DeCamp 450). This is in line with the theoretical concepts outlined above. As was mentioned, humor's capacity to make its source more likeable is well documented. Similarly, entertainment-education points to identification as a powerful tool to keep an audience engaged in a narrative. Thus, since most techniques discussed in this study relate to relatability and likability, it is likely that audiences are successfully engaged by humor when the comedian creates a sense of likability and relatability through the performance strategies described by DeCamp. DeCamp's study supports this hypothesis by highlighting the importance of rapport between the performance and the audience (450). Only by first establishing this link to the audience are comedians able to share their observations and criticism

in a way that benefits from humor's capacity for persuasion. In other words, humor can only be persuasive as long as the techniques employed by the comedian engage the audience in a way that fosters relatability and likability. This is especially true for the beginning of a performance.

In order to successfully engage the audience, the opening needs to establish the comedian as competent and credible (DeCamp 450). DeCamp identifies two of the ways in which this is accomplished as the use of self-deprecating humor and a "interweaving of non-tendentious and tendentious material" (450-451). This helps to make the performer more relatable, as self-deprecation demonstrates a comedian's ability to 'take a joke'. By starting off with less controversial material, performers can further establish a connection to the audience before any persuasive attempt is made. In her observation of comedy performances dealing with racially charged humor, DeCamp determined the following four features which comedians must display in order to build this connection:

1. ability to construct and tell a joke
 2. control of the room through ongoing acknowledgment of the audience
 3. human vulnerability/experiential relatability that bonds them with the audience into a transitory community
 4. non-hostile, yet earnest intent
- (DeCamp 451)

The comedian's competence to entertain the audience is in line with the primary purpose of comedy: entertainment. This observation suggests that the audience requires a display of this competence in order to become absorbed in the performance. Similarly, audience engagement is dependent on interaction with the audience. Comedians often display awareness of their audience by adapting their material to it (DeCamp 449). Only by considering the audiences' perspective can a performer establish the sense of community that is essential for comedy to be engaging. Finally, in order for comedy to be persuasive, the comedian needs to display sincerity about the content of the persuasive message. This need for authenticity can be explained by the effect a lack of straightforwardness might have on discounting. If the audience perceives the performance to be merely funny and overlooks the subtext, it is more likely to discount the persuasive message. The reason why DeCamp specifies that humor has to be non-hostile is that people are

less likely to respond positively (i.e. with laughter) to a joke if they feel defensive about its content (DeCamp 464). Humor needs to be entertaining in order to allow absorption to take effect. DeCamp links this also to the benign violation theory by Peter McGraw, which poses that comedy is less likely to be successful if it is perceived as overtly hostile (464). However, these four points seem more important in a setting where the audience is unfamiliar with the performing comedian, such as an open mic performance. In this scenario, each comedian's set is often limited to a short time span. A set is defined as "the complete stage performance from initial to closing 'bits' of comedy material" (DeCamp 451). This open mic setting stands in contrast to that of more famous comedians, who often attract a large audience and hold longer performances. In those cases, the familiarity with the performer and their type of humor is most likely the reason why the audience chooses to attend the performance in the first place. Thus, their professional competence is usually already established before the actual event. Furthermore, in analyses that do not focus on an entire comedic set but merely a part of it, it is possible that this first step to establishing a connection to the audience will not be included. While the analysis in Chapter 4 of this thesis does not include openings, for example, these findings are still important for the purpose of this thesis as they shed light on how comedians engage their audience. This is especially true for the four features mentioned above which can also be present later on in a performance.

DeCamp further identifies five techniques for engaging audiences that, as she mentions, came up frequently during her interviews with both, performers and audience members:

1. honesty/truth of experience
2. self-deprecation and personal vulnerability
3. acknowledgment of the audience (in terms of regional location, different demographics, and shifting mood/thoughts)
4. control of the room/crowd (through competence and acknowledgment)
5. creatively subtle, non-hostile social commentary
(DeCamp 453)

These techniques serve to illustrate how comedians succeed in having their audience be absorbed in their performance, which in turn creates the framework in which social critique and persuasion can take place. They are by no means coincidental. Both, performers and audience alike, are aware of the effect they have

on the reception of the humorous message (DeCamp 453). The intended consequence of applying these techniques is to make the comedian either relatable or likeable. Likeability, for example, could be diminished if the audience perceives the social commentary to be too overt or hostile. Similarly, by appearing authentic and acknowledging the audience, relatability is established between the audience and the performer. DeCamp finds that “[a]cknowledgement, in whatever forms it takes, is a powerful tool in winning the favor of an audience” (460). It allows audience members to empathize with the comedian and step into their shoes. By accepting the comedian’s perspective and opinion, then, a persuasive message can be relayed in a subtle manner.

This observation gives rise to the notion that humor’s capacity for persuasion is directly linked to the comedian’s ability to maintain relatability. From the moment a set starts, comedians seek to build a connection and rapport with the audience (DeCamp 454). One way in which this is achieved is through creating a sense of similarity and familiarity. DeCamp found that acknowledging the audience in some manner is essential for gaining the audience’s trust (454). This proves to the audience that the comedian is aware of the audience’s situation and that their life experience is similar. By winning over the audience early on and establishing this shared community, the comedian is then able to express criticism without worrying that the audience is going to oppose it immediately. From a theoretical standpoint, through acceptance of previously established shared observations about the world the audience becomes absorbed in the comedian’s narrative and less likely to counterargue against tendentious comments later on in the performance. For this reason, the aforementioned switching between controversial and non-controversial themes is necessary. Furthermore, this realization shows that even if a comedic performance is meant to be educational and contains a message, the comedian needs to win over the audience first. Acknowledgment of the situation also grounds the comedian in reality, making it clear to the audience that the comments made by the performer are honest (DeCamp 454-455). This is particularly important when there is an obvious moment of awkwardness. DeCamp compares this process to addressing “the elephant in the room” and gives an example of how one comedian commented on his status as a black man in front of a predominantly white audience,

which he used to acknowledge and relieve the racial tension (455). As a result of pointing out the reason for the awkwardness, the comedian again establishes a shared experience between them and the audience. The audience can then also stop worrying about it, which further benefits absorption.

Just as relatability, likability too is critical for humor's impact on persuasion. As mentioned above, likability has been linked to increased credibility (Nabi et al. 32). Therefore, it is meaningful to consider which strategies enhance the performer's likability. In her analysis of performance strategies, DeCamp concludes that:

Without likability established through some combination of monitoring tension/energy, acknowledgment of (possible) audience reactions, persona relatability and credibility, and use of equalizing and humanizing self-deprecation, a stand-up comedian's set can rapidly lose the audience (457).

Monitoring the energy of the audience is sometime referred to as "reading the crowd" (DeCamp 455). If a particular set of jokes is not working due to the difference in perspective between the audience and the comedian, and thus fails to entertain, it can have a negative effect on the performance as a whole. As a result, comedians often need to adapt their material in the moment, when they recognize that the atmosphere in the room or the audience's perspective is not in line with their message (DeCamp 455-456).

For this purpose, comedians can employ a number of techniques that influence how their message is received by the audience. DeCamp notes that "[w]hether or not comedians come with the additional goal of imparting a social or political message, they often employ at least one of these approaches to keep the audience laughing, interested and open to the material" (458-459). One such technique used by comedians is *footing*. Footing can be described as "the position/persona [...] [taken] up [by comedians] with respect to the audience in order to modify how their utterances were being received" (DeCamp 459). This tool allows comedians to acknowledge the situation and react to a shift in atmosphere. An example of where this technique is successfully used to keep the audience on the comedian's side is when a joke does not successfully elicit the desired response from the audience, i.e. laughing. In such a scenario, the comedian can use a shift in footing to signal the audience that they too are aware of the joke's failure. In one instance observed by

DeCamp, the comedian in question turned away from the audience and pretended to give himself a short pep talk (459). By using this technique, the comedian successfully acknowledged the situation at hand and counteracts the tension built from unfulfilled expectations. Additionally, footing provides the opportunity to benefit from the joke's failure by eliciting laughter through the incongruity between giving oneself a private motivational speech and speaking into the microphone on stage (DeCamp 460). This use of footing reinforces the perception of the comedian as authentic and self-aware.

Another method that DeCamp points out in her analysis is the use of "instant character" (460). This technique is marked by the comedian stepping into a different character than their regular on-stage persona. This transition is signaled to the audience to indicate that this is a different perspective than the one the comedian's persona would inhabit and is "achieved through tone of voice, posture or facial expression" (Double 393). By making use of instant character, the comedian can bring up opposing arguments so they can be ridiculed or dismantled. It can also serve as a criticizing voice that demonstrates to the audience that the comedian is aware of the reaction their previous statement might provoke (DeCamp 460). In this manner, instant characters once again acknowledge the audience by allowing the comedian to voice a compelling criticism and provides the opportunity to issue a rebuttal of that criticism. Furthermore, in a scenario where the comedian expects that a joke might cause discomfort among the audience, instant character can allow the performer to assure the validity of that discomfort and prevent a sense of hostility which would critically undermine the purpose of the joke, be it entertainment or persuasion (DeCamp 464-465). Acknowledging audience discomfort is important in general, if a comedian wishes the audience to be able to laugh about their jokes. Since people are also part of a social group which can be on the receiving end of the punchline, it is possible that they feel unfairly attacked and, in response, defensive about a joke. Particularly when the criticism of their group presents an uncomfortable truth, acknowledging their potential discomfort can be a useful strategy to help them disidentify and laugh about the joke regardless (DeCamp 464).

As Oliver Double, the originator of the term, suggests, instant character not only helps with counteracting a negative response to the performance but also demonstrates a professional mastery of the situation (402). Finally, instant character can be a meaningful tool to address an issue from more than one perspective. With the audience members being most likely part of different cultural communities, it is possible that the comedian's life experience is more closely aligned with one of them. Instant characters allow comedians to reach out to individuals with a dissimilar cultural knowledge, who would otherwise feel alienated by a lack of commonality (DeCamp 460-461). Thereby, comedians are not only able to give voice to an outside perspective of an issue they wish to bring to the audience's attention, but they once again demonstrate their awareness of the diversity among their audience and the need to establish a common set of knowledge.

As mentioned in Chapter 2.4., humor's effect on persuasion requires comedians to take a different approach than traditional forms of persuasion. For this reason, serious remarks about social issues are often interwoven with less significant jokes (DeCamp 461). In this manner, comedians instinctively understand that tendentious material needs to be presented in a way that does not make the persuasion attempt obvious to the audience. In the context of entertainment-education theory, this less socio-politically charged material allows the audience to become absorbed and be open to the political message. This view is supported by the observations made by DeCamp, which confirm the importance of indirectness and subtlety to sustain audience openness (461-462). The necessity of humor can further be explained with its relevance to counterarguing. Since entertainment-education finds that audiences are less motivated to counterargue while absorbed in a narrative, being apparent with the communicative intention would doubtlessly lead to an increase in counterarguing. Thus, comedians tend not to be too overt in their approach to performing political humor in order to avoid the appearance of lecturing the audience (DeCamp 462). Since the audience expectation for a comedy performance is to be entertained, audience members could reasonably be expected to be disappointed by the performance's failure to conform to their expectations. Therefore, it is probable that a performance that puts persuasion in the foreground is less engaging and is ultimately prone to failing to persuade the audience.

Audience motivation represents a complex variable which needs to be accounted for by both, comedians and scholars in the field of humor research. Subtlety also proves to be a valuable tool for comedians who merely wish to imply a certain meaning but keep the meaning ambiguous. This can have a positive influence on persuasion, as the comedian avoids any direct accusation, which ensures that their humor will not be perceived as hostile by the audience. In this manner, comedians can comment on political issues by recontextualizing them in a different context. For example, DeCamp comments on one performance in which a black comedian referenced the infamous Ku Klux Klan by discussing how the meaning of three K's can shift based on context. (465). However, it is important that being ambiguous can also negatively impact persuasion as well. As a different study found, "ambiguous humor often impedes persuasion, as it leaves much more room for selective perception and individual interpretation" (Walter et al. 363). Importantly, this finding relates to satirical/ironic humor, which is more ambiguous than merely implying the correct meaning of a joke, as is the case in DeCamp's study. The authors of that study similarly conclude that this relationship with ambiguity might be indicative of a difference in genre between satire and other types of humor (Walter et al. 363).

3. Methods of Performance Analysis

As the previous section on audience engagement briefly mentioned, the relationship between audience engagement, humor and persuasion has scarcely been investigated in an academic context, resulting in a lack of tools for analyzing comedy performances in respect to these elements. In order to bridge this gap, this thesis will be employing methods from the field of performance studies. This thesis will employ methods developed in other disciplines concerned with performance: theater studies and poetry performance studies. As the performance of a play, for example, differs significantly from the performance of a comedic set, this section aims to outline how these methods and concepts must be adapted in the context of political stand-up comedy.

3.1. Performance analysis in theater studies

To begin with, the word performance has been used frequently throughout this thesis in reference to the event in which a comedian *performs* on stage in front of an audience. While this use of the term might be sufficient in a colloquial sense, theater studies offers a more nuanced definition. In this context, performance refers to “the unique event witnessed [...] [which] includes, to a large degree, audience involvement, whether this is manifestly evident or not” (Balme 132). This definition of a performance as a unique event rings true for stand-up comedy as well. Even if comedians use the same material, it is likely that they will adapt it to the audience and that the delivery of jokes will differ from one event to the next. In theater studies, this definition of performance is seen in contrast to the theatrical text and the production (Balme 133). Theatrical text refers to the written script which is adapted for a production. In turn, a production is a series of performances that share “organized stage signs” (Balme 133). There are significant differences that become noticeable when one tries to adapt these terms to stand-up comedy. For a start, the (theatrical) text written by stand-up comedians is usually not available to the public. Thus, an analysis of the originally produced text in the form of notes and structured jokes which comedians can then rehearse is often impossible. On the level of “production”, however, there are marked similarities between the worlds of theater and stand-up comedy. Especially professional comedians often go on tours that are set up as a series of individual performances which all share the same material. While these performances might differ from one to the other, their overall structure is consistent and, thus, it would be possible to perform a production analysis in the context of stand-up comedy. For this purpose, one would have to attend several individual performances that are held as part of the same tour. In this manner, consistencies and differences between these performances could be observed in order to analyze the underlying structure of the production.

As this thesis focuses specifically on video recordings of individual performances, however, the term ‘performance’ is the most significant. Balme states that in theater, the intent is often to ensure as much consistency between performances as possible (133-134). This stands in stark contrast with stand-up comedy, however, as interviews with comedians show that they adapt each performance to the audience

(DeCamp 453). Therefore, the realization of the production should be considered more variable in stand-up comedy than it is in theater. As a result, individual performances are more likely to deviate from one another.

In order to analyze performances, a variety of tools are used. The most common and notable ones are notation and video recordings, which are used to document observations made in the moment of the performance (Balme 136). These two ways of recording important findings are equally valuable for the analysis of stand-up comedy. As a matter of fact, a similar method of notation was employed in the aforementioned study on performance strategies in stand-up comedy (DeCamp 451-452). However, Balme notes that “[t]he ‘significance’ [of interpretive decisions made by the directorial team] is usually only recognizable on the basis of very good prior knowledge of the text” (136; original emphasis). This hints at an analytical difference between the realization of a theatrical production and stand-up comedy. As was mentioned before, prior knowledge of the text which is the base of a comedic performance is often inaccessible to people other than the performers themselves. However, the important element here is the significance of directorial interpretation. Since directors of a production are by no means necessarily the authors of the theatrical text, there is an enormous potential for research regarding the interpretation of the source material. In contrast, stand-up comedians are usually authors, directors and performers in one person. Therefore, directorial interpretation cannot be the focus of analysis, unless in genre-atypical cases. Video records are also an invaluable tool to analyzing stand-up comedy. They allow to revisit and share crucial information. Still, Balme highlights the importance of supplementing video recordings with other forms of documentation (136). One reason for this may be that video recordings are artificial in the way they encapsulate the moment of performance. They are limited to only showing part of a performance, often with a focus on the stage, which prevents observations of the audience or the surroundings. This limitation of only showing a single perspective needs to be accounted for when using video recordings and complemented with additional forms of documentation if possible. In order to account for these limitations, the performance analysis of this thesis will include still images and reviews of these performances. The stills are meant to support observations through visual representations, while the reviews

serve to highlight the political messages of these performances and to confirm the status of the performers as successful comedians.

Furthermore, performance analysis distinguishes between two more sets of documents that can be used for analysis: production and reception sources (Balme 136). As the names imply, production sources are usually connected to the production as a whole and might include anything that provides inside into the creative process. While many of these sources are either unavailable or inapplicable in stand-up comedy, there are some that could be considered for close analysis. Among the possible sources mentioned by Balme, interviews with artists are arguably the most accessible (136). Interviews allow researchers to investigate authorial intent, which is particularly of interest when investigating persuasion for example. Thus, it is no surprise that many of DeCamp's findings were also partially based on interviews with comedians and audience members alike (453). Unfortunately, many production sources that performance analysis would consider, such as prompt books, programs or rehearsal observations (Balme 136), are less helpful in the context of stand-up comedy.

Reception sources, on the other hand, might be just as useful as they are in theater studies. As the name once again implies, these sources are significant when analyzing how a performance/production was received. Since the list of reception sources includes a variety of easily accessible documents, such as reviews, recordings and notes (Balme 136), they can be used to evaluate the success of comedy, especially how it relates to audience and persuasion. Importantly, Christopher Balme distinguishes between documents that are produced by the researcher and those produced by others (138). All of these documents offer impressions of a performance and allow researchers to revisit these impressions at a later time. While arguably every one of them is useful for a variety of comedic stand-up performances, some are limited to the specific context in which they arise. Reviews, for example, are less likely to be produced in connection with amateur stand-up comedians. In this context, amateur is not an evaluative judgement of the competence of these performers, but a factor that distinguishes these comedians from professional ones. Thus, reviews by professional critics are more readily

available and insightful when they relate to high-profile comedians. In comparison, notation and questionnaires are tools that can be useful regardless of a performer's prominence. However, they may require the person analyzing the performance to be present in the physical space. This was the case for DeCamp, who attended several performances and documented her observations in person (451). In lieu of that, video recordings are useful when examining performances that could not be observed by the researcher personally. However, while their accessibility makes them a valuable source, their limitations must be kept in mind. The limitations of video recordings will become relevant in a later Chapter of this thesis that will analyze video recordings of comedy performances.

Another insight that theater studies offers into the analysis of performances is structure. In order to identify how to approach such a structural analysis, it is important to specify the goal of the analysis. Balme divides analyses into three approaches: process-oriented, product-oriented and event-oriented (142-143).. Of the three, event-oriented analysis is the most relevant for this thesis. This is because event-oriented analysis focuses on a particular performance and is suitable for analyzing "interaction between auditorium and stage" (Balme 143). Thus, event-oriented analysis seems most promising for the purpose of analyzing how comedians successfully engage their audience. By focusing on the interaction between audience and the performer in a specific performance, engagement strategies could be identified.²

To conclude, the field of theater studies offers some insight into how a stand-up comedy performance can be analyzed. In particular, theater and comedy performances share a number of documents that can serve as basis for analysis. Similarly, the term performance as a unique event that is the realization of a production can be applied to the study of stand-up comedy as well. The main

² Process and product-oriented analysis do not lend themselves for the purpose of this thesis. These approaches focus on the process of transforming a source text into a theater performance (process-oriented) and the analysis of several performances as part of a single production (product-oriented). Therefore, these forms of analysis are not useful for analyzing video-recordings of a specific performance or identifying engagement strategies.

difference between these two forms of performance, however, is the relationship between the performance and the source text. While dramatic texts are usually available in written form and can be studied in isolation, this is not usually the case for the material comedians use in their performances.

3.2. Performance analysis in live poetry

Another area to consult for insight on performance analysis is live poetry. The reason why live poetry lends itself for comparison with stand-up comedy is the similarity in a number of features. Live poetry is characterized by the presence of poet and audience, as well as the role oral realization of the poem plays (Novak 62). In this manner, live poetry inhabits a similar space as stand-up comedy does. The artist is verbally performing in front of an audience. The emphasis is on the delivery of the text. Thus, both the poet-performer and the stand-up comedian are the author and performer of their respective texts. Another similarity that distinguishes both genres further from the theater performance is how performers interact with the audience. Julia Novak determines a key difference between live poetry and theater in that “[...] *the presence of the audience is directly acknowledged by the poet-performer*” (58; original emphasis). Whereas performers in theater often pretend that the audience is not present during the performance, performers in both, live poetry and stand-up comedy speak directly to them. While there are differences between the two, it is possible to adopt some of the methods of live poetry scholarship for performance analysis. As this section will show, live poetry research helps in understanding how the co-presence of performer and audience shapes the performance.

3.2.1. Body communication

One key area that has not been mentioned so far, which plays a vital role in both live poetry and stand-up comedy, is body communication. Due to the physical presence of both, the audience and the performer, the body becomes another tool to create meaning throughout the performance (Novak 145). Consequently, performance analysis must not only find a way to describe how the performer communicates with their body, but also ascertain the effect this has on the delivery of the message. For this purpose, scholars have identified a number of functions that body communication

serves (Novak 151). Typically, body communication adds meaning or supplementary information to a verbally delivered message. It is considered common knowledge that a majority of communication occurs non-verbally. This observation is especially important for stand-up comedy, where, due to the subtlety necessary to affect persuasion, comedians often imply a meaning rather than stating it outright. For example, body communication might be used to non-verbally deliver the “punch line” of a joke. Congruency and incongruity between word and action can not only have a humorous effect, as incongruity theories assert (Martin 62-63), but also requires audience attention to be noticed. In this manner, body communication fosters audience engagement or, as entertainment-education theory refers to it, absorption. This could be achieved, for example, by demonstrating an action to the audience, rather than simply saying it. Some techniques, such as footing and instant character (cf. 2.6.), are also relying on body communication to convey unspoken meaning to the audience.

In order to contextualize body communication in performance analysis, it is further necessary to know which elements to consider. In her approach to live poetry, Novak presents three forms of body communication which must be viewed in context to convey meaning: gestures and posture, facial communication and artefactual communication (158). In both instances (live poetry and stand-up comedy), the proximity to the stage allows the audience to deduce meaning from the performer’s body behavior. Since these performances are often well-rehearsed, a special meaning can be attributed to the forms of body communication. One can reasonably conclude that performers are aware of their physical presence on stage and thus incorporate their body into the presentation of their material. Hence, it is important to familiarize oneself with the academic process of analyzing – that is dissecting and interpreting – body communication.

The following section will outline forms of body communication that can be analyzed in stand-up and live poetry performances: postures, gestures, facial communication, and artefactual communication. Postures can be examined to determine if they evoke immediacy or relaxation, as well as their significance for the implied bodily and mental state (Novak 158-159; 163). By analyzing how comedians use their whole

body to signify meaning in a specific context, it should be possible to deduce the reaction the comedian is expecting from the audience. In this manner, postures not only engage the audience but could offer insight into the mental state of the performed persona. Body communication not only consists of postures, but also of gestures, which “can be described in terms of the basic qualifiers of range, direction, intensity, speed and duration” (Novak 163). As gestures are doubtlessly a rehearsed instrument of any stand-up performance, they too can offer insight into the hidden meaning of a message since gestures can support, contradict or supplement the verbal component of a message. Thus, performance analysis must take into consideration the implied meaning of gestures. Drawing from prior studies from the field of kinesics, Novak distinguishes between (1) symbolic gestures, (2) deictic gestures, (3) motor gestures and (4) illustrators (160-164). While these types fulfill specific functions, their meaning arises in relation to the context in which they are used. Symbolic gestures have a culture-specific meaning that is associated with them. Thus, comedians can draw from conventionally known gestures to indicate meaning. For example, by using rude gestures instead of swearing, comedians can reveal their attitude in a nonverbal fashion. Deictic gestures, which indicate location or direction, can be used on stage to point towards the object or person in question. By pointing to the side, comedians can even ‘point at’ someone absent to illustrate that the inferred person is not part of the shared community. Motor gestures are movements that are not semantically linked to the spoken text. In stand-up comedy, they could indicate attitude about the topic and the emotional state the performer wishes to relay to the audience. Lexical gestures, or illustrators, have been divided into subgroups, such as spatial gestures (related to physical space), kinetographs (related to physical actions) and pictographs (depictions of the object of reference) (Novak 162). Illustrators are especially useful for illustrating, as the name implies, actions during a short scene of a performance or objects that are not on stage.

Facial communication also features prominently in stand-up comedy. Just like with gestures and posture, comedians use their face in order to convey meaning and engage the audience. This is done to express a certain attitude or emotion to the audience (Novak 164-165). Not only can facial communication thus be used to express meaning, it can also allow the audience to understand, empathize with and

ultimately relate to the performer. Since relatability and likability are essential for audience engagement and persuasion, facial communication emerges as a crucial variable of performance analysis in stand-up comedy research. Novak confirms this by aptly linking facial communication's impact to "its high expressive potential and its ability to establish a connection to the audience through gaze" (Novak 167). Thus, by reading the non-verbal cues in a performer's facial communication, its effectiveness for the performance becomes tangible despite its inherent complexity.

Artefactual communication is a form of communication that might require further explanation beforehand. The term is used to describe how objects, such as clothing and other props fulfill a communicative purpose (Novak 168). In most cases, stand-up comedians have to rely on their own expressiveness and rarely include objects other than a microphone in their performance. Interestingly, this absence of props is another similarity between stand-up comedy and live poetry (Novak 168). At first, this would suggest a limited role of artefactual communication in stand-up comedy. However, the choice of clothing and use of the microphone are two factors that can be analyzed in almost all performance settings. Clothing in particular might be of interest, as stand-up comedy is not linked to a universally accepted dress code. Thus, what a comedian wears on stage can have significance too. Costumes, for example, are not usually expected to be worn by comedians and can thus fulfill an entertaining function.



Fig. 1a: Ricky Gervais performing in casual clothing.



Fig. 1b: John Mulaney wearing a suit.

However, the casual style of clothing often embraced by stand-up comedians suggests that a conventional appearance might synergize with relatability for the audience. This is exemplified by figure 1a, which shows comedian Ricky Gervais dressed in a dark shirt and a pair of jeans.

Formal attire, in contrast, could imply a sense of professionalism and signal the audience that the comedian is to be taken seriously. An example of this use of artefactual communication can be seen in figure 1b, which depicts comedian John Mulaney wearing a formal suit for his performance. This interpretation of clothing as meaningful form of artefactual communication is not unique to stand-up comedy either. With respect to live poetry, Novak finds that performers “make strategic choices when dressing for a performance in order to achieve a particular visual effect” (168-169). Thus, performance analysis needs at the very least to acknowledge the presence of any objects that become part of the performance and, ideally, contextualize them in relation to the performance. However, one should note that this marks a form of interpretation on behalf of the observer that does not necessarily evidence the performer’s intent. For this reason, one should be careful about drawing conclusions about the meaning of artefacts and logically explain how one arrives at a particular interpretation.

Finally, the question arises how body communication can be accurately documented. In order to answer this question, Novak recommends the use of “*verbal description* [...] due to its flexibility and accessibility” (170; original emphasis). Consequently, in order to best represent body communication, it needs to be described in a way that accurately relays the impression it has on the spectator. This technique can then further be enhanced through the use of stills, which can offer a visual representation of observations made in the moment (Novak 170). In combination, these two methods allow researchers to share their observations in a manner that is comprehensible to readers and can accurately represent the impression made during the performance.

3.2.2. Paralinguistic communication

Another essential aspect of stand-up comedy is how the comedian vocally communicates their message. In the context of live poetry, this element of analysis has been referred to as audiotext by previous researchers (Novak 75). The way audiotext is analyzed in live poetry can be for a close analysis of a comedy performance. For this purpose, the concept of *paralanguage* is worthy of

consideration. Unlike the verbal components of the audiotext, paralinguage encompasses all the non-verbal features that accompany it (Novak 76). These non-verbal features are equally significant for the reception of a performer's message. Since stand-up comedians can use a variety of modes of speaking, they invariably produce paralinguage. Any performance analysis needs to somehow account for not only what a performer says but also pay attention to how it is said and what the significance of the delivery is. That delivery is an essential part of any stand-up comedy performance is reflected in humor literature. For instance, Oliver Double explains how delivery can be the driving force behind an otherwise non-comedic text (388). This signifies that the verbal side alone is not the only meaningful element of the vocalization. Novak offers some insight into a few of these features, such as non-verbal sounds and articulatory parameters, although she also expresses that this is no way intended as a complete list (80). The difficulty, therefore, lies in discovering and evaluating the sets of features that may be present in stand-up comedy performances. As styles of delivery vary remarkably, stand-up comedy may include poetical or even musical texts, which would then require different tools in an analysis than the performance of a prose text does. For this reason, this thesis cannot offer a comprehensive list of features that would make sense to apply in a stand-up comedy context. This would not only be a monumental task due to the aforementioned variety of stand-up performances, but it would also exceed the scope of this thesis. Therefore, rather than attempting and ultimately failing at producing an extensive overview of paralinguistic features, this section will provide a short theoretical overview of non-verbal sounds and articulatory parameters which may prove useful for the purposes of this thesis. In her approach to analyzing live poetry, Novak examines the articulatory parameters of rhythm, pitch, volume, articulation and timbre more closely (85).

Articulatory parameters are qualities that affect the delivery of a text, rather than individual sounds. As such, they are "never occurring independently of segmental verbal or non-verbal utterances, but rather, qualifying them" (Novak 86). Thus, articulatory parameters are the modes in which a text is delivered. By paying attention to parameters, such as volume, articulation, rhythm or, pitch, it should be possible to determine the intended effect this has on the audience. In stand-up

comedy, use of these parameters can ultimately change the meaning of a statement. A high pitch might be used to indicate the transition into an instant character, or to relay to the audience that the performer is critical of a statement that is repeated in this manner. For this reason, they hold significant meaning for the manner in which the audience will receive and process the message.

In contrast, the category of non-verbal sounds encompasses a large number of sounds that could be produced during a performance. They could be part of an ongoing narrative, in which they function to convey the scene to the audience within the limited framework of a stand-up comedy performance, or they could be employed for humorous purposes. What defines these non-verbal sounds is that they are “acoustic occurrences” (Novak 80) which can be used by performers in a variety of ways. Novak further explains that they can be described by (1) their manner of production, (2) cultural conventions or (3) context-specific interpretations (85). Thus, non-verbal sounds can be made tangible for analysis and investigated for their meaning potential in relation to the performance as a whole.

In summary, by drawing from the field of live poetry, a number of aspects that require analysis can be identified. This adaptation of tools is not only worthwhile, it is also appropriate considering the similarities between live poetry and stand-up comedy performances. By using the insights regarding how to analyze body communication, audiotext and delivery from this field and applying it to stand-up comedy performances, it should be possible to examine and describe how these elements support the function of engaging the audience and signifying meaning.

4. Analysis of four video-recorded comedy performances

Whereas previous Chapters of this thesis have outlined previous studies on the effect humor has on persuasion, as well as the mechanisms and processes that account for that effect, this Chapter seeks to apply the concepts developed in these studies to four video-recordings of stand-up comedy performances. Whenever I mention a particular “performance” as object of analysis, it is the *recorded* performance I am referring to. Based on education-entertainment theory and the concepts outlined in

Chapter 2 of this thesis, the underlying assumption of this thesis is that through the use of engagement strategies, stand-up comedians aim to persuade their audience of a specific attitude towards a sociopolitical topic. The aim of this analysis is to determine how stand-up comedians interact with their audience in order to engage the people.

An undeniable issue with analyzing the persuasive process underlying these performances is the impossibility of inferring that persuasion successfully took place based on the observation of a comedic performance alone. As was mentioned in the section on audience engagement, one way to circumvent this obstacle would be to do post-performance interviews with members of the audience, similar to how DeCamp did in her study on performance strategies (451-452). Unfortunately, due to the fact that this analysis is based on video-recordings of performances that I have not been personally attended and observed, this approach is not an option. Thus, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the persuasive message, this analysis will consider two other elements. First, in the selection of comedians whose performances will be analyzed, this thesis seeks to include primarily performers who have a reputation as successful stand-up comics. The reason for this decision is that by acknowledging the comedian's achievements in this manner, inferences about their ability to engage and acknowledge the audience, as well as their relatability and likability can be made. Since the theory on persuasion in humor research suggests that these elements facilitate persuasion, the performer's competence, evidenced by their popularity, can serve as an indicator of successful persuasion.

Furthermore, in order to evaluate the audience's interactive role in the performances, as well as their agency in the persuasive process of the comedian, their reaction will be considered as indicator of success. Typically, audiences can have a wide range of reactions to a stand-up performance. While it is uncommon that audiences decry an unsuccessful performance through booing, heckling is a recurring issue that comedians must face. Heckling, in this context, describes a disruption of the performance by a member of the audience. Scholar and comedian, Oliver Double notes that "heckling can be a hostile act. It's a battle for status between heckler and comedian [...]" (342). While it is impossible to know the motivation of a heckler, as

the person who interrupts the performance is called, this thesis poses that heckling evidences a form of performed counterarguing and indicates a lack of audience engagement. Although heckling is often an act committed by a single person, its disruptive potential will have a negative impact on other audience members' absorption and, depending on how the comedian handles the interruption, poses the risk of hindering persuasion.

In contrast, the reaction most commonly associated with stand-up comedy is laughter. While laughter generally indicates that the performer successfully entertains the audience, thus fulfilling the primary purpose of comedy, it will also be seen as a sign that the audience is successfully engaged and thus absorbed in the narrative of the performance. Therefore, this thesis contends that laughter is also an indicator of successful persuasion, based on the theoretical findings that link absorption and the resulting reduction of counterarguing to persuasion. Cheering similarly indicates agreement with the comedian, which is especially important in the context of political stand-up comedy. Finally, silence is another reaction of the audience that is worthwhile to consider. If a joke fails to elicit laughter from the audience, it is deemed unsuccessful in a comedy setting. Therefore, it also fails to engage the audience in a way that would facilitate persuasion. While it is difficult to say if that has a negative effect on persuasion, at the very least, it does not support it. As a consequence, when silence occurs at a point during a performance where the audience would be expected to laugh, which is indicated by the punchline of a joke, a pause for laughter by the performer or admission of failure by the comedian, the following analysis of four video-recordings will consider this an indicator of failed persuasion.

Another important step to clarify beforehand is the selection of performances which will be analyzed. As was mentioned previously in this section, since the competence of comedians is assumed to be of importance, the choice of performances will be limited to commonly known, professional comedians. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to acknowledge the diversity of comedians by including performers from various backgrounds. In many cases, the comedy industry is still one in which marginalized people are not well represented. This is not due to the absence of these people in the comedy scene, but rather the lack of attention they receive. In order to avoid this pitfall, this analysis includes comedians that belong to the socially privileged group of

white/male performers but also performers from marginalized groups, such as women or people of color. Finally, the content of the stand-up performances analyzed had to deal with topics that were of sociopolitical import to warrant the label of political comedy. For the purposes of this thesis, this category of political comedy includes themes of politics, globalization, marginalization and climate change. The reason for this is the notion that by addressing these topics, comedians contribute to the discourse surrounding these topics. Thus, they provide arguments to consider to which the audience is not only exposed but by which it is potentially persuaded.

At the beginning of each close analysis, there will be some background information about the performance and the comedian, followed by a brief explanation of why each performance is considered to be part of political comedy. Afterwards, the performance will be analyzed with respect to how the performer manages to engage the audience. For this purpose, this analysis will draw from the performance strategies discussed in Chapter 2.6, as well as the insights gained into performance analysis taken from theater studies and live poetry research in the previous Chapters. In order to support the analysis of the video recordings, stills will be used to illustrate observations of non-verbal communication. Where appropriate, figure numbers in brackets will link an argument in the text to an accompanying still image. In order to refer to the video-recording as accurately as possible, time stamps will be used in quotations.

By conducting a close analysis of each video recording, this thesis seeks to exemplify how the comedians engage the audience through the use of body communication, delivery (or audiotext) and audience interaction. Finally, the analysis aims to highlight the persuasive message underlying the entertaining presentation. By identifying the persuasive message, the analysis attempts to outline how it is reinforced by the methods employed by the performer. Limitations of this analysis will be discussed afterwards in Chapter 5.

4.1. Lewis Black

The first performance that will be analyzed was given by the American comedian Lewis Black in 2010, at the Just for Laughs Comedy Festival in Montreal. As a

comedian, Lewis Black is well known for his stage persona, which is characterized by “his trademark outbursts” (Vincentelli). In this video-recording of his performance, Lewis Black talks about the difference between fact and opinion and why this difference is significant. This difference is of increasing relevance in modern politics. Political parties frequently attempt to attract voters by appealing to their perception of reality rather than on factual evidence. The most prominent politician in recent times who has contributed to this trend is Donald Trump, whose unverifiable claims have become a topic of public discourse. The consequence is that factually inaccurate assertions can influence political debates. Since the public has to rely on facts to make reasonable decisions, post-truth politics disrupts democratic decision-making processes. Thus, since Black’s performance deals with the matter of post-truth politics, it is significant for the purposes of this thesis. The video-recording starts without an introduction of the comedian by an emcee (host) or Black himself. Since the performer does also not greet or acknowledge the audience in any way, it is likely that this part was simply cut from the recording, or that the recording is merely a segment of a larger performance.

The performance starts out with Lewis Black claiming that society has undergone a change from forming opinions based on facts to abandoning facts altogether. This premise is outlined in the beginning of his performance when he says that: “[o]pinions used to contain [Fig. 2] – hold on to your hats – *facts* [audience laughs] ... or at least relate to facts, but now, [Fig. 3] everything is just a matter of opinion” (Black [0:03-0:18](#)).

In this opening, Black achieves several goals. First, he introduces the general topic of facts and opinions to the audience. More important, however, is how he manages to convey his stance on this issue. By instructing the audience to “hold on to its hats” (Black [0:06](#)), Black conveys to the audience that the following information will be a shocking reveal. Thus, when he finishes his statement by overemphasizing the word “facts” (Black [0:08-0:09](#)), the sudden reveal of an otherwise noncontroversial statement is met with laughter.³ By raising his pitch and drawing out the syllable in

³ While the audience is mostly not observable due to the format of the video-recording, which focuses primarily on the performer on stage, some reactions of the audience have been recorded as well. In

length, Black presents the word as if it was a revolutionary idea that the audience would otherwise have trouble understanding. In this manner, Black reveals the stance that he will take for the remainder of his performance in this manner. Through the use of the phrase “used to” (Black [0:04](#)), Black reveals that the idea that opinions are based on facts is a thing of the past. This allows the audience to see the remainder of his comedic bit from this perspective. At the same time, Black engages the audience directly. Not only does he present his own viewpoint, but by telling the audience to brace itself for his following comment, he acknowledges their presence. All of this serves to draw the audience into his narrative about the importance of factuality and how, nowadays, it has changed.

In terms of body communication, Black uses his right hand to gesticulate while his left one remains in his pocket. Most notably, when he tells the audience to hold on and wait for the reveal, he holds up his palm in a motion that signals ‘stop’ [Fig. 2]. His posture is straight and upright. Despite the tension in his body, he seems calm and relaxed. This effect is achieved through the resting position of his left hand, which stands in stark contrast to his movement at



Fig. 2: Stop: Lewis Black

the end of the introduction, when his final words are underlined with a motion of waving both hands towards the audience. This motor gesture signals movement away from himself and is used to indicate that he is dismissive of and rejecting the notion that opinion is the important part.

those instances where the camera switches to the audience, the audience members are always seen laughing. What this means is that the audience is not visible for most of the performance which makes it impossible to note any non-audible reactions, which presents a shortcoming of video-recordings (see Chapter 3.1. for benefits and disadvantages of video recording).



Fig. 4: Waving motion: Lewis Black.



Fig. 3: Visible frustration: Lewis Black.

Black continues by exemplifying his claim with a reference to the moon landing and the conspiracy theory surrounding its authenticity. When explaining why everybody agreed on the fact that the moon landing did indeed happen, Lewis Black starts to lose his calm demeanor and adopts his enraged stage persona. His voice raises in volume and he begins stuttering, as if his anger were blocking his capability to speak clearly, indicating a loss of control. This occurs when he says “because it di-di-did happen! [Fig. 4] [audience laughs] I saw it on TV! They did tests! Shut up! [audience laughs] It was real” (Black [0:29-0:38](#)). The pitch and volume of his voice raise once again. At the same time, his face turns into a scowl, the eyebrows are drawn towards one another and the tension in the face becomes visible. The corners of the mouth are drawn back and give his face a pained expression. He appears tormented by the anger towards the fictive listener, whom he tells to “shut up” (Black [0:35](#)). His arms are outstretched and throughout this part, Black moves his hands to interact with imaginary objects. The constant shaking of his limbs emphasizes the physical reaction to his frustration. The audience reacts to both, the stammering and the comedian’s demand that the fictive conspiracy theorist he addresses should remain silent, with laughter. This is because of Black’s exaggerated, emotional outburst. The humor of his performance stems from the audience’s understanding that his response is caricatural and excessive to an extent which would not be socially acceptable in public. At the same time, the frustration with people who do not accept

factual evidence make Lewis Black relatable to the audience. They empathize with his visible annoyance and thus, find his performed anger entertaining.



Fig. 5: Disbelief: Lewis Black.

Following his emotional outburst, which is immediately followed by a return to a calm, Black continues by saying: “Now, that same statement can be made, and someone will say: [makes a smacking sound with his lips] Well, that’s your opinion. [Fig. 5] [shakes head] [audience laughs] No it’s not. It’s a *fact*” (Black [0:39-0:50](#)). Here, the comedian makes use of the technique called instant character. After clarifying that the following remark is from an unspecified “someone” (Black [0:42](#)), he produces a non-verbal smacking sound with his lips which is combined with a statement that discounts the previously established fact as just an “opinion” (Black [0:45](#)). In combination, this is evocative of the disregard with which the instant character responds to the importance of facts. Black shakes his head in response which coincides with the laughter from the audience. Based on the part leading up to this point, the audience already knows that he disagrees with the statement and so, they respond with laughter when they see him shaking his head. His mouth is opened and the tension from before is gone – his face communicates disbelief [Fig. 5]. After a moment of silence, during which the audience laughs, Black once again reiterates the factuality of the statement. The emphasis is once again on the word “fact” (Black [0:49](#)), indicated by a heightened pitch.

Lewis Black continues his comedic bit by explaining why he believes that fact-based knowledge has been declining in the following way:

We used to [have facts], because 30 years ago, a serious man in a suit would come to your house and sell you a set of encyclopedias [audience laughs] ... that contained *facts* that someone had been paid to *check*. And now, we have Wikipedia. [audience laughs] An online encyclopedia that can be edited by any schmuck on the planet. [audience laughs] If a monkey could get a hold of a

computer, he could rewrite the theory of evolution. [audience laughs] (Black [0:55-1:35](#))



Fig. 6: Happiness: Lewis Black.

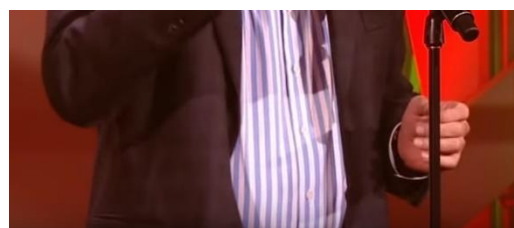
In this part, Black highlights the importance of fact-checking done by encyclopedias. His body communicates joy when these are mentioned. This can be seen in both his gestures and face. His hands and arms perform illustrative gestures towards the audience while he states that a travelling salesman would come to their house and sell them these books (Black [1:00-1:05](#)). Following this short narrative scene, Black lifts both arms and hands while smiling. This symbolic gesture is evocative of the praise he heaps onto the encyclopedias. At the time, he smiles at the audience. His cheeks are slightly raised, and his teeth are showing. His face communicates happiness to the audience. The underlying intent is to communicate the joy encyclopedic, fact-checked knowledge brings him. It is also no surprise that the words he stresses are “facts” (Black [1:09](#)) and “check” (Black [1:13](#)) either. His voice booms as Black increases its volume and draws out the syllables of each word. These represent the underlying persuasive message which is covered in two narrative scenes Black creates for the audience. First, there is the image of a travelling salesman selling encyclopedias by going door to door. Second, the scene of a monkey writing on a computer to falsify the theory of evolution. Both stories are underlined by a different level of integrity. While the encyclopedia salesman is described as “serious man in a suit” (Black [0:58](#)), the suit being an indicator of his

professionalism, Wikipedia is said to be written for by an animal or a “schmuck” (Black [1:25](#)), which is a colloquial and pejorative term for a person. The notoriety of Wikipedia as a dubious source of information is commonly known. Yet, Lewis Black uses it to highlight the importance of reliable facts that are needed to support an informed opinion. The audience responds by laughing at various moments throughout his delivery. It perceives the contrast between his happiness about encyclopedias and the absence of enthusiasm when he mentions Wikipedia. Thus, laughter is elicited at these moments. Further laughter ensues when Wikipedia is presented as an unreliable source due to the fact that anyone could be editor of the information found there – even a monkey.

Lewis Black then demonstrates how facts are used in the opinion formation process. He does this by highlighting the difficulty of this process by saying the following: “[I]f you only hear facts, *you* have to form your own opinion. And then, after I’ve formed an opinion, I form an opinion of my own opinion. And *then*, I have another opinion about my own opinion and by midnight, I hate myself [Fig. 7] [audience laughs]” (Black [1:42-2:02](#)). What Black discusses here is how facts make opinion formation more complex by enabling critical thinking and reflection. His performance demonstrates the complexity verbally and through paralinguistic features. Not only does he comment on the seemingly endless series of opinions that challenge the previous one, but his rhythm increases as well, making his speech faster and frantic. This flurry of sonic activity is meant to represent how overwhelming the process is and results in Black stating that he hates himself. This frustration is made visible once again through body communication. Black brings down his face and scowls at the audience. His teeth are shown again but unlike his previous smile this signifies aggression and anger. The corners of his mouth are sunk as well to indicate a negative attitude. In this manner, Lewis Black demonstrates that the opinion formation process is a difficult one that requires continuous reflection of prior beliefs. In turn,



Fig. 7: Anger, Lewis Black.



these beliefs have to be based on facts. Despite his visible and performed frustration that results in his proclamation of self-hatred, the underlying message is that, nowadays, people prefer the easy alternative which is to not have to go through this complex and arduous process. This is further highlighted by the stress Black puts on the words “you” (Black [1:46](#)) and “then” (Black [1:56](#)). It is the responsibility for one’s own opinion that turns opinion formation into an ongoing development of fact-based opinions that are susceptible to change based on new facts.

The difference between fact and opinion is afterwards further highlighted by a series of facts that are put in contrast with opinions about the same subject matter. While the facts are reported by Black in a very relaxed manner, the opinions are increasingly more outrageous and emotionally charged. This is best exemplified by the final punchline of this part: “Here’s another fact: The best grass seed for shady areas is creeping red fescue. It



Fig. 8: Opinion: Lewis Black

thrives with little to no sunlight. Opinion: The Jews own [Fig. 8] *everything* [audience laughs and applauds]” (Black [2:45-3:06](#)). Throughout Black’s delivery, the audience is occasionally laughing. This is because at this point, Black has already established the formula he is using for this bit. Therefore, while he is still presenting the fact, the audience already anticipates the reveal of how egregious the following opinion will be. The reason for this is the three-part structure often found in comedy. Oliver Double refers to this as “the rule of three” (373), which is based on setting up a pattern, following it and then surprising the audience by subverting it. While the previous two comparisons of fact and opinion by Black have been dealing with the same subject, this third comparison is expected to subvert the expectation that it will do the same. Incongruity with the previous pattern in itself is humorous, but more importantly, absorption in this pattern engages the audience. This can be evidenced by the eruption into laughter and applause once the pattern is broken. The humorous

effect is further supported by the delivery, as Black enhances the effect of the completely unrelated opinion by pointing towards the audience and repeatedly thrusting his hand forward. As can be seen by Fig. 8, his face is tense and expresses enmity. Black makes use of the angry persona he is known for and connects it to a racially charged comment. This stands in contrast to the calm manner in which he presented the fact beforehand and thus results in the perception of the opinion being overly based on unreasonable emotions. Without stating it explicitly, Lewis Black manages to convey that facts are based on reason and observations about the real world, whereas opinions are the opposite. He states as much when he, after waiting until the audience's reaction has settled, adds the following line: "Another opinion: That came off as *really* racist... and I am a Jew" (Black [3:09-3:16](#)). Here, Black links the opinion to racism explicitly. He also acknowledges that his own identity as a member of the group targeted by the racist comment does not change this perception either. All of this adds to his underlying message that facts are based in reason and thus more significant than opinions, which can be completely baseless and offensive as a result. Moreover, by addressing the fact that on its own this statement can be racist, the comedian acknowledges and counteracts the inappropriateness of it. This is important to ensure the audience of the validity of their interpretation and any discomfort this has caused.

Another technique used by Lewis Black in his performance is the use of two instant characters to illustrate a short scene. In this scene, two fictitious characters are



Fig. 9: Instant Character 2, Lewis Black

having a conversation on television about current affairs. Black introduces this segment of his performance by stating that “[s]ome people have only one fact and they try to put it in every discussion” (Black [3:19-3:25](#)). This statement provides the lens through which the following scene must be understood. Black then signals which character is talking by stepping to the side of the microphone. While one instant character is calmly trying to discuss the global economy [Fig. 9], the other is continuously bringing up polar bears, which are dying, presumably due to global warming [Fig. 10]. What sticks out during this scene is that the first character is continuously quiet and makes limited use of gestures, the other one is loud and gestures wildly (Black [3:25-4:12](#)).

The second character only shouts about the one fact that the number of polar bears is declining is represented as hysterical and absurd. The discussion between the two leads nowhere. The key argument here, also with respect to how this scene is introduced, is that a limited number of facts is also unreliable. Lewis Black represents this by employing forms of body communication and articulatory parameters (such as volume) to convey an emotionally volatile state. Again, the scene elicits laughter and applause from the audience. At the same time, this part of the performance fulfils a function outlined in Chapter 2.6. of this thesis. Black concedes that reliance on facts can also be ridiculous, especially when limited to a single one, which lessens his

prior criticism of opinions. Thus, Black prevents counterarguing by acknowledging a criticism that opinionated people might have. This acknowledgement serves the important function of not alienating audience members by addressing a potential counterargument.

Finally, Lewis Black ends his bit on facts and opinion with a tirade addressing a fictive listener:

And you really ... really can't have an opinion, if you start out your opinion by saying 'I think I heard someone say'. [audience laughs] You think you heard someone say? Who? Who said it? [audience laughs] Maybe you just said it to yourself, asshole. [audience laughs] Maybe you didn't hear anything at all. You just thought you heard a voice. [audience laughs] Until you can tell me where you heard it, I don't want to hear it. There is enough shit going on in my head [audience starts laughing again] without anonymous, unclaimed thoughts being shoved in. And that's a fact [audience applauds and cheers] (Black [4:24-5:04](#)).

This final part of the performance addresses a similar issue as the previous comparison of encyclopedia and Wikipedia: source reliability. Black reinforces the idea that the origin of an information is important, in order to verify its authenticity. He achieves this by starting out with



Fig. 10: Final outburst, Lewis Black.

the phrase “I think I heard someone say” (Black [4:33](#)), which prompts him to perform another one of his characteristic outbursts. Starting with the phrase “Who said it?” (Black [4:43](#)), Black starts increasing his rhythm and volume. As before, this constitutes his expression of anger, alongside his face, which is tense, and his progressively more energetic gestures towards himself and the audience. The audience responds with laughter at several points during this final bit. First, the audience members begin laughing when they correctly identify the line “I think I heard someone say” (Black [4:33](#)) as the setup for the following tantrum. Once Black

starts his final outburst, laughter can be heard in between almost every sentence. The reason the audience finds this humorous is that by now, Black has already established that his furious reaction is his response to frustration. Hence, when he starts his monologue, the audience already knows what his perspective on unreliable sources is. This response suggests that Black successfully persuaded the audience as the audience now approaches the topic from his perspective. The audience members are able to foresee where the joke is going because they now share the stance of Black's comedic persona.

To sum up, Lewis Black engages the audience to persuade them of the importance of facts over opinion. He does so through the use of comedic techniques, such as instant characters and the rule of three, which allow audience to relate to his emotional reaction. Doubtlessly, Black's characteristic outbursts of rage are a performance in that they are not to be taken completely seriously. This exaggerated demonstration of emotion is humorous, which engages the audience, and allows Black to ridicule the target of his performance. Since they are also not directed at the audience but at a fictive listener, he is not perceived as hostile. Instead, his reactions are indicative of a personal vulnerability in the form of frustration that is shared with the audience. This frustration is made manifest through his active body communication that features seemingly uncontrollable gestures and intense facial expressions. His posture barely changes throughout the performance. Similarly, despite the presence of the microphone in its stand, a chair and a bottle of water on stage, Black uses only his body and voice to convey his performed frustration not just verbally but also nonverbally. By linking this emotionally charged reaction to a narrative that supports the persuasive message, Black seems to be successful in his attempt. This is primarily evidenced by the laughter and applause elicited by his performance.

4.2. Ali Wong

The next American comedian whose performance will be analyzed is Ali Wong. This video-recording is different from the previous one in that it consists of two performances which have been put together into one compilation. The performances

analyzed here are Ali Wong's stand-up specials "Ali Wong: Hard Knock Wife" and "Ali Wong: Baby Cobra," which are available on the online streaming platform Netflix. Each of these performances are over an hour long and thus exceed the scope of this thesis. Therefore, only a few scenes from both performances will be considered. The reason why this compilation of both performances is adequate for the purpose of examining persuasion in a political stand-up comedy performance is that Ali Wong approaches topics of gender equality and racially charged humor. Thus, this analysis restricts itself to those segments of the performance that deal with these topics. This restriction helps focus the analysis on political content and keeps this segment comparable in length to the other performance analyses. However, as was mentioned in Chapters 2.4. and 2.6., non-political content can be important for the persuasive message too because of how it distracts from tendentious material. An article written by Jason Zinoman highlights the political content analyzed here as well. It describes "Baby Cobra" as "a deliriously filthy and funny hour of comedy woven into a sneakily feminist assault on the double standards of parenting" (Zinoman). The feminist viewpoint attributed to the performance will be one of the points of analysis in this thesis. Similarly, in reference to the second show "Hard Knock Wife," Ali Wong is said to "once again [take] on the stereotypes that undergird traditional gender roles" (Zinoman). In order to distinguish between the two performances, this analysis will mention which comedic bits are part of which performance.

This distinction can be made based on two observable differences. Firstly, the color of the stage background is different in each of the performances. Secondly, the clothing Wong wears is not the same either. Thus, as figure 12 and 13 demonstrate, a distinction between the two performances can be made.



Fig. 11: Hard Knock Wife: Ali Wong.

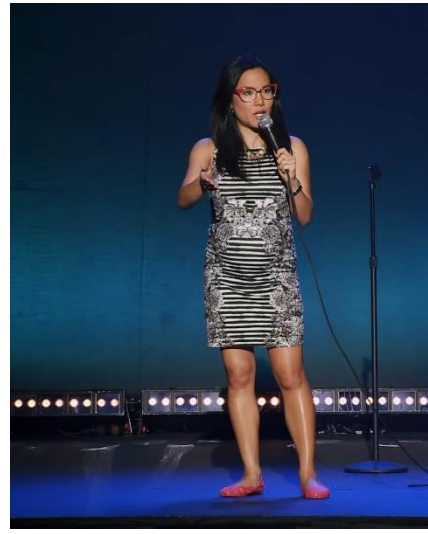


Fig. 12: Baby Cobra: Ali Wong.

The recording opens with a comedic bit from “Baby Cobra” in which Ali Wong addresses the audience directly and states: “So, I don’t know if you guys can tell but I am seven and a half months pregnant [audience applauds]” (Wong [0:00-0:05](#)). This part of the performance seems to take place near the beginning of the performance and serves two purposes. First, it acknowledges what may have been an observation by the audience. The importance of such a step has been indicated by prior research (DeCamp 455). As mentioned in Chapter 2.6., acknowledgement of the audience is essential for engagement. Secondly, by informing the audience of the fact that she is pregnant, Wong introduces the topic of gender inequality among stand-up comedians. She remarks on this inequality in the following way:

It’s very rare and unusual to see a female comic perform pregnant because female comics ... don’t get pregnant. [Fig. 14] [audience laughs] Just try to think of one, I dare you. There-There’s none of them. Once they do get pregnant, they generally disappear. [Wong [0:09-0:32](#)].

In this part, Wong not only highlights the rarity of female comedians becoming pregnant but also relates this to the effect pregnancy can have on a woman’s career. Her posture is upright and indicates immediacy. She is holding the



Fig. 13: Facial communication: Ali Wong.

microphone with her left hand, while using the right one for gestures. As figure 14 shows, the palm of her right hand is open and upwards as if she were handing over the reason for the absence of pregnant female comedians. At the same time, she feigns a smile by raising her cheeks and stretching her lips. Due to the facts that the rest of her facial features remain in the same neutral position they have been so far the smile is marked as inauthentic. Thus, the expression indicates annoyance with the situation she is describing. There is a short pause before she reveals that female comics do not get pregnant which makes the statement stand out. The audience responds with laughter. Wong further engages the audience through the challenge to name another pregnant female comedian. This comment not only addresses the audience directly through the use of the pronoun "you" (Wong [0:27](#)), it also underscores her argument about the difficulty of pregnancy for female comedians. This difficulty is then contrasted with the experience of male comics in the following part:

That's not the case with male comics. Once they have a baby, they'll get up on stage a week afterwards and they'll be like 'Guys, I just had this fucking baby. [Fig. 15] That baby is a piece of shit. It's so annoying and boring'. And all these other shitty dads in the audience [Fig. 16] are like 'That's hilarious. [Fig 17.] I identify' [audience laughs] and their fame just swells [Fig. 18] because they become this relatable family funny man all of a sudden (Wong [0:32-0:59](#)).

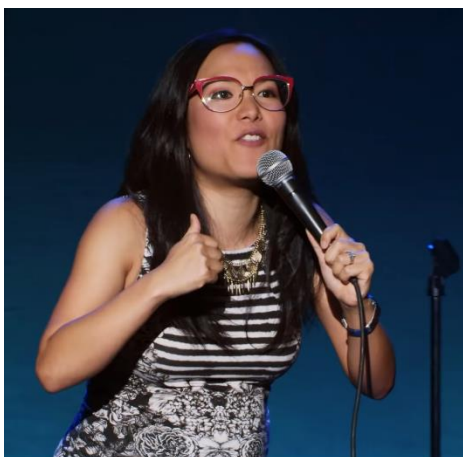


Fig. 14: Male Comics: Ali Wong.



Fig. 15: Deictic Gesture: Ali Wong.



Fig. 17: Audience reaction: Ali Wong.



Fig. 16: Spatial gesture: Ali Wong.

Here, Wong demonstrates with the use of a short narrative how a male comedian's career can benefit from fatherhood. The effect stands in stark contrast with the previously established negative impact motherhood has on a female comic. Throughout the bit, Wong skillfully supports her narrative with body communication. For example, when the instant character of a male comic she uses refers to the child he had, Wong uses her right hand to perform a deictic gesture behind her. The hand is clenched into a fist with only the thumb extended [Fig. 15]. Through repeatedly moving it towards her shoulder, she points behind herself, indicating the fictive child of the narrative. The indication that this child is behind her as a performer indicates an absence from the stage: The male comic has put the stress of childbirth behind himself and is dismissive of it. Another deictic gesture is used when she refers to the reaction of the fictive audience. Her flat hand is pointed at the space her own audience is sitting in and moves in a circular motion to indicate the audience space [Fig. 16]. Wong then uses another instant character to perform the reaction. Her head is tilted backwards, and she speaks with more volume. Wong extends the index finger and repeatedly moves her right hand forward and back, representing the audience pointing at the male comic on stage [Fig 17]. Although the statements are short, the syllables are stressed. The depiction is mocking and indicates a lack of thought on the part of the fictive audience. Finally, at the points during the performance when she says the words "swells" (Wong [0:53](#)) and "relatable family funny man" (Wong [0:55](#)), she uses her right hand to perform a spatial gesture. Her hand is flat with the palm upward and Wong raises twice [Fig 18]. This upward motion visualizes the rise in status the male comic experiences as part of his

performance. Thus, her body communicates the positive effect that having a child has on the fictive comedian's career. All of this body communication serves to engage the audience by enabling absorption in the narrative.

Wong then continues to compare the situation of the father, who is performing on stage, to that of the mother, who stays at home to take care of herself and the child. This comparison again elicits laughter from the audience (Wong [0:59-1:11](#)). The persuasive message is that men are not negatively affected and even benefit professionally by having a child, while women are affected in the opposite way. Furthermore, humor relatedness is high in this performance. This is because the subject of the joke is also the subject of which Wong wants to persuade the audience. In this case, humor is derived from highlighting how differently pregnancy affects men and women in their professional life. As Chapter 2.1.1. outlined, humor relatedness is significant for persuasion.

Gender inequality is also tackled by another comedic bit from "Hard Knock Wife". It starts with Wong walking towards the left side saying:

It's so sexist when people ask me: 'Well, if you're here, then who's taking care of the baby?' [Pause] [audience laughs] [Fig. 19] Who (.) the *fuck* (.) do you think is taking care of the baby? [audience laughs] [Pause] The TV [audience starts laughing] is taking care of the baby okay? (Wong [1:12-1:39](#)).

In this bit, Wong brings up the question of gender roles, especially concerning the responsibility of raising a child. She starts by defining the following statement as "sexist" (Wong [1:14](#)), which already implies that it reinforces the stereotype of childcare being a feminine duty. Her response to the inquiry who is taking care of the baby if not her, the mother, is nonverbal at first [Fig. 19]. She



Fig. 18: Disbelief: Ali Wong.

leans forward and squints. Her eyebrows are pushed down and her posture and facial

communication suggests that she has trouble understanding the question and needs to move closer to understand it better. In combination, this reaction to the question demonstrates astonishment and disbelief. Wong communicates that she is surprised by the inappropriateness of the question. Hence, the audience responds with laughter even before she asks a counter question. Since the audience was already informed that the question is sexist, the obvious answer to who is taking care of the baby would be the father. Wong supports this interpretation when she responds with hostility. The pitch of her voice is raised and there are short pauses between the first few words that highlight her performed exasperation. Even as she goes back into an upright posture, her eyebrows are brought down and close together to indicate her anger.

The climax of the joke occurs when Wong shatters the first interpretation (the father is taking care of the child) by revealing that the child was not supervised by anyone but distracted by television. This incongruity between the first interpretation, which is the persuasive message, and the punchline is the source of the humor in this bit. Interestingly, Wong never states that the question was sexist because men and women should share the duty of supervising their children. Instead, it is skillfully and subtly implied in order to engage the audience by encouraging the audience members to fill in the reason *why* the question is sexist in the first place. As mentioned in Chapter 2.6., the importance of subtlety has been confirmed by scholars. This cue for reflection engages them successfully, since they would otherwise not be surprised by the revelation at the end.

The final bit of Wong's performances that this thesis will investigate is taken from "Baby Cobra". Unlike the previous two comedic bits that were analyzed in this Chapter, this one primarily deals with racial issues. The following transcription demonstrates how Wong addresses issues of equal payment by talking about financial stability:

I want my husband to get us to, like, a certain point financially. I wanna get to the point as a couple where I can comfortably afford sliced mango [Pause] [audience laughs] I'm talking about-I'm talking about that Whole Foods mango. That ten dollar a box Whole Foods mango that was sliced by white people.

[Fig. 20] [audience laughs] That's the kind of income bracket I'm striving for. [audience laughs] That's when you know you've made it: When you're eating mango that was sliced by a dude named Noah. [audience laughs and applauds] I want Noah mango, Rebecca kiwi, Danielle pineapple [Wong [1:45-2:22](#)].

In order to make sense of how this bit relates to racial issues, it should be examined in segments. First, Wong broaches the topic of financial stability. She underlines that her aim is to be able to afford sliced mango, a statement that elicits laughter from the audience. The reason this is humorous is because the affordability of sliced fruit is usually not connected to financial goals. Hence, the incongruity between her aim and sliced mango is perceived as humorous. This step grabs the audience's attention, as the question arises how these two topics are linked. Wong continues to



Fig. 19: Slicing gesture: Ali Wong.

explain that the price of sliced mango is linked to the ethnicity of the workers who produce it, i.e. white people. By pointing out that products made by white people are more expensive and status symbols of a wealthy lifestyle, Wong also implies something else. Namely, her comment suggests that the labor of white people is valued more than that of non-white people. Therefore, without specifically mentioning that different worth associated with people of different social groups, Wong draws attention to the notion that products made by white people are more expensive and thus more desirable for her. This speaks to an issue of social inequality that the audience members must be aware of, as they do not respond with confusion but with laughter. The bit ends with Wong listing three types of fruits in combinations with names that are presumably connotated with white people: Noah, Rebecca and Danielle. Throughout the bit, Wong uses her right hand to make a gesture from left to right, as if slicing. Interestingly, this motor gesture is not used when she says the word, but instead deployed occasionally to incorporate movement into her performance.

However, it is important to note that Wong does not specifically mention this racial inequality and portrays the sliced mango as a luxury item in her performance. Thus, it is possible that the bit has the reverse effect on the stereotypes which are invoked in the performance. This is because comedy can not only be a tool for social critique, but also reinforce already existing power dynamics and stereotypes (Chattoo 512). Thus, it is questionable whether this bit succeeds in reflecting upon the underlying inequality or if it reinforces the idea that the labor of white people should be perceived as more valuable.

Overall, Ali Wong incorporates multiple forms of body communication to engage her audience. She further engages the audience through the use of pauses and non-verbal cues. In her performances, Wong is both overt and subtle about the social issues she discusses. Especially when it comes to gender roles, her performances persuasively highlight the differences that are made between men and women in today's society. Her performances also demonstrate how humor generated through incongruity between expectations and result engages the audience and keeps audience members involved in the performance.

4.3. James Acaster

The first British comedian whose performances will be analyzed in terms of audience engagement and persuasion is James Acaster. A review of his comedy show called "Reset," which is where this video recording is taken from, describes Acaster as "one of the most consistently brilliant and distinctive comedians of his generation" (Bennett). The video-recording of his performance features a segment that focuses on the topics of imperialism and colonialism, as well as the effects these concepts still have today. Thus, Acaster's performance fulfills the criteria of political comedy for the purposes of this thesis.

The video recording starts with Acaster already on stage and about to start his next comedic bit. Acaster is standing with his left foot on the ground, the right one slightly raised on a footrest of a stool. His upper body is hunched forward and his posture is

relaxed. His body communicates ease, as if he were bowing down to the audience. Like a storyteller, he starts the bit by saying:

“A long time ago – but not long enough ago that it is not still very relevant [audience laughs] – everyone in Britain got in a big old boat, and we set sail and we robbed, and this will sound far-fetched, *everyone in the world*. [audience laughs] Do you remember that? What a spree that was? Do you remember the great heist? What a spree [audience laughs]. (Acaster [0:00-0:20](#)).

This short introduction into this bit serves as a kind of thesis statement for the persuasive message. British colonialism/imperialism is verbally framed as a criminal undertaking through the use of terms, such as “robbed”, “heist”, “spree” (Acaster [0:10-0:17](#)). What makes this specific occasion stand out, according to Acaster, is the scope of it. By claiming that Britain robbed “everyone in the world” (Acaster [0:12](#)), he identifies the scenario as the colonial past. The relevance of this event is also commented on by his first line, which elicits laughter from the audience. The



Fig. 20: Posture: James Acaster.

initial phrase “a long time ago” (Acaster [0:00](#)) references the commonly known opening text of the Star Wars franchise. This intertextual reference alludes to the subject of his performance as the protagonists of the Star Wars movie franchise oppose an evil empire. Acaster derives humor from this otherwise typical beginning to a fantastical story by immediately interrupting it with a mundane remark on the topicality of the story. In response, the audience laughs at the unexpected disruption of the generic storytelling device. Following his statement, Acaster moves towards the audience while asking a series of rhetorical questions that seem cheerful and nostalgic. Acaster achieves this effect by increasing the rhythm and pitch of his voice. He further engages the audience by moving towards it, before returning to his original position. His use of an inclusive “we” (Acaster [0:08](#)) and the direct address of the audience enhance this interactive element of his performance. The audience responds with laughter again, arguably due to the incongruity between his cheerful demeanor and the shocking description of colonial policy as criminal activity.

Acaster continues in the following manner: “And we got all the swag, didn’t we? And we took it back to old blighty and we hid it, this is the clever part, we hid it [exhales] in a museum. [audience laughter] [Fig. 22] [Fig. 23] Last place anyone looks” (Acaster



Fig. 21: Whispering: James Acaster.



Fig. 22: Symbolic gesture: James Acaster.

[0:20-0:35](#)). This segment clarifies that the stolen items he referred to earlier are the cultural artefacts from all across the world that are nowadays exhibited in British museums. Acaster also demonstrates the shared responsibility of the audience, himself and the original perpetrators through the continuous use of the inclusive “we” (Acaster [0:20](#)). This perception is strongly enforced by the gestures he uses at the end of the sentence.

As can be seen in figure 22, when saying that the items were hidden in a museum, Acaster brings his right hand up to the face and covers the side of the microphone with it. This gesture is meant to imply that he is whispering a secret to the audience. It is immediately followed by Acaster dropping his left hand with the microphone and putting his right hand in front of his chin, extending the index finger to cover his mouth [Fig 23]. This symbolic gesture is conventionally used to indicate silence or secrecy. The implied meaning is that the audience is not meant to share this information, lest the stolen goods might be found. His posture supports this impression of complicity, his back arching forward to make him appear smaller and easier to hide. The audible exhale just before the location is revealed is reminiscent

of a suppressed laughter, signaling the audience that the following information is funny to the comedian.

Acaster tells the audience that “all them countries we stole stuff from are asking for their stuff back. Uh-uh. Don’t look worried. We’re totally saying a blanket no [Fig 24] [audience laughs]” (Acaster [0:35-0:44](#)). He finishes his statement with another symbolic gesture of his right hand. The index and middle finger are extended, creating a ‘V’-shape [Fig 24]. This symbol is known as the victory-sign, indicating victory over the other countries. Acaster uses it to mock the idea of stealing cultural artefacts as victory.



Fig. 23: Victory sign: James Acaster.

At this point, Acaster changes his posture and starts standing upright on stage. This change in posture is accompanied by a change in perspective – he no longer takes on a stage persona that ironically perceives the consequences of colonialism and imperialism as victory. He continues by acknowledging a potential response from the audience towards the accusation of complicity in the following way:

“Now, a few of you are sitting there, I can see your angry faces, like: ‘So what? Finders keepers, shut up. And [audience laughs] listen, in your defense, ‘finders keepers, shut up’ has worked very well for us so far. [audience laughs] Gents does and knocked it out of the park ‘finders keepers, shut up’. (Acaster [0:48-1:05](#)).

As was mentioned in Chapter 2.6., acknowledging the audience and accounting for potential reactions is a necessary step to ensure likability. Thus, Acaster acknowledges the possible response and defuses it in a non-hostile manner. Presumably, this part served to present the weak argument for Britain maintaining

possession of the artefacts, rather than address an actual reaction during the performance. Acaster then outlines the opposing argument:

But even you got to admit, right, if someone stole something off you as an individual, it's your favorite thing and they nicked it, and you knew who had nicked it by the way, for a fact, it's not a hunch, you *know* who's stolen it. Everybody knows, it's common knowledge. Some people have written books about it. They have definitely nicked it off you [audience laughs] (Acaster [1:08-1:25](#)).

Here, Acaster keeps addressing the fictive conversational partner and compares the theft of cultural artefacts to private property. He outlines how obvious the property claim is and supports it with articulatory parameters and simple gestures. For example, when saying "it's not a hunch" (Acaster [1:16](#)), he shakes his head to indicate disagreement non-verbally. In contrast, he puts stress on the word "know" (Acaster [1:18](#)) to emphasize the certainty of it. Overall, this line of argumentation repeatedly shows how obvious the case from Acaster's perspective is. By continuously using the pronoun "you" (Acaster [1:08-1:25](#)) and pointing into the audience, Acaster creates a verbal and gestural connection to the audience to foster engagement. He continues this comparison by referring to how these artefacts are parts of exhibitions nowadays:

You go to ask for it back and they're just standing there, they're not even running away, they're twice your size, they ain't scared. They haven't even bothered to hide it. They've done the opposite of hiding it actually. They put it in a glass display case. [audience laughs] [Fig. 25] It's lit from seven different angles, real clear what it is. There's no disputing it's the same thing that once belonged to you cause there's a plaque [Fig. 26] next to it, [audience laughs] says exactly what it is at the top of the plaque, and then a paragraph underneath about how important it is to you and your culture [audience laughs] You'd be forgiven for thinking 'Hm, I'm pretty sure they haven't got a leg to stand on here. [audience laughs] Probably gonna take this home today (Acaster [1:25-2:01](#))



Fig. 25: Pictograph: James Acaster.



Fig. 24: Deictic gesture: James Acaster.

Acaster highlights how one-sided the argument is and draws attention to the fact that no one is trying to deny the origin of the artefact in a museum. Instead, he uses gestures to demonstrate how unambiguously the ownership is shown. Two gestures are particularly noteworthy in his description. Acaster uses a deictic gesture to point to the glass display case in which the stolen item is exhibited and draws a circle around it with his hand to indicate the surrounding lights [Fig 25.]. Then, he extends thumb and index finger on his right hand to create a pictograph of the plaque he is mentioning [Fig 26].

In this manner, Acaster visualizes his argument and creates a narrative about a stolen item that can be clearly traced to its original owner. As such, he engages the audience by using his body to communicate and indicate the verbal description he gives of the scenario. In both instances, the audience responds with laughter, showing involvement in the narrative. He ends the description with the use of an instant character, taking on the character of someone who has come to retrieve an item that has been taken from him.

Acaster continues the narrative by creating a scene in which one instant character, representing the people whose cultural heritage the artefacts are, and another one, representing the British, interacting (Acaster [2:03-3:11](#)). He starts by pretending to knock on Britain's door [Fig. 27]. After waiting a moment, the character makes a brief appeal to Britain that he can retrieve his belongings. Acaster states that the reaction other countries would have most likely expected would be to say "absolutely, you can have them back. We stole them after all" (Acaster [2:26-2:31](#)) only to be met with a different reaction.



Fig. 26: Knocking gesture: James Acaster.

Acaster changes his performance to the other instant character. His mouth is slightly open and his eyebrows close together and sunken. His face communicates shock [Fig. 28]. He responds with "I don't think so. [audience laughs] We're still looking at it [audience laughs]" (Acaster [2:32-2:39](#)). The astonishment elicits laughter from the audience. "Yeah, just looking at it these days. And there's a lot of other people who haven't seen it yet we'd quite like to show it to. [audience laughs] So not right now, selfish [audience laughs]," (Acaster [2:49-2:58](#)) Acaster continues.



Fig. 27: Shocked expression: James Acaster.

This second instant character serves to highlight the absurdity of the British response to returning artefacts that were taken from other countries in Britain's past. He invites the complainant into the museum to show him the artefact in question, mocking him with an cackling laughter before reminding him to "stand behind the rope" (James Acaster [2:59-3:09](#)). Acaster then finishes the bit by claiming that the reason why the British Museum is busy are the number of people who came to inspect their own cultural heritage.

In conclusion, Acaster uses body communication and instant characters, as well as a narrative that directly asks the audience to put itself into the perspective of someone whose property had been taken away. Acaster simplifies the effects of a structural injustice in the form of a narrative on a personal level. By reducing the number of people who have been affected by colonialism to a single person, who attempts to reclaim stolen property, Acaster makes the injustice more personal and relatable to the audience. The persuasive message is that these cultural artefacts belong to the countries and people from whom they were taken away. Acaster makes fun of the argument for Britain holding onto these items and exemplifies through his comedy the absurdity of such behavior. Although Acaster highlights this absurdity on the personal level, the audience can then transfer the insight into the issue and how it affects people back to the structural level. His performance thus engages the audience and successfully elicits laughter. Presumably, the audience agrees with his presentation of the issue.

4.4. Guz Khan

The second British and last comedian whose performance will be analyzed in this thesis is Guz Khan. He is best known for his role in the comedy series "Man like Mobeen" which is produced by the BBC (Tate). In an interview with Gabriel Tate for the *Evening Standard*, Khan describes comedy as "a re-education process, and a tool to bring people together" (Tate). This perception of comedy as an instrument for education and social harmony is in line with comedy's use for social critique. As a Muslim of Pakistani descent, Khan does not fit the conventional image of a white comic. His performances, much like the BBC series mentioned before, deals with

topics of race, marginalization and stereotypes. For this reason, Khan's performance fits the criteria of political comedy as outlined for this thesis. In the video-recording analyzed in this Chapter, Khan discusses racial stereotyping and how media representation affects public perception of marginalized communities. The performance was given as part of the "Live at the Apollo" show, a stand-up comedy program by BBC that features a variety of performers.

The video recording starts in the midst of Khan's performance. This is evident by the fact that laughter from the audience is fading. This indicates the audience's reaction to a previous joke that was not part of the recording. Accordingly, Khan does not introduce himself but begins with a new comedic bit. He starts this bit by stating that: "One of the worst parts about terrorism is how it's got people doubting my credibility. People I have known my whole life, alright?" (Khan [0:00-0:06](#)). In



Fig. 28: Artefactual communication: Guz Khan.

this way, Khan introduces the topic of how global terrorism affects the perception of Muslims. This connection is visibly represented by a form of artefactual communication by Khan. As part of his attire, Khan wears a cap with a bomb on it [Fig. 29]. It is unlikely a coincidence that he is wearing the cap with the backside, which has the lit bomb on it, turned to the front. As an object of terrorist activity, the bomb visually signifies the concept of terrorism as a whole. By incorporating this symbol into his attire, Khan links his identity as a Muslim to the media depiction of Muslims as potential terrorists.

Khan continues by introducing the character of Maud, who may possibly be a fictive character he invented for the purposes of his narrative. He describes her as his neighbor who "has known [him] for 27 years" (Khan [0:07-0:12](#)). Here, Khan establishes that Maud is a person who knows him well by emphasizing the length of time. This sets up a familiarity between them that Khan will later refer to in order to make his argument about representation of Muslims in the media. Khan then states

that “because of the media narrative, the way the media portrays Muslims, minorities, black lives matter, the world is very divisive. Who in this room just wants to live and



Fig. 29: Audience: Guz Khan.

get along? Make some noise” (Khan [0:12-0:21](#)). This statement represents the theme of Khan’s performance: The media portrayal of minorities, in this particular case Muslims, reinforces racial stereotypes. Khan also engages the audience in this part by asking it to participate by “[making] some noise” (Khan [0:21](#)). This interaction not only engages the audience, but it also highlights the similarity to Khan as an individual as someone who “just wants to live and get along” (Khan [0:19](#)). Thus, Khan creates a sense of shared community with the audience. The audience responds with cheers and applause.

The video recording features a top-down camera perspective of the audience’s response [Fig. 30]. Although the audience’s reaction is difficult to observe due to the distance of the camera and the absence of light, the response is audible. The video recording also offers a brief indication of the large number of people in the audience. “*Exactly*, we all want to, alright,” Khan says to affirm the audience’s reaction, “but the media has people doubting me, alright” (Khan [0:23-0:28](#)). The high pitch of his voice when he says “exactly” (Khan [0:23](#)) emphasizes his agreement. By agreeing with the audience, Khan confirms that he too shares their desire of living together harmonically. This is put in contrast to the media representation which leads to people “doubting” (Khan [0:27](#)) him. Khan relates the effect this has back to Maud: “So I have had my neighbor 27 years, we got a r- – it’s nice simple thing, it’s a neighborly thing to do, alright – a regular Friday wheelie bin ritual” (Khan [0:28-0:35](#)).

This part of his performance reiterates the relationship between Khan and his neighbor. It also serves to set up the narrative that follows.

He continues with the following narrative to illustrate his point: “We grab the wheelie bin [Fig. 31], drag it down to the end of the driveway, have a quick natter, go back in- it’s what neighbors do, isn’t it? It’s what neighbors do, alright” (Khan [0:36-0:42](#)). So far, Khan’s interaction with the audience was mostly verbal. In this moment, however, Khan begins the narrative by illustrating the act of taking the mentioned wheelie bin. This is done by the use of a kinetograph when he extends his right hand to the side and pretends to take hold of an imaginary object. Khan thus engages the audience by incorporating his body into the narrative by acting out the scene for them.



Fig. 30: Kinetograph: Guz Khan.

Khan notes that this scene diverges from his usual routine with his neighbor by stating that “this particular Friday – Maud is like clockwork – but she was late” (Khan [0:42-0:46](#)). This anomaly is framed as important and is meant to have the audience wonder about the reason. Maud is then inserted into the narrative with an explosive non-verbal sound, and described as “stressed” and “flustered” (Khan [0:58-1:01](#)). Khan then acts out the conversation between Maud and himself. Maud is represented through an instant character that has a different voice. Khan changes his accent and speaks with an increased volume and higher pitch. This vocal change not only helps identify who is speaking during the scene, but it also engages the audience, which responds to the first line he says as Maud with laughter. He later identifies her as “from Birmingham” (Khan [1:24-1:25](#)), indicating the origin of her accent. Their conversation about terrorist attacks on the news ends with Maud questioning Khan’s relationship to the terrorist, asking: “You’re nothing like them, are you?” (Khan [1:36-1:41](#)).

Khan's immediate response is through facial communication. His mouth is slightly open, and his eyebrows are close together [Fig. 32]. His face communicates surprise and shock. When he responds with "Maud, you know me. 27 years, baby. I'm nothing like them. Stop buying into the media narrative. Stop buying into the news. I'm me, Guz, your neighbor" (Khan [1:44-1:53](#)), the pitch of his voice is raised. By making use of this articulatory parameter, Khan reflects the shock in his vocal performance. He also repeats the length of their neighborly relationship to communicate to the audience that the media's representation of Muslims has such an impact that even someone as close to him as his neighbor would be suspecting him as a terrorist.



Fig. 31: Surprised expression: Guz Khan.

The explanation as to why Maud would be suspicious is then related to Khan's appearance. Maud states that "from very specific angles [Fig 33.] [audience laughs] That's a very Bin Laden look you [Khan] have got going on there [audience laughs]" (Khan [1:53-2:01](#)). Maud's assessment of Khan is marked as based on his appearance.



Fig. 32: Assessment parody: Guz Khan.

The comparison to Osama Bin Laden highlights the judgement of Khan's skin color and beard. At the same time, Khan mocks the assessment by exaggerating the performance of it. He leans to one side, raises his right hand with thumb and index finger extended, as if he were measuring something [Fig 33.]. His face communicates intensity through the squinting of his eyes, yet further adds to the parody of it, as Khan visibly pushes his tongue out of the corner of his mouth. This satirical portrayal of Maud's reaction elicits laughter from the audience, as does the comparison to Bin Laden. The audience shows awareness of the inappropriateness of both, the assessment and the comical manner of the comparison. Khan specifically refers to the comparison as "racist" (Khan [2:04-2:05](#)). It further highlights the effect media representation has on

Maud, who acts as a stand-in for the non-marginalized British society, and how appalled Khan is by the accusation.

Khan portrays Maud's reaction as superficially understanding, indicated by the statement: "Guz, I know, I'm just being silly, I'm just being silly" (Khan [2:05-2:08](#)). However, this comprehension is immediately dispelled by Maud's request that "if you



Fig. 33: Symbolic gesture: Guz Khan.



Fig. 34: Confusion: Guz Khan.

[Khan] hear anything before the news does: [Fig 34.] just let me know [audience laughs] [Fig 35] [audience applauds]" (Khan [2:12-2:16](#)).

Here, Khan indicates that Maud still suspects he has a connection to terrorism by inferring that if he could be aware of future terrorist attacks before the news are. This statement is accompanied by a symbolic gesture. Khan closes his left eye and taps the side of his nose with the index finger of his right hand [Fig 34]. Conventionally, this sign indicates a secret understanding that is only inferred instead of overtly stated. The gesture suggests that Maud understands that Khan cannot openly acknowledge his ties to terrorism. The implication is clear to the audience, who responds to the gesture with laughter. Khan contrasts this symbolic gesture with facial communication that represents his reaction to it. Again, his open mouth and sunken eyebrows are indicators of surprise and disbelief. He is visibly confused by Maud's insinuation. Khan moves his arms behind his back, the microphone in hand, to draw the attention of the audience to his body communication.

He relays his confusion to the audience directly, asking it: “Live at the Apollo, what does Maud think is going on here? [audience laughs] That all Muslims are in one WhatsApp group?” (Khan [2:26-2:34](#)). Khan comments on how ridiculous this idea is by explaining that this group would contain too many participants to be useful due to the size of the global Muslim community. He further adds to this absurdity by creating an instant character who pretends to inquire about a person named Imran only to find that “there is 33 million Imrans in the *group* [audience laughs]” (Khan [2:42-2:48](#)). Khan increases the volume of his voice when he says “group” (Khan [2:48](#)) to underline his frustration with said absurdity.

In summary, Khan makes use of body communication and a short narrative to illustrate the impact the media has on how Muslims are perceived. Humor is derived from the absurdity of this overly negative representation in the media and how it is uncritically accepted by the character Maud. Khan acts out reactions and dialogue to engage the audience in the narrative. Through his facial communication and appeals to the audience, Khan further involves the audience in the process. As a result, the audience cheers and laughs at his performance, indicating successful engagement of the audience.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

In conclusion, this analysis supports the importance of audience engagement for persuasion and demonstrates the inherent complexity of the relationship between humor and persuasion by drawing from previous literature from the field of humor research. This thesis investigated what strategies of engagement successful stand-up comedians deploy in their performances. The underlying assumption of this thesis is that, based on entertainment-education theory and humor research, successful engagement is a crucial factor for the impact humor can have on persuasion.

The most notable engagement strategy present within all performances is the use of succinct narratives that break abstract social issues down to a concrete, often personal level. These scenes tell a brief, complete story that often includes several characters which are portrayed by the comedian. In this way, the performer ridicules

a position by drawing the attention to logical fallacies and absurdities of that position. For example, in his criticism of British Imperialism and the controversy regarding the possession of cultural artefacts, James Acaster compares the issue to ordinary theft. Thus, he draws attention to the injustice committed and highlights the absurdity of defending such a position. The audience then transfers this insight back to the more abstract structural level. In this way, these scenes further help to convey subtle social critique as they exemplify issues in order to ridicule them, instead of lecturing the audience. Moreover, the comedian's stage-persona does not have to be a character of this scene but acts as a narrator and commentator throughout it, as the example by Acaster shows. A recurring feature of these scenes is the use of exaggeration. Lewis Black, for example, employs a quasi-caricatural portrayal of anger to entertain his audience throughout his performance. Similarly, Acaster's depiction of British Imperialism as a criminal enterprise is hyperbolic. In both cases, the exaggeration is humorous because the inappropriateness of the exaggeration makes the absurdity of the scene even more obvious.

At the same time, comedians use their body and vocal parameters to convey information to the audience. Through their physicality, performers express emotional states that reveal how the audience is supposed to interpret a statement. An example of this technique can be observed in Khan's performance, when he expresses disbelief to the audience in response to Maud's statement. In this manner, Khan draws the audience's attention to the previous statement and marks it as absurd. Since the audience wishes to be entertained and depends on the additional information conveyed through body communication to make sense of the joke, audience members focus on the performer which makes this technique highly engaging. Furthermore, because emotional responses are expressed through the comedian's body communication, the audience relates to the performer's stance on the presented issue. Audience reactions usually coincide with those moments of a performance where the comedians make use of these techniques. This suggests that these strategies are successful in engaging the audience.

All in all, while this thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing research on the complex relation between humor and persuasion, further research in this field is necessary.⁴ Without a conclusive theoretical framework and established analytical tools, specifically adapted to the unique context of stand-up comedy, performance analysis in this field is in danger of neglectful oversimplification and oversight. Thus, future research will have to redress these difficulties.

As was mentioned in the introduction, the research question of this thesis was which strategies of engagements successful stand-up comedians apply in their performances to convey a persuasive critique of sociopolitical ills. While performance analysis has offered insights into how comedians can successfully engage the audience, the findings in this thesis are also limited by a number of obstacles that have become apparent during the research.

First, as Chapter 2 on the relationship between humor and persuasion mentions, the concrete impact humor has on persuasive messages is still a matter of academic debate. While this thesis supports the viewpoint that humor has the potential for persuasion, the inconclusive theoretical framework of this question needs to be acknowledged. In order to overcome this barrier, humor research must further investigate this topic and provide a theoretical framework that allows for performances to be analyzed. In particular, this requires a comedy-specific approach to performance analysis. This thesis tries to bridge this gap by drawing from the neighboring fields of theater studies and live poetry.

Second, while the analysis presented within this thesis hopefully demonstrates how comedians successfully engage their audience, persuasion cannot be observed through close analysis alone. This would require audience interviews and post-performance interviews to determine potential attitude change. Moreover, in order to account for the sleeper effect of comedy (see Chapter 2.3.), these post-performance interviews would need to be repeated after a longer period of time has passed.

⁴ The book "Audience engagement in the performing arts: a critical analysis" by Ben Walmsley (2019) might offer important insights into this issue, however, it was regrettably unavailable at the time this thesis was written.

Furthermore, while I have used responses from the audience as an indicator for audience engagement in the performance analyses in Chapter 4, this approach does not provide any insight into the discounting mechanism. Without acknowledgement of this process, it is impossible to determine if persuasion was successful. Thus, the argument can be made that while the audience was successfully engaged, this does not correlate with successful persuasion due to discounting. Unfortunately, this was one of the shortcomings this thesis was unable to address.

(27.373 words)

6. Bibliography

6.1. Primary sources

- Acaster James. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. Youtube. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Black, Lewis. "Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010." Online video. Youtube. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRSVvcUjl_o>.
- Khan, Guz. "We need to talk about the whole Muslim/terrorism stereotype thing | Live At The Apollo - BBC". Youtube. Youtube. 18. April 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4h79ExDpg8>>.
- Wong, Ali. "Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke." Online video. Youtube. Youtube. 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.

6.2. Secondary sources

- Aarons, Debra, and Marc Mierowsky. "How to Do Things with Jokes: Speech Acts in Standup Comedy." *European Journal of Humour Research* 5.4 (2017): 158-68.
- Balme, Christopher B. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*. 1. Publ. ed. Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Bennet, Steve. "James Acaster: Reset." *Chortle*. 15 April 2016. <https://www.chortle.co.uk/review/2016/04/15/30298/james_acaster:_reset>.
- Boukes, Mark, Hajo G. Boomgaarden, Marjolein Moorman, and Claes H. De Vreese. "At Odds: Laughing and Thinking? The Appreciation, Processing, and Persuasiveness of Political Satire." *Journal Of Communication* 65.5 (2015): 721-744.
- Chattoo, Caty Borum. "A funny matter: Toward a framework for understanding the function of comedy in social change " *HUMOR*, 32.3 (2018): 499-523.
- DeCamp, Elise. "Humoring the audience: performance strategies and persuasion in Midwestern American stand-up comedy." In: *HUMOR*, 28.3 (2015): 449-467.
- Double, Oliver. *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy*. Second ed. London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2014.
- Jennings, Freddie J., Josh C. Bramlett, and Benjamin R. Warner. "Comedic Cognition: The Impact of Elaboration on Political Comedy Effects." *Western Journal of Communication* 83.3 (2019): 365-82.
- Krefting, Rebecca. *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.
- Lawrason, Lisa. "Laughing Our Way to a Stronger Democracy: Political Comedy's Potential to Equalize Political Interest in Community College Students", *Journal of Political Science Education*, 13.3 (2017): 279-294.
- Marshall, P. David and Kim Barbour. "Making Intellectual Room for Persona Studies: a New Consciousness and a Shifted Perspective." *Persona Studies* 1.1 (2015): 1-12.
- Martin, Rod. *The Psychology of Humor*. Elsevier Academic Press, 2007.
- Nabi, Robin L, Emily Moyer-Gusé, and Sahara Byrne. "All Joking Aside: A Serious Investigation into the Persuasive Effect of Funny Social Issue Messages." *Communication Monographs* 74.1 (2007): 29-54.

- Novak, Julia. *Live Poetry: an Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance*. Amstertam [u.a.]: Rodopi, 2011.
- Slater, Michael D. D., and Donna Rouner. "Entertainment-education and Elaboration Likelihood: Understanding the Processing of Narrative Persuasion." *Communication Theory* 12.2 (2002): 173-91.
- Tate, Gabriel. "Guz Khan interview: 'When I was growing up, either you made people laugh or you got beaten up'." *Evening Standard*. 23 Jan. 2019. <<https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/guz-khan-interview-comedy-man-like-mobeen-a4046451.html>>.
- Vincentelli, Elisabeth. "Review: Between Disbelief and Despair, Lewis Black's 'Black to the Future'." *New York Times*. 20 Sept. 2016. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/21/theater/review-lewis-black-black-to-the-future.html>>.
- Walter, Nathan, Michael J Cody, Larry Zhiming Xu, and Sheila T Murphy. "A Priest, a Rabbi, and a Minister Walk into a Bar: A Meta-Analysis of Humor Effects on Persuasion." *Human Communication Research* 44.4 (2018): 343-373.
- Young, Dannagal Goldthwaite. "The Privileged Role of the Late-Night Joke: Exploring Humor's Role in Disrupting Argument Scrutiny." *Media Psychology*, 11.1. (2008): 119–142.
- Zinoman, Jason. "The Strategic Mind of Ali Wong". *New York Times*. 3 May. 2018. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/arts/television/ali-wong-netflix-hard-knock-wife.html>>.

7. Table of Figures

- Figure 1a: Ricky Gervais performing in casual clothing. *IMDb – Internet Movie Database*. Ricky Gervais: *Humanity* (2018). 5. Feb. 2020. <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7830574/mediaviewer/rm1682472704>>.
- Figure 1b: John Mulaney wearing a suit. *IMDb – Internet Movie Database*. John Mulaney in John Mulaney: *Kid Gorgeous at Radio City* (2018). 5. Feb. 2020. <<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1825214/mediaviewer/rm3886697472>>.
- Figure 2: Stop: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRSVvcUjl_o>.
- Figure 3: Waving motion: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRSVvcUjl_o>.
- Figure 4: Visible frustration: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRSVvcUjl_o>.
- Figure 5: Disbelief: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020.
- Figure 6: Happiness: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020.
- Figure 7: Anger: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020.
- Figure 8: Opinion: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020.
- Figure 9: Instant character 1: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRSVvcUjl_o>.
- Figure 10: Instant character 2: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRSVvcUjl_o>.
- Figure 11: Final outburst: Lewis Black. Lewis Black. “Lewis Black Stand Up – 2010.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 12. May 2017. 6 Feb 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRSVvcUjl_o>.
- Figure 12: Hard Knock Wife: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. “Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.
- Figure 13: Baby Cobra: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. “Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.
- Figure 14: Facial Communication: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. “Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.
- Figure 15: Male comics: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. “Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.
- Figure 16: Deictic gesture: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. “Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke.” Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube, 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.

- Figure 17: Audience reaction: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. "Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.
- Figure 18: Spatial gesture: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. "Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.
- Figure 19: Disbelief: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. "Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.
- Figure 20: Slicing gesture: Ali Wong. Ali Wong. "Best of: Ali Wong | Netflix Is A Joke." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 07. June 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY5-8kvMEh0>>.
- Figure 21: Posture: James Acaster. James Acaster. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Figure 22: Whispering: James Acaster. James Acaster. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Figure 23: Symbolic gesture: James Acaster. James Acaster. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Figure 24: Victory sign: James Acaster. James Acaster. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Figure 25: Deictic gesture: James Acaster. James Acaster. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Figure 26: Pictograph: James Acaster. James Acaster. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Figure 27: Knocking gesture: James Acaster. James Acaster. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Figure 28: Shocked expression: James Acaster. James Acaster. "James Acaster On The Absurdity Of The British Empire." Online video. *Youtube*. Youtube. 12 November 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x73PkUvArJY>>.
- Figure 29: Artefactual communication: Guz Khan. Guz Khan. "We need to talk about the whole Muslim/terrorism stereotype thing | Live At The Apollo - BBC". *Youtube*. Youtube. 18. April 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4h79ExDpg8>>.

- Figure 30: Audience: Guz Khan. Guz Khan. "We need to talk about the whole Muslim/terrorism stereotype thing | Live At The Apollo - BBC". Youtube. Youtube. 18. April 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4h79ExDpg8>>.
- Figure 31: Kinetograph: Guz Khan. Guz Khan. "We need to talk about the whole Muslim/terrorism stereotype thing | Live At The Apollo - BBC". Youtube. Youtube. 18. April 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4h79ExDpg8>>.
- Figure 32: Surprised expression: Guz Khan. Guz Khan. "We need to talk about the whole Muslim/terrorism stereotype thing | Live At The Apollo - BBC". Youtube. Youtube. 18. April 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4h79ExDpg8>>.
- Figure 33: Assessment parody: Guz Khan. Guz Khan. "We need to talk about the whole Muslim/terrorism stereotype thing | Live At The Apollo - BBC". Youtube. Youtube. 18. April 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4h79ExDpg8>>.
- Figure 34: Symbolic gesture: Guz Khan. Guz Khan. "We need to talk about the whole Muslim/terrorism stereotype thing | Live At The Apollo - BBC". Youtube. Youtube. 18. April 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4h79ExDpg8>>.
- Figure 35: Confusion: Guz Khan. Guz Khan. "We need to talk about the whole Muslim/terrorism stereotype thing | Live At The Apollo - BBC". Youtube. Youtube. 18. April 2019. 6 Feb 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4h79ExDpg8>>.

8. Zusammenfassung – Abstract

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Rolle, die Interaktion mit der Zuschauerschaft auf die Überzeugungsfähigkeit von Stand-Up Comedy mit soziopolitischem Inhalt hat. Während Humor in der Vergangenheit oftmals mit Hinblick auf den Unterhaltungswert und die Entstehung und Theorie von Humor untersucht wurde, versucht diese Diplomarbeit stattdessen das komplexe Wechselwirkungssystem zwischen Überzeugungsfähigkeit und Humor darzustellen. Das Ziel dabei ist es jene Vorgehensweisen zu untersuchen, mit deren Hilfe Stand-Up Comedians ihr Publikum fesseln und dessen Aufmerksamkeit auf sich ziehen. Die Forschungsfrage dieser Diplomarbeit ist dabei, welche Strategien Comedians dabei anwenden und wie diese sich auf die Überzeugungskraft der Comedy-Aufführung auswirken. Der Fokus auf Stand-Up Comedy mit politischem Inhalt ist dabei mit der Funktion von Comedy als soziale Kritik begründet.

Um diese Forschungsfrage zu beantworten werden Konzepte und Theorien aus dem Bereich der Humorforschung und dem Forschungsfeld der Performance Studies herangezogen und erklärt. Indem die wichtigsten Erkenntnisse dieser Bereiche kurz erwähnt und erläutert werden, soll gezeigt werden, welchen positiven oder negativen Effekt Humor auf die Überzeugungskraft des Comedians hat. Zusätzlich werden Methoden, mit deren Hilfe Aufführungen in der Theaterwissenschaft und dem Bereich von Live Poetry analysiert werden, vorgestellt. Besonders wichtig ist hierbei die Anwendbarkeit im Hinblick auf Stand-Up Comedy.

Anschließend werden vier Videoaufzeichnungen von professionellen Stand-Up Comedians näher untersucht, um deren Vorgehensweise zu analysieren. Dabei werden Konzepte und Theorien, die im vorherigen theoretischen Teil der Arbeit erklärt wurden, angewandt. Auf diese Weise soll gezeigt werden, wie diese Comedians ihre Zuhörerschaft ansprechen und dabei die Aufmerksamkeit des Publikums auf die überzeugende Botschaft der Aufführung lenken.