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Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle in the Light of Current
Social and Technological Trends“

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1. Introduction

A recurring question in the comedy world in the past few years has been if comedy, or humor in general, can survive in an increasingly 'sensitive' politically correct environment. Several comedians feel restricted in their craft, even regarding comedy as 'ruined'. Wagner, for example, argues that PC has a troubling influence, with big names like Jerry Seinfeld actually avoiding certain venues to play. Capurro goes so far as to claim that it has the ability to 'kill' comedy altogether. This is a powerful claim, which requires further investigation into the subject matter.

Comedy and political correctness have always been particularly entangled, since comedy can be an influential tool for shaping social attitudes, both for good and for bad. It is true that comedy promotes self-reflection and has the ability to change well-ingrained social beliefs and ways-of-life for the better (Kramer 135-137). However, if used carelessly or in an abusive manner, comedy, and humor in general, might also foster prejudice and stereotypes (Saucier et al. 124). For that reason, PC initiatives frequently target comedians and attempt to highlight certain inappropriate language or entire topics. Their hope is to positively change attitudes and beliefs through controlling and modifying the language people use (Strauts & Blanton 32). Yet, Suhr & Johnson and Harris, amongst others, maintain that the suppression of language only leads to a predominantly superficial effect and a trivialized form of activism (5, 478). Additionally, Healy demonstrates that political correctness decreases critical inquiry, which can have an adverse influence on social progress.

The critical relationship between comedy and political correctness has been exacerbated by the rise of social media and the consequently easier interaction between artists and audiences. Jenkins thoroughly discusses the participatory effect of the online environment, which provides the general public with an amplified voice for sharing ideas and opinions. He has established the term 'convergence culture' for this shift from top-down traditional media to a more democratic, collaborative online media environment. Through increased possibilities of online collaboration, social activism, such as the PC movement, has experienced significant changes both in terms of flexibility and organization (Gerbaudo 19). All these new developments need to be taken into account when discussing the relationship between comedy and political correctness and will be examined more thoroughly in chapter 2.2.

However, before being able to discuss the challenges PC culture poses for modern comedy in more detail, a general idea of both humor and laughter needs to be established. Bergson, Critchley and O'Shannon provide a valuable overview of various aspects in this context and a good understanding of humor theories in general, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.1. The same general inquiry needs to be made into the areas of political correctness and social media. In chapter 3.3, the power and effects of social media are explained, which have been discussed from various perspectives by Jenkins, Marwick and Meikle. Similarly, issues and questions relating to PC culture are taken up by Hughes, Moser and Strauts & Blanton, amongst others, which will be further elaborated in chapter 3.2.

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the ongoing debate about the effects of PC on comedy by further analyzing the current comedic environment and by focusing on two particularly controversial comedians, Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle. Both have a long-lasting history of a daring, yet successful, approach concerning their comedic material and have received considerable media attention recently due to their bits about Caitlyn Jenner and trans-people in general. Jenner's transitioning into a woman has sparked an enormous increase in media attention for the trans-community, also accompanied by hatred and intolerance from many people, particularly on social media.

The development of the two comedians over the past 15-20 years will offer insight regarding the following questions:

- Research Question 1: How is political correctness restricting comedy?
 - o How is the current environment different from the early 2000s?
 - o Does the claim that PC is restricting or even ruining comedy actually have any merit?
- Research Question 2: How has the comedy of Gervais and Chappelle changed in the past 20 years during the constant public criticism of being politically incorrect?
 - o How has it affected their fame?
 - o What is their stance on PC?
- Research Question 3: How does social media and digital technology fit into the equation of the currently perceived change in the comedic environment?

In order to discuss and answer the research questions above several stand-up comedy specials by Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle are analyzed in more detail. More specifically, two earlier shows, *Fame* and *For What It's Worth*, are compared to

more recent specials by the comedians in question, namely *Humanity*, *Deep in the Heart of Texas*, *Equanimity*, *Sticks & Stones* and *8:46*. The shows have been selected due to their relevancy in terms of material and the media presence they experienced during the time of staging and airing. Additionally, the online discourse about the comedians, particularly on the social media platform Twitter, is taken into account in the evaluation of their reception and acceptance of the comedic material and their own tweeting habits are being analyzed in more detail.

Since the 'comedy vs. PC' debate is concerned with language in relation to its social context, the methods of critical discourse analysis, performance analysis and multimodal analysis are used together with general theories on humor. CDA has been chosen over other types of discourse analyses due to the fact that it "focuses on social problems, and especially on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination" (Van Dijk 96), which is particularly suitable when discussing offensive humor that can have detrimental effects on a specific social group. In order to examine comedy shows, which are performed on a stage in front of a live audience, the method of performance analysis has been selected, as it is highly useful when dissecting specific aspects of the comedians' intentions. For that matter a structural approach is appropriate, which focuses first and foremost on the actor or, in this case, on the comedian, and on how something is being said and conveyed rather than on what is being said, which is the text (Balme 143-144). Additionally, a multimodal approach is being incorporated in order to analyze the multitude of modes of communication beyond speech or writing, such as gesture, gaze, voice, bodily movements, and nonhuman material modes (Kress 36 & Dicks n.pag.). In order to properly discuss and evaluate the primary material in the light of current social events, secondary literature and other material on comedy, PC culture, social media and their interrelation have been carefully selected and researched in appropriate libraries, online as well as offline. This material will be used for discussion and argumentation accordingly.

2. Contemporary Comedy Environment

The following chapter aims to provide the reader with a better understanding of the current situation and concerns within the comedy industry. First, the concept of comedy as an art form, in particular stand-up comedy, is introduced, since all other

aspects are connected to this field of art. Subsequently, the intersection of comedy and political correctness is focused on, specifically their long-lasting history of conflict that has developed into an allegedly existence-threatening relationship. Furthermore, the impact of social media on contemporary comedians, and also on society in general, is discussed in more detail. Lastly, the main point of interest, the comedians, Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle, is introduced and further background knowledge on them is provided. Articles and reports of various media outlets and opinions of comedians and other experts have carefully been selected in order to render an overview of the environment in which the eventual analysis of the stand-up specials takes place.

2.1. Comedy

Before the current comedy environment can be discussed in the light of political correctness and digitalization, it is essential first to establish what comedy is and what its history has been. Establishing the essence of comedy poses considerable hardship, even though the majority of people would label certain cultural products as such. This is due to the fact that comedy is incredibly difficult to be generalized. In that regard, Weitz rightfully calls comedy “an unwieldy creature of radically changeable appearance” (8). Comedies in ancient Greece differ vastly from modern television comedies like *South Park* or *The Office*, and yet, they are all considered comedies. A common denominator would be the apparent intent of making people laugh (Weitz 8). However, there is concern about such a superficial definition, since comedy is simply more complex than that. Comedies should be seen as much more than funny texts or performances. They deliver a sense of vitality and help people live their lives despite the certain mortal nature of humanity (Weitz 9).

Historically, however, comedies have often been omitted from the category of ‘art’ and placed in the lower entertainment fields. The reason for this exclusion was that it was seen as distasteful and not providing any moral pedagogy (Smith 17). This and its accused lack of intellectual character resulted in less attention in the academic fields in comparison to tragedy. It was not until the 20th century, that its cultural and intellectual worth started to be acknowledged by critics (Stott 18). The rejection of comedy as a legitimate art form was unfortunate, since it neglected the importance of humor and laughter for the individual and society. According to Smith, comedy, just

like any other art form, is concerned with ‘the intelligence of feeling’, which “realizes social membership at a higher level of intellectual development than the mere acknowledgement of fact or external truths. An intelligence of feeling is reflexive knowledge [...]” (18). He concludes that comedy, therefore, undoubtedly deserves to be in the category of ‘art’ and receive scholars’ attention. I whole-heartedly subscribe to this notion as well, as I regard comedy as extremely valuable, as it is a mirror to society and helps people understand how we interact with each other. Gervais and Chappelle are heavily involved in the art of comedy, more specifically, stand-up comedy, which makes it necessary to narrow down the area of investigation to this specific artistic craft. For a proper understanding of the subsequent parts of this thesis, it is therefore crucial to have a basic knowledge of where stand-up comedy came from and what it is nowadays.

2.1.1. Stand-Up Comedy

The roots of the art form of stand-up comedy seem debatable and rather uncertain. Ancestry can be claimed to medieval jesters, clowns or magicians (Double 20). However, Smith rejects that claim by arguing that the artistic and aesthetic form of stand-up comedy has little in common with these social figures, since they all lack essential characteristics of modern-day individuality, such as interiority, point-of-view, ego-identification or accountability. They miss the central narrative feature and intra-subjectivity of stand-up comedy to tell stories and be in the story at the same time (22). When searching for the origin of the term ‘stand-up comedy’ itself, Double encountered unexpected hardship, yet was able to trace back the term to the beginning of the 1960s, the time of Lenny Bruce and Johnny Carson. Nevertheless, this claim is still being disputed and it is assumed that the term was unofficially coined long before that (18). What is certain, however, is that there was a substantial ‘comedy boom’ in the 1980s, which saw an increase in urban showcase and road clubs that gave comedians more opportunities to perform in front of audiences. This was followed by the saturation of the market in the 1990s, through cable TV’s broadcasting of even the most average performances. However, this down phase is in the past and in the past ten years stand-up comedy has, once again, returned to being a growth industry, the 2010s even being labeled the ‘golden age’ of comedy. So even against

digital consumption headwinds like YouTube, live comedy shows are still enormously popular and have a solid place in society (Gilbert 65).

Since Double regards the Oxford Dictionary's definition of stand-up comedy, which describes it as "a comedian whose act consists of standing before an audience and telling a succession of jokes", as too simplistic and failing to recognize important features of the craft, he formulates three distinctive elements that define stand-up comedy. He claims that besides being funny, stand-up comedy needs to include direct communication between the performer and the audience; without an audience, stand-up comedy cannot exist. Furthermore, since it is always happening live, the performance aspect is another crucial element. Although there is the possibility of consuming it later on a screen from an audience perspective, the production always happens in front of a live audience. Finally, the connection to the personality of the person on stage, whether entirely made-up or through a specific version of themselves, is manifested in the performance (Double 19). The last aspect is further expanded by Smith, who argues that comedians routinely 'play' with different versions of themselves for their audience (6). These versions are seen from the perspective of other people and are able to adapt to the demands of modern society (Smith 7); they are called comedic personas.

The comedian's persona constitutes an essential aspect of their authenticity and success. No matter how well comedians represent a 'fake version' of themselves on stage, a significant part of their act "begins and ends with their own self, variously called their 'voice' or 'persona'" (Smith 7). Just as for other celebrities, the persona is crucial for a stand-up comedian's success. Yet, it is particularly critical to the intimate stand-up setting, where authenticity and realness of the comedians are central for the appreciation of the audiences (Double 77-78). The use of actual, proper jokes, e.g., one-liners, on the stand-up stage has decreased substantially over time and a commodification of the self has emerged. "We have come to expect stand-up to be a form of self-expression, so we tend to assume that the comedians we see onstage are more or less playing themselves" (Double 122). This leads to an incredibly strong connection between comedians and their personas, and it makes it almost impossible for them to change or reinvent them over time; it restricts them from being "anything else" (Smith 111). However, even though they draw from their real lives and experiences, they still only show parts of their personalities or use exaggerations to highlight certain aspects of themselves. In that regard, comic personas can be

compared to con-artists, as how they appear is not actually who they are (Smith 15). They “play to social perceptions [...] and undermine them” through an aesthetic realization of modern sociality (Smith 36). They question our fundamental ideological beliefs by asking who we are and who we are supposed to be in our given society.

Over the years, comedians have consistently pushed the boundaries of their craft. Naturally more alternative and experimental performances are the result, which go beyond the attempted definition mentioned before. Stand-up routines, which consist of smaller units or ‘bits’, have evolved into larger concepts with narrative features and new creative possibilities (Double 87-88). Furthermore, music and technology have increasingly been incorporated by comedians, which give some contemporary performances a unique feel. This highlights the innovative character of the art form and points to the difficulty of framing the term ‘stand-up comedy’, a fact that is excellently summed up by Double:

At its heart, it's a very simple form, and what makes it exciting is that the boundaries which give it definition are fuzzy and easy to break through. This makes it extremely malleable, allowing it to be tweaked, twisted or turned on its head at the whim of the individual comedian. (94)

It emphasizes the artistic freedom comedians have, which, again, increases the possible ways of transgressing social limits.

Today stand-up comedy is an important industry, not only in the economic sense, but also as an effective tool in political and cultural fields (Gilbert 65). Stand-up comedy is associated with the performance of abjection. It shows the audience who they think they are and how others perceive them, thereby shifting between subjectivity and objectivity. Placing and displacing abjection gives comedians the potential to deliver impactful criticism (Smith 109). A comedic performance is concerned with negotiations of power and “enlightens as it entertains, transforming public spaces through communal laughter” (Gilbert 65). This highlights the immense power humor entails in our society. It permeates all parts of life and touches upon every single issue human beings have dealt with in the course of time. However, as much as they can bring about positive social change, comedians are often involved in rhetorical discourses that might hinder social progress, since “the presentation of stereotypes can overshadow its critique” (González 130). The positive and negative effects of humor will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.1.

Regardless of the powerful potential for political and social implications, and also the possibility of negatively affecting society, comedians first and foremost strive

for generating laughter. Even though comedians are mostly eloquent and clever to a certain degree, Smith asserts that they should not be, and do not want to be, perceived as intellectuals or academics, which is frequently reiterated by themselves in claiming that laughter is their first priority (5). Yet, modern day stand-up comedy is substantially influenced by New Left politics, which is evident in its centeredness around issues of social equality and struggle against dominant power. Therefore, apart from making people laugh, stand-up comedians are an effective source of making sense of and helping us understand “a world full of strangers, a world where cultural conventions are relative and far from absolutely defensible, and a world where we are obliged to be sophisticated in the partial and limited worldview we have, and be sophisticated about the lives of those who are ‘different’ to us” (Smith 7). By putting the emphasis on generating laughter, comedians are also offered a way to deflect social criticism to a certain degree by using the ‘it was just a joke’ defense. Depending on the severity of the transgression such attempts are varyingly effective. Even though Gonzales claims that “making people laugh allows the performers to break social rules” (129), there are many cases that would suggest that this is not entirely true. Comedians have repeatedly crossed an apparent boundary and subsequently had to face consequences. Depending on the setting, context and severity of the transgression, the responses have ranged from public embarrassment to loss of job to even death threats (Franzini 63-64).

So clearly, stand-up comedy, as well as comedy in general, has come a long way and has evolved over time. Although it was neglected and not taken seriously by scholars in earlier times, it has been recognized as a powerful and influential phenomenon ever since. This makes comedic actions a responsible matter, which involves a certain risk, since it can cause significant damage. This is especially evident in today’s politically correct society.

2.2. PC vs Comedy

PC and comedy often find themselves at an impasse. Hence, this chapter deals with the interrelation between political correctness and comedy and highlights the incompatibility of the two concepts. As already mentioned previously, comedy is concerned with a vast variety of controversial topics. Even though humor has many positive effects like causing bonding and social solidarity among certain social groups

(Kuipers 7), it can come at the expense of other people. This bipolar characteristic of comedy has even led to comparisons to nuclear power due to its similar positive and negative consequences (Hegarty, n.pag.). Yet, unlike an atomic bomb, the effect of a joke is not solely in the hands of the joke teller since humor is open to interpretation and “no one can determine in advance how comedic freedom will travel” (Berlant & Ngai 248). In other words, there are several factors on the side of the receiver which influence the response to a joke, ranging from basic life experience, biological and psychological indicators to mood or physical condition (O’Shannon 32). Therefore, it is fairly easy for comedians to be misunderstood or taken out of context.

Comedy’s propensity to get in trouble—sometimes greater even than genres like horror or porn—gets thrown into sharper relief when we think of it as a vernacular form. What we find comedic (or just funny) is sensitive to changing contexts. It is sensitive because the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it (Berlant & Ngai 234).

As a result, what was funny once, might not be funny anymore, or the other way around, and what is funny somewhere else might not be funny in the current social or cultural context. It shows how much thought needs to be put into the comedic art form and joking around in general. Unsurprisingly, regular conflicts between comedy and political correctness are downright inevitable.

The issue of offensive humor has become a particularly aggressive talking point from the mid 2010s onwards, with a resurgence of the already past-its-prime perceived PC movement as a reaction to long neglected problems within the comedy industry. According to comedian and writer Colin Quinn, a so-called ‘anticomedy’ has gained prominence lately as a result of the comedic excesses of the past, especially the 1980s and 1990s, where homophobic and sexist jokes were a regular occurrence at comedy gigs. This ‘anticomedy’ is less about eliciting laughs and more about progressive preaching about what people are supposed to find funny, a fundamentalist approach Quinn does not agree with. Yet, a shift away from the bigotry-accepting style of the past was desperately called for, which unfortunately for many comedians has overcorrected and “suddenly, the oppressed become the oppressor” (Hennessey n.pag.). Jim Norton claims in Time Magazine “that in the new millennium, there is a seemingly endless checklist of subject matters that have been deemed inappropriate to address with humor. And by no means is that checklist final; it’s constantly changing and morphing and contradicting itself without warning” (n.pag.). Norton’s view is a clear exaggeration of the problem yet indicates the

seriousness with which the issue of political correctness is seen by many people. This has become especially apparent on college campuses, where many comedians have refused to perform, for fear of a backlash caused by their material. In 2015, Jerry Seinfeld made headlines by asserting that all students wanted to do was labelling people racist, sexist or prejudiced against any minor difference of opinion and that they did not know what they were talking about (CBS New York). This, of course, has caused numerous anti-PC advocates to side with the famous comedian on this matter and made political correctness the official enemy of comedy.

However, the aim of the political correctness movement is not the intimidation of comedians or other performers but the reasonable demand for better awareness of the potential harm they might cause with their art form. As a response to Seinfeld's criticism of college campuses' PC attitude, Berteaux argues that "there is no room in a progressive society for racist or sexist humor that perpetuates discrimination or stereotypes of minorities or women" (Nelson 9). Therefore, a more responsible approach to ridicule is expected of modern-day comedians. This approach is not only advanced by extremist PC advocates, but also by fellow comedians such as Candy Bowers, who stresses that showing responsibility for your own material does not necessarily result in certain material becoming off-limit. It simply means a culturally safe and intellectually sound attitude towards the comedic art form (Hegarty n.pag.). In order to be on the safe side, there are even comedians such as Sofie Hagen who pay social activists to check their material for possibly offensive content (Brown n.pag.). This clearly shows the strong effect the current PC environment has on comedians. Most of them try to avoid getting "boycotted, banned from appearances, or inundated with lobbying from the many activist special interest groups. Their chief interest is trying to be funny and entertaining without spending a lot of their time and energy fighting PC battles" (Franzini 52).

Apart from Seinfeld, there are numerous other well-established comedians who share his displeasure with the current direction of people's sensitivity when it comes to comedy. Among them are two of the maybe biggest names in the industry, who have both greatly contributed to the evolution of the comedic craftsmanship, Chris Rock and John Cleese. In an interview with New York Magazine Rock emphasizes that, unlike other professions, stand-up comedians practice their material in front of a crowd, which through social media can escalate quickly today if the, at that time still raw, material is somehow inappropriate (Silman n.pag.). So, there is not

really room for failing, which, however, is necessary for progressing as an artist and making it difficult for comedians to explore a daring approach to their craft.

John Cleese, who was part of the revolutionary comedy group *Monty Python*, is particularly outspoken about political correctness. In a talk at Google, he provides his thoughts on the issue:

I think political correctness started out as a very good idea, which is: let's not make jokes particularly about groups that can't look after themselves so well because of their position on the socio-economic scale. I thought that was a good idea. Then it got extended ad absurdum and I now think it's become quite pernicious, which is what happens with good ideas if they're taken too far. And I think what we have reached now is a point where anything that seems to be the slightest bit critical of any group or individual is out of bounds and what people don't understand is all humor is essentially critical. (Talks at Google)

So, Cleese clearly recognizes the well-meaning intentions of the movement, yet does not agree with the extent to which it has been 'enforced'. He highlights the important distinction between mean-spirited and critical humor. He argues that being critical is not necessarily harmful and vaguely claims that 'when it gets nasty' it becomes ineffective in terms of the message you want to convey (Talks at Google). He does this without further expanding what 'getting nasty' means, which is, however, exactly the main issue of the entire discussion - the subjective nature of 'being nasty'.

While predominately being critical of the direction it has taken, not all comedians see political correctness in an entirely negative light. Bo Burnham, a bright, young American comedian and no stranger to controversy for his stand-up material, gives a thoughtful take on the modern hardships of the comedic craft in a CBS News interview and chooses a more neutral tone. While claiming he is generally against any infringement of freedom of speech, he argues, "It's an over-correction of a serious problem, like bigotry and racism. And yeah, they've swung the other way. And yeah, they are a little irony deaf, but I take an irony deaf, tolerant crowd over a racist crowd that really understands the workings of comedy and irony" (CBS News). He has accepted that audiences have their own opinions and are, just like the comedians who complain that they are being restricted, allowed to voice them. This acceptance is crucial for comedians since they can never be sure how jokes are received by the listeners.

Different interpretations of jokes, sometimes the exact opposite of what is actually intended by the joke teller, can make attempts to be culturally and socially aware challenging and result in an uncertain environment for comedians. Burnham is

well acquainted with this issue, however, accepts that there are certain risks people have to take in comedy and maintains, “I’ve had jokes that I thought were taken as the very thing they were satirizing, you know, were seen as racist, when it was meant to be the exact opposite of that. But you know, that’s part of the gamble of what performing is, it’s meant to be interpreted in any way it can” (CBS News). He touches upon one of the key issues with subversive comedy, namely, the need for the audience to understand the joke itself and the intention of the joke teller. With comedians being unable to know how jokes are going to be perceived by the audience (Berlant & Ngai 248) the probability of misinterpretation is high. This is particularly troubling since well-meaning subversive jokes are always concerned with racist, bigot or other socially unacceptable attitudes, which they are trying to combat through ridicule. Therefore, most comedians are aware that some people in the audience might laugh for the wrong reasons, since “there is no way to make [...] antiracist humor at a safe distance from racist humor” (Berlant & Ngai 246). This emphasizes the thin, often moving, line comedians have to balance on a regular basis.

With all the inconveniences arising from a PC backlash due to inappropriate jokes, it would seem sensible to stay away from such approaches, yet many comedians have recognized the potential to profit from such controversies. There is nothing new about the competitive nature of the entertainment industry and countless comedians have tried their hardest to find a niche to gain success over the years. Resorting to shock humor can therefore be seen as a way to stand out within a tough and over-saturated market. Furthermore, the conflict with political correctness even offers new opportunities for transgressive satire. *South Park*, for example, dedicated almost an entire season to this divisive issue, with the introduction of its new headmaster ‘PC Principle’. It specifically mocks the lifestyle of PC advocates, which it perceives as often phony and hypocritical. Many comedians use the topic of PC as a way to purposely offend and to ‘rebel’ against the perceived threat of censoring. For that matter, the efforts of PC activism often result in mockery and, in some cases, further comedic attention to the topic areas that it tries to safeguard.

So, although the social climate for offensive humor has undoubtedly changed for contemporary comedians, comedy is far from being ‘killed’ by PC, and neither is politically incorrect comedy. A long time has passed since Eddie Murphy released his extremely homophobic stand-up special *Delirious* in the 1980s and the LGBTQ community has achieved substantial progress in terms of rights and acceptance in

the meantime. However, this has not stopped the regular offensive jokes in stand-ups and other comedy genres. A voice against such humor has been raised with Rebecca Shaw of the Guardian claiming that it is not PC culture that is killing comedy but old, traditional comedians who are not able to adjust to a progressive society, where bigotry is no longer accepted by a major part of audiences. She uses several Australian comedians as examples, who have complained about political correctness making it almost impossible for them to do their job. However, Shaw disagrees and, while admitting that the climate has changed, argues that it did so for the better.

It is true that you can probably no longer walk on stage, talk about how disgusting homosexuals are and expect the audience to eat it up. But this is not a bad thing. This is not PC culture censoring you or ruining your life, or making it impossible for you to do comedy. This is society progressing, and you remaining sadly stagnant. (Shaw n.pag.)

Shaw is right in saying that society has progressed, however, it is also true that the comedy scene is still far from being safe from harmful jokes. There are numerous instances where members of the LGBTQ community are at the wrong end of current comedians' jokes, with transgender people being particularly targeted in the last couple of years. This becomes especially apparent when looking at comedians such as Ricky Gervais or Dave Chappelle, whose new stand-up specials will be discussed in detail later.

Transgressive comedians such as Gervais and Chappelle have experienced an increasing amount of criticism regarding their choice of material in the past ten years due to an apparent resurgence of PC initiatives. This has come to the dismay of numerous comedians and industry experts. However, the goal of political correctness is clearly not 'killing' comedy, yet, naturally, they get into conflict regularly for their overlapping concern with controversial topics. It is certainly not a new phenomenon which comedy has to face, but the dynamic and the 'battlefield' where PC campaigns are fought have changed substantially with the rise of social media.

2.3. A New Digital Environment for Comedians to Flourish and Fail

In addition to PC's influence on comedy and humor, other social and technological developments have impacted the comedic environment, with social media being exceptionally relevant. The emergence of digital convergence culture has significantly changed the exposure and the way people watch comedy in the past decade. There

are literally millions of clips on YouTube with a click away from being consumed by anyone with a compatible device. Anyone with a camera and a funny idea is now able to upload their recording online to various platforms in order to reach a vast audience, which was previously unimageable. Bo Burnham, for example, used YouTube and the now discontinued social media video app Vine to gain enormous popularity with his creative short videos and bits. There is a good chance that his successful comedy career would not have taken off if he had not had access to these digital tools for reaching his audience. This also means, however, that the material, which is disseminated among users online, receives less verification before being released to the public. Before the age of digital content, the way on to people's screens was much more staged and difficult. Media companies and TV channels have procedures in place that allow them to control what content will be incorporated into their TV program. Unless someone blatantly violates the code of conduct of an online platform, such a gatekeeping function, where racist or inappropriate content can be weeded out, is not applicable to the current online environment.

Furthermore, the additional exposure is not only achieved by active promotion by comedians themselves but also through the spreading of clips and 'best of' compilations of well-established comedians by random users hoping to get views on YouTube or followers on Twitter. While in the past it was necessary to pay for comedic performances in some way or another, be it the ticket price of a show or the cable bill for TV, comedic clips get passed on effortlessly through the web. In this manner, comedic material reaches people who would never have actively chosen to watch this content. Consequently, it is nowadays significantly easier for comedians to be criticized for their material by people who were not even supposed to see it in the first place and, more importantly, see the material out of context. "Should enough angry people take offence at a comedy routine, your career can be over before you leave the stage," claims a Scottish presenter (Singh Kohli n.pag.). Even though being a vast exaggeration, this assertion is made particularly in the context of increased exposure online, exposure also to people who have no interest in the comedy in question and entirely different world views than the comedian.

However, not only the consumption of finished comedy products has changed but also the rules and dynamics for interactions between comedians and audiences. This is due to the fact that the digital age has created an entirely new communication environment, making interactions often impersonal and anonymous. For example,

anyone with an e-mail address can create a Twitter account and comment on celebrities' tweets or '@' them, in other words, tag them. Before social media, comedians and other public figures mostly communicated with their fan base through press interviews or other more controlled and plannable means. While these channels still exist, there is hardly a celebrity who is not on Twitter, voicing their opinions in one way or another. Despite the useful self-marketing opportunities for artists and other public figures, Twitter in particular has a destructive, often self-destructive, component to it. This has led to several mishaps of celebrities tweeting an ill-advised remark or joke, which turned into huge storylines and consequential damage to their image.

The clash between humor and political correctness has greatly been exacerbated by the rise of social media. Even though, according to Burnham, the phenomenon of unrestrained online bashing should not be confused with political correctness, there clearly are certain synergies between these concepts, which are part of the reason why political correctness has achieved such unprecedented prominence in the past decade. He acknowledges that there is retribution on social media that can have far-reaching consequences. However, he does not blame political correctness for this.

[W]hen someone tweets a little joke that is misunderstood and their life is ruined and they get fired from their job, that's awful. But that is not PCness to me, that is, the Internet being unrestrained and anonymous and horrifying and violent and quick and too many people at once. I think those two things are conflated a little too often. (CBS News)

Burnham thus points to today's inevitable intersection of political correctness with social media and also to the interaction structure that has evolved, not only between comedians and their audiences, but members of society in general.

Indeed, without social media, the term 'cancel culture', a phenomenon closely associated with political correctness, and everything it contains, would not have been possible to emerge out of social activism concerning inappropriate content. Ng describes 'cancel culture' as

the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues. (623)

Through social media channels, the effectiveness of such efforts is vastly increased and can make the punishment seem over the top for the actual 'crime'. This has been

a critical new development within the digital PC culture and has led to an increasingly negative image of being politically correct. A major reason is that the quick and widespread responses to problematic behavior facilitated by social media often lack the reflected evaluations and debate needed (Ng 625). Perhaps the peak of cancel culture could be witnessed in 2018 when famous actor and comedian Kevin Hart was chosen for hosting the 2019 Oscars. Unfortunately for Hart, he carelessly made a multitude of homophobic jokes publicly on Twitter throughout the years, which came back to haunt him in his goal to be an Oscar host. Within a short period of time, users mercilessly reposted his old offensive jokes, causing national outrage and his eventual stepping-down from hosting the prestigious event (Daw n.pag.).

All in all, modern technology, such as Twitter, has changed social practices and conventions in such a substantial way that it has undeniably also had a noticeable impact on comedy. On the one hand, it has provided artists with exciting new opportunities for their craft by making production as well as distribution more efficient and effective. On the other hand, it has led to an unfamiliar environment with unexpected pitfalls for their careers. So, comedians need to be aware of new digital trends and exposures to avoid unnecessary controversy, a task several contemporary comedians seem to have difficulties with.

2.4. Where did the line go?

Since humor and comedy are not static but evolving, it is further important to discuss what their development has been over time. Comedians facing public scrutiny is not a recent phenomenon alone and some would argue that there was even more cause to be cautious in the past. Transgressive comedians and comedies have encountered numerous protests throughout the years, with one famous earlier example being the revolutionary comedian Lenny Bruce in the 1960s. In today's time, it is difficult to imagine that people are arrested for making jokes, at least in Western societies, which, nevertheless, is exactly what happened to Bruce who was sentenced to four months in prison, because of a comedy bit that was, at the time, perceived as scatological and obscene (Moylan n.pag.). Another comedian, who needs to be mentioned when discussing pushing the envelope of what is accepted in the history of comedy and who was once arrested with Bruce, is George Carlin. In the 1970s, he became most famous for his 'seven words you can never say on television', which

was perceived as so outrageous that it led to a Supreme Court ruling establishing the regulation of broadcasting of indecent material (Cashill n.pag.). The strong religious backlash and numerous bans *Monty Python* had to face when they released *Life of Brian* in 1979, for its depiction and references to Jesus Christ and his followers, would be of minor importance today. In the course of time, the movie has turned into a cult classic and was once “even called a ‘remarkable tribute to the life of Jesus’ by a recipient of the Vatican's top theological award” (McNab n.pag.). These incidents would clearly suggest that in those days comedians faced even stingier resistance to their artistic freedom. Yet, this would be too simplistic an assumption to make and there are arguments that would point to the contrary.

Topics, such as race, gender or sexuality, have been pushed into the foreground and older comedy productions now seem outdated and in bad taste. Homophobia did not receive a lot of attention in the 1980s, when Eddie Murphy was a rising superstar. In one of his stand-up shows he displays a highly homophobic attitude and jokes that he is “afraid of gay people”. This did not cause any career-destroying backlash back then, however, in today’s PC environment, Murphy felt the need to apologize for his remarks (O’Connor n.pag.). Another more recent example has been the removal of the British sketch comedy *Little Britain* from BBC and Netflix. BBC justified this move by claiming “times have changed” and that in the light of the current renewed emphasis on the #blacklivesmatter movement the show’s content, which includes a white protagonist dressed as a black character, is no longer appropriate (Moses n.pag.). There is general consent that by today’s standards it is inappropriate to use blackface in any kind of public display. Yet, of course, this does not mean that it has ceased to exist completely and there have been instances where such a display was deemed successful, as in Robert Downey Jr.’s role in *Tropic Thunder*. The context here clearly matters, with the movie satirizing the practices of blackface rather than using it in the original, degrading fashion.

It seems as if time also factors into the equation of what is acceptable to joke about and what is not. ‘Too soon?’, is a common expression, which mostly refers to a subject matter that is not yet to be joked about. In an episode of *South Park* in 2002 called *Jared Has Aides*, this distance to a certain topic or issue is ridiculed through a terrible misunderstanding between the terms ‘Aids’ and ‘Aides’, which almost results in the hanging of an innocent man. After the confusion is resolved the whole town laughs, only for someone to notice, “Hey, we would have never laughed about this

before”, which prompts Randy to explain to the others, “Don’t you see what this means? It’s 22.3 years, so Aids is finally funny!” (*Jared Has Aides*). In a typically exaggerated *South Park* fashion this, of course, causes the town to burst into celebration, with fireworks and even a pre-made banner, ready to be revealed. Joking aside, the creators of the show refer to the ‘tragedy plus time equals comedy’ equation, which points to time contributing to “the safe distance that allows us to laugh at pain” (O’Shannon 2). The more time passes, and hence more distance is established, the more accessible an incident seems for comedic endeavor. And such time spans seem to get increasingly shorter, a fact which O’Shannon explains by the contemporary competition of being the first one to cause shock with an inappropriate joke and the fact that through technology jokes get disseminated substantially quicker and further than in the past (2).

It is difficult to compare modern comedy to the humor of the past, since the social context and setting always need to be accounted for when discussing such matters. No comedians are being sentenced to prison anymore, as it was the case at the time of Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, however, new lines not to cross have emerged along the way and old ones have slowly faded into irrelevance. Considering how easy it is for taboo topics to change and emerge, joking around requires a substantial knowledge about current and past socio-cultural issues. The same can be said about the new technology comedians use to reach their audience. There has to be a certain awareness of the opportunities and also limitations social media tools like Twitter provide for their users, which have completely changed the dynamics of social interaction. In the past a joke made by a comedian had a predictable reach, since all the audience could do was tell their friends and family about it. As stated above, in today’s ‘sharing society’, the harm a short video clip recorded on a smartphone and shared via social media might cause can be substantial. Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle are currently dealing with these relatively new forces, with increased criticism online for their comedic material.

2.5. Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle

Before analyzing their material in more detail, it is necessary to briefly expand on the two main pillars of this thesis, Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle themselves. When discussing stand-up comedy, the comedians are two household names in the

industry. The fact that they were born and reside on different continents of the earth, serves as an excellent example of comedy and humor transcending borders and cultures, at least concerning Western civilizations. The same can be said about other social phenomena such as political correctness or social communication, which are all pivotal to this thesis. Both Gervais and Chappelle have received considerable media attention in the past couple of years due to their jokes regarding transgender people. This has particularly been visible on social media channels such as Twitter, where their material has been shared and discussed widely.

Ricky Gervais is a 60-year-old British comedian, actor, writer, producer and director. He achieved fame rather late in life as he had attempted a career in music and radio during the 1980s and most of the 1990s. His breakthrough came in 2001 with the hit TV workplace mockumentary *The Office*, which he co-created, co-wrote and also starred in. The show only ran for a short period of time, however, was critically acclaimed, winning several BAFTAs and Golden Globes. He only started his stand-up career after his success in television and has delivered regular comedy specials from the early 2000s onwards. Through movie roles like *Night at the Museum* or *The Invention of Lying*, popular TV shows such as *Extras* or his recent *After Life* and the Netflix stand-up special *Humanity*, his fame and success continue to rise. This has made him a popular choice for hosting the annual Golden Globe Awards, even though he causes substantial controversy each year by offending nearly everyone in the audience. These hosting performances point to the stand-up attitude Gervais portrays, which can be described as acerbic and socially critical. As a result, he found himself in several controversies during his career and regularly voices his opinion regarding political correctness and the limits of humor and free speech in general (Ricky Gervais, Britannica).

Similar to Gervais, Dave Chappelle is also a multi-talented individual, who has found success as a stand-up comedian, actor, writer and producer. The 48-year-old African American achieved his ultimate breakthrough with his hit sketch comedy show *Chappelle's Show* at the beginning of the new millennium, which he co-created, wrote and starred in. He started out as a stand-up comedian in the 1990s when he made a name for himself with critical takes on racial and social issues. During that time, he was also given several supporting roles in larger movie productions, such as *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, *The Nutty Professor* or *Con Air*. Additionally, he co-wrote and starred in the stoner comedy *Half Baked*, which, even though disappointing at the box

office, became a cult classic for many. In 2000, his vastly popular stand-up special *Killin' Them Softly* came out, which continued his rise to stardom and eventually led to the revolutionary role that would change his life, the aforementioned sketch comedy show *Chappelle's Show*. However, the immense success and fame the show brought about also came with pressure and uncertainty about the show's influence. Chappelle did not appreciate how the show was perceived by some and was worried that it might reinforce prejudice rather than expose prejudiced attitudes (Barshad n.pag.). He therefore abruptly left the show at the beginning of only the third season and disappeared from the public eye for almost an entire decade. By doing so he gave up 50 million dollars and turned into a comedic myth. In 2013 he returned to the comedy stage and after a slow start he hosted *Saturday Night Live* in 2017, which was followed by several stand-up specials on Netflix. He received several awards for them, including an Emmy, a Grammy and, in 2019, the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor (Dave Chappelle, Britannica; Dave Chappelle, Biography.com). One major reason why Chappelle is a central figure of this thesis is that he, just like Gervais, has also earned substantial criticism for his subversive and transgressive material in his more recent stand-up specials. This is particularly interesting in Chappelle's case, since he encountered little criticism in most of his career before (Marlborough n.pag.). He was mostly praised for his handling of taboo topics, through masterfully flipping the meaning and making it humorous. Yet, the narrative has changed, and he received several highly negative reviews for his Netflix specials. His jokes were described as 'mean' and 'lazy', instead of the 'genius' and 'masterful' he used to receive (Marlborough n.pag.). A large portion of the criticism came due to his 'trans bits', which are analyzed in greater detail in the next chapters. In the face of such criticism, he mainly remains non-compliant, for example, offering a sarcastic apology at the acceptance speech of the Mark Twain Prize. "I, personally, am not afraid of other people's freedom of expression. I don't use it as a weapon. It just makes me feel better. And I'm sorry if I hurt anybody. Yada, yada, everything I'm supposed to say" (Martinez n.pag.). So clearly, he puts freedom of expression above the pain and damage he might cause with his comedy. This is also what both comedians have in common, and to a large part the reason why they were chosen as subjects for this thesis: Their stubborn and arrogant attitude towards any criticism they receive from PC advocates.

3. Theorizing Main Concepts

In this chapter, prevailing ideas and thoughts on the issues of humor, political correctness and social media are presented. Additionally, for better orientation, the 'humor' section is further divided into a general part and the sub-chapter of 'subversive humor', since the definitions of these terms are often unclear and used in an ambiguous manner. Literature on these subject matters has been carefully selected and studied to gain the necessary knowledge and expertise within these fields. Discussing the current state of available theoretical material is imperative for the following analysis of the current comedy environment and the specific works of the comedians in question.

3.1. Humor

When discussing stand-up comedians and their shows in the light of current social trends, the most fundamental questions revolve around the notion of humor and why people laugh. The concepts of humor and laughter are closely interconnected, with humor acting as the stimulus and laughter as the response. Defining humor has proven to be a complicated endeavor, since the term has been extended and has so become increasingly vague in the course of time. Hence, Saul Steinberg perceives any attempt to define humor as futile since, according to him, "trying to define humor is one of the definitions of humor" (Bevis 1). This points to the endless possibilities and situations of humorous events, not only in literature and on stage but also on the greater stage of life, which was already emphasized by the philosopher Plato in ancient Greece. Nevertheless, various attempts have been made at formulating a definition as precise as possible. Kuipers, for example, defines humor as "the successful exchange of joking and laughter" (7). In this definition the relation to laughter is already explicitly highlighted. Humorous situations frequently lead to amusement and subsequent reactionary movements from the parties involved. One of these reactions is laughter, which is predominantly associated with happiness and amusement, however, should not be seen as an automatic or exclusive byproduct of humor. For, not every humorous situation elicits noticeable laughter, nor does laughter solely occur due to humor (Vaid 506). Although this means that humor and laughter are not indispensable prerequisites for each other it can be concluded that,

if laughter occurs in connection with a humorous event in an honest manner, the relationship between the two concepts can be described as cause and effect.

Laughter itself is a physical reaction, both of the human body and mind. Like crying, laughter is considered an innate mechanism in human beings, and it is said to have preceded the advent of speech with an estimated seven-million-year-old history (Vaid 506). This was already recognized by Aristotle, who claimed that laughter was exclusive to human beings (Stott 171). Although laughter-like behavior has been observed in non-human primates it cannot be deemed equal since humans have the unique ability to generate, understand and appreciate humor (Vaid 507). Laughter is examined in more detail by Morreall¹, who claims,

Of all the things human beings do or experience, laughing may be the funniest – funny strange, that is, not funny ha-ha. [...] Almost every part of our bodies is involved, but none with any apparent purpose. We are out of control in a way unmatched by any other state short of neurological disease. And – funniest of all – the whole experience is exquisitely pleasurable! (2)

Morreall¹ refers to the biological peculiarities and uncontrollable nature of the phenomenon of laughter. He further points out how complex the mechanisms of laughter are through comparing it to a joyous neurological disease. Hence, it is not entirely up to us what we laugh about and what we do not laugh about. A humorous stimulus therefore often leads to an involuntary bodily reaction. This is especially problematic when inappropriate humor is involved and will therefore be discussed in more detail later.

The relevance and perception of laughter have changed substantially over the years and evolved from a neglected subject in ancient times to a basic human feature today. The subject received little attention from ancient philosophers. In the rare occasions in which humor or laughter was discussed by philosophers like Plato or Kant it was in a predominantly negative manner and mostly in conjunction with other investigated subjects (Morreall² n.pag.). However, just because these fields were not properly analyzed in isolation did not mean that humor was entirely insignificant. In ancient Rome, for example, vices and virtues were commented on in a humorous manner by writers such as Juvenal or Horace (Stott 158-159). Yet, it remained academically neglected for a long period of time, with one reason being that laughter was traditionally frowned upon and denounced within Christianity. It was associated with the loss of self-control and inappropriate behavior. Nevertheless, in medieval times people started to use laughter to highlight human failure and the necessity for

spiritual intervention. Through incorporating laughter, the church was able to extend its control over various areas of folk practices and joyfully teach the distance between humanity and the divine (Stott 174-175). With the establishment of rigid institutions, rules and obligations society members began to long for possibilities to express themselves individually. In modern societies humor became an essential social characteristic of people. "Humorlessness in persons [...] becomes viewed as a moral, almost psychological fault, to be pitied or condemned" (Smith 27). So, laughter has made an enormous transformation from an undesirable fault in humans into a positive trait, which can significantly influence social success or failure.

A more detailed investigation into the concept of humor only began as late as the beginning of the 17th century and consequently led to the establishment of various major theories on humor. One of the earlier humor theories, which was delivered by Thomas Hobbes, is the 'superiority theory', a theory associated with the long-lasting concern that laughter is elicited through insulting people one considers inferior. In other words, laughter requires the feeling of superiority over other people (Bevis 80). In contrast, Francis Hutcheson set out to prove the value of humor to society. According to his 'incongruity theory' incompatible contrasts explain the phenomenon much better (Stott 180). This proposition was supported by famous philosophers such as Kant and Schopenhauer (Critchley 3). Schopenhauer subscribed to Hutcheson's view when he claimed that the only reason why we laugh was "a suddenly perceived lack of congruence between a concept and the real objects that are in some respect or other thought through it, and it is itself just the expression of this lack of congruence" (93). Finally, the third well-established explanation of laughter was supported by Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer and is based on the relief or pleasure caused by the punch line of a joke. The 'relief theory' can be seen as an internalized continuation of the 'incongruity theory'. Instead of the incongruous impetus for laughter stemming from outside scenarios or situations, it is concerned with the struggle within the self. Complex workings of the human mind, like hidden unconscious thoughts and other psychological issues, are released through laughter (Stott 182-183). These three theories are deemed the most established and most durable in Western societies and they are often used as a foundation for further research.

Theorists have tried to combine the theories mentioned above in order to arrive at a more suitable and all-encompassing explanation for laughter. Bergson, for

example, incorporates elements of both the incongruity and the superiority theory in one of the most influential and sophisticated accounts of humor, his book 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic'. Focusing on three fundamental observations, he emphasizes that for laughter to occur there needs to be a lack of feeling and therefore emotions need to be put aside. Bergson recommends to "look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy" (Bergson 4b). This element of Bergson's theory is particularly valuable to the investigation of offensive humor, since emotions hinder people from laughing at and appreciating humorous rendering of issues close to them, which consequently may lead to conflict. Additionally, laughter always happens in a social context, and he argues that there always must be "complicity with other laughers, real or imaginary" (Bergson 5b). It is associated with belonging to a group, which can be as large as the human race or specific subgroups, recognizing their superiority over other outer circles. Finally, Bergson follows Aristotle by emphasizing that laughter is a human trait by claiming "that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN" (Bergson 4a). As mentioned above, there have been observations of similar behavior to laughter in non-human primates, however, these were associated with joy and pleasure in general, whereas Bergson focuses on laughter's relation to humor, which is unique to human beings. He associates humor with the incongruity between human intelligence and mechanical behaviors.

All the aforementioned theories are imperative for a proper discussion of issues regarding comedy and, more specifically, for the analysis of individual jokes within comedy shows. Knowing how humor works allows for a better interpretation of possible intentions and also effects of jokes, which is necessary when dealing with PC reactions to offensive humor. At this point, subversive humor is particularly relevant since it is always critical, often offensive in nature and has caused the most confronting instances with PC advocates in the course of time. Therefore, it will be discussed in more detail in the following subchapter.

3.1.1. Subversive Humor

At the forefront of the analysis is subversive humor, since a focal point of this thesis is the relationship between comedy and contemporary PC culture. Kramer defines subversive humor as

a form of protest or resistance to systemic structures of oppression or an unjust status quo. It is at once serious in the sense that its content is impactful and significant and that its motivations are critical, yet it is also playful in that it is open, creative, imaginative, and capable of cultivating such qualities in audiences – the laughter invoked is contagious, but so too are the attitudes and ideas. (2)

This definition highlights the multifaceted nature of the concept, which is not only playful, as one would expect from humor, but also critical. Besides making people laugh, it makes them think about real life issues in society. It is an overall positive interpretation of subversive humor by associating it with a powerful cultivating tool for the audience. It further means the pushing of boundaries of what is socially accepted and laughing “at the inappropriate” (O’Shannon 3). Subversive humor attempts to uncover critical issues in society through the ridicule of problematic social norms and established systems.

Indeed, successful subversive humor has the ability to expose stereotypical thinking and encourage fault-finding. It transfers ordinary, well-ingrained practices and beliefs, as, for example, systematic racism, into an absurd and often grotesque context, in order to promote self-reflection (Kramer 135). Kramer argues that “[t]his attitude fosters epistemic openness to multiple perspectives, often one of the first steps in the recognition that others lacking in power might be oppressed, which can thereby expose and possibly deconstruct the spirit of seriousness and ontological expansiveness” (136). In other words, such an approach makes audiences realize faulty attitudes and thus encourages them to question the legitimacy and necessity of the established way of life as they know it. It has the potential of receiving long-lasting support for a given cause, which is otherwise often difficult to achieve (Kramer 137). This power of humor to contribute to raising awareness towards social injustice and wrongdoings has historically caused fear among political regimes, which, for example, led to the establishment of ‘joke courts’ in the Third Reich under Adolf Hitler to eliminate undermining ridicule (Stott 150).

As to ‘undermining ridicule’ or, simply, subversive humor, satire is deemed the most direct political form of comedy. It is both savage and civilized, and always requires a target, which may also include the audience, who as members of the society in question “may also get bitten from time to time” (Bevis 79). While non-satirical humor aims at laughter as an end in itself, satire goes beyond the casual laugh and is used as a weapon (Abrams 153). This weapon may be pointed at

individuals, entire institutions or even complex concepts such as political correctness. Apart from needing a moral standpoint and an object of attack, an essential characteristic of satire is a specific audience that is situated in a particular social context. This social context must be shared between the satirist and the audience in order for satirical comedy to be understood. Yet, an agreement on the subject matter is not necessary, since satire has an educational component, which aims at convincing the audience of a certain point of view (Berger 146). Nevertheless, the social context of the audience affects the response to a certain joke and, depending on the stance towards the target, either enhances or inhibits enjoyment (O'Shannon 274).

If the feelings towards the target are strong, the attempted joke is likely to be unsuccessful, which makes it hardly surprising that satire and subversive humor in general possess the ability to offend. Humor can be classified as offensive when an individual or a group of people is of the opinion that a specific issue should not be joked about. This can be any topic, however, the more sacred the issue the higher the possibility of people getting offended. However, offensive humor is rarely as clear-cut as Franzini is making it out to be and therefore often difficult to detect and recognize. He offers a rather extreme characterization of offensive humor and also has a somehow idealistic expectation of audiences and listeners.

Negative humor is humor that is destructive, hostile, cruel, anger driven, belittling, humiliating, relationship destroying, blatantly biased, extreme in its effects, unpleasant to nearly all listeners in addition to the butts of the joke, and simply outrageous in its disregard for its consequences and lack of boundaries. [...] Audiences seem to tire quickly of unrelenting hostile humor even from established professionals. (62)

Franzini is overly specific on what attributes negative humor contains, which makes his description rather unrealistic and futile within a real-life context, where many individuals with unique boundaries and subjective opinions argue about what is appropriate and what is not. Furthermore, depending on the exact definition, it is debatable if 'unrelenting hostile humor' really is that unappealing to audiences. The continuous success of comedians like Jimmy Carr, who are notoriously hostile towards anyone, might point to the contrary. Revi explains the offensive nature of subversive humor by using a theory of trivialization, which reduces complexities through a simplifying process. "When an issue that has conventionally been dealt with, with a great amount of respect, fear or apprehension, is all of a sudden stripped

bare into the form of a crude caricature, this expression threatens the sanctimonious importance ascribed to this issue and irreverently denies it any global regard” (112). ‘Crude caricatures’ are never meant to be taken seriously, yet the ‘stripped’ form has the ability, depending on the subject, to hurt certain people’s feelings. If such an issue is emotionally important to an individual or a certain group of people, subjective boundaries are being transgressed and violated. But it is not only sacred issues that cause offence. An individual might be triggered through a personal connection to a certain topic, and it is difficult to predict which element of a joke will turn out to be offensive (O’Shannon 250). In some cases, Revi claims, the delivered offence can in itself be humorous without adding comic elements. Laughter results solely through the mockery or disregard of certain beliefs and values of a specific group of people, which leads to a feeling of superiority towards this group (109). If the offence is creatively combined with wit and satirical components, the humorous effect can be substantially magnified and, in some cases, even disguise the delivered offence. As a result, humor can be used as a circumvention of moral restrictions and social accountability (Revi 111).

No matter whether disguised or blatantly obvious, offensive comedy and inappropriate jokes may have an adverse impact on individuals and society as such. Since there is always a certain degree of truth to a joke, considerable harm can be caused through ridicule and derision. “[C]omedy itself can be abused as well as used – racist and sexist jokes point to its potential cruelty” (Bevis 78). Even if there is no malicious intent from the side of the joker, it may easily be understood incorrectly by the recipient, which results in subversive humor achieving the opposite of its original intention and strengthening problematic social injustices. Hence, if done carelessly, subversive humor can lead to social norms reinforcing prejudice (Saucier et al. 124). Through playing with stereotypes, it can serve as a tool of oppression, not only by deliberate and explicit racists or sexists, but also unconsciously by well-meaning individuals (Kramer 4).

The specific ways offensive humor influences prejudice in society are disputed and range from initiation to enhancement. In 1972, Martineau established the hypothesis that sexist humor could make men more prejudiced against women, thereby arguing that exposure to disparagement humor initiates prejudice. Disparagement humor is closely associated with offensive humor since it “elicits amusement through the denigration, derogation, humiliation, victimization, or

belittlement of individuals, social groups or ideologies” (Koszalkowska & Wrobel 619). However, much research has been conducted since then and Ford, Richardson & Petit, even though confirming the effect of disparagement humor on fostering prejudice, reject the claim that it introduces negative attitudes towards a target group and propose a different hypothesis.

Rather than acting as an initiator of prejudice, disparagement humor appears to function as a releaser of prejudice. According to prejudiced norm theory, prejudiced people tend to approve of disparagement humor and thus assent to an emergent norm in the immediate context that it is acceptable to make light of or trivialize discrimination against the targeted group. (182)

According to these findings, disparagement humor does not affect people themselves but social norms and etiquette, making already bigot and intolerant people feel encouraged about their beliefs and attitudes. It establishes a social environment in which discrimination and intolerance can flourish. Prolonged exposure to such an environment can also lead to people becoming more apathetic and numb to crucial social problems. Through promoting a non-serious attitude towards critical thinking problematic real-world issues can be made seem benign and non-threatening (Franzini 63). The fact that disparagement or offensive humor has the ability to influence how openly intolerant and malicious people talk and behave is crucial for the new digital social environment where comedians and other people come together and joke around without any apparent physical or geographic barrier.

At this point it is important to stress that a clear distinction needs to be made between subversive humor and offensive humor. Yet, this proves to be a difficult endeavor since the two concepts share many similarities, such as a given target and a critical social component. As discussed above, subversive humor has the potential for a betterment of society, however, if used carelessly can lead to the exact opposite: the perpetuation of established stereotypes. There often is a fine line between these two extremes, which many comedians balance on regularly. Especially today, in an increasingly politically correct environment, ‘feelings get hurt quickly’ and transgressive material is often met with contempt. In order to understand the current comedy and social climate in general, it is first necessary to discuss the origins of and the way in which the trend of political correctness has affected our daily lives.

3.2. Political Correctness

Political Correctness is a concept that is difficult to narrow down and can range from specific behavior to a movement to an entire lifestyle. Establishing a clear-cut definition for the term is challenging since “[p]olitical correctness and its obverse, political incorrectness, are more easily recognized than defined, and [...] both appear in manifold forms” (Hughes 9). The semantic construct of the term as such is problematic, as it implies a ‘correct political attitude’, which does not exist. Politics can be found in virtually everything in today’s society, from state affairs to individual identity politics. The term ‘correctness’ would suggest certain standards to conform to, which simply do not exist because not one political system can be considered the only one ‘correct’. The concept is dominated by assumptions about proper and improper language and behavior. It has become an umbrella term especially for the agendas of the political left, where, for example, radical multiculturalism and gender studies are areas of concern (Lalonde, Doan & Patterson 318). Yet, Harris claims that “PC is clearly not just an agenda. Instead, it is a subculture, an encompassing lifestyle which is far more than just the sum of its issues but rather a way of living and consuming [...]” (481). This way of politically correct living and consuming centers strongly on avoiding offensive language, prejudiced attitudes and insulting behavior, especially towards marginalized groups (Hughes 8).

The term political correctness has also been used as a tactical tool and as such caused substantial polarization. On the one hand, political correctness is equated with tyranny and left-wing conformity by emphasizing the restriction of individual freedom. On the other hand, there is the view of an invented term of right-wing advocates to attack liberal attitudes and defend traditional hierarchies (Hughes 13). At the same time, there are some who claim that the PC movement is nothing but a media creation or a myth. Regardless of the way you look at it, it is quite apparently a highly polarizing issue, which has quickly become a common topic in society (Lalonde, Doan & Patterson 318), and has led to two extreme stereotypical positions at the opposing ends of the spectrum: the ‘PC crusaders’, who are considered a heterogeneous composition of different, mostly left-wing, social groups and the ‘PC bashers’, consisting of predominantly right-wing reactionaries and conservatives in fear of losing social status to minorities (Lalonde, Doan & Patterson 319).

The term and the idea of political correctness have evolved significantly over

the decades. Even though the term as it is known today can be traced back to the 1960s, where New Left politics adapted the term from the Maoism idea of “correct thinking” (Perry 77), the concept had existed long before that time. When exactly political correctness and related concepts were mentioned and discussed first is rather unclear - accounts go back as far as 1793, where the adjectival phrase “politically correct” was used in the Supreme Court, though in a highly literal sense (Suhr & Johnson 8). The concept in the sense of ‘correct opinion’ relating to academic freedom was already problematized in 1935, approximately 50 years before it became a nation-wide phenomenon on campuses all across the United States in the late 1980s (Suhr & Johnson 9). The movement then focused predominantly on education and the curriculum. Students began to request other cultures and female authors to be included in their core curriculum, which was mainly focused on male-centered, Western civilization, hoping to establish a less discriminatory university environment (Moser 167). It was there and then that the term and movement gained momentum and started to have an impact on a greater scale (Hughes 3). However, in the 1990s the term was increasingly used in a tactical manner by right-wing proponents in the so called ‘culture war’ against women and minorities. PC-related concepts such as ‘anti-discrimination of minorities’ were transformed into reversed discrimination or ‘discrimination of majorities’ to fit the agenda of the right-wing movement (Moser 167). Thus, conservatives believe that the liberal movement was, and still is, sacrificing “fundamental American principles, including individual liberty and fairness” through their relentless crusading for equality (Eaton 26). At the turn of the millennium, Lakoff declared that the peak of PC culture had been reached between 1991 and 1995, and that the movement diminished after that (95). However, a lot of changes have taken place since and technological advances in particular have aided the PC movement through more easily accessible and wide-spread communication, making it more efficient than ever.

Today, even though of American decent, political correctness is a well-established concept in most Western societies around the world and has started to gain an increasing amount of attention in the media in the past 10 years. The debate about political correctness has inevitably resulted in a perpetual conundrum, where the promotion of equality and tolerance by liberal proponents often ends up conveying intolerance itself, which goes against John Rawls’ claim that a just society has to tolerate intolerance (Strauts & Blanton 32). The movement or concept is frequently

placed in opposition to freedom of speech, which is “often seen to be curtailed by political correctness” (Hughes 9). This has led to a multitude of debates and a highly polarized opinion field. Von Münch, for example, takes a strong, critical anti-PC stance and emphasizes the importance of free speech by discussing incidents in Germany, where political correctness has grown into a dangerous censoring mechanism. According to him, free speech has to be protected from the ‘thought police’, no matter what is being said (16). Contrary to this negative view on the developments of PC, Moser chooses a more beneficial take on the subject in the heat of accusations of over-moralization and ‘virtue terror’. She argues that political correctness is part of a larger cultural change within Western democracies, which has contributed to the enhancement and strengthening of human rights. The negatively connoted right-wing use of the term to declare war on this democratic progress is frightening to her, since, referring to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany, liberal democracy was already once before eliminated through democratic processes (Moser 179). Such a beneficial view on the subject of PC is supported by the ‘paradox of tolerance’, which was formulated by Karl Popper in 1966, who warns against the ability of the intolerant to destroy tolerance entirely (Strauts & Blanton 32).

Indeed, the main intention of political correctness is deemed to counter injustice and enhance social relations in a multicultural and progressive society. The emphasis has been on specific language use, and the avoidance and replacement of prejudicial features (Hughes 3). In this regard, one of the key arguments for promoting political correctness is the assumption that altering the language people use affects and ultimately changes their attitudes and beliefs in a positive way (Strauts & Blanton 32). Consequently, this may eventually result in real social change and thus PC contributes to the elimination of adverse prejudice and stereotypes. Therefore, a major aspect of political correctness is concerned with semantics and the labeling or naming of certain social groups, especially minorities. Grouping and labeling are common features in our society and lead to different positions within a dominant structure, where social relationships and structures define identities and meanings. Social categories are established and people distinguish between insiders and outsiders within that system (Rix 5). Difference becomes such a domineering feature in society that it consequently results in serious social problems and tensions. “Historically, difference has been a major factor in social definition and identity, focusing on features of race, complexion, appearance, dress, diet, language, and

religion, any or all of which can become the source of discrimination and xenophobia” (Hughes 44). Therefore, labels and the established differences between groups prove to be fundamental to the concept of political correctness. Labels are never free of judgment and cause a certain perception and expectation of behavior (Rix 5). To avoid and ultimately eliminate the negative associations with degrading terms, as for example ‘cripple’, ‘gay’ or ‘foreigner’, these ought to be replaced by more neutral equivalents (Hughes 15-16). Clearly, this has been a worthy cause to pursue, in order to fight socially instilled prejudices and racist attitudes. However, the initiative has encountered major obstacles since “language is not neutral, but a reflection of dominant ideologies, unhealthy prejudices, and limited notions of normality” (Hughes 16). Societies all over the globe have contributed to this rigid entrenchment of languages with deeply ingrained biases and stereotypes.

In addition to these challenges, adopting a politically correct lifestyle can have unintended side effects and often fails to reach PC’s ultimate goal of real social change. Morris investigates political correctness in terms of a reputational explanation and explores the actual speech situation in which a speaker is given an incentive to alter their words in order to avoid a judgmental inference of the listener. According to Morris’ findings the result can be the loss of important information, which “may be socially valuable; that is, all parties may lose from the suppression of information due to political correctness” (233). Furthermore, Harris argues that such a suppression of language fails to properly deal with the issues in question. The predominantly janitorial or cosmetic effects of PC only sanitize discourses by trying to erase all visible and audible traces of intolerance, racism and phobias. Therefore, in reality the well-meaning efforts of PC to change society for the better fall short of their goal and are reduced to a trivialized form of activism (478), which hinders the possibility of a critical debate for “progressing towards a more truly egalitarian society” to surface (Suhr & Johnson 5). Other critical arguments against PC are a self-proclaimed moral superiority over others and collective outrage where attention is the ultimate goal. This is, again, particularly relevant in an increasingly digital society, in which spatial, temporal and cultural boundaries have disappeared, and even a small number of individuals can cause a considerable uproar (Moser 172). Moreover, political correctness might ultimately even result in the exact opposite of what it is supposed to achieve. “Just as obsessive dieting makes us hate our bodies so that we are constantly in danger of bingeing, so excessive sensitivity about offending minorities

creates, not respect or understanding, but the hostility and bitterness that culminate in bigoted scatologists [...] rushing into the depoliticized public forum to shriek out all of the bad words [...]” (Harris 477). From this perspective, PC is seen as functioning as an intensifier rather than a reducer of intolerant and racist language and behavior. This challenges the beneficial aspects and intentions of the movement and questions its usefulness entirely.

Political correctness is, of course, not only concerned with words and lexical features but also with an increasing array of topics and issues which have been or have become considered sensitive or even inappropriate to talk about. These taboo topics revolve around differences and range from traditional marginalized fields like race and ethnicity to more contemporary focal points such as gender, sexual orientation or addictions (Hughes 115). Harris criticizes the path PC has taken to continuously add new groups allegedly in need of protection. In his view this is an aestheticization of marginality and he claims that it robs the specificity of the concept of the minority. Obesity, alcoholism or allergies are all areas that over time have turned into sensitive issues, yet the sufferings of the victims are simply not comparable to discriminations of minorities such as African American people or homosexuals. According to Harris one of the main reasons for this development is not the actual need for intervention but simply self-flattery, where Americans or other dominant cultures take on the role of the heroic rescuer of the distressed minority (Harris 480). Another aspect that affects the increase of taboo topics is the changed mechanism of how society decides what is deemed important and what is not. In the past the traditional mass media was predominantly in charge of making such decisions. However, with the emergence of digital social media it has become easier for individuals to participate in this process, which, besides having positive democratic benefits, may cause self-centered, opinion-based agendas of a few to be pushed into the spotlight and made into national or global talking points (Moser 172). This becomes particularly apparent when considering attempts to take advantage of cancel culture and use any small verbal offence to cause a national or even worldwide outcry.

It is evident that due to their public consumption and presence, cultural productions of all kinds are closely associated and concerned with the movement of political correctness. In literature, for example, individual creativity has rarely been in accordance with political norms and all through history famous authors like Dickens,

Chaucer or Austin have exposed and subverted prevailing social values through being politically incorrect to varying degrees (Hughes 238). The same can be said about other cultural fields, like the entertainment industry, where comedies have been satirizing social issues for many decades. Such humorous productions originally were only mild parodies, however, became increasingly outrageous and often deliberately politically incorrect over time to transgress particular pertinent taboo areas (Hughes 259). Comedy is especially problematic concerning political correctness and the genre has caused numerous controversies across the entire spectrum of possible topics.

[H]umor has a great range of targets and tones, incorporating xenophobia, schadenfreude, black humor, sick humor, and multifarious jokes against outgroups, condemned by the politically correct formula of 'inappropriately directed laughter' or the more extraordinary 'laughism'. All kinds of humor are difficult to control, since irony and connivance cannot be legislated against. (Hughes 262)

Hughes emphasizes the multitude of forms offensive humor can take and also the unfeasibility of keeping it contained. The strong connection between political correctness and comedy is one of the main foundations of the present analysis and will be highlighted throughout the thesis.

Political Correctness has undeniably well-meaning intentions for society, yet encounters noticeable resistance due to its desired restrictions on language and public topic areas. Since such constraints not only cause positive effects but also detrimental ones, the usefulness and appropriateness of PC in society needs to be contemplated extensively. This is particularly concerning when looking at the current 'cancel culture' environment, where PC ideals are applied to an extreme. It was partly made possible by a shift of daily public discussion from real life conversations to social media, which emerged out of our increasingly digitalized way of life. Therefore, theoretical notions about recent technological developments will be discussed in the following chapter.

3.3. Convergence Culture

In today's world digital technology has gained a particularly dominant place in our society. Posting, sharing, tagging and getting likes and followers on various social media channels are all well-established concepts, which are familiar to the majority of people (Meikle vii). Smartphones and other devices enable people to be connected

to each other anywhere at any given time. This has a substantial influence on how society functions and alters human interaction, including collective actions and activism. The significance of this digitalization of our society is evident in the number of online social media users around the globe. The number rose to a mindboggling 3.6 billion people in 2020 and is continuously climbing, with a projection to have reached 4.41 billion by 2025 (Statista¹). As of July 2021, among these social media networks Facebook is by far the most popular one with more than 2.895 billion users, followed by the video sharing platform YouTube with approximately 2,291 billion users (Statista²), and numerous other networks, which all have their own specialized function which people log on for to participate in the online social life.

As with many cultural and communicational terms, social media is rather difficult to properly define. Definitions in academic literature have been found to compete and sometimes even contest each other. Predominately, associations are made with concepts like user-created content, sharing and collaboration. The term has its origins as a marketing tool, which already points to the potential these platforms offer to empower their users (Meikle 4-5). Meikle attempts to formulate a more precise definition, which captures the complexities of the term by describing social media as “networked database platforms that combine public with personal communication” (6). The merging of personal and public communication is essential in his definition, since there is no longer the traditional divide between the public space of the media industries and personal messaging. They both take place on social media simultaneously.

Closely connected to social media is the phenomenon that paved the way for its emergence, namely the Web 2.0. Even though the concept introduced critical new technologies after the dot.com bubble burst at the turn of the millennium, its most fundamental differences to its predecessor were the core principles of transparency, participation, and openness. The term was used to differentiate between the early years of the Internet and the websites from the mid 2000s onwards (Marwick 6). “[It] shifted the narrative of what the web was about” (Meikle 14). The Internet before this revolutionary development, which out of necessity was retrospectively coined Web 1.0, was predominantly read-only. With the emergence of the Web 2.0 user-generated content became more prominent and online spaces that had previously been dominated by a restricted number of individuals became open to the contribution of

many (Meikle 15). Nowadays the term itself is already outdated, however its guiding principles are as relevant as ever.

A crucial aspect of social media is the importance of personal communication (Meikle 6). The active participation of individual users, who criticize or comment on existing material in order to express their own social needs and agendas, is emphasized (Jenkins, Ford & Green 294). Marwick draws attention to the individual profile of such online services by arguing that “[s]ocial media is intrinsically focused on individuals—the ‘profile’ being the key unit of Web 2.0—who produce and consume content” (Marwick 7). An important feature of these individuals’ profiles is the absence of the need to be physically present at the same location for their interaction (Draucker 49). People around the globe are able to communicate with each other via their screens, be it laptops, mobile phones or any other device with access to the Internet. Furthermore, the perception of an anonymous interaction process has contributed to an increased participation in communication on the web (Miranda, Young & Yetgin 6). And while the absence of the need to reveal one’s identity seems to be beneficial to the amount of interaction, this anonymity has also led to abusive behavior and cyber bullying by people who feel safe behind their screens, thereby connecting the emergence of social media to the issue of political correctness.

The most groundbreaking feature of the new Web 2.0 environment, however, was the collaborative participation aspect. It enables the emergence of imagined communities and

describes and opens up for consideration a world in which technology creates greater cultural participation, where creativity and control are disseminated throughout the population rather than concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations. Web 2.0 suggests that technology can be used to bring about positive political changes and new relationships between citizens and governments, individuals and movements, and customers and businesses. (Marwick 7)

The Web 2.0 is therefore praised as the democratization of digital technology and the far-reaching, potentially positive effects on society are highlighted. It is not controlled by a few but co-created by its users instead. Through creating a participatory environment, the Web 2.0 has led to the Internet as we know it today, consisting of online blogs, social networks, wikis and other user-generated content websites (Marwick 22). Online communities use existing creative products for their own conversations, thereby creating value and meaning through spreading the content throughout their network. By “transforming commodities into gifts, turning texts into

resources, and asserting their own expanding communication capacities” users exert a significant cultural influence on the media industry, which has caused many traditional media companies to be skeptical of this development (Jenkins, Ford & Green 292). Aware of these changes McWhirter claims,

[T]his is a paradigmatic shift, from a one-way lecture in traditional media to a two-way open dialogue and exchange between practitioners, content providers and audiences. Therefore, there is clear evidence of a large-scale media movement from passivity to activity when considering the web and its users, as new technologies have allowed communication channels to be created and manipulated. (39)

This significant change from passive to active participation is crucial for the entertainment industry, where consumers’ passive consumption changed into recommending or criticizing certain cultural productions to their online peers. In this context, Jenkins¹ coined the term ‘convergence culture’, which he describes as being not limited to a specific medium and shifting “toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture” (243). A shift towards networked practices was the logical next step of the revolutionary emergence of individualized and personalized media consumption, which was praised in the early 1990s for having the ability to ‘liberate’ consumers from the mass media (Jenkins¹ 244). This was critical, since most of the agenda setting regarding core political and cultural issues has historically been dominated by selected influential groups or individuals. The democratization effect brought about by this participatory trend towards vast online collaborations helps to push social interests and agendas to the foreground which are deemed important by ‘the people’ and neglected by the wealthy and powerful owners of media outlets (Jenkins² 269).

Convergence culture has also impacted the hierarchical structure of traditional mass media, which has lost importance and has had to give way to the emerging field of the so-called citizen journalism. The growing digital networks, consisting of non-professional people, are able to circumvent the established censor mechanisms of the old media hegemony and give an amped voice to the ordinary person. Jenkins¹, therefore, posed the inevitable question of the digital age, “[I]n a society where blogs - both text based and video enhanced - were thriving, why would anyone need to put their content on television?” (241). Even though still a central part of modern life, the

medium of television, just like any other traditional mass media, has lost considerable power to these emancipatory online outlets. In this regard, Miranda, Young & Yetgin come to the conclusion that structural constraints of the past are minimized by social media through avoidance of authorship restriction, increased source diversity and reduced influence concentration (19). Understandably, this potential power shift poses an increasingly competitive environment for media consumption and news dissemination. However, convergence culture should not solely be seen as a threat to traditional media and established creative industries members. News outlets have adapted and learned to exist alongside citizen journalism by establishing their own presence on social media and artists increasingly take advantage of the opportunities these online tools offer by resorting to tactics such as crowdsourcing or participatory design processes (Jenkins² 271). This implies that social media, even though challenging for some, can be of great benefit for anyone if used in a correct and effective manner.

So, social and political activism in general has changed substantially and amplified the voice of the people. Collaborations through social networks are not limited to the online sphere and these websites are often only the initiator or catalyst of major social movements with far-reaching consequences well beyond the cyberspace. "They are means not simply to convey abstract opinions, but also to give a shape to the way in which people come together and act together, or [...] to choreograph collective action" (Gerbaudo 4). Although this has been true for all new media throughout history, it is particularly relevant for digital collective action, since they can be organized and disseminated in a flexible and spontaneous manner (Gerbaudo 19). There are claims that social media has led to 'slacktivism', where users resort to a meaningless joining of social media groups without any social or political interest, so that change is not achieved (Morozov n.pag.). However, digital activism should not be seen as a substitute for traditional protests on the streets, but rather as a technical enhancement of fighting for a cause. Facebook is convenient for group formation and time setting, Twitter is more useful for organization in real-time and news dissemination, and YouTube serves to provide visual evidence of circumstances (Gerbaudo 3). This became apparent during the 2011 'Occupy Wall Street' movement, which was initially ignored by the mainstream media and then only reported on in an inaccurate manner. Only after protesters took matters into their own hands, by using various online tools like live streams or by posting videos and photos

on Twitter, the traditional news outlets changed their broadcasting in favor of a more balanced and respectful coverage of the protests (O'Conner 10). While these developments should be regarded as a positive direction, the innumerable smaller collective campaigns against minor cultural or moral offenses of individuals who shared a perceived politically incorrect opinion tend more towards over-the-top outrage (De Kosnik 207). This is particularly problematic on the social media website that this thesis predominantly focuses on, namely Twitter.

Twitter is a micro blogging website, which gives people the opportunity to contribute to the participatory society by sharing their thoughts and ideas on its online platform. As of July 2020, this social media website has approximately 326 million users. At this point in time, their 'About' section stated in highlighted white letters, "Twitter is what's happening in the world and what people are talking about right now", and it closes by encouraging its users to "[s]park a global conversation" (About Twitter). This already points to the enormous potential power social media sites provide to the individual. As a website, Twitter has no official political commitment, yet, it is frequently used as a political and cultural battlefield, where individuals and entire movements intersect (De Kosnik & Feldman 8). Logically, where cultural and political battles are fought, opinions clash and arguments get heated. Despite all its potential for democratic participation, Twitter has been plagued with issues of racism, sexism and other discrimination. These activities range from alleged jokes to political opinions to even threats (De Kosnik & Feldman 9). The website has had to deal with the criticism of being a hotbed for negativity from early on, however, the useful capabilities to enrich society with productive conversations and the spreading of ideas cannot be overlooked.

An important feature of Twitter, and the new collective possibilities of digital networks in general, is the use of hashtags. The number or pound sign, '#', is nowadays widely known as a 'hashtag', especially among millennials and even younger generations. They can be utilized to let users label their content in order to associate it with a certain theme or topic. Consequently, clusters of individual messages and ideas emerge, which give structure to an otherwise disorganized environment, and this results in a more sustaining conversation (Ince, Rojas & Davis 1817). From #nofilter to #tbt, also known as #throwbackthursday, every hashtag groups together an idea or a concept, which makes people feel connected. One example of the impact such a hashtag can have on a social movement is the

#BlackLivesMatter hashtag, which has been used over 30 million times up to 2016 and has so contributed enormously to exposing injustice towards and oppression of African Americans worldwide (Howard n. pag.).

The rise of social media has also had a significant impact on the presence of public figures in society. Previously, mainly restricted and also safeguarded by the confinement of traditional mass media like TV or magazines, celebrities now have the opportunity and 'obligation' to engage directly with their fans through various online channels, where authenticity and emotional attachment are important aspects of building a relationship with audiences (Kowalczyk & Pounders 353). Hence, the entertainment industry is also Jenkins' main focus of interest when discussing convergence culture. He argues that most audience engagement is rhetorical and deemed rather meaningless, points, however, to the possibility of actual influence on creative processes (Jenkins² 271). As famous comedians are part of the celebrity culture realm they are consequently affected by this development. In the Washington Post Bunch argues that this has a fundamentally negative impact on art and claims that "[a]udiences' newfound familiarity with the men on the stage and the intolerance the easily offended have for boundary-pushing work risk forever altering the workshopping process" (n. pag.). This statement illustrates the intersection of the three main concepts of this thesis, humor, political correctness and social media.

Similar to the new ways artists interact with their fan base, receiving criticism has changed substantially. Frey & Sayad analyze social media regarding film criticism in an online environment, which can to some degree be extrapolated to the entire art industry and, hence, also to stand-up comedy. Just as with journalism, the new technology has diminished the prominence of professional critics and led to democracy or anarchism of criticism, depending on the perspective (82). Either way, social media has increased the channels of criticism and made it more inclusive to the general public than it used to be with traditional media outlets. Since anyone with a computer can now hide behind an anonymous profile, this has given rise to adverse behavior of people trying to slander anything they do not like or agree with. New terms for this development have emerged such as 'online public shaming', 'online mobs' or 'cancel culture'. Nowadays, a poor joke or an ill-advised remark can be enough to cause a so-called 'firestorm' or 'shitstorm' against someone (De Vries 2053). De Kosnik argues that cancel culture or 'call-out culture' is 'toxic' because it inhibits expression rather than inspiring productive dialogue among different groups of

people” (206). It is a particularly interesting phenomenon for the attempted investigation of modern stand-up comedy, since it is closely related to the issues of political correctness that have already been discussed.

All in all, the vastly altered communication structures in today’s society in comparison to 20 years ago make an investigation into its effect on important social phenomena such as humor invaluable, particularly in the light of a rising PC pressure, which in a favorable digital environment has resulted in the negative trend of cancel culture. Since stand-up comedy is frequently concerned with socially critical issues, the two comedians in question, Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle, have experienced the impact of this new digital and politically correct reality first-hand, especially over the past decade. This is why the comparison of their current stand-up specials to their early works can give valuable insight into these social and technological developments. The next chapter will therefore analyze selected material of both comedians in the light of recent developments, particularly regarding the trend of political correctness and the rise of social media.

4. PC’s Influence on Comedy

In this chapter, the impact the recent resurgence of PC has had on the stand-up comedy of Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle is being analyzed in more detail. As mentioned previously, for this purpose two earlier shows, *Fame* and *For What It’s Worth*, are compared to the more recent specials *Humanity*, *Deep in the Heart of Texas*, *Equanimity*, *Sticks & Stones* and *8:46*. First, the change in the comedians’ material is examined to highlight possible adjustments to recent PC pressure. Subsequently, the way both comedians use the topic of political correctness in their recent shows to their advantage is discussed further, before their current financial as well as reputational success is focused on.

4.1. Lack of Adjustment in the Choice of Material

A lot has changed since the early years of the comedy of Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle, with comedians finding themselves under increased public scrutiny for their transgressive performances in a digital environment. PC-supporting users voicing and sharing their opinions in online social networks, such as Twitter, has the

ability to quickly turn careless joking into a grievous offence. For example, as mentioned before, Kevin Hart was denied hosting the Oscars due to homophobic jokes on Twitter, which caused an enormous PC outrage on social media. This 'hostile' environment has led Jerry Seinfeld and other well-established comedians to avoid certain venues that are known for being 'too politically correct'. However, as it has already been established in the previous chapters, this does not mean that all comedians opt to shy away from humor that might offend people. The more recent stand-up specials of Gervais and Chappelle, which were all released on the streaming service Netflix, provide evidence that they have maintained their transgressive material and style also in the face of PC pressure.

This has been most noticeable in their 'battle' with the LGBTQ community over inappropriate remarks by the two entertainers. The difficulties members of the LGBTQ community face in daily life have increasingly been exposed and put into the spotlight in the past two decades. This prominence also invites public discourse and jokes as well, because what people talk about, they also joke about. Gervais and Chappelle both experienced several separate run-ins with this community from the mid 2010s onwards. Despite abundant criticism, Gervais and Chappelle have since stayed steady on their course of making fun of anyone they please, including, or even especially, the LGBTQ community. This is an important observation that would negate the recurring notion that PC is 'killing' comedy.

After hosting the Golden Globes for the fourth time at the beginning of 2016, Gervais received relentless criticism from PC advocates and particularly from the LGBTQ community for his jokes about Caitlyn Jenner. At the beginning of his monologue, he assures the audience that he "will be nice tonight" and that "he has changed", only to continue with his punch line:

Not as much as Bruce Jenner, now Caitlyn Jenner, of course. What a year she's had! She became a role model for trans people everywhere, showing great bravery in breaking down barriers and destroying stereotypes. She didn't do a lot for women drivers, but you can't do everything. (Brazil)

Various media outlets and users on social media regarded Gervais' mockery of Jenner and transgender issues as going too far, with Berman arguing in Time Magazine that it "doesn't do much to advance [transgender rights] if he's reinforcing the kinds of speech and attitudes that encourage mockery and discomfort over acceptance" (n. pag.). This goes in line with the argumentation of Saucier et al. or Kramer, who have come to the conclusion that playing with stereotypes can even

strengthen prejudice (124, 4) and, therefore, should be dealt with with caution. Yet, this considerable backlash has not led to any form of an apology or a change of attitude regarding his stand-up routine. In his Netflix special *Humanity*, he continues his, at this point, seemingly obsession-like focus on the transgender community by dedicating a sizeable junk of his show to the topic. In his typical stand-up fashion, Gervais, acts out a made-up conversation between Caitlyn Jenner and her doctor about her plans to change from a man into a woman. The one-man dialogue includes visible gestures regarding her, or back then his, genitals and an over-exaggerated muscular tone to make Jenner seem as manly as possible. In doing so Gervais emphasizes the, to him, unnatural nature of changing someone's gender. He obviously cannot understand Jenner's decision and needs to turn it into a ridiculous matter. This only adds to the already enormous struggles the transgender community has finding acceptance in society. Even though times have changed and an increasing number of people take the difficult step of changing into the person they actually feel inside, the obstacles they are facing are numerous, with an influx of anti-transgender laws in the US (Holt n.pag.).

Since one of the issues with Gervais' Golden Globes monologue is him addressing Jenner by her old name, or 'deadnaming' her, he constantly reminds the audience during the made-up dialogue that the conversation happened before her sex change. He does so with such a frequency that it becomes a clear mockery of the sensitivity of today's PC society and the dead-naming incident he has been accused of.

But years ago, when ... she was a ... man. Years ago, I'm saying. And she went to the doctor and knocked on the door. And the doctor went, "Come in!" This was years ago, alright. I'd never dead-name her now, but this is like ... a flashback before anyone ... you know what ... so, like, "Come in." And he went, "Hello, Bruce Jenner." Because that ... that was his name ... then. This was years ago. (*Humanity*)

Through mockingly recreating the conversation Jenner assumingly must have had with her doctor before her sex change, Gervais finds a clever way for having an excuse mentioning her old name. This goes on for the entire bit to a highly provocative degree, deliberately saying Jenner's old name as often as possible. He manages to say 'Bruce' or 'Bruce Jenner' an astonishing twelve times within only 90 seconds. He even lets the audience know his intentional use of her old name by laughingly adding that "[The doctor] uses his whole name every time, for some reason" (*Humanity*). He

is thereby exacerbating his already existing feud with the transgender community and using the bad publicity he has received for his offence to his advantage. He is fully aware that continuing his transgender mockery will result in shock laughter, since the sensible response would be an apology or steering away from this topic.

However, Gervais even includes transgender jokes in his earlier specials. While Caitlyn Jenner has gained more recent attention from Gervais, the subject of transgender transitioning is not particularly a novelty in his shows, with him already contemplating in *Fame*, which premiered in 2007, on how the first ever discussion between a man and his doctor about turning into a woman must have proceeded. This acted-out conversation has a very similar feel to his new bit about his portrayal of Jenner's alleged visit to the doctor. He talks in a highly non-understanding manner, belittling the difficult decision and process transgender people must go through. The only noticeable difference is the attachment to a real person, in his case, Caitlyn Jenner, in the more recent special.

In his current show *Humanity*, Gervais continues on the topic by proposing an analogy to changing someone's gender. He argues that it would be the same if he identified as a chimp and wanted to be called 'Bobo'.

I've always identified as a chimp, right? Well, I am a chimp. If I say I'm a chimp, I am a chimp. Pre-op. But don't ever dead-name me. Don't ever call me Ricky Gervais again. From now on, you call me Bobo. I'm gonna have species realignment. I'm halfway there, to be honest. I'm short, with short legs and long arms. I sort of stoop like that, my back's getting hairier by the day. (*Humanity*)

The comparison, even though acted out comically on stage by Gervais, is poorly chosen, since making the comparisons between changing someone's gender and changing from a human being into an animal is without any doubt harmful for the already difficult integration of this marginalized social community. It goes in-line with the much-refuted claim by Dr. Paul R. McHugh that it is biologically impossible to change someone's gender, since transforming a human into an animal is clearly unattainable and even unethical (Pelleschi 77). On the other hand, he is at the same time problematizing the genuine struggle of people dealing with the destabilization of traditional norms and views. As the culture of identity increasingly becomes a form of self-assertion, where people choose who and what they want to be and be acknowledged for, considerable hardship arises for many people to grasp such new concepts. Thus, Gervais' act can also be seen as beneficial to help society make better sense of gender identities, by bringing them to the foreground and serving as

a discussion initiator, which might ultimately lead to favorable social change (Smith 7). These bipolar interpretations of Gervais' trans-jokes illustrate the fine line between being unnecessarily hurtful to an entire community that already struggles to find acceptance within society and being socially critical. Both of these opposite directions are possible outcomes of a joke depending on the audience and often exist simultaneously due to the high number and variety of recipients. This coexistence of negative and positive effects immensely complicates the assessment of the reception and critique of humor, which has also had an impact on the ongoing 'PC vs. Comedy' debate.

In his new special, Gervais, however, not only targets the transgender community but offends in several different ways and directions, as he has been doing his entire career. He imitates apathetically shaking his hypothetical baby while annoyingly exclaiming, "Fucking dead already!" (*Humanity*) in order to make the point of not wanting to have the responsibility of taking care of such a "weak and vulnerable" human being. This acted-out scenario results in laughter from the audience that stems mostly out of shock about Gervais' portrayal of his apathetic relationship to an innocent baby. The entire purpose of this bit is to cross a line regarding what is acceptable in society to say or do. Another example of how Gervais is not shying away from controversial material about problematic issues is his take on society's dealing with food allergies today. He complains about an incident on a plane, where the flight attendants couldn't offer him his favorite nuts because of a person on board with a fatal nut allergy. This prompts Gervais to joke about rubbing himself in nuts so the person with the nut allergy would "blow up like a frog", or in other words, die. He does not stop there and establishes the hypothetical scenario where he has to choose between a little girl with food allergies or Hitler as a dinner party guest. He argues that he would lean towards Hitler, on the grounds that Gervais "know[s] who'd ruin that party more" (*Humanity*). Clearly, food allergies are health conditions just like any disease and can cause considerable hardship for people and lead to teasing and alienation of those affected. Topics like allergies or obesity have been given a greater spotlight in the past decades and were rather neglected in the public discourse before that, and hence, if included in stand-up routines at all, did not receive as much consideration as they do today. Gervais, however, sides with Harris on the issue of aestheticized marginality and the need to distinguish between the truly protect-worthy and the 'slightly' disadvantaged. He also already makes that perfectly clear in *Fame*.

When he talks about giving to charities, he explains to the audience that some causes are more worthy than others.

Joking aside, cancer is a very worthy cause, autism is a very worthy cause. But I got asked to do a benefit gig recently for sufferers of obesity. What? You mean fat people? She went, “No, because obesity is ...”, well she actually went *talks like he has food in his mouth*, “No, actually obesity”, she was eating. Of course she was, she was feeling peckish between snacks, but she said, “Obesity is a disease.” No it’s not, is it?! You just like eating, don’t you?! *mimics playing around with the other person’s stomach* No it’s not is it? ... How is that a disease? (*Fame*)

He explains his reasoning why he believes obesity is not comparable to ‘real’ diseases by pointing to people’s option to just stop eating. In doing so, he completely dismisses the stigma and the difficult mental struggles that are associated with such a condition. This is similar to his stance on transgender issues, where Gervais also shows little empathy for what he cannot fully understand. In the case of Caitlyn Jenner, it is his inability to understand the desire to change one’s gender and actually take the difficult step to consult a doctor about it and in the other case it is his failure to fathom the hardships of obese people to change their dietary habits.

And even though, according to Gervais, there is a difference between dealing with topics such as serious diseases and self-inflicted or not as serious conditions, for example, obesity, alcoholism or allergies, he makes no distinction when it comes to incorporating issues into his stand-up bits. In *Fame*, Gervais starts off by bragging about his charity efforts, which he sees as an invitation to joke about children with cancer.

If I ever get cancer myself, I’m gonna go to the nearest hospital and go, “Right I paid for that machine, get that little bald fucker off it.” Talking of little bold fuckers, I did the teenage cancer gig at the Albert Hall last year. I’d done it two years before as well, I did it in 2004 but they called again last year. “We’re still ill.” You lasted. *mimics hanging up the phone* (*Fame*)

He deliberately uses degrading and offensive language like “little bald fucker” to elicit shock, accompanied by laughter from the audience. Clearly, Gervais is vastly exaggerating his selfishness and mean-spirited attitude towards terminally ill children to fit his on-stage persona and the entire concept of his show, yet also wants to bring across the point of selfish and phony celebrities doing charity first and foremost for the sake of publicity. This, of course, could be thematized in many non-offending ways as well and does not justify the name-calling and animosity towards children with cancer. In a review for one of his early shows of *Fame*, before his tour officially started

at the end of 2006, Gervais' choice of using cancer patients for demonstrating his shallow celebrity persona is heavily criticized. The review claimed that it is "laughter for its most primaevial reason: to diffuse tension in awkward situations" (Bennett n.pag.). By calling children with cancer 'little bald fuckers' Gervais creates tension in the audience that they are able to release by laughing. He thereby takes advantage of the 'relief theory' mentioned in chapter 3.1, where a struggle within an individual's self is dealt with through laughter (Strott 182-183). Creating such tension can be achieved in several ways, one of which is the mentioning of problematic or traumatic issues in society. Gervais is exactly doing that by talking about cancer patients.

The examples above indicate that Gervais' approach to comedy has not changed over the years when compared to earlier stand-up shows. However, at the time when *Fame* was performed, in 2006 and 2007, the worst thing that could happen was a negative review in the traditional media, which has always been limited in scope and reach. The backlash to offensive material rarely went beyond such unfavorable reviews and mostly stopped right there. During that time, the rise of social media was still in its advent and the Internet was still used in a more passive manner by most users. Comedy was not exposed to digital networks of seemingly endlessly shared content that are part of our daily lives today. It was relatively 'safe' for a comedian to go on stage of a comedy club and try out new material, since the ability of the audience passing their act on to others was limited. The new digital developments that comedians face nowadays will be discussed in more detail later.

A similar development regarding transgressive material is noticeable when looking at the latest stand-up performances of Dave Chappelle. Just like Gervais, Chappelle has come under considerable scrutiny for his takes on recent public matters, with transphobia and the #metoo movement, among others. In his Netflix special *Deep in the Heart of Texas* he uses the term 'tranny' to describe a man in a dress he encountered, which is mainly considered a highly outdated term in a progressive society characterized by freedom of expression. While explaining to the audience his feud with an online blogger, who called him out for being transphobic, he details his encounter with this transgender person, who was not feeling well at a gala.

I don't know what you call him. A tranny, or a drag queen, perhaps. Whatever he was, he was definitely a man. [...] He looked sick, and all of his friends were standing around him, concerned, trying to revive him. I don't know what, it looked like some kind of gay CPR. There was fanning and shit. [...] And I went

over there. All I said was, “Excuse me, gentlemen. Is he okay?” And then they looked at me like I was evil. “SHE is fine.” I said, “Word? Oh. I’m sorry I didn’t know this is what we were doing.” (*Deep in the Heart of Texas*)

In this instance, there was clearly no intention of Chappelle offending the person feeling ill, yet he was met with animosity when he mistakenly called her ‘he’. It shows the taken-for-granted attitude of people when it comes to the self-proclaimed identity of others. Similar to Gervais, Chappelle thematizes the difficulties that arise from this self-assertion of gender identity, which he argues is a complex concept that involves not only alteration to one’s thinking but also to the way we speak and address each other. However, the fact that Chappelle stands by his choice and insists in his show that “he was definitely a man”, denies this person her chosen identity and thereby completely negates his alleged support for this community, which he assures the audience he provides. “Here is my thing. I support anybody’s right to be whoever they feel like they are inside. I’m your ally in that. However, my question is, to what degree do I have to participate in your self-image? Is it fair that I have to change my whole pronoun game up for this motherfucker? That doesn’t make sense” (*Deep in the Heart of Texas*). He cannot be an ally and question his responsibility to accept their chosen identity all at the same time. Even if it might be inconvenient for people to make an effort to acquire an open-minded attitude towards gender identities, it is imperative to contest the continuation of people being ignorant of other people’s self-image.

Even though he suffered considerable backlash and adverse reviews by critics and online communities, his emphasis on the transgender community continues over his next two Netflix specials. In *Equanimity*, Chappelle wonders why the transgender community hates him, as he “never had a problem with them.” Yet, he relentlessly targets Caitlyn Jenner’s nude appearance in *Sports Illustrated*. Two years later in *Sticks & Stones*, Chappelle is still on the subject and explains his reason why he is continuously making fun of transgender people by asserting, “I feel like they need to take some responsibility for my jokes. Because I didn’t come up with this idea on my own, this idea that a person can be born in the wrong body. But they have to admit that’s a fucking hilarious predicament” (*Sticks & Stone*). He tries to shift the blame away from him, since he is of the belief that it is not his fault that there is a humorous element to the struggle of transgender people. His explanation can be linked to the incongruity theory of humor, where the body of one gender conflicts with the identity of the other. Similar to Gervais, he also tries to come up with a humorous comparison

to transgender identities and asks the audience, “What if it happened to me. [...] What if I was Chinese? But born in this nigger body. That’s not funny?” (*Sticks & Stones*). The comparison is not only offensive to transgender people but also delivered with a stereotypical squinted face and Chinese accent.

Apart from Chappelle’s current contention with the LGBTQ community, he has never shied away from offending people as such, no matter who they were or are. Him being a black comedian, his focus has always strongly been on racial issues, especially on African American stereotypes, prejudice and racial discrimination in American society. In one of his first stand-up specials, *For What It’s Worth*, in 2004, he begins his show by making the audience aware of the racial segregation in their city, San Francisco. He tells his audience, “Of all the major cities in America, somehow people get along here better than anywhere else I’ve seen in the country *applause from the audience*. That’s right. And I’ve always admired San Fran for that. And today I realized how you did it. Put all the niggers on the other side of that bridge” (*For What It’s Worth*). Chappelle is starting off his bit by praising the city he is performing in, and by extension the audience, since most of the attendants would have been from that city, for how few racial issues they seem to have. The applause of the audience signalizes that they agree with him and that they are proud of that fact. However, Chappelle quickly arrives at his punchline, which heavily criticizes the prevailing racial segregation in most cities in the United States, with San Francisco being no different. He puts a mirror in front of the audience by showing them their hypocrisy, their wrongly-held beliefs of equality. Yet, in this case he is punching up to white privilege, which is generally accepted in comedy.

A large proportion of the show is dedicated to racial humor, especially to the relationship between blacks and whites. Most of the jokes, albeit charged with stereotypes, feel rather harmless and mundane, such as his bit about differences in eating habits between them. “People always see the surface; they see the division in our foods. Just because I eat chicken and watermelon. If they think that there is something wrong with me, let me tell you something if you don’t like chicken and watermelon something is wrong with YOU motherfucker, there is something wrong with YOU” (*For What It’s Worth*). He explores the stereotype that black people like to eat chicken and watermelon and compares it to the clichéd dietary habits of other ethnicities such as Latinos or white people. This is all done in a playful manner without particularly singling out a specific group of people.

However, Chappelle does not only talk about racial issues but also discusses a variety of social and cultural matters over his career. For example, he begins his show with a short homophobic bit about the city he is performing in – San Francisco.

Thanks for coming out and thanks for making a nigger feel comfortable in the gayest place on earth. [...] Man, I really didn't think it was that gay at first. Cause I was coming out here and everybody was like, "man that place is really gay." What the fuck is everybody talking about? It's not so gay. And then I wandered into that Castro. Goddamn, I say this is America's anus right here, this shit is deep. (*For What It's Worth*)

San Francisco is famously known for being a center for the LGBTQ community, especially the district 'Castro', which sets the basis for Chappelle's opening bit. However, he swiftly moves on from it and, unlike in his new stand-ups, he never extensively targets LGBTQ people or any other social group. As a member of a minority in the US, Chappelle has also always particularly felt allowed to joke about other minorities besides African Americans. In *For What It's Worth* he recalls his first encounter with a Native American. Being curious, Chappelle asks, "You are a hunter-gatherer, correct? He said, 'I guess so, if that's what you wish to call it.' I said, why what are you calling it? He said, 'I am *long pause* an alcoholic.'" With this punch line, Chappelle is thematizing the troubling reality of alcoholism amongst Native Americans in the United States. However, at the same time, he is perpetuating the stereotype of Native Americans being alcoholics and strengthens prejudice towards this group in this regard. Similarly, Chappelle mocks Asian people over their annoyance of being mistaken for the wrong nationality.

If you call a Korean guy Chinese, I've done this, they flip out. "Hey!? What makes you think I am Chinese? I am Korean! Do I look Chinese?" Yes, motherfucker you do look Chinese, that's why I said it. It was an accident. [...] It was a mistake I am not trying to offend you. Some people say all black people look alike. We don't get bend out of shape, we normally just call these people police, okay? (*For What It's Worth*)

Chappelle brings up the issue of ignorance and superficiality in a multicultural society like the United States. Apart from his imitation of a stereotypical Asian accent, he achieves this without being particularly hostile towards anyone. He rather includes the stereotype that all black people look the same to other groups of people as well and even manages to include the problematic issue of mistreatment of the black community by the police. Talking about issues that relate to him is, in general, of great importance to Chappelle, which he makes clear in *Sticks & Stones*:

If you're in a group that I made fun of, then just know that I probably will only make fun of you if I see myself in you. I make fun of poor white people because I was once poor. And I know that the only difference between a poor black person and a poor white person is that a poor white person feels like it's not supposed to be happening to them. (*Sticks & Stones*)

Yet, this statement must be questioned when considering his series of jokes targeting transgender people. Chappelle does not belong to that community and clearly does not see himself in them, since he calls them 'confusing' and talks about them in a degrading and disgusted manner on several occasions.

The humor in *For What It's Worth* comes across more light-hearted when compared to his current specials in general. The earlier jokes about gay people or Asian people feel substantially less hostile than his recent obsession with the transgender community, although he stays true to his own principles of making fun of everyone. During all his bits about Native Americans, racial segregation and stereotypical eating habits he generates a comical energy by moving around the stage and emphatic articulation. Even though most of his bits are grounded on serious issues the tone of his comedy is a more positive and optimistic one. It is more about general issues of ignorance and social conflict, which gives a clear signal of anti-racist comedy. In his new specials, however, Chappelle tries to come across more thoughtful and lecturing, almost leaning towards moral antihumor, where comedians preach about what is supposed to be funny and good for society (Hennessey n.pag.). "I'll be real with you" (*Sticks & Stones*) - Chappelle repeatedly talks about 'being real', which emphasizes that what he says is not meant as a joke and reflects his real-life opinion to a certain degree. This lecturing element is particularly apparent in *The Bird Revelation* and 8:46 in which he sits on a chair the entire time instead of him pacing around the stage. It changes the whole dynamics of the show and also how the material is perceived by the audience.

The trend of antihumor has already been pursued early on by Gervais, with him explicitly referring to his stand-up shows as 'lectures' in *Fame*. He tells the audience, "People always learn stuff from my lectures" (*Fame*). By jokingly calling his stand-up performances 'lectures', he highlights the power comedy has to produce awareness in society about important issues. It also indicates how aware Gervais himself is of the influence his words have on his audience. However, if comedy shows have this power of influencing people's mind, it, at the same time, means that they have the capacity to reinforce prejudice when the material is mean-spirited or at least

understood in such a way. This is particularly troubling when a group of people is singled out like the LGBTQ-, or more specifically the trans-community, like in the comedians' new specials.

The claim of industry experts, such as Capurro or Singh Kohli, that comedy is at a crisis due to political correctness and is somehow altered through its resurgence, is unsustainable when looking at the comedic development of Gervais and Chappelle as discussed above. Their lack of adjustment to the PC movement indicates that offensive material is still very much in demand and can be highly successful. It is true that the topics joked about in society change according to relevancy, with the focus on the LGBTQ community, especially trans-people, being the most noticeable current trend. However, the degree of offensiveness or these comedians' on-stage personas have not noticeably changed over time. Whereas Gervais incorporates trans jokes in both his older and current specials in a similar fashion, Chappelle mainly works with racial humor for most of his earlier career, an area that concerns him to a substantial degree. However, in the past decade his attention has shifted strikingly to subject matters which he looks at from the outside, e.g., transgender rights. The obsessive focus on this topic and the imbalance compared to other topics discussed over all his Netflix specials are additional signs that his claim of equal targeting is not entirely accurate anymore. And even though both comedians in question continuously receive criticism for their unresponsiveness to PC pressure, they remain stubborn in their belief to have the freedom to joke about anything or anyone. Indeed, it further provides them with additional material for their shows, through dealing with the topic of political correctness and offending people through humor to an even higher degree.

4.2. PC Can Be Hilarious

So, apparently, comedians may not only succeed despite PC, but also through incorporating the 'humorless PC crowd' into their material. The overarching focus on the subject of political correctness itself is utterly striking in both of Gervais' and Chappelle's current shows. They heavily included their thoughts on PC culture and use their time on stage to advocate freedom of speech the way they see it. The two comedians use their stand-up specials and also other public appearances to raise their voice against excessive PC. Gervais makes this abundantly clear in *Humanity*:

I'm this self-confessed Twitter police. I try and explain to someone every day what freedom of speech means, particularly in the context of comedy, and particularly in the context of a joke. That a joke about a bad thing isn't as bad as the bad thing It's not even necessarily condoning the bad thing. It could be anti the bad thing. It depends on the actual joke. (*Humanity*)

Several things can be inferred from this passage. First, by calling himself "self-confessed Twitter police", Gervais' high involvement within the Twitter community and the way he uses the platform is highlighted, which will be dealt with in more detail later. Furthermore, he emphasizes the subversive nature of humor when it comes to problematic topics and that jokes may be used to change society for the better. Yet, he fails to recognize the subjective nature, the individual interpretation of jokes a comedian has to contemplate before releasing their material to a vast audience. The intention of a joke teller is often ambiguous, and misinterpretations of well-meaning jokes can cause just as much harm as disparaging humor. This makes the evaluation of a joke an extremely delicate matter.

Both comedians noticeably increased their focus on the issue of PC, with Gervais having realized the comedic potential of political correctness as such early on. Already in *Fame* he opens his show by joking, "People go, 'Oh you can't have a go at dwarfs.' You can! You can have a go at them really. Fundamentalist terrorists I stay away from. Dwarfs, what are they gonna do?" He implicates that there are certain topics or groups of people society deems inappropriate to joke about. As mentioned above, these taboo areas change over time and are difficult to specify. By juxtaposing little people and fundamentalist terrorists, Gervais also emphasizes the difference between targeting a vulnerable group of people and people with power, as in the terrorists' case, stemming from the fear they induce in people. He admits that it is easy to 'punch down' because it is safe and more challenging and daring to aim upwards. He further deliberately chooses to be politically incorrect by calling Inuits 'Eskimos' and talking about the game 'Chinese Whispers'. In his show he pretends he has misspoken and that he is accidentally being offensive. Yet, the stand-up special has carefully been planned and prepared by Gervais. Gervais wants to establish an atmosphere in which he is constantly scared of being offensive. He does this on purpose to juxtapose his reputation of being careless with the current situation of political correctness restricting freedom of speech. He is mocking society for being scared of offending anyone and thereby places an increased emphasis on the threat of PC issues.

Gervais further criticizes PC advocates who mainly focus on altering people's language. In *Humanity*, he talks about his efforts of fighting animal cruelty and mentions a tweet he posted of two men skinning a dog alive at the Yulin Dog Meat Festival, in China.

I tweeted the picture, with a petition and I just said, "One beautiful creature, and two ugly cunts, skinning it alive." Right? And it took off. Loads of retweets, it made the press. I got one tweet back from a woman, that said, "Is that language necessary?" [...] I was incensed, I said, "You're more offended by a word than by an animal being tortured to death?" (*Humanity*)

Gervais is annoyed by people's superficial and shallow attempts to 'being PC' instead of caring about serious issues that need to be addressed. It is a valid point that he brings forth, since PC movements involve a substantial portion of effort altering the language habits of people (Hughes 3). Gervais, thereby, sides with people such as Harris, who also criticize PC for its trivialized activism (478). Yet, as discussed in the previous chapters, the focus on politically correct language should only serve as a starting point for eventually changing the general mindset of society.

Gervais and Chappelle not only joke about PC proactively but also often find themselves in situations where they have to defend themselves against a previously encountered backlash as a result of an inappropriate bit, joke, remark, or tweet. For both comedians, their clash with the transgender community is just one example of this defensive approach. Whereas Gervais needs to explain his joke about Caitlyn Jenner made at the Golden Globes in *Humanity*, Chappelle's transgender bits find their beginning in one of his earlier current Netflix specials, *Deep in the Heart of Texas*, and continue all the way up to his acceptance speech at the Mark Twain Awards. Both remain firm on their choices made and blame modern society for being 'too PC'. The two comedians are in constant need to explain why their jokes are supposed to be funny. They are highly aware of the negative criticism they receive for their material and always discuss these confrontations in the light of PC, since "[t]he concept of political correctness has given rise to a timely illustration of metahumor that is humor about the processes of humor" (Franzini 51). This has resulted in abundant new material for them, which they include regularly in their current specials.

Just like Gervais retells and uses his Golden Globes joke about Caitlyn Jenner as an initiator for his trans bit in *Humanity*, Chappelle discusses a previous joke he made about trans people to continue his mockery of this community in *Equanimity*.

Even though he starts out by apologizing for making them feel bad, he recites the joke and escalates the issue.

To be honest I don't even know what I said that upset that person. I have so many transgender jokes. I feel like it was probably this joke I'm about to tell you right now *apologetic facial expression*. And it's not even that bad of a joke. [...] I had read in the paper that Caitlyn Jenner was contemplating posing nude in an upcoming issue of Sports Illustrated. And I know it is not politically correct to say these things, so I just figure, fuck it. I'll say it for everybody else. Yuck! (*Equanimity*)

He undoubtedly expresses a demeaning and disgusted attitude towards transgender people, yet resumes his show by reiterating his concern for equality for everybody and that he has no problem with trans people. Even though this plea comes across sincere, Chappelle disregards that his continuous mockery, albeit harmless to him, contributes to the ongoing degrading and discriminating discourse about the trans community. Gervais shows a similar careless attitude towards offending people and spends a considerable time defending himself and free speech.

Particularly in his new special *Humanity*, Gervais is virtually obsessed with the topic of political correctness and lectures the audience about the difference between the target and the subject of a joke. The entire show revolves around free speech and offending people. He is critical of how we have evolved from achieving breakthroughs in many social areas such as human rights and tolerance to becoming an over-sensitive society.

People see something they don't like, they expect it to stop, as opposed to deal with their own emotions. They want us to care about their thing as much as they do. It's why the world is getting worse, and the world IS getting worse. Don't get me wrong, I think I've lived through the best 50 years of humanity. 1965 to 2015, the peak of civilization, for everything. For tolerances, for freedoms, for communication, for medicine. And now it's going the other way a bit. Last couple of years, just a little blip, maybe. (*Humanity*)

Gervais refers to the emotional component of humor and how easy it is to offend people, if they are personally attached to a specific issue (O'Shannon 250). He implies that this is a modern-day phenomenon that is getting worse. Yet, people always have been sensitive to emotionally close subject matters. The pivotal difference today, however, is that the current all-accessible digital environment offers novel and far-reaching ways of expressing one's feelings, attainable within a few single clicks on an electronic device. Gervais experienced this first-hand on Twitter, which he recounts in *Humanity*. After posting a tweet about atheism, Gervais received a response from a Christian fundamentalist about Satan raping him in hell. The comedian swiftly

retweeted this response for its illogical and, to him, hilarious nature. Jokes about rape are certainly not a new phenomenon and have been circulating in society since as early as ancient Rome. However, in recent years the topic, among others in the wake of the PC movement, has been increasingly scrutinized. In Gervais' case, it was a woman on Twitter, who was offended by his comedic quarrel involving rape.

She didn't say, "What, you find jokes about rape funny?" She said, "What, you find rape funny?" And the answer to that is, no, of course not. No one finds rape funny. Not even rapists find rape funny, you know what I mean? No one ever gives evidence saying, "It was dark, he wore a ski mask, and he was giggling." So, I sent back, "You mean jokes about rape?" She said, "Yes." I went, "Depends on the joke." It does! It depends on the joke. I said, "Course it does, it's about context, it's about content. What do you mean by a rape joke?" And she said, "Even a joke with the word 'rape' in it is unacceptable." I said, "That's ridiculous, it depends what the joke is." (*Humanity*)

Gervais has revealed this view on offensive humor many times in his career and has always emphasized that the subject of a joke is not necessarily the target. This distinction is crucial for the discussion of political correctness, since uncertainty about or misunderstanding of the intention of the joke teller is a major contributing factor to feeling offended. Gervais provides a first-hand example of a joke where the subject of rape is involved but the target is entirely different.

I tweeted that clip of me in *The Office*, going, "I think there's been a rape up there!" And everyone gets that because of the context. And the target is a middle-aged man, who's so narcissistic, he'll say the most horrendous thing to get attention to win a silly game. So, you have to understand the joke and where it's going and where it comes from. [...] Real rape jokes, they are fucking horrible when the victim is the target. They're disgusting! I'd never tell those. But it depends on the joke, not the word or the subject. (*Humanity*)

He refers to his own show *The Office*, where he portrays an inconsiderate and often offensive general manager who entirely lacks social awareness. The joke involving rape mentioned before only aides to expose these traits to the viewer. It would be adverse to the issue of rape in society if the topic remained a politically incorrect matter to joke about altogether, since given the right satiric comic persona, a comedic treatment has the ability to make the topic more accessible for serious discussion (Medjesky 198) or, in the case of the example Gervais used, to illustrate an entirely different point.

He further plays around with the notion of what is acceptable to say and what is not, by telling a story about how he scared his wife before the Golden Globe awards ceremony with 'jokes he would never tell'. While going through his material with his

wife Jane, he asked her opinion on some of his introduction jokes if, maybe, they would be too offensive, introduction jokes such as, “Not even Bill Cosby carries enough tranquilizer to bring down this next magnificent beast. Please welcome Melissa McCarthy” (*Humanity*). This one-liner not only attacks Bill Cosby’s rape scandal but also makes fun of Melissa McCarthy for being overweight. He follows up every one-liner with, “I didn’t do it! I would never tell a joke like that.” The entire point of him telling this story is so he can actually tell these ‘jokes he would never tell’, in order to have an excuse to be offensive. It is entirely aimed at the PC community and provokes through being inappropriate.

In similar fashion, Chappelle lately dedicates considerable stage time to PC issues in current society. He clearly notices a difference in the audience and how his material is accepted, which he addresses in *Equanimity*:

But there’s a more important reason that I would stop doing comedy right now. And this reason is the real reason that’s been percolating, and it really is the crowd. Not you. I’m talking about the crowd on the big stage. It’s too hard to entertain a country whose ears are so brittle. Motherfuckers are so sensitive, the whole country has turned into bitch-ass niggers. Everything you say upsets somebody. (*Equanimity*)

This passage would indicate an actual change of mindsets of people compared to his earlier years. Chappelle is blaming an increasingly sensitive society, or in other words: political correctness. Yet, he is neither being cancelled nor encounters any actual hardship to his comedy. All he perceives is the increased visibility of individual opinions in a digital world, which will be discussed in more detail later. In *Sticks & Stones* he continues his discourse on PC and confronts his audience about ‘their’ recent obsession with cancelling celebrities.

“Uuh, duh. Hey, derr! If you do anything wrong in your life, duh, and I find out about it, I’ m gonna try and take everything away from you, and I don’t care when I find out. Could be today, tomorrow, 15, 20 years from now. If I find out you’re fucking-duh-finished.” [...] That’s you! That’s what the audience sounds like to me. That’s why I don’t be coming out doing comedy all the time, cause y’all niggers is the worst motherfuckers I’ve ever tried to entertain in my fucking life. (*Sticks & Stones*)

The occasional ‘duhs’ help Chappelle’s impression of PC supporters to come across stupid or unintelligent and are a clear indication of how little Chappelle thinks of cancel culture and the current PC society in general. Without explicitly mentioning it, he refers to the online environment where people have the ability to search for comments or tweets that are more than a decade old but still accessible to the general public. He

uses the Kevin Hart incident as an example of a 'damn near perfect' human being getting in trouble in the current sensitive environment.

In fact, Kevin is precisely four tweets shy of being perfect. Ten years ago, Kevin made some very homophobic comments. [...] The gay community was upset and put so much pressure on the Academy [...] that they went to Kevin and said, "If you don't apologize to that community, then you cannot host these Oscars." And then Kevin said, "Fuck it, I quit." And then he went on every talk show in America and apologized for six weeks. (*Sticks & Stones*)

This passage, which is a concise and humorous recount of what happened to Kevin Hart at the end of 2019, is an example of what pressure from PC advocates is capable of achieving in contemporary society. However, Chappelle believes that the PC movement plays favors towards specific groups and that it is particularly attentive when it comes to the LGBTQ community. In *Sticks & Stones* he claims, "The rule is no matter what you do in your artistic expression, you are never, ever, allowed to upset the alphabet people. You know who I mean. Those people who took 20% of the alphabet for themselves." As a black man living in the United States, he seems to feel disappointed and betrayed by American society, which has been discriminating African Americans for centuries, yet, as he believes, collectively stands behind the LGBTQ community. He already lets the audience know his displeasure with this, as he sees it, uneven attention trans people are receiving in comparison to his own community in *Equanimity*.

My problem has never been with transgender people. My problem has always been with the dialogue about transgender people. I just feel like these things should not be discussed in front of the blacks. It's fucking insulting, all this talk about how these people feel inside. Since when has America given a fuck about how any of us feel inside? (*Equanimity*)

What becomes evident in this excerpt is his strong attachment to his own cause, achieving equal treatment of blacks in the United States, and him feeling neglect or unfair treatment when compared to the current PC support for the transgender community. However, even though Chappelle reiterates that it is not the LGBTQ community he has problems with, it is exactly this group of people who suffer possible detrimental consequences stemming from his continuous mockery, which according to Brian Logan borders on "a concentrated campaign. A philosophy, even – Chappelle seems to think that the struggle for sexual and gender equality is in competition with antiracism. As if civil rights is a zero-sum game, and the (relative, recent) headway made by trans activists represents a threat to Chappelle's own cause" (Logan¹ n.pag.). With this singling out of the LGBTQ community Chappelle creates a division

among various good causes and deflects from the general strive for a better and more equal society. Chappelle's petty attitude towards the trans-community would therefore suggest that his attacks are more than harmless jokes and could be detrimental to positive gains minorities have made over the years. Yet, he shows no sign of remorse or admission of guilt for being inappropriate, since he sees it as his job to make fun of people.

In his opening monologue when hosting *SNL*, Chappelle further establishes this important general maxim that rules are different for comedians when it comes to being offensive. He jokes, "[Trump] [c]alled the corona virus 'Kung-Flu'. I said, 'You racist, hilarious, son of a bitch. I'm supposed to say that, not you. It's wrong when you say it'" (*Saturday Night Live*). This suggests particular rules of who is allowed to say and joke about what. He feels entitled to offend people, since for him that is part of being a comedian. Comedians can hide behind their on-stage persona, which is used as a 'mask' or a 'false face', and thus enjoy freedoms which politicians and other more serious professions do not have (Medjesky 196). The notion that comedians have special rights regarding jokes and being offensive is fundamental for a proper understanding of the conflict between comedy and PC. However, as will be discussed at a later point, these freedoms are exclusively applicable to the comedy stage.

Regardless of comedic rules, the fact that comedians such as Gervais and Chappelle discuss PC issues in their stand-up specials suggests that political correctness can also be used as a 'selling point' for transgressive comedians. From this perspective, the PC movement is assisting comedians in finding new material rather than being an actual threat to the art form. It helps gather support from the fan-base against the 'humorless' PC advocates and contributes to the current popularity of Gervais and Chappelle. This popularity is apparent in their continuing commercial and reputational success amongst peers.

4.3. No Commercial or Reputational Consequences for Gervais and Chappelle

An important indicator of the impact of a PC backlash and cancel culture regarding offensive humor is the success and popularity of politically incorrect comedians, such as Gervais and Chappelle, amidst such criticism. If the notion that political correctness restricts comedians holds true, such comedians would receive little recognition and

would be pushed to the fringe of their respective field. And even though Kevin Hart would serve as one of the few examples where a PC initiative had actual consequences, quite the opposite is generally the case. This is particularly evident with both the comedians in question, who enjoy substantial success and also respect from peers.

Gervais has repeatedly been invited to host the Golden Globes, even though, or maybe even due to the fact that he has become famous for knowing no limits when it comes to offending people. He has hosted the award show five times already, with the most recent being at the beginning of 2020. Additionally, he was voted among the *Time Magazine* 100 most influential people in 2011 (The 2011 TIME 100 Poll). Being consistently re-invited to host award shows such as the Golden Globes comes as a surprise even to Gervais himself, since he is aware of his reputation and also what happened to Hart and at the 2020 Golden Globes, he insists on not being concerned with any repercussion stemming from offensive remarks. “This is the last time I am hosting these awards. So, I don’t care anymore. I’m joking, I never did. NBC clearly don’t care either, fifth time *points at himself*. I mean Kevin Hart was fired from the Oscars because of some offensive tweets. Hello?! *points at himself* (Caruthersm). What this opening bit of his performance further indicates is the continuous and deliberate booking of offensive comedians such as Gervais by TV networks to attract a large audience. He compares his situation to Kevin Hart and wonders why he is allowed to host these awards as Hart, at the same time, was ‘cancelled’. It seems as if he had not faced any consequences from his fallout with the transgender community or other offensive jokes the previous years. Quite the opposite, with networks deliberately approaching him for ratings due to his ‘shock factor’.

The same can be said of Chappelle, who has been especially successful with his latest Netflix specials. He received 3 Emmys and 3 Grammys combined for them. Additionally, he received the Mark Twain Prize in 2019, which “recognizes individuals who have had an impact on American society in ways similar to the distinguished 19th-century novelist and essayist Samuel Clemens, best known as Mark Twain” (Mark Twain Prize for American Humor). This is an exceptional honor, only awarded to the most iconic comedians of their time, such as Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Jay Leno or Eddie Murphy. Chappelle was further voted 9th on the all-time best stand-up comedians list by Rolling Stone Magazine (Love).

All those accomplishments and praises would point to PC controversies having little impact on their financial or their reputational success. They have been known for their daring material from the beginning of their careers onward. So, getting in trouble, and with that on to people's social media feeds and other news portals, only means more resonance with their already enormous fan base, and further results in new material for their stand-up.

The combination of lack of adjustment to and incorporating of political correctness, and continuing success of Gervais and Chappelle despite an increasingly delicate PC environment would refute the claim that political correctness is the driving change within the comedy industry. This would be in sharp contrast to many comedians' claim that they are restricted in their craft and that comedy has become 'soft'. Furthermore, the notion that lesser-established comedians are more negatively affected by PC (Brown n.pag.) is arguably dismissible since there are plenty of young, up-and-coming comedians who gained success despite controversial content. Bo Burnham, for example, is one of them, who in 2010 at the age of 19, rose to stardom with often highly offensive, yet thought-provoking jokes. It indicates that failure to elicit laughter and success is therefore not a matter of political correctness but rather of the quality of the material, be it offensive or PC. However, even though PC only seems to affect comedy, and especially transgressive comedy, in a limited manner, there certainly are other forces at work that have altered the environment for comedy, with the rise of social media being the most revolutionary one.

5. Social Media – A Comedy Revolution

While it is true that political correctness has asserted some pressure on comedians, it is the emergence of social media that has fundamentally transformed the way comedic material is disseminated and also responded to. Social media has affected all parts of life and consequently substantially impacted comedy as well, not only directly but also indirectly through its influence on other social phenomena such as political correctness. It has altered the entire communication structure of modern society through making it more fast-paced, more widespread and often anonymous for its members. In terms of comedy, social media has opened up new communication channels where jokes circulate freely and comedians such as Gervais and Chappelle have the opportunity to interact with their audience. This has also made it difficult to

stay in control of one's comedic material, which calls for a different, perhaps more careful approach to joking around online. Additionally, it has made activism such as the PC movement more efficient and organized through the use of hashtags and the emergence of the digital convergence culture discussed earlier.

In this chapter, the online discourse on the comedy of Gervais and Chappelle and on political correctness in general is examined more closely. This is accomplished by looking at selected tweets and hashtag trends on the social media website Twitter. Twitter has been chosen because it is an extremely popular social media website with substantial involvement of public figures. The chapter will first focus on the differences between comedy on stand-up stages and humorous attempts online, before analyzing how the rise of social media has impacted the comedic environment in more detail. Lastly, the proactive use of social media by comedians and other public figures, with all its rewards and dangers, is emphasized.

5.1. Difference Between Joking on Stand-Up Stage and Social Media

Social Media has opened up the world to a wider and constant conversation about any topic imaginable for anyone with an Internet connection. This has dramatically changed the dynamics of interaction between people all around the globe. Chappelle is an exception in not using Twitter, since the majority of celebrities are active participants of the platform, reaching millions of followers in any given moment of time. Comedians such as Gervais regularly joke around on the website, often without making a distinction between their physical stand-up persona and their online presence. Yet, the environment and the context in a mostly written online setting vastly differ from an artistic product such as a comedy show.

As already established in previous sections, when comedians are on stage performing their shows, they often use a comedic persona to illustrate and strengthen their argument within a joke (Smith 36). For example, a trademark feature Gervais has cultivated from the very onset of his comedy career is his arrogant and selfish persona on stage. He constantly reminds the audience of how successful he is and how much better he is than them. This aspect has not changed noticeably over the past decade. Already in *Fame*, he enters the stage wearing a king's robe and a crown. This sets the stage for his bragging about how much he gives to charity but also only serves as a set up to joke about cancer patients, who he would immediately kick off

the machines he paid for, in case he fell ill. He exaggerates his arrogant and selfish persona to such a degree, that he invites the audience to separate his true self from his show. In his new stand-up, Gervais still makes sure to establish this arrogant and condescending persona from the start by telling the audience to “shut the fuck up” when they give him a standing ovation and even compares himself to Jesus. He superciliously tells the audience, “I know what you are thinking, you’re thinking, ‘Relax, we’ve already had our money’s worth just seeing you.’ What? ‘You’re legend.’ Shut up! What is he? I’m not a god. I’m just an ordinary guy, you know, going around talking to people, sort of like Jesus, in a way. But better. Well, I’ve actually turned up. So...” (*Humanity*). This serves to set up his stage persona, which is crucial for his subsequent jokes to be effective and properly understood. It is connected to the entire concept of the show and when he, for example, later complains about people with food allergies, it needs to be understood that this stems from his exaggerated selfish persona.

Comedic stage personas have a significant effect on how a joke is perceived and accepted by the audience. It all happens within the confinement of the show on stage, which is clearly marked and separated from the audience. Unless interrupted by an audience member, the comedian is in full control of what is being said and when. Comedy shows can be regarded as finished and coherent products, where jokes are embedded within a larger concept (Ritchie 119). Some jokes can only be properly judged and enjoyed when also knowing the previous parts of the show. Furthermore, looks, gestures and facial expressions constitute a large part of the comedic persona and also of the delivery of jokes in general. This is also particularly true for Chappelle whose strong stage presence is pivotal to the effectiveness of his stand-up specials. Even though, as mentioned before, some of his current specials convey a more lecturing side of Chappelle with him sitting the majority of the shows, he typically makes exceptional use of his voice and body language, which are especially important when imitating other people, such as a stiff and bland white guy at the grocery store in *For What It’s Worth*.

It is an entirely different story when comedians use social media outside of the concept of a show, where they participate as themselves, without any ‘protection’ of their stage act. Any comedic personas they use on stage are not applicable and everything they say or tweet falls back on their private lives. Therefore, jokes are judged differently on social media, even though they might cover the same topic area.

This became particularly apparent with Kevin Hart's homophobic jokes on Twitter, which ultimately led to his resignation from hosting the Oscars. Even though Hart had already included homophobic material in his 2010 stand-up special, it was his tweets that caused the controversy and his resignation. The different reception of jokes on social media compared to the stand-up stage is partly because the audience of a comedy show agrees in advance to the humorous nature of what is going to be said by the comedian (Ritchie 164). This unspoken understanding between performer and the audience creates a distinctive environment and rules for comedians, as Chappelle implies in his *SNL* monologue mentioned earlier. However, as established throughout this thesis, this does not make them immune to criticism regarding their material.

Since social media is predominantly a written medium and also a platform for more serious discussions and news content, anything that is said without being properly marked as a joke is subject to be taken seriously at first. This can rapidly turn attempts of being funny into a risky matter, since ambiguous public statements made on these websites can be saved and disseminated, even after they have been deleted by the author. Yet, many people do not seem to be aware of the severe consequences their written word can have. Gervais comparing his jokes to someone selling guitar lessons shows how little he thinks of the magnitude shared content as well as words and tweets can have in the social media age.

People take everything personally. They think the world revolves around them, particularly on Twitter. I'm not tweeting anyone, I'm just tweeting. I don't know who's following me. I've got 12 million followers. They can be following me without me knowing, choose to read my tweet, and then take that personally. That's like going into a town square, seeing a big noticeboard and there's a note 'Guitar lessons', and you go, "But I don't fucking want guitar lessons!" [...] Fine! It's not for you, then. Just walk away. Don't worry about it. (*Humanity*)

This analogy is flawed in several ways. First, the reach of a noticeboard in a town square, which is in general a highly outdated concept, is difficult to compare to the almost endless reach of the Internet. But more importantly, guitar lessons have no detrimental effect on other people. For Gervais the comparison might make sense, since he continuously undermines the possible harmful impact of humor and comedy even though, as discussed in previous chapters, studies would suggest otherwise. Furthermore, to "just walk away" and "not worry about it", as Gervais puts it, is simply not as easy as it used to be, with social media and other digital outlets exposing people to unexpected content which would be avoidable in the offline world. There is no clear-cut divide between the audience of a comedian in front of the stage or

watching the show consciously on a streaming service and users getting exposed to specific parts of the show on social media. Developing an awareness of how the digital word travels on social media is crucial for comedians and everyone else to better understand the impact certain statements or jokes can have.

So, it is pivotal for comedians to realize that the jokes they make on the comedy stage nowadays have a vastly greater reach and impact than in the past. Every sentence, or even word they say can instantly be shared online and turned into a discussion starter for uncountable users worldwide. In case of a verbal mishap this might have dire consequences for a previously neglectable offense, which means that social media is particularly relevant for the current sensitive comedy environment.

5.2. Social Media - The Decisive Factor for the Changed Comedic Environment

The emergence of social media has greatly influenced how topics and individuals are discussed in the public sphere and comedians quite often see themselves 'trending' anytime a controversial joke or statement has been made. Even though Gervais and Chappelle are vastly different concerning their involvement with social media, both are inevitably affected by this development. People collectively decide what and who is trending and put into the spotlight at any given time. Regardless of their own amount of involvement within the social media environment, just like any other public figure, Gervais and Chappelle are much talked about and anything they say or do is instantly publicly discussed. This is in sharp contrast to earlier stand-up times, in which comedians were able to consciously joke about a certain topic to an audience with a more predictable reach. If people were offended by a joke, they had limited options to voice their displeasure and most damage was done by professional critics in specific publications or other outlets.

The situation is vastly different today. There currently is an extensive online discourse about comedians being offensive through the use of #cancelNAME hashtags. Kevin Hart's career has suffered significantly as a result of the #cancelkevinhart campaign against him following his homophobic remark on and off stage. This became predominantly possible through social media tools provided to the single individual to contribute to a collective effort, for example, using hashtags

such as #cancelkevinhart. A #cancelNAME resurfaces every time a comedian, or any other public figure, crosses an individually perceived line in terms of offensiveness.

Given their field of work, Gervais and Chappelle have unsurprisingly been strongly associated with this hashtag trend. Each individual offense is grouped together under the hashtag, thereby connecting older controversies with more recent missteps. For example, in *Sticks & Stones* Chappelle comments on the, at the time, current documentary about Michael Jackson's child molestation accusations and further cements his reputation as a 'victim blamer' by declaring, "I'm gonna say something that I'm not allowed to say. But I gotta be real. I don't believe these motherfuckers. I do not believe them. [...] I don't think he did it. But you know what? Even if he did do it *shrugs*. You know what I mean? I mean, it's Michael Jackson!" (*Sticks & Stones*). He continues to explain how proud the victims should be and that he would brag in school if he got molested by the 'King of Pop', which led a user on Twitter to post the following tweet: "Wow. @DaveChappelle is trash. I support victims. I believe them. The only thing that confuses me is how Dave is still around. #canceldavechappelle #supportvictims #ibelievevictims" (@anitanoelleg, Tweet 1). The user not only uses #canceldavechappelle but also connects the tweet to other causes she finds worthy and important. By using Chappelle's Twitter handle, she also associates his account with her post, which further increases the reach of the tweet. Another user was upset about his attack on Laura Ingraham in his George Floyd-inspired YouTube special *8:46*, by tweeting, "Dave Chappelle should just keep his irrelevant mouth shut. When did it become funny to call strong influential women such as @IngrahamAngle a such a derogatory word. #canceldavechappelle" (@Karen4Collins, Tweet 2). Through the use of @IngrahamAngle, the user tries to connect to the fan-base of Ingraham and thereby gather support against Chappelle. Even though these two examples are years apart and concerning two different incidents, they are both part of the over-arching trend of the #canceldavechappelle. It facilitates the collective PC efforts against Chappelle or any other offensive comedian.

The trend of negative campaigning against a public figure who happens to display different values and opinions than one's own has reached new levels in the age of social media where even critics are being pressured into giving a bad review. In an article of The Guardian, Logan touches upon this phenomenon and mentions a tweet he received in which he was asked to "please consider the impact" of a possible endorsement of Gervais for his transphobic material (Logan² n.pag.). It shows the

different routes offended people can take nowadays to campaign against a comedian they believe has crossed a certain line. Not only do they have the option to 'attack' them directly, but also the possibility to target influential people such as journalists and critics, whose verdict can be crucial to the success of entertainers.

As much as hashtags have the ability to spread negative publicity, a shift towards an ironic use of the #cancelNAME has eventually occurred and nowadays the hashtag is almost expected after someone misbehaves. They are therefore also used in a sarcastic and anti-PC manner. This is exemplified by the following tweets, which were all posted on January 6th, 2020, during Gervais' Golden Globes performance:

- #cancelRickyGervais will be trending in 3..2..1.. (@OlgaGikharev, Tweet 3)
- Spot on @rickygervais..... spot on. Since he said a true and funny thing though, I'll just assume #cancelrickygervais will be trending. (@AaronPaulBaker1, Tweet 4)
- I'm certain #CancelRickyGervais is going to be trending later today this man is hilarious #GoldenGlobes (@IzzaacBruh, Tweet 5)

Similar sarcastic responses were generated regarding Chappelle's new Netflix specials, where, amongst others, one tweet read, "Wait...let me get this straight. Dave Chappelle, the COMEDIAN, went on stage and...MADE FUN OF PEOPLE??? *surprise emoticon* Well then we obviously know what time it is. #canceldavechappelle #cancelculture" (@AutoShermatic, Tweet 6). The tweet implies that a comedian's job is to make fun of people and that they are expected to do so, even though in today's environment this is no longer possible without receiving complaints.

When analyzing tweets directed towards Gervais or Chappelle, issues of political correctness become apparent and illustrate how the two comedians are intertwined with them. For example, the different acceptance of Chappelle in today's PC environment compared to his earlier years became obvious when some user tweeted, "Wait #CancelDaveChappelle is trending. Ok yup...America officially sucks. #Chappelle #DaveCahppelle" (@Mykes2nyce, Tweet 7). The aspect of surprise in this tweet shows how highly recognized Chappelle is in terms of his comedy. It further implies that society, the tweet referring specifically to American society, has changed for the worse and the user indirectly blames political correctness for this negative development. This also becomes apparent in another tweet, "The fact that they trynna #CancelDaveChappelle further lets me know how much y'all didn't deserve

comedians like #BernieMac or #RichardPryor. Because them too said whatever they felt and if you didn't laugh they ain't care *shrug emoticon**" (@SlowFaceKillah, Tweet 8). Bringing up comedians from the past such as Richard Pryor further juxtaposes an old era of comedy to the current one. In this tweet the past is equated to better times, where comedians were allowed to cross lines without consequences. Even though this is a vast exaggeration of reality, it suggests a certain change happening over time in terms of appropriateness and acceptance of jokes, which is the field of investigation of this thesis. The user perceives the current comedy environment as much more hostile and sensitive when it concerns transgressive humor. As discussed in the previous sections, this is certainly true for many protect-worthy causes, like social minorities, such as the LGBTQ community or specific ethnic minorities.

The contrasting use of the #cancelNAME illustrates the dynamics and also unpredictable nature of language, especially in a fast-paced digital world. What started out as a more efficient weapon for PC supporters to combat inappropriate language and behavior has turned into a source of humor and irony. It was instrumental in the PC campaign against Kevin Hart and resulted in real-life consequences with him stepping down from hosting the Oscars. However, over time, using the hashtag has diverged from its original intent and has already frequently been used in an ironic sense when referring to Gervais and Chappelle. Whether ironic or serious, such hashtags strengthen conversations about PC and offensive comedians, making them more visible and durable than ever.

However, even online discourses without the use of hashtags prove to be meaningful and impactful in the age of social media. Chappelle talks about Standards and Practices of network TV where, according to him, he regularly got in trouble during his time on *Chappelle's Show* and was once told that he could not say the word 'faggot' on the network. In *Sticks & Stones* he wonders, "Why is it, that I can say the word 'nigger' with impunity, but I can't say 'FAGGOT'? And she said, 'Because, David, you are not gay.' I said, 'Well, Renée ... I'm not a nigger either.'" Chappelle loves to talk about what people can and should be able to say, what they are and are not allowed to say but he gets a very important aspect wrong in this bit, or chooses to ignore it. He completely dismisses the reclamation process for terms such as 'nigger'. Reclamation of slurs attempts to re-shape the use of a word through the target group taking back control over a derogatory word originally used to attack them (Popa-Wyatt 160). Therefore, Chappelle being a member of the black community makes his

analogy poorly chosen. By posting this part of the show on Twitter, @HNICBrian (Tweet 9) initiated a thread with more than 1200 comments about PC and the question if Chappelle had a point. The majority of the comments viewed Chappelle's argumentation negatively. In the thread, one user pointed to the slur reclamation mentioned above by tweeting, "He misses the whole point of slur reclamation while also managing to not even be funny in his delivery...Girl" (@sukeetee, Tweet 10). Another user was simply annoyed about Chappelle's apparent lack of awareness and the false equivalence he applied, "Because you deliberately intend to use one as an insult. Not that damn hard." (@buffsblg, Tweet 11). Not only do these tweets show the instant and continuous online discussions of cultural products such as stand-up shows but also what powerful conversational tool social media outlets are, with a random user, @HNICBrian, who at the time of writing had 130 followers on Twitter, easily starting a conversation about PC with over 1200 comments. Such a vast and instant public conversation about individual statements or bits of comedians were still difficult to imagine at the turn of the millennium, which only demonstrates what rapid and significant effect digitalization has had on society.

When considering the unpredictability and possible damaging discourses of this new environment, avoiding such online platforms might appear to be the 'safest' option for public figures, which Chappelle has chosen. Yet, as mentioned above, people and incidents are talked about online, no matter if the person is involved or not. Participating in one's own discourse and attempting to steer the conversation in a specific direction has potential mitigating effects, yet also detrimental ones, if done carelessly. Aside from taking part in online discourses, there are also abundant other ways for comedians to use such channels proactively.

5.3. Proactive Use – Chance for Comedians to Thrive and Fail

Social media platforms such as Twitter offer unique opportunities for people to promote themselves and also causes that are important to them but pose new and adverse challenges for people as well. Gervais is a prolific user of Twitter and furthers his career and causes through the dissemination possibilities of the website. On the other hand, social media creates an environment where it is substantially easier for public figures to tweet a 'verbal mishap' or end up in damaging arguments with often

anonymous strangers. There have been numerous instances in which Gervais found himself in a controversy he initiated through a tweet.

Unlike Gervais, Chappelle rarely uses social media. He mostly uses Instagram for promoting his work or important personal matters and disabled the comment section, which illustrates his attitude towards interactive social media engagement. In 2012 he had a short stint on Twitter, where he posted several tweets within a week and has not tweeted ever since. Even though he still has an active account, Chappelle is apparently skeptical of Twitter, or social media in general for that matter, and judging from his first tweet, which said, “Chinese Riddle: If a man does not tweet does he exist?” (Tweet 12), almost felt compelled to join Twitter. He thereby comments on the constant pressure of celebrities to stay relevant and how life has shifted from the real world to the cyberspace, more specifically, Twitter. By asking that hypothetical question, Chappelle’s opinion of Twitter and other social media tools becomes abundantly clear. He is mocking the pressure they create and further comments on the substance and intentions of many people’s tweets by posting, “I can’t think of anything provocative to tweet, and yet, I must continue...Must...keep...tweeting” (Tweet 13). The few tweets he posted on Twitter all have an ironic undertone and should be seen as criticism of the platform itself. He implies that Twitter users are deliberately provocative to gain attention and that they are tweeting even though they do not have anything important to say. This is exactly how Gervais admits he is using Twitter occasionally; just to provoke people.

Now admittedly, when I first got on Twitter, I pushed my agenda a little bit. I was an outspoken atheist. Not because I thought I change anyone’s opinions. I thought it was important to tell the other side. [...] Then I realized I didn’t even have to tweet about religion or atheism. I can just tweet a fact and that annoyed just the right people. I’d tweet things like, “Happy Birthday, Earth. Four point six billion years old today.” And someone would always go, “Oh, we know what you’re fucking doing.” (*Humanity*)

Gervais demonstrates how easy it is for people to get into arguments on social media platforms and also the highly interactive possibilities between public figures and common people. He further provides a glimpse at his provocative use of Twitter and how he promotes causes that are important to him, for example atheism. In *Humanity*, Twitter arguments are a central part of his show and he explains his back and forth messaging with other users in detail. Gervais reads the Twitter thread from his phone, or at least he pretends to do so. This gives the audience a more authentic feel for his argument since Twitter is frequently used on phones nowadays. He even describes

the way other users write, if someone tweets in capitalized letters, for example. This is important in a virtual world, since articulation is produced through written clues such as capital letters and reveals the emotions and attitudes of the authors. The angry nature of an all-capitalized tweet he once received particularly amused Gervais and is mocked accordingly in his special.

With Twitter having this confrontational component, comedians such as Gervais easily end up in a controversy regarding certain jokes or remarks. In 2019, after tweeting several transphobic jokes, Gervais was reminded by a user that “transphobia does REAL harm to REAL kids” and that he should consider that. Yet, Gervais reiterated that he made jokes about worse subjects and that jokes did not harm people (Murphy n.pag.). He consistently neglects any notion that he might be, even partly, responsible for the negative consequences of his jokes. He further is of the opinion that as long as he is not punished legally by the current system in place, he has the right to do whatever he pleases without any regard to others. This becomes evident when he tweets, “But if I’ve said anything transphobic you should report me. Twitter has rules in place to guard against that sort of vile bigotry. My account will be closed down and you’ll be proved right and will have saved millions of lives. Why aren’t you doing this?” (Tweet 14). However, Gervais clearly has a faulty idea about how social media sites such as Twitter work, since after only briefly browsing the guidelines for offensive content one would find that Twitter is quick to state that “[i]t’s important to know that Twitter does not screen content or remove potentially offensive content” (About offensive content - Twitter Help Center). Over-estimating the regulatory power of social media sites on the one hand and under-estimating the enormous amplifying effect such websites have on bigotry and intolerance on the other hand are key components which should not be overlooked by entertainers and other influential people on the Internet. We now have an entirely different communication environment compared to the first decade of the 21st century, when direct interaction with the public was limited for celebrities and traditional media such as newspapers and television were still dominating the public discourse (Stanimirovic n.pag.).

Whether social media or traditional media, Gervais has never had positive feelings towards the media and has incorporated several bits of his annoyance about them into his shows throughout his career. In *Fame*, he complains to the audience about his dealings with the print media. After jokingly giving the advice to kill a

prostitute in order to become famous, he recounts a conversation with a local journalist.

A local paper called me and asked, “Are you worried about offending people?” And I was yea, because that is not the point of what I do. She went, “No but the joke is about the Ipswich murder.” It is not about the Ipswich murder, that’s a true anecdote. I really said that to a journalist and it happened six years before the Ipswich murders, which ruined her angle a little bit. (*Fame*)

Gervais needs to explain the intention of his joke and continues, “It’s a slight on fame. It’s like going, ‘Well if you want to be famous do something horrendous’” (*Fame*). According to Gervais, the reporter was disappointed to hear it was not about the murder and therefore not the offensive story she would have wished for. This is a good example of the misinterpretation and inferences made by people, which can lead to dire consequences for comedians or other public figures. The bit also illustrates the media waiting for misbehavior of comedians like Gervais for them to have compelling stories for their readership. This entire focus on Gervais’ involvement in the media circus in *Fame* can be perfectly juxtaposed to his new show *Humanity*, which to a large part centers on his new media ‘battles’, in particular social media and his Twitter arguments. At the time *Fame* was performed and released there was no social media and celebrity’s interaction with fans was limited. The common channel to the public went through journalists and interviews. This was a substantially more prepared and predictable method of communication, yet, as Gervais demonstrates, already extremely frustrating in terms of conveying the intended message.

Regardless of his complaining about the media, Gervais is still highly vocal on Twitter about any topic, particularly concerning free speech. He uses the platform to promote his right to joke or talk about any subject he wants, as long as it is done in an appropriate context. He further comes to the defense of fellow celebrities who are criticized for being politically incorrect. This was the case when he took J.K. Rowling’s side in a controversy that resulted from her retweeting an anti-transgender social media post (Ennis n.pag.). To a user who compared the ensuing attacks on the famous Harry Potter author to Galileo being put to court for saying the earth moves around the sun, Gervais answered, “Yep. They’ve created a dogma with its own blasphemy laws. Chillin” (Tweet 15). It shows his extreme disdain of political correctness and cancel culture, and also his commitment and dedication to actually contributing to the public discourse on the issue of freedom of speech on such social media platforms. Being a celebrity, such involvement in the public discourse about

sensitive topics such as transgender rights can have serious consequences if not done in an attentive manner. In contrast to Gervais, Chappelle circumvents this risk by avoiding Twitter entirely, which, however, does not make him less vocal towards the issue. As discussed throughout this thesis, Chappelle is also a dedicated advocate for free speech, which he demonstrates regularly in his specials and public appearances, but not on social media.

All in all, the emergence of social media has changed how we communicate. There are different conversational rules and practices in the online sphere, which users need to be aware of in order to communicate effectively and appropriately. This relatively new conversational environment is particularly opposed to a performance on a comedy stage and therefore poses new challenges especially for comedians. No matter if they are actively taking part in the online discourse on social media or only watching from afar, anything they say on stage can result in them trending on Twitter or similar websites. Therefore, it is imperative for contemporary comedians such as Gervais and Chappelle to consider such online dynamics when writing their material, not only for the sake of avoiding controversies, but also for the possible amplified harmful effects their offensive joking can have in an online environment.

6. Conclusion

‘Political correctness is killing comedy; people are too sensitive nowadays!’, has been a sentence heard more and more frequently from comedians and other industry-related individuals in recent years. The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to explore to what degree such statements have validity and how the environment for comedy has changed over the past decades, a time span in which political correctness has become more visible than ever through the digitalization of our social life. For that purpose, both earlier and more current stand-up specials by Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle are compared and the ensuing discourse on social media is analyzed. As with most research, the scope of this thesis is limited due to resource constraints and additional exploration of the fields discussed would be beneficial. Even though the two personalities serve as great examples of transgressive comedians, they are both middle-aged men, who have experienced significant success in their careers. The results might be different for unknown, small-venue comedians, who do not already have an established fan-base, even though, as mentioned before, Bo Burnham’s

success at the beginning of the 2010s would suggest a similar conclusion to the one derived from this research. Furthermore, it would be useful to expand the analysis to more gender, culturally and generationally diverse subject matters for a more extensive representation of the issues at hand. Nevertheless, these limitations do not mitigate the usefulness of the current results for further investigation into the fields of humor, political correctness and social media.

The results of the comparison of the stand-up specials indicate that both comedians did not adjust their comedic approach to PC pressure. On the contrary, both have become even more provocative. Their success indicates that such material, despite being offensive is still very much in demand and that comedians are in no need to adjust to the PC movement. The claim that political correctness affects modern comedy in a restrictive manner is therefore vastly exaggerated. The heavy use of PC-issues as timely material in the current stand-up specials of Gervais and Chappelle would suggest that the attempts of PC movements to interfere with humor can even be beneficial for transgressive comedians. They find support from their fans in their fight against the, to them, humorless PC crowd and rather strengthen their popularity. This becomes abundantly apparent in the continuing commercial and reputational success of Gervais and Chappelle amongst peers.

Yet, even though both comedians show a lack of adjustment regarding their offensive nature, they have modified their material in accordance with relevant issues in society. This is nothing out of the ordinary since comedy continuously evolves along-side social focal points. In their more recent stand-up specials, Gervais and Chappelle dedicate a considerable time of their shows to Caitlyn Jenner and the, to them, unnatural and confusing aspect of transgender existence. The attention to transgender realities and issues has greatly increased as a result of the publicly announced sex-change of Jenner in 2015, which has simultaneously caused a surge in LGQTB coverage in the media and also comedy. Accordingly, while, traditionally, Chappelle's comedy mainly focused on racial humor for a long period, his attention has substantially shifted towards the LGBTQ community in his latest specials. Even though Gervais already discusses transgender issues in one of his earlier stand-ups, the same can be said about him, with a noticeably increased focus on this topic area in his current special. For Chappelle this means leaving his area of expertise, which is racial humor, an area, which he sees himself a part of, and joking about issues he might not entirely comprehend. He is often dismissive of the real-life struggles of the

transgender community when comparing them to his own fight against discrimination as a black person living in the United States. He comes across envious of the PC support trans people and the 'alphabet people' in general receive. Gervais, on the other hand, uses his controversy regarding his Caitlyn Jenner remarks at the 2016 Golden Globes to build on one of his earlier bits about a trans person going through their transitioning phase. Both comedians have been criticized for their chosen directions by critics and people on social media. Yet, this backlash has not resulted in any serious consequences for them. On the contrary, it has only fueled another current focus area of contemporary comedians: making fun of political correctness and the apparent humorlessness of modern-day society.

Gervais and Chappelle explicitly complain about the audience, in this case the broader population, being too sensitive nowadays. Both use the example of previously misunderstood trans jokes they made to explain certain processes of humor and how jokes are meant to be understood. They spend considerable time justifying themselves for older material, which they use to continue on that very topic and aggravate the entire situation. However, this is all done in a highly prepared and conscious manner, since they are aware of their immense popularity and only minor chance of real repercussions. Their stance on free speech is as strong as ever, which they emphasize regularly in their shows, as well as online.

All in all, PC' attempts to throttle offensive comedians such as Gervais and Chappelle have mostly proven ineffective, yet, at the same time new and to some perplexing practices and ways of conduct within the comedy industry have clearly emerged. This is where social media comes into the equation, since it intersects with comedy and political correctness simultaneously. It has substantially transformed the way comedic material circulates and is being discussed online. The emergence of social media not only affects comedy directly by giving comedians new outlets to distribute their material and through more interactive communication, but also indirectly through having an impact on PC initiatives. It has led to the more rapid and wider dissemination of excerpts of comedy shows, which is predominantly a favorable development for comedians as it means more visibility. Nevertheless, it has also resulted in a more uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of exposure to users on the Internet. If these users do not agree with the content or humor of such videos, they instantly have the ability to voice their opinion on these channels as well. This is substantially different to the early 2000s, the time of the earlier comedy specials of

Gervais and Chappelle, when users predominantly used the Internet in a passive manner. Today, the use of hashtags to create a connecting thread about topics or people on social media channels is contributing to the discussion and also to the escalation of certain events. Whereas a controversial joke or statement was easily forgotten in the past, it now finds itself trending online on social media without any restrictions to who sees or hears it. Comedians are now exposed to digital networks of seemingly endlessly shared content that are part of our daily lives today. Such networks are powerful tools for collective campaigns such as the PC movement to further their own causes. They can damage the reputation and consequently the career of public figures, which was exemplified by the campaign against Kevin Hart hosting the Oscars. Even though Gervais and Chappelle are vastly different concerning their involvement with social media, both are inevitably affected by this development since, just like any other public figure, comedians are much talked about and anything they say or do is instantly publicly discussed on these channels. In many cases, the person in question has the option to participate in this discourse about them or the controversy they have caused. Unlike Chappelle, who avoids Twitter altogether, Gervais frequently chooses to speak his mind on the platform in a provocative manner, which often only escalates the issue at hand. It shows the need for an attentive and sensible approach to social media activity, especially for public figures. The technological advances in communication have resulted in new and ambiguous online practices, which have changed the entire dynamics of audience interaction with artists. This is particularly relevant for comedians, whose job it is to make their audience laugh on stage, which is an entirely different setting than the online environment. Comedians need to be aware of the new conversational practices and distinguish between their on-stage personas and their private social media presence.

Since communication technology is an ever-changing field of academic research, continuous discussions on its effect on social issues such as offensive humor and political correctness need to be established. This thesis should, therefore, serve as encouragement for further investigation into the subject matter and similar directions. Even though comedians first and foremost aim to entertain their audience through laughter, it is crucial to recognize the harmful consequences humor can produce. It is highly doubtful that Gervais or Chappelle will change their approach to comedy anytime soon. As a matter of fact, at the time of finishing this thesis,

Chappelle already released his newest special on Netflix, which caused other artists and producers to boycott the streaming platform because of his continuing focus on the trans-gender community and its damaging impact. This demonstrates the relevancy of the investigated topic and the importance of a continuing exploration of this socially important subject matter. As has extensively been discussed in the previous chapters, PC initiatives will not eliminate offensive comedy or attitudes within society altogether, yet, through new opportunities on social media platforms such as Twitter, they have the ability to raise awareness about what happens after the laughter.

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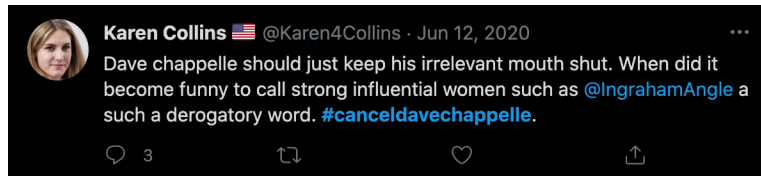
8. Appendix

8.1. Tweets

Tweet 1



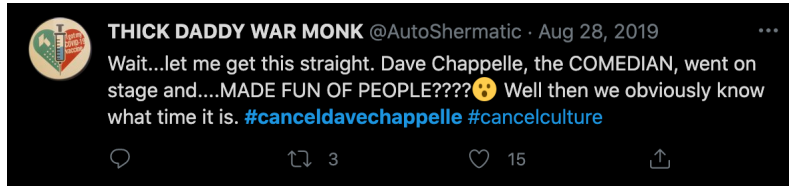
Tweet 2



Tweets 3-5



Tweet 6



Tweet 7



Tweet 8



Tweet 9



Tweet 10



Tweet 11



Tweet 12



Tweet 13



Tweet 14



Tweet 15



8.2. Abstract

The Art of Being Successfully Offensive – The Comedy of Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle in the Light of Current Social and Technological Trends

A recurring question in the comedy world in the past few years has been if comedy, or humor in general, can survive in an increasingly 'sensitive' politically correct environment. Several comedians feel restricted in their craft or even complain that comedy as such has been 'ruined'. The issue has been exacerbated by the rise of social media and the new communication structures in a digital society. This thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing debate about the effects of PC on comedy by further analyzing the current comedic environment and by focusing on the development of two particularly controversial, yet successful comedians, Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle. The methods of critical discourse analysis, performance analysis and multimodal analysis are used in conjunction with general theories on humor to analyze several of the stand-up specials of Gervais and Chappelle.

Additionally, the online discourse about and the tweeting habits of the comedians, particularly on the social media platform Twitter, are taken into account in the evaluation of their reception and acceptance of their comedic material. The result of the analysis shows a lack of adjustment to the alleged PC pressure by the comedians in question, who nevertheless continue to be extremely successful, thereby contradicting the accusation of PC censoring comedy and suggesting that different forces of change are at work, with social media having the greatest impact.

German Version

Die Kunst erfolgreich zu provozieren – Die Comedy von Ricky Gervais und Dave Chappelle unter Berücksichtigung aktueller sozialer und technologischer Trends

Eine immer wiederkehrende Frage in Bezug auf Comedy in den letzten Jahren war, ob diese und Humor im Allgemeinen in einer zunehmend sensibilisierten politisch korrekten (PC) Gesellschaft in dieser Form überleben können. Mehrere Comedians fühlen sich in ihrer Arbeit eingeschränkt oder beklagen das Ende der Comedy als solche. Die Problematik hat sich durch den Aufstieg der sozialen Medien und die neuen Kommunikationsstrukturen in unserer digitalen Gesellschaft noch verstärkt. Die vorliegende Arbeit möchte einen Beitrag zur laufenden Debatte über die Auswirkungen der PC auf die Comedy leisten, indem sie deren aktuelles Umfeld näher analysiert und sich im Besonderen mit der Entwicklung von zwei besonders umstrittenen, aber auch erfolgreichen Comedians, Ricky Gervais und Dave Chappelle, befasst. Die Methoden der kritischen Diskursanalyse, der Performance-Analyse und der multimodalen Analyse werden in Verbindung mit allgemeinen Humorthorien eingesetzt, um mehrere Stand-Up-Specials von Gervais und Chappelle zu analysieren. Zusätzlich werden die Online-Diskurse über die Comedians und ihre Tweet-Gewohnheiten, insbesondere auf der Social-Media-Plattform Twitter, in die Bewertung der Rezeption und Akzeptanz ihres Materials einbezogen. Die Analyse zeigt, dass sich die betreffenden Comedians nicht dem vermeintlichen PC-Druck beugen und weiterhin äußerst erfolgreich sind. Dies widerlegt den Vorwurf der PC-Zensur von Comedy und deutet darauf hin, dass verschiedene Kräfte des Wandels am Werk sind, von denen die sozialen Medien am bedeutendsten sind.