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Queens of Discourse: An Observation of Black Insta-Comediennes

Naoka Foreman

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QUEENS OF DISCOURSE: AN OBSERVATION OF
BLACK INSTA-COMEDIENNES

By

Naoka Foreman

Bachelor of Art - Visual Media in Digital Cinema
Nevada State College
2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts – Journalism & Media Studies

Hank Greenspun School of Journalism and Media Studies
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs
The Graduate College

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Naoka Foreman

entitled

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Kevin Stoker, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Co-Chair

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D.
*Vice Provost for Graduate Education &
Dean of the Graduate College*

Christopher Harris, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Co-Chair

Linda Dam, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Julian Kilker, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Tiberio Garza, Ph.D.
Graduate College Faculty Representative

Abstract

This study observed the ways Black females on Instagram perform sociopolitical humor online to push back against the dominant culture in this digital age – maintaining the Black comedy tradition. It explores and illuminates the strategies of resistance exhibited by Instagram comediennes through a textual analysis informed by minor discourse, intersectionality, and critical feminist theories. Each comic’s personae were investigated and their content on Instagram was randomly selected and coded then grouped into themes. Black insta-comediennes shared Black feminist thought, modified beliefs about Black females or conventionality, and negotiated with the industrial demands of show business to earn subjectivity on Instagram and their actions revealed how the platform is uniquely adjacent to mainstream media. This gave Black women room to forward Black women's epistemology in cyberspace to ultimately subvert negative stereotypes of Black women and give voice to the modern Black female experience – with millions of views.

Keywords: comic personae, minor discourse, critical feminist theory, intersectionality, Instagram

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Chapter 1

Introduction— When the digital playground becomes a research context.

My initial passion for researching Black female humor on Instagram came from observing the appropriation of Black female behavior and identity circulating on “the gram”. Instagram, commonly called the gram, is a place where people can share videos, photos, memes, stories, broadcast live conversations, cultivate an online identity, and more (Appel, Grewal, Hadi, Stephen, 2020). I joined Instagram within a year of its launch, the summer of 2011. By 2014, I was often seeing degrading videos of Black women, a stark contrast from what I observed on the photo-sharing application in its earlier years. It made me wonder why I saw a significant amount of imitations, parodies, and harmful images of Black women as opposed to seeing Black women themselves getting love, receiving likes, and going viral for their authenticity— how I recall the earlier years or so. From what I observed, by 2014 Black females appeared to have the best chances of going *viral*, or having content shared over and over until millions of people see and know about it, through mockery, parody, and buffoonery, apart from the ever-present minstrel tropes and stereotypes in media (Haggins, 2007; Riggs, 1986).

Despite how offensive I found humor on Instagram to be, its billions of global monthly active users, including my friends, family, and followers, enjoyed this type of content (Auxier and Anderson, 2019). However, I felt a lot of it was unfunny, lacked depth, and avoided sociopolitical discourse that traditionally defined Black comedy (Haggins, 2007; Watkins 2002). In my opinion, the platform was overloaded with slapstick humor, *malapropisms* (or “skull-in-bone” humor aimed at the lack of education in Black communities), dimwittedness, and shame against Black people and Black females in particular (Gray, 1995; Watkins, 2002); that is, when we are not being appropriated.

With 130 million American users by 2020, Instagram was a space filled with digital blackface and digital disgrace against Black women that arguably made us the butt of Instagram (Jones, 2018; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Tankoska, 2021). For instance, the legendary “confused Black girl meme” shows

a young Black female looking irritated and confused, mouth agape, hand parched out awkwardly with a shaggy thin ponytail on top of her head. Nabria Jackson’s natural reaction to somebody calling her name during a food fight became a caricature of Black feelings that were shared and duplicated with different phrases, over and over again until it went viral (Riggs, 1986; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Although memes are used with the intention to take one thing from one context to a funnier or more relevant one; when non-Black people use Black caricatures in cyberspace to emote or express themselves, they are “slipping in and out of alternative identities”— a luxury not given to Black people. This is what researcher Shafiqah Hudson refers to as digital blackface (Jones, 2018). Issues like this, along with Instagram seemingly becoming a mainstream social media platform for self-definition, made my experience with the platform emotionally draining; however, it also triggered an overwhelming research interest (Appel et. al, 2019; Auxier and Anderson, 2019).

Researcher positionality

Observing the blossoming of various Black aesthetics originally made available on Instagram, was something I found precious, authentic, and unique to my experience with media. I believe the adoration comes from my experience as both Black and female, placing me at the index of an oppressed, double marginalized group who carries the sting of symbolic annihilation in the film industry and who witnesses the whitewashing of Black females in mainstream television (Haggins, 2007; Riggs, 1986; Smith 2018; Smith-Shomade, 2002). As both a Black female and a media maker, this research duly addresses the negative feelings that punctuate my own experience as an Instagrammer by illuminating the bold actions of Black insta-comediennes through an investigation of *comic personae*, (“multiple and competing ideologies”, or ideas, articulated through comedic discourse”; Haggins, 2007, p. 5).

Study Focus— Comic Personae

According to Bambi Haggins, author of *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Personae in Post-Soul America*, comic personae are informed by individual choice, *acculturation* (i.e., modifications to one's values, norms, and practices as a result of coming into contact with a different culture), and *industrial imperatives* (i.e., structural demands of show business that are regulated by predetermined formulas and company standards; Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade 2002). An investigation of comic personae provides a lens to interpret the unconscious motives of Black insta-comediennes and their comic identity, amid culturally constraining elements that regulate popular culture and conventionality, distinguishing them from appropriators, digital blackface Instagrammers, and other comics with limited identities (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade 2002).

Through the performance of comic personae, Black women have shared their diva-driven thoughts, modified conventional beliefs about womanhood, and interrogated false beliefs about Black women to earn *subjectivity* (or the state of being driven by your own belief or influence) within mediated spaces (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Having personal imperatives or unconscious motives behind performing comedy, stand-ups outwardly express their beliefs and experiences through comic personae where multiple ideas collide strategically; which when observed showcases the difference between limited comic identities and complex comic identities, exalting these types of performances (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002). For example, comedienne Melanie Comacho, one of Def Comedy Jam's Queens of Comedy, expresses discontent through her comic persona towards the "trivialization of women as sexual commodities" in the joke below:

All they think about is sex, sex, sex, sex. We can't even go to the movies with the brother no more. I'm mean, there's so much sex in the movies that by the time the movie is over, the brother talking' that same old drag, "Well baby, how come we don't never do that what they was doin' in the movies?" I was like, "Well baby, they paid her \$450,000 to jump on that table like that. Now exactly how much money you talkin' about? I mean what you think you goin' get for a pepsi and some goddamn popcorn? Not a goddamn thing here. (Fulton, 2004, p. 89)

Her funny and sassy response to the brother at the movies shows her awareness of the sexual exploitation of women and what the overrepresentation of it in films means to the everyday *sistah* and her experiences

(Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Watkins, 2002). To elucidate her disposition on the matter and how romantic relationships lose value when women are seen and treated as sexual objects, she tops it off with womanist sass by adding a seemingly equal objectionable request in her response (Fulton, 2004; Smith, 2018; Watkins, 2002;). This joke reveals the self-defining agency of Melanie Comacho's personality and her resistance to sexual exploitation (Fulton, 2004; Smith, 2018; Watkins, 2002).

The legendary crossover comic from the 1950s, Dick Gregory, says Black humor has always been used to describe the present moment in regards to racism and sexism (Watkins, 2002). Accordingly, the present study examines Black insta-comedienne's content during the 2018-2019 era, as well as their online response to, and articulation of, the intersection of race and gender (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Watkins, 2002). This examination intends to make readers aware of the narrative strategies and other techniques used by insta-comediennes on social media to curate their comic identities (Fulton 2004; Monk-Payton, 2017). This investigation will provide a lens to understand how Black females "adopt, modify, or challenge" popular beliefs about Black womanhood and society while performing comedic discourse on Instagram (Fulton, 2004, p.82; Haggins, 2007, p.6). Besides observing how insta-comediennes use narrative strategies to construct their cosmic personae, I observe how each comedienne on Instagram intentionally shapes their personae through appearance and conduct (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2005; Smith-Shomade, 2002).

Study importance— The negotiation

Due to the presumption of whiteness in a culture informed by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, when Black women are not "occupying" our historical subservient roles, we lose the ability to be recognized as an individual and disappear into the abyss, only to be recognized as a person again once we reassume our proper roles in society (Haggins, 2007; Hooks, 1981; 1984; Smith-Shomade, p. 33, 2002). Black women's representation in mass culture is forced to negotiate with this whiteness to attain agency and or subjectivity in spaces intended for mass consumption (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Watkins, 2002). For instance, when Whoopi Goldberg crossed over into mainstream Hollywood

films after building a reputation as an unabashed stand-up, her comic personae had to be “comfortably contained” within Hollywood films (Haggins, 2004). As a result, her characters were often “deraced and desexualized,” with critical components of her comic personae parsed out to appeal to mass audiences and to avoid offense (Haggins, p.153, 2004). The times were not color-blind as many suggested, but “the comic narratives that got big grosses...needed to be for mainstream popularity and consumption” which did not include the unconventional jokes of Goldberg (Haggins, p. 156, 2004). The edginess of Goldberg’s comedy was discarded to properly insert her into white visual culture for big television classics such as *Corina, Corina*, *Sister Act*, *Made in America*, *Ghost*, and more (Haggins, 2014).

Image and representation play a huge role in the female stand-ups’ act and speak to how the external world is linked to and conflicts with comedic performances by women (Fulton, 2004; Watkins, 2002). During the 1940s Jackie “Moms” Mabley skillfully softened the “blueness” of her comic blows and piercing critiques by appearing as a non-threatening matriarch in house gowns (Haggins, p. 148, 2007). She did this to manage the audience’s expectations, coming off familiar and avoiding any conflicting ideas with her comedy in relation to who she might be in reality (Haggins, p. 148, 2007). Mo’Nique on the other hand, played up her sex appeal during the 90s, rocking the latest trends in fashion, like red leather co-ordinates, high heels, and other stylish outfits, to push back against the asexualized Black mammy stereotype that Moms’ character played into (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007).

Besides race being a defining factor in Black female comedy, Black women also faced gender stereotypes, requiring them to flounder around with gender bias in performances to undo society’s “lady-izing” (Russell, p.4, 2002). The very act of taking the stage to command attention or applause rejects hegemonic ideals of womanhood; female comics are challenged with acknowledging this belief cleverly in order to maintain good standing with audiences (Haggins, 2005; Russell, p.4, 2002; Smith-Shomade, 2002). For example, cultural critic June Sochen says:

Men could be satirists and physical comics. Preferably women were neither, but if they ventured into this culturally forbidden land, they should only display restrained wit--sly humor perhaps, but not raucous, screaming, demonstrative stuff. (Fulton, 2004, p. 84: Sochen p. 13)

Moms understood the race and gender limitations of the time and performed womanist discourse dressed in “floppy hats, frumpy house dresses, and socks with slippers” to appear unsurprisingly and non-offensive (Haggins, p.149, 2007). Her appearance directly contrasted with her content, which included exposing her “fondness for younger men and a distaste toward older men,” ultimately demonstrating an act of female sexual autonomy while simultaneously exposing its obsolescence in mainstream culture (Haggins, p.149, 2007). Moms Mabley gave voice to the unacknowledged desires and truths of females while Mo’Nique did the same in the 90s, particularly for Black plus-sized women (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007). It will be no surprise to see insta-comediennes engaging in similar practices, using tactics to control audience expectations in their feminine acts of subjectivity.

Study overview

In order to investigate tactics used by Insta-comediennes and how they disrupt hegemonic discourse on the gram, this study is a textual analysis that examines minor discourse (Schulman, 1994) and employs critical feminist theories (Hooks, 1981; 1984) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Through a critical cultural lens with an intersectional perspective, I observe how each comedienne grapples with and intentionally shapes elements of their small-screen personae through text, images, signals, and more to sustain their mass following all while prioritizing Black audiences (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Critics of social media suggest that “online discourse is woven of stereotypical cultural narratives that reinstall precisely those conditions” (Nakamura, 2002). This study distinguishes how Black insta-comediennes push back against or work with these stereotypes or misconceptions on the gram to share sociopolitical discourse (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Monk-Payton, 2017; Nakamura, 2002; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Critical feminist theories allow me to decode the complex systems of discrimination exposed by Black insta-comediennes that are often obsolete in anti-

racist or feminist movements and understand how Black insta-comediennes give voice to modern Black female experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Hooks, 1981; 1984; Smith, 2018).

Study justification

Black female comedians on Instagram, or *Black insta-comediennes*, use comedy to contribute to Black women's epistemology, or way of understanding or knowing oneself, online. Certain Black insta-comediennes have been selected for this study for their capability to curate web-based *comedic divadom*, or sociopolitical humor shared by Black females that have been for generations "performed on stages or around kitchen tables" that reflects the American condition (Haggins, 2007, p. 146).

Historically, Black comedy is a space where comics guard culture to ensure Black people understand their world, sharing perspectives embedded in jokes and creating a space for "laughing while slipping in sociocultural truths" (Haggins, 2007, p.6; Watkins, 2002). Having ancestral roots in Africa via orators and griots, Black comedy has been performed on American plantations, the chitlin circuit, television, and digital objects, over time (Monk-Payton, 2017; Watkins, 2002). The nature of Black comedy has traditionally created outsiders (those outside Black culture) and insiders (those within Black culture) by prioritizing the ideas, desires, culture, and truths of Black people to push back against the dominant culture in society, creating a safe communal space to share their authentic perspectives (Schulman, 2010; Watkins, 2002). The legacy of Black comedy is important to Black culture for its social utility and this study observes how the performance of Black female comedic discourse converges with a cultural product like Instagram.

Chapter 2

Literature Review— The Black comedy tradition from slavery to the net.

Black slave humor and Black people in America

Before imperialists colonizers estranged Black people from their culture and homeland, humor in Africa was found in oral traditions of sharing “esteemed dramatic, colorful speeches, imaginative storytelling, irony, and libelous verbal satire,” similar to stand-up comedy in American popular culture but centered on joy (Watkins, p. 4, 2002). Black humor during the 1880s, on American plantations, consisted of satire that denounced bondage, interrogations of slave masters, shaming of slave masters, and outwitting slave masters (Watkins, 2002). This humor held a unique role on the plantation for the enslaved and functioned to absorb the cruelty that comes with being viewed as property by society rather than humans (Watkins, 2002).

One morning, when Ike entered the master’s room to clean it, he found the master just preparing to get out of bed. “Ike,” he said, “I certainly did have a strange dream last night.”

“Sez yuh did, Massa, sez yuh did?” answered Ike. “Lemme hyeah it.”

“All right,” replied the master. “It was like this: I dreamed I went to Nigger Heaven last night, and saw there a lot of garbage, some old torn-down houses, a few old broken-down, rotten fences, the muddiest, sloppiest streets I ever saw, and a big bunch of ragged, dirty Negroes walking around.”

“Umph, umph, Massa,” said Ike. “Yuh sho musta et de same t’ing Ah did las’ night, ‘cause Ah dreamed Ah went up ter de white man’s paradise, an’ de street wuz all ob gol’ an’ silvah, and dey wuz lots o’ milk an’ honey dere an’ putty pearly gates, but dey wuzn’t uh soul in de whole place.” (Watkins, 2002, p. 29)

This is a trickster tale, also known as a John and Ole Massa tale from plantation-era comedy called Swapping Dreams (Watkins, 2002). In these types of tales, discursive nuances of Black humor are revealed in that it directly challenges white supremacy by “poking fun” at the very nature of White men (Watkins, 2002, p. 2). John and Ole Massa tales are the first examples of Black humor that directly targeted and identified whites as the butt of jokes and were “strictly reserved for Black listeners and confined to slave quarters” (Watkins, 2002, p. 2). This kind of humor emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Watkins, 2002). Again, comedy performed in African culture before

American chattel slavery reflected joyfulness; while comedy performed by American negroes and negras reflects pain (Watkins, 2002). Slave humor was based on irony with a “bitter edge” and its main objective is to provide entertainment and laughter to feel alive, “all the better if it was at the expense of a cruel or boneheaded master” (Watkins, 2002, p. 2).

While Black folks were using humor to cope with, as Frederick Douglass put it, the “soul-crushing effects of slavery,” White folks attempted to recreate what they saw performed on plantations for their own entertainment (Douglass, 1845p. 14; Riggs, 1986). In a documentary called *Ethnic Notions* by Marlon Riggs, T.D. Rice was mentioned as one of the first blackface comedians in the 1820s. Rice, a white male, referred to himself as an Ethiopian Comedian while he mocked and imitated Black humor in theaters as a performer with burnt cork on his face to appear Black (Riggs, 1986). According to rumors, Rice stole his act and costume (as if the act wasn’t enough) from a crippled slave on a plantation who was doing a dance called jump Jim Crow (Riggs, 1986). In true appropriator fashion, Rice did not make relevant the harsh reality of witnessing a crippled slave on a plantation singing and dancing (Riggs, 1986). Instead, he performed his stolen act and became a “symbol of segregation in the south” and a successful performer (Riggs, 1986).

Minstrel shows became high in demand during the 1840s (Watkins, 2002). These shows consisted of performances that imitated Black cultural expressions, by whites, that afforded them the ability to capitalize on Black mannerisms, story-telling, and humor that comes from grief, sorrow, abandonment, abuse, fear, oppression, malnutrition, etc. (Watkins, 2002). In doing so, blackface performers not only upheld an oppressive system by stealing cultural expressions and getting paid for it, but they also introduced harmful ideologies about Black people to mass audiences (Riggs, 1986). In the attempt to perform slave humor as a non-Black free person belonging to the dominant class, the provocation of Black humor is distorted and presented as a mockery to later be consumed by predominantly White audiences and people who may have never encountered a Black person before in their lives (Riggs, 1986; Watkins, 2002). This becomes problematic and reinforces unsubstantiated ideologies about Black people and their condition (Riggs, 1986; Watkins, 2002).

By the early 1900s, the media portrayed humor as one of the main character traits of Black peoples, concentrating on specific Black “figures” as representative of Black folk in mainstream discourse (Riggs, 1986). These shallow and misunderstood representations of Black people became damaging to the arguments presented during the abolitionist movement (Riggs, 1986). At the time of emancipation, Black folks' newly gained freedom was dependent on the power relations of the time and they experienced a “radically conditioned form of agency” (Lam, p.371, 2018). The newly emancipated Negroes grappled with new and continued struggles from slavery and racism while American mainstream media saturated Black male roles in visual productions with the laughing Sambo stereotype, a plantation caricature of a Black male that “turned Black men into docile, happy, simple, humor-filled slaves” (Riggs, 1986). Marlon Riggs (1986) exposed how these kinds of images contributed to the lies that slaves were happy and accepted their condition in his documentary.

Butterbeans and Susie, a husband and wife duo, performed together during the 1920s in the Black theatrical circuit (Watkins, 2002). Below is a song they performed during the Harlem Renaissance called Get Yourself A Monkey-Man:

Susie: The man I got, he’s a hard workin’ man, he works all the time; and on Saturday night when he brings me his pay, he better not be short one dime.

Butterbeans: He’s a brand new fool and a monkey-man. I’d whip you every time you breathe; rough treatment, Susie, is ‘zactly what you need. (Watkins, 2002, p. 113)

The term monkey-man refers to a man that is under the control of his wife or female companion (Watkins, 2002). In the eras prior, there was not an insignificant amount of humor that focused on the dynamics between male and female relationships, but rather the dynamics between the oppressed and oppressor, not including observations and sayings during the plantation era (Watkins, 2002). Noticeably, during the Harlem Renaissance era, both Black female and male comedians honed in on romantic power struggles they perceived between one another and it continued thereafter (Watkins, 2002). This is arguably influenced by acts moving more mainstream and away from predominantly Black audiences, thus managing white audience expectations by poking fun at things inside of the Black community, as opposed to challenging racial and social issues during the present moment (Watkins, 2002; Haggins,

2007). This is also the era where Black female comics and writers became more prominent in general, and content from women like Mom's Mabley and Zora Neale Hurston became popular on the Black comic scene (Watkins, 2002).

Watkins' findings also included jokes that hinted toward an expectation that women were customarily abused or overpowered by lovers/husbands--or that society felt like they ought to be treated in such a manner. Interestingly enough, women also engaged in these types of performances. However, Watkins explains that Black comedy should be understood on its individual merit to avoid whitewashing, distorting, or depleting the authenticity of Black comic identities by including "obscenity and cooning", as well as both "low and sophisticated" forms of comedy when observing Black humor as a cultural artifact (Watkins, 2002, p. 11).

Comedic material from the Civil Rights Era to the New Millennium may have been the most colorful chunk of Black humor due to America being in a "full-scale social revolt" (Watkins, 2002, p. 213). During the 60s and 70s and thereafter, Black comedy took on a rebellious, fiery, revolutionary tone and started to move out from white venues, mostly circulating in Black networks (Watkins, 2002; Green and Linders, 2016). This era included momentous displays of Black humor from people like Dick Gregory, Paul Mooney, Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor, and even Muhammad Ali, which shows the evolutionary openness and sharpness of Black humor (Watkins, 2002). For instance, Paul Mooney's *Nigger Raisins* depicts a frustrated and underwhelmed Mooney after witnessing a TV commercial that featured "little, wrinkled, black shriveled-up raisins" that sang Marvin Gaye's *Heard it Through the Grapevine* (Watkins, 2002, p. 281). In response to this Mooney says, "White folks favorite TV commercial... Little nigger raisin with a hat, they think that shit is cute, singin', "*Heard it Through the Grapevine*." He continues the joke by mocking a white person saying, "Oh, look at that cute nigger raisin." In this era, Black comics kept up with the times' liberation movements and took up irreverent street humor that focused on "politics, race, and social injustice," openly identifying the government and whites as the butt of jokes (Watkins, 2002, p. 213). This era of Black comedy saw a rise in "insistent vulgarity" across stage, screen, and television comedy and began spilling into American popular culture

with crossover comedians like Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor, to Eddie Murphy Raw on cable and Def Comedy Jam (Watkins, 2002, p. 214). By the late 20th century the “explicit language of the so-called “Bad Nigger”” had given voice to Black life and became “a permanent, undeniable fixture in the nation’s mainstream cultural expression,” through the popularity of ethnic humor (Watkins, 2002, p. 214).

Ethnic humor

Ethnic humor or ethnic discourse focuses on the differences, commonalities, and conditions of different racial groups while simultaneously challenging white hegemony (Green and Linders, 2016; Schulam, 1994). Underrepresented groups have historically used ethnic humor to deal with the tensions of living as “rejects” in mainstream society; the relief these groups feel comes from the shared laughter they experience together (Green and Linders, 2016; Watkins, 2002; Haggins, 2007). The effects of being excluded from mainstream society call on the collective acknowledgment of certain issues to release tension about critical topics (Green and Linders, 2016, Watkins, 2002; Haggins, 2007). In this instance, relief is experienced from the reckoning that takes place in joke-telling which comes from the acknowledgment of discomfort-- with this discomfort being disrupted by shared laughter (Green and Linders, 2016; Watkins, 2002; Haggins, 2007). Thus, ethnic humor provides a safe space for ethnic groups to share grievances and uncomfortable truths (Green and Linders, 2016).

Dave Chappelle specializes in ethnic humor, especially with Comedy Central’s Chappelle Show (Green and Linders, 2016). His common style of humor on the show is rooted in incongruous humor which pokes fun at naturalized misconceptions concerning Black folks (Green and Linders, 2016). Intentionally performing racial stereotypes, only to “violate” the misconceptions about them, Chappelle demonstrated “a relatively safe way to do violence to the oppressor in return for injustice ((Gordon 1998:259) Green and Linders, 2016, p. 243).” His non-threatening structure of the narrative triggers laughter via the element of surprise (Green and Linders, 2016). However, it wasn’t enough justice served

for the comedic icon, who eventually left his show (and millions of dollars) on the belief that he was perpetuating damaging racial stereotypes to mass audiences rather than demystifying them (Green and Linders, 2016).

Superiority theory argues that ethnic comedy is consequently linked to issues of superiority, due to performing humor at the “expense of an out-group” (Green and Linders, 2016). In addition, empirical studies have shown members of in-groups find jokes about out-group members funnier than jokes about in-group members (Green and Linders, 2016). This places ethnic minorities at a disadvantage (Green and Linders, 2016). For instance, the imitation of Black people, their dialect, clothing, and songs in minstrels and vaudeville acts are classic examples of how humor linked to superiority can impact underrepresented communities and strengthen myths, misconceptions, and feelings of superiority toward Black lives ((Duncan 1985) Green and Linders, 2016; Riggs, 1986). In an effort to push back against these superiority complexes, oppressed people creatively reject dominant culture with everyday acts of rebellion called minor discourse (Schulman, 1994).

In many ways, people of all backgrounds view the same content and inevitably run into scenarios where they are viewing ethnic-centered content with individuals outside of their ethnic group. In a study by Omotayo O. Banjo, it was shown that when Black people viewed “ethnic-oriented programming” with other in-group members, they “demonstrate greater perceived similarity and identification” with Black characters in the media (Banjo, Appiah, Wang, Brown, Walther, 2015, p. 675). However, Black individuals experienced a heightened concern towards the perception of Black life when viewing Black-oriented programming with White co-viewers (Banjo et al, 2015). In the same study, whites exhibited no differences in mentality based on who they viewed ethnic-oriented programming with, but they did show preferences towards comics in ethnic-centered programming and refrained from using humor that discussed race issues, over the comics that did (Banjo et al, 2015).

Black power, Black audiences, and capital

The impact of the Reagan and Bush-era politics, which influenced division amongst races, yielded the commodification of ethnicity through the media ((Fusco, 1989) Smith-Shomade, 2002). During this difficult time for Black people, with poverty at an all-time high, ethnicity was turned into spectacles and tailored to meet a certain standard of look to avoid so-called politicized aesthetics to remain profitable (Haggins, p.142, 2007) Smith-Shomade, p.17, 2002). The implications of this were social engineering via television programming (Fusco, 1989) Smith-Shomade, 2002). Black female images on television, which ranged from sitcoms to news stories, did not represent Black women in ways that improved equality or equity but instead exacerbated the negative connotations made about being Black and female, diminishing Black female aesthetics (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Beretta Smith-Shomade (2002) contributed to the understanding of how Black women pushed the limits in televisual spaces in an attempt to authenticate themselves against these odds with her sassy book *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television*.

Smith-Shomade (2002) asserts that Black women are the butt of network television. Taking readers through multiple accounts of television eruptions that either poked fun at Black women's "race, sexuality, questionable goodness and natural attractiveness," Smith-Shomade exposes the oppressive nature of the television industry, along with illuminating moments of Black female emancipation and self-agency within these constrained spaces (Smith-Shomade, 2002).

Black images seemingly received support in 1950 when the NAACP and the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasting announced, "racial or nationality types shall not be shown on television in such a manner as to ridicule the race or nationality" (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.12). At this time, there were few Black representations on television (Smith-Shomade, 2002). It wasn't until the Civil Rights Movement that America saw a surge in Black aesthetics across television due to news

production, especially when narrowing it down to Black female faces (Smith-Shomade, 2002). The emergence of Blackness throughout the nation during the Civil Rights movement led to an influx in Black filmmaking in Hollywood as executives learned that Blackness was profitable during civil unrest, and so they found a way to package and sell Black Power, “though with negligible regard to context and content” (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.12).

Blaxploitation movies, which were predominantly produced by White males, took off in the 70s in response to the 1960’s uprisings, showcasing Black faces as “monolithic balls of anger, trapped in urban jungles, forever relegated to the margins” (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.13). These movies had underpinnings of Black nationalist and womanist ideologies that bubbled in Hollywood from 1971 to the mid-1970s; while Blacks were simultaneously being depicted as assimilationists in White worlds on television (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Pointing out how television images distort reality, Smith-Shomade explains that angry Black female characters in Blaxploitation films went without “legitimizing” Black female anger, leaving them to be viewed as overly sexualized and demonized beings, in contrast to Black women on television who assimilated with white America and somehow never came into conflict with the racism of that day (Smith-Shomade, 2002). The control of images by the television industry’s standards and practices department made sure to erase ethnic identity, which Smith-Shomade suggests influences the policing of Black characters in the television industry (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Additionally, this “blind-eye approach” to racism in television shows provided the formula for 90s color-blind programming (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.15).

In contrast Professor of Journalism, Kristal Brent Zook of Hofstra University, says “the 90s was a glorious moment for Black television” as she described the many Black representations in 90s television sitcoms that Americans and the rest of the world had never seen before (Zook quoted in HBO, 2017). For instance, Fresh Prince of Bel-air (FPBA) was about a teenage Will Smith who was sent from Philadelphia by his mother to live with his successfully well-off Black uncle in Beverly Hills, California (HBO, 2017). Hinting at displays of class differences in the show, Zook says Smith shows up with a backward hat and appears to struggle with how he conducts himself in this new upper-class environment (HBO, 2017). The

writers and producers of the show continued with this type of humor in which they “subvert” the audience’s expectations of what Blackness is (Zook quoted in HBO, 2017). In another instance, Hanif Willis-Absurraqib, MTV News Columnist, said, “the incredible work of FPBA at its most triumphant was when it was showing these ways that being Black was always going to be a problem no matter what (Willis-Absurraqib quoted in HBO, 2017).” According to Willis-Absurraqib, FPBA addressed racial discrimination and the realities of growing up Black in America in a way that was ahead of its time (Willis-Absurraqib quoted in HBO, 2017).

The 90s also brought a television program with the first Black producer, writer, director, and main star--all in one--with Keenan Ivory Wayans’ *In Living Color* on the Fox Television Network (HBO, 2017). Unlike other television shows at the time that presented Black people as assimilationists, comedians on *In Living Color* directly interrogated negative stereotypes by “turning them upside down” (Ralph Farquhar quoted in HBO, 2017). According to Ralph Farquhar, Executive Director of The Sinbad Show, *In Living Color* presented a type of “smart, very controversial comedy that Black folks had never seen before that centered around their life experiences” (Ralph Farquhar quoted in HBO, 2017).

Fox rose to popularity during the 80s and 90s with programs like *Martin*, *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, *Family Matters*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *The Hughleys* (Smith-Shomade, 2002). African Americans made up 25% of their market (HBO, 2017). With the goal to brand themselves differently from other networks, executives made “risky” decisions by employing Black actors en masse (Smith-Shomade, p.35, 2002). Fox understood that capturing Black audiences would help them grow their viewer base and so they gave Black creatives free rein to cultivate their stories to ensure they secured Black audiences (HBO, 2017). Sarah Rodman, a television editor for Los Angeles Times, says UPN and WB took that same strategy from Fox to build their networks--by feeding this “underserved audience of urban minority viewers” and anchoring it into their practices. Television critic Bruce Fretts said networks during the 90s built themselves up by harnessing African American viewers but later took a detour due to Black families having a lower family income status (HBO, 2017). Zook said Black creators felt violated

and mistreated stating, “you made your money, you built your audience on us and now you’re done” (Zook quoted in HBO, 2017).

A decade prior, the deregulation of “incestuous relationships” between television networks, advertisement agencies, and production companies resulted in executives turning to narrowcasting to remain profitable (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.19). Narrowcasting encourages programs to focus on narrow audiences that are constructed on dominant ideas of gender, race, and the economic ability to participate as a consumer (HBO, 2017; Smith-Shomade, 2002). In turn, networks developed shows for Black audiences with narratives that would harness the interests of “White, hip-hop adults from eighteen to forty-nine years old” which led to an intense racialization of the Black image on television during the 80s and thereafter (HBO, 2017; Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.35). As a result of narrowcasting, whiteness consequently defined Black women (and their roles) in these mediated spaces, at times causing Black women to consequently vanish into the “larger mass of bodies” around them (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.32).

Black comediennes, representation, and the net

Black women have played various “non-human” roles in television and film, operating as a “nonpresence” in mainstream media, only to be seen--not heard (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.32). This becomes problematic to Black females, as audience members may have never had an encounter with Black women before and may develop a distorted version of Black women as representative based on fictional stories in the media (Hall, 2013; Haggins, 2007; Riggs 1986). Smith-Shomade describes a Black female character in the film *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) as *mise-en-scene* as “she cooks, serves, cleans, and functions” in complete silence, like a prop that adds to the visual ambiance and setting (Smith-Shomade, p.32, 2002). Smith-Shomade points out that in doing so, Blackness is maladjusted in

order for whiteness to “establish circularity, normality, and hierarchical” positioning in the text (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p.32). Predetermined formulas used in the television and film industry keep Black women’s representation in the media shackled to hegemonic ideas of Black womanhood and Instagram appeared to be a place of self-cultivation, bypassing these damaging formulas (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Haggins, 2007).

In 90s sitcoms, women were positioned to illuminate their male co-stars, center male importance, and further the male character’s story and development (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Although they played roles in television and film, they found ways to negotiate with these formulas to earn agency and subjectivity in the media (Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, p.26, 2002). Due to the prioritization of white audience members, Black female characters operated under and through a racialized existence predicated on whiteness-- creating a flawed version of Black women (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, 2002). At times racialized Black female characters were placed in opposition with one another, showing a contrast between professional assimilationist Black characters versus ghetto undesirable Black characters in the mainstream, which caused conflicts within the Black community (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002). For example, Gina (a member of the Black bourgeoisie) and Pam (a member of the hood) represented what Black men desired and did not desire, respectively, in the show *Martin* (Smith-Shomade, p. 54, 2002). The banter between castmates often provided moments of “witty, rapid-fire” jokes and double entendres that led to a harmful positioning and contrast between Pam and Gina (Smith-Shomade, p. 42, 2002).

Pam was often ridiculed by Martin for the texture of her hair (although she and Gina shared the same hair texture) and used diminishing words to describe her like “Bedebe” which refers to a woman's natural hair kinks and coils (Smith-Shomade, p. 64, 2002). This hostility towards Pam’s hair texture-- which is common among Black women--is an example of the ramifications of ethnic humor that “makes negotiating with an American sense of beauty necessary” (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, p.65, 2002). However, some women in television sitcoms, or films, found ways to push back against anti-black

femaleness while harnessing their beauty or essence through their self-defining crowns (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, 2002).

The emancipation Black women exhibit or represent in televisual spaces is both mediated by the “conservativeness and oppressive” nature of the television industry, and the unfamiliar and vast audience (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, p.4 2002). However, Black women earned agency in these constrained spaces and deserve recognition for their historical participation in pushing back against “singular, monolithic, dimwitted,” stereotypes of Black women that saturated the media (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, p.4 2002). Kim Fields' role as Regine on *Living Single* (LS) during the 90s, in which she played a gold digger stereotype characterized as being non-courageous towards her own potential expressed “progressive tendencies” in her comic persona (Smith-Shomade, p.4 2002). Amid the undertones of low self-esteem and the underlying signals that suggest she needs a man to feel complete (to once again center on men), Regine forwards progressive representations of Black women on television through her hair (Smith-Shomade, p.64 2002). Her multiple hairstyles and fashion emerged in the show as remnants of Black women's authenticity and resistance to white hegemony and its erasure of Black culture, “reasserting a certain right” (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, p.62 2002).

Maxine Shaw of LS and Hilary Banks of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (FPBA) in their skimmed-down roles also occupied a space of empowerment (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, 2002). There are ritual moments in LS when Max, played by Ericka Alexander, flexed her ability to remain unconstrained by patriarchy and gave voice to “unruly women” who intentionally claim space and self-definition in a male-dominated culture, an act not uncommon to Black women in media (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Due to industrial imperatives, the second layer of distortion takes place from the creation of two extreme types of females in the media. Good ones who adhere to patriarchal norms, and bad ones who stray from “traditional femininity” (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Woods, p.25, 1994).

Although Max was able to share “feminist articulations” through her persona, her role in the show was dependent on maintaining an objectified role, “never moving beyond banter and condescending

innuendos” with no character development (Smith-Shomade, p.53 2002). Even in Max’s articulations of feminism, she ends up subjected to one of the supporting male characters in which the forwarding of her individual narrative is carried out (Smith-Shomade, p.53 2002). Arguably, the media is the accomplice--it adds to the distortion of the female image in public consciousness by consistently depicting women as “dependent, ornamental objects” whose stories are virtually obsolete unless they are subjected to men through romance (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Woods, p.25, 1994). However, in Max’s slim objectified role, she was positioned well to let off articulations that “shattered the whitening silence...that plagues Black women’s sexuality and humanity” (Smith-Shomade, p.53 2002). Max overtly forwarded feminist notions as an unruly woman in the 90s (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, p.53 2002). Max gave voice to Black women’s self-defined agency with her wit. In contrast, Hilary Banks received her empowerment, not by expressing awareness in FPBA-- but through her expressions of dumbness (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, p.55 2002).

Hilary Banks (Karyn Parsons) in her dimwitted role as daughter to a well-off judge, delivered womanist humor through her idiocy (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, 2002). In a scene on FPBA, Hilary whimpers over not saying goodbye to her boyfriend on his birthday, who is going sky-diving for the day (Smith-Shomade, p.55 2002). In response, she lets off a dramatic and mournful monologue in her backyard while looking up at the sky, as if she knew he was headed for doom, to immediately turning around and hitting the sliding glass door which smacks her back into reality (Smith-Shomade, p.55 2002). This exposes Hillary’s true “emotional depth,” along with her control over the laughter as a comedienne, earning subjectivity and agency in the space (Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2014; Smith-Shomade, p.55 2002).

Still longing for a space to authenticate themselves as fully actualized, multi-dimensional beings, Black comediennes continued taking up stages to both, “distinguish themselves from Black male and White female comics” and to push back against false notions of inferiority as it relates to Black women and dominant ideologies (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002, Fulton, p. 82, 2004). Black female comics from the television program Def Comedy Jam were vastly different from television sitcoms that

received white filters (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Fulton, p.82, 2004). Def Comedy Jam was a turning point in Black comedy, placing the demands, grief, and personalities of Black people in homes across America (Fulton, 2014; Def Comedy Jam 2017). Understanding that not everyone is familiar with the raw experiences of Black women, which includes a history of voicelessness and degradation in mainstream culture, it is necessary to understand their inherent and unfamiliar acts of resistance to avoid audiences members using these performances to validate their racist beliefs of Black peoples (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Fulton, 2004). This is why an analysis of Black female humor on Instagram is important to the understanding of modern-day Black female comedy curated for Instagram (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Fulton, 2004).

The normalization of whiteness dominates and regulates Blackness in narratives for mass consumption (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Riggs, 1986). According to Stuart Hall, humans have an intricate system of representation in our heads to organize, compare, and rearrange concepts of meanings in the world (and beyond), in relation to one another (Hall, 2013). Representation is made from meanings that are instituted through language, and meaning is dependent on words and symbols and is signified through people, places, and things (Hall, 2013). Signs, or signifiers, can be described as images, words, or sounds that create meaning in a psychological map that functions as a language between people of the same or similar culture (Hall, 2013). Because signs carry meaning and are not the actual object it is standing in place for, it has to be decoded through social conventions to link the signified to concepts (Hall, 2013). When it comes to whiteness and blackness, they both represent different concepts based on social conventions (Hall, 2013; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Even “in its invisibility, whiteness, along with Blackness, supplies an overarching context and meaning in visual production,” which constrains or suffocates the Black image and Black creators (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, p.31, 2002). Thus, “whiteness, television, and representation connect intimately” (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, p.31, 2002). Based on that statement, whiteness, media, and representation connect intimately as well due to white hegemonic culture dominating modern society (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Rigg, 1986).

Moving along to the 90s when the World Wide Web made creating content more accessible and free of industrial constraints, Black folks used the digital space to share concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices pertaining to the African diaspora with the world (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Monk-Payton, 2017). This collective online practice ultimately contributed to the surfacing of an “African diasporic consciousness...cultivated through advanced connectivity” (Monk-Payton, p. 20, 2017). During this time, Black folks, and in this particular case, Black women, took up digital spaces like “chat rooms, listservs, bulletin boards, websites, and more,” to air out grievances through “humorous wit and candor” much like comediennees of the past who focused on sociopolitical humor (Haggins, 2007; Monk-Payton, 2017, p. 20). This came prior to modern-day social media. Black women were taking up digital objects during the 90s to share humor and truth through “critiques of hegemony” with the use of sass, ridicule, and irony to provoke sociopolitical change and awareness or express comic justice. (Watkins, 2002; Haggins, 2007; Fulton, 2004 Monk-Payton, p. 17, 2017).

The history of Black female representation in the media, rather it is on stage during the 40s, in the comedy circuit during the 60s, or on television during the '90s, it has been influenced by whiteness(Watkins, 2002; Riggs, 1986; Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Monk-Payton, 2017).

According to cultural theorist Jurgen Habermas, in order to have a future that is predicated on logic, we must use critical cultural theory to illuminate and understand our reality (Gunster, 2004). Critical cultural theory is the study of contemporary culture through an analysis of social structure (Baran and Davis, 2010). Critical cultural theory is most appropriate for investigating contemporary Black female humor since the subject at hand derives from Black culture and should be viewed through a cultural lens to understand its functionality in present-day society. Thus, the investigation of Black insta-comediennes' personae through a textual analysis using minor discourse (Schulamn, 1994), a critical cultural theory, while employing intersectionality and critical feminist theory was critical to illuminating the thoughts of Black insta-comediennes to understand how they reckon and grapple with modern-day experiences as a Black female on Instagram through comedy.

Research Questions

- 1) How do Black insta-comediennes exemplify Black feminist thought to illustrate Black women's resistance and self-definition on Instagram?
- 2) What negotiations do Black insta-comediennes make around the hegemonic presumptions of Black womanhood in order to acquire and maintain agency, subjectivity, and a mass following on Instagram?

Chapter 3

Methodology— Exploring Comic Personae on Instagram.

Insta-comediennes' humorous content has been decoded using critical textual analysis (Gee, 2014) to examine what Black digital comic divas had to say during the 2018-2019 *cult of true womanhood*, or the era's conventional notions of womanhood (Hooks, 1981;1984; Smith, 2008). Because social media is a space in which many people “conduct significant parts of their lives” it's an ideal place to observe cultural shifts and reifications (Appel, Grewal, Hadi, Stephen, p.80, 2019). This study focuses on three insta-comediennes, each selected based on follower counts, celebrity status, and their comic personae. The content of their Insta posts was examined to investigate Black female comic personae on Instagram to explore the ways they represent contemporary Black females and give voice to our struggles, resistance, and self-definition.

Sample

The subjects in this diasporic study function as both a group (or representative of a group/diaspora) and as individuals, reflecting on the historical and cultural context of Instagram (Berger, 2016; van Dijk, 1995). This means the history of Black comedy and the dominant ideas in society will be taken into account when analyzing social media posts curated by Black female comedians.

Insta-comediennes Jessica Moore, Amber Wagner, and Vena Excell were selected for this study. These women were identified for their unique ability to voice comedic sociopolitical discourse in ways that showcase how they view society and its condition (Haggins, 2007; Smith, 2008). Besides having common nuances in how they take up space online, these women were also chosen for their shared ability to cultivate a following on Instagram resulting in individual audiences of more than 2 million seemingly

active followers. These three women have also earned a popularity buzz or maintained a celebrity status, primarily by performing ethnic humor on Instagram. Furthermore, each comedienne named has shown the ability to go viral or post content that is shared rapidly online to upward from thousands to millions of views (see Table #1) – as all have consistently over time (Instagram, 2020).

Table #1

Insta-comedienne statistics

Name	Following	Engagement rate	Comment-to-like ratio	Likes per post	Date collected
Jessica Moore	5.1 million	2.02%	39/1000	97k	3/25/2021
Vena Excell	5 million	3.56%	29/1000	175k	3/26/2021
Amber Wager	2 million	1.95%	21/1000	38.7k	4/27/2021

Note: These analytics are from In Beat, a free social media analytics site that allows anyone to see the statistics from public Instagram accounts and more. According to In Beat, follower counts can be deceiving, while the comment to like ratio is more telling of how much influence an account holder has over their audience; it is suggestive of their ability to go viral (see glossary for definition).

Qualitative approach

The textual analysis for this study examines minor discourse (Schulman, 1994), employs critical feminist theory (Hooks, 1981; 1984) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) while drawing on the findings from the literature on Black people’s comedy, to explore how Black comics maintain agency in oppressive spaces. Textual analysis (Gee, 2014) was critical for revealing techniques used by insta-comediennes (e.g., verbiage, clothing, settings, storyline) in their attempt to maintain control over what they represent on Instagram (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Smith, 2008). Intersectionality theory provides a way to understand the ways in which insta-comediennes address the multidimensional impacts of oppression on women of color, and for this study particularly, the horizontal and social oppression experienced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989; Hooks, 1981; 1984). Minor discourse and critical feminist theory further

informed the focal points of identities under examination, while the existing literature on Black comedy provided historical context. Taken together, these investigative lenses and qualitative approaches expose how these funny women both (a) declare what reality is to them, and (b) articulate and establish subjectivity present-day on Instagram (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Smith, 2008).

Data Collection. The data were randomly selected posts from each comedienne's Instagram feed during the years 2018-2019. Using a random number generator (Calculator Soup) posts were collected and stored in a spreadsheet to stay organized. To ensure unification in the collection of content across insta-comediennes, 48 pieces of content were selected from each, comprising a total of 144 randomly selected posts in total to be analyzed.

Data were collected in the form of individual posts from Instagram, with two randomly selected posts across each month from January 2018 to December 2019 as representative of the comediennes' monthly postings across the two-year period under examination. Specifically, data consisted of photos, videos, selfies, memes, and graphics (with accompanying captions). For example, a picture in conjunction with the caption made for one piece of data.

The comic's total number of posts for each month created data points x and y . With x being the number of posts shared by a comedienne during a given month, and y being the randomly selected numbers from that month, the specific posts to be examined were identified. For example, if a comedienne had posted 36 times in one month, the random number generator was used to calculate two numbers between 1 and 36, and the content posted in sequence with those random number generations was the data selected for analysis.

Some posts did not qualify and had to be skipped, like promotional material showcasing tours. Such cases were documented and the process to generate a new number ensued until I had an adequate post selected.

Data Analysis. Codes were assigned to each joke based on the narrative content and how ideologies were expressed by Instagram comediennes during the 2018-2019 time period. First, category codes (Gee, 2014; Schulman, 1994) were identified to classify the linguistic strategies of resistance that these Black Insta-comediennes used to prioritize Black audiences and decenter whiteness (Gee, 2014;

Haggins, 2007; Schulman, 1994; Smith-Shomade, 2002 see Table # 2). For example, when comediennes used African American vernacular, sass, shade, or expressed acts of signifying, those jokes were coded as ethnic discourse. Other codes used during the initial coding process were misogyny, self-deprecation, and criticism to name a few. Initial codes were derived from deduction and based on findings in the literature.

The next cycle of coding consisted of identifying themes and combing terms when necessary to create the subcategory codes for Black womens' comic personae and jokes on Instagram: (SP) Spirituality, (SX) Sexuality, (F) Feminism, (SL) Self-love, (R) Relationships, (P) Positivity – (see Table #2). Arriving at these codes took the combining of subcategories such as “hustle” or “encouragement” which both went into the larger concept of sharing positivity on social media. Some jokes were very complex and received multiple codes.

Using a multidisciplinary approach in this study (i.e., informed by minor discourse, critical feminist theory, and intersectionality theory) to understand the social and political context in which insta-comediennes occupy (Hooks, 1981; 1984; Crenshaw, 1989; Gee, 2014; Schulman, 1994), various sociopolitical elements of their comedic performances seemingly exposed their perspectives and motives behind their acts of subjectivity (Fulton, 2014; Haggins, 2007; Monk-Payton, 2017; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Accordingly, this study unpacked content created by Black female stand-up comedians on Instagram, illuminated what they have given priority to, and speculated its sociopolitical relevance during 2018-2019.

Table #2

Insta-comediennes discursive codes

Deductive codes	Inductive codes	Themes from grouped codes
Feminist (f)	Self-hype (sh)	Spirituality (SP)
Ethnic humor (e)	Feminizing (fem)	Sexuality (SX)
Resistance ®	IDGAF (gaf)	Feminism (F)
Demands (d)	Ridiculous (ri)	Resistance (RX)
Grievance (g)	Encouragement (ec)	Relationships (R)
Misogny (my)	Moralizing (m)	Positivity (P)
Self-deprecatory (sd)	Call and response (cr)	
Humor (h)	Positivity (pos)	
Truth (t)	Spirituality (sp)	
Playfulness (p)	Growth (gw)	
Logic (l)	Beauty (b)	
Financial status (\$)	Inappropriate (i)	
Sex or sexuality (x)	Wink (w)	
Relationships (rel)	Ridiculous (ri)	
Critique (ct)	Fem Shade (fs)	
	Social media parody (smp)	
	Testimony (ts)	
	Male shade (ms)	
	Directive (dir)	
	Self-care (sc)	
	Grind (gd)	
	Ridicule (rid)	
	Violence (v)	

Recurring sociopolitical themes from the data were identified, which brought to light the personal discourses and ideologies emerging from each comic personae – see Table # 3. This allowed for the identification of each comic’s political positioning as either assimilationist, pluralist, or multicultural and/or diverse. (Gray, 1995; Haggins, 2007). Assimilationist discourse is where specific socio-political issues and racism are constructed as individual problems by the comic (Gray, 1995; Haggins, 2007). Pluralist is coded when “separate but equal” ideologies are demonstrated which show Black characters living and working in seemingly equal ways to white characters who never come into direct conflict with racism or oppression (Gray, 1995; Haggins, 2007). Lastly multicultural, and/or diverse is a discursive category that refers to content that evokes socio-political stances on black life with no regard for a white

middle-class audience (Gray, 1995; Haggins, 2007). Based on their approach, each comedienne’s personae was classified as either assimilationist, pluralist, or multicultural/diverse.

Table #3

Insta-comediennes discursive categories

Assimilationist	Pluralist	Multi-cultural diverse
Specific sociopolitical issues and racism are constructed as "individual problems"	Separate but equal ideologies-- Cultural differences are explored without coming in direct conflict with mainstream America	Ideologies that are both hegemonic and specific to black experiences are invoked

Note: These categories come from Herman Gray *Watching Race*.

Methodological justification

Comedienne Luenell believes there is a distinction between insta-comediennes and comics from the past who performed in person and on stages (Breakfast Club, 2018). According to her, insta-comediennes are not funny; and she insists that others in the modern-day Black comedy circuit believe this to be true, too (Breakfast Club, 2018). With the analyses conducted in the current study, it is my intention to highlight the complexity of insta-comediennes and their comic personae in aim to acknowledge the unique evolution of Black female political discourse as it is now performed and observed under a larger microscope in both an ephemeral social space and heightened sociopolitical landscape. Accordingly, the qualitative method and theoretical lenses applied in this study were selected to build on the bodies of work produced by Black female researchers (i.e., Bambi Haggins, Beretta Smith-Shomade, DoVeanna S. Fulton, Brandy Monk-Payton, Patricia Hill Collins, Bell Hooks, Kimberely

Crenshaw) to explore the modern Black female's resistance, agency, and self-definition as performed through humorous enactments on Instagram. Focusing on the modern-day stand-up, in insta-comedienne form, Chapter 4 explores each of the selected contemporary Black female street comics in the digitized world (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002)

Chapter 4

Analysis— The queens of discourse.

After coding each randomly selected piece of content, it's clear that each comic's personae occupy their own unique identity and each comic has an individual narrative or discourse she is forwarding online (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Monk-Payton 2017). I reframed from observing the comediennees as Instagram influencers to keep the study centered on comic identities. Each comic was renamed for the analysis based on their personae similar to how comedy researcher Doveanna S. Fulton (2007) renamed some of the Queens of Comedy in her study that compares Black female comic personae to Black female rap personae.

Comediennes in this study consistently delivered messages about culture, relationships, spirituality, and womanhood. Pretty Vee or Excell and Jess Hilarious are arguably more skilled, as their jokes are more complex, while Amber Wagner relied mostly on ruminations and familiarity to spread her message (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade 2002; Monk-Payton, 2017). Jess Hilarious relied more on double entendres with witty, critically biting remarks toward culture and other topics, while Pretty Vee focused on impersonations that poked fun at fools in love, “ghetto” living, and home life, based on my sample (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Monk-Payton, 2017; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Each comic carved out a space for themselves to critique the moment in various ways that translated to millions of people, over and over again.

The Milfy Headbussah

On May 13, 2018, Jess Hilarious shared a photo with her son on Instagram. A street in a brownstone neighborhood filled with cars parked bumper to bumper; she is standing on the sidewalk with her son Ashton standing in front of her. She's hugging him, and he is leaning back just a little so that his weight is supported by her. In the image, he appears carefree and cool while his momma has his back. He

is about four years old and a cutie. The second image in this carousel post is a portrait of her son (which you have to swipe to see) from a camera phone. He is shown smiling, and coy, on what appears to be the same day. It was Mother's Day and the caption read, "Ashton asked me what I was getting him for Mother's Day." The remark is innocent and Jess Hilarious shares it to softly poke at the self-centeredness of young children. In doing so, she simultaneously winks at mothers.

While the image alone is posted to intentionally connect with others on Mother's Day, the setting plays its own role in the narrative presented, rather intentionally or unintentionally. After seeing this post, I understood Jess Hilarious' persona more fully. She was a mother who had her sons back in a tough city, among many odds. She shared this after the nation was rocked by the publicized killings of young Black men and boys such as Trayvon Martin in 2012, Eric Garner in 2014, Mike Brown in 2014, along with the killing of Sandra Bland in 2015, to name a few -- all with no officers charged in their deaths (Matthews, 2021; Montgomery, 2019; Munro, 2021; Romero, 2020). In this context, the post was both funny and inspirational. The urban background reminds people of the rough city life that usually defines Black life on the east coast in mainstream media and centers in on a young, beautifully-melanated, seemingly single-mother, building her comedy career and determined to make it despite perceived beliefs.

This may be the reason Jess Hilarious is often hinting that she's tough. Perhaps you have to be a tough woman to thrive in a city like Baltimore, Maryland that in 2019 had the highest per-capita homicide rate among adults and minors for things like drugs, money, retaliation, and sometimes no clear reason at all ([AP News, 2019](#)). In one of her posts, Hilarious shows her fighting skills by flexing her jabs and punching into the camera to celebrate progress in her career. She used the caption "tough cookie" to describe herself. These subtle nuances arguably feed into her persona as a well-equipped woman that can handle herself on the comedy scene and in the streets. Adding to her tough-girl persona is the type of humor she shares which is politically charged, unfiltered, and full of divadom sass, and shade. *Sass* is characterized by expressions of defiance towards something, while shade is demonstrated through painful remarks of truth and humor (Haggins, 2007; Monk-Payton, 2017). *Sass* and *shade* are acts used to signify a repertoire of Black existence or Black cultural knowledge through words, phrases, or remarks that play

up racial identity (Florini, 2013; Monk-Payton, 2017). This behavior makes race visible online (Florini, 2013).

Jess Hilarious is often found in her car or in a random room *throwing* shade about different topics. In these short complex clips titled Jess With the Mess, she holds very few bars, pushes ideas to the edge, and shows very little mercy on her targets. On November 7, 2019, Jess Hilarious shared one of her Jess With the Mess clips where she critiques modern television by shading Kerry Washington and her involvement in remaking the 70s show Good Times, mentioning reality star Blacc Chyna's recent plastic surgery, and roasting powerful Black men in pop culture for behaving in less desirable ways in the media. The clip is like a sandwich of jokes that checks the reality of life and how the media, or celebrities play a role in distorting that reality. Jess Hilarious goes from ridicule to roasting and roasting again, then back to ridicule, and so forth until she completely crushes or exposes each figure or occurrence she is targeting. She does all this in a full face, hair whipped and slayed for the gawds, decked out with jewelry, lashes, and acrylic nails! Sis came to slay -- in multiple ways -- and earned 1,177,363 views on that video.

In these handheld video skits meant to look like impromptu rants, she uses these moments to provide her perspective on popular happenings on social media, television, pop culture, etc. is seemingly the comedy queen of the 1 million views club on Instagram out of this sample. She is most consistent with earning 1 million views or more for her "Jess With the Mess" renditions, along with the other styles of commentary she shares on Instagram.

Sex appeal never hurt nobody

Whenever Jess Hilarious isn't busting heads with jokes, she is posing for the gram in sexy bodycon dresses and heels. Although she switches it up and rocks timbs and sneakers, her overall appearance, especially as she progressed as a comic, is sexy and appealing. A mother of one, destined for

greatness as a street humorist, in a rough city -- the Milfy Headbussah is here to slay dragons and anything else mythical, unapproached, or absurd.

Queen “Notchu Hoes”

Vena Excell, Vena E., more commonly referred to as Pretty Vee, makes it clear she is not like the rest of the girls. From Miami, Florida, she has a background in radio and broadcast (Breakfast Club, 2018). Her persona on Instagram focuses on the female experience, whether it be mothers, women in relationships, women in fights, or women desperately looking for love-- Vena E. is making it clear that she is different than what folks expect from the typical Black female through her parodic performances on Instagram. In one of her parodies on social media, she plays a young woman who is arriving at a restaurant appearing slightly anxious yet very excited. The caption says, “ MOOD: “When You SEE Your FUTURE INSTAGRAM HUSBAND PERIODDDD” @starfireboutique (I LOVE YOU BABY) LMAO !!!!!!!!”. Pretty Vee appears wearing a velvet cocktail dress hugging her petite body and walking really slowly with her butt poked out. She stops at an invisible host then points at her invisible date/camera as if she was checking in, and giggles dizzily while appearing innocent and giddy. In this parody, Pretty Vee pokes fun at women who think unrealistically about relationships with people they meet from *the innanets* (internet).

After digging her hand in her purse during the imaginary dinner, she pulls out a wedding ring while saying “Yes, yes, yes”, exposing the reality of the situation with a ridiculous Candy Pop ring on her finger that she then sucks while looking into her date’s eyes and says “Forever”. She begins to melt and stroke her face, and lips as if she can’t take the level of ecstasy the current moment is bringing. All of this is happening while the song, “Happily Ever After” by Case plays in the background, likely representing what Pretty Vee’s date is thinking, or what she hopes they are. The parody is completely absurd and leaves room to question whether Pretty Vee was also poking fun at the reality of meeting a man like the one being sung about in the background, perhaps the music simply represents the desires of females.

While the song sings “I will be your man, your protector, your best friend 'til my humble life is ended,” she is sucking on a ring pop in celebration of her self-proposed proposal. This is clearly a critique on male to female relationships and a showcase of Black females’ desire for intimacy.

There is an imbalance depicted by her excited character in contrast to her invisible date, which could represent how Black women feel while dating - alone. Black women have historically played second or invisible in their romantic relationships; intimacy between Black heterosexual relationships has been dominated by an imbalance in perspective and power between Black males and females (Brown, Kogan, & Yu, 2016; Hooks, 1984; Johnson and Loscocco 2015; Smith, 2018; Watkins, 2002). These imbalances usually play out in the media through misogynistic rap lyrics, reality television, comedy, or film and show how Black females and Black males might prioritize intimacy differently (Brown, Kogan, & Yu, 2016; Johnson and Loscocco 2015; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Watkins, 2002).

In another scene, Pretty Vee is seen staring into her bathroom mirror. She is hurt, whimpering, and in a bath towel. Her sorrow comes from being left by her man and now she is left to her own self-judgment. In this scene, she showcases the psychological effects misogyny has on women who meet their own sexual desires.

Pretty Vee pokes fun at how women internalize their experiences with men to give voice to women’s romantic experiences during this age. Many of her parodies in my sample are playful feminist expressions that speak to the reality of dating for Black females. Like Hillary Banks on FPBA, Pretty Vee plays a dimwitted lover in her many skits on Instagram, revealing her “true depth” on the subject matter. Her light-hearted critiques suggest that women have the ability to move beyond seeing themselves as someone who needs the validation of a relationship in order to fulfill their sexual desires. They could also be a message to young women that they should put up better boundaries in their relationships, though it is unclear.

Besides poking fun at things that women experience in intimate relationships, Pretty Vee stands out for her use of self-deprecatory humor. Self-deprecatory humor is dialogue used to poke fun at oneself, or one’s racial/gender group (Russell, 20). During the age of Kardashian body appropriation, Vena E.

keeps her slender, youthful body all-natural ([CNBC, 2019](#)). According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, millennials created a surge in plastic surgery in 2018, going to doctors to look good on Instagram, with “butt augmentation and fat grafting” the fastest growing procedure requested ([CNBC, 2019](#)). Amid the growing popularity of butt augmentations like Brazilian butt lifts, commonly referred to as bbl’s, Pretty Vee remains unmoved by the beauty standards of the day and is often inviting her audience to laugh at the many ways she can make her body look silly, unattractive, and laughable ([CNBC, 2019](#)). In doing so, she exposes the unapologetic love she has for her natural slender body by positioning it in unflattering ways in photos and videos, unlike most modern-day females on Instagram.

In a video with more than 2.3 million views, Pretty Vee is looking into a mirror with a pink bonnet on (one of her signature props), a skin-tight romper with strings as sleeves, and sexy thigh-high boots that are glittery and shining. She appears to be in a dressing room on the set of Wild’N Out, as her biker-short romper suggests. Resisting the typical sexy girl pose, Pretty Vee positions her body in an unflattering way so that her small chest appears broad and prominent, while she sings, “Do you see what I see...?” She continues with a few more lines in her impromptu rap while dropping down into her infamous “V bounce” and hopping back up to a sideways stance to show her clinching her booty cheeks unattractively rapping, “tuck, tuck, tuck in-- have a nigga nuttin’.” A surprise lyric to remind her audience that she is not asexual, while simultaneously luring them away from her body to avoid the male gaze and objectification. Another clear demonstration of feminine control, taking charge of the audience’s perception of her.

Mz. Make Em Say Uhh

Amber Wagner is no Mo’Nique, they are respectfully very different. Both women give voice to their experiences as fat Black females through humor and truth-telling. Mo’Nique played up her sex appeal on stage in fly leather coordinates, high heels, etc., and let it be known that she is in fact sexy and desirable despite the culture (Fulton, 2004). Amber Wagner, on the other hand, outwardly acknowledges her exclusion, yet chooses to love herself regardless. Both comediennes found ways to stand against the culture that invalidates their beauty, sexuality, and desirability. Amber Wagner did this by constantly suggesting her lovemaking skills made up for her lack of desirability (by European standards), and then some. While Mo’Nique flaunted her sexiness, Amber Wagner flaunted her sex skills.

In the age of top music charters City Girls, Cardi B, and Megan Thee Stallion, there is seemingly nothing worse than a woman with no sex game. Amber Wagner avoids the implications associated with this post-feminist belief by letting it be known that despite her inability to fit into mainstream society’s desirability politics, men still desire her “meow”. Amber speaks very highly about her vagina and her ability to make a man feel good in many of her posts in my sample -- oftentimes in a taunting manner toward women and men to demonstrate that sexuality is not predicated on mainstream ideas of attraction. In an impromptu video, Amber rants about a man she is seeing that she assumes ignores her (or ghost’s her) while he’s with his main chick or family. In the video, she states, “y’all need to stop tryna cheat, and tell yo bitch what she not doin’ right.” She continued with, “You just wanna dip out with me because you know I got dat fy-urr and I’m doin’ sumthin that she not.” To show her loyalty to women in this act of sexual agency she says, “Let her know what she can do tah upgrade hursel...stop doing her like that”. In this shady remark, Amber places the blame of male infidelity on women’s sexual incapacibilities to illuminate her sexual prowess and her commitment to finding a fair solution for the love triangle. Exposing her true perspective of the situation she says, “fix your home boo-fix your home boo,” with her classic sassy nail gesture in the camera to show that her true aggression is towards the presence of romantic instability.

What sets Amber Wagner apart is her ability to subvert harmful stereotypes of Black women. Aunties, popularized in mass culture, describe comforting Black women who are characterized as headstrong mammies who are here to serve those in need (Haggins, 2007; Davis-Sowers, 2012; Chicago Tribune, 2019). Their sexuality is faint and fails to represent the sexier modern-day tropes of Black women like vixens, Basketball wives, or Instagram models; yet they do not represent everyday Black buppies or ghetto queens (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Fulton, 2004; Chicago Tribune, 2019). Aunties are sacred and glorious representations of Black women and black female spirituality, and the phrase is typically used to pay homage through endearment (Davis-Sowers, 2012; Chicago Tribune, 2019). However, prominent Black women have spoken out against it for its resemblance to reified mammies (Essence, 2020; Chicago Tribune, 2019). Ava DuVernay said she isn't old enough to be referred to as such at 46 years old and would prefer to be called “Sis”, “Queen,” or “Family” (Chicago Tribune, 2019). Oprah said she didn't want anyone calling her auntie that isn't her actual niece or nephew, giving room for one exception, “when she is in Africa, where everybody refers to anyone older as “sister” or “auntie” (Chicago Tribune, 2019). Gayle King said it should be reserved for women older, like 85 (Chicago Tribune, 2019). Having my own experiences, being called an auntie at 31 years old by twenty-year-old female friends, I understand its gut-wrenching effects on the Black female psyche.

Truly giving voice to Black women's sexuality, Amber Wagner impersonates an auntie on Instagram. In the video, Amber subverts this asexual stereotype while appearing naked getting ready to go out while singing, and bopping to her own voice-over lyrics. She starts the lyrics with how she just got a new wig and how she “do her shit” and “can suck a dick,” after mentioning that her teeth are fake. Dancing in a flirty manner with a Black feathered boa while admiring herself in the mirror/camera, Amber Wagner is shown putting on a short blonde wig with lashes and red lipstick looking joyful and excited about how good she looks. Further disrupting this asexual stereotype, she celebrates in the lyrics that she's 43, single, and has a young pussy singing, “might as well be old but this pussy 18-- it's still legal. It still flows, ooo, ooo, oohh”. Keeping it rooted in auntie humor, Amber Wagner let it be known that among the rest of her life's activities, which include yelling at kids, whooping their asses, having

great sex, and smoking Newport cigarettes, she still might be the auntie you're expecting to serve you, in all its glory. This skit breathes life into the everyday auntie caricature that is often joked about and acknowledges how aunties have historically been the backbone to struggling Black families, often taking in kids or stepping in when needed (Davis-Sowers, 2012). In closing she harmonizes, “Can I be your auntie eee... I might feed you and rock you to sleep... Oooh, don’t you wanna be my nicee eee eeeee and my nephew ewww, ooooooh...yeah.” She earned half a million views on this post with the caption “👁️ AUNTIEEEEEEEE jst got her a NEW wig!” The combination of music, self-written lyrics, props, and the constant use of the phrase auntie interrogates this mythical concept of Black women in a fun, hilarious way on Instagram that continues to reveal Amber’s sexuality and humanizes Black females. Besides her constant hints at having the ability to please sexually, Amber Wagner, or Mz. Make ‘Em Say Uhh, has another way of bringing forth good feelings for her followers.

Mental health, morals, and spirituality

It became apparent that Amber Wagner’s persona places a heightened focus on the feelings of others. Besides the constant reminders of her ability to please sexually, she often fell into ruminations on her Instagram feed, rooted in encouragement, personal testimony, and mental clarity or wellness. In a rumination about tough breakups, Amber speaks out against harmful behaviors that keep individuals in a bad place mentally while they are trying to get over an ex-lover. In a red durag, Amber speaks directly to the camera stating, “You guys asked me to speak about heartbreak and how to get over it.” In a strong but concerning tone, she continues with, “anybody can get their heartbroken, fat-- skinny, rich-poor, celebrity-regular... nobody’s safe from heartbreak.” After mentioning how some folks focus on the breakup so much that they begin to stock their ex’s social media pages, she places the accountability on the individual by candidly expressing that instead of obsessing over the heartbreak, “we need to be focused on that comeback.” She mentions a number of ways to “comeback” such as losing weight,

working on a business plan, or bettering yourself overall, rather than “tripping off him or his weak ass biatch.” That signified phrase validates her followers' feelings to gently help them refocus.

While speaking about sexuality, Wagner softly injects moments of grace for individuals who might live in shame. On May 30, 2018, Amber is in her car with a creole turban on talking about safe sex. She starts by saying she doesn't condone minors having sex or sex without marriage, exposing her morality, and continues with “but we are human, shit happens, and temptation is a muthafucka”. She slides in a critical warning in this joke stating, “If you gon do it, do it safe, do it right...don't fuck around just for the thrill and get some shit chu can't kill”. Followed by, “and if you got something that you can't kill, it's okay, because it's life and life happens.” She acknowledges and shows grace to individuals who may be struggling with incurable sexually transmitted diseases or infections. To keep the message centered on safe sex and sex inclusivity she closes out with, “but be sure to inform the partner that you're with [if you have an STI/STD], have enough respect for yourself and them, to do that... but yeah, besides that, do yo thaaaang”! Amber Wagner received over 305k views on this post and 681 comments. These moments of grace, when Amber slips in what I call verbal strokes, speak to the nurturing part of her persona on Instagram. She is there to make people feel better and this is why she's Mz. Make 'Em Say Uhh. Whether sexually or mentally, Amber Wagner is here to please.

Spirituality popped up in a lot of Pretty Vee's content as well and less for Jess Hilarious but it was still there. In a post by Pretty Vee, she is in bed with a bonnet on and she is speaking in the manner of a minister, directly to her followers. It's very clear that she is not in character and she is herself, Vena Excell, during this moment. In the caption and in the video she shares a personal testimony about her victorious battle over mental health and suicidal thoughts, and says to anyone who might be struggling with the same, “I ask that God will bind that up right now in the name of Jesus...I been there, but God has brought me out of that.” In this minute-long video, she pours out a heartfelt prayer and rumination about encouragement. Unlike Pretty Vee and Amber Wagner, Jess Hilarious is more prone to showing her spirituality through indirect measures, like many things associated with her persona, presumably to maintain her tough-girl persona, though that is unclear.

Speaking of Jess Hilarious' toughness, her real feelings towards busting heads with jokes are exposed in a response she shared after the news of XXXtentacion's death. In the caption, she says, "I'm so sorry sweet baby...even for ever making fun of how you looked because I didn't understand you..." The late XXXtentacion is a rapper who was known for his cruel acts of violence, emotional lyrics, and "SoundCloud rap" (Gaudrian, 2018) He was killed shortly after he rose to fame at the age of 20 (Guardian, 2018). He was also one of Jess Hilarious' targets on Instagram. Even with his violent background she still felt compelled to mourn him publicly with the rest of the world. His death bothered her so much that she went live and continued to discuss how much of his death made her feel uncomfortable about the jokes she shared prior. Granted, this all could have been online activity curated to stay within the current trending topic, but the posts remain and that is unclear.

Racism, cancel culture, and insta-comediennes

Racism was a theme I thought I would see more of but honestly, it wasn't much of a topic as I would have assumed. Amber Wagner and Pretty Vee stayed away from directly confronting heavy topics like racism and rape culture in the content I collected during this project (Fulton, 2004; Gee, 2014; Haggins, 2007; Monk-Payton, 2017; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Unlike Pretty Vee and Amber Wagner, Jess Hilarious touched on heavy topics, including racism often. Pretty Vee and Amber Wagner did find it important to address misogyny/misogynoir (misogyny aimed specifically at Black females) and gave subtle winks at the shameful effects of poverty through parodies that expose economic struggles or ghetto behavior.

Without the direct confrontation of racism, both comic identities could be placed in a pluralist discourse but arguably they do not fit squarely in a pluralist discourse because of their use of ethnic humor (Gray, 1996; Haggins, 2007). It's unclear why Wagner or Excell stayed away from race topics, possibly due to the strong presence of cancel culture which journalists said has been removed from its

original function (Vox, 2021). Cancel culture is described as an act of agency in which someone or something is fully disinvested from, as a repercussion to an expression or act that is harmful or offensive to interested groups, and it poses a threat to any comedian while regulating unclear boundaries (Bromwich, 2018; Vogels et. al, 2021).

Aja Romana, writer for Vox media said, “the idea of canceling began as a tool for marginalized communities to assert their values against public figures who retained power and authority even after committing wrongdoing” (Vox, 2021). However, because of its obscurity, cancel culture has been misappropriated and used as a filter on the main stage, forcing the boundaries of culture to exist in a “binary” within political correctness (Vogels et. al, 2021; Vox, 2021). According to Romana, cancel culture has its roots in the Black community from a movie called *New Jack City* in which the main character, Nino Brown, played by Wesley Snipes cancels (or gets rid of) his lover (Vox, 2021). The term was later developed into a concept that would empower Black folks to demand accountability from people who have contributed to the harm of Black people (Vox, 2021). The punishment includes public and cultural removal to shame and dissolve someone’s public image and career (Vox, 2021).

Jess Hilarious was seemingly unphased by cancel culture. She often joked about the possibility of being canceled while she targeted celebrities, the lgbt+ community, and other taboo topics while appearing playful and unbothered. In one of her Jess with the Mess jokes, she is sitting in her car and reports that Tessa Thompson will play the first lgbtq character in a Marvel movie, *Thor*. She jokes, “she gon’ play all of’em? The l-g-b-t, and the q... like all of the departments?” She continues by celebrating with, “Oh okay, dats a super queero! Haha ha.” Acknowledging she runs the risk of being canceled she says “let me stop, ‘fore I get canceled.”

In another post on IG, Jess Hilarious makes it clear that she doesn’t shy away from cancel culture and actually flirts with the danger it imposes. On July 1, 2018, Jess Hilarious said Beyonce and Jay-Z’s album, *The Carters*, was less than great, publicly. Her sentiments on the album were that it was something she didn’t want to hear from them, specifically the song *Ape Shit*. To Jessica, Beyonce’s persona shifted and appeared out of character for rapping the words “Get off my dick,” and for rapping in

general, opposed to her singing songs like “Listen”, which she references in a singing voice in her commentary and follows up with “that wasn’t no shit I wanted to hear from Beyonce and Jay-Z.”

According to [The Atlantic](#), Ape Shit and the music video was a powerful moment for Black representation, Black love, equality in marriage, etc. On Spotify (2021), Ape Shit has the most streams from The Carter album at 223 million, at least 100 million more streams than each song on that album. The video for Ape Shit has over 247 million views on YouTube (2021) and 2.4 million likes, versus its 247k thumbs down. Jess Hilarious took on their number one song on that album, after the video dropped, and rather intentionally or unintentionally relegates Beyonce back to what is more conventional, a graceful woman singing and pleading with her male lover about heartbreak, opposed to her rapping and singing aggressively to “cast aside feminine stereotypes” to show a more fully actualized feminine persona for the modern age (Hosking, 2018). What Jess Hilarious possibly intended to poke fun at in this joke, is the age of the Carters and the youthfulness in their music that comes from its on-trend sound, which she believes should come from someone else. In doing so, she delegitimizes Beyonce's expression of gender equality in relationships and expresses anti-feminist beliefs though her motive isn't clear (Hosking, 2018). Jess Hilarious has constant pokes at the reality of patriarchy while expressing anti-feminist beliefs in her material. Based on her critical personality, perhaps what they represented in this song is one of those things that Jess Hilarious finds to be mythical, thus unmoved by its display in the media by The Carters.

Fully exposing her unphased attitude towards cancel culture and perceivably her loyalty to Black audiences, Jess Hilarious expressed her sentiments on the Bill Cosby case and constantly questioned the timeliness of his accuser's claims during 2018, the year the #MeToo movement moved into the mainstream (New York Times, 2018). In one joke online she pokes fun at the length of time in between the actual sexual assaults and the coming out of victims. Jess says, “If somebody like, rape me, beats me, assaults me...I’m not waiting seventy-five-fuckin years, to go tell on you.” She says, “no I’m not waiting, I’m fuckin tellin on you right now, as soon as you do it... like, unh unh, where you going Bobby V?” In this joke, she criticizes the way women handled sexual assault while poking fun at R and B singer Bobby

Valentino for his rape allegations. She also stayed away from directly invalidating the women's claims. Instead, she pokes fun at the amount of time that had gone by in such a comical way that the main idea is moved beyond recognition, thus creating room for laughter during such a seemingly deep moment for Black people.

Another sistah who openly disagreed with how Cosby's accusers handled the situation was rapper Remy Ma during a discussion on Revolt's State of The Culture the same year (Revolt, 2018, Episode 4). She said, "I feel like 60 is a lot...find it hard to believe out of 60 women, all of y'all was scared?" Furthermore, Remy Ma said the women had a responsibility to report him while it was happening (Revolt, 2018, Episode 4). In her opinion, they were negligent for not doing so. Remy Ma said while gasping and rolling her eyes in a *I-wish-a-nigga-would* demeanor, "If I'm violated...nothing on this planet earth can [enter whatever length a hip hop queen from Brooklyn might go if ever violated here because she didn't finish the statement]." After a pause, she says, "maybe that's what we need to do, as women, we need to maybe stand up a little bit more." This is similar to Jess Hilarious' point. Both women do not believe in being violated by men and doing nothing about it.

After Bill Cosby was found guilty and sentenced to 3-10 years in prison for each case, Jess Hilarious shared her reaction to her Instagram feed stating, "About this Bill Cosby shit...now because Bill gotta do 30 years in jail because he was found guilty... now for all the hush money he did gave all you bitches to be quiet all these years, is it now refunded?" She continues this joke by saying the women should have to put money on Bill Cosby's books and that they don't deserve more money for pain and suffering after being paid off and "living lavishly". Jess Hilarious closes the joke by tying her frustrations back to her relationship with the legendary comic screaming, "Or maybe I feel that way because that was my fuckin TV Dad, and now Ashton can't even watch it because they took it off the TV! Thank you Bitch!" This makes the joke playful, revealing Jess Hilarious' detachment from the sexual assault allegations and her prioritization of Black culture. This, along with Remy Ma's response to Bill Cosby's sexual assault case, showcases how Black women are not a monolith and perceive things under their own terms.

Multicultural/diverse personae

As stated previously, all three comedienne fall into a multicultural diverse persona as their commentary has little regard for a White middle-class audience and focuses on ethnic culture. Yet, hard truths of the day were directly challenged, massaged, or exposed mainly by Jess Hilarious, while Pretty Vee and Amber Wagner expressed their Blackness through their style of communication and impersonations. Jess Hilarious has a matter-of-fact and playful persona; her humor centers on the element of surprise as it relates to misconceptions, similar to Dave Chappelle. Like Chappelle, Hilarious' jokes help us understand our culture by providing texture or context to different ideas or events. For instance, in a Jess with the Mess clip, she makes relevant the reality of Black suffering or suffering in general, in comparison to what is shown on television and media. In her whitewashed reporter voice, she says, "A remake of Good Times is coming, and Kerry Washington will be producing it." Quickly the video cuts to her real response to the report and she says concerningly, "What tha fuck is going on with all of these remakes? Ain' nobody got no new ideas? What about the bad times? It's a lot of those going on."

Negotiations on Instagram

Oftentimes insta-comediennes negotiate with the presumption of white ideology by mobilizing tropes or the male gaze only to violate or disrupt harmful and diminishing ideas about Black women (Haggins, 2007; Monk-Payton, 2017; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Watkins, 2002). When it comes to the negotiations that Pretty Vee makes, it is mostly with the objectification of her body, along with the reification of Black female tropes.

Pretty Vee controls the laughter on her page effortlessly in her wild acts online. In order to allow folks to feel comfortable enough with her wild acts, silly body movements, and awkward dancing, it still has to be clear that she is attractive in order to maintain her personhood. This helps her avoid being laughed at versus laughed with, which happens often on Instagram with viral sensations such as Welven The Great, YungBBQ, or Ice JJ Fish, all of whom have very limited comic identities. Their comedic personae on Instagram are there so folks can laugh at their unattractiveness, ridiculousness, or actual mental dumbness. To avoid being skimmed down like them, Pretty Vee retains ideas from mainstream discourse to occupy a larger role in the minds of her audience members.

Strategically playing into female objectification and tropes, she parodies ratchet and everyday Black female behavior while showing a little bit of skin, presumably to acknowledge the male gaze in real life and online. Other ways she played into the male gaze is by flaunting her ability to pop it, drop it, switch her hips, and bend at ease, in the most innocent of ways, while laughing mischievously.

Pretty Vee also played into stereotypes like the mammy, the psycho girlfriend, and other ethnic characters that dramatized cultural expressions. Her persona was in constant negotiation with Black tropes to possibly connect with and prioritize Black and Brown audiences. Her popular character “Peanut Momma” is a revisionist mammy, as Bambi Haggins (2007) would say, and depicts a more aggressive, cigarette smoking momma that is always on edge about her Peanut. Pretty Vee said on the Breakfast Club that Peanut Momma is created based on her actual mom and the rest of her characters come from where and how she grew up in Miami, Florida (Breakfast Club, [2019](#)). According to digital media researcher

Sarah Florini (2013), in order for users of color to make their race known or visible, they must perform their racial identity online. Though she was referring to Twitter and text, it can be argued that the same is required for a space like Instagram that converges text, videos, photos, and live streams. Pretty Vee's signifying becomes one of her main modes of articulating Black culture online. Being the clown that she is, her persona exposes things in our culture with her personal opinion on it remaining ambiguous (Williams, 2015). The clown is a persona that pokes fun at things, people, and ideas without revealing their opinion on the matter; their laughter on the subject, whether with the audience or against it, remains unclear (Williams, 2015). This act is deeply rooted in African oral traditions used to create group solidarity (Florini, 2013; Watkins, 2002).

The Milfy Headbussah takes on objectification as well, which is a common theme for women in mainstream spaces, especially women of color (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Though her actual stand-up persona is not the main objectified being, it is Jessica Moore, the actual person. In Jess Hilarious' photos online she is always slayed to the gawds from wig to nails. Her outfits are skin-tight, short, and sexy; though at times she switches to tomboy garb, only to showcase her beauty shining through as mentioned in her captions. Arguably she does this to acknowledge the male gaze online and to adhere to the beauty standards of the day.

Based on speculation, it appears that Jess Hilarious intentionally gained weight, appearing curvier and more filled out as her career progressed. There is a chance that she just gained weight naturally but in this era, it leaves me to wonder. She also went from cracking jokes bare-faced, with thinned-out edges and lifting wigs that she would poke fun at, to rocking fly lace front wigs, long jazzed-out nails, and full faces of makeup. This could also be a reflection of her financial success; perhaps she was living on less, eating less, working more, and all of that contributed to a slimmer, more toned-down appearance.

Jess Hilarious has a tendency to flirt with patriarchal notions of womanhood. This is communicated through her frequent jokes with her son. She invites followers to laugh at her son's early adoption of patriarchal ideas. In clips shared on Instagram, her son Ashton is often referring to himself as the man of the house who at times needs to regulate his momma to make sure she is making righteous

decisions. In one clip, Ashton is telling his mother how to behave when they go to the grocery store because he is “the man around the house” since she doesn’t have one. These interactions poke fun at men, their beliefs about women, and their early adoption of patriarchal beliefs, even towards their mothers. Even though these moments are shown as critiques, it is not clear if Jess Hilarious agrees with these ideas but she avoids directly interrogating them. The negotiations that Jess Hilarious makes in doing so arguably ensure her persona does not turn off traditional heterosexual males, keeping her desirable and situated within conventional notions of womanhood to some degree.

Amber Wagner on the other hand spoke about sex in political ways while hyping her sex game – with her negotiations leaning on the exposure of her insecurities in order to challenge misogyny or misogynoir. Wagner would often share sentiments that her being overweight decreases her level of desirability based on conventional notions of beauty. According to feminist media scholar, Katheleen Rowe, “women who are fat or [bodies’] move too loosely appropriate too much space” and they reside in opposition to conventional femininity which is built on how little space women take up (Smith-Shomade, 60 p., 2002). When it comes to Black women, the undesirable darkness of Black females’ skin is similar to this undesirable fat -- both having too much presence to be feminine (Smith-Shomade, 2002).

Amber Wagner reveals her awareness of this ideal through her style of joke-telling. Most of her funny regarding sex lived in the tactics she used to mask her lady parts verbally. It’s likely she did this to avoid body shamers, and anyone else, by reframing from using pornographic words. Instead, she opted for ridiculous sounds, descriptors, and inappropriateness to carry her feminist sexual discourse to a mass audience. For instance, in a joke, while Amber is driving in her car ranting about men she shouts:

“Aht Ahhhht! Nooooo! Ain’ none of that, lemme take you out, lemme get to know you, I could treat you...Nooooo! Y’all know why? Cus all y’all want is this mf california ice cream sushi roll! Y’all don’t want me! All y’all want is... (points at crotch) MEOW, that. You feel me? Why I call it the california ice cream sushi roll? Cus sometimes it smell like ice cream, and sometimes it smell like that damn sushi roll. I ain’ gon lie. Pussy ain’ always fresh. And I don’t give a damn. Fuck y’all cus now, I’ma stop taking showers. Haa Haa! Who wanna fuck me now? Huh! Who wanna fuck me now? Nobody. Yeah, y’all done turned me into this crazy-ass- maniac-ass-weird-ass-bitch. Ho ho, you’re in for a rude awakening. No, I’m closed. I don’t want nuthin from nobody. I’m on hiatus. Leave me the fuck alone and go find another fat bitch.”

Amber Wagner is able to illuminate Black women's experiences with misogynoir while delivering laughs to her audience. Her self-deprecatory approach earns her agency on Instagram while she directly checks sexual objectification, exposing her humanity. Her overall tone is slightly bitter, sharing remnants of the angry Black woman, yet playful and unphased by reality. Despite her negotiations with harmful Black tropes like the undesirable loud sapphire, she remains powerful, controlling the laughter on her page, while acknowledging the politics of desirability and the reality of dating for fat Black women in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society. Her response to the psychological harm it causes was to stop showering and be left alone, actions that would contribute to depression (CDC 2021).

Chapter 5

Discussion— Black female stand-up, Instagram and the main stage.

Luenell believes there is a distinction between insta-comediennes and comics from the past who performed on stages (Breakfast Club, 2018). Based on the selection of content reviewed, insta-comediennes take up the same practices as stand-up comics but it emerges differently in the digital age; comics are no longer performing on porches, on stages, or at kitchen tables to get started (Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Watkins, 2002). Instead of street corners and the likes, comics Like Pretty Vee, Jess Hilarious, and Amber Wagner used an accessible tool to build their comic personae, Instagram (Haggins, 2007; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Watkins, 2002). These new-age comics used Instagram lives, videos, blogs, written verbiage, photos, etc to build a comic personae, reaching millions of people by forwarding discourse online. Instagram makes this achievable for street comics.

When comparing Def Comedy Jam's setup to Instagram's, they appear similarly situated, particularly as it relates to platform affordances because in both spaces comics can engage back and forth with audience members. This allows comics to use traditional techniques used in Black comedy like call and response. Accordingly, audience members use the comment section to participate in the Black comedy tradition. Some are laughing, others are roasting the comic back, some are tagging friends to include them in the laughter, and others might share these funny posts in direct messages or group chats and start private conversations about them. Bill Bellamy said on the 25th Anniversary of Def Comedy Jam that if something was funny, audience members would hop out of their seats, walk over to each other, slap fives, and go back to their seats (Def Jam, 2018). Users on Instagram take up a similar practice through the participatory affordances intentionally embedded in the platform (Brophy, 2018; Garcia-Galera, 2014). This shows that digital Black comedy audiences are just as rowdy and participatory as people at Def Comedy Jam's live shows.

Instagram comedy performed by Black women thrives not only due to the participatory nature of social media, but its ability to blur the lines between different *dimensions* of comedy production (Garcia-

Galera, 2014; Hannerz, 2016). Some argue the authenticity of stand-up comedy is lost in the digital space but that doesn't account for stand-up having the ability to move beyond traditional spaces -- as showcased by insta-comediennes and even comics from the past with television. Insta-comediennes were able to record and manipulate content to the point its aura was still intact because of their ability to leverage the current era of technoculture -- when performances are commonly being viewed from the past, merged into a "pastpresent" or mediated performance/past performance collapsed into the present moment (Brophy, 2018; Somdahl-Sands and Finn, 2015). This, along with the behavior of digital comics and the platform affordances of Instagram, speak to our changing relationship with media, performance, and time and further complicate authenticity in performance (Banjo, et. al, 2015; Somdahl-Sands and Finn, 2015).

Black insta-comediennes touched on spirituality, sexuality, self-love, and relationships as their primary subjects -- which are common topics found in the literature of Black comedy. Out of the 144 items collected between all three comediennes, 18 posts touch on relationships, 18 posts touch on spirituality, and 11 touch on sexuality. This speaks to the capabilities of Black women building complex comic identities on Instagram among harmful stereotypes of Black women that crowd the internet -- and to the broader context of comedy during the digital age. Insta-comediennes included in this study offered critiques of sexual and political agency which provided fodder for a rich experience on their social media pages, often showing how similar to stand-up their behavior is. Furthermore, 128 items were coded as acts of resistance, though media scholar Sarah Brohpy (2018) might argue that each post from the Black women in this sample should be regarded as an act of resistance because of the political nature associated with self-representation which over time multiplies and accumulates Black identity online -- in a system driven by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. This behavior is linked to instinctual acts of self-preservation and survival and works against the digitized devaluation and erasure of Black females on Instagram (Brophy, 2018; Florini, 2016).

Conclusion— Carving out a pathway amid corporate greed

This new era of technoculture calls for individuals to become prosumers, consumers, and producers of culture (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008; Somdahl-Sands and Finn, 2015). Jess Hilarious, Amber Wagner, and Pretty Vee used Instagram to cultivate a marketable image and landed crossover jobs, television roles, placements on A-list celebrities’ music albums, and or mainstream exposure through interviews and photoshoots. This speaks to how Instagram is uniquely adjacent to the main stage, where people can actively construct a mainstream persona to earn money and or build an audience to achieve mainstream success.

In 2018, Amber Wagner was featured on Oprah Daily for spreading positivity on Instagram. The article featured a video of her loving life and representing Black Girl Joy. Wagner was interviewed by Fader the same year and was recognized for having the most iconic nails on Instagram. In 2019, Pretty Vee was cast in the reality TV show *Girl's Cruise* on VH1 alongside Lil Kim, Mya, B.Simone (another insta-comedienne), and Chili from TLC. This came after she became a regular act on Nick Cannon’s *Wild N’ Out* television show in 2018; she remains a member of the cast 5 seasons later (VH1, 2021). Jess Hilarious also earned a role with *Wild N’ Out* in 2018 but was soon cut from the show (*Breakfast Club*, 2019). Rumors surfaced that suggested she was causing too much of a ruckus on set for successfully roasting the star comedian, DC Young Fly (*Breakfast Club*, 2019). She went on to land a starring role in FOX’s “Rel”, a spot on Russell Simmons's *All Def Comedy*, *Love and Hip Hop*, and has opened for comic icons such as Martin Lawrence, Mo’Nique, Mike Epps, and Rickey Smiley (VH1, 2021).

In order to maintain subjectivity online while attempting to cultivate a mainstream comic personae, each comedienne made negotiations with the conventional demands of show business and mainstream culture. I found that all three used different tactics to objectify themselves on a platform that specifically objectifies female bodies. This negotiation with the power structure was displayed in the ways they projected themselves through images, words, and ideas. Jess Hilarious for example – arguably the most unfiltered comic in the sample because of her direct antagonisms toward taboo topics – plays up

her sexiness in the photos she shares and ensures that her hair and nails are on *fleek*. Pretty Vee who dominated physically comedy, a forbidden territory for female stand-ups, flirted with the male gaze in her silliness to avoid offense by flexing her agility and ability to move her slim natural body. Amber Wagner, possibly the most feminist comic in this sample, made herself heard by sending up sapphire stereotypes through angry sexualized rants to speak against misogynoir. These women had a clear intent to change their lives while forwarding a message while they sought after a large audience or high engagement metrics.

Being strategic, insta-comediennes kept a consistent flow of comedy on their pages, perfected their comedy, and incorporated money-making opportunities as social media influencers. But what are the implications of this activity – creating user-generated content on social media platforms that are driven by corporate capitalism in hopes of achieving mainstream success? Participatory culture in the emerging digital economy suggests that culture comes from corporations and consumers collaboratively (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008); however, enabling participation on social media platforms simply manufactures consent from its users and prompts digital labor which is then controlled, owned and contained by corporate power and racialized capitalism (Brophy, 2018). Because of this, I call for further investigation of Instagram and the comic personae over time.

Nevertheless, promoting products in humorous ways, rather discreetly or blatantly, appeared to provide a revenue stream for all three comediennes or at least a means to barter and trade with brands. Considering this mixture of user-generated content, culture, and profit, investigations of the affective labor taken up by digital comediennes over time – who keep millions of people engaged online – would further the understanding of how Instagram and comedic orators “mesh” with deeply rooted racial capitalism or corporate exploitation upon racialized minorities (Brophy 2018; Jenkins and Deuze, 2008; Nakamura, 2002). For instance, when Instagram creates new features what is the impact on culture producers? What role does consent play when Instagram’s algorithm will show favor to content created with its new features? These concerns must not go unchecked especially when content online can become gentrified or co-opted to serve capitalists' interests.

However, Black women subverted Instagram culture that is controlled by sexism and capitalism and demystified, mocked, or brought to life the perspectives of Black females amid a sea of misconceptions. They used Black comedy sharing feminist thoughts about the world, hard topics, and culture. Their perspectives included the voice of Black females which sometimes held a light to the darkness they experience due to their double marginalization. They also send up stereotypes of Black women in their personae with angry outbursts, mammy impersonations, and skits about the overly-sexualized jezebel or hoe. However, their morality and integrity were underscored through their personal discourses about relationships, self-love, spirituality, and more – that forwarded Black feminist thought on Instagram.

In closing, Instagram intentionally drives interconnectivity between users and provides a space where individuals can tap into the human need for connection which Insta-comediennes did through curating online humor ([Instagram, 2021](#); Brophy, 2018). One blogger described the activities that take place on Instagram as the same activities that took place on ancient cave walls, where drawings were left in caves for traveling nomads to observe (Garcia-Diez, 2017; Instazood, 2021). Accordingly, the digital activities exhibited by Black insta-comediennes, which contributed to the Black comedy tradition, make the idea of cave drawings suddenly more vivid as users on Instagram wade through a sea of content – controlled by the algorithm – as cyber nomads.

Study limitations

The difficulties that arise with the structuring of textual analysis is that it relies on finding a representative sample, measurable units for coding, and identifying discourses to ensure the validity and utility of the findings (Berger, 2016). This means it is up to the researcher to create a unit of measurement for a study or construct a sample to be analyzed and or coded based on their knowledge or expertise. Social scientists have argued against these types of non-traditional analyses citing aberrant decoding as a concern because content can be decoded in many ways (Berger, 2016; Lacy, Watson, Riffe and Lovejoy,

2015). The intra/inter coding in particular becomes a challenge due to most things or ideas are capable of having multiple meanings and are hard to understand from a narrow perspective (Lacy et. al, 2015). However, that doesn't interfere with this study as an exploration and investigation into the purposeful actions carried out by Black insta-comediennes because codes are based on prior research from the literature review as well as informed by critical feminist theory and intersectionality theory.

Another challenge to this analysis falls on access. A review of each insta-comediennes content during 2018-2019 is predicated on whether or not the comedienne has kept all of their content visible. This means there is a chance that the sample of content for this study is skewed to the likeness of the comedian and not representative of all their content shared during those years. However, this won't have a significant impact on the ability to gain an understanding of each comedienne's comic personae on Instagram. This study possibly includes content that was deemed worthy enough to remain online in the eyes of the comedian; though other content might've been archived since the platform allows such. When an item on Instagram is archived, it is hidden from the profile feed and stored where followers cannot see but the owner of the account can. Lastly, Instagram removes items if they are reported by users and found out of compliance with its guidelines. This should be noted considering comedy and its capability of being offensive.

This study does not investigate the Black female comic personae on Instagram over time which is a concern considering crossover – which is likely each insta-comediennes' goal. As insta-comediennes approach a mainstream audience or crossover to television, how does this impact their content and comic personae on the platform as they meet new industrial demands as professionals? There should be further investigations of insta-comediennes comic personae, career growth, and industrial demands for new insights on how Instagram is situated in the lives of people seeking a job as a public figure on the main stage.

Another limitation to this study is that it does not take into account the methods each comedienne used to generate views on Instagram such as press releases, mass text threads, direct messages, and more. In some cases, individuals building their following or engagement might enter into a large texting group,

upward of ten thousand people, to share and comment on each other's post, in agreement, avoiding the algorithm and being strategic. This study did not consider this type of activity to generate views on Instagram. However, this does not challenge the integrity of this study but it should be noted since the number of views each piece of content has is collected and recorded.

Glossary

Acculturation: modifications to values, norms, and practices by a minority group, or individual, as a result of contact with a different culture.

African diaspora: a fluid, heterogeneous collective that operates through fluid, elective affinities, defying the established heteropatriarchal norm black nationalism seeks to impose on diaspora studies.

Agency: The self-defining capacity to act or influence.

Algorithms: is an opinion embedded in code; some of them are so complex you would just call them intelligence; they are not objective and have an interest and definition of success.

Appropriation: when an outsider misuses or adopts culture from an oppressed group to earn profit or likeness.

Assimilationist discourse: socio-political issues and racism are constructed as individual problems.

Auntie: Black females who historically been the backbone to struggling Black families, often taking in kids or stepping in or desexualized stereotypes of Black women who tend to be spiritual or highly respected.

Black comedy: historically, a space where comics guard culture to keep Black people uniquely aware of their condition; where perspectives are embedded with jokes, creating a space for laughter, relief and sociocultural truths.

Blackface: when performers applied burnt cork to their faces to appear Black and is sometimes taken up by Black performers.

Black female humor: defined by DoVeanna S. Fulton as “the American social structure of race and gender divisions is fundamental to cultural impositions that make up the landscape in which Black women's humor resides.”

Black female humor: humor characterized by sly, witty, sassy, or critically biting remarks that describe the current days reality that at times subverts conventional meanings.

Black Twitter: millions of Black tweeters who “share similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices” through Twitter engagement.

Capitalism: a monetary system controlled by corporations or private profits.

Clown: comic personae that often reveal the absurdity and falsity of institutions and ideologies but awareness is ambiguous and laughter with the audience is unknown and remains ambiguous.

Comic Personae: defined as multiple and competing ideologies that is articulated through comedic discourse and formed by “acculturation, individual choice, and industrial imperatives.”

Critical cultural theory: an analytic tool used to understand how the social world by observing culture or the study of contemporary culture through an analysis of social structure.

Critical feminist theory: examines how Black women are obsolete from feminist movements and interrogates the true cult of womanhood which is based on hegemony and conventionality.

Crossover: when a street comic crosses over into mainstream spaces.

Cult of true womanhood: the era's conventional notions of womanhood.

Cyberspace: a space not clearly delineated or discretely bounded; it is, rather, a point of several intersections leading to other sites of connection.

Digital blackface: when non-Black people use Black caricatures in cyberspace to emote or express themselves.

Discourse: regarded as a way in which dominance is expressed or enacted in text and talk.

Discourse analysis: an analysis concerned with the linguistic content of ideologies and how those ideologies are expressed; also be described as an analysis that focuses on the use of language employed by the powerful to dominate others and the use of linguistic strategies of resistance by disenfranchised groups.

Digital Objects: blogs, vlogs, and podcasts as well as tweets, hashtags, and meme etc.

Ethnic Discourse: linguistic strategies of resistance that focuses on the differences, commonalities, and conditions of different racial groups while simultaneously challenging white hegemony.

Feminist Articulation: an expression deeply rooted in feminist discourse or fundamentals.

Fleek: extremely good; stylish.

Folklore: stories, songs, beliefs, or customs passed by a people for generations usually orally.

Folklore diamond: a paradigm created by researcher Gary Alan Fine that helps to analyze strategies used to make distinct personae and it consists of four components: social structure, performance dynamics, personal imperatives, and narrative content.

Folklore diamond/social structure: social structure places emphasis on how the impact and influence the larger social and cultural structures have on the orator, audience, and narrative/text.

Fool: comic personae that appear completely oblivious to the extratextual world so much that they distort reality to the point of absurdity and do not laugh with the audience.

Gentrification of content: when content intended for critical and political interests is used to serve capitalists' interests.

Humor: has been used collectively to manage painful experiences throughout history.

Hegemony: social dominance over a group of people.

Industrial imperatives: fixed narrative formulas in film and television departments.

Insta-comedienne: comedienne is the female-gendered version of the word comedian; "insta" signifies a designation for their comedy.

Intersectionality: the understanding of the complex racial discrimination in everyday society that is often missed in anti-racist movements that reveal the interlocking systems of oppression upon Black women or the interlocking discriminatory systems of gender, race, class, ability, etc.

Mainstream audiences: a white middle-class audience.

Mainstream culture: culture predicated on a white middle-class audience.

Malapropisms: “skull-in-bone” humor aimed at the lack of education in Black communities.

Minor discourse: everyday acts of rebellion expressed through language to intentionally reject dominant culture.

Minstrelsy: performances that imitated Black cultural expressions, by whites, that afforded them the ability to capitalize on Black mannerisms, story-telling, and humor that comes from grief, sorrow, abandonment, abuse, fear, oppression, malnutrition, etc.

Misogynoir: specific misogyny directed towards black women.

Multicultural/diverse discourse: refers to content that evokes socio-political stances on black life with no regard for a white middle-class audience.

Narrative content: refers to all of the details that make up the narrative including the themes that emerge, the moral structure, and how the story functions in its present sociocultural context.

Negotiations: the conscious and unconscious push and pull between Black women's subjectivity or self-defined agency and mainstream cultures' demand for conventionality.

Online discourse: reflections of stereotypical cultural narratives that reinforce misconceptions online.

Pastpresent: a term used to describe how in technoculture mediated performances/past performances collapse into the present moment.

Personal imperatives: refers to the comedienne's unconscious motives for sharing material.

Pluralist discourse: “separate but equal” ideologies are displayed which show black characters living and working approximately equal to whites, never coming into direct conflict with hegemonic or mainstream ideology.

Popular consciousness: mass society's collective understanding and agreement on the current socio-historical moment, representations, conventions, etc.

Representation: an intricate system of representation in our heads to organize, compare, and rearrange concepts of meanings in the world (and beyond), which we use to classify meanings in relation to one another; representation is made from meanings instituted through language.

Sass: performative acts of communication through Black vernacular that shows attitude and defiance or a defiant attitude that is reflected in speech and gesture.

Shade: remarks that approach truth in a critical biting way that is usually followed by humor or it is an artful way to hurl an insult indirectly.

Signify: a rhetorical strategy used to for the multiplicity of textual meaning...and embodies the ambiguities of language.

Social approval: feedback from peers that provides approval and validation.

Social media: a digital place(s) where people conduct significant parts of their lives.

Social media: social media has essentially become almost anything—content, information, behaviors, people, organizations, institutions—that can exist in an interconnected, networked digital environment where interactivity is possible.

Social media stickiness: the affectiveness of Instagram posts that causes a push and pull from the innate feelings of users when managing personal feelings towards the content and people may react to content that touches them deeply by clinging to it out of disgust.

Social rating: likes, views, comments from social media.

Subjectivity: evading the common representation of being an object, to being emancipated into the subject or something with conscious thought and awarenesses.

Textual analysis: an analysis informed by recognizing the adaptations of language as socially significant cultural expressions and sees identity as something that is at times performed.

Viral: when content is shared or reposted over and over again by social media users until it amasses a large audience; at the least, millions of people seeing a post on social media.

White supremacist capitalist patriarchy: a way to describe interlocking systems of dominations that define reality.

Womanist/Wommanish: the unapologetic act of outwardly expressing a commitment to the liberated survival of both men and women that exalts Black women's “epistemology, agency, experiences, lives, and artifacts” or womanist sass.

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Curriculum Vitae

Email: naokaforeman@gmail.com