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Article:

Cook, C., Callahan, J.L., Pollet, T.V. et al. (1 more author) (2022) EXPRESS: Gender(ed) performances: women's impression management in stand-up comedy. Human Relations. ISSN 0018-7267

https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267221137996

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human relations

Gender(ed) performances: Women's impression management in stand-up comedy

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Gender(ed) performances: Women's impression management in stand-up comedy

Abstract

Women in male dominated careers often face perceptions of role misfit, leading them to engage in impression management. Using a mixed-methods, observational approach, we investigate if women stand-up comedians present as female gendered at work and the relationship between gendered presentation and observer response in two settings - one diverse (N=843) and one male dominated (N=257). Women, as compared to men, presented more female gendered in the diverse setting and less female gendered in the male dominated setting. A relationship between gendered presentation and observer response was evident in one setting for women but not men. Using Lorber's taxonomy of feminisms as a lens, assessment of women's gendered expression further implied greater constraint on women in the male dominated, compared to the diverse, setting. Our findings support and extend Roberts' theory of social-identity based impression management (SIM) in the novel context of stand-up comedy and refine the theory by presenting a fifth SIM strategy. These findings have implications for impression management research and theory as well as practice focused on promoting equality and diversity in the workplace.

Keywords: Impression management; work behavior; feminism; comedians; gender

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Occupational gender segregation is an enduring characteristic of the labor market (Torre, 2017). Despite greater numbers of women gaining access to male dominated job roles, high attrition rates ensure a largely stable gender ratio in these roles and that entrenched, rather narrow, conceptions of the characteristics of a successful job incumbent persist (England, 2010; Hustad, Bandholtz, Hertlitz and Dekhtyar, 2020; Tasabehji, Harding, Lee and Dominguez-Pery, 2021; Torre, 2017). Thus, women in male dominated occupations experience perceptions of misfit and a consequent motivation to manage the image they present at work (Banks and Milestone, 2011; Faulkner, 2009; Kenny and Donnelly, 2020).

Due to its association with social acceptance and career success, presenting a viable professional image is a key occupational concern (Banks and Milestone, 2011; Berdahl, 2007; Bourgoin and Harvey, 2018; Ibarra, 1999; Faulkner, 2009; Robert, 2005; Schlenker, 2003). Consequently, individuals invest a great deal of energy into managing impressions, and those from marginalized groups – including women in male dominated professions – face additional pressure; to manage social as well as personal characteristics (Bennett, Hennekam, Macarthur, Hope and Goh, 2017; He and Kang; 2019; Heizmann and Liu, 2020; Roberts, 2005). A rapidly growing literature has explored the ways in which women in male dominated roles present themselves at work, towards constructing a role-fitting workplace image, usually in STEM and professional careers.

Despite well documented inequalities in the performance arts, there has been a notable dearth of empirical study of women in this arena, and little in the wider arts (e.g., Bennett et al., 2017). However, we argue that the performance arts represent an important area for study, not just because of the lack of existing research. Indeed, presenting a role fitting image requires performance skill. Therefore, study of those most likely to have mastered this skill to the level of an art form should best enable assessment of its subtleties

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and extremes thus allowing for more comprehensive assessment of existing theory and better understanding of the strategies employed by women.

Furthermore, image cultivation is a particularly long-standing, pervasive and reportedly inevitable phenomenon in the performance arts, to the extent that some successful women report challenges to their sense of authenticity and publicly reject their contrived images (e.g. Cameron, cited in Sherman, 2021). Thus, this arena should provide a fertile ground to further study the extremes. More importantly, if we accept Bertolt Brecht's assertion that art serves to shape reality, studying performance art can also generate deeper understanding of probable ways in which women's impression management may develop in other careers.

Stand-up comedy represents an appropriate corner of the performance arts for such study. With the growth of stand-up, the late 1980s saw greater numbers of women entering the profession. However, women still only represent 27.4% of UK comedy circuit comedians and work against a backdrop of male norms and widespread belief that women are innately unfunny (Chortle, 2020; Shouse and Opplinger, 2014). Hence, it would be expected that presenting a viable professional image is a key concern for these women, particularly given the precarious nature of many comedians' employment (Butler and Russell, 2018). In addition, the public nature of comedians' work enables assessment of much of their behavior and observer responses, making the profession of comedy amenable for study.

Therefore, this study investigates the extent to which women stand-up comedians present as female gendered[1] at work and the relationship between gendered presentation and

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[1] We acknowledge the contested nature of gender identity and the problematics of using gendered binaries of 'men' and 'women'; however, following Judith Butler (1993, as cited in Lorber, 2005) we use the concept of 'womanhood' tactically to provide a stable analytic category of one important identity that women comedians

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observer response in two settings. We enhance our understanding by undertaking further

exploration into how women comedians express their gender at work. Our work

demonstrates how Roberts' (2005) strategies of social-identity based impression management

(SIM) can be operationalized through categories of feminisms (Lorber, 2005). Our

contribution to the body of knowledge is to both extend and refine Roberts' (2005) theory by

demonstrating how the theory manifests at the level of a profession and by identifying a fifth

impression management strategy that women use, which we call "un-categorization."

Professional image construction

In an attempt to improve perceived fit, professional image construction research

indicates that individuals act to shape others' perceptions of them at work (Giacalone and

Rosenfeld, 1991; He and Kang; 2019; Ibarra, 1999; Robert, 2005; Schlenker, 2003).

Broadly, the process involves impression monitoring (assessment of alignment between how

one believes they are viewed and the perceived ideal), motivation (drive to increase

alignment) and impression construction (action to manage perceived misalignment and

present a "desirable" image; Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Roberts, 2005). Consequently, in

situations where the boundaries of what is considered ideal are not established, are unclear or

are wide, misfit is less likely to be judged and individuals have little need to engage in image

construction, unless there is a distinct reward for doing so (Roberts, 2005). However, when

there is a clear ideal, or even an accepted usual, individuals are more mindful of how they

present themselves.

Traditionally, professional image construction scholars have focused on the

management of personal attribute characteristics including appearance, verbal and non-verbal

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hold. Given the varying nature of gender identity content, we define female gendered as any expression of

womanhood (Becker and Wagner, 2009).

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indicators of role suitability (Little, Major, Hinojosa and Nelson, 2015). Roberts' (2005) broadening of the framework to include social identity-based impression management (SIM) acknowledges the challenges marginalized groups – including women in male dominated roles - face in their working life as a result of unfavorable, although reportedly improving, stereotypes and narrow conceptions of the ideal (e.g., Koch et al., 2014). To avoid unhelpful categorization, individuals seek to present themselves such that they manage others' perceptions of their social identity group affiliations in line with the perceived characteristics of a competent job incumbent (Roberts, 2005).

SIM may be undertaken through either down-playing or maintaining the salience of marginalized group affiliation, using four strategies (Roberts, 2005). Down-playing may involve deemphasizing one's social identity and attempting to associate with a more accepted group, for example through adopting the mannerisms or discussing topics of concern to the target group (assimilation strategy), Alternatively, individuals who acknowledge their social identities personally may seek to avoid disclosing them to others, for example by avoiding personal topics in conversations or using pseudonyms (decategorization strategy) Maintaining salience is generally aimed at restoring positive distinction to the maligned group and, by extension, the individual (Roberts, 2005). To this end, strategies include emphasizing the positive characteristics of one's group (integration strategy), for example, by discussing these openly with other others and capitalizing on accepted stereotypes (confirmation strategy). Amongst women, such confirmation may involve enacting a mothering or flirtatious style when interacting with others. Thus, individuals could seek to dissociate from their group memberships and blend in or openly present these and stand out (Lynch and Rodell, 2018; Roberts, 2005).

There is well-established evidence of women openly presenting their gender identity in male dominated contexts (e.g., Connell, 2009; Harris and Giuffre, 2010; Heizmann and

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Liu, 2020; Kenny and Donnelly, 2020). However, disassociation through presentations of maleness or gender neutrality and suppression of femaleness are nevertheless frequent and are more likely when demographic homogeneity is apparent amongst those in power and divergence from the norm is unwelcomed (Creed and Scully, 2000; Ely, 1995; Kaiser and Miller, 2001). Similar to members of maligned, invisible social identity groups, those with aspirations of success in male dominated careers often choose not to present themselves as women when possible (Clair, Beatty and Maclean, 2005; Lynch and Rodell, 2018). In other words, women may find themselves 'doing' gender differently to meet role expectations (Mavin and Grandy, 2012). Tactics include avoiding disclosure of revealing information (e.g., incongruent experiences, language cues and forenames) and fabricating a male identity (e.g., use of pseudonym) in written communication (Bennett, Hennekam, Macarthur, Hope, and Goh, 2017; He and Kang, 2019).

In face-to-face interactions, disassociation generally involves adopting stereotypically male patterns of behavior and in-group distancing. Indeed, women seeking employment and those who work in male dominated roles tend to present themselves as equally or more masculine compared to men and display patterns of behavior generally perceived as male as a strategy to navigate conflicting sex-role expectations (Mavin, 2008; Sasson-Levy, 2003). Furthermore, internalized gender hierarchies catalyze manufactured distinctions amongst women, leading some to avoid interactions with female colleagues (Mavin, 2008; Wright, 2016). These internalized gender hierarchies and conflicting sex-role expectations create double binds for women that constrain their behaviors within male-dominated power structures (Mavin, 2008; Mavin and Grandy, 2018). Feminist strategies are one means that women employ to manage this power inequality (Ahmed, 2017; Lorber, 1994).

Women and stand-up comedy

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Historically, stand-up comedy developed in burlesque houses and working men's clubs, neither of which provided an accepting audience for female comedy performers (Bore, 2010; Sochen, 1991). Therefore, women were effectively excluded from the early shaping of live comedy, leaving men to determine stand-up norms. This heritage is evident in modern stand-up comedy clubs which have been described as 'unnecessarily androcentric', requiring comedians to present a less conversational, more aggressive style than is generally associated with female behavioral preferences (Shouse and Opplinger, 2014; Weisberg, DeYoung and Hirsh, 2011).

With regard to the focus of comedy, there are similar challenges. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the androcentric nature of many clubs, comedy centered on women's personal experience is frequently criticized as not having a broad enough audience appeal here (Dickinson, Higgins, St. Pierre, Solomon and Zwagerman, 2013). While still male dominated, there is some evidence that the job of stand-up comedian is becoming less male centric and more welcoming of women. At least two national comedy clubs based in the UK have instituted policies ensuring a minimum of one woman be included on every bill and woman centered comedy is being promoted on major comedy circuits (Healy, 2020). In addition, recent research based in one of the UK's two preeminent comedy clubs, demonstrated that a less aggressive style of delivery was associated with effective performance (Authors, 2020). Indeed, while assertiveness was still judged to be important, comedians were expected to present as more easy-going than angry and only slightly more aggressive than meek to be effective. Furthermore, affirmative action initiatives provide wider opportunities for women who work as stand-up comedians outside of the comedy circuit (e.g., Thorpe, 2014).

In addition, the rise of arts festivals, solo theater shows, and television stand-up provides opportunities for women to perform comedy in situations that are not always male

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dominated. At the former, comedy often takes place alongside other performance art forms

meaning that, while festival comedians are majority male, there is greater gender diversity

amongst performers as a whole and amongst audience members (Chortle, 2020, EdFringe,

2019). In these settings, women have performed female gendered comedy to great acclaim.

For example, comedians Iliza Shlesinger and Sarah Millican explicitly present a female

identity and openly center their comedy on stereotypical women's issues, frequently framing

those topics from a feminist perspective. However, it is unclear the extent to which

comedians at the grass roots, either on the comedy circuit or in less male dominated settings,

have followed suit.

Methodology

The three studies presented in this paper used a mixed method/methodology design to

investigate media from two comedy settings – an arts festival and a comedy club, selected for

both their similarity and difference. The settings are similar in that both attract comedians of

varying expertise and offer career enhancement opportunities: the festival is attended by

industry scouts and critics while the comedy club provides performance footage which

comedians can use for self-promotion and has an unmatched online presence. A key

difference between the two settings is the level of gender diversity amongst performers and

audience members, with diversity being higher at the festival (Chortle, 2019; EdFringe,

2019).

To assess the extent to which women present as female gendered, studies one and two

took a comparative approach. Study one compared gendered presentation amongst women in

published, one-person festival show descriptions and Study two compared gendered

presentation in comedy club performances to the industry standard (male comedians). In line

with our focus on gender, irrespective of gender identity content (Becker and Wagner, 2009),

both studies employed content neutral measures of gendered presentation. However, the

different media used in each study, necessitated varied methods for quantifying gendered presentation. The show descriptions, over 99% of which were written in the third person, provide a brief show overview, were word limited and abided by standard grammatical rules. Consequently, they were most amenable to frequency counts. To this end, we applied He and Kang's (2019) findings, which identified two types of content neutral, gender revealing communication – self-describing language and gender-specific topics (experiences, hobbies and interests) - used in employment seeking situations. Therefore, raters recorded gendered self-describing language and gender-specific comedy topics. However, given the wide range of topics considered acceptable for discussion in comedy compared to the traditional workplace, the gender-specific topics recorded in Study one were not restricted to experiences, hobbies and interests.

Conversely, the comedy performances represent a comedian's nuanced exploration of themselves and topics of interest to them, and were delivered in the first person, grammatically complex, varied in length and challenging to parse into their component parts. Therefore, we took a more wholistic approach. Through consideration of the topics covered, how comedians self-described or, given the reduced need for self-description in face-to-face situations, how the rater would describe the comedian's on-stage persona, raters assessed gendered presentation using an adapted psychometric scale.

To assess response to gendered presentation, we utilized the available observer responses (critics, club audiences and online viewers). Finally, to gain understanding of how women expressed their gender, we selected the most strongly gendered performances from Studies one and two for qualitative investigation (Study three). To facilitate methodological integration, one rater with both quantitative and qualitative expertise took part in all three studies (Bryman, 2007). The overviews below provide details of the methods and results of each study. The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at

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http://doi.org/ 10.17605/OSF.IO/S6UBY. The quantitative analyses were conducted in R

4.0.2 (R Development core team, 2008).

Study one

Setting

In Study one we focused our investigation at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

The Fringe Festival usually runs annually for three weeks in August offering comedy, dance,

theater and music performances. While comedy at the Fringe is acknowledged to be male

dominated, approximately equal proportion of men and women perform at the Fringe, across

performance categories (EdFringe, 2019)

Procedure

Each year, Edinburgh Fringe performers are invited to provide a show description of

up to 250 words to the Festival's official bookings website—edfringe.com. Show

descriptions follow a reasonably uniform format of introducing the comedian, outlining their

comedy topics and, sometimes, presenting previous reviews. The show descriptions depict

how performers choose to present themselves and their work and, given the word limit,

arguably what they consider the defining, marketable characteristics of themselves and their

show. We searched the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival website for single performer comedy

shows and identified 843 comedians' descriptions of their show for inclusion in Study one.

Gender was recorded by two raters based on the use of gendered language referring to

the comedian, registered name and profile photograph within each show listing. There was

no instance where any of these criteria were contradictory, within a single show description.

Gender ratings were verified by consulting Chortle.com, the comedy industry's most

comprehensive database of comedians which listed 43.3% of those in our sample, exceeding

Tractenberg, Yumoto, Jin and Morris (2010) verification criteria. Raters achieved 100%

agreement on gender across the descriptions and 100% agreement with Chortle.com. To

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assess gendered presentation, two raters worked independently to record gendered self-description and gender-specific topics within the show descriptions.

Edinburgh shows are reviewed by specialist and national publications. Critics commonly use a 1-5 star metric to quantify show quality. We identified seven prolific review publications which used this common metric. Our search of the publications' websites identified between 76 and 215 reviews per publication of the shows in our sample.

Sample

There were 242 descriptions which featured comedians who we identified as women (coded as 0) and 601 comedians who we identified as men (coded as 1). This represents a very slight overrepresentation of women (28.7%) compared to industry figures at the time (27.4%; Chortle, 2019).

Measures

Gendered self-description. The number of same sex gendered nouns and pronouns used to refer to the comedian were recorded. Inter-rater reliability was calculated via Krippendorff's alpha with a 1,000 bootstraps (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007). The measures showed very good reliabilities for gendered nouns ($\alpha = .750$) and gendered pronouns ($\alpha = .933$) for referring to oneself.

Gender specific topics. Gender specific topics were defined as those which related to the experience of a particular gender that would unlikely be experienced by individuals outside of that gender and hence revealed gender. The number of same sex gendered topics previewed in each show description was recorded. For example, experiencing male-pattern baldness was coded as same sex gendered for men, while experiencing cervical screening was coded as same sex gendered for women. Inter-rater reliability was very good for coding of same gender topics ($\alpha = .767$).

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Observer response. We recorded the star ratings (minimum=1, maximum = 5) attributed by the seven identified publications, to each of the shows reviewed that was included in our sample.

Analytical strategy

We rely on ordinal association measures for most of our analyses as most values were constrained between 0 and 6 (Somers' D) (Siegel and Castellan, 1988; Somers, 1962). Somers' D can range between -1 and 1, like Pearson *r*.

Results

Gender Differences in self-description: the use of gendered nouns and pronouns

Men were less inclined to use gendered nouns to refer to themselves than were women (Somers' D = -.148, 95% CI: -.212 to -.084; Figure 1). However, there was no meaningful association between gender and use of gendered pronouns (Somers' D = -.034, 95% CI: -.074 to .006).

[insert Figure 1 about here]

Gendered topics: the discussion of same gender topics

Men were less inclined to discuss same gendered topics than women (Somers' D = -.357, 95% CI: -.260 to -.454; Figure 2).

[insert Figure 2 about here]

The impact of gendered self-description and topics on reviewer responses

We split the analyses by gender and by publication. For both men and women there were no meaningful associations between either gendered pronoun or gendered noun use for describing oneself and ratings given by publications (all CIs include 0).

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For women, there was a negative association between the number of same gender topics discussed and ratings in one publication; EdFestmag (Somers' D = -.314, 95% CI: -.556 to -.072). Yet, for two other publications, there was a positive association between the number of same gender topics discussed and ratings for women (Three weeks: Somers' D = .365, 95% CI: .007 to .724; Skinny: Somers' D = .237, 95% CI: .004 to .469). The remaining four publications showed no meaningful associations (all CIs include 0). For men, there were no meaningful associations between the number of same gender topics discussed and ratings for any of the seven publications (all CIs include 0).

Discussion Study one.

Overall, women presented as more female gendered than men did male gendered at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival thus indicating comparatively high levels of gendered presentation amongst this group of women. One explanation for this, consistent with the SIM model, is that due to the greater gender diversity amongst performers, women were not constrained by a male biased role ideal in this setting. The increased level of gendered presentation amongst women, compared to men, is somewhat surprising and may imply reward for increased female genderedness (Roberts, 2005). Rewards might be psychological such as reactance related relief (Brehm, 1966). Alternatively, given the commitment of television executives - who use the Fringe as a recruitment ground - to increasing representation of women on television, rewards may be more tangible (Thorpe, 2014). It is possible, then, that women may use their show descriptions, and likely subsequent shows, to advertise their womanhood in the hopes of attracting media interest.

Since there was no relationship between any review score and gendered presentation amongst men, our data suggests that men were able to vary their genderedness without impact on their career. Thus, other factors, such as quality of their performance, were likely to be a greater determinant of review score amongst men. For women, however, mention of

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female gendered topics was related to review success in three out of seven publications. That for two out of these three publications there was a positive relationship (and for four there was no relationship) with review score indicates increased female gendered presentation was more likely to contribute, rather than be an obstacle, to positive reception by observers. However, the negative relationship between number of topics and review score in the final publication and the inconsistency across publications suggests a mixed response to female gendered presentation.

Study two

Setting

Within Study two, we focused our investigation in one of the UK's most successful comedy clubs and most prolific producer of weekly shows and online content. The comedy club is usually open five nights a week, running multiple shows at the weekend. Typical of most UK comedy clubs and reflective of the gender split in comedy, the majority of performers are male.

Procedure

We identified 257 unedited recordings of comedians performing in front of a live audience between 2018 and 2020 posted by the comedy club on their YouTube channel for inclusion in our sample. Although publicly available, we sought permission from the club to view the recordings for research purposes and confirmation that the footage had not been altered or edited, which the club confirmed.

Two raters recorded gender based on the use of gendered language referring to the comedian, registered name and appearance. There was no instance where any of these criteria were contradictory within a single recording. Gender ratings were also verified by consulting Chortle.com, which listed 48.6% of those in our sample, exceeding Tractenberg et al.'s

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(2010) verification criteria. Raters achieved 100% agreement on gender identity across the

descriptions and 100% agreement with Chortle.com.

These two raters also viewed the recordings and assessed gendered presentation

within the performances. In addition, two industry experts rated audience responses. The

experts were experienced, award winning comedians who each had more than 15 years tenure

in the comedy industry.

Sample

There were 80 recordings that featured comedians who we identified as women

(coded as 0) and 177 featured comedians who we identified as men (coded as 1). The length

of the recordings for men and women (mean lengths were 9.20 and 8.99 minutes

respectively) were not significantly different ($t(256) = -.454$, $p = .650$).

Measures

Gendered presentation.   As we were not able to identify an existing identity content neutral

measure (Becker and Wagner, 2009), we adapted the Traditional Masculinity-Femininity

(TMF; Kachel, Steffens and Niedlich, 2016) scale to assess the genderedness of comedians'

presentation as revealed through their comedy topics, self-description and persona. The TMF

comprises six items with a seven-point response scale (1= very masculine, 7= very feminine),

demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$) and a clear factor structure (Kachel, Steffens

and Niedlich, 2016). We made minor alterations to the items to make the scale suitable for

observer rating. In addition, the response scale anchors were replaced with 'very female' and

'very male' thus enabling gendered but non-traditionally feminine/masculine presentation

(e.g., discussion of women's intimate health issues, feminism, being a 'new age' man) to be

rated towards the extreme ends of the rating scale. In the current study, the internal

consistency was high (both raters: $\alpha = .98$). Inter-rater reliability was excellent,

Krippendorff's alpha = .97. Since both raters were women, which could impact subjective

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ratings of genderedness, as a means of ratification a male industry expert (not involved in any

other aspect of the study) undertook the ratings of 25 male and 25 female comedians

(Tractenberg et al., , 2010). Inter-reliability amongst the three raters was excellent,

Krippendorff's alpha = .98. Prior to analysis, ratings of the male comedians on the adapted

TMF were recoded so that a high score denoted high levels of same-sex gendered

presentation for both men and women.

    Observer response. We employed two measures to assess response. Firstly, for

audience response, the two industry experts rated the audience during each performance

using the PANAS-X Joviality scale (Watson and Clark, 1994). The scale comprises eight

descriptors paired with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = very slightly or not at all, 5 =

extremely) and enables assessment of joviality associated positive emotion. The scale

structure has been replicated across samples and is the most the reliable of the PANAS-X

lower order scales showing a median internal consistency estimate of .93 (range = .88 to .94).

In the current study, the reliability was excellent (both raters: α = .98). Inter-rater reliability

fell just outside Krippendorff's (2004) .667 recommendation (Krippendorff's alpha = .646

but see OSF document for analyses by rater). Secondly, we recorded YouTube likes and

dislikes for each performance to give an indication of online response. One performance

recording became inactive before it could be rated. It is therefore excluded from analyses

except the associations between gender and the YouTube outcomes.

Results

Gender differences in presentation.

    Male comedians were rated as presenting themselves as male gendered (*M* = 5.69, *SD*

= .48, one sample *t*-test: *t*(175) = 46.79, *p* < .0001) and female comedians as female gendered

(*M* = 5.40, *SD* = 0.55, one sample *t*-test: *t*(79) = 22.79, *p* < .0001). Male comedians were

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rated as presenting themselves more gendered than female comedians (Figure X; $t(135.61) =$ 4.043, $p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 0.58$).

[insert Figure 3 about here]

The impact of gendered self-presentation on audience responses

Gender was not significantly related to the expert ratings (Somers' D = .05, 95% CI: -.02 to .11) or to the number of YouTube likes (Somers' D = -.03, 95% CI = -.09 to .04). Gender was related to the number of dislikes, with men receiving fewer dislikes than women (Somers' D = -.19, 95% CI = -.26 to -.12). Closer inspection with a Zero-Altered Negative Binomial Regression model (Zuur et al., 2009) showed that this association was driven by women being more likely to receive at least one dislike than men did (details on OSF).

[insert Figure 4 about here]

Genderedness of presentation was not associated with expert ratings of the audience response (all Somers D's 95% confidence intervals overlap with 0) or with YouTube likes or dislikes (all Somers D's 95% confidence intervals overlap with 0) in men or women.

Discussion Study two

Women presented themselves as female gendered on stage. However, they were significantly less female gendered in their presentation than men were male gendered indicating comparatively low levels of female gendered presentation. One explanation for this, consistent with the SIM model, is that the boundaries of the ideal may not allow for very high levels of female gendered presentation, requiring women to engage in impression management (Robert, 2005). This explanation is in line with previous assertions that comedy clubs can be androcentric and less accepting of female driven comedy (Dickinson et al., 2013; Shouse and Opplinger, 2014).

With regard to the relationship with observer response, gendered presentation did not impact audience response at the club or online, for either men or women. However, when

taken in conjunction with the finding that women present less gendered than men, it may

imply that women avoid a negative response by curtailing their gendered expression.

Consideration of how women present as female gendered would provide greater clarity on

this and is investigated in Study three.

Study three

The qualitative portion for this project, Study three, proceeded after the quantitative

analysis identified significant differences by gender across the Fringe catalog entries and

comedy club sets and sought to identify *how* women present as female gendered. The

qualitative analysis followed an abductive approach to tease out interpretation of patterns

(Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Brinkmann, 2014), as opposed to the identification and

verification of patterns sought with the quantitative portion of this project. Using a post-

coding strategy (Brinkmann, 2014), two members of the project team first sought to make

sense of the empirical material. The purpose of abductive qualitative work is not to find 'the'

answer; rather, it is an ongoing process in search of mystery (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007)

with multiple possible interpretations.

We began the qualitative portion of the project by undertaking traditional coding for

thematic topics (Glesne, 2016) presented by women in the Fringe. However, we quickly

abandoned this approach after watching the videos of comedy club sets. We realized that

context, tone, and exposition of the performed sets were crucial to understanding how women

present gender and hence how gender organizes performance (Roulston, 2001). This

realization shifted us away from analyzing content by topic. Early in our data analysis, we

also discovered disconfirming cases for using impression management strategies as our

analytic lens. Thus, we sought a new avenue of inquiry to better understand how gender was

presented.

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The common thread for the comedy club sets was a clear feminist intent in the delivery of the material. This new 'mystery' that confronted us catalyzed a different analytic approach. Thus, using a post-coding, abductive approach (Brinkmann, 2014), we reanalyzed the entire data set for Study three using Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) method of mystery construction which has three components: use of existing theory as an analytic lens, analysis of empirical material through that lens, and application of researcher experience as interpretive tool.

The theoretical lens we applied is Judith Lorber's (1997) categories of the gendered social order feminisms. There is no monolithic definition for feminism and there are many schools of feminist thought (Mackay, 2015). Nevertheless, the unifying thread tying these schools together is a recognition of a gender-unequal society with a broad commitment toward a society based on gender equality (Lorber, 2010; Mackay, 2015). To provide analytic structure to this diverse theoretical landscape, Lorber (1997/2010) clusters feminisms by their assumptions about inequality (their theories of gender inequality) and their propositions to pursue equality (their politics). Because Lorber's classification system provides a framing structure for understanding how various feminist theories operate, it is particularly useful as an exploratory analytic lens for the individual performances of women comedians. As a result, the qualitative component of our study pinpoints the multiplicity of feminisms and how gender is performed.

Lorber offers three categories of feminisms: gender reform, gender resistant, and gender rebellion. Gender reform feminisms capture ideas of equality and individual rights promoted in first- and second-wave feminisms and include liberal, socialist, and postcolonial feminisms (Lorber, 2010). These approaches to feminism generally accept gendered social orders but seek to rid them of discrimination. They hold that men and women should have equal freedom to live their lives as they choose with equal recognition and reward. Gender

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resistance feminisms (such as standpoint) began to emerge in the 1980s and reject the

balancing and mainstreaming of reform feminisms. Resistant feminists expose and disrupt

patriarchy and contend that women's voices and perspectives should be privileged. Gender

rebellion feminisms—such as postmodern, intersectional, or social construction feminism—

critique and dismantle structures of domination by rebelling against unequal systems. Rebel

feminists deconstruct gender binaries and challenge the complicity of 'doing gender' in re-

creating systems of oppression.

Our analysis process was to have the two qualitative experts on the team

independently review samples from Study one and Study two to interpret the show

descriptions and comedy sets with respect to Lorber's three categories of the gendered social

order feminisms. After assessing each description and comedy set according to gender

reform, resistance, or rebellion, the researchers talked through their analyses to reach a

common interpretation of the empirical material.

Sample

To qualitatively interpret how women present as female gendered, we drew on

women from each study. For Study one, we ordered the 242 women by the number of female

gendered topics included in their show description and alphabetically when the number of

topics was equal. Next, starting with descriptions including the most topics, analysis was

undertaken until saturation was achieved equating to 25% (N=60) of the women in the

sample. However, this did not represent a natural cut-off since 34 descriptions included more

than one topic and 37 included one topic. One description was no longer available for

analysis. In total 28.9% (N=70) from Study one were included in the sample for qualitative

analysis. Expecting to reach saturation at a similar level, we ordered the 80 comedy club

performances by women in Study two according to the adapted TMF scores. Starting with

the most female gendered, analysis was then undertaken. Saturation was reached at 18.8%

(N=15). However, to maintain consistency with our saturation level for Study one, we continued analysis until we reached 25% in Study two (N=20).

Findings

Performed presentation.

In the comedy club sets, *all* of the women presented as feminist. However, they did not incorporate the full range of feminisms. Gender reform feminism was most common with 18 of the 20 employing this presentation strategy. There were three women who took a gender resistant approach, and no women used a gender rebellion approach. In the comedy club sets, one woman employed both gender reform and gender resistant strategies in her performance.

Two of the three women who incorporated gender resistance used their ethnic or religious heritage as a foil to highlight gendered inequities such as comments about wearing a hijab or assumptions made about countries of origin. Two used interactions with their children and the experiences of motherhood as a source for encounters with micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010). All three highlighted media presentations of women. One used such representations as the centerpiece of her set, critiquing the way women artists are represented as strong and empowered when the lyrics of their songs and the clothing they wear objectify them. She suggested there was more exploitation than empowerment of women in the media.

The remaining videos, all of which incorporated a gender reform approach, had a wide variety of topics. The gendered topics in their sets included sex and sex acts, relationships, marriage and divorce, motherhood, menopause, genitalia, giving birth, body hair, age, wage gaps, and more. The common thread in these sets was women unapologetically asserting their individual rights to say what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it. This is the essence of gender reform theories of feminism. Included in this group of comedians were women whose sets included raunchy sex jokes, as if they were

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attempting to be accepted as 'one of the boys' to fit into the male-dominated scene. There

was no critique of the context, culture, or system with these sets; there simply appeared to be

an attempt to be 'interchangeable' with the type of 'shock' content many men delivered.

Written presentation.

The majority (N = 171) of the 242 show descriptions written by women for the 2019

Edinburgh Fringe Festival were topically gender-neutral. Of the 70 show descriptions women

wrote which were analyzed in Study three (all of which included a gendered topic), 66

covered the full range of Lorber's feminisms. Some explicitly incorporated more than one

type of feminism in their descriptions. We identified 46 comedians who employed gender

reform feminisms for their show descriptions; 15 who incorporated gender resistant

feminism; and 7 used gender rebellion feminism. Four of the women's descriptions were

feminine, but there was no discernible feminism.

An example of a feminine, but not feminist, show description would be:

[Full name] presents [show name], a romp into femininity, idiocy, foxes and

omelettes. [Full name] is a [Nationality]-bred, [Residency]-based comic who's

winning hearts across the country with her unique style of offbeat observations, and

surreal storytelling. [Last name] is accessibly odd, memorable and not one to miss.

[Award] New Comedian finalist. [Award] regional finalist. 'Hugely watchable'

(VoiceMag.uk). 'Brilliantly offbeat' (FunnyWomen.com).

This comedian and others who adopted a simply feminine approach conform to

stereotypes of being a woman, leveraging "femininity" to appeal to gendered expectations of

women (Roberts, 2005). This is consistent with the positive distinction strategy of impression

management associated with *confirmation*.

Another comedian employed a gender resistant approach. In this description, the

comedian raises the problem of verbal micro-aggressions against women's appearance:

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Absolute powershed and regular host of [Podcast name], [Full name] explores her big strong strength. Have you ever watched a feminist try and take '[Show name]' as a compliment? It's like watching a snake eat but funny. In preview, [Show name] was nominated for [Award]. You've seen [shorted forename] in BBC sitcoms [Television show name] and [Television show name] and [Award] Award-winning drama [Television show name]. She's also in forthcoming feature films: [Film name] and [Film name]. She writes for [Television show name] Cats. 'Consistently hilarious' (Fest). 'Smarts on her sleeve, great' (Guardian).

Gender resistant comedians like this did not shy away from their identities as women and feminists. This comedian raises her feminism as a strength with a rather gruesome, and masculine, analogy of a snake eating. This juxtaposition of feminine and masculine with an educative orientation aligns well with Roberts' (2005) positive distinction strategy of *integration*.

Gender reform, the most common strategy employed, is exemplified in the following show description:

[Forename] used to be fun. By fun, she means drunk. She's been sober for 16 years but still misses the buzz of getting rat-arsed, slaughtered and shit-faced. Is it even possible for an uptight [Nationality] woman to have fun without being drunk? [Show name] is a frank and funny show about anxiety, sex and booze – and nearly vomiting over Noddy Holder. In 2018, [Forename] reached the final of the semi-prestigious national competition of [Award]. 'Comedy gold… She holds the room in the palm of her hand' ***** (One4Review.co.uk).

Like many other women performing gender reform feminism, this comedian uses a shock strategy approach by projecting a more stereotypically masculine delivery. This

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distances her from societal expectations of how a woman should behave, consistent with the

recategorization strategy of *assimilation* (Roberts, 2005).

The 171 women whose show description content was not incorporated into the

qualitative study are also important to highlight here. Their invisibility sheds light into the

way that feminisms inform the operationalization of impression management. By submitting

a show description devoid of topics that referenced their stigmatized social group, these

women *decategorized* their gender (Roberts, 2005).

Gender rebellion strategies were employed only in the Fringe Fest descriptions. There

were only six comedians who used this strategy. Those who employed this strategy were

clear in taking on the underlying power structures that reinforced patriarchal privileges. In

her Fringe Fest show description, one comedian said:

Person of interest on [Television show name], [Television show name] and

[Television show name] squats and delivers a show about the extreme sport of womanhood.

Birthing her vision of the future before your eyes, how she hopes it will be... free from class

war, poverty and consent issues. Also dragging the overdue spectre of what it is more likely

to be: t-shirt feminism, Jordan Peterson and corporate wokeness from her loins. All without

an epidural. 'It's jaw-droppingly remarkable how much ground she covers, how funny she is,

how intelligent her attacks are' ***** (Sunday Herald).

The women who took a gender rebellion approach engaged in impression

management by challenging the patriarchal systems, which define the ideal—namely men.

Indeed, they defied the ideal and refused to accept categorization as a stigmatized 'other.'

This approach to impression management was distinctly different than the strategies offered

by Roberts (2005), which are dependent upon individuals acknowledging the boundaries of

their marginalized categories and managing them. Through their defiance, these women

rejected the categorization premise upon which SIM is based; they demanded to be what we call *uncategorized*.

Summary

While the extent to which women comedians present as gendered was found to differ to men in Study one and Study two, our qualitative analysis revealed that the mystery worthy of exploration was the way feminisms were (or were not) employed in operationalizing how women presented. In presenting as gendered, or not, women comedians engaged in a full range of impression management strategies as defined by Roberts (2005). These impression management strategies were consistent with the forms of feminisms the women employed. As depicted in Table 1, the comedians exhibited a form of impression management. When these comedians' impression management was viewed through a lens of feminisms, however, the women exhibited a form of impression management not previously identified by Roberts.

[insert Table 1 about here]

General discussion

Our findings indicate that women comedians present as female gendered during the course of their work and that they do so by enacting different forms of feminism However, the extent of their gendered presentation, compared to the industry standard, appears to vary: at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe women emphasized their gender through their show descriptions to a greater extent and in the comedy club through their performance, to a lesser extent than men. Within the comedy club environment there appears to be a line that might be too female gendered for women to cross whilst on stage. At the Fringe no such line was evident, although it cannot be ruled out that there is one for men. Thus, women at the comedy club appear more constrained than women at the Fringe. From a professional image construction perspective (Roberts, 2005), this would indicate the Fringe ideal, or lack of one, allows for more highly female gendered presentation (compared to the industry standard) but

that the comedy club ideal may be more male biased requiring women to engage in impression management.

The qualitative analysis suggests a similar trend. Comedians who we identified as women displayed the full range of Lorber's feminisms within their Fringe show descriptions and non-feminist approaches. However, a narrower range of approaches was evident at the comedy club thus suggesting greater constraint. The categories of feminism displayed in the comedy club appear well suited to a male ideal image. Specifically, performance of gender reform and resistant feminism involves behavior that may be considered masculinized (Madison, Aasa, Walert and Woodley, 2014). Indeed, a feminine performance in the absence of feminism could indicate an acceptance of women's lower status (van Breen et al., 2017) in a male-dominated environment, likely resulting in the comedian failing to assert their right to perform and hence undermining their control over the room. Conversely, rebellion feminism would likely be seen as too threatening in a male-idealized setting (Dickinson et al., 2013; Shouse and Opplinger, 2014) and therefore serve as an obstacle to the comedian performing their job effectively.

With regard to the potential career impact of observer responses, there do seem to be some consequences for women. At the Fringe, a greater focus on gendered topics is related to review ratings for women, but not men, in just under half the publications. While the relationship between number of gendered topics and review score is for the most part insignificant or positive, the inconsistency in this relationship across publications, and that there is a relationship for any publication, demonstrates a level of judgement of women's presentation that is not paralleled for men. Thus, even at the Fringe women appear somewhat constrained in their work behavior. No such relationship between genderedness and any measure of observer response was found in the comedy club or online. However, that women do not present as gendered as men and frame their presentation within a narrower range of

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feminist forms compared to women at the Fringe may indicate that they engage in a level of

self-censorship to avoid a negative response (Roberts, 2005).

Across the studies, therefore, the indication is that women comedians present as

female gendered in the course of their work. However, there appear to be some constraints

on women: at the comedy club there seems to be limits to the level of femaleness presented

compared to men, and at the Fringe gendered presentation is related to review score in some

publications, for women, but not for men. Thus, it appears women may need to make

strategic decisions regarding the appropriate level of genderedness and type of feminism to

use to present it, considering the impact on observer response.

Limitations and future research

Our mixed methods, observational approach has significant analytic strengths. We

consider comedians in two situations; however, the crossover of comedians across the two

and differences between the stimuli observed meant that a more robust longitudinal design

was not possible. Future research could attempt to investigate how women adapt their

presentation across multiple situations over time. In addition, the show descriptions (Study

one) encapsulate comedians' marketing strategy rather than their onstage behavior.

Therefore, while the comparison of women to the benchmark group of men allows us to

deduce women's relative level of gender related impression management compared to the

comedy majority group, we cannot be certain that the level of disparity observed is similar to

that displayed on stage at the Fringe. Further research is needed to answer this question.

Yet, we consider that the disparity observed in the show descriptions is informative of how

women present in its own right. Also, our observational method does not allow us to directly

question the reasons women make the presentation choices we have observed. Future,

interview-based, research might seek to investigate this question.

Conclusion

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Our research in the novel context of women in stand-up comedy contributes to both the body of knowledge associated with impression management and women in male-dominated careers. This research provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which women working in a novel public, male-dominated career present at work, in line with varying male dominance. Our findings are explainable in line with Roberts' (2005) assertion that social identity may be managed in line with an 'ideal.'

Our findings also extend Roberts' (2005) theory by emphasizing that impression management should be considered at the profession as well as the organization level and that professional image may be situation dependent, requiring adaptability across situations. In addition, the parallel between our quantitative and qualitative findings regarding social identity (gender) and the primary associated political identity (feminism) suggests that gender organizes behavior along broader lines than just gender identity itself. Indeed, to gain a fuller a picture of the professional image which women construct, our findings suggest that management of social identity should be considered in conjunction with that of the associated political identity.

Further, by using a feminist lens to interpret how comedians present their gender, our findings refine Roberts' (2005) theory of social-identity impression management by uncovering a fifth strategy for managing social identity—*uncategorization*. With this strategy, the women simply refused to accept the patriarchal system that established gendered binary categories and the impression management driven by societal norms that attach to gendered binaries; they defied categories. As they dealt "with norms that tighten the more we [women] fail to inhabit them" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 245), these women performed their comedy by presenting themselves as what Ahmed called 'feminist killjoys.'

The result of our study is a feminist interpretation of Roberts' (2005) theory of social-identity impression management (SIM) as it is operationalized in a novel, male-dominated

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context. Identification of the new *uncategorized* strategy and its alignment with *gender rebellion* feminism points to the political nature of SIM. We hope that the findings from this study will inform future research that examines how women manage their gender identities in different organizational and social contexts, and raise awareness of how SIM is a relational process influenced by dynamics of power.

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Table 1

Social-Identity Impression Management Strategies (SIMs) and Feminisms

SIMs	Feminisms
Confirmation	Feminine (not feminist)
Integration	Gender Resistant
Assimilation	Gender Reform
Decategorization	Gender Neutral
Uncategorization	Gender Rebellion

Figure 1

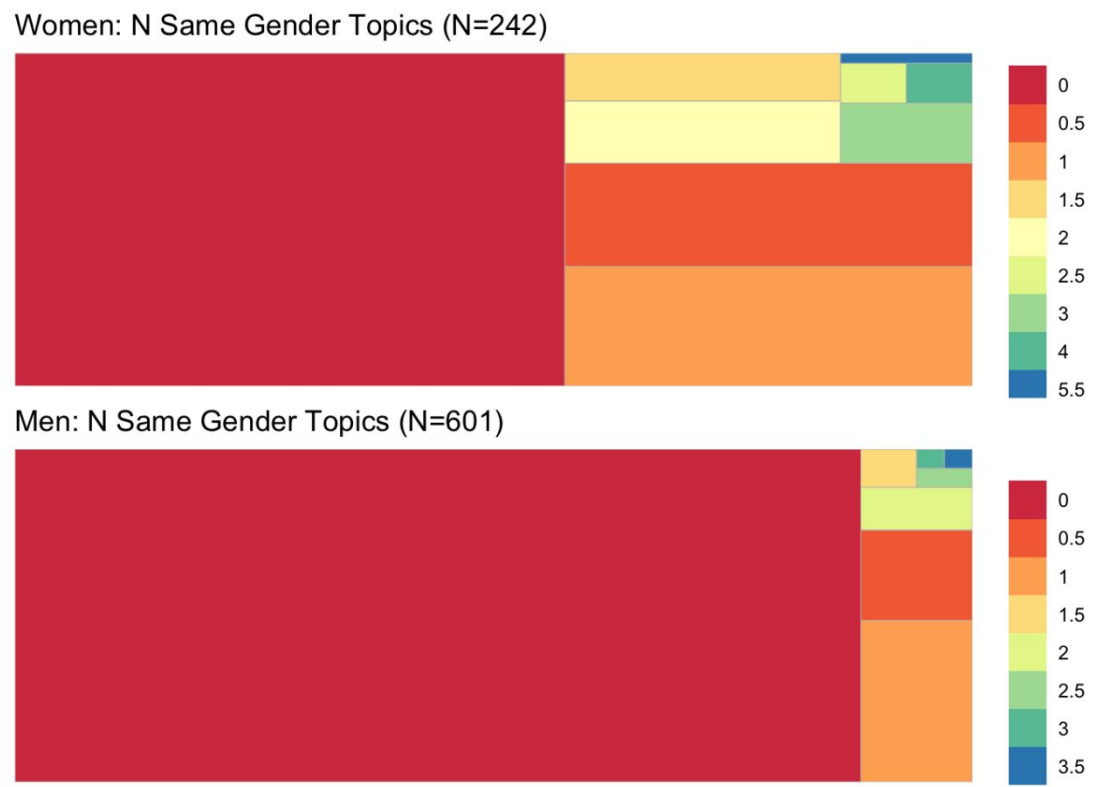The relationship between gender and using gendered nouns to refer to oneself.
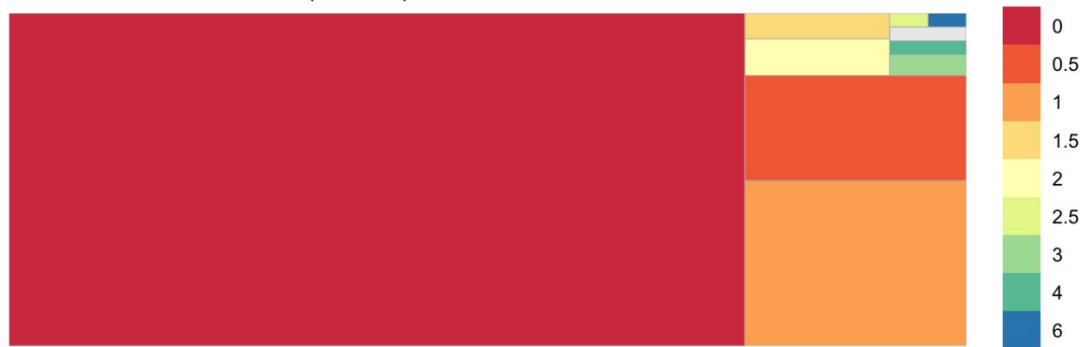
GENDER(ED) PERFORMANCES

Figure 2

The relationship between gender and same gender topics.

Women: N Same Gender Topics (N=242)

Men: N Same Gender Topics (N=601)

GENDER(ED) PERFORMANCES

Figure 3

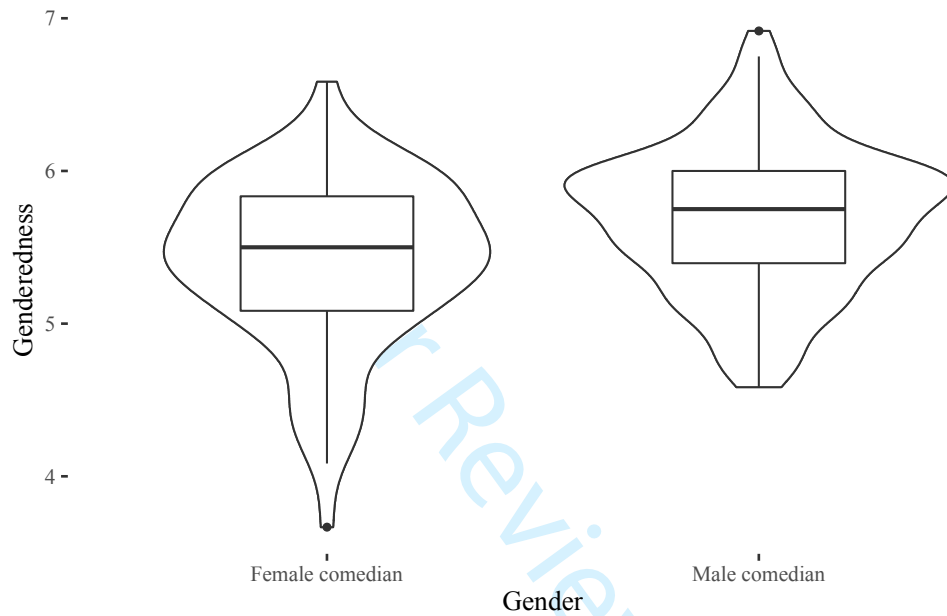Violin plot comparing male and female comedians on genderedness of self-presentation.

Figure 4
The relationship between gender of the comedian and disliked YouTube videos ($n = 257$).